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# **Personal reflections on Sir John Crawford**

Denis Blight

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# Personal reflections on Sir John Crawford

Dr Denis Blight AO FRSA  
Chief Executive, the Crawford Fund



I knew Sir John Crawford and worked closely with him for the last six years of his life, from 1978 to 1984 when he died, too young, after a brief struggle with a brain tumour. I saw him briefly before an operation that sought to remove the tumour. I arrived in his hospital room equipped with some Board papers so as to make out that all was normal. He welcomed me with a typically dry remark: 'Ah, the Blight of my life!'. The operation was only partially successful and gave Sir John only a few more months of life.

Like many people who happily class themselves as acolytes of Sir John, I had grown quite quickly to respect his compassion, and his quiet but passionate vision for a better Australia and a better world. As did many others, I wept at news first of his illness and then of his passing.

I had first met him in January 1976 when we both arrived in Nairobi. I was there, with my wife and our four-year-old son, to take up an appointment as deputy head of mission at the Australian High Commission. Sir John was embarking on yet another mission for the World Bank and the CGIAR\*. My first impression was of a modest, quietly spoken, short man but one nevertheless sure of his purpose. No car was there to meet either of us but Sir John politely turned down my offer to share a rickety cab ride into town.

I met him again in early 1978 after I had returned to Canberra and a job with the precursor of AusAID, the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau. At Jim Ingram's invitation I was to become the Executive Secretary of the Consultative Committee on Research, part of Ingram's strategy to increase the science and technology inputs to the Australian aid program. Sir John had accepted Ingram's suggestion that he chair the Committee.

Over a two-year period I got to know Sir John reasonably well: his far-sightedness, patience — even with a body made up of academics, research leaders and public servants — persistence and powers of persuasion. He had a remarkable ability to sum up views (which had sometimes seemed to me to be a babble of differing perspectives)

into a cogent, simply-put conclusion — a conclusion which he may well have reached in advance of the discussion but one which somehow met no demurrals.

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\* Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research

So Sir John somehow combined his visionary character with an understanding of what was achievable, even by small steps that were persistent and always in a consistent direction.

It is impossible in a few minutes to capture the breadth and depth of Sir John's contribution but I can give you a sense of it by drawing on some of the words of Jim Ingram, another visionary and associate of Sir John who spoke about him at the Crawford Fund's Parliamentary Conference in August–September 2010. In his short oration, introducing a Crawford Memorial Lecturer as I am doing now, Ingram focused on just two of Sir John's achievements in the international sphere:

- First, the conclusion of the 1957 trade agreement with Japan. Crawford was the first to describe as our 'Near North' the region that Europeans call the 'Far East'. He was crucial in the finalisation of a trade treaty with Japan, despite some opposition to any negotiation with that nation which many (including my father who had lost a brother to them in the Pacific War) regarded as a hated enemy. The treaty laid the foundation for Australia's agriculture-based prosperity for the following two decades. In 1957 Australia was as dependent on agriculture, especially wool, as we are on minerals today. We had a wool boom. It would have been interesting, by the way, to have had then the sort of conference that we are about to begin — about the best ways in which agriculture and mining can mutually benefit each other and the national economy.
- Second, Sir John was central to the implementation of the Green Revolution in India. Over time, he persuaded the Indian Government and the World Bank to provide India with the resources it needed to enable the Green Revolution, just in time to avoid ever more devastating famines.

That second achievement Ingram mentioned led to a third. Sir John Crawford became deeply involved with the CGIAR and chaired for many years the Technical Advisory Committee, to great acclaim. He was on CGIAR business when I first met him in Africa some 36 years ago. Part of his contribution was, with Jim Ingram, to persuade the Liberal–National Government of Malcolm Fraser and Doug Anthony to approve the establishment of ACIAR\*. Sir John was appointed as the first Chair of the ACIAR Board and it was my privilege to sit beside him during those crucial foundation years.

In his 2010 oration Ingram bemoaned the absence, then, of a full-scale biography of Sir John. I am pleased to say that the Crawford Fund, with the support of ACIAR, took the initiative seeking an author and financial backing for such a biography. As a result, and with an ARC linkage grant, two members of the School of History at the Australian National University (ANU) — Nicholas Brown and Frank Bongiorno — will lead a research team to write the biography of Sir John Crawford. With Stuart Macintyre (the University of Melbourne), David Lee (Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade) and me, on behalf of the Crawford Fund, Brown and Bongiorno will author the first full

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\* Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research

study of the life, work and context of this great Australian and internationalist. Sir John, as a leading figure in the history of the ANU, serving as both Vice Chancellor and Chancellor, would be pleased.

Finally, let me say that I am sure Sir John — if he had lived another 39 years — would have enjoyed your company at this conference.

He would be particularly interested to listen to the Hon Dr Florence Chenoweth, for she is some speaker! As her CV shows, she is highly qualified to speak to us: a Masters degree in agricultural economics (like Sir John) and a PhD in land resources from the University of Wisconsin; a life devoted (like Sir John's) to improving the livelihoods and food security of poor farmers. No stranger to political risk, having escaped from Liberia after a violent military coup, Dr Chenoweth walked to Sierra Leone and joined the Food & Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in a leadership position. She returned to Liberia to the Ministry of Agriculture which, under her leadership, has, amongst other things, trained rural women and supported them in other ways.

Please welcome Hon Dr Florence Chenoweth to present this year's Sir John Crawford Memorial Address.

Dr Denis Blight AO FRSA, the Chief Executive of the Crawford Fund, has had a career including positions as an Australian diplomat, public servant and chief executive. His association with international agricultural research began in earnest some 25 years ago. Prior to working for the Crawford Fund, he was Director-General of CAB International, an intergovernmental body in research, training and publishing in the life sciences, and had 15 years with IDP Education Australia, the international development program of Australian universities and colleges, including the position as Chief Executive.

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