

Some recent academic responses to the University of Sydney management push for ‘tainted’ Ramsay Centre money

From: John Keane

Dear Dr Spence, Professor Garton, Professor Jagose, Dear Colleagues in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,

We are writing to acknowledge with thanks the lengthy case put by our Provost in support of the University’s proposed cooperation with the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation.

During the past several days, a fresh set of objections to the proposed arrangement has been lodged by colleagues from the Departments of Arabic Language and Cultures, French and Francophone Studies, Germanic Studies, Italian Studies, Modern Greek and Byzantine Studies, Spanish and Latin American Studies, and the Asian Studies and International and Comparative Literature and Translation Studies Programs. Their letter is copied below. Open letters of objection have been received as well from colleagues in numerous Departments and Programs, including Anthropology, English, Government and International Relations, History, Political Economy, Media and Communications, Sociology and Social Policy, the Sydney Democracy Network and Theatre and Performance Studies. The public controversy has been covered by local and global media, including in the pages of *The New York Times*. We also confirm that many scores of colleagues have so far contacted us privately, to tell us of their concerns about the proposed cooperation.

As signatories of earlier open letters, which are also copied below, we do not wish to repeat the many points and concerns that have been already tabled. Here we focus only on the latest remarks by the Provost, which appear below. We want to do so briefly by indicating our lingering puzzlement about the case he has made for accepting Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation funding.

Puzzle number one: perplexing is the way our Provost uses the phrases ‘Western Civilisation’ and ‘the Western Tradition’ interchangeably. We found this surprising because the University had earlier announced, under pressure, that the proposed program would no longer be tagged with the tainted imperial phrase Western Civilisation. We struggle to make sense of this confusion. Was this merely an unconscious slippage, or does it confirm our well-grounded (by no means ‘conspiracy theory’) suspicion that the University is contravening scholarly standards by doing the high jump, bending over backwards to placate the unbending Ramsay Centre wish for a program version of a ‘degree in Western Civilisation’? More generally, many months into this public controversy, we find the University to be trapped within a bewildering multitude of slippages among the conflicting ideas of Western Civilisation, Western Tradition, Great Books, Degree, Major and Program.

A second puzzle: our Provost seeks to reassure us that course offerings in Western Civilisation must ‘be the University’s program, developed by our staff and not dictated by the Ramsay Board’. This reassurance does not tally with the consultative methods so far deployed by the University and perceived by many staff as shoddy. Our doubts are deepened by our Provost’s admission that decisions have indeed been taken about a draft curriculum featuring Great Texts using questionable hermeneutic methods that (many staff insist) will

surely disturb existing teaching programs and silence a wide range of relevant disciplines and expertise.

Puzzle number three: our Provost refers to the ‘age of declining public funding’ and to government spending cuts, as if these are set in stone. Our puzzlement here has to do with why our University still publicly sides with a federal government that wants to enforce funding austerity and ‘national interest’ criteria on our public institutions? Enforced austerity is under fire elsewhere in the world. Why does our University management consider higher education austerity policies ineluctable?

Fourth puzzle: aside from the magnetism of money, the University’s pragmatic rationale for the program remains frustratingly unclear. Why has the University not insisted that the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation do what philanthropists elsewhere are asked to do: to confirm its munificence by straightforwardly offering its money, without donor-authorized strings attached, to consolidate rather than weaken our existing teaching and research offerings?

The ethical case for accepting funding from the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation put by our Provost is equally unconvincing. The unfolding public controversy of recent months demonstrates that the University’s ethical guidelines are urgently in need of clarification. During recent days, more than a few colleagues have confided in us that they found unintelligible the Provost’s sentences justifying philanthropic funding. False comparisons between renal and bowel cancer research and funding of Western Civilisation courses were equally unhelpful. Our bafflement is compounded by the way the Provost dismissively skated over the LSE Libya scandal and the important ethical funding principles specified by the Lord Woolf enquiry. These ethical principles have a wider and deeper and more enduring significance than he supposes. For instance, they played a guiding role in the more recent Blavatnik School of Government row at Oxford University, where the revelation that the billionaire founder philanthropist of that institution contributed funding to the inauguration of Donald Trump led to the resignation of the School’s most distinguished professor of government and public policy.

Like Voltaire’s Pangloss, who believed that all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds, our Provost seeks to reassure our University community that everything will turn out well by invoking the example of Harvard University. The example is not well chosen, and baffling. The quite recent scandal about donor tax breaks and the widening gap between rich and poor universities triggered by the largest-ever donation to Harvard University by hedge fund investor John Paulson is widely known, and thoroughly documented. Equally puzzling is the Provost’s utilitarian insistence that the University accepts money from all sources except those that do demonstrable harm, or that are against existing laws. The gist of the objections lodged by so many of our Departments and Programs is that Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation money will indeed have demonstrably harmful effects on our University and its reputation. Many months into this controversy, many colleagues are still asking: since the University, facing public pressure, accepted the need several years ago to divest from the harms caused by pro-carbon investments, why in good conscience should it now accept money from a philanthropic organisation dedicated to the furtherance of male, white, Anglophone dominance of our country? If their money is accepted, what is to stop the University from accepting funding (say) from weapons manufacturers in pursuit of high-tech innovations (our Chancellor Belinda Hutchinson may have views on this)?

