

Taking It from the Streets: The Politics of Collecting, Writing and Exhibiting History from Below

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Writing in *Griffith Review* 13 about ‘being political now’, Mark Bahnisch described the Museum of Brisbane’s *Taking to the Streets* exhibition as a ‘monument to the symbolism of the ’60s’. On display, he wrote, were causes and experiences that ‘symbolise a generation’. It’s an interesting observation, especially in an essay concerned with debunking generational stereotypes. For it seems Bahnisch himself may have fallen for, well, a generational stereotype. Aside from apparently missing the 75 per cent of the exhibition that didn’t deal with the 1960s, he also seems to have failed to notice that the people represented in the interviews, the written accounts, the grainy images, the shaky film footage and the lists of arrests were not all of one generation. Ranging from punks to pensioners, students to seafarers, communists to Christians, they were in fact an amazingly motley bunch of citizens who shared a history only because they shared a desire for a better society and a belief that protest was a legitimate and worthwhile political activity. And, despite the mythology, the issues they mobilised around — war, racism, the nuclear industry, sexism, workers’ rights, civil liberties — had been around as causes well before 1965. Even that icon of late 1960s radicalism — the peace symbol — came from earlier times, as Ted D’Urso so carefully explained in his exhibition interview.

For me, *Taking to the Streets* succeeded precisely because it was not a monument to the 1960s (or any such cliché). In the main, it avoided the stereotypes and eschewed the lazy generalisations characteristic of much media comment about the period. It provided instead a wealth of detail drawn mainly from sources inside the movements. It encouraged us to recognise the dissenters themselves as the authoritative figures in the events represented. The result was sometimes contradictory and confusing. But that’s how things actually were. As Katie McConnel has noted (*Fryer Folios*, September 2006), when we start to look at the movement from the inside, a definitive account of those times becomes impossible because ‘there are as many perspectives as there were participants’. This does not mean the exhibition (or the struggles it represented) lacked cohesion. It simply means we had to look beyond generational clichés to find it. We had to look to the people themselves, to find the common threads by interrogating their insights, their analyses, their myths and stories. Far from monumental history, *Taking to the Streets* invited us to understand the past from the bottom up.

This article is about the significance of that invitation and the evidential challenges posed in creating it. Since I worked on the exhibition in its early stages, and on the book *Radical Brisbane* which preceded it, what follows are also in part the reflections of an insider. With both projects still fresh in my mind, I want to make a case for the veracity and enduring value of history told from below, and to emphasise the benefits of telling this history through records generated by the protagonists themselves, unmediated by the state and corporate media. At the risk of being accused of trumpeting the organisation which now employs me, I will finish by affirming the importance of institutions like Fryer Library at the University of Queensland, where the records of dissent are a particular strength of the collection. In a print culture like ours, I argue, collections like the Fryer's make projects like *Radical Brisbane* and *Taking to the Streets* possible.

I want to pitch my case for history from below by returning to a campaign that featured prominently in both book and exhibition: the anti-uranium *cum* right-to-march struggle of 1977–79. It's a story familiar to most Queenslanders who lived through the period. On 25 August 1977, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser announced a new policy to expand uranium mining in Australia. When anti-uranium forces began to mobilise across the country, Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen responded by introducing new street march legislation which gave the state's police exclusive power for issuing march permits. 'The day of the political street march is over,' he declared. 'Anyone who holds a street march spontaneously or otherwise will know they're acting illegally ... Don't bother applying for a permit. You won't get one.'

This decision turned every demonstration without a permit over the next 18 months into a struggle for the basic democratic right to assemble and march. By April 1979 over 2,000 people had been arrested in Brisbane for defying the ban, including 418 thrown into the city's watchhouses on one day alone, 22 October 1977. This remains the largest number of arrests at a single political event in Australian history. Many demonstrators suffered injuries at the hands of the police, whose violence was repeatedly defended by the premier and his hand-picked and corrupt police commissioner, Terence Lewis. While eventually the police, in close liaison with Bjelke-Petersen, began granting permits in a few cases, Draconian anti-street march laws remained in place until the Goss Labor government repealed the relevant provisions and passed the *Peaceful Assembly Act* in 1992.

Here was the quintessential tale of Joh's Queensland, a grand narrative of good against evil, in many respects easy to tell. But in researching and writing about these events I became acutely conscious of history as a politically charged field of knowledge, where the availability, selection and interpretation of sources decisively influences what gets remembered and how each remembrance is shaped.

