Chapter 11  The Sydney Disturbances

URING the twenty years from 1965, the philosophy department at Sydney University was rent by a series of bitter left-right disputes. Such fights — or rather, the same fight in many instantiations — were common enough in humanities departments in the period. The unique virulence of the one at Sydney, which eventually led to a split into two departments, was due not only to the strength of the left, which was a frequent occurrence elsewhere, but to the determination not to give way of the leading figures of the right, David Armstrong and David Stove.

Armstrong and Stove, as we saw in chapter 2, were students of John Anderson in the late 1940s, and ones of unusually independent mind. Armstrong had early success. He went for postgraduate work to Oxford, where the linguistic philosophy then current made only a limited impression on his Andersonian interest in the substantial questions of classical philosophy. He recalled attending a seminar by the leading linguistic philosophers Strawson and Grice. Grice, I think it was, read very fast a long paper which was completely unintelligible to me. Perhaps others were having difficulty also because when the paper finished there was a long, almost religious, hush in the room. Then O.P. Wood raised what seemed to be a very minute point even by Oxford standards. A quick dismissive remark by Grice and the room settled down to its devotions again. At this point a Canadian sitting next to me turned and said, ‘Say, what is going on here?’ I said, ‘I’m new round here, and I don’t know the rules of this game. But I think Strawson and Grice are winning.’

The story of the brash young colonial passed round Oxford. As an examiner of Armstrong’s thesis, Grice later explained why the arguments of the thesis involved a contradiction — this counts as a knockdown win in the philosophical world — but the examiners gra-
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The selection committee placed Stove second, but through a clerical error both of the top two candidates were sent letters of offer. Stove proved to have received his letter by the time the mistake was discovered, and the University decided its projected expansion made possible the appointment of both candidates. He moved back to Sydney University in 1960.


Armstrong and Stove should have acquired at least a minor degree of fame from the ‘Bertrand Russell, Andersonian’ affair, recounted in chapter 2, but as we saw, the truth was not revealed until decades later. By the mid-1960s, though, the time for such innocent pleasures as exposing Bertrand Russell was fast coming to a close, as was the happy seclusion of philosophy from the public eye. There was no shortage of the glare of publicity in the Knopfelmacher affair, one of the top news stories of 1965.

Dr Frank Knopfelmacher had for some years been one of the most controversial figures in the University of Melbourne, where he was a lecturer in psychology. Foreseeing the Holocaust, he had escaped Czechoslovakia in 1939, and again bribed his way out of Czechoslovakia after the Communist coup of 1948. Naturally, he took a more alarmist view of totalitarian threats than was common in Australia, and regarded Australians in general and Australian intellectuals in particular as dangerously naive when it came to the designs of Communism. He harangued, organised and made sarcastic jokes without pause, and a generation of Melbourne University students split into pro- and anti-Knopfelmacher camps.\(^5\) In 1965, Knopfelmacher was an applicant for a senior lectureship in political philosophy in the Philosophy Department at Sydney University. With the strong support of Armstrong, he was chosen by the selection committee, and the appointment went forward to the Professorial Board for approval.

Normally committee recommendations were unanimous and Board approval a formality. But there was dissatisfaction from one member of the selection committee, Charles Birch, the professor of biology, a Christian of ‘progressive’ views and later author of a number of books on philosophy. He called to the attention of W.N. Christiansen, the Professor of Electrical Engineering, the existence of one of Knopfelmacher’s occasional writings, one he had not submitted in his application. Christiansen hurriedly looked through ‘The situation at the University of Melbourne’, published in the Jesuit

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magazine *Twentieth Century* in 1964, and read selected passages to the Professorial Board. The offending passages included the following:

At the time when the Communist Party constituted the nucleus of intellectual and social life at the University of Melbourne, it operated through a system of concentric circles of sympathizers entrenched in academic organizations which it either created, captured or influenced ... the Old Melbourne Left continues to wield the whip-hand, or at least to exercise significant veto powers in matters of academic preferments and sinecures ... The tactic chosen [by the left] was internal disruption and the devices were sectarianism and sex. They were cleverly selected; the organizers of the Hitler Youth had shown the way.

It concluded:

Like rats, they wish to operate in the dark. Their aim is, therefore, total intellectual stagnation, certainly not 'dissidence' or 'rebellion'. Their wish is to eliminate altogether intelligent discussions of political issues from the campus. The outspoken command is — be a fellow-traveller, or a neutralist, or keep quiet. The fact that the struggle for academic freedom has to be waged not against oppressive governments and an obscurantist clergy, but against an academic junta whose members have been corroded by totalitarianism and against their psychologically disturbed and delinquent student progeny is very damning. It must lead, sooner or later, to a fundamental re-examination of our current notions about the structural guarantees of academic freedom in Australia.

The Board, especially its scientific members, were not used to that sort of thing. They were appalled at the tone of voice and agreed to Christiansen's proposal that the appointment not go through until they had had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with more of Dr K's writings. Further research turned up nothing worse, though there was one more article that caused offence. One sentence in a short piece on state aid to Church schools was, 'The notion that Catholic education produces a thing called “an authoritarian personality” filled with murderous and aggressive prejudices is a myth based on a discredited psychological theory which maintains its hold among Australian psychologists by suppression and falsification of research findings.” The reference was to, among others, the Sydney University Andersonian psychologist John Maze, but the Board's objection was not so much to Knopfelmacher’s attack on any particular person as to

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7 W.N. Christiansen to author, 27/7/1996.
his attacking the bona fides of academics without giving specific evidence. There was also some question as to whether Knopfelmacher had adequate formal qualifications in political philosophy, but it is clear that this consideration did not play a significant part in the controversy. The Professorial Board did not want someone who spoke like that on their patch.  

Knopfelmacher and his friends of course saw the incident as proof of everything he had been saying about the infiltration of universities by Communists. From the point of view of the press and of federal


and state parliaments, where the matter was debated extensively, it was a simple matter of left versus right. The counterattack centred on the person of Professor Christiansen. As pointed out by W.C. Wentworth in federal Parliament, Christiansen had appeared in the documents Petrov had brought with him on his defection, under the code-name ‘Master’, though there was no suggestion he had done anything improper. Soviet intelligence regarded him as part of their ring of Australian spies, which included his brother-in-law Jim Hill, but there seems to be no evidence that he passed any information. A brief exchange in his appearance before the Petrov Royal Commission is interesting as evidence of the connection often seen in ‘internationalist’ scientific circles between certain philosophical views and leftist opinions:

Commissioner: I gather that although you are not a member of the Communist party, you subscribe to the Communist doctrine?

