The Sixties at Wollongong: student affairs in a regional Australian university

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Abstract
The sixties were a time of revolution – sexual, cultural, spiritual, political and musical. The Beatles rose and fell, humankind reached the moon, the horrors of the Vietnam war were exposed amidst the threat of nuclear holocaust, millions died silently in China from starvation and Mao's Cultural Revolution, and Woodstock revealed the power of this new 'pop' music. The United States largely took the lead in driving western societal change, and Australia followed, though in a somewhat muted and delayed manner. A snapshot of events during the sixties at the University of Wollongong – then the Wollongong University College – highlights some of the issues which filtered down to this then small regional campus located on the outskirts of Sydney. Influenced by the world around, and by the nearby metropolis, Wollongong was somewhat isolated from many of the pressures of the time, located in a seemingly idyllic coastal setting, though swamped by the everyday harsh realities of polluting heavy industry. Residents could afford to pick and choose what they would stand up and fight for, what they would take on board, and what they would ignore. The priorities may initially have been local, but by the end of the decade they were more easily mixed in with the global. For young people it was a time of wonder, change, apprehension and excitement, and the new university campus reflected elements of this change.
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Michael Organ

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Precursors and Name Debates

The fifties were characterised by rank conservatism in Australia, under Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies (1949–63), though the release in 1955 of the movie *Blackboard Jungle* and the
“birth” of rock and roll around that time were to have a profound effect on the youth of the day. Closer to home, Wollongong was the centre of a large industrial region, with unionism as a strong force, arising out of the almost century of struggle by local coal miners (since the 1860s) and metal workers (since the 1890s). The area’s strong beach culture had evolved from the early 1920s and formed an important part of everyday life for many kids, giving rise to a somewhat more laidback lifestyle than their city and country counterparts. Sex and drugs – mostly alcohol – were already a part of this culture, with rock-and-roll the new ingredient in the mix. The future looked rosy for Illawarra youth as the fifties wound down, with low unemployment rates, ample job opportunities in local industry, and the introduction of university degree courses at a Wollongong campus, in many instances sponsored by those same polluting industries that darkened the skies.

The University of Wollongong officially came into existence in 1975, though it had in fact operated since 1951 as an adjunct of the Kensington-based New South Wales University of Technology (since 1958 the University of New South Wales). The Wollongong campus was initially designated the University Division of Wollongong Technical College, and housed in a 1927 era building on Gladstone Avenue, Wollongong. A student association formed in 1955 after a meeting held on 21 June was attended by 80 of the 150 then enrolled students. In keeping with a general trend of the time, the Wollongong student organisation was initially known locally as the Students Union. A fee of 10/- was introduced in 1956 to support its activities.

The Wollongong students’ first public campaign was not political as such, but with the bureaucracy of the parent New South Wales University of Technology. Right through to the late sixties Kensington took exception to the precise naming of the local student organisation and as a result hindered implementation of its constitution. The locals initially wanted a simple name, along the lines of Wollongong Technical College Students Union, but in 1955 were forced to accept a rather long winded alternative – The New South Wales University of Technology Union of Wollongong – which made no reference to students. Four years later this was amended to a still long and cumbersome The Wollongong Students Union of the University
of New South Wales. The local students complained, but Kensington would not budge.

When the campus moved to the present North Wollongong site in 1962 and became the Wollongong University College, the name debate again flared. The Students Union AGM of 5 October 1961 agreed to adopt the name Wollongong University College Students Union (WUCSU), along with a revised constitution to come into force from the beginning of the 1962 academic year. In line with this motion appropriate letterhead was printed and letters sent to University of New South Wales Registrar G.L. Macauley requesting the adoption of the changes. However once again Kensington dogmatically insisted on retention of the name The Wollongong Students Union of the University of New South Wales, and rejected the constitutional revisions. No reasons were given.

Whilst the students were undoubtedly frustrated by Kensington’s action, there were more pressing matters concerning them during 1962, with the move to North Wollongong. It was not until 11 February 1963 that Keith McPaul, then president of the Students Union, wrote to Macauley to register a complaint and again plea for recognition of the preferred name, with the comment that the students and its Council ‘...feel very strongly about having this (WUCSU) as our Constitutional name and would like your sincerest consideration.’

