



Home economics

He's the leading light in Australian economics, but money man/family man Saul Eslake still calls Tasmania home. Sophie Fowler reports.

It's not often that a number cruncher receives the attention that Saul Eslake has captured.

The chief economist at ANZ is widely considered Australia's number one money man and has become a familiar face in the media thanks to his reputation as the all-knowing, go-to man for anything and everything economic.

But there is far more to the former Smithton Primary School pupil than meets the eye and he is the first to admit that he can miss the mark sometimes.

"You have to cope with being wrong. Forecasting the kind of things that we do is virtually impossible to be 100 per cent right on," he said.

"I'm often wrong — hopefully not more than 50 per cent of the time otherwise I'd probably lose my job — but I am wrong sometimes about things like the exchange rate and interest rates.

"I'm not unique in that regard but if you can't cope with people reminding you of your errors then you really should be doing something else."

But make no mistake about Mr Eslake's loyalty to his home state.

The 48-year-old was born in England but moved to Australia with his Sydney-sider parents when he was eight.

His family lived in Smithton for a number of years before relocating

to Hobart where Mr Eslake finished his schooling at Hutchins.

He completed a first class honours degree in economics at the University of Tasmania.

Despite having lived in Melbourne for 24 years, his roots stay firmly planted in Tasmania.

"While I love living in Melbourne — and I'm eternally grateful that I can live here rather than Sydney — I think Melbourne's a great city but I would never think of myself as a Victorian," he said.

"In fact, sometimes if I'm asked where my home is, my answer is, 'home is in Tasmania but I live in Melbourne'."

A photograph of Marrawah, which Mr Eslake describes as one of his favourite places in the world, takes pride of place in his office and a Roger Murphy painting of the same area decorates his wall at home.





His parents lived at Marrawah for 14 years following his father's retirement as the school dental officer at Smithton in 1988.

The couple have since moved to Melbourne to be closer to their son and treasured granddaughter, Caroline.

Mr Eslake and his wife Linda adopted Caroline from Shenyang, China when she was two.

The move presented some real challenges for the family.

"It was a tough adjustment for (Caroline). The first six months or so were pretty tough, in particular she was not too enthusiastic about me and she was excessively enthusiastic about her mother," Mr Eslake explained.

He added that it was unlikely his daughter had encountered any men other than doctors at the orphanage she lived in previously.

"That was a troubling time in many ways but it was probably even tougher for her to be plucked out of her environment and handed over to people who looked and smelled funny and taken away to a different country and told, 'Well this is your life.'"

But Caroline fitted in just perfectly now, according to her dad.

"She adjusted incredibly well considering. She's a happy kid who likes going to prep and apparently behaves herself there," he said. "She doesn't always do what she's told at home but what five-year-old does?"

So when Mr Eslake winds up his 12 to 14-hour days he likes to spend time with his daughter and wife and enjoys dabbling in history.

In fact, had he chosen a career based on what he most enjoyed at high school, Mr Eslake could have ended up a

historian.

"That's something I still enjoy reading about but it's pretty difficult to make a good living as an historian," he said.

"Among other things you would probably have to be an exceptionally gifted writer and I'm not so I didn't really ever seriously contemplate pursuing that as a career."

Instead he chose economics by a process of elimination.

"I ruled out most of the things that kids who were reasonably good at their school work were expected to do, like law and medicine. I think in part it might have been an irrational fear of self employment," he said.

"It boiled down to a choice between engineering and commerce and I chose commerce for two reasons — both of which seem a bit silly in retrospect — one was that you needed to be really good at maths for engineering and I wasn't and secondly, a school colleague who I had come second to for half my life it seemed, was doing engineering and I was a bit sick of that.

"He subsequently went on to be a Rhode Scholar."

But Mr Eslake hardly underachieved in comparison.

He was awarded a scholarship from the Federal Treasury to complete his fourth year and was subsequently offered a job.

He worked at the treasury in Canberra for two years and was employed as an economic advisor to Jeff Kennett during his time as Opposition leader.

He is a member of three government advisory boards, countless committees and associations and is the one of the longest serving chief economists the ANZ has employed.

Despite his qualifications and vast experience, Mr Eslake has managed to maintain a firm grasp on the way his role impacts the everyday person and the importance of good communication to those outside of the money business.

He is the first to admit that academic economics jargon has the potential to both baffle and bore others.

"A very large part of what I do is trying to understand and predict government policy changes, be it changes in interest rates or changes in tax and other budgetary policy," he explained.

"I talk to the media but more importantly to the bank's executive staff and customers and they don't want me to be talking the language of academic economists.

"That's an important part of the job that I do — that ability to communicate about economic issues in language that makes sense to people who are not trained economists."

The future continues to look bright for Mr Eslake who said he had no intention of leaving his role at ANZ in the near future but hoped to eventually move back to his beloved Tassie.

"As much as I love the present job I really do hope in some ways that my last job, whatever it is, is in Tasmania," he said.

"At the very least we will retire there. I would love for Caroline to go to high school there.

"I feel so privileged to have done my growing up in Tasmania and I hope that it can be part of hers."



Clockwise from above, Saul Eslake and daughter Caroline enjoying a break on an overseas holiday; his wife Linda with Caroline; ready for business as the ANZ's chief economist; at the Zeehan Museum and on holiday in Italy.





The life and times of Saul Eslake

Saul Eslake graduated from the University of Tasmania with a first class honours degree in economics.

He began his career as an economist in the Commonwealth Public Service, including two years at the treasury in Canberra.

Before joining ANZ he was chief economist (international) at National Mutual Funds Management (now part of the AXA Insurance group) and before that, chief economist of the stockbroking firm McIntosh Securities (now part of the Merrill Lynch group) from 1986 to 1991.

In August 1995 Mr Eslake became chief economist at the ANZ Bank.

At ANZ he is also a member of the Group Asset and Liability Committee and is chairman of ANZCover, the bank's internal crime, fraud and professional indemnity insurance subsidiary.

In 2002 he received an outstanding graduate award from the University of Tasmania Foundation and is on now on the foundation's board.

He is also a senior fellow of the Financial Services Institute of Australia, an associate fellow of the Australian Institute of Management, a member of the US National Association of Business Economists and the Australian representative on the International Conference of Commercial Bank Economists.

Mr Eslake is a member of three government advisory panels including the Tourism Forecasting Committee and he is chairman of the Tasmanian Arts Advisory Board.



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