

TR 1859 Peter Gray Audiotapes

Interview with Alan Knight Brisbane Radical

Well I must admit I came into the Left as a direct result of Laver's influence. I can remember hearing him speak in 1966 at an anti-Vietnam meeting organised by Arthur Calwell outside the Brisbane City Hall and I was pretty impressed and I went up and shook him by the hand afterwards and said, "You know I really think you're a fine group of people." Well I didn't get into the Left until civil liberties the following year. And that once again it was Laver that was influenced me. I was pretty much in awe of Laver, I saw him as a dominant, the dominant person in the Left intellectually. I quite agree with Jim's assessment that he was you know, he was the front man and the man that could speak well that had a quick mind and Thompson was the fellow that did all the incredible fanatical organisation work, got it organised. But Brian went away in 1968 to Europe as a SDS, SDA really anti-ideologist. He came back from Czechoslovakia, a really raving Trotskyite. He was so far out in fact he insisted on ordering a mountain of surplus books on Lenin and Marx, which he got at a cut rate from Bob Gould's bookshop I believe in Sydney. He bought literally hundreds of them, there were so many they were still flogging them off in about 1972 if I remember correctly in the Red and Black Bookshop. Now the line he pushed then was a really hard line, Trot line. Now in the 12 months after that he did almost a complete somersault. By the end of 1969, he was repudiating that he'd ever been a Marxist. He was attacking the Marxists and he was moving into his SMG period. It was in 1969 that a great number of the people like myself who'd really respected Brian up till then became disillusioned with him. The disillusionment sprang from the changing hands of the Red and Black Bookshop, which had been started in late 68 as a centre for selling left wing books. It was originally in the old Cellar which was in Roma Street but later shifted to the Elizabeth Arcade. It had been organised by raising \$10 donations from, I can't remember how many people in the Left, there was quite a broad section, cross section of people and it was run by voluntary labour with a sometimes with a manager a full time manager, Jim Beatson at times, on a non, or Mal Price on nominal salary. Now in towards the end of 1969 Brian raised the argument that the bookshop wasn't being efficiently run, there wasn't enough politics in it, there was too much pornography being introduced and he argued that it should be turned over, put into his name so that he could devote more time to running it to, so that it could have a more political, more political direction. People like Peter Thompson if I remember correctly argued very strongly against that claiming that a socialist movement shouldn't have to resort to private enterprise to run its bookshop, but at the meeting in the JD Story room of the Left Brian held the day and narrowly won the vote and the bookshop was turned over to him. Subsequently the bookshop had less politics in it, more emphasis on pornographic material, not that I've got anything against pornographic material but you know it was sort of schoolgirl flogged whip sex lust type books with illustrations which he used to display at the front counter. More and more the bookshop turned into a profit making operation and more and more people who'd been involved with running it previously became angry with the way Brian was organising things. That was the beginning. By 1970 those, Brian had moved off into his own little movement while the other people were busy organising the first of the moratoriums. Brian argued against the moratoriums and became fairly isolated while the rest of the Left became involved with the actual problems of organising leaflet distributions, meetings leading up to the moratoriums themselves. What developed then was an informal Left social grouping which was made up of old acquaintances, people that had known each other since the civil

liberties period who organised the moratoria and finally the anti-apartheid demonstrations while Brian moved off into first of all RSP, which then split into as I remember correctly SMG and a Trotskyite grouping. Brian took with him I think Mal, Cam Cunningham sorry and a couple of other people that had been around the Left in 1969, the people in the other grouping were subsequently became Communist League people they were and Healyites. These people were Mal Price...can you stop it there for a minute. [Recording paused].

[Recording resumed.] (06.22).

