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" V A R I A T I O N S "

ABC (BAR)

Jim Gale

The future of an Aboriginal Community Course at Swinburne Technical College looks bleak, in spite of the support of most of the college staff.

Although the course is under constant monitoring by 3 separate college committees, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Victoria about 5 weeks ago decided it had to be evaluated by yet another committee before funds would be guaranteed for 1978. It's this extra evaluation that Aborigines associated with the course fear.

Briefly, the background is that the Aboriginal Community Organisation Course is administered by the Swinburne Technical College Council but, with a DAA guarantee regarding costs. In early September the Council informed the DAA that a final decision about the 1978 course was needed. The Department replied that before it made any assurances it would have to review the course, and established an evaluation committee consisting of 3 department officers, and 2 independent people. However, after only 2 weeks the 2 independent members resigned, and Aborigines at Swinburne say it is because they will not preside over the axing of the course, that is, the committee was window dressing for a decision that had already been made.

The course trains young Aborigines in a wide range of subjects from fairly normal technical subjects to the politics of the law and health, community organisation, and it places a strong emphasis on media techniques. The aim of the course is to enable Aborigines to get work, or continue on to higher education, but its also to create a sense of cultural identity and history. And because of this, the organisers say, there is a campaign by the DAA to end it, orchestrated by the South East region director Mr. Reg Worthy, who, they say, is opposed to Black control.

In reply the DAA points out that the course was only a pilot and could look for funds elsewhere if necessary.

But it's doubtful that this could happen. Swinburne Tech. cannot finance the course. I'm told that, with the general cutback in tertiary funding the college faces a deficit this year of at least \$200,000, indeed this could reach \$350,000, so Swinburne does not have the \$80,000 the course costs.

And the Victorian Education Department says it will not set precedent that might allow the unloading of other federal schemes. So it's the DAA or nothing.

I spoke with John Morieson, the co-ordinator of the course, and incidentally the only white on the staff, and Gary Foley, a tutor. Gary began by saying why he thought the course had been a success so far.

G. Foley

Well there are some pretty impressive statistics regarding the number of our students that have gone out and gotten jobs after they have finished doing our course, but as a Black person to my way of thinking the course is an obvious success because of the way in which it seems to restore in Aboriginal young people a sense of respect, a sense of identity as an aboriginal person and having gained this new self confidence many of our students are going out and making a positive contribution in Aboriginal organisations and in the Aboriginal movement generally.

J.G.

Well how does a Tech. course contribute to that?. How have you styled it?.

G.F.

*Well, its because of several things:
Number 1. The nature of our course, which is designed to prepare Aboriginal students who may not necessarily have ever seen the inside of a high school even. It is designed to prepare them for tertiary, further education if they so desire, but in doing that it just automatically involves giving kids a new self confidence through the sort of teaching of Aboriginal history and the real sort of things that are relevant to Aboriginal students. This comes about simply because we have such a large proportion of Aboriginal teachers on the course and it just seems inevitable that Aboriginal teachers are going to see that in order*

for Aboriginal kids to cope in a white man's society today they need the strength that can be derived from having a strong sense of Aboriginal identity.

J.G. Would you call this course particularly radical?.

G.F. *Only in the sense that there is very little else to compare us with so compared to other courses of which I think there is only about 3 other courses like it in the whole of Australia. Compared to other courses I suppose it is radical, but to my way of thinking its not radical at all its just merely confronting problems or looking at the problems that confront Aboriginal people in a realistic way.*

J.G. Well at the moment the course is under review, do you think that the sorts of things that course is aiming for and the sorts of things the Dept. of Aboriginal Affairs might look at as being desirable for Aborigines are necessarily the same things.

J. Morieson *It is very difficult to make a judgement on that, because there are a number of people, different sort of people who work in Aboriginal affairs and you can't seem to please all of them. When you are talking about the criteria by which you judge the success of the course, one of the difficulties about this course is that you have to satisfy two groups of people and until the Aboriginal people are able to have their criteria accepted by the white community we have to satisfy the white community as well. And its not just the general public, its the bureaucracy. Now we know that from personal discussions with people in Canberra, that we are satisfying people in Education Department and the Dept. of Aboriginal Affairs. We know the course is found to be satisfactory by certain people in the Dept. of Aboriginal Affairs in Vic. who don't like the course, and who don't like the personnel who are involved in the teaching of the course and don't like the courses aims, and it seems at the moment they are going to do anything they can to try and prevent the course from going on.*

J.G. What are their objections?. Is it a case of bureaucracy afraid of Aborigines actually controlling a course.