Christiansen: Yes, I feel that the materialist concept of history is the one which fits in best with scientific thinking, and it is the one that I favour.

The efforts to reverse the Professorial Board’s decision were unavailing. The Senate confirmed it, the position was readvertised, and a selection committee of almost the same composition as before met to consider the matter. It was decided to ask the opinion of Charles Martin, who was about to succeed Alan Stout as Professor of Philosophy. Though he had been worried by Knopfelmacher’s rudeness, he had been convinced by the weight of philosophical opinion that his appointment was desirable, and it was hoped that his support would convince the committee to vote again for Knopfelmacher. He travelled to Sydney via Melbourne, where he was presented with


14 Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage (Sydney, 1955), pp. 218–9; ASIO file on Christiansen, Australian Archives series A6119/78 items 863–4, A6119/83 items 1486–7; also Petrov documents under Christiansen W., A6201 items 376, 377, 379.


“‘incontrovertible evidence’ of conduct by Dr K which made it now impossible for him to support the appointment.”

The conduct in question was Knopfelmacher’s persistent bad-mouthing of the left-wing philosophy lecturer Don Gunner in an attempt to have him dismissed. With Martin’s opinion being negative, and with Stout being unwilling to foist on his successor someone he did not want, the committee changed its mind. As it did not disclose its reasons, public controversy continued. Armstrong wrote years later,

In the course of his political controversies he quite often used intemperate, not to say ungentlemanly language in writing about his opponents. In this he was a man fatally ahead of his time by a few years. A short time afterwards academic rebels were saying pretty much anything they liked, how they liked, about their opponents. If anyone tried to censure them or impede their careers as a result of this, the shouts that their academic freedom had been violated were deafening. To Knopfelmacher, however, the novelist Saki’s saying applied: it is the first Christian martyr who gets the hungriest lion.

The job left vacant by the affair eventually went to the Sydney libertarian George Molnar, prominent in later disturbances. The Professorial Board apparently did not read any of his articles, so the author of ‘Sexual freedom in the Orr case’, ‘The sexual revolution’ and ‘The nature of moralism’ was employed to lecture first-year philosophy. Naïve female first-year students had little representation on the Professorial Board.

In 1968 Armstrong’s A Materialist Theory of the Mind (considered in chapter 9) was published. It had great international success, and established him as the country’s most eminent philosopher. This was useful later when he was outnumbered in political fights, as the University was prepared to take a certain amount of action to avoid losing him.

Between the Knopfelmacher affair and the next round of the left-right fight a great deal happened. The major US and European campus disruptions of 1968 and the Vietnam demonstrations came and (up to a point) went. The old order put on its ugliest faces — Askin, McMahon, Bolte, Nixon — and did its best to ‘ride over

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18 Stout statement, 18/9/1976, in Stout papers, item 967.
the bastards’, in Askin’s famous words to LBJ. 22 True, there were plenty of places in Australia where these changes were almost invisible — country towns, banks and RSL clubs were disturbed by no more than an occasional miniskirt. It was universities, as everyone knew, that were at the centre of the trouble. One factor was the conscription ballot, which concentrated the minds of many who would never have bothered to analyse society otherwise. 23 Another factor was the huge expansion of universities during the 1960s, named by B.A. Santamaria as Menzies’s worst mistake. Apart from admitting to academic positions certain individuals with little talent or interest in matters intellectual, there were problems arising from expansion without much increase in the number of professors. ‘Junior’ staff who would once have been professors of minuscule departments at 30 seethed. Even David Armstrong agreed that the power of professors should be reduced. 24 But even in universities, there was little sign of disturbance in many areas — in engineering faculties, for example. For obvious reasons, connected both with the content of the disciplines and the kind of students they attracted, arts and social science departments were the centres of activism. To its central position among those disciplines, philosophy added a tradition of intransigence on matters of principle. Principles are, after all, what philosophy is about. Practical consequences are not.

Philosophers of conservative views thus had a box seat view of the coming wave. They were not happy. Armstrong recalled being with John Searle, the noted philosopher who was an early leader of demands for change at Berkeley, the centre of American campus protest, though later a critic:

A phone rang. It was a lieutenant of Searle’s from the campus. The first ‘Filthy Speech Movement’ posters were being paraded about the campus. The open writing up of four-letter words still had the power to shock in those days. As John started shouting back at his aide, I thought I had been privileged to witness a historic moment. It must have been thus when the Gironde first began to realize that the Jacobins were not simply people a

bit to their left, but that they wanted the overthrow of all who were not as radical as they.  

Stove too was disturbed by the Berkeley events and was among the first to accuse the Australian university authorities of ‘caving in’.26 As violent demonstrations and sit-ins multiplied, he spoke of ‘the end of my own love affair with the University of Sydney. Less than five years ago it was to me the most agreeable place in the world, and I could hardly believe my own good fortune in being allowed to work in it. I looked forward to the time when my children could share it with me. How very remote all that seems now!’  

In academic philosophy itself, people began to wonder if too much attention to the meaning of words had rendered the profession ‘irrelevant’. ‘To the basic questions which the times thus posed — questions about the dis-ease of bourgeois culture, the forms of possible alternatives, the strategies and tactics of the path from one to the other — there came no answers from the thin voice of analytic philosophy quavering on heedlessly in university mausoleums’.28 Surely something was called for from the supposed experts in ethics, when commitment was spreading abroad? Tweed coats were put away and afros grown. Pipes were replaced by microphones. Minds were expanded by the works of Marx and Mao, and by mind-expanding substances of a more physical kind. The Sydney University Philosophy IV students of 1970 included a dope-smoking group and a heroin-shooting group. 

