

### 1966: three meetings

As the temper of the arguments around Vietnam and conscription rose during 1966, opponents organised meetings, protested outside Liberal Party rallies, held Teach-Ins and emulated Jim Cairns' tireless carrying of the facts about the 1954 Geneva Accords to any audience we could contact.

The use of mounted police against street protesters gave rise to debates about whether horses were class conscious. Trained to shepherd AFL crowds, the horses seemed reluctant to trample on our feet. Were we, therefore, justified in throwing marbles under theirs?

Looking back, it seems that many of us spent every second night either at a public meeting, or organising one. Three stand out – if I remember rightly.

#### Among our betters

Somehow Monash Labor Club secretary Ian Morgan and I found out about a public meeting called by the Camberwell Anglican Men's Society to hear the Attorney-General Billy 'The Goat' Snedden speak on Vietnam. We took ourselves along, confident that we would be the only dissenters present.

The proceedings started as expected with the vicar's welcome and Snedden's rehearsal of the government's argument that we were facing a thrust by Red China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It was a Friday evening. Snedden had flown in from Canberra without a prepared speech. Neither he, nor Ian and I, was prepared for what happened next.

The questions from the floor were polite but firm. One after another, these be-suited businessmen challenged this or that aspect of the party line. Our nervousness about asking a question flew out the window and we left it up to the bourgeois masses. Then the vicar had a go.

The **TKO** came from the father of one of the local parishioners who was visiting from his Wimmera wheat grower. 'What I and all my fellow farmers want to know is when is the government going to stop killing our customers.' Much laughter and Billy let that one go through to the keeper.

Then came the TKO. Snedden's sole supporter in the audience could take no more of it. Getting the call, he asked: 'Can the Attorney-General inform the meeting, without revealing any intelligence ...'. Snedden roared along with the rest of us.

Ian and I drove away confident that Calwell was going to win. If that were the temper of Camberwell Anglicans and the Wimmera, the Coalition had Buckleys.

#### A surprise conscriptionist

As the elections came closer, anti-conscription meetings were held in every available venue. Fifty years on, I can't remember whether this one was at the Trades Hall but one speech is, as Harold Macmillan is made to say in *Beyond the Fringe*, 'indelibly printed on my memory.'

On the platform was the secretary of one of the more militant unions. When his turn came, he wanted us to know that he was in favour of conscription. 'Yes', he declaimed, 'first we nationalise the oil companies, and then we conscript all the Young Libs to fight the Marines when they land.'

Much as we welcomed both legs of this policy, many of us knew that those Young Liberals would have been followed into battle by politically reliable officers with sub-machine guns to make sure that the conscripts did not follow their treasonable principles and defect to the invaders.

### Geopolitics in Richmond

Cairns had taken Yarra from the rat Standish Michael Keon at the 1955 post-split election, on a trickle of preferences. He held it in the next three polls with absolute majorities rising to 4 percent by 1963. 1966 was going to be different. Cairns was now the best hated man in Australia. The combined forces of clerical fascism and the Coalition mounted an intense campaign to keep him from carrying the fight around the country against what his leader, Calwell, was labeling 'the dirty little Asian war', while Whitlam sabotaged their call for immediate and total withdrawal.

It behooved us, therefore, to get along to a rally in the Richmond Town. The upstairs room was packed. A handful of Young Liberals arrived too late to get inside. It hardly mattered since no sooner had they started to interject than those of us inside could hear the sound of bodies being hauled down the stairs.

The real entertainment was on the platform. Cairns was losing his voice, which was never powerful or energised. His lack of charisma was more than compensated for by retired naval Captain Giuseppe DiSalvo. The captain began by assuring his fellow Italians, mostly women, that Santamaria and Keon were '*multo fascisti*'. '*Multo fascisti*' he repeated and the phrase was taken up around the room.

With that bit of history now settled, the Commander could attend to geo-politics. The very notion that the war in Vietnam was a fight between China and the United States was impossible. To make sure that there could be no dissent from his strategic doctrine, he held up a meter-square picture of an elephant. 'This is China. China is an elephant.' It took somewhat longer for this point to gain general approval than had the fact that Santamaria was '*multo fascisti*'.

Waverers were about to get a second shot across their bows. The Commander held up another meter-square picture, this time of a whale. 'The United States is a whale.' More mutterings, and not all in Italian.

With the elephant in one hand above his head and the other holding up the whale, we were assured that Australians had nothing to fear from China. 'Whales and elephants cannot fight each other.'

Who would disagree with that?

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