

Prologue...

Networking Knowledge for Information Societies

This is a magnificent *Festschrift* but no more than William Melody deserves. He has made an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the evolution of information and communication technology over the past half century, and to the problems of regulating and controlling it during a period of revolutionary change in the technology.

The Editors of the book have been more pro-active than is usually the case with this type of publication. They have insisted on short contributions and this has not only made them very readable, it has also made it possible to include a wide range of papers, reflecting the scope of William Melody's own activities and relationships. Furthermore, the Editors have so organised more than 50 contributions that they provide a lively and well-informed commentary on the various stages of his life and work. Finally, they have written an introduction to each of the sections highlighting the main features of his work and relating these to the evolution of ICT.

This does not leave much to say by way of a prologue, which means that it can at least have the virtue of brevity. I shall not try therefore to summarise or introduce the 50 chapters which follow. This would be both impossible and unnecessary. I shall rather make a few comments of my own on William Melody's life and work based on my own reading of this book and my own experiences of working with him.

As the Editors point out and as most of the chapters testify, William Melody made an excellent contribution to research, as conventionally measured by the quantity and quality of his publications. He published 150 or so papers in dozens of journals. However, to assess his work on this criterion would be vastly to underestimate what he has achieved. His publications were certainly not just bits of information; they were contributions to knowledge and in many cases to policy-making. Even when working in a university environment, his activity was certainly not confined to academic goals. His over-riding objectives have always been to influence policy and thereby to achieve social goals.

Policy research raises some special problems which William Melody encountered at each of the five stages of his career. To be realistic, policy research often has to

Prologue

xvi

be conducted in association with industrial or governmental organisations and in practical terms to be funded by them, at least to some extent. One does not have to subscribe to Marx's description of economists after Ricardo as 'hired prize fighters of reaction' to recognise that there are serious problems in this relationship. Indeed, the very first chapter in this book, by Nicholas Garnham, makes the point exceedingly well. The conduct of public interest research has become increasingly difficult in most universities in most countries for some time now and to establish a satisfactory two-way relationship between research sponsors and research performers is one of the most complex and difficult tasks for research management.

William Melody did not always succeed in this complex task, as the experience of CIRCIT in Australia demonstrates, but he succeeded more often than not. The researchers must be genuinely independent and the sponsors must be prepared to tolerate, even to welcome research results which may be critical of the sponsors themselves and of the assumptions, prejudices and interests which they represent. To recognise that this approach is in the long-term interest of the sponsors themselves requires great forbearance and sophistication, comparable to the tolerance of organised political 'opposition' in parliamentary democracies. It does not come easily to those who wield power in most industrial and government organisations. The researchers themselves may be tempted to opt for a quiet life and more ample rewards by currying favour with powerful interest groups, or more commonly and more reasonably, they may think that 'to speak truth to power' does not require them to speak the whole truth and nothing but the truth. As time goes by, they may gradually forget to do it at all.

Good policy research requires a special kind of civic courage, a quality which William Melody possesses in abundance. He has been determined to find truth, to debate it and to communicate it. Moreover, he did this whether he himself was in the role of researcher or sponsor, or both. As sponsor, he came close to the ideal of stimulus, tolerance, perseverance and challenge.

A remarkable feature of William Melody's career has been his ability to operate in a variety of different national environments. He actually led and coordinated research programmes (and not just short projects) in half a dozen different countries and as the following chapters amply testify, all of them ultimately produced fruitful results and a legacy of constructive achievements, despite all the difficulties. To succeed in so many different countries is not only a testimony to his ability to understand a variety of national cultures and institutions, but also to his spirit of internationalism. As the chapter by Bella Mody and the book edited

by Mansell and Wehn demonstrate, he is deeply concerned with the disadvantaged position of poor countries and of poor 'excluded' people in rich countries during the ICT revolution.

Neither he, nor anyone else, has found solutions to all these problems of social and technical change. Although his work has done much to undermine the privileged position of public telecommunication utilities, he most certainly cannot be classified as a simple free marketeer or an advocate of solutions based on neo-classical economic dogmas. Nor can he be classified as an advocate of purely administrative or governmental solutions. Indeed, the editors comment that he cannot be classified as either 'right' or 'left'. He was searching for original solutions to new problems and he certainly accepted that such solutions might be very radical, even if they were achieved through a succession of incremental reforms and drastic 're-regulation' of the system.

Even though it is quoted by the Editors in one of their introductory notes, I cannot do better than to repeat Lindblom's (1988: 11) comment on incremental reform since it gives an excellent summary of the type of approach which Melody has advocated:

Do I believe that the political and social world is in such good shape that it needs only incremental improvement? ... Indeed not. ... Do we therefore need drastic change? Indeed, we do. Given, however, the existing political structures of the ostensible democracies, there is little hope of getting it except through long glacial sequences of incremental changes ... It looks as though anyone who wants drastic change will do best to promote rapid incremental change cumulating into drastic change.

Chris Freeman

April 2002