

Robert Quentin Quentin-Baxter

1922 - 1984

Robert Quentin Quentin-Baxter, Professor of Law since 1968 and member of the United Nations International Law Commission since 1972, died suddenly in Wellington on 25 September 1984. He was a man of great wisdom and learning, in particular in international law and constitutional law.

Professor Quentin-Baxter graduated in law and philosophy from Canterbury College and was New Zealand Senior Scholar in Law in 1947. For the next two years he was assistant to the New Zealand Judge, Mr Justice Northcroft, on the International Military Tribunal at Tokyo. He served the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1949 to 1968 in Ottawa, New York and Tokyo, and from 1964 to 1968 he was an Assistant Secretary of the Ministry and Senior Commissioner for New Zealand to the South Pacific Commission. He attended ten sessions of the U.N. General Assembly and diplomatic conferences on the protection of the victims of armed conflict and the law of the sea.

On his arrival at the University, Professor Quentin-Baxter strengthened further his constitutional law. The classroom was paralleled and informed by advice to Niue, the Cook Islands and the Marshall Islands. That last assignment, to advise an American territory, is itself a tribute to experience, skill and judgment of both Quentin and his wife Alison, who was in fact the principal adviser and who shared in so many of his endeavours. In a very busy 16 years, he also had a term on the U.N. Human Rights Commission (as a New Zealand Government representative) and three terms in his individual capacity on the International Law Commission; he was leader of the New Zealand legal team at the International Court in the Nuclear Tests cases; he was President of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs; and he led the New Zealand delegations to the most recent conference on the protection of the victims of armed conflict.

The knowledge, the vast experience, the good judgment, the humanity, the humour — all came together in his scholarship and teaching. The law was not something technical and separate. “The role of intelligence”, he said, “is not to frustrate instinct”. It is to inform it. And the law was not to be artificially divided; the international environment increasingly affects constitutional development.