

Obituary

Robert Martin (Robin) Williams CB, CBE

Mathematician, physicist and public servant: b Christchurch, 30 March 1919; m Mary Thorpe (dec), 1s, 2d; d Wellington, 18 March 2013, aged 93.

Robin Williams was educated in Christchurch, at Christ's College and then Canterbury University College, where he graduated MA with first class honours in mathematics and mathematical physics in 1940. At Canterbury he valued his association with lecturer and renowned philosopher, Karl Popper, who chose him for extension in individual seminars.

Because of World War II, Robin was unable to take up a scholarship to Cambridge University but worked on radar at the DSIR Radio Development Laboratory between 1941 and 1944. He was then seconded to the USA, working with the British team on the Manhattan project developing the atomic bomb.

In 1944 and 1945, he worked to separate nuclear fuel from natural uranium. He said he realised the need to build an atomic weapon to end the war but still felt troubled by it. He was one of the scientists who signed a letter to the British government alerting it to the terrible potential of the weapon. Later he condemned the dropping of the second bomb, on Nagasaki, so soon after the destruction of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945.

In 1945 Robin took up the deferred scholarship at Cambridge, graduating BA in 1946 and PhD in 1949.

Returning to New Zealand in 1950, Dr Williams joined the DSIR Applied Mathematics Division, becoming director in 1953, a position he held until 1962.

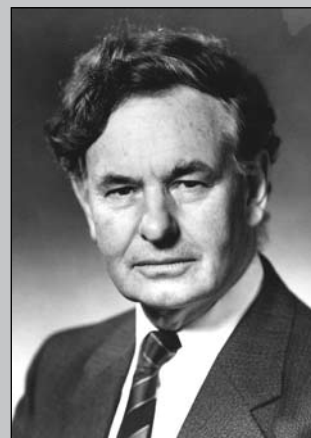
Following the McCarthy Royal Commission on the State Services, the State Services Act 1962 provided for four appointments to the new State Services Commission (SSC). The SSC was to replace the Public Services Commission, which had regulated the public service since 1913. Robin Williams was appointed to the Commission, a position he held until 1966. In a Commission dominated by efforts to establish new pay-fixing machinery, Williams had responsibility for a portfolio of departments with a technological orientation.

In 1967 Dr Williams took up the position of vice-chancellor at Otago University, which he held until in 1973, when he moved to Canberra as vice-chancellor of the Australian National University. (He was awarded a Hon LID by Otago.) In 1974 he was approached by the Kirk Labour Government to return to New Zealand as chair of the State Services Commission. This he saw as a challenge. By the time of his return in February 1975 Norman Kirk had died and been replaced by Bill Rowling as prime minister; and by the end of the year the National Government led by Robert Muldoon had assumed office.

Robin Williams' six years as chair of the State Services Commission were turbulent years in which the economy was under severe challenge from world events, inflation surged, and industrial relations were marked by constant strife from which the state sector was not immune. Major reform of the public sector was not on the agenda of the Muldoon Government, but the pressures of a changing and diverse society received a response led by the State Services Commission. Of particular interest to Robin Williams was the extension of opportunities for women, Māori and Pacifica in the state services.

Current State Services Commissioner, Iain Rennie, says Dr Williams was 'a distinguished New Zealander' who 'shared his experiences, knowledge, and wisdom generously'. He 'maintained an active interest in public administration and state sector reform' even in retirement.

In 'retirement', Robin Williams pursued his many interests, including membership of organisations committed to the betterment of the environment and of society. He was always a dedicated reader, with a special love of poetry, and he chaired the New Zealand Book Council. The Association extends its sincere sympathy to his children, Janet Hector, Bridget Williams, Tony Williams, and their families.



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Sources: *Dominion Post*, J R Martin, State Services Commission