

1970s – Decade of Protest Exhibition of Photographs Manawatu in May 2024

Speech at the opening by John Harvey

I want to start by telling you an old story about photographs and protests.

This story, which is true by the way, involved me, an SIS agent named David Godfrey, and possibly the worst photograph ever published in Auckland print media. Unlike the photographs you can see here today, this one was published in the mid-1960s.

At the time I was co-editing an occasionally scurrilous Auckland University free student newspaper called Outspoke. This paper was an independent non-student funded tabloid which was sometimes controversial, sometimes light-hearted but mostly serious, and which aimed to provide a balanced (in inverted commas) picture of what was happening on our vibrant student campus.

The 1960s were, of course, years in which New Zealand was, to our shame, involved in the Vietnam war. Our Prime Minister was Keith Holyoake, who headed a conservative government which did not believe in New Zealand having an independent foreign policy. A major contributor to the vibrancy of our student life was, of course, the anti-war protest movement.

The 1960s protests were maybe often tame compared to the major disruptions and violence that marked the Springbok tour in the early 1980s, but they were nevertheless intense and often bitter. Holyoake's government fostered a sense of disenfranchisement among many young people that boiled over in the Rob Muldoon years that followed.

Outspoke played a small but significant part in stoking the anti-war protest movement by naming a relatively undistinguished-looking and unBondlike David Godfrey on its front-page, and asserting he was enrolled in political studies as a means of spying on fellow students.

It was a great story, written by my old friend Brian Rudman, who later became a distinguished daily newspaper columnist, but who in those days was a distinguished Outspoke reporter.



The story was illustrated by a photograph of Godfrey. I assigned our photographer to a political studies lecture to obtain a picture of the spy. That pic never saw the light of day, because our photographer, the son of immigrants, was warned by his relations that he was risking his entire future career.

We were desperate to get a pic to give the story more credibility. Another of our staff was a classmate of David Godfrey, and we decided at a news conference in our prefab newsroom I should take the pic. Never mind that I knew nothing about photography. The plan was she would sit next to Godfrey in the classroom, and all I had to do was point the camera in their direction and push the button.

Easy hey. Except I walked into the classroom, a few drinks of courage inside me, to find the lecture theatre full and my classmate sitting next to Godfrey but in the middle of a row several rows back.

How could I be secretive and subtle about completing my assignment because we didn't want Godfrey to immediately learn our

intentions. We were worried the SIS could prevent the issue coming out.

Right, I said to myself, whatever else I do I must remain calm and measured. So I rushed forward to near where the pair were sitting, nervously thrust the camera toward Godfrey's face, clicked the button and hurried from the room.

It wasn't a great pic. It was fuzzy. It is a moot point whether it actually identified Godfrey who looked startled by what had just happened. But it did the job, and later became a prize exhibit in the Royal Commission of Inquiry ordered by the Holyoake Government into our activities.

Some of the aftermath of the Godfrey case was quite astonishing. Brian and I were clearly naïve when we agreed to be interviewed by the weekly newspaper Truth. Their reporter took us to our favourite bar, and spent an hour or so telling us jokes. His story then began: Harvey and Rudman laughed and joked as they told me etc etc

I never took another news pic, but that was a great way to retire from the lens.

It is special to be here to celebrate the opening of an exhibition to which the Evening Standard and its photographers like Maurice Costello, Mark Mitchell and Phil Crawford have contributed so strongly.

I missed the early part of the 1970s as I was working in Europe covering events like the IRA bombings and the Munich Olympic Games atrocity. But I restarted my Manawatu career in mid-1973 as deputy editor, and found a New Zealand that was enjoying a far greater sense of nationhood under the all-to-brief stewardship of Norman Kirk and his Labour government.

Muldoon was lurking in the shadows, however, and goodness knows what might have been unleashed on the country had social media been an option at the time.

Thankfully, it wasn't, and although the Standard received its fair share of vitriolic letters to the editor, and although much of its management could hardly be described as dynamically socially enlightened, it took its role seriously of covering the region and its people as thoroughly as possible. We were a university town, with all that implied.

