

## A tribute to George Collins (1955-2014) Swinburne Deputy Vice Chancellor (R D)

Written by The Conversation

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Now that universities are billion-dollar enterprises their senior leaders are often seen to be distant and aloof, with a chasm separating them from “the workers” and the day-to-day demands of teaching and research.

At Swinburne University of Technology we suddenly lost our Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor George Collins at the age of just 59. He [died unexpectedly](#) at the family home in November.

If there was anyone who was the antithesis of the image of the modern senior university executive it was George. George had ditched the senior university executive manual and the people loved him for it.

Although being a small academic institution can have its downsides, at times like this the smaller dimension makes it easier to see each other’s humanness and titles lose their meaning. In this respect Swinburne was an ideal location for George who thrived on one-on-one relationships.

Below is the eulogy I delivered at his memorial service on Friday that contains some thoughts about what a modern professional relationship is, and sadly, isn’t.

### **An ode to George**

Hi, my name is Matthew Bailes and George was my boss.

It is a great honour to be asked to speak here today. Shortly after George passed away I was fortunate enough to be able to express my thoughts about George to his family and friends at George’s memorial service in Sydney, and there is no-one I’ve known in my professional life that I’ve respected and loved as much as George, so I’m grateful for this opportunity to speak in his memory.

A few weeks ago I was riding down my favourite mountain in the Dandenongs when my phone

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rang. I didn't recognise the number, and a young man's voice asked if I was Matthew Bailes who works with George Collins? He explained that he was Alexi Collins the son of George and that he had some bad news.

I feared what was to come.

He continued, George had had a heart attack and had passed away. I was in complete shock but also immediately desperate. Desperate to explain in the few brief moments that such a phone call can last how to explain to this young man how extraordinary his father really was? But I was contending with my own grief and guilt.

Had I done enough to protect George from George? Who was I, someone who'd only known George for just over two years, to protest my grief at his passing when this young man had just lost his father? What about Evelyn, his wife of 33 years? What right did I have to grieve when she'd just lost her husband?

I told Alexi that George was a great man but soon Alexi was gone. Had I blown it?

Did he know how much we loved his dad? He wasn't like your boss, he was like your best mate! George was everywhere, George was kind, always smiling, seeking solutions to your problems, working late, asking about your weekend, helping people, patting you on the back.

Now once again I have just a few minutes to reiterate to the Swinburne community how awesome George was. About the impact he has had on my own life and the legacy he will leave behind.

### **Knowing George**

I first met George in mid 2012 when he beat me for a job and became my boss. Instantly we hit it off. Like me he was a physicist, hated ties, had married the girl of his dreams at the same age, had done the mandatory European postdoc returning with a family and, most importantly, liked a good cup of coffee.

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Unlike me, George had no ego. I had enough for both of us.

That night George sent me an email at 7.23pm. I responded at 10pm. Not to be outdone he sent me one back at 6.00am. Did this guy ever sleep? Since then George has sent me 829 emails, and due to some quirk in recently switching to Outlook, I've received them all again!

When I first met George and he told me that he'd ceased all of his own research I thought people would struggle to respect him, but clearly I had a lot to learn.

George inspired a great sense of trust from everyone he dealt with, and although I usually say whatever I think to most people, with George I felt as though I could just bare my soul on any issue, because he inspired such an amazing sense of trust due to his honesty and integrity. We'd usually talk about how we could change or fix things, but also about our kids, politics and sometimes even our attitude to marriage.

As we got to know each other better I became more playful knowing he was on the senior management team and bound by the letter of university policy. I would tease him or try to shock him by letting slip that my next article in The Conversation was to be entitled ["Schrodinger's Koran"](#).

But could I trick him into breaking ranks on a university policy by making outrageous statements in direct contradiction of my online HR training module that I'd just completed in world record time? He'd often cry out: "You can't say that!" But smile with a wonderful smirk and furrowed brow. Once, just once, I got him to say: "You can say it, I can only think it." A victory!

When George first arrived our office was fragmented and wounded and reeling from resignations. George's way of fixing it was just to be nice to everyone. I soon noticed that everything I did he said was great. I'd tell him, "you're too nice", but he'd insist he wasn't. Could I ever get him to tell me off for anything?

Rather than fearing non-performance people were being rewarded with kindness and having

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faith placed in them as they stepped up to new roles.

George would send junior staff cat memes or text you on the weekend to encourage you before a big endurance race. The office became fun. People wanted to repay George's trust and not disappoint him. When no-one was around he'd call you mate.

This guy was simply awesome.

When he and Evelyn came over for my group's grand final party they did the dishes while the rest of us watched the game. Clearly he didn't share my love of the AFL?

Many senior university academics are aloof, but George was more at home with a new PhD student than visiting dignitaries. He seemed to know everyone's name and be fascinated by everyone's research buzzing around rooms and listening intently to what you were up to.

I told him that unlike him I wasn't so great in a room full of strangers. To my surprise he explained that he used to be an introvert, and that his wife used to be shocked when she would see him in the workplace working a room full of strangers but that he'd got over it. It was his way of saying, "you can do it too".

### **A man of boundless enthusiasm**

One day I explained to him what my research was about and he got really excited. We'd discovered a new type of explosion (a fast radio burst) and after the paper appeared in Science he started joking about me going to Stockholm to collect the Nobel prize.

I told him that I was going to apply for a Fellowship to pursue the bursts but if I got it I'd have to resign and that would leave him a person short – he already often looked tired. Was he okay with that? He said that would be great and that of course I should go for it!

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When I didn't get the Fellowship I thought he'd be relieved but instead he was really cross, or as he would say "cranky". He seemed more upset than I was?

