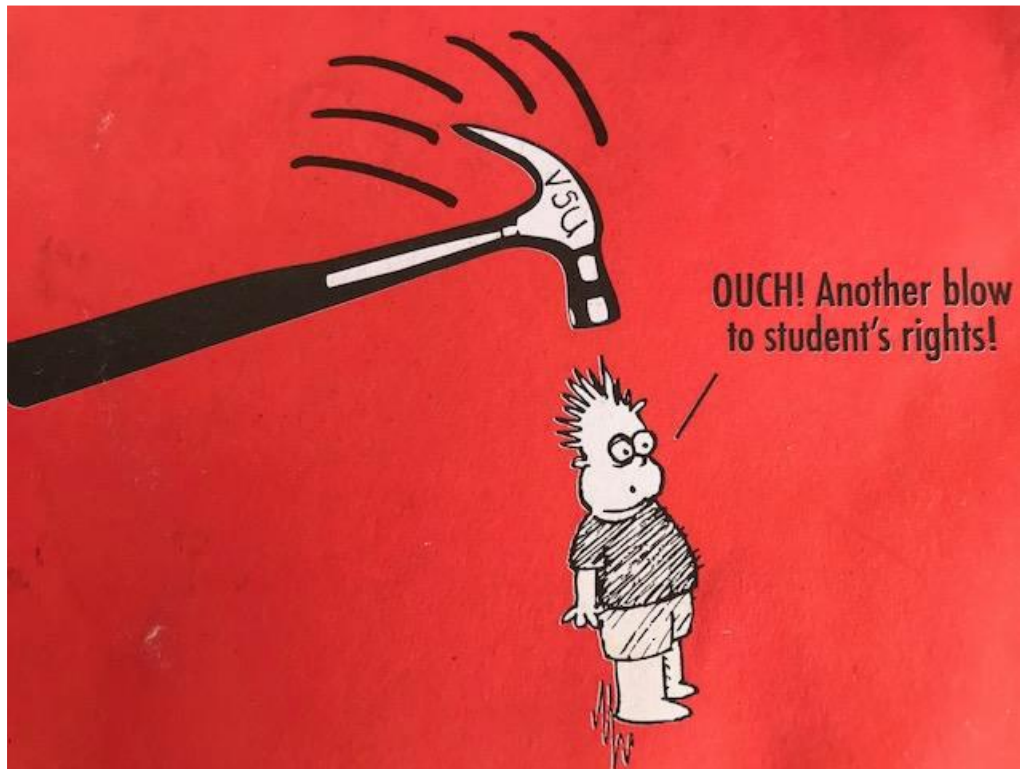


‘A depoliticising project’: the struggle against Voluntary Student Unionism, 1993-2006



Tim Briedis

‘Student organising was a bit of a power base for the left ... Kind of like an HQ, really.’ – Pru Wirth

‘Student unions became (after VSU) ... the main activity was organising the toga party. And everyone at the toga party got completely and utterly smashed. That’s really what student activism was, clubs began to proliferate. It was almost like the college fraternities in the US.’ – Jasmina Brankovich

From the 1980s to the 2000s, few things aroused the passions of Young Liberals and conservative students more than the idea of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) — abolishing compulsory membership fees for student unions across the country. As union funding was critical for supporting student activism and radicalism, a voluntary membership fee would reduce union incomes and marginalise activists on campus. After Western Australia (WA) introduced it on a state level, one right wing student declared his delight at how there was at last:

a state government prepared to stand for basic human freedoms, against the rabble-rousing and extortionist anti-VSU brigade. I write to thank them, and encourage others to do the same.

At times, this was echoed by their senior brethren in Parliament. When federal VSU was passed at the end of 2005, Coalition Senator Brett Mason insisted that it was a blow against the financing of terrorism:

a long time ago I was 17 years old and the ratbaggery that went on then still happens today. I was forced to pay compulsory union fees in the 1980s ... to an ANU association that gave money to the PLO. I was 17 and I was forced to give money to a terrorist organisation. You might think, 'Well, it's a long time ago. So what?' It can still happen today. Every time money is taken compulsorily from 17 and 18 year-olds by collectivists, it can be spent on any purpose. That is the problem.

Undoubtedly, VSU was one of the major conservative projects on campuses during this time. Similarly, VSU loomed large in the imaginary of the left. VSU — rebranded 'Vomit, Spew and Upchuck' by one activist — was a study in 'how to kill a student movement'. For Murdoch University's newspaper *Metior* it was

simply ‘the biggest threat to students – ever!!!’

Why was the issue so pivotal? While conservative claims may have been exaggerated, the right was correct in identifying a link between strong student unionism and left-wing radicalism on campus. Activist groups were financed and supported by campus unions. Despite rhetoric exalting the individual freedom to choose whether to take up union membership, in practice VSU would restrict collective freedom, especially the ability for students to politically organise. A voluntary fee would pressure student unions to commercialise their operations, necessitate extensive marketing to recruit members and thereby limit the time and resources for activism. Moreover, the various forms of VSU tended to embed student organisations (to an even greater extent) within a series of legislative and economic relationships with the state or university, further restricting their independence and power. For the student group Left Alliance, VSU aimed to ‘remove the space of organisation of the left, so that students can’t oppose right wing agendas as effectively as before’ and to ‘enforce smooth future subordination’, eroding a culture of unionism at the tertiary education level, that would flow into students’ later working lives.

From the perspective of Melbourne University activist Lizzie O’Shea, VSU was part of the process of turning the university into a degree factory, training graduates for work:

Ultimately the plan was to get rid of a huge amount of student life, the plan was to make the university more like a degree factory, more like a place where you experience a service that you sign up for, you’re a customer, you’re not going through a rite of passage that every person should have a chance to go through, which is a chance to learn liberally and explore ideas.

