

Universities at the Service of Big Business and Military Interests. The Fate of Australia's National University (ANU)

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They don't quite get it, but given their stance on education, the answer is simple. Australia's Abbott government have always had an elementary understanding of how tertiary education operates. They are the wreckers who got to university on affordable, in some cases even free education. Perhaps their very existence is an object lesson of sorts, the warning that every education brings with it the potential to turn the pupil into a Trojan horse.

Government members are particularly riled this month by moves from the Australian National University to divest its interests in various fossil fuel and resource companies. Such actions made Coalition members purple in the face. Treasurer Joe Hockey, in repudiating his own stance on supposedly "free market" choices, took issue with the university's investment choice to jettison its shares in Santos, Illuka Resources, Independence Group, Newcrest Mining, Sandfire Resources, Oil Search and Sirius Resources.

Becoming a cranky, and somewhat amateurish financial advisor, Hockey suggested that the ANU were "removed from the reality of what is helping drive the Australian economy and create more employment. Sometimes the view looks different from the lofty rooms of a university." [1]

Others have taken the move as a denigration, again revealing the rather bizarre perception that mining giants and resource companies are gentle, noble creators of wealth rather than inefficient purloiners of the earth's resources. It has left such individuals as Tim Buckley, former head of equity research at Citigroup, baffled. "I find it absolutely bizarre because, the last time I checked, investment managers have the right to change their portfolios."

The view has been expressed in an open letter signed by various Australian luminaries, including former Liberal leaders John Hewson and Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. "For politicians to try to bully, coerce and influence this university is just outrageous." [2] For Hewson, the dark hand of the Minerals Council might have been involved. "It virtually owned the previous government and appears to have large influence over this one."

The Coalition's childish indignation has ignored the fact that there is a global divestment campaign of various groups, be they religious, educational or financial, to step away from companies whose aims and objects vary from their own. The Rockefeller family stole a march last month, shifting its focus from fossil fuels to renewables.

Others have followed. The Anglican Diocese of Perth, Bishop Tim Wilmott, would rather see the Church's money invested in renewables. He does not speak purely terms of dripping

altruism for the environment – he is also aware of good business sense. The “smart money” as he terms it, is also “moving into renewables as well.” The universities are merely following the same track.

Funding and investment decisions for universities is always contentious. In a sense, the autonomy of the modern university in terms of its governance and decisions is fictitious. They have become part of the military industrial complex, standing shoulder to shoulder with the same companies that produce drones and missiles and carve up the earth’s fossil fuels. US President Dwight D. Eisenhower was already putting his finger on it in his departing speech (Jan 17, 1961) famous for noting the preponderance of the military complex in American life:

“Today, the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop, has been overshadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and testing fields. In the same fashion, the free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity.”[3]

Universities, notably in such highly industrialised societies as the United States, have become receiving institutions for representatives of big business and military interests. In Australia, the focus is more on unhealthy links to polluting industries such as coal. Mining magnates roam the continent like giants, when in truth they should be treated like museum piece dinosaurs. Donations, funds, and raising money have become hopelessly linked to appointments and positions of power, suggesting a toxic romance between government policy and university production. Hockey, in that sense, is proving to be brazenly ignorant about the links. Far from being loftily distant, the university room shares facilities with those of government in all too many areas.

University spots have become parking sinecures for the war machine just as they have become places for those who have served their country with appropriate messianic zeal. As noted by Darwin Bond-Graham, specifically with regards to the University of California system, “Plenty of UC’s leaders, from Chancellors to the Regents to the President have been insiders in the Pentagon, the nuclear weapons complex, and other branches of the warfare state.”[4]

The UC’s tenth president, David Prescott Barrows, was a supreme example. During his time as head of the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes, he proved to be a patrician moulder of Filipino subjects in terms of culture and a good splash of racial enticement. “The race is physically small, but agile, athletic and comely.” The bullying Hockey, should he ever find himself in the unlikely position of being a University chancellor, will prove far less colourful.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2014/oct/13/coalition-accused-of-bullying--anu-after-criticism-of-fossil-fuel-divestment>

[2] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/john-hewson-and-malcolm-fraser--blast-liberals-over-anu-divestment-backlash-20141014-115g2r.html>

[3] <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/indust.html>

[4] <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/07/18/the-university-of-california-and-the-military--industrial-complex/>

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