

# Police, Radicals and the Media in the 1971 Springbok Protests

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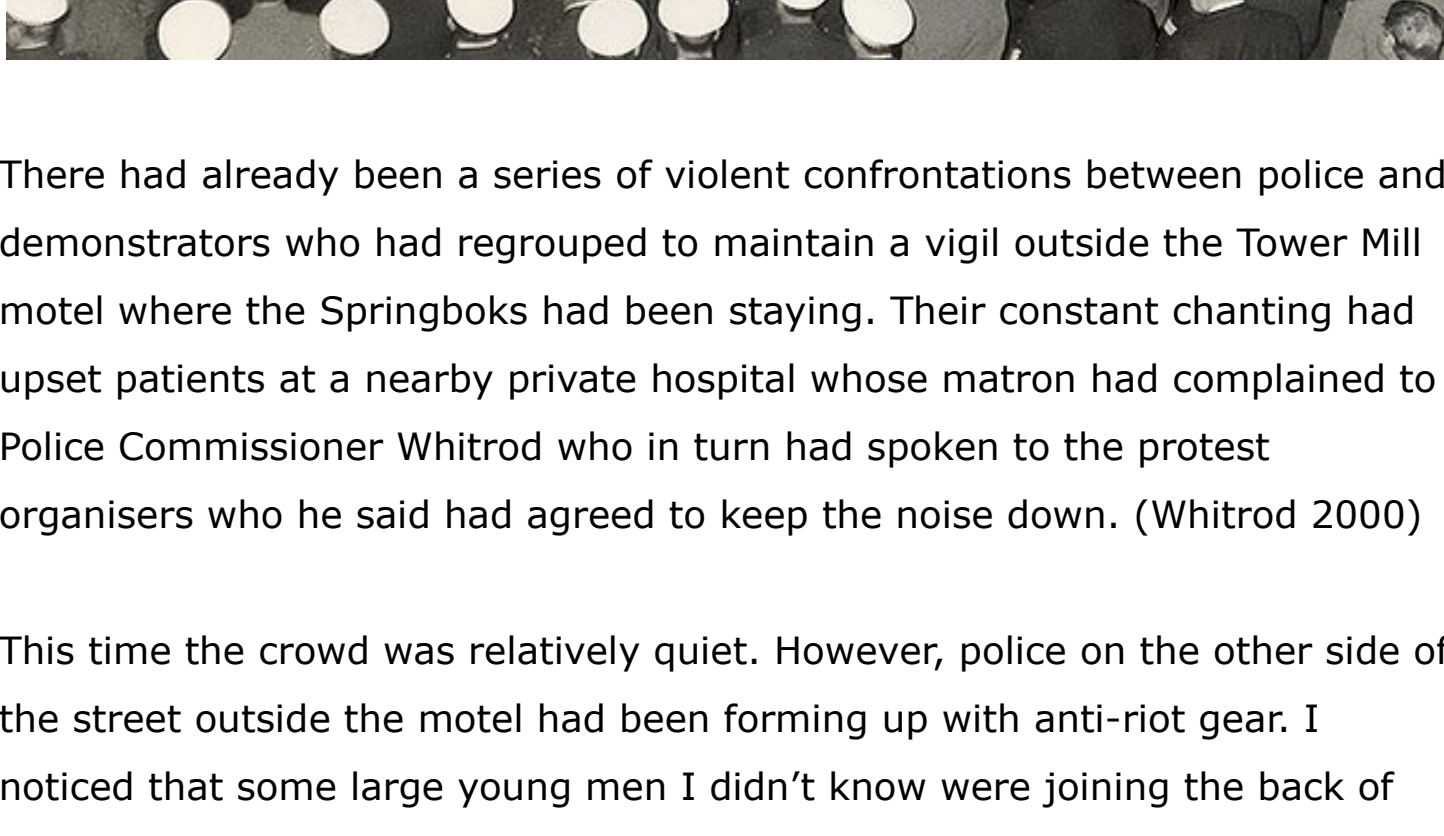
Perhaps the best way to describe the relations between the Queensland Police force and radical university students in 1971, is to tell you the story of how Police Commissioner Ray Whitrod gave me a Queensland Police Certificate of Appreciation.

