

## Obituary



**James O'Connell**

### From BASIC

It is with sadness and regret that we report that James O'Connell, Professor Emeritus of Peace Studies, University of Bradford and BASIC board member, died on 8<sup>th</sup> September. James is BASIC's longest-serving Board member, and was for many of its early years its Chair and took on the task again more recently when we needed him. He had a strong vision for the organisation, one focused upon the dangers deeply associated with a continued attachment to nuclear deterrence, and the harm such an approach has for broader reconciliation between states. He combined idealistic vision with pragmatic practice, believing that it was only through a combination of the two that individuals and groups could affect the change so deeply needed in moving away from conflict.

BASIC's former Executive Director (2001-2007), Ian Davis, writes...

When I headed towards the West Yorkshire city of Bradford in 1988 as a mature first year undergraduate on a three year sabbatical from the Civil Service I often had difficulty in explaining to colleagues, friends and family why I was going to a Peace Studies department. While it was already the largest such Department in the world it had a very low public profile albeit one that still managed to get under the skin of some within the 'defence establishment', including the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. When I left over a decade later armed with a PhD and ready to take on new challenges in the non-governmental world, it was with one of James O'Connell's favourite quotes ringing in my ears:

....and when Peace here does house,  
He comes with work to do, he does not come to coo,  
He comes to brood and sit.

Hopkins (*Peace*)

While advocacy is often furthest from the minds and inclinations of many academics, the Department of Peace Studies encouraged a synthesis of teaching and learning, research and practical application. Today, it is much larger, has greater credibility within establishment circles and is arguably the one Department that continues to make the University of Bradford distinctive. Much of this is the legacy of James O'Connell, who was appointed the second chair of the Department when Adam Curle retired in 1978.

James' view was that to endure and play a vital role in UK and global affairs, the academic credentials of the Department would have to be strengthened, which he proceeded to oversee before and during my time there. The Department also survived the dogged efforts of Margaret Thatcher to close it down. In his 1993 retirement lecture, James recalled that the Prime Minister had more than once asked her officials: "Has that department been dealt with yet?" The government's attack on the Peace Studies course resulted in an investigation by the University Grants' Committee in 1981, which quite rightly gave the department a clean bill of health. Its rigorous academic programmes and research are now sought out by peace activists and defence officials alike who value one of the few truly independent non-governmental sources of defence analysis.

Another is the transatlantic security think-tank, the British American Security Information Council (BASIC). James O'Connell was BASIC's longest-standing board member over two decades, some of that time as its chair - while also continuing to play an active post-retirement role in the Department of Peace Studies. It was also where our paths crossed again, when, in 2001, I was appointed as the second head of BASIC after the departure of the founding director Dan Plesch. Perhaps James had a soft spot for me given that I was also faced with the difficult challenge of the 'second head'

syndrome, but whatever the reason he was always warm, energetic and generous with his time and guidance.

He brought his gift for dialogue and reconciliation to both the internal management and external affairs of BASIC, where he was concerned particularly to promote conflict resolution and seek politically pragmatic ways of reducing the risks posed by nuclear weapons. James was held in high regard by the staff and board members on both sides of the Atlantic for his combination of theological and academic experience and knowledge, which he applied with both wisdom and astute judgement in security matters.

On a personal level, James became not only a mentor and later an employer to me, but also a good barometer for my conscience. Whenever I questioned my own leadership role and BASIC's power as an advocacy organisation to create any meaningful change in the world (especially during the dark days of the Bush/Blair axis), he always provided quiet support, generosity and loyalty that I had never witnessed before or would expect again. All those who have valued him know that a life well lived continues beyond the frailties of our physical existence.

I feel privileged and emboldened to have made James' acquaintance. The best tribute we can pay to his passing is to carry on campaigning on the issues that he believed so passionately in; to re-double our efforts to bring about a more enlightened world. In his 1985 lecture on the nature and status of peace studies, 'Peace with Work To Do', James examined the linkages between concepts of peace, justice and freedom - three ideas that he regarded as fundamental to human living. In these contemporary times when our own transatlantic governments stand guilty of carrying out extra-judicial executions with drones, 24 hour surveillance of our private communications and the continued prosecution of potential genocide with nuclear weapons (while threatening to attack other countries for doing the same with 'lesser' forms of WMD), these are subjects that we cannot afford *not* to study. James would want us to carry on that fight for peace that much harder. Peace still has much work to do.

BASIC Board member alongside James for many years, Joanna Spear, adds:

It is with great pleasure that I look back upon working with James O'Connell on the BASIC Board. James will be missed by all of his friends and colleagues; he was lovely to work with. He was a strong advocate for peace and for sensible solutions to difficult problems. He always kept an eye on the bigger picture too, always looking beyond the immediate to the important. Even in "deep retirement" he was following international developments with an analytical approach and a sense of strategy.

Keen to bring on the next generation he invested a lot of time and energy in younger people, at BASIC and in his work with the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University. He could be tough when necessary but was unfailingly fair and considered. He always had a good story and a sense of mischief about him, which was one of the many pleasures of working with him. He was a gem and we are sad he is gone.

BASIC has gone through a number of transformations in the last 25 years, many with James at the centre. We expect it to continue its adaptation to the challenges of our time, true to the spirit that James brought to the organisation through those years of his involvement. James was well-loved by his colleagues on BASIC's Board and by those of on the staff that knew him. Whilst in recent years his involvement in the organisation had waned, his counsel and support will be sorely missed.

Paul Ingram, Executive Director, 9 September 2013