The Civic Mission of Australian Universities

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Abstract

The civic mission of the Australian university had its roots in medieval Europe and is at least a partial inheritor of the English university tradition. This paper examines the history and meaning of civic responsibility in the Australian university experience and makes an appeal to move beyond the traditional "institution apart" culture.

…the inevitable conclusion … is a question between an aristocratic government in the proper sense of the term—that is, a government by the best men of all classes—and a democracy.
> Benjamin Disraeli 1865

… a good university is the best guarantee that mankind can have, that somebody, whatever the circumstances, will continue to seek the truth and to make it known.
> Murray Committee Report 1957

The Australian experience of civic responsibility in universities has, at best, been rather patchy. There is a strong theme running though Australia's tertiary history that stands contrary to Professor Sohail's claim that a primary function of the university is one of dissent.[1] Australian universities have traditionally provided excellent graduate standards of political, economic, and corporate responsibility. The effectiveness of those graduates, and the staff which made up the faculties, must be questioned, however, when an assessment is made of their influence on radical change within Australian society. This paper seeks to examine the origins and meaning of civic responsibility of the Australian model of the university, beginning with the original medieval universities and progressing through the reforms of the twentieth century, and concludes with an appeal to heed the warning of a university without a civic mission.

European Traditions

The expectation that universities would be the guardians and advocates of civic responsibility emerged from the earliest scholastic bodies in Europe. Falling ten years either side of AD1200, the universities at Bologna, Paris, and Oxford were to form the

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[1] For a more comprehensive treatment of this concept see Sohail Inayatullah, "Corporate Networks or Bliss for All" in *The University in Transformation: Global Perspectives on the Futures of the University*, (Bergin & Garvey: Westport, Connecticut, 2000) pp. 226–227.

blueprints for universities created in the western world (and beyond).[2] After these original three, which had been formed as communities in and of themselves from the guilds of the students and teachers, a number of other medieval universities began to spring up across Western Europe. Such early universities were heavily influenced by both the church and their perceptions of classical governments and were invariably arranged—in colleges at least—along sectarian lines. Nevertheless, it was the early influence of the church and the teachings of Christ and Paul—through the gospels and epistles—which informed the faculties and students of their obligations to the world around them.

These early universities tended to focus their curricula around a strong core of Theology, Philosophy, Classics, and History. Indeed it was an acute awareness of the Christian obligation as shaped by such study, particularly the writings of Plato, which informed the university-educated of their separateness—a separateness that reinforced their privilege. Born out of a medieval time, the very structure of the university preserved and reinforced this elitism for centuries, down even to the present day.

Only the nobility and the wealthiest of families could send their sons to a university in the time of the Renaissance, and later, the Enlightenment. The recipients of such a privileged education were made acutely aware of the responsibility this placed upon them.[3] They were earmarked for leadership and governance from early childhood and all of their education had been tailored to that end. The role of the university in this was to finish their education by the development of the mind, the banishment of the wildness of youth, and the hope of wisdom.[4] Studies of the scriptures informed them of salvation, self-denial, order, and forgiveness. The classics and history taught of courage, governance, greatness, and tradition. And the contemplation of philosophy developed ethics, logic, and societal understanding and invariably verified their own intellectual and moral superiority over those less fortunate.

The English View of Education and Character

England in particular made a virtue out of higher education and greatly revered the kind of man that it produced. This was not simply the product of the university in isolation however. The English university system was heavily supported in its attempts to create men of "good character" by the public schools. Probably even more than on the continent, the British university was seen as finishing a man's moral, civil, and scholarly education. The distinctions between higher education and lower form schooling have only become sharply apparent since the movement to the mass

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[2] J.K. Hyde, "Universities and Cities in Medieval Italy" in Thomas Bender (ed), *The University and the City, From Medieval Origins to the Present*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 13.

[3] James Anthony Froude, *Address to the Students*, (St Andrews: March 19 1869). Dr Froude delivered the address as the newly appointed rector of St Andrews University. In it, he famously observed by quoting John Knox: "To make us know our duty and to do it, to make us upright in act and true in thought and word, is the aim of all instruction which deserves the name, the epitome of all purposes for which education exists."

