

## **The Nelson Touch**

### **The New Censorship**

**By Gideon Haigh**

By most modern media measures, the recent travails of the Australian Research Council barely constitute a story at all. This is the nub of it: twice, in consecutive years, the education minister Brendan Nelson vetoed first three, then seven applications for funding of research projects in the humanities and social sciences that had previously been approved by the council's College of Experts. In the second instance, he did so at least partly on the basis of recommendations from three laypersons he'd appointed to a council committee. Then Nelson left for the more prestigious Defence portfolio.

Come only a little closer and the events loom far larger. For the last year, this apparent reopening of the History Wars across a broader front has been the number one topic of university hallway gossip. To use the expression of historian Stuart Macintyre, Nelson's intercession has even been pressed into service as a kind of the-dog-ate-my-homework excuse, with academics half complaining and half bragging that they were bound to have been among the victimised: how otherwise could their clearly deserving application have been rejected? Of course, nobody really knows, for the ARC's College of Experts routinely rejects three-quarters of applications.

Adding to the discontent are Nelson's perceived confederates: Andrew Bolt, the trenchant columnist in Melbourne's *Herald Sun* who deplors "the mind rot in our universities", and Padraic McGuinness, editor of the venerable conservative monthly *Quadrant* and the most voluble of Nelson's ARC appointments. In fact, this story reverberates beyond the groves of academe, which have in any case been clear-felled: it evinces how Australia's arena of ideas is influenced by the power of media and the predispositions of politicians, and how resistance to an abiding Australian anti-intellectualism is buckling in the face of the new populism.

Yet it isn't easy to dispel some of the abundant rumour and innuendo surrounding the ARC. In researching this article, I solicited information or reflections from more than sixty people in and outside events. In general, the response, especially among academics themselves, was either unhelpful or actively fearful. Where academic freedom is concerned, it seems, everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die: astonishment and outrage peter out at the very point where they might be expressed to anyone other than colleagues. "I've been working on this application

for months,” said one, “and you want me to waste it by criticising the people who are going to judge it?” Another recurrent refrain was: “I don’t want to be in one of Bolt’s columns again.” One vice-chancellor responded loftily: “You obviously have no idea what my job entails.” And the ARC? Chairman Tim Besley and chief executive Peter Høj were “too busy” to comment.

Andrew Bolt, by contrast, answers his own phone and is the soul of affability, despite some coruscating disagreements with Robert Manne, a member of *The Monthly*’s editorial board. “Ask anything you like and I’ll give you a soundbite,” he says. Of course, confidence befits one with a full page of the *Herald Sun* twice a week, plus bully pulpits on the ABC and 3AW. But credit where it’s due: in a conversation lasting almost three hours and involving some firm exchanges, Bolt is never other than civil, and generally good-humoured. Some on the other side of politics would flounce out after five minutes.

It’s with Bolt that the chain of events originates. His newspaper column of 19 November 2003, ‘Grants to Grumble’, denounced the ARC’s annual distribution of research monies as a “fountain of grants in search of a drain” administered by “a club of scratch-my-back leftists” peddling “self-indulgent theories and neo-Marxist fancies, much of it hostile to our culture, history and institutions”. Bolt’s own audit of the latest projects endowed by the ARC concentrated on the humanities and social sciences: “In cultural studies, seven of the eight grants were also for peek-in-your-pants researchers fixated on gender or race, and Marxists got all the grants you might expect of priests who worship state power.” Of particular vexation to him were two allocations to senior Melbourne University academics: the first of \$880,000 to Professor Vera Mackie for a ‘Cultural History of the Body in Modern Japan’; the second of \$212,000 to “three Melbourne old-time Marxists” – namely Professor Stuart Macintyre, Professor Andrew Milner and Professor Verity Burgmann – to study the works of Australian ‘radical intellectuals’.

Mackie was ridiculed for focusing on “the classed, racialised and ethnicised dimensions of the bodily experience”: what did *that* mean? Macintyre was attacked not only for having been a member of the Communist Party of Australia but also because “Macintyre got this grant while he was – and is – chairman of one of the ARC’s six expert panels that decide which researcher to fund. What’s more, three of the other eleven members of Macintyre’s humanities panel also got grants this year.” The first challenge is, actually, inaccurate: Macintyre had left the panel by the

time his project was submitted. But the general admonition stands: it is true that, while obviously disqualified from discussion of their own submissions, grant applicants *do* sit on ARC panels.

‘Grants to Grumble’ isn’t Gulliver in the Grand Academy of Lagado, but it’s a very readable column: Bolt made hilarious sport of phrases from the ARC titles list like “mobilising masculinities” and “theory of pedagogies”. However, the piece might have left no trace had Brendan Nelson not apparently been teased about it by other cabinet members; to be referred to as “this allegedly no-nonsense minister” would probably have irked him anyway. Only two days after the column appeared, Nelson demanded that the ARC’s then CEO, Vicki Sara, provide a report on each of the grants that Bolt had mentioned. It was also at this time that, in a letter to chairman Besley, Nelson mooted “broad community representation” in the grant-allocation process.