Nowhere was this more evident than in assessments of the historical significance and political effects of the mass defiance of Bjelke-Petersen's ban. It was soon obvious to me that there were broadly three versions of the same story. First, there was (and is) the official line that portrayed the protestors as either self-serving political extremists or gullible dupes. In this account, the protests in King George Square and the streets of the city had no lasting political impact, except perhaps to prolong National Party rule. This was, of course, the view publicly cultivated by Bjelke-Petersen himself. Referring to a rally and attempted march organised by

the union movement on 7 December 1978, he derided the 'same old faces' who 'went through their ritual martyrdom for the benefit of the media'. He described the protestors as a 'mob' whose attempt 'to achieve government in the streets' had been a 'futile failure'.

Protection from the mob was a common refrain for the National Party, even resurfacing after the Bjelke-Petersen era when the party had ostensibly renounced its Draconian excesses. During debate over Labor's Peaceful Assembly Bill, the National Party member for Callide, Diane McCauley, defended the State of Emergency imposed during the 1971 Springbok tour as necessary 'to protect the rights of the majority of people who were trying to go about their business'. The troublemakers they were being protected from, she hinted, were a minority driven by dark and sinister motives. She referred to a student who had later allegedly admitted being 'paid to go and demonstrate by people who wanted to promote their political view with as much force as possible'. It was an extreme situation, she said, and a warning of 'how dangerous unfettered freedom can be in some circumstances'.

The *Courier-Mail*, while critical of Bjelke-Petersen's street march ban, was nevertheless consistent in echoing the National Party view of the protestors, even down to its choice of language. 'Only extremists' welcomed the confrontations, the editorial proclaimed in the issue of 24 October 1977, 'together with a few others who sought to turn the demonstrations into a platform for their own egos'. After the clash on 7 December 1978, the editorial affirmed 'there is no right to take over a city street at will'. The Trades and Labor Council, which organised that particular protest, was held 'directly to blame' for the confrontation. The editor was again at pains to draw a distinction between a long-suffering and put upon 'public' and a minority of others, either Trades Hall bosses or 'extremists', who would claim the arrested marchers were 'martyrs for civil rights and that somehow the march [helped] promote civil liberty in Queensland'. On the contrary, the editor stated: 'There was no victory. The police behaved well. They were the only winners, if there were any.'

History from this perspective is the story of a strong leader standing firm on the public's behalf against a minority of rabble-rousers. A variant is the story of the premier as master manipulator cannily engineering street confrontations against willing antagonists in order to win support within a deeply conservative electorate. In both accounts, the protestors are self-serving and complicit in the violence, the police mere pawns in a game, principled and restrained as they carry out their duties.

The second version of the street march campaign lays stress on the repressive nature of National Party rule while downplaying the efficacy of mass extra-parliamentary opposition. It is a version most closely associated with the Queensland Parliamentary Labor Party. 'Change should be brought about through the ballot box,' the state Labor leader Ed Casey told a King George Square rally on 7 December 1977. Of course, not all party members were so dismissive of direct action. Many, including a good number of parliamentarians, rallied, marched and were carted off to the watchhouse for their troubles. But it is certainly true that the parliamentary party was less than equivocal in its support. When federal Labor senator George Georges was gaoled for refusing to pay fines imposed for

marching illegally, Casey distanced himself from his Labor colleague by telling the media that Georges' decision 'was more a problem for the federal opposition leader. On a personal basis, Senator Georges and I see the way of attaining an end result on the street march issue in different ways.'

Later, this view would inform an interpretation of the history that would place electoralism, and in particular the ALP's electoral role, as central to the restoration of democratic rights in Queensland. When Labor defeated the Nationals at the polls on 2 December 1989, Premier Elect Wayne Goss declared that 'what this election has shown is that when Queenslanders are shown the truth and [when] Queenslanders are shown a credible alternative, that there is a way to change the state for the better ... [then] they are prepared to do it in a big way'. His speech made no mention of the thousands who had resisted Bjelke-Petersen's regime by marching, rallying and striking in defiance of the law. By inference, this extra-parliamentary opposition had offered no real way for effecting democratic change. Goss paid special tribute instead to the role of Tony Fitzgerald, the Commissioner whose inquiry had exposed corruption and maladministration within the National Party government and decisively swung electoral support to Labor. It's a view that has been taken up by others. Coaldrake, Davis and Shand (1992), for instance, claim that 'the Fitzgerald Inquiry was one of those rare events which transform the politics of a society'.

