

OPINION

Islamic centre mocks ANU claim to academic authority



Professor Brian Schmidt, the Vice Chancellor of Australian National University. Picture: Aaron Francis

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Defenders of the Australian National University's decision to rebuff establishment of the Ramsay centre, a dedicated institute to study Western civilisation, say they did so to preserve academic independence.

In a June 5 statement, ANU vice-chancellor Brian Schmidt explained that the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation's vision was inconsistent with that of the university and implied that the Ramsay Centre board's unapologetic embrace of Western civilisation would compromise the university's "academic integrity, autonomy and freedom".

He then lamented that critics juxtaposed the ANU's rejection of the Ramsay Centre with its indulgence of its Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies which he said "does great work on behalf of Australia that should make us all proud".

Alas, on several fronts, Schmidt and those celebrating the ANU's Ramsay rejection miss the point.

First, consider Schmidt's lionisation of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies. In reality, that centre has made the ANU an academic laughing stock. What its conferences and events ordinarily lack in intellectual diversity, they make up for in political polemic.

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Just five years ago, for example, the centre hosted Richard Falk, a disgraced 9/11 conspiracy theorist who dismissed concerns about Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's summary executions, repression of women and general human rights abuses as "happily false". While centre supporters can defend Falk's invitation on the ground of academic freedom, that lofty principle was never meant to substitute for research, integrity and honesty.

The problems with the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies start at the top. Its director Amin Saikal argued in a 2003 op-ed that the Islamic Republic of Iran "provides for a degree of mass participation, political pluralism and assurance of certain human rights and freedoms which do not exist in most of the Middle East".

The Iranian people, who rose up en masse in 2009 and again this past winter, beg to differ. So too do the women imprisoned for removing their headscarfs and the gays slowly strangled from cranes.

Alas, this skewed reality is the rule rather than reality. In a 2004 op-ed in The Sydney Morning Herald, Saikal embraced the fringe anti-Semitic conspiracy theory until then peddled primarily by convicted American fascist Lyndon LaRouche, who argued that a small cabal of Jewish neo-conservatives had hijacked American policy to lead the US into war.

While a whitewash of the terrorist group Hamas and its genocidal charter has been standard practice at the ANU, more recently Saikal has embraced the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement. Whatever one's stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict, such a position should be anathema to any serious academic: to boycott ideas based on the national identity of those voicing them strikes at the heart of a university's mission. For Schmidt to flag pride in Saikal's centre suggests the problem at the ANU runs deep.

Alas, the ANU is not alone. A. Dirk Moses, a professor of modern history at the University of Sydney, dismisses those who suggest “double standards” when universities take money from China, Iran and the United Arab Emirates but veto a Western civilisation centre. “They do not ask about the terms of such donations,” he writes, “nor do they understand that universities jealously guard their autonomy, upon which their international reputations depend.”

Again, this is not right. Beijing launders donations through a network of Confucius Institutes to about a dozen Australian universities, including Moses’s home institution. These Chinese studies institutes may teach language but they have become centres for Chinese government intelligence and control, including monitoring and censorship of those who stray off the academic paths with which Beijing is comfortable.

Money donated by the UAE, Qatar, Turkey and Iran directly or through cut-outs likewise seeks to restrict rather than promote academic discourse. For Schmidt or Moses to suggest otherwise is baffling. Then again, Moses’s continuation to lump the study of Western civilisations with Donald Trump, gay marriage scepticism, or climate change policy opposition simply illustrates how subjective politics now trumps academic integrity.

And Schmidt’s omission of the fact the ANU changed the name of Saikal’s centre from Middle East and Central Asian Studies to Arab and Islamic Studies after a large Emirati donation undermines his claim that the university maintains a firewall between donor and product.

My support for Western civilisation centres is not partisan political. I was one of the US national security professionals who unapologetically signed the “Never Trump” letter. And at Yale University I pursued Iranian and Islamic rather than Western history. I studied 14th-century Moroccan philosopher Ibn Battuta rather than Thomas Aquinas, and I learned strategy through 11th-century Persian writer Nizam al-Mulk rather than Machiavelli. In 2000, my doctorate won Yale University’s top academic prize.

Rather, the importance of Western civilisation study is that being conversant with the ideas that have shaped Western societies helps understand and evaluate the differences when studying others. Western society has its faults but, on balance, as classicist Donald Kagan has argued, it has generated the most humane, moral and intellectual ideas and standards in history.

Universities should be home to a competition of ideas. Intellectuals imbued with the latest postmodern theories and cultural relativism so trendy in the academy today may find anathema old-school study of Western civilisation.

This is exactly why the ANU needs the Ramsay centre: challenging groupthink, breaking consensus and forcing professors to engage in a battle of ideas rather than “no platform” those with whom they disagree is the backbone of a great university.

It makes intellectual debate across fields more rigorous and bolsters scholarship regardless of perspective. The ANU is sick. The output from its Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies is a symptom. The Ramsay centre could be just the cure the ANU needs.

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