The new name and revised constitution were duly listed for consideration by the University of New South Wales Council on 11 March 1963, however at the last minute they were withdrawn from the agenda. This caused Warden Cam Gray, then head of Wollongong University College, to write to Macauley on 26 April seeking clarification of the matter, and to ask whether the Students Union was at present operating under any form of constitution. Macauley replied briefly in May, with no real answer, and the matter was dropped until July 1965 when Gray again requested ratification of the constitution. The Kensington merry-go-round began once again, and the documents were submitted to a number of committees before the matter was finally settled at the UNSW Council meeting of 15 December 1966, wherein both the revised constitution and name change (WUCSU) were officially adopted, even though they had been in local use since 1962.
Such were the lumbering machinations of the Kensington bureaucracy with regards to Wollongong, that it took over 10 years for the Students Union constitution to be amended to bring it in line with what the students wanted, and to adapt to the new Wollongong University College structure. Dithering and delay by Kensington with regards to matters of administration and policy at Wollongong were faced by all areas of the College – students and staff alike – and lead the locals to seek to have as little to do with UNSW as possible. It also helped develop a view of UNSW as Big Brother, with Wollongong a mere colonial outpost. UNSW Vice Chancellor Philip Baxter became the personification of this image, and Warden Gray was seen by many as his minion, though he did fight long and hard for the College behind the scenes.

The Students Union had no option but to accept the lengthy Kensington name in 1962 if they sought to retain access to university funds. Once this was achieved the group largely went its own way. In comparison, the Wollongong University College Sports Association took only 2 1/2 years (from August 1964 to January 1967) to get its constitution approved by Kensington. When the Students Union later resolved to change its name to the Wollongong University College Students Representative Council in November 1969 the process was not to be so laboured. This new name was ratified by the UNSW Council on 9 March 1970 (Rupert Myers was then Vice Chancellor), and the revised constitution passed on 12 July 1971, after being held up once again by Macauley.

Whether these delays were normal, or some conspiracy on the part of UNSW in revenge for the trouble both students and staff were causing, can only be subject to conjecture. However it should be noted that the UNSW Students Union suffered no such problems with regards to name and constitutional amendments. It is more probable that the Wollongong University Division, and later Wollongong University College, were simply low priorities amongst the Kensington administration, giving rise to the delays. Macauley’s involvement in Wollongong’s constitutional revisions and student affairs (he had also been heavily involved in the Kensington Student Union during the 1950s) may have been viewed as delaying tactics by the Wollongong students – and they were; though they were also
symptomatic of the administrative inefficiency inherent at the time in trying to control two dispersed university campus via a central administration. The issue of the naming of the Wollongong Students Union was a mere ripple in the ocean of events at Kensington, which was, during the late fifties and throughout the sixties, striving to stabilize its own position and move on to become the biggest university in Australia.

**Student Activities 1955–61**

The University Division had been created at Wollongong Technical College in 1951 to supervise diploma courses offered therein. As a student organisation was not formed until 1955, any activities were carried out under the auspices of the Technical College student association. The introduction of formal degree courses on a part-time basis in 1956 may have been the impetus for the creation of a distinct group to service the needs of the University Division students.

After the initial meetings of late 1955, by the middle of 1956 the local student body was up and running, with an organising committee, constitution, and income from fees. G. Shakespeare was the first president and later members of staff Bill Upfold and Bob Wheway were also involved whilst at Gladstone Avenue. Details of activities during the first few years are sketchy, with few extant records. The fact that in 1956 there were only 140 part-time students eligible for membership of the Students Union also meant that its ability to engage students in social events was limited. As we will see, it was not until the introduction of Arts and Commerce courses at Wollongong University College after 1964 that student numbers were sufficient to support an active student organisation. The second AGM was held on 29 May 1957, and the third on 22 May 1958, following which honorary secretary Bill Upfold submitted the first Student’s Union annual report to UNSW Council, according to the terms of the constitution. This document included the mandatory financial statement, along with an outline of activities during the financial year 1957-58. These included the organisation of special visits to industrial facilities such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme (April 1957), Tallawarra Power Station (August 1957), and the Lucas Heights nuclear facility, along with more frequent visits to the Port Kembla
Steel Works and other local sites. Activities which involved the Students Union but were not so intimately related to the work environment included an annual prize night, with prizes to the value of £10; an orientation night gathering and supper for new University Division students; campaigns for the installation of a public telephone and ambulance officer on site; and a call for the simultaneous release of exam results by both Sydney and local newspapers.