I had to tell him that it was okay, I didn't care about the Fellowship but he was really disappointed. He started going through the list of successful applicants and making pointless comparisons to people who were after all, deserved winners. George seemed to care more about your career than you did.

I once had a staff member from another department ask me how they could remove one of their staff and asked George how he should go about it? George's response was simple – keep the staff member and encourage them. Then he turned to me and said, not everyone has to perform at your level.

This guy could turn any negative into a positive.

I had to admit defeat on getting him to stop being nice.

When Swinburne's IMAX film was released George kept seeing it over and over again, escorting various dignitaries. I told him that I was greatly relieved that it worked out because I was secretly worried that if it was a disaster I'd be out of a job. George said it was great and do you know what? "What"? I said. He said: "Now you can do anything"!

One day one of my colleagues at the University of Sydney came to visit Swinburne asking if Swinburne could help fix her radio telescope that was behind schedule and in danger of being mothballed. I said that we could probably fix it, but it would require a new computer system and afterwards it would actually be great at finding our new bursts.

George promptly committed Swinburne to help. I warned him that this was going to be really quite tricky but he insisted that we could do it. He seemed to have more confidence in our ability to complete the project than we did?

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A couple of months ago we completed our solution and the telescope started working again after a five year break. George came up to witness the presentation of it to Sydney's head of school. He beamed with pride as the Swinburne students and staff demonstrated it in operation observing a jet from a black hole and was in his element, chatting to the students and staff of the telescope, reassuring them that this was going to be great and going to the pub with the observatory manager afterwards. After his visit everyone was upbeat.

He kept asking me when the first burst was going to be discovered but I had to explain the burst detector wasn't being added until February. He said that he had been constantly checking his phone for the news! He said he'd keep checking.

### **Oh, the bureaucracy**

Bewildered by university bureaucracy, George used to privately express to me an amazement that we ever got anything done, as forms for the two week visit from a PhD student would appear on his Deputy Vice Chancellor's desk for signing, or some endless debate about who paid the last 0.69% of someone's salary would resurface causing him to stamp the desk with his fist and yell in despair.

George bouncing around at an opening of a Design Factory workshop at Swinburne earlier this year.

His passion was boundless and he wasn't afraid to argue fervently for his position, usually based on some core principle he passionately believed in. Most of our arguments centred around me claiming that he was "too nice", and him insisting that he wasn't.

We never used to have formal meetings, instead I would appear in his doorway about 6.15pm every night clad in lycra, and we'd debrief about the day. By this time he'd usually have a puzzled look on his face working out how he was going to solve someone's dilemma. Eventually he'd tell me to get home, knowing I had a 6.45pm curfew.

George used to appear in the same dark suit every day so I asked him why DVC-R's always only owned one suit? He told me he actually had three suits, but they all looked the same!

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His son Alexi told me the other day that he had to keep reminding himself that George wasn't Jesus, with his mother assuring him that he wasn't.

Academically George wasn't perfect either, but he was a perfectionist.

Deep in the recesses of often 60-page Australian Research Council Fellowship applications, a two-page statement has to appear from the Deputy Vice Chancellor. One year George insisted on writing the introduction to these himself, even though I tried to explain to him that I read a ton of these things and nobody ever reads the letter from the DVC.

George refused to listen and carefully crafted each one, fiddling with the wording as the deadline approached. The staff and applicants became increasingly nervous and could only pace nervously while George tinkered with each of the letters to try and give them the most chance of success by pondering every syllable. We were just one IT glitch away from disaster but a few minutes before the deadline they were completed before George rushed off to complete his next task.

### **Is George looking after George?**

But George didn't always look great. When no-one was around I'd ask him if George was looking after George? Was there anything he could give me to do? He'd explain that it was okay, he'd just got up early to finish something or other and that he was going home on the weekend. Once I told him that I actually get paid to help him and it was okay for him to give me more work.

A few weeks ago I could tell he was finding things stressful. It pained me to see him like that, exhausted by his endless desire to help everyone. I thought that he needed to learn to be more of a bastard, but that just wasn't him.

The first Monday after George passed away the staff arrived to the terrible news of his passing. Everyone was completely shattered. My inbox was flooded with messages. People everywhere were in tears. I soon came to realise that everyone felt as I did, that George was their best friend, and that with his support you were going to be amazingly successful.

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In my own life I've learnt an endless amount from George in just two years, about humility, service and believing in people. I miss him terribly.

It was wonderful to hear at his memorial service in Sydney that the George I knew was the same George that had worked at ANSTO and the CRC and been a lay preacher at his church, and son, father and husband.

But I'm still struggling with what to take from George's passing. My greatest regret is that I never told George how much I admired him. Nor did I get to adequately thank him for his trust and support of me, for his friendship or his selfless example. Thank you Evelyn for your support over recent weeks, your kind words have been tremendously helpful.

Somehow, our modern professional lives demand a degree of separation along reporting lines that preclude us from becoming too close to those we most admire and respect in case we're too scared that our objectivity will be diminished?

"Professionalism" means long hours and sleepless nights. Some of us strive for our own glory whilst others like George demand more of themselves to help others.

If I could engage in one last exchange with George I'd tell him that I told him he was too nice and that he should have taken better care of himself but that he'll always be my inspiration and I'll text him when we catch our first burst.

I'm sure George would just say that he hadn't done anything special, that I should go and do something remarkable, no matter what that was. He was always happiest when helping or encouraging others.

What a legend – no wonder we've got a building named "The George" on campus, a place of healing, prayer and relaxation.

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*Matthew Bailes does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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