

TRIBUTE TO DR. JOHN DAVIS

David Rhind
Vice Chancellor and Principal
City University (UK)

At the funeral service on 13 January 1999

John Davis was a dear friend of mine. But that is not the main reason why I am speaking today. My task – which I was honoured to be asked to carry out – is to say something about his academic and other contributions to the world of education.

This seems appropriate for John served in the Department of Geography in Birkbeck College, University of London, for no less than 42 years. I believe that he made a positive contribution to the life of that department, to his colleagues and his students every single day from the time he joined Birkbeck in the far off days of 1956. Indeed, I *know* that to be true for I worked with him for a decade and have heard identical assessments made by earlier and subsequent colleagues.

John's academic interests were mainly focused on North America though he was never a narrow specialist. Why do all his colleagues believe that his academic contributions are to be greatly respected, even venerated? Why did he receive last year the singular honour of the Canadian High Commissioner's Award '...in recognition of and appreciation for an outstanding contribution to the special relationship between Canada and the United Kingdom'? Why has the response to his early death been greeted by such sorrow amongst his colleagues and friends, many of them here today? I hope to answer these questions in part at least today.

The answer is rooted in John's approach to life and in his humanity. In everything he did, he gave his all. Anything less than 100% was inconceivable to John. He was in the College more than any colleague, always cheerful and understanding of the need to support colleagues less resilient than himself. All of his colleagues have, at the end of a bad day, enjoyed a glass of single malt drawn from the inexhaustible whisky stocks in his filing cabinet! This medication would be accompanied by sane, disinterested advice - but only if sought. He was tolerant of our imperfections -though he was far from blind to them and on occasions acted to rectify their consequences on others. It would also usually be John Davis who volunteered for something or, if not, would allow himself to be 'volunteered' for a task whether it was administrative, running a field trip or teaching part of someone else's course.

He was, then, first and foremost a team player in an era during which many academics became increasingly motivated by promotion through research publications and grants. Though he acted as Head of

Department on two or three occasions, these were not his happiest days. He preferred supporting – both publicly and privately – the person running the show and he did so in every case with loyalty, integrity and total commitment. He loved playing a full part in the academic community, principally within the Geography Department but also within the wider Birkbeck College and in the University of London (for example, he served the Centre for Canadian Studies in many capacities over many years). He played a long-standing role in the profession as a member of the Institute of British Geographers and attended virtually all of their annual conferences. He was an enthusiastic Fellow and supporter of the Royal Geographical Society and especially of the Geographical Club based therein – of which more soon.

All this should indicate that John was a wonderful working colleague, the sort of person that every department needs. That is true but he was *much* more than that. At least two other things distinguished John Davis. The first was his joy of life. He loved people and social intercourse; he delighted in talking and joking with people from many backgrounds and disciplines. He could be found in the College Senior Common Room, in the Birkbeck refectory, in the bar at conferences, in the Geographical Club and in the rooms and corridors here and in North America - exulting in the pleasure of exchanging views, concerns, thoughts and ideas.

John Davis *never ever* thought academia – or any element of life itself – needed to be dull. On the contrary, he thought life and lifelong learning were inextricable for everyone and should - indeed must - be enjoyed. There were no immutable barriers for John between work and play. Life was for living, learning and making things better - and some of that could be done effectively over a bottle of wine and a decent meal in the Villa Carlotta in Charlotte Street!

More than anything apart from his family, however, John lived for his students. He loved lecturing to and talking with them. He supported the weak and encouraged the strong. And he enthused them all. Perhaps uniquely for any academic, I have never heard anything but praise from any student for him.

I can give a simple statistical example of how much this meant to his students. On 30 September 1996, we gathered for a dinner (in Villa Carlotta of course) to mark his retirement. The management of our favourite restaurant understood the significance of the occasion, knowing John as a friend as well as a customer, so they excelled themselves that evening. All students who had taken his Masters degree courses in North American Studies over twenty years were invited – at least in so far as the department could trace their addresses. No less than three quarters of the total graduates turned up, some from far overseas. I know over a thousand academics; I can think of only two or three others who inspire such loyalty

and affection. We enjoyed ourselves that evening with and because of John Davis, as we did on many other occasions.

That then is the theme on which I would like to end. John's life was one of unselfish service to others and total commitment to all he believed in. We mourn today the early death of a good man. But I hope we can do better than that. I hope that we can see today as a celebration. A celebration of the joy, fun and pleasure John Davis brought to our lives. And a celebration of how, through his enjoyment of life, his humility and his commitment, he made this world a better place.