[4] Earl Curzon, *Reform of Higher Education in India*, (Calcutta: 1902). Observations on the purpose of higher education in England.

education of the young in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Prior to this time, a young man attending a public school such as Rugby, made universally famous by the novel *Tom Brown's School Days*, learned manners, responsibility, and tradition long before graduating to the "sixth" and then moving on to Oxford University or the like. Even then, although the people attending such universities were from the landed aristocracy and the industrial rich, on the continent at least, most anyone could attend. Indeed, the original universities were not known by such names and were known instead as *Stadium Generale*. The title general did not refer to the general nature of the studies—although this was increasingly true—but to general public admission.[5] All who could afford attended, and all who attended had been invariably instructed as to their responsibilities as members of the educated elite.

Certainly, the development of good character—inseparably associated with civic responsibility—was considered to be at the core of what preparatory public schooling was about.

> In England a boy is continuously exposed to these influences from morning till night. He is not only taught in the class-room, or the lecture-room, for brief periods at stated hours; his house-master, who is really responsible for his bringing up, is always teaching him too, teaching him not merely by tasks and lessons, but by watching and training his combined moral and intellectual growth. It is the house-master, far more than the class-master, that is, as a rule, responsible for the final shape in which the public school boy is turned out.[6]

In Australia, the question of the establishment of such preparatory schools was somewhat more problematic. Because of the divided nature of the populace along ethnic and sectarian lines there were many claims of religious elitism. In 1837 Governor Franklin set about establishing such a preparatory school in the colony of New South Wales. As its headmaster he recruited an old boy from Rugby, one John Phillip Gell, who went about the task of creating Christ's College. It was intended to be a mirror of Rugby and a shining beacon of morality and learning in the antipodes erected and developed along Church of England lines. The plan, which never came to fruition, ran into heavy opposition from Presbyterian and Catholic critics.[7] This incident, and the founding of a secular university in London around the same time, meant that the road was clear for Australian universities to be purely secular bodies. While there later developed religious boarding schools, none would have the close ties with the universities that their English cousins enjoyed.

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[5] J.K. Hyde, "Universities and Cities in Medieval Italy," in Thomas Bender (ed), *The University and the City, From Medieval Origins to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 14.

[6] Earl Curzon, *Reform of Higher Education in India*, (Calcutta: 1902). Lamenting on the lack of such a system of support and preparation for higher education in India.

[7] Jan Kociumbas, *The Oxford History of Australia: Possessions 1770–1860*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 288.

At the time of the University of London's conception in 1826 there were only two other universities in England. Even Scotland had four and the continent itself and the U.S. were becoming very much awash with centres of higher learning. In truth it had been noted for some time that London was the only major European capital that did not have a university. While London University, originally developed as a full fee private college, had been specifically developed as an alternative to Oxford and Cambridge universities, it was not intended to be their rival. London was, it must be said, far more forward-looking in its dealings with students and staff and resembled continental universities far more than it did the two great English pillars. Neither staff nor students were required to be adherents to the Church of England faith—a compulsion that kept Jews, Catholics, and free thinkers from attending either Oxford or Cambridge.[8]

By removing the trappings of the Church—or at the very least not talking about religion one way or another—the London College was severely limited in its ability to grant degrees. Eventually, in 1836 after a series of complicated manoeuvrings, the College was able to establish a system of teaching and limited research and then allow the parliamentary-sanctioned London University (a separate entity) to examine and confer degrees on its students. It was a largely effective, if somewhat morally unsatisfactory, system. As a result of the establishment of a workable conferral process, the university grew and developed at a brisk pace. Its major clientele—aside from the previously mentioned religious outsiders to English society—were the middling classes or the middling rich. They were politically active, economically independent, dynamic, and influential—and all the more so for a first rate tertiary education.[9] So successful was the university that it naturally served as a model for many years to come.

The Australian Interpretation of British Higher Education

So it was that Australia would naturally emulate the London pattern. The Australian colonies had always had a strange and, at times, unfathomable relationship with the "mother country." Because of the vast distance between the colonies and their imperial masters at Whitehall, there was invariably a deal of divergence from intention and reality in the colonies. Yet for all this, there was a strong binding quality that tied the Australian people to the throne and to England herself.

