

I arrive at Newcastle University

'I submit, Vice-Chancellor, that a procedural motion might expedite the debate at this juncture...'

'So move!' Short, sharp, business-like, no nonsense.

'If I may say so, Vice-Chancellor, and with due respect to my learned colleagues, the proposed motion would appear to be somewhat out of order. If I may I refer to Standing Orders, and then to the minutes of the previous meeting, I would like to draw the attention of Senate ...'

Selected Proceedings of Senate, The University of Newcastle. On a good day.

If Newcastle was a working man's town, why were so many in leadership roles in the University filled by figures imported from – or who worked strenuously at the appearance of having been imported from – an Establishment on another shore? James J. Auchmuty, the founding Vice-Chancellor, put it: 'What I was proposing to establish was a university in the British tradition.'¹ Actually this went down very well locally because 'Few people in Newcastle understood such matters and those who did, wanted a university of the most traditional kind.'²

And at first that is what they got, with some idiosyncratic Auchmutyisms thrown in. By 'at first' I mean during Auchmuty's reign, which came to an end just over a year after I joined the staff. After that, things started falling apart. Auchmuty himself had things firmly under control; he was liked and respected despite his odd ways in interviewing prospective staff.

Laurie introduced me to colleagues in other departments. The Professor of Classics, Godfrey Tanner from Melbourne originally, had a boyish face, a quirky smile and a charming hesitation in his speech he had cultivated during his undergraduate days at Oxford. Godfrey, in academic gown as always, held his hand out for me to shake. As I did so, I was informed: 'You are now, d-dear boy, sh-shaking the hand of the finest Latin s-speaking s-sodomite in the S-Southern Hemisphaire!'

Godfrey's love of self-mocking theatre led to his being savagely attacked, several years later, in a poofster-bashing incident.

All of which illustrates the cultural schizophrenia with which Newcastle was afflicted.

I became Head of Department straight away: I, who had just been admonished by the Dean at Alberta for attending only two Faculty meetings in my entire stay there, had to chair the Departmental meeting, a job in which I'd had no previous experience and that I hated. I then had to present our Departmental motions

¹ Quoted in Ken Dutton's *Auchmuty: The life of James Johnston Auchmuty*. Mt. Nebo, Q: Boombana Publications, 2000, p. 321.

² Don Wright, *Looking Back: The History of the University of Newcastle*, University of Newcastle, 1992, p. 99.

to the Education Board of Studies of the Faculty of Arts, then re-present them to the Standing Committee of the Faculty of Arts, then yet again to the Faculty of Arts meeting itself, then still again to the Standing Committee of Senate (as Professorial Board was called), then finally, at long last, to Senate itself.

While the intended function of the standing committees was to cut debate, it didn't work that way given the loquacious propensity of certain colleagues. I had to be present at all meetings, at which the same issues could in theory be debated up to six or seven times. My often expressed views on time-wasting and resource-wasting usually received a sympathetic hearing, but the truth was most of my colleagues positively enjoyed these elaborate rituals, sent up so well by Laurie Taylor in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*.

A local example heads this Chapter.

I could understand people like Vice-Principal Bryn Newton-John enjoying these theatrical displays of pseudo-academic plumage – his tongue was almost as golden as Olivia's, his daughter. A Vice-Principal was required to be an impressive front man. It was the non-Bryn Newton-Johns revelling in all this puffery who disappointed me.

In Canada, it had been: 'Ah, so you want to put on a new course (for example). Good, how can we help to make it work as well as possible?'

In Newcastle, it was: 'Ah, so you want to put on a new course. I'm going to oppose that on principle. You have to make your case and convince me. Me! I'm going to make you sweat it out. And if you poach any of my student numbers, you're dead.'

John Kirby, from Canada, captured the Newcastle way of academic negotiation:

Professor A: 'I want to propose so-and-so'

Professor B: 'You'll get it over my dead body.'

Professor A: 'But I've got a good case!'

Professor B: 'And I've got the numbers.'

But at least even that's better than what happens in today's universities: academics don't get to make cases or propose anything. They do what they're bloody well told by men – and occasionally women – in Italian suits, with their precious strategic plans in their pigskin brief cases.

The formation of a Faculty of Education, already mooted by Laurie, would cut out one step in that tortuous route to Senate: The Board of Studies. And in 1975 that came to pass as a one-department Faculty. In the absence of any other contenders, I became Dean.