Whilst the paper war was being raged throughout 1958-61 between Kensington and Wollongong over the name of the organisation, the Students Union continued to operate with an active membership of 70-80. An inaugural Annual Dinner was held on 8 December 1958 at the Grand Hotel, Wollongong (‘not so grand’ according to the visiting Dean of Engineering from UNSW, Al Willis). It was addressed by George Caiger, UNSW Public Relations Officer, and guests included Alderman Squires (Mayor of Wollongong), F.M. Mathews (chief engineer, AI&S and member of the UNSW Council), and C.A.W. Devitt, Wollongong Technical College principal and head of the University Division. Devitt was also the UNSW representative on the Students Union council. The second Annual Dinner was again held at the Grand Hotel on 7 December 1959, with Al Willis the guest speaker and 98 guests. The third Annual Dinner (Monday, 5 December 1960) saw Professor Baxter, Vice-Chancellor of UNSW, present an address to 120 people at the Ironworkers Club in Wollongong. His talk ‘was enjoyed by all’, according to a report in the Sydney Morning Herald on 6 December 1960, perhaps because of the promise he made that £2m would be spent on developing the Wollongong University Division over the coming decade. This sum, which at the time would have seemed exceedingly generous, was in reality a mere pittance. That evening also saw a presentation by the students to Devitt upon the occasion of his retirement as head of the University Division and Principal of Wollongong Technical College.

By the end of 1961 student societies affiliated with the University Division included the Metallurgical Society, Cricket Club and Newman Society. The Students Union was also affiliated with the WTC Basketball Club and had developed a mail-order link with the Co-op Bookshop. The students were also looking forward to the imminent move to new buildings at
North Wollongong, away from the relatively cramped conditions at Gladstone Avenue.

With the demise of the Wollongong Technical College University Division and creation of the Wollongong University College in March 1962, the Students Union began a new phase. No longer a small group within the Wollongong Technical College, it now had sole responsibility for the affairs of those 308 students who formed the first classes at WUC in Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Metallurgy and Science. Undergraduates comprised 288 part time and 8 full time students, whilst there were also 6 higher degree and 6 miscellaneous students. An Orientation Handbook was published in March 1962 (the next was not to appear until 1965), to welcome the new students, and classes officially began on Monday, 5 March 1962. A room was allocated for the Students Union in the Administration building and by the end of the year a number of groups had sought affiliation, including the Rugby Union Club, Car Club, Chess Club, Hockey Club and Student Christian Movement.

**Wollongong University College Students Union**

Life on WUC campus during the early sixties was sparse, with the 8 full-time students in 1962 only increasing to 30 in 1963. There were few facilities and most classes were held in the evening to cater to industry and work commitments. The students’ sense of association was therefore slow to manifest itself, and only obvious at large gatherings such as during Orientation week (February-March), on Open Day (held in September), and for Commemoration Day/Week (July-September). With the introduction of Arts and Commerce courses in 1964 – bringing with them non-industry day students – the full-time numbers increased to 140 that year and 235 in 1965. The upsurge in student presence on campus brought with it increased activity and calls for improved facilities – including development of playing fields, a common room, function hall, bookshop, eateries and expanded library.

