

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/a-less-gross-national-product-notes-from-an-archeological-dig/story-e6frgcko-1226716257723>

A less gross national product - notes from an archaeological dig

BY:STEVEN SCHWARTZ

From:The Australian

September 11, 2013 12:00AM

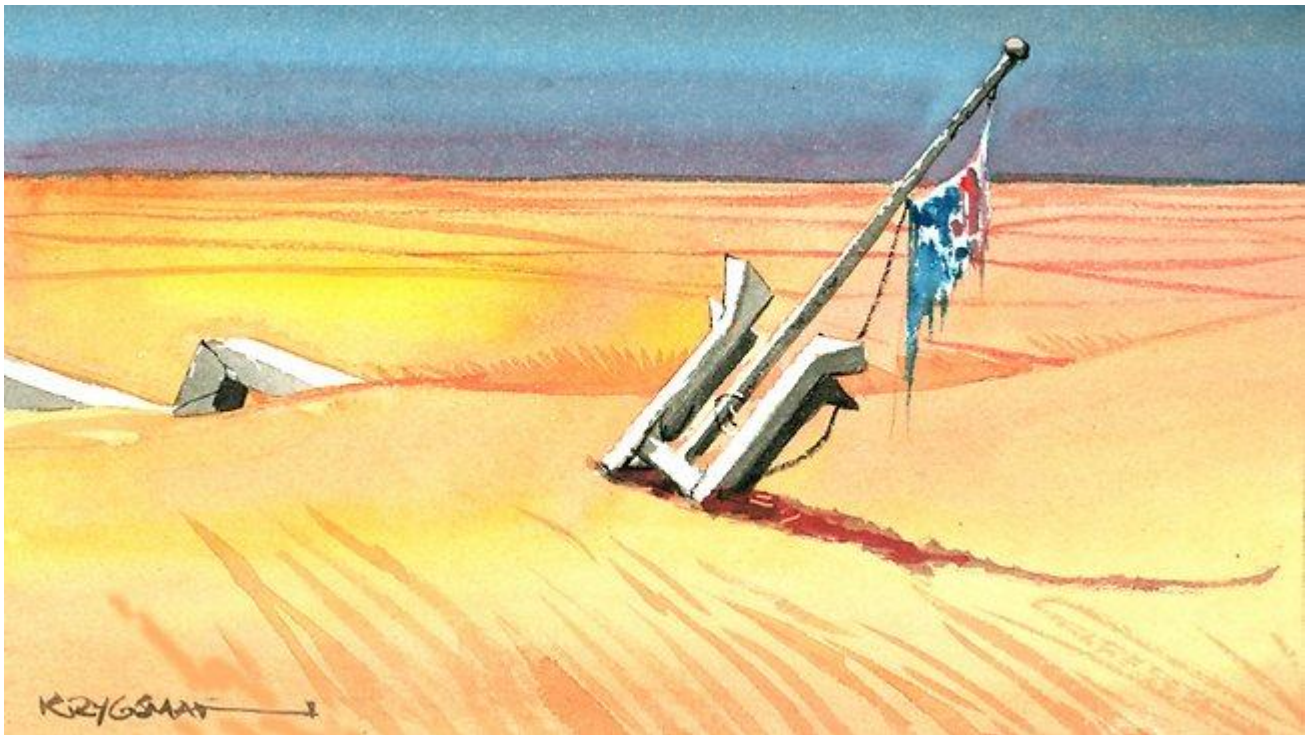


Illustration: Sturt Krygsman Source: TheAustralian

THE direction of research grants under the new Coalition government should give cause for concern in the future.

OZYMANDIAS IN OZ

Date: The future

Subject: Professor Eric Blair, Faculty of Useless Knowledge, the University of Wasteful Research

SS: Welcome Professor Blair. We are pleased that you have agreed to discuss your discovery with us tonight.

EB: Delighted to be here.

SS: So, let's begin. Why did you pick Canberra as the place to start your journey?

EB: Canberra has long been deserted and archaeologists have ignored it. I thought it might be an opportunity to shed some light on a neglected part of history.

SS: But you found Canberra not really deserted?

EB: No. I met a traveller.

SS: What did he tell you?

EB: He said that right in the middle of Canberra, in the midst of a desert of lone and level sands, I would find the remains of a once great Parliament House.

SS: And did you?

EB: I believe so, although only two wings of stone, half sunk in the sand remain.

SS: What happened next?

EB: My team organised a dig. It was easy at first, just removing the sand. But then we hit a hard layer that consisted of shredded election pamphlets.

SS: Was this a valuable finding?

EB: I think so. Every school child knows about Shakespeare, Shelley and Beethoven; we are all aware of The Godfather, Picasso and The Beatles and everyone knows Plato, Aristotle and the Bible, but who would have guessed that Australia was once home to the world's greatest treasurer? Did you know that, back in the early 21st century, Australia had an education revolution?

SS: Were there problems deciphering these documents?

EB: Initially, yes. For example, consider this extract found in the first weeks of digging: "Australia must be repositioned for growth, with a re-interfacing of the digital superhighway so that our country is at the cutting edge of the knowledge-based post-industrial paradigm. Academics in the research space need to push the envelope and start to think outside of the circle, square and box. Academic research should aim to make Australia an innovative, seamless, borderless, world-class, business-facing country going forward."

SS: What does that mean?

EB: We're still working on it.

SS: What happened next?

EB: It took a while but we finally broke through the pamphlet barrier to find a layer of political speeches, Hansard extracts and thousands of pages of legislation - everything from tax codes, superannuation and the incomprehensible output of a long-forgotten agency called TEQSA. One folder contained something called university compacts - pages and pages of meaningless drivel. It would be hard to imagine a more depressing pile of sludge. It is fortunate that no one today remembers any of it.

SS: Is this when you made your discovery?

EB: Yes. Packed in among the flotsam and jetsam was an interview given by an obscure parliamentary backbencher called Jamie Briggs in which he denounced research in the arts and humanities as "wasteful". In his remarks, he sneered at philosophy, frowned on history and wrinkled his lip at anthropology. He assessed research projects by their titles and rejected any that did not appear to lead to "practical" economic outcomes that increased gross domestic product.

SS: What is the significance of this?

EB: It may hold the key to the demise of the Canberra civilisation. Australia's leaders focused on the economy, which is only right. As Mae West said, "I've been rich and I've been poor and, believe me baby, rich is better."

But a sound economy is not an end in itself. It is a tool that can be used to help a nation reach its social goals. However, first a nation must actually have social goals. Unfortunately, Australia had become a nation of means without ends. In the words of a political leader not forgotten, Robert Kennedy, "gross national product does not include the beauty of our poetry or the intelligence of our public debate; measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

The Russians say that the poet always outlives the tsar. How right they are. Shelley lives on while in Canberra, the lone and level sands stretch far away.

Steven Schwartz is executive director of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. He is concerned about the future direction of research grants under the Coalition government