J.M. We have searched through every possible objection that has been raised, most of them have been spurious. Others we have tried to investigate as far as possible and perhaps find that its one opinion versus another opinion. It seems to be something that is held to much more strongly than that and it seems to have an emotional bias to it and one of the problems is that when the boss of the outfit has been approached by different people, each different person gets a different answer. You know he is very hard to pin down, but we have got to the stage where we have satisfied ourselves pretty conclusively that this is the case. For instance the course is undergoing an assessment at the moment by five people nominated by the Dept. of Aboriginal Affairs. Now two of these people were quite independent of DAA. One guy is an ex-industrialist and now works in a voluntary fashion for a service club. The other guy is from N.S.W. and has no contact with the course at all. Last week both of those people resigned from that assessment committee, because they claimed that too much bias was the basis of judgement about the course from the people in DAA and there was too much irrationality. The assessment team couldn't get down together discuss various aspects of the course without this bias coming over very strongly.

G.F. Essentially what these two people resigned for was that they say or they believed that the DAA's intention with this evaluation committee was nothing else than to close down the course. To find, seek reasons by which the DAA could close down this course, and eventually after realising that they themselves, these two people, were being used by the DAA in order to give credibility to any decision that that stooge committee is going to make, they resigned from the committee, and I think that is a scandalous situation, you know when you consider that here are two people who in no way whatsoever can be construed as being sympathetic to us and have done it out of sheer sympathy for us, they are two completely impartial people, now they have resigned. Yet the DAA seems 'hell' bent on going ahead with its assessment anyhow even after this

complete destroying of any credibility of the assessment team.

J.G. So you are saying that - this review committee there is no way it is going to bring down a good report on the course.

G.F. Well if we are to believe the two impartial people who are forced off the assessment committee then their opinion is there no way any other conclusion is going to come to other than to close down the course.

J.G. This isn't the first year either is it that this sort of thing has happened?.

J.M. No, we had difficulties last year, and alright there might have been poor communications between DAA and the college. The first time, it was about October I think that the Department of Employment, Commonwealth Dept. of Education and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs all got together with the College and tried to work out a few things and by the end of the year alot of the apparent problems and allegations that were made had been resolved, alot of them turned out to be spurious anyway and by March this year we had arranged the continuation of the course for this year. It is very interesting to note that when the director South Eastern Region of Aboriginal Affairs who came to the college recently made some allegations about the running of the course the best he could pull out was something that happened last year, or which was supposed to have happened last year. We know pretty well that they are not keen on us because the possibility of continuity for the course has been canvassed within the Community Organisation Advisory Committee for some months now, and at the inaugural meeting at the end of March early April when all the members were present and that included a representative from DAA, the possibility of funding for the future was talked about at length by the Director of the College and so DAA has known for months that this has been a possibility. There is no reason why at the time if they had been keen on evaluating the course they couldn't have geared up to some long term evaluation but infact they didn't respond until about two weeks ago and it was because

allegations of victimisation of the course by DAA South Eastern Region were made public that DAA started to come to the party.

J.G. Yes! this whole thing is it a product of Federal DAA policy, or is it a phenomenon that is happening in Victoria, I mean are there similar courses in other states?.

G.F. Well, there are two sort of vaguely similar courses in South Australia and they never ever seem to encounter the enormous problems we seem to consistently come across. One of the reasons for that could be that 99% of their staff is white, the entire sort of course is put together on a sort of very high white academic level and generally its end purposes seem to ^{be} completely opposite of ours, but what is happening throughout Australia that where the link does exist with our course and what is happening elsewhere in Aboriginal affairs in Australia is the fact that despite all the sort of mouthings of the slogans of self determination by both Liberal and Labour politicians there is one fundamental fact that remains in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia and that is that the white man has still got complete absolute control over every aspects of our day to day lives. Despite all these big changes that they reckon Gough Whitlam bought in and despite all the wonderful things that the Liberal party say that they are doing now. Self determination is non-existent in Aboriginal Australia. There is an organisation known as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and that organisation has literally life and death control over Aboriginal people in every Aboriginal community in Australia for the simple reason that they're a small group of white bureaucrats, in some cases like in Victoria, power made white bureaucrats can sit in their little offices and made decisions as to who gets money and who gets what and what organisations are going to be funded to what extent and so on, and any minor discrepancy in any of the audits of any of the Aboriginal organisations automatically means lengthy delays in getting money. I am talking now about essential organisations in the Black community like Health services, housing co-operatives and things like this. Now all over Australia these organisations are being affected, they're

operations are being destroyed by bureaucratic interference from the DAA now we are in the same boat as every body else in this country when it comes to that respect of it, and they have substituted one form of welfarism or handout mentality for another sort, where one form of economic dependence like the old days when they use to give us the baccy, tea, flour, sugar, they have got rid of that system now but they replaced it with a new type of a system where the dependance remains the same. We still have to go 'cap in hand' to white bureaucrats to get anything done in our own communities, and this is where the real problem lies.

J.G. If this course goes under this Aboriginal controlled planned course goes under what effect is it going to have on young Aboriginal kids who were looking for something to get them out of the unemployment, the whole thing that they are stuck in at the moment?.