It was then that I truly became aware of the accuracy of the Kirby analysis.

One of the most important roles of the Head of Department was to put in a request for resources – money – to the Allocations Committee. In my first go at this, I thought I'd play it cool. I asked the staff what they wanted. Nothing much. Equipment? We were going into a new building in a couple of years and we'd need lots then, but no, we needed nothing this year and the only thing the following year was a new photocopier. The year after we'd have a good case and then I'd go for it to equip the new building. I told the Allocations Committee we'll be right for this year, but we'd be putting in for a new photocopier for next year. Done.

When the Allocations Committee reported to Senate that equipment for Education was zero, Laurie Short, yet to take his sabbatical off campus, went right off.

'Education is being victimised yet again!' he roared. 'I move the Report be sent back to the Allocations Committee to reconsider Education's allocation!'

Silence. Laurie glared at me to second the motion. Bugger him, this was my call not his. The motion lapsed for want of a seconder.

He later stormed into my office. 'Why didn't you second my motion?'

'Because I didn't ask for anything. I'm saving up for the new building.'

That wasn't the way this game was played. Department heads *always* asked for resources, whether they were wanted or not. Laurie thought I was naive to the point of stupidity. He would have withered me with his contempt but I was unwitherable: I didn't give a stuff.

The Vice Principal now is Alan Tweedy, RN, who has a history of running tight ships. I've been summoned to the bridge: his office, that is.

Glaring icily over the tops of his rimless glasses, he raps out that I have violated procedures: 'Heads of Departments are not authorised to sign orders greater than \$3,000.'

'I didn't know that.'

'You should. It's in the University Procedures Manual.'

'Oh well, sorry about that, but there's no difficulty. The photocopier was only a couple of hundred over what we'd budgeted for. The Departmental budget can meet the shortfall easily.'

'The point is not whether or not the Department budget can meet the shortfall. The point is that you have violated University procedures. That's the point.'

I can't believe this. Here I am, a Head of Department, being treated like a junior rating over a nonexistent problem. I turn and leave. As I go through his door, I look back.

He is looking down at his desk, grinning with self-satisfaction.

The Vice Principal was also the Parking Officer for the University. As Tweedie said at one pre-Senate luncheon we Deans had inflicted on us: 'I regard parking as my most important responsibility as Vice Principal.'

It figured.

I'd bought a cute little Honda 90 motorcycle. It freed up the car for Margaret (on fine days), was absurdly cheap to run and could be parked anywhere. So I parked it anywhere. Like outside my office where there wasn't a parking bay.

Security kept giving me parking fines, I kept leaving gentle little notes on my pillion seat for them, like this one:

Dear Security Officer,

It's quite okay, this little machine doesn't take up much room. By parking here I'm easing the load in the main car park.

(Sgd) Professor John Biggs, Dean of Education.

Tweedie summoned me to the bridge again, accusing me this time of attempting to intimidate Security by pulling rank as the Dean of Education. Come on. Do *you* see the above note as intimidating? Further, I had about \$100 in fines to pay and pay I had better, or else.

I sensed that Tweedie would enjoy making a capital case out of this and I had more important things to save my adrenalin for. I agreed to pay one (1) fine of \$20, and would use the car park in future, but, I explained in a long memo, I hoped he understood that I was thereby taking up much needed space as there was indeed a parking problem at the University. If he, as the officer responsible for parking, thought that was the sensible way to go, then go that way I would. Of course, he thought it sensible: the *Procedures Manual* so ordained. We concluded on that uneasy compromise.

At another luncheon when we were discussing the film 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', Tweedie expressed the view that Nurse Ratchett was the character for whom he felt most sympathy: not Jack Nicholson, not the Indian chief, not any of the other inmates.

Again, it figured.

'The motion was carried 2 For, 12 Against.'

So said a member of the Department of Psychology, with perhaps a touch of hyperbole. The two for the motion were Professor John Keats, Head of Department, and Associate Professor Daphne Keats,

his wife; the 12 against were the rest of the Department. The Keats family had won the day, as it always had.

In fact the power of the name 'Keats' extended even further. Professor Reyn Keats, John's older brother, was the Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics. John and Reyn displayed much brotherly cohesion.

