



The Heavy Hand Of Free Speech

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The British philosopher Sir Roger Scruton in a recent speech remarked that modern-day universities are increasingly reverting to the role they played in the Middle Ages.

Medieval universities, according to Scruton, studied dogma and were “devoted to identifying and extirpating heresies”. Individuals were sometimes able to express those heresies so that they could be examined in order to be proved wrong, but – “you were not in any real sense free to affirm them. It would be quite misleading to say that the medieval university was devoted to the advancement of free enquiry.”



As Scruton goes on to explain, the suggestion that the purpose of a university “was to advance knowledge regardless of where it might lead, and to make knowledge available to the rising generation” is a recent idea dating from the beginning of the 19th century, and by the publication of JS Mill’s *On Liberty* in 1869, “it was widely accepted that free expression of dissenting views is important in all areas of enquiry, and not just in the natural sciences”.

This is the context in which to view the announcement by Dan Tehan, the federal Education Minister, of a review into freedom of speech at Australian universities to be conducted by former chief justice of the High Court, Robert French. Such a review is overdue and welcome and should be embraced by university administrators.

All too predictably though, the response of the lobby group representing the tertiary sector was that of the bureaucrat. But, said Universities Australia, there were “more than 100 policies, codes and agreements that supported free intellectual inquiry”. Which of course proves nothing. Famously, Enron’s business ethics guidelines ran to more than 60 pages. Presumably all Australia’s banks have corporate responsibility policies, but as the Hayne royal commission has established merely having a policy doesn’t mean it is actually put into practice.

A number of university policies are directly opposed to the idea of freedom of speech. James Cook University, the university that sacked Professor Peter Ridd for the heresy of questioning the quality of climate change research in this country, has a “Bullying, Discrimination, Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy” that applies to all students and staff. The definition of “harassment” includes making “a person feel offended” and it can result from a single incident. It would be difficult to imagine a discussion about current American politics in a first-year international relations tutorial that wouldn’t end up with at least one person, somehow being offended. The possibility that a student could be accused of harassment for offending another student by saying for example “I think President Trump is doing a good job” is precisely the sort of thing Robert French should be turning his mind to. He can do this after he reviews incidents such as police being called to Sydney University when left-wing students tried to shut down a public lecture by Bettina Arndt.

Universities Australia has criticised those calling for an inquiry into freedom of speech at Australian universities as appearing “to want government to override university autonomy with heavy-handed, external regulation and red tape”. Yes. If heavy-handed government regulation is what’s required to ensure freedom of speech and freedom of academic inquiry at Australia’s universities then so be it.



University “autonomy” as interpreted by Australian academics means them spending other people’s money on things they and their friends and the colleagues agree with. There’s nothing objectionable in Simon Birmingham, the former education minister, vetoing \$4.2 million of government grants to universities for various humanities projects.

One of the projects denied funding by the minister was “Double Crossings: post-Orientalist arts at the Strait of Gibraltar”, which examined the way painters and photographers represented Muslim and Christian cultures. The project’s proponent, Professor Roger Benjamin, professor of art history at Sydney University, should be absolutely entitled to have the academic freedom to undertake such research. But that doesn’t mean he’s entitled to taxpayers paying \$223,000 for his travel to London and Tangier to do so.

If Australia’s universities and academics really want to be autonomous they can be – all they have to do is hand back the more than \$10 billion of taxpayer funding they get each year.