

Remembering the University of Queensland Forum

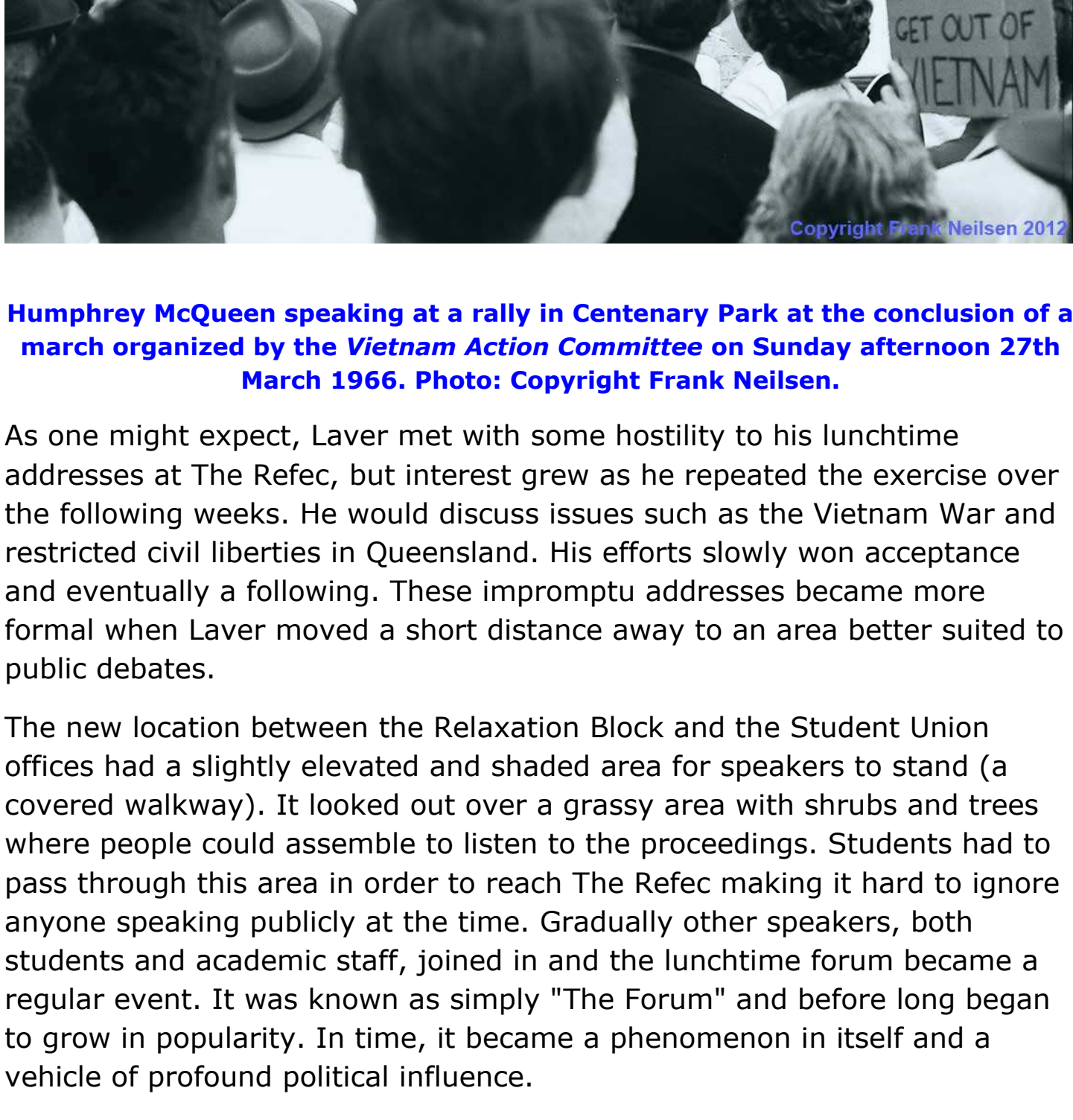
compiled by Brisbane Discussion Circle members

During the 1960s, significant protest movements were erupting on university campuses around the world. In the early 1960s, attention focussed on the University of California, Berkeley campus as thousands of students demonstrated in support of civil rights and against the escalating war in Vietnam. In May 1968, France was brought to a standstill as students and workers took part in demonstrations and strikes aimed at increasing participation in the running of their institutions.

Influenced by world events, a substantial protest movement began in Brisbane in the mid-1960s. After the introduction of compulsory conscription (National Service) in Australia by the Menzies Government in November 1964, students at the University of Queensland started to organize and demonstrate against conscription and the war in Vietnam.

In 1966, a student named Brian Laver started addressing the crowd of students at the Refectory (the student cafeteria, usually referred to as The Refec). Laver simply and unceremoniously stood on a table as a makeshift podium and started addressing the lunchtime students. This was to become a pivotal event.

Laver's initiative followed in the tradition of the Soap-box Speaker already established in the early 1960s by Humphrey McQueen and many others at Brisbane's Centenary Park (now Centenary Place) in Ann Street.

