A little less Conversation

James Paterson says academics should blame their crap ideas for their failure to influence public policy.
It has long been the lament of academics that their self-evidently brilliant ideas and advice are seldom heeded in the ‘real’ world. Nowhere is this disappointment more evident than in the field of social sciences, particularly political science and public policy.

Writing in the May edition of the (now defunct) Australian Literary Review, Peter Shergold, one of the handful of academics in Australia to have a major impact on public policy, chronicled the disillusionment of academics and the disdain many public servants and other policy makers have for the academic community.

Shergold, who served as the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet under John Howard, suggests that much academic research is obscure, and the parts that could be relevant for public policy are conducted too slowly. He also argues that academics are unable to effectively convey the importance of their research, and some are outright reluctant to state what policy changes they’d like to see take place, preferring the comfort of their nuanced journal articles to the more black and white political world.

To be fair, public servants do not escape criticism, as Shergold writes, ‘they find it hard to envisage how [the] path of discovery can be planned or mandated, undertaken to meet prescribed outcomes.’

One recent illustration of academics’ frustration with their failure to influence public policy was the launch of The Conversation, which describes itself as ‘an independent source of information, analysis and commentary from the university and research sector.’ Headed up by former editor of The Age, Andrew Jaspan, the website is primarily resourced by the Group of Eight elite Australian universities.

Evidently, it is well-funded. Besides Australia’s major universities, it also enjoys support from some corporate partners, the CSIRO, the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, and the Victorian Department of Business and Innovation. This support appears to allow them to employ dozens of staff, including editors—and in some cases, deputy editors—for each of the website’s ‘sections’ (‘Science + Technology’, ‘Politics + Society’, ‘Energy + Environment’ and so on).

The Conversation was launched explicitly to address the ‘problem’, as described by University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor, Glyn Davis, that universities were not successful at communicating their messages to the public; as if the reason academics were unable to influence public debate was because they lacked a high-brow version of News Limited’s opinion website, The Punch.

**ACADEMICS’ IDEAS AND ADVICE ARE Seldom Heeded In The ‘REAL’ WORLD**

As the site’s charter admits, it hopes to ‘give experts a greater voice in shaping scientific, cultural and intellectual agendas,’ and aims to work for the advancement of the ‘public good.’ It also promises to be ‘editorially independent,’ provide ‘diverse’ content and be ‘free of commercial or political bias.’ Whether it achieves this is open to question.

Professor Peter Shergold: One academic who made his mark on policy. Source: Newspix.

Professor Judith Sloan, another academic who can boast a tangible impact on policy and public debate, is unconvinced:

‘this site strikes me as emblematic of all that is wrong with Australian universities. Crammed with puerile, naive, left-wing tosh, the contributing academics...really have no idea when it comes to serious public policy contributions.’

Indeed, if you believe that diversity should extend to the ideological realm, The Conversation is hardly fulfilling its charter. Take a recent sample of articles in its ‘Environment + Energy’ section: one article which labels the governments’ carbon tax as ‘profoundly inadequate’ because it doesn’t go far enough, another arguing the climate debate focuses far too heavily on ‘the risks to Australia’s economic prosperity’, and a piece cheerily pointing out that businesses could become more ‘efficient’ thanks to the carbon tax. Others suggest that ‘one small thing you can do for the environment’ is to ‘be inspired’, and yet another argues that scientists have a duty to speak up against policies such as the Victorian government’s decision to allow grazing in Alpine national parks.
ONE WAY THAT ACADEMIC WRITING DISTINGUISHES ITSELF FROM OPINION JOURNALISM IS THAT IT IS REFERENCED AND PEER-REVIEWED

On a brighter note, one article argued that Christopher Monckton should not be prevented from speaking at a university, but not before comparing climate sceptics to ‘Holocaust deniers, supporters of paedophilia, critics of vaccination [and] advocates of racial inequality.’ The website also proudly featured ‘Monckton watch’ on its homepage, a section dedicated to criticising the British climate sceptic during his recent visit to Australia.

