



Australia's Galileo Moment?

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Professor Peter Ridd cannot fully express the beauty he finds in science, explaining that 'If you can't understand the mathematics behind physics, you won't get it'. He admits to a certain 'physics arrogance,' in the manner of The Big Bang Theory's Sheldon Cooper – the young, awkward genius who looks down on both his colleagues and on non-scientists generally. Ridd remarks of the popular sitcom: 'They get the science right, I think it's brilliant'.

Ridd, 57, was born in Devon in England. After spending time in Nigeria his family moved to Australia when Ridd was 10 years old. He arrived in Innisfail, Queensland (pop. 7,000) to find a melting pot of Italian, Greek and Anglo Australians. 'One of the prettiest little towns you'll ever see,' Ridd recalls fondly.

Ridd was attracted to physics at high school. 'The stuff we work on, it's fascinating,' Ridd says. Following school, he completed a BSc with a major in physics at James Cook University in

Townsville. He then did a Diploma in Education at the University of Queensland in Brisbane. ‘It was just so politically correct even then, lacking in any challenge... it was like having my teeth pulled out,’ Ridd recalls. He then did a two-year stint teaching physics and mathematics at a regional boarding school.

Ridd’s calling, however, would be academia. He returned to James Cook University to complete a PhD in electromagnetic theory and geophysical prospecting methods while working for the Australian Institute for Marine Science – the organisation he would later face censure for criticising.

After receiving his doctorate, Ridd began work at James Cook University in 1989 at a geophysics laboratory then recently established and led by the Professor Bob Carter. Ridd became the head of the physics department in 2008, a position he held until 2016. He has published more than 100 peer reviewed journal articles.

Ridd is a proud conservationist. He is the former president of the Wildlife Preservation Society’s Queensland branch, and is currently working on automated methods for killing environmental weeds, which he argues is ‘the biggest environmental threat that Australia faces because of the huge areas it affects’.

Ridd has two children and lives with his wife in Townsville, restoring old trucks and Land Rovers in his spare time.

Last August, Ridd spoke with Alan Jones on Sky News to discuss his chapter in the IPA’s [Climate Change: The Facts 2017](#). Ridd was doing what academics are supposed to do: contribute to the public debate by communicating his academic research on a public policy question. Ridd has come under fire, however, for saying something outside mainstream thinking on the Great Barrier Reef.

‘Policy science concerning the Great Barrier Reef is almost never checked,’ Professor Ridd wrote in his chapter ‘[The Extraordinary Resilience of Great Barrier Reef Corals](#)’. He went on:

Over the next few years, Australian governments will spend more than a billion dollars on the Great Barrier Reef; the costs to industry could far exceed this. Yet the keystone research papers have not been subject to proper scrutiny. Instead, there is a total reliance on the demonstrably inadequate peer review process.

Ridd is the ideal academic: when he’s not imparting expert knowledge onto students, he is dispassionately researching to better understand the natural world. He is the archetypal scientist that our universities should employ and promote.

On Sky News, Ridd said:

The basic problem is that we can no longer trust the scientific organisations like the Australian Institute of Marine Science, even things like the ARC (Australian Research

Council) Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies. A lot of this is stuff is coming out... the science is coming out not properly checked, tested or replicated and this is a great shame because we really need to be able to trust our scientific institutions and the fact is I do not think we can any more... I think that most of the scientists who are pushing out this stuff they genuinely believe that there are problems with the reef. I just don't think they're very objective about the science they do, I think they're emotionally attached to their subject and you know you can't blame them, the reef is a beautiful thing.

In response to these comments, Ridd's employer, James Cook University, put him under investigation for 'serious misconduct' for failing to act in a 'collegiate' manner. It is, they claim, unacceptable to be critical of the scientific output of your colleagues. Ridd's comments were not *ad hominem*. He plays the ball, not the man. Ridd blames the issues with science on a failure of process—science across almost all fields is 'not checked, tested and replicated'. This is worsened by structural dogmatism built into academic inquiry. 'There was no other way to get reef funding other than by saying the reef is dying,' Ridd says. For expressing this contrary perspective, Ridd was to be dragged through the mud.

'I thought I was buggered. I went back to my office the next day and I started backing up my computer, cleaning up my office. I have very little doubt that they wanted to get rid of me,' Ridd recalls. 'And if the IPA hadn't come along I don't doubt that they would [have sacked me].' The IPA provided Ridd with legal contacts and seed legal funding.

Ridd had no intention of stirring trouble. He is a reluctant combatant, forced to defend himself in response to James Cook University's threats. When he went on Sky News he did not know that his comments would put him at the centre of a global fight to protect scientific integrity and academic freedom. 'You have to half regret it... I regret saying it in the sense that it has caused all this heartache. But I don't regret saying it because it is bloody true'.

The treatment of Ridd has had a serious chilling effect on the state of free speech. It sends a signal that if you do not toe the popular line you can expect trouble. 'Academics who agree with my view, both within the university and outside, have said that they would love to support me but it is too dangerous,' Ridd says.

After months of delayed process and aggressive tactics, James Cook University issued Ridd with a 'Final Censure' and a gag order to prevent him from making comments critical of Great Barrier Reef science in the future. Ridd had a tough decision to make. He could have chosen the path of least resistance: accept the censure, stay quiet on the science, and see out his days at the university until his upcoming retirement.

