

PROFESSORS, PROMOTIONS AND POLITICS

A VICTORY FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Deborah Smith

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Dr Cedric Pugh, an economics lecturer at the South Australian Institute of Technology, has recently won a long battle for promotion — and academic freedom.

Pugh claims that since 1973 he was repeatedly denied promotion to senior lecturer although he had superior academic qualifications to others promoted before him.

Pugh has been publicly critical of the institute's policies and practices and believes he was passed over for promotion for political reasons.

His promotion to senior lectureship was finally conceded at a meeting of the SAIT Council late last month after Pugh had amassed considerable support from parliamentarians and academics both here and overseas. Many had contacted the institute with references or asking for assurances that Pugh's promotion was being denied on scholastic grounds only.

Most colleges of advanced education in Australia have had to make decisions about job losses, staff tenure and the non-renewal of staff contracts because of funding cutbacks.

They face further staff economies following the imminent amalgamation of some colleges with universities and other colleges.

Pugh claims there is not enough scrutiny of the decisions leading to retrenchment of staff.

"CAEs lack the mechanisms to ensure that these decisions will be carried out using fair and proper procedural standards where academic principles prevail — not who has the power in the institution," Pugh told *The National Times*.

As a result of Pugh's case the South Australian Shadow Minister for Education, Lynn Arnold, raised the question with the Minister for Education, Harold Allison, and the governing body of SAIT, of the establishment of an independent committee to assess promotions at SAIT and other tertiary institutions.

This type of committee, with nominees from South Australian universities, might "further the cause of academic appointments being decided on scholarship rather than on internal politics that may be involved within the institute concerned", said Arnold.

Other parliamentarians were canvassing the idea of legislative amendments to the Ombudsman Act and the SAIT Act which would write external review of staff decisions into the legislation.

Pugh is concerned that situations similar to his own could be experienced by academics at other CAEs when staff are made redundant following college amalgamations.

"It is clear in my mind that those people who lose their jobs will not always be chosen, perhaps in a majority of cases, on scholastic and academic criteria," said Pugh. "They will be determined by who has the power.

"Unless CAEs begin to take some remedial action now my case remains only a bit of personal history in Australian academia. But if more academics in CAEs become aware of the problem, the institutes can start planning to get their machinery for staff assessment and appeals in order before the real crunch hits."

Pugh's problems at SAIT began in 1972. He was outspoken on urban issues — his

specialty is economics — and particularly active in leading opposition to a State Planning Authority development in his local area. He had always been a vocal social critic through the Vietnam era.

In November 1972 the Premier, Don Dunstan, invited Pugh to join the Board of the South Australian Housing Trust, a position he held from 1973–76 and again from 1977–80.

Disagreement later arose about Pugh's appointment and whether the approval of the Director of SAIT had been given. Public appointments were a sensitive issue with the institute administration at the time.

In 1974 Pugh was eligible for promotion to senior lecturer but his application was rejected. Pugh was told that his criticisms of the institute administration were weighed against his candidature. He believes his academic performance, with support from eminent referees, was competitive with others who were promoted.

Since 1970 Pugh has been openly critical of some SAIT administration decisions and of CAEs in general.

He objected to the planning of "The Levels" campus, a section of SAIT built on the periphery of Adelaide. As an academic in urban studies he argued that it was poorly sited to serve students; its buildings had no corporate identity; and access was difficult by public transport.

In in-service conference papers he criticised what he saw as the inequality of the administration's allocation of resources in favour of the technologies above the social sciences, administrative sciences and humanities.

He was also openly critical of the creation of a professoriate at the institute in 1977. "My argument was that scholarship and research at SAIT had been set at a lower priority than was acceptable in the general academic community," said Pugh.

"To have a professoriate you have to have demonstrated to the academic community that scholarly values are important."

Pugh believes CAEs "occupy a sort of a no-man's land between scholarly purposes associated with universities and the definite vocational and cultural purposes of Technical and Further Education establishments.

"In reality the CAEs — especially the older ones — have inherited a staffing and seniority structure where scholarship and research has not been significant in appointments and promotions."

Pugh's promotion battle was long and heated. In 1978 the institute council refused to consider any further recommendations for Pugh's promotion on the grounds that he was uncooperative, obstructive and incompatible within the institute's organisation.

Pugh canvassed support and the institute began to receive correspondence from parliamentarians and Australian and overseas scholars giving reasons why Pugh should be promoted. The British Council for Academic Freedom and Democracy and the Council for Science and Society became involved.

