

# CHALLENGING A CAMBRIDGE ACADEMIC COLONY DOWN UNDER

BY BRIAN MARTIN

Cambridge graduates in archaeology seem to have a good thing going in Australia. Most tenured positions in prehistoric archaeology at the Australian National University are held by British nationals, in particular by Cambridge graduates. They and their students also occupy a number of key positions in the field in other departments around the country. But if Dr Johan Kamminga has his way, all this may change.

Dr Kamminga has submitted a complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman alleging bias in a number of appointments in the Prehistory Department made over a period of years. His complaint is one of the best documented accounts available anywhere of discrimination in academic hiring practices.

Discriminatory practices are widespread and, in private, widely recognised in nearly every academic institution. But because these practices have been largely accepted, at least by those with the most power, there has been little challenge to many of them. The feminist movement has raised awareness of the gender bias pervading academia, but has hardly eliminated it. Other biases, on grounds of ethnicity, age, political viewpoint and social attitudes, are also pervasive but very hard to prove.

A bias towards graduates of a particular country and university is not uncommon. It is an example of what has been called 'homosocial reproduction', namely appointment of new staff similar to those making the appointment. Homosocial reproduction has usually meant appointment of white middle-class males with the right background and the right ideas. A preference for ex-students who are also Cambridge graduates is simply a special case of this wider phenomenon.

Hiring practices are difficult to challenge for several reasons. Firstly, the proceedings are largely confidential, with little or no public justification required for the choice made. Secondly, professional and disciplinary insiders claim complete prerogative to make the final decision, repelling scrutiny by non-specialists. Thirdly, there are few formal and effective procedures to challenge decisions; appeals are rare. Finally, those with the greatest incentive to make a complaint, unsuccessful applicants, commonly fear, often with justification, that any action on their part will

jeopardise future job prospects.

Johan Kamminga obtained his degrees from Sydney University and made a reputation in archaeology. His extensive fieldwork has mainly been in Australia, the south Pacific and Southeast Asia. His work has encompassed empirical and theoretical dimensions, including pioneering studies of lithic function analysis, which involves microscopic examination of stone tools to determine their uses. He has been highly successful in obtaining research grants and consulting work.

A good portion of Dr Kamminga's research has practical, contemporary relevance. For example, his archaeological fieldwork around the Alligator Rivers in Australia's Northern Territory contributed to the declaration of the Kakadu National Park and its World Heritage listing.

It was natural that Dr Kamminga at some stage would apply for a position in the Prehistory Department at the Australian National University (ANU), the only major grouping of academics in Australia who do no undergraduate teaching. Furthermore, the research schools at ANU are amply supplied with support staff and research funds, making them prime locations for both aspiring and experienced researchers.

In a series of applications for positions at the Prehistory Department, Dr Kamminga has been singularly unsuccessful. His publications in leading journals, his extensive field and laboratory experience, and international reputation have been insufficient to get him a job or, it appears, even a considered examination of his applications.

In many fields it is common knowledge that certain jobs are reserved for insiders. In the field of archaeology in Australia, it is widely perceived that a powerful old-boy network operates, in which students of the tenured staff members of the Prehistory Department are given preferential treatment. What was colloquially called a Cambridge 'mafia' has, in recent years, gone native: a degree from the ANU Prehistory Department may now serve nearly as well.

Three of the four tenured staff in the ANU Prehistory Department have first degrees from Cambridge University. Similarly, four of the five prehistorians in the Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney have

Cambridge degrees. Furthermore, a number of important archaeology posts at other Australian universities are held by Cambridge graduates.

The possible influence of Cambridge or ANU connections in appointments to the ANU Prehistory Department is suggested by the shortlist in one of the tenure-track appointments analysed by Dr Kamminga. Of six shortlisted candidates, three were Cambridge graduates and four had PhDs from the ANU Prehistory Department itself. Not one of the six had an Australian first degree. The successful applicant, appropriately enough, happened to be a Cambridge graduate with a PhD from the ANU Prehistory Department. (It may be significant that all four members of the selection committee had Cambridge qualifications.)

