

Towards a Better Union

The formation and development of the National Union of Students (Australia)

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Abstract

The National Union of Students was established in 1987 and began function in its full capacity the following year after a long and contested formation process that involved as many failures as successes. Both at the time and during periods of political tension since the structure and organisation of the union have come under intense criticism for entrenching the factional power of the Labor students. This thesis closely examines the processes by which the NUS was formed and places the internal political contests that shaped the early union within a broader structural framework.

Introduction

In December of 2009 over 120 students from more than 20 universities across Australia converged on the University of Ballarat for the Annual Conference of the National Union of Students.¹ For five days delegates, office bearers and observers waited patiently for the conference to begin. On a number of occasions delegates gathered expectantly on conference floor, having heard rumours that the official proceedings may have been about to proceed. During this time the Business Committee, a group of 7 factional representatives appointed by the Executive, were debating and negotiating the appropriate agenda and order of business for the conference.²

As the delay drew on it became apparent that there was deep division and disagreement between the dominant Labor factions, the National Labor Students (NLS) and Student Unity. While ostensibly the primary issues preventing the opening of the conference were surrounding the prioritisation of autonomous caucuses, including Women's Caucus and the Indigenous Collective, parallel to these negotiations the two factions were hammering out an agreement over office bearer positions and the accreditation of a number of Universities.³ Accreditation and affiliations were of substantive importance to NLS and Student Unity as the inclusion or exclusion of a number of large campuses, including UNSW, University of Wollongong and Charles Sturt University, had the potential to shift the balance of votes in favour of one faction or the other and thus alter the outcome of office bearer

¹ The numbers used here are deliberately vague as there is no small controversy over which delegates and universities were accredited and could be counted.

²NUS, "Minutes of the 2009 National Conference" Authorised by David Barrow Distributed at the 2010 NUS Special General Meeting

³Cook, A "National Union of Students in chaos as accusations fly" *Crikey* December 18 2009 retrieved July 14 2011 <http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/12/18/national-union-of-students-in-chaos-as-accusations-fly/>

elections. As Andrew Cook puts it, "the core of the stoush relates to a co-ordinated takeover by coalition of Liberal and right-wing Labor students to install loyalists in key positions."⁴ These political manoeuvrings caused such consternation amongst the left wing members of the Business Committee as, prior to any new affiliations, the left held a majority of conference floor. On the Business Committee however the left did not have a majority, with Unity (Labor Right) having 3 members, and the Liberals 1 against NLS (Labor Left) with 2 and 1 left wing independent. This had occurred because during preparations for the conference the Socialist Alternative had "boycotted the Business Committee ballot out of frustration with the process, which further swung power to the right block."⁵⁶

For many attendees, that political machinations could delay the entire conference, and prevent the NUS from fulfilling its constitutional and legal obligation to hold scheduled elections represented the worst of the factional hold over the organisation. Even for experienced media observers who had witnessed numerous conferences and factional stoushes the 2009 conference "exceeded all those before it in being the most controversial conference yet, ending in a phase of caretaker administration of the organisation until an SGM could be held to conduct the ballot which failed to occur at the actual conference."⁷

The period of caretaker administration was rife with rumours of collapse of the union and legal challenges to the validity of any replacement meeting. The Socialist Alliance

⁴ Cook, A "National Union of Students in chaos as accusations fly" *Crikey* December 18 2009 <http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/12/18/national-union-of-students-in-chaos-as-accusations-fly/>

⁵ Buckley, Gemma "Clusterfuck!" March 22 2010 retrieved March 7 2011 <http://www.lotswife.com.au/news/55>

⁶ It should be noted that this article refers to one Liam Byrne, 2009 NUS National Queer Officer, senior member of Socialist Alternative and key figure factional dealings such as withholding votes for Business Committee. While I was present at the 2009 NUS National Conference the Liam Byrne in question is not me but a student from Melbourne University. At the 2009 National Conference I was a member of the NLS caucus but was holding a proxy for the non-aligned Thomas William Clement and as his representative was voting as an independent.

⁷ Buckley, Gemma "Clusterfuck!" March 22 2010 retrieved March 7 2011 <http://www.lotswife.com.au/news/55>

argued that “the NUS constitution had been so seriously breached” that recovery of the union may prove to be impossible.⁸ Liberal students at the University of Sydney and Monash University (the two largest financial contributors to the NUS) called for the immediate withdrawal of all financial support and even amongst pro-union commentators the view was that “with no new Office Bearers to run the union in 2010, the existence of NUS itself became unlikely, and for weeks after the Conference the actual status of NUS was unclear.”⁹

While the NUS did recover from this period of ambiguity (due in no small part to a broad coalition of factions shutting down debate of the issue when it emerged in campus representative bodies) the chorus of criticism did not disappear after the January SGM. The union was labelled extreme, radical, unrepresentative and overly politicised¹⁰. Its practices have been characterised as exclusionary, insular and coercive.¹¹ At their most extreme critics of the dominant powers argued that the “corrupt and undemocratic practices of the student Labor factions at the National Union of Students conference in Ballarat led to the near abolition of our national union.”¹² For these critics the union was demonstrably dysfunctional, and this dysfunction stemmed from the very essence of the union; its constitution, structure and history.

⁸ Barrigos, Rebecca Feb 04 2010 retrieved March 7 2011
http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=4707:labor-factions-almost-destroy-national-union-of-students&Itemid=394

⁹ Buckley, Gemma “Clusterfuck!” March 22 2010 retrieved March 7 2011 <http://www.lotswife.com.au/news/55>

¹⁰ Andrews, T “Free to Choose: ALSF Submission” *DEEWR Submissions on VSU*
<http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Programs/StudentSupport/VoluntaryStudentUnionism/Documents/AustLibStudentsFed.pdf>

¹¹ Cook, A “National Union of Students in chaos as accusations fly” *Crikey* December 18 2009 retrieved July 14 2011
<http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/12/18/national-union-of-students-in-chaos-as-accusations-fly/>

¹² Barrigos, R “Labor factions almost destroy National Union of Students” *Socialist Alternative* February 4 2010
http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=4707:labor-factions-almost-destroy-national-union-of-students&Itemid=394

While the events of 2009 are notable for the extent that normal operations of the Union were interrupted, controversies surrounding factional interests, control and manipulation have been a regular occurrence for the NUS. In an understated characterisation of this trend Cook diplomatically states that the "conference has a history of rancour."¹³ Over the years there have been numerous arrests at NUS National Conferences for drunken and disorderly behaviour, most recently in 2008 amidst allegations of sexual misconduct by conference organisers.¹⁴ In 2001 a group of delegates, comprising predominantly, but not exclusively, ALSF members were asked to find alternative accommodation off campus for the latter part of the conference after being accused by University of Ballarat staff of trashing their rooms and damaging common facilities.¹⁵

During the mid to late 1990s, concentrated on the academic years of 1997 and 1998, NUS faced a vocal and organised campaign of disaffiliations. Campuses across NSW and Queensland withdrew from the union, withheld funding to the union, and on occasion provided funding to the union despite not being formally affiliated. In 2001 a dispute about the legitimacy of the AGM led to speculation of an imminent collapse as the executive of the union lost control of the bank accounts to which affiliation fees were being directed.¹⁶

Further speculation regarding the ongoing feasibility of the union surrounded the various contests over Voluntary Student Unionism. The introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism first in Victoria and then in Western Australia in 1994 put pressure

¹³ Cook, A "National Union of Students in chaos as accusations fly" *Crikey* December 18 2009 retrieved July 14 2011 <http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/12/18/national-union-of-students-in-chaos-as-accusations-fly/>

¹⁴ VEXNEWS "From Rocks to Rose" August 13 2009 retrieved July 14 2011 <http://www.vexnews.com/2009/08/from-rocks-to-rose-nus-left-dumps-perv-for-princess/>

¹⁵ Hastings, G *It Can't Happen Here: A Political History of Australian Student Activism* (Adelaide, The Students Association of Flinders University, 2002) p.197

¹⁶ *ibid*

on the campus level representative bodies in these states¹⁷. During the 8 years until the WA legislation was revoked in 2002 (2 years after VSU had been abolished in Victoria) the NUS Executive and Business Committee dramatically expanded their powers for discretionary handling of matters concerning affiliation and conference registration fees for campuses without universal student fees.¹⁸ When VSU emerged as a divisive national issue in late 2005¹⁹ the NUS was often at the centre of debates, both as an active participant advocating for the continuation of funding for student bodies and the rejection of VSU, as well as a subject of debate for other commentators. Proponents of VSU often referred to the NUS as an example of the overt politicisation of representative bodies and as such a misuse of student funds.

For many critics both the underlying problems of the NUS, and the crises of 2001 and 2009, are a direct result of constitutional problems that give too much power to the executive and the factional system²⁰. The excessive power of the factions and the executive were traced by critics of the NUS from both the left and the right to the very structure and history of the union. In the wake of the 2009 crisis Gemma Buckley, covering the conference for Monash University student paper *Lot's Wife*, claimed that the union had been set up and was structured so as to ensure factional control of the union and that when major factions were at an impasse the "problem is exacerbated by the NUS Constitution, which provides virtually no contingency plans for resolving such a scenario."²¹

¹⁷ Voluntary Student Unionism in this context meant that universities were free to choose whether or not to impose a universal fee on their student body, rather than a ban on any compulsory fee as under the 2004 Federal VSU legislation.

¹⁸ Hastings, G *It Can't Happen Here: A Political History of Australian Student Activism* (Adelaide, The Students Association of Flinders University, 2002) p.199

¹⁹ VSU had been a Federal Liberal policy during the late 1990s when state Liberal governments were pursuing similar goals, but had been repudiated during the 2001 and 2004 election campaigns.

²⁰ Barrigos, R "Labor factions almost destroy National Union of Students" *Socialist Alternative* February 4 2010 http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=4707:labor-factions-almost-destroy-national-union-of-students&Itemid=394

²¹ Buckley, Gemma "Clusterfuck!" March 22 2010 retrieved March 7 2011 <http://www.lotswife.com.au/news/55>

Yet these criticisms are primarily based in inherited understandings of the formation and nature of the NUS, transmitted through political factions, parties and groupings. The very same arguments can be identified in the writings of union opponents who were arguing against the union at the time of its formation. Other criticisms of the contemporary union, such as the claim that "under NLS leadership, NUS has refused to hold the Rudd government to account for its anti-student policies"²² are similarly echoes of the initial debates.

The established older factions of the NUS; primarily the major party aligned Australian Liberal Students Federation (ALSF), National Labor Students and Student Unity, as well as the West Australian Independents, and the complex lineage of various socialist groupings, have strong oral traditions of the history of the NUS. A history littered with the wrongdoings of opposing factions.

