VOICES OF FORMER STUDENTS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

The following pages contain 18 personal reflections on studying political economy at university and its relationship to subsequent life and work experiences. Put in alphabetical order of the authors' names, this leads, serendipitously, to beginning with the Australian Prime Minister…

Anthony Albanese

It is an honour to join in the tributes to everything the teaching of Political Economy has done to educate, inspire, provoke and challenge Australians over five decades.

I will always be grateful that I studied Political Economy at the University of Sydney and proud that I stood up for it.

Looking back, it is hard to believe that this subject was the source of such enduring controversy and fierce institutional opposition.

Political Economy represented a challenge to the status quo but that is the nature of all intellectual inquiry. The true challenge that Political Economy has always set for its students is to demonstrate the difference that economic theory can make in practice. To interrogate and interpret economics in a way that is relevant to people's daily lives.

This is an intellectual discipline and a deeply practical one. It means you cannot hide weaknesses in your argument behind jargon or the isolated elegance of theory. Instead, your ideas have to be capable of surviving contact with reality.

That's the essence of what Professor Frank Stilwell taught all those who had the good fortune to be part of his classes: the understanding that economics is neither a dismal science, nor an elitist pursuit. It is a vital, vibrant and thoroughly democratic instrument for achieving social progress.

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This remains such an important perspective in public debate. The recognition that economics is both intrinsically political and deeply personal. It shapes the life of our nation and the lives of our citizens.

The broader economic and political discourse has a habit of gravitating to the headline macroeconomic indicators but the true meaning and merit of those concepts lies in their impact on people. So too does the most compelling case for reform and the challenge to business as usual.

Advocating for changes in economic policy cannot begin and end with numbers on a page. They have to be the supporting evidence in a story about better access to opportunity, a greater sense of security, ensuring more Australians have the right to aspire to a better life for themselves and their family.

All of us who care about building Australia's future must be prepared to marshal those values of aspiration, fairness, community and nation in advancing our economic arguments. Because making the case for change depends on making it clear to people where they fit in.

Frank Stilwell summed up the truth of this in a piece he wrote for this publication about wages policy in 1991:

> This is not simply a macroeconomic issue, but also one with major personal and social ramifications for the majority of the community whose material wellbeing depends on wage levels.

For all the changes in the global economy and the world of work since then, the truth of that insight endures. This is why after a decade of our predecessors deploying low wages as a 'deliberate design feature' of their economic architecture, our Government has taken responsibility for getting wages moving again.

Part of this is about tackling cost of living pressures from every possible angle but it's also of a question of principle. Restoring real wages growth is about repairing the link between hard work and fair reward.

The starting point in this is that fair wages are not a dividend of our national prosperity, they are a driver of it. Fairer and safer workplaces do not come at the expense of productivity growth, or Australia's capacity to compete and succeed in the world, they support and enable all of it.

The same is true for women's economic equality, another topic many issues of *JAPE* have engaged with thoughtfully. Whether it's making gender pay equity part of the *Fair Work Act*, reforming Paid Parental Leave or taking the next steps to universal child care, creating greater opportunity

for 50% of the population is not a question of special interest, it advances our national interest. It's not just a measure of Australian fairness, it is a driver of our success.

This intersection of the personal and social with the political and national is proof that any assessment of responsible economic management is always about more than making savings, or cutting waste. It's about building an economy that repays hard work, nourishes aspiration and creates opportunity for all.

This is why our government has focused on cutting taxes for every taxpayer while funding and building the services Australians rely on for peace of mind and quality of life. We recognise there is a powerful economic case to be made for strong Medicare, universal child care and a decent social safety net as drivers of productivity and participation but they are also a reflection and a statement of our Australian values, a fulfilment of the responsibility we owe to one another.

Responsible economic management means dealing with the challenges in front of us and meeting our obligations to the future too: investing in education and skills and building the new housing, clean energy, infrastructure and technology that will create and secure the next generation of jobs and prosperity for people in every part of our country.

While much of this is about new investments to meet new challenges and seize new opportunities, at its heart is the oldest and most Australian aspiration of them all: the aspiration for a better life for your children.

It is fitting that the *Journal of Australian Political Economy* is marking this significant intellectual milestone. Because for nearly as long as political economy has been taught in Australian universities, JAPE has been both its platform and proving-ground.

These pages have helped take the ambition, intellectual rigour, idealism and concrete realism of Political Economy beyond the lecture theatre, to a national readership.

Whilst many of the reflections that follow this preface will touch on Political Economy's colourful past, we should not neglect its value to us in the present and its importance to our nation in the future.

We live in a time of profound global economic uncertainty when norms and institutions are subject to significant challenge, in some cases simply because they are seen to represent business-as-usual.

An essential counterweight to this polarisation is Political Economy and its focus on evidence and inquiry and substantive analysis, qualities that are more important to the health and strength of our national political and economic debate than ever before.

The principle that the economy is there to serve people, not the other way around, is one that must continue to resonate if Australian society is to be stronger and more cohesive in the future.

Thalia Anthony

It was 1996 and John Howard had just been elected Prime Minister of Australia after a long Labor reign. The atmosphere was pregnant with the anticipation of a neoliberal slaying – cuts to university funding and the welfare state, attacks on student unionism – nothing was beyond the conservative reach. Some changes were to prove more shocking than others, especially in Aboriginal rights. While it may have been foreseeable that Howard's government would abolish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, discontinue streams of funding for First Nations services and claw back Native Title, what was more shocking was that his government would send the army into Northern Territory remote First Nations communities to facilitate a Federal Intervention.

While Howard was entering parliament as Prime Minister, I entered my first Political Economy lecture in the Merewether Building at Sydney University to witness an exuberant Frank Stilwell share his compelling critique of economics orthodoxy. The next three years studying Political Economy helped me conceptualise this new iteration of conservative rule. As an Arts Law student fascinated by interdisciplinarity, Political Economy provided guideposts to grasp the totality of social forces. It conveyed the indelibly linked nature of politics, economics, culture and history. This would stay with me as I went onto do my PhD in the laws, economies, ideologies and practices governing Aboriginal cattle workers; my M.Crim. in sentencing First Nations defendants; and throughout my subsequent career as a Law academic, primarily at UTS, specialising in criminalisation of First Nations people in neo-colonial society.

Political Economy provided a uniquely grounded approach to understanding structural dynamics in society. As the humanities increasingly resisted structural understandings of society from the 1970s, especially with the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism, Political

Economy continued to identify the relevance of class, political institutions and ideological influences. It made the postmodern questions of epistemology and culture – which presumed the end of dominant frameworks – contingent on the prevailing socio-economic-political structures.

