

OBITUARIES

James Kirk AC



1920 - 1997

It was to have been a cheerful day at the races, contemplating impending retirement followed by a European holiday. But then Jim Kirk, who has died in Sydney, aged 76, got a telephone call from then Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

Would he please take on the job of both chairman and chief executive of the Australian Bicentennial Authority? Standing in the office of the manager of the Sydney Turf Club at Canterbury Racecourse that day in 1985, Kirk told Hawke he would like time to think about the offer.

It was, after all, hardly a happy period in the affairs of the ABA. The first chief executive, Dr David Armstrong, had recently departed — with a controversial \$500,000 payout — amid allegations of waste, overspending and lack of direction. The first chairman, John Reid, had soon followed.

And an impression was growing in the public mind

that the Bicentenary was fast becoming Australia's biggest bureaucratic gravy train. The time, therefore, was opportune for the entry of Kirk, Hawke's choice and celebrated as "a lean and hungry operator" who detested waste.

Kirk had started work in Newcastle as a messenger boy on a pushbike with Atlantic Union — an early name for Esso Australia — and risen to become chairman and chief executive. Now he took little time to say yes to this new top job. "Australia has been good to me," he said then.

His fighting words to the media and staff on his first day in his ABA office were: "What is going on here?"

James Frank Kirk was born on September 25, 1920. When he was aged one his father died from complications following a chill and the family fell on hard times. Young Jim left Newcastle High School at 16 but later managed to spend some time at a local business college. His rise at Esso

Australia was remarkable after he switched to the company's marketing division. By 1951 he was retail sales manager and went on through a sales managership with Esso Standard Sekiqu, Japan, to become vice-chairman, Pacific Basin. He was appointed chairman and chief executive, Esso Australia, in 1977.

Kirk, bluff and genial, acquired a reputation as one of Australia's shrewdest business executives. He was celebrated as much for his straight-talking style as his ability to simplify complex problems and to slash red tape. These latter qualities were to prove invaluable in the challenging task of celebrating his country's first 200 years.

Kirk's reign in the ABA top job did not pass without criticism. There were charges from some staff that he ran the place "like an oil company". Hardly surprising, perhaps, considering that he had spent almost 50 years with Esso. Other colleagues, however, were supportive.

For Kirk, directing the ABA meant 12-hour days and lunches at his desk. He did not complain, although there were observations on the attractions of retirement that he had forgone. Planning for the Bicentenary proceeded. The tall ships gathered, the historical exhibition took shape, the sailing and air races were conceived and organised. And literally hundreds of nationwide committees took responsibility for district projects.

Kirk was made a Companion of the Order of Australia, awarded an honorary DSc from Newcastle University and — perhaps fuelled with the spirit of the Bicentenary — became a champion of the environment as chairman of Landcare Australia Limited. He is survived by his wife, Jean, son James, daughter Debbie, daughter-in-law Robyn, and grandchildren Georgia, James and Oliver.

A memorial service was held at St Mark's, Darling Point, yesterday.