In late November 2014, illness claimed the life of Geoff Mullen, long-time letter writer to the ‘Letters to the Editor’ page of the Sydney Morning Herald. For years the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section of newspapers had been his public forum, and the Herald published his ‘last hurrah’ the day before his death. Dictated from his deathbed, the letter concerned wealth and income inequality, ending with the caution: “Remember that the enemies of progress are always on the attack”.

Courtesy of six years in the late 1960s, early 1970s, Geoff Mullen became part of Australian history. He did not seek to do so, but once forced to engage with history, courageously and at times with satirical flair took the historic processes to task.

Born in March 1947, Mullen was one of the thousands of voteless 20-year Australian males netted by the system of conscription for military service introduced by the Menzies government in 1964/65, which subsequently fuelled Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Being ‘called-up’(ie conscripted) depended on your ‘luck/misfortune’ in a lottery marble system. Mullen was amongst the minority of young males whose marble was selected.

Having registered by force of law in January 1967, in November 1967 Mullen informed the responsible department, the Department of Labour and National Service, that he would no longer comply with the conscription process. Accordingly, in 1968 he refused to attend two compulsory medical examinations that serviced conscription and, as the result, served two short terms in prison, of 16 days and 29 days.

In 1969 he ran as an anti-war/anti-conscription candidate in the Federal Elections, contesting the seat held by the Minister for Labour and National Service. Mullen secured 1300 votes; his reason for standing, he explained, was to demonstrate “the corruption of democratic ideals that our government represents”.

A warrant for the arrest of Mullen was issued in October 1970, and he was arrested by Commonwealth police in February 1971. Police claimed he had been hard to find; Mullen countered, saying that he had been living publicly and that his name plate was on his front door.

Mullen was sentenced to imprisonment for non-compliance with the National Service Act, and joined a small and growing cohort of other anti-conscriptionists in prison, part of a successful campaign to embarrass an increasingly beleaguered government. He served eleven months.

A widely distributed poster issued by the Draft Resisters Union advertising his trial in 1971, showed Mullen satirically garbed in a ‘Spike Milliganish/Goon Show’ military uniform,
complete with medals and sabre, posing outside the Hyde Park War Memorial (Sydney). The
accompanying text urged: “Fight for Peace. Declare War on Conscription”.

Throughout his anti-conscription campaigning, Mullen wrote and published letters and
articles in whatever forums were available, and articulated a thoughtful, rational, nuanced,
and resolute anarchist position. On the eve of going to prison in 1971, he said: “Whenever I
do something, I like to think that I have a sufficient and rational reason for my action”.

Mullen’s politics did not mesh easily with the anti-war/anti-conscription movement, as his
opposition was individualist and uncompromising. He eschewed martyrdom and hero
worship; amongst formative influences were the writings of Bertrand Russell and George
Orwell. A self-described “chronic non-joiner”, Mullen was sceptical of the developing
protest movement: “…conventional (protest) marches might provide their participants with
an emotional pleasure, but to think that is enough is insane”. The pacifist journal The
Peacemaker (1939-1971) commented that even to those closely associated with him, he was
“a partial mystery, difficult to get close to”.

A product of Catholic schooling, Mullen attended Waverley College (Sydney) on a
scholarship. He was a top student, and a member of the school’s Cadet Corps. Experiences at
the hands of martinet ‘officers’ here were possibly the roots of his developing and eventual
lifelong anti-authoritarianism. Conscripted as he was completing his university studies, which
is where I had met him, earlier, during his political evolution, he briefly entered the worlds of
university tutoring, then computer programming, before imprisonment. In later life he
became an IT contractor.

Prison authorities shipped Mullen around in a prison hop-scotch, trying to minimise the
publicity that followed him, and frustrate solidarity demonstrations outside prison walls. This
meant he finally ended up in rural prison system in NSW, away from the metropole. From
one of his incarcerations, Mullen explained something of his politics: “I am in gaol and I
suppose all the official records will say I am a criminal. I might, of course, plead that I have a
moral duty to oppose conscription while at the same time the government has the legal duty
to imprison me. In this way I might see myself, and be seen, as a moral young man who takes
gaol and suffering upon himself to forge a way to a better Australia. But this is not so. I don’t
really give a bugger about moral or legal systems, governments, religion, better worlds, ‘pie
in the sky’ or anything like that. I want solely to live my life without interference or
interfering, now. And to my mind, conscription is always an unreasonable interference with
any man’s life. Not even ‘freedom and democracy’ can justify the taking of a conscript’s
freedom.”

“It may seem unreasonable that any man, myself least of all, should make pretensions to
morality in these times. I am no saint nor would-be martyr and I live as I have to live. Yet I
am convinced that life is not worth living if one is not, at least on the important issues, the
master of one’s own decisions. If others can make me kill and maim against conscience, I am
less a man, a beast to be used and manipulated. Thus I could fight in Vietnam only if I
considered it a just cause.”
The majority of the Australian people, including the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the trade union movement, had to be metaphorically dragged, kicking and screaming to opposing the Vietnam War and conscription, and away from the hegemony of deceits, fabrications and distortions that characterised the era of Menzies and his heirs. The ALP took until October 1969 to promise to bring Australian troops home from Vietnam, and not until 1971 to commit to ending conscription. Historians and history credit Mullen and his choices as amongst significant factors in helping make conscription an election issue in 1972.

A time well seized; lest we forget.

For a discussion of Mullen’s 1960s/70s views see http://www.takver.com/history/matteson.htm#mullen

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