Political Economy gave me the tools to examine the significance of political, economic and global historical forces underlying colonisation and consequent legal relations between the state and First Nations people. Teachings on the role of capital accumulation in colonial expansion, and its destruction of First Nations economies and societies, informed how I would understand constructs of race and inferiority. Translating this to racism in the Australian penal system, it could be understood as institutionalised rather than a result of individual attitudes and discourses. In this respect, it extended colonial practices that depended on racial differentiation, segregation and social control to violently occupy First Nations land, extract resources and exploit labour, especially in the cattle, pearling, seal and agricultural industries.

Colonialism and the sustained oppression of First Nations people has cast long shadows over contemporary society. The chilling fact is that, today, First Nations people constitute 36% of the prison population, despite comprising only 3 per cent of the general adult population. Both the prison and overall population statistic speak to the colonial will to 'eliminate the native', to use the phrase of historian Patrick Wolfe, or, in the words of Eualeyai and Kamilaroi legal scholar Larissa Behrendt (2001), to inflict 'genocide'. Incarceration on missions, government settlements, reserves, lock hospitals and cattle stations were features of colonisation before mass First Nations incarceration became associated with criminality and penality. The continuation of colonial carceral practices arises from the same political-economic logic of controlling sovereign owners of land.

As Political Economy teaches us, statistics are only one feature of understanding society. The lived experiences of First Nations people in custody shed light on the human cost of prisons. They reveal the loss of children and family, jobs and housing; disconnection from Country; the mental health cost of isolation, and the physical harm of deprivation from healthcare. This is exacerbated by violence of racialised policing and deaths in custody. It compounds trauma from earlier massacres across Australia, the Stolen Generations and the enslavement of workers.

Political Economy also implores engagement with the role of resistance in social change. Crucially, it provides an understanding of the tools and possibilities for change. Its analysis of social movements, policy levers and systemic transformation can help shape a vision of a better future. In my experience, this leaves students feeling more empowered to contribute to a new type of society – where economic inequality, discrimination and environmental degradation are not the key drivers of human relations and coexistence. My decolonial research, alongside my advocacy and activism with First Nations community organisations, continue to resonate with my learnings in Political Economy. It imagines a world in which the current racialised colonial orthodoxy is not immutable.

George Argyrous

I began a Bachelor of Economics degree at Sydney University in 1982, shortly after seeing a newspaper article warning students choosing to do the political economy option in first year of study that their job prospects would face 'the prophets of doom and gloom'. Instead of scaring me away, it only raised my curiosity and I enrolled in PE1, as we then called the first year of the course. The introductory lectures by Ted Wheelwright opened my mind to the role economics can play in shaping the world, for better or for worse. My peers who enrolled instead in the standard Microeconomics 1 course did not have that same experience.

Benefitting from the struggles by previous students and staff to get political economy as a complete undergraduate program, I was part of the first cohort of students able to complete four years of political economy, including a final honours year. My contemporaries in those honours courses have since gone on to become Cabinet Ministers, heads of major public service departments, leading journalists and academics.

Since completing the undergraduate program, I continued graduate studies at leading centres of political economy in the USA. Then, after returning to Australia, I held various academic positions, mainly at UNSW and at UTS, where I had the opportunity to establish political economy study programs.

Now at the end of my career, I find myself in a senior role at one of Australia's largest charitable foundations, working to end cycles of social disadvantage. This work within philanthropy and the for-purpose sector has enabled me to reflect on what I still draw from my experience of

political economy at the University of Sydney. I have two major reflections; one about the benefit I gained, the other about what was lacking.

Political Economy, unlike its orthodox counterpart, fundamentally trained us to see major socio-economic issues from different perspectives; and those perspectives, to which we were introduced in the 1980s, are still relevant to my work in philanthropy today. They help to provide more considered decisions about the approaches we might take to addressing issues such as joblessness, regional economic development, and the intersection of the criminal justice system with the economy. Unlike the lack of self-criticism and self-awareness that seems to characterize mainstream economists' pronouncements, I always have an element of healthy self-doubt, constantly alerting me to the fact that there are other approaches, regardless of how much I believe the course of action we take is the right one. This scepticism in one's own work is a direct result of the range of theoretical approaches that studying political economy exposed us to.

The political economy program, on the other hand, did not provide sufficient skills for the empirical investigations I have since found crucial to the work I do. Probably as a response to the rigid and narrow approach to teaching empirical methods in mainstream economics (mirroring its narrow theoretical ambit), the political economy program did not offer an adequate alternative. My own experience suggests that skills in empirical investigation are crucial to a political economist's ability to have some kind of influence on the world of policy and practice. Political economy could take the same approach to empirical skills that it has taken toward economic theory: exposing students to the broad range of approaches from across the social sciences, rather than just a very narrow and uncritical subset. This breadth of both theoretical and empirical knowledge would provide future political economy graduates with a formidable range of skills to address the pressing social and economic issues of the future.

Emma Bacon

In the early hours before an 9am essay submission deadline, I'm sure I wasn't the only student bent over a laptop wondering if or when I'd ever use the knowledge I was cramming into the essay via my tired brain. In practice, there have been countless times since then when I – also like

many others I'm sure – have been able to draw on the facts, ideas and history that we covered and, more importantly, on the ways of thinking critically about political and economic issues.

Nine years after graduating, having worked in community organising, political campaigns, international advocacy, and briefly as an advisor on the Treasury and Regulation portfolio in NSW Parliament, I founded the organization, Sweltering Cities. We work directly with the people impacted by extreme heat across Australia – in hot homes, suburbs, workplaces and towns – to campaign and advocate for more liveable, equitable and sustainable cities, as well as for the climate action we need to avoid catastrophic rising temperatures.

I studied Political Economy between 2008 and 2011, and the ideas and modes of analysis I was exposed to during that time have been extremely influential on how I see the world and my work. In my current role, I draw on political economy most when I 'm trying to understand what the future will look like. At Sweltering Cities, we are trying to change the way people, the media and decision makers think about rising temperatures. To do that, we are continuously trying to push at the margins of what is considered politically possible, in the context where political possibility is a neoliberal construct. We are not afraid to take on a task as big as changing the world for the better.

There are two core values that we keep at front of mind as we develop organising strategies and campaigns. Firstly, we work at the intersection of climate change, health and inequality, so all issues must be seen through all three lenses. This enables us to see the structural drivers of risk and the politics of vulnerability driven by economic forces – for example, the privatisation of public infrastructure which is then delivered to maximise profit and minimise cost.

