

8. Freethought and Politics

In March 1931 the Sydney University Society for Freethought was renamed the Sydney University Freethought Society (S.U.F.S.) and articulated the principles which would define the activity of the society over the next twenty years.

This Society (a) recognises the primacy of science, holding that in every subject without exception knowledge is to be gained only by observation and experiment; (b) supports the widest possible extension of the knowledge of all subjects; and (c) is therefore opposed to every form of censorship and restriction of inquiry.¹

From the start of 1931, Anderson, not yet totally marginalised from the C.P.A., gave a number of addresses on Communism and launched the only book he ever published with an address on 'Education and Politics'. During April and May he addressed the Sydney University Labour Club, wrote a brief piece for the Sun newspaper, and addressed the Australasian Association of Philosophy and Psychology (A.A.P.P.) on the topic of 'Science and Society' where he argued that a scientific understanding of society must be based on a deterministic treatment of social events.²

Anderson was in Melbourne for the A.A.P.P. conference and while he was there he addressed the Melbourne University Labour Club on the subject of 'The Theory of Communism' where he stressed that Communism was not a policy, but a theory that led to a policy.³ After his return to Sydney, he addressed the Sydney University Labour Club on the subject of the working class, where he contrasted the view of the working class as merely people who suffer from various social disabilities and hence require assistance with the view of it as a social and international force moving towards control of society.⁴ The Sydney University student paper, Honi Soit, carried reports of both these addresses in its issue of June 17th although the report of the Melbourne address was inaccurate and sensationalist, and Anderson responded with a correction and clarification on June 24th.⁵

Six days later, the N.S.W. Nationalist Party annual conference denounced the teaching of Communism at the University and proposed either imprisoning or deporting such Communists.⁶ Anderson responded with a short piece in the Daily Telegraph on July 4th where he described the conference as a 'shrieking sisterhood' and argued the existence of property rights are no more sacred and no more a necessary part of any social system as the right of employment.⁷ The true attacks on society, he concluded, came not from discussing Communism, but from the increasing unemployment and homelessness that was becoming more widespread throughout Sydney during these years.

Five days after the conference, on 9th July, Anderson delivered his presidential address to the Freethought Society on the topic of Freethought and Politics and although no full report of the address exists, the following summary, probably written by Anderson himself, appeared in Honi Soit on July 15th.

(Professor Anderson) began by stating the Society's basis, adopted at the annual meeting in March: 'This Society (a) recognises the primacy of science, holding that in every subject without exception knowledge is to be gained only by observation and experiment; (b) supports the widest possible extension of knowledge of all subjects, and (c) is therefore opposed to every form of censorship and restriction of inquiry.' Professor Anderson pointed out that while this implied that freethought was a positive thing, it could also be expressed negatively as an attitude of opposition to superstition, and that its connection with freedom of thought came out most definitely in the opposition to political superstitions or idols. An idol was any object treated in such a way as to prevent or hamper discussion and criticism. A superstitious regard for or loyalty to 'the State' or 'the country' was a noteworthy feature of modern political life. It could not be said that the State was simply ourselves, since the ordinary person had no control over external or internal policy, and could not be made a reasonable participant in politics by the mere act of voting. The superstitions referred to helped to conceal the absence of a true democracy or social equality. Professor Anderson illustrated his argument by reference to British foreign policy before the war, the spy-mania and other forms of propaganda and intimidation in belligerent countries, and current social and criminal legislation. He considered that war memorials were political idols, in that they were made the basis of practices which prevented critical thinking about the character and conditions of the last war and thus about war and social relations in general.⁸

The day after his address, a report appeared in the Daily Telegraph under the heading 'An Attack on Patriotism' which emphasised Anderson had argued that terms such as 'State', 'Country' and 'Nation' were superstitious notions which prevented free discussion, that war memorials are idols, and the keeping up of religious celebrations connected to them, were fetishes which only serve the purpose of blocking discussion".⁹ The Sydney Morning Herald, being a little slow to the controversy, reported the address on July 11th.¹⁰ However the controversy must have simmered over the weekend, for on Monday, July 14th, the matter was discussed in the N.S.W. Legislative Assembly where Lieutenant-Colonel Bruxner from the Country Party moved a motion that Anderson's views were "...against the best interests of the community and not in accordance with the national sentiment of the people of this State".¹¹ The debate in the House, apparently with Anderson in the gallery, lasted for several hours and was quite heated, for apart from attacks on Anderson's adherence to Communism, there were veiled warnings against the Labor Premier, Jack Lang.

