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David Biles 1932-2017

Criminologist shaped Australia's practice and policy

John Myrtle

David Biles, who died in Canberra on April 16, was a pioneer of criminology and criminal justice in Australia. Over many years he made a very considerable contribution to the development of policy in the field, particular as it related to prison management and corrections.

Biles, born in England, moved to Australia with his family in his teenage years. He was educated in Melbourne and undertook teacher training with the Victorian Department of Education in 1951 and 1952.

Initially he worked in various Victorian country primary schools and found time to play Australian Rules football for Nhill in the Wimmera Football League. Following on from primary school teaching, he spent 11 years as an education officer in four Victorian prisons. After two years lecturing in educational psychology in teachers' colleges, in 1967 he was appointed as a lecturer in criminology at the University of Melbourne (later senior lecturer). During this time he completed undergraduate and postgraduate university qualifications.

He married Julie Kelly, a fellow teacher, in January 1955 and they were to have two daughters, Roselynn and Amanda. Sadly, in 1988 the family suffered a grievous blow with the death of Amanda.

Together with university colleagues Allen Bartholomew and Deidre Grieg, Biles was a pioneer in the foundation of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology. He drafted a constitution for the new society that was endorsed at the inaugural meeting in Melbourne in 1967 and he served as foundation honorary secretary of the society and was president from 1980 to 1983. Many years later he was to receive the society's award of Distinguished Criminologist.

In 1973 the Australian Institute of Criminology was established in Canberra and David Biles was appointed assistant director of research and statistics, and later deputy director.

For more than 20 years, his research leadership at the institute fundamentally influenced and shaped policy and practice in Australian criminology. Biles also provided expert advice nationally and internationally. Over several years

Over the years he made a number of contributions to the work of the United Nations, and had an important but unsung role as co-ordinator and rapporteur from 1989 to 2002 for the Asia and Pacific Conference of Correctional Administrators, a forum for the exchange of information on correctional practice.

In 1987 the Hawke Government established the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and for several years Biles was seconded to be its head of research. In this role he made a significant contribution to Australia's Indigenous people, identifying the need for radical changes in the treatment of offenders in custody.

Biles' life work was recognised with the award of an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in 2003 for service in the field of criminology as an educator, researcher and adviser. In addition in 2004 he was awarded the degree of Honorary Doctor by Charles Sturt University.

It is noteworthy that in 2003 Julie Biles had also been awarded an Order of Australia Medal for service to the community of the Australian Capital Territory as an

advocate for issues affecting women, aged health and welfare services and improvements in educational outcomes.

Towards the end of his life Biles had reflected that his career might well have followed any of three different paths; in education (school principal, or leadership of a teachers' college); as a psychologist; or a career at the centre of criminology and criminal justice. It is ironic that in his later years he would combine his skills as a teacher with his expertise in criminology.

In recent years he continued to contribute to public life with pieces on criminological issues that were published in newspapers.

At David Biles' funeral in Canberra eulogies were presented by his daughter Roselynn Burge, granddaughter Kelly Burge and Professor Richard Harding, former director of the Australian Institute of Criminology. It was a celebration of a generous and intelligent individual who made a significant contribution to the Australian community.

John Myrtle is former principal librarian, Australian Institute of Criminology.



David Biles identified the need for radical changes in the treatment of Aboriginal offenders in custody.