Indigenous Affairs Today:

The 'Influence Wars' and the attempt to silence the social sciences

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In a recent book, *Silencing Dissent: How the Australian government is controlling public opinion and stifling debate*, edited by Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007) brief mention was made of CAEPR. Professor Stuart Macintyre, in his chapter on 'Universities', used CAEPR as one case of attempts by the government of the day to restrict academic freedom (pp 51–52). In his chapter, Professor Macintyre referred to a paper 'Indigenous affairs today: The "Influence War" and the attempt to silence the social sciences' that I presented at the Academy of the Social Sciences Symposium 'Ideas and Influence: Social Science and Public Policy in Australia' in November 2005. Although, this paper has not been published, it has aroused some interest since publication of the Hamilton and Maddison volume, and so it is posted here as a CAEPR Topical Issue to ensure transparency in access to the source material used by Professor Macintyre.

In our chapter 'Indigenous Affairs' Tim Rowse and I highlight the history of disciplinary contestation in the relationship between social science and public policy in Indigenous affairs, focusing as exemplars on economics and anthropology.1 To simplify considerably, the former has viewed socioeconomic difference as a deficit to be addressed by policy, while the latter has highlighted the heterogeneity of Indigenous circumstances and cultural differences, with policy proposals that focus on choice and self determination. Over time, one or other has had the ascendancy in policy influence, on rare occasions both.

Currently economic liberalism is in the ascendancy in Australia2 and a particular form 'radical neo-liberalism'3 appears to be increasingly influential in Indigenous affairs. Its relatively recent emergence has been linked to the demise of the national Indigenous representative organization, ATSIC4; an escalation of involvement of right-wing think tanks in Indigenous policy debates5; the privileging of some Indigenous voices, many from the government's
appointed National Indigenous Council (NIC) and sharing an ideological position with the think tanks and policy makers; and a highly sympathetic media. Most policy focus has been on mainstream notions of economic development, welfare reform and, most recently, land rights reform.

I want to say a few things about the influence wars [that follow on from the history wars] and how economic liberalism in Indigenous affairs has rapidly come to ascendancy in the discourse. I do so, a little reflexively, from my perspective as Director of CAEPR, a social sciences research centre established at the ANU in 1990 with significant public sector support. In its 15 years of existence CAEPR has quite consciously aimed to straddle the disciplinary tension between economics and anthropology in its approach. In 2002, an independent review of CAEPR [with sponsoring agency participation] noted that ‘CAEPR is the only major grouping of researchers having expertise and producing sustained quality research in the broad field of Indigenous economic and social policy in Australia at present’.

My comments today can be read as an addendum to Tim and my chapter. In 2004 and 2005 the above view of CAEPR was challenged principally by the public sector agency, OIPC, that provides much of the Centre’s core funding and that purports to represent Indigenous public policy interests. Let me provide three brief examples under the headings: discrediting the research, suppressing the research, and intimidating the researchers.

1. DISCREDITING THE RESEARCH

In late 2003, Boyd Hunter and I published a refereed discussion paper ‘Monitoring practical reconciliation: Evidence from the reconciliation decade 1991-2001’. This was subsequently re-refereed, revised and published in a reputable economics journal. In a nutshell, the paper used official census data to challenge the performance of the Howard government, suggesting it was at best little different, at worst inferior in terms of national outcomes to the Keating government. The paper was very unpopular with our research sponsors who quickly sought to engage consultants, at public expense, to discredit it. To be fair we were invited to tender to undertake this critique, an offer we declined. Nearly a year later, a lengthy critique by the sole tenderer Australasia Economics, a firm with close links to the CIS, was posted on the OIPC website as its only research ‘publication’. The critique was insignificant, avoided mentioning the authors by name instead referring to ‘the CAEPR Discussion Paper’ [suggesting CAEPR holds a position which it does not] as ‘a political economy tract’ rather than a ‘disinterested commentary solidly grounded in fact’. Early in 2005, Hunter and I produced a rejoinder, seeking that it too be posted on the OIPC website, but this offer was declined.

2. SUPPRESSING THE RESEARCH

In March 2005, CAEPR announced a seminar and posted a report ‘The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamarrurr Region’ by John Taylor and Owen Stanley. This thorough research, conducted over a 12-month period, was commissioned by the Australian, NT and local Thamarrurr governments and highlighted the current and likely future costs of extreme socioeconomic disadvantage at the remote community of Wadeye. FACS, that has a project funding agreement with ANU in relation to CAEPR and had part-funded the research, contacted me by phone and by email and instructed me to remove the report from our website and to cancel the seminar. We were told that the Minister’s office was concerned that research funded by government was critical of government policy. We wrote to FACS, noting that we would do neither and that the report was already in the public domain. We heard no further from them, but subsequently found out that OIPC had already prepared an in-house critique of the report [never published or officially shown to us] and a draft press release for the Minister for Indigenous Affairs [never used].
3. INTIMIDATING THE RESEARCHERS

In early 2005, in undertaking research on land rights I sought a copy of a discussion paper prepared for the NIC and reported in the media as the Mundine paper. This was provided electronically to my research assistant in good faith by an OIPC officer who was subsequently suspended. I was then commissioned by Oxfam Australia to prepare a report (co-authored with two lawyers, C Linkhorn and J Clarke) assessing the possible impacts of the government’s purported land rights reforms. While the Oxfam consultancy was under way, an AFP investigation instigated by OIPC was also under way seeking detailed email records from the ANU in an attempt to trace this ‘leak’, with a clear implication that the researchers who sought the document may themselves face criminal charges. The Oxfam Report published in August 2005 was highly critical of proposed land rights reform focused on private home ownership and private business development. It remains the only published social sciences critique on these issues, but it did not quote from the Mundine paper that remains out of the public domain.

In June 2005, OIPC informed me that the 15-year core funding relationship between the Australian government and the ANU in relation to CAEPR would end on 31 December 2005. No reference was made to the above three ‘incidents’, the ostensible reason for defunding was that OIPC had moved onto a purchaser-provider competitive basis for commissioning research.

The June 2004 edition of Dialogue was devoted to the Abolition of ATSIC and asked whether Indigenous voices were being silenced. Certain Indigenous voices are, while others who share an ideological position with the government of the day are being privileged in policy influence, media coverage and in new emerging alliances. At the same time there is an attempt to reduce the generation of ideas, through conflict, intimidation and defunding. This is an area where independent ideas based on expertise and fieldwork are needed more than ever before, not just because of the obvious intractability of many problems, but also because a new experimental approach based on economic liberalism is being introduced. It is paradoxical, perhaps, that free market ideology does not extend to the market of ideas, with a monopolistic cartel being the preferred approach. Fortunately, the ideas keep flowing and are posted, in CAEPR’s case, on our website where they are accessed more than ever before, frequently by Australian government agencies. It is debatable if the emerging alliance between government and neo-liberal think tanks (black and white) mediated by a compliant bureaucracy is generating better policy or outcomes for Indigenous Australians. But if it is, then there should be no fear of academic freedom nor of social science scholarship.

NOTES


6. In particular the Murdoch media outlet *The Australian* that has adopted a strident editorial policy supporting the free market approach in Indigenous affairs.


20. October 2005 was the busiest month to date on the CAEPR site, with 9.6 gigabytes of traffic (one gig is about 500 document downloads). October 2005 traffic was double that of October 2004 (4.8 gig) which was double that of October 2003 (2.4 gig). Recent public debate has clearly lifted our web profile. In October we averaged 616 visits per day, compared to 356 in the same period last year.