LEO DOBES: PUBLIC SERVANT, LECTURER, INTELLIGENCE ANALYST, RESEARCH MANAGER, ADJUNCT ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, CLIMATE CHANGE RESEARCHER

Introduction

It's almost Christmas 2005. And Christmas happens to be the time that I promised Joe Ribarow that I would give him a minor literary masterpiece about myself. By being on time, at least I can keep one half of the promise.

At this time of year, Canberra is fairly hot and dry. The heat reminds me of summers in St Albans in the fifties and sixties, when the north wind rattled the louvre windows at the back of our house, and everyone knew that another 'scorcher' was on the way.

St Albans summers were different then. At night, the brilliance of the Milky Way – due only partly to the general lack of street lights in the fifties – was complemented by the pervasive aroma of the open drains that lined the unmade roads. We lived close to the railway line at number 1 Ross Street, so we had the added bonus of a nightly chorus of frogs and crickets, especially after a bit of rain.

Emigrating from Moravia

My parents arrived in St Albans from Moravia (part of the Czech Republic) via the Bonegilla camp late in 1949 as Displaced Persons. An imaginative Immigration Department designated them as "labourer" and "house help", along with all the other new arrivals.

Dobes' home site in Beaver Street, 1950s.

Leo Dobes senior building house in Beaver Street, 1950s.

Either because I was in a hurry, or because mum wasn't all that keen to have me, we didn't quite get the timing right for my own arrival in 1950. The only transport apparently available on that historic day in St Albans was the greengrocer's truck, which was commandeered to drive mum to one of the Melbourne hospitals. And so it was that I joined the human race on the Ballarat Road, somewhere just outside the old Kinnear's Rope Factory in Footscray. But I hasten to add that our family

record improved after that. My sister and brother were both born in socially more acceptable and congenial circumstances - in hospitals.

We spoke only Czech at home, so I was like many other St Albans children who turned up at school not understanding any English, whereas now you have the phenomenon that television and radio teaches kids before they go to school. It took me a long time to pick up the language. Moreover, Polish was the lingua franca of the street - at least in our street - where even the Kivimets kids of Estonian origin used Polish. I am thankful now to my parents for persevering with speaking Czech, in the face of some hostility and unwarranted xenophobia among people who should have known better. My own sons speak Czech, and I hope that the next generation will retain at least some knowledge of it.

It was different growing up in those days. We spent a lot of the time playing outside the house rather than inside, and of course there was no TV to watch. I remember having great adventures tramping across the paddocks with Nick Szwed, one of the kids in the neighbouring street, but you couldn't think of that happening now. I also remember being attacked by magpies on the way to school, which was just part of the Aussie environment. I remember when growing up that you couldn't have a Polish playmate on a Saturday morning, because they were all off at Polish school. I suffered on Saturday afternoons, because that's when mum made us sit down to our reading and writing in Czech.

Polish was the lingua franca in our street. Everyone spoke Polish. Even the Estonian kids spoke Polish, and so did the Ukrainians and Czechs. Somehow, Polish was the easiest to learn, which we did. I still remember phrases like 'baba jaga'. Knowing some Polish helped in later life when I was living in Glasgow with some Polish migrants, as they were my landlords. Because I could speak some Polish it helped me to get on with them.

I remember a few of the other Czech families who came to St Albans in the 'fifties. The Georgi family had a chook farm in Kings Road. We also had friend by the name of Osicka who had a little chook farm out that way. He used to make his own wine. They were established wine makers and had many vineyards back in Czechoslovakia and had been quite rich. They lost all that when the communists took over. When they arrived here they planted vines at a property near Puckapunyal, near Seymour. He also had a wine store in Werribee near the railway station. St Albans was a dry area at the time. I'm not sure it was illegal to make your own wine, but it was certainly illegal to sell locally. Osicka would bring his grapes from Puckapunyal and make the wine on the farm in Kings Road. He hid his enterprise from inspectors and people by putting sacks over all the barrels and letting the chooks run over the whole lot. There would be so much chook dirt that no one would ever want to go in there.

Mr Osicka knew old Jimmy Watson, the original founder of the Jimmy Watson café/bar in Carlton. In the late fifties my father was studying at Melbourne University, and I remember going with him and Mr Osicka to that café. They had these rickety chairs and it was really just a cosy little place for students to come and have a drink. When I came across it again in my own uni days it was a real déjà vu experience as I suddenly realised I had been there before.

The Osicka family went on to establish themselves as winemakers in the Goulburn Valley in the mid fifties, and I've read that they helped revive the wine industry in the valley. They've expanded their vineyards over the years and they still have a farm at Majors Creek, just outside Seymour. I think they've done well for themselves, and even James Halliday puts in some good words about the quality of their Shiraz.

I also remember as a young boy seeing how people tested the quality of the locally-made slivovic. We pretty much all had bare floorboards in our houses at the time. When they brought the slivovic around they used to pour some on the floor and light it to see how good it was and to see if there was any residue. I think a clear blue flame was a good result; that was the quality test.

