

CELEBRATING 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF ACHIEVEMENT OF UNIVERSITY STATUS

W. J. PRYOR
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The history of tertiary education and precursor institutions in Ballarat, and of various enquiries has been told in books by Warren Perry, and Anne Sunter and written about by other authors. So I feel the most useful contribution I can make is to tell of the history of the creation of the University of Ballarat as I experienced it commencing with the BCAE.

MY BACKGROUND

After moving to the family property at Scotsburn, I was elected to the Council of the Shire of Buninyong in December 1987 and appointed to the Council of the then BCAE in August 1988 as the nominee of the Shire, presumably because that Council thought that I might know something about tertiary education. I had been an academic for twenty years both in Australia (University of Queensland) and New Zealand (Massey University) ultimately becoming Professor and Dean.

In 1990 I alerted the President of the time, Mr Ian Gordon, that I was likely to finish my local government career at the next election and following this advice Council appointed me as a co-opted member. It so happened that at that time I had more experience of universities than anyone on the campus, staff or Council, no doubt partly due to my age.

In 1990 I was appointed Vice-President of the Council of the Ballarat University College, as it had then become, and in 1992 President, in

which position I remained until 31 December 1993 when the Ballarat University College ceased to exist as a legal entity.

THE PUSH FOR A UNIVERSITY

Although the notion that this institution might or should become a university some day had been the subject of comment from time to time, no specific steps to achieve this had occurred until the October 1992 meeting of the Council where, following the report from the Strategy Committee of which I was also the Chairman, Council took a historic decision to formally seek the creation of Ballarat University. Tactics to achieve this were developed and the long process commenced. The Council resolution identified a commencement date of not later than 1/1/95 but it transpired that an earlier start would be possible.

By virtue of the affiliation agreement of BUC with the University of Melbourne Mr Ian Gordon, the other nominee of the BUC Council, and I attended all MU Council meetings. Ian is a former long-term President of the BCAE Council. At the social functions held at the end of every such meeting, we used the opportunity to speak informally with Sir Edward Woodward, Chancellor, and Professor David Penington, Vice-Chancellor and on one such occasion apprised them of the October 1992 decision of Council. Shortly afterwards early in November 1992, I wrote to the Chancellor inviting him and Professor Penington to be our guests at luncheon to discuss the BUC objective with John Sharpham and myself.

Responsibility for the luncheon was taken out of our hands with a nice twist when Sir Edward, in fact, invited us to join Professor Penington

and himself in one of the private dining rooms at University House in Melbourne. I had planned to be the host but ultimately we two became the guests!

During the lunch we outlined what the Ballarat Council was seeking to do re university status and sought their support, clarifying matters as necessary. Later in the lunch our hosts informed us that they would support BUC's application. I found Sir Edward then and subsequently to be not only astute but also warm and genuine in every respect, and of course he was born in Ballarat! I'll leave others to comment on David Penington's role but he clearly indicated his support of the application and offered a sponsorship role. Our joy was considerable. The first hurdle had been negotiated.

I received no response from the office of the relevant minister, Haddon Storey, to my fax of 29 October 1992 requesting an early meeting. On 8 December 1992 I released a press statement which argued that Ballarat had a right to a university and gave, in addition, a host of more logical reasons. This tactic was suggested to me by Mr Stan Jones QC, Chancellor of the University of Central Queensland, who I visited in 1992 because his university had a history rather similar to that of Ballarat. I wrote again to Mr Storey on 8 December and included the press release. It seemed to do the trick as I received a response on 23 December arranging for officer-to-officer discussions. This may also have been helped by his visit to the College and to my home at Scotsburn to dinner on 4 December 1992 in company with Mrs Storey, Dean Frank Hurley and Mrs Hurley, John Sharpham and Gwenda McManus, his personal assistant. That dinner was memorable for a number of aspects not least of which was Mrs Cecile Storey's refreshing directness. Sadly she died in 1997.

A period of intense activity followed including many visits to Melbourne. I may not have recorded every meeting held there though 1993 certainly saw a flood of correspondence between Haddon Storey and myself on the university issue. I checked recently and was startled to find that I had sent him over twenty official letters in 1993, five in May alone. I don't think the latter did us much good as he acknowledged all five of them in a single letter! The Director and I attended many meetings in Haddon Storey's office. During a professional consultancy assignment in Perth I even flew back overnight on the 'red-eye horror' to be in time for one of the critical meetings with the minister.

We even invited the Premier to address the 1993 graduation – subtle stuff. But he only gave cautious support!

There was so much activity during 1993, that both John Sharpham and I had car phones, mine newly installed, which proved essential for speedy communication. It was an energising and exciting period. I spent more than one-third of the year working from the President's office of BUC, working not only on the university application but also on the Development Appeal which was taking shape and requiring attention.

