

The Ramsay Twist: Australian University Funding and Western Civilisation

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There is a lot of tattle going on about why the Australian National University rebuffed, after a series of talks, the offer for the establishment of a specific bachelors degree that would feature Western Civilisation as its content. It would have been managed under the auspices of the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation. Besides, universities have been directing their attention to meaningless, tarted guff for decades, whether it be a bachelors degree in surfing, or the various toilet roll supplements that degrees in media and communication provide.

This, however, was deemed different. It's not popular to talk about Western Civilisation these days, notably in capitals, and certainly not in an environment where sexual politics and identity platforms count. The term suggests dead white men of scolding gravitas, even if a few of them were unnervingly bright and ahead of their time. But in Australia, the issue seems to be that much touchier, and uglier. Education is periodically packaged as a diorama for culture wars, and the commanders and grunts are uncompromising in their ideological positions.

In a country given over to the ad hominem stab, and the physical, as opposed to verbal putdown, victories are won through beating contenders into oblivion. The issues here are motivations, political agendas, and visions.

The effort to set up a funding stream for a Western Civilisation degree was imperilled from the start by the two front men in the endeavour, notably former Australian prime ministers **Tony Abbott** and **John Howard**. Both are members of the Ramsay Centre, the latter being its current chair. The very fact that these men had become advocates for the enterprise suggested a program and a platform beyond an offer for money and mere cultivation. On the table was essentially a program of inculcation to be controlled by the Centre, a form of soft power a grade above the norm.

There is much irony in this. Both Abbott and Howard were the conservative stalwarts who have done wonders to convert Australia into an arid world of accountants and price watchers, rendering the country a collective of aspirational voters crushed by mortgages who salivate, or despair, at the next economic forecast. Such principles have little to do with the civilizational purpose of Athens and its peripatetic walk and certainly nothing to do with the philosophe punchers who made up the Encyclopaedists. As for talk of liberty, Abbott's meditations soon veer into the territory of the Vatican, whose values he cherishes with parochial dedication.

Australia's perfected political suicide Abbott arguably lobbed a grenade of considerable proportion when promoting the merits of the Ramsay program [in a piece](#) for Australia's foremost conservative magazine, *Quadrant*. In its pages, his praise for late health mogul raises an assortment of questions.

He writes about the acquisitive Cecil Rhodes, a person distinctly out of favour with anti-imperialists and not indifferent to looting for empire, with infantile enthusiasm. He then charts Ramsay's vision about a syllabus that would "foster undergraduate courses in the Western canon at three leading Australian universities with scholarships" to contend with "life's biggest issues and history's greatest challenges" and so forth. (Whether this is Abbott talking, or Ramsay, is hard to say.)

Then Abbott starts laying his own booby traps.

"The key to understanding the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation is that it's not merely about Western civilisation but in favour of it."

This made it "distinctive". "This is an important national project." The only thing to fear here was the dictum of John O'Sullivan, current international editor of *Quadrant*: "every organisation that's not explicitly right-wing, over time becomes left-wing."

In the schemes of negotiation, this did not play well. Australia's national university was essentially being told that autonomy over the program – selection of staff, selection of students, and the program itself – would not be exercised by autonomous academics and officials within it, but by those without. Take the cash, but accept the strings. ANU **Vice-Chancellor Brian Schmidt** subsequently claimed that "academic autonomy" was at risk, terminating the conversation.

A group of academics at the University of Sydney, having gotten wind of negotiations being conducted between the Centre and their own **Vice-Chancellor Michael Spence**, claimed any collaboration with the Ramsay Centre "a violation of our crucial role in promoting a society of diversity, inclusiveness and mutual respect". [Their open letter](#) deemed the enterprise to be promoting a "conservative, culturally essentialist, and Eurocentric vision" mired in "chauvinistic, Western essentialism." Besides, subjects on western civilisation were already being studied "intensively" at the institution.

There are, of course, other hypocrisies when it comes to money, donations and the tertiary sector. Universities, when they are teased of their component parts, are fractious creatures, divided to fail rather than prosper and bound to harm that most precious resource of all: the student. If the open letter from the University of Sydney academics was right in their claim that the Ramsay Centre could be successful in creating "a cadre of leaders", that would have been a near miracle. What universities tend to do now is create gluttonous, beige products that pride management and the harnessing of specialist skills over notions of any Renaissance man.

As for the structure of the university itself, management, in whatever curious cloaking of convenience they choose to pick at any given time, see themselves as head boys and girls keeping the academic workers in check, trying to turn the modern teaching institution into a technical ant hill; the workers, generally weak, loathsomely middle class and in search of misplaced spines, tend to be compliant. Rents, mortgages and quotients of weakness need

to be paid.

When a questionable money supply finds its way to the university, the issue of compromise varies. The Ramsay Centre's mistake here was to be obvious, overt, rather than covert and clandestine. Soft power funds can be received but never described as such. Funding for Australian universities, for instance, can be traced to various states officially out of the good books of Canberra: Iran and Turkey, for instance.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have also taken the additional steps of attempting [to control](#) the way Islam and Middle Eastern studies are taught in Western universities. Then comes that most discomforting of realities: the role played by philanthropic funding and donations to the profusion of [China Centres](#) that dot the research and education landscape. Forget the Enlightenment; this is business.

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