The early leader in the ‘red shift’, however, was not Sydney University but Flinders University in Adelaide. The Professor of Philosophy there, Brian Medlin, had worked on conventional philosophical

topics, but changed direction completely. His best-known article had begun, 'I believe that it is now pretty generally accepted by professional philosophers that ultimate ethical principles must be arbitrary,' a view with evident tendencies to encourage the substitution for morality of either total inaction or politics. Medlin’s choice was politics. He was one of the leaders in Adelaide of the Vietnam protests, which he continually pushed in a more radical direction. ‘With his long, straight black hair,’ burbled the papers, ‘he looks like a cross between Che Guevara and Tariq Ali.’ He was known also for readings of his poems, many of them not published because of the ‘Lawrentian use of Anglo-Saxon words’. He succeeded in being gaoled for five days in 1971 after resisting arrest during the Moratorium demonstration and refusing to pay the fine. Four of the five members of the Flinders philosophy department converted to revolutionary socialism. A subject on ‘Vietnam, imperialism and the nature of man’ was the harbinger of a total transformation of the department’s courses to Marxism, especially Maoism.

An article by Medlin of the time, ‘Strategy for the revolution’, explains why action is needed to break up the complacency of the people. ‘Most of the deprivation is unapparent to the deprived,’ so the populace are not going to start the revolution spontaneously. But the revolutionary will not initiate violence. He will provoke the system with apparently respectable actions, staying just ahead of the liberals, who must be kept on side. The system will then be goaded into violent repression, which will induce and justify revolutionary violence:

In case my doctrine should strike some as timid, I wish to make it clear that I would not regard the wholesale assassination of the Australian cabinet, in defence of the Vietnamese revolution, as an act initiating violence. Provided that such an action would bring to an end Australia’s aggression in Indo-China, it would be entirely justified as a reasonable, though vio-

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lent, response to the violence of the Australian Government. What would be wrong with such an action is that it would be worse than ineffective: it would strengthen the Australian counter-revolution. This is because it would be seen as initiating violence ... Killing the Australian cabinet would be bad tactics. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, a number of men would be killed to no good end. For this reason alone, then, the action would be a bad one — however agreeable some of us would find it to throttle cabinet ministers with our bare hands. In the second place, forgetting the fate of the cabinet ministers, the action would be a disaster for the Australian revolution. Hence it would strengthen the bourgeoisie and so generally increase human misery. Bad tactics in a good cause are bad morality.  

Good news for the cabinet, but not so encouraging for softer targets such as philosophy departments. As large street demonstrations became rare after 1971, leftist agitation concentrated on smaller and more focused campaigns. As long as the left could keep small numbers of committed students ‘confronting’ authority, university administrations were faced with the dilemma of failing to react, leading to contempt for their gutlessness and to further demands, or reacting firmly, causing radicalisation of a wider body of students.

The high point of philosophical ‘action’ came at the Australasian philosophy conference of 1970, when Medlin draped a red flag over the lectern before giving his talk on ‘The onus of proof in political argument’. The conference passed the resolution ‘that the United States and Australia are engaged in a senseless and inhuman struggle in Indo-China and affirms that Australians are justified in opposing Allied military involvement in the Indo-China war and conscription for that war by non-violent acts of civil disobedience.’ (Eighteen for, twelve against, six abstaining.)

There was a danger — or opportunity, depending on one’s point of view — of philosophy being swallowed by politics. David Stove, seeing Sydney University as on a pre-Flinders stage on a slippery slope, wrote:

For the essence of totalitarianism is contained in the great helmsman’s injunction to ‘put politics in command’. This is not just Communist-Chi-
nese baby-talk. What it means is this: that you are to take over every institution, whatever it may be, and empty out everything which distinguishes it from other institutions, and turn it into yet another loudspeaker for repeating 'the general line'. Destroy the specific institutional fabric of — a University, a trade-union, a sporting body, a church — and give them all the same institutional content, viz. a political one. Contrapositively, the essence of resistance to this process by liberal-democrats must consist in trying to maintain the specific institutional integrity of different institutions.38

Stove and Armstrong were not, however, skilful in gaining support among the student body. Dr Knopflmacher’s abilities in that area were sorely missed.

Was resistance to extend to opposing the appointment to academic positions of candidates committed to revolution? David Armstrong announced that he would not vote on a selection committee for a candidate who was ‘not prepared to work within the institutional framework of the University, e.g. if he was associated with sit-ins and disruption as opposed to due process. DMA emphasised that he saw this not as a punitive action, but as a matter of protecting the institution against known dangers.’39 Staff who did want to politicise the University thus saw Armstrong as a known danger to their careers.

By contrast, the other side argued that there was no standpoint outside the political. According to John Burnheim, among the least radical of those who came to form the Department of General Philosophy, this was supported by the nineteenth-century European tradition, which emphasised the historical situatedness of all beliefs:

The philosopher, like it or not, must take a position that rests not on ultimate truths, but on a reading of our specific historical situation. Inevitably it will be a partisan reading, since our situation is one of deep conflicts that we are certainly not in a position to resolve on a neutral or impartial basis. Recognising this point engenders the fear that philosophy will degenerate into mere politics. It may indeed. But the appropriate response is not an attempt to withdraw to untenable ‘olympian’ positions, but to attempt to arrive at a more adequate understanding of the situation and the choices it imposes on us. We might even emerge in the twentieth century.40

39 Staff meeting 27/5/1971, summary of proceedings (Devitt Documents: hereafter ‘DD’: a collection kept by Michael Devitt, to whom I am grateful for supplying them. Most of them are also in the Armstrong papers, National Library MS 9363, series 6).
40 J. Burnheim, ‘“Profound crisis” in philosophy’, University of Sydney News 8 (11/10/1976): p. 200; on this topic, J.E. Grumley, History and Totality:
In June 1971, David Armstrong chaired a lunchtime talk by the First Secretary of the South Vietnamese Embassy. A student formerly expelled from the University took the microphone at the end of the talk and began abusing the speaker. Armstrong tried to seize the microphone back, and a scuffle ensued while he was restrained. The incident is remembered for a spectacular photograph taken of an enraged Armstrong trying to grab the microphone. People had the picture blown up and took to referring to Armstrong as ‘the Beast’.

By this time, the challenge long feared by Armstrong and Stove had arrived in their own department. Wal Suchting and Michael De-vitt proposed for 1972 and 1973 courses in Marxism–Leninism (options for second and third year, in consecutive years, so that a student


42 SMH 25/6/1971, p. 3; Australian 25/6/1971, p. 3.
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could take both). The outline of the courses included mention of the ideas of Stalin, Ho Chi Minh, Mao and Che Guevara, though these were to take up only a small proportion of the courses. Armstrong was willing to agree to a certain amount of teaching on Marx (‘not a major philosopher ... but a major thinker’), but jibbed at the other names. ‘These men have no place in the history of thought. They were engaged exclusively in political activity.’ He also objected to the total weight that would be given to Marxism and doubted the objectivity of the lecturers, who made no secret of their left-wing commitments. Suchting and Devitt said Che and Mao had a few interesting ideas, and claimed their course would be ‘objective’ but of course not ‘neutral’. ‘Neutrality means not espousing a position ... [it] is neither desirable in theory nor realisable in practice.’

