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Alexander King

Charismatic scientist who founded the Club of Rome and shaped science policy at the highest levels

January 26, 1909 - February 28, 2007

Alexander King was a scientist, international civil servant and pioneering environmentalist at the forefront of new thinking about the role of science in public policy. In 1968 he co-founded the Club of Rome, a global think-tank concerned with world problems and the future of humanity. Its honorary members included Mikhail Gorbachev, Jimmy Carter and Václav Havel. Richard von Weizsäcker, the former President of Germany, once remarked: "The Club of Rome is the conscience of the world."

Born in Glasgow in 1909, Alexander King attended High-gate School. On the advice of his father, a director of ICI, he studied at the Royal College of Science, where he earned a degree in chemistry.

While doing postgraduate research at the University of Munich King met his wife, Sarah Thompson, a talented pianist and niece of the Liberal politician Walter Runciman. They shared a passion for music and literature. As an undergraduate King had edited the college's literary magazine, *The Phoenix*, and served as president of the literary and debating society where he met H. G. Wells and Vita Sackville-West, and attended Edith Sitwell's Saturday afternoon "salons" at her flat in Bayswater.

On his return from Germany, King was appointed lecturer in physical chemistry at the Imperial College of Science and Technology. However, the outbreak of war upset his plans for an academic career.

At the behest of Sir Henry Tizard, the Rector of Imperial, King joined the national war effort in science and technology. He became assistant director of scientific research at the Ministry of Supply. It was there, by chance, that a letter from the Geigy company in Switzerland to its subsidiary in Manchester was intercepted by the censor in Liverpool and landed on King's desk.

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The letter detailed the patent for a new moth-balling agent which, while toxic to insect pests, had low toxicity to humans. King immediately recognised its potential as an insecticide in the war against mosquitoes and lice, coining the abbreviation DDT to describe the chlorinated hydrocarbon compound. Within months the insecticide that was to save countless Allied troops in the East was in production.

In 1943 King travelled to Washington to discuss DDT with the Americans and while there was instructed to act as the head of the British Mission with a brief to oversee the exchange of scientific information with the US. Subsequently, he became director of the British Scientific Office in Washington, coordinating the Commonwealth scientific representation in the US. For many years the black deed-box that carried Britain's military secrets to America remained in King's possession. After leaving the US in 1947 he became head of the Central Scientific Secretariat, a personal scientific adviser to the Lord President of the Council, Herbert Morrison, and secretary of the Advisory Council on Scientific Policy. Working with Morrison and Tizard, King was involved essentially in civilian aspects of national science policy, and for the next five years he operated at the centre of government.

After the fall of Attlee's Government in 1951, King moved to the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. Although a physical scientist by training, he promoted research into the economic and behavioural sciences in British universities and led a number of multi-disciplinary studies, including a ground-breaking analysis of the social, economic, educational, technological, and political aspects of automation.

Having been for some years chairman of the Productivity and Industrial Research Committee for Europe within the OEEC, in 1957 he took up a post in Paris as director of the recently established European Productivity Agency. In 1961 the OEEC was reformed into the OECD, and King became a director, later a director-general.

As the director-general for scientific affairs at OECD he became concerned about the long-term consequences, both social and environmental, of untrammelled growth. In 1966 a Soviet colleague, Jermen Gvishiani — son-in-law of the Russian Premier, Alexei Kosygin — sent King a copy of a speech delivered by Aurelio Peccei, the president of Olivetti, in which Peccei discussed the threats posed by the population explosion, environmental degradation and misuses of technology. King made contact with Peccei and in 1967 they met to discuss their mutual interests in sustainable growth.

The Club of Rome was born a year later, in April 1968, at a two-day meeting of international colleagues sponsored by the Agnelli Foundation. Within a few years the club's ideas and approach to policy were being discussed widely around the world and the best-selling book *The Limits to Growth* (1972), based on research the club had commissioned, had sold about 12 million copies in 37 languages.

The Limits to Growth, which modelled the impact on the planet of a rapidly growing world population with finite resources, was arguably the first significant study to draw explicit connections between unchecked economic growth and the impoverishment of the environment.

For more than 30 years King divided his time between a *mas* in Provence and an apartment in Paris, where he welcomed visitors from around the world. He was aptly described by the *New Scientist* as a “cool catalyst with the golden knack of transforming ideas into action”.

King was a man of great charisma, with an insatiable zest for life and a longing for adventure that led him to cycle from London to Istanbul as a student. He crossed the Baltic in a collapsible kayak and headed a scientific expedition to Jan Mayen in the Arctic, making the first ascent of the second peak of its striking volcano, the Beerenberg, in 1938.

Despite the enormity of the challenges facing mankind he remained convinced that many of the world's problems were soluble, and after his retirement from the OECD in 1974 he continued to campaign for policy initiatives, taking over as head of the Club of Rome after Peccei's death in 1984.

King's autobiography, *Let the Cat Turn Round: One Man's Traverse of the Twentieth Century*, was published in 2006. Many of his ideas were developed in his books *Science and Policy: The International Stimulus* (1974), *The State of the Planet* (1976), and *The First Global Revolution* (1989).

In 1933 King married Sarah Maskell Thompson, who died in 1999. He is survived by two daughters.

Alexander King, CMG, CBE, scientist, civil servant, and environmentalist, was born on January 26, 1909. He died on February 28, 2007, aged 98

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