Throughout this article I outline the origins of VSU as a state and federal policy. I closely examine the history of campaigns against it, from when it was proposed in Victoria and WA in 1993-1994, to on a national level in 1999 and 2005-6. A key debate within the campaign was whether to focus on the importance of political representation or on relatively apolitical services: I argue that stressing the political aspect was paramount. Before the federal plans for VSU were initiated, state legislation, especially in WA, established a model and a precedent for the Howard government.

Beyond just stripping away resources, I argue that the financial effects of Voluntary Student Unionism were intimately bound up with a cultural remaking of unionism. This entailed a 'depoliticising project' in which student unions were pressured to commercialise their activities, marginalise student representation and activism (through, for instance, reducing the number of paid student activists and staff who could assist with representation) and weigh the value of particular assets and services against others. The University of Western Sydney Bankstown campus student union president for 2007 Phil Rigg reflected how:

VSU was the worst experience of my life... I was forced to fire twenty of our staff because the university refused to give us a funding arrangement after VSU. All those buildings that we had, the university went 'thank you very much, we'll have that' ... And that was it for activism there [on campus].

To follow the British Marxist theorist Raymond Williams, student unions had formed part of a 'dissident cultural apparatus', containing collective memory and historical consciousness of prior activism. Exacerbated by the broader pressure of the contemporary capitalist economy, this knowledge was effaced and stripped away. In an email in early 2002, describing the post-VSU state of the Western Australian student left, Sydney activist Matt Skellern who had visited recently noted poignantly that:

Basically the left has ceased to exist as an organised force on WA campuses ... with Candice [a Left Alliance activist] withdrawing from student activism the tradition passed down through Left Alliance has come to an end ... this means that things need to be rebuilt from scratch.

In this vein, federal VSU brought a particular 'tradition' and mode of activism reliant on widespread unionism throughout the country to an end. But rather than it simply functioning as a 'VSU-apocalypse' as predicted by activists, VSU tended to enclose student unionism, with its effects experienced unevenly. Wealthier campuses, campuses with a strong history and memory of activism, or campuses with particularly strong campaigns against VSU were able to function better in the aftermath. Simultaneously the threat of VSU could galvanise activism: with student media and campaigning at times being revived by the policy's existential threat.

Why target student unions? The long history of VSU

The first conservative attempts to defund student unions arose in the Vietnam War era. On campuses such as Monash University, Melbourne University and the Australian

National University, radical activists had won control of unions and spent funds on causes such as the legal fees of anti-war student activists and support for the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Although generally framed in this period as support for 'voluntary fees' (rather than explicitly called VSU), right wing and Liberal students pushed to restrict union finances through means such as student polls, state legislation and individual court cases. Polls went poorly. At the Western Australia Institute of Technology — which as Hastings noted, was 'hardly a hotbed of radicalism' — compulsory unionism was supported in a 1979 vote by the overwhelming margin of 88.4% to 11.6%.

Legally however, the right had more success. In Victoria, the 1977 Kaye judgement ruled that it was illegal for the Melbourne University Student Union to collect money for purposes beyond the university, and the state government passed legislation that tried (with varied success) to enforce the Melbourne model across the state. However the judgement was rejected upon appeal the following year.

In the wake of the successful appeal against Kaye, the Victorian state government tried to pass legislation to ensure that fees were not spent on political activity. Similarly, the WA Liberal government passed a law allowing for 'conscientious objection' to union membership and, more significantly, prohibited affiliation fees to the Australian Union of Students (AUS). While the WA conscientious objector clause remained (attracting under 2% of students), the other measures were overturned when Labor state governments came into power in the early 1980s. Moreover, within the Liberal party itself, there was considerable support for the autonomy of universities around financing

the union — Malcolm Fraser, for instance, argued that this was an issue to be determined on a campus level rather than through federal policy.

As the 1980s progressed, some student Liberal veterans whose formative political histories had revolved around opposition to student unionism and radicalism became more important within the party. One breathless Greg Sheridan article in *The Australian*, for instance, described his and Tony Abbott's 'political baptism of fire' at the Australian Union of Students Conference in 1977:

The atmosphere of the conference was unlike anything I'd ever seen. It was an alternative universe, like the famous bar scene in *Star Wars*. The air was heavy with the pungent aroma of marijuana. Propaganda and posters were everywhere, extolling all the AUS positions ... Everything about the conference, and about AUS and student politics in those days, was undemocratic and full of intimidation ... We wanted to smash AUS to bits.

Well after their university days, Abbott and fellow travellers like Eric Abetz and Michael Yabsley would continue to push anti-student union policies within the Liberal Party. As the 1980s wore on, both Liberal students and conservative think tanks continued to push the issue. Buoyed with confidence after the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganism, in 1987 the right-wing Institute of Public Affairs released a policy paper entitled *Compulsory Student Unionism: Australia's Last Closed Shop*. By the 1990s and 2000s then, VSU — despite lingering concerns by the Nationals over the defunding of regional universities — had become the dominant position within conservative circles.

How was VSU justified? In the 2006 book *Dream* Stephen Duncombe argues that advertisers, lobbyists and conservative groupings have, since the 1990s and 2000s, cleverly appropriated traditionally left discourses of rebelliousness and freedom. The propaganda for VSU — melding arguments about freedom of choice with an attempt at class politics — provided a stark example of this. On these lines, in 1989 one pro-VSU poster asked provocatively:

In 1969 it was conscription to the army, in 1989 its conscription to VSU! The only good union is a voluntary union.

Similarly in 2006 Jess Thompson, the Monash Liberal club publicity officer, deployed the language of democracy to justify VSU, commenting scathingly:

Student unions nation-wide are largely undemocratic, with most considering a voter turnout of 5% to be a large amount...While Student Unions may have a role to play, joining them should be a choice and not forced upon the student community. It is about choice, it is about (real) democratic representation, it is about the right to make our own decisions.

Later, this sort of analysis was infused with a distorted class politics. By 2005 education minister Brendan Nelson would pose VSU as an issue of ‘Why should a single mother have to subsidise the abseiling club?’ When federal VSU legislation was finally implemented at the end of 2005 the Liberal press release exulted that the government was ending ‘compulsory upfront fees’ — striking a blow in favour of working-class

access to universities.

