



Interview with Mungo MacCallum (1958)

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conducted by Lyndon Goddard (2007)

Old Cranbrookian Mungo MacCallum (1958), well known for his long career in political journalism, kindly donated his time to conduct an interview with the OCA on his memories of Cranbrook, his post-school life & his views on current political events.

First, thank you very much for giving up the time for this interview.

Not a problem.

How much contact have you had with Cranbrook since graduating?

I addressed one dinner of the OCA, and I played cricket for the OCA during the first year after I left, but that's about it.

What were your impressions of Cranbrook during your time there?

While my teachers were generally excellent, I felt that under headmaster Gethyn Hewan especially, there was a huge money snobbery attached to the school – being rich had a lot to do with almost everything, and beyond that there was a very strong attachment to the sports, particularly to rugby.

It really didn't value other things particularly; obviously there were teachers within the school who did – there were people who were interested in the life of a mind to a very considerable extent, but the school itself seemed to be based very much on this idea of winning the football [rugby] rather than getting a good mark in the Leaving Certificate.

What sort of involvement did you have within the school while you were there?

I spent a lot of my time in the debating society, the drama group, chess etc., but these were considered to be – in my time – less important than who won the cricket or the football – and that was always the subject of the headmaster's address at weekly assemblies!

Compulsory sport (which was part of the school ethos) certainly didn't do me any harm, although I was appallingly bad at rugby union – I had entirely the wrong build and temperament for it. But by the end of my school career, I was enjoying cricket, which I probably wouldn't have done if it had not been compulsory (I probably would have found a way to drop out and become even more gawky and asthmatic than I already was!)

One thing that's certainly changed since your time was the compulsory cadet corps that boys participated in. Could you describe that a little?

That was a particularly grim part – for me – of school. It was compulsory for every student in fourth and fifth year [Years 11 and 12] to spend Monday afternoon clambering into an ill-fitting uniform and parading around the oval being bellowed at incomprehensibly by semi-retired militarists who were brought in for the purpose.

It became less compulsory later on for those (such as myself) who had shown themselves to be utterly incompetent at any form of military discipline. It imparted me with a deep and lasting loathing of the military, and it did absolutely nothing to turn me into the kind of patriot that was intended, and even less to make me even remotely competent at any sort of warfare!

You completed the Leaving Certificate at the age of 15 in 1957, but your parents decided that you should repeat the following year. What drove you to achieve your considerable academic success [second in the state in Maths I and English and fourth overall] in that year?

I had a genuine intellectual curiosity, and I think the teaching was good: I had good teachers in all disciplines who drove me on and who realized that I needed pushing, and perhaps realized that I should be singled out a little. I also did a lot of work by myself, and was genuinely fascinated by mathematics, science, history, literature – and the school, to its great credit, encouraged me in that and allowed me occasionally to skip formal periods and to spend time in the library and work at my own pace.

Furthermore, in my final year – partially because I started to mature physically fairly late – I gained physical confidence, and the peer group with whom I associated combined a certain interest in intellectual things as well as being driven by sport. I was drawn into a much more complete society: I really did need that extra year at school.

You wrote in your memoirs that you felt that your generation was the last to be able to view university as the 'end of play' rather than the 'beginning of work'. To what extent do you think that's changed?

I think that the idea of university as somewhere you go to complete your education, to mature as a person, to decide what you want to do as a career, to develop all of your options, is now well and truly dead.

People these days go to university with the idea that they are going to become qualified for a particular job as quickly as humanly possible, and that's it. Certainly the Howard government's removal of compulsory student unionism has narrowed the options enormously – that was a damned near criminal act, and it means that people don't have the real university experience anymore.

While you were still at university, you considered that you might have a future in the theatre. What changed between that feeling and your inevitable move into journalism?

The most important reason was the realization that sooner or later I'd have to earn a living – a realization that perhaps came to me later than it should have! I'd been a scholarship boy from the time I was in primary school until the time I left university. I had a brief stint overseas and by the time I got back to Australia, I realized that none of the things I'd been doing for the first third of my life actually qualified me to do anything for the rest of it.

