

Student and staff activism : radical politics and the University of Queensland

By Greg George

‘Any complaints, take ‘em up there’

Bruce Petty’s cartoon captures evocatively the way the world felt to the generation that entered adulthood through the sixties and early seventies. Politics seemed stuffy, controlled, resistant to change, patronising, and bureaucratic. Society was seen as hypocritically waving banners of democracy and consumerism that obscured deep problems of racism, nuclear fear, colonialism, poverty, controlled media and ‘grey’ working lives and culture. The Petty cartoon was used at several points in the book Up the right channels published in 1970 by a staff and student reform movement at the University of Queensland.

In the eyes of the new generation of activists, the social critics of the generation before them were failures - timid, self-censoring, and compromised. The left critics were complicit in totalitarianism and unable to think beyond rigid orthodoxy. Small ‘l’ liberals seemed unable to find a new language to respond to the depth and urgency of the issues. Change through parliamentary parties seemed unlikely, given the apparent reluctance of non-conservative parties to drive policy on the most vital contemporary issues. In Australia, the ALP defeat at the 1966 election seemed to make the end of coalition dominance unlikely. In Queensland the lack of one vote one value and the damage caused by the Labor Party split made parliamentary change even more remote.

A Cold War culture, with its fear that any social critic would be accused of sympathy with totalitarian communism, or be seen as aiding countries that threatened ours with nuclear destruction, seemed to have stopped all independent political action. But the new generation, far from being encumbered by any sense of complicity, saw totalitarianism as a primary enemy, and nuclear disarmament as something to campaign for.

Above all, they were driven beyond political impasse and silence by a sense of immediate personal responsibility.

A ‘Conscience Left’

Sometimes the new left identified itself as a ‘conscience left’¹. They meant that it was a values-based, action oriented movement, non-ideological, even anti-ideological. The main Queensland new left group’s self-description, as reproduced on leaflets, said:

¹ Interviews with Brian Laver, Mike Jones by Mungo MacCallum, The Australian, 16 and 15 May, 1969

“The ‘Society for Democratic Action’ is an association of individuals united by a belief that democratic freedom is something that must be fought for, and once having been achieved, it must be actively protected if it is to survive. With SDA the password is ACTION. Listed below are a few characteristics by which the supporter of the Society may be recognised:

- concern for the future of humanity because of the danger of nuclear war
- an axiomatic acceptance of the sanctity of human life
- revulsion at the ready use of force as an instrument of international policy
- concern for the degrading poverty of two out of every three people in a world of potential plenty
- a belief that the individual should be free from the unwarranted interference of the State”

There was in the early movement something like a combination of the Christian requirement to give witness, the existentialist project to create personal meaning in life by responsible action, and a humanistic motive against inaction whilst others suffered.

In fact the movement at the University of Queensland began with strong specific influences from each of those traditions, as transmitted by centrally placed individuals and groups.

The Christians

The Newman Society represented the left Catholic tradition and the liberalising influence of the Second Vatican Council. The Student Christian Movement, part of a world wide federation which joined actively in the ferment of the time, worked in tandem with the Newman Society. At UQ from 1970 other Christian activist traditions were gathered together in the Revitalisation of Christianity Movement (ROC)².

The Americans

The humanist tradition was transferred directly to UQ from its radical liberal flowering in the US new left by half a dozen staff and students, mostly Americans, though some were Australians who had studied in the US. As well as those individuals mentioned in the **Chronology**, these ideas were transmitted by a short-lived group of staff, Professionals for Peace, begun by Michael Kay, an American peace activist in History, who left UQ in 1966, and Ralph Summy, who is still associated with UQ’s Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies³.

The founding statement of the Students for a Democratic Society in the US, The Port Huron Statement (largely written by Tom Hayden), is acknowledged as an influence in accounts and interviews with UQ radicals.