But if Fitzgerald was the saviour, it was Labor that would provide deliverance in this version of the story. In introducing the Peaceful Assembly Bill into Parliament on 21 May 1992, Labor Attorney-General Dean Wells put the case succinctly:

So while history will record that an odious Right Wing Government repressed the Queensland peoples' liberty to peacefully assemble — so history will record that the Goss Labor Government changed all that. The Goss Labor Government has restored democracy to Queensland.

Peter Beattie agreed:

It is sad to say that the Bjelke-Petersen Government had a bad track record in industrial relations, civil liberties and its use of the police force. I am pleased to be able to say that the Goss Government had restored normality and decency to Queensland and has removed a lot of the blots that have appeared on the statute book.

His own beating at the hands of police in July 1971 had served, he told parliament, to mature him politically and was 'one of the reasons why I am in this House today'. Parliamentary politics, then, were the politics of maturity. On the streets he was a mere victim; in the House he was an agent of change.

How, then, should we view the motivations, actions and impact of the many Queenslanders and others who believed that taking to the streets was also contributing to change? If democracy was restored by Tony Fitzgerald and Goss Labor, was there a point to marching?

The answer from above — whether from the National Party or the Parliamentary Labor frame of reference — is ultimately no. Both the Laborist and Conservative views close off any serious consideration of the politics and power of direct action. But when we shift the frame of reference away from narrow electoralism, a different and infinitely richer understanding of the political process is available, and a different truth becomes apparent. It can be expressed in one simple proposition: Goss Labor's parliamentary reform agenda, as limited as it was, was made possible by a culture of democracy kept alive by the extra-parliamentary opposition. This, in a nutshell, is the third version of the story, and in my view the evidence supports it. During the darkest years of the 1970s and 1980s, it was on the streets, not on the parliamentary opposition benches, where the most thorough-going, consistent and principled visions of democracy could be found. It was here, for instance, that federal Labor Senator George Georges would make his most enduring contribution to democratic politics in Queensland, despite constant criticism, smears and threats from within his own party. It was from here that the only real pressure on Bjelke-Petersen *and* the Labor Party would be applied. As Labor Member for Mulgrave Warren Pitt has said of the trade unions: 'They were organised, and they really took the battle up to the Bjelke-Petersen Government on this [right to march] issue. For that, I think most Queenslanders owe them a debt of gratitude.'

Pitt is right, and his point goes further than the battle against Joh. The impetus that propelled Labor to power on a platform of winding back the worst excesses of the Nationals did not begin with Tony Fitzgerald. There was a pre-history forged on the streets of Brisbane that left a mark on Fitzgerald and the Labor Party, at least for its first few years in office. Fitzgerald's particular contribution was to express in the safe and reductionist terms of liberal democracy the clamour for change that had ebbed and flowed on the streets of Brisbane for 20 years. For its part, Labor enacted some progressive reforms while the reverberations of the movement were still discernable. As the echo of the chants receded, so too did Labor's modest appetite for reform. Under recent Labor governments, Queensland police have been given far-reaching 'move on' powers and issued with pepper spray; in 2005 Joh was given a state funeral.

If the street marchers were instrumental in preserving a democratic political culture in Queensland during the Joh years, albeit in ways which the state could accommodate and eventually roll back once the pressure abated, there is also a larger point. Even if they had made no difference, their history is still important and deserving of rescue from the 'enormous condescension of posterity', as E.P. Thompson so memorably put it. From where we stand today, there is a case for elevating Thompson's vaguely nostalgic goal to the status of a political imperative. Confronted with the wars, poverty, repression and ecological catastrophe imposed on us by history's so-called victors, we have nothing to lose and probably much to gain from listening to those who have been on the losing side.

This, in essence, is history from below. It aims to bring into view the circumstances, ideas and agency of people who are otherwise ignored, represented only as victims or homogenised into that most despised yet feared of categories, the mob. *Radical Brisbane* and *Taking to the Streets* can both be placed in this

tradition. They gave voice and authority to those who participated on the streets and all too often in the watchhouses of Brisbane in pursuit of a better society. By opening up this space, the book and the exhibition created opportunities to understand Queensland protest politics in the 1970s and 1980s as something other than a carry-over of 1960s symbolism, whatever that might be, or a prelude to ALP electoral success.

