

Eulogy: John Deeks

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Emeritus Professor John Deeks died in September 2015. John was a leading scholar in employment relations in New Zealand and, rightfully, claims a distinguished place as a founder of the discipline here. He was deeply respected and liked as a colleague, mentor and friend.

John's roots lay in the post-war UK, where he developed a love of both scholarship and sport, and a particular interest in literature. Indeed, in his undergraduate career at Cambridge, he attended lectures by Raymond Williams, WH Auden and FR Leavis. However, half way through his Cambridge degree, John turned to Economics and Sociology, as a result of work experience in ice cream manufacturing and working in Harrods during his gap year. He learnt from that experience two things – never to eat mass-produced ice cream, and working-people need to be protected from predatory employers.

John was a thinking Social Democrat by inclination, but his work experience made him a powerful advocate of work relations that are fair, respectful and responsible. He developed that interest in work and working-people in his postgraduate course in the London School of Economics, where he worked with Baroness Nancy Seear, staunch advocate of women's rights and equal pay. During this time, John developed a love for research and for fieldwork, particularly in the construction sector. His stories of fieldwork visits to the Glasgow construction industry matched Billy Connolly in their earthiness.

Eventually, John came in 1972 to New Zealand and the University of Auckland. He had job offers in the UK and elsewhere, but he liked the idea of New Zealand. He came, and he stayed first in the University of Auckland's Continuing Education centre, then in the newly-formed Management department, which grew rapidly under his and others' leadership.

He may have left English as a scholarly pursuit, but his fascination with literature continued all his life. He was a very able poet, and produced a stimulating and challenging collection of poems. He also wrote two unpublished novels and much more, including a TV script. One reason he gave for his untimely retirement was his desire to write creatively, an option not associated in his mind with his scholarly outputs. In this, I think he was wrong. John's capacity to write in lucid, compelling style is precisely what a scholar should do, and we were the poorer for his departure from the University.

His reading was wide and catholic, steeped in the classics but always in touch with the leading edge of modern literature. And he loved poetry. His love of literature conditioned his academic career. To the end of his working life, he abhorred poor quality writing. When he was confronted by such writing, his hackles rose, and he could be formidable. This was also true of

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sloppy thinking by colleagues. John possessed the ability to ask the most precise and telling questions in seminars, never to polish his own reputation, always to require greater clarity of thinking.

John's impact in the University and beyond remains strong and well-recognised. He was justly elevated to a Chair and led his department on several occasions. He was instrumental in setting the foundations of what is today an internationally recognised department of 35 full-time staff, a far cry from the six staff in place in 1988.

His leadership combined professionalism and high standards with compassion and judgement. He could recognise nonsense at a great distance, and paid it short shrift. He loved rigorous argument, and could be a challenging questioner in seminars. He cared deeply for the well-being of staff and students, particularly when they were facing adversity.

His impact in employment relations in New Zealand was great. He was a founder of the New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations and contributed greatly to both academic and policy debates in employment relations in the 1970s and 1980s. He created a strong employment relations group in Auckland, which, in different form and locations, continues today.

He wrote well and often, but always because he had something thoughtful to say, and desire to say it well. His approach to scholarship drew on his Cambridge years, where quality trumped quantity and where books still mattered.

His book on business and modern culture (*Business and the Culture of the Enterprise Society*, Quorum Books, 1993) captures his elegance in prose, the extent of his reading and the quality of his insight. It is a brilliant book, yet remains somehow obscure, for John was also quite unable to engage in self-promotion. His interest in small firms led to a range of international publications. John also wrote knowledgeably and well about many issues in New Zealand, including productivity performance, employment relations and neo-liberalism, and bargaining. Of course, a major contribution was the writing with various collaborators of what was, for many, the best textbook on New Zealand employment relations. He also jointly edited two major collections (*Controlling Interests: Business, the State and Society in New Zealand*, AUP, 1992, and *Business and New Zealand Society*, Longman Paul, 1994)

His contribution to university life went beyond departmental leadership and scholarship. He actively campaigned for the construction of the University Marae, at a time when university authorities could not see the point of such a building. He was a staunch member of the AUS (now TEU). He played an active and constructive role in Faculty management.

John is remembered in the University and in the wider employment relations world as an excellent and valued colleague. He is sorely missed.