

‘Taking the fight to the powers that be’: student activism under Howard

By Tim Briedis

‘Police surround students. They’ve got batons, crowbars, attack dogs and an ugly attitude. We’ve got pyjamas’ – The UTS Occupier, 1997

‘All the occupations were planned, a lot of the direct action was planned’ – Pru Wirth

On March 2, 1996 John Howard’s Liberal party overwhelmingly won the federal election. With a 45-seat majority in the lower house, and the prospect of negotiating deals with minor parties and independents in the Senate, Howard was in a position of considerable power. This would usher in a nearly 12 year Prime Ministership. The assorted Liberal Education Ministers (Amanda Vanstone, David Kemp and Brendan Nelson) were less revolutionary than Dawkins, changing, as Stuart Macintyre put it, ‘the settings rather than altering the architecture’. Nevertheless this meant that the political opening ushered in by Labor was consolidated and expanded considerably — meaning the further withdrawal of state funding, the introduction of upfront fees for undergraduate students and the expansion of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS).

This article analyses student activism and protest in the context of the Liberal government until the implementation of the Nelson Review. Despite the lack of a systemic policy shift, the reduction in public investment without accompanying positive changes meant that the Howard years were, for education analyst Simon

Marginson, ‘the most difficult (for universities) since the modern university system was founded by Robert Menzies in the 1960s’. For student activist Katrina Curry, President of the Sydney University Students’ Representative Council in 1997, the cuts and fees of Howard were both galvanising and destructive, making him ‘the best and worst thing to happen to student activism’. Writing about student protest in the Howard era needs to reflect Curry’s sentiment — it has to capture both the scale and intensity of many campaigns, while simultaneously acknowledging the failure of activists to win the most substantial demands. It needs to be honest about failure without using this as an excuse to ignore activist creativity and imagination. As historian Lane Windham notes, ‘to fight and lose is entirely different than to lose and not fight at all’, denaturalising the end result and hinting that other outcomes were possible.

In this spirit, I argue that there were two distinct phases of university-focused student activism under the Coalition government. In the first phase, following on from the escalation of protest in the final years of the Keating government, Liberal education policies helped mobilise thousands of students into activism. 1996-1999 saw a period of at times intense and creative student militancy against cuts to education, and the implementation of upfront fees. While 2000 – 2003 saw continued organising by students around broader social movements (such as against the Iraq War) beyond the university, 2003-2004 saw a second phase with a return to the tertiary education sector. Although this never reached the heights of the 1990s, education activists mobilised widely against the Nelson Review’s anti-union measures and increases to HECS.

Unearthing and examining these struggles, moreover, contributes to a small but growing historiography that depicts political conflict within Australian society during the Howard era. Although after his 1996 election Howard famously

declared that he wanted Australians to be 'relaxed and comfortable' about their country, my chapter demonstrates that discord and dissent in the university sector was a constant throughout the period — sitting alongside more well-known struggles around refugees, the Maritime Union of Australia, and US led war. The political education of student activists through protest helped strengthen these broader campaigns. Though on the surface a decade of economic growth helped make Australia appear to be one of the Global North's most stable countries, divisions around marketisation and increasing inequality show another side of Australia. This was one in which Peter Saunders (in an extensive survey of social attitudes) could note that there was 'a sense of alienation and powerlessness ... a gulf has opened up between the values and priorities of ordinary Australians and those in political power and influence'. Student protest was one reflection of this gulf.

Moreover, although levels of student militancy oscillated from year to year, the hardening of neoliberalism, and the increasing role of the university in implementing it tended to produce a confrontational edge to demonstrations. While occupations did occur in the 1980s, activists were generally more reluctant to organise on-campus confrontations for fear of alienating potentially sympathetic Vice Chancellors (VC). But by the late 1990s, when the VCs were often directly implementing the changes, activists no longer felt such compunctions. One prominent activist, who chose to remain anonymous, recalled how:

it was sort of desperate straits, in some ways ... all the looming big changes, if they were going to be introduced, a lot of people thought they weren't going to be reversed any time soon. It was another 11 years of conservative government, and it didn't look like the Howard government was going anywhere soon back in 97 either. So it felt like quite a desperate, rear-guard

*attempt to sort of stop these policies coming in too ... Taking the fight to them
I guess, taking the fight to the powers that be.*

While early-mid 2000s activist Paddy Gibson remembered (self critically) that he was consumed with ideas about direct action and militancy:

I was quite obsessed at that point with the violence of the system ... I was obsessed with militancy ... at Monash in Melbourne they'd actually created this sort of quasi satirical character of this Education Liberation Front! Their logo was a circle with a face wearing a gas mask and it was the Education Liberation Front, we are everywhere. And they produced a leaflet for the NDA [National Day of Action] and the headline of the leaflet was 'Fuck Shit Up'. And it just shows you where my head was at that moment. I remember being overjoyed at this leaflet appearing on campus. And it gave a sort of breathless account of the university being taken over by corporate interests and they are raising our fees, and they're waging war on Iraq and we have to resist, and we'll resist by any means necessary ... And I gave out, I probably gave out 800 of those myself.

