

Leadership and legacy

Dr Stephen Brown shares how an unexpected genetic discovery this year prompted him to contemplate the meaning of leadership and legacy.

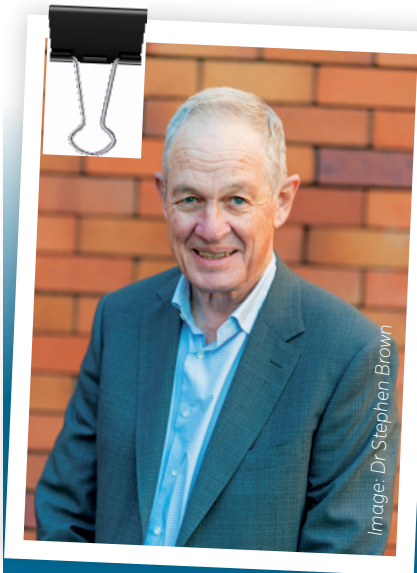


Image: Dr Stephen Brown

Dr Stephen Brown is the Managing Director of The Brown Collective, focused on the formation of educational leaders and partnering with schools, networks and system to enable sustainable impact. The organisation reflects both his collective experience over 40 years in policy, strategy and leadership development – and that of the remarkable global network he has developed during this career.

On 5 June 2025, I received an email from a family member informing me that she had discovered a branch of our family tree that we never knew existed. You may say what is so unique or profound about this? There are plenty of people making such discoveries over time.

My sister-in law, Lyn, informed my brother and I that we are related to the former Governor General of Australia, the late William ('Bill') George Hayden, AC. He is my late father's first cousin – the first child of my Dad's Aunty, Violet Brown, who married George Hayden, a US serviceman. My grandfather, James Brown, was my great Aunty Violet's brother.

Until this date earlier this year, no one in our family was aware of such a connection. I cannot describe the immense pride I feel in having such a lineage and heritage. Like so many other Australians, I knew who Bill Hayden, AC was and read years ago his autobiography, *Hayden*.

After receiving this news, I set about researching his life. When I read the glowing tributes to him in the Hansard of 28 November 2023 after his passing in that year it gave me a greater sense of the impact and legacy of this extraordinary Australian.

He helped lay the foundation of what we value about modern Australia; introducing Medibank – this country's first universal health insurance scheme; a pension scheme for single mothers; a quota for women in parliament; advocacy for same sex couples and countless initiatives to promote Australia's international interests.

Such a personal revelation and discovery encourages one to ponder the notion and importance of legacy when leading.

What is legacy?

Leadership and legacy are two intertwined concepts that define the trajectory of

individuals, organisations, and societies. While leadership is an active process of guiding, enabling, influencing, mobilising and inspiring others toward common goals and aspirations, legacy is the enduring impact left behind, an imprint that transcends time and continues to shape the future. Together, they form a powerful narrative about purpose, influence, and the long-term consequences of leadership actions.

In our roles as educational leaders we are all temporary custodians of the schools and systems we lead. The custodial aspect of school and system leadership is significant. Any decisions taken will have potentially long-term consequences for the future. Legacy is not always positive. History is replete with leaders whose actions have caused harm and division. Many leaders have inherited schools and systems that are operating well but others have found the direct opposite. James Kerr (2013, p.179) evokes us as leaders to 'be a good ancestor' – we are the stewards of our organisations, the caretakers of our own lineage.

In being responsible stewards of any school and system, leaders need to aspire to leave it in a better condition than they found it. Such a responsibility is a privilege, honour and a weight that bears on any leader. In the fast-paced dynamic of leadership in schools, there is always the challenge to act in the now but with an 'eye' to the future.

Many decisions presented to school leaders are technical ones – straight forward and an endorsement of a well-known, described approach to a familiar matter or practice. There is little time or need to be contemplative. However, much of the work of school and system leadership involves making choices, responding to ethical dilemmas, implementing policies without any opportunity to influence or shape and balancing competing perspectives such as the



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rights of the individual versus the common good. The work is adaptive: making choices and determinations that will have long-lasting generational consequences.

When I visit a school, I often stop and look at the name plates on buildings, photographs on display in the school foyer, and read the annual school magazine. Why? Such artefacts are the 'eyes to the soul' of the school and the contribution made by others to the present school.

School leaders are between the past and the future. They need to duly recognise and respect the past and take up the opportunity along with the challenge of shaping an educational narrative that will ensure its students obtain the best possible educational experiences that will enable their future. School leaders don't own any school – they hold it trust on behalf of others.

Leaders should act in the best interests of others, never in the pursuit of vain glory. The power of any leader's legacy will be how it has broader benefits and connects with the needs and aspirations of others. Leaders need to have a sense of foreseeability, being able to articulate a collective vision for the future and create school climates that cultivate imagination typified by the wonder of a child and the art of possibility not limited by imposed boundaries.

Realistically, a leader's legacy will be carried in the heart, heads and hands of others. It is therefore important to invest in the leadership formation of others and be committed to a distributed approach to working. In shaping a legacy sometimes leaders will face opposition and adversarial circumstances that will need to be engaged with, confronted and removed in the spirit of

a foreseen broad benefit. Leaders will need to act with courage and sometimes move through the 'storm' and perhaps uncharted waters with self-belief typified by humility, compassion and a desire to contribute to the common good.

Creating a meaningful legacy requires deliberate steps and intentionality. What will your legacy be? Have you considered what it could be? In your first or early days in a new position as an educational leader one should contemplate and imagine what your last day will look like? What will people say about you? What is the legacy you will be known for long after your temporary tenure has concluded?

"The rest of the pages are blank. Waiting to be filled. They say it's time to make your mark, they say. Your contribution. It's time to leave a legacy. Your legacy. It's your time" (Kerr, 2013).

Start writing. **EM**