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Bro. Sir ROBERT (BOB) CARRINGTON COTTON

Bob Cotton was just a few months old when a few miners threw rocks on the tin roof of the family home at Broken Hill. He became a founding member of the Liberal Party, a minister in Malcolm Fraser's government and Australian ambassador to the United States.

"I am not a sideshow politician," he once said. "I am interested in the job of politics, not the appearance. And: "I don't believe in government by vested interests. You exist to serve the public interest of the greatest number of people."

He was more successful in this endeavour than most politicians, and won respect from both sides of politics. He ran against the Labor prime minister Ben Chifley in 1949 but became a Chifley friend after losing; he threw a birthday party for Gough Whitlam; and Bob Hawke kept him as ambassador in the US, describing Bob Cotton as a renaissance man.

Sir Robert Carrington Cotton died on Christmas Day 2006 aged 91, and his funeral service was held in Sydney on 2nd January 2007.

He was born on Broken Hill, the eldest of six children. His son, also Robert, said, "That city, with its tough climate and its tumultuous industrial and trade union history, had a profound impact on his views and political beliefs. The resilience of Australians, their humour and their practical 'can do' attitude became an article of faith."

It is recorded that a Robert Cotton was the last person to see Charles 1st before his execution and Bob Cotton believed himself a descendant. More recent ancestors settled in South Australia, producing a geologist, Leo Cotton, who went to the South Pole with Shackleton, Frank Cotton, a leader in sports medicine, and a paternal grandfather, Frank, who helped found the Australian Labor Party.

Young Bob went to St Peter's College, Adelaide. The Depression meant that the only work available was with his father, Les, who had been a miner before opening his own merchandising business. Qualifying as an accountant, he entered a partnership with his father. In 1942, Bob Cotton trained as a bomber pilot. Seconded to the Department of Supply in 1943, he was sent to Oberon to establish a timber industry with the war priority of supplying timber to the Broken Hill mines. Bob, with the subsequent support of brothers, Monty and John, developed the company into a significant regional business.

He had married his childhood sweetheart, Eve McDougal, in 1937. A partnership, they established Carrington Park at Oberon, a mixed farming business with an emphasis on fat lambs and stud sheep. Eve carried on with the latter after Bob's political career took hold.

After running against Chifley, Cotton held a number of positions in the Liberal Party, including president of the NSW branch and federal vice-president. In 1967 he led moves to end three-cornered contests in state elections. He entered the Senate in 1966, was minister for civil aviation in the Gorton and McMahon governments and for industry and commerce with Fraser.

After Harold Holt's drowning, he had opposed moves to have John McEwen, the Country Party leader stay on as prime minister. He also opposed Bill McMahon's run. After John Gorton became Liberal leader and prime minister, Cotton moved the motion deploring Edward St John's attack on Gorton, calling on him to leave the party. St John took the hint.

Cotton retired from representative political life on 1st January 1978, at which time he was awarded the KCMG for services in government. He was later made an officer of the Order of Australia.

Fraser appointed him consul-general to New York. Back in Australia in 1981, he served on the Reserve Bank, before being appointed ambassador to the United States in 1982. Perhaps his most significant victory was persuading the United States to abstain in the 1984 vote on a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty rather than voting against it.



Distinguished career ... Robert Cotton, pictured in 1969; top right, with Ronald Reagan in 1982, presenting his credentials as ambassador to Washington; and with daughter Judy, promoting their art show in Paddington in 2005.

The Cottons settled at Palm Beach, he pursued photography, holding several exhibitions in the US and Australia, including a joint exhibition with his daughter, Judy, a painter and writer, in Sydney in 2006. He held firmly to the view that from time to time governments would have to interfere, as market forces alone could not be relied on to deliver individual and social justice. He believed that federal-state relations were unfinished business.

He hated vegetables, loved meat pies and once moved a motion in Parliament for a debate on the national significance of the lamington. He also loved elections, and betting on them. Judy's last telephone conversation with her father was on his 91st birthday in November 2006, when they discussed the US election. "Who'll get up?" he asked. "Where's the money?" she said.

Eve died in 2000; in 2003 he married Betty Krummel who provided him with a new lease of life. He is survived by Betty, her three daughters, his two daughters, his son, seven grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Sir Robert Carrington Cotton was initiated, passed and raised in the three degrees of craft freemasonry on 17 March 1950, 4 August 1950 and 16 March 1951 respectively in Lodge Oberon No 355. He called off on 15 April 1994.

Ref: SMH, 4 January 2007

Records of the UGL of NSW & ACT.