While this sort of rhetoric did not necessarily lower student opposition to VSU (when polling was conducted throughout the period it showed consistent student opposition to the policy) it did perhaps complicate and confuse the issue, muddying the sense of clarity with which students perceived that the on-campus unions were in their own interests. Moreover, as Graham Hastings perceptively argues in his history of student activism, the less openly stated Liberal motivation revolved around a sense that the student unions were a training ground for and active supporter of their political opponents. In 1994, for instance, a Victorian Liberal Party paper noted that:

We do not want compulsory moneys flowing out to anti-Kennett and anticoalition campaigns and other fringe activities of the hard left.

In a similar vein, in 1999 at a briefing to Liberal backbenchers, senior Liberals argued that VSU would truncate 'the culture of compulsory unionism ... before people enter the workforce.' Due to the rapid turnover of university students (and need to sell the virtues of a union to a new batch of students every year), it would be difficult for a non compulsory system of unionism to garner nearly the same level of resources for political activism as there had been previously. Time previously devoted to campaigning and representation would now necessarily have to be dedicated to marketing and fundraising. As one activist put it memorably, VSU would 'kneecap' the student movement.

The WA Campaign

In the early 1990s the Liberal project of VSU finally started to come to fruition. After the Western Australian Carmen Lawrence Labor government was overwhelmingly defeated by Richard Court in February 1993, the Liberal party began to initiate plans for it in WA. The WA VSU law involved several key aspects. Beyond rigidly prohibiting the ability of universities to levy a compulsory fee for anything other than directly educational purposes, it removed the status of the Guilds as the legitimate representative body of students on campus — meaning that they would no longer have a place on the university senate. This further meant that the substantial number of Guild buildings would have to pay commercial leases, as the Guild was no longer a recognised part of the university. Moreover, union recruitment post-VSU was targeted too, and ‘inducing, intimidating, or attempting to persuade’ anyone to join could be met with a fine of \$50,000.

In response to this existential threat, student organising soon commenced. An anti-VSU rally was set for September 16, and activists began a routine of lecturebashing, leafleting and plastering the campuses with ‘No Guild No Voice’ posters. In the student newspapers, heated debate on the merits of the proposal ensued — especially at the University of Western Australia (UWA), where a Liberal was the current Guild President and there was a relatively strong Liberal presence. One conservative letter writer, calling themselves ‘In Hiding’ declared that ‘I AM SELFISH... We’ll decide if we “NEED” to join the Guild!’.

While clearly not all were convinced, the anti-VSU campaigners did have some success.

A shutdown of guild services for a day was organised to demonstrate the effect of the legislation. Furthermore, a week before the demonstration, UWA student activist Elena Jeffreys recalled thinking that they could bolster numbers at the rally by providing free beer. Jeffreys remembered:

We just have to pull out all the stops, we need to have a lot of people at this rally, why don't we put on free beer at the tavern afterwards for anyone who attends! And so everyone who gets on the bus to go to the rally gets an armband, and then when they get back gets as much beer as you want to drink, we'll get like ten kegs. So we did that. And the turnout was amazing! So our pamphlets had gone from 'Stop VSU' in big letters to 'Stop VSU' in small letters and 'Free Beer' in big letters!

Although perhaps not the most political way of building a rally, between seven hundred and a thousand people turned out: large for Perth. Despite their enthusiasm in arguing their case on the letter pages of the student newspaper pro-VSU students were less keen to involve themselves on the day. Only five turned out to protest the protest. The hecklers were joined by Liberal parliamentarians Ian Campbell and Graham Kierath, who reportedly harassed the organisers to allow Kierath to speak. The UWA newspaper *Pelican* recounted that Campbell's wit extended to offering himself as a date to one of the female activists. The Liberal government was tied down with other legislation, and the VSU bill failed to pass state parliament that year.

Despite the success of the 1993 rally, the Labor controlled student unions soon began accommodating themselves to a post-VSU climate. Stewart Jackson, an activist from

Perth's relatively small Edith Cowan University (with around 9000 undergraduates in the mid 1990s), recalled how:

The Labor Party was definitely arguing for commercialisation left and right ... But the key for surviving VSU was that we had to start talking about recruitment, start talking to students about representation ... The key was not just focusing on the services, because otherwise that's what it becomes.

This defeatism was particularly clear at the Curtin University of Technology, largely controlled by the Labor Right. While Curtin had only won university status in 1987, it was Western Australia's largest university in terms of enrolments and the Guild's lack of interest in activism was thus a considerable blow to the anti-VSU campaign. In 1994, even though the VSU legislation had not gone through parliament (and with the possibility of emergency support from the federal government, even if the bill did pass), the student union began a process of extensive restructuring, to prepare themselves for VSU. This included firing the Guild's four experienced Education Officers: presumably people who would be critical to political organising. In protest, the remaining two permanent staff members resigned. In addition, despite their commercial potential, the Guild gift shop, clothing shop and tool library were closed. This all necessarily curtailed any sort of political activity.

Murdoch University was the exception: although a small campus in terms of undergraduate population, it had a history of alternative-radical politics, and its student union was controlled by the left (and was loosely linked with the student group Left Alliance nationally). Its activists moved to the forefront of anti-VSU organising. Future

Greens leader Adam Bandt was amongst them. Moreover, in response to the sort of Labor accommodationism at Curtin, the radicals became more autonomous from the ALP students and NUS, founding a cross-campus Education Activist Network (EAN), which organised rallies and actions throughout the year. With meetings at a local café cum gambling den, Café Sport, the EAN was a vibrant collective — with up to forty people attending meetings. Jeffreys, a member of the group, recalled how seriously they were taken by Labor student officials:

we were getting ready for our first big protest and myself and someone else from the campaign, we got called in to have a meeting with the guy who was the President of NUS West. And he started talking about how he wanted to negotiate with Ian, and how Ian was very important and he had a lot of respect for Ian and he wanted Ian to come into the fold. And myself and this other person were sitting there thinking ‘who the fuck is Ian!’ Ian, who is this person! But actually he meant this group Education Action Network, because he’d sent along some stooges to count how many people were going!