Matters came to a head at a departmental meeting on 7 June 1971. Suchting, Devitt and Armstrong reiterated their positions. Stove suggested that the reference to ‘theory and practice’ in the course outline ought to be interpreted in the Leninist sense. ‘He alleged that the courses were an imposture and that they must be regarded as the first step in the process of complete politicisation.’ The proposers agreed to remove the word ‘Leninism’ from the title, and voting was then ten to three in favour of the proposed courses. Armstrong as head of department vetoed them. The meeting carried eight-to-four a motion of censure against Armstrong for his veto. The issues of Marxism, democratisation of departments and ‘academic freedom’ were thus rolled into one and the fight was on. The battle lines of the era, normally dividing parties who had never met each other, were drawn across a department of a dozen people sharing a common room. A moderate, Keith Campbell, urged a conciliatory style, given that victors and vanquished would have to go on living and working together. It was not going to happen. Armstrong, Suchting and Molnar belonged to the crash-through-or-crash school of politics.

After negotiations in higher university bodies and press comment, a compromise was patched up, with one course going ahead under the name ‘Marxism’. It was obvious that the next conflict could not be far off.

43 Armstrong to Suchting and Devitt, 3/6/1971, reply of same date (DD); ‘Staff meeting of 7th June, 1971, summary of proceedings’, (DD).
44 Campbell to Devitt, 14/9/1971 (DD).
45 Nation no. 319 (26/6/1971): pp. 7–10; University of Sydney News 3 (7) (16/6/1971): pp. 1, 7; 3 (10) (28/7/1971): pp. 1–2; ‘The philosophy dispute: An interview with Wal Suchting and Michael Devitt’, Honi Soit 8/7/1971, pp. 8–9; Bogdan, D.M. Armstrong, p. 36; press comment listed in C. Green, Disputes within the Department of Philosophy at the University of
In 1972, Professor Graham Nerlich had the unenviable job of Head of Department. Democratisation proceeded apace. A meeting that included postgraduate and undergraduate representatives recommended the appointment as a tutor of a Marxist whom Armstrong did not regard as the best candidate. He complained to the administration about such a wide suffrage being allowed in matters of appointments, and tensions exceeded their previous maximum. Devitt wrote an enraged private note to Nerlich, suggesting tactics for dealing with the situation. He added a postscript: ‘It is now clear that the Beast will not leave any of us in peace. It seems necessary therefore that he be discredited and driven from the University. I shall henceforth support any tactic (within certain limits) that seems likely to help the achievement of this end.’
Nerlich proposed to take no notice of it (‘Look, I have people bursting into my office all the time saying wild and inflammatory things’, he said later), but the note somehow fell into Armstrong’s hands. Here, it seemed, was Marxist-Leninist praxis, red in tooth and claw, not only on the doorstep but inside it. Armstrong felt it necessary to publish the note ‘in self-defence’. Peter Coleman took the matter up in state Parliament, reading the offending sections of Devitt’s letter and arguing, ‘If academic self-government is to be used as an excuse for left-wing McCarthyites to smear responsible professors, responsible educators, and to drive them out of education institutions, then there is something wrong either with the doctrine of academic self-government, or with the practice of it.’ Santamaria urged Armstrong to demand Devitt’s dismissal, but it was felt more advantageous to take the rare opportunity for the right to enjoy underdog status.\(^7\) Devitt denied there had been any actual plot; earlier and later evidence makes it clear that that was true, but some recalled the Orr and Knopfelmacher cases as warnings that threats to destroy academic careers were not to be taken lightly. The Vice-Chancellor rejected Armstrong’s appeal, and the tutor chosen by the departmental meeting was appointed.\(^4^7\)

As expected, 1973 was not a year of peace and harmony. In late 1972, a departmental meeting widened suffrage to all philosophy students including those in first year, thus delivering control to those radical enough to keep turning up.\(^4^9\) Philosophy was the only department to go as far as that. A subsequent meeting allowed the teacher of any option to decide how students were to be passed and graded, meaning that exams and assignments could be dispensed with. By this time, feminism had appeared as an organised force, and was demanding a place in university courses. It was unclear where it should fit, as the then new theory of feminism could as easily be called anthropology, sociology or political theory as philosophy. The lack of a place for theory about the private sphere or ‘politics of experience’ was one

\(^{47}\) W.H.C. Eddy to Stove, 30/8/1972.
of the phenomena whose analysis was promised. In February 1973, two graduate students took up a trouble-making idea from Suchting. Jean Curthoys and Liz Jacka proposed a course on ‘The politics of sexual oppression’, to run as an option in philosophy in the second half of the year. Apart from the content, the proposal was unusual in being put forward six months later than normal, and in being offered by graduate students — though investigation did turn up a few other courses being given by similarly qualified postgraduates.

The old issues of objectivity and bias were raised in a radio interview in which Jacka and Curthoys outlined their plans:

Jacka: ... and finally we hope to discuss how women may liberate themselves. Whether it will be by conventional, political action, by raising their consciousness or by other methods including revolution.

Interviewer: Is it a political propaganda course then?

Jacka: Not necessarily. We don’t pretend to be neutral. We are committed to women’s liberation. But we hope to maintain objectivity and philosophical rigour in our discussion.

Interviewer: Jean, is this the new phase in the women’s lib movement?

Curthoys: In my personal opinion, yes. I think that up until now, although women’s liberation has been very effective, that it has suffered from a lack of theory and in a sense a lack of direction. I hope that our course will help remedy this. I personally think the future of the women’s lib movement lies in tying itself up with Marxist movements.

Curthoys was later to surmise that the explosion in women’s studies courses in universities in 1974 was a sign that women were becoming content to work within universities, instead of radically transforming their function. Her views on the need for radical transformation were far from Devitt’s ‘no threat’ scenario. Her radical views stemmed from her descent from Communist royalty and her long involvement in Sixties protest.

