obituary: keith webb



Dr Keith Webb died on March 14 aged sixty-four. He was an inspirational teacher and a mainstay in the study of conflict both in this country and abroad.

A Man of Kent, Keith left school at fifteen and had an unlikely start for an academic. He worked in the security department of the General Post Office (GPO) and was a trainee wine taster before going to the University of Keele where he met his wife, Vanda. At the same time he developed his undoubted sporting skills in table tennis (ranked ninth in the country) and cricket to County standard. He later took up sailing.

In his early academic life Keith was interested in politics, philosophy and sociology. He had a number of research and teaching positions in Iceland, Strathclyde and City Universities before settling at the University of Kent in 1982 where he concentrated on conflict research. Nevertheless, his publications reflect his broad intellectual interests ranging from Scottish nationalism to the philosophical bases of the social sciences. But his great academic love was conflict research and teaching. His justifiably great pride and joy was the International Conflict Analysis M.A. degree at Kent in the design of which he played a pre-eminent role. His design has become a template for similar degrees in at least three other universities. At the same time as his work at Kent he continued to give courses for the Open University and the Workers Educational Association – the latter in the Kent coalfield villages.

As the academic climate changed in British universities with growing bureaucratisation and diminishing academic freedom, it was not surprising that Keith took the opportunity of early retirement and went to Cyprus. Keith was always a builder, and with the Kent conflict programme well established, he started again at Intercollege in Cyprus. There he established a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. programme in the International Relations field with a major conflict component. He acted as host to the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops in Nicosia in 2006, which was an accolade of his achievements.

Not one for dry scholarship, Keith became involved in second track diplomacy in internationalised conflicts. He was concerned not only to understand the causes, modalities and outcomes of conflict but to help the parties – all of them – to find a relationship that satisfied their needs and values in the context of those of others. In particular, he was active in South Africa, Abkhazia, Moldova and Cyprus.

Keith had about him the air of a mischievous little boy. He could barely resist cocking a snook at authority, but on the important questions he was as solid as a rock. When it mattered he always went the extra mile. He was a natural researcher but often, tantalisingly, he did not publish his work. He was an inspired teacher who has grateful students the world over through whom his influence

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will pass down the generations. No one went to him when in trouble without receiving a helping hand (and sometimes tough love).

When Keith knew that his time was short he and Vanda invited family and friends to a joyous farewell party – a human being held in the highest esteem by his peers, family, friends and students.

AJR Groom, Canterbury, March 2008

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