

Sources of political power in academia

by Brian Martin

Senior Research Fellow, Department of Applied Mathematics

In the 1940s and 1950s there were wide scale sackings and harassment of academics, especially in the United States, during the so-called McCarthy era. In Australia, many academics suffered in the aftermath of the Petrov affair. This era had a strong quietening effect on potentially dissident academics.

Contrary to views in some quarters, political beliefs continue to play a significant role in appointments, promotions and sackings. As well as political beliefs, suppression of academics is often closely connected with struggles with organisational vested interests; and with disputes over the validity of different types of knowledge and ways of acquiring it — that is, with paradigm disputes. A mixture of political, organisational and paradigm aspects in suppression cases is quite common.

The author has made a study of a sizable number of cases of suppression of individuals involved in environmental research and teaching in Australia and New Zealand. One conclusion, in agreement with the findings of the few other investigations in this area, is that the scale of suppression in academia is much greater than usually realised. One investigator in this area concluded that 'the most direct attacks on academic freedom have come from the academic authorities themselves, and it is their gross and arbitrary power which continues to constitute the most serious threat to educational freedom'.

This situation points to the importance of understanding how and for what purposes political power is exercised by leading academics and administrators. The perspective adopted here is that political power exercised by academic elites can be usefully understood as being based on service to non-academic elites and on disciplinary exclusiveness maintained via specialisation and isolation of work from the public.

Patronage

Those who are high up within the academic power structure have considerable interaction — for example in providing advice, planning curricula, soliciting funds and making social contact — with people and organisations outside the academic community, particularly with those in positions of power. The results of this interaction can be seen as a quid pro quo. From powerful non-academics, the academics receive funding and some prestige. From powerful academics, the non-academics receive help in channelling research and teaching into areas selectively useful to the latter's interests, a process which involves grant money, future job prospects and possible applications for research.

The patronage of leading academ-

ics by powerful non-academics is threatened when issues are taken into the domain of public debate, since the legitimacy conferred by the stamp of unanimous scholarly approval is undermined. For this reason there is a strong preference among politically powerful academics for patterns of closed decision-making. When issues are taken to the public by concerned academics, often this is seen as inappropriate or even contrary to proper academic behaviour.

The perspective helps to explain cases in which academics who have been outspoken about environmental or other sensitive issues are denied jobs, promotions, tenure or are sacked, or in which efforts in these directions are made by corporate or government vested interests and their academic allies. Such cases can arise in the areas of forestry, chemistry (for example, over the issue of lead in petrol), entomology and political science, among others.

Accommodation

The influence of powerful groups outside the academy also helps to explain the existence or otherwise of research and teaching in particular areas. For example, the almost total lack of peace research or teaching in Australian universities can be seen as an accommodation to the influence of the military and its allies in government and industry. In contrast there are substantial academic programs in nuclear physics and nuclear engineering.

In summary, academic institutions are not organised or run solely on the basis of ivory tower scholastic criteria, but in no small measure are run on the basis of the exercise of political power by academic elites who personally or structurally have close links with powerful groups outside the academy.

Many who rise within the academic power structure do so via at least a moderately successful and orthodox research career in a fairly narrow specialisation. The bases on which power and prestige rest within the academic hierarchy therefore depend partly on the status of specialised research within recognised disciplines. This status in turn appears to depend in part on the discipline in question being off limits or opaque to non-specialists and to the public.

Only to the extent that the essence of the work in a discipline and its specialities is either a special preserve or else not readily grasped by outsiders is it possible for members of the discipline to claim exclusive rights to judge the importance of work in the discipline.

With this perspective, it is understandable that many academics in traditional disciplines would be antagonistic to potentially substantial academic programs which are either truly interdisciplinary or popular



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with students or the public. This helps to explain why universities, founded along interdisciplinary lines, have reverted to relatively traditional departmental patterns. It also helps to explain the lack of academic interest in areas which generate public interest or participant involvement, such as parapsychology or Alcoholics Anonymous.