I had an Honours degree – not a very good one – in an obscure branch of pure mathematics, which wasn't a good idea; I also had qualifications in English; but really the only thing I did that was going to be of much use to me was that I knew how to write.

I really enjoyed writing, and by the time I left university I realized that there was a big wide world out there from which I'd been mercifully sheltered – I really wanted to be involved in it: one of the ways of finding out about things relatively quickly and at a reasonably interesting level was through becoming involved in journalism.

Once I started working in it – although when I did, I thought it would only be a transitional phase in my life – I realized that I was pretty good at it and that I really enjoyed it.

You started work at *The Australian* shortly after it was established [in the mid-1960s] in the Sydney bureau, before being moved to the Canberra bureau in 1969. What was that like, and did you miss the multifarious nature of your reporting in the Sydney office?

The newspaper's managers thought that they'd give me a taste of real politics by sending me to Canberra, and I really decided that this was finally what I wanted to do with my life.

I did miss the variety of my work at the Sydney bureau to a certain extent – a lot of the stuff I did was pretty boring when you look at it (police rounds, shipping rounds, courts, local government, etc.), but it was really very good training and it gave me insights into parts of society that I might not otherwise have experienced.

What led to your personal affiliation with the political left?

It really started when I was at school, and was a reaction against the money snobbery that I saw at Cranbrook. Insofar as there was talk of current affairs or politics at school, it tended to be formally right-wing; it was thought that communism was the ultimate evil, and it was felt that the Labor Party (if you talked about it all) was something that only yobbos had anything to do with.

There was no real suggestion that there was an alternative to Robert Menzies – when I learned about the history of Marxism during history class, I was attracted to the very idea that there *was* an alternative. I was never a Marxist, but I was interested by the idea that the sort of idiot capitalism that we were taught at school was not the beginning and end of the world.

I was almost instinctively an intellectual rebel, even in those days, and that tended to take me into the leftist camp; the further I went and the more I learned, the more I felt that that was where I belonged – that I was a progressive rather than a conservative, that I did have a strong sense of injustice, and a strong sense of the need for equality in society, in a way that the elitism of Cranbrook didn't represent.

What do you see as the role of religion in politics today?

I don't think religion matters one way or the other – everyone who goes into politics has their own personal beliefs which may or may not be based on religion. I certainly don't think that religion should interfere with the political process – I'm a Jeffersonian in that sense, and I believe in the total separation of church and state.

But I'm not silly enough to believe that people who go into politics don't frequently have religious beliefs; all I ask is that they don't let them intrude in the day-to-day processes of government.

Do you think the reason why Labor has moved to the right over the past decade was caused initially by playing ‘catch-up’ with John Howard’s policies while he was in government?

No, I think the reason is that society has generally become more affluent over the past decade. Society has changed: the idea that we now need some kind of leftist revolution to ensure justice in the workplace is simply no longer true. The incremental changes that have been made – through what used to be called Fabian socialism, but which is now just referred to as general ‘progress’ – have been huge in Australia.

We now live in a much richer, better and fairer society than we used to; it’s true that there are still huge divisions and injustices, but that awful bottom line of utter poverty, utter deprivation, discrimination against women, discrimination against blacks – all of the things that used to make Australia so problematic have now changed. As that progress has been made, the political centre has gravitated more towards the conservative side – it would be extraordinary if it hadn’t.

What was your reaction to Kevin Rudd’s downfall? What does it say about politics today?

I think it was unfortunate, and I think it was unnecessary – Labor would have won with Rudd just as easily as it’s likely to without him, and I think it was engineered for all the wrong reasons. However, I do accept that this terrible problem in modern society of the politician having to be the glib communicator with the consultants and being all things to all people is a political reality.

These are the times when politicians like Ronald Reagan and George Bush are likely to succeed, because they have the simplistic and glib answers that people apparently want. It’s a real challenge, but it’s also a huge liability for society: the politicians I’ve always admired on both sides of politics are those who have some sort of vision. In my time, unquestionably the three most interesting and useful Prime Ministers that we’ve had are John Gorton, Gough Whitlam and Paul Keating – and none of them lasted more than three years!

Thank you very much for your time.

My pleasure.