

**June 2022 - Interview of Dr. Keith Clifford Bell AM RFD:**

## **On the Awarding of Member of the Order of Australia in the 2022 Queen's Birthday Honours**

**By Scott Jukes**

**Scott:** Congratulations Keith, this is tremendous recognition. It speaks volumes about the quality of your professional contributions over the decades and the merit of your service and significant achievements. Your award also reflects well on the cadastral surveying and bolsters the gravitas of the profession as a whole. As a professional surveyor myself, it certainly fills me with pride in the profession.

You've had an illustrious journey since stepping down from the role of Victoria's Surveyor General twenty years ago – a testimony to your farewell words – that there was much more to come.

You stayed strongly connected to Australian surveying and ISV whilst overseas, including retaining your Victorian registration as a Licensed Surveyor. Over the years, ISV members have read some of your exploits which made *Traverse*. Also, you continued to actively participate in ISV professional life, sharing your knowledge and experience in subcommittees and preparing reports on important topics facing the profession in Victoria, and well beyond. Following a *Traverse* article by Keith Bell, members always comment to me about the value of your contribution and the high caliber of thinking behind the insights you share. Your 3-part article on the sustainability and growth of the profession (*Traverse* 305 to 307 in 2016) comes to mind. As does your seminal work on Global Experience of Land Registry Public Private Partnerships. A work presented to Victorian Parliament Legislative Council's Committee - Report into long term lease of Land Use Victoria, which had you quoted in an Editorial of *The Age*, back in 2017.

ISV members and the profession at large have been direct beneficiaries of your commitment and service and would celebrate your achievement and recognition.



**Pictured:** Dr Keith Bell (on the left) with Governor John Landy (third from the left)

**Keith:** Thanks for your kind words and wishes Scott. Personally, I find it very humbling – and I like it that way as I believe it's a fundamental Australian trait to be humbled by such things. On the other hand, I hope it's something that promotes the importance of the surveying profession to the broader community. Surveying is a very relevant profession and the opportunities available are huge. I think the award is also a matter of pride for my family and will be a lasting legacy. You can be assured that I will continue to contribute in the discussion of key issues, until I do hang up my boots. Let me also thank the many surveyors who have supported me over the decades – they have made this all happen.

**Scott:** Before we get into the main subject of this interview, could you briefly talk on what you've been up to done since stepping out of the Surveyor-General role. You were comparatively young when appointed in 1999 so you left at what most would call mid-career.

**Keith:** Indeed, I was offered the job at 38 and commenced soon after my 39<sup>th</sup> birthday. I left at 43 to join the World Bank (WB). I had thought I would just be a WB consultant for a period while undertaking a role at RMIT University. One week after leaving OSGV I was in Manila and after around 3 weeks I was offered a staff appointment to run the WB's land program across the East Asia Pacific region, based in Washington DC, the bank's HQ. On Boxing Day 2004, there was the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster which killed up to 200,000 people in Indonesia's provinces of Aceh and North Sumatra. I was in Melbourne at that time with family on Christmas leave. I had no idea what I would be engaged in the months that followed. By February 2005, I was back in Indonesia for brief mission to undertake

damage assessment related work and I ended up staying there, full-time for the next 18 months. I was part of a core team leading and advising overall reconstruction under the Multi-Donor Trust for Aceh and North Sumatra Fund arrangements. Former US presidents Bill Clinton and George H Bush visited and soon after I was advising the newly appointed United Nations Tsunami Special Envoy Clinton on land and housing matters. It was during those early days, we conceived the concept of “Build Back Better” to ensure that we invested in the reconstruction of resilient housing, infrastructure and services. The then WB President, Paul Wolfowitz, was adamant we had to put the R back into IBRD - International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which is one of the WB constituent agencies - there are actually five agencies.

So Aceh was almost right at the start of my 18 years at the WB. Several post-disaster reconstruction experiences followed including Haiti earthquake 2010, Philippines super-typhoon 2013, and Nepal Gorkha earthquake 2015. I have been an advisor on almost US\$6 billion in procurement of civil works including infrastructure and housing through my post-disaster reconstruction engagements. Plus I also took on assignments in conflict situations like Afghanistan.

By 2020, I knew it was time to move on as I became a sexagenarian - that is a polite word - I was approached to take on a role as Senior Adviser for Land Registration and Geospatial with the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia. I left WB in April 2021 and several months later was in Riyadh where I continue at this time. It does seem a long way from where I started out in Brisbane. Life remains an adventure and I relish new challenges and geography.



**Pictured:** Dr Keith Bell in Aceh

**Scott:** Well, that’s a good point to launch my first question. Can you tell me something about your early life and start of your surveying career?