This sort of escalation produced a dynamic that led to increasingly fiery protests: as student occupations and direct action became more frequent, both the state and university administrations learnt how to respond and policing in turn became more militarised and intense. Importantly, although activism included moments of absurdist disorganisation as well as more thought-out events, such militancy — perhaps best exemplified by the 1997 UTS occupation — helped show the creativity and elaborate planning that could go into the 1990s and 2000s student movement. In this vein, prominent 1990s activist Pru Wirth reflected that:

There is a role for spontaneity, especially in the student movement – when a lot of people are starting to become radicalised and would maybe take actions they otherwise wouldn't through the course of a rally. But really a lot of direct action was planned, the occupations were all planned.

At its best, this forethought showed strategic sophistication well beyond spontaneous bursts of anger.

'Quieter than most Sundays': The 1996 higher education campaign

The first phase of activism quickly began in response to the Liberal government. In Howard's first budget as Prime Minister university funding saw huge cuts, of around \$1 billion. As a consequence, HECS was increased by up to 125% and repayment thresholds lowered to \$20,700 a year: making the reality of user-pays much more imminent. To dramatise the issue, the Sydney University student newspaper *Honi Soit* aptly produced a 'Cutbacks' edition and in response, the National Union of Students (NUS) called for a May 30 National Day of Action against the cuts.

Greek academic and education theorist Panagiotis Sotiris has noted that, in the neoliberal period, 'students tend more easily to associate with the labor movement, to think in terms of common demands' and this was certainly the case in the 1996 campaign. May 30 was chosen to coincide with a national strike by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) in pursuit of a 15% pay claim, giving students and staff a further reason to protest. The rallies were as large as the peak of the 1980s, drawing 27,000 people across the country. After a 5000-strong rally in Sydney a few hundred people stormed the foyer of Howard's office on Phillip Street and staged a sit-in, while (due to the strike action) Sydney University was reportedly 'quieter than on most Sundays'. At

the rally, a handful of police hats were reportedly ‘borrowed’ and tossed around by the jubilant students.

After the demonstration, Canberra students began a campaign of shadowing John Howard wherever he went — to the extent that one Canberra newspaper reported on the occasion where he was able to make an appearance without his student escort. On August 1, when Education Minister Amanda Vanstone was speaking at a dinner at ANU, around thirty students burst in, disrupting the event. More organisationally, a Higher Education Alliance of the key players in the sector — including the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC) as well as the NTEU and NUS — was assembled to co-ordinate further action. The main student Labor faction, the National Organisation of Labor Students (NOLS), had gradually shifted to the left over the previous half decade — with Labor Right students splitting in 1991 — and NOLS supported anti-Howard protests as well.

The next National Day of Action was scheduled a few months later on August 7, at the beginning of Semester 2. While smaller, its scale was still impressive. Again in conjunction with strike action by the NTEU, 20,000 people mobilised throughout Australia. Two weeks later, on August 19 the ‘Cavalcade to Canberra’ — a trade union action against the Budget — was scheduled. As a key sector affected by the Howard cuts, student contingents were organised and travelled to Canberra by bus. *Honi Soit* enthused that Canberra:

might be the most boring city in Australia but this will be the most amazing rally of all time – people from around the country are gathering to protest about the proposed changes by the Liberals to Industrial Relations. Call the SRC ... to book a seat on the BUS!!!

Their extravagant description was accurate and the rally was certainly a memorable affair. Much to the horror of the press and the union leadership, the demonstration culminated in a two-hour long occupation of Parliament House, with a group of protesters forcing their way through police lines and the doors and even ransacking the Parliament House shop. Although as Luke Deer has shown the unions strongly distanced themselves from the riot and refused to organise more street protests in its aftermath, its example did serve to inspire some students.

On August 21, around fifty Sydney students occupied John Howard's electoral office in Gladesville and shortly afterwards, on August 29, Melbourne university and high school students occupied the foyer of the BHP office (because of BHP's links to the Indonesian occupation of East Timor) after a rally of several thousand. Similarly at Sydney University, students managed to disrupt a graduation ceremony at which John Howard was scheduled to speak, using walkie-talkies to communicate with one another and co-ordinate the action. Several students sneaked into the hall and interrupted proceedings until they were 'bodily removed' by police. In the fracas Howard was reportedly spat on.

Student militancy, it seemed, was on the rise. The withdrawal of the unions from anti-Howard activity in the streets following the Canberra riot exacerbated this. Lacking support from broader social forces to pressure the government, militancy seemed to be the only option. In this context, enthusiasm for direct action in the latter half of 1996 would set the tone for the following year.

'This couldn't possibly come off, could it?': upfront fees and occupations, 1997

With the 1996 cuts to education passing parliament, the main focal point for activism in 1997 was the policy of upfront fees. An upfront fees system meant that students with lower university entrance marks could pay when they started

university to enter a course — clearly undermining the principle of equality of access. How was this implemented? In *The Enterprise University* Marginson and Considine note how, whereas Labor had preferred direct state initiative, the Howard government worked through more incentive-based mechanisms that gave responsibility for restructuring to the universities themselves. This marked a shift from Labor's corporatist planning to neoliberalism on an institutional level.

