

New knight charges at chance to attack Govt

By KEITH NEWMAN

Angus Tait, patron saint of the New Zealand electronics industry used the occasion of his knighthood at the weekend to argue for a shift in Government attitude and philosophy.

He said radical change was essential if the nation was to have a healthy technology-based industry.

Our 100-year-old, agriculture-based economy was not working well.

“Whoever is going to be in power over the next five to 10 years has to sort out how they’re going to drag the country out of the number 26 position in the OECD race back up to where it used to be 20 years ago. A primary and agricultural-based industry is not going to do that.”

Sir Angus, knighted in the Queen’s Birthday Honours list for service to technology, manufacturing and exporting, founded Christchurch-based Tait Electronics, our largest exporter of telecommunications equipment, 30 years ago.

The company has an annual turnover of about \$150 million and 95 per cent of its output is exported. It employs about 1000 people.

“We have been, and still are,

only demonstrating what can be done. If that was multiplied by 10 or 20 times, which is entirely feasible, New Zealand would have a substantial technology based industry and a lot fewer problems than it has at the moment Sir Angus said many countries of comparable size and resources had built substantial, technology based industries which make a significant contribution to their economies. “I don’t think that’s believed at the Beehive,” said Sir Angus, who has been campaigning for changes in the New Zealand attitude towards technology for 20 years. “While we have a very cost-effective economy, Ireland, Finland and Singapore haven’t had governments sitting on their hands on the sideline. They’ve had their hands in up to the elbows in making things happen.”

Sir Angus blames our woes on the post 1984 philosophy which suggests the market alone will solve all our problems and that the Government should neither help nor hinder.

“In the lunatic years of the 1980s no one listened because so many clever young men in glass towers moving pieces of paper around had everyone’s attention.

“It’s important, however, not to lose sight of the fact no true wealth is ever created until somebody makes something physical. That’s what creates careers and jobs.”

He said New Zealand did not have the energy, money and resources with-in the country to create substantial industries. Significant investment had to be encouraged.

“Major players are going to other parts of the world for tax holidays, cheat land and buildings at minimum cost, while we proudly say sunshine’s free and the air’s good but we’re not going to help you.”

One way to begin resolving the dilemma was to make it more affordable to train engineers than to train lawyers and accountants.

“But then there’s no use generating engineers unless there are opportunities for them. There’s got to be a broad rethink across the spectrum.”

Sir Angus, who has refused to sell his company to overseas interests, still takes a hands-on role and is in the office most days.

“I tell the young men around me they will be carrying me out with my boots on.”

Sir Angus will be 80 next month.

He is uncomfortable with his knighthood saying he will be “deeply offended” if anybody addresses him as Sir Angus.

“Beyond all else, if your head is adjusted correctly all you need is to be accepted as an ordinary person.”

