

University shame

By Henry Ergas, *The Australian*, 11 May 2015

Aristotle opens the *Metaphysics* with one of his most striking phrases: “By their nature, all men desire to know.” Quite so. But not at the University of Western Australia.

Nor is there any mystery as to why. According to a press release issued late Friday by the university’s vice-chancellor, Paul Johnson, the proposal to establish, with \$4 million in federal government funding, an Australian Consensus Centre which would undertake “detailed economic cost-benefit analysis into many of Australia’s, and the world’s, biggest challenges”, had met “strong opposition” and hence could not proceed.

Let ignorance flourish

Since there was no consensus to seek consensus, it was better to let ignorance flourish than for the merest shard of knowledge to creep in.

To say that is not to ignore the distress Bjorn Lomborg’s occasional presence at the proposed centre, where he was to have been an adjunct professor, would have caused the university’s tender minds.

Yes, Lomborg’s credentials might seem impeccable: not only is he Danish, gay and invariably clad in a T-shirt and jeans, but his books on environmental issues are heavily cited, including by an array of the bien-pensant that ranges from Barack Obama to Ban Ki-moon.

But all that, as the Romans used to say, is just the hood that masks the crime.

Lomborg is a “sceptical environmentalist”

For by his own admission, Lomborg is a “sceptical environmentalist”, which implies that doubt may be warranted; and while — heaven forbid — he has never questioned the reality of anthropogenic climate change, he has argued that the costs and benefits of devoting scarce resources to mitigating that risk should be compared to those of addressing the planet’s other pressing woes.

Where that might lead hardly needs to be spelled out. After all, cost-benefit analysis forces one to identify the objective being sought, measure the sacrifice seeking it would impose and specify any uncertainty about the gains that would be achieved.

Moreover, it exposes those estimates, and their assumptions, to public scrutiny, making it possible for them to be tested as new information comes to light.

And since not all problems can be tackled at once, it allows an informed assessment of whether the cause of alleviating human misery might not be better served by investing in, say, defeating malaria than by building wind farms and solar panels.

Simply countenancing that possibility is doubtless more than sufficient to condemn the venture outright. But Lomborg’s crimes don’t end there. Rather, as Mungo MacCallum noted, not only

has his work been praised by Tony Abbott but “Lomborg is (a) favourite of *The Australian*” — to which that noted scholar adds “enough said”.

All Dissenters were hanged or banished

Good thing then that the proposal has been scotched, defaming Lomborg in the process. As Daniel Defoe — who, having been condemned for blasphemy, knew a thing or two about tolerance — wittily wrote three centuries ago, masquerading as a High Church Tory Anglican: it might be too much to hope that “Her Majesty (could ensure) all Dissenters were hanged or banished”; but surely “as in (the) case of insurrections and rebellions, if a few of the ringleaders suffer, the multitude are dismissed”.

It would, however, be quite wrong to regard this as censorship, the National Tertiary Education Union’s WA division secretary, Gabe Gooding, assures us. On the contrary, “it’s absolutely not censorship, it’s about the academics being really concerned about standards”.

And as UWA student guild president Lizzy O’Shea emphasised, there are impressionable 17-year-olds on the campus, who don’t deserve to be exposed to someone with Lomborg’s “sort of research standing”.

So true; and so reminiscent of Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s commissar for culture, who claimed that far from being censorship, “protecting” Soviet youth from the “decadence”, “orgies of mysticism and superstition” and “passion for pornography” of writers such as Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak was “liberation”, which helped keep “the only conflict in Soviet culture that between good and best”.

Thunder at anything which threatens their beliefs

It is therefore not surprising that Lee Rhiannon, who imbibed the Zhdanov doctrine as mother’s milk, led the charge against the centre; nor is it surprising that the green Left, with its “fiends of righteousness”, in Blake’s expressive phrase, who are not seekers but saviours, would thunder at anything which threatens their beliefs.

And it is unsurprising too that Labor, which refused to release the climate change model Treasury had developed and prides itself on rejecting cost-benefit analysis, would fall smartly into line.

But one wonders whether the vice-chancellor, a distinguished economist, was well advised. Faced with no less intense controversy, Max Weber, perhaps the pre-eminent social scientist of the 20th century, had little doubt about the course to take.

If there are views which disqualify an applicant from appointment to the faculty, he wrote, then there are views the university’s current researchers are not allowed to come to. From that moment, freedom of inquiry is irrevocably dead; and “the result of such a castration of the freedom and disinterestedness of the university cannot be compensated by the finest institutes, the largest lecture halls, or ever so many prize-winning works”.

The authoritarian tendencies of the Left

The great American social scientist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who Labor's Andrew Leigh claims is his role model, was equally forthright. If university administrators did not unflinchingly oppose "the authoritarian tendencies of the Left" and its refusal of rigorous analysis of policy alternatives, "you are going to end up with a university in which decent men simply do not try to serve their function of teaching and learning".

When the president of Stanford found he could not resist their pressure, Moynihan concluded, it was unquestionably his duty to resign. And indeed it was. Because Aristotle teaches us this too: that we can speak the truth only when we can say how things really are. If our universities can't, they don't deserve to exist.