

Charles Copeman: 1930 - 2013

A Tribute and comment by Ron Manners – www.mannkal.org

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The passing of Charles Copeman, raises an interesting question about Australia's mining industry.

Most other industries, and particularly Australian sport and even the media themselves, have developed the fine art of promoting their heroes and recognizing them appropriately.

Not so with the mining industry who, of recent times (apart from a very few notable exceptions), has become a succession of short-termers running the industry and remaining in place just long enough to exercise their share options or collect their golden parachutes and then vanish into the distance.

Charles Copeman was of an earlier era when 'miners were heroes'. They were industry builders and creators of wealth for their shareholders and nation builders.

I first met Charles in 1968 through our mutual involvement in the Duke of Edinburgh Commonwealth Study Conference and have valued his friendship ever since.

Charles was no 'follow the leader' sort of guy, he was 'the leader' and it was this characteristic that caused him to 'draw a line in the sand' when many of his contemporary corporate leaders stood by in a 'deknackered' fashion whilst labour-union thuggery brought Australian mining to its knees in the 1980s.

The story has it that Charles' company, Robe River, was 'only offering' a range of 15 flavours of ice cream at their mining camps and the unions went on strike because they insisted on 16 flavours.

Charles said, "enough" and promptly sacked 1,100 union workers and restructured the company to once again become competitive.

It took courage to do this, but the alternative was for his company to vanish into economic extinction.

Subsequent mining historians have commented on the absolute lack of support that Charles Copeman received from the mining industry generally. They appeared more comfortable, standing by in the hope that he would fail and that they may benefit from picking up Robe River's iron ore customers.

This same industry, perhaps with a sense of guilt, has always been somewhat hesitant in acknowledging Charles Copeman's leadership role in returning competitiveness to our industry.

Some years later, it was widely published that as a result of his courageous actions, the mine's productivity was quadrupled and export volume doubled.

Charles later became the President of the AusIMM in 1988 and made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1999 and subsequently was inducted into the Australian Mining Hall of Fame in 2009.

Further particulars available [here](#) [*Heroic Misadventures (Australia: Four Decades – Full Circle) pages 360 – 361*]