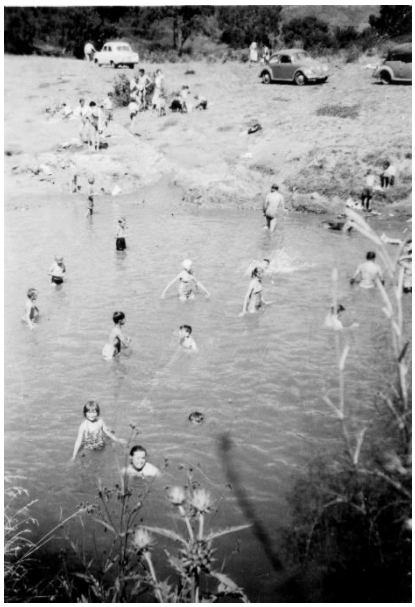
Summers in St Albans

A real family treat in the summer was to be allowed occasionally to get on my bike and cycle up an unlit Percy Street to Unger's news agency (corner of Main Road East and Collins Street) to buy a 'brick' of Neapolitan ice cream. Wrapped in newspaper for insulation, it used to survive as recognisable ice cream just long enough to make it back to the dinner table.

Summer days were equally pleasant. With a bit of money, one could get to the baths at Middle Footscray, and, later, the new Sunshine pool. A cheaper option was a hose or sprinkler on the lawn. But my favourite was the swimming hole in the Maribyrnong river. The swimming hole was at the end of Stenson's Road. A Melways Directory indicates that Stenson's Road is now surrounded by a maze of suburban streets that I have never seen. But the river was at the very edge of existence then. To get there meant a long, dusty walk with a towel over your shoulder, or a bike ride, after passing the last houses somewhere on the southern end of Errington Road.

There was a farm house that fronted the rough cattle track that used to be Stenson's Road, but I don't recall ever seeing the occupants. (It was rumoured that Mrs Fielder, a teacher at St Albans High in the early sixties, lived there because her two daughters kept horses.) The nearest sign of civilisation, apart from the farmhouse, was the Green Gully tip. The last part of the journey was a jarring ride down the

rocky hill track to the river, hoping like hell that you had adjusted the brakes properly when you last fixed your bike.



There was also a farm somewhere on the Keilor side of the swimming hole, although it was not obvious where the owners actually lived. The old German farmer sometimes crossed the rocky ford just below the swimming hole in his horse and dray, on his way to town. In season, the farmer's crossing of the river was the signal to some of the swimmers to make their way gingerly up the prickle-infested northern bank to raid the fruit orchard. Stories abounded about boys with shotgun pellets embedded in their backs and legs, so the fruit thieves were generally quick about their business.

Only once did I see the swimming hole deserted in high summer. That was about three seconds after someone yelled out "snake!!". Sure enough, a large (it looked large at the time) snake head swayed from side to side, just above the surface, as a magnificent specimen of brown or tiger snake made its way across the river. It was all of thirty feet long, by some accounts. Boys being boys, the immediate instinct was to "bomb" the snake with rocks. But the river bank offered little ammunition – all the rocks were in the river itself – and there was a marked shortage of ammunition-collection volunteers at that stage.

My good friend Ray Thurgood and I would sometimes ride our bikes to Melton to fish below the dam on the Werribee river. The ride took close to 2 hours each way, and longer if there was a north wind on the way back. We never caught anything, but the upside was that it kept us out of trouble.

One day, Nick Szwed and I made the same trip to Melton. The difference was that Nick was less patient about not catching anything. A potential engineer even then, he just had to use his time efficiently. So (and I wish to place this on record) against my better judgement, and in spite of my half-hearted refusals, we cycled on to Bacchus Marsh. Going down the escarpment brought on almost as much adrenalin as taking the curve at the bottom of the old Green Gully road at full speed. The problem was on the way back, from the then one-horse town of Melton to St Albans, with the inevitable north wind in our faces. We were so exhausted that Nick remembers the trip to this day. I'm sure he sits there with his slide rule late at night, calculating and recalculating the number of miles we travelled.

Starting at St Albans High

It was also a hot summer day when I started at St Albans High School in 1962. I had come from the Catholic primary school, and one of my first impressions was meeting a whole lot of new kids who had come from the state school, most of them from the western side of St Albans. There was a sudden mixing of kids. Even though we'd all grown up together many of us hadn't really seen each other in the school context before. The was the first big impression of high school. I remember sitting in a classroom with the sound of sprinklers outside watering the flower beds. Impressively luxurious after the fully asphalted playgrounds of the Sacred Heart Catholic School on Winifred Street (the map designates it as Reis Street now, after Konrad Reis, the parish priest in the sixties), it made me feel that I had finally 'arrived' at a genuine institute of learning.

My other first impression of St Albans High School was its intrinsically English nature. The boys had to wear caps, just like the pictures on the covers of the Billy Bunter books in the school library. The girls wore grey gloves. I'll never forget that, because it was so alien coming from the Catholic school. I never quite figured it out. That practice lasted only two or three years from the time I started. I realised later that a certain Mr Hampton who had been on the School Council or the Parents and Friends also owned the drapery shop that sold all these items. While no one ever said so, it is not hard to put these facts together. I don't know whether the teachers got sick of enforcing that policy, because wearing caps and gloves particularly in the summertime must have been pretty awful. This colonial vestige lasted only two or three years, but I still can't get over the energy and intensity with which some teachers pursued recalcitrants whose school attire was considered to be deficient. I do hope that they have developed meaningful lives since then.

The third big impression was that you had to go and get all your books at the beginning of the year and you came out of the bookstore loaded up to the eyes holding all these books with nowhere to put them, and you didn't know what to do with them.

Then there were all the new things, like foreign languages, having different teachers for different subjects, and so on. Everyone soon adapted to that, so it was not difficult.