I had been with my friends to see a New Farm cinema showing of the Greek political thriller Z; a feature movie by left wing director Costa-Gavras about Greek police murdering political demonstrators.



As we drove through Spring Hill, we saw a group of young men attacking a street dweller. They ran off when we stopped. When told they had stolen his pension cheque and his bottle of wine, we chased them down to Fortitude Valley where we got a young uniformed police man to arrest them.

I believe I next saw one of the arrested a little time later across Wickham Terrace from the Tower Mill Motel, where we were both engaged in anti apartheid demonstrations, staged against the all white Springbok Rugby Union team.

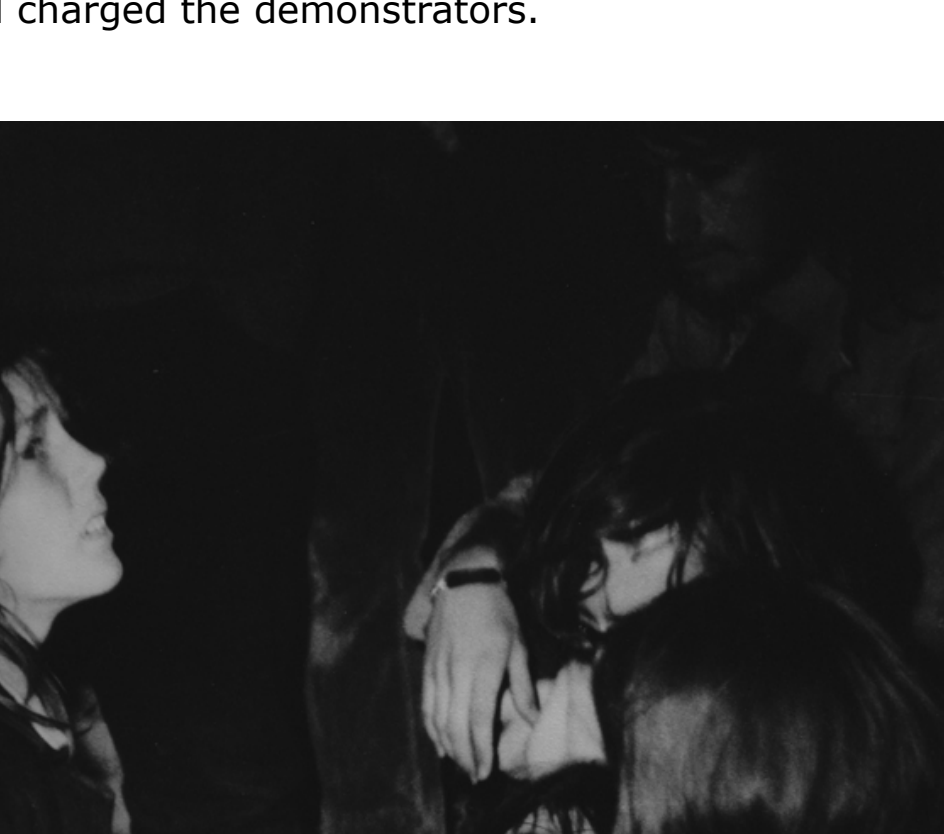


There had already been a series of violent confrontations between police and demonstrators who had regrouped to maintain a vigil outside the Tower Mill motel where the Springboks had been staying. Their constant chanting had upset patients at a nearby private hospital whose matron had complained to Police Commissioner Whitrod who in turn had spoken to the protest organisers who he said had agreed to keep the noise down. (Whitrod 2000)

This time the crowd was relatively quiet. However, police on the other side of the street outside the motel had been forming up with anti-riot gear. I noticed that some large young men I didn't know were joining the back of the demonstration. I thought they might have been wharfies until I saw that one of them had hand cuffs in his back pocket.