In late 1980 Pugh's promotion, this time to principal lectureship, was denied. He was informed that this was not on academic grounds, but because he had not fulfilled criterion (g) among criteria for promotion.

Criterion (g) refers to the advancement of the institute's objectives.

Later he was officially informed that promotion was denied because he had criticised the institute's policies and administration; the case had generated time-consuming and unproductive correspondence; his contacts with the elected members of council amounted to harassment; and his writing was immoderate.

In April this year three South Australian MPs — Robin Millhouse, Stan Evans and Greg Crafter — asked Education Minister Allison to investigate allegations of discrimination against Pugh.

The council finally conceded Pugh's promotion to senior lecturer on September 22.

Critical to the council's change of mind was their request for, and receipt of, a retraction

and apology from Pugh for the statements he had made about some members of the council and review committees, SAIT director Professor Eric Mills told the *National Times*.

“Pugh came to believe he was being penalised by council because he made critical remarks about policy. It wasn’t what he said, but the way he said it,” Mills said.

“No-one really cared if he criticised The Levels campus, or whatever. But when he was younger and less careful about his wording, he made remarks about a number of people involved on the council and committees which were extremely pejorative.”

ACADEMIC CAT AND MOUSE

Clyde Manwell

There can be no cooperation between classes whose real interests are opposed. . . The cat cannot cooperate with the mouse; and if the cat does suggest cooperation and the mouse is fool enough to agree, in a very little while the mouse will be disappearing down the cat’s throat. But it is always possible to cooperate so long as it is upon a basis of common interests.

George Orwell¹

Cat-lovers generally, and students of animal behaviour in particular, are well aware that cats play with their mice. The purpose of play in the behaviour of many carnivores is to practise and to refine the skills of predation. This is especially noticeable when a mother cat brings live mice back to her kittens. However, the mouse is not without some anti-predator “evolutionary strategies”. If caught, it may feign death, or at least lie still, thereby depriving the predator of the stimuli needed to maintain vigilance. If the cat is careless, the mouse may suddenly dash off, perhaps successfully evading the cat. Another “evolutionary strategy” is for the prey to shriek when caught. This not only warns relatives (and others) but may also attract enemies of the predator itself, thereby allowing the prey some chance to escape.

Having observed the case of the South Australian Institute of Technology (SAIT) versus Dr Cedric Pugh for ten years, I cannot help but note the aptness of Orwell’s quotation and the analogies between animal behaviour and administrator behaviour (no value judgement implied). In essence, this case shows the consequences of class stratification, both within a hierarchical institution (administrators versus staff) and within the larger society (universities versus institutes of technology).

Management, caught by times of tight resources, is trying to reduce costs. Promotion (followed by “incremental creep”) adds significantly to the increase in recurring salaries. Individual staff members, however, see an unfair delay in recognition of their contributions; they may observe that others have been promoted faster and on less merit. This is not to say that the opinions on each side need be entirely accurate. Rather, it is that the situation has become visualised as a zero-sum game, each side being put in the position of losing both money and reputation if the other side wins.

Deborah Smith’s² article suggests that the mouse finally evaded the cat, and even got a bit of cheese. However, there are signs that at least one administrative cat was not pleased. Pugh, having waited nearly ten years for his first promotion (and, in the meantime having written a major book and acquired “an international reputation in urban studies”) requested consideration for promotion to Principal Lecturer. His application, in 1980, was not approved and the 1982 review of that decision was also unfavourable. Pugh criticised the procedures and sought advice from scholars outside SAIT. He received, in 1982, the following letter from the Director, Professor E. W. Mills:

The Council views with grave concern your apparent refusal to accept the procedures prescribed by and decisions of the Council. It considers your correspondence as a refusal to be bound by the terms and conditions of your contract with the Institute and to amount in law to a repudiation of them, such as would entitle the Institute to discharge you from its service.

Whether that view be right or wrong, in the light of your past attitude to promotion and the promotion process within the Institute and your protracted and counter-productive correspondence in relation thereto, the Institute is no longer prepared to employ you unless you unreservedly give in writing the following undertakings by 4.30 p.m. on Friday, 30th April, 1982 and unless in future you adhere to the undertakings so given.

The undertakings required are:

1. That you accept the decision on your application for promotion to the senior academic staff dated 8th June, 1980 and the review of that decision conveyed to you by letter dated 23rd February, 1982.
2. That you will enter no further correspondence or public debate regarding the matter.
3. That you will accept and abide by all recommendations and decisions of those bodies charged with considering future applications for promotion for you.