The main student social events during the early sixties were the Balls which were commonly held 2-3 times per year. They included the Foundation Ball held at Corrimal Community Hall in March 1962, and Commem Balls in August, usually held at the Coniston Hotel. The Graduation Ball became a regular
event from the time of the first graduation ceremony at WUC in March 1963. It was held at Corrimal or in the Wollongong Town Hall. The first major fundraising event by the students was a charity Bowlathon held at the Northern Bowl, Bellambi, on the weekend 5–6 September 1963 as part of Commem Week. Future Commem Week events would have this charitable basis throughout the decade. The students also became involved in the regular Open Days which were held at the College from 1962, and from 1963 onwards they awarded a prize to the best student stunt associated with the day. A special issue of *Tertangala*, the student newspaper (see below) was also produced for Open Day.

The Annual Dinner, which was an important event on the WTC University Division calendar and held every December from 1958, seems to have faltered with the move to North Wollongong. The last one was took place in 1963, and that planned for 1964 was cancelled. The Graduation and Commem Balls then took the spotlight. Commem Week would become the highlight of the social calendar for the Wollongong students. Initially held in association with Open Day, it eventually broke from this association with the College administration and took its own direction. Classes were cancelled for a day, a Ball was held, and in 1964 students marked the occasion by organising a procession of floats through the streets of Wollongong. The newly formed Women Students Association won the prize that year for best float. Public stunts and pranks also became part of Commem Week activities, as did a Miss University quest in 1964. It survived through to 1968, perhaps victim of the burgeoning Equal Rights and Women’s Liberation movements. The Students Union was very much a ‘boys club’ in the years prior to 1966 – its membership predominantly males from the engineering fraternity. This changed with the expansion of Arts and Commerce courses, though engineering numbers remained large throughout the decade.

**Tertangala**

For Wollongong University College’s first Open Day (14 September 1962) the Students Union prepared the inaugural issue of their newspaper *Tertangala*, so named after an Aboriginal word for a smoke signal, and modelled on the UNSW equivalent which bore the tile *Tharunka*, an Aboriginal word for a message
stick. The first four page issue of *Tertangala* was put together by P. Schwinsberg (editor), P. Gluvchinsky and Miss C. Melton. It addressed students, staff, and the 2000 visitors to campus on Open Day, with stories on the College, student groups and local community issues.

*Tertangala* was published sporadically up until 1968, and the quality varied – from a fully-fledged newspaper with photographs and printed on quality print, through to simply typed, photocopied and stapled sheets. Printing was carried out by the *Illawarra Mercury*, *South Coast Times*, Canberra Printers or the Students Union. During the period 1962–68 issues were prepared for Orientation Week, Open Day and Commem Week, and in later years to promote student elections during May. A glossy orientation handbook also appeared from 1965 onwards, being prepared by the *Tertangala* staff.

*Tertangala* very much reflected student life on campus and the burning issues of the day. As such, it forms an important historical record, both in regards to content and visual presentation. Prior to 1967 it was largely non-political and concerned with describing the activities of affiliated societies, publishing prose and poetry, and commenting on facilities on campus. Local industries also came in for light-hearted lampooning. During the period 1967–68 *Tertangala* raised its political profile. Comment from the student Labor and Liberal clubs appeared and it began to focus on the Wollongong campus autonomy campaign. From 1967 onwards stories on the Vietnam conflict and conscription appeared regularly, while the sexual revolution of the late sixties was evident in both pictorial and textual material included from about 1968. The issue of drug use was also aired. Throughout all this, the administration – both Kensington and local – came under criticism from its various scribes. *Tertangala* at all times discussed and publicised the activities of its various affiliated societies, though these were pushed to the back pages during the years of student protest. The paper was only ever as good as its editors and contributors, with financial constraints ever present. Apart from presenting a unique record of campus life from the student perspective, it also dared to publish uncensored accounts of events on campus, filling a gap in the official record. Like most student newspapers, the reputation of *Tertangala* was not held high
in the community due to its use of profane language over the years and its brief not only to comment upon issues but also to stimulate discussion. Such a reputation is undeserved when consideration is given to the resources and time available to the various compilers, and the very nature of the publication. Amongst students and researchers *Tertangala* did not suffer such ridicule.

