

# The Last Post -Some industrial and political settings

Howard Guille

*Girdling (ringbarking) severs the water and nutrient conducting tissue and kills the top of the trees, although the effects of girdling may be immediate or may take several years depending on the species<sup>1</sup>*

Ringbarking or girdling was a settlers' pastime. Hancock writes that '*in the second half of the nineteenth century tree murder by ring-barking devastated the country on a gigantic scale*<sup>2</sup> Humanities and social science courses in Australian universities are being restructured or, as proposed at QUT, entirely eliminated. My main argument is that humanities and social sciences are being ringbarked by a combination of two forces; one is the new managerialism and the other is academic opportunism. These have been particularly potent in the old technical colleges such as QUT where Vice-Chancellors and their cronies have been very susceptible to modism and faddism.

## Two views of university education

Some idea of the distance between the techs and the rest can be gathered from two views of university education; one is an almost classical one albeit from a radical;

*I am not interested in disciples; I don't want people to be like me. I am interested in people who are different. I am not interested in handing people little tool boxes of cliches and methods that they can go out and apply<sup>3</sup>.*

This is from Edward Said - on one perspective a radical Palestinian but on another propounding a view of university as a place to develop powers of thought and individuality. In a way it is supported by the Strategic Directions of the University of Sydney; *Our spirit must be romantic and humanitarian, yet our actions must be practical<sup>4</sup>.*

The second view of universities is more prosaic; it is to treat the university as an organisation to be managed. Thus, and perhaps at the extreme; *"The goal is not to meet a range of social, economic, and cultural purposes. The goal is to be an enterprise, a quasi-business organization, serving itself<sup>5</sup>.* This sense of the university as organisation segues

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1 [www.clarkforestry.com/landmanage\\_tsi.php](http://www.clarkforestry.com/landmanage_tsi.php) accessed 4 December 2007

2 Trevor J. Daly Discovering Hancock: A Profile of an Australian Environmental Historian (W.K. Hancock) LIMINA 4, 1998 69-84 at p73.

3 Edward Said

4 [www.usyd.edu.au/about/publication/strategic/2006/index.shtml](http://www.usyd.edu.au/about/publication/strategic/2006/index.shtml) Strategic Directions 2006-2010 Our purpose accessed 4<sup>th</sup> December 2007

5 James S. Frey, International credentialing of tertiary education; principles, questions & concerns, Admissions Officers' and Credential Evaluators' professional section of the EAIE - European Association for International Education 2001 [http://www.aic.lv/ace/ace\\_disk/Recognition/exp\\_text/frey.pdf](http://www.aic.lv/ace/ace_disk/Recognition/exp_text/frey.pdf)

into the idea of the university as something that needs to be managed; for example

*Linking the work of individuals with the goals of the organisation is a major challenge for modern universities..... it is wishful thinking to expect that some invisible hand will guide the path of individual academics into a strategic direction, or that effective change can only come about by academic introspection and reflection<sup>6</sup>.*



As a past public figure and as a humanities academic, I always presume that writers are careful in choosing their language. As such, the language of these authors seems carefully selected to establish a very stark view of the imperative to discipline the meandering minds of academics into the

directions espoused by the university as organisation. It is a substantial distance away from Said's wish for people to be different. Ironically, perhaps, the authors, one of whom is now the Vice-Chancellor of QUT, seem to distrust the market (the invisible hand is a reference to Adam Smith) just as much as the individualism of academics. Instead, all power shall rest with executive management. Little wonder that QUT can advertise its MBA as military strength and visually and verbally state that; *What the SAS is to the defence forces, the QUT Executive MBA is to MBAs<sup>7</sup>.*

Many have documented the rise of the so-called corporate university and the more insightful accounts emphasise the combination of managerialism with market orientation<sup>8</sup>. My sense is that these are separate dimensions which the new executive managers of universities invoke at their convenience and connivance sometimes using the market to justify executive decisions and sometimes relying on using executive discretion to intervene in market outcomes. When the Executive finds it appropriate, market outcomes are used to justify organisational changes and the market is used, cynically perhaps, to justify the level of rewards paid to managers. Yet, just as the SAS can be used both to invade Iraq or to assist in East Timorese independence, so too university executives are 'free to choose' at what times and what places the market is invoked.

## **Making the techs comprehensive**

The current managerialism and marketisation are outcomes of the changes initiated in the 1988-93 period under the tutelage of Minister John Dawkins. The central change was the establishment of the 'unified system' of public universities out of then mixture of universities (both the the older sandstones such as University of Queensland and the 1970s universities such as Griffith), the Colleges of Advanced Education and the Institutes of Technology. The

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6 Peter Coaldrake & Lawrence Stedman *Academic work in the twenty-first century : changing roles and policies* Canberra, Dept. of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999 p13.

