Notes for the retrospective screening of Friends & Enemies - 2022

A lot of time has elapsed since this film was made, but seeing it now memories come flooding back.

Unlike many films about union history, Friends & Enemies is not a retrospective account, it was make as a fly on the wall documentary – told as it unfolded from day to day, week to week, month to month.

I recently heard historian Mark Mckenna on an ABC podcast making a few good points. He asks “what role does sentiment and emotion play in history? Should we distance ourselves from the story? Isn’t it the subjectivity of history that gives it life?“. Looking back now at the film, that’s probably not a bad description of my approach.

So what drew me to make the film in the first place? Here was an attack on unionism unprecedented in this country. The New Right was on the march and Bjelke Peterson was its champion. So I knew the dispute had massive historical importance. The stakes were incredibly high for both sides. My sympathies were clearly with the sacked workers

When I first arrived in Brisbane I headed for Dan O’Neill’s place. I can’t remember quite how I got Dan’s contact, but Dan certainly gave me the lowdown. Felt like a war was going on. Civil unrest. Manning the barricades. Paris 68 – but Brisbane style. Next day I walked into the office of the ETU who gave me permission to film. They appreciated the enormity and historical significance of this dispute. The next day I was on a picket line where I met Bernie and other sacked rank and file.

But I also keen to follow the government’s conduct of the strike – hopefully to get access to Joh’s inner circle. But no go – so I approached journalist Quentin Dempster – who was working for Courier Mail if he had any ideas. He suggested Vince Lester – after all he was public face of the government running the dispute. I had no problem getting assess to Vince. He knew he was on the winning side, and he just loved the camera. Couldn’t get enough of it. His brazen confidence and contempt for the strikers really got to me/

I kept coming up from Sydney every few weeks. I spent a long time in the union office with the rank and file committee, filming pickets, demonstrations, and visiting families. Then suddenly switching gear and going to National Party fund raisers and tea parties. I had a formal suit & pants in the crew car just in case I needed it. Lester even invited me on a trip to Emerald on the Premiers private jet. Could I refuse? Bu that was the night that Joh was going be awarded his doctorate. So I made sure I had 2 crews – one at the Deb Ball, and the other at the University.

In Brisbane those years you felt this incredible polarisation - polaristion not only between NP and labor, but within the trade union movement and the left. As the dispute wore on I witnessed an increasing sense of desperation….. to the point where the dispute started to turn in on itself. Something that I wasn’t expecting. The strike committee was becoming more and more embittered, losing faith in their own union officials and TLC and the ACTU. These peak bodies were calling the shots and not involving the rank and file. There was a sense of powerlessness that was infecting not only the men, but their partners and families as well.

I could have stopped filming but I decided to keep going - to show how the rank and file and their supporters were keeping the struggle alive – flying pickets, staging ‘illegal’ marches, confronting the TLC, and then finally how the women came to the fore when morale was ebbing low. They had nothing to lose

In the editing I wanted to make sure that everyone’s views were represented – with fairness and accuracy being my guiding principles …… but as I said earlier my sympathies were always with the sacked workers and their families. It was the ever present Bernie Neville who for me was the conscience the dispute. He took centre stage.

In the end II wanted the film to speak for itself and leave the viewer to draw their own conclusions.

At the same time I also wanted the film to ignite debate – to raise questions about how unions should respond to these kinds of challenges, and what can be learnt from these experiences. What could have happened differently? If I think in those terms I believe the film has succeeded.