

1967 CIVIL LIBERTIES MARCH AND SIT-DOWN IN ROMA STREET, BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA.

Taking to the streets in Brisbane to express your opinion in the 1960's and 1970's was not for the faint-hearted. In that era, political dissent was a serious business. A deeply conservative State Government, under Queensland Premiers Frank Nicklin and later Joh Bjelke-Petersen, was determined to show protesters "who was boss". Marchers could be targeted, bashed by police, arrested, strip-searched, and spend at least one, and sometimes several days in the police "watch house" before release. The police Special Branch would spy on anyone considered a threat, photographing them, burglarizing their homes, and compiling secret dossiers to use against them.

Encouraged by the State Government, the Queensland police used the Traffic Regulations in the 1960s and 1970s to block protest marches. The Superintendent of Traffic had the power of absolute veto over march permits, which he could refuse without providing an explanation. At the time, there was also a fee for carrying placards.

The year before (October 1966), an attempted march by left-wing University students protesting against the Vietnam War had been broken up by police before it could leave the campus. This police action was widely condemned by students regardless of their political orientation. This earlier event set the stage for the large numbers of both "right" and "left" students that marched together on 8 September, 1967, for civil liberties, free speech, and the "right to march".

On September 5, 1967, a proposed anti-war march was postponed in the hope of gaining a permit, but on September 7 Premier Nicklin announced that although the fee for placards would be removed, the Superintendent of Traffic's unqualified power of veto over march permits would remain in force. The following day, on Friday, 8 September, leaders from the Society for Democratic Action (SDA) addressed a mass meeting of students and staff at the University of Queensland campus. They asked the forum to vote on a proposal to march without a permit to insist on their right to march as a matter of civil liberties. In the repressive political climate, they expected a few hundred students might participate. In fact, 5,000 students and staff at the forum voted to march without a permit, after which about 4,000 students and staff, approximately half the campus population at the time, marched 8 kilometers from the St Lucia campus up Coronation Drive towards Brisbane's city centre. Several thousand more showed their interest and support by following behind the main demonstration on the footpath.

Close to central Brisbane at Roma Street, the marchers were confronted by hundreds of police who ordered them to disperse. In response, the marchers linked arms and sat down on the road as an act of peaceful defiance. Newspaper accounts at the time described police punching, kicking and threatening students as they forcibly removed them from the roadway. Many were dragged by their clothing and hair. There were 114 arrests.

Compared to earlier marches, the surge in the number of participants in the protest that day was significant, as was the broad base of support by a politically diverse cross section of the student body as a whole.

This march proved to be a pivotal event that inspired and helped to propel a new decade of protest in the years that followed. It was a tipping point in deepening levels of commitment to a wide range of social and political action-campaigns in that era. It helped to set in motion an invigorated and expanded push for reform around the important issues of the day.

It was public events like this, and those that followed, that exposed and directly challenged the police-state-minded politics of the Queensland State Government in the 1960's and 1970's.

When Joh Bjelke-Petersen became Premier in August 1968, things turned for the worse. Clashes between police and demonstrators were more frequent and more violent. The 1971 rugby union test series between the South African Springboks and the Australian Wallabies saw Bjelke-Petersen impose a State of Emergency in Brisbane to quash any demonstrations against racism and South African apartheid.

Eventually in September 1977, street marches in Queensland were effectively banned altogether when Bjelke-Petersen proclaimed: "*Protest groups need not bother applying for permits to stage marches because they won't be granted.*" People were outraged and, once again, took to the streets in a series of "Right to March" demonstrations, leading to further police violence and arrests. Ironically, the massive police presence on the streets would sometimes outnumber the actual protesters.

In 1987-89, the Fitzgerald Inquiry brought an end to the Bjelke-Petersen regime and paved the way for reform. The Special Branch was disbanded and many of its dossiers destroyed. Looking back on Queensland in the 1960s and 1970s, it was an exceptionally grim place to be in terms of civil liberties.

The 1967-68 and post-1977 campaigns were the only major protests of that era anywhere in Australia where the issue was specifically about civil liberties, free speech, and the democratic "right to protest" itself.

(The original 16mm film has been deposited in the Australian National Film and Sound Archive for its long-term preservation.)