

LES CAMERON: FOOTBALLER, RADICAL EDUCATOR

Introduction



I was born in 1946 in Newcastle, New South Wales, and christened Leslie Munroe Cameron. My father, Jack Cameron, was from Sydney, and my mother, Lorna Yates, was from Preston, Victoria. In 1949 the young family stayed for a while with my grandparents in Preston and then built a bungalow in the developing suburb of St Albans. People who remember St Albans in the 'fifties and 'sixties will remember Jack and Lorna Cameron for their involvement with a variety of community activities, particularly the St Albans Community Youth Club. I think the growth of the youth club was tremendously important to the town as it nurtured a variety of other groups, including the junior football competition.

St Albans was definitely a growing place. When I started primary school there were about 900 people in the neighbourhood, and by the time I finished primary school there were over 4,000 and the small town was expanding rapidly.

There was definitely a different environment then as refugees and displaced persons from various European countries started building their homes in the district. I have memories of the espresso bar in the arcade and the young men hanging out there and sometimes it was wise to avoid it by crossing the street. Some of them were angry people, probably someone who was fourteen during the war, so they hadn't fought but had seen their fathers die and still had lots of anger. Males were expected to be able to defend themselves and I remember lots of fist fights in the school ground and outside in which I participated as did others. We're talking about people from a post-war scenario but including kids who had experienced war. Certainly the 'fifties and early 'sixties were more authoritarian and it was a more violent culture - physical punishment was an accepted part of disciplining students. There was also more distance between teachers and students, which had some strength, perhaps.

Starting High School

I started at St Albans High in 1958. The school was established in Sunshine in 1956 and I remember visiting it with my mother in the church hall near the sports ground.

When I commenced with the school in St Albans in 1958 and there must have been about 250 kids starting that year spread over about 8 classes. As many as 230 of those kids would have been from migrant families, so the vast majority of students were from a non-English-speaking background. I think there might have been only three other Australian kids in my class that year: Rosemary Carson, Ian Sharp and Peter Plain.



Les Cameron and colleagues, school assembly in western quadrangle, St Albans, 1958.

Teachers

The range of teachers' capacity was extensive, from those who were dedicated and inspirational to those who weren't. Some teachers were formally qualified while others had university subjects as their academic background. Obviously the boom in numbers left the decimated previous generation in poor shape to fill staffrooms across the country. That teaching culture emphasised the contrasts in what was possible within the education system.

Of the teachers, I remember Barry Rayner who seemed to epitomise what most of the boys thought was their ambition of becoming: good looking, relaxed, charming, articulate and mathematical ... a heady combination. George Strauss, teacher of German and English, was worldly and esoteric. Geoff Reid, who later became the president of the VSTA, was a wonderful teacher and inspired us in French and English with his passion, eccentric singing, and commitment. He was a very straight-backed man and whatever he did was direct and with compassion.



V Troszczyi, P Tucker, Mr Rayner, P Becker, M Trumanis, Mr Paterson, L Cameron.

Doc Walsh would obviously be remembered by many and I remember him at two levels: his passion for sporting excellence and, above all, his fairness. He used to umpire just about every football match at the school and on one leg of his very baggy shorts he wore the red and green colours of Waratah and Kurrajong and on the other would be the yellow and purple of Wattle and Jacaranda That was very strong symbolism and resonated with the time as we forged a primitive multiculturalism on the sporting field. "Doc" always seemed to have some Vaseline cream on

hand, which solved every problem on the sports oval. If you were bleeding you got some Vaseline on the cut, if you got a rash there was Vaseline, and if you had a headache then some Vaseline across the forehead was the remedy.

Doc introduced American history into the school which was a simple but significant break from traditionalism. We were a long way from a truthful, generic, history of the world but Doc introduced tentative steps away from Anglo-centric curriculum and emphasised the revolutionary nature of American development. I am sure he stimulated an interest in equity across the classes and races and did it in an exciting, theatrical manner. It was a period of great interest about America and where it stood in the world. People who remember the Second World War well would have seen the Americans as the saviours of Australia and its Anglo lifestyle. Perhaps while we ignored our aboriginal history and the migrant stories that were all around Doc had us at least recognising that the world was bigger than what you could see.