For Sara, it was a humiliation. “Every year some newspaper will look at the list of applications and get an item out of them,” she complains. “But these were cheap shots, really cheap shots. Poorly informed too. They were simply titles. He hadn’t even looked at what the applications were about, hadn’t so much as made a phone call. It was highly unprofessional.” While Sara does not say so directly, the impression she conveys is that this was one battle too many; within a couple of months, she’d announced her resignation. Asked about the stresses of running the ARC, she says simply: “How do you think I got grey hair?”

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The ARC has had to run some sort of critical gauntlet since it began life in 1964 as a donnish, male-only professariat called the Australian Research Grants Committee, known for having precious little money but steadfast commitment to ‘pure’ research. Politicians were leery of it. When the Coalition was last in power and the ARGC was a tiny adjunct of the Department of Science and Technology, minister David Thomson was apt to complain that he was a simple National Party MP who didn’t really understand all that high-falutin’ academic language: could they just explain stuff *simply*? Journalists, meanwhile, being inherently suspicious of any unaccountable, unelected elite apart from themselves, reported its works with mockery – albeit, usually, of a harmless kind.

When the Hawke government was elected in April 1983, the ARGC seemed to have found a champion in minister Barry Jones. Captivated by the nitty-gritty of research, he would pore over its grants list for weeks. (Professor Don Aitkin, then on the ARGC committee, recalls one indignant phone call from the minister: “Why is this bloke doing work on Ferrabosco the Elder? He’s so boring. Why not Ferrabosco the Younger? He’s much more interesting.”) But it was a false dawn. Though Labor’s election platform had including a pledge of a 10% compounding increase in ARGC funding, the promise lasted exactly two years: Jones was rolled by the expenditure review committee, and the ARGC reduced to distributing green ‘encouragement’ stamps among applicants whose grants had been approved but for whom money was no longer available. The committee then found it had fewer friends than it had imagined. Aitkin remembers visiting senior treasury official Michael Keating: “I said, ‘Why aren’t we getting that money, Michael?’ And Keating said, ‘The real question is why you’re getting any money at all. The stuff you guys do is just a wank’.”

Jones, however, *did* excel in fighting the ARGC’s corner in public. Twenty years ago, he was faced with a similar challenge to Nelson when the Liberal Party’s so-called Waste Watch Committee launched an attack on a number of its projects, including one of enduring fame called ‘Motherhood in Ancient Rome’, by ANU’s Suzanne Dixon. It was actually not nearly so esoteric as it sounded. Roman families – like those of this age, increasingly – outsourced many of their child-rearing responsibilities while mothers worked: Dixon wanted to know if anything could be learned from the city’s rates of juvenile delinquency. Jones, Aitkin recalls, took the fight straight to John Laws: “Barry also usually tends to go on a bit long. But this particular day some guiding angel made him stop at all the right moments and he gave short, sharp answers which put Laws on the defensive.”

Jones’s successor, John Dawkins, went even further when Aitkin gave him the following year’s grants list.

Next thing I know, he’s standing up in parliament saying: “Mr Speaker, I table the grants made by the ARGC, which I understand the Right Honourable Members of the Opposition are *deeply* interested in. So to spare them the labour of reading, I will give them a guide. Here’s one: ‘The Mating Habits of the Red Kangaroo’. I’m sure our friends will be *very* interested in that!” Nobody said a word.

Swept into the new 'super-ministry' of Employment, Education, and Training, what was reconstituted as the ARC in June 1988 became a key cadre in the so-called 'Dawkins Revolution': the minister essentially took \$65 million away from universities – money that had previously been distributed as block grants – and gave it to the ARC to distribute through a competitive grants system, success in which would become a measure of performance and a basis for further Commonwealth funding. However, the benefits distributed themselves unevenly. Sciences, and the bureaucracy for supervision of the new accountability, were the big winners; the humanities, arts and social sciences went through the motions of conforming to the new dispensation, but succeeded mainly in confusing themselves. "In the 1980s, politicians were asking humanities to justify themselves and the humanities were running round like headless chooks," recalls Imre Saluszinsky, now an urbane political correspondent for the *Australian* but then a literary critic. "Melbourne University's English department devoted itself to producing endless mission statements tailored to what they thought the government wanted to hear, utilitarian stuff with cultural studies overtones: 'We live in a society in which innovation blah·blah·blah communication yak·yak·yak and we teach advanced bullshit·bullshit·bullshit.'"

