NATIONAL AFFAIRS

The rise and fall of Western civilisation

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Did the Ramsay Centre throw away its best chance by pushing ANU too far?

Right:

As safe as ever: Winston Churchill watching over University House at ANU. Graham Crumb/imagicity.com

On most Friday afternoons, Brian Schmidt, vice-chancellor of the Australian National University, sends members of the university a link to his genial blog. Just over three weeks ago, on 1 June 2018, it contained news that would gain just a little more media attention than usual. Wedged between a discussion of changes to the university’s admissions policy and a report on a forum about its investment strategy, Schmidt announced that after several months of discussion with the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation, ANU had “taken the difficult decision today to withdraw from contention for the program.”

“We approached the opportunity offered by the Ramsay Centre in a positive and open spirit,” Schmidt continued, “but it is clear that the autonomy which this university needs to approve and endorse a new program of study is not compatible with a sponsored program of the type sought.” When dealing with funding opportunities, he explained, the university has a policy of “retaining, without compromise, our academic integrity, and autonomy and freedom, and ensuring that any program has academic merit consistent with our status as one of the world’s great universities.”

The positioning of the announcement halfway through a regular blog was deliberately low-key, and everyone involved — including the Ramsay Centre and its CEO, Simon Haines — was thanked for their efforts.

Parts of the media reported this announcement as if it were some kind of bombshell. Even before it was made, Quadrant had engaged in the familiar neo-conservative party trick of googling individual ANU academics — and, in one case, a student — to ridicule their research
projects. Commentators in the *Australian* blamed political correctness, identity politics and cultural Marxism for the breakdown in talks. They launched one of their frequent jihadis — it must already be approaching the obligatory 100,000 words — even trawling the university website for any men of Middle Eastern appearance seen giving money to the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies.

Then the education minister, Simon Birmingham, weighed in with a series of homilies implicitly directed at a Nobel Laureate — for that’s what Brian Schmidt is — about how universities should “embrace the study of the values that helped to create them.” Prime minister Malcolm Turnbull wanted an explanation too; a phone conversation was duly had with Schmidt. John Howard, chair of the Ramsay Centre’s board, pretended to be astonished by the university’s decision and insinuated that it had backed out because of a belated interest in the matter on the part of the National Tertiary Education Union. (You would need to be unfamiliar with the way power works in a modern Australian university to imagine that all it takes for a multimillion-dollar proposal to be abandoned is timely intervention by the staff union.)

Schmidt’s announcement was no bombshell. The negotiations between ANU and the Ramsay Centre had been in serious difficulty for months. By the time the university pulled the plug, no one familiar with the lack of progress in the negotiations expected they would go anywhere. But considered in light of how the matter seemed to have been proceeding until April, this was a surprising outcome; most staff I had spoken with assumed, over much of the early part of the year, that a Western civilisation program was inevitable, and that the seemingly lengthy negotiations indicated nothing more than sensible caution on both sides.

How had it come to this? In December 2017 the university’s dean of arts and social sciences, Rae Frances, called a meeting of staff to announce that ANU was in discussions with the Ramsay Centre about the creation of a Bachelor of Western Civilisation. She did not reveal a specific amount of funding, although it was clear that we were not dealing with loose change. She did indicate that twelve additional staff would be appointed across various disciplines and that a generous scholarship program would be available to students undertaking the degree.

The money for all this was to come from the newly established Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation, which was funded by a large bequest from the late businessman Paul Ramsay to promote the teaching of Western civilisation. Universities had been invited to express interest, bound by a highly prescriptive non-disclosure agreement that required them to list every person consulted. ANU duly submitted an expression of interest and was the first university to enter discussions with Ramsay.

So far, so good. But it’s probably best not to gauge the temperature of a university a few weeks before Christmas, when most students are away and academics, too, are beginning to leave for the summer break. I recall no sign of dissent at this point; perhaps a few academics expressed concern behind the scenes. But if the cultural Marxists did eventually kill off the
Western civilisation proposal, as some allege, at that stage they were spending more time on their Christmas shopping.

On campus, nothing further was heard of the proposal until early March, when Frances arranged a forum largely designed to allow consultation with students and staff. This was a livelier affair than the December meeting. Clearly, some students didn’t like the proposal, but most expressed their views thoughtfully. Not all who spoke were worried or opposed. Some referred to news reports, mainly quoting Haines’s comments spruiking both the centre and its mission. One student pointed out — not unfairly — that my own department, the School of History, did little else but teach about the West. (While politely put, this was not intended as a compliment.) Did we really need more of the same, he wondered.

The forum helped place the proposal on the radar of the university community, but there was no wave of protest. No buildings were occupied. No eggs were thrown. No teach-ins occurred. The statue of Winston Churchill overlooking University House seemed as safe as ever, and certainly safer than that of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford. What student protest there was happened in the modern way, with some students on each side of the debate setting up Facebook sites. A few academics flagged their concerns, although mainly among themselves rather than in any public forum. A meeting was arranged between Haines and student representatives. And that, at least publicly, was it.

Until the April issue of Quadrant appeared, that is. Has any other article in that resilient cold war leftover had the immediate impact of this three-page piece by Australia’s former prime minister and present Ramsay Centre board member, Tony Abbott? Among a series of aggressive remarks that made perfectly plain the ideological agenda of the plan, Abbott explained that the Ramsay Centre’s distinctiveness is that “it’s not merely about Western Civilisation but in favour of it.”

