

## **Obituary**

# **Dr Mervyn Probine CB**

A former State Services Commissioner and Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand, Dr Mervyn Probine died on 17 April 2010, aged 86.

Dr Probine was Chairman of the State Services Commission (SSC) from 1981 to 1986, and was also a former Assistant Director-General of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). He was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand in 1964 during his time as a physicist with DSIR, having joined what became its Physics and Engineering Laboratory as a draughtsman in 1942. He completed a Bachelor of Science degree at what was at that time Auckland University College, a Masters at Victoria University College, Wellington, and finally, in 1959, a Doctorate at the University of Leeds. He became Director of the Physics and Engineering Laboratory in 1967, moving to his Head Office role in DSIR in 1977. He was involved with many other organisations, including the Ross Dependency Research Committee, the Wool Research Organisation of New Zealand, the New Zealand Institute of Physics, and the New Zealand Technology Advancement Trust. He was also a Fellow of the Institute of Physics (London).

Dr Probine was appointed as Commissioner of the State Services Commission in 1979, before becoming Deputy Chairman and then Chairman on the retirement of Dr Robin Williams in March 1981.

Dr Probine's time at the State Services Commission was a period of change. The introduction of Official Information Act in 1982 marked a far-reaching change in the relationship between the Public Service and the public. Dr Probine reminded officials that political neutrality and duty to ministers remained the foundation of a non-partisan career public service. Reflecting the changing expectations in society, the SSC in 1982 organised a major conference at the Waahi marae to consider issues of multiculturalism, and the Equal Employment Opportunities Office was set up in the Commission in 1983. During Dr Probine's period in the chair, the SSC placed increasing emphasis on 'management' and established a Management Development Division. Rapid developments in information technology, marked by the emergence of the personal computer, were taking place; Dr Probine had a particular interest in these developments

The election of the Lange Labour Government in 1984 ushered in fundamental changes in the organisation and structure of the state services symbolised by the passage of the State Sector Act 1988. Dr Probine had intended to retire before his term as Chairman expired but was persuaded to remain in office till March 1986. By then the first major act of restructuring was well under way – the corporatisation of state trading activities.

Throughout his distinguished career Dr Probine demonstrated the essential qualities of the New Zealand Public Service. He applied himself with dedication and commitment to whatever task had been assigned to him, he approached issues with the intellectual discipline associated with his scientific background, and he saw it as his duty to provide Government Ministers with 'free and frank' advice – even if it might not be welcomed. In his dealings with others, whatever their status, he was unflinchingly courteous and friendly.

In 1986 Dr Probine was made a Commander of the Order of the Bath (CB). After retirement from the SSC he continued to participate in many activities, local and national. He chaired the Legislation Advisory Committee for a number of years, was the Foundation President of the National Library Society, chaired a panel reviewing plans for the Wellington Motorway extension, and served on the Laura Fergusson Trust, the Prison Fellowship Advisory Board, and the National Council for Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

Dr Probine and his wife Marjorie moved to Auckland from Lower Hutt a decade ago to be near family. Sailing and trout fishing were among the hobbies he pursued at his Taupo holiday home while living in retirement. It was there that Dr Probine had the first of a series of debilitating strokes. It was the beginning of the end for this capable public servant.

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Sources: The Institute of Public Administration New Zealand; *The Dominion Post*; *Who's Who in New Zealand* 12th Edition (Reed, 1991); Alan Henderson, *The Quest for Efficiency: The Origins of the State Services Commission* (SSC, 1990).