John Keats had strongly supported my appointment. He'd known me previously and he perceived me as biddable (a judgement he later revised). John saw Education as psychology-related and therefore within his bailiwick. Pretty soon I realised my intended role: I was being cast, if not as the Keats mole, then as an ally within the enemy camp.

Much of the enmity between Keats and Laurie had come about because a post in Education in developmental psychology had been advertised for which Daphne Keats had applied and was well qualified for. Laurie was determined to avoid what he saw as a psychological cuckoo in the educational nest. Which was understandable. What was incomprehensible was that he blocked Daphne's appointment by changing the post suddenly to one in another area and then appointing the wife of one of his own academic staff.

My appointment was therefore seen as healing the rift between the two departments and to foster inter-departmental cooperation. But it was a rocky road.

I wanted to organise our new Faculty into departments like I was used to in U of A so we could specialise in our areas of expertise. I knew Senate would never agree, because it would give Education too much power (two more heads of department would mean two more Education seats on Senate, you see), so I went instead for divisions within the existing Department, which didn't have that consequence. One division would be a Division of Educational Psychology. I was telling Daphne this in my artless way at a departmental party.

'Oh, what an absurd notion!' she laughed. 'Out of the question. You must call it something else, anything but "psychology".'

'Why not? We're teaching psychology and the staff involved are all full members of the Australian Psychological Society.'

'Anything but "psychology", John. *We* are the Psychology Department.'

'Oh come on, Daphne,' I too now laughed gaily as I sipped cask red from a paper cup, 'you're being too territorial. We've evolved higher than dogs pissing on trees, surely.'

Apparently we hadn't. Next day, an irate John Keats knocked at my door, the strain of trying to smile pleasantly bringing a sheen to his brow. He went straight to the point.

'Call it whatever you like, behavioural sciences, educational studies, whatever, but *not* psychology. If you use another name, I'll support you, but if you persist in "psychology", I'll make damned sure the whole idea of divisions is crushed.'

There was quite an exchange. There was only one way in which it could finish. I had the last words and there were two of them: 'Fuck off!'

I held the door open for him.

Reyn Keats was at one stage Deputy Chairman of Senate, the equivalent of Chairman of Professorial Board anywhere else³, which meant he was the most powerful academic in the University and could make or break most proposals.

At one Standing Committee I reported as a matter of routine that the Faculty was about to float a journal.

'Can't,' growled Reyn.

'Why not? It'll give the Faculty visibility and will encourage staff to publish more.' I was all sweet reasonableness.

'Because faculties don't have resources. Departments do but not faculties.'

'We've thought of that. The Department will supply the resources, but we'll call it published by the Faculty, with a Faculty logo.'

'That's illegal.'

I wasn't going to waste time arguing. We'd do it anyway, none of his bloody business or Senate's. I was reporting, not asking for anything.

That afternoon, a second irate Professor Keats presented himself at my office.

'I'm worried about what you said about the journal.'

'No need to Reyn. It's not a problem. It's a Departmental decision and the Department will foot the bill.'

'Well I'm telling you now; it's illegal and it cannot be done.'

As before, there was quite an exchange, with only one way in which it could finish. I had the last words, and there were two, one different for a change: 'Piss off!'

I held the door open for him.

My forthrightness probably did me a lot of damage. The Brothers Keat would no doubt have exchanged their stories about the Biggs mode of finalising discussion. The incidents would surely have reached the ears of Don George the Vice Chancellor, and could even have been a factor in George's later

³ This was another Auchmuty idiosyncrasy, which allowed the VC to chair Senate. The Deputy Chairman was elected by members of Senate specifically to represent Senate's views in the event of strong disagreement between Senate and the VC. It worked with Auchmuty but with his successor, Don George, it turned out to be calamitous.

determination to shaft Education. But fair's fair. There's no way I would have ordered other colleagues how to run their department, so when I was told how to run mine, when it was none of their business, I believed I had every right to tell them to butt out.

There was a strange sequel to my interaction with Reyn. Shortly afterwards, I spent a week at a marathon encounter group in Canberra, at which, as is often the way at encounter groups, I floated on a sea of contrived and temporary love.

I was still floating when I saw Reyn by the Commonwealth Bank. I approached him, I put my arm around his shoulder. Lovingly.

'Great to see you, Reyn. You know that business about the journal? Well, *I feel that* (the magic encounter group words!) we all got a little too excited. It's no big deal really, is it?'

I could feel him melting under my embrace.