The Influence of Teachers

Like most people, I have fond memories of most of the teachers at the school in the sixties. They were certainly a strange mix of personalities. Some were obviously at St Albans out of conviction, but one sometimes wondered what the others had done wrong to be assigned to the wild west of Melbourne.

In my first year, there was a teacher with the illustrious name of Schiller. A German immigrant, he had what might politely be termed a thick accent. I think that he only lasted a couple of years, probably worn out by his uncaring and

disrespectful charges. He had a couple of favourite sayings which he trotted out whenever the class became too unruly. In a high pitched voice that rose to an inflected climax, he would remonstrate with us by declaring that “Chattering magpies shall cease!”. He was obviously trying to use Australian expressions from a German background and nobody ever quite figured out where he got these from. He meant everybody had to keep quiet. Occasionally he varied this with “Chattering ceases!” He was almost using the third person here. He was very literary and obviously knew his English literature and everything else much better than any of the other teachers there, but he never fitted in. He taught us a lot of grammar but not much English. None of us ever quite figured out the provenance of those expressions, but I have always thought of him since then as a true, and highly original pioneer of multicultural linguistic expression. An unassuming but obviously learned man in his field of English literature, Mr Schiller sought to apply German discipline within the contextual framework of the local fauna. I sometimes wish I had got to know him better.

Form 6, 1967. Leo Dobes in middle row, second from the right.

Other teachers in those first years that one noticed included Norm McLeish and ‘Doc’ Walsh. They were good and encouraged students to be interested in their education. Everybody could probably talk to you about Doc Walsh. I didn’t really know him, only through the sporting side a little bit, and seeing I wasn’t a sporting type in those first few years I didn’t really get to know him. He was always avuncular. I didn’t get to know Doc as well as some, but he was always there, particularly for those interested in sport. Norm McLeish, bless his biceps, was much the same deep down, but was also a mixture of taciturn Scot and Iron Man. He once shared with me his theory about having to push the body to the point of exhaustion to bring out the best in a scholar. Not being keen on 50 mile runs before

breakfast, then or now, I simply admired the learned gentleman (he was always carrying books around) from a distance.

From about third form (year nine today) onwards, I actually started to become interested in schoolwork. Partly because I had already spent enough of my life down at the river with Ray Thurgood, and partly because my parents threatened to end my school days (and possibly my life) unless my marks improved significantly. It was about then that I also benefited from the influence of a number of key teachers.

The other teacher that left an impression was Kevin Bett. He probably wasn't very well known as he was very quiet and often in the background, but he taught fourth form history. Kevin wasn't very well known in the school. A shy, retiring sort, he was almost monkish in appearance, with unconventionally long hair. But he taught fourth form history and managed to enthuse me, particularly because we covered Asian history for the first time in that year. One result was that I decided to join the diplomatic service, even though my father equated diplomats with liars. I even wrote to the then Department of External Affairs in Canberra, asking if they offered any scholarships. Heaven knows why, but I did. They wrote back and said no, so I dropped the idea, only returning to it later in life. In later life I did join that department, and I think the idea for that started back in Mr Bett's fourth form history classes, so he had a big effect on me. When he left the school we never heard from him again, and I don't know where he ended up at all.

Ivan Matthews was the senior master at the school and taught English Literature; he introduced me to Shakespeare, especially the Merchant of Venice. I also remember him telling us about his younger days he had worked somewhere along the Murray river, and once irritated his fellow workers as they filled sandbags in the summer heat by declaiming the opening stanza of Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country': "I love a sunburnt country …". The other bit of trivia that I picked up was that he had once taught a student named Gareth Evans at some country school. I well remember him saying that young Gareth was someone who would go very far one day; perhaps even become Prime Minister. It wasn't until I got to Law School at Melbourne University, where Gareth was one of the Student Representatives, that I realised

that Ivan had at least been right about the drive and ambition of the future Minister for Foreign Affairs.

I think Matthews transferred to the position of Principal at Brunswick High School in the late sixties. I once tried to get somebody enrolled at his school. The kid was a Czech migrant who came out after 1968 and he wanted to go to school, but he couldn't get in anywhere. I phoned up Ivan Mathews, because I knew him, and asked if I could get this kid into his school. Much to my dismay he said no, because the person concerned did not live in the school's intake area. And much to my chagrin the next day the kid phoned me up and said he'd gone round there on his own, went to the front office, enrolled himself, and was already in the school. So I learnt my first lesson about having contacts: a contact doesn't always work, even if it is the headmaster. It was a disappointment.

Barry Rayner was a hugely positive influence in terms of mathematics in third and fourth form. His clarity of explanation, and obvious understanding of the subject matter contrasted with the rote repetition of some earlier teachers, and was truly inspirational. For the first time, I really understood and enjoyed trigonometry and calculus. But there was one frustration that was probably symptomatic of the status of the school. A few of us had finished the maths text well before the end of the year, and were eager to do more, but Barry just didn't have the material to provide us with supplementary work, as might have been the case in a private school. He tried to give us additional work, but it was not enough. Again, one wonders what might have been achieved at St Albans if students had been given more scope to develop their academic interests fully.

For me that was a distinguishing feature of St Albans High School. In a private school there would have been that capacity. Although individual teachers were very dedicated, the system wasn't set up to allow people to progress beyond the level that was normal. I still remember that to this day. There were several of us that went to special classes that he ran after school, which was amazing for St Albans. It was usually more for remedial teaching of maths and it had a smattering of people who didn't understand what was being said in class, but there were a few of us there who wanted to do extra work. He tried very hard but it just never worked out because the place wasn't set up for it. It was another big impression.