The other person I remember well is Jack Everson. He was the maths teacher and an excellent one, absolutely stunning, as was George Sinclair in physics. Jack was one of those people who not only schooled you but excited you in terms of the passion he brought to the subject. Probably the saddest story I remember about Jack was in relation to school inspectors. In those days a teacher's performance in the classroom was inspected by the Education Department but we all thought it was the kids who were being inspected. Jack, like probably most other teachers, was dependent on his next promotion through whether or not he could run a very effective class in front of a forbidding inspector sitting at the back of a class of about 40 kids.

On the day I remember Jack ran a repeat of the class he'd taught us previously, which was not unusual at inspection time. I was pretty good at mathematics but was bored silly while this was going on and, not realising the importance of this session for him, I went "off air". During the lesson he asked me a question, possibly hoping for a bright answer, but I wasn't paying attention. Prompted by one of my buddies I gave the suggested answer, which was wrong. I had been deliberately set up by my erstwhile mate, Per Becker. I was accused by Jack of attempting to subvert his future in teaching. It was a salutary lesson, because I did like and respect Jack so much, but I became more aware that there were games going on above your head that you didn't understand. I was in year 9 or 10 at the time and it brought me to an adult world.

George Sinclair was another of absolute significance to the school as well as to many of us. He was the person who effectively encouraged me to take up science and eventually do a physics major. A brilliant style of a man: thoughtful, considerate, excited by ideas.

Alison Gliddon, the English teacher, was infectiously passionate about her craft and excited us by what we learnt, thought, and did.

All of those people were considerate to us as human beings but more particularly they were interested in something that mattered. Later when I became a teacher I tried to both demonstrate my passions as reasonable examples of what the world considers but also to find that spark in each student: what is your family history, what matters to you, and then how can I fan that spark and make it your passion, your purpose and your refuge.

Mary Myers was the first psychologist at the school and St Albans was probably seen as being in need of psychology, though I don't think that Mary would have felt that was the case. She was employed as student counsellor. She must have been there fairly early because I had most to do with her immediately after Dad died (1962). She also gave me a great push along academically. She recognised very early that many of the kids were being asked to compete with other kids from professional homes in other suburbs and yet there was no study capacity at home because there was no room or family history of Anglo-Australian schooling expectations. So Mary arranged that the school provided for private study, where you could come back at 4 o'clock and study there, with supports from volunteer teachers (mainly Mary!!). This had a very high impact on my later academic results and I suspect a lot of students could trace success back to Mary.

Fellow Students

When I look back at that period I realise how badly we treated the migrant members of our school. Partly that was curriculum driven, as almost everything we were learning was related to an English perspective. So, while we heard of Shakespeare we wouldn't have heard of Proust, or we would have studied the kings and queens of England but not taken a look at what was happening in Europe let alone Asia. There was a narrow sense of that look at the world outside Australia. When I think of people like Hannelore Henschke, Sneja Gunew, Rosemary Kiss, or Rosemary Keegan who was an English migrant, I feel that we'd not taken the opportunities that could have been there to explore real examples of a wider world.

Probably like most Aussie boys of the time I was intimidated by the strange world that girls occupied anyway, and therefore conversations that might have happened didn't happen. I was in awe of Sneja because she seemed capable of doing anything, as she later proved. She did the science course with us in Year 11 and topped the class by a wide margin. She decided at the end of the year she wasn't continuing with science and then topped the humanities course by a wide margin. I learnt later that for many of our migrants who had come from professional backgrounds that some of this can be explained by cultural capital, and that notion is very important to me in analysing achievement.

In many ways my experiences of fellow students is a blur. Looking back I see how little time we spent together outside the classroom. So we had impressions rather than friendships. Family, home duties, community, and sports took my time. It was not till my twenties that I felt I began to really talk to people. Nevertheless faces that flash across my mind, like the above mentioned or Lorenz and Katie Schwab, Darya Hawdio, Loretta Rennie, Rosemary Carson, Richard Wiatr, Thrasos Caravatis or Victor Troszczyi all had an impact. When I look back I realise how family centric I was and how I didn't even know the kids who were in my immediate group either. I didn't really know Ian Sharp's story until I met him again 5 years ago. I knew his family and visited the house but to actually understand the culture of a home is almost as difficult as to understand the culture of a community or an ethnic group - there is no constant in any of these.

Ian Sharp and I played footy together and then travelled to University every day for a couple of years. Per Becker was our mate as well, following a similar pathway at least initially.