51 Rayment, ‘The Philosophy Department Split’, p. 64.
52 P. Westmore, ‘The strike at Sydney University’, Quadrant 17 (4) (July-Aug 1973); pp. 23–9, at p. 25.
The department voted overwhelmingly for the course, although the minority voting against it included the four most senior members. The Faculty of Arts also approved it, though only on the casting vote of the chairman. The Professorial Board rejected the proposed course, and a strike of staff and students began, spreading to several arts and social science departments and disrupting lectures in them for weeks. Students attending the lectures of Armstrong and other non-striking philosophers faced pickets outside and inside the lectures. Tents were pitched on the quadrangle lawn. Jack Mundey appeared on campus and promised a Builders Labourers Federation ban on work at the University.\footnote{Rayment, ‘The Philosophy Department Split’, p 66; M. & V. Burgmann, \textit{Green Bans, Red Union} (Sydney, 1998), p. 144.}


A visitor described the victory party:

They were singing sentimental Irish songs under the banner ‘Philosophers hitherto have only interpreted the world — the point now is to change it.’

They had two four-gallon casks of wine — which is counter-culturally acceptable alcohol; spirits and beer are frowned upon, spirits because of their upper-income connotations and beer because it is associated with the worst kinds of Australian male behaviour.

We talked briefly with George Molnar, a lecturer in philosophy who had been centrally active in the strike. He was making the ‘goodies’ in the kitchen (not savouries).


From the other side, the outlook was gloomy. Armstrong wrote: ‘In the immediate aftermath of the strike, things seemed very bleak.'
The radicals had effective control of the department, and there seemed to be no future in it for the rest of us. Some older members of staff planned to retire early, others started to look for jobs elsewhere. It did not seem that it would be possible for philosophy as we understood it to go on being practised and taught at Sydney University. Nerlich did leave, taking a chair in Adelaide. Stove had applied for positions elsewhere but without success. But salvation, of a kind, was at hand. Campbell, who had been a moderate and was grossly insulted by the radicals for it, got together a proposal to split the department. Faced with the probable loss of the philosophers of repute, the Vice-Chancellor agreed. Armstrong and six others formed the Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy. It became ‘the pleasantest environment for teaching philosophy that I have ever experienced’, Armstrong says, while David Stove said in 1991, ‘the first twenty years of the new Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy have been fertile in good philosophy, to a degree unparalleled in any similar period in this or any other Australian university. The department has also enjoyed a rare freedom from internal disharmony. As I have often said, it is the best club in the world, and to be or have been a member of it is a pleasure as well as a privilege.’ The resulting philosophy is described elsewhere, mostly in chapter 12.

The atmosphere was not so tranquil in the other department, which was allowed to get away with the name General Philosophy. Animosity had already run high in the strike itself between feminists and the unreconstructed Marxist males who regarded the women’s course merely as a pretext for another fight about democratisation and self-management. The course went ahead laden with Marxist concepts like the mode of production and the ideology of bourgeois science but the search was on for more authentically feminist replacements. The appearance of the phrase ‘transcending the Aristotelian subject/object distinction’ heralded the strange future of feminist theory, to be described in chapter 14.

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The Department of General Philosophy was fully democratic, with all staff and students having the right to speak and vote on matters of course content, assessment and appointments. Meetings of up to 500 were known, though student apathy kept most down to 20 or so. Formal exams were eliminated and in some subjects students assessed themselves. Enrolments were much larger than for the Trad and Mod Department — in 1978, GP had about 750 to T & M’s 200. But all was not sweetness and light. For one thing, the Administration played hard ball. Though they never had the stomach to ‘clean up’ GP, they did fail to provide extra resources to cope with the extra students, and periodically threatened to forcibly amalgamate the two departments. They also refused to allow the Department a full Professor, as would have been normal, which permitted David Armstrong, as ‘Professor most concerned’, to interfere to some degree in various matters, especially appointments. But the more important source of trouble was a series of internal disputes, splits and scandals. They mostly arose from the domination of departmental meetings by a group led by Wal Suchting and calling itself the ‘Marxist caucus’. It was regarded by others as ruling by vigorous meeting attendance, humiliation and ridicule. Wal was, according to outsiders then and insiders since, in his element. Devitt, who wanted to get on with mainstream philosophy, found himself increasingly isolated. A tutor was appointed in logic who thought logic played a reactionary role in maintaining bourgeois philosophical ideology. Devitt failed in an attempt to have a permanent position that had been vacated by a specialist in logic and language filled by someone in the same area. A tutor not in the ruling group, who had been persuaded to come from the US by Burnheim with a written offer of a job for three years, found himself out of a job after two, courtesy of a departmental meeting. Some bravely urged that promises created a moral obligation. Devitt recalls that the Caucus were not impressed by this piece of bourgeois morality. ‘I attended a Caucus meeting (although not a member) where the whole matter was discussed. Someone asked what Burnheim’s position was. I viv-

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64 R. Archer to Devitt, 4/6/1976 (DD).
idly remember Wal’s reply: he chuckled cynically and simply went through the motions of washing his hands.  

Jean Curthoys, then much under Suchting’s influence, openly defended the political nature of the decision at the meeting: ‘It is important to be clear on two things: (1) That all appointments are political appointments and (2) that part of the case against Bryan and for Julie and Dick is quite frankly political.’ Since the whole point of the department is ‘a critique of all the practices of other departments in the University, as well as of society at large’, ‘the reason that Bryan cannot assist the particular school of philosophy we think it is important to develop is that his whole philosophical approach is the orthodox one it is our object to criticise.’ If those were the chances of a candidate actually present, the prospects of anyone absent were even less. Over many years, the determination of GP to appoint only its own candidates to positions became an ever better-known scandal.

Marks as well as appointments were handed out for political rather than intellectual performance. Even Suchting, who certainly took scholarship seriously, regarded the department’s inflated marks for poor work as indefensible. ‘It is well known,’ he wrote a few years later, ‘if perhaps seldom (very seldom) noted and discussed, that a student can pass a course in GP by attending next to no classes in that course, so long as s/he puts in an essay of a very minimum standard of merit on some subject more or less connected with the course, at some time or other ... I personally find it very demoralising to give a reasonable course to such and such a number of more or less regularly attending students (classes tend to be treated like lengthy TV movies that one watches off and on during the evening, with breaks for a drink and a snack, a game of chess, etc.) and then find submitted at the end a number of scripts far more numerous than that, most of which I am more or less obliged to pass, though they bear no impress of the course at all ... This sort of assessment very largely ... accounts for the size of our enrolment.’