**Pranks and Stunts**

University students during the sixties tended to develop a reputation for engaging in stunts, pranks, and various ‘outrages’ upon the community. Most were light-hearted; however, occasionally the participants fell foul of the law and university management.

The first recorded instance of hijinks by Wollongong University College students occurred on the Thursday evening prior to the 1962 Open Day, when a group dispersed a purple dye in the fountain of the Piccadilly Hotel, Wollongong. When the owners of the hotel later sought compensation for cleaning of the fountain from Warden Gray, he replied – as he would continue to do so over the years – that responsibility for any student actions rested with individual students, or possibly the Students Union, and not with the College administration. Events such as Graduation and Foundation Balls were also occasions for pranks and stunts, such as in 1965 when, during the South Pacific-themed Annual Ball at the recently opened Wollongong Town Hall, a group of students stole a set of valuable New Zealand Tiki carvings. After the event made the front page of the *Illawarra Mercury* the statues were returned, and the Mayor threatened the Students Union with a total ban from using the Town Hall if there was any more trouble. Despite the pranks of that evening, the ceremonies for the second Miss University quest proceeded under the watchful eyes of judges Al Willis, Frank Mathews and Mrs Gray.

As was so often the case, trouble was usually associated with the consumption of alcohol (and other narcotic substances later in the decade). The Annual Ball was an occasion when student antics would be at their most outrageous. The ‘boat race’ – a competition to drink a large amount of alcohol in a short period of time – was a common feature/highlight of such
events in the early sixties, before the Students Union was forced to officially condemn it during 1966, after which it continued to take place in a less formal environment. Up to that time the mostly male student body tended towards an abuse of alcohol at social functions, and engineers maintained that tradition well into the eighties. As early as 1965 the proprietors of the North Wollongong Hotel – the traditional student ‘watering hole’ until the opening of a bar on campus – were forced to complain to the Warden regarding troublesome student drinkers of a Friday night.

‘Kidnapping’ became associated with the Commem Week celebrations during 1966 and 1967. When a willing female student was taken in 1966 her worried father contacted Gray to complain. Normie Rowe, the singer, was the victim in 1967, and the money raised from his ransom and other funded events went to a local charity. Commem Week 1967 was also highlighted by the planting of a hoax story in the local media concerning the growing of marijuana on campus and the tale that students were regularly travelling to Sydney to engage in drug parties. The *Illawarra Mercury* ran the story with a front page headline on 20 July proclaiming ‘Startling Claims on Drugs – Indian Hemp Grown at College.’ Radio and TV reported on the scandal, and the police promised a thorough investigation. Eventually the hoax was revealed, and the following year the local Superintendent of Police was made one of the Students Union’s patrons.

In a lighter vein, 1967 also saw 12 students wheel a keg of beer in a baby’s pram from Sydney to Wollongong to raise money for charity. Perhaps they had been spurred on by some Kensington students valiant scooter-push from Melbourne to Sydney in 1961. For Commem Week 1968, twenty students squeezed into a mobile DMR toilet and raised $300 towards an ABSCOL scholarship for an Aboriginal student. There was also a campus visit by future Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, in town to launch the students’ bed-wetting competition. The list of pranks could go on, as could an outline of the numerous ‘treasure hunts’ which brought all manner of items to campus – from a DMR grader, to a pink elephant. Such shenanigans appear to have petered out by the late seventies, as the fun and idealism of the student revolution years (1966–74) passed away, replaced by a more studious, career-enhancing focus.
Politics and Protest

Whilst the Wollongong students relished the more outrageous and fun-filled social activities associated with the freedom of a university campus, they were never totally isolated from the social and political upheavals of the time. The parties continued, but causes such as opposition to the Vietnam war, abortion reform, the fight for political, sexual and racial equality, decriminalisation of recreational drugs and a general rebellion against conservative tradition and authority became issues of concern. The student protest movement appeared in earnest around 1966 and for the first time students became politically active on campus. During the seventies this activity continued around issues such as gay rights, degradation of the environment and pollution, political corruption, Aboriginal
equality and land rights. All were added to the long list of items on the student activist’s agenda.