There was a teacher by the name of Gibson who taught music in my first year or second year there. What I got from her was a liking for Australian ballads. She played us things like “Riding through the Never Never” and very old ballads that one just never heard in that environment; you just wouldn’t come across them. That was also a very big impression on me.

The final one I wanted to mention was Maddocks, who taught physics. His standard was so much above anything we’d had that it was electrifying almost. You suddenly were really learning. He always had the answers because he knew what he was talking about.

They were the inspirational teachers.

Then there are the ‘nameless’ teachers. I can’t even remember his name, but one long-haired beatnik type once came to our music class in second form and sang some Australian folk songs. That experience, and the Australian ballads beloved of our second form music teacher (the hauntingly beautiful ‘We’re riding through the Never Never’ was my favourite) have been a lasting influence. By chance, I was listening recently to a record that I had almost forgotten I had. A collection of Australian railway songs, it includes a ballad about the disastrous train crash in April 1908, “at a place they call Sunshine”. (The station itself was still called Braybrook Junction in those days). The Bendigo train ploughed into a delayed passenger train from Ballarat with a loss of 44 lives, not far from the Presbyterian Hall in Andersons Road where St Albans High School first began in its temporary accommodation almost half a century later.

The staff at the school were just as important. Mrs Wright in the front office was absolutely fantastic, very helpful, and friendly to everyone. There were the Axiaks and the Haynes who were the cleaners and people like that, who we tend to forget. They made that school a living thing, in the sense that they were always there, and they knew what was going on often better than some of the teachers. They deserve to be mentioned.

Some Negatives

Unfortunately, there was also a negative side to the school.

I remember particularly a teacher called Robertson. Apparently an Aussie Rules player who was said to have played for North Melbourne, he railed against the un-Australian behaviour of those who preferred to play soccer at lunchtime. For some time, soccer balls were banned from the school. Then there was the Sunshine Employment Service local-born whipper snapper who had been to Sunshine Tech and visited the school to offer us his professional career advice. Seemingly without being patronising, he told us that the highest levels we could aspire to were somewhere in the range of a bank clerk. Trades were highly recommended, and

even railway work and the local Council were considered to be appropriate employment prospects for St Albans High School kids.

Soccer and Volley Ball teams, 1960.

In Form 5 we had a maths and chemistry teacher who euphemistically reported sick a lot of the time, although he did complain occasionally to us of being ‘hung over’. (Marin Gunew used to sing the song ‘You gotta have Heart’ when things looked bleak in that particular teaching department.) Some of us really wanted to succeed, so we worked through our textbooks ourselves. I usually had the answers to maths problems, and David Beighton, who went on to study microbiology (and is now a professor in London) used to come in with answers to the chemistry problems. We would make them available to our classmates, a number of whom also helped. For at least half of that year, we taught ourselves, and passed. So there was a bright side after all.

Student Leadership

Equally important was the inspiration derived from older students. Although they would not have realised it at the time, people like Helga Muecke, who got an Exhibition for Matriculation Art, Stuart Rodda who received a General Exhibition in physics, Claude Calandra who went on to do medicine, Hannelore Henschke's Exhibition in German, and Sneja Gunew who became an academic after achieving First Class honours in Matric, were all role models in one way or another. In particular, they demonstrated to us younger ones that it was possible to do well, even at St Albans High. With sufficient determination and effort, one could even match the best students in the whole State. There were others whose name I don’t recall. Just the fact that they had gone off and got these prizes was inspirational because it meant we could do it as well. That was very important.

School Newspapers

It seems that the 1960s were not just the best in terms of music, but they were also prolific in terms of people trying to publish newspapers at St. Albans High School. In my early days, people like Knut Werner, Kathy Szwed, Rosemary Keegan, Lorenz Schwab, Rosemary Kiss, Ian Sharp and others were very active in producing the POE (Prisoners of Education) Gazette. I have yet to discount the possibility that Rupert Murdoch attended the school at some stage.

The decade started off with the POE (Prisoners of Education) Gazette. It included writers and editors such as Sneja Gunew and Lorenz Schwab as well as articles by the inimitable Kathy Szwed and others. I didn't normally have any money at school in those days (used to carry my horse to school in the snow, etc). Because I wasn't always able to buy a copy when it came round, I don't have a full set, but POE seems to have been published intermittently until early 1964. POE also appears to have had a degree of active support from, and possibly involvement by, the teaching staff.

I don't think that there was any more publishing activity until September (?) 1965, when Graham Neal, David Beighton and I started TROOF. The name was a spoof on the then scandal rag The Truth that was published in Melbourne, but there are overtones to 'Truth is our Plight', as some had it. There was no direct involvement by any of the teachers, so we struggled a bit.

The Gestetner stencils for the first edition were typed on my father's antique typewriter at my place, and we ran off copies on the old Gestetner roneo machine at school, but it didn't work very well, so the first edition is barely legible. (The ink in the machine drum ended up on us, rather than on the paper, as I recall.)