If you do not give these undertakings within the time specified the Institute will have no option but to terminate your services. Alternatively, if you are not prepared to give the undertakings but wish to tender your resignation from the staff, the Institute would be prepared to accept that resignation without insisting on the strict notice required by Clause 2 of Schedule 1 of the Industrial Agreement between the Council of the Institute and the Academic Staff Association.⁴

Pugh was in a difficult position. He had already received a leave of absence without pay from SAIT to take up a temporary position in the Department of Economics and Statistics at the National University of Singapore, so that he could extend his comparative studies on housing economics to South-East Asia. After an exchange of correspondence involving legal advisers, Pugh gave the required undertakings.

However, before the cat could consume the mouse, larger predators entered the scene. Four members of the South Australian State Parliament wrote a letter, addressed both to the Director and to the SAIT Council:

We have recently seen a copy of a letter written by you to Dr Pugh, a member of the staff of S.A.I.T. We are most concerned at some of its contents, as it appears to us that undertakings are being required of Dr Pugh which are not required of other members of the academic staff of the Institute.

The Institute, as a tertiary institution, surely supports the principle of academic freedom for its academic staff. It should not therefore contemplate censorship or gagging of a staff member, or interfere with his or her right to speak freely on any topic, subject only to the general laws of libel. The suggestion that Dr Pugh will be summarily dismissed unless he agrees to this censorship is surely not compatible with academic freedom.

We are also concerned that summary dismissal on such a pretext, even if legally possible, would have disastrous results for the reputation of the S.A.I.T. Academic institutions throughout Australia and indeed throughout the English-speaking world are likely to react most adversely to an attempted dismissal related to a censorship matter. The damage to the good name of the S.A.I.T. could affect recruitment of staff, recognition of graduates, the standing of the Institute's courses and cause untold damage to the high esteem the Institute currently enjoys.

The undertakings requested of Dr Pugh imply that freedoms he and all academic staff currently have are to be removed from him, and him alone. Such discriminatory action seems unjust and unnecessary to us. We would ask that you reconsider this matter and that the Council of the Institute be informed of this correspondence and of our concern.⁵

I do not know how the Director and the Council responded to these views, but the

exchange in Parliament reveals that the then Minister for Education still accepts the Director's allegation: the Minister said, "... the staff member concerned was considered to have been acting in breach of his contract with the council of the Institute".⁶ It is not explained how Pugh's actions breached his contract and, to my knowledge, the parliamentarians have not pursued the issue further. Nor can I understand how Pugh was supposed to have been "acting in breach of his contract". Why did the administration of SAIT react so strongly?

A clue lies in the nature of the issue: Pugh has questioned the procedures used in deciding upon promotions, not only in his own case but earlier, when in 1977 the SAIT administration decided to confer the title of professor on some of its senior staff. Pugh supported the basic idea, of building up SAIT by offering highly qualified applicants Chairs, but he argued: "... if the Institute would prefer the normal criteria for professorial positions, then the membership arrangements for the selection committee should provide for relevant external membership. The procedures should also include provisions for independent appeal and rigour in following academic principle".⁷

The basic idea, of professorial positions in Australian institutes of technology, is certainly commendable. Australian institutes of technology have been treated as second-class cousins to the universities.⁸ Had Pugh's criticisms been taken seriously, there would have been less strident objection from the universities about the SAIT's professoriate.

There is also, as Orwell understood so well, the matter of class. This is not just the two classes of Marxist writers, but the subtleties of multiple stratification. While the SAIT Council has some very capable individuals in its ranks, most of the local establishment members (for example three Supreme Court justices) are on the Council of the University of Adelaide. SAIT and other Australian institutes of technology have not been able to build themselves up like their equivalents in the USA, UK, Netherlands, France, West Germany or Switzerland. Massachusetts Institute of Technology rivals Harvard; "Cal-Tech" rivals UCLA.

Besides this "underdog" position (quite unfair in a number of respects), there has been a related point of conflict with the federal government. The poorer status of Australian institutes of technology became enforced by the 1978 ruling of the Academic Salaries Tribunal. This federal body, which oversees all higher education, set separate salary scales for universities and institutes of technology. SAIT was alleged later to have negotiated a "sweetheart" contract with its Staff Association in the Industrial Court of South Australia so that it paid slightly higher salaries than the level set by the (federal) Academic Salaries Tribunal.⁹ In 1984 Senator Susan Ryan claimed that SAIT had overpaid its academics by \$175,000, and that she was taking steps to recover that money.