Intolerant of impractical attitudes and practices, the colonial Australians very quickly learnt to shun the pomp and ceremony so revered by the British. The teachings of the

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[8] Sheldon Rothblatt, "London: A Metropolitan University?" in Thomas Bender (ed), *The University and the City, From Medieval Origins to the Present*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 120.

[9] Sheldon Rothblatt, "London: A Metropolitan University?" in Thomas Bender (ed), *The University and the City, From Medieval Origins to the Present*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 121–122. Jeremy Bentham had been a strong proponent of a religiously-neutral university for some time before his involvement in the creation of the London University. The principles he espoused in utilitarianism were to have a strong influence on universities of the future.

church likewise were seen to have little practical merit in the harsh land of Australia and so were paid little heed. Indeed, this lack of regard for the salvic qualities espoused by the church had an early beginning in NSW when Captain Arthur Phillip at Botany Bay asked the Rev. Richard Johnson to forego the preaching of the forgiveness of the cross and to preach rather on ethical behaviour.[10] The good reverend, as an evangelical, was doubtless appalled, but Phillip had little time for such matters that did not immediately lead to the baking of bread or bricks.

The Australian character, forged as much by the strained relationship with Britain as it was by the climate, the isolation, and the environment, was at once respectful of justice and ambivalent of law. It rejected authority but maintained the allegiance to the throne. The Australian was both the lone hero struggling to overcome the rigours of the bush and the towering figure of self-reliance, but was also the "mate" who did his duty by his friends and his community. From "Clancy of the Overflow" and the "Man from Snowy River," early Australian icons were not heavily educated gentlemen who were able fight a duel with sabres in the morning and discuss Clio in the afternoon; they were hard men who had little need for British institutions, classical languages, or absent authority.

By the same token, Australia still had a sense of cultural and civil inferiority to Britain and invariably the majority of the ruling class came from that stock. Even at the turn of the twentieth century the captains of Australian civil society were of English breeding and schooling. The hold of the old world over the new was such that, by the judicial, industrial, and political leaders, Australia was still thought of as having the potential to become a magnificent southern Britannia replete with all of the trappings and standards which that mother land embodied—even if it might never quite look the part.[11]

Such was the hold over Australia's decision-making elite of the English virtues and conventions, that they were seen as standards to be upheld and aspired to by the next generation of native-born Australian leaders. The colonising of Australia by the English did not stop at the land but included the mental colonisation of the Australian elites themselves—many of whom referred to England as "home" even though they had never been there. English standards of morality and class, as well as beauty and landscape, led to the swift and enduring belief that Australia was blighted by God. Harsh, unrelenting in its ruggedness, and coloured not green but tan-brown with muted pinks and deep blues staining the mountains, Australia was looked upon by these English Australians as a land which God had perhaps made on the afternoon of the sixth day when he was beginning to tire.[12] Such images, for example, were so strong, when compared to desires of an idyllic English country grove, that Australia's

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[10] Russell Ward, *Finding Australia*, (Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Australia, 1987) p. 190.

[11] Manning Clarke, *A History of Australia*, Volume V, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1962) pp. 4-5.

[12] Manning Clarke, *The Boyer Lectures*, 1976.

differentness customarily manifested itself as a deep but unspoken suspicion of national inferiority.

It is significant to note that Australian national leaders, even as recently as Prime Minister Bob Hawke, were educated at Oxford University. Indeed, it is even more significant to note that the bestowal of the Rhodes Scholarship, which made such a finishing school possible for the one-time union boss, was awarded not only on the grounds of good scholarship, but also on traditional standards of good *British* citizenship. There has always been and remains today the feeling that one must make good overseas to be accorded the accolades of real success. From the national myths of the Australian soldiers at Anzac Cove to Phar Lap "beating the world" in America, the Australian seal of approval must be countersigned for it to be legitimate. The same is true of public intellectuals, scientists, and artists. Germaine Greer, Andy Thomas, and Piers Lane each have carved for themselves remarkable careers, but each is accorded respect not just because they achieved success, but also that it was achieved overseas— whether in Europe, America or England. The public assumption is almost as if making it in Australia is not enough because deep down Australia doesn't really match up to the rest of the world.

