Chapter 1  Anderson and the State

John Anderson had an answer to every conceivable question. It was “No”.  
— James McAuley

As Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University from 1927 to 1958, John Anderson was Sydney’s best-known academic. He dominated the higher reaches of Sydney intellectual life for those thirty years. His students played a leading role for another thirty, not only in academia, but in politics, law, journalism and teaching. Many of them made impressive contributions to their fields, but Anderson’s own concerns were not with positive achievements, honours or the good of society. His position was one of opposition:

The work of the academic, qua academic, is criticism; and whatever his special field may be, his development of independent views will bring him into conflict with prevailing opinions and customary attitudes in the public arena and not merely among his fellow-professionals.2

And that was not just hot air. Generations of academics have justified their tenure on the grounds that they might want to criticise the powers that be, someday, but how many have actually done it? Anderson did so, and did it loudly enough to goad the authorities into action.

When the University of Sydney advertised its chair of philosophy in 1926, it received two applications. John Anderson was selected on the strength of two discussion articles in Mind, a book on logic in

Corrupting the Youth

mind, and glowing testimonials from two of Scotland’s leading philosophers. What these references failed to mention was that Anderson was a political radical, and had become more so with the failure of the British General Strike of 1926 to develop into the hoped-for Revolution. Persistent rumours that the warmth of the testimonials was caused by the desire of the writers to speed Anderson’s passage to the most distant regions possible may be true, or may just be a standard motif of academic politics. In any case, with no other professor of philosophy within 500 miles, Anderson was at last free to do things his way.

He settled into his office at the University, acquired a house in leafy Turramurra on Sydney’s exclusive upper North Shore, with maid and gardener, and called on the city headquarters of the Communist Party to offer his services. Though he did not become a Party member, he was given the status of ‘Theoretical Adviser’ to the Party, and in the next few years wrote a number of articles for its various organs. They are jargon-ridden, but there are a few points of interest in the personal spin that Anderson put on some of the Marxist orthodoxies. He had no patience with the ‘class view of truth’, according to which ideas are a function of the class position of whoever holds them, and hence have only a relative claim to truth. As befits an expert in logic, Anderson was for absolute truth. For much the same reasons, he was not prepared to accept a purely economic motivation for the struggle of the workers: ‘the incentive to revolution’, he says, ‘is a moral one. This does not mean that it is altruistic or that it is

1 Anderson’s application is printed in Dialectic (Newcastle University) 30 (1987): pp. 144–5.
3 ASIO file on Anderson (Australian Archives series A6119/43 item 389, p. 8, report of 17/7/1950).
4 Kennedy, A Passion to Oppose, chs 6–7.
5 Summaries in A.J. Baker, Anderson’s Social Philosophy (Sydney, 1979), pp. 48–63, 80–9; M. Weblin, A Passion for Thinking (to appear), ch. 3; writings of ‘Comrade Spencer’, summarised by S. Cooper in ‘When Anderson and Reich were good Stalinists’, Sydney Libertarians Broadsheet 61 (July 1970); pp. 6–7 and 69 (July 1972); pp. 5–6, and following articles (see below).
obligatory; it means that it is a demand for a particular way of living, broadly describable as freedom.’"

‘Freedom’ was a tricky concept to deploy in Marxist circles, and it was on this issue that Anderson departed most forcefully from his comrades. The *Workers’ Weekly* of 14 November 1930 printed a long letter from Anderson under the heading ‘Workers Have Right to All Public Buildings: Capitalist Class Have Not All the Brains.’ It protested against the denial of the use of Sydney Town Hall for celebrations of the thirteenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. ‘It is intolerable’, he wrote, ‘that the [Sydney City] Council should set itself up as a censor of views to be expressed at Town Hall meetings.’ Anderson was not unaware of the view expressed in some quarters that certain classes in the Soviet Union suffered similar restrictions on liberty. He had some advice to the Friends of the Soviet Union on this matter:

It seems to me to be an important part of the work of your organisation to show that nothing corresponding to this disenfranchisement exists in Russia ... Meanwhile the economic position of the ‘kulaks’ gives them a special political status, and the reserving of entry into the Soviets and other organisations for the rest of the community really makes for political equality. If anything like this, fragmentary as it is, is a part of your position, I think you would do well to state it as clearly and forcibly as possible.

Excellent theoretical advice from a master of the art of argument, but not in accord with Party policy. The page opposite Anderson’s letter had an article, ‘Imperialist agents receive just deserts: death sentence executed’, reprinted from *Pravda*, which rejoiced in the ‘liquidation of the kulak as a class’. The *Workers’ Weekly* added the editorial comment: ‘Workers in U.S.S.R. — exterminate more of these vile enemies of the working class.’