Secondly, we aim to collectivise the issues related to extreme heat. Too often, the impacts of extreme heat are felt in isolation, in our homes and our bodies, and conventional heat advice encourages people to be responsible for their own safety. In fact, rising temperatures and heatwaves are experienced by hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of people at once and global rising temperatures impact everyone. If we understand heat as an individual problem, then the solutions presented to people might be to put a cool towel on their necks or spend the hot hours of the day in air-conditioned spaces. When we treat extreme heat as a collective issue,

it demands an ambitious response where all levels of government, all departments, and all communities play a role in resilience and adaptation.

Some of our key campaigns focus on housing, transport, and inequality. In Victoria we are advocating with hundreds of community members in hot homes to put cooling and insulation in the rental minimum standards. Our *Summer Survey of 2024* found that 75% of Victorian Renters who have air conditioning at home say that concerns about cost have stopped them turning it on. In NSW, we are campaigning for better bus shelters in the hot suburbs of Western Sydney. In these regions, temperatures on the ground can reach over 50°C (122°F) and only a third of stops have shelter or shade. At a federal level, we're campaigning to stop the Department of Employment cutting off social security payments for people on unemployment or disability related payments during heatwaves ('Payments not Penalties' campaign).

We see our unique contribution as being shaped by our commitment to intersectionality, collective transformation; providing powerful evidence of impacts and resilience; and asserting that the heat we are experiencing is not normal nor OK. In the words of one of our public health colleagues in Queensland, Associate Professor Dr Shannon Rutherford, 'The rich will find their world to be more expensive, inconvenient, uncomfortable, disruptive, colourless and in general more unpleasant, but the poor will die'.[1] We aim to shift the balance of power in favour of those most impacted by extreme heat and collectively build a better future for all.

Isobelle Barratt-Meyering and Michael Janda

Michael sits typing in his Political Economy Society T-shirt – once worn with pride around campus, now worn (with no less pride) around the house. It's the most visible, but also trivial, of our legacies from Political Economy. When we met at Sydney University, it was Global Solidarity and the SRC, not PE, that initially joined our paths. However, the Political Economy community helped forge those ties – from Monopoly themed trivia with races up the Central tunnel for jugs of beer, to the one PE subject we took together, and the constant struggle to secure the Department's

[1] See: *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-02-14/brisbane-heatwaves-will-worsen-sweltering-cities-says/103460350*.

future inside an often hostile, or otherwise indifferent, Business and Economics Faculty. Then there's the mutual friends with whom we shared lectures, tutorials and, most importantly, a lively debate at the pub afterwards. Many of them remain among our closest friends, still sharing a couple of drinks and debate that's no less lively 20 years later.

While the social connections are important and deeply cherished, so too is the knowledge acquired and retained. Political Economy is ridiculed as irrelevant critique by orthodox economists, but Michael was well equipped in his first year as a business reporter at the ABC by having taken Dick Bryan's course ECOP3019 – Finance: Volatility and Regulation – starring the little known (until then) 'collateralised debt obligation'. Michael's recent podcast series for ABC News Daily, 'Housing Hostages', is an updated extension of his honours thesis written in 2007 under the supervision of Frank Stilwell. And, as past colleague Stephen Long and present colleague Gareth Hutchens admirably demonstrate, Political Economy's focus on analysing power, vested interests and social dynamics is integral to any accurate and meaningful media coverage of economic and financial affairs.

Isobelle's continuing connections to Political Economy are less overt, after being lured to Modern History, where she has remained, now working at Macquarie University. But she still draws on the intellectual training she received in PE, with its eclectic mix of theory, history and politics, and appreciates the encouragement she received to pursue an academic career. Indeed, Isobelle got her first teaching job through Political Economy – as a tutor in ECOP1001 and ECOP3019 – and has since called on PE mentors for both work and life advice (plus the occasional job reference). Perhaps most importantly, Political Economy has given Isobelle a model for a good academic life: one based on passion, curiosity and critical thinking, as well as intellectual generosity and community, in the classroom and beyond.

For a long time, we continued to be regulars at PE gatherings. With our young children to care for, however, it's been a while since we've made it along together to any events. Our last joint appearance was at the Wheelwright Lecture in 2019, when we were expecting our first born and proudly shared this news. But we know we'll return as, once captured by its pull, it's hard to escape Political Economy's orbit.

Over five decades, this gravitational force of Political Economy has only strengthened, from the highest office in the land to the way so many of its graduates choose to live their everyday lives. The slogan on Michael's

ECOPSoc T-shirt says ‘Change the Machine’. Change may not be as dramatic or linear as many graduates would like, but Political Economy is making it happen. May it continue to do so for many more decades to come.

Anna Booth

The student struggle for a curriculum that recognised the real world made my life.

In 1974, I commenced a Bachelor of Economics at the University of Sydney. Professor Warren Hogan was our professor and head of the Economics Department. My perception is that he was an orthodox economist and a conservative.

One way in which my life course was set was that I met my husband, Malcom Scott, in an Australian Economy tutorial conducted by Jock Collins whose approach was decidedly more political economy than orthodox economics, even though it was a subject in the Economics Department. Perhaps a concession to the real world! It was a good match (sure, ups and downs), evidenced by our happy coupling for the last 50 years.

The other was that I couldn’t accept that the study of economics, based as it was on assumptions, reflected the world we faced. I wanted more. I took part in the student protests for a change in the curriculum; and perhaps my aspiration, that was achieved, to be a campaigner, was born there.

Perhaps that was why I was attracted to industrial relations subjects – anchored by the stalwart Professor Kingsley Laffer. Although hardly a revolutionary, Kingsley spoke of the real world that I had been yearning for: people, power and conflicting perspectives.

I found my tribe there. I was lucky enough to be offered a role in the trade union movement, based on the industrial relations honours work I had done; and the rest, as they say, is history.

I spent 18 years from 1978 as a trade union official in the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union, becoming its first female leader, and on the ACTU executive, becoming a Vice-President. I then moved into corporate governance after being appointed to the Board of the Commonwealth Bank by Paul Keating – at the time when government-owned enterprises appointed union directors. My subsequent board membership of industry

superannuation fund entities like ME Bank and IFM was launched by this. I chaired a (then) labour law firm, Slater and Gordon, and I became a Deputy President of the Fair Work Commission and am now the Fair Work Ombudsman.

How did this happen?

