

16

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# Scarfie

## LIFE ON CAMPUS

CONFLICT STUDIES | Both theory and practice find home at National Centre

# War (what is it good for?)

GAVIN BERTRAM

**W**ITH nearly 30 wars being waged around the world it's no wonder there's a need for the study of peace and conflict.

Since 2009 the University of Otago has been home to the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, whose focus is not limited to armed conflict in hot spots on the other side of the world.

"We're beginning to embed ourselves in some of the things that are happening locally," the Centre's director Professor Kevin Clements said.

"We're trying to make sure that we're as concerned within New Zealand about neighbourhood conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, as we are over major problems in Darfur or in Sri Lanka."

The Centre was initiated through the philanthropy of the Aotearoa New Zealand Peace and Conflict Studies Trust, and Otago University bid to house it in Dunedin.

Clements said he initially hoped it would be close to the seat of power in Wellington, but has come to believe Dunedin is a better location.

"I can see all sorts of advantages to being based here," he said.

"You don't get distracted by the ephemera of everyday politics and it provides you with a chance to be more reflective about some of the issues. I think we're privileged to have got such a kind of congenial university environment to work in."

The director previously held a similar position in Australia, and was head of the International Alert peace building organisation in London. He is currently the Secretary General of the International Peace Research Association and the chair of the International Advisory Committee to the Global Peace Index.

Last year New Zealand figured at the top of that list, meaning this is essentially the most peaceful country on the

planet. "The issue is why is that so, and how can New Zealand remain there?" Clements said.

"The danger signs for New Zealand are in relation to inequality. If we allow ourselves to become more unequal then internal conflict will arise."

However, while the Centre is engaged in local affairs, much of the work focuses on overseas wars. The postgraduate programmes, populated by students from a variety of disciplines including the sciences and humanities, offer possibilities in research or theory.

Several students were interested in practitioner work, which would see them visiting war zones to work with development agencies, non-government organisations, or the military.

Hence, they are being taught the necessary skills to deal with what that situation may throw at them. That's something Clements was familiar with from his own experiences.

"I had an interesting experience with mortars popping all around," he said.

"When you're confronted by the hard reality of an active war zone all the theory goes out the window and you're constantly worrying about survival and how you can play a reasonably constructive role in helping people see ways through the fog of the conflict."

Clements' ultimate ambition for the Centre is to do that in a different way: by using Dunedin as a neutral zone for negotiations. He believed the city was perfectly poised to serve such a role.

"It's a non-threatening place and a little bit removed from the hurly burly of politics," he said.

"That's my long term ambition, that this becomes known as a place that does sophisticated problem solving with a range of conflicting parties."

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Peace man: Peace and Conflict Studies director Prof Kevin Clements



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