

The Year of Living Dangerously: Dim Sims and the Birth of *Just Policy*, 1994

Rob Watts

All sorts of memories jostle for attention when I recall that far away time in 1994: A year so long ago as to have become a mythic time, when a small group of people thought about creating a new kind of journal dealing with social policy. Dim sims is one of those memories. Let me explain.

The idea that VCOSS might sponsor a new kind of social policy journal owed much essentially to three people; some academics meeting over the odd coffee or two in the first months of 1994 in the awful student cafeteria situated on the lovely, green, but essentially vacant, campus that RMIT operated at Bundoora, had one of those 'bright ideas' our tribe is sometimes credited with having (I am sure that the smell of greasy dim sims sold as comfort food to bored students provided an olfactory backdrop to our discussions). Martin Mowbray then newly arrived in Melbourne as Professor of Social Work at RMIT, and a mixture of grumpy social critic and gentle idealist probably had the idea first: why not a new journal of social policy. John Wiseman then in the School of Social Work and a member of the VCOSS Board, and always good at taking an idea and running with it, agreed: why not. He started talking the idea up among fellow VCOSS Board members. We thought it was high time that VCOSS, in collaboration with a number of academics (most of them at working at RMIT) and community-based workers, ought to adopt a tougher advocacy role on behalf of the community sector. What better way to do this than to establish a journal we thought. I just thought it was a good idea and went along for the ride.

It is not often that a bright idea like setting up a new journal should actually happen. It probably surprised the few of us who first kicked the idea around in Mowbray's house that a journal actually emerged from all of the free flowing wine and discussion (accompanied by some truly appalling micro-waved dim sims plucked from the back of Martin's freezer).

Through the first half of 1994 a small, hardy band of university teachers including Martin Mowbray, John Wiseman, Olga Bursian, Kate Driscoll, Margo Huxley and me, and some community-based workers and VCOSS board members - like Celia Haddock and Sam Biondo - met at Martin Mowbray's house in Northcote in mid-1994 to

plan the development and launch of a new social policy journal. We probably dreamed of bringing what was then referred to - courtesy of Michael Pusey - as 'economic rationalism' crashing down. When that particular rush of blood had cleared, we probably thought that it was enough to create a new kind of journal that brought academics, researchers and practitioners together to say what was wrong with the dominant paradigm.

*a kind of cult of 'free marketeers',
'Economic modernisers'*

Those of us who ate those dim sims and drank the wine Martin served all agreed that important public policy changes were being driven by a kind of cult of 'free marketeers'. 'Economic modernisers' eagerly promoting things like 'competition' and 'globalisation'. It is possible that we even thought that VCOSS might play a larger national role - given the belief at the time that ACOSS, the national peak body, was not playing a serious or sustained or critical advocacy role (relations between VCOSS and ACOSS and *Just Policy* have always had the potential to create bother and it says much for the character and discipline of the various players in these organisations that that potential for mischief making has not been realised). Whatever was in those dim sims seems to have worked its magic. There was a very high level of consensus, easy working relations and lots of laughter, things which have defined the work culture of the editorial board of *Just Policy* ever since.

From the start it was accepted that setting up a journal like this was going to have to be done with few, if any, resources let alone anything like a generous budget. Mowbray, Wiseman and I thought that universities like RMIT had any number of academics with the kind of time, energy and political and intellectual capability that could be used on a voluntary basis to support the new venture. Most of the hack editorial work and administrative work was going to have to be done on a voluntary basis by the academics (It is entirely likely that not all of the academics who have come and gone through the JP Board since 1994 have always understood this. Some may have believed that membership of the Board was a basis for seeking promotion and could not envisage the sheer hard grind involved in putting a journal like this together).

Invitations to various people to write articles were sent out in May-June 1994 and draft articles began to come back in, leading to frenzied attempts at setting up a first primitive refereeing process in time for the layout and printing of the first issue to be complete by November 1994.

