

Eulogy for Brian McConnell

Brian would have felt awkward and embarrassed about today for the simple reason that he had a deep and abiding hate of ties, stiff collars and suits. He was contemptuous of formality. It was not until his investiture last April with the Medal of the Order of Australia that I learnt he possessed a second given name, Peter. Brian was a fixer who had time only for the substance of things.

Brian was passed a bitter cup. His response to it led to him being accorded a position of honour and respect in this community that your presence here today acknowledges. But it was a position that he never sought or expected.

Brian lost his first son to a heroin overdose. In that time Brian and Marion and their family had little more than each other for support. Then, families hid their shame when drugs were involved. A death would be attributed to a road accident, anything other than drugs. Brian and Marion were in the first wave to perceive and declare that what their son and they had experienced was pointless and wrong. Before Tony Trimmingham's own anguish had moved him to establish Family Drug Support, people approached Brian and Marion seeking help and to make sense of their experiences.

But it is in the shape of drug policy that Brian made his mark on the history of this country. If prohibition was the way to go why was it that drugs were so readily available? And why was it that so many young Australians were dying from a policy meant to protect them? No parent had dared pose these fundamental questions. Brian broke the mould. He demanded facts and evidence not ever tougher laws and enforcement that populist politicians had always assumed parents would seek.

The emergence of an organisation of families calling for reform flashed like a meteor across the sky. The new voice attracted wide media attention and led to Brian and Marion speaking to international conferences on harm minimisation at Hobart and Paris and the initiation of like-minded groups in Europe and elsewhere.

Families and Friends under Brian McConnell laboured for evidence based policy. The more Brian learnt, the clearer it was to him that Australia and much of the

Eulogy for Brian McConnell

world were on the wrong track. Fundamentally the drug problem should be approached as a health and social issue; the harmful processes of the criminal law should not be applied to drug users. This was and remains a challenging and contested message that stirs deep emotions. Brian's polite but persistent advocacy for evidence earned trust and respect among even sceptical audiences including a succession of ACT governments that did not always agree with him.

Prime Ministers learnt that Brian would not compromise on essentials. A seat on the Australian National Council on Drugs would have been his if FFDLR omitted "for Drug Law Reform" from its title. Brian refused to oblige.

Even the Governor-General had to yield to his prophetic charm. Just two months ago the GG mentioned to the crowded reception room at Brian's investiture that Brian had founded his own support group. "Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform" corrected Brian politely and distinctly. "Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform" repeated the GG equally clearly before realising what he'd said.

For twenty years Brian and Marion organised remembrance ceremonies in the beauty of Weston Park. Showered by the blossom of a locust tree these have provided a public space to lift the cloud of guilt and stigma that infected so many loving homes.

20 years of Families and Friends under Brian had its setbacks as well as its successes. The rejection of the Heroin Trial in 1997 was certainly a dark day for Brian. The opening in 2001 of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross and its demonstrated success gave hope for change which has still to be followed up.

Brian was frustrated and perplexed by opposition to reform on moral and religious grounds. Was there not a clear preferential Christian option for the outcast?

In 20 years of mixed successes Brian kept on keeping on. When the horse bucked him off, he would always stand up, dust himself and get back onto the saddle.

Eulogy for Brian McConnell

This effort came at a big price. If he had made reform of unjust and counter-productive drug laws the mission of his life he never let it become an obsession. One would catch glimpses of the Brian that had dreamt of his retirement: the camper trailer that made it just once to the Kimberleys; Brian, the early adopter of an iPad; the Brian who solved computer problems; the Brian who took up painting for love and because he recognised he probably had within him something of the skill of his uncle and daughter whose painting of the locust tree adorns the cover of his and Marion's book; Brian the gardener and Brian the cheesemaker. Then there was Brian the grandfather of the three boys here and of little Amy in Vienna. Brian who took up German at U 3A the better to spend time with Darryl and his Vienna family.

There is much to mourn in Brian's passing. Both he and his eldest son were taken from this world by failures of governments to adopt evidenced based policies. There was a failure of governments to heed warning against the installation of asbestos insulation in Canberra houses and in pursuing drug policies that disconnect drug users from society.

Words: 912