Despite these impressive numbers, the EAN was not able to better the 1993 rally’s attendance. An initial 1994 rally focusing on VSU was set for March 22, drawing a respectable 500 attendees. Later rallies were organised in June and August 13. Numbers, however, are unclear and perhaps tellingly these were unreported in either the student press or a stalwart socialist newspaper (if with an East Coast bias) like *Green Left Weekly*. The EAN’s most impressive achievement was, in the wake of VSU, a 1500-strong demonstration on May 8 1995 focused on fees that culminated in an hour long occupation of the Department of Employment, Education and Training office.

Yet with the VSU rallies declining in scale by the end of 1994, this sort of protest ran

against a tide of conservatism on both campus and in parliament that was too strong to contain. At UWA, Jeffreys recalled how ‘before you could blink they’d (the now Labor-run student union) sold a dozen buildings’ and on a state level the outcome was no different. At the end of 1994 Moore finally passed the VSU legislation — although the clause allowing for a \$50,000 fine for ‘inducement’ was dropped, otherwise it was in fairly unadulterated form.

Now in full legislative force, the VSU climate amped up the process of Guilds selling their existing resources and expanding commercialisation in order to stay in operation. Curtin’s student union continued its jettisoning of its political activities: in 1995, the Women’s Department was disbanded, and for good measure, elections were abolished in 1999. The UWA Guild retained a greater level of student representation but with resources increasingly dedicated to marketing itself, hiring the marketing firm the Results Corporation to bolster its image. It recommended an apolitical strategy of aiming to ‘appeal to everyone, from Marxist to Nazi’. Membership fell to around 25%.

Murdoch fared the best. When VSU was finally implemented in 1995, it was the most successful in retaining members — 45% continued to pay their dues — and perhaps more importantly, did so by focusing on the need for political representation. But by the late 1990s and 2000s even Murdoch had begun commercialising its activities similarly. One telling advertisement to businesses offered ‘three ways to tap into the student market’, offering listings (in bold) of company names in the Murdoch Guild Student Diary, promotion of events and, of course, discounted rates of advertising for guild sponsors. ‘Can you afford not to?’, the ad concluded. Furthermore, survival on this basis

did not only mean promoting a 'student-as-consumer' model of unionism: it ended up giving the Liberals an argument that student unions nationally could in fact, exist under VSU, and that predictions from the left of their complete demise were paranoid exaggeration. That is not to say that all guilds survived through the beneficence of the market — the Edith Cowan guild, unable to secure the level of commercial funding that the others had, collapsed in 1998.

Politically, this had a conservatising impact. Longtime Perth activist Jasmina Brankovich recalled how, in the 'whole era' afterwards:

students were really thinking of themselves as consumers and any reason for being there other than the services and advocacy, from the nineties was really losing in potency ... everything kind of went down ... I can't remember the last time between 96 and the time Labor came in [2001] that there was actually a rally held. Certainly not one that I attended.

In 2001, when the Liberals overwhelmingly lost the WA state election, the Labor student strategy of waiting for a change of government seemed like it could be coming to fruition. But the deterioration of the unions over the last half decade had taken its toll. While lobbying for the repeal of VSU soon began, a weakened student movement could no longer act as a force that could organise street marches, pressure the Labor Party and move beyond lobbying. A full repeal never came: rather a fee for student services was gathered by the university, which could then be passed on to the guilds at the university's discretion. By 2002, therefore, Western Australia had legitimised and offered a precedent for three trends: firstly a model for the Liberal Party's VSU laws,

second the commercialisation and depoliticisation of student unions themselves, and finally a Labor response based on breaking the principle of student control of student affairs and tying unions to the universities for funding.

‘Kennett is smelly. Stop VSU’: Victoria and VSU

Following on from the introduction of the WA legislation into Parliament in late 1993 it was anticipated that Victoria — with the recently elected Kennett Liberal government — would soon follow suit. In January 1994, the Student Unionism Network (SUN) was formed to oppose any form of VSU. SUN soon had success in drawing in a layer of activists, with 20-30 regularly attending their organising meetings. Their first state-wide day of protest was set for March 23.

Around a thousand turned up, alongside a small contingent of Liberal counter protestors. SUN’s rallies gradually escalated. On April 28, the day that the legislation was introduced into Victorian parliament, 1500 marched. Signs included those saying ‘Defend Student Unionism’ and more bluntly worded ones like ‘Kennett is smelly. Stop VSU’. After several eggs were thrown at the Melbourne Club (a private social club for the wealthy and elite) the rally was attacked by police horses and batons. Five students were arrested in the fracas.

On May 19, 5000 rallied, the largest demonstration of the campaign. The rally was built in part through large student general meetings on campuses. Melbourne University saw 648 students attend one on May 16 — with only 17 voting against a motion condemning VSU. Similarly at La Trobe 300 attended a general meeting. The meeting not only

condemned the legislation, but suspended from the Students' Representative Council two Liberal executive members who had claimed that the council supported VSU. In the aftermath of the rally, the student general meetings continued. The most impressive one was held at Monash, where 1400 (with a paltry 9 supporting VSU, and the rest condemning it) attended a meeting on May 26.

Another key component of the anti-VSU campaign was the defence of cultural activities that would be restricted under the legislation: funding for student art, theatre and comedy would be prohibited. This was highly visible on May 19, where an assortment of prominent comedians, artists and playwrights spoke out against the legislation. Despite Liberal recalcitrance, the pressure on this issue paid off. When a list of amendments to the legislation was released in May, arts funding was no longer prohibited. Moreover, the decision on the interpretation of the legislation was left to individual universities: so there was some scope for negotiation between administration and students. Importantly, there was no mechanism for punishing universities who interpreted the law in a way that was sympathetic to the student unions.

