

Sydney Libertarianism and the Push

A. J. Baker

Bill Harcourt's article on "The Push", in The National Times, 3rd February, 1975, is the most accurate account yet published of the movement connected with the Sydney Libertarians. But this does not prevent it from containing various inaccuracies and inadequacies. The major ones stem from the title Harcourt uses. For what he is trying to survey (in terms of personalities) is the history of Sydney Libertarianism and its flow-on from John Anderson and his followers. But he mixes this in with inaccurate references to "The Push", a term which was not used to refer to the Andersonians; nor is it identical with the term "Sydney Libertarian" (more on this anon). As a result, Harcourt is led to cite some people as members of The Push who were not (e.g. A.D. Hope, McCauley, Home), while many genuine Push heroes and heroines remain unsung - though curiously, given his interest in naming famous or publicly known people, he neglects to name the painting man, John Olsen, who was an early downtown drinker, and Robert Hughes, who painted a Push mural on a wall of the Royal George Hotel and also ran a comic strip on the Libertarians in the student newspaper Honi Soit.

Apart from this, in specifying people who were central to Libertarianism, Harcourt is guilty of a notable omission when he fails to mention D.J. Ivison, who has been one of the most prolific Broadsheet etc. writers and was one of the five people who, over the years, really did form the very "hard core" of Libertarianism (the others being Molnar, Smilde, Waters and myself). Harcourt also neglects altogether various other active people, including e.g. June Wilson, Les Hiatt, Ian Bedford, Terry McMullen and, in more recent times, Ken Maddock and Alan Olding.

Furthermore, (1) the term "elf" was coined by Don Beaton, not by Neil C. Hope; (2) Harcourt overrates the influence (on the people concerned) of Harry Hooton. For Harry while being a known and liked figure, did not influence the thinking of either Andersonians or Libertarians.

In view of Harcourt's article, this may be an opportune time for me to note some of the more precise details about the history of Sydney Libertarianism and, to a lesser extent, of The Push.

Anderson

John Anderson, Professor of Philosophy in Sydney University from 1927 to 1958, had much influence in academic philosophy and related subjects, but also had strong political

Anderson's political sympathies went through four main phases sympathy for Communism; then for Trotskyism; then, during the war and for some years afterwards, he rejected Trotskyism as well as Stalinism and advanced an anti-utopian pluralist position, seeking to expose illusions and to criticise the mentality of servility in whatever areas it is found. Finally, from about 1949 until his death in 1962, as an accompaniment of his now violent anti-Communism, Anderson became increasingly conservative. "Exposing illusions" became almost entirely exposing the illusions of Communism, and he seemed more and more to find Communism almost everywhere. (For a fuller account of these phases, see my "John Anderson and Freethought", The Australian Quarterly, 1962.)

Andersonians and Freethinkers

The term "Andersonian" has some ambiguity as it may describe (a) Anderson's trainees in academic philosophy, many of whom, especially those who became academics, public servants and lawyers (including judges), we may be sure did not share his earlier political sympathies, and (b) his political followers, the members of the Freethought Society. The latter were usually, though not always, also students of philosophy. It is the freethinkers who are the relevant Andersonians here, and of them it can be safely said, that along with some differences of doctrines, they differed from the later Libertarians in being much more academic and cut off from downtown interests and connections. The poet and Andersonian, Oliver Somerville, (mentioned by Harcourt and killed in 1946) was an unusual exception, a witty, drinking, downtown-oriented pre-Libertarian kind of Push man, who in one of his poems wrote:

I lost my love for taking
The title anarchist,
Her solid alms forsaking
For moonshine, myth and mist.

By the mid 1940s, some leading freethinkers, including Peter Gibbons, Doug McCallum and John Rybak, while they never adhered to Sydney Libertarianism, in their sponsorship of Anderson's tough anti-servility line, and their willingness, for instance, to scrutinise the values of academia and marriage, and to discuss seriously the views of Wilhelm Reich, could be said in some ways at least to be precursors of the later Libertarian position.