Well I might have to go over those, a couple of those points again but SDA became RSP and RSSA. The RSSA, Revolutionary Students Socialist Student's Alliance was all students centred around Dan and, Dan O'Neill and to a lesser extent Jim Prentice and later on Dick Shearman, while RSP as Jim pointed out earlier was predominantly worker oriented. There became, there was a RSP and RSSA had less and less to do with one another. RSSA, people in RSSA increasingly began to regard Brian as eccentric if not on the verge of a nervous breakdown. It was a fairly common sentiment that Brian had gone over the edge and wasn't likely to come back ... [Recording paused]

[Recording resumed] Well by 1969 most of the organisation had gone out of the Left, pamphlets were becoming more irregular, they'd, the Student Guerrilla had been replaced by a number of other pamphlets, offset pamphlets, which weren't really as good and were a lot less regular, but they had a lot harder line. Yu know they were anti-imperialist as opposed to reformist. But by 1970 there was virtually no organisation at all. I place a lot of stress on this informal association of people. This continued right through till about 1973. There were various personalities who were fairly prominent like Dan O'Neill, Peter Wertheim, Dick Shearman because he was a good speaker, Jim Prentice because he was regarded as being quite an intelligent person and quite reliable. These people went to parties together, wrote pamphlets together, drank together, sat around the Refec together, there was a lot of plotting going on in on the Refec tables there were enormous numbers of plots hatched just in the extensions of the Refec, but what eventually happened was that there was less and less intellectual drive, there was more and more social bitchery until by 1973 people were starting to hate each other's guts. By 1974 there was nothing really there at all, people just, the whole thing just disintegrated with people turning back to, with a few exceptions, turning back to football, beer, going to the movies, sitting around, getting stoned. That's all really I think, I don't think I can so I'll ... [Recording paused].

[Records resumed.] The way the informal organisation worked was that there were about 10 people, it narrowed down to about 10 people by the time the Springboks came around who'd known each other since about 1967 and you know they'd drink beer together and they'd sort of go around to one another's places and they'd have parties together, more often than not they'd screw one another as well, it was pretty incestuous but this group of people were the people that did the organising, printed the leaflets, wrote the leaflets and distributed them. They were, they were more you know there were still public meetings you know in JD Story room where anyone could come along but more often than not these people had already discussed what they were going to do, how they were going to do it and because they were much more active than anyone else, they influenced, they generally influenced the meeting in that direction. It wasn't exactly manipulated but it was just because these people were you know always at the core of the action that things generally went their way. There was always a couple of tables in the Refec where about 10 or 15 people would be sitting around drinking coffee just about all day every day and it would be those tables where matters would be raised, things would be discussed. If someone wanted to hand out a leaflet they'd go to those tables, they'd know there were people there and they'd do a leaflet drop. If they needed people to go and pick up some paper, or flog some paper, there was a lot of paper stolen from the University at that stage until finally the University had a special watermark put on all of its paper and got samples of every leaflet and checked them for the watermark and

threatened to suspend anyone handing out a leaflet with the University watermark on it. There was those sort of organisation going on. But it was not like SDA, SDA its weakness was there was that it wasn't there was no formal organisation and there was no formal recruiting. SDA took recruiting very seriously. As Jim said it had a table getting new people signing up, it had mailing lists, it had book discussion groups where books, you know people that wanted to join them would read a book during the week then go to a discussion group one night where there'd be a discussion about it and you know how relevant it was to the Australian situation, what I meant in Queensland, what it meant to the movement generally. Later on these sort of things didn't happen at all. If a new book came along it'd be people would find out about it by sitting around the Refec and someone would say, "Oh look I read such and such the other day, it was very good." It would be just on that sort of level so that new people coming in didn't really have any sort of program to slot into, which they could easily slot into so that what eventually happened the group just got narrower and narrower, the new people that came along were generally sort of oh excluded from a lot of the decision making until finally it just collapsed when the last of that particular group, that group left just got tired of spending all their time organising and running around and printing leaflets and doing work and left University, so that by about 1974 there was literally no one there left doing the work. So as far as I see it the failure of the movement was that when SDA relied heavily on the ability and talent of Brian Laver and Mitch Thompson when they went off onto their own particular tangents SDA collapsed. When SDA collapsed there was a period of several years where people who'd been in SDA continued in politics but this gradually wound down. The failure of the movement was that there was no organisation that really succeeded SDA that brought new people in that had discussions, that had mailing lists, that put out pamphlets, increasingly it just relied more and more on people who were veterans and veterans so called and it just couldn't last and it didn't because they just got tired and left. In terms of depths of consciousness what happened was because there were fewer and fewer people at the core of the movement, the issues became more and more superficial until finally at the Springboks it was just a basic gut reaction to Bjelke's use of the police to bring, to smash a demonstration against the Springboks. There was a lot of propaganda put out about South Africa but it was pretty liberal. It wasn't a; it didn't really have, it wasn't a, it didn't have any sort of Marxist or ideological flavour expect for SMG who put out pamphlets attacking people for becoming involved in a reformist movement. I think the lessons to be learnt from the period are that groups should try and get some sort of tight organisation going which can organise effectively and share the load of, of transmitting information that you know it's essential to all of these sorts of groups if they're going to survive to have mailing lists, leaflet or newspaper distributions, filing systems, and some sort of, some sort of way of recording their experiences and what they've been doing, otherwise they just, they must fizzle out because it just relies on the particular skills of a couple of people and those couple of people just can't last. The emotional strain is just too much. People like well look I'd better not mention names because otherwise it might be libellous. But several people had nervous breakdowns because they were just too much, there was too much pressure on them, and they just dropped out of the movement completely. And they worked their guts out. They were working 20 hours a day at times printing and distributing material and they were just lost. Lost to the movement. [Recording paused].

