

In defence of Richard Higgott, a colleague who cared

TOBY MILLER THE AUSTRALIAN

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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: TheAustralian

I HAVE one of those jobs for the boys. Normally such people do not out themselves, preferring the privilege of shadowy corridors to ruminate on the future and determine the lives of other people, anonymously and undemocratically. But not in my case.

I'm a newly returned Murdoch University faculty member. After 20 years teaching in New York and Los Angeles, I recently accepted a 40 per cent appointment as Sir Walter Murdoch professor of cultural policy studies.

I took up this opportunity because of the university's remarkable project of renewal laid out by its then vice-chancellor, Richard Higgott, whom I have known on and off since we met at a conference in 1981. He took the time all those years ago to talk to a nobody, and treat me as if I were something more. But now he's gone. Resigned, a little over a week ago in

a school for scandal that has put Murdoch on all the wrong maps. Press reports suggest that this was in part due to anonymous accusations of misconduct made to the chancellor, the senate and other state authorities and investigated by private auditors.

These claims were seemingly curated, if that's the right word, by a bold, brassy, yet strangely timorous group of 35 who complained about Richard but didn't want their names known.

We have all read rumours about their complaints, ranging from ample expenses to aisle seating, from tough hubris to tendentious hiring. In common with virtually everyone who has an interest in the university, I have no real knowledge of the allegations against Richard.

So I'm not in a position to judge the case, given the secrecy that has characterised it. I know less than the 35, the chancellor and the senate. I'm just a worker.

But I can say this. The critiques that have dripped into the bourgeois press like the detritus of a tepid, tasteless pint are basically critiques of corporate university life. It is a problem that today's salary pyramids are massive, that campus managers are dominant, that neoliberal governments are bossy and that scholarly freedom is jeopardised.

It is a problem that vice-chancellors come and go, fuelled by the desire to change things for the sake of it (or rather, to embed a visa labelled 'Transformed!' in their CVs as passports to better jobs). Such concerns matter. But they are far from the stuff of corruption — these are problems with higher education becoming market-based. And the critiques are poorly applied in this case.

Richard Higgott is one of the world's most productive and renowned scholars of international political economy. He served Murdoch with distinction over many years, initially as a junior faculty member in the mid-1980s, then as a senior administrator seeking to restore and even transcend Murdoch's former standing.

He returned after decades at supposedly superior institutions because, as he put it to me, he thought he could do something for somewhere he cared about. And it was a last job before retiring, not a stepping stone.

The fact so many similarly distinguished people joined his senior management team (as well as an indolent Master of the King's Buckhounds — me) is testimony to Professor Higgott's reputation and the way it carried over into his vision for Murdoch. That vision was about re-establishing the extraordinary foment and formation that the campus had 20-odd years ago; to return to its cosmopolitan, interdisciplinary, international, problem-solving research focus across a boutique array of subjects.

And there's something else to be said. The arbitrary, clandestine manner in which the case has been dealt with is contrary to the transparent and open norms by which most university business, research, and teaching can and should be conducted. Secrecy of this kind is unbecoming and undemocratic.

My two decades at New York University (a private college) and the University of California (a public system) made two related things clear to me.

The first was that renewal comes by attracting and encouraging people of quality and humanely managing the remainder.

The second was that open decision-making and the special autonomy of higher education were taken as read by everyone involved, including the scions of Wall Street and luminaries of Hollywood who were our trustees.

The goal of attracting and developing the best people to be in largely transparent, self-governing institutions makes universities stand out from governments, corporations, and civil society organisations. Imperilling that openness risks consigning Murdoch to the detritus of history.

The faceless, nameless 35, and those who judge and publish based on their fine words are immune to accusations of jobs for the boys. They stand above the fray. But somewhere in their eyrie, bloodlust sated, do any of them wonder, "What have I done?"

Toby Miller is the Sir Walter Murdoch professor of cultural policy studies at Murdoch University.

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