

Threats to University Independence: The Case of the Humanities

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Since the 1970s the pursuit of the humanities and the social sciences in universities throughout the English-speaking democracies has been caught up in a form of bitter contestation that we have come to call the culture wars. There are two main dimensions of this conflict.

The first is almost purely political. It involves the claim that far from being neutral the pursuit of studies in the humanities and social sciences is skewed to the Left—to predictably negative conclusions in the areas of class, gender, race, and the economic, environmental and foreign policies of the West. This political dimension of the attack on the humanities and the social sciences in the universities is encompassed in a single phrase—political correctness, which charges, simultaneously, imposed orthodoxy and left-wing bias.

The second dimension is methodological. It involves the claim that, since the 1970s, throughout the humanities and even the social sciences faculties of the Western university, rigour has been sacrificed to slavish adherence to an almost meaningless body of theory which is called either deconstructionism or postmodernism. The critics of this disease claim that contemporary scholars in the humanities and social sciences have abandoned interest in truth, which is seen as a straightforward concept, and that their values have been corroded by moral relativism. The purveyors of this disease are thought to be predominantly the French theorists, like Derrida and Lacan, who are not read by most of their critics, let alone understood, but frequently dismissed as misguided at best and as impostors at worst.

In the real world, of course, the two dimensions cannot be separated as neatly as my analysis suggests. In their rhetoric critics lazily associate political correctness with postmodernism and vice versa. One dimension is seen as hostile to Western political achievement. The other is seen as hostile to the Western intellectual tradition. In general, the critics of the humanities and the social sciences come from outside the

university. At first, the criticism was mounted by neo-conservative intellectuals, mainly in the United States. Since the mid-1990s, the campaign has been led by attack dogs in the popular right-wing media, in places like Fox News, the Murdoch press and talk radio. The campaign has not only expanded its social base over the past decade or so. Since 9 /11 it has become more self-assured and shrill.

My concern today is to show concretely the gains that right wing cultural warriors have made, by outlining briefly two recent episodes in the life of the Australian university and attempting then to draw out some of their meaning.

The first episode goes like this. The Australian Research Council is overwhelmingly the most important source of research funding for academics in Australia, and the near-monopoly supplier of research money for those who work in the fields of the humanities and the social sciences. There is much about the system I do not like. Because of the reward system, academics are encouraged to apply for funds even when they are not needed. Even failed applications have been of some monetary value to the institution of the applicant. Success in winning grants is seen as an achievement almost equivalent to the publication of something that is truly important. The process is wearily bureaucratic. And so on. Nonetheless it is difficult to deny that the system is rigorous, very competitive, dominated by tough peer assessment and armour-plated against institutional nepotism and insider trading. It is hard to think of how a system for rationing research funds could be more scrupulously structured or administered more fairly and objectively.

For many years, none the less, the outcomes have been criticised, usually in the parliament or the press, generally with heavy sarcasm about the topic of the proposed research. Even when ill-informed, most of the criticism was pretty harmless or so it seemed. In late 2003 Andrew Bolt published in the *Herald Sun* a characteristically nasty and ill-informed attack on some projects in the humanities and social sciences which had just won ARC funding. On this occasion the criticism was not harmless. According to reporters, the Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, was sensitive to the ribbing of his Cabinet colleagues. He appears to have decided to take action. A number of things happened the following year. In the grants given for 2005, Nelson exercised the formal Ministerial veto on ARC grants he undoubtedly possessed in

law. Three grants were vetoed. This was the first time the veto had been exercised, at least so far as I am aware. Those whose grants were vetoed were not of course told.

One of the unwritten stories of the Howard government concerns the regular political traffic that flows between Ministers and right-wing columnists, especially in the Murdoch press. Now that he had exercised his veto, Nelson could not resist boasting about the matter to Bolt. In turn, Bolt could not resist boasting in his column about his culture war victory and his influence with Nelson. In this way the exercise of the veto became known, although it is still not known whether the veto was exercised on political correctness or post-modern grounds or maybe both. Apparently the Labor Opposition were willing to ask questions about the projects vetoed in parliament until it was warned that if they did so the potential recipients would be viciously lampooned under the protection of parliamentary privilege.

