

Ralph Nader Meets the Ghost of Foco.

In the pantheon of issues held sacred by the radical movement in the 1960s and '70s, concern for the environment was never very high on the list.

Certainly, Rachel Carson's groundbreaking book *Silent Spring* was on our "must read" list (which for many meant "must steal, and hopefully get around to reading soon"). Also, the profile of key conservation groups had begun to rise by the 1970s, as had single-issue campaigns, such as the (unsuccessful) attempt to save Lake Pedder.

In mid-1971, the formation of the Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) by a small group of students at Queensland University, largely from Law and Economics, made only a modest impact on the campus, where the Vietnam Moratorium and Anti-Apartheid/Springboks campaigns were coming to a head.

However PIRG went on to publish the provocative pollution report *The State of Queensland* in July 1972, and to be the umbrella for the Brisbane end of the Australian tour by Ralph Nader in the same month.

Ralph Nader was an outspoken consumer advocate and early environmentalist from the US.

As was common in America, Nader used his popularity and oratory ability to raise funds for his campaigns. He was brought to Australia by a consortium including Barry Jones and Phillip Adams, and very large fees (by Australian standards at least) were charged for his appearances.

PIRG was suggested as a likely Brisbane host, but they were rightly concerned about the high financial risk.

In most cities, a conventional approach was taken to Nader's appearances, with expensive ticket prices in closed auditoriums. There was friction with security at some venues, and in one city a helicopter was used to achieve both campus and city appearances on the same day. Some host organisations struggled to raise enough income to meet the speaking fee.

In Brisbane, PIRG called a public meeting on campus to ask for help, and the Ghost of Foco barked loud and long with the answer.

Foco was a legendary and unique experiment in the partnership between radical culture and radical politics, held on Sunday nights at Brisbane Trades Hall for about fifteen months in 1968 and '69. Foco's lifespan was very short, but its influence was exceptionally long, with many activists being inspired by its example to try new ventures in Brisbane for many years to come.

The first two Vietnam-War Moratoriums in 1970 began with large numbers of students camping overnight on the UQ campus. The self-titled *Peoples Parks* were a reflection of the rise of the Counter Culture, and also a tilt towards the Teach-Ins common as protests on US campuses. The second Peoples Park concluded on Moaratorium-eve with a huge concert from former Brisbane band *Chain*, on the grassy slopes between the UQ Union buildings and the Uni Lake. The show was free (*Chain* marched in the Moratorium the next day) and considerable sum in anti-war donations was collected in buckets while the band was playing.

The activist Counter Culture organization HARPO (How About Resisting Powerful Organisations) was also on the rise at this time. As well as its blatantly Foco-esque Harpo's Nite Out, HARPO ran a newspaper, theatre troupe, food co-op and (for a short time) a restaurant, all based on donations, volunteers and dirt-cheap prices.

At the PIRG meetings, we confidently suggested that, if the potential numbers wanting to hear Nader were anything like what we all thought possible, then why were we bothering with the grief of managing ticket sales and security and disappointed people. Why not go for a mass audience, and seek the speaker's fee via voluntary donations.

Take a radical leap of faith for a radical event; trust in the lessons from Foco.

Once again, the hills by the Uni Lake were a spectacular setting, and Ralph Nader spoke inspirationally. Many non-university people attended, and crowd estimates were as high as 6000. And everyone was happy.

Fortunately for PIRG and the organizing team, the confidence we all drew from Foco's success paid off, and money went into PIRG coffers, as well as flying off to the US and Nader's causes.

Foco Lives!