With these limitations to the legislation in place, the VSU bill passed Victorian state parliament in June 1994. In response, the ALP prepared the Higher Education Funding Act, allowing money to be directly passed on to student organisations, bypassing the Liberal legislation. But the result of this was to transfer greater power over student unions to both the universities and the state — the bill gave the Education Minister (then Simon Crean) discretionary power over how funding would be allocated. Moreover, the unions had to negotiate funding deals with the university, rather than the money being

handed over automatically — akin to a trade union having to negotiate for its members' money with an employer. This apparent victory, then, was received cautiously by the activists. For RMIT education officer Sean Kilmurray the bill represented either 'salvation or slavery', while La Trobe activist Nick Bolger predicted with concern that the ALP, with their increasing sympathy for neoliberalism, would prove an unreliable ally:

Given that the federal government is now funding this activity, it will not be long before the ALP – our knights in shining armour – defy their propaganda about support for unionism.

Victorian VSU came into operation at the beginning of 1995. Yet the sort of organising that had been going on in the previous year gave activists some leverage. One RMIT student activist recalled that the large 1994 student general meetings bolstered their ability to negotiate, threatening universities' image if they failed to support student organisations. They:

meant that we had a lot of power on campus to negotiate with the universities. And we had the support of most of the institutions, I mean I have no doubt that they didn't actually give a shit about us, but it was more you know, they wanted to be seen to be supporting us, because they didn't want to disrupt the relationships, they didn't want students to be occupying VC's offices, or interrupting council meetings ... And university councils weren't as right-wing as they are now, yeah.

Nevertheless, having to rely on the universities and the state for funding made the student organisations more vulnerable. At La Trobe, still a hub for the radical left, the issue of funding became embroiled with a broader scandal engulfing *Rabelais*, the

student newspaper. In 1995 *Rabelais* was edited by a particularly unapologetically radical team, publishing articles such as 'I love being a Marxist' (a discussion of the link between Marxism and women's liberation), sharp critiques of police violence and an array of attacks upon 'the enemy', La Trobe Vice-Chancellor Michael Osborne.

While the vast majority of articles were more generally political, *Rabelais* had a provocative edge too: in their July edition they republished a piece from the Sydney anarchist zine *Destroyer 247* called 'The Art of Shoplifting'. After emphasising the 'golden rule of theft', that you should 'NEVER STEAL FROM ANYONE WHO COULD CONCEIVABLY BE A COMRADE', the article proceeded to offer tips, predictably enough, for how best to shoplift. It recommended the use of blindspots, scanning for video surveillance, and crying and bawling to get out of trouble if you are caught.

A media scandal ensued, with radio hosts Neil Mitchell and John Laws condemning the article. Scathing opinion pieces were published in the *Herald Sun*, while the Victorian Retail Traders Association was less than impressed. Education Minister Simon Crean denounced the article and wrote a letter encouraging prosecution to the Victorian Attorney-General. The subsequent, unrepentant issue of *Rabelais* contained a selection of the most fulminating responses:

Extremely offensive, bordering on obscene ... Sergeant Trevor Lockwood Driven by some ulterior motive, contrary to any human standard of decency ... John Zovaro, Audio Visual Services Officer, La Trobe University ... All people condemn you, may car run over you. Anonymous.

Whatever one thinks of its contents, 'The Art of Shoplifting' has to be situated within the particular genre of the student newspaper: from the notorious sexual libertarianism of UNSW's *Tharunka* in the early 1970s (publishing risqué poetry like 'Cunt is a Christian Word') to the frequent guides to illegal drug use in the late 1980s and 1990s (often published without scandal or comment), crossing the boundaries of 'respectability' and flirting with legality was fairly commonplace.

While the tone of 'The Art of Shoplifting' was more outrageous than some of the drug pieces it was not too far outside the norm. As *Rabelais* editorialised in their defence, its publication was in fact simply part of their election manifesto — they had pledged, after all 'to publish shoplifting manuals that tell it like it is'. Ben Rosenzweig, one of the editors, reflected later in *Overland* that it was part of a questioning of the norms of bourgeois property rights, if perhaps inadequately put into effect.

This all came in the context of negotiating funding arrangements between the La Trobe Students' Representative Council and the administration. In the aftermath of the media outrage, Vice Chancellor Michael Osborne seized upon the *Rabelais* incident as an excuse to tear up the deal that had been negotiated, refusing to pay the staff of the student union. In response, activists called a student general meeting in the Agora Cinema on August 15th to discuss how to respond.

The Agora meeting was large, with around three hundred students turning out: one of the biggest La Trobe student general meetings in years. It was a triumph for the activists. Students overwhelmingly rejected any compromise with management. A motion to

occupy the university administration office until the funds were handed over was passed, and the students stormed in. Management, it turned out, had little desire to press the issue, and, in a strikingly successful protest, the fees were handed over in a few hours.

The *Rabelais* scandal was to persist for a few more years. At the end of 1995, the editors were arrested under the Classification of Film and Publications Act — an act largely designed to counter underage pornography. They faced charges of ‘publishing, editing and distributing an objectionable publication’, carrying a fine of \$72000 and up to 6 years jail. In a less high-profile case, ‘The VSU 4’, were arrested in the aftermath of the La Trobe occupation, around property damage charges. While the La Trobe occupiers eventually pleaded guilty and received a warning, in March 1999 all charges against the *Rabelais* editors were dropped.

Overall, ‘The Art of Shoplifting’ incident illustrated two aspects of VSU vividly: the way in which greater entanglement with the state and university could endanger student unionism’s independence, but also that this was not immutable. It confirmed how collective action, in this case through the classic formula of a general meeting and occupation, could challenge the establishment of new norms.

At the other Victorian universities the struggle over funding arrangements was more subdued and less spectacular. With the combination of student activism and institutional prestige at stake, student unions were generally able to work out funding arrangements with their respective universities — which importantly (although put

under increased pressure) were maintained after the election of Howard when ALP federal funding was wound up. One of the areas under particular pressure after VSU was the relatively expensive student newspapers: Monash's *Lot's Wife* ceased publication in 1996, while others were forced to operate on an (even more) shoestring budget and roll back the frequency of publication. But after an outcry and a year of campaigning, Monash administration relented: in 1997 they and students reached a funding arrangement and *Lot's Wife* returned.