No area was so associated with bullshit as cultural studies, where sociology and anthropology met literary criticism and produced prose that repelled the lay reader like a mouthful of Mace. There were some accomplished practitioners in Australian universities, and some notable works; more often, though, it smacked of an attempt to keep up with the scientific Joneses, recalling Jim Dixon's 'The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques 1450 to 1485' in the "pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems". Cultural studies is often fingered as a cause of the academy's travails; but it might, says historian Professor Iain McCalman of ANU's Humanities Research Centre, equally be considered an outgrowing of them:

There was a mindset that either the humanities belonged to some kind of rarified world of the past, should be done for the sake of higher civilisation but regrettably we couldn't afford them, or that it was infinitely accessible, anyone could do it, and therefore anyone could comment on it. The response to that among young humanists in particular was to try and create a new clerisy, with its tortuous jargon, which was an attempt to show both that it *was* modern, and that not everyone could do it. It was actually not arrogance so much as defensiveness.

Everyone has a theory about how the humanities lost their way in the 1990s –from political correctness to the decline of the canon. In Australia, the situation corroborated Lord Kelvin’s dictum that “what gets measured, gets made”, for what wasn’t, didn’t: there were no points, for instance, for editing a journal, reviewing a book, participating in collaborative endeavours such as the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, or, indeed, becoming involved in public debate. The borrowed laboratory template of the sciences turned everyone into a ‘researcher’, and mingled the task of intellectual inquiry with the responsibility for revenue generation. Saluszinsky recalls: “When I was doing my anthology [*The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*], my dean said to me, ‘You should think about getting a research grant, so you can employ a research assistant.’ I said, ‘What would they do?’ He said, ‘They’d go and read old journals and newspapers and find candidates for your anthology.’ I said, ‘Well, isn’t that what I do as editor?’”

With the end of free tertiary education in 1987 and the concomitant shift in focus to vocational learning, the humanities, arts and social sciences in Australia seemed even more anachronistic. As enrolments in business studies eclipsed those in arts, the numbers of specialist scholars in history, literature, art and music shrank. Language, in particular, weakened: between 1997 and 1999 classes in no less than thirteen languages disappeared from our universities; by 1999, just one university taught Hindi, and only two taught Vietnamese. Though an avowed devotee of histories and biographies, John Howard saw the future in scientific terms. In the Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering and Innovation Council, there was no place for the humanities, arts and social sciences – they were, by implication, not innovative.

By this time, the ARC was distributing about \$150 million a year: a paltry sum in a country where there are few philanthropic foundations and business endows research with the same concentration as a passer-by tossing coins at a busker. “You just had to look around the world to see how badly we had fallen behind in fundamental research,” says Vicki Sara. “The ARC was still part of the department, which was a very unsatisfactory arrangement, and there was no single budget received from the Commonwealth.”

As chairman from September 1997, Sara successfully championed the ARC becoming a fully-fledged statutory authority with expanded funding. Again, it was the sciences that set the hares running. They had a vigorous advocacy body, the Federation of Australian Scientific and

Technological Societies; they had a man on the inside, chief scientist Robin Batterham, whose eponymous report powerfully advocated increased ARC funding; they brought to Australia an eloquent outsider, Bill Clinton's science adviser Neal Lane, to reinforce their message. In the ARC's new incarnation, it symbolically moved into its own premises in Symonston, shared with the Australian Geological Survey, and Sara became the inaugural chief executive, with her own chairman and board.

However, the separation was incomplete: as before, all grants had to be approved by the minister. And from September 2002, the board was chaired by Tim Besley, former chairman of the Commonwealth Bank, and a close friend of the prime minister. Says one senior academic who has worked closely with Besley: "He's somebody who's made his reputation as a political 'yes' man, looks good in photos, never says anything, and never would say anything to embarrass the government." As Sara observes: "In politics, as I'm sure you understand, it's all about control."

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The ARC has always prided itself on exacting standards, often out of all proportion with the amount of money involved. In the 1980s, Don Aitkin had called it "the world's best process for the world's smallest fund"; Barry Jones once chided him for winnowing a \$1000 application away to \$50. Sara made them more exacting still, dividing the old program structure into six disciplinary panels: humanities and creative arts; social, economic and behavioural sciences; biological sciences; mathematics, information and communication sciences; physics, chemistry and geoscience; and engineering and environmental sciences. She also promoted the appointment of "end users": the humanities panel, for example, seats a publisher, a lawyer, a media executive and a museum research scientist among the professors.

Publisher Phillipa McGuinness, from the University of New South Wales Press, was stunned by the voluminousness of the applications and the rigour devoted to their perusal. "I've spent most of my working life in academic publishing," she says. "But I had no idea how many people were involved, and how much time was devoted to it, by really good people. I'd always thought it was pretty shadowy. It is *so* not." In fact, it engulfed her life: "When it was known I was to join the panel, an academic said to me: 'Has your suitcase arrived?' I thought he was speaking figuratively;

then a suitcase turned up. That was my reading every night for the next three months: 100 applications, each taking between an hour-and-a-half and three hours to get through.”

