



## Chapter 5

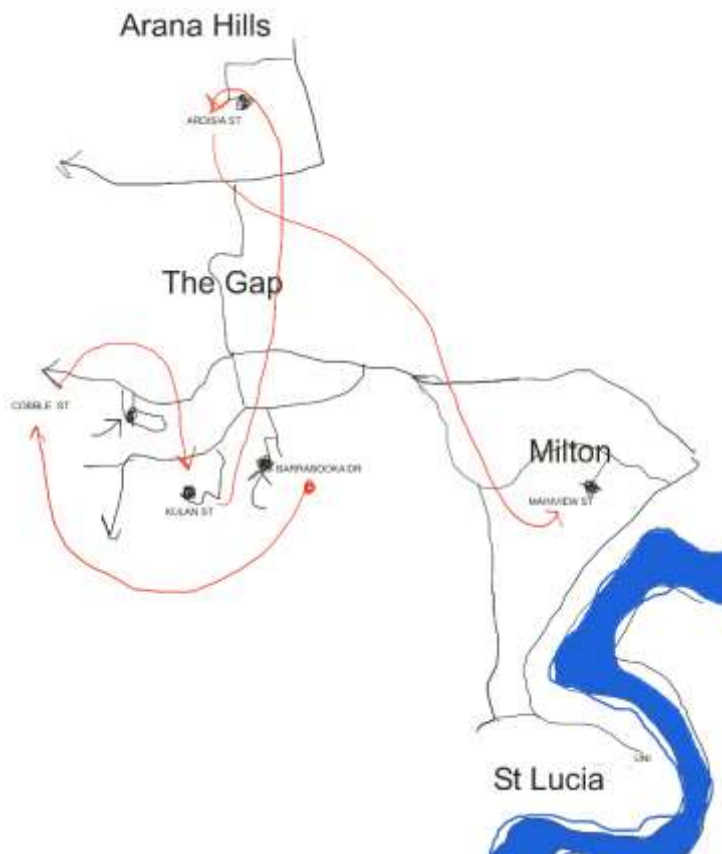
# Networks Ambition and Protest

## (The Uni Years)

During my undergraduate degree, I started to feel grown up. I began to live independently from my parents and my mission in life became clearer. For my peers and myself our future careers and employment were now getting more clearly mapped out and relationships were now getting more serious. Ambitions were building, everyone wanted to be successful in love and work.

### Place

As ‘the ground’ and where you are located has become a critical part of my current way of thinking, I hope you will indulge me a quick tour of the 5 different houses I lived in while at Uni. I finished first semester at Barrabooka drive, then my family rented at Cobble St in The Gap while mum and dad built another house in Kulan St, which we moved in towards the end of my first year of uni. Not long after we moved in to this new house, Dad got another promotion. Mum, dad and my sisters Sue and Louise moved to Sydney. My eldest sister and her husband Allan moved back from California and I continued to live at Kulan St with them, till it sold. I then moved in with my second eldest sister Cathy and her husband Arch. I made a little flat under their house in Arana hills and spent my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Uni there. In my 4<sup>th</sup> year I moved in to a share house





with Uni friends Lynette, Geoff, Glenda and Liz in Mainview St., Milton. These were all fun exciting years.

When white people first arrived to the Brisbane area, the local Yuggera people were described as nomadic as they shifted camp to be closer to different food sources that appeared in different seasons. The nomadic tag was a way of delegitimizing their claims to the land and to see them as inferior to white settlers. A view still held by many people today. My various moves and all the moves of my family to follow Dad's work and his focus to provide for Family were not derided in the same way, quite the opposite just part of our need to get a head, a desirable ambition.

Kulan St was another house designed by Mum and Dad's friend Bernie Ryan. My room had a mezzanine level where I used to sleep. It was a very nice upmarket architectural home with a pool. Mainview St was at the other end of the extreme. It was a very run down workers cottage in a street with other very low cost rentals, warehouses and a large men's boarding house. One room which we left vacant in the house had a hole in the ceiling where water had been coming through for some years which had led to a hole in the floor. Further inspection of the roof revealed a spray of little holes in the iron, which we deduced was a shot gun blast.

As a social work student, I did 2 placements. Both were done in and around Red Hill which was still a working class suburb in those days. I began to identify and feel at home in this area. As a primary school kid, I think I looked down on these poor old areas, but now a new identity was emerging for me as a working class sympathizer and supporter. The area was very hilly with the large old Queenslanders along the ridges and smaller worker cottages on the slopes.





Gentrification of the area had started but it still had lots of poor families living in rental houses. Part of the gentrification process involved young middle class students (like me) moving in to the area, and young professionals buying up old homes and restoring them to their former glory. Cafés and restaurants followed, and then other businesses to support the renovation of the area. A consequence was that poorer people were starting to get forced out as rents increased or their rental houses were sold. I was aware I was part of this trendification, but excused myself by seeing myself as an ally for the existing residents rather than the new rich elite moving in. I was part of the “keep Paddington poor” brigade.

### University

When contemplating what career to pursue after school I had thought I would be a good civil engineer. I believe I would have enjoyed the sculptural artistic possibilities. I also liked thinking about the big physics questions and perhaps I would have also enjoyed studying more in this area. Alongside these interests and abilities I also started to get interested in doing something to “save the world”. A very arrogant and ambitious objective particularly given my shyness. For a while I played with the idea of being an engineer for the UN or something like that but this never really took a feasible shape. I thought if I could not change the world I should at least do something to help people and so in grade 11, I decided to do Social work.

It really was a bit of an odd decision given my poor English results. Social work would require good writing and reading ability. I felt very confident that I would fail social work as a result. Part of me wanted to fail. I would have exercised my desire to help people and I could get on with what I would have been really good at - Civil engineering. My first mark at Uni was 3 out of 10 for a 10% sociology assignment. To make it even worse the tutor commented in the margins that it was really only worth 2 but he felt sorry for me. This was very bad news for my self-esteem, but it did mean my plan to move to engineering was on track.

