

# THE NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION OF ECONOMISTS CONFERENCE (NZAE): 27–29<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2001

Les Oxley

*University of Waikato and University of Canterbury*

## 1. Overview

Some 10 days after the Hawaii Conference on Business (HCB), (see Oxley 2001a) and I'm back in New Zealand attending the annual New Zealand Association of Economists (NZAE) Conference. In previous years my attendance at this conference has been lacking due to the overlapping schedules of the NZAE and Econometric Society Australasian Meetings (ESAM). With ESAM2001 in Auckland this year (see Oxley, 2001b), coordination between the organisations finally proved successful.

Like the HCB, the NZAE conference was based in the same hotel where most delegates stayed (Holiday Inn). This is where the similarities ended. Apart from a few minor issues discussed below, the NZAE was a (near) model of conference organisation, due in no small measure to the skills of Val Browning, Administrator for the NZ Association of Economist Inc. Some delegates were 'fooled' by the 356 Oxford Terrace Christchurch address for the venue (apparently this is a very long road that crosses the Avon River) and possibly by the recent name change of the Centra Hotel to the Holiday Inn. One delegate in particular was seen wet and bedraggled pulling her suitcase along the Terrace having chosen an airport shuttle-bus over a taxi. Her husband warned me not to joke about it as we opened the taxi window to offer her a ride. Wisely, I followed his advice.

Although the conference bag was replaced with a cardboard conference folder, (typical for this conference), it contained much of what the serious delegate required. In addition to the programme, it contained floor plans of the conference venue, (little niggle — no email access), no fewer than 4 variations on lists of delegates and their email addresses (listed by attendees, chairpersons, discussants and presenters), abstracts of all papers presented, and important housekeeping notices. According to the information provided, 126 delegates attended (I didn't even have to count the list of names — each was numbered), with 4 'guests'. I would say these numbers were approximately correct. There were no conference proceedings either in paper or electronic form available at or before the meetings — normal practice for the NZAE. However, it seems that, after the event, papers

are now available at, [http://www.nzae.org.nz/conference\\_details.php](http://www.nzae.org.nz/conference_details.php). At \$295 for members and \$360 for non-members (both inclusive of 12.5% Goods and Services Tax and both exclusive of conference dinner at an extra \$50 per person), the registration fee might be regarded as a little high. However, no one seemed to complain. With a large number of New Zealand civil servants attending the conference (which is typical for this event) perhaps the organisers have identified their market niche quite well.

The involvement of economists from the various Government Ministries and agencies adds a unique, refreshing focus to the conference and is an excellent venue for academia and government agencies to forge synergistic associations. Perhaps for this reason the 2001 NZAE was chosen by the NZ Treasury to launch its *Academic Linkages* initiative (see <http://www.treasury.govt.nz/academiclinkages/>) with both Alan Bollard, Secretary to the Treasury, and Grant Scobie of the Policy Coordination and Development Section of Treasury in attendance. Several other Treasury members also attended and presented papers at the conference as did delegates from NZ Reserve Bank, Ministries of Social Policy, Foreign Affairs and Trade and Labour. The Treasury Launch on the first evening was preceded by complementary drinks and nibbles and acted as the conference 'social opener'. Tim Hazeldine from the University of Auckland attempted to use his toastmaster skills to attract the attention of the gathered crowd, only to realise that drinking glasses are 'not what they used to be' showering Alan Bollard in splinters when calling the meeting to 'order'.

## 2. The academic programme

The Vice President of the NZ Association of Economists, Caroline Saunders, opened the conference at 10 am on the Wednesday morning. Even so, some delegates found 10 am too early for an opener if flying-in from the regions. The opening was immediately followed by the first keynote speaker, Rod Carr, Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank. His speech was entitled: 'Banking on Capital Punishment'. There was a time when every word uttered by the Reserve Bank was seized-upon by the media to extract potential gain. It seems as though Rod had been warned as much and chose to read each word carefully from his script. The venue for the keynote addresses did not help the monologue (a long room with few effective visual aids or efficient acoustics) nor did its length<sup>1</sup>).

The keynote lecture was followed by four parallel streams of sessions, each two hours long. This gave presenters approximately 25 minutes to present with 10 minutes to the pre-assigned discussants and 5 minutes of general questions. A reasonable amount of time compared to the 12 minutes or so at the HCB. Formal discussants (one of who was typically assigned to chair the session) are a tradition of the NZAE conference and an arrangement that seems to work well. Presenters were told to bring copies of their papers with them and most did. However, some sessions were very popular and the relatively few papers 'dragged-along' by presenters were soon gone. The NZAE has not followed the cd-rom, bound proceedings or dedicated web-page route to disseminate conference papers prior

to or during the conference. Future organisers may have to think of how they are to adapt to the new technologies now available. However, for the lucky few to receive papers, they could choose to read them at the session (but not before) which was much better than the HCB or ESAM2001 (see Oxley 2001a), with cd-rom only, solutions.