They were kinder times, but as the decade ended the face of Muldoonism had cast its pall over the country and was about to embroil it in ugliness

and shame. The explosion of anger that was about to occur was not because of French nuclear testing, for example, or women's rights to abortion, a particularly sensitive issue in a city heavily dominated by SPUC-leaning gynaecologists. It was, of course, about rugby contact with South Africa, an issue that apparently mattered far more.

It was a challenging time to be a journalist in New Zealand, especially in rugby-mad place like Manawatu, and especially if you were writing a weekly sports column like I was.

There were certainly advantages to being here, however.

Prominent leaders of the anti-tour movement, like my friends, former All Black Robert Burgess and unionist Roger Middlemass were well-known local identities and both had considerable mana.

Such was the level of hate and anger engendered by the Springbok tour, however, that good relationships only counted for so much.

Having used my sports column to argue against the tour, and editorial columns to develop the anti-tour agenda, I was an obvious target for the more thuggish pro-tour supporters, particularly after what happened in Waikato.

Nothing more serious than name-calling, spitting etc happened, but the atmosphere was often chilling and disturbing.

I remember one media conference quite vividly in the week of the Manawatu match. Local police had asked me to provide informal media liaison for them, as they had limited experience in dealing with the influx of overseas journalists who descended on Manawatu post-Waikato. When I arrived at the conference on the eve of the match, my way was blocked by Ian Cruden, a local rugby personality and future president of the New Zealand Rugby Union. Ian and I had a long community relationship, but on this day it consisted entirely of bile. I probably would not have made it into the conference if the police had not supported me.

But that was what the country was like then, and hatred, anger and division infected relationships all over the place and particularly in workplaces. The tension in our once-happy newsroom was palpable and I feared for the chances of normal friendships resuming when the tour was over.

I was quite pleased with myself when a solution suggested itself. On the day of a test match I knew a group of editorial colleagues were convening in the house of one of our senior journos to watch the match.

I got together with a reporter mate and a subeditor and we hatched our plan. That afternoon we dressed in protective gear (cricket pads, boxes etc, but no helmets in those days) and shortly after the match was scheduled to have begun, we marched down the long drive to the house in the quiet and genteel suburb of Hokowhitu noisily banging rubbish tin lids and loudly chanting Amandla and remember Steve Biko.

The effect was electric. Faces peered through the curtains and the bubble of tension evaporated in laughter. We maintained our protest on the veranda for the duration of the test, and those inside kept providing us with beer and sausage rolls during the match. The newsroom became a far happier place again.

There was another incident I should mention. During the final test at Eden Park, while the ground was being strafed with flour bombs, friends and I were having our last gathering of the tour.

There was a knock on our door, and who should be there but a pollster for a regular political opinion poll. We invited her in so we could continue to watch the mayhem on the pitch.

To our appalled astonishment she began a tirade against the protesters while working through her theoretically impartial survey. She has obviously decided that because we had the telly on we must be pro-tour. We gently disabused her of that notion.,

I want to finish with one story that for me summed up that tour. On the day of the Manawatu match there was a tense and dangerous stand-off in Cuba Street outside the ground.

Journalists including me had stationed ourselves outside the main entrance close to where an implacable and immovable blockade of Red Squad police had formed.

The protesters marched down Cuba Street toward the police and one by one walked past the squad, exchanging a few words as they did so. They were desperate moments.

Three of those at the scene knew each other well from school days. One was one of my reporters. One was a protester The third was standing in the row of Red Squad members. The protester paused in front of his school friend in the squad. My reporter friend watched tensely. The protester said nothing and walked on after a long stare.

It was no wonder some of the wounds took a long time to heal.

Thank you for the invitation to be here today, and congratulations to Dion and his fellow organisers who have put this superb exhibition together.



John Harvey, past deputy editor and editor of Manawatu Standard, speaks at the opening event of the 1970s Decade of Protest photograph exhibition on 1 May 2024 at Square Edge Gallery Palmerston North, New Zealand.