Aside from self-doubt, Australia has always had a problem of self-definition. Australians see themselves neither as English nor entirely un-English. Thus the tension between the English expectations of the University and the peculiarly Australian expectations of the same have served to create an institution that is at once monolithic and remote, but at the same time focused on practicality, nation-building, and engagement. Sadly, nowhere in this definition was the notion of civic responsibility specifically enshrined.

Early Views of the Role of Universities

From the early establishment of the universities in Sydney (1850) and Melbourne (1853), the Australian leadership, somewhat hesitantly at first and then with growing confidence as graduates took their places in the Australian bureaucratic, financial, political, and manufacturing echelons, linked the development of the nation with the development of the universities. That these bodies were to be secular in nature and governance was, following the ill-fated Christ College idea, without question. Gradually each major city was to gain its own university and reap the benefits of its presence and its graduates. Australian universities, unlike the universities in Europe and Britain, with their network of preparatory schools, were to deliver practical benefits to the economy and the labour force rather than the development of character and manners.[13]

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[13] Beverley Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia: Glad, Confident Morning*, 1860–1900, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 91.

Nevertheless, the standards of education to be offered at these institutions were expected to be every bit the quality of Cambridge or London. The Royal letters patent issued to the University of Melbourne on 14 March 1859 stated that: "The Standard of acquirement which must be obtained by Graduates of the University of Melbourne is not below that prescribed by the most learned Universities in the United Kingdom." To that end, the university council was vigilant in its appointment of high-quality professors from the United Kingdom to teach their colonial youths. Of those, while each competent teachers and mildly ambitious men who had been lured to Australia by the offer of free lodgings and 1,000 pounds per annum, only W.E. Hearn was considered to be truly a "famous Australian scholar." Hearn, who was a towering intellectual and practitioner of the civic arts in court, parliament, and the marketplace in the Victorian Colony, was scorned by his university colleagues—not least because of his acceptance of the Darwinian theory of evolution.[14]

For all Hearn's active involvement in the life of the colony, however, Melbourne University remained largely an institution apart from the colony itself. Alexander Gibson, Professor of Philosophy at Melbourne from 1935, commented in the University's submission to the Murray Committee that it had been created as "an ornament of colonial society" and though its early professors had "sharpened the intellect and humanized the feelings," it had done so in a community that was largely unappreciative of such efforts.[15] Even the contributions to society of graduates such as Alfred Deakin were hardly accorded the prestige with which such men in the United States of America were regarded.[16] The meritocracy of the man on the land had little time for such niceties.

Civil engineering, architecture, plant biology, law, mathematics, and medicine were only some of the disciplines that were both encouraged and sought-after in Australia. Anything that would assist the development of the nation and create an effective workforce was supported. Labour-saving devices and ideas were particularly encouraged as this in some way made up for the labour shortages periodically experienced by Australian industry. Indeed, industry and private enterprise were particularly interested in the kind of developments that Australian universities could provide. Classics were always offered at the original "sandstone" universities and in large numbers, but were never revered in the same fashion that they were in England, although it must be said that none of the traditional disciplines offered at Australian universities could truly be regarded as having been "revered."

Yet, for this, the quality of the offerings at the Australian universities cannot be said to have suffered for the anti-intellectualism of the general public, and faculty boards

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[14] Geoffrey Blainey, The University of Melbourne, A Centenary Portrait (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1956) pp. 6-11.

[15] Quoted in John Poynter and Carolyn Rasmussen, A Place Apart, The University of Melbourne: Decades of Challenge, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996) p. 2.