This was especially clear around upfront fees. After the 1996 budget had passed, decisions around how to adjust to the new environment lay with the universities, and they could choose whether to implement upfront fees on their own campuses. Despite the previous year's alliance with the AVCC then, from 1997 the struggle to oppose the commodification of education tended to focus on the specific universities that decided to push ahead with a policy of upfront fees. Moreover, as the AVCC were now enemies not allies, activists were even more eager to organise direct action on the Vice Chancellors' campuses. Importantly, particular types of university were more vulnerable to campaigning on the issue. As revenue from fees went to the institutions themselves, for the most established, high status universities with a potentially large market for upfront degrees like Melbourne and Sydney the income derived from the fees would largely outweigh any reputational damage. Less prestigious institutions, such as the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and so on, faced much more of a dilemma.

Despite this, in January UTS was the first institution to announce that it was considering plans to introduce an upfront fee. As a result, UTS became the prime target for activists across the state, and was to become one of the best examples of student ingenuity in organising and direct action. On February 27, UTS held a budgetary meeting to decide whether to implement the fees, and activists called

a snap demonstration. The meeting was held in the UTS administration building, which the students correctly assumed would be locked for the meeting. To circumnavigate this, one protest organiser was sent in an hour beforehand and hid in the toilets. The activist remembered vividly how staying hidden was a challenge:

It was another Keystone Cops episode with UTS security ... I distinctly recall a few council members coming in to the toilet and me nervously pulling my feet up and holding my breath until they left.

But they were able to maintain their cover and, when the meeting began, dashed to the door and opened it to let the other activists in. About a hundred students occupied the room. Amidst the protests, it was impossible to vote on whether to implement the fees, and the decision was deferred.

The next major protest action was a rally on March 26 — part of the NUS National Day of Action. After the success of the militancy at the council meeting, it was agreed amongst a core group of organisers that the demonstration would culminate with an attempt to occupy UTS. Yet after February 27, UTS security had been reinforced substantially. A steel bar was placed behind the glass door to the administration building (the Chancellery), to try and prevent the activists from barging in again, and access through this entrance was restricted. At the same time, activists were weary of ultra-leftism and argued that breaking the door and smashing the glass would be potentially dangerous, alienating to students not expecting such an action and easily allowing them to be portrayed in the media as violent.

This presented the students with a strategic dilemma. However, after sending teams of activists to scout out the area, the organisers discovered that despite

the reinforcements there was a backdoor route, through a temporary construction site at the back of the Chancellery. A small team of eight was given the responsibility of covertly entering the building through this entrance and removing the steel bar from the inside, to allow the mass of students to enter. For this group to come into play the students first had to evade police and make their way from the rally's starting point into UTS. To serve as a diversion, a permit was negotiated with police to march from Belmore Park to the Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) building near UTS. The DEETYA building had experienced a student occupation for several hours in 1995 so the police were more concerned about this possibility. A line of police assembled to block the DEETYA entrance. All of the rally marshals knew that there was going to be an attempt to occupy. Their role was crucial. Beforehand, the organisers had walked the route from DEETYA to UTS several times and identified seven different strategic spots where traffic needed to be stopped. They then assembled several dozen 'Stop' signs for the marshals to use to block traffic — although theirs read 'Stop Up-Front Fees' instead. The plan worked perfectly. After the rally (of about 1500-2000) reached the DEETYA office, the marshals ran down the route to UTS, leading the way, and the rest of the rally followed — while the police were left behind. The demonstrators eventually reached the UTS administration building, where one of the members of inside team was able to lift up the steel bar and open the doors. The students poured in and occupied the Chancellery, where they stayed for three days.

Overall the first 3 days of occupation went very smoothly. Yet at about 2.30am on the Saturday morning, about 115 police from the elite State Protection Group stormed the building, with sledgehammers, dogs and batons. The police were quickly able to round up the students, ushering them into a central area of the

building. Amidst the chaos, several people were injured by police dogs and batons, and an ambulance had to be called to the scene.

Eventually the activists regrouped outside. A picket of the university was planned for Monday morning, and a 'back to UTS' rally scheduled for Wednesday, which drew more than 250 students. The actions attempted to publicise the brutality of the eviction and the university's complicity in it, with speakers decrying police violence and VC Tony Blake mockingly dubbed as Tony 'Attack Dog' Blake. A t-shirt commemorating the occupation was made, with an image of a police dog biting a student's leg and the text 'UTS: where students and police dogs come together'.

Compared to other student occupations, in both the 1960s and the 1990s, UTS stands out for its elaborate planning and smooth execution. It drew extensive media coverage from the Sydney press and in the aftermath a journal, *The UTS Occupier*, was compiled, which discussed both the strategies used to get inside and the internal organisation of the occupation.