'Well, not really, I suppose.' He grinned at me. Shyly.

We published the journal. Not another word was said about it. I never got around to publishing anything in it myself, not that I can remember. Truth to tell, it wasn't a very memorable journal.

Education faculties in most universities tend to be cloven in twain, but unlike Plato's hermaphrodites, the two halves do not wish to seek the other half to become soul mates again. One half is comprised of those with academic roots. Most have academic aspirations but there's frequently a rump of sociologists or philosophers with political aspirations: Marxist-anarchists they called themselves in my Department. The other half is comprised of those with professional roots in the classroom. They have ambiguous aspirations, which if political, tend to veer to the right. In all, it can be a poisonous mix.

I had a hard core of three Marxist-anarchists. One said to me straight up: 'I'm going to oppose everything you propose. You, as Department Head, have more power than the rest of us. It is a given that you will be making decisions to maintain or enhance your own personal power.'

He liked wearing message badges, including one: 'No God, No Master.' This prompted Jack Doczy to make the brilliantly perceptive comment: 'I see he's read another book.' Our Marxist-anarchist then must have read yet another book, this one published in Disneyland, for he bought a set of Mickey Mouse ears and wore them at Departmental meetings. He argued against whatever came from the chair, grinning and pulling faces sidelong at his colleagues.

In one subject I was teaching, I tried the Keller Plan of teaching, in which students progress through the course at their own pace, moving to the next section when they have passed a test on the previous section. It is therefore possible for students, if they want to, to pass a semester-length course in two or three weeks. Science graduates loved it; Arts graduates hated it. It required the tutors to be flexible

with their time, which one tutor wasn't, deliberately I fear. For these reasons, I dropped it the following year.

I read in *Opus*, the student paper, a letter to the editor about

...a certain unscrupulous Head of Department who has set *his* text book as *the* one and only text ... To ensure that students are thoroughly ingrained in the bourgeois ideology of his pearls of wisdom., he has also set compulsory exams on *every* chapter of his right wing propaganda...⁴

That was the work of a member of my own staff. What would you do about it? Go to court? Or ignore it? I chose the latter. I treated it as childish destructiveness, on the same level as opposing everything on principle while wearing Mickey Mouse ears (not the same person, incidentally). I learned to develop a thick skin and as far as ongoing policy was concerned, the far left crazies were outvoted on most matters of importance at staff meetings. Er, let me revise my terminology. They weren't 'far left crazies', they were nihilistic fascists. I wouldn't want to give far left crazies a bad name.

In 1979, Arthur Jensen and Hans Eysenck came to Australia on a lecture tour of universities, both propounding genetic theories of intelligence and personality. At a meeting of the Australian Psychological Society convened for Jensen in Melbourne, I presented a paper⁵ explaining Jensen's data in terms of a model of simultaneous and successive processing that had been developed by my friend from Edmonton days, J. P. Das, and his student and now my colleague, John Kirby. This model made no genetic assumptions about ability. Which model you chose, Jensen or Das-Kirby, hinged on the interpretation of a statistical point. Jensen generously praised the paper but of course disagreed with my conclusions.

Jensen was a significant figure in theories of intelligence. Accordingly, I referred to him in my text *Process of Learning* (1982: pp. 390-7), outlining his theory along with the Das-Kirby model that countered it. For my pains, there was another outburst in the student paper about 'a certain professor of education peddling the racist views of Arthur Jensen.'

This sort of unacademic behaviour only confirmed the opinion the rest of the university tended to have about education staff. Either they were failed psychologists, philosophers or sociologists, otherwise they'd be in psychology, philosophy or sociology departments wouldn't they? Or they were ex-schoolies, not academics at all. Which is drastically unfair. Think Ann Brown, for a start.

⁴ *Opus* (undated). I kept the cutting but omitted the date.

⁵ Biggs, J. B. (1978) Genetics and education: An alternative to Jensenism. *Educational Researcher*, 7(4), 11-17.

Yet I remember taking my usual lunchtime jog round the picturesque golf-course just outside the university grounds. I posed myself a question: 'If I won the Lottery, so that I never had to work again, what would I do?'

I'd upgrade house and car, take a long trip, donate as appropriate, all that of course; and then? I'd do exactly what I was doing before: Be an academic. I probably wouldn't even move from Newcastle.

So you see, it couldn't have been all that bad.