Fred Paterson

The Rhodes Scholar and theological student who became Australia’s first Communist M.P.

By TOM LARDNER

Frederick Woolnough Paterson deserves more than the three lines he used to get in Who’s Who In Australia.

As a Member of Parliament he had to be included but his listing could not have been more terse:

PATerson, Frederick Woolnough, M.L.A. for Bowen (Qld.) 1944-50; address Maston St., Mitchelton, Qld.

Nothing like the average 20 lines given to most of those in Who’s Who, many with much less distinguished records.

But then Fred Paterson had the disadvantage—or was it the distinction?—of being a Communist Member of Parliament—in fact, Australia’s first Communist M.P.

His academic record alone should have earned him a more prominent listing, but this was never mentioned:—

A graduate in Arts at the University of Queensland, Rhodes Scholar for Queensland, graduate in Arts at Oxford University, with honors in theology, and barrister-at-law.

He was also variously, a school teacher in history, classics and mathematics; a Workers’ Educational Association organiser, a pig farmer, and for most of the time from 1923 until this day an active member of the Communist Party of Australia, a doughty battler for the under-privileged.

He also saw service in World War I.
Fred Paterson was born in Gladstone, Central Queensland, in 1897, of a big (five boys and four girls) and poor family.

His father, who had emigrated from Scotland at the age of 16, had been a station manager and horse and bullock teamster in the pioneer days of Central Queensland; but for most of Fred's boyhood, he tried to eke out a living as a horse and cart delivery man. There wasn't much in it and in the last years of his life he was a pig farmer.

As a member of such a family, Fred wouldn't have had a hope of higher education in Queensland in those days (or even in these days).

But Fred was a brilliant student (top of the year in the Junior State Examination) and won a bursary and scholarships that took him to Rockhampton and Brisbane Grammar Schools, and eventually to the Universities of Queensland and Oxford.

Fred's family was devout Church of England, and he was brought up in that faith. Quite early he had decided that his future was with the Church.

He was lucky in the churchmen he met in his formative years. The men who most influenced him in his schooldays, says Fred, were Bishop Halford of Rockhampton, and the Rev. F. E. Maynard (later Dean of Melbourne).

Both were men who believed passionately, and who taught young Fred Paterson so, that the main mission of the church was for social justice.

Both were men who practised what they preached.

In 1917, while doing an Arts course at Queensland University, Fred enlisted in the A.I.F. and spent a year on overseas service—a striking contrast to the peace time soldier and patriot, Bob Menzies, whose only interruption to his Melbourne University life was to resign his commission in the peace time army to avoid war service overseas.

Returning, Fred took his B.A. in 1919, and was appointed Rhodes Scholar for Queensland. Rhodes Scholars have to have a good sporting record, too—Fred was a top runner (he once held the Queensland quarter-mile title) and footballer.

A few weeks before his selection as Rhodes Scholar, Fred Paterson, with memories of two successful strikes in the A.I.F. organised by older soldiers than himself for better food, played
a prominent part in organising a strike among undergrads at the University against an attempt by the Senate to introduce examination fees. Though the Repatriation Department would have paid his fee as a returned soldier, and though several of his friends tried to persuade him not to jeopardise his chance of Rhodes Scholar selection, Fred never wavered.

The students decided unanimously to refuse to sit for the exams unless they were free and Fred was elected as one of the committee of three to negotiate with the Senate. The students stood firm, the strike was won and the exams were held without payment of a fee.

Fred, at this time, was still of a mind to become a churchman, but his studies in theology at Merton College, Oxford (he graduated with honors), were to take him along a different road.

"My study of theology", says Fred, "led me inevitably to belief in the materialist conception of history.

"I came to realise that man's image of God changed with his environment and his social relationships.

"I also came to realise that theology at Oxford was a study of history, no different from any other discipline, and that it had nothing to do with the dogmas of any particular church.

"I could no longer accept the Bible as the inspired word of God, and I could no longer accept belief in the Divinity of Christ."

There were other, deeper, influences at work on the young divinity student—the great world-wide social unrest that followed World War I, the Russian Revolution, the great industrial upheavals in England—but young Paterson did not then take from them the lessons that may have been obvious to others.

That was to come from a ship's steward on the old Bay liner "Moreton Bay", in which Fred returned to Australia.

The steward told Paterson that he was a Socialist, and loaned him pamphlets on Socialism. He also told him of other works that would be useful to him and, when the "Moreton Bay" reached Melbourne, he took Fred to Andrade's Bookstore in Bourke Street (remember it?) where he bought several Communist pamphlets, among them Lenin's State and Revolution and Proletarian Revolution.
These helped Paterson move forward from the step he had first taken as a divinity student and in 1923 he joined the fledgling Communist Party of Australia.

Before this he had taught briefly at the Brisbane Church of England Grammar School and the Brisbane Grammar School, and he learned then, as he was to learn again so often later on, that the Establishment and marxists scarcely mix.

Fred was in Rockhampton in 1925, lecturing on economics to railway workers, when the great Queensland railway strike erupted. The government of the day had cut the basic wage from £4/5/- to £4.

Fred, still a novice at political and industrial action, addressed a meeting of 1,800 railwaymen and called for strike action. Only 17 voted against the recommendation, and Fred was elected to the strike committee.

Within 10 days the strikers were victorious, winning back their 5/-.

At a victory social held by the combined railway unions at Rockhampton, Fred Paterson was presented with a gold medal for his services to the strike.

Soon after this Fred's father died at Gladstone, and Fred became partner in his brother's pig farm. When his brother left the farm (to work on the wharves) Fred carried on the farm alone.

He began to study law, and here again he learned how far the ruling class will go to crush a radical.

