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Oh, the Power and the Passion: Managerialism and Collegiality in Australian Geography

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Australia-Academics-Managerialism-Collegiality-Geography? Is this the stuff of a debate? Well... let us just say that Joe Powell is the only one recently to have spent his time and money sending letters to try to find out what people think,. These issues have escaped recent conferences of heads of departments, and the Institute of Australian Geographers. Other Australian geography professors and ex-geographer vice-chancellors are not scurrying into print. As Powell (1993: 6) remarks, “most academics remain outside the discourse or shuffle around its periphery”. All quiet on the Antipodean front.

It is, of course, Joe Powell’s nature to act as a bellwether on matters of disciplinary and broader professional concern, walking where others fear or choose not to tread (Powell, 1980; 1984; 1988.; 1990). But what of his latest effort? This time, he stands at a historic disjunction pertaining not only to Australian universities but also to those elsewhere. Until the end of the Second World War, our universities were small, slowly-moving and quiet havens accessible mostly to the elite. That changed with the postwar boom which, by the 1960s, led to unprecedented expansion of tertiary education and its extension to mass populations. Funding from a variety of sources was plentiful for both capital and current budgets; growth was in the air and academics learned to love and seldom question it.

By contrast, the 1980s and more so the 1990s have been about squeezing and alloying the system which had previously developed. Developments during the 1960s and 1970s did not seriously erode the exclusivity and “scholarship”, even though they created a minority of errant tenure awards which, years later, were clogging the system and compromising output and performance. But then, the political agenda changed. Universities could obviously become way-stations for those attempting to enter the workforce; student entry and continuation standards might have to be adjusted accordingly. So much could be sold as democratisation of access, whether or not a degree led to any real enhancement of job opportunities.

As Joe Powell pointed out at the 1992 I.G.U. conference in Washington and later in private correspondence, he is not simply a traditionalist decrying the loss of former exclusivities or the heady expansion of the 1960s. At it happens, he appears more as a prophet, in light of debates and strikes presently erupting as employer associations in tertiary education attempt to introduce revised provisions for decisions on tenure and staffing which allegedly threaten academic freedoms.

Powell’s survey identifies some strongly pro-managerial geographers who would be likely to welcome the robustness of the new employer provisions. It is with both amusement and bemusement that I see the paper (our paper) on strategic planning (Wadley

and Lindgren, 1957) edged towards that same camp (Powell, 1993: 22). In fact, the paper's title, as published in *The Professional Geographer*, ends with a question mark (?) which accurately recorded our stance at that time.

Nov, the case can be advanced. Notwithstanding the views of Fay Gale, quoted by Powell (1993: 22), there are probably several ways of running institutions devoted to teaching and research. For example, secondary education has long been bureaucratised: thousands of students have survived and many have even become educated. Private enterprise presumably uses more entrepreneurial, managerial models. Unless we are completely to discount the value of basic and applied business research or the pursuit of "high-tech", we have to conclude that some activity must proceed satisfactorily under such auspices.

One alternative, a collegial model, appeared to work quite well in universities until recently. What, however, were its precepts? Did it depend on professors acting as chairs or heads of departments, a role they progressively abandoned from the 1970s? Did it, indeed, rely on tight disciplinary structures? These points aside, it is likely that the halcyon days of campus "autonomy" masked certain shortcomings. At its worst, an opaque collegiality produced deals in smoke-filled backrooms, plea bargaining, unchecked incompetences, inappropriate solidarities and often unpleasant eccentricities. Then there were its tendencies, variously, towards patriarchy and anarchy. Such excesses were neither equitable nor efficient, though these elements should mark any good operational system.

So did collegiality defeat itself or, rather, were other underpinnings of beneficence and exclusivity pulled away? Perhaps the ebbing of resources produced more critical positions toward university administration, not only from society but also from within the academe. Maybe new student clienteles, fee paying at that, judged situations differently. At very least, as Australia's "binary" system of advanced education was dismantled in the late 1980s, university academies had to answer more cogently to their upgrading colleagues in former colleges of advanced education.

A reasoned position today is that both collegiality and managerialism have their strengths – as long as they are well-run and positioned. Whatever its failings, collegiality has, for centuries, been seen as appropriate in universities, and appropriateness is a virtue. Yet, in recessed and presently quite open environments, collegiality must be redefined. Our paper on strategic planning leant towards team building and the pursuit of group goals as an alternative to the often destructive individualism and neglect which the age of growth fostered. At the departmental level, an infusion of corporatism (not necessarily managerialism) might offer career development otherwise denied by resource shortages and constrained promotional opportunities. At no stage did we argue for an outright bureaucracy, which in its ponderous or bovine form is arguably worse than poorly run collegiality or the more entrepreneurial forms of managerialism.

A good managerial model should be transparent, fair and productive but also needs acceptance. Academia has not so far specialised in developing good "managerial" managers and, as Powell at various stages implies, those imported have often come to grief on issues of work culture. The crudest applications of managerialism in academia, by any system standards, would be laughable were they not so lamentable. After all, there might be a certain elementary appeal to booting out loafers and laggards, geeing-up the middle field and then picking and running with the winners. If, as we are told in David Williamson's play *Emerald City*, the purpose of life consists of the acquisition of a harbourside residence in Sydney, the means lies obviously in diffusing blame and appropriating glory in the managerial way!

Hence, what Joe Powell is currently reflecting is Australians education on the cross-benches. Neither administrative model is ascendant and the system is not signalling

experimentation with any others. What is in place is not running very well and, if managerialism advances, the administrative melange could produce further disruptions and industrial unrest.

In this context, realists sense a paradigm shift based on access and recession and look for viable alternatives such as collegial corporatism adopting the better elements of managerialism. It might include, for instance, purposive staff development via internal and external avenues, acceptance of different academic products and outcomes, new and defined career-long motivations, promotion by exiting the system, and "rolling" tenure. This last idea would define "tenure" as stretching never more than five years in advance, a level which would be maintained as of right by a satisfactory, peer-based review undertaken annually and based on the preceding three years' performance. A deficient review would reduce the tenure level by one year which could never be recovered. Thus, the irredeemable would be excluded from the system in a mere five years.

Borrowing the best of managerialism is neither radical nor breaking ranks. Not only can it be compatible with collegiality but it can sharpen its purpose and inherent discipline. Such a mix has arguably existed in North America for years. To illustrate, the Association of American Geographers' Special Committee on Faculty Roles and Rewards reported in the March 1993 *AAC Newsletter* (p. 19) that

faculty members deserve unambiguous statements of the mission of the institutions and programs in which they profess. They deserve accurate descriptions of the criteria that will be used to assess how much they contribute to those missions. They deserve criteria that have been formulated in ways that permit them to document the quality and quantity of those contributions.

Thus, Joe Powell (1993: 23) has got it right to say that "if we can honestly *engage* the management processes we may turn some of them to better account" [original emphasis]. One could be more generous and corroborate the bulk of his paper. Despite this endorsement, it would be surprising if he (and others) wholly embrace the pragmatic, mix-and-snatch approach advocated here. But that's life: disagreement should at least extend the discussion and, from among few commentators, it remains to be seen whose prognostications and solutions grace the history books.

What history will record is that Powell has done everything possible to engender debate on matters which, by any reasonable standards, deserve it. The situation this time favours individuals and organisations who can see what is at stake, know where they stand and have some prospective designs for improvement. Joe Powell is again at the forefront and should be credited for encouraging Australian academic geography to become aware and define its position.

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