

Divine Discontent; The Brotherhood of St Laurence: A History

Colin Holden & Richard Trembath with Judith Brett

This is an important book for many reasons. It is important because the BSL has been based on Fitzroy since the 1930's and it is a very important part of the city's history. The BSL having been essentially an Anglican agency this book adds to our understanding of Anglican social thought. Especially since the 1960's the BSL has been so important in helping us all to understand the drivers of poverty and disadvantage. Further the BSL apart from influencing the direction of social policy, in this State, has over the past forty years influenced social policy in Canberra as well.

I remember an early visit to the BSL, it must have been in the early seventies, when Bill Hayden, then minister for social security, swept into the place with his entourage. There was present at that moment present the scent of power.

I think that Colin and Richard with a little help from Judith have painted an, always interesting, and insightful history. I recently reread John Handfield's book on Tucker itself a very good portrait of the founder. However I think Colin adds considerably to his picture showing more of the complexity of his character, the importance of his father as a role model and the ongoing support of his family. I think also in Tucker you see the ongoing contradiction in the agency on the one hand wanting to build a very different society on the other being at least partially dependent for its financial survival on the eastern suburbs and perhaps the establishment. Colin also gives you a feeling for the theological influences that shaped Tucker especially the influence of the English Anglo catholic Gore on the one hand a link into the monastic communal tradition on the other along with the 19th century Christian socialist tradition. There are ongoing influences through his brother in law Reginald Stephen

some time warden of St John's College in ~~Brisbane~~ and through him to the ~~'Bush Brotherhood' in Queensland~~. You have the sense of Tucker always being in a hurry, an activist, not having time for the discipline that a religious community suggests. As between the priest in him and the activist there will always be a tension.

A continuing worry at the BSL is whether it still is able to wear Tucker's clothes, embody his spirit. Of course desperate times call forth desperate measures thus civil disobedience in King William St and the 'siege of Armidale.' However the defining issues of these times would remain the brotherhoods highest priorities throughout its history poverty and unemployment, the housing crisis while in parallel there was always an international dimension 'food for peace' and later for David Scott at least the formation of 'community aid abroad'. What changes of course is the growing professionalism that the Brotherhood will bring to its programs. This professionalism is there in improved professional practice as well as in the greater emphasis on research as the necessary partner of social action. The Brotherhood of course from the late thirties on had close links with Melbourne university both because of the work that Barnett was doing in the economics faculty on the poor housing conditions in Fitzroy as well as with the formation of the Social Studies Board and the beginnings of social work training. Jock Reeves an economist and early researcher helped to initiate a tradition of scholarly research now synonymous with the name of the brotherhood. The link through Frank Coaldrake initially a lay brother and Reeves with the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM) is also important. The ASCM represented the movement towards an ecumenical theology and especially emphasised the essential compatibility of faith and reason. William Temple who helped to shape Geoffrey Sambell's thought was one of the pioneers



of the WCC while his incarnational theology became a fundamental theme in modern theology.

As Richard Trembath demonstrates Sambell was crucially important in creating the modern Brotherhood in three main ways. Firstly he was responsible for recruiting the women who created the BSL's modern reputation in social research Elaine Martin, Jan Paterson, Judith O'Neill and Anne Stevenson. Sambell also created the Family Service Centre which sought to embody the latest insights from social work in working with families. (The Brotherhood was very quick to recognise the professionalism of post war social workers and social researcher but much slower to place them in positions of power) Secondly Sambell created the modern Family Centre working with families on the basis on the latest thinking in professional social work and thirdly Sambell's idea of building the donated goods division helped to create a much stronger financial base making it possible the BSL to maintain its key services. Trembath documents in the Sambell chapter the extraordinary range of activities that the Brotherhood was able to initiate often as a result of Sambell's capacity to bring various forms of church based support as well as increasingly winning support from government.

