

Reflections on AWEA

JOHN BENSEMAN

Interviewed by Jen Margaret, October 2014



John Benseman was AWEA's tutor-organiser from 1980 to 1985. During that period he was instrumental in moving AWEA from a state of financial insecurity to the point of being able to purchase a house in Grey Lynn as a base for the organisation. His commitment to AWEA's philosophy of education for social change led to a focus on innovative courses and projects.

John is known as a leader in the field of adult learning both within Aotearoa and internationally.

Kia ora John, can you tell me about how you became involved with AWEA?

I had been in Sweden for a year and I came back to Auckland to a job at the Medical School. Very soon after I got back the role of AWEA tutor-organiser came up. I was an adult educator interested in education for social change—there was only really one job in the country that paid you to do that. So it wasn't rocket science to work out that was where I wanted to go.

I applied for the job and got it. Then I asked if I could job share with Mary Hancock, who was my wife at the time. It was a little bit complicated because the job technically belonged to AUT—it was administered through them. They wouldn't accept the job share so the role was in Mary's name and we split the money. I went to half time in my Medical School role so at lunch time on Wednesdays I got on my bike and went to my other job at WEA.

What was happening in AWEA when you took on the role?

The organisation was in deep financial trouble. We had two office workers and we had to make them both redundant. We had to start from scratch really trying to claw back some money. We inherited a huge community education programme. It was a liberal arts programme with a bit of interesting stuff around the edges like women's studies. The programme was based on tutor hours from four high schools which covered paying the

tutors. It was a huge bureaucratic undertaking to manage the tutor hours. It gave the appearance of AWEA being a big educational provider but we were totally dependent on the schools' goodwill to give their tutor hours to us while they kept the capitation grant that went with the hours. This meant we didn't get the money to administer this large programme.

When we came on board Mary and I did a big analysis of where the tutor hours were going and how much money we were making out of each of the courses. We set up a Saturday workshop with the Executive and anyone else who wanted to come. We put our analysis up for discussion and it sparked huge debate because the art and craft courses were chewing up all these tutor hours and making very little money for the organisation. Women's studies and a few other similar courses had few tutor hours but were making a reasonable profit for the organisation. That debate gave us licence to cut back on the liberal arts part of the programme and put up more social change courses. That did cause a bit of a ruction at the beginning.

There were also ructions with the adult literacy programme which June Matthews ran. Initially, under Martin Harrison, the programme was influenced by Freirean ideas. By the time we came in, it was more of a social casualty model. There was a lot of friction between the adult literacy programme and the rest of WEA as the Executive was much more interested in the original approach. So in the end the adult literacy programme split off and became an autonomous organisation and that worked much better for everyone.

When we lost the government funding in 1982 the tutor-organiser role was pulled back into AUT and WEA lost the use of the position. Because it was in Mary's name she went with it and worked for AUT. She and I had split up by then so I worked for WEA for no pay; they just used to pay some of my bills and bits and pieces. We went into survival mode really.

One of the ironies of that period was that it was the time of government funded work schemes like PEP and VOTP. Ripeka Evans, Marilyn Kolhase, Basil Prestidge and others came and 'worked' for us under those schemes. It gave them a base to undertake their social justice work and they did some work for AWEA helping organise courses and so on. WEA hosted a whole lot of people under those schemes—at one point I calculated that we were chewing twice as much government money through that as we did when we had the paid positions. They were heady times really. WEA was very involved in the 1981 Tour and it certainly sparked a lot of related educational activities. Ripeka Evans had been based with us and she did some work with women's studies. The anti-tour organisers used to have some of the midnight meetings using our rooms.

Merv Wellington was the Minister of Education who chopped the money. We never really knew why but the rumour was he didn't like the word 'worker' in our name. I was in Belfast when it happened. It was the time of the Falklands War and the Northern Irish were very cynical about the war. The British were getting their fleet ready to sail to the Falklands and someone in Belfast put out one of those advertisements that go outside dairies that has the headline for the local newspaper on it and it said, 'Titanic to sail to Falklands.' I thought it was very funny so when we came back I talked about it with George Baxter, who ran a course at WEA on political poster making. We did a replicator of the Auckland Star with 'WEA funds restored, Wellington resigns.' We posted about 100 of them up all around the

inner city. The Star had an article denying it was to do with them. Later when Prince Charles was coming George did another one saying, “Treaty a fraud says Prince.” He posted them up in the inner city and by morning the cops had been around and every one of them was taken down!

There were a lot of things like that. We had a printing press in the basement at Williamson Avenue and George used print off all sorts of things for various groups. We tried to get away from just running classes and the few classes that we did run we tried to make really different. There was a lot of effort in running an organisation like WEA so I felt we shouldn't just do what everyone else was doing. There had to be a point of difference and the point of difference came out of our philosophy. I tried to make the programme reflect our philosophy so we ran courses on legal rights, parenting, race relations, environmental and political issues and things like that. I went to an uncle's funeral and got angry about how bad it was, so we ran a series on how to organise your own funeral. We ran a series on major thinkers—Gramsci, Marx and so on. We did things that no one else was doing that responded to different ideas.

