



A tale of two cities?

Trevor Douthett is the subject of this issue's instalment. **Merv Robertson** reports.

TREVOR DOUTHETT WAS born in Lower Hutt and has lived in the Wellington region ever since. He graduated from Victoria University with a Bachelor of Commerce & Administration, majoring in Finance with a strong marketing influence. His working life has not all been retail – his first job was in the Department of Trade & Industry when **Warren Freer** was Minister in the **Kirk** Government.

That was a period of “really diverse work experiences” part of which included helping develop Government policy in the area of market control. With a stint in industrial development and import licensing and as well as in Parliament itself, if he hadn't been “caught” by a powerful retail advertisement for a role at LV Martin, Trevor Douthett may well have had a long career in politics.

“**Alan Martin** put the same time, effort and skill into creating recruitment advertisements as he did in promoting products,” says Trevor, who had not been even thinking about a change in career but somehow found himself applying for this position. An initial interview was followed by “extraordinarily rigorous” psychometric testing and a final interview with Alan. Trevor joined LV Martin & Son in March 1977 as Group Accountant. **Alvin Relph** was General Manager at the time.

LV Martin's portfolio at the time was, shall we say, diverse, as the company took advantage of Government initiatives in trading and exporting. For instance, it produced and sold go karts and sold paua jewellery into the United States. In 1978, looking for a way to increase its small appliance sales by some form of direct marketing, LV Martin started a highly successful mail order business which boomed up until it was sold off in 2002.

Trevor and Alan Martin worked very well together in a period of significant business and cultural change, taking a proactive approach to proposed law changes which could impact on the business. They made submissions for example on the *Fair Trading Act*, the *Fringe Benefit Tax Act*, the abolition of the *Money Lenders Act* and others.

“The removal of the *Money Lenders Act* in particular, had a positive outcome for retailers. It was virtually replaced by the *Credit Contracts Act* and for the first time, as an example, we could use revolving credit as a sales tool. It allowed us to introduce a range of interest free and interest bearing finance products for our customers, effectively making LV Martin much more accessible to a wider group of customers. We could finally match the type of lending offered by the banks in terms of credit cards.”

The involvement with Government policy led to a real highlight for Trevor when he was retained as a consultant for the Brash Consultative Committee on the introduction of GST to New Zealand.

Trevor progressively became more involved in management responsibilities across the company, becoming Financial Director and, a year or so before Alvin Relph left the company in 1988, Deputy Managing Director.



Alan Martin retired from fulltime participation in the company in 1990 at which time, his son, **Neil Martin**, and Trevor Douthett became joint Managing Directors. Neil had joined the company in 1979. “This was an unusual arrangement back in the day,” says Trevor, “But it worked well for us. Neil was the face of LV Martin in the media and he controlled the mail order and marketing whilst I looked after things operationally.”

But, when TVNZ changed its attitude towards infomercials in 2002, Neil decided to pursue a future outside LV Martin and Trevor was appointed CEO.

More change was afoot. In 2004, the deteriorating health of the legendary Alan Martin led the family to sell the business. Trevor Douthett takes up the story: “When the decision was taken, Board Chairman **Geoff Harley** made it clear that I would be welcome to make a bid, either in my own right or in partnership with a third party.”

The third party turned out to be Smiths City and on 1 November that year they took an 80% shareholding with Trevor and his wife **Lorraine** picking up the remaining 20%. In 2008 Smiths bought the Martins' shares to assume full ownership of LV Martin but Trevor was pleased to stay on as CEO until 2012, at which point it was “time to do something different”.

So – where is he now? “Late in 2011, I was shown a confidential document in which it was revealed that the Postie Plus Group wished to divest itself of a trading division called Baby City and it was suggested that I might be interested in a new challenge. I was interested all right, leading a group in the acquisition and Baby City Retail Investments Ltd was launched on 13 March 2012 with me as Managing Director.”

Baby City has 15 stores from Whangarei to Dunedin and, according to Trevor Douthett, has an “aggressive” programme of store openings in train. “It's a fascinating business. Of course we sell baby clothes but also technologically advanced buggies, strollers, high chairs and car seats plus toys, feeding and health items, nappies, cots & bedding.

“Readers can check us out at www.babycity.co.nz and we would welcome lots of new faces from the appliance industry. You can also ‘Like’ us on Facebook.”

Trevor Douthett served on the Board of the old Appliance Guild for many years, the last three as President and was a Director of Appliance Connexion from its incorporation in 1998 until the resignation of LV Martin from ACL in 2008. Our industry is the poorer for the absence of Trevor Douthett, a man of wisdom, a man of balance. We wish him every success.