At one point, it was discovered that the department was giving a course without official approval — on
anarchism, appropriately enough — and allowing self-assessment in it.\footnote{\textit{Gee, I’m good!}, \textit{Bulletin} 24/7/1979, p. 140; Devitt to VC Ward, 24/7/1979 (DD).}

Devitt denounced the Caucus:

What is disturbing, and, in a way, more relevant, is the typical practice of (small) Marxist groups in capitalist countries. Bourgeois critics refer to them as ‘dogmatic’, ‘ruthless’, ‘fanatical’, etc. It seems to me that these labels are unpleasantly close to the truth. Their approach to theory tends to be narrow-minded and inflexible. At their best such groups are simply insensitive to outsiders; at their worst they treat them with a relentless inhumanity, intolerance and contempt. Warmth, kindness and generosity are more despised than admired (unless the beneficiary is a ‘comrade’). What is strikingly lacking is an appropriate degree of *scepticism* about themselves, their theories, and their actions; a *sense of proportion*. Indeed the atmosphere is more religious than scientific; converts struggling to learn the new theology ... advocating the ‘tough’ line is psychologically and socially (within the group) rewarding ... and the same grounds are readily available, of course, to dismiss criticisms of the sort to be found here.\footnote{M. Devitt, ‘Some thoughts on being asked to join the Marxist Caucus’, 24/6/1976 (DD); Curthoys, ‘The loyalty requirement’.}

These views on Marxist sects were hardly original, but few have had the opportunity to observe their truth so closely.

Devitt and two others had had enough, and began negotiating secretly with the Vice-Chancellor with a view to re-amalgamation. ‘The VC puffed smoke, made encouraging noises, and did nothing. (It was often hard to tell if he was breathing.)’\footnote{Devitt to author, 1/1/1998.} When it became clear nothing was going to happen, they quit General Philosophy, again denouncing the intimidation, insults, ostracising and hectoring there. They joined the Traditional and Modern Department, becoming known as the first wave of ‘boat people’.\footnote{\textit{Honi Soit} 5/4/1977, p. 7; M. Campioni, ‘To the curriculum committee/appointments committee’, 8/12/1977 (DD).} The remaining members were rocked. The radicals wanted to keep up the fight: ‘Certainly the department may be destroyed, but better it be destroyed than it evolve into a Traditionalist department.’\footnote{Burnheim, as usual, and Suchting, unusually, and others in receipt of salaries advised caution. The ‘period of easy offensives is over’, Wal announced.} The ‘period of easy offensives is over’, Wal announced.\footnote{W. Suchting, ‘A letter from afar’, 16/4/1977 (DD); J. Burnheim, ‘The future of the Department of General Philosophy’, 1977 (DD).}
What the department was teaching its students in these early years can be gathered from the 1978 anthology *Paper Tigers*, which arose out of the first-year General Philosophy ‘Counter-ideology’ course. The anthology gives a good insight to the general thought-world that spread in the social sciences as the expansion of the Whitlam years delivered control in those disciplines to the Marxist scholars called by their enemies the ‘tenured radicals’. Much of it is concerned with attacking what is taught in other disciplines in the University. ‘In practice, the process of demystifying what is offered to us as objective knowledge, and of offering an alternative, has been inseparable from struggle against the educational practices and authoritarian organisation of the university itself.’

It was hoped that the ‘bourgeois’ departments being attacked would respond by trying to suppress the course, leading to some useful action.

The volume is especially interesting because, in contrast to the general run of Marxist philosophy, the authors have taken seriously the introductory nature of the exercise, and the result is by and large coherent and free from obscure jargon. This makes all the stronger its inescapable air of a floating world. Everything is to be analysed without residue in terms of ‘class conflict’: what people do is to be explained in terms of their class interest. No attempt is made to present evidence that that is the only, the best, or even a possible explanation. Nor is there any effort to ground concepts of mass psychology like ‘class’ in individual psychology. It is explicitly denied that the capitalist class literally conspire (usually) to advance their class interest, and it is suggested that by and large they do not even consciously recognise

As a result, how class interest acts causally on anything is left as magic.

It is apparently the need to keep the theory floating unsupported that causes so much of the effort in the book to be devoted to explaining why empirical support for theories is a bad thing (this is denounced as the error of ‘empiricism’, which is criticised with much reference to work in the philosophy of science on the supposed impossibility of distinguishing between observations and theories). The lack of evidence is in one way just as well, as the rare excursions into matters of fact are not happy ones: ‘Despite their defects in other areas, such as political liberties, the U.S.S.R., the Chinese People’s Republic, and others, have made considerable progress in the elimination of poverty, unemployment, anarchic production and so on, by ending the capitalist economic system.’ Further, any demand that mass terms like classes should be explained in terms of people is put down to the bourgeois error of ‘individualism’.

In his contribution, Suchting maintains the Marxist dogma that all opponents are infected with ‘idealism’. Thus analytic philosophy is supposed to be confined to the analysis of concepts. That may have had some truth as applied to Melbourne Wittgensteinianism — paradoxically far left politically — but was obviously untrue of Sydney philosophy, as in Armstrong’s *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*. Suchting simply labels Armstrong an idealist.

Study of this material would tend to rot the critical faculties, if someone enrolling in General Philosophy had any left. As to the moral faculties, the effect would seem to be the same. The only sin mentioned is oppression, which is committed by classes, not individuals. It appears to follow that the only virtue is solidarity and that personal morality is a leftover of bourgeois individualism that is a mere cloak for class interest and is best abandoned. This consequence is not explicitly drawn out. Indeed, the whole point is to avoid talking about any such personal issues and to replace morality with political commitment.