[16] Geoffrey Blainey, The University of Melbourne, A Centenary Portrait, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1956) p. 10.

walked a fine line between social relevance and academic integrity. After a poor initial take up of students in history and classics, Melbourne University employed a local barrister who began teaching a two-year law degree. Other vocational courses followed, with varying degrees of success.[17] Sir David Derham, VC of Melbourne from 1968 to 1982, explained bluntly, " … its primary objective with respect to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge arise from a commitment *not to a local community*, nor to the State, nor to the nation but to the world. "[18]

Regardless of this, it is clear that while not developing a pure British civic-mindedness in their students and maintaining their academic integrity, these early universities could clearly be regarded as having met the criteria of equipping its graduates with the skills and know-how to govern and to be the nation's leaders. The civic responsibility of those nineteenth century Australian graduates, while not assuming the aristocratic posture of the English civic obligations of graduates, did arm them for nation building and economic management—certainly two of the more demanding forms of civic responsibility required in a society. This is true even if such models of civic responsibility seem mild and compliant when compared to those of France or America. The Australian graduates were far more likely to attempt to maintain than reform, and reform rather than revolutionise. The responsibility as a citizen to question one's leaders, as embodied in America's national documents, are poignantly absent from the literary collections of Australia's men of equivalent standing.

The Separation of Universities from Civic Life

Though the universities were seen as elitist bodies that only the wealthy could afford to attend, Australia reinforced its desire for egalitarianism and internal tolerance by adopting the secular model of London University.[19] While America was going through the upheaval of civil war, in Australia men were examining the value of self-government and opening up more of the country to the graziers and miners. In England, the matters of civic responsibility and democracy were being debated in the House. Remarkably, because of the existing network of public schools and universities and their emphasis on the creation of men of character, the debate, as outlined by Benjamin Disraeli, was not one of greater responsibility and greater democracy but of either/or:

> I think it is possible to increase the electoral body of the country by the
> introduction of voters upon principle in unison with the principles of the

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[17] Geoffrey Blainey, *The University of Melbourne, A Centenary Portrait*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1956) p. 5.

[18] "Universities, Governments and the Assumption of Federal Responsibility for Higher Education in Australia," the *Australian University*, pp. 201–213. In Quoted in John Poynter and Carolyn Rasmussen, *A Place Apart, The University of Melbourne: Decades of Challenge*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996) p. 2.

[19] This claim may only extend so far and cannot be said to encompass the White Australia Policy or Aboriginal relations.

constitution, so that the suffrage should remain a privilege, and not a right—a privilege to be gained by virtue, by intelligence, by industry, by integrity, and to be exercised by the common good of the country. I think if you quit that ground—if you once admit that every man has a right to vote whom you cannot prove to be disqualified—you would change the character of the constitution, and you would change the manner which it will tend to lower the importance of the country. Between the scheme we brought forward and the measure brought forward by the honourable member for Leeds, and the inevitable conclusion which its principle supporters acknowledge it must lead to, it is a question between an aristocratic government in the proper sense of the term—that is, a government by the best men of all classes—and a democracy.[20]

It must be pointed out, however, that while this period well and truly followed the discoveries of Isaac Newton, it was before the sweeping changes wrought by the thesis of Charles Darwin. Whereas Newton at Cambridge had propounded wide changes to our perception of the physical universe, his inquiries were made in the name of God and for the purpose of discovering His grand design. Darwin on the other hand, was not even working for a university. His work, which proved to be so perplexing to philosopher, scientist, and reverend alike, was conducted for the Royal Society.

In Australia, universities accepted, after small initial hiccoughs, the benefits of the new sciences and of the applied sciences particularly. Precisely because of the studied secularism of the universities in Australia however, the most significant debate of the age was one that was naturally foreign to them. The march of science and the new religion of evolution and its consequences for faith, the church, moral decency and the implications for society in general were rather lost on the university staffs—at least publicly. Very few public comments were made on the issue and indeed on any issue of public interest or import; clearly it was not seen as one of the functions of the universities to fulfil.[21] Thus, while being adequate developers of men (and later women) who would prove to be excellent citizens of responsibility and capacity, the universities themselves seemed largely ambivalent to their role as public experts and pronouncers. Following the loud and oft criticized attempts of Professor Hearn at filling the role of public university intellectual in relevant debates and in the colony's development, few other academics seemed willing to step into the breach.[22]

Even more clearly, it was seen as being rather silly to criticise the government or government policy when it was the self-same government that provided the monies for universities to exist at all in Australia. Numerous cases may be cited from the times before and during the World Wars when public dissent of any kind by academics was

[20] Benjamin Disraeli, *Speech to Parliament Against Democracy*, (London: 1865).

