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The Humanities as Heuristic: Coordinating the Sector

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What follows are some personal reflections on what I see as the particular value which the introduction of a Cultural and Communications Studies Electoral Section into the Australian Academy of the Humanities has brought not only to those of us in these fields, but also to the sector in general. What I wish to talk about in this short piece comes from my involvement in the Academy's engagement with governments of both colours in relation to higher education and research policy over the last twenty years. This involvement was initially part of my role as Vice-President, and then as President, but has extended well beyond that subsequently, into membership of national committees dealing with a wide range of issues: these include research infrastructure, national research priorities, the national curriculum, and various iterations of the national assessment of research excellence, engagement and impact.

I should admit at the outset that until I was approached to be one of the initial group of candidates nominated to establish the Cultural and Communications Studies (CCS) Electoral Section of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, I never actually thought of myself as a humanities scholar. Cultural studies was a project that challenged traditional formations of the humanities, and explicitly contested their universalism and aestheticism. I was not particularly interested in values and traditions; rather I was interested in the politics of cultural practice. My initial motivation for seeking to become a fellow was primarily to do with the Academy's strategic value as a platform for dealing with government, and the possibilities it created for greater recognition and traction for research in cultural studies; the Academy was a heuristic device towards that end. Over time, however, that motivation has extended to recognising the broader value of the Academy as a means of promoting and defending the capacity and contribution of the humanities disciplines in general.

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At the time the establishment of our section was first proposed, governments treated the Academy as a disinterested and independent body, whose advice, when sought, could be respected. For many years, though, the Academy had paid little attention to policy debates and had done little to support the interests of the sector as a whole. The creation of the CCS Section was among a number of initiatives which set out to correct that situation. Under the leadership of Malcolm Gillies as President, and then even more forcefully under Iain McCalman, the Academy began to engage more vigorously in policy debates. Some of this early engagement resulted in the humanities' inclusion in planning for research infrastructure, and the revision of Brendan Nelson's national research priorities to better recognise and include research in the humanities. The focus on dealing with policy and its impact on the humanities disciplines has continued to shape the Academy's activities since that time, and both of these issues have returned time and again in ways that have required the Academy's intervention.

As a result of such interventions, and the manner in which they have been made, the Academy has enabled access to policy committees for many humanities researchers across the disciplines, while accruing a degree of authority which has ensured our advice is sought, if not adopted. The CCS section was probably more readily disposed to such engagement than some others, and has continued to play a major role since that time. Most recently, this has had CCS fellows such as Ien Ang, Stuart Cunningham and Gerard Goggin serving in representative positions on ARC committees, sectoral working parties, or leading Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) research projects. I am probably entitled to say that I have been involved more deeply and for longer than just about anyone else in the CCS section, not only in higher education and research policy, but also through my personal appointment to the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) over two terms. PMSEIC had been established by the Hawke government and continued until the election of Tony Abbott as Prime Minister and it dealt with a wide range of policy issues; during my time, it provided advice directly to the Prime Minister and Cabinet on medical, engineering, environmental, educational and other strategic research issues.

While that may sound positive, gaining access is really the easy part. Dealing directly with government, even as an invited representative, is extremely challenging for those who take on such roles. In most of the committees and working parties humanities representatives will attend, they are usually the least powerful person representing the least respected constituency and making the least appreciated arguments to an audience dominated by individuals who may be the least qualified to properly respond to, and certainly are the least interested in, those arguments. Respect has to be won, and you have to take the long view on the outcomes. Realistically, the objective can't be to achieve whatever is your desired end within that specific committee; rather it is to ensure you are in the room for the next stage of the negotiations.

The trouble is, of course, much of this work is invisible to everyone else. Almost all of this work is confidential, and of its nature it occurs within a context where you are never entitled to point to a specific policy outcome for which you might claim credit. As a result, such work is not necessarily well understood by the fellows of the Academy: they only see what is going on in public, and they interpret such activity through their own understanding of the process—which can be quite limited. In one particular published exchange over what was suggested to be a decline in cultural studies interest in 'the political', for instance, the work that I was doing in this space—which was about as explicitly political as it gets—was happily derided by one AAH fellow.¹ The terms in which this was expressed revealed a profound ignorance about what was actually involved if you undertook the task of fighting political battles directly within

the arena of government. More worryingly, I suspect it reflected a more widespread ignorance about the point and indeed the necessity of humanities academics accepting the responsibility of engaging directly in this way.

Nonetheless, while it is inevitably difficult to point to comprehensive victories, I would argue that the fruits of the Academy's engagement have been significant—notwithstanding the fact that at this particular point in time, it looks as if we are facing a new wave of disrespect and even direct attack within the political arena. Those fruits are not found so much with elected governments, although they can be seen there, too, but rather they are most evident in the extent and character of access we have to the relevant departments within the federal government, and most highly visible in the dramatic change in attitude to the humanities we have seen in our colleagues in the sciences, and in medical research, over the last decade.

