Tony Harris 1948-2013

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Abstract
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TONY HARRIS 1948-2013

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Harris was born in Orange, in rural NSW, on 10 August 1948. His parents, Keith and Wilga, came from working class backgrounds. Keith was a self-employed contract house painter, and former POW (Changi and the Thai-Burma railway), and Wilga ‘kept the books’ of the family business. In a conservative political environment, Keith was mostly a Labor voter, and Wilga consistently so. Recalling his own youthful politics, Tony described himself in secondary school as being “predisposed to a left-wing sensibility”.

Following schooling, Harris went to Canberra and studied economics at the Australian National University. He was not amongst the minority of males in his generation that was selectively conscripted for military service, and while maintaining a left political perspective, did so within the ALP, which he joined in 1968. In that time of political turbulence, in his own words, he remained “on the fringes of an active political life”. After graduating, he joined the federal public service, in Treasury, but found this a miserable experience. So he quit, left Canberra and moved to Sydney to train as a NSW secondary school teacher.

Harris became part of a collective household in Annandale, and in this environment and local milieu quit the fringes of political activity, becoming exposed to and part of a flourishing radical culture of grass roots democratic and self-management thinking, an array of socialisms, feminism, protest, direct action, left-wing journalism. He transferred his ALP membership to the then small Annandale Branch, became its secretary in 1973, and challenged established ALP practices which placed party power in the hands of factions, stacked branches, families/dynasties/cliques, advocating instead more democratic processes. It was an advocacy and conduct which led to him being expelled from the party in 1984.

Harris was dealing with ideas and politics the ALP could not contain. Inspired by the formation of the German Greens in 1980, Harris began advocating the formation of an Australian Greens political party. In 1984 he called the first public meeting to set this in motion, and the party was registered in 1985, adopting the core principles of social justice, ecological sustainability, grassroots democracy, and non-violence. Harris became the Greens first national registered officer under the Commonwealth Electoral Act, a role requiring much diplomacy, tact, good humour and goodwill in a burgeoning arena with many and diverse ecological/environmental/local/political groups and organisations. He held this position until relinquishing it in 1991. In the 1990 federal election he stood as the Green candidate for the seat of Sydney.

During the next two decades, Harris taught history within the TAFE system, and at the University of New South Wales. He undertook postgraduate study, completing a doctorate which became the basis of his book *Basket Weavers and True Believers*.
(Leftbank Publishing, Newtown, 2007). This was a scholarly and nuanced study, written from the perspective of a participant-historian. Focused on, and dealing with, the microcosm of Labor politics in the Leichhardt area of inner-Sydney during the period 1970-1991, it was also an account of a vibrant radical culture, a snapshot in time, and more widely, a prescient account of an old and major political party struggling to redefine itself as the Twentieth Century came to an end, and the resulting conflicts between ideas and principles versus politics, orthodoxies, and pragmatism.

During his time in the academy, he also took a hand in the work of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, and from 2005 until 2011 was a member of the editorial board of the Society’s journal, *Labour History*, in which he also published. From 2005 until 2008, he was a member of the journal’s editorial working party.

In 2008 Harris took to journalism, joining his journalist friend and activist colleague since the 1970s, Hall Greenland as part of the small team producing the weekly national news magazine, *The Week*, which ran from 2008 until 2012. Greenland was general editor; Harris the International News editor. He stayed with this job until diagnosed with advanced cancer, moving to Melbourne in 2010 to be with close friends and support.

As he battled cancer during these final years, Harris engaged deeply with the antiwar thinking and pacifism of his earlier political days. He became more direct and forthright; the way forward, he argued, was “to find a way back to that peaceful mass political activity which can help shape a better world in ways that war and violence never can”. In 2011 he began essaying on his blog, *Watermelon*, writing from an historical perspective on political ethics, war and peace, non-violence; he described his stance as being on the “sceptical and critical left of the Greens”. Harris proudly took his blog title from the cheap attempt at smearing used by anti-Green interests; yes, politically he was green on the outside and red on the inside, and, further, as he explained, in his case the black pips of the melon represented the spirit of libertarianism.

Harris’ last blog essay, in May 2013, was an erudite and considered critique of the Anzac legend and its political manipulation; he argued the need to assert an oppositional antiwar culture of peace, and internationalism. War memorials in Australia, he argued, were ‘military’ memorials, and not about remembering, but forgetting. He advocated their use by antiwar activists as sites for peaceful protest, for example antiwar poetry readings, songs, speeches, performances. He made a case for the creation of an antiwar day of commemoration which recognised the real costs of war, and remembered those Australians who have opposed and struggled against war. In an earlier post, he suggested May 8 as the day of commemoration, being the date of the first Vietnam antiwar Moratorium in 1970. In May 2013 he had himself filmed on video performing antiwar poetry by Siegfried Sassoon and A. D. Hope in front of the iconic Canberra War Memorial; these videos were posted on the antiwar Facebook page *Fed Up With Anzac Jingoism* he had started earlier, in March.
Harris died during the afternoon of 26 July 2013, in Melbourne, in the presence of his younger sister, Janice, and his close friend Julie Kimber.

*Rowan Cahill* is a sessional teaching academic at the University of Wollongong (NSW). His latest book is *Radical Sydney* (UNSW Press, 2010) co-authored with Terry Irving.