[Recording resumed]. Well a lot of people are cynical about what developed for a lot of different reasons. I think cynicism had to come because there was so much optimism. Unfounded optimism at the beginning, people thought that by working their guts out and being honest and being truthful that they could bring about some sort of social change in Queensland. I think they underestimated the conservative nature of Queensland. I think they underestimated the extreme reactionary nature of the State Government and the lengths at which it was prepared to go to suppress even the smallest amount of dissent. What happened over a long, the State Government used to discourage people dissenting by keeping files on them, keeping Special Branch Policemen outside their door, by having Special Branch Policemen beat them up at demonstrations, by having massive shows of

force at any big demonstrations, by ruthlessly enforcing to the letter of the law, laws on leaflet distribution so that even the most minimal amount of information distribution was made very difficult. Now on top of that there was a real hate campaign against the stereotype student radical within the press and within the radio, particularly the talk back programs. People after a period of years, people started becoming tired of being regarded as some sort of social pariah simply because they were pushing what in the end was just, smaller liberal things like the right to disseminate information, the right to assembly, opposition to racism, it was just a combination of many years of hard work which resulted, which seemed to result in very little except a great deal of hatred from a great number of people. There was all sorts of pressures put on people, not only police pressure but parental pressure, pressure from groups within the University in that a number of people were expelled. A number of other people were threatened with expulsion. It was just a constant hassle and year after year after year it seemed that there was less and less chance of changing anything until it finally came down to that, it came down to the thing that people were actually still pushing politics because they felt that there was nothing else that they could do and that just pushing the politics gave them some sort of meaning and even though they thought that they were going to achieve nothing by pushing the politics they felt that at least it gave them some sort of integrity to keep going, to keep going. And finally it just became too much. People opted out into teaching; they went into the Public Service, some of them worked for Queensland Newspapers. But you know they just went straight and buried themselves in various different places. Other people kept going went off into splinter groups. Mitch is still going in a splinter group. Brian is still going in SMG. It's interesting, as an aside, it's interesting to note that SMG has got practically nobody that was involved in the movement in 1967 in it. Most of the people in SMG are people that joined after the Red and Black Bookshop split. With the exception of Cam Cunningham is the only person that I can think of that's still with them. Everyone else was recruited later. And it, but going, that's an aside, going back to cynicism, there just didn't seem to be anything that you could do anymore because the State was so well organised, it had so much sympathy from the press, it had its propaganda so well orchestrated it just all seemed, started to seem a waste of time and the attitude came around that well you know Queenslander's deserve all they get if they're stupid enough to have high regard for someone as obviously corrupt as Bjelke-Petersen, and is obviously as stupid as the Labour Opposition then really they deserve all they get and people just relapsed into apathy because the only alternative was really madness. There was, it was that extreme. I mean if they still took it seriously I mean some might say that's what's happened to Brian but...umm I think we can cut it there hey. [Recording paused].

