

# POLITICS AND THE UNIVERSITY

Claims of academic bias raise deeper questions about the nature of universities, writes **Greg Melleuish**

It is generally recognised that staff in the humanities and social sciences at Western universities are far more likely to be lean to the left than to the right in political matters. This has led to claims that generally only one view of the world will find expression amongst academics and that this will have a detrimental effect on the educational experience of young people attending universities. These students' knowledge and capacity for analysis will be diminished because they will not be exposed to the variety of ideas they should be if they are to consider themselves educated.

Many critics of this state of affairs have followed B. A. Santamaria in appropriating the idea of hegemony from the left. They argue that the left's monopoly of the humanities in academia is an attempt to impose a left worldview on students that will guide their political activity. It has been claimed that the only way to restore some balance is to insist on the employment of academics from a range of political and intellectual backgrounds so that university departments become pluralistic. In the United States, a campaign along these lines has been waged by David Horowitz and the Students for Academic Freedom, who have drawn up an Academic Bill of Rights that promotes diversity, pluralism, and objectivity in university teaching.<sup>1</sup>

To my knowledge, in Australia the only academic who tried to put something like this into practice was Manning Clark. At Canberra University College, which would later become part of the Australian National University, he employed historian Laurie Gardiner because he needed a Catholic. Gardiner eventually moved to the University of Melbourne, where he distinguished himself by not signing the 1984 letter from fellow

Melbourne University historians condemning their colleague Geoffrey Blainey for his remarks on Asian immigration.

More recently, the Young Liberals in Australia have been largely responsible for running a campaign called Make Education Fair, which has emulated the activities of American Students for Academic Freedom.<sup>2</sup> The campaign has managed to convince the Senate to run an inquiry focusing on the 'level of intellectual diversity and the impact of ideological, political and cultural prejudice in the teaching of senior secondary education and of courses at Australian universities.'<sup>3</sup>

## Politics and academia

In his 2008 book, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, American academic Stanley Fish argues that academics should restrict their activities to those of the academic variety.<sup>4</sup> This is not an easy matter, as it raises two major and quite difficult issues. The first is about the nature of academic activity, while the second is about the relationship between universities and the wider world.

In the journal *First Things*, Richard John Neuhaus points out that *Save the World on Your Own Time* is really two books:

The first is directed to fellow professors and provides a vigorous critique of the politicising of the academy. The second is directed to outsiders who are

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concerned about the politicised academy and assures them that their worries are quite unwarranted.<sup>5</sup>

Fish says universities should not be involved in overt political activity. In return, the wider society should leave them alone to get on with their job and also provide them with the funding required to do it properly.

On first inspection, this looks like a neat deal that should satisfy both parties. In fact, many of its arguments are quite similar to the ones that John Anderson expounded in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s. Anderson argued that the role of the university was to pursue academic matters. To replace critical inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge with something like 'service to the community' would subordinate the university to something outside of it, in this case the state. Like Anderson, Fish rejects the idea that the role of the university is to create 'democratic citizens' and to engage in politics.<sup>6</sup>

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But one should always look at the fine print in these matters. Fish has a rather narrow concept of what 'politics' means. It seems to consist of interventions such as urging students to become activists in a particular political matter or to vote for particular parties or candidates. Now, of course academics have no right to engage in such unprofessional conduct. Fish also states that academics should be left to devise their curricula as they see fit—a sound professional principle. But what happens if they choose to abandon professionalism and devise curriculums based on ideological and political principles?

Looking at various submissions made to the Senate Inquiry on Academic Freedom, it would seem that the complaints cover both of these scenarios. There are a number of cases where there are overt attempts to influence the political beliefs and behaviour of students. There are also

cases where the curriculum has been designed to exclude some material that is important to the topic being taught. One example of this kind of political indoctrination is the way political ideologies is taught at the University of Melbourne, with the mainstream ideologies of liberalism and conservatism sharing one week while extremist and obscure ideologies are given much fuller treatment. According to the Fish view, this sort of behaviour is acceptable and the public has no right to worry itself about it. They should just hand over the money.