I think I was anchored by the early experience of campaigning for what I perceived of as right, and I believed it was right to teach reality. To describe and explain inequality and its drivers; to identify the policies and programs that would redress inequality; to encourage social good.

I am perplexed about why the discipline of political economy is now in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. But does it matter? I will leave that for others to answer. I love the description on the website: 'We investigate broad economic questions within social and political contexts through a variety of perspectives and methodologies.'

That is what I am doing at the end of my career. My current role is all about that. I am sure that my grounding in political economy means that when I am 'retired' (whatever that means) I will still want to 'investigate broad economic questions'.

I congratulate the *Journal of Australian Political Economy* on its theme of '50 Years of Political Economy in Australia', which just happens to coincide with my journey.

Anthony D'Adam

I arrived at O-week at Sydney University in 1989, having already settled on my initial subject choices. I remember chancing upon the stall of the Political Economy Society. I struck up a conversation with the people at the stall and began to understand what political economy was. I had studied orthodox economics for the HSC and was unaware of the existence of alternative perspectives in economic thought.

As a result of that conversation, I changed my subject selection, abandoning psychology in preference for first-year Political Economy. This was a fork in the road moment. That first year of lectures from Frank Stilwell, Gavan Butler, Evan Jones, and Debesh Bhattacharya opened my eyes to the existence of extensive contestation within the discipline of economics.

The economics I had been taught in high school had been so obviously blind to the existence of asymmetries of power in economic relations. Absurd economic assumptions were exposed, and I began to see the economy and society from an entirely different perspective.

I still vividly recall a lecture on the work of Andre Gunder Frank and the Dependency School and its model explaining the system of colonial extraction and integration of the global periphery into an international capitalist system. It was through Political Economy that I was first exposed to the ideas of Manuel Castells. These are thinkers and ideas that I continue to draw on to this day.

I learnt that the promotion of particular ideas was also the product of political and social struggle. That some ideas have currency in public debate while others are more muted, delegitimised, or unacknowledged was a product of power relations. The amplification of one view over another is directly related to the resources and social support that are behind it, and these struggles are also fought out in the curriculum and appointments that are adopted by our public universities.

The political right has a deep understanding of this dynamic. They have, over the last two decades, engaged in a successful assault on the liberal arts in our universities, an agenda that should be resisted if we are to preserve space where voices that critique the current neoliberal hegemony are able to thrive.

This is why the existence of Political Economy as a discrete school within the university is so critical to ensuring that there is vibrant debate and alternative voices in the public discussion on economic matters. It is also critical that those graduating from university are exposed to the diversity of ideas that exist within the discipline.

My time studying Political Economy at Sydney University helped provide me with both a theoretical and political orientation that has shaped my approach in my work, first in the trade union movement and now in my capacity as a Labor member of the NSW Legislative Council.

I'm pleased to be able to contribute to the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Political Economy at Sydney University. This is, indeed, an important milestone and a reminder that we must redouble our efforts to preserve spaces of dissent within academia and within society at large.

Chris Gambian

I enrolled in political economy without any clue of what it was. The UAC handbook, which Year 12 students across the nation pour over in meticulous detail to make their university choices, informed me that, whilst mainstream Economics carried with it a prerequisite of 2 Unit maths, I could do Economics (Social Sciences) with no such obligation. Still traumatised by log tables and the equation for calculating the area of a parabola, I turned up in Merewether Lecture Theatre 2 on a summer's morning in 1994 with no sense of the history, idealism and conflict that had come before me.

By the time I graduated in 1997 I was amply qualified for a life as either a human resources manager, or some sort of social activist and, to the dismay of my parents, I chose the latter.

My first job, after two inglorious weeks as a teller at St George Bank, was organising members at the Finance Sector Union. These were overwhelmingly women working hard in underpaid jobs in an industry that was on the eve of breaking all profitability records at the expense of over fifty thousand workers in the following few years. Technology transformed that industry and ran havoc through the lives of countless people.

First it was centralisation of work from branches to giant processing centres: white-collar factories where, under the watchful eye of eager team leaders wearing corporate polo shirts in open plan offices, a bank's traditional services could be delivered far more cheaply. Then, even that work was shipped overseas for a fraction of the price. What was once good, secure work became a revolving door of restructures and reimagined business models. But the workers pressed on. They loved their work and their teams. They loved their customers and their communities. They fought to protect the integrity of banks that had long since abandoned it.

I saw union delegates risk their jobs in the service of their co-workers. I saw solidarity among the people at what we used to call capitalism's pointy end. Some folks on the left might deride their bland, suburban values; but I saw them at first-hand performing quiet acts of resistance often against their own economic interests.

I'd joined the ALP at age 15 and, in both 2016 and 2019, I was selected as the federal Labor candidate for the seat of Banks. I vowed that if elected I

would go to Canberra as the Member for Bank Workers. But I lost both times: the first was nail-biting, the second bruising. Both campaigns were a privilege because to be invited into the living rooms of one's neighbours is a singular honour. It opened my eyes and changed me. What most struck me was this silent, unnoticed army of people who make fundamentally important things happen. They care for family and neighbours; they organise sport; they make places and community; they give away their money and their time.

I became Chief Executive at the Nature Conservation Council and again found people ready to act against their financial interests to secure something far less tangible. As activists, they sit in trees to stop logging trucks; they fight for rivers and wildlife; they give all of themselves in the service of their country and for generations as yet unborn.

Today I head up Australians for Mental Health, a small grassroots campaign outfit that aims to bring people together to find each other and fight for change. The motivating vision is a new kind of country – one that centres the mental health and wellbeing of its citizens as a top national priority.

None of this is very 'efficient', of course. But it is very human. It is the stuff that makes life worth living. The complex stories of our world are hard to understand through a spreadsheet or a graph. It is the Political Economy of Love: love of family, love of community, love of country.

I have had a very fortunate working life. I'm grateful for the pioneers of Political Economy who, 50 years ago, fought great battles that allowed me to lead this life. I hope they feel I've done something useful with it.

Clive Hamilton

After three years of Political Economy – its first three years, 1975-1977 – I wanted to do the honours year. But there was no honours year in PE; the mainstream economics professors were not going to allow the radicals to have that prize. So I would have to do it in mainstream economics, which was daunting because it was mostly advanced neoclassical theory, not taught in PE (needless to say, there was no course in advanced Marxism!). I'd be competing against the cleverest students from the mainstream. I took the gamble, opting for the advanced macro and history of economic thought electives and writing a thesis on monetary theory.