After appropriate discussion between the institutions, the President of SMB Council, WJ (Bill) Gribble and I signed a formal affiliation agreement between SMB & BUC on May 4, 1993 in the Town Hall. Apart from the strong desire for close cooperation we thought this might satisfy government that a suitable measure of linkage had

occurred rather than the full amalgamation into a single university which was being suggested but which was unacceptable to the SMB..

On 1 June 1993 Haddon Storey wrote and also issued a press statement that the government's response to our application for university status was to set up a review panel to advise the government on the BUC application. A lot of work was done by the Director and staff to prepare the documentation which was highly praised. The panel comprised three vice-chancellors and two bureaucrats, one state and one federal. (I didn't ever understand why a Liberal government didn't appoint a Chancellor or a Deputy-Chancellor to chair this committee. BUC certainly requested this.)

Arrangements for the visit of the review team to the BUC on 17 June 1993 were very comprehensive and we also included in the programme a meeting with civic leaders at the Ballarat Town Hall as the final part of the visit. We sought six suitable contributors to each give to the review panel a five minute address indicating the attitude of the community to the university proposal.

We had finally decided that the following should speak for the community: The Mayor, John Hayden (businessman), Councillor Judith Coull (local government), Peter Byrne (solicitor), Jim Pryor (consultant surgeon), Dick de Fegely MLC and finally Bill Gribble, President of the SMB Council who assured the panel of the SMB's strong support for the BUC'S application. As a group they were just magnificent, succinct and forceful. In fact when I drove the review panel chairman (Professor Bob Smith) back to his motel later, he told me that the group had made a very strong impact on the panel.

I like to think that the occasion, together with the formal documentation from the BUC and the petition organised by Peter Davies along with the blandishments arising from our office, helped the panel to write a final report which was very positive - not that the BUC Council subsequently agreed with every recommendation.

When the report was duly released the BUC Council's comments were sought. We welcomed the main thrust of the report but raised our objections which broadly covered three areas namely: the name, the modus operandi and membership of the projected Planning Advisory Committee and some aspects of the proposed sponsorship by Melbourne University .

In a further flurry of correspondence and meetings I made it clear to the Minister that BUC **did not** support the establishment of a Ballarat University of Technology, **did not** want the Planning Advisory Committee charged with recommending a new Council chaired by a university employee and thought that the proposed sponsorship arrangements were too long and somewhat restrictive. My letter of 10 August 1993, Pryor to Storey, gives more detail.

Shocked to read this week where I then said in the media, "will not countenance any other name except U of B"

As already mentioned the attitude of the School of Mines to the proposal that it be included in the new university was an important peripheral issue. Its Council on 24 August made it very plain it had never been consulted on this proposal and wanted no part of it. However some very good things emerged from this period, I believe, some quite personal. The President of the SMB Council and I had

increasingly frequent contact and at the personal level confidence was built. I've said flippantly before that perhaps it's because we're both fourth generation descendants of Cornishmen that our relationship has been so cordial and constructive and continues so.

The BUC Council strongly supported SMB's right to make its own decision and relations at Council level have continued to be good. It must be said however that this was not the case with respect to John Sharpham, and the SMB Council's lack of confidence in John has been a difficulty.

The Commonwealth Government, as reported in the Ballarat Courier of 1 October 1993, by offering a financial inducement, made a rather crude attempt, I thought, to persuade the SMB to join the university but were given short shrift by WJ Gribble and his Council "who objected to Commonwealth comments which could be interpreted as threats." I commented at the time that that the new University Council would work smoothly with their counterparts in the SMB and any change in relationship that might occur would result from genuine discussions and mutual respect.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

A message from the Premier's office requested the Director and myself to appear there at an appointed hour on 8 October 1993 to participate in the Premier's announcement (of which we knew no details) about the future of a university. After we had been chatting for a period in the anteroom with local members of parliament and with Haddon Storey and some of his staff, the Premier entered and said that at a press

conference to be held shortly he was to announce the intention of government to bring in an act to establish the University of Ballarat, great news to be sure. The SMB was not to be involved in the University at this stage.

In any event the Premier announced, and Haddon Storey confirmed in writing, that the government had decided to bring in an act of parliament to establish the University of Ballarat. Ballarat was delighted.

We returned to Ballarat for a celebration in the Director's suite, also attended by local members of parliament and senior university staff. The Courier covered this function well with a front page picture of us and parliamentary colleagues toasting the new university.

Next day Minister Storey's formal letter (Storey to Pryor, October 8) arrived spelling out the above decision and gave a detailed response to BUC's concerns. The response was not universally popular with me, nor later with Council, but the main game was over. My concerns, which Council endorsed, centred on the shabby way that government was treating valuable BUC Councillors by restricting their number in the new Council to two, on the composition of the Planning Advisory Committee and the arrangements for sponsorship by Melbourne University which I have mentioned above.