This letter of Anderson’s caught the attention of Australia’s rudimentary security services. In the files later inherited by ASIO, the first reference to Anderson was a request that investigations be made concerning the letter ‘purported to have been received by the “Friends of Soviet Russia”.’ It requested:

John Anderson: photo submitted with his application to University of Sydney, 1926 (Anderson papers, University of Sydney Archives)
Will you please find out if there is a professor at the University of this name and whether you could possibly verify the truth of the statement.

If there is any truth in it one cannot but view with alarm the sympathy expressed by one who is in a position to effectively spread the doctrines as evinced in his letter to the Secretary referred to. DIRECTOR

Alas, verified it was.

There is a Professor John Anderson at Sydney University, his Chair being Philosophy; he is described as a young man of enthusiasms in some directions and representative of school of thought evidenced in the letter to the paper mentioned. He is stated not to be regarded very seriously by his colleagues some of whom have already spoken to him regarding the present matter.

Despite this initial alarm, Anderson does not seem to have been regarded seriously by security either. The only other mention of him in the 1930s (or 1940s) in the file is a note of late 1931 that he has 'very recently been in personal consultation with principal members of the C.P.A. at the Communist Hall, including MOXON lately returned from BOURKE.' But an article in N.S.W. Police News did take exception to one of Anderson’s Freethought addresses, in which he claimed that there was no political freedom and that the evidence of one policeman counted for more than many denials by non-police-men. The article observed, with some prescience, that many a man has been made famous by public censure of his views, and has then with age 'moderated his opinions and finally reversed them, after getting the true philosophical point of view.'

Whether Anderson was in fact using his position to spread Communist doctrines among the students is unclear. A speech of his at an ‘anti-war’ rally in 1933 suggests there was little neutrality about his position. 'University students are a breeding ground for Fascism’, he said. 'It is among these people that a great deal of valuable work can be done ... Many university students are taking up a class position. They could be organised and brought together, only that the powers that be will prevent such a movement.'

Events in Moscow were to destroy Anderson’s special relationship with the Party. With the rise of Stalin, previous policies of co-operation between the Communist parties of all countries and other far left parties were forbidden. Relentless Communist criticism of former

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11 ASIO file on Anderson, p. 3 (21/11/1930).
allies, now branded ‘social fascists’, weakened the left opposition everywhere (notably in Germany, easing Hitler’s rise to power). Australia was a significant country in international theory, in this very connection. It had been the scene of the world’s first ‘reformist’ (Labor) governments, and Lenin himself had expressed the rage of the true revolutionary at workers proving themselves satisfied with the gains won by reformist parties. Orders came from Moscow to overthrow the comparatively easy-going leadership of Jack Kavanagh and replace it with the hardline Stalinism of Lance Sharkey and Herbert Moxon. The Party Conference of 1929 accepted the directive. Kavanagh made the mistake of attacking the manifesto of the agent sent from Moscow to clean up the Party, apparently under the impression that it had been written by Anderson, and was promptly expelled for ‘rightist deviationism’. Anderson, as a man committed to theory, supported the new Stalinist line (‘with a naivete and enthusiasm that might seem unbecoming in a mind generally acknowledged by philosophers as first rate.’) Anderson’s position had been entirely against reformism, with its trading of material gains for compromise on principle. (‘The merely utilitarian pursuit of the workers’ interests’ is suitable for Labour opportunists. But to express the sickness of society in terms of the poverty of the masses is not the position of revolutionists; ‘the humanitarian objection to violence is an objection to emancipation.’) But whatever Anderson’s zeal, there was no place for fellow-travelling intellectuals in the new order, and he was forced to resign when an article of his, on the theme that the fear of

20 ‘Comrade Spencer’ [i.e., Anderson] ‘The moral factor in the proletarian revolution’.
spontaneity was a sign not of leadership but of bureaucracy, was suppressed by the new Party leadership. Like Heidegger’s involvement with the Nazi party, the relationship came to an end at the initiative of the Party, not the philosopher.

In the meantime Anderson’s relentless criticism troubled a larger pond than the diminutive Central Committee of the Party. Anderson had set up at the University the Freethought Society, giving himself as President a permanent platform. His first presidential address, of 9 July 1931, was on ‘Freethought and Politics’. It made him famous overnight, mainly for the statement, ‘War memorials are political idols.’ No complete record of it exists, but it seems that the most controversial points were correctly summarised in the motion of censure moved in the NSW Legislative Assembly by the leader of the Country Party, Mr Bruxner. Lieutenant-Colonel Michael (later Sir Michael) Bruxner, DSO, chevalier of the Legion of Honour, had been severely wounded at Gallipoli, commanded the 6th Australian Light Horse in the Sinai, and had been in charge of supply to the right flank of Allenby’s advance on Damascus. He had therefore known more than a few of those commemorated on the war memorials. He moved in the Legislative Assembly:

That, in the opinion of this House, the statements made on Thursday, 9th July, by the Professor of Philosophy at the Sydney University, namely, Professor Anderson, when speaking as the president of the Free Thought Association, to the effect that such terms as ‘the State,’ ‘the country,’ and ‘the nation’ were superstitious notions; that such terms as ‘your King and Country need you’ were appeals to prejudice and superstition; that ‘loyalty’ was a kind of superstition, that war memorials were idols, and that the keeping up of religious celebrations connected with them were fetishes which only served the purpose of blocking discussion — are

against the best interests of the community, and are not in accord with the national sentiment of the people of this State.26

The motion was debated on and off for a couple of months, but not passed, as the Lang Labor government was still in power, and its minister for education supported Anderson at least to the extent of defending his freedom of speech. Among the more interesting arguments were those of Albert Henry, Member for Clarence and another ex-serviceman. These and later public reactions to Anderson cast light on something normally hidden in obscurity: what the ‘dominant ideology’ of Australia really has been. As often observed, tradition works best when it is not justified, but presumed, so that all take it to be natural and thus to admit of no serious alternative. As Anderson put it, ‘Tradition itself invites criticism, because it represents certain things as worth while but is unable to give any account of their value.” When someone like Anderson challenges the status quo, the ruling class — to use that term in as noncommittal way as possible—is forced to look for arguments to defend itself. The results are revealing. Henry expressed a philosophy of education diametrically opposed to Anderson’s.

Mr. HENRY: If we spend £6,500,000 in New South Wales upon education then such a thing as patriotism, which is not upon the curriculum of the University of Sydney or of our schools, is a sentiment and an inspiration in regard to civil duties and responsibilities which we cannot overlook. What is the use of educating a man in mathematical science or in academic matters unless at the same time we instil into him the fundamental principles of citizenship, civic responsibility and noble ideas?27

Henry went on to discuss a question rarely debated on the floor of the New South Wales Parliament: what is philosophy itself for?

This man is a professor of philosophy. I believe in philosophy; it is a necessary study, and gives one an outlook upon life which is of great consolation to persons who possess the elasticity of mind necessary to adjust themselves to changing thought and conditions. But when a man stands up and traduces in unbridled terms institutions that are revered, and that appeal to the highest sentiments and the noblest motives in the community, he transgresses the reasonable bounds of propriety and all the canons of decent conduct. For instance, why did not this professor go farther, and say that religion is a fetish—that churches ought to be razed?

26 New South Wales Parliamentary Debates, 14 July 1931 (2nd series, vol. 128 pp. 4266–7); the text has ‘mocking’ for ‘blocking’.
28 NSWPD, 8 Sept 1931 (vol. 129 pp. 5995–6).
to the ground, and that people went to church on Sunday only because they believed in a superstitious doctrine? Because he did not dare to attack religion openly.  

SINCE that sums up rather well a certain view of society, it is time to consider what Anderson’s own philosophy was. Anderson never wrote a short summary of it, but there is an excellent one by his student John Mackie. It makes clear how his politically contentious views of 1931 follow from his general philosophy:

His central doctrine is that there is only one way of being, that of ordinary things in space and time, and that every question is a simple issue of truth or falsity, that there are no different degrees or kinds of truth. His propositional view of reality implies that things are irreducibly complex, and we can never arrive at simple elements in any field. Anderson rejects systematically the notion of entities that are constituted, wholly or partly, by their relations: there can be no ideas or sensa whose nature it is to be known or perceived, no consciousness whose nature it is to know, no values whose nature it is to be ends or to direct action. Knowledge is a matter of finding what is objectively the case; all knowledge depends on observation and is fallible; we do not build up the knowledge of facts or laws out of any more immediate or more reliable items. Ethics is a study of the qualities of human activities; there can be no science of what is right or obligatory, and the study of moral judgements would belong to sociology, not to ethics. Similarly aesthetics can only be a study of feelings or judgements and not a source of directives for artists. Minds, like anything else, are complex spatio-temporal things: they are societies of motives or feelings, and there is no ultimate self to which the motives belong. Similarly a society is a complex of movements which both cooperate and compete; it has no inclusive social purpose, but neither is it reducible to its individual members. And all things have their regular causal ways of working.  

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29 NSWPD, 1 Sept 1931 (p. 5819).
It is clear why Anderson was in direct conflict with Henry’s ‘highest motives and noblest sentiments’: he believed nothing is or can be higher or nobler than anything else. Nor are there ‘civil duties and responsibilities’, since there is no purpose to society, but only conflicting interests. Nor are there ‘canons of decent conduct’. And as to ‘consolation’, no-one ever suspected Anderson of offering that. Some of the corrosive implications of the more central tenets of his philosophy are clear, some will become clearer in the following chapters.

The University Senate, ‘while asserting the principle of free speech in universities,’ severely censured Anderson for using ‘expressions that transgress all proper limits’ and required him to abstain from such utterances in future.  