I scraped over the line to get a first and, after a year of working for a left-wing Labor Party senator, headed off to do a PhD at the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex. It drew progressive students from around the world and I would sit in the refectory listening to students speaking Spanish, Amharic, Urdu and German, feeling ashamed and provincial as virtually the only monolingual student there.

I immersed myself in researching the definitive thesis on the international division of labour. After 12 months of going nowhere, I had to get real, so I switched to studying the industrialisation process of South Korea, one of the famous 'Four Little Tigers.' I worked hard and lost my hair but finished the thesis in two years.

Returning to Australia in 1984, with partner and toddler, I needed a job. One came up at the Development Studies Centre at ANU whose new boss, Helen Hughes, had a reputation as an aggressive free marketeer. She told me I would be teaching microeconomics and statistics, and then macroeconomics and econometrics, to the Masters students who arrived from across Asia and the Pacific. As the weeks passed, I made sure I stayed one chapter ahead of the students in the textbooks. Teaching that stuff was the education in mainstream economics I needed; you cannot properly critique something unless you know it.

At the time, the ANU was dominated by bevy of bumptious right-wing economists who were at the height of their influence. It was the era of 'economic rationalism in Canberra.' I found the environment intimidating and alienating so after four years I left to join the Commonwealth public service, ending up as the head of research at the Resource Assessment Commission (RAC). It was while the Commission conducted an inquiry into a proposed mine in Kakadu National Park that I noted with dismay the enormous influence of two or three right-wing think tanks. 'Where are the left-wing think tanks?' I wondered. 'Maybe I should set one up.'

The RAC was falling apart due to abysmal leadership. A phone call out of the blue offered me a job in Jakarta as a resource economist with an American advisory team. So, in 1991, we went to Jakarta. It turned out that the senior bureaucrats weren't really interested in sustainable development; they were on the take. After a couple of years, we returned to Canberra where I set about creating the Australia Institute, launched in May 1994 (I tell the story in my memoir, *Provocateur*).

For the Institute's first years, we wrote papers pushing back against the neoliberal tide. My Political Economy training and my neoclassical economics knowledge were invaluable. But the economic policy battle had been lost so we shifted to working on consumerism and climate change, among other issues. I wrote a book titled *Growth Fetish*, which was my breakthrough book as an author.

By the early 2000s, economics began to bore me. So, when not stirring the pot at the Institute, I began a long period of reading philosophy, which I should have studied at university. I stopped thinking of myself as an economist years ago.

After running the Australia Institute for 14 years I was burnt out. So in 2008 I resigned and looked forward to taking time to work out what I would do next. However, I soon bumped into the chancellor of Charles Sturt University who said they wanted to appoint a public intellectual. Did I want a job? Before I knew it, I was a professor of public ethics, a title I made up, with a job description that in effect read 'be a public intellectual.'

No teaching, no admin, no applying for research grants. Just researching, writing and speaking. I became a book-writing machine and I will be still be doing it long after someone should have stopped me.

Dymphna Hawkins

I studied Economics Social Sciences (Political Economy) from 1990 to 1993 at the University of Sydney. My experience of study in that degree was extremely positive and useful for my life after university. The lecturers such as Professor Frank Stilwell, Evan Jones, Margaret Power, Gavan Butler, to name a few, were very supportive, open-minded, and made us as students think critically about the way economic behaviour affects the development of the world.

The courses I studied addressed issues such as cities and planning; the 'invisible hand' of Classicists Adam Smith and David Ricardo; neoclassical theories of market equilibrium, rational actors, supply and demand, and marginal analysis of prices; Keynes' government intervention for economic stability; Marxist critique of capitalists acquiring surplus value as profit, only to be overturned by class struggle and revolution; and the Institutional theory of 'the leisure class'; women as an affected economic class; and economic exploitation of developing countries.

The benefit of covering such diverse topics was that I gained an overall understanding of different theories and practice of economics affecting a diverse world, including their historical basis.

As a result of studying Political Economy, and then a Bachelor of Laws, I worked in the construction and maritime industries in a paralegal capacity. I was exposed to significant industrial cases between large corporations and working people; to serious criminal matters; and worked at the Sydney Aboriginal Legal Service where understanding Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and prejudice informed my submissions in cases of police impropriety and illegality.

I was admitted to the NSW Bar in 2003. Since then, as a barrister, I have done many cases requiring an understanding of how socio-economic factors such as housing inequalities and homelessness affect society. One case we appealed to the High Court of Australia related to homeless people at the Bondi Pavilion.

My study of political economy has also been relevant to other issues such as discrimination in employment, contractual inequality of bargaining; apprehension of judicial bias; the right to legal privilege; and of individuals targeted by State power. Equitable and common law and family law matters have led to the development of my role in conciliation and arbitration of various types of disputes. I am currently seeking to finish studies for a Diploma of International Commercial Arbitration through the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (CIARB) (Singapore) and CIARB head office, London.

When reflecting on my study of political economy, I am grateful to the Department for a well-rounded education about how economics plays such an integral and important role in power imbalances in nearly every facet of law such as commercial, family, crime, wills and construction matters.

Today, issues like climate change and industry pollution, wage theft and gig economy workers, and injection of government funds during the pandemic (reflecting a Keynesian theory) are directly informed by political economy theory and practice. Such insights are invaluable as a critical tool to understand global economic players and one's working life. I thoroughly recommend the course to anyone interested in a realistic world outlook of economic activity.

Christina Ho

I began studying for my BEc(SocSci) degree at Sydney Uni in 1992, cheekily assuring my parents that I was studying Economics so therefore setting myself up for a respectable and lucrative future. I immediately felt right at home in the PE course. I loved every unit, felt inspired by all the teaching staff, and loved hearing the dramatic tales of the early days of the program's establishment.

My undergraduate education was rich and captivating beyond my expectations. I remember suffering from hand cramps in lectures given by Evan Jones, as I frenetically tried to write down every precious word that came out of his mouth. I remember conversations with peers where we jokingly referred to Frank Stilwell as Jesus, and not just because of his old-school leather sandals. I remember asking to submit essays on self-devised topics and being encouraged to do so. Stuart Rosewarne even allowed me to write my own essay question on some arcane aspect of Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto. Most of all, my Political Economy education gave me the tools to make sense of the world and to understand how it needed to be changed.

After four fantastic years, including an Honours year with the fearless Gabrielle Meagher, I started a PhD in New York before abandoning it and returning to Sydney PE. Even though I had to start again on research for my PhD thesis, it felt like a beautiful homecoming. I sought Gabrielle out again, thankful to have a genuine human as a supervisor, rather than a jet-setting superstar academic with no time for their students.

