

Australian Senate

Inquiry into Academic Freedom

**Standing Committee on Education, Employment And
Workplace Relations**

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In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell wrote of how the enemies of freedom used words to mean the opposite of what they appeared to say. So it was that the ‘Ministry of Truth’ was responsible for propaganda; the ‘Ministry of Love’ was responsible for torture. The slogans of the Ministry of Truth were:

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
WAR IS PEACE

And so it is that the phrase ‘Academic Freedom’ is being used, at least by some, to mean quite the opposite of what it implies: the attempted suppression of intellectual freedom to advance the collective ideology of its advocates.

My comments are written after reading one of the submissions to this Inquiry into Academic Freedom. The establishment of this Inquiry appears to have led to submissions at odds with the goals of intellectual freedom that would otherwise appear to be espoused by the title of the inquiry.

I have not read most of the submissions, I am too busy to do so. But one has been drawn to my attention and I find it both astonishing and disturbing. It is submission 43 from a group calling itself “Make Education Fair”, which in turn appears to be a “joint campaign between the Young Liberals and the Australian Liberal Students Federation”.¹ “Make Education Fair” states that the establishment of this Inquiry was one of its objectives, the other a proposed “Charter of Academic Freedom”.²

The submission is barely literate. Much of it is a pastiche of disconnected images, scans and extracts that is somehow meant to comprise a comprehensive argument in favour of state intervention in universities in order to promote a proposed “Charter of Academic Freedom”. The pages are unnumbered. It contains non-sentences such as:

According to her profile, who lectures in the School of Social Sciences and International Studies at the University of New South Wales. has researched 'focused audits on gender and sexuality' and is a member of the Women's Electoral Lobby.³

After a one page covering note, it contains four sections: “Profiles of various academics”; “Photos of the campus environment”; “Extracts from Course Guides & Related Materials”; and “Course Descriptions exhibiting bias”. The sections on “Course Descriptions exhibiting bias” and “Extracts from Course Guides & Related Materials” (presumably also exhibiting bias) are the longest.

The section “Course Descriptions exhibiting bias” comprises extracts from selected course outlines from six universities and highlights, in red, offensive words which “Make Education Fair” believes exhibit bias that is “indicative of the extent to which radical leftist viewpoints dominate the curriculum” reflecting a “highly ideological Marxist worldview [which] has been imported wholesale from radical activists in the

¹ “Make Education Fair” website,
http://www.younglibs.org.au/site//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=48&Itemid=68

² *ibid*

³ “Make Education Fair” submission, p6

United States”.⁴ This bias is “gravely disturbing and poses significant challenges for diversity”.⁵

In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the excision of words that were ideologically offensive was an important part of the thought control exercised by the state. Successive editions of the official *Newspeak* dictionary were produced, each containing fewer permissible words than the other. The state aimed “to diminish the range of thought ...by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum”.⁶

So what exactly are these red-letter terms that “Make Education Fair” wishes to delete from university courses, and from our thinking, because they demonstrate this highly ideological bias? “Social justice” is one, with reference to it as one of the dozen or so topics to be addressed in a course on Australian Migration Issues⁷ apparently demonstrating the bias in such a course. Here is the course outline in which this red-letter term appeared:

Topics include an ecologically sustainable population; globalisation and international migration flows; brain drain to and from Australia; multiculturalism; criteria in determining migration policy; settlement issues; skilled migrants; refugees, international aid and **social justice**; identity, ethnicity and community.⁸ (emphasis in original)

To most observers, this would appear to be a reasonable coverage of the issues associated with migration. But consideration of “social justice” apparently makes it biased. Presumably the term “social justice” is offensive to those who do not believe in such a thing, but it is hardly grounds for wishing to stop others from discussing it.

Another red-letter term is “refugees”, with its appearance earning a course outline on Human Rights in Australian History the bias tag.⁹ It is not clear whether “Make Education Fair” believes refugees should not be considered relevant to a course on human rights, or whether they just do not believe they should be entitled to human rights.

Yet another offensive term is “environment”. Consideration of Sydney’s “environmental history”, as part of a course on The History of Sydney, means that course is biased.¹⁰ Another course that considered “the environment and sustainable development” was condemned for including this topic. Even reference to “climate change” meant that a course on Issues in Environmental History was biased, though this course was apparently doubly offensive because it also contained reference to “pollution”.¹¹ How someone could study issues in environmental history without considering climate change and pollution is, I confess, difficult for me to understand.

⁴ p71

⁵ p2

⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four: A Novel*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, p242.

⁷ “Make Education Fair” submission, p72

⁸ p72

⁹ p95

¹⁰ p73

¹¹ p89

What other words are offensive and should be removed from course outlines, according to “Make Education Fair”? “Civil rights”, a topic which to someone’s horror appears in a course on twentieth century history,¹² is one. “Culture” is offensive when it appears in course outlines at one university,¹³ though curiously it does not attract the red highlighter when it appears in course outlines at some other universities.¹⁴ Is this because culture is an unbiased term when used on some campuses but, when it used on another campus, it suddenly becomes loaded with bias?