Every application is read by two panellists, who assign it a preliminary ranking and then send it for scrutiny to two Australian and four international assessors, who must have no past personal or professional association with the applicant. These assessments are then sent to the applicant, who composes a rejoinder, on the basis of which they may be re-ranked. Assessments, says Professor Jim Piper, deputy vice-chancellor (research) at Macquarie University, can smart: “Everybody reacts. No one likes being criticised. That’s why I advise people to have a stiff gin and not do anything for a couple of days. Then I say: ‘Don’t react. Address. Don’t say the reviewer’s an idiot. Just coolly go about showing that the reviewer is wrong or out of touch.’”

That’s nothing, though, compared to rejection. “If you get knocked back, it’s devastating,” says Piper. “I know, because part of my job is persuading people, by whatever promises I can make of a better tomorrow, to do it again. I also know because when I look at the website, my hands are shaking like everyone else’s, despite the fact I’ve been making applications for thirty years. You might get three good reports, then a real roughie who says it’s mundane or pointless, and that’s it. A helluva lot hinges on it. You work all day in your normal teaching job, and you’re working all evening on your grants applications, you’re emailing and on the phone at eleven or twelve at night. That’s why I know that people just don’t just put in applications about mindless crap. There’s too much effort involved.”

Possible criticisms are obvious. Members of the panels are often also applicants. It can’t really be otherwise: universities would never consent to their best scholars being disqualified from seeking research dollars. It even has advantages: active researchers are conversant with the latest in their disciplines, and apt to read applications with greater insight. The conflict-of-interest provisions are exacting, and the ARC five years ago also introduced what it called its Quality and Scrutiny Committee, one of whose functions is to evaluate whether the scores allocated to members show a statistically significant bias in their favour (so far, they have not).

No one will ever persuade the ARC’s detractors, like Andrew Bolt, that the process is not just nod-and-wink: “Come on. We’re human. We’re all human ... There’s the groupthink. It’s so obvious. The sort of crap that gets funded. It’s groupthink. Be serious.” Probably no process

would satisfy Bolt; the better the process, the more airily he would dismiss it. ‘Groupthink’ is an easy charge, for it can never really be disproven, and it’s a common one, especially from the media, being there more pervasive than anywhere. But frankly, Bolt doth protest too much, for his objection is not so much to ‘groupthink’ as to ‘think’ that is outside his own interests, understandings and convictions.

It *is* arguable that the ARC’s processes have become too Byzantine, and too cross-disciplinary, with lawyers meant to reach views on linguistics and architects on anthropology. Some box-ticking is muddle-headed: applicants are forced to attest to the benefit to Australia in their applications, for instance, but not to the benefit to their teaching, which tends to widen the gulf between research and teaching. Some effort is self-defeating: the pressure to seek research cash pushes many young academics to apply before they are genuinely ready. But generally peer review is trusted – some testament to a system inflicting so much disappointment. Hence the bafflement when grants the ARC had approved for 2005 returned from the minister with three deletions – never made public – and that it was announced by Andrew Bolt.

‘Paid to be Pointless’, published on 26 November 2004, hewed to much the same line as ‘Grants to Grumble’, but thanks to a private audience with Nelson contained a hint of credit-where-it’s-due: “First, we now have a Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, who seems to share my alarm, if not quite my sense of urgency. This year, for the first time, he knocked back several of the sillier grants the ARC wanted to fund.” Bolt’s ARC columns have acquired an avid university readership; this one circulated like ... well, a minister working a room of backbenchers.

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Some Bolt columns are better than others: ‘Paid to be Pointless’ seemed as descriptive of the writer as the subject. Bolt had to remind readers of Vera Mackie’s earlier grant to bulk his examples of the “self-pleasingly radical or foppishly fashionable”. The columnist returned to form a fortnight later. He responded to a published gripe about his column by Elspeth Probyn with some wickedly well-chosen quotations from the work of Sydney University’s gender studies professor herself: “The mouth machine registers experiences and then articulates them – utters them. In eating we may munch into whole chains of previous connotations, just as we may disrupt

them. For instance, an email arrives, leaving traces of its rhizomatic passage zapping from one part of the world to another, and then to me.”

Yet this was more pretentious than obscure. ‘Rhizomatic’, which simply means root-like, is commonly used in cultural studies to describe the internet. By the standards of some in her field – Gilles Deleuze mused that “multiplicities are rhizomatic and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are” – Probyn’s contention was a monument to clarity. Indeed, the Bolt pose depends on his neither delving too deeply, nor making any effort at comprehension – effort of which he, an intelligent man, is perfectly capable. The hapless Vera Mackie, for instance, is pelted in Bolt’s pillory every time he writes about the ARC, but her most recent book *Feminism in Modern Japan* (2003) is actually informative, lucid, and even contains a sentiment to warm Bolt’s heart: “For explaining women’s current situation, Marxist jargon is as useless and superficial as nail polish.”