**Keith:** Firstly, my early life, I will keep its brief. I was born in Brisbane and grew up there. I have 5 siblings. I went to state schools - Oxley State Primary and Corinda State High. I actually don’t have a long family history in Australia and can only trace things back to my grandparents. Most were orphan immigrants sent to Australia by Britain in the late 1800s and early 1900s - sadly all part of what was dubbed the Forgotten Generation and part of the awful policy to keep Australia white. My background is mainly Irish and I am still to apply for my Irish passport.

My father, a Second World War navy veteran died when I was at primary school. He also has post-war service which included being on the first Allied ship (HMAS Murchison) into Hiroshima in February 1946 to transport Japanese local government officials. All of the crew became ill and sadly most did not live long lives. One of the crew did survive to 2013, Noel Jensen-Holme and has written about it in a published report to the Atomic Ex-Service’s Association June-July 2013. Unfortunately, I did not learn about it until about a year after he died. He was a gunner like my father and they would have had to have been close shipmates. The exposure to nuclear radiation was also reported by a Swiss agency long ago. Exposure of the crew to radiation causing cancer and premature death was denied by the Australian Government despite much advocacy by people like Jensen-Holme. Anyway it’s all too late now. My mum, in her late 30s had to go to work – no war widow’s pension or other benefits.

My maternal grandfather, a First World War army veteran, died about a month after I finished high school. He was wounded severely, which impacted his entire life. He was Irish – and that’s another story given the British efforts to commit an Australian battalion to help quash the Irish Rebellion leading to mutiny, but it was corrected by the Australian government which ensured charges were not prosecuted against Australians by the British. My paternal grandfather was a conscientious objector.

My eldest brother was conscripted in the final ballot and was discharged in 1973 following the Whitlam government abolishing of national service. Victorian surveyor Ken Toleman was also in the last batch of conscripts.

I was in Army cadets for a few years while at high school – it wasn’t an especially popular thing to do back then, especially at a time of the end of Vietnam. So, I probably thought that was the end of army for me. But, it wasn’t.

Following high school, I was originally enrolled to do Engineering at University of Qld, but actually withdrew and effectively did what would now be called a number of consecutive Gap years. After around 7 months of doing different things and attaining the right age, I actually joined the army and after recruit course started in Armour, but soon transferred to Infantry as defence austerity measures precluded me from continuing my training as tracked vehicle driver and crewman.

It was over the next couple of years I decided to do surveying at what is now Queensland University of Technology and I graduated in 1983 – but I also continued army reserve service. Oddly, I started QUT when I was just 19 and I was around average age, despite having been out of school for some time in army. I had absolutely no problems in starting my education again and in fact, the time out of school had allowed me to grow up and be an efficient student. Also, having been “there and done that” I had really no interest in the University bar or other such places off-campus, so I avoided them.

Overall, QUT was a great experience and a very solid grounding. Around 18 months after graduation, I was recruited into the Australian Survey Office (ASO) in Brisbane and got licensed later that year. Prior to joining ASO I was with Port of Brisbane, which was a fabulous experience doing hydrographic and engineering work including work on the then new port development and also dredging operations. I also did cadastral work. At ASO, I did a range of cadastral and engineering tasks throughout Queensland, including the new Brisbane International Airport. But, what I really loved at ASO was getting into the bathymetric program over the Great Barrier Reef.

I first joined the Queensland Division of the Institution of Surveyors Australia in 1984.

While with ASO in Brisbane, I did undertake a Masters degree at University of Queensland, which also enabled me to pursue further career development as it covered both geospatial units and civil engineering. Ironically, I ultimately also got a second career as I much later became a Chartered Professional Engineer and I registered under the National Engineers Register as a Civil Engineer.

I continued my Reserve service while at university serving in Infantry. I returned to full-time service in late 1988 in Intelligence and did so until early 1990. I corps transferred back to Infantry in 1993. In 1999, I transferred to what became the Standby Reserve which has limited obligations and still a few years until mandatory retirement.

Phew – that’s about the gist of it all.

**Scott:** So, what actually got you into surveying? What was the motivation or attraction?

**Keith:** Surveying seemed to be the right fit for me and I was impressed by the staff at QUT with whom I communicated. I had no involvement with surveying or engineering in army, so it was all based on my research and interactions with QUT staff. I believe it was the right decision. It’s important to always encourage youth to think carefully before jumping into any career and to check all available information including social media. Talk to students and experienced professionals. I am strong advocate of school leavers to consider taking time out through Gap and taking the time to thoroughly check things out before making a decision to commit. A wrong decision can take a year, or even multiple years to course correct.

**Scott:** The citation reads: “For significant service to surveying, to geospatial information, and to humanitarian operations” and I see there is a short media note provided giving some background to your service. It’s an impressive resume : <https://honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/2011559>

So it is more than surveying in this, and we will get into it all during this chat.

