GORDONSTOUN
Plus Est En Vous

John Chown

Gordonstoun House, 1949

Recognised for his notable contributions to international economics, tax policy and public advocacy

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John Chown is a distinguished economist, international tax specialist and public policy advocate.

He was born in 1929 in Yorkshire, the eldest of five children. During the War,the family moved to Cheshire, where John attended the village school briefly, before boarding at Wadham House (preparatory school), followed by a time at Lymn Grammar School, before transferring to Gordonstoun.

At Gordonstoun, John enjoyed broadening his musical horizons and whilst not a natural sportsman, was a keen high jumper. He was also a member of the choir. After school, he intended to study Engineering but during his time of National Service, he developed an interest in economics, and switched his course of study. A choice that brought him early success - winning the Adam Smith Prize at Selwyn College, Cambridge for his dissertation on fixed versus floating exchange rates. He also received the Wrenbury Scholarship as top of his year.

In 1962 he founded J F Chown & Company Limited (later Chown Dewhurst LLP) becoming one of the UK's foremost international tax specialists. For more than five decades he played a transformative role in shaping global cross-border taxation - pioneering the concept of international tax. During his career he has advised Chancellors and Shadow Chancellors, contributed to European tax reforms and worked internationally advising governments across all major economies on reform, policy design, and the development of modern fiscal systems.

John co-founded the Institute for Fiscal Studies, served on the International Tax Specialist Group and for many years was an active contributor to a raft of think tanks. His work has shaped UK/EU taxation and he has written several books on tax policy, including A History of Monetary Unions published in 2003. He has been a prolific writer, and a much sought-after international conference speaker.

John has always been a passionate supporter of the arts, served as Honorary Financial Adviser to the Royal Society of Musicians, a Founder Trustee of Handel House in London, became a trustee of London Handel Society and of Cambridge Handel Opera Group. His lifelong commitment to cultural philanthropy is reflected in his many honorary roles and long-standing support of musical charities.

My father was an astute businessman - I soon realised how much I had learnt from him.

He was exceptionally good at reading the signs of what lay ahead. In the late 30s, he was doing a lot of business with Germany and was increasingly fearful of the political situation. He bought and read an English copy of Mein Kampf after which he ceased his business activities with Germany and actively campaigned for the need for rearmament. True to his word, he adapted his business to manufacture aircraft parts during the war which included compressed wood propeller blades for Spitfires and the like.

When details of the first jet plane were released, I suggested that this was bad news for him as a manufacturer of propeller blades. He said no, businesses must always react to new developments as opportunities, not to seek to preserve the status quo.

I learned so much from him, but we couldn't have worked closely together. By his retirement, however, we developed a very satisfactory relationship as non-executive directors of each other's companies.

I could have made more of my career had I thrown myself wholeheartedly into one aspect - but I enjoyed the variety.

I accidentally became a connoisseur of fraud. It began when I advised the Irish government on proposals from international investors. In two cases, the paperwork was fine, but it "smelt wrong". To persuade my bosses, I had to find enough dirt on them to abort the project. A few years later, both cases went down for major frauds.

Public policy was another interest and became a serious concern with Jim Callaghan's disastrous 1965 budget. Ted Heath brought me in on his team and I worked closely with Enoch Powell and Keith Joseph, who passed me on to Margaret Thatcher. I became a major tax advisor to her Chancellors.

Then, when Communism collapsed, I decided I wanted to spend some of my time helping those countries develop capital-market-friendly tax policies. I worked in Poland, Estonia and Russia – some being unprofitable business, but fascinating for me and, I hope, constructive for them.

Gordonstoun taught me to think widely and independently - to see problems as opportunities.

I had a rather oddball but interesting circle of friends at school and this stood me in good stead for the vast variety of people I would meet in my career. Gordonstoun was unusual as, unlike other schools which put much focus on its First teams, it encouraged the likes of me to build on what talents I had and achieve a "personal best". I never forgot this and in my own firm, many years later, I recognised what this lesson had taught me: the importance of letting other people build on their skills and develop their own strengths.

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