The First Libertarian Society

After the war, many more students, including more mature ex-servicemen, attended Sydney University, and the ranks of the Freethought Society correspondingly swelled. Then many of Anderson's followers were alienated when he demonstrated his growing conservatism by supporting such things as strike-breaking (Chifley's use of troops against the coal miners in 1949), conscription, social "privilege" in Australian society, and

I am not trying in this (mainly factual) survey to take up in detail difficult questions about the reasons or conditions for the rise of Libertarianism etc. But I suppose it is evident enough, given what I have just said about Anderson's final conservative views, that there is no direct line of causation from Anderson to Libertarianism or The Push. Thus, while some of the views and arguments of Libertarians have been very Andersonian (support for empiricism and objective inquiry, rejection of religion, conventional morality and censorship), the distinctive features of the Libertarian line, not to speak of its irreverent, downtown bohemianism, is in no obvious way Andersonian. For example, critical but sympathetic treatment of the early work of Reich and of the classical anarchists, stress on the social role of ideologies, emphasis on the work of Pareto, Michels and Nomad, are not found in Anderson's writings and lectures on social theory. (He did in a lecture-course in 1948 speak approvingly of Nomad's views on "permanent protest" but did not afterwards follow this up.) It follows that there is a case for maintaining (as some people have done) that Libertarianism and The Push would have come about - as a result of the nature of Sydney and post-war conditions - even if Anderson had never been in Sydney. Nevertheless, his emphasis on realism and objectivity and his rejection of romanticism and salvationism, plainly made it easier for his erstwhile followers and other people exposed to his thought to formulate their Libertarian views in a tough-minded, non-utopian way.

To return to the chronology, at Sydney University in 1950 was formed (and opposed by Anderson) the Anti-Conscription Committee, in which the leading figures were freethinkers, including David Stove, David Armstrong, Alwyn Karpin and Darcy Waters. (By an irony of history, Stove and Armstrong, who were regarded by Anderson at that time as dangerous exponents of "proletarianism" and "socialism", have long since, as more recently shown by their defence of American involvement in Vietnam etc.. come to have conservative views rather similar to those held by Anderson in his last phase).

In the summer of 1950-51, numerous member of the A.C.C. and other interested people held a series of meetings in the Ironworkers' Hall with a view to forming a downtown political society. Here a division developed between a more radical wing (including e.g. Waters and Grahame Harrison) and a more conservative wing (including e.g. Stove and Eric Dowling). The general orientation of these meetings may be judged from the fact that when Harry Hooton proposed "Anarchist" and some of the conservative proposed "Democratic" as the name for the new Society, both were rejected and "Libertarian Society" was adopted as an acceptable title. Likewise then accepted as the motto for this Society - and continued by the later Libertarian society - was the early Marx quotation used by Wilhelm Reich as the motto for his *The Sexual Revolution*, vis:

"Since it is not for us to create a plan for the future that will hold for all time, all the more surely what we contemporaries have to do is the uncompromising critical evaluation of all that exists, uncompromising in the sense that our criticism fears

(So, incidentally, those people who feel that Sydney Libertarian sympathy for "Libertarian Marxism" represents some recent new trend, are out of touch with its origins).

The radical wing further succeeded in having adopted a constitution which, in order to emasculate would-be leaders and bureaucrats, spelled out in precise detail and reduced to the barest minimum, the powers of the elected office-bearers. Then, in a close vote, the radical candidate, Waters, became Secretary - but promptly announced his intention to resign, on the ground that he could not see himself working with the conservatives on the committee. They for their part lost interest too - so the new Society was inherited by Harry Hooton, but for want of support it soon became defunct.

(I attended these meetings with interest, and was an advocate of the name "Libertarian Society" and of the Marx motto. While I had been a keen supporter of Andersonian freethought I was now becoming critical of the increasing narrowness and conservatism of that position).

The University Libertarian Society

Later in 1951 the incipient Libertarians turned their attention to the Freethought Society, and at the General Meeting of the Society that year, Anderson was duly elected unopposed as President of the Society, but his own nominee for Secretary was easily defeated by the Libertarian candidate, Waters. Then followed a year of controversy and division in the Society. Anderson, having been its President for so many years, claimed the right of veto whenever he was in danger of being outvoted on the Committee, and did so in a dispute connected with the political issue of the year, the Anti-Communist Referendum. Most of us wished to have a speaker present the No case, but Anderson was so adamantly opposed that nothing was done. (The Referendum, another effort by the fine prime minister, Menzies, if carried would have suppressed the expression of Communist (and anarchist) views, but largely owing to the dedicated campaign of Dr Evatt, the No vote prevailed).