All this "class warfare" on salaries and titles has resulted in considerable erosion of staff morale within SAIT. The situation has pitted universities against institutes of technology, senior staff against junior staff, and administrators against academics.

Thus, it may well be that, despite the good sense and moderation of Pugh's criticisms of SAIT's administration, the issues of professorial status and the alleged overpayment of staff have sensitised administrators at the Institute. Perhaps it is easier for them to displace their aggression on Pugh than to react appropriately to the merit of his criticisms and to put a better case to the federal government to end their second-class status.

In other words, returning to the quote from George Orwell, "it is always possible to cooperate so long as it is upon a basis of common interests", let me look constructively at the situation. The fragmented and demoralised state of higher education in Australia today benefits no one, neither the staff and students, on the one hand, nor the public at large, on the other. Barry Jones, in his book *Sleepers Wake!*¹⁰, made a compelling case for the necessity for Australia to catch up in technology. As Minister for Science and Technology in the federal government, Jones has pressed his case as well as he can — but the trouble is that he lacks help from the leaders representing higher education. In the last federal budget, both

science and higher education did relatively poorly. Jones has become so demoralised by the "wimpish lobbying" from the academic and scientific communities, and the consequent poor slice of the budget, that he has considered resigning his ministerial post.¹¹

The case of SAIT versus Pugh illustrates well the divisiveness of the issues of rank and promotion. I believe that only quite radical solutions will solve such problems. All systems of higher education should have similar systems of rank, if rank is really needed at all. For many years some American universities have run fairly automatic promotion systems, with mandatory periods in each rank, for example, the University of California, by a number of criteria considered the best university in the United States. Individuals who fail to meet certain minimal standards are not given tenure, nor are they promoted to higher ranks — but that is rather unusual.

While it is recognised that the institutes of technology have a somewhat different purpose, it is also recognised that times are changing. The relationship of knowledge to commerce has been transformed as a result of the Second Industrial (or Information) Revolution. Discoveries, even in seemingly *pure* fields, are *applied* so much more quickly than occurred when the separate institutes of technology and universities were created. The lag-times between invention and commercialisation have also correspondingly shrunk. Thus, the apartheid of institutions of higher education is no longer defensible. Furthermore, research — and social criticism — are responsibilities to be shared throughout higher education.

Independent-minded teachers and researchers, like Pugh, are a valuable commodity which SAIT should treasure. A good critic is a good friend, even if a bit uncomfortable at times.

There have been some changes in the composition of the SAIT Council, and a new Director will be in residence soon. The opportunity is there for the cats and the mice to cooperate and to share the cream and the cheese.

References

1. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962 printing, originally published in 1937), p. 200.
2. Deborah Smith, "A Victory for Academic Freedom", *National Times*, 18–24 October 1981, p. 47. Reprinted on pp. 63–65.
3. Andrew Symon, "Letter threat to dismiss lecturer", *Adelaide Advertiser*, 15 June 1982, p. 11.
4. Letter from E. W. Mills (Director of SAIT) to Cedric Pugh, dated 20 April 1982, two-page document. All of the body of the letter is quoted except the first (introductory) paragraph.
5. Letter from Anne Levy, Lynn Arnold, Greg Crafter and Peter Duncan to the Director and Council of SAIT, dated 27 April 1982. Two typing errors have been corrected.
6. M. Allison, in *Parliamentary Debates (South Australia)*, 10 August 1982, p. 474.
7. Cedric Pugh, "Guide to the Institute: an excursion into off limits territory", *Ego* (SAIT newspaper), 24 March 1978, pp. 6–7.
8. Colin Field, "Time to scrap archaic approach to role of institutes of technology", the *Australian*, 27 June 1984, p. 11.
9. Helen Trinca, "Ryan set to trim waistlines of the 'fat cats' of academe", the *Australian*, 7 March 1984, p. 11; Jane Dargaville and Helen Trinca, "Universities face \$80,000 slug for overpaying senior staff", the *Australian*, 2 March 1984, p. 2.
10. Barry Jones, *Sleepers, Wakes! Technology and the Future of Work* (Oxford University Press, 1982).
11. Jane Ford, "Angry Jones may quit over budget cuts", the *Australian*, 24 August 1984, p. 2. After the 1984 election, Barry Jones lost the "Technology" part of his portfolio.

Postscript by Brian Martin

On 2 September 1984 I sent a copy of the two contributions in this chapter to the South Australian Institute of Technology inviting a response from someone representing SAIT, or anyone else appropriate, to be included in this book. As of February 1985 I had received no reply.