

## John Loizou – A Life Dedicated to Truth in Journalism.

John Loizou's sister Margaret recalls that her brother was a boisterous and rowdy player of Australian Rules football for the local Dandenong team. For him the game was more a competition of total concentration and dedication, than a social event. After the final siren he would say to his sister, "Come on Margaret, we're going now!" And that is how John played the game of life. When the final siren came he upped and left us without a word of goodbye.

Most likely, that is how John would like to have left this material world, without acknowledgement or ceremony; however, his achievements as a journalist deserve the recognition they did not always receive in his lifetime. In football and in life, he played a hard contact game, but with outstanding talent. Indeed, when his home team presented the annual award for Fairest and Best, they gave John a trophy for "Best Player", and excluded the citation, "Fairest".

Born in Melbourne in 1942, John honed his politics in the Eureka Youth League in the 1950s. As a teenager he was a voracious reader of Marxist-Leninist literature and working class novels which he recommended to his sister, causing her history teacher, Barry Jones, to advise his pupil against involvement in subversive movements and ideas.

At the age of 17, a friend pointed out to John that the ABC was advertising for cadet journalists. John applied, in competition with at least sixty applicants, mostly from academic backgrounds and private schools in contrast to John's training at Dandenong Technical School. Recognising his inherent talent, the ABC sent John to the then remote outpost of Darwin at the tender age of 17, where he remained with the ABC for the required three years.

During his cadetship, John's talent as a journalist was noticed by the legendary editor of the Northern Territory News, Jim Bowditch, and his rugged good looks by a Darwin girl, Olive Kennedy, a member of the stolen generation. Olive and John were together for over 14 years, marrying in Saint Kilda in 1964 having two sons, Brendan and Damien. John also became a respected member of Olive's extended Walpiri family from Phillip Creek. Later, in an ABC documentary, John recorded the Phillip Creek children's experiences of family disruption at the hands of an assimilationist government.

At the age of 22, John was in the newsroom of The Age in Melbourne when news of the supposed attack by North Viet Nam patrol boats against the destroyer USS Maddox came through. In 2008 he described the mood in the newsroom on the night: "...the bells to alert us of a 'snap' from the wire agencies began to ring in semi-darkened newsroom and we learned of the 'attack.' Later, - the newspaper's news editor and I, the only two members of the editorial team still at work, were chilled at the first reports of 'dogfights' in the skies above the 17th parallel ... as we plated for an extra city edition to tell our small world the news. We thought it could well herald the end of civilisation as we knew it because of our unfounded fear that the then Soviet Union would enter the war ... The Bac Bo or Gulf of Tonkin incident became, as they say these days, a defining moment for me. I have never again trusted reports out of Washington of far-off provocations and have remand ashamed of my own government's acquiescence in many of the subsequent mis-adventures."

On assignment in Indonesia during the Suharto regime, John developed many friendships in Java and Bali. During one extended visit to Indonesia, contact was lost and it was feared that John had been arrested. From 1975 his involvement in the East Timorese liberation struggle included assisting to operate the Top End clandestine radio communications with occupied East Timor. Since his death, John's work for East Timor has been recognised in a condolence letter from Mari Alkatiri, General Secretary of Fretilin, who wrote in part: "We in Timor-Leste who have struggled for justice and peace know very well and close to our hearts John's love and commitment to both principles. He gave his time selflessly coming over to see for himself the crisis that enveloped our nation and people in 2006 and writing about it in the coming years."

In the 1970s, John was a subeditor at the NT News, ensuring that the oppressed were given a voice by prominently publishing reports on the Darwin Aboriginal land rights protests in the crucial years from 1971 to 1976. Protests reported by John in the NT News included the raising of a flag to claim

back Darwin, the blocking of peak hour traffic in sit downs on Bagot Road, the preparation of a petition for land rights to Queen Elizabeth and many other actions that might not have otherwise been reported. For example, in 1973 John persuaded the editor to hire a helicopter to cover the occupation of an island by four Aboriginal men protesting against the use of a sacred site for a bombing range. The photographs have been used in several publications since and the bombing was stopped. John was also a close friend of Aboriginal activist, Fred Fogarty, who made headlines by firebombing a surveyor's truck encroaching on the Kulaluk land claim in Darwin.

Following Cyclone Tracy, social life was being restored in Darwin centred at the popular "Restaurant Cri" in Austin Lane. A friendship blossomed between John and the proprietor, Christine Pas. They were to share many ventures during their 38 years together. At the Dinah Beach Yacht Club beside the marina where they worked restoring a 17-metre wooden fishing boat, the couple were once told by an angry club member, "Go back to the Workers Club where you belong!" As well as editing for *The Age*, and *The Canberra Times*, in Darwin John worked at various times and in various roles for the ABC, the NT News, *The Star*, *The Advertiser* and *The Sun*, as well as several attempts to start up a community newspaper. For many years he was a regular contributor to the CPA newspaper, *The Tribune*.

In 1995 John and Cri accepted a position with the Vietnam News Agency in Hanoi where they stayed on and off for the next 15 years. In 2000, John and Cri launched the *Southeast Asian Times*, at first as a broadsheet and later, for 12 years, as an on-line newspaper, reporting on Southeast Asian affairs. The *Southeast Asian Times* epitomised John and Cri's visionary belief that the Top End of Australia and Darwin in particular is an integral part of the Southeast Asian region with a shared history, geography culture and developing economic interests.

In a revealing observation, John noted that "my fellow journalists in Hanoi didn't ask me how much advertising I had in my first edition [of the *Southeast Asian Times*]. All the Australians ask the same question: How much advertising did you get?"

In the early 1990s John won the NT Journalist of the year award and on other occasions he was the story, as will no doubt be shared over drinks in Darwin for years to come. In tributes after his death, John's reporting has been variously described as being "of depth and substance", "old school", "committed and inspiring", "impeccably balanced", and with "a great hunger to tell a good story". Others described him as "a journalists' journalist" or "a craftsman" with "a great hunger to tell a good story and hold the rich and famous to account ... a journalist who dug for his own information and did not rely on ministerial releases ... a dedicated anarchist who never revealed his sources... the last of his kind".

John died suddenly in Perth on January 17<sup>th</sup>. His funeral was held in Darwin on February 8<sup>th</sup>, attended by over 75 people, including many fellow journalists. It began with a haunting Aboriginal song expressing a yearning for country and ended with the rousing Internationale. John Loizou will be sadly missed by all, in particular his partner and comrade, Christine Pas, his sons Brendan and Damien and his siblings, Margaret, Charles and Peter.