

## Percy Rollo Brett OBE (1923–2022)

### Research Leader and Public Servant

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Former PMG/Telecom Australia Engineer

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**Abstract:** Percy Rollo Brett OBE (11 November 1923 to 8 August 2022) was a highly respected head of the PMG/APO (later Telecom Australia/Telstra) Research Laboratories between 1964 and 1975. He was promoted to Head of Planning for Telecom Australia in July 1975, and then State Manager, Victoria for that organization in 1980–1983. Rollo’s achievements as Director of the Research Laboratories included building links with Australian universities to strengthen the Laboratories’ expertise in longer term research, and masterminding the Laboratories’ move from six different sites in central Melbourne to a single site, in purpose-designed buildings in Clayton, opposite Monash University’s main campus. In the early 1970s, he used the expertise he gained as Chairman of the Telecommunications and Electronics Standards Committee of the Standards Association of Australia to lead the Australian Post Office’s conversion of all its standards to metric. Upon retirement in 1983 he was awarded the OBE.

**Keywords:** History of Australian telecommunications, obituary

### Early Life and Education

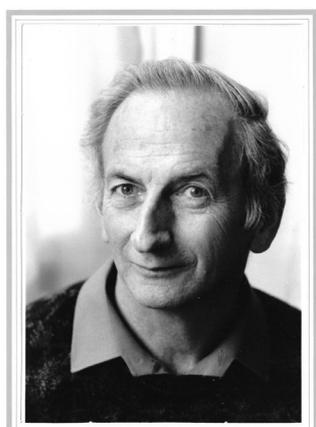


Figure 1. Rollo Brett in retirement

Rollo Brett was born in Kyabram, north central Victoria, as the second eldest of five children of Harry and Matilda Brett. They had just moved to a mixed farm in nearby Lancaster. His siblings were Betty, Harry, David and Bryan, now all deceased.

His parents strongly encouraged education. Rollo attended high school at Kyabram until Intermediate, and then went on to high school at Bendigo, where he completed Leaving Honours in 1939. He sat for the exam to enter the Commonwealth Public Service and topped the State. He

was offered a free university place but was unable to take it up as it did not include a living allowance. Instead, he joined the Engineering Division of the Postmaster General's (PMG) Department as a base grade clerk in 1939 at age 16. He also enrolled for a science degree at the University of Melbourne, initially as a part-time student (and full-time clerk!)

In January 1942, he was called up for military service in the Survey Corps. While travelling from Melbourne to Darwin in April 1943 with this group, he learnt that he had been exempted from military service. This ultimately allowed him to complete his science degree as a full-time student with a living allowance. He graduated in 1944 as a Bachelor of Science majoring in physics. Rollo really wanted to be an engineer but had failed to obtain a cadetship, which was rather surprising. He once remarked: "I have always been intensely interested in the study of electrical phenomena".

After graduation, he joined the Research Laboratories of the PMG's Department as a Physicist Grade 1 in the Physical Sciences Section. His main technical contributions there were in the field of materials and components and their environmental behaviour. He was also involved in establishing and understanding the standards required for adapting modern polymer materials for use in telecommunication equipment.



**Figure 2. Rollo Brett as a young research physicist at the PMG Research Laboratories**

When Rollo returned from Darwin in 1943, he met Beryl Williams. She was then working at the YWCA as a youth worker. They were both members of the congregation at St John's Anglican Church in Latrobe Street and were married there in 1946. Their first child, Judith, was born in 1949. Soon afterwards, the couple moved out to their newly built home in Nunawading, which was then an outer suburb of Melbourne being opened up for residential development. Two more children were born there, Ian in 1951 and Helen in 1956. Rollo was

an enthusiastic gardener and a skilled handyman around the home. As a young couple, Beryl and Rollo became foundation members of All Saints Anglican Church in Nunawading. Rollo was a lay preacher there, the vicar's warden, ran stewardship campaigns and worked to raise funds to build the church hall and later the church itself. In addition, he was a member of the Council at Nunawading High School, where all three children attended, and he later served as its President. He had a strong commitment to public education and believed that it contributed to a fairer and more cohesive society.

## Professional Life

During the 1950's, Rollo was active in the Professional Officers' Association (POA), preparing and presenting cases to the Central Committee of the Public Service Board (PSB). These actions led to substantial organisation and classification improvements in the Physical Sciences Section. In 1953, he was promoted to Senior Physicist and, in 1958, to Section Head. By this time, the section had expanded to include two other related specialities, chemistry and metallurgy.

Following the re-organisation of the Research Laboratories in 1963, Rollo was appointed Assistant Director General (ADG) and head of the Apparatus and Services Branch. Then, in 1964, he rose to Senior Assistant Director General (SADG) as head of the Research Laboratories, succeeding Len Harris. His career was now moving from research work into executive leadership.

