

THE REDEMPTION OF ROBERT TICKNER

As Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, he made a decision that threatened a major development and the repercussions were fatal for his career. Now CEO of the Australian Red Cross, Robert Tickner tells Libbi Gorr that he has no regrets.

Photography Marco del Grande



Nine years ago, life took a nasty turn for Robert Tickner. His second marriage was over, his mother had died. In the routing of the Keating government by Australian voters, he lost the then marginal federal seat of Hughes in Sydney's south and with it his ministerial portfolio. "I was ready then to get back into the human race but I had a big stamp on my forehead that said, 'Tickner, ALP Aboriginal affairs – do not employ,'" he recalls. "And no one did. No one. For 20 months. And for the first time in my adult life I was unemployed."

Today, Tickner has found his calling and fittingly, it involves rebuilding broken lives. As the secretary general (CEO) of the Australian Red Cross, the 53-year-old has turned professional idealist. He is clearly relishing the role, which he took up in February, and bounds into the Melbourne headquarters with labrador-like enthusiasm, looking fit and positive. "I've hit the ground running at a million miles an hour," he enthuses. "These files," he points to them, spread in mass and colourful purpose across the floor, "all represent key action areas I want to get involved in."

According to his friends and even his detractors, it is this energy that defines the former Hawke and Keating governments minister, who served the Parliamentary Labor Party for 12 years and took a leading role in socially defining moments in Australian

"There's always room for idealism but I think your ideals have always got to be tempered by an actual perception of the world that we live in," says Tony Abbott, Minister for Health and Ageing. "I think Robert fell prey to political correctness run riot. I think he took a politically correct opinion and that politically correct position turned out to be dead wrong." (In 2001, following construction of the bridge, a Federal Court judge rejected the findings of the royal commission, vindicating Tickner's decision.)

Meanwhile, Tickner's 10-year relationship with his second wife, Jodie, was crumbling. "I was away an average of 4.8 nights a week out of seven," he says. In 1995, they separated and Tickner moved into a rented garage near the family home in NSW's Stanwell Park and away from their two-year-old son, Jack, and Jodie's daughter, Jade. "Jade was six when we met," says Tickner. "She was – and still is – my daughter."

And so began a painful journey, one made rougher by the fact that within the year, Tickner was out of a job. "I kept spending because I thought I'd get work. And it never came. I did 70 detailed employment applications and I don't just mean perfunctory chuck-and-email-them applications. And at the end of the day, was I angry? You betcha life I was angry. I thought, 'If I was a bank robber, I would've served most of my sentence and I'd be back on the street.'"

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history such as the 1992 Mabo decision and the Stolen Generations Inquiry. "That was an enormous privilege," he reminisces, as he sips a cup of tea. "The opportunity to get involved in the most momentous issues of the day – setting up the reconciliation process, initiating the Stolen Generations Inquiry, getting a passionate response to the 330 recommendations in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody – really huge, sort of epic, all-consuming issues."

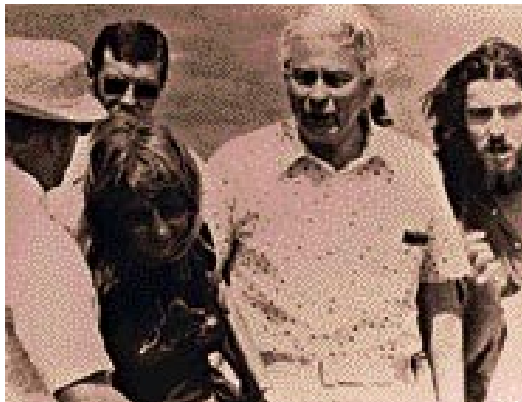
But with power, there is always the possibility of a fall. It came in the form of the infamous Hindmarsh Island affair. In 1994, the construction of a bridge from the South Australian town of Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island was banned for 25 years by Tickner, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, when he supported the claim by a group of Aboriginal women that the island was a special site for them. A royal commission in 1995 found that the women's claim of "secret women's business" had been fabricated and the incident took its place in Australian political history, alongside Ros Kelly's whiteboard and John Howard's "children overboard" affair.

"Robert had a rough spin for a long while," says close friend Tom Uren, a parliamentary member of the ALP for 32 years. "He was chosen by these headhunters for many fairly substantial NSW state government jobs but he never got them. I rang a very senior official whom I knew very well and said, 'Why does Robert Tickner get selected for a job and then it seems someone is vetoing him, blackballing him, if you want a Masonic term?' He said, 'I'll look into it and find out,' and he never rang back. The NSW [Labor] right machine, they look after their own people and Robert was never part of the right."

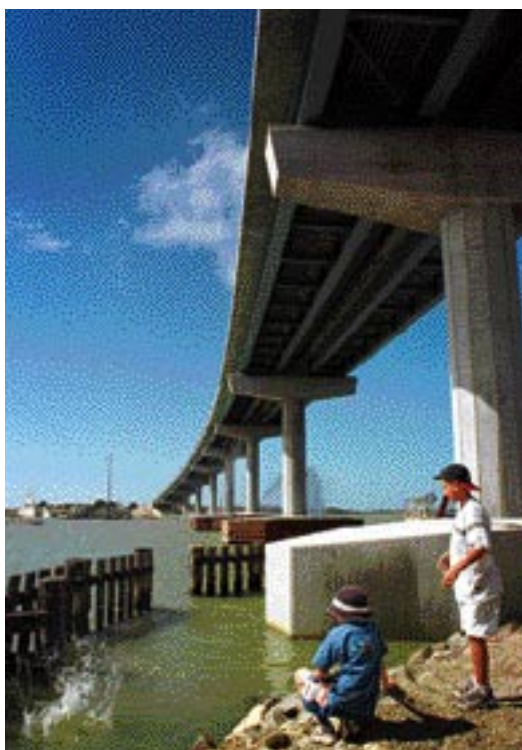
It took Tickner 21 months to get a job. "The same despair and insecurity that affects every long-term unemployed person affected me," he says. "I was so unhappy. I got so broke, so desperate I couldn't afford to share a house, I was in such a mess."

