

Tony Thursfield: an obituary

by Peter Conran

It is with a great deal of sadness that I report the recent death of Tony Thursfield, late of the Department of Law's Executive and Policy division. *Thirsty*, as he was known, passed away in Melbourne in January.

Thirsty literally was a legend in his own lifetime.

Born in Burma, educated in England and cultured in Australia, he left a fond and lasting impression on all who knew him.

He first came to the Northern Territory in the early seventies working at Ward Keller and Rorrison as it then was.

He gained fame as the only practitioner in the Territory who actually enjoyed probate work, let alone understood it. While there he also worked closely with now High Court Justice Sir Gerald Brennan on the *Milurpump* case which, in part, led to the introduction of Land Rights legislation in the Territory.

Just prior to self-government in 1978 he was snaffled by the Territory's first Solicitor-General, Ian Barker, to help establish the new Department of Law Policy unit.

Again Thirsty thrived on the obscure, the complex and to what the rest of us in the unit (which included Geoff Clark, Steve Bailey and Gary Robinson) considered the downright

boring -- a euphemism for too hard for mere mortals.

At one stage in the early 80's Thirsty left the Territory -- he was coming and going so often it's hard to remember when, precisely. But he left, anyway. It's uncertain, but rumour had it that it was either to accept or reject an hereditary peerage in his beloved and bemoaned England.

At the time he vowed he would not set foot inside the Department of Law again.

He did, however, return in 1984, this time to work with the Parliamentary Counsel who he claimed had nothing to do with the Department of Law.

In 1985 he left again to join the Attorney-General's department in Hong Kong, again in the Policy area.

He became one of the Darwin *Triad* (Mafia) in Honkers.

A noted and outspoken civil libertarian, Thirsty's comments on the Hong Kong system were always unprintable.

I always thought Hong Kong was the benchmark for effectiveness.

He left Hong Kong in 1988, allegedly to go duck farming in Tasmania.

I said those reports were not correct; he was not duck farming but he perhaps had a arm.

In any event, he returned to the Department of Law in 1988, again to the

Policy division, then under the stewardship of Leanne Robertson.

He returned to the obscure, the complex and the too hard for mere mortals. His learning, his understanding, his powers of persuasion and his ability to use a colourful turn of phrase had not left him.

Many a junior and senior wandered in for five minutes' quick advice, only to leave an hour later convinced their years of study had left them quite inadequate.

In late 1989 he returned again to Hong Kong working for the Law Society. Law was not Thursfield's only area of expertise.

He was famous for his John Ariott impressions and notorious for his inability to recognise that Australia was a far better cricketing nation than England.

Thirsty came back to Darwin late last year for medical treatment.

Unfortunately, the diagnosis was grim and his subsequent death untimely.

Those who met with him in his final weeks cannot speak too highly of his courage and strength in the face of adversity.

He was a comfort to those who sought to comfort him. He was an inspiration to all. The pipe-smoking raconteur will be sadly missed. Our deepest sympathy is extended to his wife, Toni.

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