Mr A Reid (Manly) said Ministerial supporters could defend the Communists for as long as they liked, but the opposition were there to fight them. Communistic doctrines were being taught by hundreds of teachers throughout the State, and the Minister for Education had allowed Communists to hold public meetings in the schools. "The day will come when they will not have your protection", he proceeded.

Mr Martin: That is a vicious threat.

Mr Reid: In a few months there will be a government in power that will stop this sort of thing. If Government supporters have a spark of manhood they will not allow one of their children to read the Communist books which are being circulated. I

have read some of them. They contain expressions of a most filthy and outrageous character.

The Premier: Where did you get them?

Mr Reid: I did not get them from you (Laughter). They are filthy, most outrageous.

The Premier: That is why you read them (Renewed laughter).

Mr Reid declared that the Government was trying to force this sort of thing on the Australian people.

The Premier: Give us the names of these books.

Mr Reid: I would be pleased to bring them over for Mr Lang tomorrow (Laughter).

The Premier: I would not like to read books that bring about your results.

Mr Reid: You be careful! You will drive me to say something that will prevent you continuing your career in this country (Uproar).

The Premier: Say it now.

Mr Reid: I warn you.

The Premier: Don't warn me again. You have warned me too often.

Mr Reid: I will stop at that and proceed to something else (Ministerial laughter). You can rule on that side, but you cannot rule over here. Ninety five percent of the people are against you. I challenge you to appeal to them. If the Government has a spark of manhood it will say to the professor: "We will not allow you to insult the soldiers or their relatives."

The Legislative Assembly, dominated by the Lang Government, did not support the motion and no action was taken against Anderson. In fact, the Labor education minister, Mr. Davies, came out quite openly in support of Anderson and became an important ally for him in the coming weeks. It was even rumoured that Anderson would take the Government's seat on the University Senate, although nothing came of this.¹² On July 15th, Honi Soit carried a reply to the controversy by Anderson in which he argued that the Philistine always meets criticism by contending that it should not have been passed and that the critic is an objectionable person.¹³

The Sydney Morning Herald reproduced Anderson's reply the following day, although it omitted the reference to the Philistine, just as it omitted a reference to the Daily Telegraph that Anderson had mentioned.¹⁴ Indeed the editor of the Herald, in an editorial entitled 'Freedom of Speech, asserted that freedom of speech must not be abused and is limited by the rights of the community and such restriction is in the interest of society. The editor went on to assert:

To hear loyalty derided, and tributes which were paid in grateful commemoration of the fallen described as idols, fetishes and superstitions is painful, especially to those who still mourn the human losses inflicted upon them by the war. One would expect such sentiments to be expressed by a fanatical and unbalanced mob orator rather than by a University professor, trained, moreover in and teacher of a subject - philosophy - which is supposed to make men 'see life steadily and see it whole'.¹⁵

The Labour Daily, on the other hand, came out firmly in favour of Anderson and attacked the jingoism of Bruxner, asserting that his comments are like "...the staccato outpourings of a flock of startled parrots threatened by some distant danger".¹⁶ The Labour Daily also published a long article by Anderson in which he discussed his interpretation of loyalism and the obscurantory nature of idols and symbols. He asserted that whatever is used to cloak political

realities he is prepared to call an 'idol' and argued further that he regarded the unthinking adherence to any object or standpoint as an evil.

It is part of my business as a philosopher to remove symbols and get down to realities. And the same conditions apply when I am trying to get down to political realities. Whatever is used to cloak political realities, I am prepared to call an idol. And I contend that war memorials are so used, even if other sentiments are also attached to them. Indeed it is just the mixture of sentiments which makes cloaking possible and the solution is to think of the realities - the actual persons in their lives and deaths, and the actual issue of the combat. When all this is thought of, there is no need to think of the symbol, and great possible harm in doing so. The question of loyalty is the really central one in my argument. I contend that unthinking adherence to any object or standpoint is an evil. Recruiting appeals, as I pointed out, were not so framed as to attract thinking men, i.e. free men. 'Your King and Country need you' does not explain what it is that you are to fight for. I contend that the only good fight is a fight for a cause, for something which the fighter understands, and to which, therefore, he does not need to be told to be 'loyal'.¹⁷

