

James Allcock OBE: A Tribute

By Richard Higginson

It is with a deep sense of personal loss and affection for one of my closest friends that I write this tribute to James Allcock, who died on 23 November 2025. In the business world, he will be best remembered as the British Gas director who was pivotal in securing reliable supplies of gas both before and after privatisation. He also played a key role in the life of Faith in Business for many years, and was an enthusiastic reader of this journal.

James and his twin sister Frances were born in 1935 in Valletta, Malta, but soon returned to England; his father Frank was an electrical engineer for the Admiralty. Educated at Bradfield, he did two years of National Service in the Middle East and West Germany, before studying economics at Emmanuel College Cambridge. It was a time when undergraduates sat at the feet of the great names in any discipline. James, a keen Christian from a conservative nonconformist background, came under the abiding influence of CS Lewis. While many of his Christian friends went into ordained ministry, he felt called to business, but his strong sense of service led him into the public sector. So began a long career in the energy sector, interspersed by recreational trips to the mountains: he climbed many peaks in Snowdonia and the Alps.

First, James worked for the National Coal Board as a graduate trainee, gaining experience in the harsh reality of industrial life in the collieries of Staffordshire. Then in 1962 he became personal assistant to the chairman of the Electricity Council, before transferring to the Ministry of Power to embark on and oversee the distribution of natural gas which was then being discovered under the North Sea. This led James to join the

newly formed British Gas Corporation in 1972. He played a major role in securing reliable supplies from offshore companies, developing great skill in the negotiation of prices. Donald Trump talks to a nauseous extent about ‘doing a deal’, mainly in quite inappropriate contexts; James knew how to strike a business deal that was both favourable and fair. At his funeral, his sons told an amusing story about protracted talks which took place with a French gas company at a Paris restaurant. James took a break to visit *les toilettes* and came across his corporate counterpart who was also relieving himself. They agreed a figure there and then: the deal was done!

James ascended the corporate ladder and became the overall Director of Gas Supplies at British Gas in 1980. Charming and forthright, he was popular with the staff who worked for him; “every one of us would have walked over coals for James”, one said. He was awarded an OBE for service to the industry.

All through his career, James wrestled – and I choose that word advisedly – with the issue of what it meant to be an authentic Christian in business. I often heard him recall that, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was very little written on the subject; Sir Fred Catherwood’s *The Christian in Industrial Society* was pretty much the sum total. James felt he had to work things out for himself. He set himself to do so with his characteristic brand of intellectual rigour and dissatisfaction with anything that sounded glib or self-deceptively pious. In the 1980s he became a prominent member of the UCCF (Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) Business Study Group which held annual conferences under the auspices of the LICC (London Institute for Contemporary



Christianity), an organisation he later chaired. James was a frequent speaker at these events.

It was in 1989 that I met James for the first time. I was 35 and had just been appointed Director of the God on Monday Project (what became Faith in Business) at Ridley Hall. Conscious that I had much to learn, I signed up for an LICC/UCCF conference at High Leigh near Hoddesdon. James was speaking on Christian Distinctives in Business, a memorable talk that had a lasting impact on many who heard it. The talk was later published and two businessmen who attended that conference, David Parish and Cal Bailey, describe their response in the articles that follow. I realised that if Faith in Business was to flourish, James was a key person to have on board. We arranged to meet for lunch, James agreed to serve on our Council of Reference, and so began a firm friendship which lasted to the point of his death. We would meet twice a year for lunch, often at his London club, the

Cavalry & Guards on Piccadilly. Those lunches were always very meaty, and I'm not referring to the food on the plate. We would engage in detailed discussion of many substantial issues, mainly business and theology, washed down with a good bottle of wine and lots of humour.

On the business front, James was ambivalent about the privatisation of British Gas in 1986. When he retired in 1994, he predicted that the liberalisation of gas and electricity would end badly because the market had no interest in the security of supply (something he was zealous to safeguard), only profit. Of course, he believed in the necessity of profit and thought it right that some managers in a company (eg the finance directors) should make that their primary concern. But I will never forget his saying in a talk at Ridley Hall: 'The purpose of British Gas is not to make profits for shareholders. That is to confuse means with ends. It is to keep you, the customer, warm in winter.' All of us who heard that found it a heart-warming conviction.

James found retirement difficult at first, missing the buzz of business, but he remained active in the energy sector for several years in a part-time role. Until 1999 he was chairman of Interconnector UK, which built a pipeline between Norfolk and Zeebrugge, and he was director of a small oil and gas business, EnQuest. But he found other ways to spend his time and serve people, such as teaching English to immigrants, reading to a blind lady, and preaching at his local parish church in Chesham Bois. More recently, he taught himself to make wooden models and built uncannily accurate resemblances of three great cathedrals, Durham, Lincoln and Salisbury, in his garden shed.

James also threw himself energetically into the life of Faith in Business. He was an active player in several small group events which took place in the 1990s, notably *Transforming Leadership* and *The Stakeholder Economy*. He was a regular participant in all the annual spring conferences we ran at Ridley from 2000 until my retirement as Director in 2018. He

was a generous and faithful financial supporter; he was one of three key individual donors without whom Faith in Business would not have survived during those years. There was something slightly truculent about James. He would often provoke discussion by making an outspoken remark; this did not necessarily represent his final position on the topic but he did so in order to spark a lively debate. In the early years of FiBQ, he contributed several articles and reviews, and would always tell me what he found most interesting in each issue.

This tribute would be incomplete without mention of his family, to whom James was devoted. Single until his early 40s, he then married the delightful Judith, a medical practitioner, and they had two sons, Simon and Jonathan, who are married with children of their own. James was indeed a larger-than-life figure, and is greatly missed by all who knew him well. We thank God for his life of service, and offer our warm condolences to his family. 🙏



James Allcock with Prince Philip at the inauguration of the Interconnector pipeline in 1998. Photo: The telegraph.