

Cowgill in demand, still young at 89

The Financial Times

Thursday 22 September 2005

Invitations for the 90th birthday party in November for Tony Cowgill, the former brigadier who is founder-director of the British Management Data Foundation, are likely to be keenly sought after, if this week's lunch to mark the body's 25th anniversary was anything to go by.

The softly spoken but immensely alert Cowgill set up the foundation to shed light on business subjects close to his heart, such as the role of manufacturing, company regulation, energy strategies and whether Britain would be better in or out of the euro. (He does not like to appear dogmatic on such matters but he leans firmly towards the latter and is a strong critic of most things to do with the European Union.)

About 20 companies – including Rolls Royce and British Nuclear Fuels – pay £9,000 a year to be members of the BMDF. This allows them to sit in on meetings with civil servants and others judged to be influential and have a say in putting together reports on Cowgill's catholic area of interests.

This week's event in London drew top people in the world of economics and policy making, including Ruth Lea, head of the Centre for Policy Studies, Derek Scott, until recently Tony Blair's chief economic advisor, and Sir Alan Budd, formerly the Treasury's most senior economist.

Cabinet secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell, another long-term contact, could not attend but sent a message of appreciation.

Sir Bernard Ingham, the pugnacious press secretary during Baroness Thatcher's prime ministerial career, paid tribute to Cowgill's indefatigable approach.

What is his role exactly? Cowgill eschews the term "lobbyist", which he reckons sounds a bit too crude; he prefers to call himself an "illuminator of facts". He said he could not guarantee to be around for the 50th anniversary but promised a few more years of winking out information and making it accessible.