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POLICY

A Journal of Australian Social Policy



Photo: Ruth Maddison

The Unemployment Crisis and the White Paper
Jocelyn Pixley • Iain Campbell • John Quiggin

Women Management and Local Services

Heroin and the War on Drugs

Women Superannuation and Retirement Income

Who Benchmarks the Benchmarks

Child Protection Policy

Reviews

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It was probably not the best time to be doing all this. In 1994 VCOSS itself was going through the usual bother peak bodies like it face when a newly-elected state Coalition government - headed up by Jeff Kennett in this case - was making it plain that it did not take kindly to criticism and was cutting core funding to peaks that got up its nose. The situation was not helped by the additional fact that the VCOSS Director's role was under pressure from the need to do more with fewer resources: indeed for some of the time that planning was underway to set up the new journal, a process that began in

April-May 1994, there was no VCOSS director. Fortunately some key VCOSS board members like Sam Biondo, who worked then as now for the Fitzroy Legal Service, Olga Bursian and Don Siemen both of whom were then at the BSL were Board members who all believed strongly in the value of policy and advocacy. When Kate Redwood took on the Director's role in 1994 she strongly supported the proposition that setting up a new journal was a good idea.

VCOSS was able to make a small but as it turned out a vital contribution. A small amount of money was set aside from member's subscriptions. In return all VCOSS members got a copy of the journal. VCOSS also agreed to second Letizia Mondello, then one of its publications people in to make the editorial and layout process happen. This appointment by itself ensured the long-term success of the journal. Letizia, who stayed with the journal till 2004, brought a rare capacity for hard work, discerning layout and editorial production values and graphic intelligence that deserves that most overused terms of praise, 'genius'.

The belief in critique and holding the line on ideas like justice explains the energy and passion devoted to the bringing the new entity into the world as well as the form of the thing itself. This led to some significant decisions. The political assessments we made at the time about the collapse of the ALP as a source of any kind of decent policy and the relatively low average level of morale in the community sector suggests why the journal took the form that it did. We were committed to the journal being a quarterly - though we didn't actually get four issues out within the year until the start of the new millennium. The name of the thing mattered too. After a lot of useless thrashing about the ever-creative Letizia Mondello came up with the name *Just Policy*. We agreed that each issue should carry an editorial that spelled out our ideas and approaches to contemporary policy issues that might even be a bit edgy.

To encourage non-academics to publish we created two categories of article; refereed articles and Commentaries, a distinction that has caused endless trouble, as well as solving difficult problems like how do you tell an academic that their piece is no good. The solution was simple: tell them that it could be carried as a Commentary.

It was agreed early on given the collapse of ventures like *Australian Society*, a very costly monthly publication of the 1980s edited by Peter Brown and modelled on Britain's *New Society*, that the sector needed something that was more accessible than the usual 'boring as batshit' academic journal format. This sustained the idea that we needed a

publication that looked a bit more accessible and 'with it' in terms of lay out and graphics (This has not meant we have not carried some very dull and boring but worthy articles!) It was agreed - possibly at my suggestion - that we also carry interesting photographs with each article including one on the cover so talents like Brian English in Newcastle provided the start of an impressive gallery of images.

And again in a decision that has given the journal a depth and resilience it was agreed that the Editorial board should not be made up only of academics but that it should include a range of policy and community-based workers. Over the years this has seen people like Don Siemen, Celia Haddock, John Honner, Barry Hahn, Mandy Levaratt and the redoubtable Sam Biondo provide calm, grounding advice along with lots of solid support for a journal that could easily have lost its way

The sense of permanent crisis at VCOSS then housed in truly scungy offices in Collingwood, may begin to explain why many things were never properly resolved; like the precise nature of the relationship between VCOSS and its Board - and the Editorial Board of JP. This was left for the 'logic of history' to resolve (This was probably at that time a wise decision, though it was one that returned to haunt meetings of the Editorial Board in the mid-2000's). There were also to be many efforts to construct a systematic policy-driven, data based rational model to deal in a timely and efficient way with the receipt and treatment of articles. This dream of a seamless administrative system was to prove elusive since it requires a lot of time for administration, a lot of motivation accompanied by a certain kind of pedantic micro-management and clarity; attributes not always on display in academic communities. Dr Ruth Webber of the ACU brought the first modicum of order into existence in the late 1990s and was later ably assisted by several volunteers who added extra grit and determination to the editorial Boards frequent expression of pious hope that *Just Policy* ought to have an efficient editorial system that avoided monumental stuff ups.

