

# Marxist reporter won praise for his work

By Chris Ray

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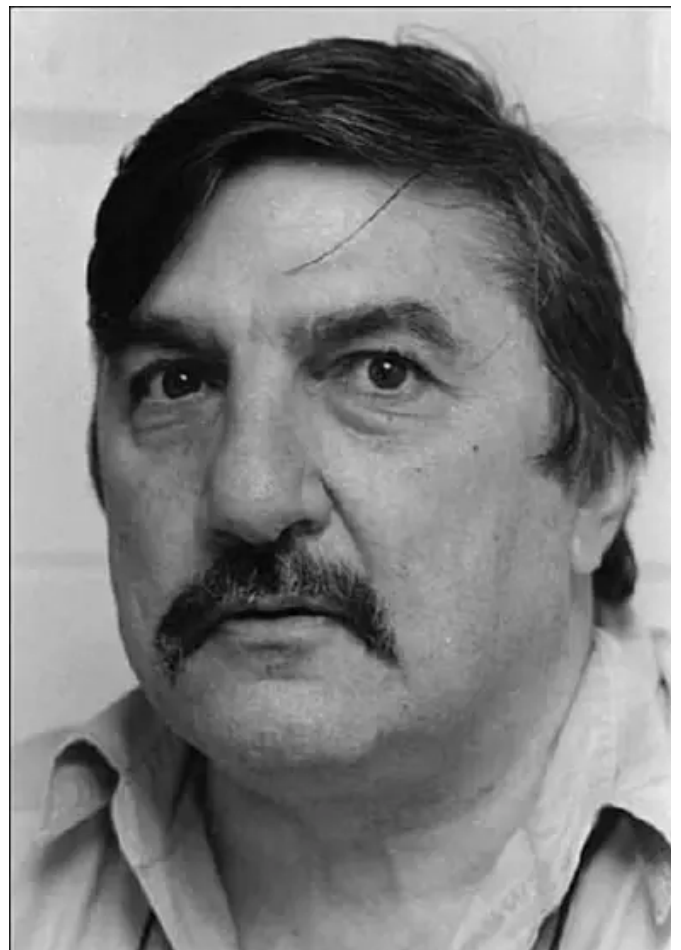
## JOHN LOIZOU JOURNALIST 20-6-1942 — 17-1-2013

Memorial services and public tributes in Darwin, Hanoi and Dili marked the death of Melbourne-born journalist John Loizou, whose 54-year career in radio, newspapers and online publishing ranged across northern Australia and south-east Asia.

Loizou was buried in Darwin with a traditional Aboriginal smoking ceremony, while Vietnamese colleagues in Hanoi stopped work in his memory and East Timor's Fretilin party paid him a public tribute in Dili.

Loizou would have appreciated the diverse acknowledgments: his life's work was shaped around the notion that Australia's Top End was an integral part of south-east Asia, with a shared history and common future.

During a Northern Territory parliamentary debate on a condolence motion, both sides of politics described Loizou's reporting as balanced and fair. Yet he called himself a Marxist and, while never joining a political party, was prepared to cross the line separating journalism from social activism.





John Loizou.

John Brendan Loizou was born to a Greek Cypriot immigrant, Vasilios Loizou, and Tasmanian-born Gladys Jackson. He tasted left-wing politics in the Eureka Youth League and was an eager teenage student of Marxist-Leninist literature and working-class novels. His education never went beyond Dandenong Technical School yet he managed to win a prized ABC cadetship at the age of 17.

The ABC sent him to Darwin where he met Olive Kennedy, a member of the stolen generation who grew up in the Retta Dixon Home for "half-caste" Aboriginal children. They married in 1964, were together for more than 14 years and had two sons.

Loizou became a respected member of Olive's extended Walpiri family around Phillip Creek, south of Darwin. In an ABC radio documentary long after Olive's death, John recorded the Phillip Creek children's experiences of family fragmentation under Australian government policies of assimilation.

Still in his early 20s, Loizou returned to Melbourne to take a job at *The Age* where, in the newsroom late one night, a wire agency "snap" brought news of combat between US and North Vietnamese forces above the 17th parallel, the military demarcation line that divided Vietnam.