To give some sense of the change in attitude involved, let me compare two moments. When I was President (2004-7), the AAH, the Academy of the Social Sciences (ASSA), and Council for Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS) collaborated on two days of meetings with members of the federal Parliament, an event called 'HASS on the Hill'. On the first day, FASTS, the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies, issued a press release attacking the spending of 'their' research money on humanities projects. Under the headline of 'Is This What You Had in Mind?', and addressed to then Minister Julie Bishop, it listed humanities projects which carried titles that FASTS felt entitled to ridicule. This was an explicit attempt to undermine any political, as well as financial, investment in the humanities. It came, as I remember, only a year after we had approached the Academy of Science with a request to publicly support our protest against Minister Nelson's vetoing of a group of humanities ARC projects that had been recommended for funding. That request was refused and, scandalously, not one of the other three Academies joined us in protesting at this intervention.

In comparison, when eleven humanities projects were vetoed by minister Birmingham in 2017, the reaction from the sector was overwhelming, including from all the other Academies and from medical research organisations. Their protests did not only repudiate political interference into the grants process, but also explicitly affirmed the importance of humanities research to the national interest. The Academy's advocacy and engagement across government departments, across the learned academies, and in all areas of policy over the last decade or so have played the major role in building this level of support—not just for our legitimacy, but for our necessity.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the current government apparently sees the university sector as indulged and precious, and unlikely to ever constitute a significant electoral asset; while the humanities may not be the only target for criticism and attention, we are certainly one of the weak spots through which a sector of privileged rent-seekers can be attacked. To some extent, in my view, that is always going to be the case—hopes that we might someday correct the prejudice against the humanities in any definitive way that would preclude the need for these continuing battles are in my view unrealistic. The difficulties we face with government in the policy domain are in some sense constitutive; dealing with them is just part of what we have to do if we wish to continue pursuing our work. We can certainly win lots of battles, and there may well be long periods of reduced hostilities and significant achievements, but the seeds for conflict remain as long as the humanities are forced to compete for limited resources in a climate of instrumentalist corporatisation in which the fantasy of commercialisation still preoccupies university administrators and policymakers alike.

One of the things that I have learned through such engagement is how crucial it is for any sector seeking government attention to articulate its position in a straightforward and unambiguous manner. You need one voice to represent the many. Unfortunately, within the humanities, it is most customary for us to take positions on behalf of our disciplines, rather than for the humanities as a whole. As I said earlier, that was pretty much my position when I first entered the Academy. That makes it very easy for government to pick us off, dealing with the disciplines one by one without having to consider issues of scale. More importantly, though, it enables them to say something along the lines of: ‘we asked you what you wanted, and we couldn’t get a clear answer, so we ended up putting the money somewhere else’.

That is precisely what I was told that when I chaired the working party charged with designing a humanities capability for the National Collaborative Research Strategy (NCRIS) in 2008; it was offered as an explanation of the fact that not a single dollar of the \$550 million allocated to the setting up of a national research infrastructure had been spent on research infrastructure for the humanities so far. The Academy’s current president, Joy Damousi, was given a similar explanation for a 2018 decision in the same area—the latest national roadmap for research infrastructure: \$43 million, out of the \$50 million set aside for humanities and social science projects, was allocated to CSIRO to set up a collecting facility for plant conservation. This strategy is not devised solely for us, of course. Those of you who have followed the treatment of Indigenous Australians within the policy space will have encountered precisely the same tactic. Assuming all Aboriginal groups have the same political interests is a handy means of setting their claims aside when their positions appear to be in conflict.

As a sector, we have not been good at, nor indeed much interested in, finding ways to present a united humanities policy face. We are most heavily committed to the internal battles within our disciplines, but also with competing formations within the humanities itself—we love to see the humanities as a field of continual contestation and clarification. It is not surprising, then, but nonetheless debilitating that, apart from the Academy, there is no peak body that can speak for the humanities. Of course, the problem with this is that the Academy is also an elite group, positioned at some distance from the coal face, and this affects their credibility in some contexts. It certainly makes it difficult to claim authority on some issues; this is not so much of an issue around research, but it is definitely an issue around teaching, the plight of casual staff and so on.² The role of CHASS was initially designed to fill that gap, but over its career it has become less involved and less relevant both to the sector and to government.

This is a problem in a context where we need leaders who have the respect of their constituency, and who have the authority to speak on their behalf. From time to time we have had such figures, but there aren’t too many contenders at the moment. And, of course, the personal cost of undertaking policy advocacy at this level is significant; it is necessarily a long term commitment, it can be wearying and dispiriting for long periods, and it brings little in the way of recognition or appreciation from within the sector or among one’s peers. The Academy Council and Secretariat are probably among the very few places where that recognition and appreciation is expressed. This is because the Academy has learnt the importance of using its position to do what it can to coordinate the sector’s responses to policy issues, and to defending the importance of our disciplines to the nation. That, then, is my answer to the question of why cultural studies might bother with belonging to the Australian Academy of the Humanities. This is work that needs to be done, this is a way of doing it, and there isn’t, at present, a viable alternative.

Endnotes

1. This was derived initially from a series of posts onto a cultural studies site, which were collected by John Frow into a publication by 'Various Authors' entitled 'An Exchange on Theory and Cultural Studies', *Cultural Studies Review*, 12:1, 2006, pp 181-201.
2. Which is why the current LASP research project on the future humanities workforce, the brainchild of Kylie Brass at the Academy, is such an important contribution for the Academy to make.