

Mind of the Nation: Universities in Australian Life

By Michael Wesley

La Trobe University Press and Black Inc, 247pp, 2023

ISBN 9781760643706 (pbk), 9781743823118 (ebook)

Reviewed by Raewyn Connell

THIS BOOK OFFERS AN ACCOUNT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND Australian society, mainly since the Dawkins restructuring. The author is currently a Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Melbourne, with special responsibility for internationalisation; he is also Professor of Politics, with a specialty in international relations.

The relationship between universities and Australian society is a troubled one, as the author explains in the Introduction under the subtitle 'Ambivalence', calling on Freud to help. The troubles are spelt out through six chapters and a conclusion, each with a one-word title suggesting its theme. The chapters are written in an informal, sometimes chatty style that is presumably meant for non-academic audiences.

The themes are, in order: Money (largely about the funding arrangements for the university system); Value (largely about dissatisfaction with universities and various critiques); Loyalty (to the nation presumably, as the chapter largely concerns overseas students); Integrity (about the politicisation of universities or their activities, and criticism thereof); Ambition (about the post-industrial revolution and commercialisation); and Privilege (about inequalities in access, and among staff and between universities). The Conclusion, presenting the author's thoughts on the future, is titled Transformation.

In a nutshell, Michael Wesley thinks that Australia has a high-quality university system, and wants the benefits of its teaching and research, but hasn't really been willing to pay the full price. The universities for their part haven't posed the hard questions back. The result has been improvised and clunky commercialisation, draining of money from teaching to research in the search for prestige, and a great deal of policy shilly-shallying by successive governments. Despite this, universities

have created a large export industry, for which they have not been given enough kudos.

There are parts of this account from which any reader can learn. Wesley has experience in several universities and in the federal government's intelligence apparatus, and he knows how to sum up sticky situations. His summary of the neoliberal policy shift and the creation of corporate-style universities is excellent. His analysis of the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation fiasco is sharp—though one wishes he had some inside dope from the three university managements who finally took the Ramsay money. His short critique of university 'rankings' and their consequences is equally good. His characterisation of the scene of competition around new technologies and national economic growth is also worth attention. It's quite possible this will become the ground for the next generation of policy-making, now that the 'Asian Century' rhetoric seems to have faded into the aether.

In a more complex argument, Wesley suggests that the pushing of universities and colleges into a single national market, forcing them into competition with each other, undermined the differentiation between institutions. He makes a good case that this was important in Australia to what happened after Dawkins. All the institutions, in effect, converged on the single model of a general-purpose research university. He suggests this has both undermined their capacity to serve different social groups, and fuelled a new kind of stratification within the system, since some universities (to wit, the G08) were better positioned for the status-driven competition. Inequality has only been amplified by the rise of global ranking systems.

I must declare an interest: I too have written a book about universities, intended for a wider audience. Also, I'm a union member. When I was asked to review *Mind of the Nation* and realised it was written by a current Deputy Vice-Chancellor, I was very pleased. At last we would peer into the top floors of the glass tower and learn—from a political scientist, too!—how our managerial elite really operates. Sadly, I was wrong. The book has no angst-ridden sessions with PricewaterhouseCoopers, no dirty deals in the wood-panelled committee rooms, no bloodstained grapples with the NTEU at Enterprise Bargaining time. *Mind of the Nation* is not a view into the glass tower. It's the view from it.

And from this particular window, quite a number of matters which one might think important to the relationship between universities and society aren't visible. Half the university staff are absent: what's happening to the professional, technical, administrative and maintenance workers isn't in the story. Wesley notes the casualisation of academic labour. He never acknowledges this as an industrial strategy adopted by management, though he offers a magnificent array of excuses for them ('The reasons... are many...'). Widespread industrial conflict, one of the

important new features of Australian university life, isn't discussed. Wage theft gets three lines, and isn't called wage theft. There's a chapter on Privilege, but no treatment of the universities' slow recognition of indigenous populations and indigenous knowledge. Though system-wide finance gets a broad treatment, there's no analysis of any university's actual budget to show how the broad dilemmas are handled in practice. There's no discussion of the corruption that has come with commercialisation, nor of the array of corporations that have inserted themselves into Australian universities' routine operations.

The grittier side of university life, therefore, doesn't feature in Wesley's story. It's also noticeable that a book reflecting on the higher education sector has almost nothing to say about *education* as a process or practice. Both absences are, I think, connected to the author's pitching his work at the level of media discussion, and using media discussions as his principal source. He's mainly tracking the media commentaries and news stories, media releases from politicians and institutions, reports of inquiries, and policy papers. And without other bases of analysis, he's easily caught in the simplifying formulas of political journalism. So when there is conflict or controversy, Wesley presents it as a 'debate' between 'two sides', even 'two tribes' (actual quote). These tribal voices are easily dismissed as driven by prejudice or emotion, while university managers come through as holding the reasonable middle ground.

More fundamental in the book's design is another journalistic habit, to reify terms such as 'the nation' or 'Australian society'. So Wesley writes as if 'Australia' had attitudes and opinions about universities, made decisions about funding, etc. It's not just a manner of speaking. Though Wesley sometimes drops in social-scientific terms such as the 'new class' or 'identity politics' these, to put it bluntly, never rise above the level of cliché. He is left with the reifications, which yield woolly generalities about Australian norms or character or culture, in the style for which Donald Horne, the source of the book's title, became famous. Portentous chapter titles—Value, Loyalty, Integrity, Ambition—show the same vagueness of thinking in defining the questions at issue.

I would like to think that these problems simply reflect bad decisions about how to write for a non-academic audience. But another slide in language suggests it's something more. When Wesley writes of the 'universities' making some decision, or doing something, or having certain ambitions, he almost always means, in fact, the university managements. This is the trick that 'Universities Australia' constantly pulls. This organisation, which is actually the re-badged Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee and never swerves from promoting the managers' interests, announces itself as 'the voice of Australia's universities'. Synecdoche is a powerful ideological device: through it, conflicts of interest and the structure of power within institutions can be, and often is, obscured.

Wesley objects to what he calls ‘ad hominem’ argument in discussions about universities, so let us agree that he is a lovely man who is kind to dogs and children. He is also a member of the ruling group in a university that is part of the dominant alliance in the sector, and it’s that milieu that matters. Read the book impersonally as a document of styles of thought in the top-tier modern university’s executive suite. And tremble for the future.

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