Australian academic writing can be dire. Forces other than Marxist brainwashing and political correctness are at work, though. Postgraduate guidance in Australian universities is poor; supervision of PhDs varies widely and is often desultory; few incentives exist to access an audience beyond one’s peers. Stuart Macintyre laughs as he observes that Geoffrey Blainey’s *The Tyranny of Distance* (1967) “would probably qualify for the five points accorded a research monograph, but the publication auditors would need to be convinced it is not a textbook!” In any case, those peers *do* matter. As Phillipa McGuinness points out in the case of Mackie: “Vera’s not writing that book for Andrew Bolt and his mum. No one expected it was going to be sold in Target. But in her field, Vera is a success story, a scholar of international standing. Bolt’s attacks on her have been despicable.”

Furthermore, the last five years have seen some relief of the siege mentality in the humanities – thanks, ironically, to Brendan Nelson, minister since November 2001. He devoted several speeches to promoting their centrality in cultural life; belatedly secured them a Science Engineering and Innovation Council seat, occupied by Iain McCalman; and obtained funding for an advocacy body, the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. Its president, Professor Malcolm Gillies, is one of Australia’s most extraordinary scholars, who applied his expertise in patterns of rhetoric in Roman oratory to patterns in pitch notation in the music of Béla Bartók, and who has edited Oxford University Press’s *Studies in Musical Genesis, Structure*

*and Interpretation* for twenty years. Gillies is also, in his own mild-mannered way, one of Australia's most eloquent defenders of the liberal arts tradition.

My work is of no direct commercial conceivable benefit to Australia. But the forensic nature of the study ... leads to a whole set of skills very far from irrelevant. That's the nature of this area. The subjects may be esoteric. The skills they yield are not. Look at current Australia business leaders. You'll find a large proportion with higher degrees in the humanities and social sciences. You have to say: How do they do this, with what some people say is a training altogether useless? Because the human mind is sufficiently subtle to transfer the skills even if the knowledge or facts do not directly transfer.

It was Gillies who shared the sector's concerns about the integrity of peer review with Nelson in the first week of March 2005. He understood Bolt to be influential, but was surprised by Nelson's responses. In contrast to the attitudes taken to criticism by predecessors Jones and Dawkins, the minister seemed to be hedging.

MG: I talked about the importance of peer review, and the danger to our sector of disturbing the pattern of cutting edge research, particularly the danger of self-censorship. The minister's response was one of recognising that there could be dangers in those areas, although he also said other considerations came into play ...

GH: Like Andrew Bolt's column?

MG (smiling): Let's just say it hung there as something taken for granted.

The ARC's only comment was a glib one from chairman Tim Besley, who said "one shouldn't get one's knickers in a knot" about ministerial interventions; CEO Peter Høj, lured from the Australian Wine Institute only six months earlier, sat pat. When two ARC board members discussed Nelson's veto with Sydney University's vice-chancellor Gavin Brown, their tone was one of what Brown calls "passive resignation". The tone was well chosen for, on 15 July, Høj received a letter from Nelson advising him of "the outcome of my assessment of the Australian Research Council (ARC) against the two governance templates developed by Mr John Uhrig in his *Review of the Corporate Governance of Statutory Authorities and Office Holders*." Which

was: “I have decided to amend the ARC’s governance arrangements so that they are fully consistent with the executive management template and will therefore abolish the ARC Board.”

The ARC had not been part of the consultative process to the Uhrig report, which makes the average grant application read like a bodice ripper, yet was being chosen as the first statutory authority to adopt its operating principle: essentially, that any board not appointing its chief executive was superfluous. The board, in fact, had never been especially significant, although Nelson’s eagerness of implementation may have been more closely related to personal ambitions than fastidiousness about corporate governance: at least, that’s the view of board member Professor Peter Doherty.

PD: This report came along and Brendan thought he’d look good if he was the first to implement it.

GH: Really?

PD: Oh, yes. He’s got his head so far up Howard’s arse he can hardly breathe.

Nelson had spoken too soon: it emerged he needed legislation to abolish the board that didn’t go before parliament until April 2006. But a bigger story was brewing: where John Cleese gave us the ministry of silly walks, Nelson now conceived a ministry of silly titles.

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Brendan Nelson’s desire for a “community representation function” had first been made to Besley after Bolt’s ‘Grants to Grumble’; it had been reiterated in August 2004, but consideration was delayed by the federal election. It’s believed that Nelson first posited a stand-alone lay committee examining grants approved, and that Høj ‘plea-bargained’ him down to making three non-academic additions to the existing Quality and Scrutiny Committee – revised terms of reference for which were agreed on 25 January 2005. In the six months that then elapsed, there were rumours that Ray Martin had been earmarked for one position; it turned out to be an odd trio of Padraic McGuinness, former High Court judge Sir Daryl Dawson and television newsreader Ross Symonds.