The boldness of the UTS occupation boosted the anti-fees campaign both locally and nationally. In response to the plans for upfront fees throughout the country, a national rally and student strike was called for May 8. Undoubtedly the publicity generated by the UTS occupation helped build the May 8 demonstration, and the Sydney rally was 6000-strong — over three times the size of the March 26 action. According to *Green Left Weekly*, it even included a high school contingent of 700, while *Honi Soit* noted how disruptive sit-ins happened at intersections along the rally route.

The rally finished at the quadrangle in Sydney University — where the Senate

was set to vote imminently on whether to implement upfront fees — and there was a debate amongst the activists about what to do next. Eventually a Tent City was established and around two hundred stayed the night. However, it was an extremely cold evening and the Tent City — posed as a moderate alternative to occupation, that might be more likely to attract non-activist students — seemed less strategic in this context. After a dismal night, the mood had altered, and the remaining students decided to occupy. However, compared to UTS the occupation was short-lived, and police cleared them out in a few hours.

Throughout the country the tactic of occupation came to the fore. The May 8 National Day of Action saw occupations at six different universities. By comparison to previous years, the scale of the Adelaide rally was a disappointment (down from 5000 in 1996 to several hundred in 1997). Yet there was a 300-strong occupation of Amanda Vanstone's office, followed by an occupation of the Adelaide University administration building overnight.³⁹ Griffith, Deakin and the Northern Metropolitan TAFE institute in Melbourne saw occupations of similar scale. A week later, a half dozen balaclava-wearing Southern Cross students in Lismore occupied a balcony of the 'heavily fortified administration building' as well, following on from a rally of 200 on May 8. The most prominent May occupation was at Melbourne University for 48 hours on May 8 -9. This followed a 2000-strong protest as part of the student National Day of Action. The rally culminated at the Melbourne University administration building, and as the building was open, several hundred students simply walked in, while a larger body of 600 watched outside. Melbourne had been the first university to formally authorise upfront fees, making it an obvious target. However the police soon moved in and the students' situation became perilous. Activist Chris Breen recalled how the lack of basic hygiene undermined the occupation:

we were very excited to have got in and we barricaded everything up solidly, every filing cabinet you could find. And then we realised we had barricaded ourselves in on the wrong side of the toilets!

As a result, the students were forced to bring buckets into two offices and turned them into makeshift facilities — which, Breen remembers, was predictably ‘disgusting’. The university soon cut the power, and the police also tried to prevent food from getting into the occupation. An elaborate pulley system was devised by Engineering students, lowering food in from the roof — as the ground below was monitored by police. This was initially successful, but that route was soon sealed off as well. *Farrago* estimated that 180-200 students stayed the night.

The next morning a spontaneous rally of 1000 surrounded the administration building, providing some cover for the food collective to sneak in supplies. However, they were only able to offer a ‘tablespoon’ of chopped banana and peanuts for everyone. Faced with these conditions, students gradually began to leave, and the final sixty left at 5pm that day. While activists were willing to make personal sacrifices, in the Australian 1990s, a certain level of hygiene and living standards were helpful in ensuring that the cause remained attractive.

While student accounts from the time celebrated the experience — and to be fair, in moments of creativity like the pulley-system and the number and diversity of students involved, there were elements to be proud of — there were clearly lessons to be learned. For Andrea Maksimovic, a left-wing activist at nearby RMIT, future occupations needed to be thought through much more carefully as Melbourne’s poor planning had led to its rapid demise. Maksimovic recalled that

the Melbourne occupation was:

just very impulsive and random. So when we got up there it was like 'oh there's no toilet, this is an issue'. And like all those sort of logistical things that you don't really think about. So, um ... we thought it was a pity that we had to come down but we almost didn't have any other choice because otherwise we would have had severe hygiene and other issues. I mean it was funny, like, we were having pee buckets lowered up and down, anyway, I don't want to get too gory. But it was kind of clear that we could only survive for that one day. So having learned the lessons of that occupation we decided to start thinking about how we can show our opposition to upfront fees at RMIT, and we put a lot more time and thought into the process.

Throughout the rest of the year, activism at RMIT would build on the lessons of Melbourne. While UTS had exemplified the ingenuity of the NSW student left, RMIT would best illustrate the creativity of Victorian student activists.

'Run Amok Till They Give a Fuck': the RMIT campaign

At the same time as the Melbourne University-focused organising had been building up, an RMIT-centric campaign was going on. For most of the 1990s, the RMIT Student Union had been run by a broad left coalition called Activate. As soon as the threat of upfront fees for undergraduate degrees became clear, this group of activists began organising events and protests at RMIT.

At RMIT the key decision-making body was the University Council. While there were two elected student representatives on it, it was stacked with corporate and managerial figures, and it was unlikely that this body would vote against fees. On August 11, a council meeting was disrupted by activists, but at the end of

August a meeting was successfully convened, and it voted 9-7 in favour of introducing them. Fortunately for the activists, a rally against upfront fees had already been planned for Wednesday August 20, 1997, as part of a Trans-Tasman week of action. In the light of the decision, and the broader atmosphere of student militancy that year, it was agreed to attempt an occupation at the rally. The activists had to find a suitable target. It needed to be central enough to the university that an occupation would have an impact, but not too prominent. At places like the main administration building they thought security would either be too tight to get in, or they would be evicted immediately. After scouting the campus, they felt that the university's Department of Finance and Strategic Planning — on the fifth floor of Kay House on Swanston Street — was an ideal location. Importantly, unlike at Melbourne University, there were ample toilets and even a shower. The rally was planned to march past Kay House, but it was not supposed to end there — in order to not make it an obvious site for security and the police to protect.