While the debate concerning NUS rages amongst student commentators and within factional echo chambers there has been little scholarly work done on investigating just how and why student representation in Australia takes the specific forms it does. There is a distinct lack of a deeper analysis into why these forms of representation have led to the discourses and understandings that we see from within the movement. Where the history and formation of the NUS has been discussed by academics it has generally been approached in broad strokes as parts of larger works on student movements²³. Such texts provide overarching histories of the student movement in various contexts.

²² Barrigos, R "Labor factions almost destroy National Union of Students" *Socialist Alternative* February 4 2010 http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=4707:labor-factions-almost-destroy-national-union-of-students&Itemid=394

²³ See Armstrong, Barcan and Hastings

The publishing in 2001 of *Student Resistance: A history of the unruly subject* by Mark Boren triggered an outpouring of responses across the English speaking world pushing for the inclusion and importance of local narratives, events and understandings as central to, or unique from, the grand internationalised student experience Boren tried to assert. It is in this context that the works on the Australian movement, such as Mick Armstrong's *1,2,3 What are we fighting for?*, Alan Barcan's *Student Resistance* and Ian Hastings *It Can't Happen Here* can be understood. Indeed Hastings admits as much in the prologue to *It Can't Happen Here* when noting his reasons for collecting, elaborating and editing a number of short essays into a book length treatment of Australian student activism. The broad scope of these three texts limit their usefulness in a close analysis of the events of 1986-1990 and the formation of the NUS. For both Barcan and Armstrong discussion of the NUS occurs primarily in the present tense. The NUS is the student movement as it is today, to be compared and contrasted with the "old left at Sydney University" and the mass mobilisations of students during the 70s, the periods respectively identified as the peak of the student movement by those writers. While useful in showing the long term trends and influences, works such as these are necessarily limited on some of the specific debates and controversies surrounding individual events. Little attention is given to the dynamic processes that have shaped the NUS and little historical perspective is brought to the topic.

In contrast Hastings devotes a quarter of *It Can't Happen Here* to the student movement during the 1980s, the time when Hastings himself was at university and involved in student politics. While he provides a detailed account of the formation of the NUS the title of his chapter, *Believers and Deceivers*, indicates that his position may not be entirely non-partisan.

During the period around the formation of the NUS Hastings was a member of the Left Alliance and was associated with Resistance. Hastings' chapter on the formation of the NUS, is remarkably similar in structure and argument to *Free Education, NUS and the Left* by Will Wroth, a publication released by Resistance (the youth wing of the Socialist Alliance) in 1989 following their split from the Left Alliance and withdrawal from the broad coalition controlling the NUS. Both texts structure their account of the formation of the NUS in the same way, including the point at which they choose to diverge to discuss various self contained issues such as the representation of international student and the establishment of autonomous women's collective. Both make reference to identical passages from early NUS pamphlets, circulars and motions, and there is significant overlap in the selection of material from student media and publications, with the same On Dit article, ANU Orientation handbook and Melbourne Uni campaign material being referenced by Wroth and Hastings.

Interestingly however, Wroth's work is not referenced anywhere by Hastings. Hastings is upfront about *It Can't Happen Here* being an edited collection of a number of essays some time in the making, and a similar acknowledgement is made by Will Wroth so it is possible that both may be based upon an earlier writing, but the similarity of the accounts indicates that despite Hastings' moderation of the strongest claims of conspiracy and duplicity made by Wroth, both are expressions of a similar, factionalised interpretation of the events surrounding the formation of the NUS.

Given the dearth of secondary material on the formation of the NUS, with this thesis I hope to provide some depth to the history of the Australian student movement by looking closely at the various contexts and understandings of a specific development,

the formation of the National Union of Students. The aims of this thesis are twofold; first to provide a clear and detailed account of the events and processes involved, and second to explore a number of structural and external influences on the process that have been neglected by understandings based on factional discourse and political manoeuvring.

The first chapter will examine the processes by which the movement calling for a new peak student body emerged and will investigate the decisions, debates and policies that led the NUS to take on its distinctive federal structure. Using archival material, newspaper reports (especially student newspapers) and the account provided by Hastings this chapter will track the development of national student organising bodies that formed in response to the introduction of the Higher Education Access Charge and the interaction of these campaigning bodies with formal state and campus level student unions and associations. The contest of ideas between direct campaigning models, direct representative models, and federal models of organising will be a core theme throughout.

The second chapter will look beyond the events surrounding the formation of the NUS and will examine how these events have been understood by students and non-students both at the time and since. The importance of political and ideological commitments to the initial construction of narratives and understandings of the union will be questioned by looking at how the different factions involved in student politics understood, explained and reported on the NUS. Some key themes that will be raised in chapter two include the attribution of agency during the formation of NUS, the nature and impact of government reforms of the tertiary sector and the role of the University as a stable institutional power. It will be argued that the dominant

understandings of these factors attributed far too much agency to the student political actors and as such set up unrealistic expectations for the NUS.

Chapter three investigates the external and structural factors that influenced the formation of the NUS and explores the ways in which they may be used to nuance and challenge the factionalised accounts. The two primary themes discussed are the reforms of the tertiary sector during the period, including amalgamations, increased federal government funding and intervention, and changes to the decision making processes within universities; and the influence of the wider trade union and labour movement on the structure and organisation of the NUS.

impacted upon the ways in which student politicians were willing to reform their own organisations in order to more successfully influence decision making bodies.

Chapter three looks at the extent to which the changes in the wider tertiary sector influenced the development of the structure of the NUS. The impact of the federal government reforms, leading up to and including the Dawkins reform, on decision making and flexibility will be examined. Much of chapter 3 will involve the location and discussion of student organisations and power within a more established literature. Building on Marginson's argument that the introduction of a competitive tertiary funding model led to a homogenisation of the University sector, I will look at the ways in which this new regulatory environment changed the role of student organisations²⁴. The dislocation of students from decision making processes, physically due to the rise of multi-campus institutions, mentally due to increasing student numbers and amalgamation, and structurally through increasing federal

²⁴Marginson, S. *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000)

government direction will be investigated. Parallel to this universities were become more restricted in their own capacity to respond to student demands. The increasing reliance upon federal funding, the reduction in funding security due to student linked funding, and the imposition of performance indicators that had to be met reduced institutional flexibility. As a result student organisations became less effective when running individual campus campaigns, but more effective when engaging at a national level with governmental departments and processes. These shifts, some recognised some not, caused tension within many student organisations.

The second half of the chapter contextualises the debates surrounding the federal and executive structure of the NUS within the broader trade union movement. Taking specific note of the criticisms directed at the NOLS for pursuing a structure that entrenched factional power and maximised NOLS influence the organisation of the NUS is compared to the moves within ATCU affiliated trade unions towards amalgamations and federations.

Overall the idea that political machinations and conspiratorial intent were the primary factors in determining the structure of the NUS are dismissed, with an argument put forward that for all of its faults the NUS was profoundly shaped by its time, and that criticisms of the formative processes that assert factional manipulation and political machinations as primary drivers are deeply mistaken.

Chapter 1

Before the NUS

The National Union of Students is generally considered to be the direct successor to the Australian Union of Students. One can identify the ongoing legacy of the AUS in shaping the debates and language of student politicians, the continued existence of factional forms of national student organisation, and the institutional continuity provided by some state unions. But the NUS was not the only framework for national student organising and representation that competed for legitimacy during the mid 1980s.

On the right of student politics the loose coalition that had brought down Australian Union of Students tried to make use of the anti-leftist momentum they had gathered during the disaffiliation campaigns to reshape how student politics and representation was understood at a national level. Many of these students were fundamentally opposed to the formation of another student controlled union on the grounds that the structure of delegate based representative organisations necessarily resulted in the politicisation and radicalisation of debate.²⁵ The model that was put forwards was instead one based upon examples from the corporate world, a formal lobby group. Modelled upon organisations such as the National Farmers Federation the new peak body was to employ professional lobbyists, rather than have student delegates fill activist office bearer positions, and was to be restricted to activities directly related to tertiary education and students.²⁶

In January of 1985 a conference was held at Adelaide University to formally found the Australian Council of Tertiary Students (ACTS). ACTS was quickly condemned by the Left, who criticised the limited number of campuses invited to the formation

²⁵ Stacey, W “Politics and Student Unionism” p.14-15, Phillips, G “The Australian Union of Students: Lessons from the Past” p.38 both in Ryan, G *Compulsory Student Unions: Australia’s forgotten closed shop* (Perth, Australian Institute for Public Policy, 1989)

²⁶ Hastings p.179

conference, the lack of a direct representative structure, and the constitutional restriction on the activities and issues ACTS could deal with.²⁷ The Left Alliance actively campaigned against the affiliation of campuses to ACTS and by the end of the year had effectively collapsed, though it remained the source of student opinion for the News Limited Press throughout the first half of 1986 despite serving no representative role.²⁸

Stemming from experiences in the final years of the AUS and the restrictive structure of ACTS the Left Alliance took a stance opposed to a formal national student organisation and instead concentrated on cultivating issue based cross campus networks and revitalising the activist traditions within student politics.

Not wishing to be a part of either the activist networks of the left, or the peak body lobby group of the right, in late 1986 a number of student leaders from the Council of ALP Students (CALPS) began circulating a proposal for the creation of a federation of state student unions.²⁹

“A federation of state student organisations allows students to be represented nationally with a strong and united voice. Issues such as TEAS, tertiary fees and education funding all need to be fought and won by a strong and effective National Student Lobby. The Federal component of state student organisations gives students the muscle necessary to concentrate on getting a better deal from Canberra.”³⁰

²⁷ Flinders University Students' Association Coordinating Group minutes 1984

²⁸ Hastings p.179-180

²⁹ Wroth, Will *Free Education, NUS and the Left* (Chippendale, New Course Publications, 1989) p.10

³⁰ Cook, Roger, Ellery, Tracey & Lisle, Bevan

This federation of state unions was to become, after much negotiation, the National Union of Students. Publicly calling for a federation of state unions was the easy part; it would be almost two years before the NUS would finally elect their first full executive and be able to claim a majority of tertiary campuses as members of the organisation. In 1986 the position of the state unions was not as strong as CALPS may have hoped.