Fred passed the Intermediate Bar Exam and the first section of the final exam with ease; this was a quiet political period for him; but, by the time he came to sit for the second section he had bought a pig farm nearer Brisbane, to enable him to attend sessions of the Full Court in Brisbane, a compulsory condition for admission to the Bar.

Contrary to all precedent, he used to finish his morning work on the farm, travel 30 miles by train to attend the Full Court and then 30 miles back to complete his day's work on the farm.

The low prices for pigs in the depression forced him to sell his stock and abandon the farm; but he was not idle. Back in Brisbane, he increased his political activity giving lectures in the Labour College and completed his studies for the second and final section of the Final Bar exam.
By this time he was a marked man; the authorities were after him. A short time before the exam he was arrested on a charge of sedition arising out of a speech he had made in the Brisbane Domain on the "Law and The Working Class".

To be admitted to the Bar he had to have a reference from two members of the legal profession that he was a fit and proper person to become a barrister. Fred got the two references, but a move was then made to get the sponsors to withdraw their references. To their honor they refused.

Fred's biggest hurdle was his sedition trial, for a conviction would have ended his efforts to become a barrister. He defended himself at the trial. Two police officers, in identical terms, swore to the words he was alleged to have used, amounting to over one hundred words.

But under cross-examination neither could recall what he had said before or after the offending words, and both admitted they had not taken any notes and were depending solely on their memory.

In his address to the jury, Fred Paterson likened the police witnesses to the Siamese twins: they did not eat together or drink together or sleep together, but they thought together, they remembered together, they forgot together. "Gentlemen of the jury", he said, "behold the Siamese twins of the Queensland police force".

The jury acquitted Paterson after a few minutes' retirement. Brisbane "Truth", reporting the case, praised Paterson for his brilliant defence and predicted a great future for him in law.

Ever after, those two policemen were known around Brisbane as "The Siamese Twins".

His early days as a barrister were very lean; his work was mainly in the Police Court and included the defence of several unemployed arrested in street demonstrations. He recalls that he had to borrow a coat to appear in his first police court case, as unpaid defence of an unemployed worker.

His first break came when he was called on to defend two Italians at Ingham who had been charged with assaulting the local Consul of that time, and smashing his fascist badge.

Paterson's defence got the two men acquitted and he became something of a hero among the big local Italian population.
After this, Paterson decided to practise at Townsville. Other important criminal cases came his way, although he had few civil cases (again the Establishment in action—some of the local solicitors boycotted him because he was a Communist).

One of his biggest cases was in securing the acquittal of a prominent grazier in the Gulf Country charged with cattle stealing.

Another case involved a man who had shot his brother-in-law, apparently without motive, in the presence of a policeman.

Paterson, defending him, successfully pleaded insanity—no sane man, he argued, would shoot another man without cause, in broad daylight, in the presence of a policeman.

After that it used to be said in North Queensland: “If you want to get away with murder, shoot someone when a policeman is present, then get Paterson to defend you.”

In 1939 Paterson was elected as a Communist alderman in Townsville; at the next election he was again elected, polling over 9,000 votes out of a total of more than 14,000.

While on the Council he organised truck deliveries of fruit, vegetables and ice to counter ice shortages and profiteering. His work was so successful that the Council established its own municipal ice works and fruit and vegetable shops.

In the 1943 Federal election he contested the Herbert Federal seat, which consisted of seven State electorates with three candidates standing—Labor, Communist Party and Country Party. Fred topped the poll in four State electorates and in the whole Federal electorate he polled over 20,000 first preference votes, only 1,500 behind the leading candidate, the Labor sitting member.

In 1944 he successfully campaigned as Communist candidate for the seat of Bowen in the elections for the Queensland Legislative Assembly, to become Australia’s first Communist M.P.

He was again successful in the 1947 elections, but was defeated in 1950, due partly to a gerrymander of the electorate, and the Red Bill scare.

Of his six years as a parliamentarian, Fred Paterson says:

“They were lively, interesting years. There was a tremendous mass movement in Queensland at this time, and I was able
to make effective use of parliament as a forum for policies to assist the working class and other sections of useful people."

In 1948, while he was still an M.P., the Queensland ruling class really went after Paterson.

It was the time of the big railway strike of 1948, enthusiastically backed by the railway unions after they had voted overwhelmingly in its favor at a secret ballot.

Police were harassing the picket line around the main railway depot at Mayne and Paterson’s legal advice on the spot thwarted the intimidating tactics of the more aggressive plain clothes men.

In the course of the strike, several strikers were arrested, and on St. Patrick’s Day 1948 Fred was on his way from the Brisbane Trades Hall to the Police Court to defend some of the men charged. He stopped near a procession near Edward Street to take notes when he saw a plain clothes policeman bashing a member of the procession and was struck on the skull from behind by a policeman’s baton, which left him bleeding and unconscious on the ground. He was later taken to the Brisbane General Hospital.

For some strange reason the police never found the culprit although many of them were within 20 or 30 feet of the bashing. Luckily for Fred, a photo was published in the first edition of the Brisbane *Evening Telegraph* that day, showing him a few seconds before standing quietly with his note book and pencil taking notes. This photo effectively prevented any attempt to frame him and make an excuse for the bashing. Baffled, the authorities remained singularly silent.

Some time after Fred came out of hospital police officers came to his home to get a statement, but made no use of the statement for Fred had wisely agreed to make a statement only on condition that his wife was allowed to take a shorthand record of the interview, signed by herself, read back to the police and then countersigned by the senior police officer.

Today, Paterson is living in an outer Sydney suburb.

He is in semi-retirement; he is 69, but he still manages to give useful advice and experiences, and is still as trim as he used to be, still as dedicated as a Communist as he used to be as a divinity student.