[21] Beverley Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia: Glad, Confident Morning, 1860–1900*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 207–208.

[22] Geoffrey Blainey, *The University of Melbourne, A Centenary Portrait*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1956) pp. 7-10. Apparently even Hearn was more highly regarded overseas in the US than he was in Victoria.

treated to swift and decisive responses.[23] Thus, one of the major functions of universities in Europe, America, and Britain—to inform society and take an active role in debate—was largely overlooked in Australia. The implications for the university *in* Australian society was therefore moot—effectively, the universities stood outside society and did not relish interaction with it.

Thus, sadly the grand civic questions of the World Wars period were ones in which the universities largely failed to effectively involve themselves. In England, following Disraeli's loss in his argument against democracy, it was seen as each subject's civic responsibility to cast a vote in the elections for the House of Commons. In Australia however, the introduction of Compulsory Voting in the states between 1914 and 1942, and with Commonwealth elections in 1924, essentially removed the onus from the Australian and transformed the question from one of responsibility to one of law.[24] The universities played so minor a role in the public commentary on this core issue of civics that they hardly warrant a mention in the histories. This is true of preferential voting, conscription, and the republicanism of the nineteenth century. For the second of these three issues, the print media and the Catholic Church played the major roles in public criticism and opposition debate. The universities were minor players indeed.

The Post WWII Link Between Universities and Nation-Building

The first major change to the participation of universities and their students (as opposed to graduates) in public life in Australia correlates closely with the massive expansion of university places and funding following the Second World War. Universities in the late 1940s, the 1950s, and into the 1960s became lively places of discussion and debate, despite the tide of fear and anti-communism which was sweeping the western world.[25]

If staff and students had in the past only occasionally exercised their privilege/right to speak out on matters of social and political import, the decades following WWII saw a marked improvement. Yet for all of this, the universities were still seen as assets of the *nation* rather than *global* centres of learning, culture, and research within a nation. In this, their regard was held in as much esteem as any piece of infrastructure—much like the National Highway System or the Snowy River Scheme. All were seen as important for the future of a small, growing, and remote democratic country. The universities' role in this nation building was two-fold, to serve as the engine of innovation in the land and to provide qualified men and women for service in government and industry. In this the Australian National University was seen as being of paramount importance.

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[23] For a rather chilling catalogue see Stewart MacIntyre & Simon Marginson, "The University and its Public," in Tony Coady, *Why Universities Matter*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000) pp. 58-59.

[24] Russell Ward, *A Nation for a Continent: The History of Australia 1901-1975* (Heinemann Educational Australia, 1977 [Revised 1988]) pp. 82–3.

[25] Russell Ward, *A Nation for a Continent: The History of Australia 1901-1975* (Heinemann Educational Australia, 1977 [Revised 1988]) pp. 335–6.

A university in Canberra had been spoken of many years before and Sir Littleton Ernest Groom, a self-proclaimed nation-builder, had on more than one occasion demanded a national university in Canberra. In a speech in parliament he claimed, "It is impossible to contemplate the existence of a national capital without a national university as part of its equipment.... [T]he immediate duty of the government is to study seriously what practical service it can render to the national capital, the public service and the nation in this respect, by the gradual establishment of a national university."[26] Indeed, Groom was also an advocate of the University of Queensland and was highly influential in its founding in 1909.

Groom might have been pleased to know that the Australian National University was eventually founded in 1946. And although it was a clear pillar of the new nation-building which was taking place after WWII, he may have been less impressed with the obvious attempt it represented for Australia to become a nuclear power. Prime Minister Ben Chifley is reported to have remarked regarding the famous Australian nuclear physicist who worked on the Manhattan Project, "If you can persuade [Marcus] Oliphant to head the school [of physics] we will do whatever is necessary."[27] Then again, Groom was an undoubted patriot, as were others in the federal government who were devoted to the notion that Australia should become a nuclear power. The universities did not wade into that debate until much later on and when they did the staff were strangely subdued. There were strong strategic reasons for the development of nuclear capacity, but there was never any serious public debate about the subject until the issue of uranium sales took centre stage. Even then the second round of that debate was a rather one-sided affair between passionate community groups headed by a prominent singer and a sheepish government desperately hoping this issue would simply go away while they grappled with economic Realpolitik.