After the first couple of editions, Mrs Wright in the school office kindly helped by cutting the stencils for us on her electronic typewriter (the technological marvel of the day), so they started coming out better. As is always the way with school newspapers, David and I had to give up our editorial responsibilities as studies became more serious, and I ended up putting out the last edition myself in November 1966. Interestingly, the 1965 editions were 3d (3 pence) and the 1966 ones 2 cents, but I'm too lazy to work out whether we managed thereby to increase the effective price in all the confusion of conversion to decimal currency.

We became too busy after a couple of years, but others took up the challenge when Troof folded. ‘Aspect’ appeared briefly, thanks to Paul Fox, Len Weigh, and John Macans.

In July 1967, a group of Form 3B students, under the patronage of teacher John Grieve, produced several issues of ‘The Griffen’ which was edited by Marita Schreyer. The name always puzzled me because it seemed so English and out of

place at St Albans High School, but I never found out how it had been chosen. Griffen obviously had staff support, but also seems to have been more serious in content and layout than its more irreverent predecessors. However, I have no editions beyond the July one (which foreshadows a further edition on 25 August), and can only assume that this publication folded as well, probably as the school year advanced inexorably into the final exam period.

I also have two editions of Aspect, but am not sure of the year of publication. Apparently 1967 or 1968. It focused heavily on pop music and soccer results (Slavia was doing well, so that may help with the date), with a fair amount of the underground/hippy feel of the day in it. The only other clue as to a date is that David Watkins was in Form 5D, but Alba of that same year only refers to a J. Watkins in 5D. The first edition appears to have been edited by Paul Fox, Len Weigh, and John Macans. The other edition that I have has the usual plaintive note by the single surviving editor (Len Weigh) saying that the other editors had been retrenched, ostensibly due to financial problems. The reference to financial issues is matched by an apparent cover price increase from 3 cents to 5 cents.

Unfortunately, the school magazine fared less well. One edition of ALBA was produced in my first year, but it was not until my Matric year in 1967 that another was published. Although I was the editor, the production was a team effort that involved Maija Svars, Marilyn Huellet, David Beighton, and Joachim Simovic.

Alba editors: Leo Dobes, Maija Svars, Joachim Simovic, Marilyn Hulett, David Beighton; 1967.

Other Activities

Even though we were fairly sheltered in St Albans there were occasions when we did get to see the outside world. It was usually at someone's initiative; it didn't just happen. One year at the school we organised an Abschol day, an Aboriginal Scholarship day. A referendum had been held a couple of years earlier to give

voting rights to indigenous people. Our fundraising activity for the year was for the indigenous cause and we invited Pastor Doug Nichols to speak to the fourth and fifth formers. It was an eye opener in many ways.

Another impression of school was the career days, when people from the Sunshine Employment Service would come to advise us. It would usually be a young whipper-snapper type of Anglo Saxon, locally born. What I remember is the way they talked to us. It was almost as if the highest we could aspire to was to be a bank clerk. Basically, they said you could go and work on the railways or for the councils, or something like that. There was never any suggestion that you could go beyond that. I used to think, "Well, is there anything else?"

Then there was the non-academic side. A number of the guys would go down to the back paddock at lunchtimes. It really was a paddock in those days because there were no houses beyond Beaver Street, clear to Albion or north Sunshine. Our intrepid hunters would occasionally come back with a snake as a battle trophy. Despite all the chest beating that accompanied their exploits, I tended to sympathise with the snakes in those days because they were so heavily outnumbered. I always remember that, because it was almost like a tribal ceremony they performed together by going down to the furthest boundary of their domain and coming back with a snake or lizard. That's probably something that doesn't happen any more.

There was a guy by the name of Jim Gloftous who was a very recent immigrant from Greece and hardly speak any English; he was being looked after by George Zoumboulakis. Good football player, was George. They discovered that one of the houses on Beaver Street had acquired some goats that were tethered in the school yard, probably without permission. They decided to start milking the goats, because they knew how to do it. So Jim and George put their latent talents to work and started milking the goats at recess. Most of the milk ended up on the admiring audience that came to watch the fun. I'm not sure if the owners ever worked out why their goats produced no milk, but the menagerie disappeared a short time later. That was the atmosphere of the school at that time.

One guy that I knew really well was Pete Manic. I used to go home for lunch and one day when I got back there was a rock'n'roll band playing Poison Ivy. To this day I wonder what convinced the teachers to let them play rock'n'roll, which in those days was not a very acceptable activity in the school. The classroom was packed and the noise was tremendous. It really was nice to have. I don't know what happened to him or whether he eventually played in a band.

Broderick Smith used to play in a rock band somewhere. His brother Valentine Smith was in my class; I think he was Broderick's half brother. Valentine was very tall, and his nickname was 'The Giraffe'. Broderick was quite smaller. I remember Valentine because he spent a lot of time down at the river, as I did in my first two

years at the high school. It was only when my parents told me that if I failed again I'd be out that I started working, but I think Valentine didn't.

It was naïve of me to think that I could get away with skipping classes because my father worked at the St Albans railway station and used to see all the teachers who'd come in by train. I remember being punished quite severely because I'd been mucking around in class. In my early years I did no studies. I was a bad student. One of the teachers decided to tell dad. When I came home that night I really got a thrashing. I used to be really angry with my father for working at the railways and having such good access to the teachers. It was a bit unfair compared to the parents who just never had contact with the teachers. That was life.

I got a scholarship in fourth form which carried me through Matric. My parents were fairly tight with money at the time and it was a bit difficult because my father had changed jobs, so that scholarship was very useful.

