

Taxpayer-funded activism undermining the nation

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The Australian Human Rights Commission, Gillian Triggs, may well be the nation's highest paid activist. As the president she draws a \$417,800 annual salary from taxpayers and spends much of her time advocating for pet political causes, in particular to dismantle the offshore processing element of our border protection regime. Her rhetorical flourishes, emotive posturing and wild claims differ little from those of the vocal activists who campaign for no recompense. Professor Triggs also benefits from the gravitas accorded her views because of her position. Yet, as we have seen again this week, Professor Triggs has a habit of giving misleading evidence to public inquiries and having to change her statements after people draw attention to errors. After more than four years in her role, this habit has diminished her effectiveness and undermined confidence in the AHRC.

For more than a year The Weekend Australian has highlighted concerns about why the AHRC failed to launch an inquiry into children in detention when Professor Triggs first decided it was a pressing issue under the Gillard Labor government in 2012. Instead it waited until almost two years later when the Coalition was in government and the flow of asylum-seeker boats was stopped. The president's evasions, misstatements and corrections on this issue failed to erase the perception that politics were at play. In the past three years enormous damage has been done to the AHRC's standing because of this taint of partisanship. The commission also has become embroiled in other controversies such as recommending compensation for a refugee who killed his wife and taking up complaints under section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act against this newspaper's cartoonist Bill Leak and a group of Queensland students who mocked the idea of an Aborigines-only computer room at university.

Incredibly — in the true sense of the word — Professor Triggs has told CNN that it is her freedom of speech that is under threat in this country, not that of the people the AHRC seeks to silence. In the wake of a silly report from the UN Human Rights Council, Professor Triggs told CNN the Australian government was muzzling entities such as the AHRC. "It is essentially a violation of the right to freedom of speech and it has impacts on so many areas of the law," she said. As far as we know this is one statement she has yet to retract or "clarify". To borrow a slogan she may remember, it's time. Even though her term expires before the middle of next year, given Professor Triggs's latest humiliations she would best protect the AHRC if she were to resign.

The taxpayer-funded political activism that Professor Triggs has come to personify is a deep and broad problem. Four Corners this week continued the ABC's long-running, jaundiced and deceptive campaign against strong border protection and offshore processing. In its eagerness to demonise government policy, the public broadcaster portrayed Nauruan people and Australian staff on the island in an appalling light. Rather than focus on the obvious toughness and difficulties of the policy and the possible solutions, the ABC — in cahoots with activist groups — is intent on accusing Australia and Nauru of brutalising and even torturing people.

Such campaigning is encouraged by many publicly funded institutions, especially our universities. Refugees, climate change and identity politics have become the defining issues of our age for so-called progressives. By proclaiming progressive positions on these issues, many define themselves as morally superior and are exempted from normal constraints of debate such as facts, reason and tolerating the views of others. Many groups receive public funds or are given tax-free status. We need a diversity of views but it seems occasionally absurd that

green groups receive government support to protest against developments governments encourage. Refugee advocacy centres are funded to challenge government policy. And activists at the extremes of gender politics are funded to develop insidious social engineering projects such as Safe Schools. As a society we seem to lack the courage to defend the values and policies that underpin our success. Yet we help groups that undermine policies, projects and institutions that benefit all of us. We need a stocktake.