I was always interested in Per in the sense that he was very alert as to where he was going. He had very strong focus in his family and the fact that he had a much broader view of life, I suspect, than I did not only because of being bi-national but because he could see that theatre and the world of arts was important. He went on and became a successful actor as well as working for Shell in a top position. Per knew where he was going. He was of German background and his father had been with the German army, so he was a refugee in a different sense to many others. He had an elder brother and an elder cousin who were also very astute.

Of that 250 students who started Form 1 when I did, the 20 or 30 who ended up in Year 12 were all people shared substantial cultural capital. Of the very small number of English-speaking kids who started Year 11, I suspect that the predominant number of these that got to Year 12 had that cultural capital, predominantly through having the dominant language. The final year was therefore an unfair representation of those who had started. I remember when kids started to leave school as they got to fifteen thinking 'But that kid's really smart. Why are they leaving school?' It was only later that I realised that smartness and school were not necessarily acquainted. Many of the kids were going off and taking real jobs and doing really important things like learning other skills in the world of work. Those of us who remained were being convinced that we would be part of the new professional class that was growing up after the war. We felt we had to study hard to respond to those expectations because so many of our peers were now breadwinners for their families ... a most significant contribution in a struggling community.

Responding to Change

Everyone in St Albans was being changed in the same way as the students were. The high school and the neighbourhood were no longer comprised of people of the same language and cultural background. People were trying to learn from each other and there was a sense of optimism that

you would hope would still be in St Albans. It felt to me that we were preparing for growth even though we didn't know where we were going or what we were doing.

There is no doubt in my mind that Sputnik had a huge impact on the course my life has taken. I was probably much more interested in literature and the humanities than I was in science, but after Sputnik any of us who did a reasonable job with figures was encouraged to take sciences as a means of helping the West catching up with the USSR. Whilst I didn't understand this at the time I now recall that the pseudo-clash between sciences and humanities was a very strong topic at that point and there were big arguments about what was most important: cultural transmission or scientific advances. We, who had lasted the distance to Year 12, were all caught up in that. We were told we were going to be new technocrats or part of preserving established culture. So there was again an artificial division between the two groups of kids who left school at the end of 1963. And what a transforming world we were entering!.

I suspect that if we looked at every one of those 30 people in that HSC year you would find an interesting history of where they came from. Sneja's father, for instance, was a research chemist from Munich and her grandfather was a journalist of some repute. You had a large number of people who as immigrants were effectively downwardly mobile, whose kids were not going to stay down. That was true of my father in some sense. He didn't complete his secondary education but he came from a wealthy background.

I would be very surprised if any one of those 30 who did Year 12 in that year had started without cultural capital. That continues to be that case with every kid who succeeds. We were all working class economically but we were not equal in terms of the opportunities we had. The saddest thing of all is we had to learn later that this was an unfair system that continues to be unfair.

Introduction to Football

My interest in football really started with Mum and Dad because they were involved in the community and saw sport, dance, and cultural activity as unifying opportunities. Dad had apparently been a professional football player prior to the war when he was young; this was in another code, rugby, in Sydney.

