

Radical Media in the Deep North:

The origins of 4ZZZ-FM

by Alan Knight PhD

Brisbane used to be called the Deep North. It spoke of a place where time passed slowly in the summer heat, where rednecks ran the parliament and the press, blacks died from beatings and the police thought themselves above the law. Even though Brisbane is situated in the bottom southeast quarter of the great northern state of Queensland, it's sobriquet represented a state of mind.

Queensland was described as a cultural backwater lacking bookshops, political pubs, radio and television network headquarters and the publishing centres where Australian intellectuals could be seen and heard. It was fashionable, then as now, for many in Sydney and Melbourne to dismiss Queenslanders as naive, if not malignant conservatives.

Yet in 1975, Brisbane created Australia's most radical politics and music station, 4ZZZ-FM. It broadcasts to this day.

How did it come about and why?

The Bitter Fight

Queensland has a long, yet often forgotten history of conflict between conservatives and radicals. In a huge, decentralised state, the march to democracy has been signposted by demands for free speech expressed through a diversified media.

ZZZ is an offspring of these battles, which were in part fought out in the state's mainstream and underground media.

The bitter fight began in earnest in 1891, when Queensland shearers went on strike over work contracts. The strikers produced a flurry of cartoons, articles and satirical poems, which were passed around their camp fires. They joined armed encampments, which were broken up only after the government called in the military.

After the shearers' leaders were arrested, the Light Horsemen got an Emu feather in their hats as a battle honour for breaking the strike. (Australian War Museum, 2007) The shearers' leaders got to hard labour for conspiracy, They had been supported by a radical Rockhampton barrister, TJ Ryan, who subsequently turned his talents towards seeking parliamentary representation.

Press coverage of the shearers' trials in Rockhampton by former *Courier* reporter, William Lane, helped ferment the creation of the Australian Labor Party. Lane had been one of Queensland's top paid journalists before he became editor of *The Worker*, a union newspaper funded by unionists. *The Worker's* first editorial contained an unambiguous critique of Brisbane's mainstream press:

...the fact [is] that the press, as a body is owned and controlled by those who are mere profit mongers are distinctly opposed to the interests of the workers; and that owing to the commercial nature of all business speculations, no newspaper conducted on ordinary lines is to be permanently relied upon. The only means for labour to insure itself a free voice and unswerving advocacy is for organised workers to maintain by co-operation a journal, which shall be, as the Worker is, absolutely independent and indifferent to, all outside assistance and influence.

(The Worker Vol. 1 Number 1, 1.3.1890)

The world's first Labor government was elected in Queensland in 1899. (ALP, 2006) But it wasn't until 1915, in the second year of World War One, that TJ Ryan, was elected leader of the first majority Labor government. Premier Ryan used parliamentary privilege to attack military censorship of criticism of conscription for the war. He told state parliament in 1917 that:

... anything that is bona fide for the securing of public safety and the defence of the Commonwealth no doubt is welcomed by all parties and by every member of this House. (Hear, hear!) But when these powers are used for an entirely different purpose; when they are extended to be utilised for political purposes, they are then beyond the ambit, not only of the War Precautions Act, but of the whole purpose for which censorship is established. (Australian Department of Veterans Affairs, 2001)

The Australian government supported both conscription and censorship. Prime Minister, Billy Hughes sent in the Army to the Queensland government printing office in Brisbane to seize and destroy government parliamentary Hansard's reporting Ryan's speeches. Mounted on a charger, the censor demanded entry backed by a troop of armed soldiers from Victoria barracks. (Ibid)

The Right

The need to communicate more effectively with its supporters led the Labor Party to consider an emerging mass communication medium, radio. Australia's first Labor radio station, 2KY, was founded in Sydney in 1925. Initially intended to give listeners direct access to Sydney Trades Hall debate, 2KY rapidly adopted an entertainment format, which included music and invited Labor personalities. In the same year, the Queensland Labor government established 4QG to provide what it saw as fair and balanced coverage. (Ward 1999)

4QG was absorbed into the ABC in 1932, where it to day as the platform for ABC Radio National. (Allen, 2005) In 1945, the Queensland branch of the Labor Party received a broadcast licence for the radio station 4KQ. The station adopted a commercial format and served as a cash cow for election campaigns. By the 1970s, like most other Brisbane commercial radio stations it relied on news syndicated from the Courier Mail. It was sold to a commercial operator in 1986.