Before CALPS initiated their plan for a federation of state unions, genuine unions with broad based membership existed only in Tasmania, the Tasmanian Union of Students (TSU) and Western Australia, Western Australian Post-Secondary Students Organisation (WAPSSO). In the case of the TSU – which only served the University of Tasmania, the Australian Maritime College, and a number of CAEs – the union amounted to the Tasmania University Union President recruiting a number of students on the other campuses. The dominance of the TUU President over the TSU was interpreted differently by supporters and opponents of the federal project. While the small scope of the TSU meant that on paper they had near full affiliation, a source of pride for Tasmanian organisers during a time when a number of other states were struggling to establish functional cross campus bodies. It also meant however, that TSU policy was largely dictated from the University of Tasmania as it represented more than half of the total student population and thus received more than half of the delegate positions. Controlled by Centre-Unity, the TSU during this period had Andrew Wooldridge as President for a number of consecutive years. Given that Wooldridge was rarely opposed by the other TSU office bearers accusations were

spread by Left Alliance members that the TSU was nothing more than Wooldridge's rubber stamps and had been reduced a collection of minutes under Wooldridge's bed.³¹

WAPSSO had a far larger membership base and was at the fore of calls for a federation of state unions to replace the AUS. As CALPS looked to move on the issue, Labor students in Victoria and Queensland established unions in 1986. The Victorian Students Union quickly gained affiliation from the large Melbourne universities, which traditionally had large Labor and left wing presences, but the Queensland Union of Students lost the affiliation campaign at the University of Queensland, the first major campus they held a referendum at, and quickly lost momentum.

In NSW there was no real state union. CALPS in NSW had become a secondary organisation to Young Labor throughout the 1980s as sub-factional disputes within AUS led many emerging ALP student leaders to view student politics as somewhat of a joke compared to "real" politics. With no concerted push coming from the Labor students they conceded ground to the Left Alliance, forming the NSW Education Action Network in 1983 as a compromise between the open activist networks favoured by the left and a formal union structure. The NSW EAN turned out to satisfy neither party, offering little of benefit over issue based organising networks to those from the left, and failing to provide the strong organisational influence sought by the ALP students.³²

During the 1987 affiliation campaigns the State Union of Students was established in order to be a constituent member of the National Federation, however (as we will see) that campaign stalled quickly and the SUS never included any of the major Sydney campuses.

³¹ Hastings p.319

³² Wroth p.10

In South Australia, even throughout the later NUS affiliation campaigns, there were never any serious moves towards establishing a state union, partially due to the close ties between the representative bodies on the major Adelaide campuses rendering a formal structure unnecessary.

Lacking any strong groundswell of support for the nascent state unions, the CALPS project for a federation of state unions appeared a long way off – but the introduction of the Higher Education Access Charge by the Hawke government was to significantly alter the landscape of student politics and activism.

The Fees Debate

The fees debate prompted the re-politicisation of many campuses that had seen student politics lose relevance³³ as bitter personal and ideological disputes between campus politicians were replaced by a broad based, widely popular movement that was framed in universally pro-student language as opposed to motivated by political ideology.

While the issue of tertiary fees can was never entirely absent from the student political discourse (straw men have considerable utility in electioneering) the issue became one of serious consideration in late 1985 Peter Walsh, then finance minister, raised the need for reforms of funding in the tertiary sector. During 1986, rumours and debates grew increasingly frequent within State Unions, SRCs³⁴ and political conferences³⁵, but it was the national budget in August (and the federal political reporting leading up to the budget) that pushed the issue into the mainstream student discourse. The Higher Education Access Charge was to be a two hundred and fifty dollar fee paid upfront by all students at the time of enrolment; it was to primarily go directly to the institution

³³Farrago Sep 86, Flinders COG May 87

³⁴Honi #6 86

³⁵LA Conf 86

of study, though a not insignificant portion was to go to the federal government. The initial reaction from students was overwhelmingly negative, left wing students complained about the impact on equity³⁶, right students took the opportunity to attack the Labor government for breaking policy commitments made during the last election, international students warned of the creeping increases to the Student visa charge and the need to freeze all fees, and students across the political spectrum objected to the hip pocket reality of being \$250 dollars poorer. While more nuanced positions would emerge throughout the campaign, the strength of the movement stemmed from the initial groundswell of opposition and the movement's cross-factional orientation.

During the semester break for most universities student activists and representatives from the left gathered in Canberra, forming the National Coalition of Students Against Fees and Education Cutbacks (NCSAFEC) – which would later become the National Free Education Coalition (NFEC) as they combined with CALPS led state groups.³⁷ Through these groups a series of large demonstrations were coordinated through the second semester of 1986 (or the third trimester for universities on such a schedule).

The anti-fee demonstrations in September and October 1986 were seen by students as typifying both the best and worst of the student political organisation. The initial reaction, focussed almost entirely on the large numbers, saw student editors around the country engage in a near universal bout of self congratulation. The largest rallies, held on September 24, were variously reported as attracting “over fifteen thousand protesters”, “nineteen thousand people around Australia” and “almost 20,000

³⁶ On Dit “Students say no to \$250”

³⁷Wroth p.9

students”.³⁸ As a comparison the mainstream media, based on police reports, put the numbers at approximately ten thousand around the country.³⁹

A mass letter writing campaign was initiated, with Education Minister Senator Susan Ryan the main target. Based upon conciliatory remarks made by Senator Ryan when speaking on university campuses (which in hindsight appear vague and equivocal) there was a strong view in both Adelaide and Melbourne that while the HEAC could not be removed in time for the 1987 academic year, significant gains had been made.⁴⁰ There was an expectation that a review of AUSTUDY would bring about improvements to student assistance for students from lower income backgrounds and introduce exceptions from student charges for a wide range of students. Comparisons were made to the perceived heyday of student activism in the early 70s, and there calls for future rallies to broaden demands beyond student fees.⁴¹ A country wide boycott of the charge was enthusiastically endorsed by state unions in Victoria, WA and Tasmania; with rallies, demonstrations and forums planned as part of O-Week celebrations on most campuses.⁴²

The end of the 1986 academic year however led to a change in tone of the government response to the protests. The language of consultation, open-mindedness and working towards equitable outcomes became demands that the student movement “abandon extreme positions”, to engage in “reasonable compromise”, and to acknowledge that they gained the majority of the benefit from their taxpayer funded education.⁴³ The government response, which students had seen as indicating their willingness to be

³⁸ Federation Times #9 1986, On Dit #17 1986, Lot's Wife #1 1987

³⁹ The Australian article 3, SMH article 1

⁴⁰ Hastings

⁴¹ Wroth

⁴² Wroth p.9

⁴³ The Aus, article 5

flexible, was becoming a demand for students to be flexible back down from their definitive opposition to all fees.

The claim was quickly put forward that the introduction of tertiary fees was a direct response to the lack of adequate student representation or organisation at a national level.⁴⁴ It was put forward that had the students had a representative body to continue to push their case while mass demonstrations were unfeasible due to the summer break the government would not have been able to marginalise students so easily. This line of argument was strongest on the CALPS controlled campuses in Adelaide and the Unity controlled campuses in Sydney (Macquarie and USyd).

This line of argument developed from a continuing narrative of student representation that framed Fraser's reduction of the Overseas Student Program and introduction of full fee paying places for overseas students as primarily an opportunistic reaction to the 1979 leadership crisis in the AUS.⁴⁵ Similarly during the failure of pro-fees lobbying in 1983 primary agency was given to the student protests and AUS organising, with the role of dissenting voices within the Parliamentary Labor caucus, including their ideological and economic arguments for continuing free tertiary education, downplayed⁴⁶.

Speaking to a South Australian ALP Students Association in early 1987 the Premier John Bannon reinforced this framework of understanding, emphasising the role a peak student body could play in developing policy, and going so far as to say that the introduction of the HEAC could have been stopped by a national student lobby⁴⁷. While Bannon's comments were critiqued by non-Labor student activists, who

⁴⁴ On Dit #2 87

⁴⁵ Hastings p.108

⁴⁶ Hastings 156-160

⁴⁷ On Dit "National Student Body would have stopped fee – Bannon"

questioned Bannon's emphasis on lobbying as opposed to direct action, and who accused ALP students of undermining student autonomy by appealing to their "factional masters"⁴⁸ there was little questioning of the core assertion that it was only the lack of student resistance that prompted the introduction of HEAC.

NOLS and NUS

1987 was to see the emergence of two organisations that would shape student politics for the following decades; the National Organisation of Labor Students (NOLS), and the National Union of Students.

CALPS throughout the early 80s had become increasingly divided along sub-factional lines reflecting both the turmoil of the collapsing AUS and divisions in the senior ALP. The Victorian Socialist Left had come to dominate CALPS and their grip on the CALPS executive positions began to earn the ire of other states and factions. During the AUS disaffiliation campaigns a major split occurred as the Victorian, South Australian and Western Australian right left CALPS and tended to work more often with the NCC, Liberal and independents, who they could gain far more concessions from. As the NSW Left, the only block of similar size to the VSL, at the time was more concerned with Young Labor politics than student politics there was no real challenge to the status quo. During 1986 however the VSL was weakened at a senior party level as a new group, the Socialist Forum, began pushing for cross-factional cooperation and non-factional debates.

At the student level the emergence of Socialist Forum aligned students, mainly from former VSL members, broke the VSL dominance and introduced a push for greater

⁴⁸ On Dit letters in response

unity amongst the various Labor students. This greater willingness to share power allowed CALPS to break the coalition that had brought down the AUS, and tempt much of Centre-Unity and Labor Right into a new organisation called the National Organisation of Labor Students.⁴⁹

Following the transformation of CALPS into NOLS this new, larger body convened a conference in Canberra during May to work towards to establishment of a new national student organisation.⁵⁰ At this conference, the National Union of Students (NUS) was first referred to by that name. While ostensibly the conference was open to delegates from all campuses affiliated with their respective state unions, outside of Western Australia no non-Labor controlled campuses had affiliated. In South Australia, which lacked a state union, campuses were required to affiliate directly to the NUS, despite the organisation having no formal representative structure or constitution.⁵¹ The result was a conference primarily concerned with establishing a factional consensus within the newly established NOLS rather than dealing with Left Alliance, the Liberals or the Independents.

Unsurprisingly the conference resolved to establish a federation of state unions, the position long held by WAPSSO and advocated by CALPS leadership earlier in the year. Confident of gaining the assent of the state unions (which were after all NOLS controlled apart from WAPSSO), the conference set about planning an extensive affiliation campaign. A timetable was established whereby throughout the second half of 1987 NOLS would push for the affiliation of all major campuses to their state unions using the lure of a national union and the ongoing tertiary fees campaign as

⁴⁹This “broad church” NOLS was relatively short lived, with sections of the Right leaving again by the early 1990s and parts of the Left splitting in the mid 90s to form the Australian Labor Students

⁵⁰ Wroth p.11

⁵¹ Hastings p.182

major incentives to attract votes and activists. Following the conference interim President Roger Cook wrote to SRC presidents across the country outlining this vision. In it he emphasised that national action was required to combat the HEAC, and that the “National Union of Students is the first real opportunity that students have had to unite under a national banner in the past three years”.⁵²

With WAPSSO and the TSU openly advocating an interstate federation, the pro-union forces set about establishing student unions in the other states, under the presumption that the new unions would be supportive of joining NUS. In South Australia the strength of the South Australian Students Forum and the lack of a secure NOLS controlled campus, as well as the recent defeat of ACTS, inhibited the formation of a formal state union. While members of the SASF were supporting of a national organising body there was a hesitance towards a federation of state unions and a suspicion of the motivations of NOLS members.

