

Remembering the Rainforest Information Centre, Australia

Part 3

by *Divish Petrof*

Melbourne Rainforest Action Group (1990)

After a few days in the lock-up in H.M. Pentridge Goal* we were informed we would be let out immediately provided we sign an undertaking to not return to the protest site in South-East Forests. In our hearts each one of us individually refused to sign up to this devious offer, which I believe was aimed at making our surrender slightly, seemingly honourable. Necessarily after that, we had to start bracing ourselves for the real possibility of a prolonged stay in jail.

But in the meantime our support team worked hard. Though I actually did not follow the media reporting, there was apparently a wide and overall sympathetic coverage of the old-growth forests conservation issue, and our particular campaign to save the ones in East Gippsland. And, as more freshly arrested protesters were arriving in jail, the authorities seemed anxious to defuse the situation from it potentially developing into a more widespread civil unrest.

This would also not be the first, nor the last time, that I witnessed a subversive strategy of the ruling elites working at a well paid job. Namely, the purveyors of the dominant narrative were once again attempting to shortfuse a genuine grassroots movement. Our protect the wilderness movement was aiming for a fundamental political ethics change and our opponents responded by a clever use of promissory and conciliatory language. The counter-protests campaign consisted of a skilful use of language in order to make objectors to the dominant narrative believe that their voices and reasons were actually being considered seriously. This subversive strategy bought the ruling circles time and thus allowed them to plan their further moves. In the meanwhile, the main body of protesters would be, sooner or later, forced by sheer existential necessity to eventually return to their regular daily lives.

So it happened that, without any prior warning, and to the utter surprise of our jailed contingent, the lot of us protesters were one fine day released, with all charges miraculously and unconditionally dropped. There were no fines and no need to fear potential subsequent subpoenas. We walked out of the old imposing building of H.M. Pentridge Gaol to a sizeable and welcoming reception of supporters and the media, all stationed on the wide stone stairs in front of the more than architecturally remarkable building. Our supporters were a mix of individuals with diverse affiliations but I believe the majority were from the self-organised Melbourne Rainforest Action Group (MRAG).

MRAG was one of a number of rainforest action groups at that time in existence in the major cities of Australia. They sprung to existence in response to the work of Lismore's RIC and in particular John Seed's educational tours and road shows. In my evaluation, two pressing forest conservation issues, one international and one domestic, were the inspiration for MRAG's activities. The international issue was, in our part of the globe, the ongoing destruction of the still remaining tropical rainforests through logging and monoculture crop agriculture development in places such as the Solomon Islands and Borneo (e.g. oil palm plantations). Australia's involvement in this environmental and social piracy consisted of purchasing massive amounts of timber, of a range of tree species,

extracted from those rainforests. The domestic issue at that time was the protection of East Gippsland's, Victoria, old growth forests (South-east Australia).

As we were being let out of gaol, I was confronted by the unreserved camaraderie of a throng of high-spirited supporters. They would not let us become a sacrificial offering to the mainstream philosophical agenda of quick short-term economic gain. The support given us was neither an institutionally sanctioned, nor an non-rational act. Rather, I was experiencing what I would call the spirit of true humanity. A grassroots support extended to us from those of one heart. "Getting closer to paradise" is the metaphor that comes to my mind. If asked who our diverse supporters worked for I imagine a reply along the following line:

"We are the Melbourne Rainforest Action Group. We work for ourselves. We work for ourselves because we work for the Earth."

When I walked out a free citizen I had not the slightest idea of what might be ahead of me. I had no particular plans, no expectations, and no personal connections in Melbourne. I had left my tent and personal belongings back in the protest camp and was assured by comrades there they would be looked after in case of my arrest. On the imperial gaol stairs was also Bullfrog, the man who ran the protest camp kitchen and pantry. In Lismore he lived in the RIC compound in the cottage house that stood between the residential house and the office house. This cottage no longer stands as it collapsed in the 2022 floods. Bullfrog came up and offered us to stay at his place in Eltham, an outer suburb of Melbourne, which he shared with two other people. Simon and I gratefully accepted. At the house we were reunited with Viking Glenn, aka The Pirate, an old-growth forest activist from Lismore.

Bullfrog's was the first of three places I stayed at during my four months in Melbourne. After going to a hospital for several days with serious septicemia – the result of a neglected tropical ulcer on my right foot – I and Simon stayed briefly at Anthony's, a bright beatnik-type activist. His cat's name was Pushkin. During my stay there an over-filled passenger carload of us went for a day's trip to Wilson's Promontory. It was a windy day with overcast skies. At Anthony's Simon assisted with my further post-hospital recovery from the staphylococcus blood infection (septicemia) by taking me to a Chinese medicine practitioner, who actually also happened to be a genuine Chinese man.