Something of an educational miracle then occurred. Lynette a good friend from school was also doing social work and she told me how to write assignments. The things she told me were very simple, but I had not heard this in my 5 years at high school. It was incredibly helpful and without Lynette’s help I am fairly confident I would have continued to struggle. I had heard many times at high school that a story had to have a beginning, middle and end. I used to think how





stupid this statement was, as how could anything in the universe, fail to have a beginning, middle and end. It was a physical reality. It seemed a ridiculous statement. What Lynette explained for the very first time (for my ears), was exactly what you do in each section. I now had a structure for writing. In my next assignment I got 6 out of 10 and I began to think I could pass this course. By the end of the semester, I was one of 2 to get the highest mark in social work and did well in my other subjects. My plan to do engineering now moved to the back burner. Thank you Lynette.

Being only one of about 15 males with 100 women provided an extra attraction for doing social work. Moreover, as I chatted to friends doing other courses, I realized how great it was that I was really able to study things that interested me. I felt in control of what I wanted to learn, focusing on inequality and poverty wherever I could. The sciences started to sound very trivial in comparison to the important social issues we were talking about in social work. While I started social work with the goal of helping people it was not long before it was clear that some of the academic staff saw social work not just as a band-aid, but that it could be one way to change the world. With this realization I was now very much on board. I became totally focused on 'community development' as one form of change orientated social work practice.



My interest in changing the world was given a massive affirmation after hearing lectures in second year from Sugata Dasgupta, a professor from India who had been involved in the Gandhian movement there. I immediately felt a great connection to this nonviolent approach to social change and it provided a clear direction and methodology for my future work. Gandhi was a great communitarian who was on about equality. I had a new hero to add to my list.

A bit like Robin Hood but with a nonviolent orientation. Very much like Christ without the mystical stuff. A key message of Sugata's was that Development (by which he was really describing capitalist economic growth) causes poverty. There was no trickle down for poor people, their situation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world was made much worse by development and Sugata could see the same processes occurring for poor people in the first world. I now had a clear and historically successful way to imagine the revolution non-violently. It was very clear that the





establishment may respond very violent ways to nonviolent protest, so courage was required.

The social work course required me to do an 18 week practice placement in 3<sup>rd</sup> year. I wanted a solely community work placement, but was given one where I also had to do some counselling. This was partly a result of Bob Bland, my interview skills subject tutor, who for whatever reason did not want me just to do community work. I was scared of doing this work, but my placement supervisor was very supportive and I came to like and get some confidence in the counselling role. Looking back I was genuinely terrible at this interpersonal work but I think I did get better towards the end of the 18 weeks. I also noticed I was getting better at listening to friends and family, without wanting to quickly provide solutions and direct them. I began to see how individual work and community work could all be practiced with the same intent and style. Both could be about social change.

My main task in this placement was to try to get local residents together, to form a community centre. This was exciting and I am pleased to say that the organization that grew out of these initial meetings The Red Hill Paddington Community Association is still going very strongly today (now known as Communify). My first placement gave me confidence about a future career in social work and I now felt like a productive contributing citizen. I had actually contributed to some meaningful change, it was no longer just an ideal.

I was part of a student unit with 4 others and we became good friends. Two were mature aged students and working with them as a team, further strengthened a sense of competence and maturity. My placement supervisor, Jill was also a Uni lecturer and we shared a similar interest in the Gandhian orientation. I realized, I had a bit of a ‘teacher crush’ when I felt disappointed, hearing that she was getting married. Jill married another Uni tutor Morrie, who ended up supervising my second placement. Both Jill and Morrie would remain mentors for many years to come. I greatly valued Morrie’s influence over my practice. He was an excellent community practitioner who had a great ability to get things done, in a very methodical and developmental way. He would listen to local people and encourage and assist them to work at solutions to issues building in structures and resources to support them in these actions. I learnt a lot from him.





While I was finding a clear ideology and direction in community work practice, another direction for me was also brewing. I liked theorizing. Another lecturer in my second year had an enormous impact. Mal McCouat was a real character. He would arrive at lectures increasingly late throughout the semester, but while annoyed, most students would still wait, as his lectures were very entertaining. We would be keen to hear what new excuse he would come up with for being late. His apology for being late would then without any clear transition, move into the theme for the day extracting out of his morning problem with milking the cow, something that would provide some new insight. Very creative improvisation. He did not seem to have a clear agenda or ideology like Sugata but was particularly interested in new ideas beyond the text books.

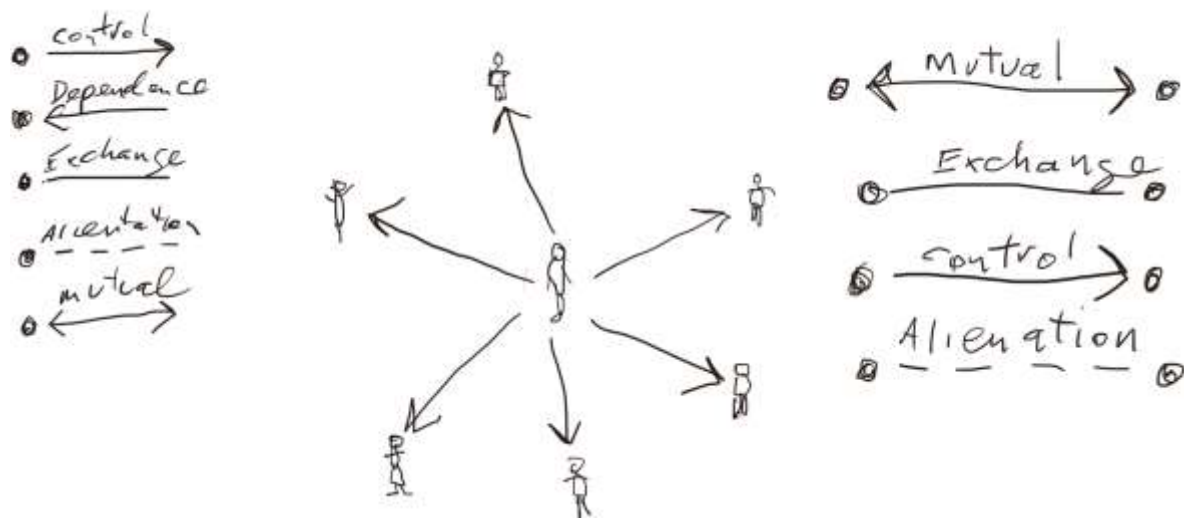
Mal spoke like he was grappling with some new and very different perspectives. He was creating rather than just applying ideas. One lecture focused on “mutuality” which immediately struck a chord with me. I went to see him after the lecture and pursued the idea with him, wanting to know how it could be incorporated in to social work practice more directly. He discussed it with me without offering any clear insights and listened to my ideas and thoughts running with some and asking more questions. I left initially feeling disappointed that Mal had not offered me clear ‘mutuality’ guidelines, but a few minutes later I excitedly realized Mal had very cleverly demonstrated in his process of communicating with me, the whole mutuality approach. He had not assumed the expert position in our conversation, but worked with me in a mutual way to explore the idea. I was so impressed by this congruence and reflexivity that I knew immediately this was someone I could learn a lot from.