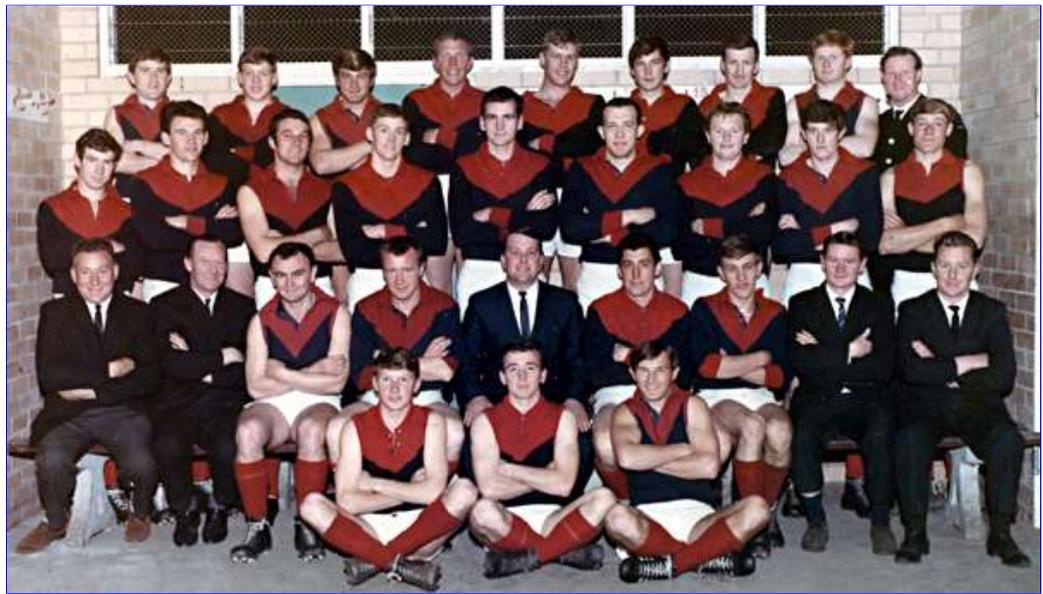


(Back) I Sharpe, P Metha, H Steigler, P Becker, F Richardts
(Second) V Manic, M Neskov, A Lubicz, D Pringle, V Beka, J Darul, G Listopad, E Strehling
(Front) L Cameron, S Hubik, P Plain, Mr K Robertson, R Ciolli, R Clifford, I Volkov.

At school we were offered cricket in summer and football in winter. It was the dominant cultural thing that the school tended to reinforce but didn't play a large part in sport other than having

token games against other high schools. I certainly wasn't any more athletic than the average kid at the school, but we were the ones who had the support. I probably had a football and someone else didn't. That I had a younger brother, Garry, probably made a difference to that in a big way too - we were able to have a kick together. At 12 or 13 I turned from the boy wimp into the biggest kid at my age level. From that point I was both successful and passionate about football and felt as though I learnt a lot from being part of teams. The school tended to encourage individuality, as most schools do, but the sports ground brought us into ways of uniting.

Football was interesting because it was clearly as high status then as it currently is, but with very little money associated with it. Nobody would have thought that this was career that one should follow. If you were good enough you got a job and you played football, but you wouldn't have been seen as a professional.



Les Cameron (second last row, second from left), St Albans premiership team, 1966.

League Football

I was given the opportunity of joining Footscray when I was about 17 but it was only 6 months after dad died and there seemed higher priorities. Clubs used to have a rookie list and I made that list but I also got into university. Whilst the result of attending university wasn't guaranteed it was a considerable honour to get there and also I was on a scholarship, so I was fully subsidised, including a wage for the whole period, which is pretty unknown by kids these days with HECS fees and so on.

I decided not to play football at Footscray and continued to play locally, so I almost gave away my opportunity to play at league level but fate had different plans. In 1967 Garry and I went to play at Uni High Old Boys because of his student link there. The coach for that team (and the school, one George Murray) was also a fitness advisor at North Melbourne Football Club. While they were recruiting Garry, who had won the best and fairest player award at the school in 1966, I was also "packaged into a transfer deal.

Inadvertently we negotiated a pretty good financial deal. In those days we were paid \$20 to play in the firsts and \$3 to play in the seconds. Probably the average weekly wage would not have been much different from \$20 at that point. I negotiated brashly I suppose, when I look back, because we had three clubs interested in us: North Melbourne, Fitzroy, and Footscray. They started negotiations by offering us \$50 to sign and finished paying \$800 to sign for each of us. That was a substantial sum of money for us. It went straight to Mum, who was a widow with five kids, and helped pay debts that were accruing.

We went to North and I played half a dozen games in the seniors and about 20 in the Reserves being part of Premiership with Garry and a lot of future stars (including Carlton and North coach

Dennis Pagan and John Scholes who became captain and coach of the Victorian Cricket Team). It was fabulously interesting and I learnt a lot.

The footy was like my science qualification - it gave me a ticket to do things. The combination of teaching and football then allowed me to go and work around country communities. I feel I've lived a privileged life thanks to the combination of achievements (both strongly prompted through Mum and Dad) particularly as they gave me the opportunity to participate in the community in a way that teachers don't often enjoy without that dual skill.

At schools I tended to be viewed positively because I was a footballer, and viewed as a little bit different at the football club because I was a teacher. It was a very significant advantage. It enabled me to play a political role in those communities that I wouldn't have had if I hadn't had the dual connection.

Teaching

I came out of university in 1968 into my first year of teaching. I realised pretty early that there are dangers in the inspirational model - I wasn't drawing the best out of others - I was more Pied Piper or Miss Jean Brodie. There were enormous changes occurring across the world. The French students were in the streets overturning and burning cars and trying to overturn the government. The students, blacks, and young people in America were fighting for civil rights. Australians were on the point of tossing over 20 years of Liberal government. Feminism was being muttered if not shouted and a radical period in a period of new affluence was sweeping Western Culture.

