Max Teichmann remembered

by social scientist Dr Christopher J. Ward

Many Monash University academics were opposed to the Vietnam War and caved in to student demands to hold sit-ins to discuss Vietnam in place of the regular lecture.

I was taking second-year politics at the time, and Max Teichmann was a senior lecturer. He was well known to be a left-winger, some said a Marxist (although it was never manifested in his lectures).

On a particular Thursday morning in October 1970, he had commenced a lecture on Australian politics. The door of the lecture theatre literally flew open, and in marched two students, dressed in denim jeans and shirt, the de facto uniform of the revolutionaries of the Monash University Labor Club.

While one of them was eminently forgettable, the other was future Labor premier of Tasmania, Jim Bacon, whose history shows that, after university, he went on to be a head-banger and knee-capper for the Builders’ Laborers’ Federation (BLF), a militant left-wing union led by the notorious Norm Gallagher, also nominally a member of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) but, like so many, more a criminal than a revolutionary.

The dynamic duo marched up to the lectern and accosted Max, who had probably noticed their entry but declined to regard them as any more than latecomers. Jim Bacon took the lead, interrupting Max in mid-sentence and demanding that the lecture be turned over to a teach-in on Vietnam and US imperialism.

Max carefully weighed what appeared to be a serious demand. And then he addressed the student body along the following lines: “Mr Bacon has asked that I relinquish the lecture to him for the purposes of a teach-in on Vietnam and, as we are discussing democracy, I think it only right and proper that the matter should be put to a popular vote.”

He then turned to Jim Bacon and said clearly and distinctly (because the microphone was still on): “These are second-year students, many of whom face exams in a couple of weeks, so I take it you will abide by their decision.”

He did not wait for any response but put the question to the students: “All those in favour of Mr. Bacon’s teach-in, please raise an arm, and there will be no comeback as far as I’m concerned.” Two arms slowly lifted hesitantly from about 165 students, and Max said: “And those against?” And a forest of arms arose.

With a certain amount of panache, Max turned to the distinctly uncomfortable duo and said: “Comrades, the people have spoken.” And with that, Jim Bacon and
his associate slunk out the side door, and even the pair in favour of the teach-in remained in situ.

What followed next was strongly reminiscent of things one read in the Soviet press — stormy and prolonged applause. Max bowed slightly with just a vague suggestion of a smile and continued the lecture.

That episode left a lasting impression on me of a man who was more dedicated to the teaching of the students and getting them through exams then caving in to a disruptive minority group. When I met him several years later, he vaguely remembered the event and we had a good laugh.

And, as he pointed out to me, Jim Bacon had gone on to become Labor premier of Tasmania.

He told me that his dalliance with the left was just that, and he had become more conservative as he grew older to the extent that he was scornful of the left in general.

He also said that a number of people had adjudged him to be a Jew, largely because of his surname, but he was raised an Anglican and served in the armed forces during World War II.

He was one of the most unforgettable characters I have ever met.