My community work lecturer Tony Kelly had got me thinking about social networks and the ways people help each other naturally without professional assistance. Mal had got me thinking about mutuality and the sort of relationships that exist between people and between social workers and their clients. From this, I started to develop my own theory of social networks, which highlighted the interaction between different types of network structures and the particular relationships that make up the network. For example controlling people often put themselves at the centre of the network and at the same time a centralized network tends to encourage controlling relationships. My theory was that all stable relationships could be categorized in to 4 types, alienation, control, exchange and

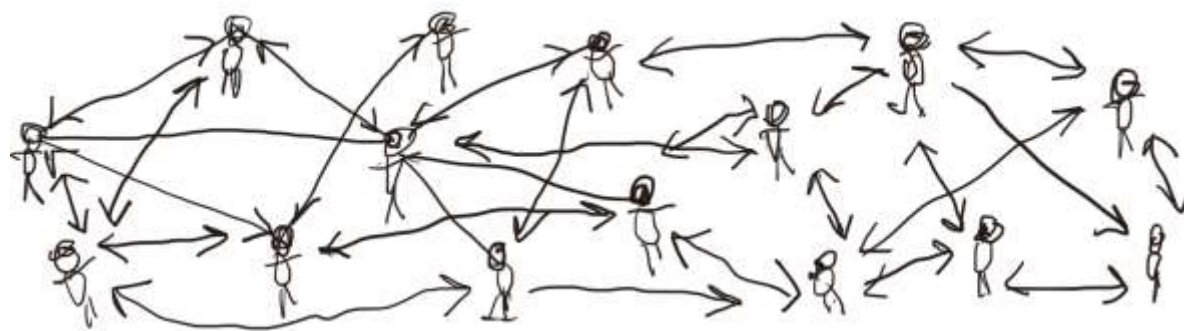




mutual. Each relationship supports and is encouraged by different network structures.



My goal was to encourage more mutual relationships and the sort of network structures that would support this. All this theorizing dovetailed very nicely with the Gandhian approach where flat community based structures and egalitarian relationships were encouraged. Mutual relationships, based on a strong sense of interdependence best captured what nonviolent relationships should look like.



My final placement was a chance to put some of these network ideas in to practice and eventually the ideas were fully explained in my honours thesis. I was honoured that one of the 4<sup>th</sup> year lecturers acknowledged and presented my ideas and theory as part of one of his lectures. I was also very chuffed to be asked to share my theory a year later with the next lot of 4<sup>th</sup> year students. I will describe the theory in more detail in the next chapter.





My final placement while supervised by Morrie involved working very closely with a Catholic parish worker Mal Mc Kenna. Mal was another key role model for me in my early career. He was a very friendly and welcoming person who had an amazing ability to connect with all sorts of people. At the same time he could be very challenging and would enjoy a good argument. He was tremendously dogged and did not easily give up on things important to him, where as I could be easily put off by hostility or indifference. He was an ex-Christian Brother. While now married with kids he still had the goal to live out the gospels. The connections to nonviolent approaches were very clear to Mal with the focus on loving your neighbour like yourself, turning the other cheek and supporting the poor. We became good friends and collaborators for the next few years and I really enjoyed working with him, as he was always so positive and keen to make things fun at the same time. I learnt a lot from Mal.

One of my concerns on placement was about unemployment and how could we create work at the local level. Sugata Dasgupta and Morrie came and spoke to a group of other concerned local people who had been working with Mal to establish an odd jobs co-op. Sugata sowed the idea that we needed to challenge capital intensive industries, to replace the machines with people, just as Mahatma Gandhi had done, to reclaim India's ability to make its own cloth rather than relying on English manufacturing. We began a soap cooperative with this vision in mind. I stayed working in this co-op and others initiated by Mal and I for the next 4 years.

Now at the end of my undergraduate education I felt my career and job prospects were at right angles with my fellow students, who were now all thinking about their future careers and applying for jobs. I think amongst people who enrol in a helping profession, the level of ambition is a lot less than what would be expected in other professions. Nevertheless after 4 years of study on small incomes, most of my peers were certainly looking forward to a well-paid job. I, however had decided to keep working in the worker cooperatives which really meant next to no income. While everyone else was graduating and embracing the achievement of their new graduate/professional status I was at a regular co-op meeting. I felt good about missing the pomp and ceremony of my graduation, reflecting a bit of reverse snobbery. I felt more 'moral', pursuing my social change focus while they participated in an elitist ceremony.







The contrast of ambition was much stronger with my other uni friends who were now moving in to what would become very well paid jobs as lawyers, doctors and dentists. Even friends from school who had left in grade 10 were now in steady work and some were earning big salaries in business. I felt right however to be on a different track.

While most of my peers were heading off to be rewarded by the system I was seeking to challenge and change this system. While confident enough in myself to pursue this there was a small part of me that had mixed feelings. It is hard to escape your culture and I could also feel a sense of failure that I was still doing what I was doing on placement while they were all going off to new and important jobs. I was going to miss out on their income and status. This sense of failure was strengthened, as I could feel this evaluation coming from my peers. They responded with confusion about why I was not applying for a “proper” job. Part of me did feel like I was being left behind.

