

Union breaker Copeman joins mines hall of fame



Honoured: Charles Copeman rewrote Australia's industrial relations rules.

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LOUISE BURKE and PETER KLINGER

Charles Copeman, the Robe River boss who single-handedly busted the unions' grip on the Pilbara iron ore industry in the 1980s and in the process rewrote the country's industrial relations, is being inducted into the Australian Prospectors and Miners Hall of Fame.

He will be inducted in Perth on Friday night at a function sponsored by BHP Billiton, one of the beneficiaries of his actions two decades ago.

Mr Copeman won acclaim and disdain from opposite sides of the political fence in 1986 when he sacked 1100 iron ore workers and hired just over half of them back on his own terms in an attempt to lock out the unions.

At the time he justified his actions by pointing to a subsequent trebling in the mine's productivity and doubling its export volumes.

To this day, the Pilbara remains

virtually union-free, a position major players such as BHP and Rio Tinto, now Robe's parent, are keen to maintain.

Mr Copeman, 79, was made a member of the Order of Australia in 1999 for his achievements in the mining industry.

He will join four other mining identities, whose combined achievements in the industry span nearly 200 years, in being inducted into the Hall of Fame.

The other inductees are the late Charles Warman, the late Ross Kennedy and 19th century pioneers William Clarke and John Reid.

Kalgoorlie-born Mr Warman, who died last year, will be cited for his role in the development of the Pilbara iron ore industry, having financially supported Stan Hilditch, who discovered the Mt Whaleback deposit at Newman.

Dr Warman also promoted agree-

ments between companies from Australia, Japan and the US in developing the Mt Newman iron ore operations.

He was a graduate of the WA School of Mines and became a renowned scientist, designing the patented Warman slurry pump, which is used around the world.

Ross Kennedy, another post-humous induction, will be recognised for his role in several big gold and nickel discoveries in the Goldfields and Murchison, such as the Paddington and Mt Pleasant finds, as well as the Challenger strike in South Australia's Gawler Craton.

John Henry Reid made his name with the discovery of the Leigh Creek coalfield in South Australia in the 1880s while working as an engineer for South Australian Railways.

English-born William Clarke created the first geographical sketch map of NSW in 1880.

**Charles Copeman's induction
into The Australian Mining Hall of Fame***

If you judge Charles by his words you will come up with the same answers as you do when you judge him by his actions, both embodied in the single word **Leadership**.

The essential ingredients of leadership are humility and courage and the wisdom to act on your judgement.

For Charles' words please read his 1988 Presidential Address to the Australasian Institute of Mining & Metallurgy.

It included:

- "...it is fair to claim that the mineral industry had played the major role in providing the means for the advancement of the human quality of life".
- ... we know that as members of the mineral industry we have a responsibility to do what we can to help other people to be aware of, and to understand the significance of, those facts which will only speak for themselves if we take the trouble to make them known".

Now moving to his actions.

Charles Copeman, almost single-handedly reshaped Australia's archaic industrial relations practices when he was M.D. of Peko-Wallsend / Robe River in the 1980s.

Able described by Tim Treadgold in the *BRW* magazine of April 7, 1997 - "...had the effect of boosting productivity 400% and elevating Robe River from a corporate basket-case into one of the world's most efficient iron-ore operations". ...

That's a remarkable statistic for one man, a true hero of the nation.

Charles, by causing Australia to be competitive, you planted the trees, so the rest of us could come along later and gather the fruit. We will be forever grateful.

I'll close with a brief quote from one of Australia's leading economic commentators, when he sent me an email this week, on hearing the news of Charles' induction to the Mining Hall of Fame.

He said, "They don't make them like Charles Copeman anymore. I wonder who will be the first business leader to stick their head up and say the re-regulation of the labour market is a load of crap, and actually do something about it?"

Charles, we are honoured to have you and Alison here with us tonight and we look forward to your words of wisdom.

*Ron Manners' notes—Perth, October 23, 2009