Wollongong was considered a relatively timid campus in the Australian scheme of things during the sixties. This was in part due to its small numbers, with only 320 full-time students by the end of the decade. Also a contributing factor was the engineering and science discipline emphasis at the College up to 1964. It is generally true that arts and humanities students were more likely to engage in campus issues and protest during this period, no doubt due to their availability of time and the very nature of their learning, which often encouraged discussion, debate, and social engagement. After 1964 the number of arts and humanities student at WUC increased substantially, such that by the end of the decade they outnumbered the often more conservative and time constrained engineering and science students.

The issues against which WUC students protested during the sixties tended to be local. They included the gaining of more funding for the College, independence from UNSW (as in organising the Autonomy Forum of 22 June 1967), ongoing criticism of Warden Gray and Vice Chancellor Baxter, and the right to free speech.

The Labor Club Affair

The increasing world wide tension over the Vietnam war saw expression at Wollongong University College in 1967. On 14 September of that year the Illawarra Mercury ran the rather emotive headline ‘Local Students to Aid Vietnam’, referring to WUC students alleged support of the North Vietnam government, then engaged in conflict with Australian service men and women. The origin of such ‘unpatriotic’ and ‘treasonous’ activities can be traced to actions by members of the Monash University Labor Club who in late July voted to collect monies for unspecified aid to be despatched to the peoples of Vietnam. What raised the ire of conservatives in Australia was the fact that the funds were to be dispersed by the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the International Red Cross, within both North and South Vietnam. The unspecified aid – not simply medical – was the first to be offered to the victims of war in North Vietnam, who were being heavily bombed with all manner of materials by
The repercussions of the Monash students’ actions were to be felt throughout most Australian campuses, and in the highest levels of Government. The origins of the affair can be traced to 1965 when the Australian Students Labor Federation – a coalition of university Labor Clubs – had supported a motion to provide medical assistance to the NLF. At their May 1967 conference a motion aiming to increase this support was passed and gave rise to the ensuing controversy. Unfortunately by mid 1967 the NLF – the political arm of the Vietcong – was labelled by conservative forces as a terrorist organisation. The action of the various university Labor Clubs could therefore be viewed as support of a regime then at war with Australia. When students of the Monash University Labor Club implemented the motion and sought funds on campus for the NLF, there were howls of protest. The Liberals seized upon the Monash students’ action (which had also been endorsed by Labor Clubs at the University of Melbourne University and the Australian National University in Canberra) to introduce the Defence Forces Protection Act in mid August, banning the giving of financial or other aid to the NLF, the North Vietnam Government, or the North Vietnam Communist Party. The ALP denied any affiliation with the Monash University Labor Club, and the Bill was passed in mid September.

During its stormy passage through the House of Representatives various university campus throughout Australia became involved in the debate. Issues of freedom of speech, patriotism, the validity of Australia’s presence in Vietnam, and conscription were all brought to the surface and presented to the community. Unfortunately the ‘terrorist’ affiliation of the NLF tended to bury the humanitarian side of the debate and allow the Bill’s speedy passage through parliament. The anti-Vietnam movement was in its infancy in mid 1967, and the supporters of the NLF fund raising were merely branded extremists and not representative of views held by the wider student body.

By 1 September the Bill had passed through the House of Representatives, and during the following week campuses across the country were alive with debate over the issue. During that week the Sydney University Student Representative Council voted 188 to 163 to condemn the Federal government
legislation; Newcastle University students similarly condemned the Act, but rejected support of NLF fund raising or any condemnation of Australia’s role in Vietnam. They were possibly reacting against headlines such as ‘Students raising cash for Reds in Australia’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 1967). On Friday 8 September the WUC Labor Club (which had been formed on 10 May 1967 following the national conference, but not yet formally constituted) met and passed a motion to send aid to the NLF.