Anderson was unrepentant, and issued a statement to the effect that ‘the fight for freedom of thought and speech does not stop.’ When he entered his logic class, there was a sustained demonstration in his favour. Visibly moved, he said, ‘I will not insult the intelligence of this class by asking it to put the Senate’s resolution into logical form.’

As to the claim in Parliament that he did not dare to attack religion openly, that was, as the saying goes, ‘asking for it’.

Following the Communists’ rejection of him, Anderson joined the Trotskyists, the home for a number of other individuals unappreciated by the Party. He largely paid for their printing press, and contributed articles. The Workers’ Party (Left Opposition) was, like any Trotskyist group, so small that it is a surprise to find more than one person of significance in it. But there was another, Laurie Short, later a central figure in the fights of the 1950s against Communist control of the trade unions. Short recalled, ‘Anderson came to a little meeting in Jack Sylvester’s home in early 1933. I was only a boy of seventeen, I had never met a university professor, and here was this tall, dignified looking character with a hooked pipe, and a slight stammer in his voice, and of course I thought he must be very wise because of this


32 Baker, Anderson’s Social Philosophy, p. 93.

bent pipe and this profound look. He impressed me enormously’. During the rest of the 1930s, Short often visited Anderson in his office at the University, talking and borrowing books. Under Anderson’s influence, he became converted to a view of society as pluralist, where various forces contend for power but where there may be overall stability.

Anderson split the Workers’ Party at its 1937 conference, arguing that Trotsky was wrong to see the Soviet Union as a true workers’ state merely suffering temporarily from Stalinism. His disillusionment with the USSR proceeded rapidly thereafter. By the time of his 1943 paper, ‘The servile state’, Anderson was one of the harshest critics on the Left of the Soviet Union, then being viewed at its rosiest as a result of its resistance to Hitler’s invasion.

The second major public controversy in which Anderson was involved concerned a public lecture he gave in 1943 in a series on ‘Religion in education’. His view was that ‘As with the subject of snakes in Iceland — one could say “There is no religion in education”. In other words, education is necessarily secular.’ Religious teaching as usually understood, he argued, was not part of education but opposed to it, as it limited inquiry instead of encouraging it. Teachers, he concluded, ‘would be well advised to endeavour to keep the clergy out of the schools.’ Anderson was particularly angered by students arriving at University and immediately joining religious societies to ‘safeguard themselves in

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advance against learning anything.’ There was an outcry in the newspapers and pulpits. Reversing what had happened in 1931, the State Parliament condemned him, *nem. con.*, declaring that his statements were ‘unjustified, inasmuch as they present a travesty of the Christian religion and are calculated to undermine the principles which constitute a Christian State.’ The attack was led by the Reverend Donald Macdonald, MLA for Mosman, a Presbyterian minister and former military chaplain. His collected sermons on marriage had had a certain vogue among ‘those who would retain the highest ideals in regard to Marriage, Home, and Family Life.’ He held the same university degree as Anderson (MA, Glasgow). He delivered an impressive piece of oratory. Philosophy, he made clear, was a good thing:

> If I know anything at all of philosophy, its principles date right back to the Greek schools where it was set out originally by Aristotle as an elaboration of Socrates and Plato, that the main principles of philosophy could be propounded by way of the syllogism. They pointed out that thereby two given ideas can be presented at the same time, and one could ‘think together’ consistently along certain lines. The Greek word used was συνοπτικος. Synthetically one can, as Browning [*sic*] put it, by a syllogism, ‘see life steadily, and see it whole.’

In a statement whose content is not far from Anderson’s own opinions, he said, ‘Universities were never meant to be filling-up stations to fill the students’ minds with a conglomeration of facts, but they were meant to be institutions where the inquiring mind might develop’. But an inquiring mind, he said, is not developed by turning a lecture desk into a soap box.

Then he got down to the business of what was wrong with Anderson’s philosophy:

> Philosophy has many vagaries, many avenues of inquiry and many strange words, terms and symbols—abstract and concrete. May I quote just in passing the terms ‘ideational’ and ‘sensate’, used by Professor Sorokin, as probably the most modernised terms in the vocabulary of philosophy. I submit that Professor Anderson takes the sensate view, and dismisses the

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ideational. The things that are seen are only part of the whole; the things
that are believed, that cannot be expressed, are the deeper part of man’s
being and of man’s hope. The ideational is something that may not be
demonstrated—like this desk—the idea that lies beyond this desk is the
growing tree; and the elements and mystery of nature and the mystery of
creation. But the sensate view says: ‘This is just a wooden desk.’ A
primrose is just a primrose to one man while to another it conjures up
thoughts too profound for words or tears:

A primrose by a river’s brim,
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.40

Macdonald’s references make it clear that his opposition to An-der-
son was not based on philosophical thin air. He was a representative
of the philosophical school of Idealism. Now almost forgotten, Ideal-
ism was of immense influence a century ago. It included the first
professional philosophers in Australia, and inspired great projects from
the British Empire to the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration
Court. It will be described in chapter 6.