While in my own mind I saw their ambition as counter to a social change orientation, in many ways I was demonstrating my own perhaps “reverse” ambition and commitment to a certain future. I was perhaps relying on a “holier than thou” attitude to protect my ego. I think I still had much of my father’s ambition in me, it had just taken a new form, and perhaps a very arrogant ambition. Who was I to think that I could change the system, but more over what arrogance to assume I knew what the direction of this change should be. Having some awareness of my confused motivations, I certainly did not disparage any of my friends for their ambition. Mine was really just a different one.

### **Politics – Parties and Demonstrations**

While dad was a businessman, he was also a strong Labor supporter. The election of the Whitlam government in my high school years sparked my interest in politics. In grade 11 dad took me to hear a young Bob Hawke give a talk and we were both impressed. My sister Cathy’s boyfriend Arch Bevis was a fervent Labor supporter. It did not take much to get me to go along to young Labor meetings in grade 12. I felt a real sense of connection to the politics of the day. The idea I could have a say in Labor party policy was very appealing. I remember the first policy discussion I initiated in a young Labor meeting was to do with gun control after seeing an ABC 4 corners documentary on the American gun

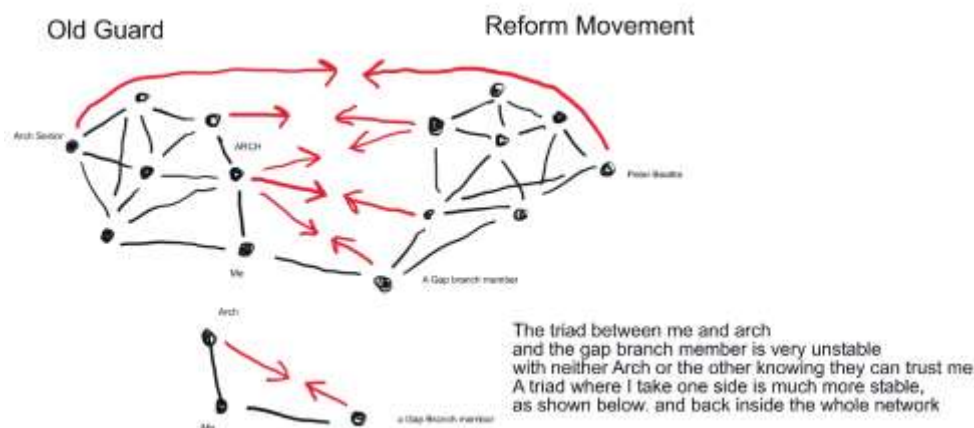




problem. I found it exciting to formulate an argument and join in the debates and discussions taking place.

During my uni years I recruited many of my friends to join Young Labor and later became president of the local Brisbane Young Labor branch. My friends and I now had a way to try to change everything we thought was wrong. At an annual conference, our branch contributed something like a 120 of the 180 policy suggestions from around the state. Our policies did not however win the day at the state conference as we did not understand the political processes in the party and what was involved in gaining support for ones policies. We just assumed they would be taken up because they were good ideas. A way of thinking I still suffer from today.

I also joined The Gap branch of the Labor party. It was good to be in touch with older people who had been supporting change for a long time especially in Queensland where Labor had been in the wilderness for so long. The Gap branch members were keen supporters of the 'reform movement' in the party championed by Peter Beattie, while my brother in law and his father were key members of the 'old guard'. I supported the ideas of the reform movement and attended several meetings. This created an interesting position for me, particularly as I was living with Cathy and Arch at the time. The reform movement directly challenged the power of Arch's father in the Party and Peter Beattie was a potential challenger for Arch's own political ambitions in the federal seat of Brisbane. To his great credit, Arch while arguing his position, didn't pressure me to change my own views. Being connected to two warring factions did put me in a difficult (unstable) network position. Joining one side and having conflict with the other is much more stable.

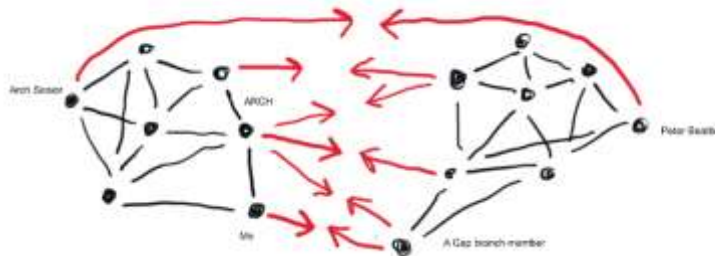




This is now a more stable triad and my relationship at home would be more relaxed. It would however make my position in The Gap Branch very unstable

Old Guard

Reform Movement



Living with Arch was a real insight in to what is involved in a political career. Arch would spend hours on the phone, ringing around different people seeking their support for policies and their backing for various positions he was seeking. The work and energy required was amazing and my sister was very patient and understanding to support him. I knew this was not something I would really be able or want to do. While I like ideas and to imagine new policy possibilities, I did not really have an interest in the hard reality of the bargaining and deals required. Also there seemed to be a lot of enemies to be made in this process and I like to be liked.

In my 2nd year of uni, I participated in student rallies and marches seeking “a living wage for all students” (clearly we lost that one) and bicycle rallies calling for “bikeways not freeways” (turns out this went much better). I later began to attend rallies and marches about nuclear disarmament. I joined a small local group to secretly put up anti-nuclear posters around our suburb. This was the year Joh Bjelki Petersen banned street marches. The protests then shifted to be more about the right to march. I would be a regular attender of the rallies at uni and in King George Square. After the ban, at an anti-nuclear rally it was decided that we would march anyway and be prepared to get arrested. I was one of the 120 people to get arrested on this first occasion. I can remember sitting on the steps getting ready to march. My friends had advised me





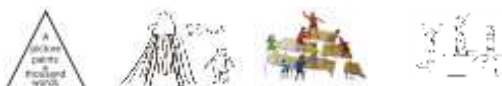
against doing so, as I might never get employment with the government. While very nervous and uncertain of the future risks, I was committed enough at this point and felt obligated to act.

