

## Remembering '60s Radical Politics in Brisbane

*Remembering 60s radical politics in Brisbane -- and the role of Mitch Thompson*

by Jim Beatson (2007)

*As Brisbane prepares to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the watershed 1967 Civil Liberties March, one of the active participants of the time recounts his experiences.*

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This is my story of someone who has had a profound influence on activist politics in Brisbane during the '60s and '70s and on the direction of my life.

Prior to meeting Mitch my closest 'political' friends were Kit Guyatt and Anne Rook. Those two and myself, all aged around 19, had called the foundation meeting of **Youth Against Conscription** in early 1964 after meeting each other at Brisbane's Sunday speakers forum, Centenary Park, in the Valley. We changed YAC's name some months later after discovering similar groups were forming in both Sydney and Melbourne under the name **Youth Campaign Against Conscription**. Like Mitch our interest in politics had exploded over the immorality of the Vietnam War, the United States appalling weaponry (napalm, fragmentation bombs and defoliants) and the sending of Australian troops, including conscripts, to the war.

At the time YCAC was Brisbane's only radical youth organisation excepting the Communist Party's Eureka Youth League, whose members, suffering the cringe of 50s Cold War hysteria, quickly joined our populist campaign. YCAC was a demo-based organisation -- and typical of the pre-Joh, era -- we were endlessly arrested and studied by the Qld Police's Special Branch. Branch members were a particularly stupid bunch of largely Catholic red-necks and roughnecks who parked outside every YCAC meeting and social event in their Ford Falcons, no matter how insignificant, to intimidate the faint-hearted from attending.

Within a year of YCAC's formation Anne left to work for a development group based in Kerala, India, while Kit disappeared to Sydney following his passion to start a lifelong career as a filmmaker and to continue a romantic liaison. As the months went by YCAC's numbers benefited from a couple of new Uni student members disaffected with a personality conflict present in the newly forming University of Queensland-based radical movement. So, bored with the interminable YCAC/Special Branch cat and mouse arrest game, in mid-1966 I went to the St Lucia campus to check out the new-born "*student radical*" thing named **Students for Democratic Action** (SDA).

SDA was inspired by the US-based SDS 'participatory democracy' model, favoured by a group of US-born academics now with teaching jobs at UQ. The US-model was married to the clever, larrikin tactics of a slightly earlier group of UQ free thinkers led by Humphrey McQueen in the late '50s and early '60s.

SDA's 'leadership', in contrast to YCAC, was intellectual, imaginative, unruly and dangerous. SDA's unchallenged leader, Brain Laver, was under the spell of a group of slightly older academics, like Ralph and Gay Summy. Brian, was a skillful, inspiring, if earnest orator. Alan Knight, once humorously summed-up Brian the orator with a drawing of the bearded leader standing tall in his Cuban heeled boots, chin jetting out defiantly, po-faced, while declaiming from a sheet of paper which trailed into a roll on the ground labeled "Unattainable Demands". But Brian was more than just a persuasive speaker. Mature for his age and married with kids, impossibly optimistic he was full of original ideas for taking the movement forward. One example -- Brain never publicly spoke without giving the titles of books that influenced him, their authors and publisher. As a result these books were endlessly discussed and purchased in large numbers from the University Bookshop, and later the Red and Black Bookshop that SDA established. The brilliant multi-media club/venue Foco (superior in breadth of vision to the longer-lived, commercially more-successful 4ZZZ Joint Efforts that it inspired) was another example of Brain's flashes of originality.

In contrast to Brian, Dan O'Neill, Peter Wertheim, Phil Richardson, Ralph, Gay and the other academic members of SDA were quieter, intellectually challenging, and more politely angry. They shared, or inspired, Brian's appealing and highly effective line of insisting every individual in a democratic society was required to think through the many domestic and foreign political issues facing us. Although the Vietnam War was uppermost in our minds every issue was up for intellectual debate. But rather than using the turgid lexicon of Marxism that dominated the speaking style of Southern campus activists our speakers discussed issues as intellectual ideas using conversational language. It worked. Through the consistency of being challenged to confront moral imperatives laid out before us, each person decided where they stood.

I instantly fell in love with the St Lucia crowd and resigned from YCAC at its next meeting and suggested our members do likewise.

SDA had so many bright, committed and thoughtful members. But the person that impressed me most was not a public speaker but Laver's loyal lieutenant, Michel Marcel Gabriel Thompson. Universally known as "Mitch" this son of French mother once residing in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) and an Australian father was the most practical of men with a keen interest in justice, politics, psychology (which he was studying), girls (later to be called women), the share market and organisation.

Organisation? To digress. Some would say that without Karl Rove there would have been no George W Bush. Without James Carvel would Bill Clinton have made it? A good, or even a great cause, without a sustained, skilled organisation behind it, typically fails.

Mitch was a man of lists, a human personal-organiser. If an individual representing an organisation showed interest when Brian spoke, Mitch would be beside them asking their name, phone number and arranging for a speaker to address the group. Mitch systematically listed every one of dozens of campus and non-campus based groups regardless of their interest in politics. The campus Christian groups, like the roman catholic Newman Society and the protestant Student Christian Movement, with their interest in morality, were a particularly fertile ground for the SDA leader's proselytising and Mitch's organisational skills. The Mitch touch even extended to meetings and recruitment at the normally redneck UQ halls of residences. Mitch also targeted the Universities' highest academic achievers. I remember his glow when one such UQ scholar, with the campuses' highest academic results, joined SDA.

And while Mitch's loyalty to Brian was never in doubt, Mitch like all wise organization-men matched Brian with a critical and practical eye.

