

Chris Laidlaw

Born 1943

All Black, politician, diplomat, writer, broadcaster, regional councillor

When Chris Laidlaw applied for a Rhodes scholarship he was already famous. An All Black at 19, he was widely regarded as one of the most brilliant halfbacks New Zealand had ever produced.

Laidlaw refused to become one of the Englishmen that Cecil Rhodes imagined his colonial scholars would turn into under Oxford's influence. The more he saw of English life at Oxford, the more he knew he 'wanted to be something else'.

'Janet Frame was right when she wrote of the impulse of those who travel from New Zealand as "examining not the place of arrival, but the place of departure"', he wrote. Laidlaw's experiences at Oxford gave him a new appreciation of his homeland: 'it gave me a better sense of what I was capable of and a fuller understanding of the way other societies pigeon-hole their citizens. I grew to

better understand how lucky NZ society was in having consciously set its mind against that'.

Graduating with an MLitt, Laidlaw joined the New Zealand Department of Foreign Affairs, serving in Fiji, France and Britain. He was then seconded to the Commonwealth Secretariat as Executive Assistant to the Secretary General. In that time Zimbabwe gained independence and the infamous career of Idi Amin in Uganda ended. Working with the Secretary General, Laidlaw was also caught up in the politics of Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea, Namibia and the Caribbean. In 1986 his specialised experience led to his posting to Zimbabwe as the first New Zealand High Commissioner in Africa.

In 1989 he returned to New Zealand to take up the post of Race Relations Conciliator and Human Rights Commissioner.

Laidlaw is now based in Wellington where he is a Regional Councillor. He is well-known for his Sunday morning radio programme.

FURTHER READING

Chris Laidlaw, *Mud in your eye: a worm's eye view of the changing world of rugby*, Wellington: Reed, 1973.

Chris Laidlaw, *Rights of passage: beyond the New Zealand identity crisis*, Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1999.



1964 All Blacks vs France. Chris Laidlaw remains best known to most New Zealanders as one of the great All Black halfbacks of the 1960s. (Chris Laidlaw collection)

'I quickly realised that although I was adopting many of the manners of the English, I wanted to be something else.'



Chris Laidlaw in 1992. He was MP for Wellington Central at the time. (Dominion Post collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Ref: EP/1992/5067/23-F)