The Executive were fantastic—very supportive. John Colquhoun, Margot Roth, Mike Hanne and others. When we were in deep financial trouble one of the Executive anonymously gave us \$1000 and that kept us afloat. It was a very important donation at that point because \$1000 was a lot of money.

When the government funding came back in 1984 we were funded directly for the tutor-organiser role so we didn't have to be under the umbrella of AUT. I took on the funded role but we decided we wanted to employ a Māori staff member so I gave up half the job and Miriama Scott came in for the other half.

By 1985 we had turned the place round financially and were able to buy Williamson Avenue.

Can you tell me the story behind buying the Williamson Avenue house?

When I applied for the job at WEA I had read up about the organisation. There was a bit in a book by A.B. Thompson¹ that said Auckland WEA had bought some land in the Waitakere Ranges that it used for weekend workshops and other events. In the early 1980s we got a formal letter from the University of Auckland telling us that they had sold the land that WEA 'had been associated with'. Audrey Luckens, who ran writing classes for many years, happened to be at that meeting and she said, 'They can't sell that, it's our land.' I put two and two together and realised that this was the land that Thompson had referred to. In the 1930s when AWEA was gifted the land we were legally linked to the university. AWEA couldn't own the land itself so the title had to be held by the university. There were two adjoining sections that belonged to us. At some stage the university had gone through their books and sold off the land to a university staff member then notified us. We wrote back and said, 'Hold on, that was our land. You may have sold it but we should get the money.' The university denied it was ours so John Colquhoun said he would like to have access to their archives to check the details. They refused to give him access to the archives and there were a lot of letters back and forth. Then one day a cheque arrived from the university!

¹ Thompson, A B. (1945). *Adult Education in New Zealand: A Critical and Historical Survey. Educational Research Series No. 22.* Dunedin: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

That was really the kick start for being able to buy Williamson Avenue. We had that money and we had also built up some savings by that point and then the McKenzie Trust gave us \$30,000 and that was enough. We bought Williamson Ave just about debt free. We had gone from being in the red to having our own house in 5 years. That was quite an achievement really.

Funnily, when I applied for the job as tutor-organiser one of the other applicants was Phil Goff. By the time we opened Williamson Ave, he was the Minister of Education and he came and opened it for us.

What other memories do you have?

We ran a couple of summer schools. One was in West Auckland and a number of Chinese students attended—the government paid for their enrolment to give them something to do over the summer break. I also tried to organise one in the Coromandel. It was on how to increase the effectiveness of your organisation as a pressure group. We were planning it jointly with the Coromandel anti-mining people. We were going to invite John Minto and Guy Salmond-type people to talk about their experiences as lobbyists and social change agents. It blew up because some of the anti-mining people were conservative farmers. When they heard that we were going to invite John Minto they hit the roof and it all fell apart after that.

Another story—John Shaw was the very nice man who was our link at the Ministry of Education. He rang up one day and said, ‘I’m sorry John but I have to come round and see you.’ There had been a question asked in Parliament and so John had to come and officially ask me, ‘Was it true that the Auckland WEA, using government money, had been running workshops for terrorists in the Waitakere Ranges?’ This was around the time of the Springbok Tour. We had run nonviolent action training workshops and this was ‘the terrorist training in the Waitakeres.’ Another time John had to ask me, ‘Was it true that WEA had invited Tim Shadbolt to run a session at our summer school?’ You have to remember these were the days of Tim Shadbolt being absolutely fringe as hell. What was interesting about that question was that we had written to Tim but our correspondence wasn’t public. So I don’t know how the Ministry of Education had found out about that.

I think some of those things flattered us. We were pretty tame yet some people had an image of us as much stroppier than we actually were.

We had a strange relationship with the other WEAs. I wasn’t hugely involved as it was the Executive members who went to the meetings but Auckland was always on the outer. Most of the other WEAs were pretty conventional and we were these weird people who were always ruffling feathers. I think some of the other WEAs thought that we were responsible for bringing all of WEA down.

Reflecting on what we did or didn’t do, I think the mistake that we made during my time was that we tried to be too many things to too many people. At the time we lost our funding I had been talking to Paremoro Prison about doing things up there; we were doing women’s studies and trade union stuff as well as our ongoing programme. We would have been better to choose one thing and do it well. We were a bloody small organisation and we spread the butter too thinly—we had ambitions beyond our means. It was always a

very stressful job because you could never do enough. It was a funny mixture of people—some of whom were quite big personalities—so it was always a bit of a bumpy ride. People were very committed though and did a lot of work.

The real value of WEA was that we pioneered a lot of things that no one else would touch and that goes right throughout the history. In my time, no one wanted to run literacy or women's studies or lesbian studies or programmes in prisons or trade union education. All of those things are now mainstream but at the time they were pretty fringe. They got traction by WEA putting them up first with many of them later splitting off and becoming their own entities. AWEA was a great innovator in those areas.