Unlike our parents we weren't the kids who were going to count our pennies and put away bits of string because we were worried about the next depression. JFK had become President of the USA at 43 and had left a legacy of youthful confidence. Through the 50s and 60s we'd watched as migrants, women, Catholics and working people were locked out of opportunities. As their sons and daughters we knew that sort of stuff had to be changed, and we were part of that radical vanguard wanting to change it. From day one in teaching I was on the streets protesting about too many kids and too few resources in the classroom. It was a very heady period.

When I started teaching I had 55 kids in the classroom. I don't remember being one of 55 in a class at St Albans but I probably was, so management issues were crazy. When I started teaching there were 30 sessions in a week and we would be teaching 28 and then taking a sports session for the other two. There was no time for preparation, which is one of the things we later fought for. I remember half the time in my first couple of years walking to the next classroom wondering what I was going to teach for the next period. That must have been even worse at St Albans because there were probably a number of teachers who were not well qualified in the formal sense.

Heywood Alternative School

I went into teaching thinking I could offer the stuff Geoff Reid or Mary Myer or George Sinclair were offering: an inspirational, enthusiastic, and passionate profile that would transform kids into motivated learners.

I quickly became very disenchanted with the enculturation models of education that I had grown up with as I could see knowledge-based curricula always gave those who had the dominant culture the opportunity to move forward more easily. I had been part of a number of noble experiments in school change at Birchip and Warrnambool but the turning point in teaching for me was in Heywood in 1973. Whitlam was PM, Medibank and the Schools Commission had been established, and a wash of great, radical educational thinking was challenging world views on education. I had been struggling to get changes in the school because I thought it was appalling education for kids to be following a curriculum that was set 200 miles and 100 hundred years distant from the real lives of these kids. The other teachers had the majority and they didn't want to move away from conventional modes of teaching. Schools had by this time been handed back the right to control the schools up to Year 11 by the Education Department. The time had come for

schools to take more control and respond to their kids. As a result of a few circumstances I got the chance to start one of the first alternative schools in Victoria. The same year Swinburne Community School and Huntingdale Tech opened following similar directions.

Danny Vadasz from St Albans joined me in Heywood. At that stage he was a student in Dip Ed at Monash. We were able to negotiate that he came down and effectively did a full-time placement with me and stayed with us. He was fantastic. In that period I learnt many things about kids that I didn't think I ever could have understood in the traditional structure.

With the blessing of School Principal Jack Finck we moved into an old house close to the school and established what would still be considered to be radical education. We had effectively an adolescent kindergarten with self-directed learning in a communal setting. People from all parts of the country flocked to this simple school of 30 kids. Free and open discussion on all manner of topics ensued. People, each with their own passion for something, challenged and were challenged by these kids in and out of the school hours on politics, art, feminism, drugs and abortion.

It was a very rich three months of discussing urban alienation and problems of society. One of my fellow teachers Graeme Mathews who was very much a long-haired surfer boy and sympathetic to the direction, pointed out however:

“You've done extremely well here. Absolutely all of these kids are singing Bob Dylan or Paul Simon, believing the world is a rat race, and that cement and tar are weighing us down. The trouble is you are 200 kilometres away from Melbourne and these kids are country kids and not city dwellers.”

And he was quite right. I had done exactly what “Jean Brodie” had done in terms of persuading people to follow my life.

From there we effectively stopped the curriculum and asked the kids what they wanted to do. For a while there was a bit of a hiatus but soon the kids took control and developed a jungle curriculum. Observing them I realised these kids were real kids with real relationships and that with their parents, the real direction of their lives had already been set. What we teachers had (and have) been doing was steamrolling over the top of that with our culture ... alternative or conventional.

Seeking a New Pedagogy

From that time forward I have tried to search for a pedagogy that has the school as servant to the learner's needs. I have tried to help the student identify what he or she wants and then tried to arrange mentoring and tutoring from good exemplars or supporters. I feel I am incredibly lucky that those kids at Heywood in 1973 taught me my most important lesson as a teacher.