7 The words and the picture are from a four page insert into the Australian Financial Review in October 2007. The visual was downloaded from the QUT Brisbane Graduate School of Business website on 5 November 2007 (<http://www.bgsb.qut.edu.au>). Note the item was no longer on the website in December 2007.

8 Two of the most informative are Margaret Thornton, *Governing The Corporatised Academy*, *The Journal for the Public University* 1, 2004 and Clive Kessler, *Public Universities In An Unbrave New World: Globalisation, Managerialism And Accountability* *The Journal for the Public University* 3: 2006

total number of institutions was reduced but the number of universities was doubled<sup>9</sup>. Each of the 'new' universities was to be comprehensive in terms of the coverage of academic areas, undertaking research as well as teaching and offering honours and research higher degrees<sup>10</sup>.

This required substantial changes from the former institutes and CAEs; the Institutes were dominated by business, engineering and applied science and the CAEs by education, nursing & business. Neither had any research higher degree students. Hence the key fields of study which were absent were humanities and, to a lesser extent, pure science; the key academic absences were research and higher degrees. Indeed, the major distinction of the binary system were that Colleges and Institutes were not funded for research; this was built into university funding through a larger amount per student place<sup>11</sup>. Accordingly, the universities created out of Institutes and Colleges (such as QUT) had to widen their fields of study to include humanities and social science and to establish higher degree research programmes. Similar 'internal adjustments' were required of the former CAE staff moved into amalgamated 'former' universities. (for example Gatton staff joined with University of Queensland and Mount Gravatt (part of Brisbane CAE) staff and Gold Coast CAE staff formed around half of the expanded Griffith University).

The marketisation of universities began with Dawkins but has subsequently been intensified. The main elements have been to force universities to be more competitive with each other for publicly funded students, for fee-paying students and for research money. The level of Commonwealth funding for undergraduates has required universities to meet quotas which since 2003 have been set annually for each of 16 fields of study so that there are pressures to meet overall targets and those for each field<sup>12</sup>. There have been cuts in public funding per student<sup>13</sup> and universities made more reliant on full-fee paying overseas students and full-fee paying postgraduate coursework. Separate to these there has been an increasing reliance on competitive and outcome based funding for research with research funded separately to undergraduate teaching. The competitiveness provides a set of 'objective conditions' for university staff including uncertainty and variability in income and pressures to attract and retain Australian funded undergraduates, fee-paying postgraduates and overseas fee paying undergraduates<sup>14</sup>.

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9 In 1998 thirty universities were formed out of the 18 universities and 47 CAEs which had existed in 1985.

10 These were three of the key conditions eventually formalised in the *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes* (National Protocols) were approved by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs on the 31 March 2000. However, the conditions were relaxed in mid 2006 (applicable from 1 Jan 2008) to allow 'Specialist universities' (limited number of fields of study) and University colleges (limited higher degrees). The relaxation applies to existing as well as new universities. see [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/policy\\_issues\\_reviews/key\\_issues/MCEETYAS/default.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/MCEETYAS/default.htm)

11 Accordingly, academic appointment and promotion criteria differed especially in regard to expectations about holding doctorates and research and publication records.

12 Universities are funded annually according to the targets. Consequently a university could be required to repay the Commonwealth funding for failing to meet its overall quota and/or failing in a particular field of study.

13 See Simon Marginson, Education, Australia and the OECD, *Australian Policy Online*, 2007 Election Backgrounder, [www.apo.org.au](http://www.apo.org.au) and Simon Marginson, Shooting the messenger, *Australian Policy Online* 26 September 2007, [http://www.apo.org.au/webboard/comment\\_results.chtml?filename\\_num=175821](http://www.apo.org.au/webboard/comment_results.chtml?filename_num=175821) accessed 30 Sept 2007.

14 The Coalition Government also permitted universities to offer full-fee places to Australian undergraduate students who did not receive a publicly funded-place. The conditions covering domestic full-fee paying were relaxed in 2002 and 2005 and a deferred income contingent repayment scheme introduced very similar to HECS. While this is a very controversial public policy issue, there had not been sufficient time for a

These 'objective conditions' have particular effects for humanities and social sciences which are much less marketable than areas such as commerce, business and information technology. Unlike these areas, humanities and social sciences are not large earners of overseas or domestic fees. One effect is that the humanities have become more reliant on public funding over the period that public funding has been falling in real terms. Even where the quota for publicly funded undergraduates is met, the humanities and social sciences will still go backwards unless extra funding is obtained within each university. The earnings from fee-paying students – mainly in commerce, business and IT are the main source so that humanities and social sciences have become supplicants for internal cross-subsidy. This makes them vulnerable to the whims of internal management which is accentuated by being on the receiving end of the 'culture wars' and not being a fulsome part of National Research Priorities.