Moreover in terms of journalistic quality and creativity, student editors were able to respond to the existential crises faced by their newspapers positively. In response to the 1995 issue of *Lot's Wife* being forced to accept advertising from McDonalds in order to generate revenue, an impressive Victorian Intercampus Edition (VICE) was produced from 1995-99, featuring some of the best work from each publication. Despite the pressure to seek out external revenue sources (through advertising) and self-censor in the wake of the *Rabelais* scandal, many of the newspapers were able to retain a critical edge. In 1996, with federal Liberal incumbency further threatening student union funding, the RMIT student newspaper — that year renamed *Revolution Catalyst* — captured the climate particularly vividly. A series of *Asterix in Victoria* cartoons featuring the nefarious Julius Kennett (who would, for instance, denounce students as 'un Victorian anarchists who like to burn flags') urged students to protest the VSU legislation and get involved in supporting their student newspaper.

Perhaps the student unions most affected by VSU were those outside the university

system at TAFE, which closed down throughout the state. While the TAFE unions had never been hubs of radicalism, they were consistent sources of representation and services for those enrolled at these institutions. Similarly, regional student unions were affected: in 1999 the Monash Gippsland union's funding was reduced by two thirds and decisions about where the amenities fee would go removed from student control. Closing these unions, meant, to some extent, an enclosure of activism: limiting it to the more elite, well-off universities. But compared to the devastation unleashed by the Western Australian version of VSU, students had managed fairly well in Victoria, maintaining both representation and services, and finding creative ways to resist the legislation.

Federal VSU: the 1999 campaign

By 1999, with a federal Liberal government firmly in place, the right decided to try and legislate VSU on a national scale. Following the Western Australian model of a much more absolute ban on political funding, in March the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill was put before the House of Representatives. While 1998 had generally been a quiet year for student protest, a strong layer of activists galvanized by the 1996 and 1997 protests against education cuts and upfront fees remained on campuses. These radicals came to the fore.

March saw a series of rapid response protests against the threat of VSU. On March 11 there were actions across the country — Sydney and Brisbane saw pickets of the Liberal Party headquarters; in Brisbane students swarmed into the Liberal foyer after a door

was forced open. In a more comic vein in Adelaide, Elysia Turcinovic, the Adelaide University Student Union President, debated then Liberal backbencher Christopher Pyne on television. According to NUS executive committee minutes, Pyne was 'apparently hung over' and was 'thrashed' by Turcinovic, both embarrassing the Liberals and raising the profile of the campaign.

At Wollongong on March 19, 150 students 'stormed' Wollongong University's administration building in protest at Vice-Chancellor Gerard Sutton's partial support for the legislation, overpowering campus security guards to force their way inside and occupying the building for several hours. March 30 saw the first National Day of Action on the issue. Melbourne was the most well-prepared state, with *Green Left Weekly* estimating that around three thousand students attended a rally at the State Library; while Sydney and Brisbane saw turnouts of 750 and 500 respectively.

On the second National Day of Action on May 19 the numbers were reversed: 2000 rallied in Sydney and 1000 in Melbourne, with 6000 across the country. In Sydney the Cross Campus Education Network resolved to hold an emergency picket when the legislation was put to the Senate. It did not come to this. The legislation hinged upon support from two independent senators in Parliament — Mal Colston and Brian Harradine — whom the government hoped to persuade to vote for it. In July, a new Senate would come in with the balance of power held by the Greens and the Democrats, which would make the passage of VSU almost impossible. Harradine had a track record of dealing with the government, but in the face of popular pressure Colston began to express scepticism about a full-blown VSU, though was open to a Victorian

style compromise. The Liberals were either unwilling to moderate the bill or lacked the time to organise revamped legislation. Amidst the parliamentary wrangling, the debate lapsed on June 29, and with a hostile Senate in place in July it was not put to Parliament again. Yet by 2005, with a unified Liberal Party and a much more favourable balance of forces in the Senate, the right was far better positioned to take advantage of these weaknesses.

‘A shadow was hanging over the campaign’: VSU passes, 2005-2006

After establishing a clear majority in both houses of federal parliament in the 2004 election, the Liberals soon moved to establish an array of anti-union legislation that had previously not been viable. For the trade unions this was experienced through WorkChoices and bodies like the Australian Building and Construction Commission, while for students it came through VSU. On March 16, 2005 federal VSU was introduced into parliament. Protests soon followed. The first National Day of Action in 2005 was set for April 28, with VSU the overwhelming focus. In the largest student rallies since the late 1990s, 10,000-15,000 marched nationwide. In Melbourne the demonstration was an impressive 5000-strong. One heart shaped prop declared ‘VSU: ripping the heart out of student life’. Memorably, it featured a Queer Pirates bloc proclaiming ‘Queer Mutiny against VSU’. Other signs included exhortations to ‘Keep the Booty in the Student Union’ and a commitment that ‘Queer Pirates Paddle Together’. On campus at Melbourne University, Lizzie O’Shea recalled how a wrecking ball was assembled and used to symbolise the effects of VSU.

Sydney mobilised 5000 as well, with 3000 from Sydney University the largest single campus bloc in the country. But while the numbers involved in these demonstrations were substantial, optimism was always tempered by the Coalition's parliamentary majority. On these lines, O'Shea reflected how:

There was always this shadow hanging over it, because I was always pretty confident that the legislation would pass ... There's a trepidation about bringing people into this movement when you're pretty sure it's not going to succeed.