We began to realise that the same sort of thing was happening in America, England and Europe, but almost every one of those was supported not by the state but by private fellowships. You might find a school supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, which would have been operating from a shop on the street front with 30 kids. We certainly gained strength and communicated with some of these. There was hence a great sense that this was about a genuine and radical attempt to say what the kids on the streets of France were saying, or Bob Dylan was telling us, that the world can be a better place if we were all treated as equal. There was a real sense of collectivism.

We had these schools across the world but where it was particularly interesting for us was that the failure of the Bolte government to properly plan for the post-war population growth meant that many schools were struggling just to accommodate their kids. When this group of radicals came along and said “we'll teach kids in a church hall or an old house and run our school that way”, this most conservative of governments allowed us to do the most radical things because it was pragmatic.

We were funded by the state: our wages were still met, the accommodation was usually cheaper than any school building, and the fact that parents were involved gave us a real solid chance that

what we were doing in a radical and refreshing way would succeed.

Throughout the '70s and '80s I worked in schools like Heywood, at Warrnambool, St Kilda, Collingwood and Kensington. I used to argue at all of them that our philosophies were right but our educational theory was lousy. We understood that kids needed to feel free to find their own direction. If that meant sitting around all day reading a book that wouldn't have been so bad. If they sat around wishing to read a book but couldn't read because no one had intervened, then that obviously meant the cultural capitalists had won and our "come and have a good time and learn as you go" was not really strong enough. We really had to rethink our theory. Many of those schools collapsed because they emphasised individuality and not development.

Educational Consultant

In my search for a good pedagogy I became a consultant to the state government on literacy matters and a consultant for the Australian Schools Commission. Out of chance I realised that the work of James Brittain on how kids learn to speak largely through informal and unstructured experience was my Grail. From that point all my educational efforts have been to create a learning environment similar to that created in every home that welcomes a new baby home!!

I was involved with the Labor Party through most of this time because of the radical thrust of social justice that had flowed through the party after the split and into the '60s and been enflamed during the early '70s with Whitlam achieving Government.

On the Education Committee and through this I met Bruce Wilson, a lecturer at Melbourne Uni. He was chairperson of the Kensington Community School, committed to developing a working class curriculum and a brilliant theorist. I was there about four years as coordinator and probably would still be there except for some personal relationship issues. To me, what we were doing there was fantastic. There are a lot of positive stories to be told about the school. I believe it proved that the combination of the right philosophy and the right theory can transform kids' lives. It generated interest and we were much lauded by the educational community of the time. I believe many of our initiatives have now been encapsulated into later work such as the VCAL inauguration.

Educational Advisor with the Food Unions

In the late 1980s I took a position with four food unions as their educational advisor; Bill Kelty was in control of the ACTU and Bob Hawke was PM. As a result of declining manufacturing base Hawke and Kelty had supported change, to workplace based education. This absolutely suited the model of community education that I been part of. I moved to Chisholm TAFE and for ten years I managed a group that was very much focussed on how to support workers in the food industry. That was very much based on the notions of how to organise yourself and how rather than take people out of work and replace them you took people who were in the factory and treated them as though they were worthy and dignified. We simply gave them access to information from which they had been blocked.

Australian Vocational Training Institute

What I've done in the last ten to fifteen years has been to work broadly in that field, and now the aged care area. The interest in the aged care area was prompted by the bad treatment received by Mum during a bout of ill health. The aged care area is another one where we have a long way to go before we can be proud of our culture support for our elders.

I am currently the Director of the Australian Vocational Training Institute, a Registered Training Organisation which is part of the TAFE system. I see us as a flexible TAFE where we go to people in their workplaces rather than them coming to us. I am pleased and proud of the work we have done in helping unqualified but highly skilled workers in food and aged care achieve the status they deserve.

Reflections on St Albans

The contribution of St Albans High over 50 years in some senses is through its hidden curriculum. It has taken the world's migrants and given them a chance to talk to each other. It has supported families and kids through tough times and given them a platform for securing a better future. Whether the teaching was good enough, the resources suitable, or the outcomes all they could be, the participants in St Albans High School have gained from the connections. I am proud to have been a student there, I learnt a lot while I was there and I continue to build on what was learnt. A school can do no more than offer that to its graduates.

As a student, and young teacher I was inspired by a Radical Education Dossier (yes, there were such publications in the '70s) where the eleventh law of radical teaching is "don't be co-opted but don't be sacked".

I think that's where I've spent my life. I'm not co-opted into believing that the current system is the best it can be and, if I can hang in somewhere on the margins and try to make the opportunities better, then I shall.

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