Every article that appears on the website is accompanied by a disclosure statement that lists any possible conflicts of interest the academic author may have. Obviously, this is part of The Conversation’s efforts to elevate itself above commercial media and demonstrate the rigorousness of its content.

But many of these articles, supposedly ‘curated’ by The Conversation’s team of professional journalists, are littered with political talking points like ‘clean energy future’, a phrase that features in headlines and introductory paragraphs multiple times on the website, and—coincidentally, of course—in the Gillard government’s publicly-funded advertising campaign in support of their carbon tax package. This represents either wilful participation in the government’s propaganda campaign, or more charitably, sloppy editing standards, because neutral language would be both more accurate and more illuminating.
Moreover, one way that academic writing distinguishes itself from opinion journalism is that it is referenced and peer-reviewed. Yet the articles that appear on The Conversation are rarely footnoted and only occasionally contain links to other articles which back up their claims. Neither are articles on The Conversation peer-reviewed, which is ironic considering many articles published on the website assail climate sceptics for not submitting their work to this process.

If the gap between the ‘man in the street’ and academia is a source of its estrangement from the public debate, then the Australian Political Studies Association, and its annual conference, is a study in that gap. Its 2010 conference, held at the University of Melbourne, was characterised by the obscure, the odd and the plain irrelevant.

Take the morning session on the first day of the conference. It featured enlightening talks under the category ‘Australian Feminism, Politics & Choice’ such as ‘Tony, Tony, Tony!: Abbott and Abortion’ and ‘Emily’s List: an affirmative action plan with a difference’. No prizes for guessing the answer to the question asked in the ‘Politics & the news’ stream: ‘Watchdogs or toothless tigers? The extent to which prominent political columnists performed the watchdog role during the Howard era.’

And Jason Lacharite probably could have dropped the question mark at the end of his awkwardly, and unsubtly, worded talk ‘Canadian and Australian Defence Policy under the Harper and Rudd Governments: Exaggerating National Security Threats and Determinants of Policy Choice in an Age of Perpetual Crisis?’

Though Daniela di Piramo’s question, ‘Do intellectuals like Revolutions?’, which referenced Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, probably didn’t need to be asked. Other topics seemed to strive for incomprehensibility. Take, for instance, Florent Marciacq’s talk on ‘Casual and constitutive mechanisms of Europeanisation—an analytical framework.’

Environmental topics were popular, unsurprisingly focused on climate change. Two talks were given by Melbourne University academic, Verity Burgmann, once a member of the Socialist Workers Party of Britain and active in the International Socialists, including one entitled ‘From jobs versus environment to green-collar jobs.’ Another environmental talk, about the villainous role played by the United States in climate change, was delivered by another University of Melbourne political scientist, Robyn Eckersley, who was once the opening speaker at an Australian Greens national conference and advocates a ‘green democratic state’ as an alternative to liberal democracy.

Suspicions that academics are predominantly left-wing unquestionably contribute to the limited influence they enjoy—particularly, though not exclusively—over political parties of the centre-right.

In 2008 the Senate held an inquiry into academic freedom. Despite the overwhelming majority of individual submissions reporting instances of academic bias against students, the Labor-Green majority on the committee dismissed the idea bias was a problem in Australian universities. The Liberal minority report, however, argued the evidence presented at the hearings by students and representative organisations
suggested it was a problem. Students complained they were treated as pariahs if they expressed centre-right views and felt excluded and vilified because of their politics.

Studies in the United States make it clear that academia is almost exclusively dominated by the left. One, published by the New York Times in 2004, showed registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans in humanities departments by seven to one. Others found donations from faculty members to Democratic candidates far outstrip contributions to Republicans.

Critics note few conservatives aspire to careers in academia, preferring to enter the private sector in search of higher earnings. They argue it is only from self-selection that university faculties tilt left, not sinister design. That may be true, but many conservatives are discouraged from seeking careers in universities because faculties appear monolithic and unwelcoming for those on the right. Regardless, the perception that academia is dominated by the left means that many policy makers treat their policy advice with suspicion, and are often reluctant to engage with them.

