



The Right Honourable Dame Helen Winkelmann

CHIEF JUSTICE OF NEW ZEALAND | TE TUMU WHAKAWĀ O AOTEAROA

28 FEBRUARY 2025

MEDIA STATEMENT

Chief Justice pays tribute to the Hon Peter Penlington CNZM KC



The Hon Peter George Spenser Penlington CNZM KC (1932 – 2025)

(Photo credit: Christ's College Old Boys' Association)

The Chief Justice, the Rt Hon Dame Helen Winkelmann, today paid tribute on behalf of New Zealand's judiciary to the Hon Peter George Spenser Penlington CNZM KC, who passed away on 31 January 2025, aged 92.

“On behalf of the New Zealand judiciary I acknowledge the Hon Peter Penlington KC’s service to the law and to the judiciary. While Peter achieved at the highest level as a lawyer and judge, his career was first and foremost devoted to serving the legal profession, the law and, through this, New Zealand society. Peter will be greatly missed by his many friends and colleagues in the judiciary and in the profession. I extend my deepest sympathy to his family.”

Peter served as a Judge of the High Court from December 1990 to December 2000, sitting in the Hamilton High Court as resident Judge from 1991, and as Executive Judge from 1993. He also sat as a criminal and civil divisional member of the Court of Appeal. As a lawyer,

and then as a judge, he brought the same meticulous approach to his work — he was meticulous in his preparation for a hearing and, as a judge, in his approach to rendering judgment. He understood that finding the truth often requires mastering the detail. His measured and methodical approach to judging enabled him to preside over trials of great complexity, including one of the Waikato's most significant drug trials, "Operation Ring", in 2000. Peter kept detailed records throughout his career; his notebooks and copies of his judgments, sentences, rulings, summings-up, minutes and memoranda were deposited with Archives New Zealand in 2017 for future study.

Peter had a clear sense of justice and set high standards for himself, the profession and the law. Speaking to newly admitted lawyers before his retirement in 2000, in remarks that were published at the time, he spoke of the part that the courts, judges and the practising profession each play in "seeing that the rule of law continues as one of the central pillars of our free and democratic society", and in ensuring that the law is able "to meet modern conditions and to embrace public perceptions of what is fair and just in our society".¹

He is also remembered for his kindness and courtesy. He treated counsel with the utmost respect and was generous in his support of new lawyers and law students. Together with Justice Grant Hammond, he established the Penlington Hammond Trophy for the best competitive mooting team at the University of Waikato.

Following his retirement as a permanent judge in 2000, Peter served as an acting High Court Judge until 2002. He also served on the Kiribati Court of Appeal until 2003 and the Fiji Court of Appeal until 2007. In 2003, Peter was appointed a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (CNZM) for his services as a Judge of the High Court.

Highlights of career in practice

Peter graduated with an LLB from the University of Canterbury in 1956. He was admitted to the partnership of Christchurch firm RA Young Hunter & Co in 1959, before moving to the independent bar in 1977. He was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1978 at the age of 46. Peter was also a member of the Crown prosecution panel from 1968 to 1990, and a member of the Police Tribunal from 1980 to 1990.

Peter's dedication to the law and to his profession was evident throughout his professional career. He was the president of the Canterbury District Law Society from 1974 to 1975, a member of the Council and the Executive Committee of the New Zealand Law Society from 1972 to 1974, chair of its Ethics Committee from 1988 to 1990, and chair of the Criminal Law Reform Committee from 1980 to 1984. He was also a member of both the Rules Committee and the New Zealand Council of Law Reporting. Peter, together with Judge Anthony Willy, published the legal textbook *Penlington and Willy's High Court Forms* (Butterworths) in 1985. He was made a Fellow of the NZ Institute of Mediators and Arbitrators in 1990.

Peter also served in the New Zealand Territorial Force from 1956 to 1962, where he attained the rank of lieutenant. He later became a Judge-Advocate from 1968 to 1983, and a Judge of the Court Martial Appeal Court from 1983 to 1990. After his retirement from the High Court, Peter served again on the Court Martial Appeal Court from 2003 to 2009.

¹ Peter Penlington "Speech for Admissions Ceremony" (2000) 8 Wai L Rev 153.



Peter Penlington in his youth as a student at Christ's College, Christchurch (c. 1946-50)
(Photo credit: Christ's College Old Boys' Association)

Peter is survived by his wife Jill and his three children, Simon, Tim and Anna.

