01 Geoff Spring on: getting a job in education in the Northern Territory

I was reading The Australian and a job as head of research and curriculum was advertised and since that is what I had been doing in Queensland and nationally, I applied for the job. I was interviewed by a man called Jim Eadle. I got the job and I was delighted. We moved up within a couple of weeks.

I was Head of Education here. That was quite a job because I used to visit every community in the Northern Territory that had a school or an outstation school and so I got to see a lot of the Territory and a lot of empty country but a lot of great settlements.

02 Geoff Spring on: getting involved in Tertiary education

I got involved in Tertiary education because my Minister Tom Harris was very keen to have a university, and of course to the best of my knowledge the whole cabinet were behind him. One of the things that happened in those days, because of the lack of a university, was that people with university qualifications who were coming up to do various jobs, whether as doctors, dentists, economist or whatever, wanted their children to have a university education and many of them would move themselves and their families south when the time came. This was a tragedy because they took an enormous amount of experience with them and so good people were lost to the Territory and the people who were replacing them of course were probably good people too but they had to build up that same reservoir of knowledge. It did seem to me that we did really need a university when I came here, and although I came here to be Head of Education, Schools and TAFE, it certainly did seem that way. And of course when my daughter came of age to go to university, there was no university here.

The Territory Government and those around – parents – they wanted a proper university. There was no question about that. They weren’t against the old Darwin Community College, but they thought the time had come. The question was to get somebody on side to make it happen.

One of the things we did was get a reference group of Vice-Chancellors from other states. I was helped by a man called David Caro from Melbourne University, because every now and then we were getting – if I can use the phrase - “beaten up”, and the Northern Territory Government in those bad old days – I was head of education – had a habit of getting rid of departmental heads that didn’t agree with them. So anyway he helped me get some stiffening in my spine and told me to stick to my guns.
03 Geoff Spring on: the Northern Territory Government “going it alone” to start the University College of the Northern Territory in 1987

Around the mid 80s, Ian Tuxworth, Paul Everingham, I think Tom Harris was involved too, advised the Commonwealth what we were doing. It proved the Territory’s commitment to the Commonwealth. And also there was a little bit of, do they still call things a shame job for the Commonwealth, for the Territory out of its budget to have to put up a swag of money for the university when it was the Commonwealth’s job to do that.

04 Geoff Spring on: Menzies School of Health Research

I brought the education community on side but Keith did a good job in bringing the health community on side (Dr Keith Fleming was Secretary of the Department of Health NTG 1980s), and also in setting up the Menzies School of Health Research. Keith was a great person to have on side. As far as Menzies was concerned, I was involved in helping to interview and appointing people. The Menzies School of Health Research was a great idea because we got involved directly with I think the Sydney University School of Tropical Medicine. Having that on board as another part of our expertise was a very good thing.

05 Geoff Spring on: indigenous education

One of the most important things was what we had begun to be able to do in important areas of Aboriginal education. For example, I appointed the first Aboriginal principal of a normal school - Mandawuy Yunupingu – from Yirrkala. Within a year we had 16 other applicants who had qualifications from Batchelor (and Deakin University sitting on top of Batchelor), so within a year or so we had 16 other fully qualified Aboriginal principals of Aboriginal schools all around the Territory.

06 Geoff Spring on: Tom Harris, NT Minister for Education 1980s

The man I believe did so much – I was his Departmental head so I worked very hard to help him – was Tom Harris. He really used all of his influence and skill and drove me – with a whip (laughs). It didn’t need much driving because it was such a self-evident idea.

07 Geoff Spring: reflections

Seeing the place developing the way it has – for an old soldier – is a good thing. I wasn’t an old soldier but I was a soldier for the university. It is delightful to see what people have made of it. And more power to you all.