

Illiberal, intolerant and anti-Western universities

By Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 7 June 2018

Now that the Australian National University has shown us beyond any possible doubt how illiberal, intolerant and anti-Western our big public universities have become by rejecting the prospect of a centre for the study of Western civilisation, it is of the greatest importance that the Ramsay Centre, which offered the funding, not get into bed with any other big, public university.

Ramsay must face up to the difficult, perhaps bitter, task of rethinking its model because the model it has, of giving vast amounts of money to public universities to teach undergraduate courses in Western civilisation, cannot possibly yield the results it wants. This is more important even than the debate about the ideological narrowness, indeed foolishness, of so much of what happens at our universities.

The military will tell you that no matter how brave or well-funded a force is, it generally loses if it has inferior “situational awareness” compared with its adversary.

Western civilisation has a huge number of enemies at universities. Ramsay looks like a businessman preparing for a Rotary Club meeting when actually he has been invited to a knife fight. It’s a literary critic in a boxing ring wanting to quote the poetic passage on page 212 when the other guy just wants to punch their lights out.

The Ramsay people have to face up to reality if they are not to waste, or worse, a vast sum of money. An institutional initiative essentially by conservatives that is captured and misused by the left is familiar and deadly. John Howard, the chairman of the Ramsay board and by a vast distance Australia’s best leader since Menzies, set up as PM a review of the school history curriculum to try to get rid of the ideological rubbish and bring the teaching back to reality.

What we have instead is a severely anti-Western (and incidentally anti-Christian) national curriculum that is almost a parody of zeitgeist prejudice and cultural self-loathing. This is not remotely Howard’s fault, but how many times must we go through the same experience?

Australian public universities are not that different from US and British counterparts. A few weeks ago in London I interviewed Lord Paul Bew, an old-style leftie, for decades professor of politics at Queen’s University Belfast. He is a crossbencher in the Lords. He told me one of his most important priorities now was to defend private think tanks. “Without them you’d have no real debate,” he said. “State intellectual life would be as rigid as the Soviet Union under Brezhnev.”

That’s a bit of ironic exaggeration but his broad point is unarguable. Alternatively, just Google the interview by Dave Rubin with Niall Ferguson, who laments the “gradual homogenisation” of history departments. The left has decisively won the culture war at universities and there are now only a few conservatives left, he says. And the transmission of Western civilisation is in the best sense a small-C conservative endeavour. So why on earth would anybody think these universities will reverse all existing practice and teach Western civilisation in a way that is remotely sympathetic? Ramsay centres, concerned with teaching undergraduates, will also inevitably be caught up in arts department politics, and this will grind them into dust.

The ANU controversy recalls Tom Wolfe’s phrase, “mau-mauing the flak catchers”. A puff of protest from the tertiary union and the students association and the university went to water.

Some ANU folks claim they were outraged at an article in *Quadrant* by Tony Abbott, a Ramsay board member. Abbott's offence? This single, shocking sentence: "The key to understanding the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation is that it's not merely about Western civilisation but in favour of it."

Abbott did a great service by writing this sentence in his mild, sensible piece. If this is enough to throw the whole Ramsay project out of bounds at the ANU, then any Ramsay centre at any public university will always be one demonstration, one serious protest, away from utter chaos and disruption and probably political sellout. Any remotely pro-Western course that gets through the university thought police could at any instant spark demands for an equal and opposite course or just be chased off campus altogether.

The University of Sydney, in discussions with Ramsay, responded not by laughing off the ANU nonsense but by piously declaring it would never consider doing anything that compromised academic freedom. So in this Kafka world, Ramsay is, *prima facie*, a threat to intellectual freedom. Oy vey!

The ANU reaction to Abbott is utterly ludicrous, almost Monty Python in its absurdity. Consider a centre on the Middle East. If some sponsor suggested Australians lacked a full appreciation for the human contribution of Middle East cultures, and the centre might help remedy that, this would not be remotely controversial. If a Chinese government official said a Confucius Institute would help students appreciate the genius of Chinese culture, would anyone bat an eyelid?

Australian conservatives have been outplayed again and again and again in institutional politics. They fritter away millions of dollars, sometimes tens of millions of dollars, into institutions that are almost without exception captured by the left. This is often because the people making the financial decisions do not understand the dynamics of institutional control. This is not an indictment of their character. They have been busy running businesses and leading good lives. But their opponents study these matters deeply.

It is also more fun to give large dollops of money to big institutions the left approves of. You get invited to opening nights; rooms and floors and sometimes whole buildings are named in your honour. Even the lefties, especially the ones with their eye on the dollars, praise your open-mindedness. And you have absolutely zero effect. On the other hand, you can undertake to build a new institution, as the founders of Buckingham University in England did 40 years ago. It's slow, it's hard, you start out fairly modest. The *bien pensants* deride you. Any opening nights you go to are modest affairs. But over time you actually have an effect.

Alternatively, Ramsay could make a real difference supporting the Foundations of Western Civilisation program at the Institute of Public Affairs, similar programs at the Centre for - Independent Studies or those smaller private institutions of higher learning that are dedicated to Western civilisation.

Any program Ramsay sets up at a big public university will be a waste of money or, worse, it will frustrate Paul Ramsay's intentions and will squander his legacy. The evidence for this doleful conclusion is overwhelming. Facing reality now requires courage, toughness and tenacity. But truth is stubborn. Truth is truth.