The following year we decided to by-pass Anderson and the Freethought Society (which then became defunct), so the University Libertarian Society was formed. It was called the Libertarian Society at Sydney University instead of the Sydney University Libertarian Society, because the latter would have needed a formal constitution and office-bearers and to be open to supervision and possible interference by the University authorities. Instead the Society functioned informally but effectively, with decisions made by unanimous consent instead of by voting, and with every Libertarian being a member of the Committee and the one office-bearer (for convenience) being the Secretary, who was first June Wilson, then Roelof Smilde, and then for a long stretch George Molnar.

At the University from 1952 meetings were held dealing with topics which set the pattern

meetings were also held, most notably at Liberty Hall in the Haymarket area, and in Nestor Grivas' cellar near Taylor Square. The first conference was held in 1956; the first Broadsheet appeared in October, 1957 (four pages on Little Rock); and the printed journal, *Libertarian*, ran for three issues in the period 1957-60. A printed selection from the first 25 Broadsheets, *The Sydney Line*, appeared in 1963. (A second selection from later Broadsheets has been made and been ready for printing for over a year, but owing to shortage of funds has not yet been published).

The following is a statement of the Society's position that appeared in the *Orientation Handbook*, Sydney University, in 1958:

"Contrary to the account which wandered into last year's *Orientation Handbook*, the Libertarian Society is openly, though not solely, a political group with a distinctive platform. For as against the academic myth of detachment, libertarians see the presentation of a definite line not as a bar to a thorough examination of views but as a necessary part of it. The libertarian standpoint is that of opposition, in every field of human activity, to authoritarian forces and to their social and political demands. Concurrent with this is support for non-servile, co-operative and free activities. On this basis, libertarians are found to be atheists, supporters of sexual freedom and opponents of repressive institutions, particularly that great destroyer of independence and initiative, the political State.

Libertarians have an historical, and to some extent a logical, connection with the S.U. Freethought Society which operated here during the '30s and '40s. In a more general way, libertarians have logical connections with past and present anarchist movements in other countries, although disagreeing with part of the line that these present".

The Push

The term, "The Push", of course goes back to the famous Rocks Push in Sydney in the 1890s, a hard, larrikin group, celebrated, for example in (Henry Lawson's?) *The Bastard from the Bush* with such lines as:

"Will you have a cigarette?"
Said The Leader of The Push
"I'll have the flaming packet",
Said The Bastard from The Bush.

Since then the term has, in imitation, been bestowed on various Australian groups, including intellectual and artistic ones. But in the present context, "The Push" only gained currency in the 1950s, though there were one or two, not widely known, precursor uses of the term. The first that I know of concerned a group of leading students who, in the mid 1940s, met monthly to discuss papers on intellectual and cultural topics, and who styled themselves satirically, "The Poseurs' Push". Although some of its members were Andersonians, Anderson was not over keen on this group and relished its name. Then in

perhaps coined by him) to refer to a group that included Stove and Waters.

But while the term was in the air, it was not until the early 1950s that it caught on at Sydney University and downtown. When it did so, "The Push" or "The Libertarian Push" were used in the early years to refer to the group that consisted mainly of Libertarians (so that at that time the terms "Push" and "Libertarian" were commonly used synonymously), but then as time went on and more and more people became involved, notably in the heyday of the Royal George, the term "The Push" came more and more to be used to refer to a proliferation of people, sometimes sub-grouped as "The Prestige Push", "The Fringe Push", "The Scunge Push", and "The Baby Push", as well as "activist" and "oblomovists". Amongst these the Libertarians were very prominent, but it may have been that quite a few other Push people felt antipathetic towards Libertarian views to some extent - if only as an endorsement of their life-styles.

In the early 1950s the downtown pub was the Tudor Hotel in Phillip Street, in which drank some poets and painters from the Lincoln coffee shop in Rowe Street, some socialists, science fiction fans, and others, but most of all the ex-Andersonians and Libertarians from the University. It was at this time that there was a social fusion of theorists and politically-committed people like Smilde, Waters and myself, with Alan Blum, and other mainly ex- University folk about town like Dorothy Addison, Sandy Anderson, the Armstrongs, Eilva Baker, Shirley Buffett, Jack Gulley, Neil C. Hope, Joan McKenna, Lillian Roxon, Eric Walsh, plus the outstanding first wave of young Libertarian students including Marion Hallwood, Elwyn Morris, June Wilson, plus again, Dick Appelton, Bob Cumming, Maggie Elliott, Rudi Fischer, Bill Harcourt, Lois Hayden, Judy Hillier, Harry Hooton, David Ivison, Peter Laycock, John Maze, Rocky Meyers, Ray Newall, Doug Nicholson, Bruce Nield, Harry Roberts, Barbara and Milo Roxon, John Rybak, Edgar Waters, Graham Williams, Lay Wolfe, Dick Woodward . . .

