Whistleblowers and why academic freedom is most threatened from within

Although Australia is part of the so-called 'free world', it is
unremarkable how dangerous it can be to openly disagree with powerful interests. Bill Toomer discovered this 20 years ago when, working in Perth as a quarantine officer for the Commonwealth health
department of health, he ordered ships to be fumigated in the face of
disagreement from his superiors. He ended up being charged with dis-
obedience, transferred and demoted. Since then there have been a whole series of official in-
quiries into his treatment; he continues today to fight for justice.

The story is the same in the US. Vice-Neary, an employee of the State Rail Authority. His complaints in 1989 about unsafe signalling prac-
tices and riots in consultancy work were initially ignored. He was then
warned, ostracised, demoted and finally, earlier this year, dismissed.

Those who investigate can discover dozens of cases like this. The
organisation called Whistleblowers Australia, formed a few years ago, cannot begin to cope
with the problem, especially since most dissenters have little or no
money and are confronted by powerful vested interests. More often
these cases cannot be fully discus-
ced in print because of Australia’s stringent defamation laws, which act as a system imped-
iment to free speech.

Dissenters are sometimes said to be self-interested, trouble-
makers who are paranoid and incom-
petent. Certainly it is the case that
no one openly admits to at-
tack ing free speech. When an
employee is reprimanded, removed from normal duties, transferred, demoted or dismissed, the
official explanation is invariably
that they have not been doing
their job properly. There is no
ironical way of proving that sup-
pression of dissent has occurred.

However, when a person who has spoken out is treated more
harshly than colleagues who, with a
similar performance at work,
are not critically procedural or
replies, then it is a reasonable in-
ference that dissent is being at-
tacked. Sometimes victimisation is
blatant, but there are many more
cases of subtle subversion.

Whistleblowers tend to be
hardworking, conscientious
employees who believe that the
system works. They believe that if
they speak out, through the proper
channels, that problems of corrup-
tion, danger to the public, injustice
or discrimination will be ad-
dressed. Their disillusionment can be
intense. The community loses
effective workers and suffers from
failure to rectify problems.

Although governments and cor-
porations seldom foster dissent,
what about universities? They are,
after all, supposed to be havens of
intellectual freedom. This is true to
a certain extent, but dissent can be
dangerous for academics too.

Ironically, academics often are
safer when they are attacked from
outside the university. When, in
1977, Peter Rawlinson and Philip
Keane of La Trobe University spoke out about problems of
rin-
novum fungus in forests, the chair-
man of the Forest Commission of
Victoria applied pressure to the
vice-chancellor of the university to
take action against them. The
university defended Rawlinson
and Keane.

During the Gulf War, Dr Robert
Spratt, a professor at Murdoch Universi-
ty, who appeared in the media and
did not fully endorse the
Australian government’s position, was
attacked by the then prime
minister Bob Hawke. Last year,
then NSW premier Nick Greiner suggested that Professor Bob
Gregory of the University of NSW
be sacked for publicly disagreeing with state government accounting calculations. In both
cases it is difficult to see how of-
ficials defended the right of the academics to make
comment.

The biggest danger to academic freedom comes from within. When in
the early 1980s Richard Sylvan and
Val Plumwood wrote a critique of forestry philosophy that was to be pub-
lished at the Australian National
University, members of the
forestry department at the ANU
applied pressure to prevent publi-
cation. Sylvan was transferred from the forestry depart-
ment to the library. Sylvan and
Plumwood’s critique was a threat
to the forest industry and state
forestry commissions, with which

Most tenured academics never have
and will never speak out in
public critically on any
sensitive issue or about any powerful
group. They are too concerned about the
opinion of their peers, their promotions and research
grants. On the other hand, quite a
few of those who do speak out are
students or junior staff who do not have the protection of tenure.

What is more important than formal protections is the general
culture of intellectual life. All the
changes in higher education since 1967 have tended to discourage dissent: institutionalisa-
tion, greater federal government control, and promotion of managerial rather than collegial
methods of decision-making.

While the AHFIA has made a few

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