

Chapter 8

Some Readjustment is Necessary: The University of Newcastle

Newcastle had begun as a punishment centre for particularly recalcitrant convicts sent up from Sydney, with the mighty Hawkesbury River to prevent them from sneaking back to Sydney's proto-civilisation. Newcastle was sitting on large coal seams, and during and after the convict era, coalmining was the major industry. By the time I had arrived, BHP was by far the largest employer, with its vast plant on Kooragang Island (today the university is the largest employer). Newcastle was then 'a working man's town', as I was abruptly reminded when trying to buy avocados, which we used to eat regularly in Canada. I had asked a fruit shop proprietor why I couldn't buy avocados anywhere when they were grown only a couple of hundred miles up the NSW coast. 'And ya won't mate,' he assured me. 'This is a working man's town and ya won't get that classy sort of stuff 'ere.'

The Newcastle University College arose out of Newcastle Technical College in 1951. The college was established under the authority of the then University of Technology New South Wales, now the University of New South Wales, with just five full-time students. Study was restricted to engineering, mathematics and science. In 1965, the college became the autonomous University of Newcastle. At the opening ceremony, the Professor of Classics, the charmingly eccentric Godfrey Tanner, poured wine libations onto the ground in order 'to sanctify the land upon which the University rests'. The founding Vice-Chancellor was James J. Auchmuty, with whom I had broken bread in Montreal, 777 ft about sea level. Auchmuty later said of the new university: '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 had joined the staff. Auchmuty himself had things firmly under control; he was liked and respected despite his odd ways in interviewing prospective staff. But after he had left, things started falling apart.

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.

Sure enough, Newcastle started out ominously. I repeated the mistake I made when setting out for Armidale eleven years earlier. I'd forgotten that academics are expected to travel first-class in trains. Laurie Short nearly missed us, as he waited at the first-class carriage while we descended from second-class, just as had occurred previously with Jim Richardson in Armidale.

Given the tenor of our previous correspondence, Laurie was thoughtfulness itself. He took us to the City Motel in downtown Newcastle, which was to be our home until we could find our own accommodation, and then to his home where his wife Elvie fed us generously.

Laurie introduced me to colleagues in other departments, including Godfrey Tanner, he who had sanctified the campus with libations of wine. Godfrey had a boyish face, a quirky smile and a charming hesitation in his speech he had cultivated during his undergraduate days at Oxford. From Melbourne originally, 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 Hemisphair!'

Godfrey's love of self-mocking theatre led to his being savagely attacked, several years later, in a poofster-bashing incident. Godfrey's *Brideshead Revisited* antics were unappreciated in working class Newcastle.

... I became Head of Department on arrival. I, who had just been admonished by the Dean at Alberta for attending only two Faculty meetings during my entire stay there, had to chair departmental meetings, a job in which I'd had no previous experience and that I quickly learned to hate. I then had to present our departmental motions 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.

I suppose the intended function of these standing committees was to cut debate, but it didn't work that way given the loquacious propensity of certain colleagues. I had to be present at all meetings and to present the same case to be debated up to six times. My often expressed views on time-wasting usually received a sympathetic hearing, but the truth was that too many of my colleagues positively enjoyed these elaborate rituals.

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 his daughter Olivia's. A Vice-Principal was required to be an impressive front man and Bryn filled that role perfectly. It was the non-Bryn Newton-Johns revelling in all this puffery who disappointed me.

Changing Universities

I can best describe the proceedings of Senate with this little cameo, with apologies to Laurie Taylor of *The Times Higher Education Supplement*:

‘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 ...’

Why, I wondered, if Newcastle was a working man’s town, were so many in leadership roles in the University filled by figures imported from – or by figures who worked strenuously at the appearance of having been imported from – an establishment from another shore?

Also imported from that shore was a by-blow of the Westminster system: opposition for opposition’s sake.

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’ll have to make your case and convince me – yes, *me!* I’m going to make you sweat it out. And if you poach any of my student numbers, you’re dead.’

John Kirby, who had joined my staff from Canada, captured the Newcastle way of academic negotiation thus:

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.’

The formation of a Faculty of Education, already mooted by Laurie, would cut out two steps in that tortuous route to Senate: the Faculty of Arts and its Board of Studies. And in 1975 that came to pass as we became 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.

Changing Universities

One of the most important roles of the head of department was to put in a request for resources 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. 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. But the year after that, we'd need to equip a new building, so best, thought I, to save up until then. Accordingly, I told the Allocations Committee we'd be right for this year, but we'd be putting in for a new photocopier for next year and then we'd really go for it when we had to equip the new building. Done.

When the Allocations Committee reported to Senate that equipment for Education was zero, Laurie Short, yet to take his sabbatical off campus, jerked his head up in outrage.

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

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 wanted them or not. Laurie thought I was naive to the point of stupidity.

The following year, it was time to buy that photocopier. By this stage, Bryn Newton-John had retired, his successor being Alan Tweedy, RN, who had a history of running tight ships. I was summoned to the bridge: his office, that is.

Glaring icily over the tops of his rimless glasses, he rapped out that I had 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 the stipulated maximum. 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 couldn't believe it. There I was, a head of a department, being treated like an errant junior rating over a non-existent problem. I turned and left. As I went through his door, I looked back.

Tweedie was looking down at his desk, grinning with self-satisfaction.

Changing Universities

But I was not done with Vice-Principal Tweedie, RN. 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 nice 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. 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, as 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 we discussed the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Tweedie expressed the unusual 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.