

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Croxford, Alan Humphrey (1922–1985)

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Alan Humphrey Croxford (1922-1985), barrister, cattle-breeder and works administrator, was born on 22 September 1922 at Wangaratta, Victoria, fourth of seven surviving children of Victorian-born parents Charles Reuben Croxford, farmer, and his wife Irene Mabel, née Dunlop. Educated at Port Fairy Higher Elementary and Warrambool High schools, he developed an early enthusiasm for stock-breeding, winning the Port Fairy Young Farmers' Best Young Farmer award in 1937 and next year judging stock himself. In 1940 he began work as a law clerk in Port Fairy and on 6 October 1941 enlisted in the Citizen Military Forces. He transferred to the Australian Imperial Force in September 1942 but remained in Australia, serving with the 3rd Motor Brigade. Commissioned as a lieutenant in October 1945, he served in New Guinea with the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit from November 1945 to May 1946 and then at No.1 Internment Camp, Tatura, Victoria.

Immediately on leaving the AIF on 5 March 1947, Croxford entered the University of Melbourne (LL B, 1950). Admitted to the Bar on 1 August 1950, he built a thriving practice in Melbourne as a thorough advocate and forceful cross-examiner. He relished criminal law but also worked in liquor licensing law, common law and Equity.

On 16 August 1947 at All Saints Church of England, St Kilda, Croxford married Eleanor Pearl Willis, an army nurse whom he had met at Tatura. 'A farmer at heart', Croxford moved his family to 50 acres (20 ha) at Warrandyte in the mid-1950s, and commuted daily to Melbourne to attend his practice. At Warrandyte and later at Malmsbury and Nagambie (with the help of his daughters) he developed a highly successful Aberdeen Angus stud cattle-breeding program.

The lack of services and poor planning on the outer suburban fringes of Melbourne drew Croxford into local politics. Outgoing, friendly, with an imposing, handsome presence, a good sportsman and a family man who comfortably bridged the urban-rural divide, he soon emerged as a natural leader in the district. The local schools, sports clubs and Civic Association grew to rely on his analytical and organisational skills as well as his knowledge of the law. In 1961 he was elected to Doncaster and Templestowe Shire Council. As chairman (1961-66) of the Warrandyte Waterworks Trust, he set about improving services to his riding. His fellow councillors were quick to recognise his abilities: in 1962 he was appointed their delegate to the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, a body representing all Melbourne's municipalities in coordinating water and sewerage provision.

In 1966 the MMBW commissioners prevailed on Croxford to give up his law practice—and a higher income—to accept the full-time chairmanship of the board, the responsibilities of which now included drainage, urban planning, major roads and freeways, foreshores, river management and metropolitan parks. This position, encompassing the role of chief executive officer, was one of great power but with it went a heavy workload, particularly given the pressures of urban expansion. Croxford proved an able, if sometimes abrasive, administrator with an ability to digest masses of detail. Above all he was decisive, tackling head-on anyone who disagreed with his plans.

Croxford had a clear vision of what the board must do. The population of Melbourne was predicted to double over the next two decades; accordingly it would be necessary to double water storage and sewage-processing capacity as well as extending services to old and new suburbs. In an increasingly tightly regulated capital market, Croxford cajoled unprecedented levels of finance from both State and Federal sources. Despite his Liberal leanings, in 1973 he struck up a strong working relationship with Tom Uren, minister for urban and regional development in the Whitlam Federal government. The resulting funding did much to clear the backlog of work on Melbourne's sewerage system, laying the foundations for an infrastructure that served the city to the end of the twentieth century.

The board found Croxford an inspiring leader after his indecisive predecessor, Raymond Trickey, and appreciated his willingness to defend the organisation when attacked publicly, as it often was over issues ranging from rate increases to the concrete lining of creeks. During his first decade at the MMBW its workforce doubled in size and a massive building program began; it included the construction in Spencer Street of a forbidding bluestone 'fortress' as head office, complete with a sumptuous twenty-second floor office to which the chairman allegedly summoned State government ministers. An enthusiast for new technologies such as computers, he encouraged innovation. His uncanny ability to remember the names of workers, and of wives and children, and his zeal for social events that brought the workforce together, made 'Big Al' popular with the rank and file—despite his insistence on conservative dress codes and his anti-union stance on industrial relations. Some commissioners, however, particularly those representing the more environmentally active local governments, were unimpressed by the autocratic way he ran meetings. Discontent with the MMBW forced the government of (Sir) Rupert Hamer to establish a public inquiry in 1977, the report of which affirmed Croxford's 'enlightened dictatorship' (as the *Age* put it) by replacing the fifty-four quarrelsome commissioners with a board of seven.

As one of Victoria's best known and powerful public bureaucrats, Croxford was dogged by controversy including a 1972 inquiry into his land dealings (during which he stood down as chairman, and which exonerated him). His relations with the press were always wary, often hostile, and coloured by its perception of his arrogance. In some respects he was an environmental pioneer although not widely recognised as such. His credentials were evident in the sewerage of Melbourne's postwar suburbs and in a change in philosophy on metropolitan drainage that led to the revitalisation of many

suburban creeks. The associated system of metropolitan parks owed much to his strategic flair. On the other hand, the freeways built by the board as well as its attempts to deposit treated sewage into Port Phillip Bay and to dam the lower Yarra River were attacked by environmentalists.

The State Labor party was a constant critic of Croxford's style and policies, and its election in April 1982 prompted his resignation in July—pre-empting likely dismissal. Open-heart surgery in 1978 had slowed him somewhat, but in retirement he maintained his active engagement with family, friends and cattle-breeding, and his commitment to a range of community organisations. A Freemason from 1943, he was master of his Lodge (Chatham) in 1953 and past senior grand warden from 1981. In 1967 he had been a founding board member and councillor of the Australian Institute of Urban Studies, and was twice (1983 and 1984) elected its chairman. Embarking on a third term, he died of a heart attack on 13 November 1985 in Hobart, and was cremated. His wife and their five daughters survived him.

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