Uren gave his longtime friend refuge in the basement of his home in Sydney's inner-west for six months. "There's a close relationship between the family," explains 84-year-old Uren. "He was married to my wife, Christine. Robert's first wife is my wife. They grew up as kids together." →

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From top Robert Tickner (far right) and Meredith Burgmann (left, now president of the NSW Legislative Council) at an anti-apartheid rally in the '70s; Tickner in 1995 with then Prime Minister Paul Keating (left) and Pat Dodson, then chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation; SA's Hindmarsh Island Bridge was opened in 2001.



Robert and Christine Tickner were married for two years in the mid '70s. "Then she discovered opera and I discovered politics and our lives went in dramatically different directions," explains Tickner. "We've been friends ever since." Says Uren, "Robert split with Christine and it was some time after that that Christine and I started to go out. [They married 13 years ago.] I knew it was all over with Robert and we didn't discuss it for some time."

After Tickner's second marriage ended, his relationship with his son, Jack, now 12, was his "shining light", he says and these days he sees him every two weeks. "I used to kid around to friends when Jack was young, 'If he ever develops a social conscience, I'll beat the living daylights out of him.' But what happens at age nine? He shaves his head for leukemia. I was a bit blown away. I thought, 'The poor little fella is struck down with the same gene.'"

Genes are of intense interest to Tickner, who found his birth mother 12 years ago and his birth father a year after that. His "newly developed relationship as an adopted person with my birth family" has, he says, helped him discover who he is. And that is all he will say on the subject. "It's an intensely private matter and not fair to my birth mother to discuss," he says. "But has knowing them enriched my life? You betcha."

At the end of 1997, Tickner found a part-time job as a member of the Residential Tribunal of NSW, hearing tenant disputes. "It wasn't work that I'd ever envisaged but I was so grateful to be brought back into the human race." Then, when his tribunal work dried up near the end of 1999, Tickner saw an ad for JOB Futures, a national network of community organisations providing employment services with a range of government contracts. "By this magnificent irony, I'd really got to understand the abject misery of wanting work and not being able to find it."

Andy Small, who was then executive chairman of JOB Futures, hired him. "I think Robert had the same problem as a lot of ex-politicians who lose office seemingly midway through their political careers," recalls Small, now a member of the St James Ethics Centre committee. "Prospective employers look at them and think, 'Ah gee, they are just going to use this job as a way of getting back into the main game.'" Given Tickner's political past, prudence was imperative. "I think I made a couple of phone calls," says Small, "just to cover myself."

The approval of an unlikely ally was sought – Tony Abbott, who was at that time the Minister for Workplace Relations in the Howard Government. "Behind the scenes I was happy to see Robert Tickner in that job, that's absolutely correct," confirms Abbott. "I thought that he was – not withstanding a

tendency to be too politically correct for my taste – a decent, conscientious human being."

Tickner and Abbott's time in parliament intersected by only two years but Abbott had seen enough to be impressed. "Working in the JOB Futures network requires a high level of personal commitment, an ability to keep seeing the good in people, though enough realism to understand that in the end, some people only respond to fairly crude stimuli. That is, money, brute force and coercion." Is that something Tickner needed to learn to be effective in the commercial world? "I suspect," Abbott says, "that was probably something deep down he was aware of."

In his four and a half years at JOB Futures, Tickner proudly recounts, business trebled. But the Red Cross lured Tickner back into pouring his heart into humanity – this time on an international level. Six months into the job, he's already fiercely protective, rebutting claims that the Red Cross needs to change its image after the Bali bombings, where its dispersion of funds was challenged. "It's all ancient history," he says. "In the wake of challenges to Red Cross expenditure, two individual audits gave the Red Cross a clean bill of health. Secondly, the extraordinary results of the recent tsunami appeal [which raised \$105 million] show the incredibly high esteem in which the Red Cross is held in the Australian community."

Is he glad that he's proved the naysayers wrong? He chuckles. "No. Really no. Hear me out. Have you ever seen the broken and bitter people of the world? And do you think it's a good look, that it's good for them? I decided long ago that going down that road was such an awful place to be so I ended my public life – hand on my heart – absolutely at peace with myself. I did consciously decide I did not want to be full of unhappiness and regrets. As Tom Uren says, 'There's no progress in hate' and it's damn well true."

If he has rebuilt his professional life, is Tickner now ready to work on his personal life and mosey into matters of the heart once more? "No comment," he blushes sheepishly, batting his eyelids in mock innocence. "Look, to give you an idea of what this job is like, last Sunday night was Perth, Monday Adelaide, Tuesday night was Melbourne, Wednesday night was Sydney after a day in Hobart, then it was Brisbane and then back to Adelaide. This is not a job that aspires to an active social life or a settled home life. Though I think I have to be careful, as a dear friend of mine once said, to save something for myself. That's important, because you need to be OK about yourself and your wellbeing in order to give to others. What I'm saying is like every other human being, I've been through a hard time in my life and were it not for friends and family I wouldn't have got through it." ●