The situation did not end there. In playing the populist game, Nelson announced on several occasions that every last grant that was given had to be justifiable in the eyes of the ordinary citizen. On the face of it the ambition was ludicrous. Most citizens are probably both unaware of the existence of the ARC and sensible enough to realise that, so long as impartiality is guaranteed, research grants are best administered by those who understand the state of research in any particular field. This was not Nelson's view. In order to make the system more sensitive to the views of plumbers and shop assistants he decided to place three citizen-outsiders on the sub-committee of the ARC charged with Quality and Scrutiny. One of the citizen-outsiders was a former television news reader. One was a conservative former High Court judge. One was the editor of *Quadrant*, whose increasingly wild views on everything, which included contempt for all those things which he fantasised were happening at universities, were by now very well known.

The situation soon predictably descended into farce. The Quality and Scrutiny Committee met in September 2005. As was the customary for this sub-committee, the public servants in charge showed the members only the descriptive titles of the applications which had passed through the process of peer assessment successfully. The meeting was extremely acrimonious. McGuinness was displeased. On the grounds that he had no intention of being anyone's window dressing, he publicly

threatened to quit. Nelson was alarmed. He agreed that the citizen-outsiders would be sent the actual successful applications. McGuinness now recommended twenty-seven vetoes. The public servants scurried around, saving all they could. In the end only seven vetoes were exercised, some on the recommendation of McGuinness, some on the recommendation of the Minister, some perhaps on the recommendation of both.

Only at this stage, did the universities collectively stir. On behalf of the Group of Eight, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, Glyn Davis, sent a letter asking for information on the vetoes. He received no evenly remotely satisfactory reply. The four learned Academies also protested about political interference in the process of research grant allocation without noticeable effect. Eventually Nelson moved on. The idea of a citizens' ARC scrutiny committee seems to have collapsed.

Despite its collapse, there is good reason to be worried about the meaning of this episode. Beyond some trade union action and some grumbling, almost no individual academics in 2005 did anything about the situation. When Professor Stuart Macintyre wrote a column about the matter in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* he received more than a hundred sympathetic emails and phone calls. What surprised him most was that almost all praised his courage. Many admitted they were not willing to risk future funding success or immediate public abuse in the way he supposedly had. When the journalist Gideon Haigh was researching the story for the *Monthly* magazine he approached sixty people. "In general", he wrote, "the response especially among academics themselves, was either unhelpful or actively fearful." In my own case I raised the issue informally at a meeting of the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe University. The atmosphere was interesting. Almost everyone seemed appalled. Almost no one thought there was any action that might be taken. What is the best explanation of this attack on academic freedom? Even more importantly, how can the academic inertia and failure of nerve, in the face of this obvious political attack on academic freedom, best be explained?

One person who was not fearful about speaking out was McGuinness. In March 2006 he published an editorial in *Quadrant* on his experiences inside the ARC. These were some of his views: "The reality is that the humanities are being, and largely have been, destroyed in the name of the meaningless subject of "cultural studies" and

corrupted by “post-modernism”... Absurd subjects like “gender studies” or, even worse, “queer studies” are solemnly treated as worthy of respect...The ARC...allocates money to ridiculous projects on the advice of people who are products of the same belief system or secretly nurse their residual sympathy to Stalinism and Maoism...Probably there would be little loss to society and to genuine intellectual enquiry if the funding of the non-sciences through the ARC...were simply abolished.” These words were quoted in a speech with complete approbation by a member of the Board of the Reserve Bank and close confidant of the Prime Minister, Hugh Morgan. Australian academics often smile at the kind of views expressed by McGuinness and at the enthusiasm for them shown by people as significant as Morgan and Howard. This seems to me to rest on unwarranted complacency and to involve real political misjudgement.

The second episode can be outlined even more briefly. In 2005 the Lowy Institute conducted a public opinion survey on Australian attitudes to international affairs. It discovered that while 97% of Australians felt affection for New Zealand and 84% for Japan, only 58% had affection for the United States. Indeed, 57% of those surveyed believed that US foreign policy posed a danger to the world, precisely the same percentage as those who were worried about Islamic radicalism. One of those alarmed at these results was Rupert Murdoch. Rather than blame the unpopularity of America on the uber-hawkish policies no one had supported more enthusiastically and effectively than he, and perhaps forgetting momentarily that he owned 70% of the Australian daily press, Murdoch blamed the supposedly left-wing bias of the Australian media for this unsatisfactory situation. To combat their influence he proposed to help fund, at an Australian university, a United States Study Centre. The proposal was led by the elite lobby group, the American Australian Association. It had the warm support of the Howard Government, which in May 2006 pledged an initial grant of \$25 million as part of the Centre’s endowment..