How they came to embody ‘the community’ was never explained. McGuinness, since resigning two years ago, rather magnificently, from what he called “the increasingly chaotic and badly managed Fairfax company”, has ploughed all his energies into *Quadrant* (to which Nelson is a subscriber). But propped at his dining table in Balmain supping insouciantly from a can of VB, the 67-year-old savant is still rather bemused by the invitation.

PM: The ARC, I think, is a relatively valuable institution. But, of course, virtually none of the people who make the decisions know anything about the arts, humanities and cultural studies bullshit.

GH: Did you understand how the other appointments were made?

PM: It was quite bizarre. Ross Symonds is a very nice bloke, but he knows fuck-all about anything. Daryl Dawson was interesting, but I don’t know why he got involved.

Confusion was never really dispelled. The committee – chaired by University of Tasmania’s vice-chancellor Daryl Le Grew, and including deputy vice-chancellors (research) Brian Stoddart (La Trobe), David Siddle (University of Queensland), Jim Piper (Macquarie) and Edwina Cornish (Monash) – was designed to discharge two duties: to compare the quality of five marginal papers from each of the six disciplinary panels, then apportion \$5 million in discretionary funds on the basis of a one-to-thirty ranking; and, as mentioned, to scrutinise scoring of members’ applications. When McGuinness, Dawson and Symonds attended their orientation meeting on 4 August, they found the vice-chancellors pursuing their assigned duties, and they were given a list of the titles and abstracts of the thousand approved grants. Everyone parted amicably, and within a fortnight the new appointments had designated a total of 58 grants whose titles were “of concern” to at least one of them, and ten that concerned two of them. ARC executive director Dr Mandy Thomas prepared 49 revised titles for approval.

The proceedings of the meeting on Tuesday, 6 September, however, are the subject of dispute – even the time of Padraic McGuinness’s arrival. Cornish was involved only by phone; Stoddart, Siddle and Piper insist McGuinness was late, perhaps by as much as half an hour. McGuinness denies it: “Sounds like the usual exercise; how you start to try and discredit someone.” The vice-

chancellors are adamant the meeting was completely civil; McGuinness says he and his colleagues were marginalised: “They felt we were intruders ... They’re all about getting their share of the moolah for their establishment. Quite frankly, they didn’t give a fuck about the quality. They were just sharing [the money] out.” And whether community representatives were entitled to evaluate ‘national benefit’ caused the deepest disharmony. Piper says:

The letter of appointment was a bit ambiguous. It said that [the community representative group’s] job was to advise the minister on matters of national benefit. That could be interpreted in different ways ... but at the start of the meeting, Daryl Le Grew stated that he had discussed it with the minister, who had indicated that the job was not to make judgements on national benefit, but to ensure that the national benefits intrinsic in the projects, which had already been judged in the selection process, were properly represented. And Ross Symonds confirmed that that was his understanding. Daryl Dawson didn’t seem to be entirely convinced or happy about that, but he didn’t say very much ... And, indeed, when Paddy arrived huffing and puffing about half an hour late, my recollection is he concurred with that as well.

Stoddart says:

The idea that someone like him [McGuinness] would range across all the applications in all the disciplines and inform the minister about what was sensitive was in many respects laughable. Anything tinged with postmodernism would be canned. Anything with some new theoretical insight post-1960 was going to be canned. Paddy’s a classics and economics man. Anything outside those areas he was going to be suspicious of.

McGuinness felt that he was being denied his proper remit: “I said, ‘What about actually talking about the merit of these things?’ They said, ‘No no, that’s not your role.’ I said, ‘Really, what we’re here for is to be sub-editors’.” But he participated in the rest of the meeting’s community representation stage, issuing only the occasional provocation: “Of course, this cultural studies is all a bunch of cyclic crap, the same bunch of effete wankers assessing each others’ work.”

Afterwards, McGuinness and Dawson shared a cab to the airport.

Their exchanges would have been worth overhearing. McGuinness says: “Dawson felt insulted; felt he’d been asked to do a trivial exercise.” By the time he returned to Sydney and answered a journalist’s call, McGuinness agreed: “Frankly it’s pretty useless. It’s limited simply to commenting on the titles of projects, nothing more ... It’s purely window-dressing.” Reading these comments the next day, Nelson was incandescent: McGuinness was immediately offered anything he wanted. Political points were in jeopardy; at a joint press conference, there was a hint that Alexander Downer was enjoying his colleague’s discomfiture.

Journalist: Do you have any comment on Paddy McGuinness’s complaints that his appointment to the ARC has been a waste of time and window dressing and it’s been a PR exercise for the government and also that some of the titles put up by some of the academics were nonsense that were limited only by his ability to limit the nonsense?

Nelson: Well, I –

Downer: Were they his words or yours?

Journalist: I think they were his.

Downer: Well they’re good.

