

**Dr Ken Henry**  
**Secretary to the Treasury, Australian Government**  
**Melbourne Town Hall**  
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When I sat down to write some words for this occasion I tried to recall when I had first come across Ian Little. But I couldn't. Still can't. It seems to me that Ian has always been there. Of course, I do remember that Mike Vertigan once ran the Victorian Treasury. But even then, Ian was there. He was always there.

I guess I had assumed that Ian Little would always be a feature of Victorian government. A permanent voice of reason from that important state that could be relied upon, absolutely, to take an intelligent, principled approach to issues: a capacity that thrived in finding win-win options in the most improbable places – in problems that would strike most people as an intractable morass of conflicting interests.

When I sat down to write some words for this occasion, I realised that I had been taking Ian Little for granted. And that realisation took the wind out of me. What madness. What dangerous folly. Nobody should be excused for taking Ian Little for granted. He was unique.

Ian Little was appointed Secretary of the Victorian Department for Treasury and Finance in 1998. With that appointment he joined an exclusive club – the Heads of Treasuries; HoTs: a club that I have had the privilege to chair these past five years. Usually, the chair of HoTs wouldn't speak on behalf of its members without clearing the script with them. But I haven't had to clear these words. I know what the Heads of Treasuries think of Ian. I have seen them together; at work and in relaxation; in the tough times and the good. I know how much the loss of Ian means to my friends and colleagues John Pierce in New South Wales, Gerard Bradley in Queensland, Tim Marney in Western Australia, Jim Wright in South Australia, Don Challen in Tasmania, Paul Grimes in the ACT and Jennifer Prince in the Northern Territory. And I know, too, how much Ian meant to my colleague Ian Watt, Secretary of the Australian Department of Finance and Administration, who joined HoTs in recent times.

On behalf of these public sector leaders, I want to express to Ian's family our sincere condolences for your loss of a son, brother, husband and father. And I want to express our utter devastation at his having been taken from you at such an appallingly young age.

To Ian's troops in the impressive Department of Treasury and Finance, I want to say, on behalf of the HoTs, that we feel for you. You have lost a truly great leader. We know that whoever is chosen, at the appropriate time, to take up the reins torn from Ian's hands, we will be there to offer support, guidance and counsel. Ian would have wanted me to tell you this.

To the political leadership of Victoria, can I say that you know what you have lost. And you have expressed that loss with eloquence today. I just want you to know how much your Mr Little was admired by his state, territory and commonwealth colleagues. And I want you to know that we think he did you proud. In all of our work together the State of Victoria could not have been better served.

The Heads of Treasuries hold Ian Little in the highest possible regard. All are proud to be able to say that they were a close colleague and friend of this outstanding Australian.

Let me share with you a little of what it was that made Ian so special to his HoTs colleagues.

Ian had a keen sense of Victoria's interest. But he also had a sense of how those interests related to those of his HoTs colleagues and how they would be viewed by the Commonwealth. On especially difficult Commonwealth-State issues, Ian would often be the one to put the States' view. He had the intellectual capacity, the negotiating and communication skills, and the passion to present a case cogently and with force. And he had the strategic sense to find pathways forward. He didn't like coming to HoTs with problems; usually he brought elegant solutions. While always willing to entertain an alternative point of view, he was also always searching for common ground. Yet he was never so pragmatic as to leave his principles stranded.

Ian wasn't motivated by the adrenalin rush of the quick-fix. For him, problems worth worrying about had a strategic dimension. They demanded a long hard look, an analytical crunch, and the solutions demanded painstaking implementation.

But there was much more to Ian's contribution to the Heads of Treasuries. He encouraged us to risk a level of candour in our discussions that, I am sure, would shock some of our political masters. Ian had such a high level of personal integrity, and demanded so much from others, that he couldn't see why any discussion should be off limits. And so, somewhat tentatively at first, the HoTs started opening up to one another, saying what they really thought about the issues that had typically divided us. At Ian's urging, we started, several years ago, to discuss the microeconomic reform agenda that should replace the National Competition Policy when

it came to an end. Our discussions were wide ranging – across numerous elements of productivity and participation that would drive future growth. We discussed the relationship between health status and workforce participation, and the importance of preventative health policy; we discussed the link between education – including early childhood education – and participation; we discussed the national infrastructure challenge – in water, land transport, energy and access regulation – that had to be met if we were going to close the gap to the productivity frontier. And we discussed what sort of financial arrangements might be required to underpin progress in these and many other areas.

Ian Little wanted the HoTs to discuss all of these things because he saw HoTs as a potentially powerful vehicle for the development of whole-of-Australian policy approaches in difficult areas. He thought we could make a difference. He thought we could work together; that not every discussion had to be a negotiation; that we had the capacity to address problems in a way that benefited all. Ian taught us how to be a team.

When I think back on it now, that was always Ian's approach. Whether we were implementing initiatives of the National Competition Policy developed in the mid 1990s, dealing with the fallout from the High Court's decisions on franchise fees, or the difficult insurance issues that landed on our plate following the collapse of HIH, struggling to find ways of simplifying the extraordinarily complex methodology that is used to determine the way in which the GST proceeds are shared among jurisdictions, dealing with the accounting and tax implications of public-private-partnerships, trying to find ways of harmonising the financial reports of state and commonwealth governments. In all these tasks Ian insisted that we work as a team.

Ian Little did not always work for government. He told me that he was comfortable working in both the private and public sectors. But there was no doubt about his passion for the latter. He got swept up in public policy. It defined him.

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating used to say, perhaps he still does, that there is no higher calling than public service. Public Service, he would say, is ennobling in a way that nothing else can be. I don't know what Ian Little thought of this. I'm not sure that he felt he was responding to a calling. But I will say this: in everything he did, he provided compelling substantiation of Paul Keating's view. I would defy anybody familiar with Ian Little's career to suggest that he could have devoted himself to any higher cause.

And his contribution to public policy and administration will not be forgotten. It stands as a monument to inspire future generations of public servants, in all jurisdictions across Australia.

Yet, in Ian's passing there is much to mourn.

One night last week, while most of us were asleep, a meteor struck the State of Victoria. The course of that state has been altered forever. Many good things that were going to happen will now never be seen. The meteor hit with such force that all states and territories in the Commonwealth will feel its repercussions.

When I sat down to write some words for this occasion, I realised that Australia had lost one of its best. And that loss could not be compensated.

I have one thing left to say.

Ian felt very deeply about the need for all states and territories, and the Commonwealth, to develop a truly ambitious, comprehensive, programme of economic reform to boost productivity and participation. He worked at this goal with skill and determination in several Heads of Treasuries meetings, and in numerous bilateral meetings in a number of jurisdictions. He was a true champion of the cause.

When the Premiers and Chief Ministers met with the Prime Minister at the Council of Australian Governments meeting in February this year, they came to an agreement that gave Ian much to celebrate. The broad architecture of his vision had been agreed by first ministers. But much remained to be done. The rhetoric had to be converted into action. The road ahead was long and full of potholes and made difficult to negotiate by numerous blind corners.

Ian Little was leading the charge down this road when taken from us.

Ian, the Heads of Treasuries commit themselves to finishing this journey. It will be more difficult without you. But we will do it. In your memory, we will do this mate.