Since graduating with my PhD in 2004, I've worked at UTS, teaching in the Social and Political Sciences program, and researching cultural diversity, Asian-Australians, and education. During this time, I've worked in a very inter-disciplinary environment, alongside historians, sociologists, geographers, and media and cultural theorists, among others. My education in Political Economy provided a good foundation for appreciating this inter-disciplinarity. Because of the inherent inter-disciplinarity of PE, and the openness of the academics who taught me, I've never had any affinity with the theoretical or methodological gate-keeping that pervades much of academia. That has allowed me to appreciate all manner of research interests and approaches, some much more arcane than my own undergraduate explorations!

Above all, my Political Economy education has provided an anchor that has always kept me grounded, regardless of whatever research or teaching I pursue. This includes a materialist lens and a strong social justice orientation. At a time when such approaches are not always fashionable, and it's easy to join preoccupations with the ephemeral, I am grateful to have a framework for understanding that prioritises making an impact in the world. It has also meant that my research has been strongly linked to activism, working with migrant communities over the years, and advocating for policy change in relation to education and schooling.

Congratulations on turning 50, thank you for everything you've given to generations of students, and may there be many, many more!

Tim Kenny

I started doing the BA (History and Geo-Economics) degree at Sydney University in 1978. I can still remember sitting in a lecture room of the Mereweather building as a first-year student. It was a bit frightening but, having studied economics at high school. I thought I would be building on solid foundations. Then in walks the lecturer, Dr Stilwell, who proceeded to tell us that much of what we had covered at school was limited, even useless. I was a little stunned! Over the next three years, however, as I was exposed to Political Economy (PE) *a la* Wheelwright and Stilwell, I really enjoyed it as an eye-opening experience. Whilst I was always heading toward the teaching profession, my experiences with PE, and perhaps to a lesser extent studies in economic geography, convinced me to move away from being a history teacher to an economics/geography specialist – a good move!

Over the next 30 plus years, I plied my trade across three states starting in NSW, then NT and finally WA, where I am now retired - as a well looked-after superannuant boomer.

Looking back over my teaching career, it is interesting to reflect on how my studies in PE assisted or hindered me as a 'garden variety' high school teacher. Under the rather restricted guidance of the various states' curriculums, I was largely focussed on shaping young minds to the wonders of neoclassical and Keynesian economic theory – without much lateral educational movement – passing exams was the goal in any case!

As any Year 12 economics teachers (current or past) will know, the standard curriculum requires that lots of rules, 'laws' and graphs have to be crammed into the heads of our young people. At the core is a strong emphasis on 'the market' and its 'invisible hand' (magic tricks)! The primary focus on getting good HSC 'outcomes' severely limits what can be done to foster a broader perspective on what is really going on in economic reality. Nor is the curriculum conducive to a pluralist education in which views outside the economic mainstream can get a hearing.

So, the challenge was how to provide young and eager minds more breath of real world understanding within those curriculum constraints. Sadly, I did not have much success (to be perfectly honest) but there were some topics and concepts that needed that extra dimension: for example, the social and environmental impact of unabated economic growth. Providing a non-neoclassical, even radical, view was not easy – sometimes done covertly.

Providing alternate views also needed to be reflective of the (student) audience. For example, I recall one experience when I was teaching in Alice Springs (NT) and introduced a class of largely American students (children of Pine Gap workers…yes that's right) to critiques of the GNP concept and the assumption that economic growth is always necessary. Debate was somewhat 'vigorous' but it was worthwhile. I would have loved to invite Dr Stilwell and others from Sydney University to that year and some of my other Year 12 classes to provide some alternative and impactful perspectives!

For an economics teacher, the broader PE educational background undoubtedly gives perspective above all else. PE certainly influenced how I considered whether all the mainstream economic theory really did stack up with reality! Providing students with a balanced view of the socio/politico economic world is not easy, however, because teachers can't just 'run off course' from the curriculum – not if you want to keep your job.

Perhaps the ultimate lesson is that, although problematic, teachers can facilitate students to keep an open mind as to the veracity of economic theory within their own world. I see now that there are methods and media that could have been deployed; but I now leave that to younger advocates out there. How well we as ex-PE educators do and have done in this endeavour, only time will tell.

Stephen Long

I will be forever grateful to Kevin Bolton, a teacher at my high school, for encouraging me to study political economy at university. 'PE' – as we called it – has informed my work throughout a long career in journalism covering economics, business, ecological issues, and industrial relations. I don't think I would have been nearly as good a journalist without it.

Arriving at Sydney University Orientation Week in early 1983 as a teenager from a state school in the suburbs, I first made a beeline for the Debating Society, where the topic for debate was 'That a good woman is better, even, than a cow'. Recoiling in horror, I crossed the campus and searched for the political economy stand at the Merewether building; I found my people.

While all the PE staff had much to offer, the late Ted Wheelwright and Frank Stilwell were especially gifted teachers. Lectures on the crisis in global capitalism and on the power of transnational corporations were revelatory and inspiring. We were analysing 'globalisation' before the word was invented. The critique of mainstream economics that political economy offered made sense of the disquiet I had felt studying the subject at school, with its emphasis on 'firms' and 'individuals' – untroubled by notions of class or power. As PE students, we devoured a smorgasbord of paradigms: Marxist, institutionalist, classical, neoclassical; reading among others, Sweezy and Baran, Andre Gunder Frank, Susan George, and J. K. Galbraith.

Decades later, as an economics journalist, studies of Schumpeter and Minsky in political economy helped me understand and forecast the global financial crisis; while Harry Braverman's analysis of Frederick Winslow Taylor's time and motion studies enabled me to see the neo-Taylorist character of electronic sweatshops that use algorithms to direct, control, and deskill labour.

Alongside the study was the activism. I wasn't there when the Tactical Response Group of the NSW police force was called in to break up a student-sit in the Merewether building's staff common room – part of the campaign for a separate department of political economy. I was there, however, when we gathered in force at the University's main quadrangle, entering the Vice Chancellor's office before activists, including future PM Anthony Albanese, climbed the clock tower. For a while, I ran the Political Economy Students' Association – choosing the path of passive resistance

as burly economics students hostile to PE followed me, pulling down and screwing up posters for our events. Paul Cleary, an acclaimed journalist who studied political economy during the same era, recalls – with much mirth – seeing me rallying the students at the end of lectures, decked out in a string vest (apologies, it was the 1980s).

