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Last salute to Patrick Birkinshaw

Professor Patrick Birkinshaw's academic career was distinguished by an extraordinary intellectual breadth, a fearless engagement with the relationship between law and politics, and an unwavering commitment to openness, accountability, and the rule of law. Beginning his career in 1976 at the University of Hull, shortly after qualifying as a barrister of the Inner Temple, Patrick quickly established himself as a scholar of originality and purpose. Hull remained his academic home throughout his career, even as his influence extended far beyond it, through visiting professorships, international collaborations, and advisory roles across Europe and beyond. From the outset, Patrick's work was driven by a vision of public law as a living instrument of justice. His early research on grievance redress transformed understanding of how citizens seek remedies against the state, not only through courts, but through ombudsmen and informal mechanisms. His monograph *Grievances, Remedies and the State* (1985) became a foundational text, admired for its ambition and its humane concern for fairness in public administration. It reflected his belief that law must serve the citizen, not merely regulate the state.

This concern for justice naturally led him to the study of freedom of information, openness, and transparency in government. Patrick was among the pioneers who identified secrecy as a structural threat to democracy. His seminal work *Freedom of Information: The Law, the Practice and the Ideal* (first published in 1988) shaped generations of scholars and practitioners and remains a cornerstone of information law.

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He combined scholarship with public service, acting as legal adviser to Parliament during the passage of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Patrick's intellectual courage was equally evident in his embrace of European public law at a time when many UK scholars still viewed EU law as peripheral. He understood early that European law would reshape domestic constitutional thinking and that to ignore it was to misunderstand modern public law. In 1992 he founded the Institute of European Public Law at Hull, an audacious and visionary project that brought together some of the greatest minds in European legal scholarship. The Institute became an international center of excellence, reflecting Patrick's belief in cross-fertilization between legal systems and the creative dialogue between national and European law. His creation and long editorship of the journal *European Public Law* was another defining achievement. Under his leadership, it became one of the most respected journals in the field, a forum where law, politics, and constitutional values could meet in serious and principled debate. Editing the journal from 1994 to 2018, Patrick shaped not only its direction but the very contours of European public law as an academic discipline.

Brexit, which preoccupied him in the later years of his career, represented for Patrick both a constitutional tragedy and an intellectual challenge. Through edited volumes and major monographs such as *European Public Law: The Achievement and the Brexit Challenge* (2020), he sought to preserve the insights of European legal integration while confronting the realities of political rupture. Even in disagreement, Patrick remained committed to rigorous analysis and to the future of public law as a moral and constitutional enterprise.

Beyond academia, Patrick gave his expertise generously to public bodies: advising the OECD, governments in Europe, North Africa and Hong Kong, training judges, serving as an ombudsperson on nuclear transparency, and helping institutions adjust to cultures of openness. These roles embodied his lifelong conviction that scholarship must serve the public good. Patrick Birkinshaw's work reveals a single unifying theme: the inseparability of law and politics, and the duty of law to restrain power through transparency, accountability, and reason. His legacy is vast: in his books and articles, in institutions he built, in laws he shaped, and in the minds of scholars, students, judges, and civil servants whom he inspired.

He was not merely an academic of distinction. He was an academic with a vision – bold, demanding, sometimes uncompromising, but always

guided by a profound belief in justice, integrity, and the civilizing power of law.

Patrick was not only an exceptional scholar, but also an outstanding Head of School. During his term, the Law School at Hull reached its highest research rating in the national assessment exercises, a testament to his leadership, energy, and uncompromising standards. He promoted his department with passion and strategic intelligence, believing deeply in the collective strength of his colleagues and in the visibility of their work. He fought tirelessly for the recognition of the School, never hesitating to put himself forward when it meant advancing the institution he served so loyally.

As a colleague, he was simply remarkable. Patrick was entertaining, witty, and dynamic, capable of transforming even the most technical discussion into a lively and memorable exchange. His humor was sharp but generous, his conversation stimulating, and his presence unmistakably energizing. He could be dominant and stubborn, sometimes overstepping boundaries, driven by an intense sense of purpose and conviction. Yet beneath this formidable exterior lay a soft heart, immense loyalty, and a deep generosity of spirit. He was a true friend to those he trusted and a fierce defender of those he believed in.

