

I reviewed Tony Coady's book, and my review drew a criticism from someone I had encountered before at the ANU. I wrote to him, and this is a section of the reply, slightly edited. I received no answer.

You say in your letter to the HES (15 March) that I missed the important issues. But surely I addressed them. I set out what I thought made up the kernel of Coady's essay, and then I set out where I thought he had it wrong. I said that most of the contributors came either from Melbourne or one or other of the group of eight, and that the three who were from other universities said nothing about their experiences there.

True, I said nothing about the replacement of collegial decision-making with top-down management. That is because I don't think this is a useful way of describing what has happened. If you do, then you need to spell it what you mean, and give examples. In my judgment what has occurred is the end of expansion, which has meant that unpleasant choices have had to be made. On the whole the college is very bad at making such choices (your own experiences at ANU should tell you that), so that eventually a vice-chancellor, or someone, has to do the job (look at Monash, ANU, Tasmania, for example). What do you think they should do if there isn't enough money to pay the salaries? While outsiders can never be sure about such things, your own university is widely thought to be delaying needed maintenance expenditure to keep staff numbers up (and now to pay staff a lot more). What does the college say about that? In 40 years of university life I have never known a faculty or department to be able to make a difficult decision, because when things are tough 'collegiality' always preserves the status quo. It is the professor, the head of school, the dean, the vice-chancellor, the individual finally responsible, who has to make the tough decision. None of us likes doing it, but the alternative is chaos and collapse.

There is nothing in your letter, or in Coady's book, which suggests that either of you have thought about where the money comes from. Don't you know that public funding per student has been declining since the late 1970s? All the other things you list in your catalogue of grievances have been slowly occurring over the same time. A whole generation, or half-generation, of academics missed out on university jobs in the 1980s because of the end of expansion in the universities. Quite a number of them then found jobs in the CAEs, where they started doing research. That's one reason why places like UC made such an easy transition to university status as we currently define it. Do you remember how you wanted a bit of action from the top to get rid of the drones you saw occupying the tenured posts in the JCSMR? The college wasn't much good then, was it! And it is much harder to get rid of drones than you may think — or perhaps you have found that out, now you are a professor.

The argument put forward by Judith Brett that academics owe their loyalty to their discipline is neither new nor significant. I first came across it thirty years ago in a piece by Joe Tanenhaus, who created a useful property space from running 'college oriented' at right angles to 'discipline oriented' and getting a nice 2x2 table from it which conveniently provided four different types of academic. I could have talked about academics I have known (all of them at the

ANU) who not only felt, but said, that they had done the university a favour by joining its ranks! The JCSMR had more than one of them, too. I think that this kind of attitude is the summit of arrogance, but then I have always been devoted to my institution, whatever its name, and not much given to the moody- genius model of academic life.

And I don't know what you are referring to in your criticisms of management in universities. UC has a very flat structure, with only four levels on the academic side and four or five on the support side. And we consult like crazy. I have made no major move at UC without masses of consultation. But it is understood that when the really hard questions come, someone has to make the decision. Mostly it's me. That's one of the things that I'm paid for. And I would have to say that morale here is quite high (the union thinks so, anyway). How many universities do you know, incidentally? I have known four Australian universities for substantial periods (UNE, ANU, Macquarie, UC) and I got to know the Australian system pretty well over my research-funding period (1981-1990). For the last ten years I have been to all universities on a regular basis. Again in my judgment, the people who have low morale are on the whole those who are older, and in the older universities where change has been slow and by and large resisted.

Yes, workloads are larger, time is at a premium, the old career lines have gone — but look around you: that's true in every walk of life. Why should universities be special? There is an answer, and I have been articulating it for years. But however you articulate it is a kind of special plea, a claim for privilege, and there is much less readiness to accept such arguments in the general populace, whether from doctors, lawyers or academics. I have been criticising the lack of public investment in education for years, and so have my colleagues in the UK, Canada and the US. Where on earth do you get the idea that these countries are immune from what we are going through? Don't you recall Mrs Thatcher's 'onslaught' on the British universities, or the Canadian horrors (reductions of 15% in one year), or the similar kinds of stringencies in the public universities in some American states? There is less public money around because our governments won't tax us heavily enough. Don't you know that we rank third or fourth from the bottom in the OECD in the proportion of government revenue to GDP?

You'll probably see that I'm getting vexed, and to some degree I am. Letters from someone like yourself carry some authority, and you don't seem to understand anything about the political economy of higher education. But it's not at all hard to understand. Indeed, I've heard scientists claim that anything in the social sciences can be understood at once by a well-trained scientist, though I have never seen much evidence of this supposed truth.

You finished your letter with the claim that it was the academic who carried out the important functions of the university. It is indeed true that such a sentiment runs through the Coady book and it is one of the sentiments that makes general staff thoroughly browned off. It doesn't endear academics to students, either, who have a strange view that they are the reason for the existence of the

university. People like me have to try to weave together students, academics and general staff so that the university prospers, not simply functions. In universities like yours, which are very large, that is a most difficult task. It is all very well to say that you are the *raison d'être* of the university, but if there weren't a university you wouldn't have a job. Surely the university deserves some recognition from those who shelter in it, receive its money, occupy its rooms, use its libraries and laboratories, and take its name! Every now and then I encounter a stropky student who tells me that he has paid HECS and deserves something better than (whatever it is that he is upset about). I point out that UC is a public asset worth a quarter of a billion dollars, and he has provided none of that, and it costs \$100 million to run, and he has provided \$3000 of that.

I would say the same to staff members who proclaimed themselves to be the centre of the universe, though I haven't yet had that experience. Read the Coady book again, if you can, and see the messages there from another perspective. You might see why I thought it was a bad book.

Having said all that, I agree with you that there are problems for us all in Australia's universities. The central problem is how to persuade our fellow citizens that they should pay more in taxes and serious philanthropy to support the public side of education. I have been trying to do this for the past decade, and it gets harder, not easier. The individualist, materialist, low-tax mood of the very late 20th century is against us, as is the frantic urge of political parties to reduce what they do so that they can fit demands to the money available. The national sentiment is very different to that which prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s, so the task is much, much harder than it was then. The task is not helped by books like this one, or by your letter, which will only confirm critics of our universities that they were right in the first place. I hope that you will give some thought to how you can make a contribution to that task.

With best wishes,