

The dumbing-down of Australia's universities. By Nick Cater, for The Australian, 9 December 2014.

THE barbarism of the modern Australian university is an ugly sight to behold. On a Friday afternoon in October, a vigilante mob assembled on the University of Sydney campus to denounce Barry Spurr, a distinguished professor of poetry and poetics and an intellectual treasure.

A wide-eyed Trot from the lunatic fringe, Ridah Hassan, poured scorn on Spurr as “racist scum” before revealing her own ethnological prejudice. Spurr was not only “a vile bigot” but “a rich white bastard” to boot.

They marched to the John Woolley Building and Spurr's empty office, scrawling swearwords across his door in permanent marker. With that, the lawlessness, intimidation, foul language, disruption and vandalism was over for another day.

Michael Warren Davis, a Bostonian studying English at the University of Sydney, describes these disturbing scenes in an article in December's *Quadrant*.

“The country's finest academic institution is happy to let professional rabble-rousers skip class to hijack its campus and insult its most accomplished faculty members,” he writes.

The administration had capitulated to hundreds of caustic 20-year-olds who insult and abuse a 60-something-year-old who has given the better part of his life to that institution.

“There would be no University of Sydney without men like Barry Spurr,” writes Davis, “and there would be no Australia without the Western civilisation he defends.”

While Hassan and her Socialist Alternative chums remain free to burnish their leftier-than-thou credentials, Spurr has been suspended while the university considers whether irony and satire are a defence in the use of racist descriptors. The use of the offensive language in any context in emails sent from the university's account is prima-facie evidence of foolishness. Some words, like loaded guns, should be kept under lock and key.

Yet so far there has been no explanation as to how Spurr's private emails entered the public domain or if those responsible for this breach of privacy will be disciplined. A further question to consider is whether the private correspondence of a distinguished academic is anyone else's damned business.

The persecution of the hapless Spurr brings to mind the plight of Coleman Silk in Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain*. Silk is an academic brought down by absurd allegations of racism, pursued by his prissy, academic rival Delphine Roux. Roth's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, says “everything Delphine Roux does must have virtue as its explanation ... By defining you as a monster, she defines herself as a heroine.”

Silk picks up the theme: “Her metier is the stories that peasants tell to account for their misery. The evil eye. The casting of spells. Her metier is folktales full of witches and wizards.”

Whichever way you look at it, the persecution of Spurr is another small step in the dumbing down of Australia's oldest university. Cheap and shallow thinking, fed by postmodernism and legitimised by intellectual prejudice, has been allowed to triumph over the precious inheritance of liberal scholarship on which the university was founded.

Spurr, by rights, should be reinstated without delay. Assuming the university administration follows the path of least resistance, however, as administrators tend to do, Spurr's teaching career is all but over. Future students will be deprived of his erudition, wit and wisdom.

One of the few opportunities they will have in life to draw the rich tradition of classical learning will be denied and a noble academy will have drifted further from what the late Pierre Ryckmans defined as a true university, one anchored in enduring values.

Faddishness and personal posturing are the order of the day. Learnedness has been superseded by appropriateness; it is not the force of argument or the wisdom of words that takes precedence but their imagined coded meaning.

Roth describes "appropriate" as "the current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and therefore making everybody 'comfortable'".

This, needless to say, was not what Charles Nicholson, the university's founding vice-provost, imagined when he addressed the university's first matriculation ceremony in 1852.

"We may hope the institution thus founded may stand secure and serene, whatever the perturbation of the social or political atmosphere that surrounds it," Nicholson said.

Nicholson saw fit to explain at length the university's secular foundations and the virtues of pluralism.

"To make revealed religion a special element in our teaching would be at once to destroy the catholic character of the institution, and limit its influence merely to one single class of religionists," he said. The university would be a place in which "a spirit of toleration, of mutual charity, and good will, may be nourished and maintained".

Nicholson is, of course, a very old white male and the classical liberal education he advocated, though kept alive by souls like Spurr, is unsuited to the modern university. Today the game is bums on seats, a high-throughput, high-yield business model in the production of what we dismally describe as "human capital".

Christopher Pyne's beached legislation was a small step towards rescuing the university sector from the dreary fate bestowed on it, in part, by the Dawkins reforms and the fetish of "inclusiveness". Deregulation would help restore an intellectual meritocracy, which is why the Group of Eight universities supported Pyne's bill, backed by 30 of the 31 other institutions.

The fate of the bill was sealed last week by the bloody-mindedness of a Labor opposition whose members, in their heart of hearts, surely knew that Pyne was right.

Labor blocked the legislation with the support of a former rugby league prop forward who has never been to university, representing a party that stands accused of buying its way into power with stolen money.

“I will not allow Australia to become the dumb country,” Glenn Lazarus told the Senate.

So higher education is stuck, for now, with an exhausted funding model that gives preference to quantity over quality.

It is burdened, too, with a culture that despises pluralism and shouts down debate.

Admirably, Lazarus wants his kids to go university. It is ironic, then, that Lazarus, possibly unwittingly, has prevented our universities from being better than they are.

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