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Statement on the "Rindos Affair"

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This statement is made on behalf of all the world's undergraduate students subjected to mockery, abuse, sexual overtures, vexatious threats, harassment and litigation by university teaching staff.

The background to the persistent issue of my having been "convicted" of defamation against Dr Rindos had nothing whatsoever to do with the "Rindos Affair" itself. I am satisfied that there is nothing I did myself leading Dr Rindos to take such action against me, and since he was unable to collect on the damages awarded in the circumstances I feel that at the end of the day justice was served.

The time I was at the University of Western Australia was a period of radical change in Australian universities under the reforms brought by John Dawkins, then Federal Minister for Education under the Hawke Labor Government. The process triggered a great deal of residual paranoia among university staff.

In the Anthropology Department at UWA the problem for us students was that teaching staff were being replaced at the very time we were progressing through our Honours seminars in preparation for writing our dissertation.

The system of student assessment was haywire, differing fundamentally from one staff member to another such that we were unable to rely on any coherent performance benchmark informing our progress. Rather than an objective assessment we were wholly dependent on the constantly shifting state of power-play among individual staff members.

The wording used around the Department was "irreconcilable differences among staff", such that in order to enable student assessment a mutually disagreeable procedure was set up finally for double marking by representatives from the two main camps.

Even then, the charges of students "being given a free ride" were tossed back and forth between the different sets of adversaries, in denial of the actual progress of students and seeking to discredit their particular teachers. Students were then obliged to wait for periods of six weeks and more, well into the next term, before receiving an assessment of their previous term's work.

The persistent representation of students to staff during that period was that they resolve their differences and focus on their teaching duties. The feedback from staff was that they felt they were the ones being victimised, that students had no standing and no right to comment, and that further representation would detrimentally affect the career progress of the student concerned.

My clear understanding was that the situation was the same in Archaeology as it was in Anthropology, then two separate departments although on the same floor of the Social Sciences building. Following my return from China in December 1989, the issue of the state of these disciplines was raised in discussions on the Anthro-L mailing list and on the sci.anthropology newsgroup.

It was through those media that Dr Rindos, who I had never met before, then contacted me seeking information on Professor Bob Tonkinson in support of his case against UWA for denial of tenure. I felt then and feel now that his problems had nothing to do with me; rather that it was a

subset of this wider issue of disruption of student progress due to chronic staff disputation, and that he should sort it out with his colleagues.

When I found myself being further informed of a report Dr Rindos had written against Professor Bowdler while she was herself away in China, I became physically ill at the thought of such a thing. It was after that, that I raised the issue with him of his reasons for not waiting until she had returned, then sitting down with her to discuss the matter at hand professionally, as a colleague.

The one thing staff were forming a common barrier against the students was on this very issue, and Dr Rindos was no exception. Over an extended period further efforts to have the problem the students were facing discussed brought negative, abusive reactions from academics around the world in favour of continuing the singular campaign on behalf of Dr Rindos himself.

As matters developed, it was obvious to me that an alliance had been formed between Dr Rindos and Hugh Jarvis, moderator of the Anthro-L mailing list, to place pressure on me to drop my own complaints about disputation among staff generally and align myself with them against Professors Bob Tonkinson and Sandra Bowdler.

This I refused to do, and as a result Dr Rindos had charges of defamation brought against me in the Supreme Court of Western Australia on the spurious grounds of his lawyers having "deemed" certain words of mine to be defamatory. In the event, Dr Rindos contacted me further offering to drop these charges he had brought against me if I complied with his demands for evidence against Professor Tonkinson.

When I still refused to do so Dr Rindos then began phoning members of my family to talk about "the situation I was in", and seeking to persuade them to discuss it with me toward my "being reasonable". On the Internet I further found myself the target of the most egregious, horrific smear campaign involving the setting up of whole web-sites about me. After that I had no longer any qualms about what I might have said or written about such people, then or now. I will simply not be manipulated in such a manner.

From that point I was riled and did not care what happened next. It was not me in a situation, but Dr Rindos. I had been drawn by campus political activists against my will into their beat-up "Rindos Affair" over gay rights when I had only wished to enter University and take up a career as a research scholar.

My reasons for doing so were not personal or ambitious, but related to the continuing social situation in remote inland Australia. The particular matter ought not to have arisen at all given a reasonable level of maturity and professionalism in UWA administrative procedures.

At the core of the business was a fundamental breach of the ordinary duty of care toward their students in covering up a pattern of arrogance, carelessness and sexual misconduct among teaching staff. I did not then and do not now accept that such a situation is either normal or defensible. It is not a question of intellectual integrity or freedom of speech; quite to the contrary.

In the event to protect my family I thus simply returned to the country to run sheep for the next several years on a farming property near Busselton, in the SW of Western Australia.

It was there that my mother phoned me from NSW to tell me that she had read in a Sydney newspaper of my conviction in the WA Supreme Court for defamation against Dr Rindos, and to ask me what the heck was going on. My subsequent actions were planned and implemented solely to protect my family from this dreadful person. Even then my marriage failed to survive the onslaught such that for the period since I have been sole parent to our two boys.

When my by then ex-wife phoned to tell me Dr Rindos had died I am sad to say that I found nothing in my heart to grieve for him, only relief that it was now safe for me to bring my children back into a society where they would have no further fear of being stalked or harassed by such people seeking to manipulate me, for whatever reason, and for myself the freedom to get on with my life.

Rather than my being allowed to argue my own case or for any coherent discussion to develop on

the nature of Anthropology in Australia; on the grounding of social theory in sustained and integrated fieldwork practice; on issues of overseas academics lacking any Australian fieldwork experience coming to teach here; on issues of clarity, uniformity and consistency in teaching in the Social Sciences and in the formulation of social policy; and not least on objective, apolitical standards in student assessment, the whole affair was forced into an hysterical, abusive confrontation over gay rights on campus.

Eight years later I am still finding these monstrous websites with their selective, biased reporting of the affair and their persistent denial of the most basic rules of decorum and debate, of intellectual integrity and freedom of speech. I still find myself deeply shocked at such behaviour among those in our universities with power to propagate selective misinformation on their own behalf, in the face of the very principles on which I understood our universities to have been founded.

It has taken me all of this time to have my own point of view heard. The outcome for me is a profound and abiding mistrust of campus-bound academics not only in this country but globally. To my mind no sanctions against university teaching staff on breaches of professional conduct with respect to political or religious affiliation, morality, ethics, or in their relationships with students, will ever be strongly enough enforced.

The "Rindos Affair" is the single most shocking thing I have ever experienced.

That is all I have to say on this matter.

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