The issue dominated the press over the next few days, and some branches of the Returned Soldiers League severely condemned him and the Royal Empire Society expressed its abhorrence at his remarks.¹⁸ At the University however, Anderson received widespread support, with his first year philosophy class breaking into applause when he entered the philosophy lecture room.¹⁹ Anderson said he would not insult the intelligence of his students by making them put Bruxner's motion into logical form and the class sent a letter of support for Anderson to the parliament. Anderson was similarly greeted with applause, this time from 200 colleagues, when he addressed a joint meeting of the Science Society and the Australasian Association of Philosophy and Psychology.²⁰ Anderson also submitted a lengthy letter to the University Senate after being requested to attend a special meeting of that body where he reiterated many of his earlier points from his Telegraph article.²¹ Anderson attended the Senate meeting on July 20th and was interviewed by the Chancellor, Sir William Cullen.²²

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| Chancellor | Loyalty to the King. Do you consider this a possible subject for discussion? |
| Anderson | Yes |
| Chancellor | Revolution or a rising as in Russia. Do you think this a matter for discussion? |
| Anderson | Yes |
| Chancellor | Do you think that subjects such as murder, marriage, rape, etc should be discussed? |
| Anderson | I think so |
| Chancellor | What about assassination? |
| Anderson | I think all political questions should be discussed. There should be no limit to discussion in any manner |
| Chancellor | Are there no matters sufficiently sacred to be outside the scope of discussion? |
| Anderson | I consider that good must come from criticism. The spreading of information in accordance with intellectuality is within the functions of an |

academic man. A philosophical person should be prepared to discuss any matter.

The Senate however was not impressed by his arguments and passed a motion of censure for making statements which “transgress all proper limits” and ordered him to refrain from making such utterances in the future.²³ The passing of the censure would not have surprised Anderson for he believed that it is inherent in the nature of Freethought to transgress the limits of popular belief and therefore natural for those defenders of popular belief and custom to censure those who transgress those limits. In fact, on July 22nd, a mere two days after the censure motion, he wrote to Honi Soit where he criticised the role of the Sydney Morning Herald in the affair.²⁴ He argued that if the old saying the ‘something isn’t news until it appears in the Herald’ is true, then given the omission of the Herald to reproduce certain passages from letters which had appeared in Honi Soit and the Daily Telegraph, then what appears in the Daily Telegraph or Honi Soit *isn’t* news and hence doesn’t need to be accurately reproduced. To the end, he remained unrepentant, arguing that it is an important element of academic freedom for a university teacher to develop his subject in whatever way he sees fit.

The matter was further debated in the parliament on July 21st, where the Minister for Education, Mr Davies, said that Professor Anderson had submitted a statement to the Vice-Chancellor giving his conception of the freedom traditionally enjoyed in universities:²⁵

- 1) A university teacher is free to develop his subject in his own way, there being a tacit understanding that he will not use his position to force upon students’ minds an uncritical acceptance of any special doctrine.
- 2) University societies are free to discuss any current problem or outstanding theory of the day, participation of teachers in these societies being understood to be independent of their teaching work.
- 3) The university is not committed to any views put forward in these societies, the tradition of freedom being the best guarantee that it will not be so committed.

However tensions were beginning to appear within the Freethought Society itself when Frank Hatcher, the secretary of the Society, resigned in August because he believed the Society was becoming a vehicle for the dissemination of Communism. However the Freethought Society replied to Hatcher that it regarded his position to be in opposition to Freethought.²⁶

The Freethought Society was also invited to attend a conference of the United Free Speech Committee with Anderson receiving a personal invitation to the meeting. Ray Bass, Margot Hentze and Lynch attended the meeting of the 3rd September held in the Friends Of the Soviet Union hall at 114 Liverpool St.²⁷ By this time the editor of the Herald, apparently chastened by Anderson’s remarks, declared that Mr Bruxner was ill-advised in initiating the debate in the Parliament, for anyone who had watched the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly would see that they were not qualified, neither by education nor temperament, to decide what a professor of philosophy should say when dealing with his own subject, and indeed, perhaps the Professor’s own students were more competent judges in this manner. The University, he continued, is and should be an autonomous body and that the Senate is the sole arbiter in deciding whether the heads of faculties are carrying out their duties properly. Although the editor again slipped into his previous rhetoric about the virtues of patriotism, he concluded that