<http://www.tomhayden.com/porthuron.htm>

² Fryer has an ephemera collection from ROC. Refer to [Publications of political organisations in Queensland: held in University of Queensland Libraries](#) link. Note that not all ephemera collections listed in this bibliography are catalogued at this stage.

³ Ralph Summy interview in Young, M., A historical portrait of the new student Left at the University of Queensland 1966-1972, B.A. Hons, University of Queensland, 1984, Fryer FIC6657

The Statement expresses the values and action based, rather than ideological, nature of the movement. They were looking for a tone of radical but pragmatic reform. SDS also impressed by their willingness to join other groups in dangerous voter registration and other activity in the American south. They also worked in the poor areas of the cities in the north.

Society for Democratic Action

Students for Democratic Action was formed in Brisbane in 1966. Much of SDA's success was attributable to high levels of organisation and the rapid development of infrastructure such as a press, a headquarters, and a bookshop. The later change of name to '*Society*' for Democratic Action reflected their aim to campaign in the community as well as on campus. They began weekly forums in Centenary Place in the city.

An early interview with an SDA leader, Brian Laver, captures the radical liberal position and the influence of SDS:

"These students believe in democracy and most importantly they believe in the maximum participation for the individual. Believing that democracy is a continuous process that does not finish at the polls they are prepared at any time to check abuses by working through the legal and administrative channels. However if this does not work they are prepared to commit civil disobedience. The students believe that our society develops continually an ethos of war, where values of love, sincerity, honesty and respect are sacrificed to a rule of thumb called expedience, which is defined at any time by what group is in power. The students therefore are united in the belief that our society needs to be re-oriented...to communication of life. The program to do this is found in the American "New Left" students concepts of "Grass Roots Democracy".⁴

The Liberal Club⁵ seized the word 'liberal' to represent small 'l' liberal values (forcing right-wing opinion to revive the Democratic Club⁶ tag). As the movement changed in 1969, and ideology took hold, the New Left Group⁷ formed, and it articulated the humanist left liberal position. These two clubs often cooperated and provided a critique when the movement later took a revolutionary turn. That critique pre-figured some of the criticism in later histories of the movement⁸.

The Labor Club⁹ (which was not affiliated with the ALP) often formed, collapsed and reformed (as had been the case with previous Labor and ALP clubs) so its input varied. It played a major role in campus-based anti-conscription action. It also joined at times with the above two clubs to voice caution on the ideological and revolutionary turn.

⁴ "Brian Laver speaks" in Viewpoint, December 1966, p. 6

⁵ See Liberation

⁶ See New Light and Charisma

⁷ See Fryer FVF249

⁸ See for example Young, N., An infantile disorder? The crisis and decline of the new left, Boulder, Westview Press, 1977

⁹ See Dickson, Bruce "University of Queensland Labor Club, Brisbane: a snapshot from the late sixties/early seventies" Fryer F3295

Collectively all of these groups became known as 'the radicals'. 'Radical' means 'going to the root' of social issues, that is, seeking changes that will deal with problems for the long term.

Hitting the streets

World-wide events supported a sense of change. The 'Suez crisis' in 1956 saw 30,000 demonstrating in Trafalgar Square against the British invasion of Egypt. In 1959 50,000 marched for the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The numbers grew to 100,000 by 1962. One of the very earliest local signs of revived political action was the formation in 1962 of the Brisbane Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

The American civil rights movement, with a new non-violent militancy, came to prominence in the 1955-6 Montgomery Alabama bus boycott. By 1963 250,000 were marching on Washington. In Australia Student Action campaigned against the bipartisan White Australia policy at the time of the 1961 federal election. Locally Student Action protested against some deportations and in 1962 picketed a pub over a colour ban.

The cultural revolution of the sixties hit before the more explicit and organised political revolution. The fifties were undermined from within by a challenging tide of satire, literature, philosophy, political writing and music; see for example the account of Brisbane's rock 'n' roll riot¹⁰.

