

PROFESSOR JOHN BARRATT

A Tribute

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John Barratt, who died in Johannesburg on 8 August 2007, was Director (and later Director-General) of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) between 1967 and 1994.

Under the stewardship of his predecessors, Louis Kraft and Gordon Lawrie, the SAIIA had established a modest presence in the public life of the country; under Barratt's it grew in stature, becoming – by the time he stepped down – one of the most respected political clearing-houses on the continent.

Born and raised in Idutywa, Transkei, Barratt was the son of an Anglican clergyman. His mother was descended from Thomas Bains, who had built many of the country's mountain passes' – something he always claimed with great pride!

John Barratt was educated St Andrew's Prep before going on to St Andrew's College, where, in 1946 at the age of 16, he took a first class matric with a distinction in English. After a post-matric year (during which he attended courses at Rhodes University), Barratt enrolled at Wits – where he graduated with a BA in history. Before going up Exeter College, Oxford, to read modern history, he briefly worked in a blanket factory in Johannesburg.

While a student at Wits he met his wife, Valerie Davis. Wonderfully iconoclastic, Valerie, who passed away in 1997, was the perfect foil for the caution and diplomacy for which, in the 1970s and 1980s, Barratt became respected way beyond this country's shores.

His first career was diplomacy and he enrolled with the Union Diplomatic Service (later the Department of Foreign Affairs – DFA). After training as a cadet he was sent to the United Nations in New York from 1958 to 1965. He always maintained that the most interesting aspect of this work was done in the Third

Committee (which deals with human rights), on which he was South Africa's representative. He was a fount of stories of inter-cultural conflict between the Soviets and others during the course of its meetings. The most famous of these involved confusion between the Ukrainians and Soviets as to whether Barratt, who, as representative of the Union of South Africa sat between them, could speak Russian.

On his return to South Africa, and increasingly unhappy with defending South African government policy, he left the DFA to take up the position at the SAIIA. It was not to be easy. At the time, the institute was caught between the mining houses that funded its work and had paid for Jan Smuts House; the remnants of the United Party, who wanted its work to honour the memory of Smuts; the Nationalist government, which had an obvious interest in international affairs; and Wits students, who considered the SAIIA the instrument of predatory capital. The ambiguous situation of the university's Department of International Relations, then under the leadership of Professor Ben Cockram, further confused the picture.

All John Barratt's diplomatic skills were needed to set the institute on a new trajectory. Fund-raising required schmoozing the business community, something that did not come easily and which he often did with a heavy heart. The burden of this work was eased from the mid-1970s when he appointed an energetic and often offbeat retired businessman, Gordon Rackstraw, as director of fund-raising. His day-to-day work benefited enormously after he appointed Edith Ryland as his secretary.

Strengthening the institute's intellectual base came easier. He assiduously worked at building the holdings of the Jan Smuts House library, which, at the time of its dismemberment in 1997, was a depository library for United Nations material. With its holding of some 50 000 volumes, its extensive collection of periodicals, and specialist librarians (led by Dr Jackie Kalley), Smuts House library was one of the two best international relations libraries on the continent. (The other was in Lagos; a gift from the US to Nigeria on its independence.)

His enthusiasm for strengthening the academic side of SAIIA was shared by Dr Leif Egeland (then National Chairman of the SAIIA), whose own career has traversed the fields of politics, diplomacy and the corporate sector. Encouraged by Egeland Barratt embarked on a publications programme which addressed the dearth of publication in IR in the country. He also hired a series of assistant directors – including David Hirschman, now a professor at the American University in Washington; Deon Geldenhuys (University of Johannesburg); Denis Venter (who went on to direct the Africa Institute); and Michael Spicer, now of Business Leadership. This energy certainly helped to deepen the debate on IR in the country and opened up the possibility of careers in the field outside of

government. In today's language, this work opened up the space for civil society interest and a voice in South Africa's international affairs.

But he also supported the discipline's growth and the development of a younger generation of professionals. The fact that the discipline of international relations flourishes in South Africa reflects John Barratt's unrelenting efforts to support its professional development. It is to be hoped that an Annual Lecture will be established in his name and that its focus will be upon the development of academic international relations in South Africa.