### **The academic craft and university managerialism**

Although I suggested earlier that management and market need to be analysed independently, the new university management has invoked the need for competition. A new corps of university executive management has been created that apes corporate and public sector management<sup>15</sup>. Some of the elements are increased managerial prerogatives, the promulgation of mission statements and the growth of marketing and branding to 'create' distinctiveness through sustained publicity and advertising campaigns. There is a multiplicity of key performance indicators (which can include equity) and emphasis on counting outcomes. There has been the establishment of internal markets with charging for services such as rooms, printing, computing and even marketing. Perhaps the most substantial internal changes involve the pressure for employment flexibility combined with performance management of staff.

Such management and such markets have produced what I call 'the flexible university'; its main purpose is to be an organisation that 'survives' and pragmatically adapts to external circumstances. Such an organisation is not a comfortable place for those who ascribe a more principled purpose to academic activity and indeed, who might want to question the specification and assumptions of the 'external' realities. Nor, of course, is the flexible organisation very comfortable with such academics and there is evident tension between the university as organisation and what might be termed the academic craft. Some of these are summarised in table 1.

Table 1	
<b>The flexible university</b>	<b>The academic craft</b>
Demands identification with	Commitment to craft & discipline

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substantial number of such students and, to 2007, the main numbers seemed to be in already prestigious (and well-endowed) medical, veterinary and law schools.

15 Coaldrake makes the point “*In line with reforms occurring elsewhere in the public sector, universities were expected to operate with greater financial and managerial efficiency, and to be held accountable for their operations. The tools of contemporary management found their way into academic life, and universities were increasingly expected to justify their relevance to society*” The Transformation of Australian Higher Education, Winds of change in Latin America’s Higher Education: Fostering and Managing the Transformation, OECD Seminar: Mexico City, 8-9 October 2001  
[www.chancellery.qut.edu.au/dvc/docs/Mexico.doc](http://www.chancellery.qut.edu.au/dvc/docs/Mexico.doc) accessed November 2007

organisation	
'Policy' based	Curiosity & imprecise
Internal markets & managers allocate tasks and disburses rewards	Assessment of needs & outcomes are universal and peer-based.
Encourages competing projects & winner take-all	Individuality within collegiality
Calculating, pragmatic & opportunistic	Sustained & even obsessive

This approach draws upon the wider comparison which Richard Sennett<sup>16</sup> makes between the organisation of work and society in the welfare capitalism of the 1950s-70s and the neo-liberalism of the 1980s to the present. In essence, academic work is based on some universal craft standards -for example the proscription of plagiarism and the expectation of academic standards and intellectual freedom. Some of these can coexist with the university as organisation so long as they serve 'organisational needs'- however tensions can and do arise occur – for example 'overzealous' marking conflicts with the need to maintain student fees and university managers have been know to agree to give exclusive domain to externally funded research.

### Tenure and Flexibility

Perhaps though the most fundamental clash has been employment flexibility vis a vis the notion of academic tenure. Tenure meant strong protections not only to individuals as employees but also to their scholarship and academic field. One of the first national demands of the newly combined university employer organisation of the unified system in the early 1990s, was for easier dismissal of academic staff on grounds of performance, conduct or redundancy. They have continued to seek further reduction in protections through enterprise bargaining. Overall, employers have combined restructuring and redundancies with the use of fixed term and of casual employment to make the academic work force increasingly insecure and disposable.

This has been an explicit assault on 'academic tenure'. For example, Coaldrake and Stedman state *Thus in place of permanence of employment, job security will derive from being employable*<sup>17</sup>. This approach has been reinforced by the increasingly common practice of declaring redundancies at the lowest level of subjects and disciplines rather than university-wide financial exigency. In other words, redundancies can be declared in say accounting even though business studies and/or the university as a whole is running a financial surplus. One consequence is that jobs are being shed from parts of some universities that are in very good financial health – this has been prevalent at the University of Queensland for example. Few efforts are made to redeploy academic staff and the notion has been lost of building university teaching and research around the capacity of extant academic staff. Indeed, it is common to have 'prestigious' appointments in one part of a university almost simultaneously with the shedding of staff elsewhere. As such, 'employability', as used in the above quote, does not seem to mean being a capable and functioning intellectual but rather being judged

16 Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006

17 op cit p30

as being suited to the academic programme deemed necessary by the university executive. And in turn, decisions about what programmes are to be offered often seem to have little to do with the academic integrity of current programmes or the intellectual performance of staff. Instead, they often appear to rest on who can convince the executive that the 'new' will provide a competitive marketing or branding edge<sup>18</sup>.