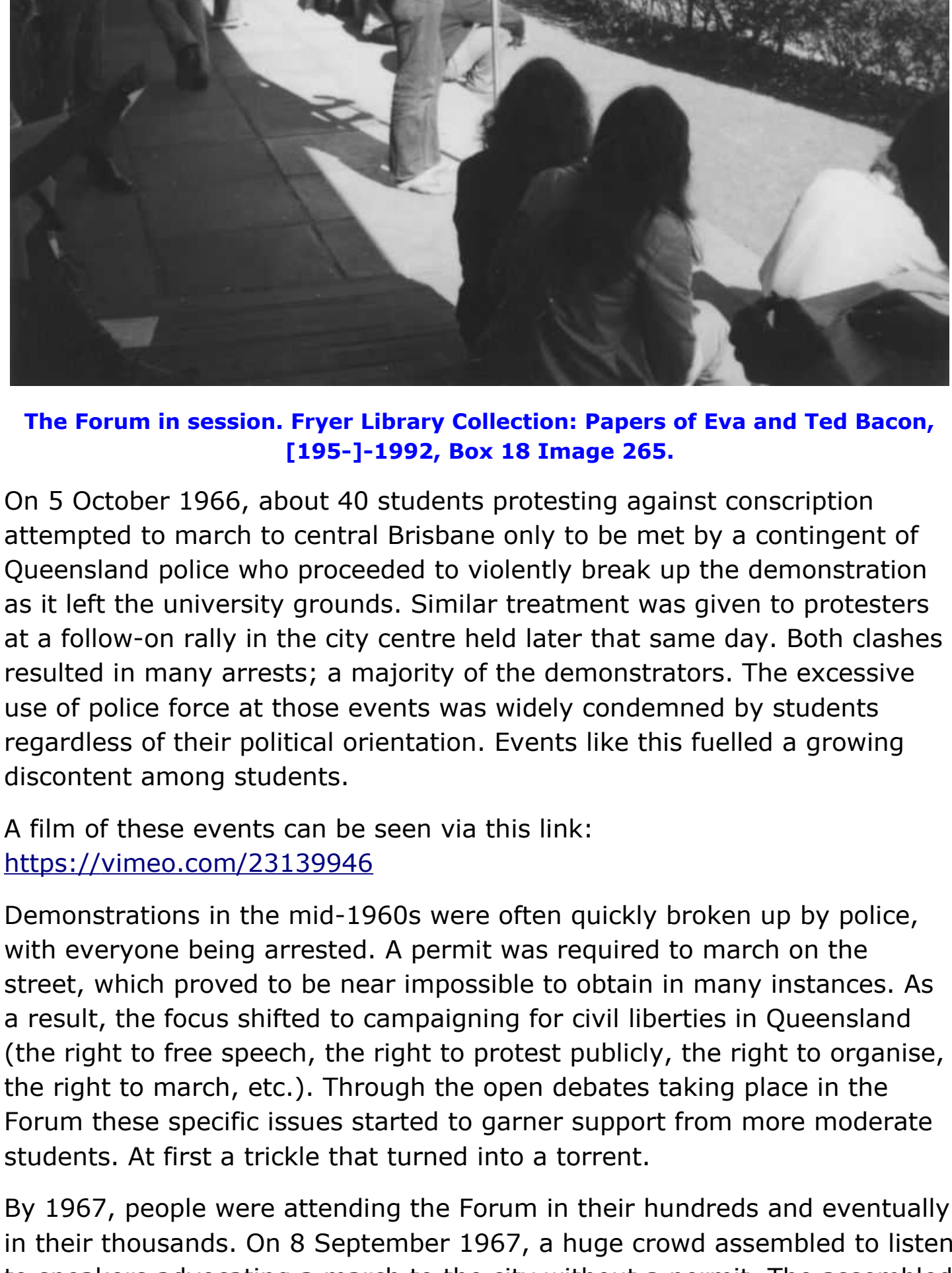


Copyright Frank Neilsen 2012

Humphrey McQueen speaking at a rally in Centenary Park at the conclusion of a march organized by the Vietnam Action Committee on Sunday afternoon 27th March 1966. Photo: Copyright Frank Neilsen.

As one might expect, Laver met with some hostility to his lunchtime addresses at The Refec, but interest grew as he repeated the exercise over the following weeks. He would discuss issues such as the Vietnam War and restricted civil liberties in Queensland. His efforts slowly won acceptance and eventually a following. These impromptu addresses became more formal when Laver moved a short distance away to an area better suited to public debates.

The new location between the Relaxation Block and the Student Union offices had a slightly elevated and shaded area for speakers to stand (a covered walkway). It looked out over a grassy area with shrubs and trees where people could assemble to listen to the proceedings. Students had to pass through this area in order to reach The Refec making it hard to ignore anyone speaking publicly at the time. Gradually other speakers, both students and academic staff, joined in and the lunchtime forum became a regular event. It was known as simply "The Forum" and before long began to grow in popularity. In time, it became a phenomenon in itself and a vehicle of profound political influence.



The Forum in session. Fryer Library Collection: Papers of Eva and Ted Bacon, [195-]1992, Box 18 Image 265.