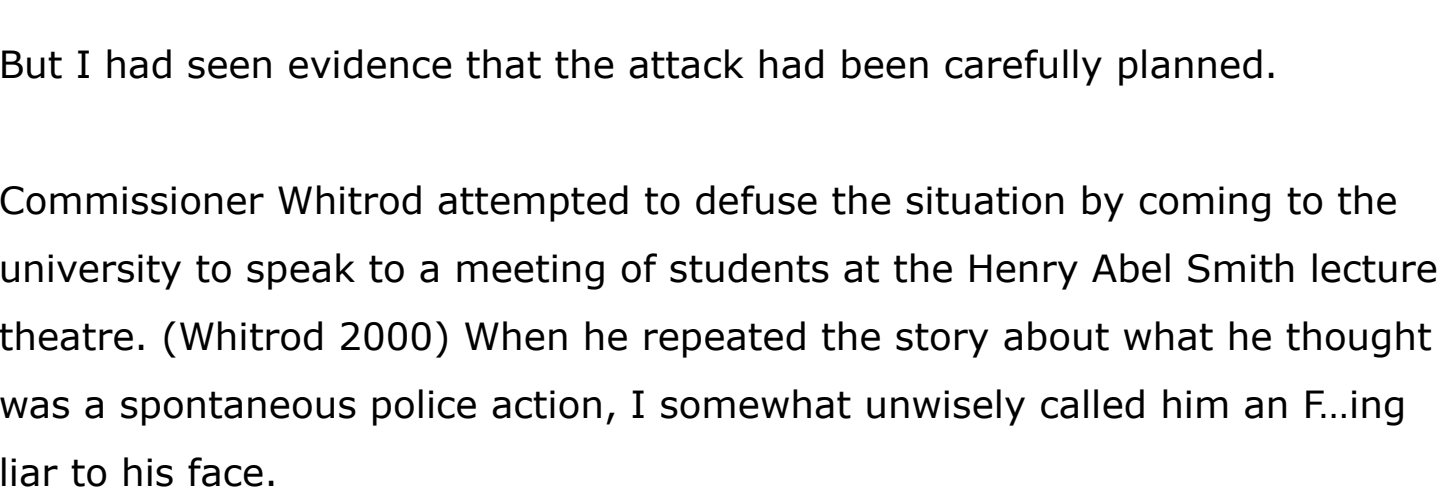
Figuring something was about to happen, I warned my friends and left the demonstration, walking down through the darkening Wickham Park. As I did so, several squads of uniformed police were marching up the hill. When I reached Albert St, a paddy wagon came to a halt.

That's when the screaming started up top.



The Police outside the Tower Mill had charged the peaceful crowd who then tried to escape down the hill. To their surprise and terror they found more police behind them.

Ray Whitrod said later that country police brought to the city by the government to enforce the State of Emergency had lost their tempers, lost discipline and charged the demonstrators.



But I had seen evidence that the attack had been carefully planned.

Commissioner Whitrod attempted to defuse the situation by coming to the university to speak to a meeting of students at the Henry Abel Smith lecture theatre. (Whitrod 2000) When he repeated the story about what he thought was a spontaneous police action, I somewhat unwisely called him an F...ing liar to his face.

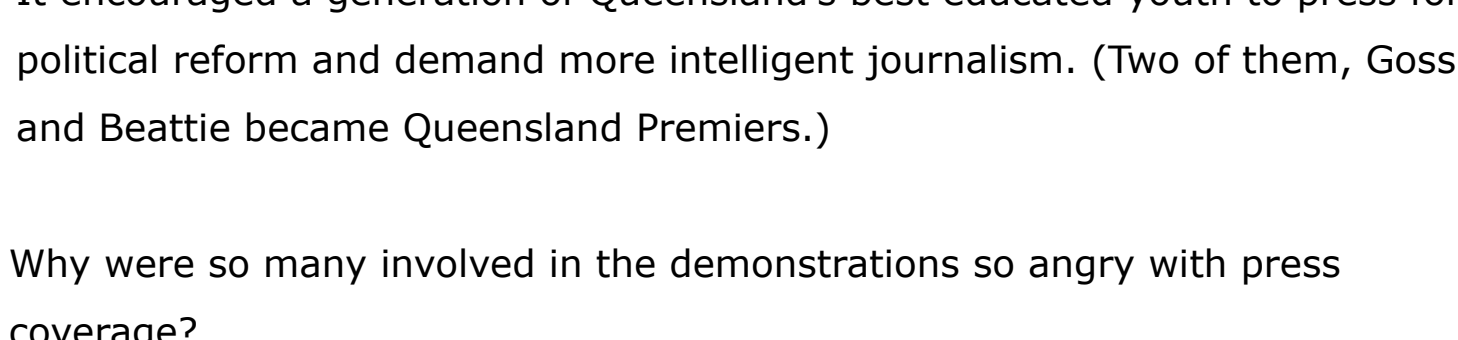
Some time later, I was at home at my house in Paddington when there was a loud knock on the door. When I opened it I was confronted by a uniformed police sergeant. "Are you Alan David Knight?" he asked. "I am," I replied nervously, thinking of what I had said to Commissioner Whitrod. "What am I charged with?" "What do you mean," he said, "The Commissioner wants to give you an award for keeping violence off the streets!"

