

Queensland political culture and preparing for the G20

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Background

On Thursday 6 November I attended a panel session 'Policing in a mature democracy' hosted by the Caxton Legal Service in conjunction with the three Brisbane university law schools. Its advertised purpose was to discuss the implications the Brisbane G20 will have for protest and policing.

The gathering was chaired by the ubiquitous Paul Barclay for one of ABC Radio National's 'Big Ideas' broadcasts going to air on Wednesday 12 November 9.05pm. The recorded segment was followed by a 'question-and-answer' session.

The panellists were Tim Costello (Head of World Vision Australia and chair of the C20 Steering Committee, Dr Tim Soutphommasane (Race Discrimination Commissioner), Assistant Commissioner Katarina Carroll (Queensland Police Service), Walter Sofronoff (former Solicitor-General of Queensland), and Professor Simon Bronitt (TC Beirne School of Law, UQ).

Impressions

Everyone in the large audience gathered in the Brisbane Supreme Court's Banco Court will have taken away different messages. The informative evening generated a flood of impressions for this former political scientist. Drawing on first-hand experience of pre-Idi Amin Uganda, and then Belfast at the height of the 1970s 'Troubles', I have lectured and written on the politics of violence. I have lived and worked in Queensland since 1976, interrupted by a turbulent period in a tertiary institution in Canberra between 1987 and 1990. The evening's proceedings brought together these two disparate experiences.

Paul Barclay had previously chaired with great insight a Brisbane discussion on 'Civics and Citizenship' sponsored by the Australasian Study of Parliament Group (broadcast on 13 October). Panellists for that discussion included John-Paul Langbroek MP (Queensland Minister for Education, Training and Employment), the Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne, Professor Glyn Davis (a former senior bureaucrat in Queensland under successive ALP governments before becoming Vice-Chancellor at Griffith University), Dr Barry McGaw (Chair of the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority - also with Queensland connections) and David Hamill, former Queensland Education Minister and Treasurer.

The title of that event was 'Don't you worry about that: there's no need for civics education'. This was a self-conscious historical reference to the premiership of Bjelke-Petersen and his anti-intellectual brand of populism. However there was little discussion by the 'Civics and Citizenship' panel, or by the 'Policing in a Mature Democracy' panellists of the political culture which supported and rewarded this populism. It was disappointing that Barclay did not make an explicit connection between civics education and the Queensland social context of the G20.

Media in search of 'good story'

What Barclay did do very expertly was manage a range of diverse contributions of varying immediate relevance to the G20 preparations. His most potent comment

focussed on the 'news value' pursued by all the media (ABC radio included) which required something remarkable such as bad behavior or threats to public order before showing interest. A peaceful demonstration of dissent made a poor media story compared with one that turned violent and/or required a police response.

This point was underlined in the wide-ranging contribution from Assistant Commissioner Katarina Carroll, the officer responsible for the QPS response to G20 events, and a frequent presence on Brisbane television screens over the past few months. She reported how when she provided a very long statement to the media, comments about the peaceful intentions and good behavior of police, their expertise in training, and their close co-operation with registered protest groups was always edited out. Her final brief qualification about the justification for strong action if things appeared likely to create disorder always got the headlines and became the focus of media discussion. Her frustration with the media was palpable: the media were feeding the suspicion about the police which had become ingrained in Queensland, inherited from the worst of the Bjelke-Petersen era of repression, and reinforced by more recent clashes over indigenous issues.

Clarifying the rules for the protest groups

To some extent the extended exchanges between Carroll and former Solicitor Walter Sofronoff – balanced and low-key – were framed by this political culture. Carroll was able to point to the breadth of consultation with publicly-identified protest groups, to the extended research on similar events overseas and in other states and to the close working relationship across all the organisations concerned with the preservation of public order and the judicial protection of individual liberties.

Their dialogue focussed in detail on the specifics of the relevant legislation and its implementation through regulations and advice for protest groups. Sofronoff and Carroll exchanged views on the range of items prohibited for those participating in a demonstration or present inside protected areas. Uncertainty emerged about advice police had given the protest groups that over-size banners, loud-hailers and (more problematically) soft drink bottles were banned. Representatives of protest groups asserted that they had received such advice from police liaison officers, but Carroll gave the impression that at least some of the advice might be subject to a re-think.

Sofronoff also offered an extended hypothetical defence of the right of demonstrators to wear masks, even though this item is on the proscribed list published in the press, but ignored in the recent 'practice run' by Anonymous demonstrators. Sofronoff argued that the mask could be justified if it was an intrinsic part of the message, such as skeletons to emphasise the fight against global hunger.

