GEFF Knight was to become an important player in economic development as South Australia came under external pressure to transform or wither.

He was born to Patricia and Ronald Knight into a farming family of long standing at Port Elliot.

He earned a scholarship to study mathematical science at the University of Adelaide after topping the state in chemistry at Seacombe High School.

Geoff completed his mathematics degree only to launch into a career in social work. Taking unexpected forks in the road would become a trademark.

In the late 1980s, he worked on the Social Justice Budget brought into State Government by John Cornell as the new community welfare minister.

His work, informed by his unique combination of social sciences and mathematics, brought him to the attention of the Treasury.

Despite his lack of formal accounting or financial qualifications, he was ideal as an agent for change, and was soon cajoling government agencies and even ghost-authoring the Treasurer’s annual Budget speech. His daughters remember being smuggled up in sleeping bags under his Budget office desk while he worked.

He added further education including an MBA and went on to serve the public sector in a diverse range of senior roles for the next 30 years. He worked in treasury and finance, and then for the Department of Premier and Cabinet. In 2006, he was appointed chief executive of Primary Industries and Resources SA, leading its emergence as a key economic agency.

It was through the mining industry he met Julia and their shared interest in music and the arts led to them marrying in 2007.

In 2011, he became chief executive of the Department of Manufacturing, Innovation, Trade, Resources and Energy when it was created in 2011.

Under his leadership, DMITRE developed strategies for the Department’s engagement with China and India, a new manufacturing strategy for SA and undertook ground-breaking studies in emerging sectors, including unconventional gas and cellulose fibre.

Over the past two decades, the positions of public service CEOs have become politicised, with government ministers playing a bigger role in selection while the senior public servant contract terms of three to five years have amplified ministerial power.

But Geoff was of the old school of enduring public servants, non-aligned and trusted by his political masters. He was respected, highly trained, loyal to staff and proof that long-term professional CEOs make their departments successful and their ministers look good.

He was rewarded with further responsibilities, often chairing State Government boards for trade, finance, energy, planning, mining, oil and gas exploration, biosecurity and economic development.

These roles included taking an active part in the work of the Essential Services Commission of SA and in Renewal SA. In 2014, he gained the Institute of Public Administration Australia (IPAA) National Fellow Award.

Career milestones include establishing Biosecurity SA, introducing the Plan for Accelerated Exploration (PACE) in mining, and leading the Millennium drought response.

When Holden’s Elizabeth plant closed, he established the Automotive Transformation Task Force, having previously overseen the transformation of Tonsley Park from automotive manufacture to innovation precinct.

He was keen to empower staff, enable job-sharing and work-life balance, as well as diversity and placing women into positions of power.

His driving forces included his Bahá’í faith, embracing humanity’s need to find a unifying vision of society’s future.

Geoff was able to bring people together to advance ideas and seek solutions to the many challenges in sustaining SA’s economic development.

Aside from his public service work, Geoff was a passionate road cyclist. He was a member of the Sons of Bitumen, riding up to four times a week, and his dedication included seeking out Olympian and Tour Down Under winner Patrick Jonker to coach him, becoming a close cycling friend.

Cycling took him to the local challenges to riding the Alps routes of the Tour de France.

He died after a long battle with lymphoma. He is survived by Julia, his daughters Vanessa and Jacqui and three grandchildren.