

Monoculture is killing thought

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'Like the characters Winston Smith and Julia in George Orwell's classic anti-totalitarian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, students with non-Left views need to learn to outwardly conform to inwardly remain free.' This is how a high school tutor, Mark Lopez, describes the plight of Australian students in his submission to the Senate inquiry into academic freedom, which is due to table its report today.

In 18 years tutoring English and the humanities, Lopez has seen a "subtle, unstated pressure for students to ideologically conform if they want to succeed academically".

He said the "beliefs of the politically correct, which are seen by them as so noble and emancipating, especially when ... touted by radical students in the 1960s" have become a "means for compromising the intellectual freedom of the young in the 21st century".

Many academics have derided the Senate inquiry, begun in June by the Victorian Liberal Senator Mitch Fifield, as a "witch-hunt", an exercise in "mud-slinging", the dying throes of the Howard regime and a "McCarthyist" attempt to curtail the freedom of academics. The National Tertiary Education Union was typical in its submission asserting that bias does not exist.

But the submissions - some anonymous - tell a different story and paint a chilling portrait of an often unconscious academic bias in schools and universities, and of students too intimidated to say or write what they think.

Joshua Koonin, a third-year law student, told the inquiry: "I have ...consistently felt intimidated that if I express views other than those [of my] tutors and lecturers ... my marks will suffer." He told of readings on "the immorality of the United States ... with no countervailing position" and a lecturer who said, "nobody in Australia supports John Howard and his crimes".

Professor Brian Martin, of the University of Wollongong and vice-president of Whistleblowers Australia, who researches the suppression of dissent and is hardly what you would describe as a conservative, was among the most powerful witnesses to the inquiry. He told a public hearing in Sydney in October that students have become "strategic" at working the biases of their teachers.

"For someone like me, teaching social science, I actually would like the students to be speaking out much more, disagreeing with me ... But they are afraid ... They are trying to find out what the lecturers are looking for because then they will give it to them. These are strategic students ... They

want to get good marks, so they are trying to figure out what their lecturers want. That is a far bigger problem, in my mind, than the bias that may exist."

Together, the submissions form a story of an academic world plagued by what the James Cook University academic Merv Bendle described in a public hearing in Canberra as an "intellectual monoculture".

"In another age this could be a fascist, far right intellectual monoculture and it would do just as much damage to our society as a left-wing or far left intellectual monoculture. It is not so much the politics of the thing; it is the fact that it is an intellectual monoculture, that it is one voice being heard over and over again unrelentingly."

The inquiry split early along party lines, with a minority report due to be released today by Coalition senators, who are expected to recommend reform of ideologically driven university education faculties, as well as a "charter of academic freedoms".

While the concerns of Young Liberals, who inspired the inquiry with their "Make Education Fair" campaign, are expected to be dismissed in today's Senate majority report as an "undergraduate exercise", the federal president, Noel McCoy, said yesterday the inquiry had established the existence of "a radical orthodoxy which pervades the development of university courses and school curriculums, stifles debate and prevents genuine balance or diversity of opinions".

McCoy reserves special scorn for university education faculties, which he says are crucial to the "long march through the institutions", which the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci said was necessary for socialism to take hold.

The inquiry discussed the problem of education being used as a tool for social change rather than to impart skills. One result is that Monash University has just announced remedial English courses for students who arrive "functionally illiterate" after 12 years of school.

And committee member, Liberal Senator Brett Mason, complained about a Brisbane high school he visited in which Mao Zedong was displayed as a "freedom fighter" alongside George Washington and Mahatma Gandhi.

Gideon Rozner, president of the University of Melbourne's Liberal Club, told the inquiry about a course on "contemporary ideologies", comprising 12 lectures, 11 "dedicated to different variations of socialism". The solitary lecture about liberalism and conservatism had as its compulsory reading an article from the left-wing Monthly magazine titled "Young Liberals in the chocolate factory".

"The entire liberal or conservative tradition [was] summed up by that article ... When students enrol in a contemporary ideology subject and finish it not knowing any of the works of Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill

or Milton Friedman or any of the great thinkers of our time, that is a significant quality issue."

A month after Rozner's testimony, on November 4, the inquiry committee received a letter from a "disappointed" University of Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis, who defended the subject. But he said it was to be replaced next year with a "broader introduction to political ideas subject [with readings from such] liberal authors such as John Stuart Mill and Milton Friedman". Chalk up a victory to the Young Liberals, even if no one will ever admit it.