



Obituary: Royce Elliot

Royce Elliott, who died on 19 September 2019, had a distinguished career in the Ministry of Agriculture, where he was a visionary leader for more than 20 years. He led the transformation of the state veterinary service, modernised the regulation of the dairy industry, oversaw the introduction of the fisheries quota management system and led the integration of the Ministry's food safety and agricultural biosecurity systems. He also served on many national and international bodies involved with agricultural and fisheries regulation and trade.

After graduating as a veterinarian in 1956 with honours from Sydney University, Royce practised in Northland, working for 2 years in Ruawai and 4 in Kaitia before becoming a research scientist at the Wallaceville Animal Research Centre, working on bovine mastitis. He then gained a Veterinary Services scholarship to study at Manchester University, where he gained an MRCVS by examination and a Diploma of Bacteriology. The following year he was awarded a Harkness Fellowship to study brucellosis from 1968–1970 at the Trudeau Medical Research Institute in Saranac Lake, New York. This training left Royce with a profound commitment to science-based decision making and a systematic approach to management.

On his return to New Zealand Royce joined the Animal Health Division of the Department of Agriculture to head the development of the scientific and management infrastructure for New Zealand's world-leading bovine brucellosis eradication programme. This included the expansion of the veterinary diagnostic laboratory network and the establishment of an associated veterinary investigation service.

Royce's vision was for the establishment of a veterinary field and laboratory capability in MAF to "define, protect and improve" animal disease status. This led to his founding *Surveillance* in 1973, modelled on the weekly disease reports of the US Centre for Disease Control, reporting trends and unusual occurrences in animal diseases as well as reports on surveys and epidemiological studies that supported our animal health claims for overseas markets.

From 1985 to 1990 Royce had the challenge of leading a major restructure of MAF. He created MAFQual, which amalgamated the field, laboratory and food inspection services of the Ministry into a single organisation. Out of this eventually grew Biosecurity New Zealand, the Food Safety Authority and ASureQuality, all true to Royce's vision of modern science-based risk management and quality management systems supported by diagnostic and epidemiological expertise. In the process *Surveillance* was expanded to provide support to health and biosecurity status claims for all agricultural and fisheries trade.

During these later years at the Ministry, Royce held a series of senior management positions including 8 years as Assistant Director-General and a year as Acting Director-General, before

retiring as Group Director Policy in December 1993. He advised the many Directors-General and Ministers he served without fear or favour – and with great discretion, as is evident from the logbooks of many of those meetings that he left with the National Library.

In the face of the neo-liberal Douglas reforms and the rise of managerialism in the 1990s Royce regretted the declining influence of science on public policy. Throughout his career he had worked to change MAF's culture from one of empirical thinking to one of scientific thinking. In his own words, "Bureaucracy's main concern is to see that certain things don't happen; but there is enormous satisfaction in having a team recognise what a country needs and making it happen!" His motivational leadership style reflected that view and his intellectual curiosity was constantly generating new ideas. He later admitted that "I got my kicks out of innovation and once satisfied that a need could be met, I tended to want to move on."

Royce had an insightful sense of humour that was never barbed and he was a great raconteur. He was wise and self-effacing, never promoting himself but instead supporting and encouraging others. He led by example and, unusually for a senior public servant of that time, kept his desk pushed against the wall so that he would have to turn round and engage his staff and other visitors without that symbol of authority between them.

Royce was not born to privilege but achieved a great deal by personal effort and intellect. He spent his childhood in an orphanage and in 2015 he published "The Glass Jar", the story of that experience.

Royce was one of a select group of veterinarians appointed as a foundation member of the Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists. He was also the Harkness Fellowships representative of the Commonwealth Fund of New York for New Zealand from 1984 to 1992. Following his retirement from MAF in 1993 Royce became Executive Director of the Institute of Public Administration NZ for several years and was involved in many community organisations including emergency management and St John New Zealand. For his contributions to agriculture he received a NZ 1990 Medal and an OBE.

Royce had poor health in his later years but remained cheerful and intellectually curious all his life. He was a devoted family man and is survived by Gwenette, his wife of 62 years, and four of his five children and their families.

– Contributed by John Hellström ONZM, BVSc, PhD in consultation with Royce's family and colleagues. John worked under Royce in various roles from 1972 to 1991, including as Chief Veterinary Officer (1987–1991) and subsequently built on Royce's vision for biosecurity as the Chair of the Biosecurity Council, 1997–2002.