The Certificate of Appreciations presentations were made at a police graduation at the old Petrie Terrace barracks. Myself and a pal were placed in seats of honour, surrounded by senior officers who apparently had never seen long haired hippies before at a police function. At the high point of the event, we were invited to join Commissioner Whitrod on the rostrum. My friend got his award first and Whitrod shook his hand.

When he turned to me I could see in his eyes that he recognised me as the student who had called him a f....ing liar about police violence during the Springboks tour.

Without missing a beat, Whitrod said over the loudspeaker system, and I quote, "Here's your award, you can hang it in the toilet if you want to". For many years I did.

For those of you who might doubt this story, here's the award.



## Reporting the Springboks

The gulf between the official view of the Springboks tour, as dutifully reported in the press, and the reality experienced by the demonstrators created perhaps the most lasting impact of those events forty years ago.

In the seventies, it sparked considerable discussion within Queensland University about the role of the media in reporting politics.

It encouraged a generation of Queensland's best educated youth to press for political reform and demand more intelligent journalism. (Two of them, Goss and Beattie became Queensland Premiers.)

Why were so many involved in the demonstrations so angry with press coverage?

Writing in Semper Floreat, Roger Stuart, the Springbok protest historian conceded that, "...in individual cases quite fair reportage was given".

*This was largely the result of having an official press group and of the presence of several sympathetic journalists who were interested to find out 'what was really going on'. Obviously editorial policy remains a powerful limitation, but it is a pity when individual journalists became the victims (though some deserve it) of blanket outrage at media distortion.* (Stuart 1971)

A review of the press clippings from the tour showed reportage focused on confrontations, which was strongly skewed by vitriolic government sources. Ministers were treated with deference. Demonstrators were mostly voiceless objects of reporting, frequently stereotyped as anarchists or hippies.

The complex, divisive and multifaceted nature of the events stretched conventional journalism practices to their limits.

But as Roger Stuart observed, individual journalists tried hard to report what was going on.

In the front page story, WILD CHASE IN CITY PARK, the Courier Mail attempted to summarise a decision by police to launch a charge against demonstrators gathered across the road from the Tower Mill motel. The Courier Mail noted that :