During this period, the ALP was morphing into the Queensland Labor Party, a conservative Party of government. It would remain in power from 1915, with only a three year break, until 1957. The longest serving Labor Premier, William Forgan Smith, expelled people he identified as radicals from the Labor Party and sold off nationalised services. In 1938, he introduced a Transport Act which allowed the Government to declare a 'State of Emergency' suspending civil liberties.

These powers would be applied in 1971, by a National Party Premier, Joh Bjelke Petersen, when he sought to crush anti apartheid demonstrations. The mass arrests which followed, prompted Queensland University students and left unionists to seek better ways to communicate with the Brisbane public. In 1975 they founded 4ZZZ.

The Left

Many radical unionists and activists, who found themselves unwelcome in the Queensland Labor Party, joined the Australian Communist Party.

The man who would become the only Communist elected to Queensland parliament studied at Queensland University. Fred Patterson was a scholarship boy and sportsman who had grown up on a pig farm near Gladstone. In 1918, he would volunteer to serve with the AIF in France. He left Australia as a concerned Christian and came back a left activist. (Fitzgerald 1997)

Patterson became a lawyer, a journalist and the only member of the Communist Party to be elected to an Australian parliament. Excluded and vilified by the mainstream press, Paterson wrote for the communist press, represented striking unionists and advocated a socialist state. Banned from speaking on the Cairns Esplanade in 1933, he beat the authorities by speaking from the top of a table placed in the shallow waters of the nearby sea. (Fitzgerald 1997)

To spread the word in a largely hostile political environment, the Communist Press published its own newspapers including *Tribune*, the *North Queensland Guardian* and the *Guardian*. In Brisbane, they were distributed from Party Headquarters in Saint Paul's Terrace, a building which would later house 4 ZZZ FM.

Reflecting on the difficulties in reaching the Queensland public, Patterson's Campaign Manager, Jim Henderson spoke about how activists avoided government restrictions on leaflets:

On one occasion a young wharfie member said to me, "I don't know much about communist theory, but I will distribute leaflets in every public toilet". Jokingly I said the leaflet might be used for another use if left in toilets", to which he seriously replied, "If the fascists wipe their arse with our leaflet, they will soon have more brains in their arse than they have in their heads". (Henderson cited by Fitzgerald 1997 p 149)

The New Left

The National Party government's banning of political demonstrations sparked a campaign for civil liberties in the sixties. Protests against the Viet Nam war, held in Brisbane, Rockhampton and other regional centres were regularly suppressed by cabinet directed police action. Even the distribution of leaflets required police permission:

If this pamphlet that you are now reading was handed to you in any street in Brisbane, the person so handing it to you would be committing an offence, and be liable to arrest, unless he/she had a permit from the police authorising him/her to distribute such matter. Incredible! Almost! But nevertheless such is the law in Queensland.

(Tony Bowen: The Press, the Protest Movement and the Propagation of Minority Ideas)

The sixties movement demanding right of assembly and freedom speech was led in Queensland by the New Left; a critical, democratic movement with its origins in the non communist Students for Democratic Society. It was a copy-cat movement, which had emerged in Californian universities, whose ideas were spread by a new mass communication medium, international television.

The New Left produced leaflets to promote demonstrations, cultural activities and its ideas. New Left members who distributed leaflets outside the safe haven of Queensland University were subject to arrest. SDA Activist, Tony Bowen complained about how difficult it was to even get a dissenting letter published in Brisbane's only mourning 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: "The Press, the Protest Movement and the Propagation of Minority Ideas")

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.