The 1963 atmospheric test ban treaty and the beginning of non-proliferation negotiations (not concluded until 1968) took the heat out of the nuclear disarmament movement, especially as the Vietnam War commitments and conscription began. In 1962 the Cuban missile crisis¹¹ passed without catastrophe. The lessening of the nuclear threat liberated the movements into action by lifting a pall of doom.

Changes in communications technology and the development of current affairs TV meant that the events of the time were rapidly shared. The rapidity of that was new. Protest actions around the world, including the anti-colonial struggles in the developing world, fed off each other. Local efforts were given gravity and hope by a sense of shared effort, and the apparent possibility of a world-wide breakthrough.

Talking – a free form democracy

If we designate the height of the movement in Australia as roughly 1966 through to the mid-seventies, there was a shared cultural ethos for much of that time.

A crucial element in this was the 'Forum Area' where very frequent debates happened, from an open platform. In the earlier period the audience would

¹⁰ Chapter 39 in Evans, R. et al. (eds), *Radical Brisbane*, Carlton, Vulgar Press, 2004

¹¹ The only one of the several incidents that have taken the world to the edge of nuclear war which was publicly known and watched as it happened

gather on grass under a tree and on the surrounding paved areas and covered way. Changes to the area seemed to express a kind of architectural hostility to its use as a forum. By the time of the second civil liberties struggle in 1977 the audience area had been built out. The speakers still occupied the covered way but faced east. The 'Relax block'¹² was another site of informal exchange, meetings and conferences.

Both areas became central during teach-ins, quasi-strikes (mass skipping of classes) and an actual strike in 1971. At those times, forums and meetings happened on a daily basis.

The university ethos at the time was perceived as arid, instrumental and closed to issues and ideas, in fact as anti-intellectual. But the three term teaching and end of year examinations structures actually allowed ample time for talk, and the (sole) eatery 'The Refec' (the Refectory) was the site, as much as classes, homes, meetings, the Relax Block or the Forum Area. Students today have direct and indirect (HECS debt) financial pressures which put them in a position rather like the large evening student population in the earlier period, with barely an opportunity to collect reading material between class contact times. Students at the time did not usually work during term but during vacations instead. After 1973 they did not have fees to pay, and in any case, scholarships were numerous. Also they had very little to spend money on. The materiel of living was minimal and the inducements to consume rudimentary, compared to today. From requirements to wear suits and dresses, student culture rapidly arrived at a uniform of t-shirts, jeans and naff footwear like thongs, army disposal jungle boots, Dunlop Volleys, or no footwear at all. When without a car everyone hitch-hiked. There was a long area of broad footpath at the end of Schonell Drive – the 'hitching area'. Most drivers picked up, at least intermittently.

Dan O'Neill, one of the leading activists, wrote in 1969:

"The debate and tumult of 1967 persisted in voice, deed and written word until the examination period itself.....there were many students who made almost palpable the feeling that, after all, the examinations were not the central part of the pursuit of knowledge, and the practice of critical reasoning. The forum was held sometimes up to three times a week right into November and a communal breakthrough seemed to have been made. Refectory trivia gave way to serious discussion, and immature groupings based on prejudice broke up in a new climate of serious camaraderie"¹³

In 1976 he wrote:

"There was a fascination in listening to the speeches in the forum area in those early years. People would stand around for hours of the afternoon watching as their fellows stood forth and began to exist in a new way, listening as the spoken word broke a long enchantment, moved us day after day to a new vision of the world in which we as individuals and as groups seemed, for the first time to have a part."¹⁴

The revolution takes the stage

¹² Relaxation Block – now occupied by the Union, Student Support Services and the kindly

¹³ "The growth of the radical movement", Semper, March 17, 1969, p. 11

¹⁴ "The rise and fall of student consciousness", Semper, 20th May, 1976, p. 12

Films, music, plays, books, newspapers and magazines played a huge role in creating a shared cultural experience. Brisbane's small size accentuated what was an Australia wide phenomenon. Seeing 'the latest' film, at least in so far as European and 'art' cinema was concerned, often meant going to a specific theatre, for example 'The Crystal' on Lutwyche Road. So predictable was this that The Crystal was the scene of a Commonwealth Police raid in an unsuccessful attempt to catch some radicals on whom Crimes Act warrants were drawn (they escaped through a toilet window). Smaller, non-commercial venues began to develop and the palette got richer. On campus the New Left Club raised money with weekly films in a lecture theatre.