Anderson was far from understanding any of this, thought Mac-
donald. He might be strong in logi-c, but knew little of ethics. And
what about the youth? Macdonald continued:

We know the student mind; we know how impressionable and malleable
‘freshers’ are, and how inclined to hero-worship of their professors during
the first year—though they get over it in a year or two—and surely
Professor Anderson has a greater task to do than merely making himself
popular and appearing very clever before a group of immature students.
We are awaiting for their instruction a positive contribution from
Professor Anderson. We are still awaiting a textbook on logic that will
surpass in value the textbooks of John Stuart Mill, or Jevons or Mellone.
Here is an opportunity for a positive work, instead of all this destructive,
negative criticism that is emanating from an accredited professor of our
university.41

Since Anderson’s book on logic was no closer to publication in
1943 than it had been in 1927, this was a direct hit. The book never
did appear.42 What was missing from Macdonald’s speech, though,

40 New South Wales Parliamentary Debates, vol. 171 p. 2173 (the phrase
attributed to Browning is from Matthew Arnold).
41 NSWPD, vol. 171, p. 2071
26/3/1959, p. 6; an extract in Heraclitus 72 (Mar 1999): 2; the full typescript
in Anderson archives, Sydney University; on Anderson’s published views,
W.A. Merrylees, ‘Some features of Professor Anderson’s logic’, AJPP 7
was any evidence that Anderson had travestied Christianity, in the sense of misrepresenting it.

Lieut.-Col. Bruxner rose to read from Hansard of 1931, and regretted that he had not then commanded the powers of rhetoric of the honourable member for Mosman. He hoped that this time there would be no hitches in getting rid of Anderson. ‘I do not know of a better way of spending public money than to pay him for all the remaining years for which he has been engaged to serve as teacher and to pay his fare to any place where he may care to go.’

Others joined in. J.J. Cahill, Minister for Public Works and a future Premier, complained that the *Sunday Telegraph* had responded to his criticism of Anderson by saying that ‘it would be as ridiculous for Professor Anderson to give his opinion on bulldozers or gutters’. The member for Kurri Kurri asserted that in attacking religion, Professor Anderson was attacking the fundamental structure on which the British Empire was built. ‘What man is there here’, he asked, ‘who has not the happiest memories of the days when he attended Sunday-school and received religious instruction?’ None disagreed. The member for Yass congratulated Macdonald on his range of knowledge in philosophy and the mysteries of religion, ‘matters of which we do not hear enough in this Chamber’. The member for Phillip, the electorate in which Sydney University lay, protested that the motion did not go far enough, since it did not instruct the Senate of the University as to what exactly to do. ‘The time is due for an overhaul of University matters generally. I find from certain weekly religious papers that the University is being charged with drifting into atheism, communism and materialism’. Several other members spoke, all in favour of the motion condemning Anderson, and it was passed.43

A week later in the Legislative Council, a similar motion was introduced by Sir Henry Manning, the Council’s representative on the University Senate. The preamble to the University and University Colleges Act stated that the purpose of founding the University of Sydney was ‘for the better advancement of morality and religion and the promotion of useful knowledge’, which implied, according to Manning, that Anderson had signed a contract to advance those aims. But not all was plain sailing, as it had been in the lower house. A Labor member said the motion reeked of bias and prejudice, and would be ruled out of order if it had come before the Ironworkers Union:

Hon. members when battling for votes pose as champions of democracy. Their jaws, which in most cases are the strongest parts of them, reach dislocation point in their advocacy of freedom from fear, freedom of

43 *NSWPD*, vol. 171 pp. 2176–90.
speech, and freedom of thought. But once they get off the soap-box and public platform and reach the soft, seductive couches of Parliament, they forget all they said ... Millions of men throughout the world to-day are opposed to the Axis Powers and are fighting to give the human race that very freedom of thought and speech that members of Parliament evidently want to deny to Professor Anderson.

Support for Anderson did not come only from the left. A reasoned defence of free speech was mounted by Sir Norman Kater, a medical graduate of Sydney University and president of the New South Wales Sheepbreeders’ Association. He had taken part in the opposition to Lang, and was regarded by the left as a key figure in the capitalist Establishment. While admitting that Anderson’s remarks had been unfortunate, he believed that Anderson must have really been merely advocating a less literal interpretation of the Bible, of which Sir Norman said,

I look on the Bible as one of the greatest works in English literature. I can say this with some knowledge, for though I cannot say that I have read every word of the Old Testament, I have read the bulk of it, and I have read some of the books many times. I have read the whole of the Apocrypha, including that very interesting book entitled ‘Bel and the Dragon’.

