

THE NAMING OF MURDOCH UNIVERSITY

As Under Treasurer of the State, Member of the Senate of the University of Western Australia and Pro-Chancellor, I became deeply involved in the processes which led to the establishment of the State's second university.

On the 15th June 1970, I addressed a minute to the Premier, the Honourable Sir David Brand, recommending the setting up of a Planning Board to initiate and implement plans for the second university. I put forward the names of persons whom I considered to be suitable appointees to the proposed Board and also its terms of reference. Cabinet approved my recommendations on the 23rd June 1970.

Although detailed and careful consideration had been given over several years to the question of new university development in Western Australia, I was aware of only one reference to a name for the new institution. In a paper dated February 1968 and titled "A New University", M.N. Austin Professor of Classics and Ancient History in the University of Western Australia commented as follows:-

"When we come to the naming of our second university, let us not fall back on that of some local worthy, however well he may have served his own generation, but rather follow the example of that great educational entrepreneur William of Wykeham, who called his second great foundation, now some 500 years old, simply New College. We need a New University, or, if we must compromise, at least let it be something in the nature of a Brand New University.

"Whether or not our modest Premier would care for such posthumous fame....."

It is not surprising that little consideration had been given to naming the new institution as much of the debate had been on whether it should be completely autonomous ab initio or whether it should be established in the first instance as a College of the University of Western Australia.

In the course of framing my recommendations to the Premier, I arrived at the conclusion that it was desirable to decide as soon as possible, on a name for the new institution and after considering various possibilities came up with a short list of names which strangely enough all began with the letter M. The list was:-

Mitchell
Menzies
Melville
Murdoch

Sir James Mitchell had been Premier and Governor of the State and Sir Robert Menzies was a former Prime Minister. Lord Melville was Secretary for the Colonies around the time the State was founded and the area in which the new university was to be built had been named after him.

I finally decided to put forward the name of Murdoch and in this respect, my minute to the Premier dated the 30th June 1970 on Treasury File 161/70 reads as follows:-

"The second university will need naming before long to prevent common usage giving it a title not intended, e.g. Somerville or Melville.

"A very suitable name would be Murdoch University. Sir Walter Murdoch was a foundation professor of the University of Western Australia and is a former Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Chancellor and Chancellor of the University of Western Australia. He is a distinguished scholar and man of letters."

I sent my minute into a meeting of Cabinet which was held on the day it was written but a decision on the naming of the institution was deferred.

In the days that followed I had several talks with the Premier during the course of which we discussed the four Ms. He was inclined to narrow the choice to Murdoch or Menzies.

As the first meeting of the Planning Board was to take place at 4 p.m. on the 9th July 1970, I was anxious to see the institution named beforehand but that day dawned without a decision being taken.

The Chairman of the Planning Board, Professor N.S. Bayliss, called on the Premier in the morning of the 9th July. I was present and mentioned the desirability of naming the institution that day but the Premier was not disposed to do so. He mentioned the possibility of inviting the Planning Board to suggest a name.

During the course of the discussion, Professor Bayliss asked the Premier for a message which he could read at the Board's first meeting scheduled for that afternoon. The Premier asked me to draft a suitable message.

I was aware that Sir Walter Murdoch's health was failing and that it was necessary to move quickly if the new university was to be named after him during his lifetime. I therefore decided to write the message around his name notwithstanding the fact that a decision in the matter had not been taken.

It was about 1 p.m. on the 9th July when I placed the message before the Premier. A copy is attached.

The Premier immediately raised the point that Sir Walter had not been consulted and accordingly the university could not be named Murdoch without his permission. I suggested that he could be spoken to on the telephone and obtained Sir David's agreement to ring his home address in South Perth.

When Lady Murdoch answered the call I told her that Sir David wished to speak to her and handed the telephone to the Premier. Sir David asked if he could speak to Sir Walter but Lady Murdoch said that he was too ill to take the call but she could convey a message to him.

Sir David then stated the purpose of his call which was to seek Sir Walter's permission to name the new university after him.

After several minutes, Lady Murdoch returned to the telephone and told Sir David that Sir Walter was deeply moved by the gesture and that he considered it a great honour.

The message was then signed by the Premier and was handed to Professor Bayliss by my secretary shortly before the start of the first meeting of the Planning Board.

The message was read out at the meeting and so began the life of Murdoch University shortly before the death of the very distinguished man after whom the institution was named.



(K.J. Townsing)
C.M.G., I.S.O.

UNDER TREASURER FOR
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

December 1973

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DECEMBER 1983

9th July, 1970.

Dear Professor Bayliss,

The first meeting today of the Planning Board for a university south of the Swan River is the beginning of a new chapter in the story of tertiary education in Western Australia.

I would like to thank you and your colleagues for agreeing to undertake an important task which I am sure you will find both challenging and rewarding.

You are being asked to lay the foundations of an institution which in years to come will play an important part in the lives of many thousands of students who in their turn will contribute to the development of this State and the welfare of its people.

A university should be given a name in keeping with the high standards expected of it as a place of scholarship and learning and of service to the community. I can think of no more appropriate name than Murdoch University and the Government has decided that it shall be so named.

Sir Walter Murdoch is a man who has been prominent in the life and learning of Western Australia for more than half a century. He was a foundation professor of the University of Western Australia and is a former Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Chancellor and Chancellor of the University of Western Australia. He is a distinguished scholar and man of letters. His name gives dignity to our new university and I trust that the quality of its graduates will add further lustre to this name.

I wish your Board every success in the task which lies ahead of planning and bringing into being Murdoch University.

Yours sincerely,

PREMIER.

Professor N.S. Bayliss, C.B.E.,
Chairman,
Planning Board,
Murdoch University.