

**Professor Gavin Brown AO  
Memorial Ceremony  
Great Hall, University of Sydney  
Friday 18 February 2011**

**Address by Emeritus Professor Ken Eltis AM  
Former Deputy Vice-Chancellor**

I should begin by saying how honoured I am that Diane asked me to speak today at this Memorial Ceremony. From the time of Gavin's arrival in July 1996, our association went well beyond our professional endeavours and I think I understood him, and what drove him, pretty well. Gavin was surely the most inspirational leader I ever worked with and certainly the most gifted. He was one of those larger than life characters – and that is why we feel his loss so deeply.

I was a little surprised one day when someone in my office asked whether I knew Gavin and I had come to be known as the Kray Brothers – Ronnie and Reggie, the enforcer twins from London's East End. Apparently we were seen as dangerous risk takers, and ready to give very strong backing to big ventures, but clearly some people were a little uneasy. Some schemes – imaginative and far-sighted though they were – didn't make it, for example a public hospital on campus. The big ideas that did make it are there to be enjoyed today: think, for example, of the Sydney University Student Village, and the massive building program on the Camperdown and Darlington Campuses. Photographs of Eastern Avenue in 2000 and today tell the story. Making things happen didn't need quite the enforcement techniques of the Kray Brothers, but given the pressure placed on Gavin by some interest groups at various times, he must have been sorely tempted.

We know about his outstanding career. I would just add that I can imagine, as a boy, Gavin was a delight to teach, but I suspect a handful at times. His teachers would have appreciated his intellect and his vast general knowledge but would surely have been wary of his keen and wicked sense of humour, such as he displayed later as VC in this place. Remember his *Obiter dicta* columns which appeared regularly in Uni News. They were a blend of serious comment and great wit, and were compulsory reading. When I went to functions with Gavin I always knew I would enjoy myself. But it always paid to listen to what he said, at work or play, even if sometimes that Scottish accent could make it hard to decipher the message.

But what did he believe in? In his inaugural address, in 1996, he portrayed himself as a conservative, a liberal and a socialist.

As a conservative, he valued tradition, understanding that Universities do not exist for instrumental purposes alone. As a liberal, he valued the independence and autonomy of universities and their student organisations. As a socialist, he looked to the expansion of higher education so that, as he said, “others like me can be the first in their families to experience university”. These were the values which informed his efforts as an inspirational leader.

Though Gavin knew a lot about Sydney University when he accepted the post of VC, I doubt that he appreciated just how great was the challenge he would face, given the University’s history over the preceding years. Could we have appreciated at the time just how lucky we would be to have the place led by such a man? A new government in 1996 saw an extension of policies which placed universities more and more tightly under government control. They were policies which he often talked about as threatening the autonomy of institutions and their student organisations; which emphasised the instrumental functions of universities, considerably diminishing their role as places of learning for its own sake. And he was particularly disturbed by changed federal funding arrangements which created the need for universities to introduce new student fee structures, including full fee payers, making it harder for less wealthy students to consider going to a university at all.

When the history of Gavin’s period as VC is written, I believe it will be shown that his was a time of significant and far-reaching achievement. If he had failed during the first years of his appointment, this University would have been in huge trouble and the sector as a whole would have been badly hit as a result. Though well aware of the proud heritage of Sydney, he did not let that pride in the past hinder the need to look forward. He came to the University as an outsider, able to look objectively at what needed to be done. He understood full well how necessary it was to lay strong foundations for the University’s future success, based on fresh thinking and innovative practice.

It is easy to forget that when Gavin came on the scene the University was suffering badly from amalgamation pains. Bruce Williams, a great admirer of Gavin as VC, argued that the Dawkins reforms of the 80s and 90s, and the amalgamations which followed, brought greater problems for Sydney than for the other GO8 Universities. These problems explain, in part, the low morale which Gavin inherited. The fall in quality rankings didn’t help, either. It was not until 2000 that we could say that a unified University of Sydney was finally emerging. What was particularly frustrating was having to work with so many administrative and financial systems which were unsuited to the new era and were incompatible with one another. Back then, Vice Chancellor, no team of hackers would have stood a chance: they wouldn’t have known where to start.

So much happened in the first six months after Gavin arrived.

The first shock was his approach to dealing with issues. He adopted what might be termed the “contemplative approach to leadership”. In meetings he would sit, often with both eyes

closed, listening to what was being said – in the early days some people mistakenly believed he was taking a nap. He had an extraordinary ability to digest a discussion paper or a report very quickly. He listened to everyone's contribution, and would then suggest a way forward that had built into it the core of what had been said, but so often the solution had a genuinely novel touch to it. For a time, for instance, the University faced the problem that very bright Sydney school leavers were being attracted by offers of big scholarships to study in Melbourne. Who else as VC would think of using a high flying AFL and Sydney Swans star to advertise on the side of Melbourne trams that Sydney University would be a good place to relocate to, just as the South Melbourne Swans had done years earlier? (It helped, of course, that this was just after the Swans had played in the 1996 Grand Final.)

In those first six months he listened, he consulted widely, and then he put together for submission to Senate a set of reform proposals. He proposed that new style "academic colleges" replace the existing administrative structures. Ever the mathematician, he gave a nice symmetry to his solution: there would be 3 DVCs and 3 PVCs College, each with 3 year appointments.

Staff, academic and general, were asked to reconsider the ways they had been doing things. There were those who felt threatened by it all, or worse: saw that power was being redistributed, to be used differently, and weren't happy. But Gavin gradually overcame an understandable but deep-seated resistance to change evident among many in the place at the time.