The action created a major split in the Students Union and an uproar on campus. President Bill Parnell and the Students Union condemned it and moved the dismissal of the Labor Club executive from the Students Union. Warden Gray and his administrative officer Webster interviewed relevant parties and kept Kensington informed of local events. Parnell disassociated himself from the Labor Club and sided with Frank Mathews and Edgar Beale, chairman and deputy chairman respectively of the University Union, when they banned the Labor Club (and any other political parties) from holding planned meetings in the Union hall on the 13th and 21st. The Union ban raised a storm of protest from amongst both students and staff. Alan Healy, president of the Wollongong University College Association of Academic Staff (WUCAAS) wrote to Webster on 14 September stating that the Union Board’s action was ‘an intrusion on the freedom generally accorded student bodies within a university and could set dangerous precedents for the future’. Healy tried to present the humanitarian side of the debate, pointing out that the money would be dispersed through the International Red Cross and the action displayed an ‘impartial concern for the innocent victims of war’. He labelled the ban ‘a deterrent to humanitarian sentiment’ and sought its immediate withdrawal. The ban was lifted on 20 September when the authorities agreed with the Healy comments that their interference in student politics created a dangerous precedent.

The Labor Club affair was a foretaste of things to come with regards to protest and the Vietnam war. It revealed the divisions then developing in society over the conflict. The fact that humanitarian action by students could also be cast in the light of treason was simply an early manifestation of the confusion surrounding that war and the differences between it and previous wars fought by Australian military forces.
Fighting Kensington

As early as 27 April 1965 the Wollongong students had published an autonomy song in *Tertangala*, long before the local staff and administration seriously considered the issue. The first major public protest action by WUC students took place on 18 October 1966 in connection with the allocation of government funding for a new Arts, Commerce, and Science building.

A busload of students marched on Parliament House, Sydney, calling on the government to guarantee funding and make sure the money was not misappropriated by Kensington. With a symbolic coffin in tow to represent the death of the College, and placards waving, the students brought to national attention the whole question of UNSW treatment of Wollongong. The trip followed on a day of protest by both staff and students in which telegrams were sent to all local Members of Parliament and other relevant individuals. In collaboration with the WUCAAS the students protest ensured the eventual building of the ACS block, though not without continuing effort which did not see it completed until May 1970.

The Student Union’s involvement in the Bill Parnell affair of 1967-8 (see below) went as far as gaining support for a state wide student strike if Baxter and UNSW proceeded with their
threat to deny enrolment to the Students Union president for having openly criticised them. Once again, the protest was aimed at UNSW – the parent university. During these volatile times the Students Union did not always proceed with a single purpose. The Labor Club affair of 1967 split the group, with the majority of the student body voting to expel both the President and Secretary of the Labor Club (Bruce Ross and Wolf Rittau) from the Students Union, even though Rittau was also secretary.
of the Students Union. A motion was also proposed in February 1968 not to support Bill Parnell in his action against Baxter over exclusion from re-enrolment that year.

Generally 1967 was a very busy year for the WUCSU – with its active support of the autonomy campaign, the formation of the Sports Association, the Labor Club affair, and continued pursuit of the ACS building funds. They were ably led by president Bill Parnell, who went public on many issues concerning the College like no student before, and despite internal opposition by both conservative students and the administration. In the *Wollongong Express* newspaper of 7 June 1967 he hit out with the story that there were plans to downgrade WUC to a Technical College or College of Advanced Education. In order to fight this threat the Students Union called for a student representative on the WUCAC, however Baxter swiftly replied in the negative.

A public forum was called by the Students Union for the 22 June to discuss the College’s status, on which occasion Eric Ramsay spoke passionately on autonomy and the UNSW withholding of funds earmarked for the College. Ramsay was eventually dismissed from WUCAC for these and other comments by UNSW Council in January 1968. In the meantime a letter from Rittau to Baxter calling for autonomy was answered with the buck-passing comment that the decision had nothing to do with UNSW, but was up to the Federal and State governments. Of course Baxter did not point out that most State government decisions regarding WUC by Minister Cutler were dependent upon advice from him and the UNSW Council.

