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RESPONSE

Of boiled frogs and other things

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The boiled frog syndrome

The corporatisation of public universities has spread like a cancer throughout the world; it is by no means confined to the UK, as Ben Martin notes in his proposition paper. It is not just the top-down governance, centralisation, teaching templates, perpetual audit and rankings-driven research that are the same everywhere, but also the response of academics. The boiled frog metaphor brilliantly encapsulates the acquiescence of academics in the face of the erosion of all they purport to admire about the *idea* of the university and the academic life for which they opted. The latest edict from on high, however foolish and misconceived, elicits a frenzy of head-nodding and forelock-tugging. Any murmur of dissent is likely to occur in the corridor or behind closed doors.

The academics I interviewed in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and Canada for *Privatising the Public University* (Thornton, 2012) were willing to vent their frustrations, assured by a guarantee of confidentiality. Several respondents said, 'This is the way things are', in a perfect parody of the boiled frog syndrome (BFS). In other words, they perceive an inevitability about what is happening that renders resistance futile. As one legal philosopher said, 'I don't know how you can write about this stuff; it's bad enough living it'. He thought the best way to deal with it was to bury his head in scholarship and pay as little attention as possible to what was going on.

Another dimension of BFS is the sense that writing critically about the *realpolitik* of the contemporary academy is unseemly, if not unscholarly. Had I been writing about twelfth-century land tenure, for example, I could have expected approbation for my scholarly detachment, but scrutinising what is happening close to home is deemed to compromise one's objectivity. But turning away not only ratchets up incrementalism on the part of management, it also leaves the neo-liberalisation of everyday life in the academy largely unexamined. We can therefore be grateful that Martin has been prepared to ignore the amphibian bias.

I would nevertheless like to pursue the issue of academic objectivity – or lack of it – a little further, as it is deployed by both managers and politicians as a justification for delimiting the participation of staff in university governance. The Australian experience of what has happened on university boards underscores the point and highlights why academic resistance is so difficult.

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Managers as the new élite

As the governance of public universities has moved from a collegial to a top-down managerial model, managers have displaced academics as the new élite and become responsible for key decision-making, as Martin reminds us. Managers are paid salaries that far exceed those paid to academics, and receive perks, such as cars, business class travel and corporate credit cards. Several Australian vice chancellors (VCs) have joined the million dollar-plus club. They earn more than their counterparts at Oxford and Harvard. Their salaries are more than double that of the Australian prime minister. These VCs are also frequently accorded the title 'president' (vice chancellor *and* president), as though they were CEOs of for-profit private corporations, not VCs of what are still nominally public universities.

VCs have come to believe that their appropriate comparators are in fact CEOs, not academics. If they formerly occupied an academic post, all vestiges of the former self are sloughed off when they assume the mantle associated with the new position. Gone are the collegial figures of the past who maintained an open-door policy. In their place are the new-style VCs who retreat to their eyries where they are free from pesky academics and students. The VC at one university was not only able to secrete himself behind three sets of locked doors lest he be set upon by demonstrating students, he was also able to make a quick getaway via an underground tunnel if necessary (Veness, 2012).

These managers-in-chief, of course, do not head for-profit corporations. Most notably, there are no shareholders to whom they are accountable. And here lies the nub of the problem. While the public might assume that the tradition of collegiality, participatory decision-making and shared governance still prevails in our universities, the privatising imperative, induced by state disinvestment and a user-pays philosophy, has totally undermined this tradition. The VCs themselves are the victims of BFS and meekly follow the government line. When the government proposed fee deregulation for all Australian universities in 2014, every VC in the country (except one) supported it, despite the disastrous ramifications for both their students and their universities.[1]

Stifling the voices of staff and students

As a result of the concentration of power in university management, staff and students play an ever-decreasing role in university governance and there are ongoing attempts to eviscerate the last vestiges of their role. The argument used for removing staff and student representatives is that they are incapable of objectivity because they have a vested interest in the future of the university. This is apparently in contradistinction to senior managers, who are assumed to have no such interest. Staff and student members of council are mere 'stakeholders' of the university, a parlous status not to be confused with that of shareholders of a for-profit corporation.

The rationalisation of the elected members on university councils has been effected incrementally since the transformation of the tertiary sector by the responsible minister, John Dawkins, in 1988. In accordance with the corporatising imperative, a shift from staff representation to an exclusive reliance on business representatives was proposed (Marginson and Considine, 2000, pp.99–103). This was considered in reports by the federal, South Australian and Victorian governments and led to amendment to federal protocols and university acts of incorporation.

Even though councils were pared down, that was not the end of it. In 2012, the Victorian liberal government empowered universities to remove their elected representatives, though

there was a subsequent reprieve by the Labor government in 2015. In the same year, the University of Sydney senate itself voted to reduce the majority of its elected positions, including all alumni-voted places and two staff-voted positions (Lavoirpierre, 2016). Of course, the presence of elected staff representatives is not necessarily going to be able to guarantee the accountability of a university council. The decline in collegiality and the animus towards the academic voice renders challenge increasingly difficult. In 2015, the University of New England alleged that a conflict of interest arose because a member of its council, Margaret Sims, was also the branch president of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). The university then denied Sims access to council papers and meetings where, in the opinion of the chancellor, a conflict arose (Roberts, 2015, p.4). Sims was not permitted to know the nature of the material from which she was excluded as even the subject headings in the agenda and minutes were redacted. The issue has since become the subject of litigation (Loussikian, 2016).

Another familiar tactic for by-passing scrutiny by council members is to have the council executive deal with substantive matters and then have the council merely ratify decisions. In fact, in 2003, the Victorian state education minister recommended the creation of an executive committee system to deal with 'sensitive issues', such as VC's salaries (Buckell, 2003), which partially explains their exponential increase. Academics therefore have to be alert not only to the depredations of managers, but also to those of politicians, who are keen to instantiate neo-liberal modes of managerialism in universities. (As a rider to the salary issue, I might add that even if VCs did not deliberate on their own salary increases, their power within the executive bloc would have subtly influenced the upwards spiral.)

A web of subinfeudation

The model of managerialism in which the academic deliberative voice is stifled tends to be mirrored at each level of university line management. While academic boards are charged with maintaining standards for all matters pertaining to teaching and research, their power has also been diluted. The role of some boards has been reduced to that of affixing the ubiquitous rubber stamp, while others have been abolished altogether. Deans and heads of school emulate the favoured model too, surrounding themselves with clusters of managers and support staff, whose role it is to tell academics what to do, rather than help them do it, as Martin notes.

Even departmental and school committees have largely disappeared or been reduced to a perfunctory advisory role, with decision-making effectively confined to an appointed executive committee, as in the case of councils. In accordance with the demise of democratic and collegial norms in the corporate university, elections have largely been abandoned. Each manager is answerable to a more senior manager up the line whose job it is to ensure the compliance of those below. In this way, a complex web of subinfeudation militates against resistance. Would that those frogs on the boil would speak out before the academy faces further depredations, but I fear it may already be too late. I thank Ben Martin for his courage in doing so.

Note

1. Stephen Parker of the University of Canberra was the only VC to speak out against the proposal (ABC, 2015). The issue of fee deregulation is presently on the political backburner.

Disclosure statement

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