

City life

How people power, John Clarke and Julian Assange saved Fitzroy Pool

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Fitzroy locals enjoy their swimming pool on a hot afternoon this week. JASON SOUTH



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It's just gone 3pm, and the mercury has crept to 32 degrees.

The concrete is baking hot underfoot. It's a weekday, but Fitzroy Pool on Alexandra Parade is teeming with life: tanned bodies lounge in the stands with dog-eared paperbacks and hot towels; lap swimmers splash past one another in the lanes; a young child shrieks before bombing into the deep.

This 116-year-old pool is baked into Melbourne's inner north cultural psyche. It featured in Helen Garner's novel and film *Monkey Grip*, and its famed misspelt warning to migrant children painted on the wall inspired singer Courtney Barnett's song *Aqua Profonda*.

But many young people here for a dip today are probably unaware of the pool's alternative fate as a block of flats – and the Herculean community effort 30 years ago to save it.

Away from the sunbeds and umbrellas, behind the bike racks and bins is a small, tarnished plaque on a brick wall near a storeroom door – a humble reminder of what happened: “This drinking fountain commemorates ... the community campaign that saved the fabulous Fitzroy Pool from closure by an unelected Council.”



Locals swimming in the pool on Thursday. JASON SOUTH

In October 1994, fresh from controversially amalgamating Victoria's 210 municipalities into 78, the Kennett Liberal state government installed commissioners to run the newly formed City of Yarra – a merging of the former councils of Richmond, Collingwood and Fitzroy.

These commissioners had been appointed to usher in the new council under the guidance of the Hawthorn-dwelling bureaucrat Julian Walmsley and comb the books for efficiencies.

Four months into their reign came the announcement that the Fitzroy pool's days were numbered.

The baths were "poorly attended" and were losing \$40,000 a month, and the council could only recover 39¢ for every dollar spent on running it.

Divestiture, the commissioners reasoned, was the "most appropriate strategic option", mooted plans to sell the site for apartments.

Key campaigner Peter Fitzgerald, an economics and policy consultant, said that after two years of public asset sales under Kennett, including gas and electricity companies and hospitals, progressive activists were worn down.

"People were tired – there was a fatigue to hearing what was next on the chopping block," he says.

But the affront of coming for this cherished pool lit a fire. An initial informal meeting called at a resident's house turned up 25 local union officials, lawyers, journalists, graphic designers, former councillors, parents, students and local MPs.

"Between ourselves we realised we had enough people to mount a campaign against this decision," Fitzgerald says.



Peter Fitzgerald, one of the key community activists who helped save the pool in 1994. JASON SOUTH

On a rainy night on October 19, a public meeting was called at Brunswick Oval, where – to the organisers’ surprise – about 2000 locals turned up to hear from speakers Anglican bishop Michael Challen and the late local comedian John Clarke.

According to reported accounts from the night, Clarke wryly told the attendees that if the commissioners had closed the pool because it didn’t make a profit, “things are not looking too flash for footpaths and parks”.

Two days later, on the day the pool officially closed down and staff walked out, about 30 activists locked themselves inside – beginning a 40-day occupation.

“The facility was occupied, which sounds like an aggressive and problematic thing to do,” says Fitzgerald. “But the leaders of the resistance were well attuned to dealing with police in relation to protests and industrial action.

“The local police went along with it. [Their attitude was] as long as there’s nothing untoward happening, if you’re just occupying, there’s no vandalism or theft and as long as we know who is in charge, we are not about to break in the doors to take you out.”

The pool became the headquarters for organiser meetings. The rules of occupation were written on a whiteboard in the entrance: no alcohol, all visitors must sign in, all those on site must share a roster of chores.

At 14 years old, Fitzroy local Ellen Csar was the youngest member of the core activist crew, tagging along with her father.

“With my dad, I would sleep up in the gym on a mattress – we basically moved in there and didn’t leave,” she recalls.

“We used the showers. The council had drained the pool of water, and we used to play backyard cricket in there and have barbecues.”

Csar remembers feeling incensed over the closure decision, especially for the children from the nearby Atherton Estate public housing flats.

“A big part of the reasoning for saving that pool was that it was their outlet to come and have a swim,” she says. “They inspired us even more.”

The campaign’s strength was its political diversity, Fitzgerald says.

