

WHAT IS THE UNIVERSITY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE?

It has become clear in the last week that this campus is in a crisis deeper than any that has yet arisen since the days of the Civil Liberties campaign in 1967. The elements in the situation are very similar in many respects. In 1967 the issue of civil liberties broke as a response by an incensed campus which suddenly found itself in increasing solidarity in the conviction that minorities should have the same rights of protest. This huge movement of opinion and feeling arose out of repression and threats of repression directed by both university and government authorities against radical groups dissenting by civil disobedience against the Vietnam War and Conscription. In 1970 a movement of the same huge character is developing and is drawing more and more student and staff as the points at issue sink in gradually to everyone's consciousness. Again the issues have been posed by a small group holding intense convictions about Vietnam and conscription. Again, in the expression of these convictions in symbolic form they have raised contentious issues of principle going well beyond the ideological debate, the debate about the war and the debate about legitimate limits of protest within this society.

Many people, inside and outside the groups from whom the activists in both the Regiment affair and the Quang incident disagree about the two actions involved. There are moral differences; there are political differences; there are tactical differences. These differences can be resolved only by lengthy debate going into the question of the diverse moral imperatives acting on socially conscious people concerned about the issues which divide Australia today. It does not help much to reiterate on one side that personal liberty must at all costs be defended and that the Quang incident involves this issue and this alone. This is merely one ingredient in the situation and one's moral judgment of the restriction of the Ambassador's freedom of movement must be seen in perspective. It is not as bad as a lot of other things that are being done in the world and in our society. It cannot be considered unrelated to his actions to his social role, to the politico-military effort that he symbolises seen by many people in the world today, as the genocide of a nation. Any discussion of the incident must take into account proportion, perspective and the various moral tensions in the total context, from the point of view of this university and the reaction from many groups within it, the activists in the incident ought not be regarded as innovators of conduct restrictive of others. If we think of the issue of freedom of speech, how about the generations of bullyboys in the fifties and early sixties who spent a lot of time shouting mindlessly during political meetings in an attempt to make discussion impossible? If we consider freedom movement, what about the Engineering students in recent years who have actually thrown things at radical students for gathering for political purposes? And if we raise the issue of the use of force (it should be noted that nobody alleges bodily restraint or violence to the Ambassador) then how about the physical abuse and physical intimidation of Freshers during the various "ceremonies" of initiation? In any of the above counts the Quang incident is less culpable of denial of liberty than those, and these have not even the justification of being in any way motivated by a conflict of principles.

Hence it would be quite out of place to consider action against anyone involved in this incident that was disproportionate to action taken about the other kinds of incident. Has anyone ever been particularly exercised over those? If people are outraged by this incident they owe it to the rest of the university community to state the grounds of their outrage, distinguish them from the elements of the situation and assess the moral content of them in open discussion. Because it is not as if the issues are simple. They are the very dilemmas over which men are agonising in all parts of the world.

It does not help much, on the other side, to merely declare over and over again that the only issue involved is the Vietnam debate and the symbolism of the Ambassador and his opponents. This does not do justice to the deep disturbance that many feel about the conscientious decisions implied, about the implications of the action for future choices in times of crisis, choices between moral demands acting on people to pursue contrary courses, either of which seem to have inadequacies. Many people are now convinced of the need for revolutionary changes in this society. This action poses more sharply than any in recent years the many questions as to possibility, method, legitimacy, and morality involved in the process of social change within a society already as full of violence as ours. Nobody on this campus has got the answers to this. There are real doubts about the efficacy of violence, there are real doubts about the possibility of non-violent change, there is potential tragedy involved in the choices to be made, and there are questions about what will give people hope and what will intensify their despair about the way things are now. To treat anyone's convictions or opinions about these questions with contempt or as if the matter were clear is to treat a major crisis in human civilization as if it were merely a text-book question in ethics, or sociology, or Marxism, or Divinity.

Those are some of the things that are obviously in the situation now. There are others. There is the fact that the Quang Incident might have died a natural death had not some person called the police on campus. There is the fact that not only the state police but the Special Branch were on campus. There was the contribution made to this already bad situation by the actions of Professor Webb as acting vice-chancellor. There is the role

played by the mass media, considered by many as mischievous and dangerous in its exaggerations of the incidents into a "battle". There is also the connexion now confusedly made on all sides between the Regiment incident and the Friday incident. The Cowen committee has followed the stupid conflation of both these issues made by the Government and the mass media. There is now a generalized phenomenon of "violence", making no distinctions whatever as to persons as against property, or as to time, and seeking out, by the very mode of perception it employs some simple originating factor, if possible in the form of a small group of students. Whoever was there at "the beginning of it all" (whatever that means) will get the honour of being considered, if not the prime causes, at least the prime scapegoats.

The Cowen Committee is a creature of this situation, it is merely another symptom of it and as such deserves itself to be investigated along with all the other elements. It carries many of the marks of unwillingness to discuss issues openly, generously and fully that are remarkable in all the other parts of the whole situation, from the years of entrenched apathy, bad faith and lazy self-interest inside a more and more corrupt socioeconomic system (into which the university has been glad to fit) to the total situation of mindless denunciation that now oppresses those who have uncomfortably exposed the profound and complex tangle of issues implicit in the events. For one thing, hardly anybody knew that the committee had called for evidence, and having begun its deliberations on Monday of last week it had closed the period of accepting reports by 1 p.m. on Thursday. Who could possibly respect that sort of investigation?

The Cowen Committee has been opposed by several hundred quite explicitly in four specific motions immediately after its formation. It is probably opposed by considerably more than that throughout the university. The body that is organising this feeling within the university is the university coordinating committee. This was set up on Wednesday night last and its meeting at 5 p.m., each night in the Relaxation Block have attracted growing numbers of students and staff who are projecting it as the nucleus of a permanent movement of systematic, creative and action-oriented discussion of all the important issues implicit in recent events, along with all the other issues that have never been adequately discussed in this institution, including all the matters gathered together in Up the Right Channels.

The central committee is an umbrella committee with three committees functioning under its aegis and reporting to it:

1. A newsletter committee responsible for producing daily news from all groups involved in any aspect of the developing crisis.
2. A publicity committee producing daily leaflets connecting the complex of permanent problems focused in the events of last Friday.
3. An investigatory committee with the task of using all reasonable means of discovering the facts, intentions, issues and contexts involved in any full understanding of the events of Friday. This committee will include in its investigations consideration of the role of the mass media, the Vietnam debate, the Administration, the world views in conflict, the pressures operating to produce irrational responses and simplistic praise/blame categorisations and avoidance of problems that will give rise to further crises other than the crises that will naturally arise in a society of this kind. It is hoped that the full results of the investigation will take the form of a cheap book.

The operations of these committees, with no preconceptions whatsoever imposed on the discussion, will ensure, if nothing else, that the whole university community will have access to as full a collection of information and opinions on the issue as is needed to guide any persons of good will to gain some reasonable understanding

(1) of the events and (2) of what they manifest, portend and desiderate for the future of this institution and for radical change; it will enable people to make more considered commitments to the movements whose dialectical interplay will radically change both this university and this society.

Dan O'Neill

Notice: MOTHER OF TEN TO SPEAK AT UNIVERSITY

Tuesday 15th September 1 p.m. Relaxation Block

If shit was worth money, the poor would be born without assholes.

.....old Portuguese saying.

FORUM: Whitrod on Closeup Wednesday 9th

There are no special branch on campus (Thursday 10th. Sept.)

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