The Social Scene

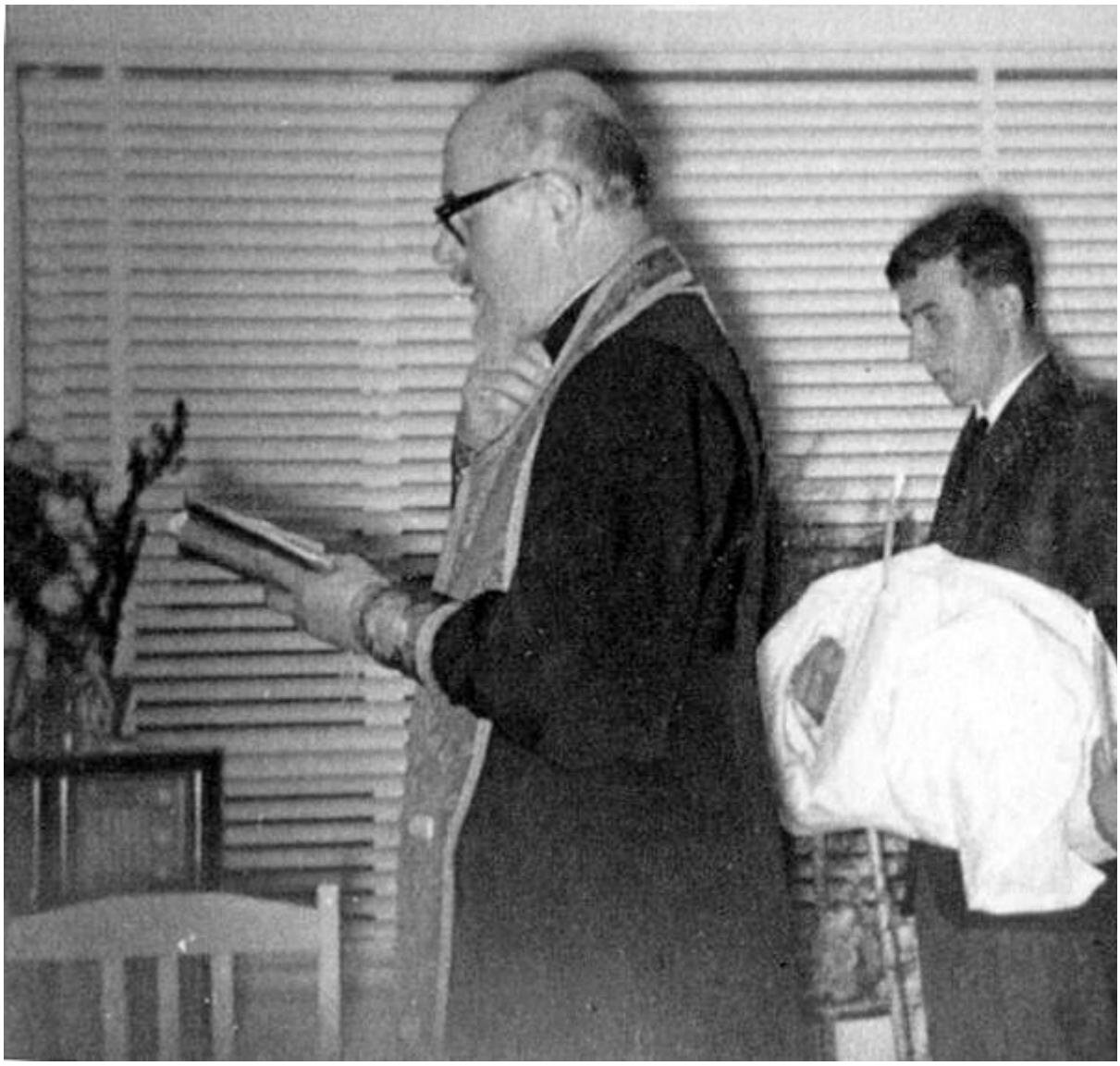
Lindsay Chatterton had a big influence on me as well, even though he doesn't know it. In the first or second term in Matric, Lindsay invited some of us back to his place after the school social. He lived on a farm in Sydenham, and had his own sleepout behind the main house. Marin Gunew drove all seven or eight of us out there in his VW Beetle without any lasting damage to the car, despite the bumpy road. Lindsay was heavily into Bob Dylan in those days, and fired my own enthusiasm that night, although I never really understood the lyrics – I was too embarrassed to ask anyone what they meant, until I realised that no-one else really knew either. But I am most grateful to Lindsay, because I was able recently to impress one of my sons (who'd seen a TV documentary on Dylan) with the fact that I possess a Bob Dylan CD. I don't usually succeed in impressing either of my sons, so Lindsay deserves a special vote of thanks.

Saturday night dances in the old Nissan Hut Police Youth Club are the other abiding memory. Peter and Bernadette Reeves unselfishly gave up many nights teaching some of us ungainly teenagers how to dance, despite having their own very large family to look after. And Lorna Cameron was in charge. Doubling as the school librarian, she seemed to be everywhere at once, knew everyone, and was totally dedicated to the kids of St Albans. Thank you from all of us, Mrs Cameron.