Over the decades, during a long career in journalism, at Fairfax then at the ABC, I have maintained contact with scholars from political economy, often shooting the breeze about issues and drawing on their insights. Emeritus Professor Dick Bryan has been a particular friend and mentor. He featured on camera and on air in several of my investigative stories, and I was privileged to participate in the Australian Working Group on Financialisaton he convened. More recently, for a critique of the Reserve Bank, I've drawn on the work of current political economy staff Gareth Bryant and Mike Beggs, as well as political economist Ben Spies-Butcher.

As it happens, I was in the Merewether building, catching up with some political economy staff, when news broke in the late 1990s that Joe Stiglitz had quit as chief economist of the World Bank after infuriating the US Treasury and the International Monetary Fund with his blunt criticisms of the 'Washington consensus'. Last year, Stiglitz toured Australia as part of 30th anniversary celebrations for The Australia Institute, a public policy think tank where I now work as Senior Fellow and Contributing Editor. I was honoured, in that capacity, to arrange a meeting between Professor Stiglitz, Frank Stilwell, and current members of the Sydney University political economy staff. It was a stimulating discussion, though the fine tea and fancy canapes in the hotel where we met seemed a little at odds with my notion of political economy. At the risk of creating an oxymoron, it is a fine, radical tradition. Long may it continue.

Amanda McCormack

The attacks on the discipline of political economy at Sydney Uni continued into the 2000s, when there was a massive university restructure that significantly changed the Faculty and School structures that had existed. At that time, I was President of ECOPSOC (the political economy students' society). It fell onto us – the Society's executive and members – to sort through this mess and to campaign for the continuation of the political economy program. Our meetings became bigger and bigger – the

usual Tuesday night meetings at Hermann's bar eventually needed to be held outside on the lawn because we simply couldn't fit inside.

The campaign was energetic – we had a dedicated issue of *Honi Soit*, we lecture bashed, we raised the issue at all relevant fora, and we held rallies. That time was a whirlwind of activity and one which flew by in what seems like an instant. But an interesting development came out of it – the interest that students showed in getting elected to School and Faculty board positions so that they could participate directly in the deliberations and decisions of those boards, let other students know about discussions and decisions, and run campaigns about decisions that would affect them and future students. The political economy courses were again saved, and a Department of Political Economy was established for the first time, as part of a shift from the Faculty of Business into the Faculty of Arts and Social Services, where it is still a beloved discipline.

I enjoyed my time as an undergraduate student, but it was also good to finally graduate, including with Honours in political economy, and make my way outside the lecture halls. Post university, I embarked on a different adventure. I have held two paid jobs subsequently, one of which I am still in – as a policy and research advisor for a member of the upper house of the NSW Parliament. The common thread of both jobs is that they involve social and economic policy and research.

The nature of political economy means that you can grasp, analyse, and understand the complexities of social and economic policy issues. The discipline also encourages thinking outside of the policy 'silo' because the multiplicity of tools and studies that political economy provides helps to identify trends and problems as well as possible solutions. You also understand the limitations of analyses and the difficulties of projecting into the future. I have also found undergraduate political economy beneficial to undertaking postgraduate studies in orthodox economics.

The paid work I have done and am doing has taken me on an adventure that I wasn't sure where it would go, and I still don't know what the future looks like. The policy and research work I have done has been interesting and spans across different areas that affect people's everyday lives. This work has also meant that I have met a broad range of people who have taught me, mentored me, and helped shape me to do better social and economic policy and research.

I have been involved in a raft of things – being the lead on a research grant investigating aged care and home support workers; shaping industrial relations policy, particularly around migrant workers and gig workers, and low wage jobs in the labour market; local government and roads funding; investigating the impacts of worker and materials shortages on government projects and the housing construction sectors; being involved in research on fair trade and supply lines; tax policy; interest rate policy, and a whole lot more.

I would also like to give a shout out to three academics that took an interest in and helped mentor me during my studies in political economy– Professor Dick Bryan, Dr Joseph Halevi, and Dr Susan Schroeder. Thanks to the three of them, I maintain an interest in monetary, industry, and fiscal economics and policy, and their developments.

Alison Pennington

Growing up in a working-class family of six in Adelaide's western suburbs, economics wasn't an abstract exercise, but part of understanding the Howard-era ecosystem of power relations around us – supermarket giants cannibalising corner stores, union-busting employers cutting wages, and governments privatising public goods and reducing Centrelink payments. I had a burning drive to understand why hard-working people like us and those in our community struggled to secure the basics of life, and how material deprivation stole dignity from very good people.

My journey to formalising that raw anger through university education started with social sciences at the University of Adelaide. But the tidal waves of postmodernism and political 'science' were in-vogue in the 2010s, and I wanted new tools to front-foot the real-world problems that I saw everywhere around me.

I remember the day I stumbled across the landing page for the University of Sydney's Master of Political Economy. Scanning the academic staff and their research areas, I couldn't believe this inquiry was happening in Australia, and within reach! So I went to Sydney and did it, completing the Master of Political Economy program a decade ago. Since then, I have worked in roles across government, unions, think-tanks and politics in search of answers to questions of economic policy that serves the people, and economic democracy. Each role has layered new knowledge and

experience of effective interventions from different vantage points in the system. And this journey will continue over my lifetime.

I scored my first full-time, secure job in the federal public service with the Department of Finance in Canberra, where I cut my teeth as a policy advisor in foreign affairs, customs and trade. Having been exposed to the wreckage of APS neoliberal 'reform', I then turned my focus to rebuilding public sector unionism as a National Organiser for the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). Working within unions, I acutely felt the strategic challenge of forging a vision for an economy operating in the interests of workers, and wanted to contribute more effectively to forging that vision.

While organising workers at the coalface of Australia's restrictive industrial relations laws with the CPSU, I researched the impact of those laws on the collapse of enterprise bargaining for the think-tank the Centre for Future Work, within the Australia Institute. I went on to work as the Senior Economist with the Centre for four years, working in proximity to unions and social movements developing economic strategy and popular interventions in the interest of workers. I published research across a wide range of topics including the future of jobs, skills and training, industrial relations, public sector jobs, and the role of government. I performed regular media interviews in television and radio, published analysis in mainstream publications like *The Guardian,* delivered university lectures, testimony to government and regulatory bodies, and led education and training to union members in economics.