The Schonell Theatre (which closed in 2006) took on part of that role for films from its opening in 1970. 'Dramsoc' student theatre had always been prominent at UQ. UQ's Avalon Theatre had been the venue for new and experimental theatre, and continued to share that role with the Schonell. From the sixties there Scoop revues, Architects' revues, and various politically themed revues (such as "On Stage Vietnam" at the Rialto), proliferated. One revue, "I hear what you say", was a rebuff to the UQ administration under Zelman Cowan. Another "Life wasn't meant to be easy" satirised Malcolm Fraser's government¹⁵.

FOCO was a combined effort of the 'cultural revolutionaries' and the 'straight politicos' in a venue provided by the labour movement. Music, films, dancing, meetings and lectures all happened in the one Trades Hall venue. Hundreds turned up on Sunday nights. The experiment demonstrated to the cultural revolutionaries a potential in Brisbane that they were soon to tap.

Divergence

Dan O'Neill captures a moment in 1969 when all the divergences that were eventually followed out still lived together fairly closely within SDA (as it turns out, just prior to its dissolution):

"SDA now has four distinct areas of concern...There is not an all-encompassing ideology, though all would probably agree to being anti-authoritarian, in favour of increased democracy in the political and social field, supported on the basis of decentralisation of power. Many would argue that the completion of the trends of SDA thinking is the adoption of a form of workers control in all institutions. Some would see the underlying philosophy of the movement as a form of socialist humanism. Some would see SDA as a transitional grouping in advanced capitalist conditions, tending towards an eclectically Marxist form of revolutionary socialism. Others tend, at this level of generality, to organise their perceptions and actions in terms of less political creeds, emphasising the socio-cultural and moral content of the revolution fought for. Some see forms of non-violent revolution as the soul of all revolutionary movements, the inner principle of all attempts at really radical social change. Some profess to be theoretical anarchists who consider any State power ultimately illegitimate."¹⁶

An SDA conference in August/September 1969 proposed to overcome 'problems' and 'grievances' and the role of 'minority groups' by evolution into

¹⁵ Fryer has a brief video clip from this revue as part of the Bruce Dickson 1977 street march videos and some satirical ads screened during the revue

¹⁶ "The growth of the radical movement", *Semper*, March 17, 1969, pp. 9-14

an 'alliance'. Instead SDA dissolved and new groups formed. However, more than just the forms were changing. That is reflected in the formation of the Revolutionary Socialist Students Alliance. The name expresses the shift in ideas as some of the tendencies O'Neill described hardened into fixed positions. According to the Chronology authors the counter-culture became more 'anti-political' by the time of the second Peoples' Park in late 1970.

Hippies and air waves

In 1970 the cultural revolutionaries set up a drug counselling and referral service, the Bomb Shelta. In 1972 they formed Harpo, a loose coalition that produced an occasional newspaper and stood for arts and activities positions in the union. In March they held the first Harpo's Night Out, a combined political theatre and music event¹⁷ reminiscent of FOCO. Food coops and alternative businesses were begun¹⁸. A Learning Exchange was set up in the city and on campus. In 1973 some were involved in the first counter-cultural festival, initiated by the Australian Union of Students (AUS), the Aquarius Festival at Nimbin. People began to move into alternative business and arts careers. Life choices were sending people in different directions, as much as any tensions of diverging politics.

