

The champions in government: Ralph Tobias and Ian Macphee

‘That’d be right,’ he grumbled to himself. ‘Thinks he’s on a winner when all he’s got are the crumbs. Wouldn’t know a business opportunity if he fell over it.’ Ralph Tobias angrily bundled his papers together and left yet another upsetting government department meeting in disgust.

In 1976 Tobias was first assistant secretary in the Department of Productivity, Science and Technology. He had graduated from university as an engineer and started public service life in 1952 in the Department of Civil Aviation, eventually moving through the Departments of Supply and Industry and Commerce. At that point he was responsible for the initiation and oversight of technology development projects aimed at developing Australian defence industry technology. The development included type-testing the final products for defence approval. But Tobias was more than that. He was a man on a mission. Over time he had noticed how technological ideas and initiatives that were developed in Australia were never bought by the Australian military. There was an apparent disjuncture between the ability to innovate and the ability to recognise the commercial value and possibilities of Australian research. The pervasive culture considered that something made in the USA or UK would obviously be superior to an Australian-designed and manufactured product. International networks had been established and international mateships often maintained the culture.

As the years progressed Tobias was able to influence some decisions to help the cause. On a visit to the Australian Research Laboratories in Adelaide, for instance, he learnt that the laboratories had been developing a sonobuoy system to detect