I enjoyed Trembath's chapters on the rediscovery of poverty in Melbourne together with the following chapter on David Scott's time as director and the focus on empowerment. The work done by the BSL in the early sixties on housing and of course the work so complementary to Ronald Henderson's early work on poverty in Melbourne helped to lay the basis of the poverty enquiry and preparing the ground for the families project which in a sense trialled Henderson's central idea of the guaranteed minimum income. My own contact with the BSL goes back to 1969 when David Scott steps up to replace Sambell. At the time the thing that

impressed me most strongly about the Brotherhood was its professionalism. I remember an early conversation with Janet Paterson about poverty which I had been studying in Chicago and I came away feeling how little I knew. I found David Scott to be a good listener and someone willing to reconsider what I thought at the time to be established BSL positions on issues. In 1969-70 I was closely associated with David in our efforts on behalf of Hanover to get a new Gordon House established and I saw his formidable negotiating skills in action with Henry Bolte. David was as Richard demonstrates very keen to take the BSL out into the community in all manner of creative collaborations.

I was then a strong opponent of the HCV commitment to block clearance and high-rise housing. The BSL had earlier published *High Living* partly funded by HCV that was more positive. However the common ground with David on housing was not so much a debate about high-rise etc, as finding alternatives to high-rise and so called slum clearance then an established policy. The Brotherhood in the seventies was looking for a different model to the HCV model establishing the cost rent housing association in Collingwood (with Andrew McCutcheon) and supporting the formation of tenant associations in both the public (CURA) and private rental sectors (Michael Salvaris). During this period there was much going on in the inner city. Vivienne McCutcheon in her early study for the BSL had focused on ethnic diversity in Fitzroy. The Ecumenical Migration Centre (David Cox and Alan Matheson) began with an outreach program for young people but by the seventies had established a major migrant resource centre in Richmond. CURA on the other hand worked more directly with established and emerging ethnic communities. Arguably these networks in which the BSL participated in inner Melbourne heavily influenced the

commitment to multi culturalism in Australia. An important theme during this period was ethnic rights.

During the seventies the BSL took on the family centres project (ARC) which was allied to the Henderson poverty enquiry initially established by the McMahon government responding to pressure indirectly generated by the BSL (you will need to read the book to see how they did i. But perhaps it was during this period when the BSL began to move its focus from protests to making and influencing policy. Barbara Spalding's Family day centre project would become national model for delivering childcare in Australia building on local migrant family networks. The current success of the BSL with Hippy is reminiscent of this project. Of course this much more ambitious approach was to have its moments including a clash between Peter Hollingsworth and Bob Hawke over the child poverty issue which the BSL was particularly focused on during the 1980's.

I was immensely impressed by the work the BSL did later on the Future of Work because it helped to bring home to me following my long period in government the extent to which Australian governments were failing to recognise the fundamental nature of the changes taking place in the Australian social fabric. The nature of work itself was being transformed by the drive on the part of employers for a more flexible workforce but also by the shift in the attitudes of women no longer prepared to play second fiddle to their male partners and demanding a stronger role in the paid workforce I think this research on the future of work that the BSL undertook in the nineties laid the ground work for the fundamental recasting of the Brotherhood policy agenda under Tony Nicholson and Paul Smyth placing the focus on life course transitions together with Paul Smyth's emphasis on Amartya Sen

and Martha Nussbaum's emphasis on capabilities as the means of redressing the realities of complex equality (Walzer)

This takes me back to my earlier reference to Christian socialism a creed now subscribed to by our PM. The Christian socialists in the 19th C saw society as facing a moral or ethical crisis, a crisis of values. in Amartya Sen recognizes that the materialism that drives western societies is ultimately unsustainable in that it treats people as means to someone else's ends. Gerard Tucker believed in the importance of human dignity. In the sixties and seventies the BSL used words such as empowerment Today we talk about investing in people., building capability. However Christians have always recognised the good that we would do and the evil that we would not, that we do. There is in human nature a fundamental contradiction. Ideals are important but they are not enough. In the end of the day you must choose to take a risk and that requires faith that as Christian we understand is a gift. The Brotherhood over its long history has been able to demand of people (successfully) that they take often life course threatening risks with the result that they have been able to build and sustain such wonderful staff and create not only within their own organization but often within the public service and the community sector leaders of great integrity.

I think our three authors Colin Holden, Richard Trembath and Judith Brett have performed a considerable service in bringing together this history. The history of institutions especially when they are still alive and well is never easy I think that they have recognized where the Brotherhood might have done more or done it sooner. Perhaps there might have been recognition of the talented women who helped build such a wonderful organization. However history is only written so that it can be rewritten. I offer

my congratulation as participant observer who finally joined the movement.