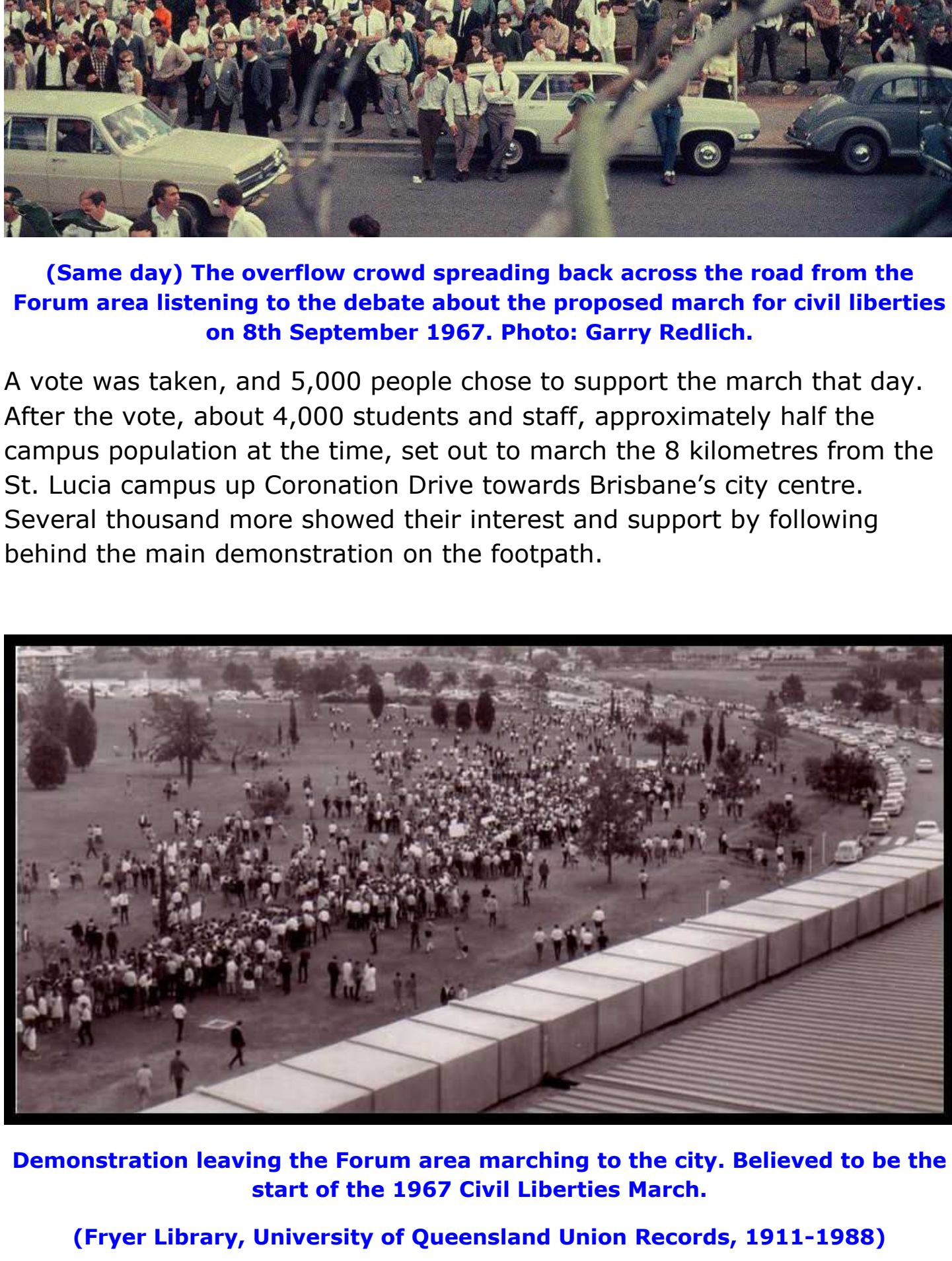
On 5 October 1966, about 40 students protesting against conscription attempted to march to central Brisbane only to be met by a contingent of Queensland police who proceeded to violently break up the demonstration as it left the university grounds. Similar treatment was given to protesters at a follow-on rally in the city centre held later that same day. Both clashes resulted in many arrests; a majority of the demonstrators. The excessive use of police force at those events was widely condemned by students regardless of their political orientation. Events like this fuelled a growing discontent among students.

A film of these events can be seen via this link:

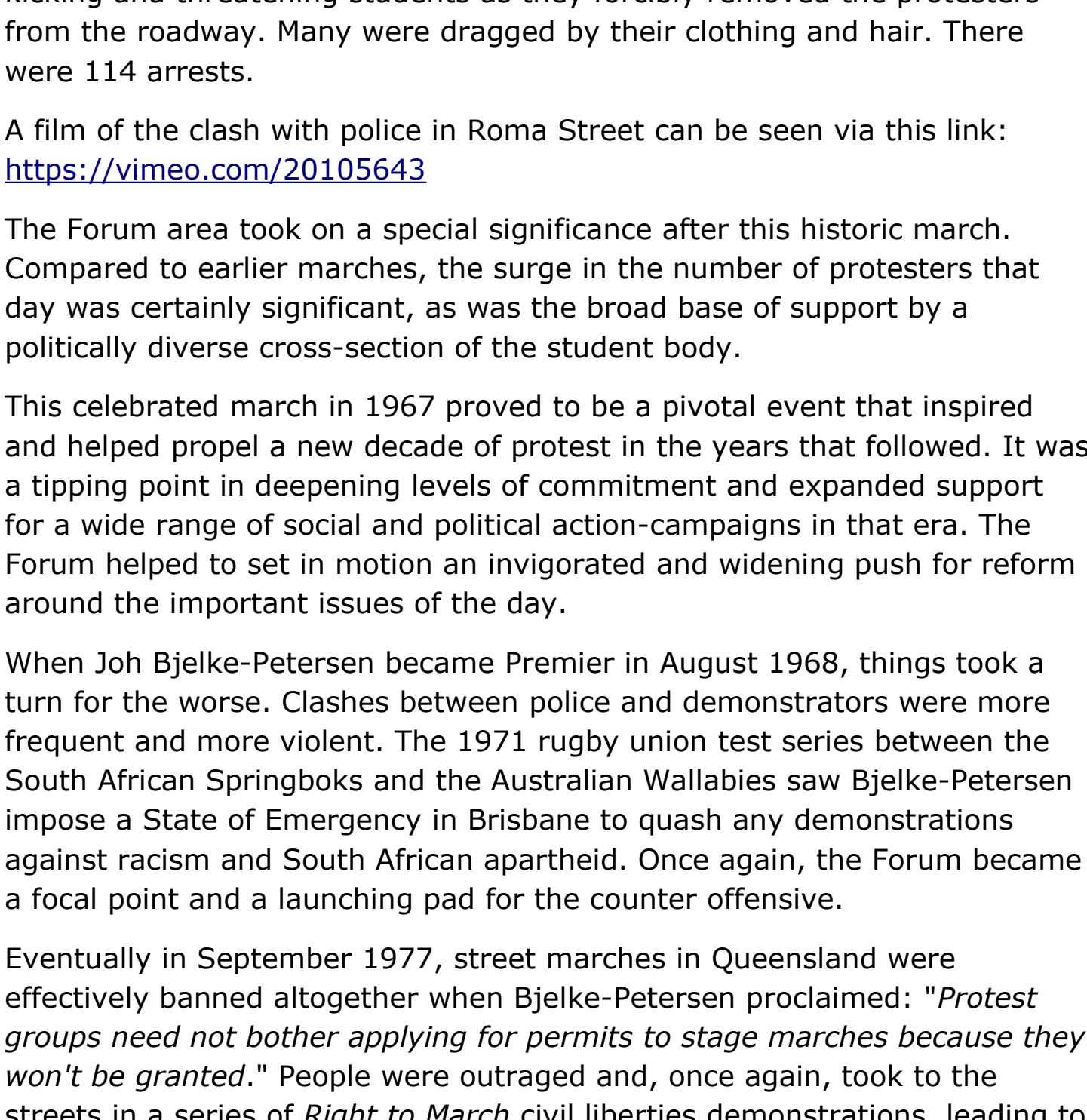
<https://vimeo.com/23139946>

Demonstrations in the mid-1960s were often quickly broken up by police, with everyone being arrested. A permit was required to march on the street, which proved to be near impossible to obtain in many instances. As a result, the focus shifted to campaigning for civil liberties in Queensland (the right to free speech, the right to protest publicly, the right to organise, the right to march, etc.). Through the open debates taking place in the Forum these specific issues started to garner support from more moderate students. At first a trickle that turned into a torrent.

By 1967, people were attending the Forum in their hundreds and eventually in their thousands. On 8 September 1967, a huge crowd assembled to listen to speakers advocating a march to the city without a permit. The assembled crowd was so large that it spilled across the roadway spreading back to the library.

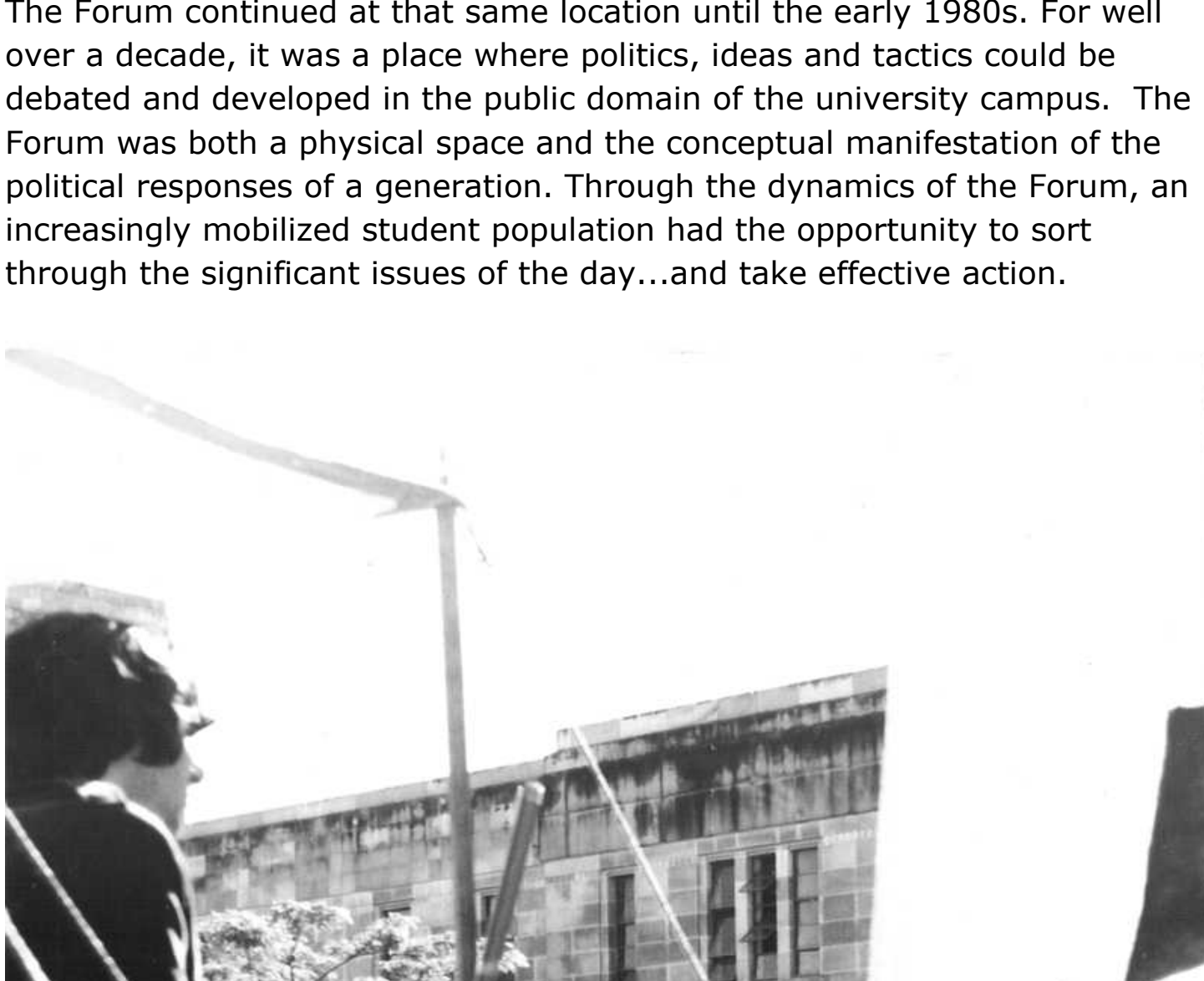


Mass meeting in the Forum area before the 1967 Civil Liberties March on 8th September 1967. Photo: Garry Redlich.



(Same day) The overflow crowd spreading back across the road from the Forum area listening to the debate about the proposed march for civil liberties on 8th September 1967. Photo: Garry Redlich.

A vote was taken, and 5,000 people chose to support the march that day. After the vote, about 4,000 students and staff, approximately half the campus population at the time, set out to march the 8 kilometres from the St. Lucia campus up Coronation Drive towards Brisbane's city centre. Several thousand more showed their interest and support by following behind the main demonstration on the footpath.