Following an excellent buffet lunch, Tony Atkinson presented the second keynote lecture: 'Explaining Recent Changes in the Income Distribution across OECD Countries'. Professor Atkinson had previously presented papers to NZ Treasury and would present at the ESAM2001 conference some two weeks later. His generosity in spending so much time in New Zealand must be to our benefit. Three parallel sessions wound-up the first day including a 'Consultants Corner' and a 'Teaching Principles of Macroeconomics' seminar, both of which seemed favourably received.

Day 2, Thursday, started at 9 am giving delegates time to take breakfast in refreshing contrast to the HCB. Except for the start time it followed a similar pattern to the opening day with academic sessions commencing with a keynote lecture — this time Paul Carpinter, recently stood down as CEO of the Ministry of Economic Development (MED). His talk entitled: 'Regional Development — from Matai to Maturity' stressed the need to consider regional issues within an overall agenda of economic growth policies. Lucid, entertaining and informative, Paul added anecdote to academic content to provide an excellent keynote address. Four parallel sessions of 2 hours duration followed the morning coffee break covering 'exchange rates', 'social', 'taxation issues' and 'unemployment rates'. Most papers in these sessions had an 'applied feel', as did many at the conference generally.

A post-lunch AGM was followed by two sets of 4 parallel sessions, one before and one after afternoon tea. The 'economics of trust', 'health economics', regional development' 'stock returns, superannuation and savings' were some of the sessions presented. Savings issues have a high priority in New Zealand as in many other OECD countries. The presentations in this session were lively and well attended as Treasury staff sought any clues to take to Ministers. More complimentary drinks (generally minus breaking glass) at the 'Chatz Bar' at 6 pm preceded the conference dinner. A few ministry staff I'd not seen all afternoon could be spotted close to the bar. They insisted later that this involved serious 'networking' and 'happened all the time in Wellington'. I remember some spinning a similar tale to me when they were students.

The conference dinner was held in the same room keynotes had previously presented their lectures. The room was much better designed for dining than as a venue for public lectures. Caroline Saunders was not discouraged by Tim Hazeldine's attempt at toastmaster, but luckily these water glasses were made of sterner stuff. Caroline informed us that the planned after dinner speech had been cancelled (probably a wise choice, see Commandment 8: *Select the keynote speakers wisely*, in McAleer, 1997), but then took the initiative to present one herself! I'm not totally sure if she remembered the content the next morning, but she seemed quite jolly at the time. Frank Scrimgeour (current Editor of the

Association's journal, *New Zealand Economic Papers*) followed Caroline with a statement of the financial health of the organisation and presented a number of new Association prizes (along with generous cheques) to several graduate students. These prizes were in addition to the annual Jan Whitwell Prize and Young Economist Essay Award that would be presented at the end of the conference. Perhaps the conference fees were being recycled after all?

There was no keynote lecture on the Friday morning following the conference dinner although parallel sessions were scheduled to commence at 9 am. Trade, productivity and environmental economics were the themes of three of the streams — traditional issues of interest in NZ. In addition, 9 am represented the start of a three and a half-hour session (with 20 minute coffee break) where postgraduate students could present work in progress. An excellent idea although the scheduling of the other parallel session papers made attempts to move in-and-out of the postgraduate session to hear particular papers, hard to coordinate. The final buffet lunch was concluded with the presentation of the Jan Whitwell Prize and Young Economist Essay Prize. Well, almost concluded. The organisers, quite sensibly, canvassed comments via a questionnaire. Once again they seemed to have gauged their audience well by offering, for the first time, prizes to those who completed questionnaires. The chance to win either a bottle of red or white wine was enough to double previous year's response rates.<sup>2</sup> This seems to say a lot about the delegates at the conference, but also offer a model to other organisers wishing to increase response rates to questionnaires. As an aside, asking delegates what they thought about the conference before they leave also seems a sensible thing to do.

## 1. Epilogue

Organising successful small conferences is no easier than large conferences see for example, Commandment 1: *Size is not important*, in McAleer (1997). By international standards the NZAE is a small conference with few overseas delegates, but by almost any standard the 2001 conference would have to be gauged a great success. It has some refreshing characteristics including a large proportion of delegates from NZ government agencies, a reasonable amount of time to present papers, formal discussants and relatively few formal speeches. It looks as though the NZAE has 'come of age' and can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with some of the larger international conferences held in Europe and N. America. Visiting academics to New Zealand should think seriously about attending future NZAE Conferences — they will be pleasantly surprised!

## 4. Classic quotes

No region should grow slower than the national average (Attributed to a previous NZ Prime Minister).

What motivated me to write this paper? My boss told me to. (Name withheld to protect his job).

## Notes

1. Note for next year, 'pack opera glasses'
2. The completed questionnaire acted as the 'ticket', although the positiveness of the responses was not a criteria for winning.

## References

- McAleer, M. (1997) The Ten Commandments for Organizing a Conference. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 11, 231–33.
- Oxley, L. (2001a) Hawai'i Conference Business or Hawai'i Conference on Business? *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 15, 679–84.
- Oxley, L. (2001b) 2001 Econometric Society Australasia Meeting: Auckland, 6–8<sup>TH</sup> July. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 15, 691–98.