(Bowen: Democracy and the Pamphlet Issue)

Fools or Idealists?

In Queensland, the protest movement's growth was driven by new media, which might relay new critiques of society. The introduction of the small offset printing press allowed the publication of daily newsletters, which could be distributed to thousands of students and staff at University of Queensland, at workplaces and public events. The publications promoted issues such as draft resistance; the campaign against foreign involvement in the Vietnam war; gerrymander in the Queensland electoral system; and the lack of civil liberties in Queensland, particularly issues concerned with freedom of speech. The movement had adopted the tactics of the US civil rights movement and challenged state laws restricting political assembly by staging illegal demonstrations. (More than three hundred students were arrested in a single demonstration supporting civil liberties in 1967). John Stanwell, a sixties student activist, who was to become a founding Director of 4ZZZ, said that while Brisbane was geographically isolated, its young people were increasingly influenced by global political and cultural changes:

The whole range of cultural and political issues world wide developed in the 60's, with the social and sexual freedom coming from the pill. But primarily two political threads: one was a sort of a broad civil liberties you-can-do-anything kind of thing which ended up being quite important in Queensland because of the reaction of the Government, and then the other one was around a specific political issue which was the sending of troops to Vietnam. (Stanwell:2000)

In 1968, in yet another attempt to create an alternative press, the student radical movement published an "underground newspaper" called *Brisbane Line*. The paper was produced before computerised story production, editing and layout. It was printed on a single sheet, flat bed printer located at the headquarters of the Queensland Communist Party. Since newsagents frequently refused to sell the papers, *Brisbane Line* then had to be sold on the streets. Street sellers could be subject to harassment and arrest. *Brisbane Line* ceased publication after only three issues.

Jim Beatson was one of the printers, that is offset printers, of the student left and he was probably the only one who actually got out of it relatively sane. They had the most shitty job of all because they basically started when everyone else finished and then worked right through the night and had to then have the material ready for distributing the next day and many attempts to – they wanted to be a little more creative, to do something more than just a leaflet - floundered on distribution... I mean the newspapers were sort of hard enough as it was to produce, but then what happens is they'd be driven around in people's cars for weeks because everyone hated distribution ...(Stanwell: 2000)

Demonstrations continued against a range of issues; the Vietnam war, racism, the state gerrymander and civil liberties throughout this period. A combination of naive press relations, a conservative *Courier Mail* dominated media, press gallery reliance on government handouts, did not result in what the left student movement considered to be favourable press coverage.

In 1971, the students mobilised against a visit by the South African Springbok Rugby Union team. The Bjelke Petersen Government backed the team, proclaiming support for the white controlled South African apartheid government . -

When they marched this time, the Premier declared a State of Emergency, suspended civil liberties, ringed the rugby field with barbed wire and called up more than 600 police from country areas. The protests were to be broken up by force...Arrests went on all week, but the demonstrators would not give up. To avoid confrontations, they changed tactics and chose instead to gather peacefully on the footpath opposite the hotel where the Springboks were staying, the Tower Mill. They sang 'We shall overcome'. The police waited until dusk when they called in the riot squad to baton charge the anti-apartheid demonstrators off the hill. A correspondent covering the tour for the *London Times* reported that people were kicked and punched by police as they tried to escape. The local media carried State government news releases praising the police. (KNIGHT, 1985:5).

Much of Queensland University was closed by a staff and student strike. Students camped out at Students Union complex where a printing press was put into action. Once again the available communications technology proved inadequate to the task of circulating the views of those being arrested. At the meeting called at the Students Union Relaxation Block to review the anti Springbok campaign, the left collective talked about radio as an alternative.

