Doughty Street Chambers mourns the loss of Professor Sir Nigel Rodley, the leading human rights lawyer, who has died at the age of 75. Nigel was a much loved and valued academic member of Chambers. He was always available to provide wise and thoughtful advice on all human rights issues. In a manner that sums him up, Nigel would provide succinct and clear answers to questions in such a way as to make you feel as if you’d known the answer all along. He was so clever and he knew so much, but he wore his expertise lightly. He was a kind, wise and generous man, and his loss to Chambers will be significant and real.

Undoubtedly the loss to the world will be greater. Nigel’s career was extraordinary. He was Amnesty’s first lawyer and he went on to become one of the great human rights academics of all time. Along with his colleagues Kevin Boyle and Françoise Hampson, he created the Human Rights Centre at Essex University. That Centre blazed a trail providing a human rights legal education to literally thousands of people from across the globe. Some of the greatest opinion leaders of today were educated by that extraordinary and dynamic trio. The global understanding of human rights would be very different without them.

Nigel continued his association with the Essex Human Rights Centre until his death, but the final decades of his life were taken up with making sure human rights were given real meaning and substance at the UN level. Nigel was an exceptional UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. He shined a light into the darkest crevices of the human soul and without fanfare or flourish would expose
torturers. As one comment on Twitter pointed out, this could not be a worse time to lose him and his wise counsel.

Nigel then went on to the UN Human Rights Committee, eventually chairing that essential institution, and here he continued to thrive. He was careful and cautious in his approach to giving effect to human rights. He understood their role within the international legal order and was, therefore, conscious that they should only be used to address the most serious violations.

Upholding the absolute prohibition on torture is the right that Nigel is most associated with. However, his expertise spanned all human rights and their relationship with international law. Nigel was resolutely committed to the role of civil society in promoting and protecting human rights. He was a co-founder of Interights and a passionate supporter of local NGOs working to have human rights enforced in their communities. He was a great supporter of JUSTICE and was a commissioner for the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ).

Nigel’s professional life was marked by extraordinary achievements. It still feels he had so much more to give. Chambers has lost a dear friend and a valued colleague. Our love and thoughts are with Nigel’s family at this sad time.

Below are some of the comments expressed by members of Chambers on hearing of his death:

“This is so, so sad.”

“Nigel was a kind, courteous and humane person, and although I only worked with him on one case I felt very honoured to have done so.”

“Nigel was instrumental - essential - in making human rights meaningful. All over the world there are people who are grateful to him. And Nigel was genuinely proud of his association with Chambers and we were honoured to have him amongst us. He was a great man.”
“The incomparable Nigel Rodley. Where would international human rights law be without Nigel? It would be a very dimmed version of what it is now. And thanks to the firm foundation Nigel and other pioneers at Essex have given it, human rights law remains resolute.”

“Always alert & always accessible. Always ready to give advice and always on hand”

“About a year ago, I sent off a mail to our members asking for information about how to obtain an Advisory Opinion from the ICJ. It is of course, the uniqueness of Doughty Street Chambers that we have access to experts of Nigel’s calibre. Although, not corresponding with him, or indeed meeting him before, his reply was as if I was a long-term colleague, immediately interested, supportive and helpful. He put me in touch with his colleagues at the ILO and suggested I contacted named people at the WHO. His responses were completely without ego, or pomposity of any kind, simply to try and assist in taking the issue as far as possible. This can only stem from an understanding that human rights are won, not by great people, or indeed great cases, but through thousands of struggles that illuminate injustice and seek to remedy them. He passes that baton to the next generation, who are inspired by him to carry on his struggle.”

“I greatly admired him.”

“Nigel agreed to come onto the Bar Human Rights Committee’s Advisory Board a couple of years ago. I used to meet with him to discuss human rights issues in Bahrain, Colombia and around the world. He was hard to keep up with - we often just missed each other in Geneva or India and always reached for our Spanish greetings when we emailed. Quite simply, he was a kind, warm-hearted, super clever and incredibly modest man. And he had a mischievous sense of humour which made him much fun to meet with over drinks or dinner. He did not suffer fools but also gave his time freely and generously. He expected the same high standards that he never let slip.”

“Nigel was a real boost to BHRC’s pro bono work and was a regular supporter at DSC international team meetings. He always fizzed with ideas. His work is still continuing as he linked me with a lawyer at Guantanamo and we are holding a seminar on 10th February. We are going to dedicate it to his memory. I will miss him so much.”
"I worked with Nigel a little at the JCHR as he was very interested in our work on trying to get Parliaments to take greater responsibility on the implementation of Treaties and the execution of judgments and decisions of international monitoring bodies. However, I got to know him more in his capacity as a member of the JUSTICE Council and in his Presidency at the ICJ. I’d obviously read his work as a student and was very much a fan even before I met him. His body of work made a contribution to the human rights community which has had a lasting impact on legal systems everywhere and on many millions of lives."

“Twitter’s 140 characters made it difficult to sum up all you could say about his achievements. However, he was an inspired & inspiring champion for human rights, a brilliant lawyer and a great human. It’s the last of these that made me most sad about his loss. Nigel was quite simply great company and very, very kind. On my first trip to Geneva for JUSTICE, to participate in a rare meeting of all of the ICJ branches worldwide, when I caught up with Nigel – despite having not seen him for years – he was warm and chatty but both interested in the work that JUSTICE was doing and curious about my own life since we’d last crossed paths. That he would take the time out to try to catch up properly with a junior lawyer he hardly knew in a room of high-profile visitors from across the globe was a tiny insight into his real humanity."

“When I think about Nigel, this is what comes to mind: he was instrumental in the creation of a new form of international human rights law; while his work as Special Rapporteur on torture meant that he saw the very darkest side of human cruelty, he always remained calm and determined; he was diplomatic and always impeccably behaved even when his message to governments was challenging and critical; he was dedicated to accuracy in fact and law and was relentless in speaking truth to power."

“He was I think incredibly brave – I remember him telling us during a tutorial at Essex about visiting a prison in Africa (I’m afraid I can’t remember the country) while he was the special rapporteur on torture. It was an announced visit and the prison governor had ensured that the prison cells were all clean, and had even put a rose on each prison cell bed, but he had forgotten to remove the instruments of torture from the office in which he met with Nigel. Nigel was absolutely dedicated to ensuring there was an actual change in behaviour and culture and not to allow governments/prisons/police to portray a false commitment and respect to human rights to the outside world, while secretly torturing and perpetrating cruel and inhuman suffering.”
“Nigel was absolutely dedicated to exposing the truth and challenging inhuman treatment no matter who was responsible and no matter what the cost.”

“He will be very sadly missed by us all.”

“My email inbox is strewn with emails from Nigel providing advice to me and other members of Chambers. He would give of himself so freely and generously and of course everything he shared was so wise.”

“I thought I understood the prohibition on torture until I read Nigel’s work. He has left a tremendous body of written work in decisions, judgments, articles and other texts.”

“I just went on to the Anti-Torture Twitter feed. The comments lamenting Nigel’s passing are amazing. What a huge loss he is. And, of course, there are equally amazing tributes to him on Amnesty’s website and the ICJ’s. They’re everywhere.”

_Doughty Street’s tribute was prepared by Jonathan Cooper. An obituary by Geoffrey Robertson QC, Joint Head of Doughty Street Chambers, and Ivor Crewe, has been published in The Guardian, and can be accessed by clicking here._

_The University of Essex is also publishing many further tributes to Nigel and his many achievements on their website, which you can view by clicking here._