Sofronoff had cast off his previous bureaucratic/public prosecutor persona (as Solicitor General) in favour of reverting to an earlier life in the 1970s, in the role of defence counsel for hypothetical demonstrators. He described how the justification for arrests in the past had often allowed police to detain someone for asserting he or she was using obscene language, the detention was then escalated to 'resisting arrest', and ultimately to 'assault of a police officer'. Generally magistrates held that the police officer was a more reliable witness than the demonstrator.

Accountability and transparency - police and protesters

The advent of mobile telephone photography has created a new transparency for all participants. Assistant Commissioner Carroll was asked about whether individual police would be identifiable, and confirmed that they would more readily identifiable than they had in the days of Bjelke-Petersen, and were required to be clearly numbered. She also pointed out that important lessons had been learnt from

London, and especially Toronto, to avoid confrontation and seeking to disperse rather than concentrate protesters. The Caxton Legal Service itself would be an important actor with its sponsorship of legally-trained observers.

Professor Simon Bronitt provided an overview of the broader legal context; as a counterpoint Jonathan Sri (the Greens Candidate for South Brisbane - member of the audience) contributing from the perspective of demonstration organisers.

The C20¹ - the other agenda

Tim Costello, CEO of the C20 ([The G20 will be judged on fairness says C20](#)), is an established media presence and his 'door-stop' interview was covered by evening newscasts while the session was still in progress. In the forum itself, he was able to draw upon parallels with demonstrations he had witnessed at a large number of international centres and often of overwhelming size, such as climate change marches in New York - at which Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott was notably absent. Costello also linked the rising concern for inequality and the frequent public policy response of instituting austerity programs - which increased this inequality. His best throw-away remark noted that even Rupert Murdoch seemed recently to have discovered inequality, at least for other people.

Tarnishing Australia's image as a tolerant democracy

Costello also drew attention to the poor image created by major international organisations being banned by the Brisbane Airport Corporation from using billboard displays, on climate change and financial corruption. Both are agenda items for the G20, but climate change is still being 'shunted to the back' as a result of the Abbott government's climate change denial. The rationale given by the Corporation was that the advertisements were 'too political'. This was not a 'good look' in a tolerant democracy encouraging free speech. *The Guardian* covered this story in depth ([G20-climate-change-ad-banned-by-brisbane-airport-due-to-political-intent](#)) noting that Chevron Oil's self-promotion against climate change activists posed no problems for the Airport Corporation, nor did the Newman government's controversial claims about the neutral impact of its coal mining policies on the Barrier Reef.

One can only speculate why the Corporation lost the opportunity to reinforce an image of Australia encouraging free speech and dissent in contrast to so many other countries attending G20. Was it at the direction of their Federal political masters, or was this an example of the worst kind of timid self-censorship? Are climate change and political corruption areas where Liberal governments have their own Achilles heels, best concealed from the rest of the world?

Mixed messages confusing the public

I had hoped, in question time, to follow up with a wider question about the image which the local organisers of the G20 wished to project to Brisbane's overseas visitors and the much-vaunted opportunities to promote tourism via the visiting media contingents. I wanted in particular to point to another 'bad look' - the Brisbane City Council's decision to choose this week to close an indigenous community centre for urgent repair and renovations. The organisers of the indigenous G20 protest movement were thus expelled and deprived of access to a strategically-placed building. The TV news the previous night had a close-up of locked premises, ejected goods, protests at a council meeting and disgruntled former occupants. Fortunately, I was too low in the list of questioners to get the nod. By the time the forum was over

¹ The C20 (or 'Civil Society 20') is a platform for dialogue between the political leaders of G20 countries and representatives of civil society organisations. 'Through the C20, civil society can have a say in the discussions shaping our global economy.' (C20 website).

the matter had been quietly resolved, almost certainly following informal police intervention.

This begged the even bigger question, raised by both Sofronoff and Costello. What were the expected benefits of locating the G20 and all its proven security problems in the middle of a significant urban concentration? Toronto was hardly a good omen.

Mixed messages had been transmitted by national, state and local political leaders seeking to answer this question. Prime Minister Abbott had talked of the boon that he was conferring on Brisbane and Queensland in terms of international recognition. Queensland Premier Campbell Newman had much to say about the benefits for attracting business investment but apologized to everyone using or living in the city centre for the inconvenience. An offer to pay \$200 to each person inside the restricted area to take a holiday was apparently not taken up, but resort operators across southern Queensland reported a startling increase in bookings from Brisbane as the city's residents took advantage of an unexpected public holiday weekend.