On the day, around five hundred students turned up to the demonstration. The core student activists handed out a clear, simple leaflet entitled 'Occupation invitation: RMIT', which laid out the main arguments against upfront fees and for an occupation. As they had predicted, there was a line of police guarding the administration building, but at Kay House the one security guard was on a break. Midway through the rally, the students charged in and went up the stairs, bursting into the Department. Conscious of the food-deprivation that had hampered Melbourne, some of the staff working at the student union had brought along backpacks filled with supplies, which they handed to students as they ran in.

Police and security soon surrounded the entrance to the building, preventing

new occupiers from joining them. This also meant that if anyone left, they could not return. At the same time, the 150 students barricaded themselves inside. A 19 day occupation had begun. A makeshift pulley system (a rope and a bucket) was quickly set up to bring in food from the street — the police would allow food in, but nothing else. A series of badges were soon produced too. They ranged from the straightforward ‘I support the RMIT occupation’, to the more colourful ‘The occupation rocks my world’ and ‘Run amok till they give a fuck’.

As the weeks went by, it became hard to sustain the occupation. Students increasingly had to leave, especially those in (non-activist) paid employment. While some activists with work responsibilities were able to help with outside support, feeding the still sizeable contingent of occupiers was a difficult task. In this context, the occupiers decided to demand a non-binding referendum, funded by the university and monitored by the Victorian Electoral Commission. This could be a ‘bridge to a deeper and ongoing campaign’, which even if the university refused to accept its results, could embarrass them and expose an anti-democratic mentality. As the vote on upfront fees at the University council had originally been quite close — nine to seven — it seemed plausible that a large anti-fees turnout could persuade two members of council to change their vote. Those favouring the proposal amongst the occupiers won a vote, and on September 8 a deal was signed and the students left Kay House.

Soon an array of referendum propaganda was whipped up, including one poster featuring the face of ‘Action’ Andrew Fernandez, the ‘no-fees crusader’, exhorting students to vote no to the scheme. The students won the referendum overwhelmingly, with 79.62% of the vote out of 13,131 legally cast. This was a participation rate of 24.78% — whilst clearly not a majority of students, it was a much larger turnout than one would expect from student elections in the

period.

However, the referendum result was rejected by the university council and RMIT implemented the fees the following year. While a review into the effects of upfront fees was agreed by council to take place in 1998, this did not eventuate. Despite the hope that it would expose the university, the failure of the referendum strategy took the wind out of the campaign's sails more generally. After activists had put it in so much effort, they were 'hugely demoralised', recalled Jessica Whyte. In the absence of a strong national movement the campaign dwindled.

Beyond RMIT, what were the results of the 1997 occupations? The UTS campaign likely had the most clear-cut success, with the university council eventually deciding against implementing the fees. Other campuses with recent strong histories of activism, such as ANU, Flinders and La Trobe, also chose not to go ahead with them. But universities like Sydney and Melbourne proved immune to vigorous campaigning against the fees. While the deepening of neoliberalism at universities had been deterred, its advance had by no means been stopped.

'Defer Second Semester': 1998

Some of the momentum from the 1997 occupations carried into 1998. Although Education Minister David Kemp distanced himself from its recommendations, the West Report into tertiary education helped mobilise students on campuses. The report supported even higher fees and a voucher system, through which funding would be allocated to universities on the basis of student demand and how 'successful' their courses were determined to be. April 1 — the NUS National Day of Action — saw a demonstration of 5000 in Melbourne, which culminated in an attempt to re-occupy Kay House. This time, however, the

university was better prepared and within hours security guards had breached the activists' barricades and dispersed the occupation.⁶⁰ Sydney's and Brisbane's attendances were similarly impressive, with around 4000 and 3000 respectively. In Adelaide a respectable 800 turned out.

Beyond the campus, students were able to put their newfound direct action skills to good use in environmental activism, above all in the campaign against the construction of the Jabiluka uranium mine. In 1998, Energy Resources Australia began construction of the mine in the Northern Territory's Kakadu National Park, on the land of the Mirrar people. Aboriginal traditional owners Yvonne Margarula and Jacqui Katona argued that there had been limited consultation with the Mirrar and that the mine violated their claims to the land. An eightmonth blockade of the site was established. Throughout the eight months, around five thousand people participated in the blockade, and there were over six hundred arrests.