The changes since Dawkins carry mixed blessings. There is more university undergraduate education and some widening of access. But there have been some systematic failures. Some of these are clearly linked to overall funding. Public funding per student fell by 27% between 1995 and 2004<sup>19</sup> Marginson reports that participation rate in tertiary education have fallen for year 12 school from 40% in 1994 to 32% in 2004. He also writes that the “*basic research capacity is being emptied out*”<sup>20</sup>. Some however are more directly related to the executive actions. One is the wasting of humanities and basic sciences and their reduced contribution within and without universities. Another is that academic careers are increasingly unattractive because of the twin insecurities of employment and one's intellectual and discipline areas. A third factor is the high degree of embarrassments visited upon university staff by the frequency, with which some of the executive managers of the new and the technical institutions fall for snake-oil sellers. QUT is one example – whether adopting *qut.com* as its URL or selling adjunct professorships to business corporations<sup>21</sup>.

### **New agendas for the humanities (and the union)**

The flexible university brought about by the cupidity of market management is antagonistic to the academic craft which characterises much of the humanities, basic sciences and social sciences. There is little time and space for reflexion. There is a widespread sense of deficiencies in the humanities and sciences whether in the conservative call to re-establish the narrative of Australian history or the literary canon or in more pragmatic and economic concerns about research and growth. I think there are three important reasons to rebuild the teaching and study of humanities; one is that the general arts degrees are essential to high levels of participation in tertiary education. Second, humanities and social sciences are keys to serious efforts to improve access and equity – especially in Australia where there are considerable cohorts of prospective students from working class and migrant backgrounds. Third, the humanities and social sciences are essential to sustaining and debating Australian democracy and culture, both of which need to be made more robust.

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18 My justification for this statement comes from two decades of direct involvement in negotiating about 'management of change', restructures and redundancies in Queensland Universities. In my opinion, there has been an increasing proportion of such situations where the changes and job losses are being sought, in whole or part, in order to 'redesign' a programme. Moreover, there is a clear targeting of particular staff who are seen as not 'fitting' the new programme. In my opinion, some of the restructures which have occurred at University of Queensland, James Cook, QUT, Central Queensland and University of Southern Queensland were not fully justified by reduced student numbers and funding. Instead they rested on claims, often by interested parties and/or 'consultants', about the need to 'improve' the programmes. As such, it would have been possible to retain some of the staff who became forced or voluntary redundancies if some of the 'new' had been rejected. Moreover, in my opinion, this would not have affected either the number of students or the quality of their education.

19 Marginson op cit, this compares with an average increase across the OECD of 6% per student.

20 ibid

21 This was reported by ABC Radio National who provided the author with copies of letters which invited firms to nominate staff as adjunct professors in business and accounting in return for donations of around \$20,000.

However, the humanities have to be contemplated within a mass tertiary system. This requires serious contemplation of what form of 'institutional diversity' could be positive for the humanities and how humanities can be fitted into technical universities. Thus, for example, we need to be willing to consider the place of humanities in liberal arts colleges, of humanities and social science teaching to students of professional degrees and degrees spanning Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education. Put another way, we have to recommit to a truly liberal humanities and social sciences which engages with and demystifies the profound structures of the ordinary and everyday. This is too large a task for cultural and media studies.

We also need to reconsider some industrial and organisational issues especially the ease with which jobs are shed and the limited accountability of executive managers. We should be advocating for a system where as many staff as possible have real security in employment so that they can pursue and use sustained scholarship in a wide range of contexts. The relatively high redundancy payments do not seem to be acting as a deterrent to job shedding and have provided a false sense of equanimity about change and job loss. Perhaps the most critical is for the NTEU to develop a capacity to challenge restructuring per se rather than just handling individual restructures. This will require the union to mobilise members and officers to challenge management on academic as well as industrial issues and to argue positions on what should be taught. Indeed, collective union action may be the only effective way to get academic issues discussed given that executive managers now dominate Academic Boards and the processes of Councils and Senates.

The second new agenda should be about how to manage universities for permanency. Thus, for example, internal budgeting and management must be designed to fund and maintain the basic disciplines on an university-wide basis. In return, humanities and social science staff would have to accept a commitment to promote their scholarship across the width of the university. There also needs to be the provision of 'patient' capital for scholarship in the basic disciplines. Some other accountability measures could also be beneficial; one that would act on the executive is an annual academic audit to expose venality and opportunism. Another, more directed at the verbose, is an annual performance award for using plain language. All of these could provide a basis for venerating the academic task and recognising that "*Craftsmanship broadly understood means the desire to do something well for its own sake...*" This would be a strong antidote to the managed university and, moreover, may be essential if we are to supplant the enterprise university. To be optimistic, this may not be too difficult. Sennett concludes that *..the triumph of superficiality at work, in schools and in politics seems to me fragile. Perhaps indeed, revolt against this enfeebled culture will constitute our next fresh page*<sup>22</sup>.

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22 Richard Sennett, 2006)