Sixteenth Geoffrey Sawer Lecture 2013

Geoffrey Sawer and the Art of the Academic Commentator: A Preliminary Biographical Sketch

Friday 15 November 2013  6–7 pm, light refreshments from 5.30pm

Professor Michael Coper  ANU College of Law, The Australian National University

Finkel Theatre  John Curtin School of Medical Research, Bldg 131, Garran Rd
The Australian National University

Geoffrey Sawer was the first Professor of Law at the Australian National University, appointed in 1950 at the age of 40. His fluid and incisive writing, especially on Australian constitutional law and politics, has had a significant impact on succeeding generations of academics, practitioners and judges. One of Michael Coper’s first acts on assuming the Deanship of the ANU College of Law in 1998, two years after Sawer’s death in 1996, was, with then Centre for International and Public Law Director Hilary Charlesworth, to inaugurate the annual Sawer Lecture in honour of this pioneering scholar. Since then, the annual lecture has been delivered by such luminaries as Sir Ninian Stephen, Sir Gerard Brennan, and Professor Leslie Zines.

On the occasion of the 16th annual lecture, Professor Michael Coper takes a look at the man himself and his contribution to Australian legal and political life. How does his scholarship stand up today, when so much has changed in the legal and political landscape? What is enduring and what is transient in a life’s work? What obligation do we, as the inhabitants of the present, have to mine the time-bound wisdom of the past? What lessons can we draw and what insights can we glean when we look at law and life through the lens of biography? In a preliminary biographical sketch of this outstanding scholar and warm and genial human being, Michael Coper draws upon Sawer’s writings, oral history interviews and private papers to pose these and other intriguing questions.

Michael Coper was Robert Garran Professor and Dean of the ANU College of Law from 1998 to 2012. He has himself written extensively on Australian constitutional law, practised in that area with a national law firm, and appeared as counsel in a number of High Court cases. He is the author of Encounters with the Australian Constitution (1987) and co-editor of The Oxford Companion to the High Court of Australia (2001). In his capacity as Dean, Professor Coper introduced almost all of the previous Sawer lectures, and was delighted to have been asked to present the 16th Sawer Lecture in 2013.

The views expressed in this lecture are those of the presenter and do not necessarily represent the views of The Australian National University.