This extensive reading had convinced him that there was nothing wrong with a certain amount of non-literal interpretation, and that heresy hunts were bad for the advance of science. ‘Science is always advancing, and it may be that certain opinions which now may be considered unorthodox may be proved later to be absolutely correct. Take the case of Galileo, who was born in the year 1364 [sic] ...’

The resolution was passed in the Council, though not overwhelmingly. It was forwarded to the Senate of the University of Sydney, but the Senate sent back to the Parliament a reply pointing out that the University Act laid it down that ‘no religious test shall be applied to the teachers or the students of the University’, and added, ‘remembering, as it does, the results that have followed the regimentation of universities in other parts of the world, it is also strongly of the opinion that nothing but harm would follow the stifling in the University of the spirit of free inquiry.’ It could have been written

by Anderson himself. By this time, the controversy had turned into a full-scale hue and cry on the theme of freedom of speech—even though, as a Catholic commentator sourly pointed out, what Anderson had actually called for was restriction of freedom of speech, by excluding clergy from schools. In a meeting of the Freethought Society shortly afterwards, Anderson said, ‘The theorist cannot recognise any limitation of freedom of speech and academic freedom, and has the right to be as blasphemous, obscene and seditious as he likes, whatever offence may be sustained by vested interests’. That is about as far as you can go. Free speech had won total victory. Anderson, and any other academic, was in a position to say virtually whatever he liked. Neither Anderson nor anyone else, as it happened, chose to go any further than Anderson had already gone.

In the heat of the debate, Anderson was attacked from the opposite direction. The background to the dispute was the takeover of the Workers’ Educational Association, or at least its section dealing with political matters, by Andersonians, especially Percy Partridge. Evening lectures were an important part of intellectual life at a time when a very small proportion of the population could afford to go to university. When postgraduate study was almost unknown, they also gave an opportunity for graduates to pursue intellectual interests while working. John Kerr, for example, a young lawyer in the city in the mid-thirties, enthusiastically attended Partridge’s WEA lectures on political and social philosophy. Partridge was the first true member of the Andersonian school, having studied with Anderson in his first years in Australia, and soon becoming lecturer in philosophy in Anderson’s department. He was later Professor of Social Philosophy at ANU — appointed in preference to Karl Popper — served on various commissions, and was Chancellor of Macquarie University. In his WEA lectures, he repeated Anderson’s denunciations of the Soviet Union and its...

28; also D. Wetherell & C. Carr-Gregg, Camilla: A Life (Kensington, 1990), pp. 131–2.
30 Honi Soit 29/4/1943, quoted in Baker, Anderson’s Social Philosophy, p. 121; a later round in Honi Soit’s ‘blasphemy’ issue, 12/7/1945, on which see A. Barcan, Radical Students: The Old Left at Sydney University (Melbourne, 2002), pp. 160–5; SMH 20/7/1945, p. 4.
crimes. The author of the pamphlet *The WEA Exposed* was Anderson’s old enemy, Lance Sharkey. Sharkey was still firmly in control of the Communist Party and had had a decade to refine his Moscow-line prose style:

Anderson, as Professor of Philosophy at the University, is receiving a big salary to teach the opposite of Dialectical Materialism, i.e., metaphysical, bourgeois philosophy ... After a period, Anderson ‘renounced’ the Trotskyites and formed what he called the ‘University Free Thought Society’, with himself as high priest and generalissimo. Anderson’s ‘free thought’ is as jumbled a hotchpot of ideas as Hitlerism, which it further resembles in that its main motif is counter-revolution ...

Anderson, he said, had transformed the WEA into a nest of ‘free-thought’ and Trotskyism, dedicated to blackening the name of the Soviet Union under the ‘slogan of “free inquiry” and “discussion”’. Sharkey gave free rein to his imagination, in considering what Anderson deserved for his fascist treachery:

When a counter-revolutionary murderer is dealt with in Soviet Russia, the Andersons rush to the defence of the criminal and denounce Soviet justice, in chorus with the Trotskyites, and counter-revolutionaries the world over. The existence of the revolution requires the crushing of the enemy — ‘the weapon of criticism gives way to the criticism of weapons’, as Marx wrote ... Soviet justice is the finest system of justice in the world ... It does punish criminals, spies and provocateurs, just as the great French Revolution and every other historical movement had to suppress enemies of progress, just as every revolutionary movement has had to deal drastically with spies and provocateurs and every trade union with scabs ...

Anderson’s creed in the absolute links Anderson with Hitler, Goebbels, Archie Cameron and the blackest reactionaries the world over.

When Sharkey was gaoled in 1949 for claiming that if Soviet troops were to invade Australia, Australian workers would welcome them, Partridge was one of the few public figures to protest.

The late 1940s saw the polarisation of Australian politics, with the Communist victories in Eastern Europe and China...