In any event, the influx of people into the university system following the war— including the large numbers of ex-service personnel—saw the character of the universities change forever. No longer the remote ivory towers *of* the privileged and the advantaged, the Australian university increasingly came to be seen as an opportunity *for* advantage by all who could attend. Then, and even more so now, a university education is seen as a ticket to better pay and better living standards.

National Changes in Higher Education Policy and Finance

In the 1950s and 1960s, though, there still seemed to be plenty of time down the track for students to worry about vocations and mortgages. These were the golden years of the Australian universities' vocal and intellectual engagements with society. Public debates, protests, and activism were synonymous with universities and while the

[26] Jessie Groom, *Nation Building In Australia* (Sydney: Halsted Press, 1941) p. 326. Taken from a speech made in the house in 1935.

[27] Stewart MacIntyre & Simon Marginson, "The University and its Public" in Tony Coady, *Why Universities Matter* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000) p. 58.

governing bodies of universities may have been less than impressed, civil society was at least seeing a return on the considerable investments which it had made in education.

Starting with the establishment of the Commonwealth Universities Commission in 1943 which greatly increased federal funding, through the Murray Committee findings which were adopted by the government, and the Martin Committee in 1964, the amount of money which was delivered to the universities increased tremendously.[28]

The Murray Committee was probably the most important review of universities ever conducted in Australia prior to the Dawkins reforms. Rather surprisingly, the committee was initially appointed by Chifley just before his electoral defeat of 1949, but it was vigorously pursued by his successor, Robert Menzies. The Prime Minister eagerly endorsed just about everything that the committee recommended and was himself responsible in no small measure for the great expansion of post-graduate schools at the universities.[29] Rather strikingly, the report states boldly that the university should be

> [T]he guardians of intellectual standards, and intellectual integrity in the community. Scholars and scientists who spend their lives in the search for knowledge should, at least in their own spheres of inquiry, be proof against the waves of emotion and prejudice which make the ordinary man, and public opinion, subject from time to time to illusion and self-deceit. [A] good university is the best guarantee that mankind can have, that somebody, whatever the circumstances, will continue to seek the truth and to make it known. Any free country welcomes this and expects this service from its universities.[30]

For the first time, and with the express sanction of government, with the twin expansions of the university budgets and placements, faculty members and students began to raise their voices in public.

At the same time, alongside the expansion of the curricula and the truly liberal nature of the education offered in Australia there was, without doubt, another catalyst for the outpouring of social and political commentary which was to follow—the ABC. From its formation in 1932 the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was clearly designed to promote Australian content. Initially focusing only on music and then on other forms of drama and verse, the ABC fearlessly promoted large amounts of Australian content to an Australian audience.[31] After a time it became clear that the ABC was also a strong voice of political and social commentary. Indeed, it was through the ABC that the Australian universities began to effectively realise their role

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[28] Fred Alexander, *From Curtain to Menzies and After* (Sydney, Thomas Nelson Australia, 1973) pp. 48-49.
[29] Fred Alexander, *From Curtain to Menzies and After* (Sydney, Thomas Nelson Australia, 1973) p. 50.
[30] *Report of the Committee on Australian Universities*, September 1957 p. 11.
[31] Fred Alexander, *From Curtain to Menzies and After* (Sydney, Thomas Nelson Australia, 1973) p. 51.

of social and political commentary, and of general significant information delivery to the public. Furthermore, the ABC was staffed by former graduates of the universities—particularly the big east coast universities—and by university academic staff for special comment and explanation.

After the initial flurry of growth in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, the universities suffered a period of stagnation into the early 1970s. This overall period also coincided with a continuous period of economic growth in Australia and the rest of the first world. During this time the access to universities had been greatly increased by the Commonwealth Scholarship fund. Under the Whitlam government, however, the university fees were abolished altogether and funding was again greatly increased.[32] The effect was dramatic. For the first time demand was somewhat comparable to supply in tertiary education places, though this situation did not last.