**Keith:** I found it all a little overwhelming. But, it is what it is. It covers the surveying and mapping/ geospatial side as well as the international work especially in post disaster reconstruction.

**Scott:** What have been the greatest highlight/s of your career, as no doubt those do influence this award?

**Keith:** I could never consider there to be just a single highlight. There have been many during the respective episodes of my career. Let me describe a few.

At Port of Brisbane, while doing a channel survey off Moreton Island and taking a break for coffee, tied up against a beacon, we were visited by developer Keith Williams in his large fast boat. He had a special passenger on board, one George Harrison, who was in Queensland visiting with Keith at Tangalooma and later went up to buy Lizard Island in North Queensland. Working in bathy work and also with dredges with PoBA was really fun – back then we largely used sextants or actually quintants – I won't explain the difference, and leave that as your post-interview assignment. Working in hydrography and also port engineering including dredging was never a dull moment, it was fun. Technology was then starting to change with automated or digital recording and we had to test the impacts of vessel squat on high speed sounding operations.

At the ASO Qld office, I really enjoyed the Shallow Water Image Mapping (SWIM) Program over the Great Barrier Reef. Some fun long stints at sea operating out of Townsville and Bowen. Again, lots of technology changes especially moving into automated recording, moving from Transit to GPS.

An unusual experience was actually in Brisbane itself, while doing engineering detail surveys I discovered a number of marked buried chemical weapons storages at Enogerra Army Barracks– and it was just a km or so from a state primary school, it was mustard gas and who knows what risk the community ignorantly faced with these corroding canisters that had been sitting around for more than 40 years. I am talking mid-1980s.

I relocated with ASO into Canberra 1987 and was registered in both ACT and NSW through reciprocity. There were lots of great experiences in Canberra with ASO, which became AUSLIG in 1988. Perhaps a highlight was managing the reform of the digital national mapping program, called the Australian Geographic Data Base (AGDM) and leading the development of new DEM products to support the new telecommunications industry with mobile phones. I also did a development assignment in Canberra where I was the Chief Technical Advisor for the liquidation of Australian Construction Services in 1995 - probably was appropriate as I am also a civil engineer.

In Canberra I moved to the ACT Government from 1996-99 as the General Manager of the ACT Land Information Centre. We did some leading edge work with the ACT Cadastre (ACTMap) as well as collaboration with CSIRO in the development of an early generation web-based portal as well as a 3D modelling simulation system for planning and related purposes which more many of the hallmarks of what would almost now be called digital twin.

In Victoria, the highlight was all of the events associated with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary (sesquicentenary) of the Office of the Surveyor-General of Victoria. Traverse well reported the many events and the fantastic engagement of OSGV, the Board, ISV and ACSV as well as other prominent figures such as the legendary Governor of Victoria John Landy and the Lord Mayor of Melbourne John So. It was inspiring and a time of great professional pride for us all.

In Victoria, I took on a major role concerning governance for the Surveyor-General's office and was guided by The Auditor-General, the Victorian Government Solicitor and the Ombudsman. I won't go into details as they are well covered in various reports by these offices, but there were lots of issues.

Also in Victoria, it was good for the Surveyors Board to also focus on improved governance and gender balance. Dorothy Prescott was a long-serving Board member representing the community and in 2002 Gabby McCarthy joined the Board as the first female surveyor member. The Board also devoted much more energy on candidates for registration and encouraging youth to enter surveying as a career. It was good to formally celebrate the licensing of new surveyors. Presenting to you your own certificate of registration as a LS back in 2002 brings back great memories and I am proud of your service to the profession and your success with Andy Reay.

My engagement with the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) over the past decades has been full of great experiences and it was especially great to collaborate with Past Presidents Stig Enemark 2007-10 and Teo Chee Hai 2011-14. I was an honour to co-author FIG Publication 60 with Stig, "Fit-for-Purpose Land Administration", which has had a huge impact across the developing world Stig correctly predicted it would be a game-changer.

Now, I have already touched on what I have done since leaving Melbourne with WB and my current role in Saudi. So, it seems my destiny has had some weird design that I could never have foreseen.

**Scott:** I knew you have worked in some fairly difficult, if not precarious situations. We saw you get the medal from the former President of Afghanistan. You also got a medal from Vietnam. Any recollections?

**Keith:** My time at WB has not only seen me working in not only in post-disaster reconstruction, but also working in conflict (war) and post-conflict operations in places such as Aceh, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon,

areas of Pakistan and in areas close to Syrian from the Turkish side. The 30 year civil war in Aceh only came to an end with the truce signed late in 2005.

Sadly, with those experiences there have been deaths, with the most widely reported being that of the International Monetary Fund's Resident Representative in Afghanistan on January 17, 2014. I had just returned to Kabul, staying at the IMF Guest House and was invited to go to a safe external dinner at his favourite, the Lebanese Tavern. I declined, as I always did. At around 7.30pm that night, he was amongst 21 killed by an attack which started with a suicide bomber, breaking the entrance to the tavern, followed by two terrorists with automatic weapons. Also killed were 4 Canadians who had been staying at the IMF guest house.