G.F. Well, the simple answer for Victoria is that they are not going to have anything. But you have got to also remember that this year in our course we have Aboriginal students from all over Australia. In fact the Roper River community in the Northern Territory actually approached us. The elders of the community approached us and asked us if we would except four of their young people to come down and train with us for a year and go back and work in their own community. Now that automatically means that not only is Victorian Aboriginal young people going to suffer by the closure of this course, but Aboriginal people all over Australia, because I think Aboriginal communities, as is indicated by the action of the Roper River people Aboriginal communities throughout Australia can see the legitimacy of what we are trying to do, and they respect what we are trying to do and they support us by doing things like sending their young people to our course, now if that goes once again as in all actions of the department of Aboriginal Affairs the only people who are going to suffer through any sort of bureaucratic bungling that occurs, is once again going to be the Aboriginal people.

J.G. When I contacted Mr. W.J. Sinton to ask why he resigned from the evaluation committee, he said that it was only because the decision on whether the course should continue or not was purely a matter for the DAA. However, Kevin Gilbert, the other independent member of the committee, confirmed Gary Foley's account.

Kevin Gilbert Well I found that the review committee could not be objective in its assessment of Swinburne, that it wasn't examining the course on its merits and/or demerits, that it was taking in too much hearsay evidence, that it had become too complex in its approaches that would not allow for an objective evaluation. Mainly, I was concerned with a departmental order that requested one of the departmental officers to keep careful note of the bias, attitudes and contacts of the other member of committee and that those notes would accompany the official report of the committee finding, which of course, would undermine any such report or could be used to undermine the report. The level of criticism, the level of bias, the emotional type of reaction from the Director and from the Departmental officers levelled against the personnel and also the course itself would not allow any type of objective evaluation.

J.G. The Committee has been described to me as existing merely to justify the DAA's non-involvement in the course next year.

K.G. Well, this comes across fairly clearly and I think one of the indications there also is that another man from Rotary International, Mr.Sinton, was also involved, possibly at a personal level, in this committee but is quite obvious that the DAA was trying to get somebody else to pick up the tabs even though it does not support the continuation of the course. The course and all other departments have expressed their concern that the course should continue as it does meet the purpose of the needs in the Aboriginal community, that it has fulfilled alot of its objectives, that it has changed, that is a positive development. Now the department has flown in the face of these findings and the previous evaluations were carried

out with long connection with the Aboriginal community, they have educational background, some from the Commonwealth Department of Education, and what have you, and they have advised that the course is a useful course, that it should continue, and we are concerned that this is an approach by the DAA generally to cut back all initiatives in Aboriginal education, that is not part of the normal education system. We are concerned because there is quite a lot of finance, something to the point of 33.5 million dollars expended in Aboriginal education, that all initiatives for Aboriginal education separately to the normal stream has been cut back such as the South Australian Aboriginal Task Force, the University of Sydney's teachers aid training programme, the Aboriginal Family education centres programme in N.S.W., now Swinburne and all state department programmes have been cut back and it seems to be a drive on the part of the DAA to cut these initiatives. We are concerned with the great amount of money the 33.5 million dollars expended for Aboriginal education that certainly doesn't seem to benefit Aboriginal people to any great degree, we have a tremendously high drop-out rate, lack of confidence, lack of initiative, lack of a sense of a positive identity, now these are the very things that Swinburne seem to be achieving in its course. It has a very high retention rate for students, a very high employability rate after the students finish the course.

J.G. So the threat to the Swinburne course is not an isolated Victorian incident, its part of a broader national thing. What then are the specific objections?.

K.G. Well, the specific objections to Swinburne by the department is that it has radical approach to education, that it builds the confidence of the people involved, that it builds identification factors in the people involved, it associates them more closely with the Aboriginal community and of course bureaucrats are not able to cope with that type of consciousness building within the Aboriginal section.

J.G. Well what sort of course at Swinburne do you think would have actually satisfied a DAA committee?.

- K.G. *Something on very normal lines, following the approved courses, nice little Blacks pepper-potted throughout the whole of the college. They do not, and its obvious they do not wish, they do not want, to support any separate, any group type education programme for Aborigines.*
- J.G. *So finally just to sum up, you do not believe that the DAA is acting in good faith in relation to the Swinburne course and that is why you resigned.*
- K.G. *Yes, they are not acting in good faith. They are not trying to evaluate on its merits or demerits. The departmental officers who are carrying out an evaluation now have not the educational, and, nor the social background which would enable them to assess and to gily in the face of the advice that has been given to them by various other departments who support the scheme and by the educational officers who have carried out previous evaluations, and have requested that it be continued.*
- J.G *Kevin Gilbert. I might also add that I approached Mr. Worthy, the South East Region Director of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, for his side of the issue, but he declined to comment.*