The Whitlam reforms seem to have made the dream of universally high standards of education a reality, but it had come at a cost. Disraeli's vision of a nation ruled by the "best men"—wise, educated, and scholarly—was only possible if, as he surmised, democracy was to be resisted. In Australian universities, democracy had been realised at the cost of the benefits of exclusivity. Thus the earlier realist aspiration of a society delivering governorship to a group of particularly English platonic philosopher kings was replaced by the idealists' democratic wonderland in which education delivered the keys to a better life.

The Trivialisation of the University Tradition

So it was with the cry of *noblesse oblige* ringing ever more faintly in the ears of the university senates that John Dawkins became education minister and took the next logical step. If tertiary education should be accessible by all who are able to meet the criteria, why not roll all tertiary education bodies into the universities? This proved to be the penultimate step in the trivialisation of the university tradition in this country. The previous trend and public bias towards vocational studies and away from intellectual inquiry and research became official policy. Universities would be the engines of vocational training quality.[33]

Changes for the students also meant that the re-introduction of fees, if generally deferred under Labour, and selectively applied upfront under the Coalition, meant that students were less inclined to see their time at university as something for which they should be grateful. Further, the successive imposition of higher monetary costs on the students meant that it was even more imperative, from their perspective, to simply get

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[32] Stewart MacIntyre & Simon Marginson, "The University and its Public," in Tony Coady, Why Universities Matter (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000) p. 61.

[33] Robert Manne, The Way We Live Now (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company 1998) The University Question, 1996, p. 260.

in, get out, and get a job. Nowhere in this equation does social or civic responsibility figure, beyond that of the compliant and productive citizen.

What became policy under Dawkins, later became a *priori* under Education Minister Amanda Vanstone. Universities were no longer even seen as investments, but as costs to be borne by the taxpayer with little or no perceived benefit to the voters. Catch-phrases such as 'cost recovery' tended to faintly mask a sea-change in the university system from that of education and scholarship to instruction and service-provision. Today, the vast number of students and graduate students are less concerned about raising their voices and speaking to issues than they are about securing their future and paying back their accumulated debts. The same is true for the young academic—they can no longer afford the luxury of political activism and dissent. On contract, one tends to observe the time honoured Australian tradition of "keep your head down mate!"

Renewed Attention to the Civic Mission of Universities

Yet during this otherwise melancholy time, against the backdrop of enhanced multiculturalism, aboriginal reconciliation, and still another of this country's dalliances with republicanism, we are witnessing a strong revival of the notion of citizenship.[34] What is a citizen and what are their responsibilities? Where does or should the universities feature in this?

The current rush to community being displayed by universities suggests that the cultural revolutions wrought by the changes in university profile and population of the 1940s–1970s and the funding cuts and corporate culture of the universities in the 1980s and 1990s have practically forced an opportunity to come to terms with the university's natural constituency: the local community. This apparently new awareness of local communities involved a shift in attitude which removed the community from the exclusivity of the civic test tube and placed it more reasonably at the centre of the local civic reality of the university. In a very real sense, engagement with local communities can effect a re-humanization and a renewal of the university mission as global (truth), national (productive), and communal (civic). If we do not take this chance to re-evaluate the civic mission of the university in this country we will have squandered an opportunity to revitalise and re-apply the medieval concept of the university in Australia's modern, and more egalitarian, society.

Perhaps it is the medieval universities, those pillars of feudal responsibility and guardians of knowledge, which should have the last word on this issue. They might, if they could see what legacy their descendants may imperil as a result of submission to

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[34] Simon Marginson, *Educating Australia: Government, Economy and Citizen since 1960* (Cambridge University Press: Melbourne, 1997) p. 247

pure market forces, be concerned at the diminishment of scholastic and scientific sovereignty and be disapointed at the loss of civic mission.[35]

Acknowledgments

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[35] Stewart MacIntyre & Simon Marginson, "The University and its Public," in Tony Coady, *Why Universities Matter* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000) p. 68