Moreover, a focus on services downplayed the political component of the campaign. At the Sydney demonstration, Gibson remembered how, while criticising the legislation's effect on clubs and societies helped build the size of the demonstration, it concealed the Liberals' emphasis on restricting political student organisation, limiting the terrain of the debate:

the first rally that we had at Sydney Uni was enormous, 5000 people, it was huge. And one of the reasons why it was so huge was because clubs and societies mobilised. People brought their kayaks to the rally and got dressed in their hockey uniform for the rally and that sort of stuff ... there was a speech by one of the welfare staff, I remember quite clearly, gave this big booming speech about 'I don't play women's hockey but I'll fight for the right of women's hockey to be played' or something. Oh god you know. It was a good speech, not the content, but it was delivered very powerfully. Lame sort of politics. That really set the tone.

Infused by a more autonomist politics, Monash saw some attempts that year at organising a more radical campaign. In their student newspaper *Lot's Wife*, some anti-VSU activists insisted that the legislation was about minimising resistance to neoliberalism and capitalism:

Erasing the spaces of student unions is about finding ways to eliminate resistance to the imposition of a worse form of capitalism. 'VSU' is about keeping us quiet, submissive and compliant. It is about social control. We want to create forms of resistance in which we create relations outside of 'markets', in a way that can provide a positive content to the idea of struggle.

On these lines on July 18, activists organised a 'Strike against VSU' action on campus.

But only 50 people turned up to a barbeque on Monash grounds. An Open University was organised as well, and more successfully, on July 27 'Operation Beer O'Clock' commenced: a clandestine, 30-strong occupation of the university bar. The campus service provider Monyx had closed the bar, and for the students, this symbolised perfectly the crisis of service provision that the looming threat of VSU represented. If the university could not even manage a bar, asked the activists, how could it possibly maintain an array of services like childcare in a post-VSU world? The occupation persisted for 8 weeks and was eventually largely successful: one could not it seems, simply take away students' beer.

While the Monash beer campaign might not seem like the next Vietnam War — and there was certainly a tongue-in-check atmosphere to it — it did raise the important point of the unmaking of public, collective spaces at universities. These spaces were often essential to its cultural life, and to the development of a radical politics. As Anne Coombs described well, from the 'critical drinkers' of the 1970s UNSW libertarian scene to a more general culture of discussing ideas at the university bar, pubs were often

important sites in fermenting radicalism. At ANU in the 1990s, student activist Gerry Keaney reflected how this formation of radical communities took place:

There were a lot of different bars which people were cruising in, with a degree of structural support unknown in this day and age, in which people were fucking talking, creating and discussing. And people fought for that as well! ... There was a sense in which the whole peninsula and the ANU grounds were kind of like a utopian zone.

In this way, VSU was not just a threat to the act of student politics, but to its spaces of reproduction as well. The restriction of services was entwined with a restriction of politics. By the end of August 2005, the ALP had changed its line on VSU. Arguing that as the Liberals had a majority in parliament it would not matter if they tried to block the legislation, Labor offered to vote for it if the bill was reshaped in a more progressive direction, with fees permitted for services like sport and childcare but not for politics. The ALP backflip — if not necessarily a decisive blow — helped both heighten internal divisions and take the wind out of the VSU campaign's sails. The second semester rallies were, while still substantial, considerably smaller — with 2500 in Sydney, and 1000 in Melbourne. At one of the Sydney demonstrations, NUS president (and ALP member) Felix Eldridge was booed and heckled, with activists calling for him to tear up his Labor Party membership card.

In response to both this activist pressure and the policy shift more broadly, the Sydney ALP student left criticised the decision to vote for VSU. Rose Jackson, for instance, then the President of the Sydney University Students' Representative Council, declared in a speech to a rally on August 25 that she was ashamed of the federal party's behaviour.

However the Labor student factions gradually became more resigned to VSU. It is hard to tell exactly why. Perhaps the federal position made them more recalcitrant, but they also may have felt that they needed to adapt to VSU, and that campaigning against it was just trying to delay the inevitable.

Nevertheless, rallies and activism persisted into 2006. Perhaps the best organised campaign was at Sydney University. The April 12 National Day of Action drew around a thousand Sydney University students to the front lawns, who marched from there to the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), joining a larger contingent of students from across the state. As the rally went down Broadway, a group of 50 students staged a sit-in at Railway Square. However, the newly created Public Order and Riot Squad were in attendance and after about thirty minutes the sit-in was cleared and 26 students were arrested. This was one of the largest mass arrests in Sydney University's history. One of those arrested recalled how:

That breakup of the sit in was one of the most traumatic demonstrations that I've been in, people being flipped by police, I think there was one woman who was bleeding from the head, I think they had dogs there too ... All of us got two charges, disobey police and sitting on the road longer than was necessary, which is kind of like a parking fine.

Despite the arrests, the Sydney University activists, with their fairly substantial grassroots campaign — though aided by the university's relatively deep pockets compared to other institutions — were ultimately quite successful in winning guarantees for funding from the university itself, as far as was legally possible. Activist

collectives, with budgets for photocopying and political activities, were maintained. By contrast, the 2006 Melbourne rally in April was much smaller: with around three hundred in attendance. In the less populous states the campaign began to fade away as well.

Why did the campaign flounder? Clearly the strong ALP student left was committed to the campaign, despite supporting different tactics to the more radical activists. Michael Janda, then a Labor Left activist involved in the VSU campaign, recalled that ‘we did pretty well... we mobilised a huge number of people, we came within one vote of defeating it’. Even Gibson — a staunch critic of the ALP — reflected that there would have been ‘no mass campaign’ without the Labor students. There was, perhaps more importantly, a broader set of circumstances which mitigated against a strong, long term campaign. Sean Kilmurray, for instance, reflected perspicaciously that VSU was a more abstract issue of principle:

you could have quite easily continued being students and had a decent education without a student union. I think that’s always the weakness of that issue. Whereas you know you can’t actually mobilise masses of students to take some serious action that could actually stop it ... I think that’s just the nature of the political terrain you’re working on.

