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Mathews, Russell Lloyd (1921–2000)
by Peter Karmel and Allan Barton

Russell Mathews died in Canberra on 1 March, aged 79 years. He had a distinguished career extending over 50 years as an academic and government consultant.

Russell was one of the very early staff members of the newly established ANU, joining it in December 1949 as Research Assistant to the first Vice-Chancellor, Prof Sir Douglas Copland, on the princely salary of $1,300 a year. He subsequently became an Administrative Officer to Mr Ross Hohen, Registrar of the University, and in 1951 was posted to London where he was engaged in recruiting staff and postgraduate students for the ANU.

In 1953 he accepted an appointment as Reader in Commerce at the University of Adelaide and in 1965 rejoined the ANU upon his appointment to the foundation chair of Accounting and Public Finance in the Faculty of Economics. In 1972 he transferred to the newly created Centre for Research in Federal Financial Relations as its foundation Director and remained there until his retirement in 1986.

Russell was born in Geelong and was educated at Haileybury College in Melbourne, where he was dux of the school.

He then studied accountancy at night school while he worked for the Australian Estates Company.

In 1941 he joined the Army and later was engaged in active service in New Guinea and Bougainville. He rose to the rank of Captain and was mentioned in dispatches for his bravery. He was wounded on several occasions, including a serious one in 1945, which necessitated hospitalisation in Melbourne for almost a year. His leg had been badly injured and he limped for the rest of his life. His wartime experiences are graphically told in his history of the 58/59th Battalion, Military Battalion at War (1961). He then went to the University of Melbourne to study commerce and economics and graduated with first-class honours in 1949.

Russell Mathews was a dominant figure in accounting theory, taxation theory and policy, and fiscal federalism throughout his career. At Adelaide he built up a solid reputation for accounting research and education, and was appointed to a chair in 1958. In particular, Russell was a stern critic of conventional historical cost accounting and a proponent of inflation accounting; and together with Prof John Grant, undertook the first study in Australia of the impact of inflation on corporate profits and finance (Inflation and Company Finance, 1958). Russell also developed and taught courses in public economics and taxation.

He continued working in these areas at the ANU following his return in 1965. The new Department of Accounting and Public Finance (now Commerce) had been established to attract Russell back to the ANU. Russell always believed in the merits of combining the accounting and economics disciplines as much as possible.

Russell's greatest achievements came with the foundation of the Centre for Research in Federal Financial Relations in 1972 with funding from the Commonwealth Government. He soon built up a research centre on taxation and fiscal federalism of international repute, notwithstanding its tiny budget and staff. The Centre attracted leading scholars from around the world and hosted major international conferences.

Concurrently, Russell was appointed to the Commonwealth Grants Commission in 1972, a position he retained until 1990. This gave him deep insights into problems of fiscal federalism. He made many significant contributions to the work of the Commission, particularly in developing a new methodology for the calculation of claims, and he was the principal author of many of its reports. He was also appointed to a variety of other Commonwealth Government Commissions and Committees of Enquiry, including the Committee of Enquiry into Land Tenures (1973), the Academic Salaries Tribunal (1973-74), Inflation and Taxation (1975) and Accounting in Higher Education (1990). Furthermore, he reviewed the tax systems in several Pacific Island nations.

Russell always combined accounting, economics and finance in his academic work. He was a firm believer in normative approaches to economic enquiry that would assist in policy analysis. He strongly supported the need for social justice and full employment; and in this regard, he was an advocate of Keynesian policies for macro-economic management and Galbraithian policies for public sector infrastructure. These approaches are strongly reflected in two of his major books: Public Investment in Australia (1967) and The Public Sector in Jeopardy (with B. Grewal, 1997).

Russell Mathews' academic output was prodigious. He authored or co-authored 43 books, 47 official reports and in excess of 250 articles over his 50-year university career. He was a first-class scholar and his work has had an important influence on academic research and public policy. He was also a generous benefactor to the ANU, donating funds for the purchase of several works of art and for prizes in Public Economics. Russell's contributions to the nation were recognised by a CBE in 1976 and an AO in 1987.

Russell will be remembered by his many friends and colleagues as a distinguished scholar, a wise government adviser and a braver soldier. He was a fine person — kind, considerate and compassionate. Russell is survived by his wife Joan, daughter Sue and son Peter.