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55 *SMH* 3/11/1949, p. 3.
prompting the secret manoeuvres of B.A. Santamaria’s Movement and Menzies’ efforts to ban the Communist Party. Anderson, like many others, moved sharply to the right, and shocked former leftist colleagues and many students by supporting Chifley’s use of troops to break the coal strike of 1949. He now saw Marxism as one of an array of dangerous Utopian illusions and regularly spoke against it. He never went so far as to approve of the suppression of free speech that Menzies’s proposed ban on the Communist Party would have involved, but he at least said that any argument against the ban should start with recognising Communism as the greatest threat of the day.56

Writers who enjoy discoursing on Sydney–Melbourne differences are inclined to attribute to Anderson the absence in Sydney of an intellectual left in the 1950s — Sydney Communists, it is said, organised but could not argue.57 Sydney anti-Communism, on the other hand, disposed of considerable argumentative resources. The leading figures associated with Quadrant, Australia’s main anti-Communist magazine, were Eastern European refugees and three of Anderson’s students, James McAuley, Peter Coleman and John Kerr. All three had made the journey from left to right under Anderson’s influence.58

By 1950, Anderson was regarded as a reactionary by all on the left, a sad case of decline in intellectual powers and in commitment to the cause. The view from Melbourne, where the rage was maintained, was recorded by Manning Clark:

As a Melbourne man, I was suspicious of Anderson as the man who had betrayed the Left, a man who had gone over to the other side. Melburnians wanted Anderson to answer a simple question: was he or was he not interested in the fact that some were very rich and some very poor? Anderson replied that we were all bothered by different things. That finished him with the Melburnians. Out of his own mouth Anderson had shown himself to be wrong-headed and walnut-hearted. Exit John Anderson, the Fascist bastard, ha, ha, ha!

I heard John Anderson speak in Canberra at the philosophy conference in 1951, and was enchanted. Melburnians had warned me to be on my guard lest he get me in. The man, they said, was a mesmeriser, a man who got you in by giving you in the first five minutes of his talk high-

56 Baker, Anderson’s Social Philosophy, pp. 130–3.
57 Gollan, Revolutionaries and Reformers, pp. 200–1.
minded reasons for wanting to ‘kill’ your father. Be on your guard, Melburnians said, the bastard will convince you that if you do what you want to do you will not feel guilty. Yes, be careful, or he will persuade you that everything is allowable.

Well, I was carried away, though I did not know why. I disagreed with everything he said, but enjoyed the act he put on. Maybe it was the Scottish accent; maybe it was the capacity to toss off the right word or the lively image; maybe it was the man wearing Scottish tweed suits in sunny Australia, a man wearing a tie when most of his colleagues in philosophy and other intellectual sports were dressing much more casually. I was already convinced that the Bohemians of the heart wore suits, and that the new conformists stripped off all formal gear; maybe it was the thumbs under the waistcoat, and the twiddling fingers that explained the attraction; or maybe it was the light in the eye, a sign that there was a man within who was still alive.\footnote{Clark may have picked up a few clues on how to dress like a prophet, but his admiration of the great man did not last long. At a conference party, Anderson gave one of his famous renditions of blasphemous songs, and Clark was shocked to the depths of his manse-sodden soul. ‘I thought of him later as a man of vast gifts who, for some reason I did not understand, devoted the last half of his life to swimming upstream against the great river of life.’ But there were limits to Anderson’s fame as an anti-Communist. In 1952, the recently formed ASIO conducted a wide-ranging series of inquiries into subversion at all Australian universities. One of the sixteen staff listed under ‘Communist Activities at Sydney University’ was John Anderson, whose file had been added to in 1950. The 1950 report on Anderson has three pages. One page notes his signature on a letter to the newspapers protesting at the Communist Party Dissolution Bill. The second is a handwritten note that ‘He proposes the Communist doctrine to friends while travelling from the city by train.’ The final page has more information:

My informant is a senior member of the University staff, and knows him well. I reproduce what he told me below:

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\footnote{M. Clark, \textit{The Quest for Grace} (Melbourne, 1990), pp. 193–4.}

\footnote{Versions more or less as sung by Anderson in D. Laycock, \textit{The Best Bawdry} (Sydney, 1982), pp. 23–6; \textit{Sydney Libertarians Broadsheet} 24 (Feb 1962), p. 5. There is also a tape.}

\footnote{D. McKnight, \textit{Australia’s Spies and Their Secrets} (Sydney, 1994), pp. 146–50.}

\footnote{‘University and Anti-Red Bill’, letter, \textit{SMH} 22/5/1950, p. 2; the 33 signatories include, besides Anderson, the Andersonians Partridge, Stout, Mackie, Rose and Foulkes.}
Although some of Professor ANDERSON’s activities — e.g. the Free Thought Society — may seem rather ridiculous to outsiders, it would be a great mistake not to take him seriously. He is a very lucid, plausible and convincing speaker who makes a great appeal to students of the intellectual type, and his influence on them, which is great, is entirely a bad one. My friend had no evidence of subversive activity, or association, against Professor ANDERSON, but said such evidence would be practically impossible to get as ANDERSON was too clever to give himself away.53