The government had created a farcical situation. The anti-march laws were introduced so protesters would not stop traffic. On this day, the protesters stood on the steps while a police and police cars blocked the road. In very small groups we walked about 20 feet on to the road and then a police person would escort us to the paddy wagon. After feeling very conflicted about whether to march, I felt a real strong sense of pride and freedom on my short 15 meter journey. I was doing what I thought was right despite the consequences and it was a nice feeling. I felt congruent.

This feeling was very short lived as we were bundled in to paddy wagons and taken off to Mt Gravatt watch house as the city watch house was already full by the time I had been arrested. There was a lot of fun and comradery in the cells although I did feel somewhat isolated not having any friends there and nervous not really knowing what would happen next. The civil liberties solicitors worked over time to get everyone out and my brother in law Allan and my sister Cheryl were there in the early hours of the morning to collect me. My family were very supportive, but I would hear later that some of my extended family in the Lockyer Valley (who were Joh supporters) were quite the opposite.

I would get arrested again weeks later and this time would spend a long sleepless night in the city watch house. I attended most of the rallies after this and it was interesting to see different people trying to lead the movement in different directions. Generally there was an open platform where anyone could get up to talk about the cause and to advocate for their particular tactics. A very common debate was about whether to link arms and resist arrest or go without a struggle. This really was a debate between those supporting nonviolence and the International Socialists who were seeking to encourage more physical altercations with the police.

I think I started to lose interest in young Labor around this time, as no one else from my branch had been willing to get involved and I began to question their real commitment to change, and creating a different sort of society. The party's political work was important but it also seemed inherently conservatizing. The





focus was not on changing the structures of society but rather on appealing to enough voters to get in to power so that they could tinker with the system in favour of the workers. More exaggeratedly, my friend Mal McKenna reflecting his anarchist sympathies would say “same shit, different flies”.

I attended a lot more “right to march” rallies and had some very interesting encounters with the police which highlighted the stupidity of the whole thing. One occasion about a hundred protestors met in King George Square. Half way through the rally busloads of police arrived outnumbering us, two to one. While in the middle of the square we pretended to get ready to march in a particular direction and the police would quickly move to get in position on one side of the square. We would then turn around to pretend to march in the opposite direction causing a scurry of police to the other side of the square to prevent us from moving in this direction. We then turned around again. The police eventually tired of this joke and told us to disband or be arrested, and if we moved off in groups of 3 or more we would be arrested. We all headed off, in very small groups. My brother in law Allan started to also come to the rallies and on this occasion we spent half an hour walking around the city being followed by several police to ensure we did not form a bigger group. The waste of police resources was amazing, and highlighted the misuse of police resources by the State and the power of these oppressive elements. Cleverly, Joh was able to use his hard line stance to further entrench his position with his rural base.

I was a foot soldier in all these rallies never trying to take a leadership role. I was there just to make up the numbers and to continue to show my support for the cause. While such actions were useful, the media would lose interest after a while. A couple of other actions at the time were perhaps more effective in shifting public opinion. A group of priests, nuns and clergy were arrested for singing without permission to have a rally. And a dentist got good attention for organizing a street march with just himself and his dog down a suburban St in a rural town at 2am in the morning. These actions helped to start to shift more of the middle ground. It was somewhat comforting to later see the fall of the Bjelki Peterson government and the corruption in the police and the collusion with government exposed. I felt I was at least on the right side of history here and that I played a small part in challenging them.





The involvement in Young Labor and the street marches were great learning experiences. From then on, any thought I may have had, of becoming a politician fell away. There were too many enemies to be made even within people on your own side of politics and there was too many compromises to be made to toe the party line. For what benefit? I felt fundamental change was necessary not just tinkering. Amongst the leaders of the rallies and in the Labor party it was also evident that there was many people with strong ambitions to lead. It was not just that they wanted goals to be achieved, you could see people were jostling for leadership positions. Like any hierarchy, the political hierarchy creates this constant combative and competitive structure in which only a few will succeed and where their success may be very short lived.

### Share house in Mainview Street

After living with my sisters, the move to a share house in my 4<sup>th</sup> year of Uni marked a greater sense of independence and maturity. I had to learn to cook more and negotiate about cooking and cleaning with my flatmates. I really enjoyed this experience although it was often difficult learning to live with other people and their different ways of doing things. It was a very important learning. We got along pretty well and we had some good parties in the house. Romantic pursuits now seemed easier away from the gaze of family. .





One incident at this share house here had a traumatic effect on me (and possibly more than I ever have realized). After about 6 months in the Mainview St house, new neighbours, a couple with a small child moved in next door. After about a week, a very loud fight developed and we could hear window glass smashing and things being thrown around the house. He was yelling and she seemed to be screaming in fear. Our houses were only about 2 feet apart but you could see nothing from the windows. My house mates hesitated about what to do, but I decided to go out the front to see if I could work out more about what was happening. A group of about 5 guys from the boarding house a couple of houses down had also come out on to the footpath to tentatively investigate. I walk past next door which was now quiet to talk to these guys. They told me that the woman had got out of the house and was now safe inside the boarding house. I was relieved. Returning to our house, I could the next-door neighbour was now sitting on the front steps. He had blood all over his hands. I looked up at him and in a stuttering voice asked if he was OK. His eyes lit up with rage. He then picked up a knife that must have been lying beside him, stood up and yelled “you fucking bastard”, and started to move in my direction. At that point I flew back in to our house without looking behind me and shut the door. I was terrified.

Soon, there were several police cars in the street. We could see from our front window that the neighbour was now sitting on the steps with the knife and his child on his knee. The police began a process of negotiating with him. Meanwhile several police climbed in our windows on the opposite side of our house. They quietly moved out through our house in to the backyard and then jumping the fence, entered the neighbour’s back door. The standoff continued for quite a while with the neighbour yelling aggressively back at the police. Eventually the police snuck up behind him and with a very quick struggle disarmed him and took him and the child away in separate cars.