While UTS activist Angela Khodeir argued that the short life-span of the student activist was a problem too:

We could see how the trade unions were going to go really hard to counter that [WorkChoices], they had a long term campaign over three years. I think in the student

movement we kinda hoped we could mirror that by sustaining a really long campaign to defeat Voluntary Student Unionism but I guess in hindsight the life of a student activist is one-two years before they graduate or burn out or move on, because it's just this crazy, intensely passionate environment where there are no adults around! People who are on the cusp of teenagehood and adulthood running these really big organisations, really big campaigns, trying to make a difference. But it's sometimes not always as straightforward as that.

In this transitory environment, it was more difficult to sustain long term campaigns.

Perhaps a broader shift towards an impermanent, mobile student population was important as well. With faster graduation rates for students, and increased amounts of time spent in work, it may have been harder for students to become invested in a campaign based around 'defending student life': a cultural life that these underlying factors were already decomposing.

The final sting in the tail for activists was the Labor Party's refusal when in government from 2007 — true to past experience in Victoria and WA — to fully repeal VSU. Instead in October 2011 a Students Services and Amenities Fee was implemented, which although partially restoring funding, was orientated around services and required unions and student associations to negotiate with their university administration for funding. The amenities fee conceded fully that the political culture surrounding student unions was no longer going to be financially supported by compulsory student fees.

What were the effects of VSU? The most obvious link between compulsory student unionism and protest was a directly financial one. Money from student fees provided a small but necessary base for the expense of producing leaflets, posters and other forms

of propaganda. Paid office-bearers in particular areas could devote their time and energies to student activism more fully. Nick Harrigan reflected how this restricted organising not just around student issues, but broader social movements as well:

I think those resources made a huge difference – you only have to look at some really basic things like almost every left social movement, except unions, were organised out of students' associations like UTS! The Jabiluka campaign, or the Refugee Action Collective. Lots and lots of campaigns were organised out of the students' associations that we had control of. You know they get a million dollars a year, which is not small – basically you've got free photocopying! You get the capacity to reach a hell of a lot more people, engage a lot more people by doing that. It has its problems, but so does everything. It's got its downsides, but it seemed too large to simply disregard, it seems too puritanical.

On a national scale, VSU meant an even more restricted space for radical activists trying to organise within the union. While in the 1990s and early 2000s, radicals were often able to win waged state office-bearing positions in key areas (Harrigan for instance was a half time paid NSW Education office-bearer in 1999), in the post-VSU context many of these positions became unwaged, or were cut entirely. The intense factionalism of the union now meant competing for ever smaller amounts of resources.

But in my interview with Alison Humphry — who subsequently had a long involvement with community activism and trade unions — Humphry reflected that, in an age of social media, financial resources seem less important than they once were.

For her:

What do you need staff and posters for, when you can just put something on social media?

But entangled with the stripping away of financial resources was an institutional culture of collective memory and knowledge that was being effaced too: one that had played a key role in reproducing and facilitating student radicalism. Student unions were ‘carriers of the knowledge that comes with political experience’. Without the infrastructure to support these circuits of transmission, such knowledge has deteriorated. Research officers — now a much less frequently employed position — played an important role in this. For Harrigan, the ‘ressos’ played a key role in passing down activist skills:

One of the big institutional memories around student activism used to be the research officer, former student activists would get jobs and become research officers. [At Macquarie] Jim Wellsmore was the research officer, and he had been involved in the [1992] occupation, and I was in touch with him almost everyday. He was like a mentor to me ... Later I got to go to Melbourne ... And I met Simon Kent, who was the National Education Research Officer. And he explained to me how they organised the [1992 Macquarie] occupation. He went through [it] in very systematic steps ... And that informed how we went about organising on campus, we basically just did what Simon told us to do!

Perhaps even more significant was a rich informal culture of passing on knowledge through pamphlets, zines, videos, reading groups, mentoring and the exchange of ideas and experiences. While this may seem like a process that could continue relatively unscathed despite VSU, it was dependent on formal structures of support: these materials were frequently produced by paid office-bearers, whose positions may not have survived.

Did the Liberals have a point in arguing that student unions only represented the small number of students who voted, and that VSU was thus only a blow to this minority? It is true that the turnouts for elections were consistently low, and that students could be hostile to the process. Michael Janda for instance, recalled how during elections the onslaught of propaganda could be received negatively:

Campaigning for Labor was like a full-time job, it was a machine ... We'd bash [speak at] the same lecture three times and people would throw things at us!

Despite this sort of hostility, student politics had and has a much lower barrier of access than other forms of politics. Unlike the huge role of money and support from institutionalised structures like the media needed to participate in federal and state politics, to enter student politics all you needed was a small, likeminded group of friends and supporters. The inherent collectivity of universities — with students necessarily sharing some sort of a common space with one another — makes this process easier. In this respect student politics was and is much more genuinely democratic.

As in Victoria and WA, the effects of VSU were experienced unevenly. The unions at better off, metropolitan universities were better positioned to survive. At less privileged campuses, where universities had less resources — and less of an incentive in terms of image to spend revenue on specific funding arrangements — closures and the loss of staff members began to increase. This led activism to decline. In NSW, for instance, previously vibrant cultures of student activism at places like Macquarie (one of the

strongholds in the left in the early 1990s) and Western Sydney (which had seen the most significant occupation of the 1990s) went into decline for many years. Across the continent as a whole, Flinders and La Trobe, two previously vital campuses for the left, saw activism retreat in disarray. Student unions, such as at UNSW, were frequently rebranded in ways that downplayed activism and politics.

Yet the recent surge of solidarity with Palestine movement, with well attended encampments and huge general meetings, shows that VSU has not led to the end of student activism. The halcyon days of activism in the 1960s and 1970s were largely organised by clubs and societies (from Brisbane's Society for Democratic Action to the Monash Labor Club) separate from the more conservative student unions. This can happen again.

VSU did draw a particular era of activism to a close. Yet over the last two years in particular we have seen how a new generation post-VSU is inventing new methods, strategies and organisations. While knowledge continues to be enclosed and commodified, and exploitation, imperialism and inequality reign, activism will continue, albeit in a different form.