Tertiary Studies

<p<="" p="">When I started at Melbourne University in 1968, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I had toyed vaguely with doing forestry, or maybe languages.</p I was enrolled in a course that was honours economics and law, which I was doing through the Arts faculty, but after a while I dropped law and

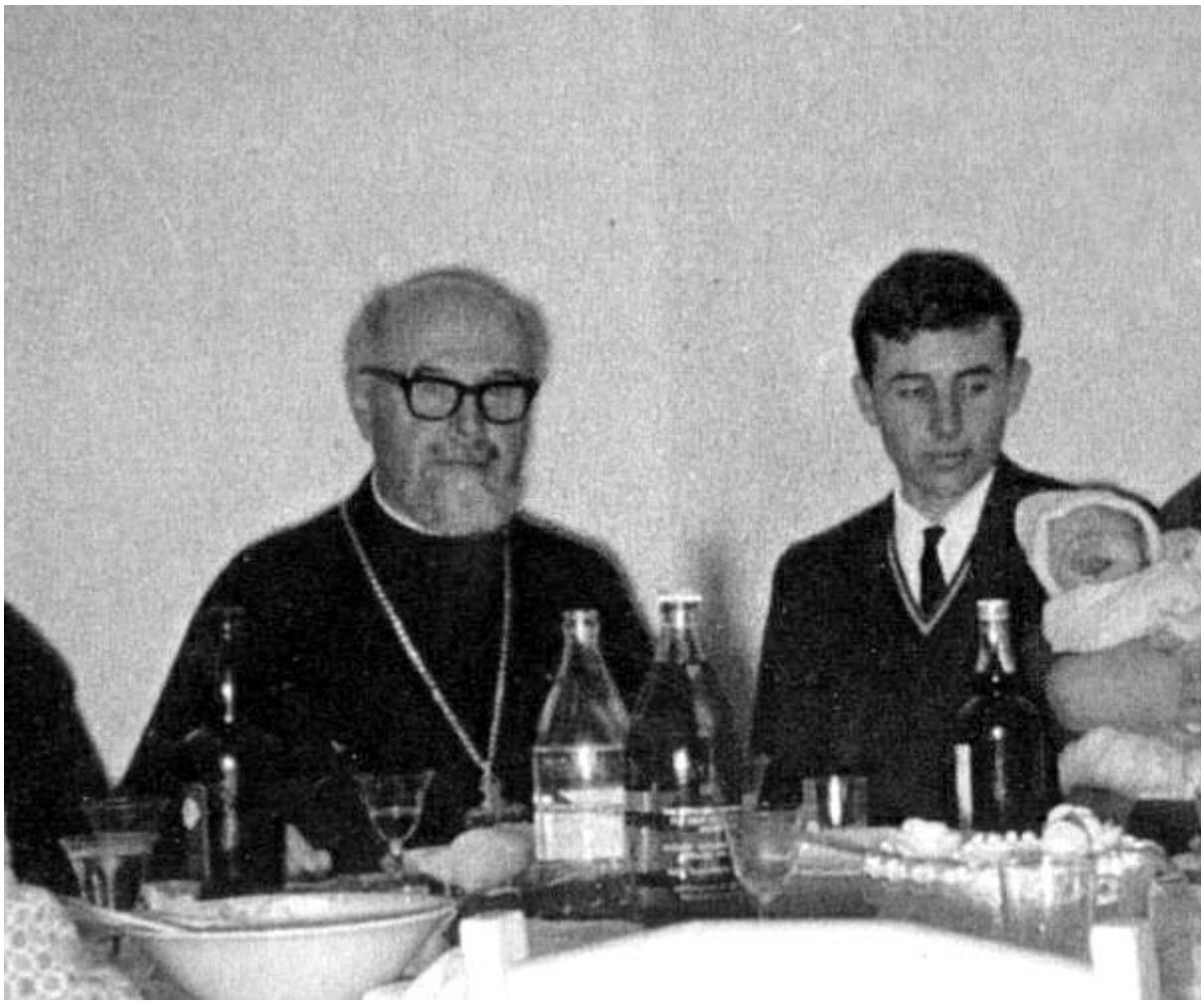
focussed on economics. I fell into it by accident. Someone in the Old Arts building loaded me up with a course that included Indonesian, economics and all sorts of things. I went to see the Professor of Economics because I didn't know too much about it. She found I had mathematics as a background and said just do economics. So I eventually enrolled in a combined Law and Arts course that included economics.



But I soon struck a problem. Because of the honours year in economics, my course was going to last something like six and a half years. However, the Commonwealth Scholarship only lasted five years, putting me in a potentially awkward financial position.

One day I went to the Department of Education office in Melbourne to plead my case. When I walked in, the person behind the office desk looked familiar. I think she had been several years ahead of me at St Albans High. Not being used to having friends in high places, I asked, "Are you Rosemary Kiss?" She said, "There

were two Rosemarys in my year, and I'm Rosemary Keegan." I apologised profusely, but she was very nice and organised for me to have the scholarship for six and a half years. I don't know how she did it, but she managed to have my scholarship extended and I am eternally grateful to her for helping me out.



When I finished my course I was lucky to be able to teach at Melbourne University in the Economics Department for about 4 years. It was usual to get a tutorship and do a Masters, which is what I did. I then worked for a few months at the Institute of Economics Research which was in the same building. At that stage it was normal if you were interested in an economics career to go overseas. I was advised to go to Cambridge, but at that time I was very much in my St Albans mode and thought that Cambridge and Oxford were too snobby. I decided to go to Glasgow University because they had a specialty in Soviet economics and I was interested in the international scene, so I though this might incorporate my diplomacy interests as well as the economics. When I got there I realised that this very famous Institute of Soviet Studies was falling apart because it had been taken over by a Trotskyist cell. In fact, the leader of the Trotskyist cell was a millionaire son from South Africa who had a Russian wife. It was a very complicated story. Halfway through the year I decided to go to Oxford instead and did my doctorate there.