Returning outside to the street to again talk to the guys from the boarding house, I was told my neighbour had actually chased me a few yards up the footpath before he returned to his own home. This reinforced my anxiety. My house mates had not seen any of this chase and we did not talk about it much that night, more focussing on the excitement of all the police action and feeling very thankful that no one was hurt. I started to feel a bit calmer as I assumed my neighbour would not be coming back, but the next day he and his partner were back in the house as if nothing had happened. This was in a way even more traumatizing for me. I



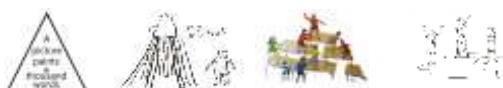


felt very anxious. I now would always be unsafe. My initial thought was that I wanted to move if they were going to stay, but no one else witnessed the knife or the chase and they were less concerned, and we decided as a group to stay. A few weeks later the neighbour said hi over the fence in a nice way and I tentatively reciprocated but I must admit I consciously avoided any future eye contact. I felt very relieved when they moved out a few weeks later. I now wonder how much this incident contributed to my later episodes of anxiety. I wonder if I had actually been able to speak to a counsellor, what difference this may have made to me. I would recount the story from time to time to others, I think to help put it in the past, but it would also reignite the anxiety.

At the end of the first semester in 4<sup>th</sup> year, I handed in my final assignment and then returned to my room in the house feeling very relieved and pleased that all that work was behind me. An hour later I would have all the symptoms of a terrible flu and I can remember being struck by, how I went from being completely well to so awful in such a short space of time. I must have been keeping the flu at bay to get my work done. After the flu had lifted I was left with a constant sense of anxiety that I could not shake. It seemed unrelated to anything going on, uni had finished, and everything else was good. The anxiety went on for a week or so and I eventually went to the doctor who told me it was a common side effect of the flu. I immediately felt better being able to blame my emotional state on a virus. I think this helped me get over the anxiety much more quickly. Whatever its cause, this was my first experience of a prolonged anxiety that did not feel connected to anything in particular and which lasted several days. As the knife wielding neighbour had now moved away, I did not really think it could be related. The idea of post-traumatic stress was not being discussed at this time.

### Romance and Capitalism

During my Uni years, peers from school were getting married and having children. There was a strong societal and family expectation for me to be doing the same. My sisters were having children and I strongly hoped I would one day as well. I remained keen on my first high school girlfriend throughout Uni. My sisters were both married to boys they knew from school, so it seemed my destiny to marry someone from school. As mentioned earlier, she however was not anywhere as keen on this level of commitment and we had an on and off relationship over the 4 uni years. Uni did offer some other romantic ventures. which helped me gain some more relationship maturity and understanding.







This ambition for love and family is very different to the very individualistic capitalist ambition for wealth, power and happiness. The ambition for love and family, predate capitalism, and involve moving from an adolescent focus on the self to a focus on others, to care and protect them. It's an ambition for others rather than just one's own interests. Capitalism could be seen to be stuck in a very adolescent version of ambition focused on individual gain at the expense of others, in a competitive market place. How bad would family life be if this was its underpinning motivation? Of course such motivations do effect family life and we can see plenty of examples where a partner or both are entirely self-focused. This is typically most obvious in divorce situations but perhaps rather than being a consequence of the divorce, the cause may actually be the other way around. I am very concerned that capitalist market style relationships are more and more permeating family life and relationships creating very conflictual, unstable exchange relationships rather than mutual ones.

Capitalism relies on its individualistic ambitions to encourage people to work hard and to sacrifice family life for some future benefit. The capitalist approach to ambition is however a bit like a Ponzi scheme, everyone is offered the same future benefits but this cannot happen, one person's success will be at the expense of others. It has become very apparent that trickledown economics has not worked. Everyone cannot be rich in a capitalist system. A system where self-interest and greed is used as a motivator can never end in equality but rather it builds inequality.

The capitalist ambition however is not just bad for those who lose out in the competitive arena, it is also bad for the winners who need to actively defend their position, always worried about someone trying to take their place and so in a constant state of anxiety and mistrust. In contrast the ambitions of those that want social change is more mutual. They are generally people focused on the needs of others rather than themselves.



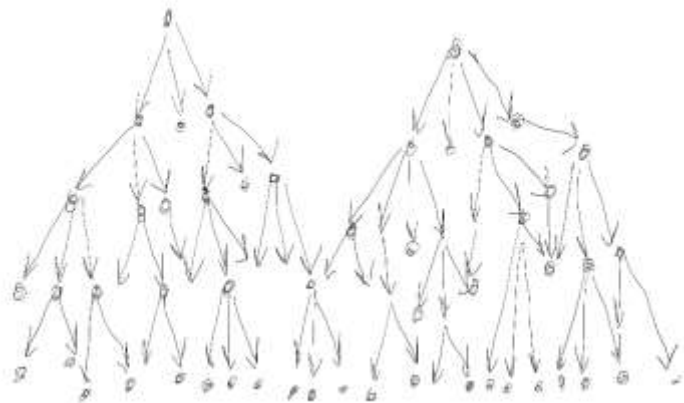


## Ambition

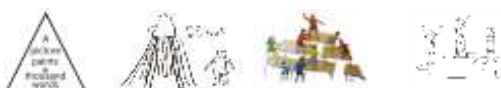
In primary school children were encouraged to do the right thing, to be caring of others for the good of the community and the country. The socialization process was seeking to get children to act in a way that would benefit the whole community. In high school the motivation began to shift to being much more individualistic, and this develops in one's 20s to an explicit embracement of personal ambitions for work, family and education. The goals of young people to be rich and famous provide an energy to ensure young people worked hard in study or apprenticeships to cement their futures. The structures around young people appeal to their individualism to ensure society gets its value from them.

I want to now bring together a few different arguments to explain why the goal of ambition is actually misguided and a destructive one for most people if not everyone, before tracking my own history with ambition. I want to find a better motivational force for our society

The messages from the wider community to young people are presented as if everyone can be successful. The goal is to become the best, to reach the top, to be the boss, to be wealthy. Seen through the blinkers of individualism it sounds like a good thing, but standing back to see the whole, it is clear that it is just a fantasy. To be the best relies on others, to be not so good. To reach the top of a hierarchy of any sort (work, sport, entertainment) means there must be people occupying positions below you including those at the very bottom. To be wealthy is only meaningful, if most are poorer than you and is most meaningful when the inequalities are at their greatest. Success relies on failure. In our hierarchical system, there is by design only a few at the top. It is actually a very weird moral imperative in our society. Everyone is encouraged to be the top of the class, "King of the Castle". However, in a class of 40 only one can be at the top and 39 will not be.