A little later had come (or returned) Judy Andrews, Don Ayrton, Val Bancroft, Jan Barber, Don Beaton, Peter Bowie, Ross Byrne, Bill Haggerth, Peter Hamilton, Doug McCallum, Judy McGuinness, Charlie Lloyd, Harry Reed, Willy Russell, the Tomachevsky brothers, Kathy Toshack . . .

It was from the mingling of all these groups that The Push was born and nurtured.

Some years later, when the Tudor closed, there was a brief move to the Assembly Hotel in the same street, and then in 1957 to the Royal George Hotel in Sussex Street (discovered by Neil C. Hope just before he departed for Italy). By this time the Libertarian Society was in full flight with George Molnar and David Ivison now emerging as leading writers and paper-givers. The ranks of the society's active members were also being swelled by some of the students Hope had encountered when he was teaching at North Sydney High School: Ian Bedford,

Ross Poole, John Roberts, and later David Ferraro and David Makinson. Around this time

and a little later by Bill Bonney, Don Brown, Andre Frankovits, Terry McMullen, Don Pattenden, Cam Perry, Peter Smith, Geoffrey Whiteman . . .

By 1959 Germaine Greer had appeared, to succeed Redcraze as a spectacular Push lady, and to stimulate activity but also to provoke factions for the first time in the Broadsheet Committee - and to be one stimulus for the fake, send-up Broadsheet brought out in 1961 by Paddy McGuinness, Geoffrey Mill and Ian Parker.(Germaine, incidentally, disappeared from the Libertarian and Push scene years before she left Sydney, so there was something disingenuous about her re-appearance in the Newcastle Hotel in 1972 and her being described in the media as a "returned member of The Push".

Now too into The Push had come or were coming, Helen Barber, Miles Comen, French Deal, Brian Fegan, Jan Gibson, Jean Hall, Stan Hall, Eva Hauser, Brian Hickey, Jane Iliffe, Peter Kenny, Pam Logan, Ian Macindoe, Katie McMullen, Brian Murray, Col Ryan, Roseanne Smith, Julie Snelling, Warren Stewart, Bob Tardif, Albie Thom, Brian Thornton, Carol Thornton, Mike Walsh, Frank Wilson . . .

Kurt Bader, Pam Berry, Ken Buckley, Geoffrey Chandler, Robyn Clode, Rosemary Cresswell, John Cox, Pam Elks, Graham Fryer, Pam Fryer, Katie Fullager, Lois Gillow, Brenda Linn, Wendy Lucas, Robyn Mack, David Perry, Judy Perry, Len Smith, Derek Wood . . .

Harry Andronicus, Gillian Burnet, John Caferella, Ann Capsey, Phil Chambers, Toss Davidson, Corin Dennett, Jim Edwards, Liz Fell, Ann Hoberg, Arthur King, Ian Lightfoot, Keith Looby, Michael McDermott, Bonnie McDougall, John Matheson, Val Payne, Bruce Reason, Borris Richardson, Inge Riebe, Sue Robertson.

Oh, what a wild crowd they made, when will their glory fade? . . .

You wanted a good drinking session? then find Bob Cumming, Nestor Grivas, Bunny Britton, Ron Opie, Ian Parker, Rod Streeter, John Pentony, Peter Roblin . . .

Or with the folk singers like Ayrton, Earls, Brian Mooney, Terry Driscoll . . .

For a board game, The Horse, Molnar, Maze, Ivo, John Meggitt, Lyn Speedy . . .

the long line of people come up from Melbourne, Lee Tonkin, Patty Dixon, Heli, Jan Miller, Marilyn Little, Ken Cobb, John Fogarty . . .

Medical observers and/or advisers, Ross Byrne, Rocky, Ram, gambling John, young John .

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The early Argentine Ant Squad with Ashleigh Sellars, Roger Cox, Appleton, Smilde . . .

