

JOHN FITZGERALD – 2005

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By John Trevorrow

John Fitzgerald was editor of The Melbourne Herald during one of the biggest political stories in Australia's history.

*The Herald* uncovered the scandal of the Whitlam Government's 'Loans Affair' in 1975. The paper's revelations led to the dismissal of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam by the Governor-General, and the downfall of Whitlam's Labor Government after three tempestuous years.

John Alexander Fitzgerald, who died in 2007 at 76, was never actually in charge of running Melbourne, but he had a big say in it for a long time.

For half a century, the journalist known universally as "Fitzie" operated from largely behind the scenes, but he was one of the most influential, get-it-done men Melbourne has seen.

His was a career in two parts, each highly successful.

As a journalist, he made the transition seamlessly from an accomplished news reporter and sportswriter to a range of executive jobs, culminating in an eventful and courageous five-year editorship of *The Herald*, later merged into the *Herald Sun*.

Then he spent another 15 years as managing director and chairman of one of Australia's most successful public relations firms, IPR, now Shandwick IPR.

In that role he not only monitored and helped shape what was going on in boardrooms all over town, he raised a huge amount of money for charity.

"We couldn't stop him -- any charity that came through the door we'd work for them and there would usually be no bill sent," says Mark Kerr, son of the late Laurie Kerr, the company founder and a lifelong mate of Fitzgerald's.

“His philosophy was that you had to put in at community level and that's how you earned your stripes.”

Fitzgerald's love affair with journalism began, as it continued to do for many of Fitzgerald's proteges, in the bush. Originally from Bendigo, he began training as a cadet at the *Warrnambool Standard* before joining *The Herald* in 1951.

Even then he attracted special attention. His first 12 months were spent as an editorial secretary and assistant to the managing director, Sir Keith Murdoch, who had decided he needed to keep in touch with what the younger generation were thinking and the way to do it was through the views of one of his junior staff.

From an office next door he fielded Sir Keith's questions and accompanied him to board meetings in Brisbane and Adelaide, official lunches and dinners, and Murdoch family functions.

It must have been heady stuff, but colleague and mate John Dunn recalls: “Even though he was a country boy, Fitzie was no shy, rural type.

“Immediately his enthusiasm, engaging personality and confidence made him a central, albeit junior, figure on the editorial staff. He had an opinion, always forthright, on everything. He was simply irrepressible, a larger-than-life figure who lobbed like a grenade into the reporters' room.”

In the mid-'50s, Fitzgerald left for four years to work with *Australian Associated Press* in London and New York, covering a lot of major sports, including Ashes cricket, major tennis and Olympic and Empire (now Commonwealth) Games.

At the Vancouver Empire Games he interviewed a young 400m runner named Kevan Gosper, who became a firm friend. Years later, when Gosper became a heavyweight within the Olympic movement in Australia and internationally, he relied on Fitzgerald's “wise counsel” to guide him through the many controversies in which he became embroiled.

Returning to *The Herald* after reporting the 1960 Rome Olympics, he covered the 1964 Games in Tokyo before becoming chief of staff in 1966. In 1971 he began a four-year

stint as managing editor of the *South Pacific Post*, Papua New Guinea's only daily paper. He returned to become editor of *The Herald* from 1974 until his departure for IPR in 1979.

It was his years in *The Herald* editor's chair that took his career to a new level. Les Carlyon and Harry Gordon, both to become editor-in-chief of *The Herald & Weekly Times*, each described him as "a great editor". In neither case was it any platitude.

Two of Fitzgerald's great, agenda-setting newspaper coups were the investigations of the Whitlam government's notorious 'Loans Affair' and the Mafia's links with drug dealing in Australia.

Both involved reporter -- and long-standing friend and colleague -- Peter Game.

"They were two stories that underlined the quality of loyalty and trust, which made working for him so rewarding," Game said.

"In 1971 I tracked down the central figure in the loans affair, Tirath Khemlani, and persuaded him to tell his story.

"I interviewed him in London and the Minerals and Energy Minister, Rex Connor, sued *The Herald*. John rang my wife at home and told her he could be going to jail but said he intended to print my reports and assured me he stood by me 100 per cent.

"It was John Fitzgerald, editor, at his best. As it turned out he was right. Khemlani and I were able to produce a telex showing Connor had lied and he quit."