



Brian Parmenter, 1946-2023: reflections on a great friend and colleague

**by
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Brian died last week of leukaemia. He was 76.

The thing about Brian is that he was always fun to be with, such great company, always up to something. Everyone who knew him will have their own stories. Here is one of mine.

It relates to the time we worked at Monash under an unpopular, humourless vice chancellor from Yorkshire, who was later fired after being caught up in a scandal involving plagiarism and falsifying his own academic record. However, that is a different story. Back to this story.

Just for the fun of it, Brian made up an elaborate story about the vice chancellor keeping ferrets in his office. The only credibility that this had is that ferret-keeping is a popular pastime among a certain class of Yorkshiremen. But a story told by Brian didn't need much to give it legs. Brian's stories were always replete with vivid details (in this case on the habits of ferrets and Yorkshiremen) making his stories fun to retell and build on.

The success of the ferret story became apparent a couple of months after it was launched. It was at a meeting called by the vice chancellor to discuss the finances of the University or some equally boring topic. There were several hundred professors present. The climax came when the vice chancellor explained that gathering the information that led him to some tedious and forgettable decision had required considerable "ferreting around".

To the vice chancellor's surprise, this statement was greeted with a spontaneous roar of laughter. As I have said, the vice chancellor was humourless and perhaps had never got a laugh before. Although he was puzzled, my guess is that he was pleased to have at last said something that went down OK with the colonials.

Brian was a sportsman and participator. He played rugby into middle age, he was a rower and rowing coach, he had a keen tennis period, he played soccer, darts and bridge. He was a stalwart of our work cricket team and an enthusiastic runner with great strength and stamina. Brian gave time to university and professional committees. Among many roles, he was the staff representative on the Monash university council, president of the Victorian branch of the Economic Society and served on the Society's central council. With all of these activities, and with his enthusiasm and inclusive personality, it is not surprising that Brian had a huge circle of friends from every walk of life.

I count myself as very fortunate to have had a big slice of his attention.

We worked together for 25 years at the IMPACT Project and its successor, the Centre of Policy Studies. Over those years, the group moved from the public service to La Trobe, to Melbourne and to Monash.

The IMPACT Project was set up in 1975 by the Federal government to provide economic modelling services, initially focused on the likely effects on employment of moving from high rates of protection against imports towards free trade. Brian and his wife Gill had migrated to Australia from England a few years earlier and after short and I gather rather wild stints in academic positions at La Trobe and Melbourne, Brian arrived early in 1976 at the IMPACT Project.

Alan Powell, IMPACT's first and highly distinguished director, had created three teams within the Project: the macro-economics team; the demography team; and the industry team. I had responsibility for the industry team. Alan let Brian choose which team to join. Brian certainly didn't rush into this choice. After several scorching interrogations by Brian, each of the three team leaders was hoping he would choose one of the other teams. Brian's assessment was that the industry team might be on track to doing something worthwhile, and on that basis he made his choice. History has proved him right.

With Brian on board, the industry team produced the ORANI model. Derivatives of this model can be found in many parts of the world and the associated software, GEMPACK, is used by about 700 modelling groups in 100 countries. In Australia, the ORANI model morphed into the Monash model, the TERM models, the VURM model and others. The scope of application has broadened from trade to encompass labour markets, environment, taxation, micro economic reform, and major public investment projects. The research team that Brian chose in 1976, and to which he contributed for 25 years, now has a continuous 48-year history.

So what was Brian like as a colleague? He was a great team member, a star player in his own right, and, for many of us an excellent coach.

The team member

As a team member, Brian unified our group, making it fun to work together. With Brian in the vanguard, there were memorable sporting events. Who could forget IMPACT's soccer game against the Prices Justification Tribunal in which the referee lost control and Brian awarded himself a penalty kick, which he duly slotted to seal the game? There were parties and Friday afternoon analyses at the local pub. But most of all, Brian contributed to team morale by being curious about what everyone was doing. Researchers know how lonely it can be working on a problem with the feeling that no-one else cares. With Brian in the group, there was always someone who was willing and able to take a genuine and intelligent interest.

The star player

Brian had numerous achievements as a player on the economic modelling team. No-one who looks at the foundations of the ORANI model could miss the "Gaudy Gold", also known as "Input-Output accounting and the ORANI module", working paper OP-05. In that paper Brian laid out the database configuration for the ORANI model in a way that has guided our data work ever since. Why Gaudy Gold?

This was 1976, long before electronic transfer and download of papers. All our papers were sent to a printer and then posted out to interested organizations. The covers of these papers were plain white paper with unremarkable print. But not Brian's paper. The cover of his OP-

05 was made of gold-coloured cardboard with enhanced print. How Brian organized this special treatment will never be known.

As the IMPACT Project matured and broadened its scope, Brian made strong contributions to the group's work on regional economics and dynamics. He became a key person in applications of the models and in presenting results at conferences and to clients. Brian was an excellent presenter. Sadly, the last presentation I heard him deliver was at the Celebration of Gill's life in 2017. It was moving, insightful and beautifully crafted. Just wonderful.

The coach

While we worked together, Brian reviewed just about everything I wrote and put me through rehearsals for every major presentation. He provided ex-post comments on every one of my public performances. He provided similar services to everyone else in our group who could handle it. Why do I say handle it? Brian's critiques were frank. That is what made them so valuable. Brian's coaching improved every aspect of my professional performance.

By the mid-1990s, Brian was taking an increased interest in university administration. He would have made an excellent vice chancellor. Frustratingly, there are a lot of steps along the way to becoming a vice chancellor. As a first step, Brian applied for the Deputy Deanship in the Monash Faculty of Business and Economics. At interview, he delivered a convincing critique of how the Faculty was being managed and the ways in which things could be improved. Not surprisingly, at least to me, Brian didn't get the job. I used to think that Brian had a blind spot: he overestimated the ability of people to benefit from honest, constructive criticism.

Now I think he understood all that. He wasn't interested in ego management. He wanted to work with people who could come at least part of the way to his level of integrity.

Brian's employment profile

- 1976-1978 Research Officer in the Industry Assistance Commission assigned to the IMPACT Project
- 1978-1984 Senior lecturer in Economics at La Trobe University and Senior Associate at the IMPACT Project
- 1984-1991 Deputy Director and Professorial Fellow in the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne
- 1991-2000 Deputy Director and Professor in the Centre of Policy Studies at Monash University
- 2000-2007 Manager, Brisbane office of Tactical Global Management
- 2006-2012 Chairman, Queensland Competition Authority
- 2008-2012 Consultant, Frontier Economics
- 2012-2023 Senior Associate, ACIL Allen