

## Donald John Roberts (1945–2026)

Donald John Roberts, John H. Scully Professor of Economics, Strategic Management, and International Business, Emeritus, passed away on Friday, January 23, after a long illness. He was 80. He is survived by his loving wife, Jayne Lange. He was preceded in death by his first wife, Kathy Roberts.

Roberts graduated with First Class Honors in Economics from the University of Manitoba in 1967 and was awarded a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Minnesota in 1972. His thesis advisor was Hugo Sonnenschein, and his thesis title was “Lindahl Equilibrium and the Allocation of Public Goods.” His first academic appointment was in the Managerial Economics and Decision Sciences (MEDS) group in the Kellogg School of Management, where he was rapidly promoted to the rank of Professor in 1977. At MEDS he was a leader of a legendary group that laid the foundations for information economics for decades to come, included Bengt Holmstrom, Paul Milgrom, Roger Myerson, Mark Satterthwaite, Nancy Stokey, and Robert Weber. He moved to the Stanford Graduate School of Business in 1980, where he remained until retirement in 2012. While at the GSB, John served in several administrative capacities, including Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs from 1987 to 1990 and Senior Associate Dean for External Relations and Executive Education from 2000 to 2008.

Roberts was a world-renowned economist. He was a Fellow of the Econometric Society (from 1982) and served as Council Member (1994—96), a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (from 2000), and a Fellow of the Society for the Advancement of Economic Theory (from 2011). In 2007, he was awarded a Doctor of Laws *honoris causa* from the University of Winnipeg. In 2009, he was awarded the Fundación BBVA/IESE Prize for Economics and Management. He was the inaugural recipient of the Douglass C. North Research Award from the International Society for New Institutional Economics, 2014. At the GSB, Roberts won awards for outstanding service and teaching. Roberts traveled extensively, immersing himself in the academic community and local culture on every visit. Over the years he had longer visits or sabbaticals at the Universite Catholique de Louvain; All Souls and Nuffield Colleges, Oxford; London School of Economics; the Universite des Sciences Sociales, Toulouse; the Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem; UC Berkeley; and the Sloan School of Management.

Roberts contributions to economic theory were both exceptionally broad and exceptionally deep. His c.v. lists approximately one-hundred publications of various sorts. The number

of these publications that made seminal contributions makes it impossible to provide a full list, but here are highlights.

His earliest work, coming out of his thesis, was in the tradition of general equilibrium, focused on Lindahl Equilibrium and moving from there into such topics as the existence of Cournot Equilibrium with concave profit functions and the foundations of the theory of monopolistic competition.

In 1982, Roberts published “Limit Pricing and Entry under Incomplete Information: An Equilibrium Analysis,” with Paul Milgrom. This paper began a collaboration with Milgrom that, over time, provided seminal work in games of incomplete information and reputation, predation, other topics in the theory of industrial organization, work on complementarities and comparative statics, and the theories of management and organization, including the theory of influence costs. Their work on organization and management culminated in their magisterial book, *Economics, Organization, and Management* (Prentice Hall, 1992), which was subsequently translated into at least eight languages and has influenced both practitioners and a generation of scholars in organizational economics.

Roberts continued to work on topics related to organization and management. In 2004 he gave the inaugural Clarendon Lecture in Management, which was published as *The Modern Firm: Organization and Design for Performance and Growth* (Oxford University Press, 2004), with at least twelve translations and cited by the *Economist* magazine as the best business book of 2004. In 2013, with Robert Gibbons, he edited the *Handbook of Organizational Economics* (Princeton University Press), contributing with various coauthors at least four chapters.

Roberts was first and foremost a theorist, seeking to understand at a fundamental level what lay behind observed economic phenomena. His theory was marked with elegance and insight, in papers such as “The Simple Economics of Optimal Auctions” (with Jeremy Bulow), “The LeChatelier Principle” (with Paul Milgrom), and *Robust Comparative Statics* (with Susan Athey and Milgrom).

But unlike many theorists, Roberts used theory to understand specific real-world phenomena and he used real-world phenomena to refine theory, in such papers as: “Options for Shipping Policy”; “The Economics of Modern Manufacturing: Technology, Strategy, and Organization” (with Paul Milgrom); “How Lincoln Electric Makes Piece Rates Work” (with Milgrom); and “Deterring Predation in Telecommunications: Are Line-of-Business Restraints Needed?” (with S. Gates and Milgrom). And he went out into the field to build and test theories, in a series of empirical papers including “Does Management Matter? Evidence from India” (with N. Bloom, B. Eifert, A. Mahajan, and D. McKenzie) and

“A Working from Home Experiment Shows High Performers Like It Better” (with N. Bloom, J. Liang, and Z. J. Ling). These papers not only influenced the academic fields of development, productivity, and growth, but they further served as a foundation for economic policy, for example during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While recognizing the breadth of Roberts’ contributions across all of economics, we feel fully justified in saying that he has been the foremost scholar of management theory and practice of his generation.

As one lists Roberts’ contributions, it is important to understand that, while producing this flood of research and scholarly writing, he made enormous contributions locally. It can fairly be said that he was pivotal in bringing the economics group at the Stanford GSB into the modern era. He advised generations of doctoral students, mentoring his extended family tree far beyond the students’ time at GSB. He was an innovative and creative teacher in professional degree programs, and a leader in the GSB’s programs of executive education, often forming connections with students and companies that lasted decades. His energy was legendary, as was his love of life.

Susan Athey, Jeremy Bulow, David Kreps, and Robert Wilson