



SIGMA

Creating Change Together



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SIGMA News

May 2019

**On 9 May it was “Europe Day”
This May, the European elections took place
And SIGMA celebrates its 27 years of age**

SIGMA has always been part of the “European project”. With this message we wish to pay a special tribute to the person who started SIGMA back in May 1992 – Bob Bonwitt – who sadly passed away last July. Bob’s manager and friend at the outset of SIGMA was Derry Ormond, so we will let Derry lead you down memory lane, with the help of some past and present colleagues.



SIGMA colleagues, 1993

<< Derry Ormond, Head of OECD/TECO, then of OECD/PUMA, 1972 – 98,
In liaison with several former colleagues and current SIGMA staff >>



Bob Bonwitt, who died in July 2018 after a three year struggle against cancer, was a truly exceptional person. He came to the Technical Cooperation Service (TECO) on a summer detachment from business school. We then worked together until my retirement 23 years later.

In an important sense, he then recruited us! We had just begun to focus the TECO's activities first on the fundamental difficulties of public management and governance; and second, to replace traditional advisory assistance by opportunities for countries to meet, bear witness, empathise and draw their own conclusions for change and reform or not. While Bob had a business and informatics background, he saw a wide professional opportunity in this nascent programme starting in the Southern European countries, but already beginning to interest some other Members. And he never looked back.

Bob was a man of exceptional drive and vision, analytical capacity and knowledge. But these qualities were always deployed with ambitious collective action as the aim, and he never stinted in effort and enthusiasm to bring his staff with him. He knew and encouraged each of them to give the best of themselves, and put a strong 'footprint' on their lives. He did not shrink from saying what he believed and giving his own opinion in any situation, whether asked for or not. This on occasion provoked considerable difficulties and hostility in the international context of his work. But he carried on, solely because he had a clear idea of what the courageous reformers in the SIGMA countries had to overcome.

Above all I recall him, and I am joined by many, as truly modest, willing to interact with anyone at any level; a man of real integrity, loyalty and incredible energy; someone who built friendship, and, who had a great sense of humour. In the last years, in spite of debilitating illness, he devoted his time and energy to each of those children in most need at the local branch of "Les Apprentis d'Auteuil". They have just planted a tree in memory of Bob. In all respects, he was a fundamentally Good Man.



The Bob tree (2018)

When Bob retired in 2012, he wrote the following farewell words, which gave a hint as to how Bob thought about SIGMA, Europe and his team. We would like to share them with you all today.

Dear friends, chères amies, chers amis,

Over many years, as part of OECD/PUMA/GOV and then as part of SIGMA, I have been given the enormous privilege of working with you as you try to advance democracy, good governance, rule of law and human rights. Much of this was in the context of the emergence of Europe as a strong and active geo-political force. So I have been doubly privileged -- I have also been able to make a small contribution to the wonderful adventure of "la construction européenne", of which since the War OECD was historically a partner, and its role in spreading peace, prosperity and stability in Europe and its neighbours.



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Together, we have marched as foot-soldiers in history, following the "Long War" of the twentieth century: the democratic transitions of the 70s in Southern Europe and their strengthening ties with Europe; the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the return of central and eastern Europe to its roots; the break-up of the USSR and the emergence of new democracies; the aftermath of the "Wars of Yugoslav Succession"; and now the "Arab Spring".

We have worked together to build some new institutions - PUMA (which became the OECD's Governance Directorate), SIGMA, NISPACE, ReSPA -- all of which will, I hope, stand the test of time and continue to promote our OECD/European good governance values for the benefit of our citizens.

As you may know, I started life as an engineer working on Concorde. When I joined OECD in 1976 (for a 3 month consultancy), I never dreamed of having a career as a bureaucrat. And I thought that nothing could beat the beauty and thrill of seeing Concorde take off for the first time (and not knowing if it would be able to land!).



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But I learned that it is even more rewarding to assist the slow, uncertain, struggle of dedicated public servants working to make public governance systems evolve towards higher values and better public service; to find in every change, however unpalatable we think it may be, some positive element on which we can build. Concorde leapt into the air in a few seconds and we knew it was a success. Governance reform needs a long view, peering through the surface whirlpools and ripples, to pick out the strong current of the river underneath.



My time with OECD, and as a partner of the EU, is now over. It has been 35 years and I don't think a day has gone by when I have not thought how incredibly lucky I have been. It was not mainly because I have been able to participate, from the margins, in reforms; not even that I lived in one of the most beautiful cities and travelled to wonderful countries. No, it was my contact with all of you that has so enriched my life.



It is often derided. We, functionaries, are the butt of jokes and the source of endless frustrations. But the current crisis has shown that we are invaluable. In many conferences, I have stripped to show you my tee shirt. For me that says it all.

I am not retiring, just leaving OECD. I hope to do some more work and some teaching. Perhaps chance will favour us to meet again in the future. With all my best wishes for a happy life and successful governance reform.

Bob

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