Victoria had its own network, the Victorian Students Forum, which had been operating successfully since the collapse of the AUS. In contrast to South Australia however Victoria was also home to a very strong Young Labor and NOLS presence. Prior to the NOLS push towards state unions CALPS had been vying for control of the VSF with the Left Alliance. When in 1986 they proposed the formation of the Victorian Students Union the Left Alliance gave qualified support in exchange for Left Alliance control of the VSF and a clear delineation of roles between the two organisations.⁵³ This clear delineation was soon transgressed by office bearers of both bodies, but relations remains generally workable and throughout 1987 and 1988 all of

⁵² Cook in Wroth p.11

⁵³ Lot's Wife

the Melbourne metropolitan universities, and most from regional Victoria, were affiliated to one or both of the organisations.⁵⁴

In Queensland and NSW, however, where the main political rival to NOLS was not the Left Alliance but the ALSF and centre-right independents the process of establishing state unions was far more contested. As had been the case with the AUS, the NSW State Union of Students and the Queensland Union of Students required member campuses to affiliate through a direct referendum or a binding General Student Meeting (in Victoria where the VSU officially grew out of the VSF members of the latter could affiliate with the former automatically). Without broad cross-factional support this meant that during the second half of 1987 campus elections up and down the east coast were accompanied by a passionate affiliation campaign.

In both states positive results during the first ballots at smaller campuses were quickly overshadowed by damaging losses at their oldest and largest universities, the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney. In Queensland UQ was widely recognised as a conservative campus at the time. The absence of UQ from the QUS was detrimental, but the affiliation of other large campuses, including the Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University, gave the QUS a solid base from which to grow.

In NSW however the failure of the affiliation campaign at the University of Sydney stemmed from conflict within the left and would undermine the NSW SUS entirely, with significant consequences for the NUS down the track. Prior to the USyd referendum the NSW SUS had received overwhelming support at ballots at the University of Newcastle, Newcastle CAE, the NSW Institute of Technology and the

⁵⁴ Hastings p.132

University of Wollongong. The campaign at USyd however would be defeated by an unlikely alliance between the ALSF (represented by the Sydney University Liberal Club) and the Left Alliance.

The Liberal objections to the NSW SUS were straightforward and expected. They objected to compulsory student unionism and as such they objected to state unions. They did not trust a union that would be controlled by NOLS, doubting its ability to stand up to a Labor Government. And, they were fearful of a repeat of the “extreme left wing propaganda” that they believe had emanated from the AUS.⁵⁵ Brendan Wong, SU Liberal Club President, also noted that the affiliation process was taking place before the NSW SUS had adopted a constitution and that \$18,000 was a large affiliation fee to be paying under such circumstances. The financial support of the University of Sydney SRC to the NSW SUS, and later the NUS, was to be a key issue.⁵⁶

The Left Alliance, who had given qualified support to the state unions in Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania, took an anti-affiliation stance during the campaign at the University of Sydney. In an official campaign statement published in the election edition of *Honi Soit*, Kiri Evans (who would go on to be the NUS Education Officer the following year) laid out the Left Alliances main objections. It was asserted that the NSW SUS was the brainchild of “a small group of right wing SRC heavies”, that it was set up the ALP factions to “divide and rule” the student movement and suppress left wing criticism of the ALP government, and that the SUS was irrelevant as the most pressing issues facing students were national issues and that a national, not state

⁵⁵ MacGibbon, A & Wong, B “No” in *Honi Soit* p.5

⁵⁶ In an interesting parallel at the present time the affiliation fees from the USyd SRC have been largely responsible for keeping the NUS afloat since the introduction of VSU, as most student organizations no longer had the capacity to contribute.

based, union was required. Despite the SUS being engaged in the NUS federation project, for the Left Alliance a federal union based upon state unions was just not good enough. The affiliation campaign at the University of Sydney saw the first concerted resistance and criticism from the Left Alliance towards the NOLS federal model of national student representation.

The failure of the affiliation campaign at USyd was a significant blow to the SUS. The affiliation fees received from the university were to entail almost a third of their overall budget, and would go a long way to supporting the ballots that were to follow on other campuses. The absence of Sydney University was also damaging to the reputation of the SUS, during the affiliation campaign at UNSW opponents of affiliation derided the union as a group of small and inconsequential universities, and advocated instead for direct cooperation with the USyd SRC for anti-fees demonstrations. By October 1987 it was clear that the SUS had failed to establish a functional and representative union in NSW.

Towards a National Union

The activities of NOLS and their play for control of student representation at the national level prompted other factions and student leaders to reconsider their position on student unions. For Centre-Unity and much of the independent centre-right the more open structure of NOLS in comparison to CALPS, and its increasing independence from Young Labor, allayed many fears about leftist domination and co-optation of the union.⁵⁷ Further to the right the ALSF continued in their staunch opposition to student unionism in any form.⁵⁸ But to the left of NOLS the myriad of

⁵⁷ Hastings p.179

⁵⁸ "Compulsory Student Unionism: The Forgotten Closed Shop"

socialist, communist and left independent students were engaged in vigorous debate over whether or not to join the NOLS project.

The Left Alliance (LA) had emerged in January of 1987 after a series of left student conferences, at both state and national levels, as part of the free education campaigns. Comprising the student wings of the Communist Party of Australia and the Socialist Workers Party, Resistance, the Young Socialist League, as well as left independents, the Left Alliance was inherently sceptical of NOLS claims of an open and transparent union, and of NOLS's willingness to concede power. Many in the LA viewed the success of the National Free Education Campaign in mobilising and informing student as proof that rigid union structures were not needed.⁵⁹ Others were supportive of a national union in principle, but not one based upon a federation of state unions that were seen as NOLS dominated and, in the case of Queensland, NSW and Tasmania, largely illegitimate and unrepresentative.⁶⁰

The main impetus from within the LA for engaging with NOLS in the establishment of the NUS came from the CPA Tertiary Collective.⁶¹ The CPA Tertiary Collective had been working closely with NOLS students during the fees campaigns, particularly in Victoria, where a group of former CPA members had established the Socialist Forum, an unofficial grouping within the ALP Left that worked towards pragmatic accommodation of neoliberal ideas such as privatisation and deregulation in order to reduce cross-factional tensions.⁶² Indeed a number of students associated with the Socialist Forum were influential in the transformation of CALPS into NOLS and the reintegration of the centre-right ALP students into the left-dominated organisation.

⁵⁹ Evans, Kiri "State Union of Students: The No Case" *HoniSoitElection Issue '87* p.5

⁶⁰ *ibid*

⁶¹ Wroth p.11

⁶² Socialist Forum Archives, University of Melbourne

The Tertiary Collective worked closely with these students to ensure both NOLS and the LA negotiated in good faith.⁶³

In response to the NOLS announcement of the NUS in May, the July National Conference of the Left Alliance passed a motion regarding their own vision for a national union:

*The Left Alliance will work towards the establishment of a democratically structured, and effectively organised national student union...that does not exclude any faction, campus or students from participating in the democratic process of establishing such a body.*⁶⁴

The motion put forward was a direct criticism of what were seen to be the major flaws in the federal structure proposed by NOLS. The NUS was seen to be the product of backroom negotiations and the machinations of student politicians. If the LA were to get on board NOLS would have to open up the NUS process significantly, and allow for the involvement of unrepresented students such as those in South Australia.⁶⁵ The relationship between the union and the wider student movement was a central concern throughout the conference. The position advocated by Resistance, and other anarchist leaning members, was that the NUS would be obliged to provide support to all student activists and campaigns, and that the union leadership should be subordinate to activist networks. The CPA view was that “the interests of any student movement could not be conflated with the interests of a national student union” and that the

⁶³ Hastings p.183

⁶⁴ Left Alliance in Wroth p.11

⁶⁵ Hastings p.183

union's strategic objectives may at times reasonably conflict with the goals of left activists.⁶⁶

This debate played out in considerations regarding the structural autonomy of the Women's and Overseas Students' Departments within the new union. In line with the standard practice for campus organisations the base position on this issue was for autonomy in policy areas and discretionary budgetary concerns, but for negotiation with the wider organisation over the financing of strategic objectives. The conference debated going further and providing complete autonomy, with constitutional guarantees of independent funding, but the example of the Overseas Students Department actively campaigning for the dissolution of the AUS led to this demand being dropped.⁶⁷

In August an article was published in *Honi Soit* entitled "Towards a National Students' Union: The Left Alliance View" expanding upon these criticisms and clearly stating the Left Alliance demands for participation. The "Fundamental Principles" required in order for the Left Alliance to support the NUS were laid out as follows

- 1. A national union must be democratically established*
- 3. A national union must be democratically organised*
- 4. A national union must be broadly based reflecting the diversity of student interests*
- 7. A national union must be run for and by students, and independent of outside vested interests such as government or corporations*⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Hastings p.183

⁶⁷ Hastings p.184

⁶⁸ LA in Wroth p.11

Points 1 and 3 speak directly to concerns regarding the NOLS domination of the state unions and the power they would hold in a federal system, while 4 and 7 make clear that any constitutional limits on the issues the union could deal with and over reliance upon paid lobbyists, as per ACTS, would not be accepted. Stating that “any national body which is set up in a secretive fashion will never adequately work for all students, nor will it gain support from students”⁶⁹, the LA made it clear that these conditions were absolutely essential for their cooperation.

By October, when a conference entitled “Towards a National Union” was held in Adelaide to establish a cross factional proposal for the structure of the NUS, many of these fundamental principles had turned out to be negotiable. Prior to the conference the CPA Tertiary Collective had passed motions calling for the LA to appoint negotiator to liaise with NOLS counterparts on issues of potential conflict.⁷⁰ Once established, this preference for closed doors negotiations undermined genuine debate and decision making on conference floor. In return for a campus based union structure, rather than a federal structure, and constitutional assurances that delegates would be required to be popularly elected the LA negotiators agrees to join the NUS project.⁷¹

Following the loose agreement established at the “Towards a National Union” conference a constitutional conference was held in December of 1987 to formally transform the campaigning organisation that had been existent for the best part of a year into a fully representative national student body.⁷²

⁶⁹ Wroth p.11

⁷⁰ Wright, Andy “A Proposal for Pre-Conference Framework Negotiations with NOLS”

⁷¹ Wroth p.12

⁷² Hastings refers to this conference as the first annual conference of the NUS. NUS counting refers to the 1988 conference as the first NatCon.