In recent years the environmental area has been a source of research and teaching which is potentially threatening to many parts of the traditional academic power structure. By its nature much environmental research is interdisciplinary. The results of this research often offer a challenge to existing policies and practices of government and industry, and the area is one of high public concern. Such research thus can provide a threat to the hierarchical academic power structure. Indeed, traditional disciplinary approaches and traditional hierarchical organisational structures seem quite inadequate bases for getting to the roots of environmental problems.

A study of environmental programs in US universities concluded that two features were necessary, though not alone sufficient, for their success: substantial or complete control of the faculty reward structure and freedom to be innovative in introducing course material, educational programs, work study programs, and curriculum requirements for degrees. These requirements obviously conflict with the maintenance of the current academic power structure, and hence are seldom achieved in practice.

Because the existing emphases in universities are predominantly in traditional subject areas, using traditional methods in traditional organisational structures, there is an in-built resistance to changes in this prevailing pattern, such as offered by innovative interdisciplinary research and teaching programs in areas such as the environment, alternative technology, women's studies or participatory democracy. Those who do research or teaching in such topics often find it hard to find jobs, get tenure or promotions, get grant

money, maintain proper staffing levels or introduce desired innovations.

These problems are sometimes imposed in a manner which can be widely seen as contravening academic principles; more often the discouragement of interdisciplinary and socially challenging research and teaching can be justified or rationalised in terms of a commitment to traditional disciplinary norms of scholarship and service to the interests of existing powerful groups. For example, economic geology is accepted as an academic subject, while environmental geology is virtually non-existent.

In any case, it is most difficult to change institutions from the usually narrow purposes for which they were designed. In the area of energy and environment in the US, no holistic study programs were established at universities before 1971. Thus the programs followed rather than preceded the development of widespread public interest and definition of the main problems, a situation which also applies in Australia. This suggests that the generation of public interest in issues and the creation of independent, citizen-oriented research groups may have a larger impact on existing scholarly institutions than isolated attempts for change from within.

Finally, it may be argued that many characteristics of the academic community have evolved out of the community's history of interaction with government, business and other groups. For example, the tendency of academics to avoid controversial public issues can be interpreted as an adaptive response to avoid alienating potential sources of patronage. More generally, the process of professionalisation can be seen as a process of transforming special knowledge and skills into social and economic rewards. The academic power structure would seem to be an important component in this process.

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Articles and other material published in *ANU Reporter* may be used without prior reference; however, an acknowledgement of the source will be appreciated.

Editor: Madan Nagrath

New Bursar for the University

Mr Russell Boardman, a senior Commonwealth public servant, is to be the new Bursar of ANU. Until recently Chairman of the Capital Territory Health Commission, he will take up his ANU appointment in October this year.

Mr Boardman, 51, born and educated in Britain, has held a number of public service appointments in Canberra since 1961. He became Chairman of the Capital Territory Health Commission in 1977. He has very extensive experience as an administrator, in computing, financial management and in senior management.

The position of Bursar became vacant in April this year on the resignation of Mr J.A. Coleman.

Public Lectures

The final series of University Public Lectures for 1980 will be held from 10 September to 1 October. The series 'Language = Facts and Fallacies' has been organised by the Department of Linguistics (Arts).

On Wednesday 10 September, Professor Bob Dixon will speak on 'What is language?'; on Wednesday 17 September, Dr Tim Shoppen will speak on 'Language and education'; on Wednesday 24 September, Dr Anna Wierzbicka will speak on 'Language and meaning'; on Wednesday 1 October, Professor Stephen Wurm will speak on 'Language and society'.

The lectures will be held in the Coombs Lecture Theatre at 8.15pm. They are open to all those interested.

Supplement guidelines

ANU Reporter welcomes special supplements for inclusion, as an integral part, in the *Reporter*.

The timing of such supplements must first be discussed with the Editor, as well as the general concept. It is imperative that the copy and other material for inclusion in the supplement are cleared in advance.

The production cost of such supplements will be borne by those placing the supplement and its preparation will be their responsibility. The Editor will be happy to provide guidelines about the preparation and production of the supplement and other help as appropriate.