



## Working Papers 2006-2020: Reflections

If you are reading this you are a subscriber to [www.workingpapers.com.au](http://www.workingpapers.com.au), happy new year and thank you for your continuing support. Thank you, most of all, for taking the trouble to open up this paper and for taking the time to read it.

Bushfires made me reflective in the early hours of the New Year.

Just before Christmas I had driven down from NE Arnhem land to Kangaroo Valley in southern NSW and I saw the mosaic burning done perfectly, just before the wet season arrived, over hundreds of square kilometres from the Company Islands through Western Arnhem to Katherine. The Barkly Tablelands were parched and hot. Then from Western Queensland on the carnage started. From Brisbane to Sydney there was the hell of hot fires all along the Pacific Highway. The South Coast was just starting to catch a-light.

At home in Kangaroo Valley the fires were coming and I wondered if the property of my close friends and neighbours, and my house, library and office and the family heirlooms could survive a full-on confrontation with the monster Currowan and then Morton fires. In the days after New Year I worked hard setting up sprinklers around my house and office and clearing round close friends houses.

At night I thought particularly of those that had lost everything at Cobargo, Mogo and Murrumbidgee. All places I had worked in or knew well. In the end in Kangaroo Valley, the village and upper river were tremendously lucky, however 30 houses and decades of work on properties and agricultural activities went up in smoke on the unforgettable Saturday Jan 4 when it was in the high 40s. Farther south even more calamitous events had occurred. It was shocking and sobering

As I did my stocktake I was astonished to find that since 2006 I had put over 300 papers, reports, podcasts online on the Working Papers website. I started to look back at the archive. At times, when I considered the personal criticisms of some leaders, I wondered if maybe the papers should have been burned. It's always confronting to see errors and mistakes on so many fronts. But I have made it a point not to go back and correct things after the fact. There was some gold and some things that I am proud of. And they would survive fire. Most of all there are the articles naked and accountable to any critical reader. All the vanities, points of ignorance are there for all to see; all raw and not artificially

processed by an editorial group or set of advisors. All there, so long as I continue to pay for the costs of the server and host!

When I look back working papers seems to be a vain/noble project. It was probably a lot to do with my slow withdrawal from the addictive mainstream political sphere. Even in the margins of the national spotlight if you weren't writing something or being discussed somewhere somehow you didn't matter.

How to fill the void? Publishing was my thing since Local Consumption Press in the 1980s, but the prohibitive costs of a press made me think twice about that, in the 1990s at Evatt, Brisbane Institute and the Whitlam Institute the web was the major innovation. So the idea of a general working papers website evolved alongside the ISX website and Australian Prospect. My idea was to do something akin to the work I had done at the Evatt Foundation, Brisbane Institute and at least, the early days and aspirations, of the Whitlam Institute. The idea was to create engaging public research that targets people at every-day levels but with high levels of research and scholarship and without political restrictions.

Why? Part of the reason I have alluded to above but I was frustrated as well. I was always disappointed at the lack of research freedom in the political sphere. I did my share to create an independent space within the labour movement at the Evatt Foundation. But it was constantly undermined. So many times, working for political causes, there was unnecessary interference and censorship. It was not necessarily overt. Although I remember one time a former ACTU President sneered at how much funding we had attracted even when we were working on a millionth of the budget of the mainstream conservative think tanks. If there wasn't definite vested interests or political pressures, there was self censorship. Something akin to "you just can't say that" floated around your brain. Could this be acceptable? Will it have an impact with x or y audience? How can we do a press kit that will make a journo want to be interested in it? But in my heart of hearts I was always thought that you find the best people and researchers and you give them free rein and you release the results come what may. That is what is all about. You try your best and give it as much effort and heart as you can and then you let it go. Come what may. Is it possible to do that?

Universities also seemed barren. Like so many senior researchers and academics who left Australian universities in disgust in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s I was over the incompetent, dictatorial central management, the committee meetings, the insular peer reviewed journals, the lack of accountability to the public, the lack of accountability to students, teaching and learning, the sheer bureaucracy of every day academic life and the tendency of many senior academics to hide away in a clover patch somewhere deep in the system, avoiding all this, where no-one disturbed them. This is not always the case. There are some tremendous teams of researchers but not who were directly accountable or writing publicly accessible research articles. Please don't get me wrong there have been some great innovations in this sphere since 2006, things like **The Conversation** (2011) sprung up for similar motivations. But even this attempt to put academic work into a journalistic format was not really what it was about as far as I was concerned. It was not just putting existing research into accessible language it was about changing the way research itself formed and could be formed by responding to practical events in a "free" environment. And if all there was to it was to put academic research into a journalistic format then nothing challenged the problematic corporatist culture of our university research sector which continues to be a major problem.