Despite the Left Alliance's demands for democratically elected delegates few attendees of the December conference were chosen through an open election or general meeting of students. Due to the timing of the delegate registration process, towards the end of semester and when most students were focussing on final assessments and exams elections were impossible for many campuses. Most delegates were selected through SRCs and Guilds, though a not insignificant minority were directly appointed by campus presidents or executives.⁷³

The LA had also backed down on their demands for autonomous women's and overseas students' departments. Instead the LA were promised an increase in the number of office bearer positions they were given, included the no-longer autonomous Women's Officer.⁷⁴ As the conference became dominated by pre-agreed deals between LA and NOLS there was much disquiet amongst grassroots left delegates, and the fragile LA alliance began to show signs of tension.

The debate on the constitution was subject to particular criticism. As the specific text of the constitution had only been agreed upon by factional leaders over the first 4 days of the conference the motions for debate were in reference to documents tabled during conference, rather than policy distributed to delegates for consideration prior to the conference.⁷⁵ Liberal students alleged that full copies of the proposed constitution were only supplied to factional leaders, state union office bearers and campus presidents, with it being the responsibility of the factions to ensure that all their members received further copies. This led Ian Farrow to argue that many "Left Alliance and Labor Students delegates did not have copies...instead they simply raised

⁷³ Wroth p.12

⁷⁴ Wroth p.12

⁷⁵ Farrow, Ian "National Union of Students Treads Familiar Ground" IPA Review p.62

their hands at the command of factional leaders”.⁷⁶ While accounts such as these, based solely on the proceedings on conference floor, ignore the extensive discussion and debates that occurred in factional caucusing over the first 3 days of conference they do demonstrate the tightly controlled debate between factions. The Constitutional Conference was a demonstration of factional numbers and support, an opportunity to approve of the deals already negotiated between NOLS and the LA (primarily the CPA).

Nonetheless by the end of the conference the NUS had formally assumed the representative responsibilities of the state unions, which were now state branches of the NUS, and could legitimately call itself the peak body for all Australian tertiary students. The memberships of the state unions however meant that the NUS was only formally affiliated with the major West Australian, Victorian and Tasmanian universities, and a smattering of smaller institutions throughout NSW, SA and Queensland. The NUS would face a fierce affiliation campaign throughout 1988 that would ultimately lead to it relaxing affiliation regulations so that affiliation from student representative bodies was an accepted substitute for direct affiliation from students.

In South Australia, with the support of the South Australian Students Forum, the affiliation campaign began the year on a positive note, with Flinders University voting overwhelmingly in support of affiliation in March, despite strong opposition from the editors of the *Empire Times*. Successes followed across the state and by the mid year break all South Australian campuses bar the Salisbury CAE had passed successful referenda or general student meetings.

⁷⁶Farror, Ian “National Union of Students Treads Familiar Ground” IPA Review p.62

In NSW there were also positive results during the first semester. Macquarie University, who had not been part of the SUS, recorded strong support for the replacement NUS-NSW and the University of New South Wales also affiliated, giving the union far greater coverage and legitimacy than it had had the previous year. However at the university of Sydney, despite the support of both NOLS and the Left Alliance, a campaign to affiliate the university with the NUS was again defeated at a referendum after a successful General Student Meeting.

The failure of the NUS to gain the affiliation of the largest and oldest campus in the country was seen as a real and immediate threat to legitimacy and credibility of the union. Immediately following the failed campaign Stephen Conaty asked,

“So what is the future of the NUS? One cannot hope to continue without the participation of the largest campus in the country...Without the participation of these campuses NUS’s claim to be the exclusive representative of all student, and thus their ability to command the attention of the government and media will be severely undermined.”⁷⁷

The absence of the University of Sydney also posed a threat to the legitimacy and stability of the NUS executive. The two Left Alliance representatives on the NUS national executive, the Education Vice President Kiri Evans, and the Women’s Officer Emma Koorey, were both University of Sydney students. That they were office bearers without belonging to an affiliate university gave opponents of the Left Alliance fertile ground for criticism of the pair. Furthermore the NUS, presuming the affiliation of Sydney University a foregone conclusion following the agreement

⁷⁷ Conaty, S “The NUS Debacle: Postscript to a Referendum” *Honi Soit* 1988 #12 p.4

between NOLS and LA, had already allocated the money they were to receive from USyd in affiliation fees. Facing immediate financial difficulty the NUS executive drafted a constitutional amendment, and passed a motion for an extraordinary acceptance of the amendment, granting them the power to accept financial contributions from non-affiliate organisations.

Despite the referendum failing, the University of Sydney SRC proceeded to pay an amount of money to the NUS equal to what their affiliation fees would have been, and University of Sydney students continued to play an active role within the union.

These measures were followed in the December National Conference by further constitutional changes that removed the explicit requirement for students of a university to affiliate directly with the NUS through a referendum or general student meeting. In its place the new affiliation procedure required only the assent of body that had been elected by the students, although referendum would still also be allowed for a number of years.

While in 1987 the Left Alliance had been critical of NOLS and the NUS for working towards a model that entrenched factional power through office bearers and the executive at the expense of ordinary delegates, the motions passed at the 1988 conference with full Left Alliance support gave far greater powers to the executive. The level of discretionary power the executive now held over the affiliation of campuses and the payment of membership dues contributed directly to many of the later problems and crises that were blamed primarily on the entrenched factional power of NOLS.

Chapter 2

The general overview of the events leading to the creation of the NUS outlined in chapter 1 are relatively uncontroversial.⁷⁸ The documentary evidence is quite clear in tracing the conferences, meetings and referendums that led to the formation of the NUS and the adoption of various constitutional forms. Establishing a detailed chronological narrative is an important step in political and institutional histories and is necessary for this project. However such an analysis results only in a shallow and in many ways unsatisfying history of the National Union of Students. It leaves out many of the debates surrounding the early years of the NUS; the essential questions of why.

The question of why the NUS took on the form and structure that it did has been answered in various ways by different groups and factions that had different levels of interaction with the union, commitment to the broader concept of student unionism, and access to the decision making processes. This chapter will look at the various factional responses to and interpretations of the formation of the NUS and investigate why these different narratives arose in particular settings.

Despite these widely different approaches to and understandings of the NUS and the events surrounding its formation, this chapter will attempt to draw out a number of common threads that underpinned these interpretations. On a basic political level this includes the view that each faction was the most representative of the ordinary student, and that any electoral evidence to the contrary was due to structural or external influences. However on a larger scale, and more importantly for this thesis, there is a common understanding of student politics, and the debates surrounding

⁷⁸Hastings, Wroth and the NUS website trace a similar narrative, though with a lesser scope and different focus.

student unionism, as being a dynamic process taking place in a largely static environment. Agency is given almost exclusively to student unions, factions and leaders. The dominant understanding of the formation of the NUS is a narrative of exclusively student and factional activity and decision making.

The National Organisation of Labor Students, being the architects and primary advocates of the federal model, saw the formation of the NUS as the restoration of a democratic voice for students after unjust attacks on the AUS had left students unrepresented.⁷⁹ For many CALPS students the informal network structure that had guided the campaign throughout 1986 were criticised as being ineffectual. There was a view within Labor circles that a properly functioning “national student union would have stopped the Hawke government decision to re-introduce tertiary fees.”⁸⁰ As South Australian Premier John Bannon put it at the time, “too many of the activists have been side-tracked into extremist activities or areas which have really become irrelevant to the larger consciousness of the body politic.”⁸¹ A national representative body was needed to “dispel, to a certain degree, the image of students as a ‘rabble’.”⁸²

In the minds of NOLS activists, the only group that could seriously attempt this was the centrist position occupied by NOLS themselves. The Liberals were overtly anti-union, the Left Alliance more concerned with networks and direct action, and the other independents and centre-right groupings didn’t have sufficient numbers of influence. As one student commentator of the time put it “”NOLS perceive of

⁷⁹*Higher Education in Crisis* p.54; *Tharunka* article 4

⁸⁰ “National student body would have stopped fee – Bannon” *On Dit* August 1987 p.3

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² Ellery, Tracey, *NUS 1988 Annual Report*

themselves as the ones serious about unionism: the responsibility sitting squarely on their shoulders to the extent that it almost became *their* union.”⁸³

This sense of ownership of the union was reflected in the way in which NOLS as a faction went about securing the ongoing control of the union through structured deals for the Presidency. Throughout the first 25 years of the union Labor Left were able to form groupings that ensured they had the numbers on conference floor for most, and often all, of the executive and office bearer positions.

Initially, after coming to a suitable compromise on the constitution and structure, NOLS dealt with the Left Alliance, creating a voting block of nearly two-thirds of delegates to the 1988 National Conference. Through this deal NOLS controlled the President, General Secretary and other roles relating to the financial and administrative functioning of the union, while the Left Alliance was given the paid activist positions of Education and Women’s Officers. In 1990, following NOLS overseeing the affiliation of a number of centre and centre-right campuses the role of junior partner was taken up by the capital ‘I’ Independents, a grouping of non-NOLS Labor Right, centre-independents and wet Liberals. A split in NOLS during 1991 led to the re-emergence of a Labor Right faction, Student Unity, that absorbed much of the Labor presence in the Independents and resulted in Labor aligned factions controlling conference floor outright.⁸⁴ A deal was struck between NOLS and Unity to split the office bearer and executive positions between them. The so called

⁸³ Conaty, Stephen, “The NUS Debacle: Postscript to a Referendum” *HoniSoit* 1988 #17 p.7
⁸⁴

“sweetheart deal” between NOLS and Unity, whereby the former gets Presidency and the latter General Secretary, has continued almost uninterrupted to the present day.⁸⁵

It was the exception for any elected positions to be truly contested; with most votes a simple formality after deals had been done. Smaller factions were largely locked out of involvement at the higher levels of the NUS, with the rare exceptional candidate from outside the Labor block being allowed to hold elected office. The security of the sweetheart deal led to the growth of a number of traditions that lauded this position over other factions and delegates.⁸⁶ The prime example of this is the chant of “NOLS Presidents forever”, to the tune of Solidarity Forever, following successful presidential ballots at every national conference since 1999 and quite possibly earlier.⁸⁷ Similarly the identification between the NUS and NOLS led to NOLS presidents making statements such as “the National Union of Students is an unashamedly Left organisation”.⁸⁸ In a comment that will become repetitive, the NOLS position is predicated on the belief that they truly represent the best interests and views of the general students populace and that electoral results to the contrary are due to external factors.