I experienced attacks on several occasions with the last being an attack on my armoured SUV just outside Kabul airport in mid-2018. Fortunately, the vehicle sustained only minor damage. In another incident, a young boy, just 13, was forced to blow himself up by ISIS in 14<sup>th</sup> Street some 20 meters on the other side of the compound wall protecting my own office. Three were killed and the aftermath of the scattered body parts outside my office littering the compound remains in my memory.

I could probably raise at least half dozen more experiences, some Taliban and some ISIS. But let me conclude by saying that some of which have left deeply entrenched memories and feelings that just can't be erased. What's important is keeping perspective and moving on. One should not dwell on these things. And before you ask, I don't see a shrink and I don't medicate. But I think I should seek out Rob Steel at our favorite "All Saints" clinic at some time for an evening consultation with prescription.

As an aside, Afghanistan is a topic I can discuss with Gary Hunter, who has been a mate for over 30 years and also has done quite a bit of time in Afghanistan and other dodgy places and has had some serious experiences. Gary as you know was at Uni Melbourne for a long time and was on the Board. We have worked together in a few places, the last being Nepal. We are in regular communications and I value his counsel.

**Scott:** Thank you for sharing such intimate memories. Hopefully we can catch up with you at the "Wahgunyah Clinic" the next time ISV Regional Conference is the vicinity. OK, so changing the subject what turns you off professionally?

**Keith:** These days we see too much dependency on social media which fuels egos and needing to be noticed. In moderation, social media is probably Ok, but for some it's just too central to their lives. Often, if you dig a little deeper, what is claimed and what has really been achieved are some distance apart. But, never let the facts get in the way of a good story. I am not saying this is always the case, but there is a lot of it.

**Scott:** Would you do it all over again?

**Keith:** Possibly – but looking on these things with the wisdom of hindsight sometimes means I would do some things differently. In February 2020 I spoke at the surveyors' lunch at Parliament House in Sydney organized by Phil Hayward, former ISA President. My presentation for that, was the first time I had reflected on my time at WB. It really made me think about writing a book. But who would even read it?

As an aside, it was a great event and enabled me to catch up with former NSW Surveyor-General Don Grant who was upgraded to Officer of the Order of Australia in the 2020 Australia Day Honours. Don has been a great adviser for the past 25 years and we have also worked in a number of locations such as Vietnam, Philippines and Laos. Knowing such icons and being mentored by them has really made me.

**Scott:** Are you planning to return to Australia?

**Keith:** Yes, but it's all about when. I took early retirement from WB in 2021, around 7 years ahead of the mandatory age and almost immediately started a new role in Saudi. So, the game hasn't yet played out. It will happen - inshallah! I also know Ed Young would like me to bring my rather large collection of surveying instruments back to Australia.

As you know I keep a remote engagement with ISV and am never afraid to speak out on professional issues. I keep a role at the University of Melbourne's Centre for Spatial Data Infrastructure and Land Administration as an Advisory Committee member. Engineers Australia has chatted with me about mentoring professionals for humanitarian operations. Also, Army has exchanged with me about advising on operations for engineering works in the SW Pacific. I have been an advisor on almost US\$6 billion in procurement of civil works including infrastructure and housing through my post-disaster reconstruction engagements.

But, it would be nice to get to Lions games again, be they at the Gabba or in Melbourne. It was a great part of living in Melbourne and I fondly remember the late Norm Edwards with whom I was able to enjoy those Lions-Cats games on multiple occasions.



**Scott:** Any final thoughts?

**Keith:** We often hear the saying that history is the ultimate judge. It's almost 19 years since I stepped down as SG in July 2003. Before departing, I was humbled to be honoured by RMIT University with an Honourary Doctorate. Last September, University of Melbourne presented me with a lifetime achievement award. Now we have this honour which is again very humbling. It seems there are consistent verdicts being handed down by history. So the message in this is do the right thing – and that's what the late, great Governor John Landy advised me back in 2001 "Do the right thing". I think you would probably recall that I followed that advice and continue to do so.

**Scott:** Thanks for the chat and again congratulations on this great honour bestowed on you and something the whole profession can bask in. We look forward to seeing you back in Australia, and hopefully Melbourne in the coming years. I am sure there is still much more to come.

**Keith:** Inshallah! And may there be a Lions Grand Final!

**Pictured:** Dr Keith Clifford Bell (third from the left) with (from the left) past Surveyor Generals – Alan Fennell (Acting), Bob Eddington (Acting), Dr Keith Bell (SG), Governor John Landy, Colin Middleton (SG) & Ray Holmes (SG)