Demonstration leaving the Forum area marching to the city. Believed to be the start of the 1967 Civil Liberties March.

(Fryer Library, University of Queensland Union Records, 1911-1988)

Close to central Brisbane at Roma Street, the marchers were confronted by hundreds of police who ordered them to disperse. In response, the marchers linked arms and sat down on the road in an act of peaceful defiance. Newspaper accounts at the time described police punching, kicking and threatening students as they forcibly removed the protesters from the roadway. Many were dragged by their clothing and hair. There were 114 arrests.

A film of the clash with police in Roma Street can be seen via this link:

<https://vimeo.com/20105643>

The Forum area took on a special significance after this historic march. Compared to earlier marches, the surge in the number of protesters that day was certainly significant, as was the broad base of support by a politically diverse cross-section of the student body.

This celebrated march in 1967 proved to be a pivotal event that inspired and helped propel a new decade of protest in the years that followed. It was a tipping point in deepening levels of commitment and expanded support for a wide range of social and political action-campaigns in that era. The Forum helped to set in motion an invigorated and widening push for reform around the important issues of the day.

When Joh Bjelke-Petersen became Premier in August 1968, things took a turn for the worse. Clashes between police and demonstrators were more frequent and more violent. The 1971 rugby union test series between the South African Springboks and the Australian Wallabies saw Bjelke-Petersen impose a State of Emergency in Brisbane as any demonstrations against racism and South African apartheid. Once again, the Forum became a focal point and a launching pad for the counter offensive.

Eventually in September 1977, street marches in Queensland were effectively banned altogether when Bjelke-Petersen proclaimed: "Protest groups need not bother applying for permits to stage marches because they won't be granted." People were outraged and, once again, took to the streets in a series of *Right to March* civil liberties demonstrations, leading to further police violence and arrests.

A video of the Forum in action featuring a speech by Dan O'Neill in 1977 can be seen via this link: <http://youtu.be/J4Gep63wXwo>

Activity in the Forum kept pace with all these events. The Forum effectively played an organizational and leadership role in a multitude of events and campaigns that exposed and directly challenged the police-state-minded politics of the Queensland State Governments in the 1960s and 1970s.

Most large-scale demonstrations assembled and started out from the Forum area, most notably the massive Moratorium marches of 1970 and the anti-Springboks demonstrations during the State of Emergency in 1971.

The Forum continued at that same location until the early 1980s. For well over a decade, it was a place where politics, ideas and tactics could be debated and developed in the public domain of the university campus. The Forum was both a physical space and the conceptual manifestation of the political responses of a generation. Through the dynamics of the Forum, an increasingly mobilized student population had the opportunity to sort through the significant issues of the day...and take effective action.

Brian Laver addresses a Forum in the Great Court during People's Park in May 1970 which was a prelude to the first Vietnam Moratorium march. Photo: Peter Gray.

Recollections from those who were there...

The following personal accounts reflect the memories of those for whom attendance at The Forum was a regular, even daily, event in the 1960s and 1970s.

"The Forum at UQ St Lucia was an experience as much as a space. In a precinct at the eastern end of the campus, where the Union had constructed the Refec, the Relaxation Block and its admin offices, was our very own Agora, under the eavesdropping windows of the *Semper* office. Crossing that space, the anti-line of students heading for hamburgers and coffee was detained, half-untiling. There, they might be invited to consider the merits of some arcane thing of which they'd never heard, while Hare Krishnas spread vegetarianism around them and loopies spread love; or urged by in-your-face speakers to direct action on Brisbane streets. People hesitantly tried out their own rhetorical talents. Munching students digested ideas rawer and more exciting than those they were fed in the lecture halls. Heroes declaimed there: Brian Laver, Dan O'Neill and countless others. Jack Thompson, before he was famous, contemptuous behind amber-coloured, John Lennon granny glasses, explained our location on the bottom of a pond being pissed on by Capital. People massed and listened, cynical and outwardly unmoved in their Australian way. But in September 1967, four thousand pairs of feet set out from there and marched to take on the Dragon."

Michael O'Neill, 2012

"My earliest memory was the day I saw Brian Laver take out a Refectory table and stand on it and address the students who were eating their lunch inside. A group of heavy looking male students (rumoured to be engineering students) proceeded to throw oranges and apples at him. Nevertheless Brian would come back the next day and repeat the exercise again. As the opposition to this action lessened the 'forum' moved to the area between the Student's Union Building and the Relaxation Block."

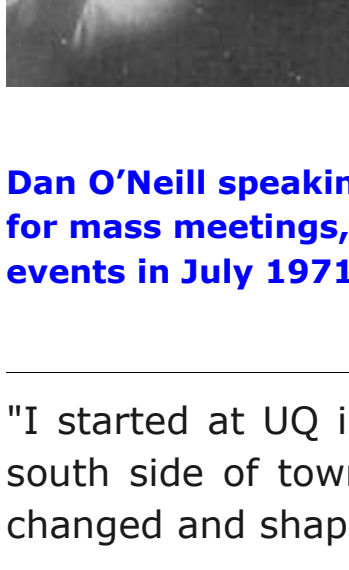
Greg Mallory, 2012

"If we designate the height of the movement in Australia as roughly 1966 through to the mid-seventies, there was a shared cultural ethos for much of that time. A crucial element in this was the Forum Area where very frequent debates happened from an open platform. In the earlier period the audience would gather on the grass under a tree and on the surrounding paved areas and covered way. Changes to the area seemed to express a kind of architectural hostility to its use as a Forum. By the time of the second Civil Liberties struggle in 1977 the audience area had been built out. The speakers still occupied the covered way but faced east." (*i.e. in the opposite direction.*)

Greg George (Fryer Library online), 2011

"There was a fascination in listening to the speeches in the forum area in those early years. People would stand around for hours of the afternoon watching as their fellows stood forth and began to exist in a new way, listening as the spoken word broke a long enchantment, moved us day after day to a new vision of the world in which we as individuals and as groups seemed, for the first time to have a part."

