



Natural Built Social Environment Health

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IN MEMORIAM

Dr Geoff O'Brien (1952-2023)

Dr Geoff O'Brien, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Management in Northumbria University, was a Geordie - born in Newcastle upon Tyne [1]. This was a centre of the flourishing heavy industry of the British Empire at its height, with firms such as Vickers and Parsons, and inventors such as Armstrong and Stephenson whose work transformed the world. The city itself has traces of the Roman Wall, mediaeval buildings and a magnificent 18th Century heritage of buildings as well as improvements to the ancient city plan.

O'Brien was educated at Washington Grammar School, and subsequently qualified with a degree from what was then Newcastle Polytechnic in 1974 (since 1992 the University of Northumbria at Newcastle upon Tyne) as an electrical engineer, and worked in the global (USA and Norwegian) oil and gas exploration worlds, both offshore and onshore, between 1975-1986 for Chevron and Statoil. He became more and more interested in and committed to environmental management, local (e.g., Surfers against Sewage in North Tyneside), national and international. Dr O'Brien worked as a UK national civil servant for a while in London (at the then Department of the Environment), writing drafts of ministerial speeches etc. in the environmental and local government domains in the late 1980s.

He became, upon return to Tyneside, a consultant in environmental management, put together as editor and author a number of case studies for learning, and was recruited in 1991 by Northumbria University to teach on its then undergraduate degree in Environmental Management. A short while later Dr O'Brien's expertise was called upon as lecturer, module leader and supervisor on Northumbria University's MSc in Disaster Management and Sustainable Development, which still continues after 25 years, to provide a UK sustainable development and emergency management strand, with the associated policy and practice sector. Dr O'Brien was working in the 2000s especially in relation to the much-needed transformations to the UK emergency management sector. In 2008, he successfully defended at Northumbria University his PhD thesis 'by published work'. This meant that his published peer-reviewed articles, held together by a framing thematic analysis and an overall

methodology and epistemology, had to be evaluated by two external examiners, including a viva voce defence [2]. This was entitled ‘Disaster Management, Climate Change and Variability and Social Resilience’.

He was instrumental in taking this type of learning to various parts of the world, including East Asia (Taiwan, South Korea, China), South East Asia (Malaysia, Philippines), and the Gulf (Oman and Kuwait) as part of the expansion of the new paradigm of bottom-up emergency planning. Dr O’Brien also taught by invitation in Taiwan, South Korea and the Gulf states, as well as the Caribbean (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), where he had a number of PhD students from their public sector.

Dr O’Brien was eager and effective in assisting student education in building sustainable problem-solving approaches, drawing on his experience in academia, engineering and the public sector. He made notable scholarly contributions to UK emergency preparedness and response, local government, energy and climate adaptation, and preservation and development of cultural and social assets. The general theme of his scholarly contributions was the global, international, national, and local, interfaces between social, institutional and governance learning for climate change, disaster risk reduction and energy transition transformations.

He was also a compassionate and effective local councillor (rising to alderman) from 1991 to 2018 (ward councillor in Moorside and then, after the 2004 boundary review, a new ward called Westgate taking in the whole of the city centre), being Sheriff in 2011 and Lord Mayor in 2012. As Lord Mayor, he chose Muslim Aid for his charity for his period of office. He visited Birzeit University, Palestine, November 16-17th 2011, where he made an encouraging contribution to people who needed to be recognized and better supported by the rest of the world [3]. This political and civic activity included trusteeship of the key community asset The Beacon in the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne (owned by North East of England charities Centre West and Groundwork South Tyneside and Newcastle), the historic Tyne Theatre and Opera House, and also the Byker Community Trust. He died peacefully in St Cuthberts Hospice, Durham, on 22nd November 2023. A man of the people, and a man with vision [4].

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