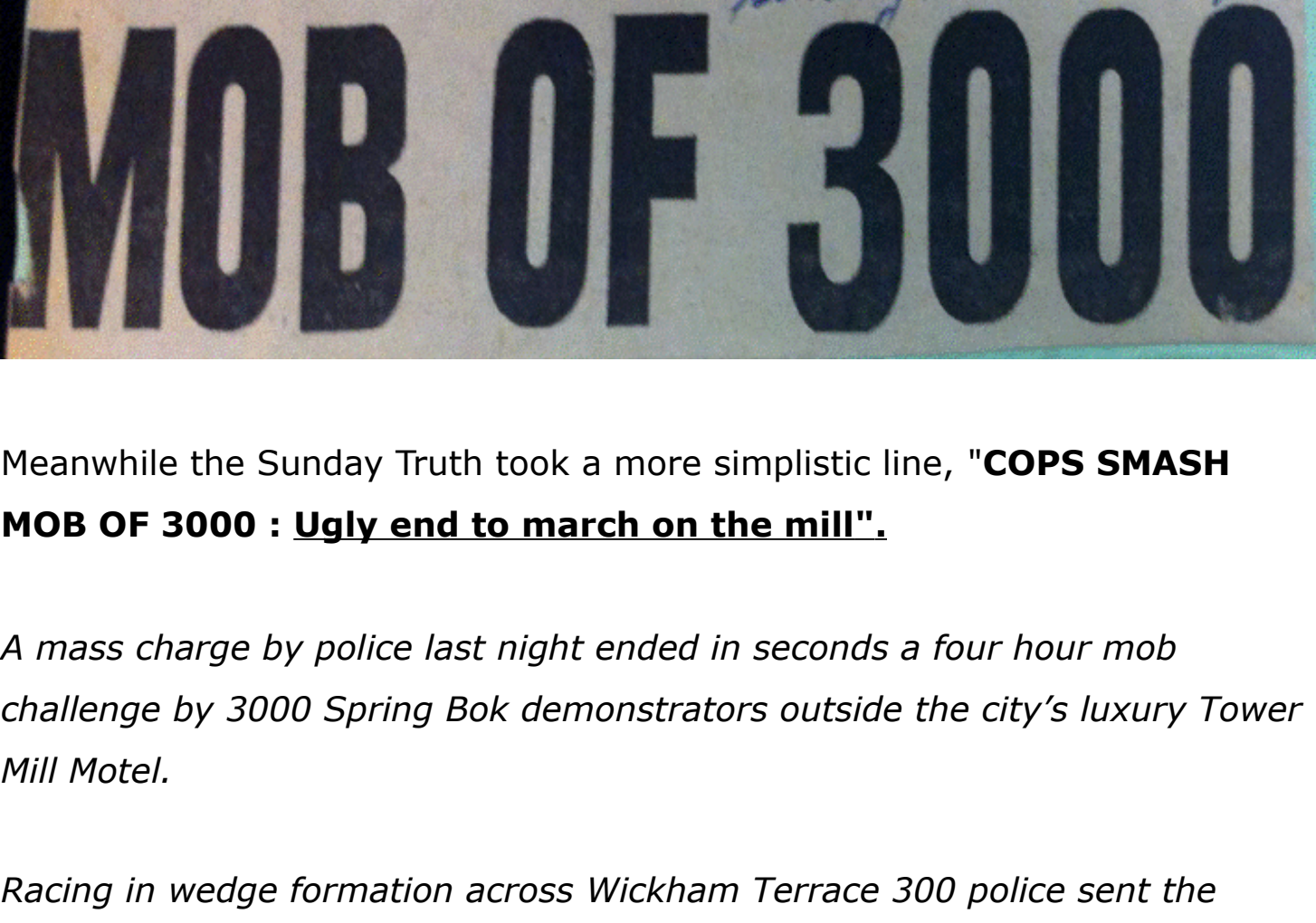
- the police moved against "mainly young people, standing peacefully on the footpath"
- arrested demonstrators were "frogmarched" back
- allegations that a student (later Premier Peter Beattie) had been bashed in Trades Hall
- a weeping young woman was heard to cry "You herded us down the slope like animals. What did we do wrong?"



The report further noted that police had used batons on the fleeing demonstrators. (Courier Mail 23.7.71)

But the Courier Mail’s reporting appeared fragmentary, when compared to more analytic and often more literate material being distributed in leaflets. In TOWER MILL; Roughshod through the park, an anonymous author wrote that , "The point is not police brutality. It’s not a question of individual policemen being thugs..."

*The explanation for this incredibly needless and dangerous action by the police is not to be found in the individual psychology of a few aberrant members of the force. ...it is in the higher ranks of the police force. Consider the complete lack of responsibility in police commanders who order a charge in conditions that could lead to mass frenzy in a steeply sloping and darkened park. ...Did they consider the possibility of near hysterical young people running fearfully into the direct line of peak hour traffic? (Anon. 24.7.71)*



Meanwhile the Sunday Truth took a more simplistic line, "**COPS SMASH MOB OF 3000 : Ugly end to march on the mill".**

*A mass charge by police last night ended in seconds a four hour mob challenge by 3000 Spring Bok demonstrators outside the city’s luxury Tower Mill Motel.*

*Racing in wedge formation across Wickham Terrace 300 police sent the chanting demonstrators flying to stop what was developing into the ugliest riot Brisbane has ever seen. (Sunday Truth 25.7.71 )*

**Issues hindering truth seeking**

On reflection, inadequate mainstream media coverage could be attributed to a number of factors:

