Editorial

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*The New Critic* has made it through its first completed term of a Federal Government, an achievement to be greeted with moderate celebration. Western Australia is not noted for its media diversity and the online journal of the IAS is an additional – albeit occasional – voice to broaden the debate.

And if ever a debate needed broadening, it is now. Other contributions in this edition deal more directly with the stuff of the national election. Here, it must suffice to quote Bernard Keane, who wrote in *Crikey* this week that:

> There are several grounds for questioning Tony Abbott’s fitness for office. The fact that he is not merely a global warming sceptic, but an actual advocate of global cooling, and of inaction on climate change, is one. His insistence that economic stimulus was unnecessary and wasteful is another… That Abbott readily makes such economically damaging statements in his quest for power is a third.¹

I’ve argued elsewhere that Abbott is an unprincipled opportunist, but perhaps even that is giving him the benefit of the doubt. We will know soon enough what the Australian people think one way or another.

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In the previous issue of *The New Critic* there was a fierce exchange between two of Australia’s decorated historians, Richard Bosworth and Ann Curthoys. Bosworth’s paper contained some broadsides at his colleagues in the Australian community of historians but it also contained a lament over what he considers has been lost, in educational terms, in the teaching of the humanities at the University of Western Australia. It is a sense of loss that I share, particularly having been a student of the History Department (as it then was) in the golden moments that Bosworth describes. Courses were simply longer allowing for deeper thinking; first year was challenging and complex; you had to write more, read more and attend more classes. I think one could demonstrate that both empirically and qualitatively, we have witnessed decline in the teaching of history at UWA in the course of the twenty year period to which I refer: but that is definitely not to be critical of the present crop of historians at UWA, all of whom in my experience struggle on to keep the candle burning in ideational and material conditions which are not always conducive.

There are other areas in which campus life has declined in this period too. In the mid nineties a protracted battle was fought to retain the autonomy and financial base of Australian student unions, which were then permitted to charge a compulsory fee. By the time I commenced studying at UWA

in 1988, students could either pay Guild fees or the equivalent to charity. In other words, membership of the Guild was not compulsory, but you couldn’t simply free ride in purely financial terms.

Then along came the rabid right of Australian politics and decided to make an issue of what was misleadingly dubbed ‘Voluntary Student Unionism’ or ‘VSU’. The campaign was always premised on misinformation – that joining the student union was compulsory – which plainly it wasn’t. But the real ideological agenda of ‘VSU’ was simply to target student unions as sources of potential political opposition, and no doubt to also encourage students to think of themselves as individual ‘customers’ of ‘education services’, rather than as a community of pupils and scholars.

The proponents of ‘VSU’ ritually failed to gain power within student unions around Australia – and repeatedly failed at UWA – but when ‘VSU’ supporters came to power at State and Federal level of government, they did the dirty work. In Western Australia it was Norman Moore under the State Government of then Premier Richard Court who ushered in legislation to grind down the student unions. Many students at the time cautioned of the impact on campus life and a bitter but ultimately fruitless campaign was staged to resist the ‘VSU’ agenda. But the campaign failed and the warnings were right.

In the new millennium, the sense of student community seems thinner; the growth in clubs and societies does not appear to have kept up with student numbers and campus politics looks a pale shadow. It is easy, of course, to mock the undergraduate experience, but having the time and space to read, argue, debate the acorns and adopt the insufferable earnestness that comes with discovering great thinkers for the first time, is one important way in which engaged citizens are made. It is a precious process which incubates and inculcates feelings of civic engagement, social obligation and both national and international community.

There may of course be other reasons for a certain sense of diminishment that can be located in broader forces in the outside world associated with the dominance of neo-liberalism, the rise of the new technologies permitting greater individualization of experience and the post modern splintering of Australian society. It is hard to imagine though, that the imposition of ‘VSU’ has not been at least a factor in the diminution.

Some members of every generation say that ‘things were better in the old days’. Sometimes, some things were. In contemporary politics, amidst the ceaseless quest for ‘reform’, we should also turn our eyes to the preservation of what stands to be lost, and for that matter, to be unafraid to recover that which should be retrieved.

David Ritter is a commentator, academic and campaigner. He is currently Head of Biodiversity Campaigns at Greenpeace in London. The author of numerous essays, articles and reviews in law, history, politics and current affairs, his most recent book is Contesting Native Title (Allen & Unwin, 2009). His weekly blog on global politics appears on Global Policy http://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/author/david-ritter.