At one level, Fish's acceptance of the situations like the Melbourne politics example is based on the idea that professionals should be trusted to define and elaborate their area of expertise. The wider society should trust that the academics will behave themselves in constructing their own disciplines. But that there has been a need to campaign for 'academic freedom' in the United States and Australia indicates that academics and some schoolteachers have forfeited some measure of that trust. It is not good enough to say, as Fish does, 'we promise to behave ourselves if you will just leave us to get on with it.' Things have gone too far; there can be no going back.

### Education as a political weapon

One reason for this situation is that Fish's simplistic division between education and politics fails to recognise the extent to which many people now consider education a political weapon. Capture the minds of the young, they argue, and you will capture the future. Once this process begins, you end up with an attempt to impose an intellectual hegemony on students, and this in turn encourages attempts to institute a counter-hegemony. In this scenario, academics do not need to break Fish's rules of academic behaviour by telling students who to vote for, because they have already been indoctrinated with a set of values that spells out the correct choices as clearly as a how-to-vote card.

A minority dedicated to such tactics within academia will ultimately win the day. Genuine advocates of the liberal view of education will happily appoint people of ability to positions simply in recognition of their capacities. But hardcore ideologues will find any excuse to get

the person who agrees with them selected. I am particularly dismayed to see Fish write that he was never aware of the politics of the applicants when he sat on selection committees. Does he really expect us to believe him?

Once a group gets itself established within academia, it can redefine what *academic* means so that it comes to include a particular ideological approach to the world. 'We're not being political,' the group will claim, 'but our critics are.' Having established themselves and defined their opponents as 'ideological,' they are now able to marginalise and exclude those genuine liberals who were happy to employ them in the first place.

In this way, the academic activity that Fish wants the general community to fund and foster comes to be defined in political terms. At this point the fun begins for the minority who are hijacking the academy. It is possible, especially in a small academic community such as Australia's, for ideologically driven groups to capture the positions and the intellectual agenda of entire disciplines. They can do so by controlling appointments, PhD scholarships and marking, and access to publication in journals. Once these groups reach a certain critical mass they can even exercise an enormous influence over book publishing which explains why it can be difficult to get non-left academic works on politics and history published in Australia. Fortunately, such groups cannot control popular areas such as military history, which continue to flourish despite academic disdain.

Once they have succeeded in dominating their fields, the ideologically-motivated groups and their acolytes in the media and in schools are able to pretend that their highly politicised worldview is mere common sense. Over the past forty-odd years, an academic subculture has come into being that is self-perpetuating and capable of handing on its values from one generation to the next. Apparently, in America there now exists housing for retired academics associated with universities and colleges. One could imagine, in a future Australia, academic retirement villages where baby-boomer oldies can pass their days reinforcing each others' prejudices and 'mentoring' the next generation.

But these academics cannot control the ideas of students who come to them from families outside

this culture—from mainstream Australia and from the burgeoning Christian subculture whose children have been educated at Christian schools or at home. Such students will not so readily succumb to the values of the academic subculture, and may even resist its hegemony. Certainly, a number of the submissions to the Senate enquiry seem to be telling this story.

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The conflict here is between the university's universal pretensions and the reality that academia is just one element of our pluralist society. The universities were designed as national institutions that could speak to the whole country. They may not always have achieved the goal but, in such activities as adult education sponsored by the universities, they genuinely aspired to. They now seem only able to speak to the subculture that shares their values, and behind this failure is the decline of professional academic values.

There appears to be two solutions to the problem. One is to follow the Horowitz model from the US, and that advocated by the Young Liberals, and attempt to make universities more pluralistic by encouraging intellectual and political diversity. I find this solution unpalatable because it recognises and condones academics' unprofessional behaviour. It institutionalises the existing practices of politicised academics 'letting it all hang out,' and turns the university into a political battleground. It is also unlikely to work, as there are too few dissident voices currently in the established system.

Nevertheless, an academic code of conduct would be useful. Such a code should place an emphasis on the need for academics to think of themselves as professionals and to uphold appropriate standards. These would include the duty to teach, assess, and provide course materials in as balanced and objective a fashion as possible. It would be a pity if the current lack of

professionalism led to a system whereby courses had to undergo external accreditation.

