A Tribute to David Philips (1946-2007)

AFSAAP members will be saddened to learn of the unexpected death of Associate Professor David Philips (retired) on 7 August 2008. David suffered a massive heart attach while on holiday at Port Douglas. He is survived by his mother and brothers, who live in Sydney.

David was born in 1946 in apartheid South Africa, where he received his early education before attending Oxford University in Britain, where he completed his D.Phil. He joined the History Department at the University of Melbourne in 1974, as a specialist in British social history. He was an active member of the department, publishing numerous books and articles on British social history, justice in colonial Australia, comparative South African and Australian history and most recently the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He supervised dozens of Honours and postgraduate theses, and played an active role in the administration of the Department.

David Philips was a founding member of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific and instrumental in securing the support of the then Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University, Dr Roy 'Pansy' Wright, which helped give the Association a leg-up with the academic establishment in Melbourne at the time.

However it is as a founding-member and president of the Melbourne Anti-Apartheid Movement that he will perhaps be best remembered by AFSAAP friends and colleagues. There was considerable paranoia amongst refugee South Africans in the 1980s and, as a White South African, David often had a very rough time. That he was to play such a prominent role in the movement was a tribute to his patience and diplomatic skills.

David was a frequent media commentator on apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and, in his latter years at the University of Melbourne, taught a very popular subject on South African history.

It was David's interests in issues of social justice, criminality and the state that informed much of his later publications. He was a founding member of the University of Melbourne Human Rights Forum in 2005, serving on its steering committee and as co-convenor in 2007.

He did an LLB degree at Melbourne University and took leave in 1999-2000 to work in a law firm in Melbourne, but academia was his true vocation and he resumed his post at Melbourne University in mid-2000.

In 2007, he also helped organise a special exhibition on South African Jews in Australia at the Melbourne Jewish Museum.

In his last years at Melbourne University, David Philips carried the torch for the History Department and the Humanities more generally against what he saw as the pernicious "Melbourne Model", its impacts on staff, students and tertiary education.

He will be sorely missed.

David Dorward