

Student politics — then and now

Former activist TONY ABBOTT remembers how it was.

A COWBOY raid and a Supreme Court action were part and parcel of the political contest at Sydney University in the late 1970s.

Early in August 1978, I was elected president of the Students' Representative Council (SRC). That involved many weeks preparing a team of supporters, dawn visits to the university chalking campaign slogans and 10 hours a day for the week of the election itself — addressing lectures, distributing broadsheets, appeasing the antagonistic and encouraging the faint-hearted. The voter turnout was nearly 30 percent — then a record.

The hard part, however, was actually assuming office. Under the SRC constitution, the new president took office at the first meeting of the incoming council. The timing of this was in the hands of the outgoing executive controlled by the "Left Collective" — a coalition of communists, Trotskyists, feminists, homosexuals, non-aligned Marxists and left-wing Laborites. September had almost gone, the university year was ebbing away and no meeting had been called.

Passions were raised by the planned visit of Mary Whitehouse, the English morals campaigner. More than 1000 turned up on the university front lawn but Whitehouse did not. The eggs and tomatoes intended for her were directed, instead, at her sponsor — me.

The next day, Friday, September 22, a barrister advised that unreasonable delay by the old executive meant that I could be regarded as president. Fortified by this, the university recognised me as president. Thus armed, I entered the SRC offices and declared that I was taking over. An angry crowd of Left supporters made that impossible.

The university — or, at least, two of its senior officers — agreed that strong action was necessary. The following evening I assembled 30 supporters accompanied by a locksmith and a university officer. The door was forced, we flooded in — there were no lefties to subdue. The locks were changed, the raiders retired, the transfer had taken place.

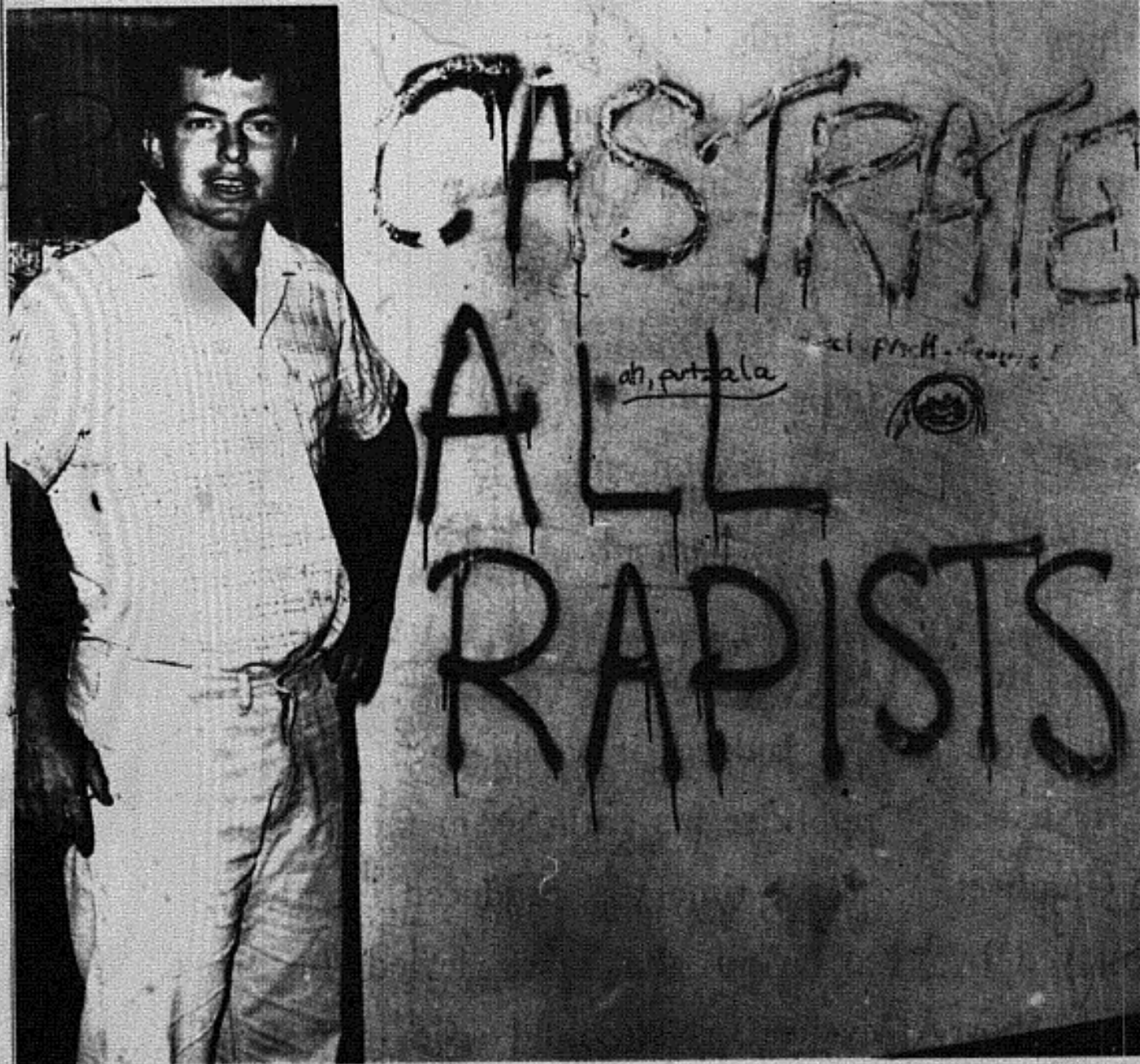
Or so I thought. But on Sunday morning I could not enter. During the night, there had been a further break-in

and the locks had been changed once more. While nothing stirred, I had the locks changed for a third time.

On Monday morning, I opened one door of the SRC and attempted to conduct business. The burly friends who had spent the night in the SRC had lectures to attend. The crowd outside quickly became a riot inside. I called the police. They refused to clear the building. The university Registrar arrived and declared that the building was closed until further notice. That didn't worry me — I was later supposed to have said, "There's no business like no business" — but it meant that the Left had lost its nerve centre.

On Tuesday, the university and I were served with summonses. On Wednesday, the university got cold feet and prepared to lodge a consent notice with the court but a senior officer stiffened their resolve. On Thursday afternoon, Justice Kearney declared that I was indeed the president.

The incoming council, however, was also dominated by the "Left Collective". The regulations were changed so that I never presided at a single meet-



Tony Abbott on campus in 1978

ing. During my term, despite my objections, the SRC continued to give money to feminist, environmental and anti-nuclear groups and resolved to support the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the African National Congress and rebel groups in the Philippines. I never managed to have the feminist and homosexuals' slogans on the SRC walls painted over, nor to open the "Womens' Room" to men, nor to make the SRC truly accountable by ending compulsory SRC fees. A solitary success was secession from the widely discredited and even more left-wing Australian Union of Students.

Of course, it was all worth it. The facts were trivial but the issues were not. The routine was banal but the personalities were not.

Student politics attracted eccentrics and fanatics but also people of deep commitment. Student polities rarely got first-class honors and usually read about themselves on toilet walls. Not for them the anonymity and indifference that made for an easy life. A touch of obstinacy, a large measure of idealism — even if misguided — and a romantic belief that human strivings could make a difference were the characteristics of the student activists I knew. I dare say today's breed is much the same. □