The later exploits of Flash Ash and Neil Shard . . .

the Shadforth Army of Retreat with Michael Baldwin, Chairman Gunter, Parker, Morag, Peter the Peddler, Diana Kemp . . .

The military man of a different colour, the Good Soldier Pattenden . . .

That fine anglican Churchman, Archbishop Gough, whom Libertarians would have been pleased to invent if he had not existed, who denounced Sydney academics for advocating Communism and free love, and amusingly in the resulting hubbub not only Anderson, but

"God in the Marijuana Patch", but the police, feeling sure that the name "Michael Baldwin" would be a pseudonym, did not look too hard in The Push pub . . .

the expert performer who well knew how to liven up a Push cricket match, John Cardensana . . .

The Bulgarian Anarchists come to Sydney, including notably Jack the Anarchist . . .

The eye-catching trio of Witch Girls, Kay Hancox, Lyn Gain, and Robyn Robb . . .

The poets like Hooton, Appleton, Lex Banning, Chester, Geoffrey Lehman, Peter Newton. . .

the writers and literary people like Geoff Mill, Sylvia Lawson, Frank Moorhouse, Edna Wilson, Ken-Quinnell, Michael Thornhill, Michael Wilding . . .

The right wing drinkers in The Push, Brian Raven, Graham Royce and Cyrus . . .

The posters produced by the Midnight Activists criticising the police hunt for the prison escapees, Simmonds and Newcombe, and the delight of The Push when the police psychiatrist, Dr McGeorge came out with the verdict: whoever the people are who produced this poster, they are certifiably insane . . .

The other posters brought out at election times, such as the ones depicting a well dressed pig and bearing the caption, "Whoever you vote for, a politician always gets in; vote informal". . .

In the early 1960s the Push, deterred by the numbers, poor service and sometimes the violence now to be found in the Royal George, moved away to a succession of new pubs, the main ones being the Unites States in 1963, the Criterion (Sussex Street) in 1965, the Vanity Fair 1967-68, then the Lismore, the Vanity Fair again 1969-71, the Newcastle (where some past push people had been drinking for years), and then in 1973 back to the Criterion again. But I'll let the list I gave above of Push names stand, without further addition, back in the heyday of the Royal George and the United States.

The Libertarian Society and The Push had their heyday a decade and more ago. By the mid-1960s, the connection between University Libertarianism and down town had become much attenuated - but in my view this connection is absolutely vital (and which is what marked off the Libertarian from the Freethought Society). Some younger University Libertarians had become more narrowly academic in their interests than formerly, while downtown dissidents and lumpen proletarians for their part were now more and more lacking the previous infusion of lumpen intellectualism. Then with the protests against the Vietnam War, plus the growth of the (non-drinking) drug scene, and the spread of greater permissiveness in society at large including sexual permissiveness, there was less interest in either Libertarian views or old-style Push social life.

The Libertarian Society held its last meeting at Sydney University in 1968 and later the associated Kensington Libertarians (University of N.S.W.), who included Wendy Bacon, Ric Mohr and John Murphy, were quite active, while in the 1970s a series of downtown meetings was held above the Third World Bookshop, the Libertarian "Anarcho-Marxist

In addition, in recent years, some Libertarians and sympathisers, including Wendy Bacon, John Cox, Liz Fell, Ric Mohr, Roelof Smilde and Darcy Waters, have been actively involved in activities on specific issues, notably (1) in opposition to the "obscenity" laws of N.S.W and (2) in the valiant attempt, in association with Jack Munday and the Builders Labourers Federation, to save Victoria Street from developers.

On the side of thought and criticism, it is plain that there is much room for the expression of Sydney Libertarian-type views today. There is nowadays in Australia a great deal of uncritical, un-thought-out radicalism (mainly borrowed from abroad), and while there are in the universities quite a few scholars capable of social criticism, most of them are either clear defenders of the establishment or else so neutralised that they do not write or speak on contemporary or controversial issues. So surviving Libertarians have a continuing role open to them. Confronted as they are both by the ever-present forces promoting privilege, illusion and servility, and by the upsurge of a race of trendy, radical utopians, they can try to keep alive (as Harcourt partly quoted me as saying) radical critical thought in a period of intellectual poverty.

A.J. Baker,

in Broadsheet, No 81, March, 1975. (abridged)

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