Then there was government, public sector or semi-government agency consultancies particularly in the Aboriginal sphere. Hundreds, possibly thousands of consultant reports, have never been published. There is not just no equivalent of **The Conversation**; as the Ecological Society of Australia noted at its annual conference last year, there is active suppression of research findings by governments<sup>1</sup>. It is not just in the sphere of ecology or climate change that this is occurring. Many important reports lie deep within filing cabinets with restrictions on their authors ever speaking publicly about their contents. Tax payers dollars are spent on the research but tax payers never get the benefit of the findings. The direct control and censorship of research by public servants and politicians is inexcusable. Moreover, nothing ever appears, unless there is plaque, a speech and a vetted public relations exercise. All this fundamentally stems progress, problem solving and knowledge sharing. It widens the gap between us all. I believe that any author contracted as a consultant has a moral right to make their findings public if they are suppressed by public servants or politicians for political or bureaucratic reasons. Many groups are exploring the moral right of authors in this context. But why have to go through all this pain to get facts and information out there quickly and easily? Why not just do the research and publish it online with no fuss?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ecolsoc.org.au/new-research-highlights-suppression-ecological-and-conservation-science>

Working papers was my response to all that. I wanted to be free to write and create and to share and grow a community of readers, thinkers. I wanted to be responsive and fresh. I wanted to offer a serious alternative to un-researched news items in the 24 hour news cycle. I wanted to be accountable too.

That was the thinking, but the project was a great mistake in many, many ways.

It was very arrogant for a start. You can't create a culture on your own. As one of my friends in the USA told me: "As soon as you start to write as an individual, everyone will just ignore you". You can't compete with the authority that comes from institutions. If your article is not on a reading list, if it is not on some curated list or forum it will probably not be read. You do need to spend a massive amount of time promoting your ideas.

Then there is the difficulty of creating an independent readership and audience. The generational desire for higher learning at established institutions with nationally accredited degrees stem the enthusiasm of many to read outside their demanding study recommendations. Young people move directly from school into these environments no matter how inappropriate they sometimes are. And it is true that it is the fellowship of researching and learning above all else that probably matters above all else and it often over-rides any of the institutional staleness, incompetence or bureaucracy or even the self-serving, insular reading list of a professor or lecturer. But to develop something new and to get people to spend time reading something outside of the box is hard.

And then there is the challenge of funding and figuring out what stringing together words is worth in the real world. The answer is probably not much. The growth of outstanding podcasts funded through the ABC like **The Minefield, Conversations** and the many attempts by news corporations to monetise their content make the whole space highly competitive. To charge even the tiniest amount for a piece of writing is a great hindrance to many readers.

Having said all this, would I change anything about the last 14 years of learning and writing? No. The insights I have gained personally and some of the articles I have published over fourteen years are valuable. They are uniquely forged and I could not have written them or shared them without having the temerity to stand alone and have a go. Moreover there working papers has a rock solid following of readers from a variety of important places within the Australian and international community. It is a unique community which I value greatly.

I think Working Papers has been about doing something different. It is not just an independent publishing strategy. It is an independent enterprise in which issues and papers have to arise from some organic place that is not a media organisation, or a university, or a government, or a philanthropic enterprise. This in turn I think changes the nature of the work. Sometimes there is a fantastic failure, sometimes there is the opposite of group think or team readership but once in a while something unique is written that would never have appeared if not for the freedom to just publish quickly and efficiently.

Even when I see some more personal peccadillos in the mix, a dozen or more articles and reports stand up to scrutiny from any quarter, and some have been part of tremendous changes, and I don't think they could have evolved or be published in the form they are anywhere but working papers. I am really pleased they are easily available and on the public record. I would love to know what your thoughts are of all of this. Please don't hesitate to email any comments you may have to [peter@peterbotsman.com](mailto:peter@peterbotsman.com)

Best for the New Year

Peter Botsman

The whole working papers catalogue 2006-2020 and links can be uploaded below.