In 2022, I became an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow in Politics, Philosophy and Economics with La Trobe University. In the same year, I wrote the book *Gen F'd: How Young Australians Can Reclaim their Uncertain Futures,* tracking the decline of the 'fair go' for young Australians under neoliberalism and how to fight back, outlining what the new infrastructure of economic opportunity could look like in good jobs, social housing, a stronger tax system that taxes wealth, and a reimagined income support system.

After writing that book, I went back 'inside' the institutions, working as Deputy Chief of Staff and senior advisor to Tony Burke, and then Director of Economics and Employment with Murray Watt – the two federal Ministers who've held the Employment and Workplace Relations portfolio in the Albanese government. This privileged role has been an incredibly fulfilling, illuminating experience, and would not have been possible

without my firm grounding in political economic inquiry (alumni of which include the current Prime Minister Anthony Albanese).

Finding alternative ways to organise the economy in terms more favourable to the mass of people requires people who understand political economy both on the inside and outside. With more people armed with this knowledge and working together across institutions, social movements, and Parliament we can tackle Australia's myriad challenges and forge a new path for the country.

Darren Rodrigo

Some of the most defining moments in life happen by accident. My life-changing encounter with political economy at the University of Sydney was one of them.

After high school, unsure of my future, I took a job as a porter at Lilianfels, a five-star hotel in the Blue Mountains. I spent my days carrying suitcases and parking luxury cars, earning $11 an hour while guests spent $800 a night. I couldn't help but ask: why was my life so different from theirs? Education seemed to be the key. The guests had degrees and lucrative careers; I was a low-wage worker. So, with ambition in my heart, I enrolled at the University of Sydney, aiming for an economics and finance degree – my ticket to wealth.

I had no deep understanding of what political economy was. I picked it mainly because I thought it would give me credit towards my eventual economics degree. That choice changed everything. Had I gone straight into mainstream economics, I have no doubt I would have found it so uninspiring that I might have dropped out. Instead, my first semester of political economy, with (then) Dr. Frank Stilwell, was like an intellectual awakening. It was the first time I'd felt truly engaged, as if I had been jolted awake. Studying political economy, industrial relations and sociology didn't just transform my education – it altered the entire trajectory of my life.

By the end of my first year, I had abandoned my plan for a career in finance. Instead, fired up by my studies, I was drawn towards progressive politics, particularly in service of the working class. I transferred into the Bachelor of Economics (Social Sciences) degree and joined the political economy honours program.

Political economy didn't just shape my worldview; it sharpened my ability to think and write critically. It is the foundation of every success I've had since. The honours thesis was an intellectual crucible, refining my analytical skills but, like many graduates, I faced the anticlimax of struggling to land a full-time job. Again, political economy intervened. I was offered the opportunity to teach first-year students – passing on the knowledge that had transformed me – and worked as a research assistant to Frank Stilwell, while still pulling shifts in hospitality to pay the bills.

At that time, political economy at Sydney University was under attack. Enrolments were down, opposition from conservatives within the Faculty of Economics was ongoing, and the program's survival was in question. Working with Frank, I led a campaign to promote political economy to career advisors, high school teachers, and incoming students. We printed flyers, organised student advocates, and spoke to prospective students directly. That year, enrolments surged, and the program lived on – eventually finding a permanent home as a distinct discipline in the School of Social and Political Sciences.

My teaching credentials in political economy helped secure my first professional role as a Labor staffer in the NSW Government led by Premier Bob Carr. From 2004 to 2011, I served as a policy advisor and eventually a Chief of Staff, writing speeches that pushed back against conservative attacks on progressive institutions and analysing policies through the lens of their impact on working people. Later, I joined Bill Shorten's office as a senior policy advisor during the Abbott years, when political resistance was critical.

I then transitioned into consulting, first with Essential Media – famous for the 'Your Rights at Work' campaign that helped topple the Howard Government – and now with the Shape Agency, where I support unions and NGOs in their advocacy work. More recently, I achieved a long-held goal of entering elected office, becoming a Labor Councillor for the City of the Blue Mountains, where I now live and raise my family. So, I'm back in the region where I started work as a hotel porter, but in a very different role where I can, hopefully, make a difference to the society, economy, environment and overall wellbeing of the area.

Political economy didn't just teach me the right questions to ask about the world – it gave me the fire to do something about it. For that, I will be forever grateful to the study of Political Economy and the people who made my education possible.

Anna Samson

It is not an overstatement to say that my decision to study political economy at the University of Sydney was the most influential choice of my personal and professional life.

I am the daughter of a former Catholic nun who arrived in Australia under the Columbo Plan to study nursing and raise three children on her own in Sydney's western suburbs.

In 1999, I received a scholarship to study a Bachelor of Laws and Economics (Social Science) at The University of Sydney. I was the first person in my family to attend university.

At the Law school I was exposed to the closest thing Australia has to an aristocracy: young men and women used to failing upwards and asserting without a shred of self-awareness that they would one day be Secretary-General of the UN. I quickly discovered that, while education could help me transcend my class status, it would never allow me to truly escape it, at least not without a fight.

The memory of attending my first political economy lecture is indelible: I sat transfixed through an overview of the history of economic thought. The economics I had studied in school was taught teleologically: although I suspected that there must be some disagreement in the ranks, I had been led to believe that the dominant economic theory was dominant because it was right.

But in my PE classes I learned that economics was a far from settled science. It was contested space – contested by people like me who not only wanted a better explanation of the realities they observed, but who also weren't content allowing those realities to persist. We didn't just imagine a better world, we had evidence showing why it was necessary, and we were prepared to do the work to bend the arc of history in that direction.

Studying PE encouraged me to stand on the shoulders of others who dedicated their lives to building a more just world. It motivated my decisions to work as a community organiser and in humanitarian advocacy around the world for more than two decades.

PE helped me understand how legacies of colonialism and extraction work to reproduce disadvantage and dependency at an international scale, destabilising communities and fuelling conflict. It prompted my doctoral research on military humanitarian interventions and mass atrocity

prevention. As a strategy and business transformation consultant, I drew on my PE lessons about the military industrial complex and technocratic decision-making. 25 years later, a PE-based approach to markets is foundational to my current work in knowledge valorisation and research commercialisation.

When I chose to start a family, political economy prepared me for the frustration of my reproductive labour never being fully valued by the contemporary labour market. PE gave me the tools to appreciate how big picture economic theory reflects and affects the political dynamics frequently on display in workplaces, neighbourhoods and families.

PE taught me the importance of critical thinking, of never blindly accepting orthodoxy, to always look for the interests behind the evidence and act with responsibility and compassion; lessons I will pass on to my daughters as they forge their own place in this world.