For many, success just does not come very often or the opposite happens, failure follows failure. Some people's lives will have trajectories that are on a continual down slide. So strong is the capitalist culture, that even people on a downward





slide can still be huge supporters of the system, believing their turn will come eventually (if only they work harder or believe more!). Their faith can be maintained when they see someone's success. These supporters never recognize the success of some relies on the failure of others, further they will blame the losers for their own failure.

Uni exams begins a grading process, allowing comparisons between those just passing and those at the top of the class. Those doing better are seen to be more likely to get a good job. Once graduated the ambition shifts from good grades to getting promoted and making more money. The desire for promotion is not just about gaining more income, it is also about status and keeping up with your peers. If you are staying at the same level while your peers are all getting promoted you can feel like you are actually going backwards. Keeping the good feeling of being promoted requires further promotion, staying still will be demoralizing.

There is a powerful societal message that encourages everyone to do their best, and for everyone to succeed, to try harder. This idea that, "if you really want it enough, it will happen" is very common. However, if everyone follows this message and tries harder you will not gain any advantage. There is no limit to this, if the calls grow even louder, to believe you can succeed if you try even harder, and they are taken up by everyone the falseness of this message is revealed. Everyone can be working and trying harder and faster in this race, but everyone will still be stuck in the same position in the race. The only winner is the capitalist/hierarchical system as we are now all trying and working harder for the same reward. It's a hamster wheel.

There is little acknowledgement that most will not achieve their ambitions and that they may only be achieved very briefly if at all. There is little warning given to young people about this reality. The individualistic ethic helps to shield people from this understanding. It also shields them from being concerned about those that fail and fall by the way side. There is very little appreciation that the whole system leads to the unhappiness of many for some to achieve their goals. Soap operas and tv dramas often highlight the terrible backstabbing and ruthless selfishness involved in many careers, but young people fuelled with a selfish ambition identify with the successful and miss the misery of the whole situation.

The successful feel good in comparison to those less successful. Conspicuous consumption to highlight your success is a key feature of this competition. Having a big house, a flash car or a giant barbeque are just different ways to





demonstrate your superiority to others and yet it is never enough when a different neighbour has an even flashier car, house or whatever. Those who are less successful than their peers are left to feel a failure. There is always someone doing better than you. This creates an anxiety about the future, as to whether you will fail or succeed, and a depression about the past in not having achieved what you had hoped or what ones family and or friends expected from you. It creates an energy consuming constant comparison to one's peers. Today's social media has hyped this even further

Capitalist ambition is anti-egalitarian, as relations become competitive where everyone is trying to be better than their friends. It creates a climate where each is always trying to get a bit higher in the pecking order. This is a negative for everyone, as everyone misses out on a mutual connection and is isolated by a rivalry with others.

So I am arguing ambition does not work well for the majority where success is always in the future. I want to also argue that ambition is bad even for the winners. Capitalist ambition is always open-ended and never satisfied. It does not matter how rich you are you can always be richer. No matter how much success you have already had, you need to do even better and this creates a permanent state of restless stress. We have seen plenty of evidence of very unhappy rich, successful and powerful people. If you have had to fight and kick and struggle over others to get to the top you will also know that others will soon be coming for you to throw you from your position. Politics is a clear example. This means success is very transitory and there is constant stress to hold your position whatever level of success has been achieved. Others will be after your position on the way to fulfilling their ambitions. I would argue this is at the core of why so many of us suffer from anxiety and depression in our society. The hierarchical structures we have adopted and embraced as a good thing is actually a recipe for breeding misery. Not only for all those whose ambitions are thwarted but also for those who have succeeded. The system works beautifully at strengthening the hierarchy and people's commitment to it but it is not actually any good for anyone. One mutual relationship in which you really feel unconditionally valued, supported and cared for will be more uplifting for a person than a hundred exchange relationships or a hundred relationships where you have control.

Ambition could be seen like an addiction. It seems like a good idea when you first start but it is never satisfied and involves becoming even more self-centred





and focused to try to become even more successful. There can be a momentary relief or joy when a success happens, but to get to the next success involves more hard work, grind, despair and anger until the next success or promotion 'fix' is achieved. While the goal is to get to the top of the mountain there is always a bigger mountain or a goal to conquer more peaks than anyone else. Ambition is an insatiable value for our society which creates misery, depression and anxiety

As young people begin to move into permanent relationships and have children, the capitalist ambition can become more positive in that it becomes about the whole family and it is not totally self-focused. Nevertheless the same ruthlessness in relation to others can still apply as the ambitious person does whatever they can, to do the best for their family. Also the family benefit can become a convenient excuse to justify the extent to which a person is prepared to climb over other people to get to their goals

Similarly the goal could be an ambition for the whole community or the whole state and in this way ambition becomes the same as nationalism or patriotism where the interests of the country are held as being paramount over the interests of other countries. This is typically a call used by politicians to cement their position, to achieve their own personal ends. There is something more positive about this sort of ambition in that people act to support their community in a selfless way, but it is also far more dangerous as it used to incite and manipulate the whole nation towards actions including military ones, often which we find later was actually in the interest of the elite. Ambition has just shifted up a gear and it is now one group or one country trying to benefit at the expense of their peers

The capitalist culture of ambition is really a clever pathological trick on us all. While the misery it inflicts on everyone is there to see if people are prepared to stand back, its great trick is that it offers solutions to the misery which actually reinforce the whole system. The greater the misery the more people are encouraged to become self-interested and competitive with others. The greater the failure the more people think it's their own personal fault and that they need to try even harder. Ambition is the Capitalist solution to misery, but it actually compounds misery.