In direct contrast to NOLS, the most strident opposition to the NUS came from the Australian Liberal Students Federation. Their objections, throughout both the initial formation and in subsequent years, have been based on two main points: the illegitimacy of compulsory student unionism, and the unrepresentative nature of student representative bodies.

⁸⁵ The notable exception came in 2006 when the WA Independent Matthew Chuck was elected General Secretary over Unity’s Camden Gilchrist.

⁸⁶ NLS Unity “Sweetheart deal” Alexander, H “Student Union’s lurch to the left delights the right” *SMH* December 12 2006

⁸⁷ Fernandez, N, Personal correspondence. Nick was a NOLS/ALS member at USyd from 1999-2002

⁸⁸ Barrow, D “Student Politics: Future Renewal” *Dissent* 2010

While it has been argued that the former was the main motivation behind the entire ideological direction of the ALSF throughout the 1980s and 1990s the fierce debates concerning voluntary student unionism that had pushed Victoria and Western Australia to experiment with VSU legislation in 1984 had died down by 1988 and were not clearly articulated in the NUS debates. While it informed the definitive oppositional stance of the ALSF it was expressed only in oblique references to the NUS “wasting your money”⁸⁹ and “*forcing student fees up!*”⁹⁰

The more direct critique was based upon the idea that the NUS as a federation of state unions would be fundamentally unrepresentative. Much mileage was made of the fact that “state unions are under the direct control of the National Organisation of Labor Students (NOLS) which by simple logic leaves it under the control of the Federal ALP”⁹¹ and that the AUS had been “associated with the PLO and other extremist groups” acting as “an extreme left wing propaganda machine”.⁹² Inter-campus organisations were depicted as “havens for student politicians, not students”⁹³ The NUS was portrayed as irrelevant, as “most tertiary students regarded their student union as remote”⁹⁴ a federation of unions was a further step removed. The average student simply wanted to get on with their degrees and a limited, professional lobby group could be employed to represent students in Canberra at far less a cost to students.⁹⁵

ALSF participation in the NUS was aimed mainly at disruption of conferences and the hindering of “extremist” office bearer. ALSF delegates would often wear shirts

⁸⁹Tharunka referendum edition article 2

⁹⁰Wong, B &MacGibbon, A “No” *Honi Election Edition* '87 p.5

⁹¹Wong, B &MacGibbon, A

⁹²Ryan, G *Compulsory Student Unions: Australia's forgotten closed shop* (Perth, Australian Institute for Public Policy, 1989)p.65

⁹³Wong, B &MacGibbon, A

⁹⁴ Stacey, W “Politics and student unions”

⁹⁵Ryan, G “Student Unionism: economic necessity?”

bearing slogans such as “NUS: What a joke”⁹⁶, adorn themselves with paraphernalia emblazoned with the Australian flag, and sing the national anthem or “God Save the Queen” at various points in proceedings such as welcome to country ceremonies.

Antics of this kind resulted in moderate Liberal clubs, such as those Adelaide University, Flinders University and RMIT taking an autonomous stance on union affiliations, sending conference delegates independent of the ALSF and organising with other centre and centre-right groups. During the formation and early years of the NUS groupings such as the non-NOLS Labor Right, unaligned wet-Liberal, the (capital I) Independents, single campus factions such as the Varsity Club and others were largely pro-union. For most of these groups the motivation for participating in NUS project was driven by genuine desires to simply be involved with any national representative structures. For groupings not aligned with the ALP supporting the union allowed them to claim an active role in representing student interests without being subject to many of the criticisms levelled at NOLS of hijacking, dominating or diverting the student movement for party political reasons.

The support of centrist independents for the establishment of state and national unions was particularly strong in South Australia, due to campuses such as the South Australian Institute of Technology which were controlled by non-aligned presidents.⁹⁷ Cross campus cooperation between SRCs and unions in South Australia was strong and the smaller campuses had traditionally looked towards Adelaide University for leadership. The possibility of formalising these relations into a state union, and then joining a national federation, was campaigned on using the examples of past

⁹⁶ Herald Sun, April 2 1998, p16

⁹⁷ On Dit 87 article 4

collaborations.⁹⁸ Lacking some of the bitter factional disputes that plagued other states the arguments between a union structure and a network structure were not as contentious as they were in Victoria.

For more populist independents such as Joe Hockey, 1987 SRC President at Sydney University, the affiliation campaigns presented an opportunity to attack the credibility of on campus opponents. In an article published in the election edition of *Honi Soit* a week before the '87 State Union of Students affiliation referendum Hockey dedicated two thirds of his space to picking apart the motivations of the Liberals and the “Rad Left” (a group largely analogous to the Left Alliance but also including radical socialists), with less than a quarter outlining positive reasons to support the union.⁹⁹

Union opponents are accused of “attempting to stop the development of a democratic and responsible inter-campus organisation.”¹⁰⁰ Hockey argues that for the Liberals this is motivated by a commitment to voluntary student unionism, treated by Hockey as a self-evidently bad thing, and a belief that following the “demise of the student movement...the student political club with the most money will, by default, become the de-facto spokespeople for students.”¹⁰¹ Their alliance with the “Rad Left”, their ideological opposites, to oppose affiliation is seen as a “cynical move [that] displays a contempt for the intelligence of students.”¹⁰²

The actions of the Rad Left on the other hand, a group supportive of some form of student representation, is put down to an unwillingness to engage in democratic processes that they may not win. The reason the Rad Left had “consistently worked

⁹⁸ On Dit 88 article 1

⁹⁹ Hockey, J “Yes” *HoniSoit Election Issue '87* p.4

¹⁰⁰ Hockey ibid

¹⁰¹ Hockey ibid

¹⁰² Hockey

against the formation of a democratic inter-campus organisation in N.S.W.” was that “they know they don’t have the numbers on the ground to control a democratically elected body.”¹⁰³ In an inverse of the Left Alliance criticism of NOLS – that NOLS would only join a union with a federal structure that ensured NOLS control of the union – the Sydney Uni Rad Left were accused of opposing the State Union of Students simply because NOLS would likely be the dominant faction.

The underlying premise common to both of these arguments is that the structure of any project for a national student representative body was determined largely by factional manoeuvring and political concerns.

The last significant block, Left Alliance, and its constituent organisations, provide the most dynamic, varied and nuanced case of factional interpretations of the events surrounding the formation of the NUS. As a coalition which contained a number of distinct groupings, open and well articulated dissent and debate was far more common, and left a far better documentary record. The initial position of the LA was one of caution and scepticism, throughout 1987 the internal debate over whether or not to engage with NOLS was fierce, and for most of the year it was decided on autonomously on a campus level whether or not the Left Alliance would support affiliation to the state unions.

While the voting record shows that the Left Alliance as a whole was compliant to the direction that NOLS was keen to take the NUS in the lack of prominent LA figures arguing the case for a national union in the affiliation debates, in contrast to the large number of dissenting voices, both at the time and in later reporting of events, indicates a certain hesitance within the faction.

¹⁰³Hockey

At the University of Sydney Kiri Evans, who would go on to be the 1988 NUS Women's officer, led the left alliance campaign against affiliation. The State Union and NOLS were portrayed as "a small group of right wing SRC heavies and their ideological brethren[sic] who seek to speak for all students."¹⁰⁴ This argument is the exact same form used by the ALSF to attack the NOLS controlled State Union of Students, albeit accusing them of being too far right as opposed to too far left.

Evans also attacked the SUS on the grounds a state based organisation was irrelevant to the largely federal funding issues that faced tertiary students at the time. As the movement towards a federation was well underway this last point can be seen not so much as driven by state-federal concerns, but by a view that the current NFEC network based system was at a national level and should be maintained and developed. Indeed Evans puts forward that "you can bet the main impetus for next years fees boycott will come from the Free Ed. Coalition".¹⁰⁵ In a parallel argument favouring networks over unions Evans mocks the stated goal of the State Union as a lobbying group. For Evans change was driven by successful mass actions, the "National Day of Education Action...saw over 10,000 students from around Australia participate in street marches", a "6,000 strong rally of students for Free Education", these were the successes of the student movement in 1986 and 1987, not lobbying of Ministers and Senators.

A situation emerged where parts of the left alliance were working primarily to support the national network system which they controlled, while other parts were engaging with the state union structures that were part of the NOLS federation project.

¹⁰⁴Evans, K "NO" *Honi Election Edition* '87p.5

¹⁰⁵ Evans p.5

This should not be taken to imply that the Left Alliance, or NOLS for that matter, were cynically pursuing the representative structure that resulted in them attaining the most power, influence and control; rather for the most part factions directed their attention towards the activities which they viewed as most legitimate and effective, and thus became most prominent in those sectors. The Left Alliance were the most ideologically committed to the activist collective and national network structure and thus came to dominate those networks. Their later commitment to these structures was not based primarily on their control of the networks, but their ideological position that led to them controlling the networks and collectives.

Throughout 1988 the involvement of the Left Alliance in the NUS and the prominent role of LA members on the executive led a decline in this sort of rhetoric in external statements from the group. Within the Left Alliance however lively debate about the true nature and role of the NUS continued. In September of that year, based largely on these issues surrounding Left Alliance engagement and endorsement of NUS one of the larger groups within the alliance, Resistance, withdrew from faction, citing excessive CPA dominance of policy discussions.¹⁰⁶

Despite a relatively small size, Resistance at this time became the focal point for left wing dissent and critique of the NUS. In later years, following the collapse of the Left Alliance in 1992 and the dominance over the NUS executive by a coalition of NOLS and centre-right Independents many former LA groups would repudiate Las involvement in the power sharing deal with NOLS and take up the critiques offered by Resistance.