With Frank Mathews the only Wollongong representative on Kensington Council – and he was more a Kensington man than a local, with conservative views on autonomy – the reality was that Baxter would ultimately decide the fate of the College. Any action on autonomy, or downgrading of the College, must come from him. The Students Union and Staff Association were therefore forced to put pressure on UNSW and any politicians who could possibly influence the VC. Parnell and his cohorts – including Ross and Rittau – maintained the autonomy campaign with an attack on the local Liberal member Jack Hough in the *Express* of 19 July. Even more upsetting to Baxter, on 29 August the Students Union sent an invitation to Senator Gorton
Baxter was outraged by this lack of protocol on the part of the Students Union, and tried to have the visit cancelled. He contacted Gorton’s parliamentary secretary on 12 September, asking for the visit to be stopped. Gorton replied in no uncertain terms that he would come to Wollongong whether Baxter liked it or not, and the visit was earmarked for 10 October. Baxter immediately wrote to Gray, telling him to reprimand Parnell and the Students Union for this indiscretion. Despite this win for the students the victory was ultimately a hollow one for Gorton never came, citing ‘pressures of work’ in a letter of 4 October.

The simmering Parnell:Baxter conflict came to a head following an Illawarra Mercury story of 30 November in which Parnell once again blasted Kensington – and by inference Baxter – over the delay in the ACS building, and noted that the students planned another march on Parliament House over the autonomy issue.

A young John Bannon, president of the National Union of Australian University Students (NUAUS) and later Labor Premier of South Australia, had also written to Baxter on 20 February on behalf of the WUCSU in the plea for autonomy. Baxter’s replies to Bannon’s ‘hostile’ letter revealed the pressure then bearing upon the VC. Though an associate has since stated that Baxter considered many of these incidents and conflicts mere annoyances to be swiftly dealt with and forgotten, he was obviously miffed by the machinations of the Wollongong people judging from the tone and content of his letters at the time.

By mid March 1968 Baxter appears to have decided to concede to Wollongong’s demands. A letter from Wolf Rittau dated 7 March and calling for his dismissal over the treatment of Bill Parnell was answered with a conciliatory letter suggesting a meeting be held between himself and the WUC Students Union. On 30 April he also recommended that a student representative be appointed to the WUCAC, and in bravely facing the enemy gave the occasional address at the Wollongong graduation ceremony on 5 April, wherein he spoke for the first time publicly on autonomy for the College, suggesting 1972 as an appropriate date. The front page of the June 1968 edition of Tertangala even featured a picture of Baxter and Parnell in jovial conversation following the graduation ceremony. Also in the photograph was Parnell’s conservative replacement as Students Union
The remainder of 1968 was to be somewhat of an anticlimax after the heady times of 1967 and early 1968. Bill Parnell was no longer active, being enmeshed in his studies. *Tertangala* in June 1968 made a plea for the students to continue the autonomy campaign, though it accepted that the Staff Association had now taken the lead, spurred on by the likes of Alan Healy, John Steinke, and Jim Hagan. What the Students Union did not realise was that the fight was practically over, for on 20 May 1968 Baxter had asked Willis to prepare a timetable and plan for Wollongong autonomy, giving them greater administrative control and a local Council as soon as possible. 1972 was envisaged as the date for implementation. When Baxter retired in June 1969 the wheels had been set in motion by Kensington. The NSW Minister for Education, Cutler, announced on 22 April 1970 that WUC would be an autonomous university from 1 January 1975 and both the students and staff were somewhat surprised, with the bitter battles of 1966 to 1968 almost forgotten. Parnell’s final word on the issue came in a letter to the editor of the *Wollongong Express* on 18 September 1968 wherein he pointed out that autonomy and building funding were only to be won by political pressure, not by sweet words and influential friends.

**Notes**

This account is largely based on records held by the Wollongong University Archives, including student publications such as *Tertangala* and extant administrative and pictorial records such as Series U7 – Students Representative Council 1956-74. Also consulted were University of New South Wales University Archives records, specifically Series CN495 Box 2, Central Registry file 67/C237/21285 – ‘Wollongong Students Union – Constitution’.

**Reference**