Environmental student activists throughout the country soon began prioritising the campaign, raising funds for students to travel there. During the midsemester break, there was a particularly strong influx of students, and the blockade grew to over 600. Civil disobedience became an important strategy for the activists, with specifically designated 'arrestable' protesters breaking the law and disrupting the construction process, through methods such as locking on to machinery and blockading entrances to the site. Scott Alderson, the Queensland NUS environment officer for 1998, recalled how large numbers of student activists were involved and on one occasion:

We did a big lock-on ... I think it was an old Kingswood station wagon. We originally rolled that up in front of the gates, and had a huge almost conical

shaped lock on device, with a lot of people in the car locked in on it and everything like that. That took a fair few hours ... to get everyone removed ... I think (on another occasion) they arrested over a hundred people in one day. And they couldn't process everyone in one day, so a lot of people stayed in the cell overnight.

In the second semester of 1998, a 'Defer Second Semester' campaign was launched — encouraging students to take the semester off and travel to or stay at the Jabiluka blockade. Beyond the camp, Jabiluka Action Groups in the major cities cropped up. Including students as well as community activists, the groups organised rallies against the mine, blockades of company offices in Sydney and Melbourne and helped to raise awareness. After eight months of campaigning, the activists were winning the public relations battle — with polling suggesting that two-thirds of the Australian public opposed the construction of the mine. Although in October the onset of the Northern Territory wet season forced the closure of the blockade camp, and the conservative Howard government won reelection, the activism had some impact. Amidst falling prices for uranium, Energy Resources Australia abandoned the construction of the mine. In 2005 a treaty with the Mirrar people was signed, guaranteeing consultation with them before the commencement of any new uranium projects.⁶⁸ More organisationally, the Jabiluka protests helped spur the formation and consolidation of the Australian Student Environment Network, that would help train and bring together student environmentalists, and which continues to exist today.

On campus though, in the absence of a new development in federal education policy to galvanise students, 1998 saw it become harder to organise students on a university level. After the first National Day of Action activism began to decline. In Sydney Anthony Keenan, one of the Education Officers at UTS, recalled how:

I remember the following year [1998], it was hard, it was hard graft, trying to keep the whole campaign going ... I just remember there, everything just bounced around so we had some stuff at UWS, something out at UNSW, and then you know the various SRCs would have had all their own election campaigns.

By September 1998 Melbourne's National Day of Action had reduced in size to only 1000, while Sydney's was even smaller. With federal policy firmly ensconced, and individual campuses having mostly determined their policies around upfront fees, the end of 1998 saw an era of protests against government imposed fees come to an end.

What had the late 1990s protests achieved? Beyond slowing the roll out of fees at particular universities, the legacy of student protest around education would resonate in different spheres. For Andrea Maksimovic the 'relationships forged' in the tumult of campaigning would 'last the test of time' with 1990s student activists heavily involved in important protests such as the 20,000 strong S11 protest in 2000 in Melbourne against the World Economic Forum, the Woomera breakout of refugees in 2002 and other refugee organising. An array of interviewees recalled how trust built between activists in the course of lengthy student occupations was essential for facilitating later collectives and activism.

As Gawne and Darby describe in their university honours theses, some student orientated groups initially brought together by education protests, such as the Wollongong-based Revolutionary Action, became interested in autonomist Marxism and applied this praxis to community organising. Similarly Richard Bailey recalled that a 'big strong student left' was central to the success of off-campus protests, such as around Jabiluka and the second Iraq War. Like

Jabiluka, many of these campaigns involved direct action and civil disobedience, and student's past experience was important in giving activists the confidence to organise creative militancy. As Sergio Fiedler argued in a contemporaneous journal article, civil disobedience could cascade, with initial attempts at direct action making later militancy seem much more conceivable. Yet protest around fees would only return to the campuses in late 2002, with the release of Education Minister Brendan Nelson's eponymously named Nelson Review.

'Hey Nelson, you're an ass': protest against the Nelson Review

The Nelson Review advocated further deregulation and another fee increase. Unlike the lack of action following the West Review, this 'student-centred' focus was taken up by the government, with plans allowing for a 30% increase in student contributions (except for those studying nursing and teaching). Nelson's plans soon ushered in a second phase of on campus protest, continuing from late 2002 – 2004. The first action was in Sydney in August 2002, when a 500-strong demonstration marched. On April 10 the following year there was a rally of 1000 in Melbourne, with 600 marching again in Sydney.

Like the earlier campaign against upfront fees, the implementation of the Nelson fee hikes was left to the universities themselves. Once again therefore the campaign shifted to the campuses, with disruptive direct action often employed. This time Sydney University was the first administration to try and push through the plans — with a Senate meeting arranged in early July 2003 to vote on a 30% increase to HECS, before the legislation had passed parliament. Students heard of the meeting and around thirty managed to dodge police and security and gain access, disrupting the vote. Although eventually police removed the protesters — according to *Honi Soit* leading to one broken arm and dozens of bruises — the vote on the fees was adjourned. But a secret Senate meeting was organised for

the following day at dawn, and the proposal was ratified.

Student anger around this clandestine vote helped build second semester's August 27 National Day of Action against the Nelson Review considerably. Of all the major cities, Sydney had by far the largest turnout of 2000, with 1000 from Sydney University, including a contingent of lab coat wearing medical students (protesting possible fee increases in their discipline). The rally in Melbourne saw 500 demonstrators, while in Adelaide 150 students managed to disrupt a Liberal Club meeting where Alexander Downer was speaking.