The third place I stayed at was Cameron's, our fellow jailed activist from earlier on. Cameron shared the rented two storey house with Clair and Danny, two other activists. The host trio was providing a number of nomadic activists with a place to stay, meet others, and plot. Of these I remember a few by name. Barney and his Butch brother, Lisa who later worked at RIC, Len from Brisbane RAG, slim Ashley, happy Sandra, Viking, smiley Steve, and the unforgettable reggae musician Tony Wandella who one weekend brought his muso friends over for practice. Here I stayed the longest and it was a time of persistent activism. Melbourne RAG ran weekly meetings in a large rented room in the city. Barney, a mellow character with long hair and a few freckles, was usually the man, sometime with the help of his Butch brother, to get a load of us to the venue in his VW. Barney knew how to smile.

There were several actions I took part in in the course of my four months in Melbourne. Here I list them but their order may not be chronologically accurate:

- The Cage

- Women's Protest
- The Bulldozer
- The Ducks
- The Ship
- The Banner

The Cage was an action staged in Melbourne CBD, in the open plaza space across the street from Flinders Street Railway Station. It was a fine warm sunny day in early 1990. As honourably as I could I was representing the dispossessed rainforest peoples. Dressed in nothing more than a nomadic Penan-style g-string I placed myself in a makeshift cage. The cage was very simply constructed from a large cardboard box that had sections of its walls cut out to create the desired prop effect. Our small group of the faithful was handing out printed leaflets and engaging members of the public in meaningful conversation. There were the essential bongo drummer and a guitar player, creating an indispensable no-nonsense wake-up atmosphere. We were trying to say: "Though we are light-hearted this is not entertainment but a serious call to accountability."

The Bulldozer. Inspired by the ever-artistic medicine Simon, we set out one morning constructing a bulldozer prop at Cameron's place. Ours was made not out of steel but a huge cardboard box that we carved and painted to create the desired effect. Simon climbed in as the driver and we set out on a street march to the CBD, which was about a 2 kilometre walk. We had a stack of printed propaganda leaflets that we handed out to passers-by. The occasionally grinning Simon was bravely trudging along, his arms wrapped around the outside of the bulldozer's sides, unstoppable.

The Ducks. One night, at one of our regular weekly MRAG meetings, a tall formidable-looking man whose name I believe was Larry, talked to us about the upcoming [duck hunting season](#) and the need to expose the falsehood of selective bird shooting. He represented a group of activists determined to finally prove to the public the duck-hunting rules were impossible to implement and police effectively.

For the first time in Victoria shooters were required to pass a water-bird identification test in order to get authorisation to hunt ducks this particular season. Of the 24,000 odd hunters who set for the video Waterfowl Identification Test 21,000 passed and were accredited to hunt 'ducks' in the 1990 season which ran from mid-March to end of May. Victoria-wide of the total of over 120 waters about half were open to hunting. 16 waterbird species, consisting of ducks, swans, grebes and coots were legitimate quarry.

Larry's seriously ardent presentation was urgent and inspiring. A number of us present at this MRAG meeting put up our hands as willing and ready to join in the battle. Battle it would be not just metaphorically because there would be guns going off around us and possibly stray shotgun pellets, ricocheting off trunks of trees. There is no doubt this was a risky undertaking the real dangers of which many of us were most likely not fully aware of. It was blind love.

Transport was organised and on the opening weekend our MRAG contingent and Larry's people arrived at the action site which was, I believe, in the Colac Region. Arriving before dawn, we received education on matters of personal safety, bird rescue, and dealing with confronting shooters. We were there to rescue injured birds and hand over any recovered legal prey to shooters claiming them.

After a breakfast of warm porridge we fanned out into the shallow but expansive body of water. We needed to be well spread out to cover as large an area as practicably possible but at the same time always remain within sight of another rescuer. This was critical in case of an emergency situation, such as a confrontation with shooters or a personal injury. I don't remember any such situation developed in the course of the day I participated. The waterbody we scouted was semi-open. The area we targeted was mostly fairly shallow to allow us to wade through at about knee depth. There were trees growing here and there, as well as stands of reeds.

Rescuers walked out for kilometres and brought back both dead and injured birds of many different kinds. The injured birds were provided with medical care, the dead ones placed in plastic bags, labelled, and later placed in refrigeration. I did not think of it that way then but in retrospect we seemed to be all silenced by the experience. As if we reached a level of mutual, shared understanding and dedication that needed no verbal corroboration. Perfectly innocent birds were wasted in a blood sport that had no ethical or economic or environmental justification. They were not pests nor were they needed dead for the survival benefit of the shooters. The hunters were not shooting them for their subsistence but for entertainment.

The following I believe Monday there was a demonstration on the steps of the Victorian DCE building. The Victorian Department of Conservation and Environment (DCE) was the government institution responsible for managing and monitoring hunting activities. The DCE staff as at previous times experienced problems with enforcing the hunting regulations and while on the opening weekend they issued 109 infringement notices this did not prevent once again a sizeable slaughter of protected birds. [Altogether 454 protected birds of 20 species were found dead during this season.](#) Of these, 374 were collected by animal welfare and wildlife protection activists, and 80 – less than one fifth of the total – by DCE staff.