Another offensive term is “Aboriginal women”, a phrase which demonstrates bias in a course on Women in Australian History at one university and in a course on Aboriginal history at another university.¹⁵ Strangely, at a third university it does not attract the red highlighter,¹⁶ but I presume that with two thumbs down and only one thumbs up, “Aboriginal women”, on balance, is meant to denote imbalance.

The more one delves into this submission, the more anti-intellectual its intent becomes. In one course, the term “anthropology” is considered offensive.¹⁷ In another, perhaps even more bizarrely, the use of the phrase “industrial relations” is said to denote bias.¹⁸ Outside the confined world of “Make Education Fair”, these are academic disciplines in which decades of distinguished scholarly research has been undertaken. But for “Make Education Fair”, they connote ways of thinking that need to be suppressed and subjugated to the strictures of the *Newspeak*-inspired “Charter of Academic Freedom”.

But beyond the offensive terms already identified, beyond even offensive terms that demonstrate bias like “migration”,¹⁹ “multiculturalism”,²⁰ “justice”,²¹ “racial equality”,²² “international aid”,²³ “decolonisation”²⁴ (how can you talk about twentieth century history without mentioning decolonisation?) and “cultural diversity” (hold on, wasn’t this submission meant to be promoting “diversity?”), the term that most excites and aggravates “Make Education Fair” is “gender”. Wherever it appears in a course outline, the red bias pen is out. Whether it be a course on “Gender and Contemporary Chinese Culture and Society”, “Crime and Society”, “Women in Asia”, or “Issues in Australian Politics”, if it contains the word “gender” in the course outline, it is outed as biased. Never mind that it is difficult to conceive how many of these courses could be effectively taught without some mention of gender issues. In all, gender appears 242 times in the “Make Education Fair” submission, almost always highlighted in red. It is approaching three times as offensive a term as the next most (un)popular term (which happens, not surprisingly, to be

¹² p81

¹³ p81

¹⁴ pp73-80

¹⁵ pp81-86

¹⁶ p71

¹⁷ p81

¹⁸ p84

¹⁹ p102

²⁰ pp73-104

²¹ p94

²² p94

²³ p103

²⁴ p94

“feminism”/“feminist”). Whether this is misogyny, obsession, or just a plain old hankering for the good old days of a century ago, is difficult to know. What is clear is that condemning a course simply because it mentions women is inappropriate and ill-conceived. But it gives a very clear indication of the sorts of things that would be happening if the “Charter of Academic Freedom” advocated by “Make Education Fair” were to be adopted.

The related section on “Extracts from Course Guides & Related Materials” is even stranger. There is no introduction or narrative, just a series of scanned extracts from offensive course guides, materials or textbooks. Some are inexplicable. For example, one extract from an edited book apparently condemns the book because it reveals *one* of the contributors to be

author or co-author of nineteen books, including *Teachers’ Work, Making the Difference, Gender and Power, Schools and Social Justice, Masculinities* and, most recently, *Gender*. A contributor to research journals in sociology, education, political science and gender studies, her current research concerns social theory, changing gender relations, neo-liberal globalisation and intellectuals.²⁵

“Make Education Fair” seems to be unaware that this is one of the leading global thinkers in her fields, her work having been translated into Italian, German, Spanish, Swedish, Portuguese, Japanese and Chinese.²⁶ Perhaps it is because “gender” is one of her fields of study that she is deemed unsuitable for “Make Education Fair”. The submission then includes an extract from the table of contents – only four of the chapters are listed, dealing with the offensive topics of aboriginality, class, cultural differences and gender (none of them authored by the above contributor). Then follows a pastiche of extracts, I presume from the same book, but with no indication as to which chapters or even pages they are from. Page 67 (as calculated by the PDF reader) exactly replicates page 65, and page 66 replicates page 64. The approach is so disjointed that I would be tempted to say that it is a post-modern pastiche, were it not for the fact that “post-modern” is another of the red-letter terms denoting bias in the final section of the submission. (However, “post-modern” attracts the red highlight in some²⁷ universities but not all.²⁸)

The submission also cites essay or exam topics that it finds offensive, such as this optional essay topic in a course on human rights:

An overseas research organization is trying to assess the level of equality or discrimination faced by women in Australia. Write a research report for them explaining how well or badly Australia is doing in the area of gender equality.

As the student is given the opportunity to argue that Australia is “doing well” or “doing badly” in the area of gender quality, it is difficult to see what is the problem with this topic, unless “Make Education Fair” wishes to argue that “gender equality” is itself an inherently bad thing to think and research about.