Politics and Culture

To make life a little more livelier not to mention more political, the left student movement allied itself with Communist Party youth to create a cultural club, FOCO, which met at Brisbane Trades Hall. In 1968, FOCO offered a mind bending mix of poetry, folk singing, cinema, book readings, rock music and ultra left politics. Brian Laver, a serious student activist who had been employed briefly as a Trades Hall research officer, had proposed a club for "radical working class youth and students involved in the anti Viet Nam struggle":

Most people were fairly tired at that time after the civil liberties struggles and the early anti Vietnam War struggles. So we were looking for both a bit of easy R an R where people could meet socially and culturally and form alliances which might lead to a concentration of political forces...When we set Foco up, the National party launched an attack on it in Hansard, describing it as a den of iniquity and radicalism. They never caught onto the fact that the word Foco was from Che Guevara's book. It means guerrilla encampment. (Laver: 2000)

Foco was held on Sunday nights, often attracting more than five hundred young people from Brisbane's otherwise deserted streets. Police would park outside and detain revelers. The club was forced to close after a conservative MP began a press campaign claiming that it was a distribution centre for marijuana. However, FOCO's fusion of politics and culture inspired activists influenced by the American "counter culture", to create a home grown group, HARPO (How About Resisting Powerful Organisations):

With HARPO, we had the full gamut. We ran a newspaper which came out occasionally which I guess harked back to the *Brisbane Line* and those other kind of papers. We ran a restaurant, Mr Naturals. We ran a food co-op, *Whole Foods*, and we ran what started out as a street theatre group, which had grown out of *Romp*, its predecessor, and into HARPO's Night Out which were the predecessors of the [ZZZ's fund raising] Joint Effort. And we basically brought bands up from Melbourne or Sydney, particularly Melbourne which we had a close allegiance to, to Brisbane. We would do a piece of theatre with a political theme that was actually presented with the main band kind of coming in behind us. So there was this quite a crossover between the local political sort of end of it and the fairly populist kind of pop music/ rock music culture side of it. (Stanwell: 2000)

HARPO activists took over most arts activities positions with the University of Queensland Students Union and subsequently became involved in planning for the 1973 Aquarius festival which established the alternative cultural capital at Nimbin in northeastern New South Wales. After the festival, HARPO members including John Stanwell returned to Brisbane to become involved in the creation of 4ZZZ.

On Air

Radio was a cost effective outlet for music, drama, and comedy. Radical radio journalists could concentrate on news-gathering instead of labour intensive newspaper distribution. Broadcasting eliminated much of the repetitive manual work associated with underground newspapers. The technology was simple and relatively cheap. Many people had radio receivers, which could tune into FM, which enabled the broadcast of high quality music. As a political bonus, radio was regulated by the more liberal federal bureaucracy, taking it beyond the control of the reflexively censorious Bjelke Petersen state government.

A pirate radio station was initially proposed, mirroring the British experiments from ships anchored in the English Channel. Jim Beatson called for a station which could broadcast twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. The new broadcaster would borrow ideas from hippies in Harpo and the civil libertarians of SDA.

The proposed radio station sought to:

- Provide an alternative source of information to that which was offered by the mainstream media;
- Create a training ground for other people so that they could acquire skills outside the mainstream, that would allow them access to the mainstream;
- Demystify the media;
- Broadcast Australian music.

While most other potential community broadcasters believed that their role was confined to broadcasting to a minority audience, ZZZ argued that there were significant audiences unhappy with the limited choice offered public and commercial radio.

ZZZ's first studios were constructed by volunteers; students, unemployed people and communist tradesmen, in the basement of the University of Queensland Students Union refectory. John Woods, the announcer who took the station to air, was among those who laid the bricks to construct the studios.