This pattern of appointments occur in spite of the presence of dozens of talented local archaeologists with no UK degrees. Twenty-eight of these archaeologists were listed by critics who denied that Cambridge graduates dominated the field in Australia. But these critics have not explained why only two of those on their list have attained tenured academic posts in archaeology in Australia.

Dr Kamminga's complaint would have lacked power and detail without two factors: new regulations to ensure equal employment opportunity, and Dr Kamminga's own extensive investigations.

Regulations governing appointments at the ANU cover a multitude of things, including training in selection procedures, composition of selection committees, procedures for culling of candidates, conflict of interests and adequate documentation. Dr Kamminga has claimed breaches of regulations in specific cases in these and other areas.

What distinguishes Dr Kamminga's complaint is its wealth of detail. Numerous individuals have volunteered information to him, including testimony from members of selection committees. This is backed up with many documents that he obtained through freedom of information requests.

The result is that Dr Kamminga's formal complaint is outstandingly well documented. He gives figures on

appointments in the Prehistory Department over a period of 25 years, and includes detailed analyses on five appointments. (For only some of these was he an applicant). He argues that certain applications were arbitrarily culled, that reasons for selection certain candidates were faulty, and that favouritism was shown towards graduates linked to present tenured academics. In my opinion, the lengthy complaint stands as a worthy model of scholarly investigation.

Dr Kamminga's fundamental demand is for equal opportunity for Australian-trained scholars. Australia is one of the few countries that has no formal policy favouring its own citizens in academic appointments, when other things are equal. This undoubtedly reflects a continuing 'cultural cringe', in which many Australians think that foreign products must be better. Pressures from junior Australian academics for a change in this situation, especially in the light of protectionist appointment policies in other countries, have been successfully resisted by academic administrators.

Whatever the quality of Dr Kamminga's complaint or his demands for change, there is no guarantee that it will have any effect. He has been regularly informed by others in the field that by making the complaint, he has wrecked his future job prospects in Australia and overseas.

The best documented case of a similar nature involves David Mandel, and unsuccessful applicant for a post at McGill University in Canada. As detailed in the book *The Academic Corporation*, Mandel challenged a decision which involved picking a foreign applicant, though Mandel's radical politics seem to have been the real reason for the decision. Over a period of ten years there were two major inquiries and much further activity, to little avail. Mandel remains without a permanent job.

Whatever the findings by the Commonwealth Ombudsman, Dr Kamminga's complaint could have quite an impact. Since the Ombudsman has accepted that his office is a legitimate body to deal with such issues, the way is opened for further complaints dealing with academic appointments.

It is noteworthy that the ANU administration, in responding to the Ombudsman's investigation, has resolutely defended every

single detail of procedure and result in the appointments in the Prehistory Department.

The story of Kamminga's complaint was broken in the media by *The Australian* (18 April) and *The Canberra Times* (19 April). Two replies defending the ANU were published in the following weeks, one by Professor R. Gerald Ward, Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies at ANU (*The Australian*, 25 April) and the other by Professor Jack Golson, head of the Prehistory Department at ANU (*The Canberra Times*, 4 May).

These replies attempt to deny any bias towards Cambridge graduates by giving figures on the number of degrees from different institutions held by various prehistorians in Australia. One problem with their replies is that they focus on Cambridge degrees and hence fail to address the argument that there was an original Cambridge connection that has 'gone native'. An 'academic colony' does not require all the local figures to be from the colonising institution.

Even more noteworthy is their failure to examine the micropolitics of appointments, including belief systems, institutional and informal hierarchies, favours given and received, supervision, research interactions and friendship networks. Any serious study of patronage must examine the intimate social dynamics of the society in question. What is curious in that these leading social science scholars make the claim of 'no bias' simply by citing statistics.

It is also noteworthy that the replies by Professors Ward and Golson do not address Kamminga's claim of violations of appointment procedures guidelines. Both professors claim that appointments are made on the basis of merit. There is little reason to doubt their good intentions. But if anything has been learned in the struggle for equal employment opportunity, it is that good intentions are not enough to guarantee fair treatment and equitable outcomes. Kamminga's complaint suggests that much more is required if justice is to be seen to be done.

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