

Neocon Ideologues and University Politics: The RMIT Dismissal

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In its crusade to re-construct higher education institutions as free-market monasteries populated by conformist academics and demobilised students, the Howard Government has enacted legislation to fund only those universities which implement a range of industrial changes, including individual contracts, harsher “performance management,” and stern restrictions on union activity. These Higher Education Workplace Relations Requirements not only match the reformed and weakened industrial relations arena; they impose anti-collegiate conditions on the ways universities operate and reduce the independence of university teaching and research. Whereas construction unions have now lost their right to remain silent before employer-instigated tribunals, academics have had their right to free speech dramatically curtailed. Neo-conservative politics, the relentless drive to subordinate universities to free market ideology, and what Fredric Jameson famously called “the cultural logic of late capitalism” are at the heart of all such threats.

The dismissal of RMIT academic Robert Austin, after shock-jock *Herald Sun* polemicist Andrew Bolt derided his postponement of classes to allow students to participate in nationwide protests against Howard’s Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) legislation in August 2005, highlights late capitalism’s agenda for compliant, uncritical universities. Dr Austin is a Hispanic Studies academic employed by the Melbourne institution since February 2005 to run its Spanish language programs and Latin American Studies from 2006. He is widely published and read, having produced seven books with another three underway, plus numerous journal articles in a 15-year academic career. He is also a long-time union activist. His September probation report acknowledges “excellent” research performance and “commendable” teaching, leading to a “considerably more attractive” Spanish program. Enrolments have increased by 25 per cent since his arrival. Dr Austin has already established staff-student exchange programs with renowned Latin American and Spanish universities. He has won five federally-funded student scholarships to Chile for this year; and is a Fellow in the prestigious History Department of the University of Melbourne, complementing similar ongoing posts in Cuba and Chile.

However, embracing the neocon *Herald Sun* view that empowering students to exercise their right to protest is not a legitimate academic activity, management rushed through the dismissal and, in doing so, systematically breached university policy and the current Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA). For instance, one week after management confirmed his dismissal effective 24 April 2006, it illegally removed Dr Austin from all program coordinator

responsibilities and presently from all teaching duties in open defiance of the EBA. Throughout, management have denied natural justice, an explicit requirement of probation procedure. The sole evidence that management has provided to justify the dismissal has been the Bolt article (17 August 2005) and a management-approved Latin American Studies poster. Indeed it has consistently failed to provide anything which would normally substantiate action other than promotion. Ironically, the National Day of Action against the VSU had the almost-unanimous support of students, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), and the knowledge of immediate management. The Vice Chancellor, Professor Margaret Gardener, is a public VSU opponent. However, former Left intellectuals at peace with neoliberalism have also been key antagonists.

On the ground, management has worked feverishly to censor and distort information. Posters advertising public meetings and NTEU declarations have been torn down and replaced by “authorized notices only” directives. Dr Austin was threatened with further disciplinary action if he used university email to update students on the case, after one of 300 recipients complained about one of six items in a Spanish Matters bulletin. If, as the NTEU workplace delegate has stated publicly, there has not been anything in her 15 years at RMIT to compare with this witchhunt, the broader implications of authoritarian censorship, the privatization of public space, and the intimidation of staff can only diminish the collegiality and pedagogical status of the institution. Dictatorial practices are abhorrent to public higher education; their class character has been clear from April 2005, when management advised that Latin American Studies courses from 2006 should “not offend business students”. This contradicts the intellectual freedom provisions of RMIT’s Code of Ethics, and marginalises the academic perspective acknowledged in Dr Austin’s unanimous appointment.

Known denunciations in writing to the VC or on RMIT websites are at least 200, from national and overseas students, intellectuals and labour activists. Whilst management has not provided its own figures, it is likely that the actual spread and number of messages is significantly greater. The groundwork for resistance laid by the “Defend our Universities” campaign, punctuated by a vibrant end-of-year public meeting and student demonstration, have ensured a continuing challenge to this quintessential assault on free speech and open debate.

Dr. Austin’s dismissal will shortly be tested in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. The Defend Our Universities committee has organised a *fiesta solidaria* for 15 April. Contributions to the Fighting Fund to cover the \$12,000 legal costs are welcome. Details of that account, the fund-raiser, regular updates, and articles in both English and Spanish can be found at <http://defendrobert.blogspot.com> We would also appreciate any distribution

which readers can give this article, and encouragement that people actively express their concerns. Protest messages can be sent to the Vice Chancellor at vc@rmit.edu.au and copied to viviana.ramirez@westnet.com.au