Ridd has, however, reluctantly chosen to fight back. His lawyers have filed with the Federal Circuit Court to assert his right to academic freedom—as protected by his employment agreement which permits Ridd 'to participate in public debate and express opinions about issues' within his field of competence. In order to fight, however, Ridd needed money for his legal defence. The response to his fundraising campaign was extraordinary. In just 49 hours Ridd raised \$99,332—surpassing

the \$95,000 goal—from over 800 people around the world. The success was so rapid that many of Ridd’s closest friends and family, including his mother, did not get a chance to donate. ‘I was just amazed, incredibly relieved and very, very grateful,’ Ridd says.

While Ridd fights on, his case is one part of a larger pattern in higher education. James Cook University did not renew Bob Carter’s Adjunct Professorship following his remarks about climate change. Danish skeptical environmentalist Bjørn Lomborg was barred from the University of Western Australia. An academic left Monash University after he offended Chinese students in a quiz. Liberals Tony Abbott, Sophie Mirabella and Julie Bishop have faced violent protests against their mere presence on campus.

The stifling of academic speech

IPA research has found Australia’s universities are increasingly hostile to freedom of expression and have taken steps to limit the diversity of ideas. The IPA’s Free Speech on Campus Audit 2017 found 34 of Australia’s 42 universities have taken action or maintain policies that are hostile to free speech. A further seven threaten free speech, while only one fully supports free speech. Australia’s universities maintain policies covering students and academics which make 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act look like child’s play. Section 18C restricts behavior that is ‘reasonably likely’ to ‘offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate’ on the basis of race, with some defences established in Section 18D. By contrast Australia’s universities maintain policies without the protection of a reasonableness test, and go far beyond just preventing offensive behavior.

Federation University’s bullying prevention statement defines bullying to include hurting another person’s ‘feelings’. La Trobe University defines bullying to include ‘unintentional... offence’ and says students must not use language that causes ‘emotional injury’. The Australian National University’s Discipline Rule 2017, Bond University’s Student Handbook, and Charles Sturt University’s Harassment and Bullying Prevention Policy prevents behaviour that is ‘unwelcome’. The University of Queensland’s Discrimination and Harassment policy, Western Sydney University’s Bullying Prevention Guidelines, and Charles Sturt University’s Harassment and Bullying Prevention Policy forbid ‘sarcasm’.

These policies prevent free expression, threatening the entire purpose of higher education. Discomfort, hurt feelings and occasionally offence are essential stops on the path to understanding. Being confronted with a different perspective to our own can be tough, but it is necessary to fully grasp the world.

The policies encourage students and academics to err on the side of caution, remaining silent rather than expressing controversial ideas that could cause backlash and disciplinary proceedings. Everyone is worse off as a consequence. The students who do not express a viewpoint are unable to fully develop their ideas and learn if they are right or wrong. Meanwhile, other students are exposed to fewer ideas, leaving them unchallenged and with a weaker education.

Last year the University of Sydney student union attempted to block the screening of a film, Red



Pill, because, it was claimed, the showing of a video could ‘physically threaten women on campus’. Monash University has become Australia’s first to formally introduce trigger warnings, which are now part of course guides. The University of Sydney has required conservative students to pay costly security fees which are not charged for the activities of other student groups.

The Gillard Government amended the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* to require all universities, as a condition of receiving federal funding, to have ‘a policy that upholds free intellectual inquiry in relation to learning, teaching and research’. The IPA’s 2017 Audit found that just eight of Australia’s 42 universities are fulfilling this legal requirement.

The very essence of our humanity depends on our ability to freely think and express our ideas. Canadian psychology professor Jordan Peterson has said that ‘free speech isn’t the freedom to speak, it’s the freedom to think... this allows for stupid thoughts to die’. Speaking is in itself an essential part of thinking—through speaking you can develop your ideas. Therefore, Peterson argues, you are condemning people to a life of suffering and preventing human flourishing by limiting speech.

At a societal level the same principle applies. The only way to improve our society is through a battle of ideas. It is no coincidence that since Western Civilisation adopted free inquiry and the scientific method that we are living longer, more prosperous, and more peaceful lives. We can only achieve progress, and will only continue to achieve progress, for as long as we continue to encourage free inquiry.

Today’s universities, however, are suffering from the monoculture disease. There is only one correct perspective. Across the Anglosphere, if you do not fully ascribe to a set of politically correct ideas you can expect to be hounded.

Protecting freedom in the academy

In order to protect free speech, administrators should abolish the concerning policies, introduce policy that protects intellectual freedom (as they are mandated by law), and make explicit unreserved commitments to freedom of expression.

There are many reasons to be optimistic. The more extreme the silencing, the stronger the backlash as has been seen on American and British, and increasingly, Australian campuses. In Australia, students are campaigning for free speech, inviting provocative speakers, and bringing attention to the most egregious cases.

Some academics are taking up the responsibility to promote free expression. A model approach is NYU Professor Jonathan Haidt’s Heterodox Academy. Heterodox promotes the diversity of ideas on campus and now has 29 academic members in Australia, and 1,650 across the Anglosphere.

Australia’s future prosperity depends on a society that deeply respects the value of free speech. In our rapidly changing world, we can only answer the complex questions ahead of us by putting all viewpoints on the table. Our universities, the very places designed to seek out answers to difficult



questions, can only achieve their essential mission, the pursuit of knowledge, by allowing all ideas to be expressed.

Postscript: Since the publication of this piece Peter Ridd's employment was terminated by James Cook University. Ridd subsequently raised a further \$160,000 for his legal action fund and is now fighting to have his employment restored in the federal circuit court.

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