²⁵ p61

²⁶ <http://www-personal.edfac.usyd.edu.au/staff/connellr/books.shtml>

²⁷ “Make Education Fair” submission, pp93-102

²⁸ pp85-86

The second section of the submission is a series of “photos of the campus environment” designed to demonstrate “the creation of a hostile atmosphere for mainstream students on campus” and highlight “the atmosphere of intolerance that exists”. The photos are unsourced and undated (apart from two which appear to be from 2004 and one from 1998 – none show evidence of being recent). Many are poorly focused or unreadable. Strangely, these incriminating photos do not show evidence of teaching staff discriminating against students with views that differ from their own, or indeed of academics doing anything at all. Rather, they are all from student pamphlets, student posters and student papers. It appears that “Make Education Fair” wants the state to intervene to either stop students with alternative views from expressing those views, or somehow require the views of groups associated with “Make Education Fair” become more popular on campus.

The smallest, but most genuinely distasteful, part of the “Make Education Fair” submission is the section on “Academic Profiles”. It lists a number of academics in several universities who do not fit its view of what an academic should be. Twenty two academics are on the List. Somehow, identifying twenty two academics, about whom unsubstantiated assertions of “radical left” activism are made, out of a population of 42,200 academic staff in Australia, is meant to demonstrate “the extent of the lack of diversity within academia”. If only 0.05 per cent of the Australian academic population were “radical left”, then voting data indicate that Australian academics would be far *less* leftist than the voting population at large.

But the real intention here does not appear to be to demonstrate a lack of diversity. If twenty two academics with unfashionable viewpoints are too many, then clearly the aim is to reduce diversity within academia. Rather, the submission appears to be to attempt to intimidate those people who have been named. Yet no evidence is presented against any of them for having shown bias in their treatment of students. No evidence of any form of misconduct is presented. Their sin is to apparently have views that do not coincide with those of “Make Education Fair”. The academics’ error is what Orwell called “thought crime”.

The information about these academics is outdated and poorly researched. At least one is not even teaching in Australia. At least one is listed as teaching in a School that does not now exist. I do not know all of the people who appear on the list, but those I do know or know of are well regarded, respected academics in their fields. In some cases, the assertion that they are of the “radical left” is laughable. But even if they all were “radical left”, *so what?* There is no shortage of researchers with “right”, “centre” or “left” views. Intellectual advancement comes from the interaction of competing views, and from the ability to develop concepts, theories and hypotheses, and empirically investigate those hypotheses, in independent institutions free from supervision by thought police of the left or right.

“Make Education Fair” seems to be unaware that students have choice when it comes to university. Students can choose which university they wish to attend. They can choose which programs they wish to do, and therefore which courses they wish to study. They can read course outlines and find out if they include offensive terms like “gender”, “international aid” or “aboriginal women”. If they do not want to learn about such things, they can go elsewhere. Or if they do want to learn about them,

they can attend the courses and, if they are capable, research and write essays on the topics expressing their rigorously argued views with appropriate evidence (one desperately hopes with much better evidence than is presented in that submission). This is called developing critical thinking, and it is what the majority of people who attend, and all those I know who work in universities, believe that tertiary education is for. If students do not like their mark, they can seek a re-mark. They can lodge an appeal. These things all can be and are handled successfully within the university system, without the need for external state intervention.

It is not just a sloppy submission. What we read here is indicative of the sorts of things what we could expect to see if the wishes of “Make Education Fair” were granted and a “Charter of Academic Freedom” were established along the lines that organisation proposes. We would see academics, courses and texts targeted for abuse and elimination on the grounds that they did not meet the ideological standards of groups such as “Make Education Fair”, seeking to perform a similar role to the thought police in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eight-Four*. As that submission demonstrates, there is no standard of evidence required for such abuse, as the mere use of terms that are deemed politically incorrect would be enough to see people, and lines of critical inquiry, hounded. That is why the submission by the “Make Education Fair” “campaign” is so important, illuminating as it does the consequences of adopting the recommendations of that campaign.

There is a role for a statement by the state on intellectual freedom. It is to proclaim that the state should not interfere in the scholarly affairs of universities: that independence between the state and academic is critical, that Ministers should not be intervening to stop research which they do not like for political reasons, that academics should not be personally vilified for discussing the findings of their research in public debate, that there is no role for lists of academics who do not meet the ideological standards of the producers of such lists, and recognising that ensuring academic rigour, appropriate content and fair treatment of students in courses is a matter for universities themselves, not for the state nor, for that matter, groups of anti-intellectual activists.

Our country is not East Germany in the *stasi* years: the careers of academics with independent views should not be blighted by their being deviant from the politically correct dictates of the time. We must heed the lessons of Orwell’s *Nineteen eighty-four*. It is to be hoped that this Committee will see the need to avoid any possible association with “McCarthyist stuff”, repudiate this submission and any others that might resemble it, and stand up for intellectual freedom in Australian universities, by making sure that the state does not seek to interfere in the intellectual work of our universities.