Writing or exhibiting this kind of history poses unique challenges. Commenting on the so-called history wars, Raymond Evans (*Overland*, 184, 2006) has suggested that only the wilfully naïve could claim that a literal reading of the establishment's records is sufficient to reveal the truth about the scale of Australian frontier violence. His point has wider application. Government and other sources of power generally do not adequately or accurately represent minorities, the marginalised or the extra-parliamentary opponents of state and corporate power. Indeed, these sources often function to misrepresent or silence the voices of resistance and to obscure or hide the original acts of repression against them. Whether official or unofficial, moreover, the written word does not always convey the creativity and dynamism of mass extra-parliamentary opposition. The key records of this history are often amateur photographs, films, sound recordings, posters, banners, placards, fliers, cartoons and the like: in short, records in a myriad of forms generated by the dissenters themselves.

But where do we find this material? Most record-collecting systems operate to capture the decisions and actions of the powerful (through a combination of statutory obligation, a systemic bias towards institutional record-keepers who have the resources, time and incentives to preserve their corporate history, and a process of cultural and class filtering which privileges the written record and the white, educated middle class who enjoy greater access to collecting agencies). Aborigines have been disadvantaged most by this regime. But they have not been the only voices marginalised: dissenters and the disempowered in general have traditionally been under-represented in the archives. In Britain, as Janette Martin (*Australian Society of Archivists*, 4, 2006) has observed, 'the groups which have suffered the most *ad hoc* survival of their papers are those that exist outside of the political mainstream'. Typically, the outsiders are represented in our collections only if historians, librarians, archivists and curators have sought them out. It has required building links to and the trust of the custodians of unofficial history, be they individuals or organisations.

In the case of Fryer Library, this process began in the 1970s under university librarian Derek Fielding, who was also president of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties and a government critic in his own right. Since then, Fryer has developed a particular strength in what can be described broadly as movement history — records of civil society organisations and campaigns committed to defending democratic rights and bringing about progressive change. These records include material produced by trade unions and their members, the Communist Party and its cadre, Trotskyite groups, student leftists, environmentalists, the women's movement, the anti-war movements, the campaigns for civil liberties and so on. It is a body of material substantial in volume and scope, diverse in format and

capable of supporting research into a wide range of topics.

For both *Radical Brisbane* and *Taking to the Streets*, the Fryer Library provided a rich vein of information and artefacts. A substantial volume of research for the book was carried out in Fryer and over 500 items from Fryer's collection were loaned to the Museum of Brisbane for display in the exhibition. As a researcher, though, I was struck as much by what Fryer turned out not to have as by what it did. Many items featured in *Taking to the Streets* came from individuals who had kept them in their homes as mementoes of struggles past — reminders, perhaps, of repression they hoped would not come again and of a sense of solidarity, commitment and excitement they hoped would. These people deserve recognition on two counts: for standing up for democratic rights in the first place, and for preserving this history. Paradoxically, their collecting raises an important issue. The very fact that so much of the exhibition's display material was retrieved from often less than ideal storage environments within households across Brisbane, where it has sat for years beyond the reach of researchers, serves merely to highlight how fragile our hold is over our own material heritage. In my view, this is an argument in favour of centralised collecting institutions (the Fryer in particular) which are committed to preserving and providing access to collections in perpetuity.

Whatever the collecting model, it needs to be remembered that this total body of material constitutes vital historical evidence. It is the material form of our collective memory. Humphrey McQueen reminds us that the history of labour cannot be understood without reference to the actions of capital and the state. He is right, of course. But just as we cannot rely on labour and radical sources for information on the powerful, nor can we expect state and business records and the corporate media to supply accurate and authoritative knowledge about the voices of resistance. Where possible, we need direct access to what the resistance itself had to say. Even then, of course, the records need interrogation, contextualisation, rigorous critical appraisal. They do not speak for themselves any more than do the documents of officialdom.

But they will yield knowledge we won't find elsewhere, and they will reveal truths only hinted at in the documentary archives of the powerful.

Without extant, accessible records of dissent, events like the right to march campaign are more easily maligned or marginalised, with all the attendant political consequences. In a society burdened with even more repressive laws than Bjelke-Petersen's in the guise of protecting us from terrorism and giving us 'work choices', media clichés that trivialise past dissent invariably function to discourage resistance today. These clichés ought not go unchallenged. The voices that railed against the police state 30 years ago need to be heard, not out of nostalgia or a desire to lionise earlier generations, but as part of a continuous dialogue between past and present over the kind of society we have become, the kind we would like to be, and the best way we might get from one to the other. Far from a sentimental indulgence, such a dialogue, it seems to me, is essential if being political now is about achieving more than Labor's minimalist agenda of 'recaptur[ing] the centre' (Kevin Rudd, *The Monthly*, November 2006) or Bahnisch's more nebulous vision of a revolution in cyberspace.