

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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Good evening all: I am deeply gratified to have this role tonight. My association with Jean and Richard now is well into its fifth decade. I think it is true to say that a cross word has never passed between us. All has been harmony, and still more there has been LIGHT: that is to say we have shared common interests and have thereby been enriched. That sense of common interest has deepened as I read *Contempt of Court* and associated material. It is in that ‘associated material’ that I find Jean in recent months more than once has quoted a remarkable report of a committee established by the Legislative Council of New South Wales to consider government’s role in the provision of education. Especially did the committee ponder whether such aid should be given to the various churches to establish their denominational schools or rather go towards establishing a non-denominational state-directed system. Let me follow Jean in quoting from that report: *‘The first great objection to the denominational*

system is its expense; the number of schools in a given locality ought to depend on the number of children requiring instruction which that locality commands. To admit of any other principle is to depart from those maxims of wholesome economy, upon which public money should always be administered. It appears to your Committee impossible not to see, that the very essence of a denominational system, is to leave the minority uneducated, in order thoroughly to imbue the minority with particular tenets.’ There is no need to elaborate how remarkably such words anticipate DOGS’ fundamental principles. Fifty and more years ago as I wrote a thesis which became the basis for my first monograph this report was a characteristic and brilliant contribution to the development of what I saw as the dominant value system of the Australian colonies then and indeed ever thereafter. Somewhat pompously I called this value system ‘moral enlightenment’; perhaps ‘liberal culture’ would have been a more

realistic term. Whatever, the salient point I make is that DOGS have maintained ‘moral enlightenment’ in more recent terms.

So in my own self-centred terms that is the highest praise I could bestow on any movement. Others have and will add their praises in somewhat different terms, albeit not to essentially similar ends. A supreme example is offered in the preamble to *Contempt of Court* written by Emeritus Professor Jack Gregory, an earlier—indeed pathbreaking—historian of relations between church and state in Australia, education of course and necessarily to the fore. Gregory’s emphasis is on how DOGS people have upheld the highest—and rare—qualities of active citizenship, persevering against considerable and over very many years to fight for a fundamental civic principle. If ever a group has ‘kept the faith’, here is one such. As Gregory suggests Australian experience is not rich in such stories.

Jean’s book is part of this story and contributes to the particular historiography that Gregory helped pioneer. It is, of course, not the first such contribution that she and Richard have made. Most closely allied is Richard’s *Unto God and Caesar: Religious Issues in the Emerging Commonwealth*, most remarkable for exploring the background to clause 116 of

the Constitution, which affirmed that ‘the Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion’—this, of course, to be the bedrock for DOGS future campaigns. One figure in that story was Andrew Inglis Clark, whose enduring reputation largely results from much scholarly writing about Clark in recent years, Richard a very notable and continuing figure in that story. Meanwhile Jean had published her *Reality and Rhetoric: An alternative history of Australian education*. This drew in substantial measure from a doctoral thesis as did Richard’s *Unto God and Caesar*; happily for local pride both those degrees came from the University of Tasmania. The close continuity between the interests of Richard and Jean, and became still more explicit in their joint authorship of a sympathetic study of Lionel Murphy, that venture also strongly linked with DOGS’ concerns.

All of which leads us to here and now, our celebration of *Contempt of Court, Unofficial Voices from the DOGS Australian High Court Case 1981*. It is a rare and impressive achievement. In recent decades there has been much vaunting of ‘history from below’, that is telling the narrative in terms of the relatively dispossessed and disempowered, as against history from above, that is in terms of the ruling powers in society and disposed to

interpret what happened in the past as generally resulting in desirable or at least inexorable outcomes. History from below is angered by such complacency, sensitive to sufferings of have-nots while at the same time sensitive to the degree that, notwithstanding sufferings and repression, those have-nots were active in the historical process. *Contempt of Court* obviously is much more history from 'below' than 'above'. But it seems to me that it is still better described as history from inside, from within. Here I differ a shade from Jean herself, as she speaks of writing from 'the side'; no, Jean, I say not **from the side** but **from inside**. This quality is most obviously true in that Jean writes of events in which she was an active, often central, subject; all history has its autobiographical element, but here that element is very substantial. By saying this I do not mean to imply that Jean engages in any kind of self-enhancement. She writes of *the cause* to which she and her fellows devoted passionate energy. *Contempt* is very much a product of mind and brain, but perhaps it is still expressive of heart and belief, and thereby 'history from inside, from within.'

Reading the book accordingly carries one into a vivid narrative, full of life, laughter, commitment. Jean builds her story with much skill, vividly recounting such episodes as DOGS propaganda work

during the election campaign of 1969, including a massive meeting at the Sydney Town Hall; similar activity in '72; the grass roots militance at Kogarah high school about the same time; the angry ridiculing of government funding of swimming school and other such largesse at wealthy private schools; above all, of course the preparation for the High Court challenge and a day-by-day report of that excruciating event. 'We were the original middle class protestors weren't we', Jean asks with ironic glee. She gives pen-portraits of the movement's leading spirits: Raymond Nilson and his family; Kath and Reg Taylor; Ernie Tucker, Bob Child.

Tasmania has its due, if subordinate, part in this story. Jean invokes three dining room tables at which essential decisions were taken, and one of these was in the Ely home in Battery Point. Her account of an interview she had with then Minister for Education here, Robert Mather, is one of her most sparkling gems. For my personal self it is especially moving that Margot Roe should be mentioned as one of the local pioneers. Much more active was another figure in my pantheon, George Wilson, grand old man of the bygone History Department at the University – and of the Hobart DOGS. He was a very wise man: an ex-student of his remarked to me the other day of George affirming **in 1948**, 'the history of

the 21st century will be the history of China’.. One of Jean’s splendid anecdotes tells of how the local group received what they had the optimism to foresee as a vital breakthrough: Among those present were Bruce Ross and Tas Knight, two of the local Education Department teacher active in the cause. ‘George Wilson started to clap in strict time and Bruce and Tas lifted their arms and saluted each other with a who; then proceeded to dance a highland fling. It was a Scottish dance, but there was a Tasmanian bravado in the performance.’

You see what I mean in applauding this as history **from inside**. An alternative, academic descriptor—one that I used in telling Jean of my enjoyment of the book—is to say that it is a supremely Crocean achievement. Benedetto Croce ranks supreme among philosophers of history who has insisted that true and good history necessarily requires the scholar to get inside his subject, achieving understanding through identification. Jean and Richard have ever been upholders of Crocean thought, testifying to its inspiration..

Croce believed that historical scholarship should have a purpose,

especially that of broadening the play of human liberty. That obviously was the dominant concern of DOGS—as Jean puts it in the final words of her introduction she and her colleagues were inspired by belief ‘that a strong public education system with is corollary of freedom of religion from the State was essential to the maintenance of an Australian democracy’. Immediately preceding that passage Jean says ‘if present trends continue, public systems are in danger of passing into the mists of time as brave educational experiments which offered educational opportunities to all, not only some Australian children’. That is indeed a sad prospect. Since Jean wrote that passage the Gronski report has addressed relevant issues. Jean’s reaction to the report has been critical, even pessimist, forecasting that the private-school sector will benefit proportionately more than the public. Very likely so, one must accept. But possibly active citizenship might turn Gronski for the good. That active citizenship might well draw inspiration from the example of DOGS, and its splendid evocation in Jean’s book.

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