

ROBERT THEOBALD

11 June 1929 - 27 November 1999

Bob Theobald was a passionate man, and he had a great capacity to inspire that kind of strong feeling in others. His passion was for a future for humanity which transcended wealth-creation, exploitation and international rivalry. Indeed, he saw these goals as responsible for our present ills, and conceived of the next hundred years as 'The Healing Century', in which human beings would work out a different salvation.

He said himself that there was nothing which he thought or wrote that had not been said or written by others, but he had an unrivalled capacity to synthesise, to clarify and to intensify. When he presented his ideas they took on a special importance because of the way he integrated them with the experience of his audience. He could touch the hearts and minds of people who had never heard or known him before. It was a very special gift.

Robert Theobald was born in Madras in India and educated at Cambridge, reading Economics with Joan Robinson in the late 1940s and early 1950s. After working in France he moved to the other Cambridge, to what would later be called the Kennedy School. At Harvard he formed the view that too much Economics was bad for you, and abandoned his higher degree studies.

In the 1960s he started to become well known as a 'futurist', writing reports that were influential in both the Johnson and Nixon administrations. He developed skills as a facilitator working with corporations, unions, national organisations and community groups, and honed his writing and speaking capacities. By the time of his death he had written more than 25 books and scores of pamphlets, given hundreds of lectures and several well-known lecture series, was highly experienced on radio and television, and was exploring productively the use of the Internet as a medium for linking people and organisations.

He discovered Australia in the 1990s and fell in love with it. It is fair to say the sentiment was returned by many Australians. He saw Australia as a society small enough, clever enough and resilient enough to build the kind of society he thought the world needed, and he quickly became widely known in this new environment. He also felt that the shift in consciousness that he saw as necessary if humanity was to survive the new century was occurring faster in Australia than elsewhere in the world. By the time of his death his Australian network was extraordinary, since it covered federal and state departments, universities, corporations, unions, the media and community groups of all kinds. In all of them he was highly respected: somehow he was able to tap a powerful undercurrent of thought and feeling that was being by-passed in conventional places.

He survived oesophageal cancer in 1997 and seemed to have overcome it, though the sheer pace and texture of his speaking engagements, especially in Australia, continued to tire him. In October he was at a kind of pinnacle. His tall, erect and cheery presence, his urgent voice, his compassion and understanding were to be found at a successful conference at the University of Canberra, in the several 'Australia Connects' link-up, in meetings everywhere, and on television, radio and in the press.

In Hobart he felt suddenly ill, had to cancel engagements, and then went back to his home in Spokane, Washington. A very few weeks later, he was dead, of a rapidly growing cancer. His marriage, which ended in divorce, was childless, but he leaves tens of thousands of people who will feel that the world is somehow an emptier place through his passing.

He would hope that they would go on to do the work which, through him, they saw to be necessary.