Dan O'Neill (*Semper Floreat*), 1976



Dan O'Neill speaking in the Great Court. The forum moved to the Great Court for mass meetings, for example during the Springbok / State of Emergency events in July 1971. Photo: Bruce Dickson.

"I started at UQ in 1972 arriving from a small catholic girls school on the south side of town. The UQ lunchtime forum was definitely an event that changed and shaped my life.

I can still recall the tenor and rhythm of Dan O'Neill's voice as he argued with such force and clarity on the issues of the day - a brilliant orator the likes of which I have not heard since. I was excited and inspired by Carole Ferrier as one of the very, very few female voices heard during the lunchtime debates, and I was deeply inspired by her passion and courage.

So successful were the speeches given by Betty Hounslow that I signed up straight after to go to the protests at Bowen Hills - and was there the day of the filming of that poor protester shoved up against the fence and thumped by police.

I heard Dennis Walker speaking / shouting his anger and never again forgot about the monstrous lie I had been taught at high school; that all we could do now was 'smooth the pillow' as the Aboriginal Australian was a dying race.

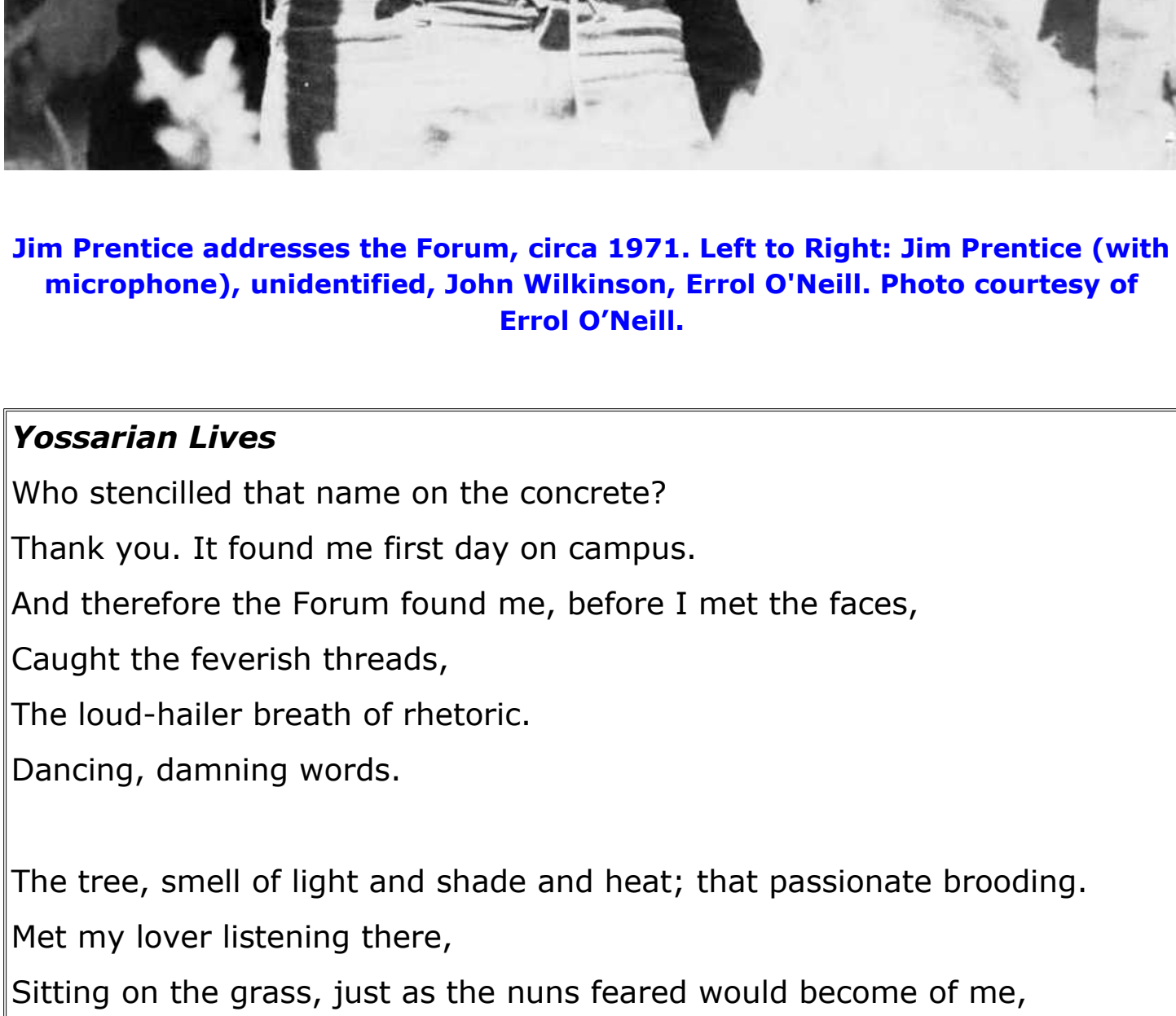
Life changing moments all ... informing my understanding of Marxism, of feminism, of grass-roots activism and of the perniciousness of racism. I learnt way more at those UQ lunchtime forum events than I can recall of my three years at UQ of 'formal' education."

Debra Beattie, 2012

"I was a first-year student in 1966. I had joined the Liberal Club, and the Forum was the home of the student radicals, the 'enemy'. In October, I helped organize a counter-demonstration to the first anti-Vietnam War demo to leave campus. It began with speeches at the Forum of course, but when they got to the edge of the campus, the Police beat, harassed and arrested the protesters without warning.

I was so shocked by their treatment that I ended up working on the Civil Liberties campaign that culminated in the September '67 march by 4,000 students. I began to attend the Forum to hear speakers talk of things other than civil liberties, and before long I was radicalized on those issues as well."