“...the principal point arising out of this controversy is that no greater disaster can be imagined than that any symptom of political control, by whichever side initiated, should crept into the University of Sydney”.²⁸

A notable feature of this incident is not only the support Anderson received from some parts of the university and the Lang State government, but also the widespread support he received from the general public. He received more than one hundred letters from as far afield as Victoria, Queensland and South Australia and within N.S.W. from places such as Moree, Gunnedah, Broken Hill and Armidale, expressing support for his stand on freedom of speech.²⁹ A report on the controversy even appeared in The Freethinker in Britain.³⁰ As a result of his actions, academic freedom became firmly entrenched within Sydney University and from this vantage point, over the next six years he defended academic freedom from Perth to Auckland. Another important consequence of this controversy was that Anderson was able to stand up to the authority of the University Senate who had previously dismissed professors such as R.F. Irvine and Christopher Brennan.³¹

Alec Hope had seen the consequences of such a dismissal when he came across Christopher Brennan in Sydney in 1929. The old guard at the university had taken exception, not only to Brennan’s excessive drinking, but also to the fact that he had an affair with a married woman. Brennan was sacked from his position and when Hope found him, he was apparently quite drunk at a Kings Cross pub, The Mansions Hotel. Hope and his fellow student, Ralph Piddington, tried to engage Brennan in conversation and were rewarded in their efforts with a few heavy grunts. Hope went to the lavatory and, while standing before one of the two bays, was surprised when Brennan appeared and filled the other bay. In an attempt to engage Brennan’s attention, Hope took out a pencil and wrote before him the ancient Pompeian inscription: *Multo melitus quam glaber futuiter cunnus pilossus*. Brennan responded, discussing the Saturnian metre of the verse and gave Hope a fascinating account of Latin accentual metre. However when the two men returned to the table Brennan resumed his sprawled position across the table, uttering only occasional grunts to his company. A few years later, Brennan was dead.³²

Chapter 8

¹ Freethought and Politics

² ‘Support for Labour Club’ Honi Soit 1/1/31; ‘Are we any happier?’ The Sun 12/4/31; Science and Society ARW Archives Series 13 Item 1/1, 3/1

³ ‘Melbourne Citizens Agitated’ Honi Soit 17/6/31

⁴ ‘A.F.A. Criticised’ Honi Soit 17/6/31

⁵ ‘Professor Anderson replies’ Honi Soit 24/6/31

⁶ ‘Communism ‘taught by Professors’ SMH 27/6/31

⁷ ‘The Right to Study’ Daily Telegraph 4/7/31

⁸ ‘Freethought and Politics’ Honi Soit 15/7/31

⁹ ‘An Attack on Patriotism’ Daily Telegraph 10/7/31:

¹⁰ ‘No Political Freedom’ Sydney Morning Herald 11/7/31

¹¹ ‘Prof J. Anderson – Protests in Parliament’ SMH 15/7/31

¹² Baker ??

¹³ ‘Freethought and Politics’ Honi Soit 15/7/31

¹⁴ ‘Reply to criticism’ SMH 16/7/31

¹⁵ Editorial: ‘State Parliament – Question of Free Speech’ SMH 15/7/31

¹⁶ Editorial: ‘A Jingoistic Outbreak’ The Labour Daily 20th July 1931.

¹⁷ ‘Philosophy is my work’ The Labour Daily 20th July 1931.

¹⁸ Press reports??

¹⁹ Passmore ?

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- 20 'The Philosophical Criticism of Science' Original Notes at Series 4 Item 75/2. Reported in Labour Daily and SMH 22/7/31 and as
21 'Philosophy and Physics' Honi Soit 29/7/31.
- 22 'Statement to Senate' Series 11 Item 1
- 23 'Record of Senate Interview' Series 11 Item 1
- 24 'Statement of Senate Censure' Series 11 Item 1
- 25 'Ethics and the Sydney Morning Herald' Honi Soit 22/7/31
- 26 'A Professors Statement' SMH 22/7/31
- 27 Frank Hatcher ???
- 28 United Free Speech Committee ??
- 29 Editorial: 'Professor Anderson' SMH 10/9/31
- 30 Letters of support
- 31 Anderson Archives Series 11 Item 4
- 32 Baker?
- 33 Hope, A.D.