There were links between Harpo people such as John Stanwell (one of the Chronology authors) and ex-SDA activists like Jim Beatson, in the Union's setting up in 1975 of community radio station 4ZZ-FM. The station became both a subject of Union controversy, battles over content within the movement, and a police target¹⁹. Some 'politicos' attacked what they saw as the lack of sufficient news and current affairs programming. At the other extreme some wanted rock only. In between were a range of positions. The battles were quite bitter but the station settled into a combined news, current affairs and music format. The very repressiveness of the Bjelke-Petersen regime ensured that the cultural revolutionaries maintained a political edge. 4ZZ Joint Efforts were harassed by police to the point that they eventually had to be discontinued. Beginning in 1977 the government contemplated dissolving the students' Union, with some encouragement from the Fraser government. Vice-Chancellors Cowan and Wilson opposed the move and it was never acted on²⁰. Fryer has a reasonably good run of the 4ZZ/4ZZZ newsletter Radio Times, strengthened by some recent donations from the station²¹.

¹⁷ See Knight, A. 'Radical media in the deep north: the origins of 4ZZZ-FM', Queensland Review, 14 (1), 2007, p. 101-102

¹⁸ Harpo established Mr Natural's, a vegetarian restaurant, on Schonell Drive, and Wholefoods on Milton Road, both unique at the time contrasting so much with today where every shopping centre has its health food store

¹⁹ Stafford, A. Pig city: from the Saints to Savage Garden, St Lucia, UQP, 2006; Doyle, J (ed). Sounds Like a Jilted Generation: 4ZZZ-FM 1975-1995, Brisbane, Creative Broadcasters, 1995; Carolli, L et al. (eds). Radio Timewarp: Ten Years of Independent Radio In Brisbane, Brisbane, Creative Broadcasters, 1985; Williams, G. Generation Zed: no other radio like this, Brisbane, Kingswood Press, c2000.

²⁰ Thomis, op. cit. p. 334

²¹ Fryer PN1991.3.A8 R34

Bookshops and bookstalls

The history of these developments, and later blossoming of the issue and identity based movements, could be told in terms of bookshops. The iconic bookshop was The Red and the Black Bookshop (always referred to as 'the Red and Black' or 'the R and B'). It was started by SDA in 1969. It reflected wide-ranging radical, liberal, humanist and new leftist ideas, and the counter-culture, as that developed. The 'Red and Black' was associated with the campus based movement through on campus book stalls, initially 'Zac's bookstall'.

The Red and Black was prosecuted over 'Lysistrata', an Aubrey Beardsley poster.

The banning of Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint also led to prosecution. In defiance of the banning, boxes of the book were taken to the UQ campus and sold. Later The Little Red School Book (a booklet of advice on sex, contraception, rights, personal development and education) was banned and the bookshop was again prosecuted.

Book stalls were always a feature in the Refec area. Other radical groups, such as the Labor Club, ran them. Later women's, environmentalist and Marxist group ran book tables. On the UQ campus, for the duration of a given campaign, book stalls would often appear, for example during the late seventies anti-uranium movement.

Up the new channels

Very quickly the new women's, gay, and black, rights and liberation movements became engaged in elaborate reform processes. As they continued with that they became fully involved in social institutions, or they built new institutions. The same processes were underway in other issue areas (see the **PIRG** and **Battle for Bowen Hills** stories). In many cases it was not so much a matter of surrendering radicalism and climbing into a 'right channel', as creating new channels. In most cases this took many years.

The women's movement already had a first wave history and organisational structures²². But the new ideas captured by the term 'women's liberation', and the large numbers of new activists and new groups²³, swamped the older forms. Since their mission was to reach out to women, and specifically to provide direct assistance in crisis with advisory and help centres, the second wave went straight to the community. In Brisbane Children by Choice²⁴ began in 1971 (under a different name). Women's House²⁵ was established in 1973.

