

# Academic freedom under Dawkins?

The Green Paper on Higher Education circulated by John Dawkins, Minister for Employment, Education and Training, states:

*"Changes to academic employment practices must not erode the principle of academic freedom in higher education institutions. Academic freedom and freedom of speech are central to the effective operation of higher education institutions. Open, critical discussion is to be encouraged and safeguarded."*

Noble sentiments — but will they be realised in practice? The only suggestion in the Green Paper on how to protect academic freedom is through legislation. What is entirely overlooked is the impact of structural changes, specifically those proposed in the Green Paper, on academic freedom.

Occasionally attacks on academics are directly from corporations or government bureaucracies. But a much greater problem is attacks from within, especially from academic superiors. Senior academics have by far the greater opportunity to hinder the careers of dissidents, for example by blocking appointments, hindering promotions, imposing onerous duties, preventing travel and study leave, knocking back research grant proposals and so forth. Numerous Australian examples are documented in the book *Intellectual Suppression*.

Attacks on dissidents are virtually always couched in proper academic terms. An individual's teaching, research or administrative performance is found inadequate rather than the individual being openly criticised for speaking out. Since the standards for assessing academic performance are continually being 'renegotiated' through both formal and informal channels, those who have most power tend to define proper performance of academic duties in a way that enhances their own status and denigrates those who deviate from the norm.

It is worth emphasising that those who launch attacks on dissidents are usually completely sincere in their belief in the legitimate shortcomings of those they attack. It just so happens that belief and service to vested interests coincide. The sacking of Professor Sidney Sparkes Orr from the University of Tasmania, documented in the classic book by W. H. C. Eddy, illustrates all these points.

While senior academics sometimes exercise their power against critics who threaten the patronage of outside groups, special vehemence is reserved for critics of the senior academics themselves. Such critics are few, since during the years of student apprenticeship and early posts, most budding academics thoroughly imbibe the

intellectual orthodoxy and the niceties of academic behaviour, which means restricting criticisms to scholarly style and forums. Speaking to the press on controversial issues usually is not seen as quite proper, except for senior figures.

Back to the Green Paper. It is proposed that institutions develop educational profiles, which are to include "the institution's contribution to national priorities identified by the Commonwealth". Institutions will have to compete for a fraction of their grant on the basis of their capacity to "respond to specified Commonwealth objectives in teaching and research".

What then of the dissident who does teaching, carries out research or makes public statements which threaten the current "specified Commonwealth objectives"? A likely possibility is that senior academics in the dissident's institution will not be pleased, since the institution's bid for a larger slice of the grant cake may appear to be at risk. The likelihood of attacks on dissent will be increased, and this is likely to deter academics from speaking out on the most crucial issues.

The amalgamations proposed in the Green Paper will increase the degree of hierarchy within institutions. As the sway of senior academics increases, so does the threat to academic freedom.

Who decides what is in the national interest? The Green Paper assumes that the Government decides. It is reasonable to assume that any government will make sure that the 'national interest' turns out to be as similar as possible to the Government's interest.

Neither Dawkins nor the Labor Party were elected to office because of their stand on higher education. The government bureaucrats who wrote the Green Paper and who would be involved in developing "Commonwealth objectives in teaching and research" have no special claim to represent the 'national interest' either.

It is desirable that a wide cross-section of the community be involved in helping define priorities for higher education. This would include parents, trade unionists, pensioners, youth, the disabled, Aborigines and many others. Collectively, people from a range of these categories are likely to be able defenders of academic freedom, since what is seen as 'critical research and teaching' is so often of special value to them.

The present Government is hardly an attractive model for a defender of intellectual freedom. The Labor Party, like most political parties, is intolerant, and often abusive, of internal dissent. The Commonwealth public service, like most large bureaucracies, cultivates

## VIEWPOINT

from Brian Martin\*

conformity and timidity. 'Freedom of information', brought in against enormous opposition, continues to be frustrated in practice.

Even more importantly, increased direct government control over higher education opens the gate to abuse by some future government which is less scrupulous than the present one. New governments are not noted for renouncing expanded powers introduced by their predecessors.

The Nazification of German universities in the 1930s provides some valuable lessons. One of the first things done by the Nazis was to move to centralised national control over educational institutions, and to appoint Nazis to key administrative posts. A

sorry part of the story is the lack of resistance by the German academic community, who preferred 'prudential acquiescence' (Joseph Haberer, *Politics and the Community of Science*) to principled opposition. On the other hand, in recent decades universities (especially students) have been at the forefront of opposition to repressive military regimes around the world.

Australian academics need to make extra exertions to protect academic freedom in the present climate. The best way to do this is to exercise that alleged freedom, and to work to extend it to everyone in society.

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