

Foreword

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Judge Bob Bellar's family standing in front of his portrait in UNSW Law's Moot Court

The choice of Redfern as the focus of *Court of Conscience's* collection on community legal issues is both welcome and appropriate. UNSW Law's special relationship with Redfern goes back to our earliest days, when our founding dean, Emeritus Professor Hal Wootten worked with leaders of the Redfern community, notably Bob Bellear, to establish the Aboriginal Legal Service. Soon afterwards, Redfern Legal Centre was established, again by a combination of UNSW academics and students and community lawyers and activists. That tradition has been continued in the leading role of UNSW Law colleagues in the formulation of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* – Gabrielle Appleby, Sean Brennan, Gemma McKinnon and of course the extraordinary Megan Davis.

In recent years, our connection with RLC has been renewed through the Police Powers Clinic, an initiative led from RLC by David Porter and Joanna Shulman (an alumna who is now the Centre's director) and from UNSW by Dr Vicki Sentas, someone who exemplifies the combination of socially committed and engaged research and teaching which has been such a proud part of the UNSW Law tradition. The complaints and cases which the Clinic deals with are depressingly familiar to anyone who knows the history of policing in Redfern. While much has changed both in the area and in the NSW Police, too much remains the same, as essays by Michael Siciliano, Vicki Sentas, and Thalia Anthony show. However, more is involved than direct racial discrimination (although there has been plenty of that).

For anyone unfamiliar with Redfern's history, Jenny Brockie's film *Cop it Sweet* is an essential introduction to the structural nature of Redfern's policing problems. The long final scenes record the interaction between a police officer and an Aboriginal resident. The latter has been arrested for offensive language, swearing at the police who were, in his words, 'studying the Block'. In this exchange, the police officer patiently tries to obtain the man's name so that he can be booked in to the station. The man resists – 'That's for you to find out' – but the officer snatches his wallet, and with it his dignity and autonomy. In this sad scene, these two men carry the weight of history, acting out parts in a pathetic drama.

Watching *Cop it Sweet* again took me back to a low point of the time I spent doing fieldwork research on police in Sydney almost thirty years ago. On a

night of torrential rain, an Aboriginal man had been hit by a car on Cleveland Street. He lay in the gutter with (at least) a badly broken leg, water streaming around him. An officer who, not long before, had taken part in the station abuse of Aboriginal people, knelt in the streaming gutter shielding the badly injured man from passing cars and trying to make him comfortable without moving him, while waiting for an ambulance. The injured man's colleague shambled around a second police officer on the pavement, drunkenly mumbling abuse and blaming the police for his friend's predicament. It was a scene of utter misery and hopeless contradiction.

Nothing is simple in Redfern. Just as changing police seems to mean two steps forward, one step back, so the urban regeneration discussed in Ned Cutcher's and Jo Shulman's essays involves both the necessary removal of appalling living conditions and the opportunism and exploitation which so often goes along with development.

Just as there is shadow, so also there is light, the light provided by the people of Redfern themselves. For UNSW Law, an iconic figure is our alumnus Bob Bellear, a man who became a lawyer in order to fight the injustice he saw around him in Redfern and who went on to be the first Aboriginal judge in Australia. As well as his role in the ALS, Bellear established the Aboriginal Housing Corporation in Redfern in 1972, and throughout the 1970s was a director of the Aboriginal Medical Service. His portrait now hangs in our Moot Court. Students wanting to understand the complexity of Redfern could start well by studying the proud face of a man who is an example not just to the young people of Redfern, but to us all.

In that spirit, I pay my respects to the elders past and present of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, forever custodians of Redfern and the land around it, and congratulate the editors of *Court of Conscience* for this fine collection of essays on community legal issues in Redfern.