In 1970, Rollo departed on an overseas visit to investigate the management and development of telecommunications in other research organisations. These included Siemens (Germany), Philips (Netherlands), Ericsson (Sweden), the British Post Office (UK), Northern Electric (Canada) and the Bell Telephone Laboratories (USA). The purpose of this visit was to investigate how the output from a research and development group could be utilised to serve the needs of the parent organisation in the manufacture and application of telecommunication equipment. During the period when Rollo was in charge of the Research Laboratories, from 1964 to 1975, he concentrated on managing its research program to align it with the longer term needs of the PMG's Department. To expand this advanced knowledge, he fostered relationships with Australian universities involved in postgraduate research relevant to telecommunications.

During the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Rollo also tackled the problem of poor accommodation and facilities at the Research Laboratories. The Labs were then scattered over six separate sites in the Melbourne CBD. His initiative eventually led to the consolidation of the Research Labs at a single location in specially designed buildings in Clayton, across

Blackburn Road from Monash University. The first of these buildings was occupied in 1975 and all facilities were finally transferred there by 1980.

Rollo's earlier career had involved him participating in relevant working groups of the Standards Association of Australia (SAA). He eventually became a member of its Council as well as Chairman of its Telecommunications and Electronics Standards Committee. He also became a member of the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Melbourne and a member of the Academic Policy Committee of the Victorian Institute of Colleges. Moreover, he graduated from the Staff College at Mount Eliza just prior to taking up his job as Head of the PMG Research Laboratories. He was also a Fellow of the Institute of Radio and Electronic Engineers and a member of the Radio Research Board.

In 1970, the Australian Government passed legislation which created the Metric Conversion Board to facilitate the conversion of measurements from Imperial to Metric. This included the changes needed in all aspects of the PMG's Department. Rollo, then Head of the Research Labs, was chosen to lead this change, both in Postal and Telecommunications. This affected such matters as the sizes of and charges for letters and parcels, the standardisation of postal packets, the charges for long distance calls, and, of course, all heights and weights. Rollo's extensive knowledge of the standards requirements was recognised and respected throughout the Department.

Rollo was from the generation of nation builders shaped by World War II and Labor's post-war reconstruction; leaders who believed in the central role of Government in making Australia a better society. As a public servant, he truly believed in serving the public good and, as a nationalist, he believed that Australia should develop its own solutions to the communication challenges of its unique environment. As Head of the Labs, he strengthened its links with other institutions, especially the universities with research into telecommunications.

In 1975, the PMG's Department was divided into two parts: Telecom Australia, which handled telecommunications; and Australia Post, which handled mail. Rollo was appointed Head of Telecom's newly created Planning Directorate in 1975. He was a member of the task force which investigated the feasibility of Australia developing a domestic satellite. However, he was somewhat sceptical of this, considering that Australia already had a high-quality terrestrial communication infrastructure.

In 1980, Rollo became State Manager of the Victorian Division of Telecom Australia. In 1982, Rollo presented a formal appreciation to Harry Wragge (["Council of Control Function", 1982](#)) to mark his retirement as founding Editor-in-Chief of the journal, *Australian Telecommunications Research* (ATR). ATR had been an initiative of Rollo's in 1967,

influenced by the model of the highly regarded *Bell System Technical Journal*, to provide a wider audience for the engineering and scientific advances in the then PMG Research Labs<sup>i</sup> ([Gerrand, 1996](#), p. 34). Harry later on became Director of the Telecom Research Laboratories.



Figure 3. Rollo demonstrating Telecom's videoconferencing system in the early 1980s

## Later Life

Rollo retired from Telecom Australia in 1983 at age 60 after 44 years of service. In that year he was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the New Year's Honours List. He would have preferred an Order of Australia, but such an award was not available at the time! It was still a splendid recognition of his many contributions.

After retirement, Rollo and Beryl bought a house at Mount Martha, which became their actual retirement home in 1989. Here, Rollo pursued his hobbies of gardening and woodworking, as well as entertaining family members and old friends. Both were active in the Balcombe Probus Club and the local Anglican Church of St Martin's. It was a very happy period of their lives. However, Beryl was to die suddenly in 2006, after almost 60 years of marriage to Rollo. A few years later, Rollo married a fellow parishioner, Anita McDonald, and she remained with him until her own death five years later. In 2014, he moved into a retirement village at Mount Martha, and in 2019 was admitted to hospital. No longer able to live on his own, he came to stay firstly with his elder daughter, Judith, and partner Graeme in Northcote and then later

with his younger daughter, Helen, and partner Trevor in Adelaide. Rollo suffered from dementia and was eventually transferred to a nursing home in Westgarth in Melbourne. He received excellent care and remained there until he died peacefully in 2022. His funeral was conducted at St John's in Flinders. His life was one of love to his family and of service to his nation.

## Acknowledgements

This obituary was compiled with contributions from Rollo's daughter, Emeritus Professor Judith Brett, and former PMG/Telecom/Telstra engineers David Smyth, John Costa, John Lewis and Peter Gerrand.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> At different times before 1 July 1975, the Laboratories were known as the PMG Research Laboratories and the APO (Australian Post Office) Research Laboratories.