

Foreword

Gordon Briscoe is one of the most remarkable and successful Australians of his generation. He has had a profound impact, over more than 40 years, on what has happened in public affairs. But his real impact has been on people's thinking on significant public policy issues, particularly Aboriginal affairs. And yet many people who have been influenced by his ideas and his actions, or by structures he has helped put into place, scarcely know him. Or if they do, fail to recognise how important he has been not only in what has happened but how we understand what has happened and what we think about it.

This is Gordon's story, as told, all too modestly, by himself. It is a remarkable story, even for fellow citizens now more or less familiar with tales of the Australian frontier, the role and place of Aboriginal Australians, including women, in the Central Australian economy, the story of the Bungalow, of the impact of the Second World War on Aboriginal people and policy in the Northern Territory, and of wholesale dislocations of individuals and families. Gordon is one of a group of people who were taken, on understandings that were never really honoured, to South Australia with the St Francis home. Gordon, Charles Perkins and John Moriarty are three of the best known, but several dozen others were to play important local, regional and national roles in Aboriginal affairs. The boys who became men there were among the most significant leaders of a new generation of Aboriginal men and were to have a profound impact on policy and programs from the mid-1960s. That so inadequate a place punched so significantly above its weight invites real questions of what might have happened if those sent there had been given access to real education, as well as more love and nurturing. There are and were other important activists of their like – and from all parts of Australia. One could, however, write a general history of the past 50 years and somehow forget to mention some players. One could not write such a history without frequent reference to the influence of the boys of St Francis.

For some, including Charlie, Gordon and John, sport and travel and marriage played a very significant role in helping them get to points at which they could begin to influence others, then further their educations and ultimately nag the national conscience. Gordon, like Charlie, first became known in NSW. He played a leading role in the establishment of the first Aboriginal legal service, not least in mobilising the goodwill of a number of sympathetic and liberal lawyers, including Professor Hal Wootten. Briscoe was to be the service's first field officer. Not long after, he was the most significant figure in helping to mobilise the resources, including the help of sympathetic white doctors such as Professor Fred Hollows, to establish Australia's first Aboriginal medical service. Later, Briscoe, now a Commonwealth public servant, helped conceive and carry

into effect a plan which, with Fred Hollows, became the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program. Over three years, it visited all parts of rural Australia to look at, and do something about, the state of poor Aboriginal eye health. Hollows always made clear how much he had depended on Gordon not only for the development and funding of the program, but for its innovative and critical focus on engaging with and creating something real and lasting for Aboriginal people. Quite apart from the services directly delivered, the program played midwife to scores of new Aboriginal medical services around Australia. As one who worked with the program myself, having been more or less recruited by Big O, I can testify to the centrality of his ideas, his focus and his nagging about and insistence on the fundamentals.

It was just that focus on ideas that took him in his next directions. Briscoe became a student again, a historian and a leading, and by no means uncritical intellectual, of Aboriginal history, policy and programs. His work was in new fields. His ideas were not usually popular ones, sometimes even (or especially) in Aboriginal circles. The irritating but basic questions he was asking about some things – for example, about whether the very legal and medical services in whose establishment he had played such a role were living up to their charters – made him quite unpopular in some quarters, often with old colleagues. That has led to his foundation roles being significantly underplayed in the early histories of Aboriginal affairs over the past 50 years. That is a deficiency which he will not have to redress; it is in part because he has led a charge in Aboriginal involvement in writing their own history that he can be assured that his role will never ultimately be forgotten.

But if Gordon's story can be – should be – seen as a triumph, one should not forget the adversity against which it was achieved, and the sadness of many of the circumstances of his life. He wears the scars. He's had his pleasures, not least in a lovely and successful family and some acknowledgment of how a man can make a difference, but he is also highly conscious of what he has lost, of promises unkept, of linkages which have slipped, and of a liberation yet to be achieved. But it is not only a matter of the light on the hill being far, far ahead, with many certain disappointments on the way, because Gordon has always had a forward optimism and hope in the perfectibility of man that has ever astonished me. It is much more an appreciation of how much of his achievement has been at a cost of the anguish of separation, emotional detachment, big and little betrayals and ever-present pebbles in his shoes. Even in telling his own story, Gordon rejects any notion of presenting it as romance and triumph – though some could see it that way. Even less any sort of excuse-mongering or wallowing in self-pity. It's a narrative, a story, a history. He can tell a story. And the truth. It has been a slog for him, and a sorrow. A hard one, and one that has worn on him hard. I

sometimes wish that he understood better that even if the love and the respect and the admiration of his family, his friends and his followers cannot entirely paint over the lines on his brows, they can stand out too.

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