Perce Harpham

B. E., M. Sc., FIITP, Dip Bus Stud.(Dispute Resolution)

I was born in Tauranga and graduated as a Chemical Engineer and Mathematician from Canterbury University in 1955. I had 2 New Zealand University Blues in rowing.

I was President of the Computer Society in 1973-74. It is now the Institute of Information Technology Professionals and I am a Fellow of that body.

I have given numerous lectures on technical and political topics including being a keynote speaker at a conference in Beijing in 1989.

I stood for the Green Party in Hutt South in 2002 but joined the Labour Party in 2006.

So having had a long, interesting and fortunate life I hope that some of my opinions may be of interest to others. They have been formed by many influences and experiences.

I was raised in "The Depression" of the 1930s by my four siblings and wonderful parents who lost their farm early in 1929 when the price for wool dropped below the cost of production and freight. Then I had great teachers at school and universities as well as mentors in my employment at Dulux New Zealand for 14 years. This included being sent to the United Kingdom for eighteen months to study "anything interesting" in the ICI group of companies. My wife, Myra, gave up her professional career with the Department of Industrial & Scientific Research to come with me and our first child was born in England.

The ICI Board of Directors had made what I have always regarded as an impeccable main board decision. This was to put a computer from each of the leading developers into one of their divisions. Then to do as they were told in using the computers for three years before evaluating the results and considering putting computers into all their companies world wide. So in 1957 I visited six ICI divisions and reported back that computers were not cost effective. I did not foresee that in the next 3years the cost per unit of usefulness would drop by a factor of about 9.

Then as an Operations Researcher in Australia reporting to the Technical Director I was able to study all sorts of management problems at a high level and to improve a number of operational practices. I returned to NZ as Factory Superintendent then Production Manager at Lower Hutt. Next I was responsible for investigating and installing for Dulux the fourth computer in NZ and joined the management team.

I left Dulux in 1968 because of the threats of recession and staff unemployment that accompanied the UK joining the Common Market. With the vision of establishing a "programming factory" and a computer software industry in New Zealand I established, Progeni, the first software company in NZ. Its story of success and failure is on my website (perce.harpham.nz).

Progeni prospered for 21 years with offices throughout NZ and Australia as well as Chicago, Los Angeles and Beijing. We provided 80% of the joint venture staff who developed the software for the Wanganui Computer System (for the police, justice and transport departments). I know of no other large project which was brought in on time, on budget and exceeded the specification. We made a profit and paid tax on it.

We were responsible for most of the Poly computer development. We took it over when the Government welshed on its undertakings to buy these computers which were specialised for educational purposes.

We had run computer courses for about 12 Kura Kaupapa middle-aged teachers in 1988. So I next thought our system would be of great assistance in the teaching of Maori and we put a lot of effort into a short demonstration course with the help of the lecturer in Maori at Victoria University.

A group from Wainui Marae liked the demonstration but not the lecturer's pronunciation or choice of words. They were keen to work with the Open Polytech to develop a full course. Four Polytech staff members were released from duty to work with the Wainui

people. Then one of the senior Maori (I forget his name but he was later knighted) thought it would be very profitable. He and the Open Polytech could not agree on the division of profits and the idea collapsed.

We pressed on and talked to the Maori Language Commission. They too were impressed but one of them told me that we could never sell our system to them because I was not a Maori. Racial prejudice has been around for a while! It was several years before a computer-based Te Reo course emerged.

My wife, Myra, was Co-Director of the Commission for the Future and had alerted me to the future of China. We first visited China in 1982 and by 1989 had made a few sales leading to us adding Chinese character-handling to a new range - the PolyC computers..
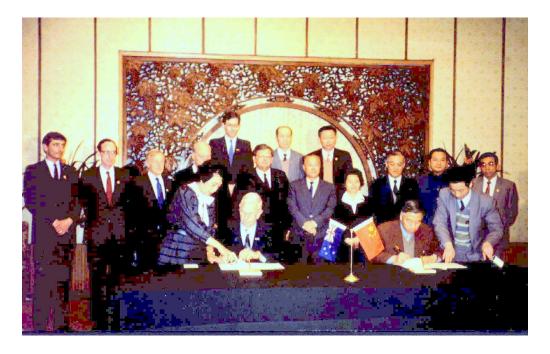
Our system did have particular merit for teaching languages and we sold more to the Chinese before the Tienanmen square disaster and the failure of the Bank of New Zealand, then owned by the Government,in 1989.

The Beijing Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics used our computer system to develop a very successful course to teach American English to their Chinese students.

We had earlier recruited Zhao Ling, a recent immigrant to New Zealand. She was incredibly well connected having been an interpreter for Zhou Enlai (first Premier of the People's Republic of China) The results were amazing.

We established an office in Beijing and brought 12 Chinese from different organisations to NZ to work with us. The world was wide open ahead of us. The Tianenman Square disaster halted things for a year but we retained our presence and marketing efforts.

I prize the photograph below which shows me signing the contract to supply PolyC computers to the Beijing Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics. It shows us being watched by Zhao Ziyang, Premier of the Peoples Republic of China with his entourage, and David Lange, Prime Minister of New Zealand with his entourage, in the Fishing Palace in Beijing, March 1986.

But then came the 1987 share crash! The Bank of New Zealand was owned by Government which rescued it. (The whole scandalous business of this and the "wine box" has never been told).

This was not enough and the BNZ was desperate. It put receivers into companies where it thought it could recover money quickly. Nonetheless Government had to put in more money and ultimately sold (gave away?) the BNZ. In the meantime in December 1989 Progeni was put into receivership. We managed to avoid publicity for a week until the vice-president of the Agricultural Bank of China (It only had 1.5million employees and 40,000 branches) came to NZ and signed an agreement to use the PolyCs for all their education needs. It was of no avail. Progeni was killed.

Fortunately Myra and I were running our finances separately. At age 57 I went from having been, mistakenly, named on the NZ "hundred rich list" to being unemployed with no income, a personal net worth of $8,000 and no unemployment benefit because my wife had an income. .

I then ran a small consulting business and completed a 2 year Massey University post graduate course in Arbitration and Mediation in readiness for the projected computer problems in the year 2000 which were mostly avoided.

The point of all the above is that systems of management and control of both people and systems have been an interest of mine from the time I graduated as a chemical engineer. I have been able to pursue this interest in other areas and other countries. Along with my wife and family, people of different ethnicity, creeds, nationalities and religions have informed my views in many different areas – particularly as regards governance and the management of our world.

I enjoy sailing. My wife, Myra, as well as my three children and eight grandchildren are less enthusiastic so I have often sailed solo, such as a return voyage to Sydney at the age of 71 in my 25 foot yacht. I have published a book about my sailing life.