It’s a free country and people are entitled to express views of this kind. But if it was intended as a foundation for academic enquiry, Abbott’s remark was obviously ridiculous. In an academic context, a claim like his has about as much value as the judgement — advanced by some on the left — that Western civilisation is a racist idea and that any program concerned with it would promote white supremacy. The point of the humanities is to seek to understand the world in its complexity, not to express muscular allegiance to one kind of society or system over another. We can probably all agree that there is value in reading Homer or Plato, but most of us would prefer not to issue firm pronouncements on the quality of classical Greek civilisation — and even less of Western civilisation — on the basis of a reading of The Iliad or The Republic.

There is nothing relativist about any of this; the approach reflects the peculiar mixture of disinterestedness, ethics and curiosity necessary to conduct scholarly enquiry of any worth. It takes commitment, patience and long training — for instance, in classical and modern languages, if you really want to study Greece or Rome seriously — and it often demands a cool appraisal that can be difficult and uncomfortable. It sometimes leads to scholars being publicly abused or even threatened because they are assumed to be excusing or defending,
and sometimes criticising or condemning, what they are rather seeking to understand and explain.

Another disturbing feature of Abbott’s intervention in Quadrant was his claim, made towards the end of the article, that a management committee which included the Ramsay Centre’s CEO and academic director would be making staffing and curriculum decisions. This contradicted what everyone in the university who had taken an interest in the matter up to this point understood to be the arrangements: that staff would be appointed by ordinary university procedures, and the curriculum would be subject to the same internal committee processes that apply to any other academic program.

That claim, especially when considered alongside Abbott’s hope that the program would begin “an invigorating long march through our institutions,” began ringing the warning bells for many of us who had not directly been involved in the negotiations. It did not help that Abbott also explained to his readers what he called “O’Sullivan’s law” — named after a Quadrant editor — that “every organisation that’s not explicitly right-wing, over time becomes left-wing.”

While the ANU negotiators were already familiar with the Ramsay Centre’s desire for tight control over whatever program was established, it still defied belief that these could really be the assumptions that the centre had brought to the table of its negotiations with a major Australian university. The deliberate introduction of aggressive cultural warfare into an academic institution with a strong international reputation and a proud record of education and research was odious and intolerable. Surely the Ramsay Centre understood as much? Could Abbott’s article have been merely a bargaining ploy? Or was Abbott, for some obscure reason, trying to wreck the negotiations? Was he acting with the knowledge of his CEO and colleagues, such as John Howard, or was he freelancing? Perhaps we could safely ignore him?

The negotiations continued. These had always been based on the idea that there was some middle ground on which the Ramsay Centre’s desire to promote an appreciation of Western civilisation, and ours to promote analysis of it, could meet. But Abbott’s article, and the failure of the Ramsay Centre to repudiate it, had exposed that no such place existed. There was no room for the Ramsay Centre inside an institution committed to enquiry, analysis and critique. It wanted to advocate, celebrate and, if Abbott’s views were any guide, to crusade.

The negotiations fell through because of these differences in purpose and outlook — as exposed by Abbott’s article — not because of a plot by conniving cultural Marxists or purveyors of identity politics, and certainly not because the staff union wrote a letter to the vice-chancellor. The problem was a lack of common ground and, more particularly, the distrust of universities among key members of the Ramsay Centre board, which is nicely captured in “O’Sullivan’s law.” This is, of course, unfortunate because our leading universities presently contain most of the capacity that Ramsay needs to spend its money well.

My own view is that there is nothing to celebrate in the failure of the negotiations. Those of us who supported this proposal did so because we like to see universities teach students well about the Greek and Roman worlds, the Bible, early Christianity, the medieval
world, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and Australia’s place in Western culture. We also envisaged opportunities for academically trained classicists, medievalists, historians, philosophers and biblical and literary scholars who would otherwise have no chance of a career in Australia working in a leading university.

In my own school — History — and in other parts of ANU, we already teach many of the things that were to appear in this program — although not all of them. There has been much partisan and ill-informed commentary, a recent example coming from Geoffrey Blainey, who disparages History at ANU — we are twelfth in the world in the most authoritative of the subject rankings — as offering merely “dozens of minor history courses.”

We are accused of shunning the study of Western civilisation. Then, when we point out that the bulk of our courses deal with the history of the West, the reply from our critics goes along the following lines: “Oh yes, but the problem is with how you teach them. We know that you lefty academics have it in for Western civilisation.” Such critics, of course, never explain on what basis they have arrived at their authoritative views about how teaching is conducted at ANU or what any of its academics think about the West, or indeed any other points on the compass.

All the same, I suspect that if the Western civilisation program had gone ahead, our students would have brought their critical and enquiring minds to bear on their reading and discussion, as happens in any university worthy of the name. The University of Sydney has been in discussions with the Ramsay Centre, but the level of contention about the proposal on that campus — a stark contrast with what occurred at ANU despite blatantly false reporting to the contrary — makes a successful program unlikely. For all the right-wing media’s huffing and puffing about ANU, it was almost certainly the Ramsay Centre’s best chance.

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