Then the Lord Mayor of Brisbane weighed in, concerned that the Brisbane public had been alarmed about all the heavy police protection, the army presence, paratroop security forces doing night exercises, three levels of personal search, cancellation of public transport and physical barriers to usual South Bank recreation haunts. Heavily under-publicised cultural attractions might wither from lack of interest and Lord Mayor Graham Quirk feared the world's media would report on empty streets and proclaim a boring city. That his fears were well founded was confirmed by a report 'Where the bloody hell are ya?' in the Brisbane Times on 12 November.²

The cliché of the not-absent pachyderm

Finally, the Race Relations Commissioner, Dr Tim Soutphommasane, recognising the international focus on Islamic identity and ISIS, was able to report positively on the success of large Muslim demonstrations in Melbourne and the negotiations that took place which reassured the Australian and Brisbane Muslim population. This was the only time that the word 'terrorism' was uttered all evening.

Conceptually, terrorism remains near the end of the spectrum of political dissent - violence in the form of international wars and civil wars are at the extreme at that end of the spectrum. At the other end lies civilised discourse such as letter-writing, petitions, delegations to power-holders and parliamentary debate – even if debate seems uncivilised at times. Peaceful demonstrations come in after normal interest group lobbying, just after bribery and political donations (the two often indistinguishable).

The degree to which the protests turn out to be peaceful may condition the success or failure of the political strategy of agreeing to host the G20 in Brisbane. Very large protest crowds, such as those who attended CND, Vietnam and American civil rights demonstrations, undoubtedly send a strong political message if politicians are concerned about voting behavior. (Tianamen Square and recent events in Hong Kong suggest sheer numbers matter less in China).

Alternatively the media may be attracted by, and politicians need to respond to, the impact of violence at demonstrations. A smaller protest for a minority cause that becomes violent and threatens public order, requiring a police or military response, gets headline attention as a public policy issue. This is the undiscussed 'appeal' of G20 for terrorists as well as demonstrators because it will be noticed by the world media. Thus the G20, in particular, has the potential for violent attention-seeking.

² <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/brisbane-g20/g20-set-to-turn-brisbane-into-ghost-town-20141112-11kq8c.html>

On the face of it, the local demonstrators, media, and public perceptions of the police may all be conditioned by the past – Springboks, Vietnam, civil rights in Selma or Belfast. Belfast got 'nasty' when a peaceful student-based march was set upon by Protestant extremists at Burntollet Bridge near Londonderry, aided by an official police militia called the 'B Specials'. Shortly after that, the IRA joined the fray with bombs and bullets. Eventually the British army had to be sent in to restore public order by separating the combatant communities, and it has taken years of rebuilding to establish confidence in the local police. In Queensland the notorious 'Special Branch' was closed down in 1989 on the recommendation of the Fitzgerald Inquiry, having been accused of being a political tool, used by the government to investigate political opponents, but the memory of that particular Big Brother has not entirely faded.

But this is not 1970s Belfast, nor is it Brisbane in the 1970s. There are now new circumstances where nastiness has expanded in scope and intensity, requiring greater sacrifices of individual rights, so the attitude of Brisbane people may be like generals still fighting the last war. The technologies available to all the participants have changed beyond recognition, which makes the events easier to monitor on one hand, but even more unpredictable on the other.

The local media have been playing the terrorist card for all its worth, with alarmist headlines which sell newspapers and engender disquiet. But none of this was mentioned at the forum. People with long memories continue to be wary of the good intentions of the police. What we heard from Assistant Commissioner Carroll was reassuring and she deserves all the accolades that have flowed in her direction for her 'open communication' approach to an extremely difficult task. The official terrorist threat level was raised well after the decision to hold G20 in Brisbane had become virtually irreversible - unlike the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in March 2002, which was hastily moved from Brisbane to Coolum after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre.

What was even more impressive was the confidence that Assistant Commissioner Carroll generated – for me at least – by apologizing for what she could not say - that there was a great deal of activity going on, working with a wide range of different organisations, to deal with the more threatening potential scenarios. External observers can, naturally enough, only see the tip of the security iceberg. Brisbane has had to implement a different level of security planning to underpin the more obvious confrontations of demonstrators exercising their rights to express dissent about government policies and consequently disturb public order.

The G20 is a unique case study, taking place on our Brisbane doorstep, of how a civilized society can cope with emerging challenges to a peaceful existence. Locating G20 here has been a gamble, initiated by Labor governments in Canberra and Brisbane and then endorsed by the current incumbents, which pits the value of political grand-standing about a range of government policies (and ancillary commercial benefits) against the unpredictability of G20 meetings potentially stimulating democratic and undemocratic challenges to public order across the full range of violent responses, terrorism not excluded.