ASIO apparently remained entirely unaware of Anderson’s anti-Communism, although the letter to the papers referred to begins ‘we are wholly opposed to the aims and methods of the Communist Party’, and the front page of the Herald said that the left regarded him as ‘the greatest intellectual force against Communism in the country.’64

While anti-Communism was a common enough position by 1950, Anderson had not run out of less popular targets. After 1945, the gravy train started rolling for intellectuals in Australia. Though there were no sudden attempts to restructure society from top to bottom on the advice of intellectuals, as happened overseas under Roosevelt and Attlee, there was a gradual acceptance that the role of government should expand, in areas like the welfare state, housing and education, free milk for schoolchildren and the like.65 It was further accepted that planning, advising and policy-making in these areas could benefit from people with university training. While there was no Australian Keynes, there were men of wide intellectual training like ’Nugget’ Coombs, who came to have a large role in planning the new society. Even the new Liberal Party was convinced by its in-house intellectuals that a reasonable dose of welfarism was a good thing.66 In the late 1950s, Menzies himself came to accept that university education was something Australia needed a lot more of, and money was found for a large increase in the size and number of Australian universities.

To all these developments, Anderson had the same attitude. It was ‘No’. His article of 1943, ‘The servile state’, already appreciated that wartime planning was an indication of the widespread planning and regimentation to come.

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53 ASIO file, p. 8 (17/7/1950).
54 SMH 22/5/1950, p. 1 column 8.
Even if the word freedom is used, ‘freedom from want’ and ‘freedom from fear’ are simply the sufficiency and security, the desire for which marks the servile mentality ... And those persons who expect ‘sufficiency’ to be provided for them, will find themselves worse off in relying on what the State deems sufficient than in making their own organised efforts for the provision of materials they require ... But the second and more vital point is that the pursuit of security and sufficiency is itself a low aim, that the maintenance of a high level of culture depends on the existence of a plurality of movements which take their chance in the social struggle, instead of having their place and their resources assigned to them from a supposedly all-embracing point of view.  

He went on to oppose the ‘planned society’, ‘service to the community’, ‘such demagogic slogans as “equal opportunity for all”’, education for ‘the needs of industry’ and “social unity”, (i.e., established interests’). All these philanthropic ideas, he said, were merely sectional interests masquerading as the good of society, something which does not exist.

Like many academics approaching retirement, he took to protesting about the decline in ‘standards’. In a single talk of 1958, he attacked expansion of universities (as there were already more students than could cope with real university work), lower failure rates (for the same reason), tutorials (which dealt with the students’ problems, when students ought to be dealing with the problems of the subject), specialist training generally and ‘universities’ of technology in particular, and religious university colleges. In his last published article, ‘Classicism’, of 1960, he looked back almost with nostalgia to the standards of the Golden Age, when education was pure inquiry (whenever that was: Glasgow in 1912?).

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68 SMH 29/3/1955, p. 16; also Honi Soit 14/10/1954, p. 5.
John Anderson at his home in Turramurra, 1960 (Anderson papers, University of Sydney Archives)
Concentration on what serves one’s purposes, satisfaction with the ‘just as good’ or the ‘good enough to get there’, exists even more strikingly and influentially in public life at present than it did in Arnold’s time, and it has penetrated more and more deeply into education, promoting shoddy thinking and slipshod language in the name of social equality and amelioration and other ‘inadequate ideas’ which have less and less critical intelligence applied to them … the function of education at the present time is substantially that of turning the populace into Philistines.70

The classical theme of the decline of the present age was strong:

The classicist recognises the natural opposition between disinterestedness and interestedness, between concern with the working of things themselves and concern with what we can get out of them. He will certainly note the special weakness of the objective outlook at the present time; he may even decide that our modern intellectual age, dating from the Renaissance, is on the verge of collapse and that a new barbarism is imminent; he can hardly fail to note the resemblance between current conditions and the decline of classical Greece, with the replacement of the solid thinking of the preceding time by a woolly-minded cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism.71

The article included a final tough-minded ‘No’ to the style of protest that emerged in the late 1950s. The Sixties would, like Anderson, be against just about everything, but the ‘protest’ of the Sixties was far from the ‘criticism’ that Anderson advocated:

A topical example of such salvationist thinking is to be found in agitations for peace, in which, leaving aside any attempt to determine the objective conditions either of the occurrence of international conflicts themselves or of the discovery of truth concerning them, it is assumed that anything that is ‘undesirable’ can, by a sufficiency of protests or ‘appeals to reason’, be eliminated.72

It was all a long way from the imminence of the Revolution and the criticism of everything.

Anderson died in 1962, aged 68, after collapsing at his home from a stroke brought on by a furious bout of woodcutting.
