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Senate Education and Employment Committees
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Honourable Senators

Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers

It is some years now that I served as Private Secretary to Senator Harradine, more since I was a Cabinet notetaker and more still since I first visited Mr Odgers and talked with him about Senator O'Connor's motion to send back the 1901 Supply Bill to the House of Representatives.

I have therefore seen more folly than I care to remember but I must confess I am astonished by the misgovernment of the ANU.

The destruction of the School of Music is appalling. I recall being told that Ernest Llewellyn warned against the ANU ever getting the School of Music.

How wise he was!

But it seems the ANU's mismanagement is now exposed by this sorry episode as going far deeper. The rot goes right through.

I have spent 12 years in universities - from 1966 to 1974 and 1976 to 1980 - and have honours degrees in Arts and Economics from Sydney University and a PhD from Harvard as well as a Diploma of Law earned later to show for it.

My view of universities today is simple.

They are no longer public charities devoted to the advancement of education and learning.

They have degenerated into profit-making corporations run by management for management with no shareholders to whom to account and with domestic and overseas students as captive customers to whom they sell devalued degrees.

How has this come about?

Governments have taken over the appointment of University Senates and Councils. These days, politicians appoint themselves to gain undeserved status. Years ago, Chancellors were distinguished people such as Sir Charles Bickerton Blackburn as Chancellor of the University of Sydney.

Years ago, graduates elected most of the members of the Sydney University Senate. That is no longer so and the same is true of other universities.

Universities started as groups of scholars with students.

Let us go back to that idea and realise that universities are partnerships of staff, students, graduates and governments as representing the community.

Therefore, let university Councils and Senates be composed of representatives of those who finance them and those who work, study or have studied in them and supported them. Real universities are there to promote learning and scholarship, not to provide sinecures for political hacks or advocacy political pseudo-academics.

Restore larger representation for graduates and staff and introduce representation for donors on University Senates and Councils.

By all means let Parliaments appoint representatives as well but do not let these be appointments by Ministers for their mates. Let the appointments be by Parliamentary vote on the recommendation of a committee so there is some accountability.

I confess to being totally shocked by the evidence of Dr Allen as to her treatment by Julie Bishop. Political head kickers do not belong on university senates.

Universities are partly funded by Parliamentary appropriations. Therefore Parliament, not Ministers, should exercise the right of appointment of some representatives to university senates where the government is a donor – but that should never be a dominating set of appointments. Graduates, staff and students should elect at least half the members of senates and councils, if not two thirds.

Yours sincerely

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