

# His Honour Dr Christopher John Armitage

1944–2023

**Her Honour Judge Robyn Tupman**  
District Court of New South Wales

**H**is Honour Dr Chris Armitage died in Sydney on 24 December 2023, just a few months short of his 80th birthday. His funeral was held at St Martins Anglican Church, Killara on 5 January 2024.

Chris was a war baby, born in May 1944, when his father, John, was away at war. Chris was already eight weeks old when his father met him for the first time while on short leave from his Army unit in North Queensland. Chris and his mother, Betty, continued to live with his maternal grandmother in Lane Cove until his father was discharged from the Army in 1945. As Chris' brother, Will, said at the funeral, this was the commencement of the strong influence which women continued to have in Chris' life.

He was educated at Normanhurst Primary School, Eastwood Opportunity School, and Homebush Boys Selective High School. He excelled academically, with interests in literature, architecture, history, and music, especially Bach – but as we were reminded at the funeral, no interest in nor aptitude for sport! He developed

an early interest in the Anglican Church, despite the lifelong atheism of his parents. Law, history, politics and theology were Chris' academic and professional passions throughout his life.

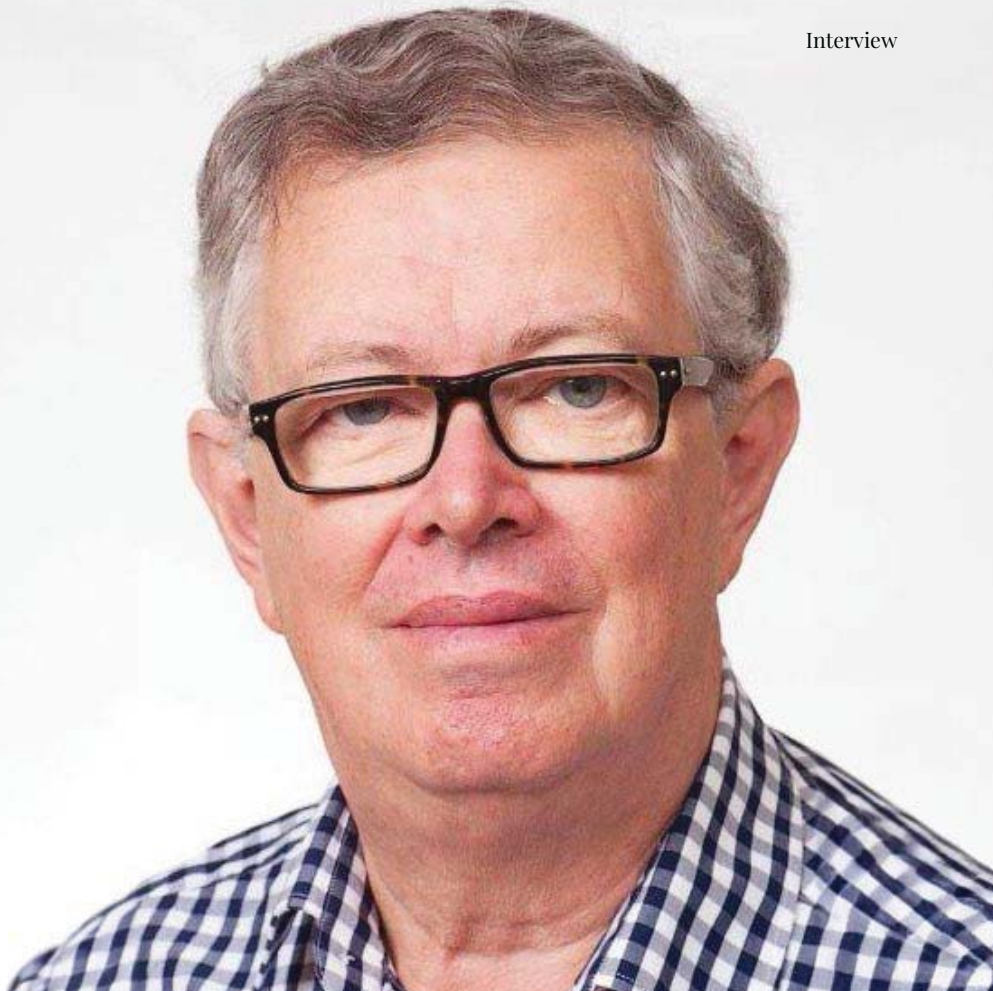
Chris graduated in Arts and Law from Sydney University and, after serving articles at McLellands, was admitted as a solicitor on 14 February 1969, practising first in Newcastle at AB McIntosh & Henderson, where Brian Moroney, later his Honour Judge Moroney of the Compensation Court, was a partner. He then practised as a solicitor in Five Dock from about 1972 until being admitted to the Bar on 27 July 1973. He spent his early years at the Bar at Frederick Jordan Chambers.