¹⁰⁶ Wroth p.22

In the writings by Resistance we see a clearer development and articulation of the suspicion shown by the Left Alliance towards the motivations and actions of NOLS and the ALP during the establishment of the NUS. It was argued that the NUS “was set up in 1987 by ALP students in order to demobilise the student movement.”¹⁰⁷ The doubts over the willingness of NOLS to challenge the ALP government were solidified into claim that it was the overt purpose of the NUS to prevent such a challenge. The NUS, through its federal structure, had an inherently “pro-ALP framework that prevents a consistent defence of students’ interests” from the government.¹⁰⁸

Along side these charges of conspiracy Resistance made some pertinent criticisms of the processes by which the NUS had been established. The analysis that that NUS began as a “a shaky, illegitimate structure until enough of the student left was cooped into thinking they could best campaign for free education by building NUS” is, apart perhaps from the implication that the Left Alliance was cooped, hard to refute. Similarly the charge that “NUS, despite its name, is not a union at all, but a peak council of student unions” is a valid assessment of what the NUS had developed in to. As was noted in a circular by the national executive of Resistance in 1988 the constitutional changes to NUS that allowed the affiliation of Sydney University, despite the failure of two referenda, “made explicit that NUS represents student organisations, not students, reduced the number of delegates and made possible campus affiliation through student council vote rather than referendum.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ *Resistance National Executive Position Paper* September 1988

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*

¹⁰⁹ *Resistance National Executive Position Paper* September 1988

An interesting exception to this tendency was the analysis of Michael Danby, a Labor Right aligned student, in his critique of the enabling role played by Vice-Chancellors in allowing the rise of “extremists” in the final days of the AUS. Published in a collection of essays distributed by the Australian Institute of Public Policy, a small ‘l’ liberal think tank (though with obvious links to the capital “L” Liberal party) the article “Extremists and Vice-Chancellors” deconstructed the negotiations, both explicit and implicit, in determining the boundaries of acceptable activities for student unionism and activism more generally.¹¹⁰ In response Mark Trowell in “The Politics of Compulsion” examined the increasing role of the state and federal government in these relationships. However the issue of voluntary student unionism, not discussed by Danby, leads Trowell to lose sight of some of the specific issues surrounding the structure and role of student representative bodies in his haste to reject compulsory student unionism.¹¹¹

If the students, engaged as they were in partisan political contests, had a tendency to focus primarily on the motivations and actions of the factions and students themselves how was the development of the NUS seen by those less engaged in the process? While the formation of the NUS gain nowhere near as much attention outside student circles as within it, the developments within student organizations did not go unnoticed from the wider media. The implications of the National Free Education Campaign were widely discussed in left wing journal and newsletters, predominantly including unfavourable comparisons with the heyday of student activism in the 1970s,

¹¹⁰Danby, M “Extremists & Vice-Chancellors” in Ryan, G *Compulsory Student Unions: Australia’s forgotten closed shop* (Perth, Australian Institute for Public Policy, 1989)

¹¹¹Trowell, M “Politics of compulsion” in Ryan, G *Compulsory Student Unions: Australia’s forgotten closed shop* (Perth, Australian Institute for Public Policy, 1989)

and the formation of the NUS gained significant attention in the wider mainstream media when it secured positions on a number of Government advisory committees in late 1988. Bringing an external perspective did these commentators similarly attribute primary agency to the machinations of student factions?

While the overt charges of conspiracy to demobilise student criticism were not widely embraced beyond the rhetoric of campus electioneering this tendency to link the changes in student organisations with the increasing dialogue between the NOLS controlled NUS and the Labor federal government was reflected by the writings of left wing commentators. Gerrard Goggin, in the prominent progressive journal *Arena*, questioned the ability of the NUS to achieve revolutionary change when it was increasingly “regarded as partners by the Labor Party in the Accord-style arrangements of higher education”.¹¹² He argued that the “politics of education became marginal”¹¹³ as the NUS eschewed independent policy formation and analysis, preferring to work within government committee frameworks and “to speak of information gathering and exchange.”¹¹⁴ Goggin was dismissive of this involvement as “token membership” designed to “squeeze a few minor adjustments out of policy and administrative apparatus of the Department of Employment, Education and Training”¹¹⁵.

In return the government acknowledged the legitimate role of the NUS and gave it a prominence that assisted in recruiting affiliated campuses. Goggin lamented the demise of radical, broad based student activism, criticising the NUS’s “preference for

¹¹²Goggin, G, “Students of the New Management” *Arena* 98 (1992) p.88

¹¹³ Goggin p.90

¹¹⁴ Goggin p.91

¹¹⁵ Goggin p.92

pettifogging research and futile campaigns such as the High Court Challenge to the tertiary tax rather than promotion of more radical action.”¹¹⁶¹¹⁷

Appeals were made by those on the left to ideas such as Foucault’s notions of governmentality and the transformation of student power into “a ‘rational activity’ in the Weberian sense”¹¹⁸. The simple identification of the fact that student representation was becoming governmentalised was the extent of this critique; the heavy lifting had already been done by Foucault. Governmentality was inherently linked to excessive bureaucratisation and was opposed to the leftist program of revolutionary change. This tendency, it was supposed, once identified could, and must, be resisted.

Despite appeals to ideas based in broad structural understandings of power, the problems and solutions facing student activism were addressed with a discourse firmly grounded in the students’ actions and motivations. The shift towards governmentalisation was a result of the type of students controlling the NUS and could be countered by a unified leftist push. For all the appearance of a broader structural view, such an analysis places primary agency to the political actors.

¹¹⁶ Goggin p.92

¹¹⁷ As an aside Goggin’s contempt for high Court Action as “futile” ignores the important role court cases brought by the ALSF played in bringing down the AUS. Following the demise of the AUS student representative bodies at campus, state and national levels all became more aware of the role of legal challenges could play in activism and advocacy.

¹¹⁸ Goggin p.98

Chapter 3

What is largely absent from both the factional understandings that have been passed down to today's student leaders, as well as the analysis from student media and other commentators at the time was a discussion of the interaction between the processes that were shaping the emerging union, and the larger processes shaping the context in which the union was forming; the universities and the wider trade union and labour movement.

Structural changes in the tertiary sector resulted in a reduction in the ability of universities to respond to student demands at a faculty or even university level, and required student activism to realign their focus towards more national level campaigns and a greater engagement with lobbyist structures, at the expense of direct action and grass-roots campaigns.

The influence of the wider labour movement is also evident in the structure and organisation of the National Union of Students. The federal model adopted by the union reflects the push from the ACTU under the leadership of Simon Crean towards national alliances and mergers between state based unions, and the administrative and constitutional structure of the NUS has strong parallels with that of the NSW ALP. When assessing the development and formation of the NUS, especially with regards to charges that the NUS was specifically structured to benefit NOLS such external models and influences need to be considered against purely political motivations. Of course these two areas should by no means be considered the only external factors that impacted upon the development of the NUS, but rather will be discussed as counterpoints to the student centred understandings and the factional based narratives.

Tertiary Reforms

While the Australian University system has never been static, the 1980s were a time of dramatic change within the university sector in terms of governance, funding and identity. These changes profoundly impacted upon the ways that Universities could relate to each other, to governments, to funding bodies and to students.

When investigating the changing nature of student politics, we must consider the levels of decision making in the tertiary sector. The policy and discretionary powers available to staff, faculties and universities shape the ways in which they can respond to student complaints and in turn determine the levels at which student demands must be made.

To begin with we require a brief sketch of the state of the tertiary education system during the 70s and early 80s. For many within the left-leaning world of student politics the early 70s represented the zenith of tertiary education in Australia, a golden age that was now lost to their generation.¹¹⁹ Under Whitlam, the post-war project of transforming tertiary education from a semi-private, elitist institution with strong class boundaries into an open and inclusive system of mass credentialing and national improvement was seen to have been realised.¹²⁰ Not only was the rhetoric of the university student as a privileged elite challenged but there was a wide range of public policy aimed at increasing educational equity and accessibility. A student wishing to gain entry into university in 1974 faced no fees, was judged by an open and transparent entrance exam system, and through the Tertiary Education Allowance

¹¹⁹Marginson, S. *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000) p16

¹²⁰Marginson, S. *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000) p23

Scheme (TEAS) could be granted, if eligible, a stipend to assist with living and educational costs.

Alongside this expansion in participation was an expansion in the range of degrees available to students. The increases in enrolments at universities allowed for a wider range of units of study to be run within many courses. In a series of expansions and re-organisations of faculties and departments the student body found many opportunities to voice their concerns and shape outcomes. The reforms to the medical program at Monash, the introduction of political economy as a distinct department at Sydney, and the shift of psychology from the social sciences to the hard sciences at Flinders University had all involved the universities paying attention to student demands.

While the traditional universities in the main simply increased enrolment numbers in their existing fields, and offered earlier specialisation in their degree programs, those outside the university sector were undergoing more radical transformations. Within the teachers and nurses colleges the demands of an increasing level of interstate and international movement created a large impetus towards standardising qualifications, or at least establishing base standards for mutual recognition. Part of this process involved the move in all states towards teachers colleges awarding Bachelor's Degrees, as opposed to the Teaching Certificates that had dominated previously. Similarly the demands for greater expertise and accountability in the health sector led to the introduction of Registered Nurses, and later Nurse Practitioners, and with them the relevant Bachelor's and Master's level degree programs. At the same time an increasing number of these non-university tertiary institutions began offering more post-graduate and research degrees.

By the mid-80s Australia in effect had three distinct higher education sectors; the traditional universities offering a full liberal arts and science education, the teachers and nurses colleges that were beginning to be granted university status, and the more vocationally oriented Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs). For the school leaver this represented an unprecedented diversity of opportunity.¹²¹

However along with this increase in funding and support for tertiary education came an increase in federal governmental attention to and intervention in the university sector. As most universities found their legal origins in acts of state parliaments it was state governments who held the power to regulate universities. In general this meant that universities were allowed a great deal of independence. Relying mainly on fees, grants, donations and their endowments the universities had few external constraints on their financial dealings. As the federal government began funding course costs more directly a number of conditions were imposed upon institutions and courses to ensure they were eligible. Beginning with the Fraser government, and continuing throughout the early Hawke years these conditions increasingly focused on accountability, transparency and economic efficiency in delivering educational outcomes. Governmental discourse and policy surrounding universities began to shift from regarding the academia as a separate and unique domain, towards regarding the university as a corporation, delivering specific services to the community. Senates were increasingly likened to boards of directors, and the roles of Vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors were considered akin to CEOs and upper management¹²².

¹²¹ Hogbin, G *Withering Heights: The State of Higher Education in Australia* (Sydney, Centre for Policy Studies, 1988)

¹²² Marginson, S. *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.27

Through the Dawkins reforms these shifts in metaphoric language became solidified in explicit federal policy outcomes. Efficiency became a central measure of differentiation in the competition between universities for funding. While competitive funding had been an ongoing feature of grants and scholarships for both undergraduate and research students, Dawkins linking of institutional funding to equivalent fulltime student loads (EFTSLs) increased institutional competition to unprecedented level. While universities had always striven to attract the best students and academics, they now also required to make sure they had the most students they could handle, and were structured so that these students could be educated at the least expense. The imposition of external metrics and measures of performance greatly limited the ability of universities to make discretionary decisions regarding their courses. From the perspective of student representatives, while they still had the same access to Vice-chancellors and Deans, their concerns were now competing with federal government directives.

As Marginson argues these common funding goals led to a reduction of diversity within the tertiary sector.¹²³ While some of this was the result of conscious decisions to favour amalgamations, much of it was the result of the need to maximise common performance measures. In his words, a shift from having to satisfy policy outcomes of high quality education, to satisfying management and governance outcomes. The paradox within this account is that the introduction of neo-liberal, competitive funding mechanisms aimed at increasing student choice, have resulted in many identical choices. The importance of this shift to the argument at hand is that while universities had greater power to shape their institutions as they saw fit they could be responsive to student concerns pressure and demands. As the federal government took a more

¹²³ Marginson, S. *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.9

active role in funding universities they also took a central role in determining what a modern university should look like. Representative student bodies had no choice then to also engage more directly with federal policy making bodies, and indeed as will be argued, to change the structure of their bodies as well.