Murdoch’s political purpose in proposing and partially funding the Institute was completely open and undisguised. In a speech he delivered last year, he said this. “Australians must resist and reject the facile, reflexive, unthinking anti-Americanism that has gripped much of Europe...That is why the American-Australian Association is proud to join with the Australian government in founding a new Centre for United

States Studies in Australia. The centre will conduct research, raise awareness, dispel myths, groom new leaders...” So was the Howard government’s. As I outlined in detail in an article last year published in *The Monthly* one of the central long-term purposes of the Howard government has been to lay the foundation of a long-term and even more intimate defence, foreign policy, economic and cultural association between Australia and the United States, a process I have christened the re-dominionisation of Australia. Clearly government support for the Centre was a part of the cultural arm of this general strategy. Equally clearly, as is made apparent in the documents associated with the foundation of the Centre, continued government support for the endowment was to be contingent on the Centre’s fulfilment of the strategic purpose, which is to deepen the association between Australia and the United States.

The Centre was to be established at one of the Australian universities, who were invited to make competitive bids. Before bidding began it was made clear that control of the Centre would be vested not in the University but in a Board half of whose positions would be assumed by the lobby group the American-Australian Association. The Board not the University would make the key appointments. The Board not the University would control the funds. It was implicit in the establishment of the Centre not only that the Government would need to be ideologically satisfied with its output. It was the explicit position of the Association—put on several occasions by the Association’s deputy chairman, the former Howard Government heavy-hitter, Michael Baume—that if the Centre proved to be an ideological disappointment funding would be instantly withdrawn.

There was not the slightest pretence that the Centre enjoyed academic freedom, as over the past century or longer that idea has been understood. Clearly the key position at the Centre would be the Chief Executive Officer who would control future direction. Although the CEO was to be appointed by the Centre’s Board, five of whose members were to be appointed by the University that won the bid and five by the American Australian Association, the leverage the Association required over the appointment was made clear in supplementary information released to potential bidders on August 16 2006: “With respect to the appointment of the CEO, the Board of the Centre would have the responsibility to identify and appoint the CEO.

However, the Centre will be expected to advise and consult with the AAA on selection process and the appointment of the CEO.” There was not the slightest pretence that the Centre’s independence would be safeguarded by the University. Gavin Brown, the Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University which won the bid, actually praised the Centre on the ground that it was independent of both the university and the funding Association—a clear untruth, given what Murdoch and Baume had said publically, and the role of the American Australian Association in the formation of the Board and in the selection of the CEO. There was not the slightest attempt to disguise the fact that the Centre would be seen and judged and funded according to its usefulness and loyalty both in supporting the general foreign policy agenda of the Government and in strengthening the pro-American side of the culture war. To see what I am saying all one need imagine is a Centre established under identical conditions at an Australian university by a Saudi-Australian or a Turkish-Australian Association or an Israeli- Australian Association. What I am saying has nothing to do with anti-Americanism but with the traditional idea of university independence

What interests me about all this is not the fact that Australia’s most powerful media proprietor or the Australian Government or the main pro-American lobby group in this country should make a proposal such as this. What interests me rather is the fact that a proposal so radically inconsistent with the fundamental university tradition of autonomy, of independence from all vested interests and, most importantly, from the state, should have been accepted by almost all the Vice Chancellors of the universities in Australia as perfectly legitimate. So far as I am aware only Ian Chubb, Vice Chancellor of the ANU, expressed concerns about the staffing and funding arrangements of the Centre and its clearly stated political objectives. What interests me, too, is that the proposal should have been at the receiving end of so little criticism from the present generation of university professors, one of whose most important responsibilities is the preservation of the core values of the institution they inhabit, so that the university is passed on in good health from this generation to the next.

I do not want what I have said today to be interpreted as meaning that I think all the accusations made against the pursuit of the humanities and the social sciences are mischievous and empty. I do not. Nor do I want to exaggerate the danger of the situation. Most of those who work in the humanities and social science faculties at

universities in Australia still enjoy more or less unrestricted academic freedom. Freedom does not require a government grant or protection from abuse. What I am convinced of, however, is that the episodes I have outlined briefly in this talk do reveal the existence of serious threats to the future of the university as traditionally understood. I am not so much surprised that the challenges have been mounted. The momentum has been building for a long time. What surprises me is the failure of those inside the university, who bear responsibility for its future, either to identify immediately the nature of the threats or to defend their institutions courageously when the threats have eventually been grasped.

What these episodes seem to me to reveal is that in Australia two values at the very centre of the conception of the Western University—academic freedom and the independence of the university—have already been profoundly even perhaps fatally corroded. Whether this is so, and if so why this has happened, is what I have come here today to discuss.

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