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Professor Renfrew Leslie Christie (1949–2025): Energy historian, anti-apartheid scholar, and leader in building research at the University of the Western Cape

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) mourns the passing of Professor Renfrew Leslie Christie, one of the most consequential scholars to have served this institution. Born in Johannesburg on 11 September 1949, Christie lived a life in which the pursuit of knowledge was never separable from the pursuit of justice. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa, a Member of the Academy of Science of South Africa, and UWC's first Dean of Research. Although I did not have the privilege of knowing him personally, the record of his contribution to this university, to South African science, and to the liberation of his country speaks with extraordinary force.

Christie came of age in a society that required of its dissenters not merely conviction, but sacrifice. His mother, widowed when he was barely 2 years old, worked for many years at the Black Sash advice offices, counselling black South Africans caught in the machinery of the pass laws and influx control.[1] From his earliest years, Christie understood, viscerally and intellectually, that the law could be used as an instrument of oppression and that scholarship could be deployed in the service of resistance.

As a student at the University of the Witwatersrand in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was one of the more active members of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), serving as its Deputy President from December 1971 to December 1972.[1] Before the age of 21 he had been arrested four times, once for praying in a church designated 'Bantu', once for demanding the release of Winnie Mandela outside John Vorster Square, and twice for the offence of being a white person in a 'black area'. These arrests were not incidental to his intellectual development; they were constitutive of it.

He went on to obtain a BA, honours and master's cum laude from the University of Cape Town. In 1975, he was awarded the Field Marshal Smuts Scholarship and took up residence at St Antony's College, Oxford, where he completed a doctoral thesis on the history of electrification in South Africa, spanning 1905 to 1975. That thesis, awarded the DPhil in 1979 and published as *Electricity, Industry and Class in South Africa*[2], was at once an energy history and a forensic anatomy of the apartheid state itself.

Christie's central argument emerged from meticulous archival work in the Eskom records and government files housed in libraries across Europe. He argued that South Africa's electrification programme, heavily subsidised by World Bank and IMF loans, was designed primarily to generate cheap electricity for uranium enrichment and gold mining through forced labour.[2] His research led him to an explosive conclusion. South Africa, he argued, possessed the equipment needed to produce a nuclear explosive device. He had been quietly pursuing that possibility since the age of 17, when, as a conscripted soldier, he caught a glimpse of something at the Lenz ammunition dump that could only mean one thing.[3]

Returning to South Africa in July 1979, Christie took up a Coal Research Fellowship at the University of Cape Town's Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit. Within months, he was arrested under the Terrorism Act. He was subjected to sleep deprivation and prolonged standing, measures classified as torture by Amnesty International. He was then held in solitary confinement for 7 months in Caledon Square, John Vorster Square and Pretoria Central Prison.[3] Tried in June 1980, he was convicted of conspiring to supply the African National Congress (ANC) with information on coal, electricity, oil, nuclear activity and the Koeberg nuclear power station. The possible sentence was death; he received 10 years.

What followed was six and a half years of imprisonment. Christie was first held on death row in the Pretoria Hanging Prison, where he and fellow political prisoners were forced to listen to the executions of other inmates. During his imprisonment, Christie's confession was read aloud in court. It had been extracted under duress, but he had shaped it with deliberate strategic intelligence. In this way, it placed on public record both the extent of the nuclear weapons programme and a set of operational recommendations to the ANC.[3]

In December 1982, Rodney Wilkinson and Heather Gray detonated limpet mines inside the Koeberg nuclear power station immediately before reactor fuel was to be loaded, causing significant damage.[4] Christie later suggested that the operation was consistent with the recommendations contained in that statement. He was later transferred to the rebuilt Security Prison, where he remained until his release on parole in November 1986.[5] When President P.W. Botha later offered conditional parole and did not honour it, Christie challenged the matter in court, arguing that an offer and an acceptance constituted a contract. The State ultimately settled the matter before it was heard.[1]

St Antony's College, Oxford, maintained contact with Christie throughout his imprisonment, reserving a Junior Research Associateship for his eventual release. Dorothy Hodgkin, Nobel Laureate in Chemistry and Chancellor of the University of Bristol, corresponded with him during this period.[5] Such international attention may well have contributed to the reduction of his sentence.

After his release, Christie began the second chapter of his scholarly life at UWC, where he was appointed as the university's first Dean of Research. In that role, he played a leading part in strengthening UWC's research culture and in advancing its development from a predominantly teaching institution into a university with a growing research profile. He encouraged a strong culture of publication and set high expectations for academic staff,

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which some colleagues experienced as demanding, but which also contributed to a significant shift in the institution's trajectory. Over more than two decades, Christie helped build UWC's research standing and drew doctoral candidates and research staff from across the African continent.

He served for 24 years on the Board of Trustees of the Community Law Centre, now the Dullah Omar Institute. There he contributed actively as Minister Dullah Omar and colleagues drafted the ANC's Bill of Rights, which later became the bedrock of the 1996 Constitution.[6] Christie further argued that the Bill of Rights, especially in its articulation of socio-economic rights, provided the constitutional foundation for the doubling of the South African economy under democratic governance.

He brought the same exacting standards to international science governance. He served on the Inter-Academy Partnership panel that produced a globally agreed framework for research ethics, published by Princeton University Press in 2016 and endorsed by the presidents of virtually every national academy of science in the world.[7] His contribution was influenced by a deep conviction. He believed that South African universities which had conducted research in support of the apartheid nuclear weapons programme were guilty of profound research misconduct. He also held that scientists bore direct moral responsibility for the uses to which their work was put.[4]

Professor Renfrew Leslie Christie leaves behind a university immeasurably strengthened by his presence, a South African constitution to which he contributed, and a body of scholarship that stands as a model of what it means to pursue knowledge in conditions of extremity with rigour and moral purpose. UWC honours his memory and extends its deepest condolences to all whose lives were enriched by his remarkable example.



Photo: Courtesy of the University of the Western Cape Media Office

Professor Renfrew Christie

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