

Colin Hughes Obituary

With the death of Emeritus Professor Colin Hughes, aged 87, at Peregrian Springs, Queensland, on 30 June 2017, the Australian and international political science professions lost one of their most distinguished members and Queensland one of its most esteemed immigrants.

Colin Anfield Hughes was born on 4 May 1930 in Dunmore Town, in what was then the British colony of the Bahamas in the West Indies. His father John, a former school teacher on the Isle of Dogs, was a senior civil service commissioner and a 'power behind the throne' when the former King Edward VIII was Governor of the Bahamas during WW II.

Colin was educated in Nassau and at Anacostia High School in Washington DC. He briefly enrolled at George Washington University but transferred to Columbia University in New York City—his father having been seconded to the United Nations. He gained a Bachelor of Arts in 1949 and graduated with a Master of Arts in Public Law and Government in 1950.

Uncertain as to a career in law or academia, he completed a Doctor of Philosophy at the London School of Economics on West Indian constitutional politics but also passed the Council of Legal Education's Bar Examination in the same cohort of students as Margaret Hilda (later Baroness) Thatcher in late 1953.

He was admitted to Gray's Inn early the next year. But he lacked the private income then necessary for a new and junior member to survive at the English Bar, and so decided to return to Nassau. In San Francisco in 1954 he married an Australian, Gwen Olive Glover. In addition to her many other qualities, Gwen became a talented potter and her death in 2015 devastated him.

Hughes became a partner in the law firm McKinney, Bancroft and Hughes, which is now one of the Bahamas' most prominent legal firms. Still attracted by an academic career, he moved to Queensland University in 1956 to become a lecturer in Political Science in the Department of External Studies. Passed over for promotion, he returned to the law in Nassau in 1959.

Bahamian politics were volatile in the 1950s and 1960s as an indigenous nationalist movement confronted the corrupt influence of the white colonialist 'Bay Street Boys'. Colin Hughes abhorred racism, held progressive political views and took briefs which antagonised elements of the establishment. On one occasion, the Riot Squad was put on alert to protect him and the presiding Magistrate in a fraught electoral law case.

A major achievement was the legal work he undertook for what is now the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park and what then was the first legislated marine park in the world. Yet his successful prosecution of a white man for the attempted rape of a black woman only increased his unpopularity with the reactionary elite.

In 1961 Hughes returned to Australia as a Professorial Fellow at the Australian National University, quickly establishing a strong reputation as a political scientist both here and overseas. He was impressed with the new behavioural approach, which drew on psychology and sociology for political analysis, but always blended this with an attention to law, history and public administration.

He published widely in Australian, Queensland and comparative politics and, with Bruce Graham and Don Aitkin, produced comprehensive data sets on Australian elections, which were indispensable to generations of students and academics in the pre-digital age. His books *The Prime Minister's Policy Speech* (with the late John Western) and *Images and Issues: The Queensland State Elections of 1963 and 1966* were ground breaking.

When a new Department of Government was created at the University of Queensland in late 1965 Colin Hughes was appointed inaugural professor of Political Science and Head of Department. By now his expertise in electoral law and behaviour was unsurpassed. He continued to publish widely as well as carrying a heavy teaching load and appearing as an expert commentator in the media.

The year 1974 saw him back at the ANU as a Research Fellow and a member of the federal government's Priorities Review Staff. The books and journal articles continued to flow including, in 1980, his definitive study, *The Government of Queensland*.

Instead of a serving public servant being chosen for the job, it was Colin Hughes who was appointed the first Australian Electoral Commissioner in February 1984. The AEC had much greater autonomy than the Electoral Office which it replaced, and Hughes used this to modernise the nation's electoral apparatus while resisting the interventions of ministers and defending the AEC's independence and impartiality. Unfortunately we can only surmise his view of the AEC and the Bureau of Statistics being required to run "non-binding plebiscites".

Hughes did not believe in the reappointment of statutory officers such as Electoral Commissioners and returned to Queensland for the third and final time as Professor of Political Science at UQ in 1989— just at the time when the state was reeling from the revelations of the Fitzgerald Inquiry and was about to elect its first Labor Government in three decades.

When the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission (EARC) was reluctantly established by the dying National Party administration, Colin Hughes was appointed as a part-time Commissioner in 1990 and served as its interim Chairman in 1992. He was a very active commissioner and regarded his work at EARC as the pinnacle of his career.

The EARC effectively re-wrote Queensland's electoral laws. But it was equally influential in bringing a much needed culture of ethics and accountability to public administration and governance. Given its relatively brief existence (1990-93), EARC was an engine room of activist reformism with Hughes one of its major drivers.

Colin Hughes retired from the University of Queensland in 1995 but continued to publish and provide valued advice to such bodies as the federal parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

He was a polymath whose knowledge of world electoral affairs was unequalled and who could have easily held high academic positions in History, Public Law and perhaps even English Literature and Cinema.

He was also a gentle man and a gentleman, but did not suffer partisan political fools gladly. When a junior minister unwisely questioned his commitment to the integrity of the electoral roll, his public rebuke was withering.

Always an internationalist, he simultaneously adhered to the dictum that 'all politics is local' and conducted his career accordingly. He believed passionately in the need for the rigorous analysis of the political systems of Australia and Queensland as well as the USA, Britain and elsewhere.

In short, he was a good and valuable citizen.

Brian Costar is Emeritus Professor at Swinburne University and was a colleague and friend of Colin Hughes.