Larry's people brought the many dead protected birds we and others collected over the opening shooting weekend and laid them out on the ground for all to see. There must have been a few dozen of them. It was a cloudy day. The media were present and an overall subdued and serious mood prevailed, just one step from embarrassment. But it also felt, looking at the beautiful but no longer alive creatures, whose lives were pointlessly wasted, that any display of emotion and sadness would be no more than cheap media fodder. Just like the miles and miles of log ponds lining the banks of the Baram River in Sarawak that I saw a few years earlier. There the trunks of slaughtered rainforest trees, for reasons of some timber defect or unfavourable market conditions, were left to rot unutilized. If anything epitomises the current level of human global civilization, then this is it: unfeeling waste.

Women's protest. A group of women in the MRAG decided to hold their own demonstration in the CBD in Burke Street Mall. For me it turned out to be a unique and unparalleled experience. Accompanied with musical instruments, the participating women sang the haunting chant "Isis, Astarte ...". They performed a street theatre, dramatically revealing the irrationality and ignorance of the citizenry with regard to respecting, cherishing and nourishing our natural environment. These young women were not just entertaining the passers-by. They were serious about waking the populace to an agenda of examining our hearts, acts, and non-acts. In my interpretation, they were attempting to awaken and support a deeper form of awareness in the Joe-and-Jill in the street. They

were pulling us out of the mesmeric day dream of technologically assisted form of immortality. They were championing honourable survival.

The Ship. With the advancing southern hemisphere autumn, the weather was starting to get cooler. This, however, did not dampen the enthusiasm of many of us to put on wetsuits and one night jump in Port Phillip Bay. I remember the face, body and voice of the young man who was the mover for this bold action, but cannot recall his name. He was a gregarious person and a surfer, with the enthusiasm to inspire MRAG comrades to don wetsuits, jump in the bay, and in semi-darkness swim towards a just arrived huge trawler loaded with rainforest logs. Quite a few of us went into the water, wading, swimming, paddling on surfboards, in kayaks or rubber dinghies. A larger group stationed themselves on the beach, offering hearted support and hot drinks. The media were present, as well as the police. It was a chaotically orderly protest with no arrests made, so far as I can remember. A magical night.

“It’s possible, and we can do it!”

The Banner. This was the last MRAG action I participated in while in Melbourne. It happened on a cloudy but not yet too cold Saturday morning. A dozen or so of us assembled in a large but otherwise not particularly busy leafy public park in order to paint banners. It was meant to be a preparation for future actions, such as one where a large *Save the Rainforest* banner was hung over a busy Melbourne artery from an overpass and got viewed by a huge number of peak hour commuters. In the park we laid out new canvasses, got the paint tins and brushes out, and started to design and paint a few banners. My small group of three or four people worked on a sizeable one depicting an opalizing Earth globe suspended in pitch black background of the cosmic matrix. The accompanying lettering simply yet eloquently read: *Earth First!*

As we were working away on our banner, a man in our age group approached us and started a casual conversation. He presented himself as a reporter for a local community newspaper or bulletin. It puzzled me how he got to find out about our activity as it was not publically advertised and was more of a close friends’ workshop-and-picnic. My suspicions about the identity of this supposed journalist grew into alarm when he focussed on my person and tried to win my confidence by playing the ethnic card. He claimed to be of Polish ancestry and in a round-about way tried to elicit more detailed information about our group and MRAG. Based on previous experiences, I unwittingly sensed the energy of an undercover agent and desisted to co-operate with his type of “journalism”. Somewhat alarmed, I communicated my suspicion to others but was left feeling almost flabbergasted and bewildered to see that other people mostly did not see a reason to question this man’s presence and his motivations. I did not follow up on this incident and to my knowledge there were no identifiable consequences.

My time with Melbourne RAG came to an end at the start of May when I decided to return to Lismore, northern New South Wales. I said thank-you and good-bye to my friends, not knowing I would soon see many of them again at other actions and in other, far-away places.

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* Elisabeth II is no longer with us. But the institutions she symbolically represented, and to whose continued existence she could possibly have had no meaningful input, have not gone away with her. The millennia-old instituted social control mechanisms still require the use of mental coercion and livelihood punishment in the hands of those who are paid to do so, believing themselves invested through 'the will of the people' with the authority to dispense and impose 'justice'. I concede with kudos that this country of Australia does not subscribe to the barbarous practice of capital punishment and hope in the possibility that we will go still further away from the current ethics of 'behaviour correction'.

The question of how far is it from a baton to the noose is unanswerable as its parameters have been for way too long determined by the unaccountable ones. But pondering the question within the scope of natural justice can serve as a sobering reminder that human reasoning follows models of logic which are just taught to us. Teaching should not be indoctrination. There are superior forms of logic to the ruling one, forms that adhere to standards of critical thinking. They lead to results which cannot be engineered as any – no matter how sophisticated – popularised narrative can be, and routinely is. The binominal principle holds here also: 'want to know' versus 'want to believe'. Recognising the difference between the two could serve us as a useful reference point.