In the Nelson Review campaign, the next key action was on October 16, for which the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) had called a sector wide strike against the legislation — the first since 1996. A key part of the Nelson Review legislation involved withdrawing \$40 million in funding from universities if they did not comply with the government's industrial relations agenda and put staff on anti-union Australian Workplace Agreements. In response to the strike, activist students helped man picket lines and at Sydney University, the campus was reportedly 'like a ghost town'. At ANU the administration went against the government and signed an enterprise bargaining agreement with its staff.⁸¹ As the recommendations of the Nelson review moved into Parliament, the NTEU's campaign had some effect and the anti-union proposals around workplace agreements were dropped. The fee increases however remained, and student protest continued.

At the beginning of 2004, a wave of direct action by students began. On Thursday March 18, Flinders saw the successful disruption of the Senate meeting that would vote on the fee increases. Around 150 students occupied the registry building on Thursday night and staged a night-long sit-in: in response, the

university agreed to delay the decision till June, to allow further consultation. Similarly hundreds of students stormed a university council meeting at Newcastle University, winning the same sort of demands. At the University of Queensland, on Thursday March 25, there was a 500-strong blockade of the Senate meeting, preventing it from reaching quorum. But a secret meeting of the senators who had been unable to get in was organised via a teleconference and voted in favour of the changes. Protest occurred in a more cultural vein too. Anti-Brendan Nelson protest songs were composed across the country, with one (to the tune of 1980s classic 'Hey Mickey') enthusing:

Hey Nelson

You're an ass

You're an ass

You cut my class.

The most substantial direct action was at Monash. Monash had recently established a South Africa based campus that was running at a loss of nine million, which made the university's consideration of a fee increase (when they clearly had money to invest in overseas ventures) seem particularly egregious to the activists. On Monday March 22, the day on which the university council was due to vote to approve the fee increases, a crowd of 400 blockaded the main administration building. A student then dramatically discovered that the entrance to Robert Blackwood Hall, which had a passageway into administration, was open. Around two hundred entered the building, making their way through a security grille before being blocked and pushed back by police. In the furore, 19 people were arrested, and the students promised to return. Despite the protests, the fees were forced through the council meeting.

On Thursday March 25, a much larger rally of 1000 returned — this time heading to VC House (the site of Monash marketing). A decoy group of around twenty activists, dressed in pink tutus, diverted police attention at the administration building. Simultaneously around two hundred students were able to force their way into VC House, occupying three offices.⁸⁹ After the Monash Vice Chancellor Richard Larkin refused to change his stance in negotiations with the students, the activists decided to withdraw rather than risk violent arrest by police. In the aftermath one university council member, Rhonda Galbally, resigned in protest but the fees remained.

The momentum from the campus-specific blockades and occupations flowed into the March 31 NUS national day of action. In Melbourne, after a rally of 1000 — with one banner proclaiming that Education Minister Nelson was in fact ‘Minister of Higher Execution’ — 200 students managed to burst through police lines and occupy the central administration office at RMIT, which they maintained until about 10pm. Smaller crowds of 300 and 200 gathered in Adelaide and Brisbane respectively, while the largest action of 2000 was in Sydney. Of those, 700 stormed into UTS, with the intention of occupying the Chancellery — just as students had previously in 1997. Student activist Paddy Gibson recalled how, calamitously, he forgot the access code to get inside the Chancellery, and students started hammering on the door:

I had been given by a sympathetic staff member the code, the electronic code for the door of the Vice Chancellor's office at UTS ... And so my job is to run ahead, punch in the code so the students can get into the Vice Chancellor's office and occupy the Vice Chancellery! It would have been a wonderful thing to do ... And I went oh my god, I don't have the code. So we're standing at this door and there are hundreds of students streaming in and there's this glass

door that's shut in front of us and people start banging on the door! And then people start kicking the door with the intention of shattering the door and breaking it ... Anyway Jo Ball was in the crowd and she also had the code but she'd written it in texta on her arm, much smarter! And she finally pushes her way to the front of the crowd and just looks at me like 'what the hell are you doing'. I've lost the code! And so she goes up and puts the code in and the door opens. But the door opens to a group of riot police who at that stage are incredibly aggravated and charge out and just go nuts and pepper spray everyone. I got pepper sprayed, heaps of people got pepper sprayed, heaps of people got arrested. There was this one hilarious moment where one student fought back against the police with pepper spray with a can of Lynx and he's like running up and trying to use this Lynx against police!