A recent article in the City Journal by Heather MacDonald perfectly highlights this conundrum. Courses that teach students about the importance of Western Civilisation—its history, philosophy, art and literature—have been in decline for decades at American universities. They’ve given way to subjects focused on gender, race and sexuality, the lenses through which so many humanities subjects are taught at modern universities.

But there is evidence that these traditional subjects are in fact in high demand. MacDonald profiled one highly successful private business, Great Courses, which succeeds financially because it offers what universities have long ceased to provide: ‘a curriculum in the monuments of human thought, taught without the politically correct superiority and self-indulgent theory common in today’s colleges.’

The subjects offered by Great Courses—typically by mail-order DVDs—cover an enormous breadth of topics such as the American literary canon, Plato’s Dialogues, the Bill of Rights, an introduction to Astronomy, the Old Testament, and classical music. The company employs many university professors to deliver their courses—but what sets them apart is that these academics are selected only for their...
expertise and ability to deliver the material in a compelling way. The courses endure rigorous quality control and the company ensures that the personal ideological preferences of the presenter are kept out of the course material. Indeed, academics who have been unable to resist editorialising in lectures have been dismissed. Another key reason for Great Courses’ success is that it has not adopted a hostile posture to the world around it—unlike many universities, its courses aren’t loaded with the assumption that the Western world is riven by class, gender and racial inequality, and they do not set out to change it.

It does not reflect well on universities that companies like Great Courses need to exist and thrive in the modern world. Universities are obviously failing to deliver what many students demand. If academics can’t even cater to their own market, it is hardly surprising that their views are not given significant weight in the political world.

Even when academics are brought into the policy making process, such as through Kevin Rudd’s much vaunted 2020 Summit—co-hosted by his favourite academic, Glyn Davis—they often fail to have a meaningful impact. Perhaps it is because their ideas are naïvely utopian, slightly loopy or simply impractical (see sidebar).

The summit, though not exclusively comprised of university professors, was substantially dominated by them. It was also a poor attempt at reflecting the views of most Australians, famously featuring only one lonely supporter of Australia’s current constitutional arrangements amongst the 100 delegates in the governance stream.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the ideas put forward in the 2020 Summit was the almost universal acceptance that government was the solution to all the problems identified by the assembled experts. Many of the suggestions put forward for the government to act on were already being provided in some capacity by the private sector or had a reasonable prospect of commercial viability. Even the government noted this throughout its response.

So it is hardly surprising that academics fail to make their mark on public policy debates. Too often, academic research is removed from the concerns of everyday Australians, and therefore also from policymakers. Even when it is relevant, research is too often conducted in opaque language and stuffed full of qualifiers for it to be of any use to legislators.

The dominance of the left on campus may be gratifying for those who hope to change society by influencing the young, but it actually contributes to their exclusion from the public policy process. And in order to actually shape public debate, you need ideas that are relevant, achievable and that have some semblance of community support. Australian academics are not just one flashy website away from reshaping the nation according to their vision. To achieve that, they require nothing less than a fundamental cultural revolution. Until then, others will hold sway. Judging by their contributions to date, that might not be a bad thing.

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The 2020 Summit’s zaniest ideas

- **The Big Issues**
  - ‘Instigate a campaign to “wipe out” fences from suburbs and a program to bring back the neighbourhood’
  - **Piece of Cake**
    - ‘Prevent crimes against sustainability’
  - **This Will Help**
    - ‘Create a Minister for Democracy’
  - **A Little Greedy**
    - ‘Set targets to double artists’ income, the proportion of export of cultural products, and the number of Australians participating in cultural activity’
  - **Gimme, Gimme**
    - ‘Introduce a levy on commercial broadcasters, with funds going to public broadcasters’
  - **More $ For Me**
    - ‘Fund creative endeavours through a 1 per cent creative dividend from all government departments for expenditure on the arts’