The other solution would be to encourage the development of new institutions where a genuine pursuit of knowledge and critical enquiry could flourish. This could be achieved by the establishment of private tertiary institutions. There is already an example of this in Australia—Campion College, which has been established on the model of an American liberal arts college. The commonwealth government could play a role in assisting such institutions, in much the way it currently assists private schools. It is generally easier to set up new institutions than to attempt to reform old ones. In such new places, those who feel alienated from the politicised public universities might just feel at home. But it must be recognised that once a government funds any institution, it ultimately has the potential to control it.

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### The academic and the political

A wider issue raised by Fish also needs elaboration. One can take the line of argument regarding the division between academic activity and political or practical activity a step further. Following Michael Oakeshott, it is possible to argue that theoretical knowledge has no real implications for the real world. It is a mode of knowing that issues statements about history or economics or ethics, but it cannot be used as the basis of practical knowledge or skill. A theoretical knowledge of ethics does not make individuals behave more ethically, and political science academics can have very poor political skills. To act in the world requires that one has acquired skill and has passed beyond the threshold of theory to the world of action.

Hence it is possible to take Fish's position a step further and to say that it is illegitimate—and may even be highly dangerous—for those who have a merely theoretical understanding of the world to attempt to impose their theories in a

non-academic context. It is the academic equivalent of the centrally planned bureaucratic state, with academics playing the role of knowledge planners. Universities whose academics see themselves in this way are open to the critiques offered by Oakeshott and also by Friedrich Hayek. Academic activity is really more like a giant game than a political or bureaucratic enterprise; it is a cultural activity individuals participate in for the same reasons that they might also play sport.

Universities embody a particular approach to knowledge and intellectual enquiry. They should develop that approach to its maximum extent and enable those who are capable of benefiting from what it has to offer to think as deeply and systematically as possible. Those whose talents lie elsewhere, and who possess different skills and capacities, need other opportunities for them to develop those talents.

The gulf between theory and practice, and between science and skill, remains enormous. But this is not an issue that universities normally face. By and large, they remain locked into a model that derives from the late nineteenth century, in which theoretical science translates into applied science and then into practical application. W. K. Hancock satirised this model in his 1930 description of the plans for the projected Australian National University:

The buildings of the future university, for example, are planned in concentric circles intended to illustrate the expansion of human knowledge through the fundamental sciences to the applied sciences, beyond which are 'those spheres where the sciences will be utilised in real life.' Thus, on that part of the rim of the outer circle marked by the two spokes running out from biology, lie surgery, medicine, pharmacy, recreation, athletics; in the offing there is a hospital and a field pond.<sup>7</sup>

This model is simply taken for granted in the public sphere but without anyone ever really asking, does this really describe how knowledge is created and how it comes to be applied in the real world? If Fish's self-denying ordinance is to be taken seriously and the worlds of academia

and politics, or of theory and practice, are to be kept apart, there is a pressing need to reconsider the relationship between what universities do and what happens in the world outside them. We do not understand very well the process of how theory turns into practical application, often simply assuming that universities' key task is to produce knowledge that will be of practical benefit to the wider society. If universities offer the prospect of an improved material life, then it is a short step to the idea that they can also improve the world in other ways, and before long they will see 'saving the world' as a legitimate activity for them.

It would be good if academics and university administrators reflected more on exactly what it is that they do. If Fish is correct, and universities should concentrate on their role as academic institutions, this also means that academics should cease trying to save the world.

## Endnotes

1. Students for Academic Freedom, 'Academic Bill of Rights,' [www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/documents/1925/abor.html](http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/documents/1925/abor.html)
2. Make Education Fair, 'Make Education Fair,' [www.makeeducationfair.org.au/](http://www.makeeducationfair.org.au/).
3. Senate of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee, 'Inquiry into Academic Freedom—Terms of Reference,' [www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet\\_ctte/academic\\_freedom/tor.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/academic_freedom/tor.htm).
4. Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
5. Richard John Neuhaus, 'The Public Square,' *First Things* (July/August 2008), [www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id\\_article=6270](http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=6270)
6. John Anderson, *Education and Enquiry*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
7. W. K. Hancock, *Australia* (London: Benn, 1930), 280–281.

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**Greg Lindsay, Founder and Executive Director, CIS**

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