After this, the activists retreated and went up to UTS's much less secure Great Hall and briefly occupied it. Whilst producing memorable actions, the effectiveness of direct action was constrained by this sort of better preparation for militancy by universities and the state than there had been in the 1990s. While the 1997 UTS occupation had ultimately been ended by police force too, a relatively unprepared university allowed them to spend three days inside, helping build momentum and attract publicity. Although radicals were inspired by past histories of activism, universities had an institutional memory of protest too, and acted accordingly. Similarly, increasingly networked technology helped to promote and organise protests, but also helped the administration counter tactics like the blockades, as meetings could be organised remotely if necessary. While there were further blockades of Senate meetings at Murdoch University, Southern Cross and Sydney University, the campaign would gradually flounder.⁹³ The end of the Nelson Review campaign thus saw the end of the second phase of student activism in the Howard era.

Conclusion

Overall, despite occasional victories, Howard's time in government was clearly a moment of defeat for student activists. Amidst the Howard era increases to HECS, access by domestic undergraduate students stagnated — with an increase in enrolments of 5.7% from 1996-2001, compared to an OECD average of a 27% increase from 1995-2000. In contrast, in this increasingly marketised environment, the number of fee paying places exploded — domestic fee-paying postgraduate enrolments increased by 84.8% from 1996-2001, while international student enrolments went up by 112.2% in the same period. Beyond the university, strike rates hit record lows, massive protest failed to stop the Iraq War, and the Labor Party drifted ever further to the right. When Howard was re-elected again in 2004, the sense of frustration and demoralisation was palpable. In *Honi Soit* environmental activist Wenny Theresia vented:

I've never been as pissed as I was last Saturday night ... and it wasn't because I was having a grand old time at my dear friend Nat's 20th. I was pissed that fucking Howard had won the election, fucking again. I was pissed that the Liberals will also have a majority in the Senate! I was pissed that we're in for three more years of economic rationalist cuts to education, health and welfare.

Yet in this period of conservative triumph across society, maintaining a critical presence at all was a victory. In this vein, Melbourne student activist Lizzie O'Shea reflected that keeping the spirit of radicalism alive was an achievement:

The experience of going to university is totally different, most people worked and most were paying HECS. So the extent that you can revive it ... keeping

that spirit alive is an achievement in of itself, given how much the experience of the university has changed. I might be optimistic but I think that should be celebrated, rather than seeing it as ‘ohhhhh, things are so much worse than they were in the seventies’ ... I wouldn’t want nostalgia to get in the way of a more sanguine appreciation of student activism.

In the late 1990s in particular thousands of students demonstrated, occupied or were active in some way. Although in a recent history of La Trobe University, left-wing academic and author Dennis Altman could recall that the state of 1990s student activism was summed up in a protest by music students that politely wrapped up at a pre-determined time so the students could return their instruments, singling out this example reflects Altman’s prejudices more than proving a consistent trend towards quiescence. Creative, complex direct action in this period at places like UTS and RMIT did not play by the rules and showcased student’s capacity for collective invention. They would have been impressive in any era. Even if not always successful on its own terms student protest became important in invigorating off campus campaigns, especially against the Jabiluka uranium mine. Defeat itself was related to the broader context, rather than just the scale and quality of protest. Activists faced a university structurally limited by contracting state funding, compared to the 1960s and 1970s, when university funding was expanding or static — meaning that new, progressive courses like gender studies or political economy could be offered relatively easily. As Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward astutely argue, ‘what was won must be judged by what was possible.

More generally, the militancy of protest and the police response — increased from the 1980s and early 1990s — highlights genuine political conflict. This was true for both the 1990s and Nelson campaigns. May 8 1997 alone saw 6 different

student occupations throughout the country, while the Nelson Review campaign saw blockades at 7 universities. Pepper spray and police dog bites caused injuries to student activists. Although on campus protest would briefly abate after the 1990s and shift into broader political organising, it would soon return under Nelson and was impressively constant throughout the era.

Increasingly it had become clear that the Liberal government was not the only enemy of student activists: the neoliberal mentality had permeated the ranks of university administrations too. While Vice-Chancellors had begun this period as reluctant allies of the student movement, arguing that they were merely ‘the meat in the sandwich’, compelled by funding cuts to restructure campuses, by 2004 they were well and truly perceived as opponents. Rather than ‘enlightened academia’ activists saw them more frequently as ‘managers of a corporation that produces human capital’.

In a 2004 election pitch at Sydney University Paddy Gibson summed up how the student movement saw them:

Our uni administration won't recognise what you and your community wants. All decisions are made with one consideration in mind: how will we get more cash from private sources. Fees have gone up and unprofitable public need faculties such as nursing are being booted out. Multi-national sponsors direct uni research, while coursework becomes a bootcamp for life in an office cubicle.

Universities, moreover, had learnt how to respond to direct action — with the different fates of the UTS occupations in 1997 and 2004 emblematic examples. With a multiplicity of institutionally powerful enemies the odds were stacked against the student movement. Even the memory of activism has been difficult to

preserve — at UTS for instance, a recent online summary by the Students' Association of the history of UTS activism neglected to include the 1997 occupation, by far the most substantial occupation in the university's history. This article has offered a corrective to this often partial and fragmented memory of student protest. It shows that being 'relaxed and comfortable' was not the only option for students living in Howard's Australia. Some experienced another university, with the thrill of rallying and occupation on the one hand, and the horror of police dogs and pepper spray on the other.