

Preface

This reference was given to the committee by a Senate resolution on 24 June 2008 under the title of 'academic freedom in school and higher education'. The title of the report: *Allegations of academic bias in universities and schools* more accurately describes the thrust of the inquiry. Academic freedom is not in question in this inquiry and was given scant attention during the public hearings, except in relation to the idea of charters of academic freedom in the last of the terms of reference.

This inquiry comes as something of a surprise to most members of the committee, as it was for many academics and students in universities. There may have been scepticism about what we would be told, what we could reliably find out, and what conclusions could we possibly draw. From the committee's perspective it appeared as though it was to be called on to play its part in a university revue. The submissions, the performance and the style – to say nothing of the rhetoric – presented by some Liberal Students suggested a strong undergraduate tone. The 'outing' of Left and purportedly Left academics and commentators (masquerading as academics as we were told at one hearing) was in keeping with this tone. None of those outed objected. Some appeared flattered to be named in the company of others more famous. From the evidence provided the committee has managed to draw some conclusions, even though these are not substantial enough for it to make any recommendations.

It is the subjectivity of the issues involving academic bias that make the terms of reference difficult to address. They require the committee to take a particular stance on what would be reasonable to regard as bias, and this is very difficult. The expression of a forthright but one-sided view of an issue by a lecturer or tutor, even if sustained over a whole term or semester, is not necessarily to be regarded as improper or unprofessional. There would need to be other 'transgressions' that went with it. A particular view of the world may not affect teaching quality. Nonetheless, there is evidence that in some very few cases an academic bias may be accentuated through poor teaching, and this should concern departmental heads and faculty deans. That is why a majority of the committee regard the concerns raised by students as one that should be addressed through the processes of 'quality control'. There are procedures in place for universities to deal with allegations of biased teaching.

The committee advertised the inquiry on its website and in *The Australian*, calling for submissions by 15 August 2008. The committee also directly contacted a number of relevant organisations and individuals to notify them of the inquiry, and to invite submissions and appearances before the committee.

1.1 A total of 69 submissions for the inquiry were received as listed at Appendix one. These also appear on the committee's website which can be accessed at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/academic_freedom/index.htm.

1.2 The committee conducted public hearings in Melbourne, on 8 October 2008 and in Sydney on the following day to hear evidence in relation to the inquiry. A

teleconference hearing was conducted in Canberra on 16 October 2008. Witnesses who appeared before the committee are listed at Appendix 2. The committee is grateful to those who made submissions and who agreed to appear before it at the public hearings.

The committee's finding is that in view of the relatively tiny number of submissions received, from the hundreds of thousands of students who are said to be affected, there can be no basis for arguing that universities are under the control of the Left and that this is reflected in course content and teaching style. If there is a Left conspiracy to influence the direction of the nation's affairs and its social and economic priorities through the process of subverting a generation of undergraduates this is not yet evident.

It must be said that the committee processes of the Senate are not at all suited to the kind of inquiry that might have been imagined by its instigators. That is probably less important to them than the fact that the inquiry was held at all. On the other hand it might be argued that as even the most intensive specialist research would be unlikely to reach any conclusion as to the incidence of biased teaching, this inquiry has been as useful as any.

The committee commends its report to the Senate.

Senator Gavin Marshall

Chair