We bought bricks and we mixed concrete and everybody learned to lay bricks. I remember a woman riding in on a motorbike, a trailbike, smoking a pipe, Margot Foster. She ended up becoming a producer at the ABC some years later. She rolled up and said she'd heard about us and she was keen to help and she was willing to lay bricks - she was a bloody good bricklayer too, Margot. And so in building a dream we would meet every night and have dinner and talk about how mighty the station was going to be. (Beatson: 2000)

News and Current Affairs

4 ZZZ demanded the right to be heard. Rob Cameron was an early member of the newsroom:

The ZZZ newsroom wants to demystify...wants to fuel radical ground swells, wants to force other media to open their eyes wants to make listeners WANT to hear a black tribal leader cry over a destroyed heritage, wants to defeat the censorship that exists under our libel laws. (Cameron: 1976)

Many commercial radio stations, then as now, carried little investigative news or current affairs, relying on material inspired by the daily newspapers' agenda. At the time of ZZZs creation, all five commercial radio stations received most of their news from Australian Associated Press which processed Queensland newspapers copy, sent it to Sydney for editing and returned it to Brisbane for ripping and reading. ZZZ Radio Times:

Have you noticed how identical and predictable the commercial news services are? Are you disappointed with the way the existing news services shirk their responsibilities to the listening public by avoiding controversy? There are numerous local pressure groups in the community who receive very little coverage in the media, and that which is given trivialises the issues and distorts their position in the political spectrum. The mass media thrives [sic] on the perpetuation of myths. (*Radio Times*: 1975/76. Vol. 1. Number 1 P 4)

4 ZZZ attempted to offer local perspectives which it believed were ignored by the mainstream stations. In the station's early years, information provided by ZZZ's newsroom had a high profile within the station's format. A current affairs program, *Brisbane Line* (intentionally named after the failed underground newspaper), was launched in February 1976. From the beginning it was staffed by volunteers, citizen journalists, and supported by station staff.

The ZZZ newsroom produced interviews and information segments which were interspersed throughout normal programming as well as being offered in current affair program blocks. The station chose not to subscribe to syndicated news services such as AAP or Reuters. Unfortunately plagiarism, ironically from *Courier Mail* headlines, became a way of life. However this information was combined with details from other radio and independent sources as well as their own brief analysis. Margot Foster got her start as a volunteer journalist in the ZZZ newsroom:

We were able to be more straight forward [than the mainstream media]. We allowed ourselves to be biased. I had no background in journalism and no formal training. I was quite oblivious to a code of practice. Others like Lindy Woodward [later JJJ's information Executive Producer] and Sean Hoyt [researcher on Four Corners' Moonlight State] did have understanding, which is probably why they were paid staff. If you were angry about something, it was a forum to say it. Balance wasn't an issue at all. It was really giving you a platform for something that hadn't been heard anywhere else. I was able to comment on the issues of the time. I got radio training, which for me was significant, because that is where I stayed. (Foster: 2000)

Discussion

The ideas of TJ Ryan, Fred Patterson and Tony Bowen informed the creation of ZZZ. Their convictions about freedom of speech and their courage to challenge the authorities inspired its practices. The notion of the station as an innovative centre of music, culture and politics, reflected the aspirations of FOCO and the hopes of Harpo, Aquarius and the counter culture. It echoed the shearers in Central Queensland, who sang what became folk songs and talked of revolution as they boiled their billies.

ZZZ reaffirmed the convictions of the sixties street marchers who sought a voice for the peripheralised. University of Queensland was the crucible for these discussions, acting as the safe haven where programs could be broadcast free from police harassment. The Communist Party provided the living links to the past.

4ZZZ-FM has been broadcasting now for more than thirty years.

In 2007, ZZZ continued to inhabit the somewhat derelict former headquarters of the defunct Australian Communist Party. The station's aims to populate mainstream media with its veterans seemed to be vindicated by the host of ZZZers working for the ABC and other radio. Its pivotal role in promoting Australian music had been amply documented in Andrew Stafford's *Pig City*. (Stafford, 2004) The ZZZ newsroom was trying to re-invent itself, using the web to develop notions of citizen journalism.

On its website, it still promulgated its founding slogan, Educate, Agitate and Organise:

...we don't shy away from challenging the status quo. We aim to do this by providing access for the community to radio, supporting local bands, artists and events, providing training for our volunteers, and through dissemination of alternative news and current affairs. (4ZZZ-FM, Undated)

One might only question, how much longer ZZZ could remain as a foco on the margins of an imagined deep north.

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