The first issue was put together quickly and in ways that set a kind of pattern for much of the next decade. People brought lots of enthusiasm even spontaneity, a lot of creativity not much system and an approach to making policy on the run that was not all that different from managing by crisis. But we got there.

The first issue set a high standard. It had very high quality articles by some of the key intellectuals and policy academics in the country. Chris Goddard a leading social work writer with a research background in child protection wrote a piece on child protection. Major sociologists like Lois Bryson wrote on women in local services, Jocelyn Pixley wrote on employment policy while Dane Olsberg wrote on women and superannuation. John Quiggin the great heretical economist addressed the Keating Government's White paper, as did labour sociologist Iain Campbell. The feminist historian Sue Davies wrote on heroin policy while social gadfly Mike Salvaris exposed the role of private audit agencies like Standard and Poore in putting pressure on governments and their budgets.

Bishop Michael Challen then the Executive Director of the Brotherhood launched the new venture at the old Meat Market craft centre in North Melbourne in early December 1994. Plenty of people turned up from the sector. The new baby was baptised with a liberal application of

red wine and mineral water, and a beautifully framed speech by the mellifluous Bishop. And yes they served plenty of nibbles - and plenty of high-quality dim sims.

It is not possible to say much that is definitive about the value of *Just Policy* since 1994. If it was ever seriously believed that creating and running a journal devoted to a wide ranging and critical exploration of policy and political ideas might effect a sea change in the kinds of ideas and values which had then shaped Australian government policy for a decade or more and has continued to do so over the life of *Just Policy*, then we may be judged to have failed conspicuously. Equally if *Just Policy* has not produced any large positive effects the mere fact that it is still around after more than a decade, *and* that it has fed ideas and research into the community sector *and* that it has provided a public space for dissenting voices to be heard, is more than enough of a reason to feel that the effort has been worthwhile.

Equally the very 'success' of *Just Policy*, one of the most read journals in Australia, reminds us that we live in strange times. Courtesy of some 'bright' ideas - like the idea that it is both desirable and possible to measure the 'impact' and 'quality' of academic research - managers in our universities are treating academic journals with minuscule readerships as 'high quality' and 'prestigious' while journals like *Just Policy* with substantial subscriptions and large readerships are deemed to be 'low status' and 'low impact' journals. That this should be so is in no small measure a consequence of political pressure to make universities more accountable. This project was driven hard by former federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson. It was Nelson who assiduously promoted the virtues of the new proposed Research Quality Framework (RQF) and the crass idea that 'quality' is measurable. The RQF model reflects a 'market metaphor framework' which says those things that are scarce - e.g. houses with a view, or rare metals or gems - are more precious than widely available goods, much more than it does the democratic idea that there is great value in a large and robust public culture in which lots of people participate. This reminds us - as if we could ever forget it - that public policy is more often than not driven by fashion and fads which do not pass any basic tests like truthfulness, utility or value. But then as the Australian composer Larry Sitsky said on the radio show *Late Night Live* in 2005 'we live in a kind of new 'dark age'.

We should not forget that in 1994 the Keating ALP government established a National Competition framework as part of its messianic commitment to 'modernising' the Australian economy and to opening Australia up to the liberating effects of global free trade. Although we should not hold our breath waiting for the winding up of the cult, these kinds of ideas are now looking distinctly tired, even irrelevant, as new kinds of problems like global warming, intergenerational equity, or persistent abuses of human rights come onto the policy agenda. These are problems for which market-based solutions are irrelevant or worse. It would be nice to think that the dawning recognition that free markets are not infallible policy panaceas has had a little to do with the advocacy of a journal like *Just Policy* but this is unlikely. As John Gray has remarked, 'the cult of the free market promised all that communism had failed to deliver' - including 'an end to history'. As Gray goes on to add, that cult and the attendant delusion that 'America could export democracy worldwide, is now meeting its brutal end in the killing fields of Iraq'.