Nelson: I don’t know how many windows that Paddy has dressed in the past but he is certainly not dressing mine. I have made it very clear to him this morning that he and the members of this committee will have access to all of the details of the grants they are considering ... I have to look the average Australian in the eye, who is a truck driver or a gas fitter or works in a shop or a policeman or a nurse, and I have to assure them that every last dollar of that \$600 million that we’ll be putting in through the ARC is money well invested on research that serves the interests of them, their families and the future of the country. And I’m sad to say that I have not been satisfied in the recent past that all of the research projects put up by Australia’s researchers are ones that serve the best interests of Australia.

McGuinness told the *Australian*: “I’ll stick around and wait to see what happens. At least it will be fun.” Bolt exuberantly reminded fans of his role in the campaign, and theirs: “Never underestimate the power of laughter or the votes of 1.5 million *Herald Sun* readers.” Le Grew circulated an emollient email among committee members the following Monday: ‘Since we met last week I have had some clarification on the role of the Committee from the Minister’s office. We now invite you to make any further comments, from a community perspective, on the national benefit or value of any projects you have highlighted.’”

Dawson declined. Symonds cheerfully waived the offer, noting he “did not see any particular reason to change so many of the titles”. Only McGuinness, who rises daily at 3 am and sets a cracking working pace, was inclined to pore again over applications, especially those whose titles he’d queried. By the time he pressed the send button for his email to Høj and Thomas at 5.23 am on 4 October, McGuinness had not only concluded that 27 grants from the humanities and social sciences were beyond redemption, but magisterially dismissed the whole process as “inherently corrupt”, designed to “confirm existing academic fashions”, and based on research records in refereed journals that were “little more than ... vanity publications”. Cross-disciplinary studies he thought especially susceptible to “lack of rigour”, “lack of expertise” and “social or ideological agenda”, although he poured equal scorn on works depending on “feminist assumptions” and “applications written in the usually impenetrable jargon of obsolete French ‘theory’”. He concluded:

I am well aware that these comments will be greeted with horror and ridicule, along with much *ad hominem* attack. That is what I expect. It was clear from the beginning that the ‘regular’ members of the quality and scrutiny committee were hostile to the presence of three outsiders, and set about limiting the damage from the interlopers, making it quite clear to us (whatever the intentions of the Minister and of the Executive Director) that we were there to play none but a minor sub-editing role.

Siddle, Stoddart and Piper objected to accusations of “hostility”. Each provided accounts of the meeting challenging McGuinness’s recollections. Siddle wrote:

The plain fact is that Mr McGuinness is wrong. There was no hostility. On the contrary, there was a good deal of collegiate discussion about research and its myriad of surrounding

issues ... What Mr McGuinness is asserting in his letter to Professor Høj is that his judgement alone carries more weight than a combination of international experts, Australian readers and the relevant members of the College of Experts.

But McGuinness wasn't finished, compiling a minority report with specific comments on the 27 grants, which Høj forwarded to the minister on 18 October. For the next fortnight, ARC staff worked night and day preparing briefing notes for the minister, defending the grants McGuinness had fingered and saving all but three, although Nelson himself proscribed a further four. When results of the funding round were announced on 9 November, with \$370 million allocated to 1200 projects, losers wore even longer faces than usual.

Details of the seven rejected – five from the humanities and two from the social sciences – have not become public. It is conjectured that at least two concerned studies of gay subcultures, although others may have been vetoed simply for sounding silly. But no one knows why the applications were blocked – other than because they could be.

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It was not immediately known how many projects had been scotched, but the ARC's acknowledgement that some had been, caused widespread alarm, even in the sciences. College of Experts member Professor Graeme Turner recalls:

At the end of 2004, there'd been a bit of an attitude from the other disciplines of: "Well, humanities people are wankers, Nelson was probably right." But the second time, when the social sciences as well as the humanities were questioned, there were rumours that science would be scrutinised as well. Other people started saying: "What's going on?" In fact, the position I took with people in science was to say: "What's the position going to be in a few years on stem cell research? All you need's a shift in the politics to be in the same position."

Little, however, was given away. When Iain McCalman asked Tim Besley about the minister's intervention, the response was dismissive:

I said, “There’s a lot of concern in the sector about this.” And [Besley] was acting chairman, and he just went for the jugular: “You don’t know what you’re talking about etc.” We had a stoush ... He was saying that although a large number had been scrutinised, only seven had been rejected. I said, “OK, but I still think, whether it’s seven or three or one, the circumstances are very regrettable.”

Vice-chancellors of the elite G8 universities asked Nelson to disclose the vetoed projects; Nelson declined. Malcolm Gillies wrote a please-explain letter; it went unanswered. Besley did nothing, and has recently had his hands full as a director of the AWB. McCalman observes that the ripple effects are still to be reckoned with: “What this has done and will do for a long time to come will bring about self-censorship. You watch: young academics will sheer away from gender, because of the perception that it’s being monitored. The fact is that in this country we have no other form of research advancement apart from the government. And it gives them a power like no other country.”