Though the histories differed in many ways this pattern is characteristic of the emergence of the other organisations and campaigns that grew out of the ferment the new left created. The result was a great fostering of talent and

²² Fryer UQFL300

²³ Fryer F3197, UQFL296

²⁴ Fryer FVF111

²⁵ Fryer Accession Record 060127

skills that continues to benefit society. As happened with the artistic and counter-cultural individuals in the movement, careers were begun in these reform movements. The channels may have been new but the life cycles being lived out were familiar. The apparent dissipation of the new left was actually a combination of creative growth and inevitable personal choices.

The Movement moves off campus

In the high-tide the centre of activism was unquestionably UQ. By the early seventies that had already begun to change. Some movements which picked up pace in the seventies began as primarily community-based, or quickly shifted toward that. This was the case for the environment, aboriginal, women's, and gay movements.

As far as the gay movement²⁶ is concerned the community based and Australia wide CAMP²⁷ initiated developments at UQ. As well as ephemera from Campus Camp and succeeding groups²⁸, and various newsletters, magazines and newspapers, Fryer holds the Greg Weir²⁹ collection - 'Gay issues 1891-1994 : mainstream political and cultural perspective : a comprehensive archive and index'³⁰.

4ZZZ and Semper are also instances of the move into the community. From its modest start the station had become central to rock and alternative culture, and a useful resource for non-mainstream political groups, campaigns and ideas. It had long outgrown the student life when, after a final bout of extremely bitter Union controversy (including an attempted eviction), it moved off-campus in 1989³¹. Semper also made a valiant foray off-campus. Semper editor Bruce Dickson has written an account of this.

The anti-war movement also moved into the community. Change in nuclear policy with the adoption of strategic use of nuclear weapons, and the consequent deployment of cruise missiles in Europe, provoked a new world-wide upsurge of protest in the eighties. In Australia this merged with the already established movement against uranium mining and export which began in the mid-seventies. In Brisbane this was community based, rather than primarily a campus phenomenon. The ground work had been laid by Campaign Against Nuclear Power (CANP)³², which was based throughout the suburbs, and from which People for Nuclear Disarmament was formed in 1982. There was extensive campus involvement, represented at UQ by the Campus Movement Against Uranium Mining³³, and the newly established Griffith University was soon prominent on these issues.

²⁶ Moore, C. Sunshine and rainbows : the development of gay and lesbian culture in Queensland, St Lucia, UQP, 2001

²⁷ Fryer FVF115

²⁸ Fryer FVF133 , FVF209, FVF210, FVF211

²⁹ Whilst a student teacher in Queensland Greg Weir was a victim of discrimination - Fryer HQ76.3.A8 P76 1977

³⁰ Fryer UQFL249

³¹ Doyle, J op. cit. and Carolli, L op. cit.

³² Fryer FVF99, Fryer TD195.E4 C3

³³ Fryer FVF102

The Sixties seeds society

The sixties movements influenced public opinion. There was a readier recognition of issues in the media, in mainstream politics and in the community. The Whitlam government brought in gains that were visibly beneficial to all (universal health care, free tertiary education, suburban services, regionalised welfare, and protection of the national estate) so there was a widespread identification with an overall process of change. Much of what was on the radical agenda and originally met with fear and resistance, now became just 'the way of things'. In short, the movements were successful in many respects. Many elements of the changes began before Whitlam (the end to White Australia, withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam) and many continued after (land rights under Fraser).

In Queensland the Bjelke-Petersen government continued to provide provocations to engagement and re-engagement through the eighties. The responses to these were vocal and determined. On the surface the Premier remained supreme. In reality the ground was shifting under him. The demonstrations on indigenous rights, war and the environment through the eighties, and more recently with the reconciliation walks of 2000 and the anti-war rallies and marches of 2003 (Brisbane participation numbered many thousands), showed that society had been seeded with the sixties values.