Right from the start, Gavin set the tone for how he would do things. Bruce Williams, who was then Chair of Finance Committee, advised Gavin that his Committee's review of unspent balances which were not for specific purposes revealed a large pool of funds able to be called on: very fortunate for an incoming VC. In short order, Gavin announced a series of U 2000 initiatives firmly directed at prime targets: a much stronger research profile, enhanced quality of undergraduate education, and new technologies in teaching and learning. He liked the idea of giving something a name which people could identify with – hence U 2000 - and tight time frames: these initiatives covered the period 1996 to 2000. And big dollars were involved – from what I think were the last of the hollow logs in the University.

But more was to follow. At a time when the Government had imposed significant reductions in operating grants, Gavin was able to adopt measures to secure income beyond that lost as a result of the Government's action. He set aside more funds for scholarships and for salary increases arising from enterprise bargaining. And he guaranteed provision of funds for capital works, to enable the University to attack a huge backlog of refurbishments, to look after the heritage buildings and to determine what should be future building priorities. All prime targets.

One of his very clever moves was to couple funding initiatives with the University's Sesquicentenary, celebrated over 3 years from 2000. Of special importance, to Gavin, were even more local and international student scholarships, and "new blood" lectureships.

But however successful he was at devising new structures and processes, for me, it was Gavin's personal influence with people that made the difference. He placed great trust in people, whether they came from the academic or the general staff, whether they held management positions in the University, were from the Unions, or spoke for the various student bodies. He expected them to be honest with him, as he was with them. He trusted people with information, and in his time there were very few damaging leaks to media organisations. His trust was rewarded.

Only a week ago, Australia's newest Senior Citizen of the Year, Professor Ron McCallum, commented to me that "if Gavin told you that something would be done, you could fully trust that it *would* be done".

I have heard it said that Gavin rarely gave high praise to people. I'm not so sure about that. If you received an **APPROVED, GB** notation on a submission, you knew you had satisfied him, you had done your job. This acknowledgement, plus a smile and a Thank You, was for him appropriate recognition. I guess, one could argue that such a reward system was not particularly consistent with the prevailing view that positive reinforcement might be distributed more exuberantly. I eventually came to realise that if his final notation was **OK, GB**, this was high praise, well and truly earned.

It will be obvious that Gavin Brown was idiosyncratic in his leadership. Not only did people have to get used to his style in meetings, they needed to realise that meetings might not take place in his office.

One of the most beautiful spots on the campus is the VC's garden, along the path leading from the Quadrangle to the Holme Building. Passers-by became used to seeing Gavin out there, in all kinds of weather, with one or two people looking at bits of paper, steeped in discussion while he puffed on his cigar. We had a bench installed, and a special ash tray. If I wanted to see him urgently, either his staff would let me know he was in his favourite meeting place, or I would get the smoke signal as he lit up.

In his foreword to a *History of Sydney University Sport* (2008), Gavin wrote: "I believe that sport and other clubs are intrinsic to the University experience." He loved being with students, and did all he could to make their time at the University as rich as possible. He strongly supported University clubs, especially but not only Rugby and Cricket and Rowing. Debating was another of his great interests and he was a keen participant in events students arranged in the Manning Bar. He was awarded a Gold Jacket for his distinguished

contribution to the development of sport at the University and he wore it with great pride at the Annual Blues Dinner.

So it would be no surprise that he expressed extreme displeasure at the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) by the Government in December 2005. He condemned the Act strongly: "This is a temporary victory for red-necked philistines. It will damage Australia's reputation internationally," he said, in a press release. (December 2005) He was delighted that Senate agreed to ongoing support for student services to compensate for loss of funding which flowed from VSU.

Gavin also understood the importance of Sydney University's standing in the broader world of universities. As he began to see progress on the home front, he initiated all manner of links with overseas institutions; this consumed a lot of energy and time, as extensive travel was involved. He also played a major role in the establishment and consolidation of the Group of 8 Universities.

And all of this at a time when Gavin's personal circumstances were not easy. His wife, Barbara, became very ill and for a considerable time he carried out his duties under great personal strain. People forget that Vice-Chancellors do have a personal life. I know that after Barbara's death he felt extremely fortunate in "establishing a relationship", as he described it to me one day, with Diane, and their "relationship" became a very happy marriage.

The Gavin Brown I knew was essentially a shy, modest and generous man, a man who never raised his voice at anyone, a man I never knew to be boastful. A man of absolute integrity. I'm sure he was an enigma to many, but he was, in every way, a big man. His passing is a great loss to us all. I can say with certainty that we who worked (and occasionally played) with him are so grateful for all he did and appreciate that we have lots of happy and lasting memories.

An instance of his generosity close to my own heart came at the end of 2003, just before I retired. He suggested that, rather than attending what would have been my last Senate meeting, I might feel able to represent him at the University of Wuhan, in China, to help them celebrate their 130<sup>th</sup> birthday. I thought I just might. The visit included a boat trip on the Three Gorges. On the afternoon of the first Monday in December, on the river, I looked at my watch and noted that the Senate would soon be meeting. Gavin was indeed a generous man.

It has been an honour to have been asked to share my recollections of a man I am proud to have worked with. I wonder what he would make of what I have said today. I know he wouldn't give an **Approved GB** verdict, as there has been no prior consultation, either in his office or in his garden. I would hope he would think an **OK GB** assessment would be appropriate.

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