McGuinness devoted *Quadrant*’s March leader to the ARC, without much advancing his critique; it actually bore some resemblance to a column in his eponymous 1989 collection denouncing “the prattlers in the humanities”. He was probably as misused in this process as anyone, imagining Nelson to be interested in intellectual contestation when his main concern was cosmetics. All the same, it is perplexing to find a former protégé of the philosopher John Anderson abetting state interference in the academy, considering that Anderson argued so fervently for “institutions which are not merely autonomous but have a *doctrine* of independence”, and that “the measure of freedom in any community is the extent of opposition to the ruling order, of criticism of the ruling ideas”.

When Nelson was promoted to the defence portfolio in February, new minister Julie Bishop affirmed a commitment to the old system of peer review. Bolt warns that she is in his sights – “Bishop is a weakling” – and remains combative. When Stuart Macintyre merely quoted ‘Grants to Grumble’ in an 800-word op-ed about the ARC, Bolt responded vitriolically: “Professor Stuart Macintyre, the former communist, has denounced me in big articles in the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* as sinister.” Macintyre’s support for peer review evinced his seditious tendencies: “I can see why communism appealed to him.” Vera Mackie got another good kicking, too.

A kernel of truth lurks in Bolt's gripe about the self-pleasuring propensities in some academic inquiry. But it was ever thus, and no one ever took it as evidence of an intellectual fifth column or tried to define the whole of academic investigation by reference to its most esoteric extremes. Almost 950,000 students are enrolled at Australian universities; there are 34,000 permanent academic staff. The most common attitude is fatigue. "My wife is a renaissance scholar with an international reputation," says Professor Bill Kent of Monash University. "She works six and a half days a week in a building falling apart – conditions no office-worker would tolerate – and is paid less than a schoolteacher."

Campuses, meanwhile, are as radical as milk. In order to stuff his straw leftist academic, Bolt is reduced to desperate measures: Macintyre spent exactly one year as a member of the Communist Party of Australia, and his 'radical intellectuals' project encompasses such traitors as Daniel Deniehy, Henry Lawson, Dame Mary Gilmore and John Curtin. Furthermore, one as conversant with communism's iniquities as Bolt should hear in Nelson's rhetoric about clearing intellectual projects with gas fitters and truck drivers an echo of Stalin's preachings that the "bourgeois theorist" must give way to the "practical worker".

Bolt's writings in this debate, alas, revealed an authoritarianism he affects to despise. It is especially strange that a writer so protective of his freedom of expression should take such objection to freedom of inquiry. "What's so funny is Bolt representing himself as an idol smasher," comments Iain McCalman. "Actually, he's a bully. The people he's attacking are not powerful. They're vulnerable, poorly paid people trying to get their first grant in an incredibly competitive situation, whom he attacks with the full approval of the state. He's just a backyard thug and I have nothing but contempt for him." Bolt's columns also showed to good effect a common modern species of Australian argumentation, which might be called the Mandy Rice-Davies Challenge, in honour of her famous mot when Lord Astor denied their affair, "Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?": Academics believe peer review generally effective. They would say that, wouldn't they? *The Monthly* reports them saying so. We would say that, wouldn't we? The publisher is Morry Schwartz, he knows Robert Manne and ... well, say no more.

It is a primitive logic, crudely used, seeking to disqualify from comment anyone with whom Bolt disagrees, and absolve him of responsibility to make enquiries and address counterarguments. In

the world of “Australia’s most controversial columnist”, no one is a free agent, and everyone is tainted by vested interests ... except, *mirabile dictu*, Andrew Bolt, free of fear or favour, and those of whom he approves. Again, the Left is as susceptible to this as the Right, and it does itself no favours with standing ovations for cynical propagandists like Michael Moore. But the Mandy Rice-Davies Challenge is usually the giveaway of an argument unable to stand on its own merits – as, indeed, it is here.

Nelson? McCalman is charitable: “Personally, I think it was against Nelson’s instincts. He was trying to show he could kick sand in people’s faces like everyone else.” But in revealing how far he would go to pander to critics and colleagues, Nelson showed a disturbing lack of political vertebrae. “I’ve been on grant committees in the US and Canada for years, and I’ve never heard of a political intervention so blatant,” says Peter Doherty. “It was only to stop [Nelson] having to read about some of these grants in Andrew Bolt’s column ... or being teased about it at the level of cabinet. You should be able to handle that if you’re a mature human being.”

The events, however, invite larger questions than all the *dramatis personae*, and Doherty, as a Nobel laureate, is securely placed to ask them. “What these people are saying is that certain things shouldn’t be looked at ... and I don’t believe that at all. In a free society, we should be able to look at anything. A free society should welcome debate – which is one of the very depressing things about *this* society, that it’s trying to close debate down, which is always a sign of mediocrity, and mediocrity at the highest political level. What happens next?”