Another important part of the reforms to the tertiary sector was the move towards the consolidation of campuses and the amalgamation of institutions. Dawkins 1987 green paper, *Higher education: a policy discussion paper*, proposed the wholesale integration of Colleges of Advanced Education, Teachers Colleges, Conservatoriums and other specialist institutions into the university system. While 33 of Australia's 37 Universities would by 1994 be involved in amalgamations of some form, there were 4 early mergers which would shape the debate; the establishment of Chifley University (now the University of Western Sydney), the establishment of Curtin University of Technology (now Curtin University), the breakup of the NSW Conservatorium and subsequent absorption into the University of Sydney and University of Newcastle, and the integration of the Lincoln Institute of Health Sciences into La Trobe University¹²⁴.

For student organizations, and for student-university relations, amalgamations posed a number of new challenges. For both the sudden influx of students, a significant number of whom were accustomed to a different system, challenged many of the taken norms and traditions of the institutions they were joining. Related to this was a change in culture and expectations of new student intakes who had composite expectations of both the traditional university experience as well as a more vocationally focused degree program. On top of these challenges came the difficulties in managing organizations that were increasingly being spread out of a number of campuses. Multi-

¹²⁴Universities Australia report 2004

campus institutions were of course in and of themselves nothing new. What was new was the distances between campuses, the duplication of similar services across multiple campuses and the introduction of degrees that were run entirely on satellite campuses.

At the University of Sydney former Conservatorium students, now having to deal with a university bureaucracy based on a different campus faced difficulties in recreating former flexibilities they had enjoyed regarding examinations, rehearsal allocations and library facilities.¹²⁵ The Conservatorium student at Newcastle faced an opposite problem, university administrators were content to give the Con a high level of autonomy and run as it previously had, but without the administrative support of the Sydney campus this proved problematic. In both cases the respective student representative bodies lacked the expertise, institutional familiarity and contacts to move towards solving these issues.

The dislocation between the power structures and the emerging student body not only shaped the practical results and outcomes of affiliation referendums as outlined in chapter 1, but also influenced the way in which student politicians viewed their legitimacy as representatives of not only the student body that directly elected them, but the student body as a whole. The same unfamiliarity with, and subsequent suspicion of, student political organizations that allowed for anti-affiliation campaigns to gain such traction was reflected in student participation in on-campus events. Students associations at both campuses struggled to find a successful organizing model and maintain their relevance to the general student populace. In a little over

¹²⁵ Anon, Honi 87 #8 p.4

twenty years UWS has had 4 distinct undergraduate representative bodies, with many services remaining directly administered by the university.

While the creation of Curtin University and UWS through the amalgamation of smaller institutions was to foreshadow a significant trend in the university sector, Bond University founded a year after the former and a year before the latter represented what many speculated would be an even larger development, the private university.

With a campus made up of brand new buildings, lecture theatres with the latest technology, fees in the tens of thousands, on campus accommodation for all students, degree programs with a high level of industry integration and a trimester system that allowed students to complete their degrees in 2/3 the usual time Bond University was definitely a challenge to the status quo. For students interested in developing student representation and activism at Bond there was one attribute of the university that proved the biggest challenge to the traditional union/association structure, Bond's for-profit status. Student organizations around the country in the main framed their role as being based in advocacy for student rights, and in the development and maintenance of a vibrant campus culture. The Bond model challenged this by establishing a different relationship between the university and the student body, that of vendor and customer.

Within this framework student advocacy took on a very different form. The entire conception of Bond University as a university with the best of everything meant that Bond lacked many of the traditional complaints dealt with by SRCs. Class overcrowding and a lack of educational resources were not significant issues. Bond demanded high levels of professionalism and organisation from their staff limiting

complaints in that area. With regards to student input into course content and range, given that Bond's courses had all been freshly created and incorporated the latest research and best practice this appears not to have been an issue in the early years. Many students reported being quite satisfied with what they perceived as sector leading responsiveness to student concerns provided by professional student liaisons.¹²⁶

In term of student culture, Bond's waterfront residential halls and close proximity to the Gold Coast strip limited the scope of a union's activities. Food and beverages were run on a for-profit basis, clubs were dominated by those of a sporting nature and events such as Bondstock were organised centrally by the university¹²⁷. In any event the campus bars,

If the NUS was going to continue, as AUS had done, in portraying itself as representing all university students it was going to have to adopt a structure that still gave it a claim to be representing these students without a representative body. While, as it happened, Bond University remained the exception to a public system, rather than a portent of a new wave of private universities, much of the drive for an ultra-professional, lobbyist-not-activist, student focussed and overtly apolitical NUS must be considered in light of fears and expectations of further private universities.

The Influence of the Labour Movement

In addition to the reforms in the tertiary sector there was another set of external forces that also shaped the development of the NUS; the institutional inertia and legacy from

¹²⁶ NUS survey 1993

¹²⁷ It should be noted that by the mid 90s many of these functions had been devolved to the Bond University Students Association, though BUSA remains owned by the University.

the AUS, and the parallel influences of the Labor Party and trade unions in structuring and informing the organisational principles of the NOLS students.

While the federal and executive structure of the NUS came under fire for supposedly being designed to entrench the dominance of NOLS over the student movement, many of the essential features and organisational principles were clearly evident in the contemporary Australian Labour movement.

The 7 member Business Committee appointed to organise and set the agenda for NUS National Conferences, as well as the selection process, reflects the procedures used by both the federal and NSW branch of the Australian Labor Party. While in both the NUS and ALP settings this particular mode of organisation does rely upon entrenched factionalism to function smoothly the motivations for NOLS imitating the ALP on this issue was not in order to entrench factionalism but rather in introduce a level of independence from the executive to the conference process.

Similarly while the federal structure of the NUS can be said to favour entrenched factional powers, it can also be seen as reflecting the wider tendency within the trade union movement towards larger unions.¹²⁸ Under the arrangements of the Accord and the threats to militant unions such as The Builders Labourers Federation and the Australian Federation of Air Pilots the ACTU initiated a push towards the “one big union” organising model.¹²⁹

This process resulted in the formation of a number of the largest and most influential trade unions in Australia today. In 1989 the National Union of Workers was formed out of 6 unions across the country, including the Federated Storemen and Packers

¹²⁸ Bramble, Thomas *Trade Unionism in Australia: a history from flood to ebb tide*

¹²⁹ Scalmer, S *the little history of australian unionism* (Carlton, the vulgar press, 2006) p.68-70

Union, and the Federated Millers and Manufacturing Grocers Union. The Maritime Union of Australia was formed out of the Seaman's Union of Australia and the Waterside Worker's Federation (both themselves products of mergers or federations of earlier state unions). The Transport Workers Union amalgamated with the Motor Transport and Chauffeurs Association, expanding their coverage in Victoria and becoming a truly national federation. And over a period of 6 years a number of amalgamations, including the mergers between the Builders Labourers Federation and the Building Workers Industrial Union, and the Australian Timber Workers Union and the Pulp and Paper Workers Federation of Australia, led to the formation in 1992 of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU).¹³⁰ In all of these unions a federal model was employed and state branches enjoyed a large degree of autonomy.

Within the Labour movement that NOLS saw itself as the future of the overwhelming trend in national organising models was a federal model embracing the diversity and differing histories of the constituent state branches. In this context the NOLS stubborn insistence that the NUS be structured along similar organisation principles cannot be primarily understood as an ideologically empty move to ensure NOLS control over the national body.

When faced with the collapse of the AUS and the formidable task of establishing a successor union in a largely hostile political environment the students and factions working towards the formation of a federation of state unions were subject to a number of pressures that challenged the traditional conception of the role of a national student union. The pressures of amalgamations, the expansion of university status to

¹³⁰ *ibid*

other tertiary institutions, and the threat of deregulation of the university sector were all strong motivators for the student movement to shift away from the traditional domains of direct action and move towards a more professional organising model.

Concurrent with these pressures the trade union movement in Australia was moving away from boutique unions towards larger unions and more centralised organising model. The federal structure that was adopted by the NUS should not only be considered in opposition to the participatory networks advocated by the Left Alliance, but also the proliferation of federated trade unions whose structure the NUS reflected.

Conclusion

The formation of the National Union of Students was a deeply politicised, factionalised and contested process. As such it is only to be expected that understandings of those very same events and processes will remain, to a certain extent, politicised, factionalised and contested. This is only more true in situations that rely primarily on oral traditions and implicit understandings.

That is not to say however that such interpretations should remain unchallenged.

It has been demonstrated in this thesis that the narratives of formation that characterise all important decisions with regards to the structure and role of the NUS as factionalised political decisions first and foremost are unrealistic and divisive.

As shown in chapter one the formation of the NUS was a complex and fragile process. Far from obeying some grand political plan concocted by the NOLS leadership to seize power, the processes of affiliation faced a significant number of setbacks that forced the pro-union forces to continually rethink their positions, constantly adapt, and compromise with other factions and groupings where feasible.

With specific regards to the expansion of executive power and the relaxing of affiliation criteria it was also shown that the Left Alliance was just as intimately involved in such decisions as NOLS was.

More importantly however chapters two and three demonstrated the shortcomings of understandings of the formation of the NUS that rely solely upon the actions and decisions of students, even when those actions are removed from strict factional frameworks and placed in a more nuanced narrative.

The external and structural factors that shaped the union, the wide ranging reforms of the tertiary sector in the mid to late 80s, as well as the ideological and institutional norms that were impressed upon the NOLS students from the trade unions and labour movement, further undermine arguments that decisions were made for purely political reasons.

The dislocation of students from decision making processes, physically due to the rise of multi-campus institutions, mentally due to increasing student numbers and amalgamation, and structurally through increasing federal government direction had profound effect on the role of campus, state and national student representatives. Similarly the federal organising model followed by the NUS, and the centralist tendency present within the executive, need to be understood not only in term of who within the NUS benefitted from them ,but also with regards to who outside the NUS they were modelled on.

By looking at the wider context, and tracing the lineage of the various ideas, behaviours and structures adopted by NOLS and the NUS we can understand more completely the reasons and motivations for certain choices.

The student movement in Australia, and the NUS in particular, is a wonderfully complex and messy institution full of unexpected individuals, events and alliances. To limit ones understanding of the history of the movement to simple factional divisions, and a catalogue of political heroes and villains is to do a disservice to the fascinating and multifarious stories that can be found.

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