Behind Mitch was a group of around 30 individuals he coordinated, of which I was one -- an inner core who could be relied on if called to ring people, put up signs or to visit somewhere to distribute leaflets. Reliable because they not only agreed with the movement's politics but also accepted Mitch's role as the movement's never-formalised organisational head.

No public event occurred without Mitch having organised a team of collectors to ensure a constant cash flow to defer amongst other things the costs of feeding paper, ink and metal masters required by our professional offset printing press that Brain and Mitch bought at the end of 1966. It was installed in a print room under a communal home and headquarters, SDA House, 188 Gladstone Road, Highgate Hill. Jeff Dalton Morgan and myself were recruited to run this printing operation called Action Printers. SDA House, being just a ferry ride from the university enabled us to produce leaflets, booklets and posters containing pictures, cartoons and graphics. A team of SDA workers would be ready at 8.30am covering each of about half a dozen entry roots to the Uni. ready to distribute that morning leaflet/s. Typically we would produce an astonishing five plus leaflets per week, each of 3000 copies. On some days as many as three leaflets were produced.

For another five years our brothers and sisters in the southern capitals would still using the messy and crude Gestetner/Roneo printing system.

Mitch was years ahead of his time. A few years later it seemed to me that only Democrat Presidential Candidates Eugene McCarthy's New Hampshire wunderkind organiser, Gene Pokorny (who in a pre-computer age required campaign staff to make a card index system of doors knocked noting policy areas of concern so the relevant McCarthy policy paper could be dropped off a day or two later), matched Mitch' flair for organization.

Did Mitch have an interest in the share market? Mitch's second passion, was tracking and investing in mining shares. He used this skill to make money for SDA. Mitch was one of very few investors that predicted both the Posiden and Western Mining massive stock jumps. Hard to believe though it may be, at the same time as SDA speakers would be damming stock exchanges, Mitch and his "aides" would be popping down to the Exchange twice a day to check on his/our share prices. A contradiction, yes. But an example of the highly entrepreneurial side of protest politics, Brisbane-style.

Inspired by Mitch's example I took advantage of a lifelong passion for cinema by hiring and screening 16mm movies in unused lecture theatres for UQ students looking for a couple of hours of 'vegging out'. We ended up training teams of projectionists and ticket sellers who at only 20 cents a ticket, generated around a hundred dollars a week in a good week, the equivalent of around \$1000 in today's money.

SDA was undoubtedly Australia's richest and best organised radical movement. From Mitch's share profits, the printing press, bookshop and a VW Kombi were purchased, phones connected at SDA house, individuals received airfares to enable them to speak at events in Southern cities. Foco with its impressive range of multi-media performance spaces

included bringing up Southern musicians. A city-based office, The Cellar, was established.

In 1967 when Brian decided to run for President of the UQ [Students] Union, it was Mitch who organised his brilliant campaign in a very bitter, highly-publicised battle. UQ students from 1967 will remember that in a record polling turn-out Brian narrowly lost to his conservative rival. In fact, as was uncovered two decades later, Laver lost only because his rival benefited from sufficient insider forged ballots to get him over the line.

The 1967 Civil Liberties campaign, organised by SDA, was one of the truly great campaign achievements of the era. Ten months earlier in mid-1966 some fifty odd students protesting the Vietnam War marched from the UQ campus with the city their destination. Around five hundred students lined the University Drive to cheer and jeer the departing protesters. Most of us were arrested before even getting to Toowong. Less than a year later after an extraordinary tireless organisational effort three and half thousand students marched along the same route who then sat down on the road in Roma Street to be met by hundreds of police. And this was a year before the rest of the world had their "momentous year", 1968.

Mitch also found time to visit PNG annually between 1968 and 1973 making political contacts, contributing to critical written analysis of "Niugini" and providing books on Vietnam and other political subjects wrapped as Christmas presents to fool officials at Port Moresby airport who regarded such books as seditious in a country still governed from Canberra. Mitch formed friendships with student leaders like the poet John Kasapwalova and political activists like John Kaputin, then leader of the Matangan Association, a self-government campaign in New Britain, who ultimately became the countries Foreign Ministers after Independence.

The happy Brisbane local scene all came at the end in the early '70s when Brisbane's once united, imaginative progressives movement split into two broad groups: those attracted to building radical or reformist infrastructure like Women's House, Children By Choice, the Popular Theatre Troop, 4ZZZ, the Cane Toad Times (later Toadshow), the Public Interest Research Group, Queensland Conservation Council, Queensland Council For Civil Liberties, Caxton Street Legal Centre, the Aboriginal Legal Centre, the Aboriginal Health Centre and so on. And a set of ideologues who created collections of megaphone warriors from Brian's anarchist Self Management Group, to a complete set of the world's dizzy collection of Trotskyist factions. But that's another story.

One entertaining summation of both Mitch's organisational and entrepreneurial skills is revealed upon his discovery that the University of Queensland Library would like a collection of all the radical publications distributed in the '60s. Not only did Mitch have such a collection, but he sold to the University of Sydney's Fisher Library because they offered to buy his collection for a tidy sum. It was Dan O'Neill's collection that ended up at the Fryer.

Mitch drifted off for long stints in Sydney and then France in 1978 before returning to Brisbane in 1983. While maintaining an interest in and providing financial support for a variety of local and overseas progressive causes Mitch has become an innovative member of Brisbane's culinary culture opening any number of quality restaurants including Brisbane's first contemporary style sidewalk café, the enormously successful Le Scoops.

Jim Beatson  
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40th Anniversary Celebration:  
Location: Brisbane Workers' Community Centre  
2 Latrobe Terrace (entry from Given Terrace)  
PADDINGTON.