It is customary for philosophers of a continental bent to declare themselves for one or other European author, commentary on whose

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83 Polemic along these lines in P. Shrubb, ‘Down at the Works: Pure Mind’, *A List of All People and Other Stories* (Sydney, 1982), pp. 211–6.
works provides the mass of the scholars’ own output. In General Philosophy, first choice of guru was Louis Althusser, author of *For Marx, Reading Capital, Lenin and Philosophy*, etc.* Embarrassingly, Geoffrey Harris, a student of both the Sydney University Philosophy Department and the Aquinas Academy, visited Paris, secured an interview with Althusser, and brought back bad news for his Australian disciples. He had never heard of them, and when their interpretation of his work was explained he denounced it as a travesty. The movement of his thought, he said, was away from ideology, and he had this message: ‘Go and tell the comrades down there, on my behalf, not to confuse philosophy with ideology nor to reduce philosophy to political agitation.’ But the Althusserian message that one might be just as good a revolutionary by producing dense theory as by agitating in the streets had already sunk in, so much so that some began complaining that real activists were becoming intimidated by theory. ‘As we all know’, George Molnar said, ‘Althusser himself stayed in bed during the Paris student uprising in 1968.’ In any case, a few years later Althusser suffered a recurrence of mental illness and murdered his wife. It was time to move on.

There were plenty more gurus where Althusser came from. An early favourite was Michel Foucault.* A faction that eventually over-

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*87 Molnar, ‘Sydney University’s second philosophy department’, p. 8.

Corrupting the Youth

threw the Marxist Caucus leaned towards French authors who combined Marxism, feminism and psychoanalysis — Irigaray, Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze and so on. 'The new wave is Freudo-semiotics etc,' said Wal gloomily. The local impact of the feminists among these is described in chapter 14, that of the postmodernists in chapter 15.

In the face of student disillusionment with Marxism, Paper Tigers proving too hard for first-year students, and above all the loss of the numbers by the Marxist ruling staff faction, the acting head of the department in 1979, Alan Chalmers, suspended the democratic constitution and assumed the traditional powers of a head of department. As Stove put it, 'General Chalmers has overthrown the government of General Philosophy. He has promised that free elections will be held after order has been restored.' The promised restoration of democracy never took place. The department also increased its respectability by the appointment of a leading Hungarian Marxist forced to leave his own country, George Markus.


A. Chalmers, announcement, 1979; ‘Honest Al’s philosophy department’, poem (DD); earlier, Honi Soit 23/7/1979, p. 6.


Meanwhile there were parallel developments at the pioneering university, Flinders. It had instituted a women’s studies course in philosophy in 1973, the same year as Sydney. There was less trouble over it, though the usual reactionary academics had the usual complaints about matters such as group assessment and the policy of giving people ‘the grade they feel they need’. Medlin was appointed nominal co-convenor to keep the administration happy. Philosophy staff and students were prominent in the occupation of the administration buildings of 1974. In a probably unique development, the occupation was ended through spontaneous direct action by lackeys of the ruling class, when University staff who had been excluded from their offices for three weeks stormed the building and threw out the students. The department continued its radical course on a track similar to Sydney’s General Philosophy. No other major Australian philosophy department became primarily radical, but many acquired radical factions, necessitating a lot of exhausting organisational activity on all sides.

Back at Sydney University, a new Vice-Chancellor found himself deluged by complaints about the doings of General Philosophy. In 1984, he was finally willing to grasp the nettle. After secret discussions with Traditional and Modern Philosophy, he announced, on a Friday, a coup giving control of a united School of Philosophy to Keith Campbell. It was to be effective immediately. Burnheim and GP worked furiously over the weekend to round up support. By Monday, the VC had caved in. The result was that GP then had effective control of its appointments. They proceeded to use it, in securing the appointments of two internal feminist candidates, Denise Russell and Elizabeth Grosz, over outsiders regarded by T & M as obviously superior.

95 Hilliard, Flinders University, pp. 66, 68.
97 Devitt to author, 1/1/1998.
The Grosz case in particular showed the stark contrast between practice in General Philosophy and the standards applying in the rest of the Australian philosophical community. When Dr Grosz’s appointment as lecturer was under consideration, eleven of the seventeen permanent members of the School of Philosophy conveyed to the selection committee their view that her appointment would be ‘unacceptable in any circumstances.’ It was leaked that a moderate outside feminist was likely to be appointed, whereupon 60 members of the Faculty of Arts signed a petition in Grosz’s favour, and further references were allowed for Grosz but not for the other candidates. Specious reasons were thought up to eliminate the strongest of the 55 external candidates. Charges against Grosz’s teaching and assessment were ignored. Grosz was appointed. Another wave of three ‘boat people’ left GP for T & M. They included Jean Curthoys.

In 1984–5 David Stove protested publicly that the Faculty of Arts was favouring women in appointments. It appeared that the figures the administration had supplied him with were not accurate, which was a cause of embarrassment, but he relied also on information about individual cases such as those of Russell and Grosz. *Playboy* invited him to write, and ‘Willesee’ and ‘Nationwide’ suggested he appear on TV, but he declined his opportunity for fifteen minutes as performing seal. Susan Ryan, the federal minister largely responsible for the Affirmative Action Act, embroidering on Stove’s claim that contrary to there having been discrimination against women, philosophers would appoint a broomstick if it was the best philosopher, told the Senate, ‘I will not extrapolate on the broomstick analogy and suggest that in the appointment of Professor Stove there was perhaps something other than total adherence to the merit principle ... The fact that Professor Stove was so outrageously wrong in his claims about the percentage of women appointed to the philosophy department does more to undermine confidence in the employment practices of Sydney University than the appointment of women.’ At the same time, Stove

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98 Devitt to VC Ward, 20/10/1985.
101 Stove to author, 1/10/1984.
wrote an article arguing that women are on average intellectually inferior to men. His colleagues persuaded him that the time for its publication was not opportune, and it did not surface until after his retirement.\textsuperscript{103} When he wrote to the Vice-Chancellor threatening to name those responsible if Denise Russell were to be appointed to the lectureship in General Philosophy over stronger candidates, the University of Sydney was finally moved to action. The Registrar wrote to Stove in the following terms:

The Vice-Chancellor considers that your letter of 29 May 1985 to Professor Dunston may be cause for disciplinary action against you in that the letter may constitute an improper attempt to influence some members of the Committee which will consider applications for the advertised lectureship in General Philosophy.

In accordance with Section 4 of Chapter XXXVI of the By-laws I am writing to inform you that the Vice-Chancellor has decided to have this matter investigated to determine whether disciplinary proceedings should be taken against you.\textsuperscript{104}

No more came of it, but the threat of disciplinary action for such an ‘offence’ is a rare one.