[Recording resumed]. Yeah I'd say the thing about Queensland is that it is a very repressive place. I'm not sure whether it will; whether the movement will revive in the same way, same form that it started in the sixties. Essentially a lot of people came into the movement in the sixties because the Government's "small l" liberal rhetoric was obviously, obviously contradicted its "large A" Authoritarian manner. Now what's happening in Queensland now is that the Government doesn't have "small l" liberal rhetoric, this government has "large A" Authoritarian rhetoric and it's behaving in more and more oppressive ways. I think there'll be reaction. I don't think it will come from the students, I think it's more likely to be reaction from the Trade Unions as the State Government moves to break their power. I think that if there is a renewed student movement, I think it will be centred around small Marxist groups who'll grow as it becomes more, as the fascist nature of the State Government becomes more obvious. I don't think there'll be we'll see a renewal of the large "small l" liberal, civil liberties type marches, I can't see that happening again. Not for a long while anyway. Unless the nature of Queensland politics changes substantially. I think can we cut it there? [Recording paused].

[Recording resumed]. Well it, the negative effects of it was that it threw a whole lot of people out into limbo in that it, the early radical movement really tore up people's beliefs in middle Australian ideals. You know there was just the house, the family and the sub, the wife and

the car in Kenmore, just wasn't a thing to be believed in anymore. What it temporarily replaced it with was a moral outrage with the whole number of various issues. But as these tapered out people found themselves sort of isolated in that they couldn't, they a lot of them found it really difficult to believe in Marxism because they'd been through the SDA anti-ideology thing but at the same time they couldn't accept the SDS philosophy while they were still alienated from the capitalist philosophy so there's still there are quite a number of people around who just really do feel really alienated. They can't identify with the Left because they regard them; they regard the Leftists ideologist as people who are deluding themselves, while at the same time they can't identify with the norms of Australian Society. These people have floated into alcohol, dope smoking, screwing; a lot of them are travelling overseas. They're creating short term goals for themselves so that they, you know they can justify their working in a fairly meaningless job by saying that they're saving for the end of the year when they're going to go to Europe. What they're going to do when they go to Europe they're not sure but it's a sort of a goal that they've created for themselves. It's a fairly common attitude. Other people the reaction was more severe. People that really worked hard and were really idealistic some of them had nervous breakdowns, others returned, went back to their old beliefs, not people really at the core of the movement, not many of those did. That was the people active in the movement. As far as the other people are concerned, I don't think it really had all that many negative effects on the population at large because Queenslanders seem to generally have such crazy right wing views that a bit of a short injection of some Left wing rationality can't do them all that much harm. Possibly the only negative affect would be that it might upset them to think that someone's undermined their faith in God, Bjelke and bauxite. But I think it had quite a serious affect on the lives of quite a number of people at the centre of the movement but I'm repeating myself. [Recording paused].

[Recording resumed.] In the end it wasn't only that the community around I mean you know all the hatred that was around and the inability to cope with just Queensland society generally but the tight incestuous relationships that existed within the Left really drove people crazy. I can't think of just about anyone that was involved in the Left over a long period who hasn't come out of it some, demented in some way or another you know, some people have gone back to drinking grog, watching football and bashing one another up with beer bottles at parties. Others have ended up in Wolston Park, others are screwing one another's wives, daughters, girlfriends, boyfriends in increasingly incestuous and vicious, bitchy situations. Others have gone on to become shampoo salesmen and become, play football; I think that, we might as well cut that. Umm, but it did have a bad effect on them they destroyed one another in the end. It just got to the situation where people would go down to the pub; the RE where a lot of the Left used to hang and they'd just cut one another to pieces for a bit of enjoyment. And it just got nastier and nastier and nastier until people started finally dropping out so that the stage it's reached now is virtually no one talks to anyone. There are scattered houses around the place with people that were involved in the Left who are virtually at war with one another socially. They don't go to see them they don't speak with them, they don't share the same, they don't even go to the RE, the pub, which used to be the centre, anymore because they might run into them. And you now this is quite common, I can think of at least four or five households like that at this stage.

END OF RECORDING: (28.19)