

How radical Left shuts down debate

Gerard Henderson, *The Australian*, 3 June 2017

Once upon a time, universities in the West were a bastion of the free exchange of ideas — even controversial and intellectually unfashionable ones. It's just that this was a long time ago.

Today, radical students with the support of some academics are in the forefront of moves, sometimes violent, to shut down debate. This is the case in Australia, North America and western Europe.

Use of the words racist, colonialist, imperialist, sexist, Islamophobic, homophobic and more besides as weapons frequently leads to the silencing of contrary views. The same is true of the demand for a safe space, since a reserved place for one person, by definition, leads to the exclusion of others.

In the lead-up to World War II, it was groups such as the British Union of Fascists that disrupted the talks and rallies of its opponents. During the past half century, it is predominantly the radical left that has attempted to censor opposing views, if necessary by the threat or reality of violence.

In recent years in Australia senior Coalition figures such as Julie Bishop have been subjected to violent demonstrations after accepting an invitation to address a university function. Commentator Andrew Bolt had to abandon a book launch in Melbourne when it was threatened by radical left activists, including tertiary students. And it's becoming increasingly difficult for Lyle Shelton's Australian Christian Lobby to hold any event of which the radical left becomes aware. Yet the likes of Bishop, Bolt and Shelton are willing to hear the views of those with whom they disagree, and all hold positions in the mainstream of politics.

The radical left is responsible for its own intolerance but its authoritarianism has been facilitated by the weakness of others — from administrators to journalists. A recent example: between its commencement in 1967 and the late 1970s, La Trobe University's Bundoora campus in Melbourne was Australia's most violent campus. The very strong student left went to war with the administration along with academics and students who took a different position to its own.

This year, La Trobe is celebrating its 50th anniversary. On February 24, the ABC's 7.30 decided to mark the milestone by reporting the return to campus of two of "the La Trobe Three" — Brian Pola, Fergus Robinson and Barry York. The program reported the La Trobe Three were "student activists protesting the Vietnam war in the early 70s who refused to obey a court order banning them from the campus — as a result they spent several months as inmates of Pentridge Prison".

This is a fudge. Pola, Robinson and York were jailed by the Victorian Supreme Court in 1972 for breaching a directive to stay away from the La Trobe campus. The order was successfully sought by the administration to prevent illegal occupation of university buildings. There was no causal link between La Trobe University and the Vietnam war. After repudiating any form of violence, the La Trobe Three were released from prison. In his book *Student Revolt! La Trobe University 1967 to 1973*, York acknowledges the "dogmatism and youthful intolerance" of his one-time comrades.

In her 7.30 report, Josie Taylor said Pola and York returned to La Trobe in February as "honoured guests" and were "warmly welcomed" by vice-chancellor John Dewar. Dewar

told 7.30: “They haven’t asked for an apology, but I must say I do think that setting in train events that led to their incarceration without trial or without charge for an indefinite period of time was an excessive reaction by the university.”

In other words, according to Dewar, the events of 1972 were all La Trobe University’s fault, on account of the “excessive reaction” of the then VC, David Myers. Dewar implied the university should apologise to the La Trobe Three but made no demand the radicals apologise to the administrators, academics and students whose lives they disrupted. It is this kind of weakness that is responsible for the fact many universities have surrendered to the radical left’s authoritarianism.

There were a few academics at La Trobe in the 60s and 70s who stood up to the radical left in defence of pluralism and freedom of expression, in particular professors Hugo Wolfsohn (a German-born Jew who had family members murdered by the Nazi regime) and Joan Rydon (who was a social democrat).

Earlier this year, Dewar put out a collection titled *From the Paddock to the Agora: Fifty Years of La Trobe University* (La Trobe University Press). The vice-chancellor commissioned Robert Manne to write a chapter on the campus during the period 1975 to 1988. Manne used the occasion to traduce the academic reputations of Wolfsohn and Rydon — both of whom are dead and have no right of reply. Manne’s attack on Wolfsohn included the totally false statement that in 1975 he insisted all members of the politics department eat lunch together in the staff club. Dewar refuses to produce evidence to support Manne’s claim or advise whether Manne’s chapter was fact-checked and, if so, by whom.

So there you have it. La Trobe’s vice-chancellor warmly welcomed the return to the campus of Pola and York, who once attempted to curtail the freedoms of others. However, Dewar has presided over an unprofessional attack on Wolfsohn and Rydon, who once stood for freedom of expression in the face of violence and intimidation.

Nothing better explains the weakness of the intelligentsia.