Later in the same year the University of New South Wales advertised its only chair in philosophy. There had been no other professorial appointment in philosophy since 1966, so it was an important event for the direction of philosophy there. The advertisement said, ‘The School of Philosophy has a particular interest in developing teaching and research relating to women and philosophy and in extending its participation in the Women’s Studies program.’\textsuperscript{105} On the face of it, this was not wholly consistent with Senator Ryan’s affirmative action policy, ‘Employers should ensure that job advertisements are classified by the type of occupation under which they fall rather than by pre-conceived ideas of what sex the person should be.’\textsuperscript{106} Some exceptionally strong male candidates applied, but, needless to say, were unsuccessful. The woman appointed — not, it was said, the woman desired by the writers of the ad — was Genevieve Lloyd, author of \textit{The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy}.


\textsuperscript{104} K. Jennings, Registrar, to Stove, 27/6/1985.

\textsuperscript{105} SMH 30/11/1985, p. 79.

\textsuperscript{106} S. Ryan & G. Evans, \textit{Affirmative Action for Women: A policy discussion paper} (Canberra, 1984), p. 44.
Stove’s last word on the question, before he took early retirement, was his 1986 Quadrant article, ‘A Farewell to Arts’. ‘The Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney’, he wrote, ‘is a disaster-area, and not of the merely passive kind, like a bombed building, or an area that has been flooded. It is the active kind, like a badly-leaking nuclear reactor, or an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in cattle.’ The centre of these developments, he said, was General Philosophy. ‘The Department of English may have more feminists, French may have semioticians still more impenetrable, Anthropology or Fine Arts may have even stupider Marxists, but you cannot go past General Philosophy for solid all-round disaster.’ As evidence, he offered three passages from writings in the Faculty. The most offensive of them was from a paper, ‘What is feminist theory?’, by Elizabeth Grosz:

Feminist theory cannot be accurately regarded as a competing or rival account, diverging from patriarchal texts over what counts as true. It is not a true discourse, nor a more objective or scientific account. It could be appropriately seen, therefore, as a strategy, a local, specific intervention with definite political, even if provisional, aims and goals. In the 1980s, feminist theory no longer seems to seek the status of unchangeable, trans-historical and trans-geographic truth in its hypotheses and propositions. Rather, it seeks effective forms of intervention into systems of power in order to subvert them and replace them with others more preferable.

Stove comments that the value of the passage ‘lies in proving that nowadays the Faculty of Arts has philosophy lecturers who frankly avow that their “philosophy” has nothing to do with an interest in truth and everything to do with an interest in power.’ The only solution, Stove suggested, was the imposition of fees, at least for Arts students, and the diversion of resources from Arts to the scientific faculties.

Reaction was predictable. ‘Little more than a gross display of bigotry’, wrote an Arts academic from another university, while ANU’s Humanities Research Centre wrote to cancel its Quadrant subscription.

Michael Devitt and Jean Curthoys in large part repented of their earlier radicalism. Devitt became well known in the US as a philosopher of language, and Curthoys wrote a book attacking radical femi-


nist ‘theory’, to be considered in chapter 14 (Professor Elizabeth Grosz’s subsequent career will be noticed there as well). George Molnar left academic philosophy and became a public servant, though he continued to do serious work on laws of nature up to his death in 1999. Wal Suchting remained an unreformed old-style Marxist until his death in 1997. David Armstrong, by then the University’s longest-serving professor, retired in 1991; his 1997 book, *A World of States of Affairs*, which sums up over twenty years of work on universals and laws of nature, is described in chapter 12. He was succeeded as Challis Professor by Keith Campbell. Brian Medlin made legal history when injuries in a car accident led to his early retirement on the grounds that he felt a lack of ‘intellectual energy’ and concentration, and the resulting loss of earnings was held to entitle him to compensation. David Stove died in 1994. He is best known for his two books of philosophical polemics, *Popper and After* (first published 1982, reprinted in Australia in 1998 under the title *Anything Goes* and in the United States in 2001 as *Scientific Irrationalism*), and *The Plato Cult* (1991) an attack on the persistent idealist currents in philosophy. His prose style has made his books of essays widely read in Australia and overseas.

As for the disaster in Arts faculties complained of by Stove, its spread has been unstoppable. It is sometimes presumed that after the early 1980s the department of General Philosophy settled down and became a respectable enough outfit, at least by the standards of Arts faculties. Doubts about whether the leopards had really changed their spots were raised by the Stephen Buckle case in 1998. Buckle had been a member of the Department of General Philosophy for over five years with a very good publication record, in more traditional areas of philosophy than those of the

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111 ‘The passionately rational professor retires’, *SMH* 20/12/1991, p. 3.


General Philosophy majority. In 1995, he published in *Philosopher* magazine a vigorous attack on the misuse of statistics by a number of academic feminists. Feminist illusions, he wrote, ‘fed by an inappropriate and melodramatic vocabulary, and embedded in an interpretation of history which verges on paranoia, are the main cause of feminism’s present impasse’, and so on.\(^{115}\) Unfortunately for him, he had neglected to obtain tenure before committing these observations to print. After some rewriting of his position description, his contract came up for renewal; no-one was surprised to hear that his job had gone to a Canadian political theorist, whose writings on Mabo and sovereignty are more or less identical in content to the writings on Mabo and sovereignty of two GP insiders. They were even less surprised when it turned out that the Dean of Arts, whose work on feminist statistics had been attacked years before in terms similar to those of Buckle’s article, had chaired Buckle’s selection committee. The Vice-Chancellor showed himself of similar quality to earlier VCs. Buckle left and took a position at the Australian Catholic University.\(^{116}\) His well-received later work in Enlightenment thought\(^{117}\) did not qualify him for the lectureship in that area advertised in Sydney University Philosophy in 2003.

The end came for T&M over the summer of 1999/2000. The head of the philosophy school declared that on the last day of the old century the department had ceased to exist, and hence was no longer able to vote to prolong its existence. The wishes of the majority of remaining T&M members were otherwise, but the struggle had become impossible.\(^{118}\)

Sydney University has recently gained a well-funded centre in the philosophy of time, but its activities are closer to physics than philosophy. Apart from that, philosophy remains in decline. The Challis Chair of Philosophy once graced by Anderson and Armstrong has stayed vacant for years without explanation. Since the other universities in Sydney have never taken philosophy very seriously, Sydney is no longer a city where a student can find a respectable course of study in philosophy.

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