He was relentlessly diligent and extraordinarily hard-working. Patrick gave everything to his scholarship, his institution, and his students. Long hours, meticulous preparation, and an unyielding commitment to excellence defined his professional life. For him, academia was not a career but a vocation, demanding total engagement and integrity.

Patrick was an academic force of nature: visionary, formidable, and profoundly human. His passing leaves a silence that echoes across the world of public law, European public law, and freedom of information scholarship. He was not merely a scholar of towering intellect, but a builder of institutions, a shape of discipline, and a personality impossible to forget.

Patrick was a man of vision. He saw ahead of his time the centrality of transparency, openness, and accountability to democratic governance. Long before “freedom of information” and “transparency” became fashionable political imperatives, he understood that they were constitutional necessities. His work transformed the way governments, courts, and scholars think about secrecy and openness. Few academics can genuinely claim to have shaped legislation itself; Patrick did. His influence on the UK Freedom of Information Act, and particularly its extension to

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Parliament, stands as a historic contribution to democratic accountability, with consequences that continue to resonate today.

Equally, his pioneering role in European Public Law was nothing short of foundational. Through the creation of the Institute of European Public Law at Hull and the establishment and long stewardship of the journal *European Public Law*, he did not simply participate in a field: he created its intellectual infrastructure. Generations of scholars found a home, a platform, and a community because of his relentless energy and belief in cross-fertilization between legal systems. He understood that law does not grow in isolation, but through dialogue, comparison, and sometimes confrontation. In this, he was both architect and catalyst.

As Head of the Law School, Patrick was an outstanding fighter, a tireless champion for his department. Under his leadership, the School achieved its highest research standing, a concrete reflection of his ambition, organizational brilliance, and refusal to accept mediocrity. He promoted his department with fierce pride and strategic acumen, always placing Hull firmly on the national and international academic map. He believed in excellence, demanded it, and inspired it. His loyalty to his institution was absolute, and his advocacy for his colleagues was tireless.

Patrick's personality was as powerful as his intellect. He was dominant, stubborn, and sometimes gloriously unyielding and not easy to contradict or have as an opponent. He did not shy away from conflict if principle was at stake, and he was unafraid to overstep conventional boundaries in pursuit of what he believed was right. Yet this intensity was inseparable from his generosity, warmth, and loyalty. Beneath the commanding presence was a soft heart: deeply caring, protective of friends and students, and unwavering in his support for those he trusted.

As a colleague, he was fabulous. Entertaining, witty, and endlessly dynamic, he brought color and vitality into academic life. Meetings were livelier when Patrick was present; conversations were sharper, funnier, and more consequential. He combined intellectual seriousness with a theatrical sense of engagement, making scholarship feel alive. His humor disarmed, though, if ever subtle, sometimes it was harder than a punch and might let people bleed. Such feature of his character revealed him as a true Londoner. His animated energy, and his presence transformed the ordinary into the memorable.

His diligence was legendary. Patrick worked harder than almost anyone around him. Academia for him was not a profession but a calling. He wrote, edited, advised, lectured, organized, and mentored with

relentless commitment. His productivity was matched only by his sense of responsibility: to truth, to scholarship, to public service, and to the next generation of lawyers.

Above all, Patrick was loyal. Loyal to his friends, loyal to his colleagues, loyal to his discipline, and loyal to the idea that law matters because people matter. He stood by those he believed in with fierce devotion, and his friendships were deep, enduring, and sincere. University for him was not a firm, as it is now sadly become after forty years of neoliberal transformations, but still a community of teachers, research and students all united in the pursue of academic excellence, critical thinking and conversation

Professor Patrick Birkinshaw leaves behind an extraordinary legacy: a legacy of intellectual courage, institutional creation, legislative influence, and human connection. He showed us that scholarship can shape the real world, that leadership can be both demanding and generous, and that authority can coexist with warmth and humor.

He was brilliant, complex, passionate, and unforgettable.

He is, in every sense, irreplaceable.