John Stanwell, 2012



Jim Prentice addresses the Forum, circa 1971. Left to Right: Jim Prentice (with microphone), unidentified, John Wilkinson, Errol O'Neill. Photo courtesy of Errol O'Neill.

Yossarian Lives

Who stencilled that name on the concrete?

Thank you. It found me first day on campus.

And therefore the Forum found me, before I met the faces,

Caught the feverish threads,

The loud-hailer breath of rhetoric.

Dancing, damning words.

The tree, smell of light and shade and heat; that passionate brooding.

Met my lover listening there,

Sitting on the grass, just as the nuns feared would become of me,

Became of me, and for the most part I loved it.

Male dominated world of course,

But no different to the rest of my limited life.

A foot soldier to hand out pamphlets and yes, I read them.

Over the top with vitriolic splendour,

A surfeit of preposterous juxtapositions and mangled metaphors.

Why not? When armies were over the top with bombs

And hearts with grief, despair, revenge ...

When there was such a lack of remorse in heaven.

Read the Red & Black's dangerous books

Fell for Fromm, Chomsky, Angela Davis and the *Soul on Ice*.

Abbie Hoffman dared *Steal This Book*. *Ah she said*.

The Wizard, Pot Smoke-in, Guerilla Theatre.

Hunt Sharp, tapped phones, bail outs and beat ups.

The seriousness and the boredom;

There was no music.

Loved the rampage, the follow-on from words to action.

The momentum, the possibility of possibly changing something,

A disharmonious scream of opposition, or just that whimper

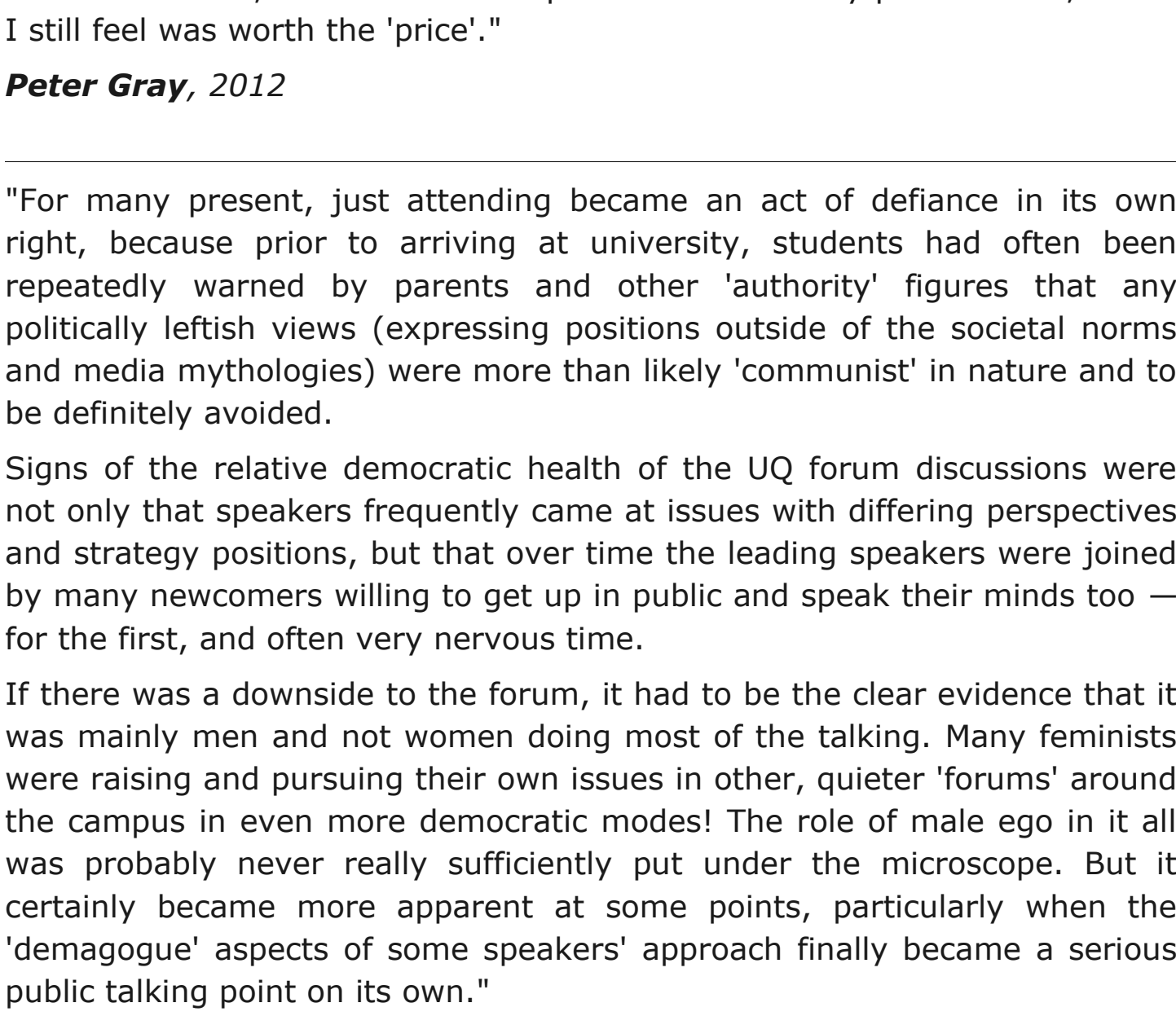
To somehow express the Not Rightness of it all.

Anne Richards, 2012

"Brian Laver, Phil Richardson and Tony Bowen would speak about Vietnam in an international context and Brian would use the book *'From Yalta to Vietnam'* as his major source. Tony Bowen was an interesting character, a fair bit older than the rest of the students; he would turn up with his briefcase, dressed in a tie and give a very well researched analysis of the Vietnam War.