It was during his time as a suburban solicitor that Chris became good friends with his Honour Geoffrey Graham, now a retired District Court judge, and thus began a lifelong friendship and collegiate association which lasted for over 50 years, ultimately including both extended families. Chris briefed Geoff in the early years, and at the funeral Geoff spoke of their friendship, shared interests and views and, after 1994, their shared judicial roles.

At the Bar Chris initially had a general practice but ultimately specialised in workers compensation as a member of 4th Floor Wentworth Chambers. He was appointed to the Compensation Court of New South Wales on 30 September 1994, became a judge of the Dust Diseases Tribunal from 1996 to December 2003, and ultimately became a judge of the District Court of New South Wales in 2004 following the transfer of the Compensation Court judges. Chris was humble and was always grateful for the opportunity to practice law as a judge of two hard-working courts, something he regarded as the pinnacle of his ambition.

Chris retired as a District Court Judge in May 2016 but continued as an Acting Judge until not long before he was 78, only ceasing because of increasing ill health. As a judge he put into practice all those views that he loved to share and discuss with friends of long standing, very often over a nice glass or two of red wine. Geoff Graham said this at the funeral:

We had similar views, for instance, about the benefit of ensuring collaboration between Bench and Bar in the conduct of cases. And neither of us regarded a prison sentence as the inevitable starting point, but, rather, as



a last resort, except in the more serious category of crime.

He was a judicial ‘all-rounder’ sitting in both the civil and criminal jurisdictions of the District Court and was extremely well regarded by the profession, other judges, court staff and associates. He was known for his egalitarian views and also his support of women’s issues. After his death Judge Siobhan Herbert of the District Court reminded us of this. She said:

One Thursday in 2016 the judges at Parramatta had just finished having lunch together when Chris stood and said he wanted to mark what he regarded as an important occasion. He had our full attention. Chris then said this was the first time in his career that he had been at any court where the male judges were in the minority. As the father of two girls, he thought it was important to mark the achievement of the female judges being present and outnumbering the men. Of course, I already had a soft spot for Chris, and this memory still brings a smile to my face.

At his farewell ceremony on 6 May 2016 the Chief Judge, the Honourable Justice Derek Price AM, said of Chris:

During your judicial career, you have demonstrated some of the best qualities expected of a judge. Hard work, patience, thoroughness, and above all, fairness.

Chris also contributed to the collegiate life of the District Court, believing that the relative isolation of ‘the job’ could be greatly reduced by taking time to talk to each other about topics other than our latest case or points of view about the latest decision of the Court of Appeal or Court of Criminal Appeal. He loved nothing more than a lively conversation about politics, having come from a family with politics at its core. His parents were actively involved in politics from 1950 onwards, and his father became the Labor Member for the federal seat of Mitchell from 1961 to 1963 and then for the new western Sydney seat of Chifley from 1969 until he retired in 1983.

In addition to all of these legal and judicial achievements, Chris completed a PhD in Theology at Charles Sturt University in 2015. His thesis was entitled ‘Atonement and Ethics in 1 John: A Peacemaking

Hermeneutic’, and he was subsequently the author of two published books dealing with issues of peacemaking and internal solidarity within early Christian communities. He was also an active leader in the Anglican Church, including as a lay member of Synod, Deputy Chancellor of the Bathurst Diocese, and Chancellor of the Newcastle Diocese. He continued an active involvement in the parish of St Martins, Killara right up to his death, including as an enthusiastic member of the choir.

But above all of these achievements in law and religion, Chris regarded the centre of his life as his loved and cherished family – his wife of 42 years, Maureen, and their daughters, Lucy and Clare. He was immensely proud of their achievements and more recently proudly welcomed Cam and his beloved grandson Oscar. His regret when he realised that his days were numbered was that he was leaving them behind.

Chris was a man who gave his all in everything he pursued. He is a loss to the Law, to the Bar, to his friends, and particularly to his family. He will be remembered as compassionate, loyal, patient, and fair and, to quote from Gilbert and Sullivan, one of his favourite singalongs, ‘A Good Judge Too’.

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