While most of my high school peers began to be seduced by capitalist ambition, a few turned their back on the whole thing dropping out, living on the dole and became anti-ambitious hippies. If they had any ambition it was all about being





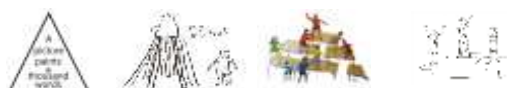
happy. While the goal of opting out could have been to build a new alternative society, for many it was still a selfish motivation where there was no real desire to help in the creation of such a society. It was more about trying to find a nirvana just for themselves in which they could be happy. As a young person I believed a challenge to the existing system was required rather than opting out.

At this time I still think I had not actually escaped capitalist ambition. I still wanted to do well in my studies and I wanted to be successful in changing society and I worked hard. Passing was not really good enough for me I wanted high grades. While my future aspirations were more social than individualistic, there was still an imagining of myself being an important part of social change processes. Now just because I had explicit anti-capitalist goals I was no less immune to implicitly soaking up its societal values. I realized at some point my ambition to be at the centre of change processes was itself a very selfish individualistic thing. I began to see ambition as a bad thing, based on self-interest. I needed to let go of wanting to be personally successful in change processes to focus instead on what needed to happen and to let go of a desire to control the process and actions of others. The social work course was a real help in gaining this understanding.

My emerging commitment to nonviolence lead to a very different sort of ambition, which was actually very scary for me. In nonviolence theory leadership involves sacrifice and a willingness to be at the front of any violent retaliation. Most of the nonviolent heroes suffered violent endings. I have often wondered, how much I was actually prepared to sacrifice. How much was I prepared to go to jail? How much of a simple life style was I prepared to adopt. Should I own a home, rent or perhaps just live a homeless lifestyle. This Gandhian version of ambition did not have many carrots and so I naturally hesitated about my commitment.

### A different goal

What we need instead of selfish ambition is a recognition of our interdependence with everyone. In this framework we can only improve our life if we improve everyone's. To see all humans as of equal value and for our goals to be about improving the lot of everyone. This more egalitarian ambition was at the heart of socialist theory but unfortunately experiments with Socialism often fell foul to





nationalistic ambitions, where control structures dominated without recognizing the interdependence of all.

Had Socialism recognizing human interdependence, a hundred years ago and acting on this, I believe it would have produced a better more egalitarian society. This however would still not be sufficient for today's world. Climate change shows us we can no longer see ourselves as separate and superior to the natural world. The ambitions of human to continue to dominate and exploit the natural world is coming back to bite us all. In particular the vast ambition of the capital elite, who profit from coal and fossil fuels are forsaking a concern about others and the natural world to risk the future of the planet for their own short term greed.

If we are to have ambition it needs to involve everyone and the whole natural world. We need to recognize our interdependence with everyone and everything. The goals of domination is an impossibility, it is an ecological mistake, a pathological error.

We are so imbued in capitalist culture it is hard to clearly imagine an alternative. It is also hard to imagine it is possible to change tack. In my uni years I looked for a positive future where communities had more control over themselves and people worked together locally to solve their own problems and to create neighbourhoods based on mutual relationships where people genuinely supported each other and the community as a whole. Governments would have less power and power would be shifted to the grass roots. Multinationals would have less power and influence and communities would be more self-sufficient. These goals were seen by friends and family as very idealistic and not actually achievable. I was idealistic enough not to be too deterred. People would challenge such goals by reminding me of human history and the continual process of conquest and war and how while it was a nice ideal it could not work, it was a pure fantasy.

It's hard not to be effected by such argument and the doubts it raised. However what I did not realize at the time to my own great embarrassment and shame, and to the failure of the society around me, was that there was a model practiced here across the nation, very successful for 65 thousand years or more. Not only did the custodians of this country recognize their interdependence with each other and surrounding tribes/nations they also recognized the interdependence with the natural world. People did not dominate each other, decision making structures





were very flat. Nature and the land were not there to be dominated, it was part of one's family and identity.

Unfortunately at this time in my life I looked to western thought and philosophy for inspiration rather than my own local history. It would take me another 40 years to uncover what I could have found at the time had I not been blind to the philosophy of the First nations people.

We had in Australia for 60,000 years or more a non-ambitious society where people practicing a very rich and sustainable lifestyle that followed the seasons and established longstanding cultural practices. Being content is a much better objective than ambition, but unfortunately, an ambitious aggressive society has a dangerous advantage over a content peaceful society. We have seen here in Australia how the former quickly over ran and dominated the latter.

What we need is a new approach which can rebuild a fatter more egalitarian mutual society. This will involve undermining ambition, and showing up its failing for the unsuccessful and the successful, where people can be happy and content to be equal and not superior, but we also need to learn from our colonial history to find a way to protect such a new society and its values and aspirations when the violent hierarchical capitalist system seeks to retake its palace as the dominant structure of society. Gandhi and nonviolent resistance seem very relevant, but something else is also required.

### A quick recap

I wanted to do well at Uni. While I almost failed before I got started, I quickly became one of the top students academically. Placement was a place where again I thought I would fall on my face and while I did better than I thought and my supervisors and peers made me feel competent, I have never felt like a top practitioner.

In my wider peer group I was surrounded by ambitious people and it rubbed off on me. While my goals were more altruistic, I was still ambitious to achieve these goals and imagined myself as a key player in this social change movement.

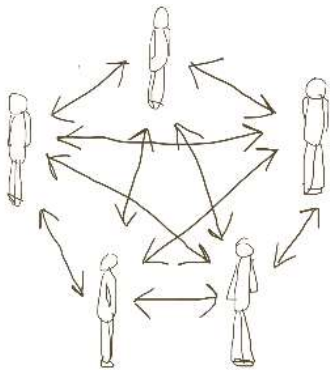






Ambition I now realize is by definition anti egalitarian. Success for one in the capitalist hierarchy can only happen with the failure of many. Ambition further is self-defeating as it creates a relentless churn, where even the very successful are in a constant defensive state to protect their position or to climb further up themselves.

Contentment is a better goal, but the content people need to find a way to protect themselves against the incursions and takeovers of ambitious people



Vs

