



The Right Honourable Dame Helen Winkelmann

CHIEF JUSTICE OF NEW ZEALAND | TE TUMU WHAKAWĀ O AOTEAROA

5 July 2023

MEDIA STATEMENT

Chief Justice pays tribute to Sir David Tompkins KC



The Honourable Sir David Lance Tompkins KNZM KC (26 July 1929–2 July 2023)
(Photo credit: Outward Bound)

The Chief Justice, The Rt Hon Dame Helen Winkelmann, today paid tribute on behalf of New Zealand’s judiciary to the Honourable Sir David Lance Tompkins KNZM KC, who passed away on Sunday 2 July 2023, aged 93.

“On behalf of the New Zealand judiciary I acknowledge Sir David’s service to the judiciary and extend my deepest sympathy to his family.

Sir David had a long and distinguished judicial career. He was an early and enthusiastic user of personal computers and was a key figure in the development of modern case management techniques for the management of commercial litigation and the use digital systems to support complex trials. His reputation was that of a skilled and effective trial judge. During his time as a High Court judge he authored many leading commercial judgments, written in a clear and accessible style. He will be greatly missed by his family, including his children Simon, Arthur and Bridget, and his many grandchildren and great grandchildren.”

Born in Hamilton in 1929, Sir David served in the 1st Field Regiment of the Royal New Zealand Artillery from 1949 to 1959, attaining the rank of Captain in 1958.

Sir David graduated from the University of Auckland with an LLB in 1951 and was called to the bar that same year. He joined the firm Tompkins Wake as a partner in Hamilton in 1953, before joining the independent bar in 1971. He was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1974 and practised as a barrister until his appointment to the High Court bench in 1983.

During his distinguished career in practice, he was President of the Hamilton District Law Society (1969-71) and a council member (1969-71) and then Vice President (1979-81) of the New Zealand Law Society. Sir David also served as a judge of the Court Martial Appeal Court from 1982-1983.

Sir David was appointed a Judge of the High Court in 1983. He served as a permanent judge of the High Court for 14 years, and also sat as a member of the criminal division of the Court of Appeal from 1996. After reaching statutory retirement age in 1997, he continued to serve as an acting judge for a further five years, retiring in July 2002.

During his time on the bench, Sir David served as executive judge of the Auckland High Court (1989-92), as Chairman of the Council of Legal Education (1991-1997) and as Chairman of the National Case Management Committee (1994-1997).

Sir David also provided extensive judicial service in the Pacific during his career, including as a judge of the Court of Appeal of Tonga from 1995, as a judge of the Court of Appeal of Fiji from 1997, and as a judge of the Court of Appeal of Tuvalu in the early 2000s.

After retiring from the High Court bench, Sir David practiced as an arbitrator. He was a member of the high-profile arbitration panel in the 31st America's Cup dispute and published a subsequent book on the topic with the other panel members. He also resumed service on the Courts Martial Appeal Court (2003-2008).

In 2005, Sir David was appointed to conduct an inquiry named "Operation Reason" into the culture and conduct of officers in the Counties Manukau Police District.

Sir David was made a Knight Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (KNZM) in 1999 for services as a Judge of the High Court and to the community. He was also awarded the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal in 1987 and the New Zealand 1990 Commemoration Medal.

Sir David was actively involved in the community during his career and in retirement. He served as President of Birthright Waikato in 1966, and as Pro-Chancellor (1979-1980) and Chancellor (1980-1985) of the University of Waikato. He was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1986 in recognition of his services to the University. In retirement, he provided remedial reading assistance to students at One Tree Hill College. He also served as Chelsea Park Trust chairman, and played an instrumental role in bringing the historic Chelsea Sugar Works estate into public ownership in 2005.

He also had a long association with Outward Bound New Zealand, including serving as Hamilton Association Chairman (1977-79), New Zealand Vice-President (1981-83) and later, President (1983-84). He continued to serve as a board member and guardian of the Outward Bound Foundation until 2019.

Sir David is survived by his three children, Simon, Arthur and Bridget, and his eight grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. His wife Lady Felicity Tompkins, passed away in 2019.