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JUSTICES OF THE HIGH COURT OF AUSTRALIA

DURING THE CURRENCY OF THIS VOLUME

THE HONOURABLE ANTHONY MURRAY GLEESON, AC,  
CHIEF JUSTICE

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THE HONOURABLE PHILIP MAXWELL RUDDOCK, MP

## MEMORANDUM

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2005  
July 15

— Death of THE HONOURABLE SIR RONALD DARLING  
WILSON, AC, KBE, CMG, who resigned as a Justice  
of the High Court of Australia on 13 February 1989.

## THE LATE SIR RONALD WILSON

On 25 October 2005 at a ceremonial sitting of the Full High Court at Perth, GLEESON CJ said:

The purpose of this occasion is for the High Court at its Perth sittings to mark the death on 15 July 2005 of the Honourable SIR RONALD DARLING WILSON, formerly a Justice of this Court. Joining us on the Bench today is the Honourable John Toohey, a former Justice of the Court and a former colleague of SIR RONALD WILSON. Present in Court are SIR RONALD's widow, Lady Wilson, and members of their family. To them we extend our sincere condolences.

Also present in Court are the Chief Justice of the Federal Court of Australia, the Chief Justice of Western Australia, Justices of the Federal Court and the Supreme Court of Western Australia, the Commonwealth Solicitor-General, the Solicitor-General for Western Australia, the representative of the Solicitor-General for Victoria, the President of the Western Australian Bar Association, who also represents the President of the Australian Bar Association, the representative of the Chairman of the Victorian Bar and the President of the Law Society of Western Australia, who also represents the Law Society of the Australian Capital Territory, and members of the Western Australia legal profession. The President of the Queensland Law Society who is unable to be present has asked that his Society's appreciation of and gratitude for the work of SIR RONALD WILSON be mentioned. I have been asked particularly to convey the regrets of Sir William Deane, former colleague and friend of SIR RONALD WILSON, that he is unable to be here.

SIR RONALD WILSON was the son of a solicitor. His mother died when he was three. Four years later his father suffered severe health problems which resulted in hardship for the family. He left school at the age of fourteen. In World War II he joined the Royal Australian Air Force and became a fighter pilot. After the war, he enrolled at the University of Western Australia on a returned serviceman's scholarship and studied law. He graduated with first class honours in 1949 and joined the Crown Law Office in Western Australia. In due course he became a Crown Prosecutor. He took silk in 1963. In 1969 he became Western Australia's Solicitor-General. He was a formidable figure in the Western Australian legal profession.

During the 1970s he represented the State of Western Australia in important constitutional cases in the High Court. I saw him in action in many of those cases. He was a vigorous and compelling advocate, usually called upon to support what might be described as a federalist as opposed to a centralist approach to constitutional interpretation. Sir William Deane

said that in his role as State Solicitor-General he became one of the most effective and persuasive appellate advocates our country has produced.

Many people here today will not recall the forensic atmosphere of the 1970s, especially the atmosphere that prevailed in this Court. It was not an easy time for State Solicitors-General. Successive Commonwealth governments on both sides of politics were exploring the outer limits of Commonwealth power. This Court was constantly on the alert against what were seen as attempts to revive the doctrine of reserved State powers. There was to be no backsliding on the principles of interpretation established by the *Engineers' Case*. Any advocate who used the adjective "sovereign" to qualify the noun "State" received the same kind of reception as would have awaited a Cathar who attempted to justify the Albigensian heresy to a convocation of Dominicans. But the Western Australian Solicitor-General put his arguments firmly, clearly and succinctly and was always heard with great respect. I once heard him tell the Court that it was not good enough to pay lip service to federalism. The response was electrifying.

In 1979 SIR RONALD WILSON became the first Western Australian to be appointed to the High Court. He made an important contribution to the jurisprudence of the Court, especially because of his expertise in constitutional and criminal law. He brought to the Court a deep practical understanding of the workings of government and of the dimensions of issues of public law. He understood the theory and practice of constitutional law from the viewpoint of an immensely experienced government lawyer. The perspective that he gained from his years of experience became part of the collective resources of the Bench to which he belonged.

SIR RONALD WILSON retired from the Court in 1989 but his working life and his contribution to the community was far from complete. In fact I have it on the authority of Lady Wilson that he only began to take retirement seriously when he turned eighty. For years he had been associated in an official capacity with the administration of the Uniting Church. He became President of that Church. He was President of the Australian Chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, Deputy Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, President of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid and Chancellor of Murdoch University.

In 1990 he was appointed President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, a role that reflected his passionate concern for the welfare of disadvantaged members of the community. He was the co-author of the report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. As a lawyer, judge, churchman and citizen he made a notable contribution to the life of the nation.

Tributes that were paid to SIR RONALD following his death emphasised his personal qualities of humility, decency and generosity of spirit. He was a great son of this State of Western Australia. He was an ornament to the State's legal profession. He was proud of Western Australia and Western Australia was proud of him, but his life and work affected the whole Australian nation. He was deeply committed to his family. Lady Wilson said that his greatest personal satisfaction when at last he decided to retire was in his relationship with his grandchildren.

It is fitting that the High Court should pay public tribute to the memory of SIR RONALD WILSON on the occasion of our annual visit to Perth. He made a distinctive and valuable contribution to the work and life of the Court and there is no more appropriate place for us to acknowledge that. I thank you all for joining in this occasion with us.

The Court will adjourn.





**The mode of citation of this volume of  
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## CORRIGENDUM

**218 CLR 218, line 21:** For “*R D Ellis SC*” read “*T J Ellis SC*”.

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