

# Academics keep left

Rohan D'Souza

Last August, Treasurer Peter Costello sparked outrage by suggesting that Australia's high school history teachers peddled anti-American sentiment. In a subsequent interview with John Laws, he pointed to a left-wing bias in our universities, commenting that 'there was a very left-wing period in Australia in the '60s and '70s, and I think that could be a source of anti-Americanism which is lingering today'.

In 1970, Lawrence Saha conducted a study that confirms the Treasurer's recollection that 'universities, particularly the humanities parts of universities were very left in the '60s and '70s'. Saha found that just over 50 per cent of academics at the University of Sydney identified their political ideology as 'left', compared with only 11.5 per cent of the general population.

There are no contemporary statistics about the political leanings of Australian lecturers and tutors, but it is safe to assume that left-wing academics still dominate Australian universities.

In the United States, the predominance of left-leaning thinkers is confirmed by research. In 2004, *The New York Times* published the results of a nation-wide survey involving 1,000 academics. It found that Democrats outnumbered Republicans by a ratio of seven to one in the humanities and social sciences.

In a separate study of voter registration records for professors from a range of disciplines at Berkeley and Stanford, the ratio of Democrats to Republicans was nine to one. That study included academics from the hard sciences, engineering and professional schools.

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*Rohan D'Souza is a Melbourne writer and currently works in the energy industry.*

## Why are there so many left-wing academics?

Academia is a natural career choice for dedicated left-wing graduates. University is a safe harbour for high-achievers who are reluctant to 'sell out' to the corporate monolith. The life of an academic offers financial security and social status without apparent ideological compromise.

By contrast, graduates who identify with centre-right ideology are more likely to embrace private industry.

And the trend is self-perpetuating—because universities are populated by left-wing academics, those institutions are more attractive to people of that ideological persuasion. It is natural to gravitate toward the people that we admire and respect, and toward environments that affirm our world-view.

Some theorists argue that academics always oppose the dominant political system, regardless of what the system is. In the 1970s, a study of Swedish academics found that they were more conservative than the Swedish public, partly because a socialist government had held power for 40 years. It is the nature of academics to challenge and criticise popular thought.

Other commentators offer more sinister explanations for the 'left-wing monopoly' on academia. David Horowitz, an American conservative, claims that '[t]he most successful and pervasive blacklist in American history is the blacklist of conservatives on American college campuses'.

## Is there a problem?

As well as generating data about the proportion of left-leaning academics at Sydney University, a study by Professor Lawrence Saha evaluated the impact of ideology on the quality of teaching. He found that left-wing academics were more 'research oriented and concerned about academic freedoms'.

Saha found that they spent more time in committee meetings, assisting students outside of class, and preparing lectures. Based on these findings, there is no cause to impugn the qualifications or dedication of left-wing academics.

Today, our universities are among the best in the world. According to the most recent annual study by *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, Australia has 17 of the world's top 200 universities. Of these, Melbourne University performed best—it was ranked nineteenth overall, and eighth in arts and humanities.

Without detracting from the success of our tertiary institutions, there may be problems that flow from an ideological imbalance.

Think-tanks do not emerge in a vacuum—they are created to meet social and political demand. Because the majority of academics are left-wing, there is a dearth of conservative or liberal thought at universities.

This means that the community is forced to look elsewhere for ideas that challenge the dominant academic paradigm. Think-tanks provide these ideas, in an environment where conservative and liberal thought is encouraged.

The strong demand for alternative thinking highlights the problems that flow from ideological imbalance at our universities.

## Look Left

Left-wing and right-wing thinkers are not enemies. In fact, they are heavily dependent on one another for criticism

and inspiration.

Randall Collins, a sociology professor at the University of California, has analysed the social conditions which precipitate major developments in philosophy. He observes that history's most celebrated philosophers usually appear in pairs or trios, such as Heraclitus and Parmenides, or Mencius, Chuang-tzu and Hui Shih.

Collins emphasises the role of rivalry:

Intellectual history is a conflict process. It is divergent factions that make it go. These factions attempt to make intellectual property out of ideas that have been produced in the past. They generate new ideas largely in opposition to the ideas of their rivals, sometimes by recombining these ideas. Strikingly new positions are produced largely by the negation of pre-existing positions, along the lines of greatest political rivalry.

Although a single political base may give rise to multiple threads of thought, there can be no doubt that political diversity feeds into intellectual diversity, especially when the object of study is history or politics.

When intellectuals are exposed to radically different ideologies, they are encouraged to re-evaluate their understandings. They are confronted by weaknesses in their own theories and strengths in the theories of others. This creates an environment that is challenging and dynamic.

If a particular ideology is disproportionately dominant, there is a danger that its fundamental assumptions will go unchallenged. Without challenge, there is less impetus for change.

If left-wing thought is overwhelmingly accepted on university campuses, this will detract from intellectual rigour

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and could breed stagnation. Diversity encourages intellectual accountability; it is in the long-term interests of the Left to share university campuses with conservative academics.

### Look Right

In the United States, many conservative students complain that they are treated unfairly by left-wing academics.

Late last year, *The Boston Globe* reported an incident at Warren Community College in New Jersey. Rebecca Beach, the head of the campus chapter of 'Young Americans for Freedom', sent an e-mail to an adjunct English instructor, advertising an up-coming talk by an Iraq War veteran in support of the war.

The professor sent a vicious response, promising to 'expose your right-wing, antipeople politics until groups like yours won't dare show their face on a college campus'.

In a separate incident, reported in *The New York Times*, a physics professor at Pennsylvania State University frequently used class time to belittle President Bush and the Iraq war. One student—an Air Force veteran—complained to her state representative, which led to a full-blown legislative enquiry.

In 2002, Janet Albrechtsen wrote about a course offered at the University of California, Berkeley, called 'Politics and Poetry of Palestinian Resistance'. The syllabus advised that 'conservative thinkers are encouraged to seek other sections'.

There have been no reports of such extreme political discrimination in Australian universities. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that right-wing students are sometimes marginalised by left-wing academics, which can lead to feelings of isolation and resentment. Similarly, conservative and liberal aca-

demics may find themselves excluded from the university community.

### The Moral Dimension

In 1985, Oxford University refused to confer an honorary degree on Margaret Thatcher. She was the first Oxford-educated Prime-Minister in post-war years to be denied the privilege. The snub was a response to her Government's decision to cut funds for research and education.

The BBC recently published a number of comments about Thatcher, one of which describes her as 'an evil, twisted woman who encouraged greed and isolation'.

Left-wing politics is often framed in terms of morality. Right-wing thinkers are regularly accused of moral bankruptcy and inhumanity. For some people, the Left's position is seen as the only ethically viable option. This imbues a sense of righteous fervour, which crowds out balanced discussion.

In Australian universities, the Left has a firm hold on the moral high ground.

This poses a huge threat to diversity of thought. While there is a prevailing belief that right-wing thinking is amoral, any challenge to the left-wing hegemony can be summarily dismissed. It also opens the door for personal attacks on right-wing thinkers, as has been seen on campuses in the United States.

The left-wing domination of universities means that Australian academics should be especially wary of conflating politics and morality.