- The difficulties encountered accessing and covering round the clock demonstrations where major events took place undercover, in darkness and close to deadline. It didn’t go unnoticed that many of the press photographs were taken from the police side of the demonstrations. The technical limitations of black and white press cameras, and film recorded television, strictly limited photo journalism, particularly in low light.
- The reliance on police reporters accustomed to writing flattering reports of police behaviour, could be seen to slant reports. Whitrod later noted this process himself. "The media were very much in the pockets of the police rounds men who were in the pockets of the detectives, for information," he said. (Whitrod 2000)
- Meanwhile, the practice of state rounds or political reporting in Queensland relied on news releases which Joh Bjelke Petersen would later famously refer to as "feeding the chooks". During the Springboks tour, some official handouts were incendiary. Colin Bennett, a Labor backbencher, was quoted referring to demonstrators as "jackals". (Bennett 1971) The Police Minister, "Mr" Hodges, called student demonstrators "pseudo intellectuals".

*At the university, they must be improving their intellect, because I distinctly hear some of them count up to four... But apparently some of these students think they are above the law.*  
*They should remember that many are at University because of the benevolence of Governments, commerce, industry and the public.*  
*It is the taxpayer generally who has to pay to educate these disreputable looking people, who are supposed to be the future leaders of our community. (Hodges 1971)*

- The lack of or unavailability effective radical spokesmen hindered any attempts by reporters to offer alternative sources . The anarchic nature of the radical movement resulted in it having no official representatives....just people journalists described as "leaders" so that they might be more frequently quoted.
- Meanwhile, there was long standing radical antipathy to mass media in general and the Courier Mail in particular. Writing as far back as 1968, Tony Bowen, complained about how difficult it was to even get a dissenting letter published in Brisbane’s only morning daily newspaper, The Courier Mail.

"The aim of press men is not to discover the truth," Bowen claimed.

*This is not to infer that pressmen of every grade are not people of integrity. They are basically no more dishonest than the rest of us, but it is time that we get rid of the poppycock concerning the press, and exposed it for what it is...overprotected by an entanglement of myths.*  
(Tony Bowen 1968 )

Bowen wrote that western democracy was supposed to be founded on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom to disseminate ideas and the protection of minorities. The American Revolution had assumed a free market of ideas. But where could Queensland minority groups express their opinions?

Bowen: For the person holding minority views, it is obviously very difficult for him to gain access to the public through the mass media, even if the controllers of the mass media had the most liberal of wills, which without being paranoid in any sense, they clearly have not. The press etc. are in fact societal instrumentalities. They are on the side of the government, they believe in the status quo. They will criticise the government over such momentous issues as parking facilities in Brisbane, but they will not and in fairness cannot publish objective articles on topics such as socialism or overseas investment in Australia, or press, radio, or TV monopolies or oligopolies. They are in fact part of the group that are doing very well out of the position as it is. Only a fool or an idealist would wish to change it.

(Tony Bowen 1968a)



**Fools and Idealists**

Dissatisfaction with the mainstream media’s apparent inability to come to terms with the complex issues involved, prompted a number of former radicals to leave Queensland, seeking careers in journalism in southern states.

It began a debate about the effectiveness of "he said, she said" reporting, which had resulted in journalists merely re-cycling intentional untruths.

