

How universities are betraying Australia

By Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 21 June 2018

We are funding our own demise. A country that is the product of Western civilisation has a death wish when it sends billions of taxpayer dollars to a swag of fancy universities, few of which teach students the tenets of Western civilisation. Each year the federal government — meaning we taxpayers — sends \$16.8 billion to universities because educating the next generation is a fine way to spend our money. Except for this: a detailed history audit conducted last year by the Institute of Public Affairs found that few Australian universities teach the core subjects about the history of Western civilisation.

More university subjects cover the history of film than democracy, more focus on identity than the Enlightenment.

It's bad enough that the Australian National University, which received \$632.8 million from taxpayers, isn't teaching the great books of Western civilisation to its students. That it turned down a generous donation from the Ramsay Centre to do that, along with an offer of scholarships for students, points to the sly anti-Western virus infecting our universities.

The rearguard attack from ANU academics yesterday that they have Western civilisation covered is laughable. For starters, their course outlines are skewed to what's wrong with our history, not what's admirable about Western civilisation. If they truly offered what Ramsay offered, anti-Western students and union activists would presumably be protesting against their content in the same way they protested against Ramsay's proposal. More to the point, the ANU would not have sought a partnership with Ramsay, nor proceeded so close to sealing the deal, if ANU history academics had Western civilisation covered.

And it's not just the ANU that lets students down. Using the most recent available data, the five Australian universities ranked worst in the history audit received \$1.6bn from taxpayers in 2016. La Trobe University receives \$465m from taxpayers and students can study Food for Thought: Discovering the World Through Commodities. But of the 20 most significant topics in the history of Western civilisation, La Trobe offers students just one. When universities draw on the public teat to teach humanities yet do not teach the basic foundations of Western civilisation, it is, frankly, a two-fingered salute to taxpayers, to our history and to our future.

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On that front, here are some more pertinent numbers. This week's Newspoll revealed that two-thirds of those surveyed want university students to have the chance to study a serious course in Western civilisation just like the one proposed by the Ramsay Centre. The common sense of Australians contrasts with the hysteria from academics, a nincompoop branch secretary at the National Tertiary Education Union in the ACT, and some misguided students who are so drenched in politics and ideology that they oppose a course that introduces students to books by Aristotle, Linnaeus, Shakespeare, Plato, Socrates, Newton, Darwin, Einstein, Goethe, Kierkegaard, Joyce, Jung and more, minus the myriad political filters of left-wing academe.

Another set of numbers offers more evidence that we are funding our own demise. Glance at Tom Switzer's piece where the executive director of the Centre for Independent Studies sets out the results of a CIS/YouGov poll. Fifty-eight per cent of millennials have a favourable view of socialism, while almost 60 per cent think that capitalism has failed, even as socialism fails to feed the people of Venezuela. And where, by the way, do millennials think their iPhones come from? Alas, having a university education doesn't change this figure among millennials: 62 per cent think workers are worse off today than four decades ago, pointing to a problem that stretches from school to university.

The CIS/YouGov poll coincides with the latest Lowy poll, released yesterday, which confirms once again a stubborn majority of 18 to 29-year-olds do not believe democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Staying with the state of rotteness in our universities, Institute of Public Affairs executive director John Roskam last week highlighted something that deserves far more policy attention: Australian university students lack choice because a small number of very big universities wield oligarchic power — and that is set to get worse with the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia in merger talks.

When the University of Sydney has 60,000 students in contrast to Harvard University's 22,000 students, it's time to talk about breaking up our big universities. And Roskam explained why: a student in the US seeking a solid left-wing education can enrol at a progressive university such as Evergreen State College, which kicked out a science professor last year for daring to say that a "Day of Absence" — where whites are told to stay home — is racist. An American student with different ambitions can choose a very different education — maybe a course in the great books at Boston College or the University of Chicago or Columbia. "No such opportunity exists in the insular and parochial world that is humanities teaching in Australian universities," wrote Roskam. Only the small, liberal arts Campion College offers something close to this great tradition.

Summing up these dismal numbers, we are not getting bang for our buck from our universities. And it became a teachable moment when the ANU turned down money to teach the great books of Western civilisation but readily takes money from the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Turkey to fund a Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies.

Actually, two teachable moments: first, about the fact we are funding our downfall by using taxpayer funds to spread an anti-Western virus. On this front, a few Liberal ministers have made fine remarks about defending Western civilisation. Josh Frydenberg deserves kudos for saying it is critical for the next generation of students to understand where the rule of law came from, where democracy came from, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, women's suffrage too. He's right to say this is a new fault line for Australia. "This is not a cultural war," he says. "This is about ... where Australia (is) heading. And in order to know where you're going, you have to know where you come from, and we come from the Judeo-Christian ethic. This for me and for my colleagues is absolutely vital. We need to fight on it, we need to make it well known that our position is not for changing."

But with respect, as someone else once said, if your actions don't live up to your words, you have nothing to say. That raises the second teachable moment about the only real antidote to the anti-Western virus on Australian campuses. We need to disrupt and dismantle Australia's small group of very large universities so that students are given more choice, perhaps through financial incentives to encourage the rise of new universities and funding cutbacks to existing ones. We need a whole new model of tertiary education.

The prospect of dealing with more, not less, vice-chancellors won't thrill an education minister. But imagine the legacy of giving students the choice of a truly liberal education at universities willing to teach the reasons Australia, a land that millions of migrants have flocked to, is a product of Western civilisation.