THE PLANNING ADVISORY COMMITTEE (PAC)

The PAC was established in effect to plan and implement the conversion of BUC to the University of Ballarat. I was one of the six

appointees. I frankly did not greatly enjoy my service on the PAC. The Melbourne-based members seemed to believe they had nothing to learn about what we might know of the capacities of some names suggested.

The fact that the Director and I were not wholly of one mind about the value of certain BUC Councillors was also a difficulty. No doubt this difference reflected our different standpoints: I was thinking of their value as Councillors, he perhaps as potential employers of the new Vice-Chancellor!

Of course the PAC made no appointments. It recommended a longish list to government who made all the final decisions. Subsequently it was embarrassing for me to try to explain the government's decisions to former BUC Council members whose contributions I greatly respected and who were willing to continue to serve.

However on 9 December 1993 at the final dinner of the BUC Council and special guests, I was able to tell every member of the final Council individually and publicly what regard I had for them and to present a plaque to each recording the historic occasion.

CREATION OF THE COUNCIL AND THE UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT

The act of parliament that established the University of Ballarat was duly promulgated in November 1993 and the invitations to members of Council followed. I was phoned by Dr Ian Allen from the Minister's office conveying an invitation to serve on the new Council. Though reluctant at first I accepted mainly on two grounds:

1 That I probably possessed the greatest corporate memory on the new Council. (David Fiskin, the only other BUC Councillor, had been a more recent appointment, likewise Pamela Davies who represented the SMB Council.)

2 That since Geoffrey Blainey had been appointed Chancellor and he was the only one of the six names submitted to the Minister as potential Chancellors for whom I had any enthusiasm, I believed I would find it agreeable to serve under him and at least be available to support him as a Deputy if Council so wished.

Of the first Council it was said “not surprisingly there was a liberal tinge to the political affiliation of some members.

RELATIONS WITH THE DIRECTOR

I've had the privilege of attending major activities of other universities such as installation of chancellors, silver anniversaries and an Association of Commonwealth Universities Congress in Swansea, Wales. I was much impressed with the words of the Honourable Richard McGarvie, Governor of Victoria at an installation when, in reference to relationships between Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors, he said *inter alia*: “I consider that a university works best where the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor are and are seen to be working in cooperation.”

Throughout the drive for the creation of the University of Ballarat I tried hard to do this. I can say without reservation that our working relationship was intense, energising and even exciting and apart from an isolated instance very cordial. We were in constant communication

both face-to-face and by phone or by car-phone, discussing arrangements, tactics and reviewing each step. There was scarcely a working day when we were not in communication except when either of us was overseas. John visited my home on several occasions and I think we were both helped by the support of my wife Ann in our mission. I certainly was. At the end of the year John wrote to express appreciation and included her role.

I did have difficulty coming to terms with what seemed to me to be John's obsessive search for personal media attention, sometimes at the expense of Council. Presumably he saw the need to be a successful publicist as a critical part of his job, but I would have preferred a more even recognition of the Council role and in retrospect found this applied even more.

FINALE

Over the years I've reflected from time to time on the events of 1992-93 I've concluded that perhaps I made a reasonable contribution, having spent about a hundred days in 1993 working for it. Though it was a good deal of time for an **honorary** officer of the Council to spend, especially given my other professional activities, I saw it as being very necessary at that stage of history. I think that my great grandfather who migrated to Australia and came to Garibaldi, near Buninyong, in 1853, my grandfather, three times Mayor of Ballarat, and my father equally active in public affairs, would have agreed it was a proper level of public service.

I should say that without doubt there have been great pleasures too. When I moved to live permanently in Scotsburn at the end of 1987 to

establish an international veterinary consultancy business and be an active woolgrower on the old family property, I thought that my university days were over, but I was wrong on two counts. In 1988 I was appointed Chairman of the Australian Veterinary Schools Accreditation Committee (AVSAC) which took me regularly to the five Universities of Melbourne, Sydney, Queensland, Murdoch and Massey (NZ) where I led in-depth analyses of veterinary faculties.

But far more important than this was my involvement with Ballarat where I was until recently immersed to some degree for fourteen years and I've enjoyed immensely the friendship of so many academic and administrative staff members, many linkages in the Ballarat community, particularly including the former President of the Council of the School of Mines and his colleagues, many in the media, parliamentarians and municipal leaders. The pleasure has been mine and to have led the drive for the creation of the University of Ballarat I regard as a rare honour.

I leave it to others to describe subsequent changes including the amalgamation of the three institutions arranged in 1997 in which I was happy to be involved. My hope is that this university will continue to evolve and serve the wider community but never forget the importance of the pursuit of knowledge through scientific rigour and research in any organization that dares to call itself a university.

WJ Pryor

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