Barratt's academic interest lay in the diplomatic side of international relations rather than in the conceptual and theoretical side. That said, the first international conference Barratt organised was on population – a book he edited with Michael Louw, then the Jan Smuts Professor, was published. A few years later, in partnership with the World Peace Foundation (Boston) and the newly established Rand Afrikaans University, the SAIIA organised two conferences on 'development' in Southern Africa. Within a particular perspective on the idea of modernity, this was pioneering work and the two edited collections (on which Barratt's name appears) marked a particular moment in the conversation over apartheid that would eventually lead to the idea of 'modernising racial domination'.

He was also deeply interested in the possibility of bringing conflicting parties – or parties to potential conflicts – together, an interest that saw him involved in some audacious enterprises. One, which began in the early months of 1974, tried to anticipate the effects on Southern Africa of the Portuguese decolonisation of Mozambique and Angola. The venue was to be Angola and Barratt, with the late Otto Krause and me, travelled to Luanda to put things in place. It was stymied, of course, by the Portuguese coup of 24 April.

His attention then moved to the prospects for resolving the Rhodesian issue. A famous conference – organised with the renowned journalist Hennie Serfontein – took place in Botswana under the title 'Prospects for Détente in Southern Africa'. John Barratt skilfully chaired an intensely fractious meeting between representatives of the Smith government and members of the liberation movement. He was 41 years old at the time – sharp as a bell, but focused on opening a space for all voices as he drew the difficult conversation steadily forward.

John Barratt believed that knowledge could be approached objectively – so, for him, international relations were ethically neutral and free discussion of its 'facts' would open towards truth and justice. It was hard to hold this position in the 1970s and 1980s. Not only had the ideology of apartheid corroded most intellectual debate within the country, the Marxism within anti-apartheid academic circles raised questions about the relationship between knowledge and the struggle against apartheid.

If these were not challenges enough, in 1977 the government Department of Information launched the Foreign Affairs Association (FAA). This was an attempt to use international relations knowledge and the techniques of diplomacy to improve apartheid's image abroad. Although only one of more than 150 projects, which would eventually come to light in the 'Info-Scandal', the mandate of the FAA was suspiciously close to the brief of the SAIIA. Immediately, the press pointed a finger at the institute: Barratt weathered the storm well. The SAIIA had never received funding from the South African government – it was, he once, famously, stated, 'poor but pure'. Looking back 30 years later, it is probably true to say that the government in Pretoria had paid both him (and the institute) a backhanded compliment.

He was appointed Honorary Professor of International Relations at Wits in 1981 – a just reward because he wrote and edited an impressive number of papers and monographs on topics in diverse fields, including development studies, African affairs, and the United Nations. His journal pieces appeared in influential policy-making outlets – including *Foreign Affairs* and *International Affairs*. The book *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, written with the British scholar James Barber on the history of South African foreign policy, remains the standard work in the field.

The introduction of television to South Africa drew Barratt and the work of the Institute of International Affairs further into the public eye. He became a fluent and authoritative voice on the dilemma of South Africa's deepening isolation and on international developments in general.

In the 1970s he organised a series of high-profile conferences which brought the full implications of isolation home to a South African audience. Guests included Dr Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State, and Ted Heath, British Prime Minister between 1970 and 1974. The programme was not without its own controversies: efforts to bring the highly respected British politician and intellectual Shirley Williams, then on the opposition benches in the House of Commons, floundered. In the 1980s, his attention was drawn to the prospects of a post-apartheid South Africa and, of course, the opportunities the ending of the country's isolation presented to its foreign policy.

During the country's transition to democracy Barratt served on the Transitional Executive Council's Sub-Council on Foreign Affairs, to which he had been nominated by the then Democratic Party. He took great pleasure in this appointment, which brought together his training, provided an opportunity to practise his calling as a diplomat, and signalled the ending of South Africa's international isolation – the cause to which he had devoted his career.

Keenly interested in politics, international issues and cricket until the end of his life, he was increasingly drawn to the work of the Church and completed a Master's in Theology at St Augustine's College in Johannesburg. This closed the

circle of the deep faith he had discovered as a student at Oxford, when he converted to Catholicism.

In his letter applying for the post of director of the institute in May 1967, Barratt wrote this paragraph. 'I have no objection to an appointment for a minimum period, as mentioned in the advertisement, and, in fact, subject to further information about the proposed conditions of employment, I would hope, if my application were successful, that I could look forward to a longer period of service to the Institute and the Smuts Memorial Trust.'

The hope was fulfilled, of course; he served the institute for 27 years, building its reputation at home and abroad and, in the process, becoming, as *The Times* of London described him, 'the founding father of the modern study of international relations in South Africa'.