As he helped the news editor plate for an extra city edition to deliver news of what became known as the Tonkin Gulf incident, he was highly sceptical of the US claims and chilled by the thought that the alleged attack might lead to war with the Soviet Union. More than 40 years later, at work in another newsroom in the capital of reunified Vietnam, Loizou recorded his grim satisfaction on learning from declassified material that key aspects of the episode were fabricated to justify the bombing of North Vietnam.

Melbourne may have been the city of Loizou's birth but the territory stole his affections. He went back to Darwin to work at the *Northern Territory News* under its crusading editor, Jim Bowditch, who championed such unpopular causes as Aboriginal land rights and opposition to the Vietnam War.

Loizou's sympathetic coverage of Aboriginal actions such as the occupation of Quail Island, which stopped RAAF practice-bombing of an area containing sacred sites, and the Larrakia people's successful claim to land at Kulaluk in suburban Darwin was crucial in the battle for public opinion, according to anthropologist Dr Bill Day, an adviser to the Larrakia claim.

Loizou played Australian rules football for St Marys and Wanderers, two clubs that fielded almost exclusively Aboriginal teams. He refused to allow eldest son Brendan to play for Waratahs, which he considered the club of the establishment "long socks brigade".

The departure of Bowditch as editor and the choice of his replacement caused a strike at the Rupert Murdoch-owned *NT News*. As the staff representative, Loizou briefed the Australian Journalists Association in Sydney, urging it to support the proposition that *News* journalists were entitled to a say in editorial management because they had a stake in the paper remaining financially viable.

Whether settlement of the dispute reflected a form of industrial democracy or not, it barely had time to take effect before cyclone Tracy blew Darwin away at Christmas 1974, forcing the evacuation of 30,000 residents including John, Olive and their sons.

With the *NT News* shut down, Loizou found casual subediting work at *The Sydney Morning Herald*. When he finally made it back to Darwin, the *News* had no room for him so he worked as a council labourer until he was picked up by ABC radio. He later edited the independently owned *Darwin Star* before returning to the *News*.

One of the first establishments to open after cyclone Tracy was the Restaurant Cri under its proprietor Christina Pas. A friendship developed between Christina and John and they were together until his death.

Colleagues remember Loizou as an "old school" reporter who scorned the media's reliance on ministerial and corporate handouts and dug for his own information. A former manager of ABC radio in the territory, Sarah Lunn, said he was respected for retaining his independence in a small town where some of the highest-paid journalists' jobs are as government minders.

A former Australian Labor Party leader in the territory, Brian Ede, described him as "a potent, sometimes frightening mixture of high lefty idealism and tough territory pragmatism". NT Treasurer David Tollner of the Country Liberal Party said he and Loizou enjoyed a "wonderful relationship" despite political differences.

Relations with other CLP politicians were not so friendly. An encounter with cabinet minister Mick Palmer in Darwin's Petty Sessions bar yielded the memorable headline "Toothless MP head butts reporter". Palmer admitted he "snotted" Loizou while claiming "I copped one myself too."

Following the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor, Loizou quietly provided assistance to the illegal radio, set up by the Communist Party outside Darwin, that provided the only link between Fretilin commanders inside East Timor and their exiled external leadership. The Fretilin leader Mari Alkatiri applauded Loizou's "honest, committed and inspiring journalism" and his contribution to Timorese independence.

During a trip to Hanoi in the early '90s Loizou was offered a job on Vietnam's first English-language paper, *Viet Nam News*. He stayed there for 15 years, as a subeditor, columnist and mentor to young Vietnamese reporters with little media experience "who treated him like an uncle", recalled the paper's founding editor, Nguyen Khuyen.

In 2000 John and Christina launched *The Southeast Asian Times*, at first as a broadsheet and then for 12 years as an online digest of south-east Asian affairs, emphasising the links between northern Australia and the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

John Loizou died suddenly in Perth while preparing to return to work in Hanoi. He is survived by Christina, his sons Brendan and Damien, sister Margaret and brothers Charlie and Peter.