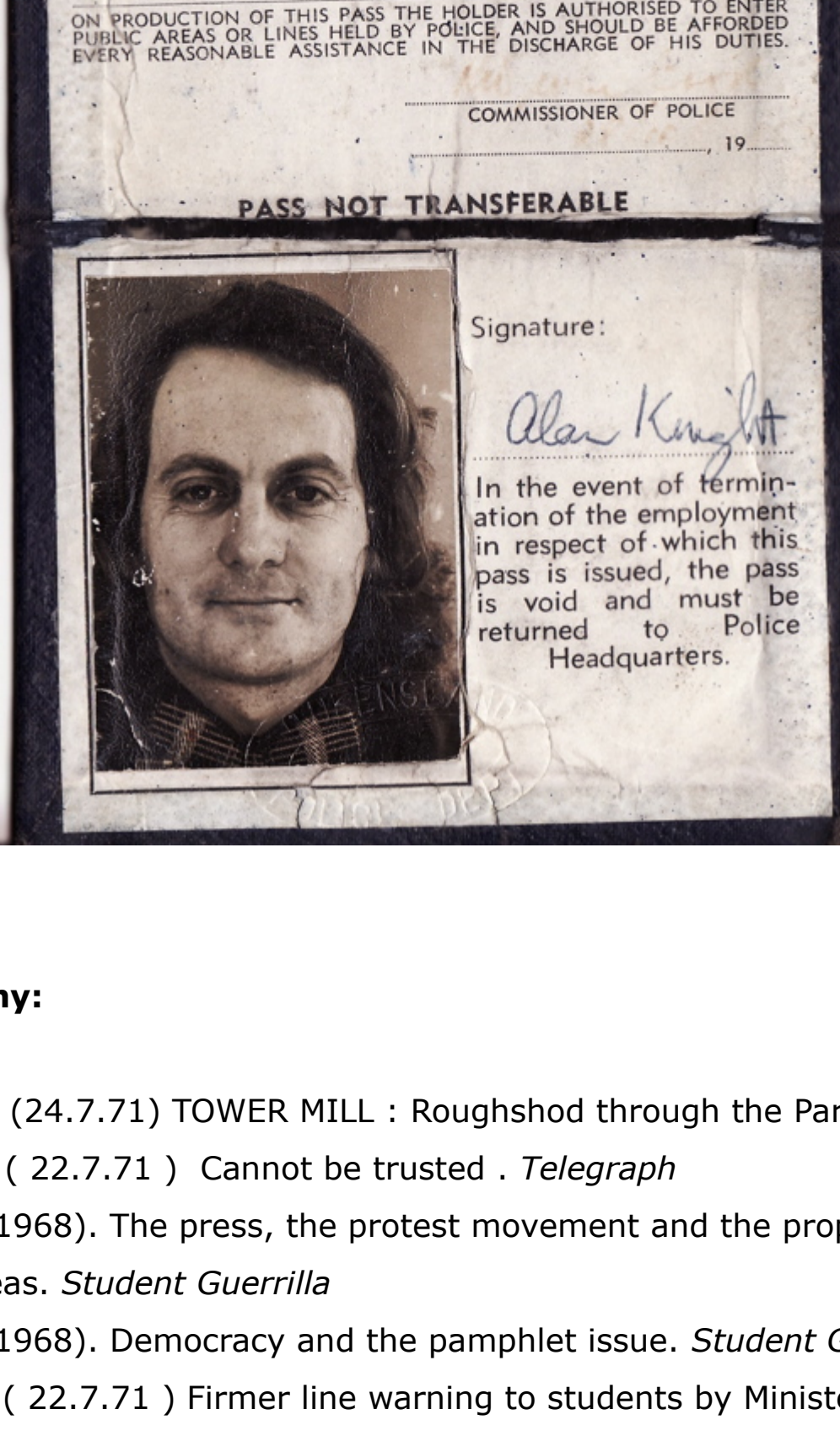
A Public Interest Research Group, influenced by IF Stone, collected and catalogued mainstream media reports and government statements in an attempt to contextualise them. In Sydney, a group of Queenslanders produced the Queensland Dossier, an edited collection of reports which sought to expose the repressive nature of Queensland politics. Printed in Sydney, copies were brought to Brisbane in a car boot and sold at bookshops and concerts.

Since it was illegal to distribute leaflets in Queensland without a police permit, a meeting called to review the impact of the Springbok protests, discussed newer media, radio and television. This led directly to the invention of community radio in Australia, with the creation of the still unique, 4 ZZZ FM in 1975.

However it was the innovative Four Corners production, *Moonlight State*, which deployed footage of Brisbane brothels, exploding government statements claiming such corruption did not exist. Broadcast across the state, the stark images were seen in gerrymandered regional electorates, sparking the political pressure for the Fitzgerald inquiry.

Meanwhile, police management of the attacks on demonstrators, demonstrated deep divisions within the Queensland police force over Whitrod’s leadership. Later he saw this as a response by corrupt police to his attempts to clean up the force. In hindsight, the police indiscipline shown in the "wild chase" after Brisbane anti-apartheid demonstrators, may have been the first stages of a police mutiny which with support of the Premier, later placed the rat pack in command of forces of law and order.

If that were the case, the Brisbane mainstream media not only failed to comprehensively cover the unfolding events in its own streets and parks but entirely missed the bigger story later illuminated by the Fitzgerald inquiry and detailed in Whitrod’s memoirs.



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