The debates at the Forum occasionally became very intense particularly when students from the Democratic Club or Liberal Group turned up. I remember a physical altercation occurring between one of the 'left' students and a leading member of the Democratic Club over the placing of NLF flags in the area. A fairly lengthy debate took place one Friday afternoon when a then future Liberal Party politician and a number of leading left figures were engaged in debate (without microphones) until 4.30 pm."

Greg Mallory, 2012



Half-tone photo from an article "A Decade Reviewed - Being a Reflection and Prophecy Upon The Long March of the Radical Movement Within the University" by Bruce Dickson published in Semper Floreat, November 1974 (Vol 44 No 16).

"I found the passionate expression of radical politics at the time of my arrival in Brisbane pretty daunting and intimidating to say the least. I was fresh from five years 'locked up' in boarding school. Everything with my new life in Brisbane was totally overwhelming to me at first, yet wondrous and amazing. I think the influence of the Forum was profound in many respects. I'd even go as far as calling the lunchtime Forum a life changer. I believe it was in my case. I hung out in the Forum area for pretty much my entire first year at Uni, failing all my courses in the process. This was 1970. Without a doubt, the Forum was a powerful force in my politicization, which I still feel was worth the 'price'."

Peter Gray, 2012

"For many present, just attending became an act of defiance in its own right, because prior to arriving at university, students had often been repeatedly warned by parents and other 'authority' figures that any politically leftist views (expressing positions outside of the societal norms and media mythologies) were more than likely 'communist' in nature and to be definitely avoided.

Signs of the relative democratic health of the UQ forum discussions were not only that speakers frequently came at issues with differing perspectives and strategy, but that over time the leading speakers were joined by many newcomers willing to get up in public and speak their minds too — for the first, and often very nervous time.

If there was a downside to the forum, it had to be the clear evidence that it was mainly men and not women doing most of the talking. Many feminists were raising and pursuing their own issues in other, quieter 'forums' around the campus in even more democratic modes! The role of male ego in it all was probably never really sufficiently put under the microscope. But it certainly became more apparent at some points, particularly when the 'demagogue' aspects of some speakers' approach finally became a serious public talking point on its own."

Bruce Dickson, 2012

"The morning after the Police riot at the Tower Mill (Springboks Rugby Tour 1971) I joined Mitch Thompson walking towards the Refec. He said we were going to move a Strike motion for the whole Uni, but he was not sure how it would be received.

A decision was taken to move the Forum inside the Refectory, which turned out to be an inspired judgement. As well as the Forum regulars, a large number of 'ordinary' students got up to tell their stories of violence and chaos from the night before. The large numbers of staff and students present were visibly affected by the reports, and the Uni Strike motion was passed overwhelmingly."

John Stanwell, 2012

"Fresh faced, conservative, Christian, the first of our family ever to go to the university, I entered UQ with excitement and fear. I was most terrified of going to the Refec on account of that was where those ones my father had warned me against - the baby eating communists and radical students - gathered and spoke loud and strong.

But one could not avoid the Refec, nor the environs of the Forum. One could not ignore the voices, could not help but hear the arguments, nor not read the pamphlets thrust forward. So it was that I sat and listened and read. This is where I learned that one could be both a Christian and against the war. In fact it was those who refused to sign up for conscription because they were Christians, David Franken, Jim Varghese, and David Martin, who convinced me that it was imperative to stand against the war. I learned that communists were many and varied, and far from putting out lying propaganda actually had truth to tell about what was happening in Vietnam, Cambodia and also South America. It was where I heard my economics tutor Peter Thompson wearing a National Liberation Front flag as a cape, explain about the money-making business that is war. The horror of that convinced me that capitalism was/is truly an evil on the earth.

This is where I heard from young Aboriginal men, Dennis Walker and his mates, that their people, their families were imprisoned in places such as Cherbourg, well known to me as I came from the bush, from near there. How could we white fellas want to stop Apartheid in South Africa and not be with Black men and women in their struggle against the perditions of the Act under which they lived? How could we not see that we had apartheid right here in Queensland?

It intrigued me that the speakers on the opposite side could not answer the arguments and put by the radicals. They resorted to personal attack, jingoism and rhetoric, and I began to see the invalidity of their positions.

Around the edges of the Forum the booksellers set up their tables and it was from these that I found out about liberation theology and ultimately the story of the women's movement. I found myself becoming friends with many of those who at first had terrified me, intimidated me.

For me the Forum was exciting, exhilarating, and ever present. It became the norm for what should happen at a University. It was pivotal in my change from a conservative Christian bush girl to a woman in the struggle for liberation from the Church, State and the Military, and importantly it provided a space where I could make new friends and comrades who have remained in my heart ever since."

Jennie Harvie, 2012

Draft-resister's Union table set up in the Forum area. (Left to Right) Bill Denham, Errol O'Neill, Colin Beasley, Craig Davenport, John Jiggins. Photo taken Monday 20th September 1971. Sign top generously: "Fines to be paid by 21st Sept. Total of \$300 needed. Please give generously." Photo courtesy of Errol O'Neill and Colin Beasley.

This project was coordinated by Peter Gray, Greg Mallory and John Stanwell.

Brisbane Discussion Circle

*In an effort to develop and preserve the historical legacy of an era, political and cultural activists have formed the **Brisbane Discussion Circle (BDC)**, an email group that exchanges information and resources about the events and activities spanning the period 1960 to 1985. The circle is comprised of a diverse group of individuals who achieved amazing things in Brisbane during this time. The aim is to preserve our history for posterity with sophistication and accuracy. This article is an example of a document arising from such joint effort by BDC members. Requests for membership to BDC (including full name and brief details of your activism in this period) can be e-mailed to: <BrisbaneDiscussionCircle+subscribe@googlegroups.com>*

Vote at a Forum in the Great Court in July 1971, during a widely-supported, general strike at the University of Queensland. Photo: Peter Gray.