Working for Foreign Affairs

While still writing my thesis, I saw an advertisement for positions with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. Like many others, I applied more in hope than with any real expectation of success (there were over 3,000 applications, but only 12 of us were accepted in my intake). I went to the usual two-day interview at Australia House in London, and at the end of it the Chair of the interview committee came up and spent a lot of time talking to me, which worried me at the time. What I now realise, it meant he was going to support my application. I was the only one selected on that occasion. Because I had been Student President of my college (the University of Oxford is composed of affiliated colleges, rather than being a single campus), I had not progressed all that much with my thesis. I paid for my lack of diligence when I arrived in Canberra in February 1979, <p<="" p="">and I remember the gum trees and the blue sky, having just come out of the British winter.</p<p<="" p=""> </pI spent the better part of that year completing the thesis, often staying up till 3 or 4 am before going to work the next day. I stayed in Canberra, partly to finish the Doctorate. Then I went back to do the examination at Oxford. They do an oral examination of the doctoral candidates and they can ask you any question, it doesn't have to be limited to your doctoral thesis. It was a bit nerve wracking but I got through that. I came back and was posted to Germany. Shortly after completing it, I was posted to Bonn, the then capital of West Germany, as Third Secretary (Political). I was responsible for the politics of immigration, not the immigration itself. I decided to leave Foreign Affairs at the end of that because I had a working wife and she wanted to go back to work, and we wanted our kids to grow up in Australia.

Settling in Canberra

My wife and I wanted our children to grow up in Australia, so I left the diplomatic service just before the end of my three-year stint in Bonn, and joined the Office of National Assessments (ONA) in Canberra, which was part of the Prime Minister's Department. It simply receives information from all the intelligence agencies. That was quite interesting work. ONA (known affectionately by some of its employees as the Office of Notional Assertions) was little known even in Canberra in those days. It is Australia's peak intelligence assessment body and reports directly to the Prime Minister. Access to all diplomatic traffic and intelligence material, as well as the freedom to analyse anything of interest, and knowing that one's reports were almost always read personally by the Prime Minister, made this one of the most interesting jobs I have ever had.

After ONA I worked for various agencies, including the Department of Defence, the Treasury, Communications, the Bureau of Transport Economics, Ernst & Young (on secondment) and Transport and Regional Services. I have taken up

some part-time teaching in recent years, both at the Australian National University and Canberra University. I still haven't worked out why, except that I enjoy it.

Leo Dobes giving us a wink from his Canberra vegie garden, 2005.

I'm married with two kids and the whole catastrophe. My elder son is 25 and doing his masters in accounting at Sydney. In the good old European tradition that was good enough for great-grandfather, grandfather, father and me, this son is called Leo. He swears that tradition will never be continued. The younger son, Martin, is 23 and studying medicine at ANU. We deliberately spoke Czech in my parents' house, and I continued with that tradition by speaking Czech with my sons. One of my observations, and it was never scientific, was that many families who did succumb to the pressure – as there was in those days – to speak English at home often mixed up the grammar because they couldn't speak one language or the other. I think they did their kids a disservice. I spoke Czech to my kids from the start and their Czech is not that great, but they can read and write. However, I don't think that will last beyond the current generation.

My wife, Alice, is originally from Hong Kong and was working as a Senior Executive Service Officer in the Department of Defence. Her speciality has been financial, but now she has reached the magic age of 54/11. She retired recently and has just started up a consultancy.

I've come across very few other people from St Albans working in the higher levels of the public service. My sister Maria also works in Canberra. Dusan Savanovic who lived in Beaver Street is in the public service. I think his background is Turkish-Cypriot but it was a mixed marriage.

Only two other people in Canberra comparable to my level come from this area. Mike Negus is from Deer Park, and he was a senior executive in Immigration. The other one is Marilyn Childers from North Sunshine.

Although I harbour a certain nostalgia for St Albans, I have now lived in Canberra for almost a quarter of a century. My father often remarks irritably that I have become too "Canberra-like" and that I am losing touch with my roots. But I'm not so sure about that, because I have known for a long time that you can take the boy out of St Albans, but you can never take St Albans out of the boy.

Leo Dobes, 2005

Leo Dobes, Maria Dobes, Luba Uwarowa nee Szwed, 2006 school reunion.

2012 Update

Leo Dobes – a graduate of Melbourne University, Leo Dobes completed a DPhil in the area of East European economics at the University of Oxford in 1980. Since then, he has been an Australian diplomat, an intelligence analyst in the Office of National Assessments, a policy adviser in a range of Commonwealth, including Defence, The Treasury, and a research manager in the Bureau of Transport Economics. He played a key role in developing and implementing the reform of the telecommunications sector in 1990-91. Leo is currently an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Australian National University and at the University of Canberra. He was President of the ACT Economic Society in 2012. His main research interest is adaptation to climate change.
(Ref: http://esacentral.org.au/nsw/events/cost-benefit-analysis-fourm/cba-speaker-profiles/)

Leo Dobes, 2012

Photographs courtesy of Leo Dobes, reproduction by Nick Szwed.
Maribyrnong River image by Nick Szewd.

Menu
People
Photos
History
Albas
Top of Page
Home Page