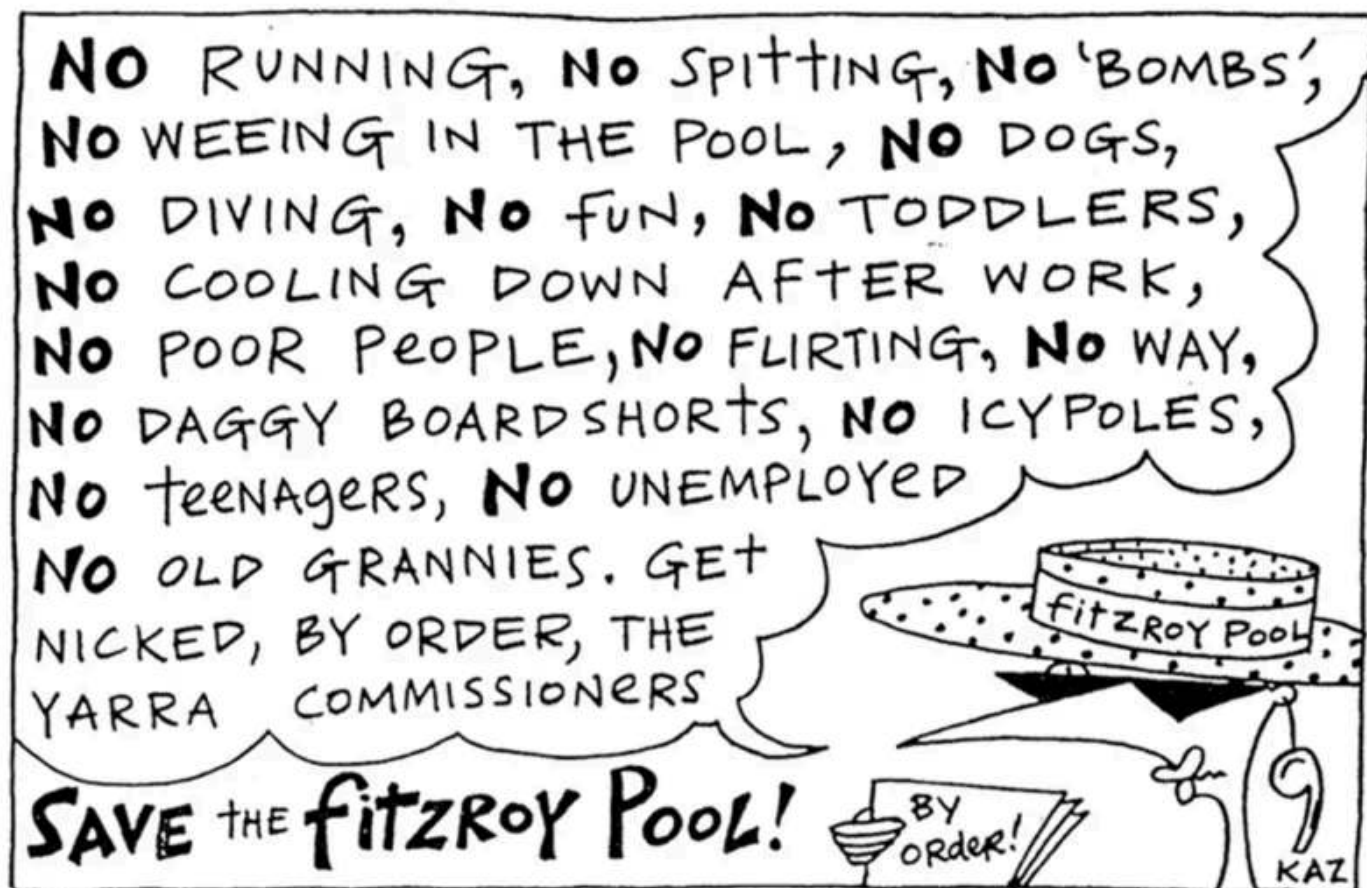
“We had a former staff member of Jeff Kennett’s in the resistance, we had the ALP deputy prime minister Brian Howe, we had Trades Hall council, Greens, Socialists and some anarchists,” he says. “No one was left out.”

Among the “sleepover group” was a young, then-unknown activist, Julian Assange.



The campaign continued to escalate; posters and T-shirts were designed and disseminated across the suburb – some by author and cartoonist Kaz Cooke.

When the council tried to cut power to the pool, Trades Hall stepped in to issue a union black ban on electrical works to keep the lights on.



Kaz Cooke cartoon from the Save The Fitzroy Pool campaign in 1994. KAZ COOKE

Cafes and restaurants on nearby Brunswick Street supplied the occupiers with breakfasts, while subcommittees worked furiously on getting media attention, finding legal challenges and – crucially – dismantling the council’s economic rationalism argument.

Campaigner and Melbourne University academic Dr Suelette Dreyfus says: “Being able to lie on your back and stare up at the blue sky on a warm summer’s day as you backstroke down the pool lane – that’s pretty priceless.

“But that aside, they claimed that because the cost recovery ratio for the pool was below the national average, we should close the pool.”

Dreyfuss compiled a forensic 20-page report, along with Fitzgerald, comparing the pool’s performance with every other municipality. The report, titled *Drowning In Numbers*, was picked up by the media.

“As we pointed out in that report, by that measure, we should be closing half the public pools in Australia every year. We blew their argument to smithereens.”

The fight escalated to federal parliament. Deputy prime minister Howe (who was a long-term Fitzroy resident) threatened to launch legal proceedings to claw back nearly \$550,000 in federal money that was granted to the council for the centre’s development in 1992.

A series of public actions culminated in a rally of nearly 3000 people at the empty pool site in the heat on October 23 – providing the media with a striking image.



Fitzroy Swimming Pool. Fitzroy locals enjoy the pool on hot day. JASON SOUTH

“I looked up and I saw this news TV helicopter, and I could tell that they must have been looking down on us,” says Dreyfuss. “And I thought, ‘We have won.’”

She was right.

The following Monday, *The Age* editorialised that “when so many people are so upset by a decision made at a local level, local government politicians, if they want to survive, would be smart to stop and listen”.