A final and related puzzlement: when it comes to external funding, the Provost portrays the University as a champion of a kind of ‘anything goes’ pluralism. Since our University is ‘a very diverse community’, runs his argument, objections to external philanthropic funding are a constant possibility, so that ‘we would be in a sorry state’ if we rejected funding because we did not like its sources. Little or no external funding would materialise. This is fake pluralism founded on confused reasoning. Philosophically speaking, pluralism *sensu stricto* is discriminating. Well aware that judgments are unavoidable, proper pluralism is democratic. It pays attention to power relations. It knows that support for anything and everything typically works to the advantage of those who are better organised and more powerful. That is why, for the sake of a just and genuine pluralism, there are contexts where, for the sake of consistency, the claims by the powerful must be rejected.

The string of connected puzzlements listed here encourage us to be blunt. The offer of money from the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilization is no run-of-the-mill philanthropic proposition. We say again that it is tainted. It is the work of a handful of miserable political ghosts bent on pushing a miserable government further to the nationalist alt-right of the political spectrum. It is an attempt to deal a blow to the spirit and substance of our unfinished Asia Pacific experiment with multi-culturalism. It aims to reinforce silence about the injustices heaped by Western Civilisation on our Indigenous peoples.

Other colleagues will no doubt have things to add to these points, and some hereon may be preparing to do so. They need to hurry. Talking is reaching an end. Decision time is nigh, which underscores the point that most of us feel we have little power to decide things, and that the University may well seek to ignore what we are saying. This sense of unfairness explains why the public shaming of the University will continue. The Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation affair will not slip away quietly. It shall not easily be forgotten, for a reason that a conservative friend of the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation long ago explained. ‘When bad men combine’, Edmund Burke wrote, ‘the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.’

Sincerely,

David Brophy (History)
Paul Dwyer (Theatre and Performance Studies)
Timothy Dwyer (MECO)
Victoria Grieves-Williams (GIR)
John Keane (SDN)
Robert Van Krieken (Sociology and Social Policy)
Neil Maclean (Anthropology)
Adam Morton (Political Economy)
Nick Riemer (English)
Lucia Sorbera (Arabic Studies)
Matthew Stavros (Asian Studies)

Re: Further Concerns about Western Tradition and the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation

Response From: Stephen Garton (Provost, DVC)

Dear John – given the personal address I hope you won't mind a more personal response – although as there have been other letters floating around recently I might digress on occasion to address a couple of the points raised in these (at the risk of making my long response even more tedious). I think we might have to move beyond 'disagreeing well' to 'agreeing to disagree'. There are leaps of logic (you will undoubtedly accuse me of the same) and assumptions (and of course I have my own assumptions) that I simply don't agree with. But it also strikes me that there are myths that frame some of the (in my view) mis-representations circulating. Let me first offer a short narrative.

In late 2017, the Ramsay Board announced an EOI process for universities in NSW and the ACT for a 'degree in Western civilisation'. This was not a proposal to establish a Ramsay Centre at any University or a branch thereof (a crucial issue which some colleagues seem not to have realised when drawing comparisons with centres at places like Virginia) but a request to express an interest in receiving funding for a 'great books' course in Western Civilisation. Eleven universities submitted EOIs to the Ramsay Board for consideration, and Sydney was one of those eleven institutions. What we submitted was a case for why we had the skills and expertise to deliver such a program. The fact that (in my view) we have the best Faculty of its type in the country and colleagues doing, by any definition, many units of study already that might be classed as central to any 'great books' idea made our case a very strong one. And we put forward a skeleton proposal (some of the texts we thought we might focus on and the structure of a proposed program) as part of that bid (like all the other universities). The Ramsay Board, however, chose to open negotiations with ANU, but we, like most other universities in the State were in the mix from the very beginning and remain in the mix.

And we need to clarify the story about the ANU. Having spoken personally to the VC at ANU I have a reasonably informed account of what went on (from his perspective). ANU management and academics at ANU were well down the track of finalising a curriculum in Western Civilisation (although they wanted to call it Western Civilisation Studies). The decision to withdraw was not an academic content issue but a response to demands to audit courses and other forms of monitoring that were unacceptable to ANU (and would certainly be unacceptable to us). ANU withdrew on this basis. It was at this point that the Ramsay Board sought to explore the EOIs from other NSW universities, primarily us to begin with, and also began to open up the EOI process to universities in other States, which is why UQ is also exploring the possibilities. And there are other universities waiting to activate their EOI or put in an EOI as the process proceeds.

With that as background let me highlight a couple of points of disagreement with respect to the claims made in your letter:

First, is the assertion that the title 'the Western Tradition' is window dressing and 'must already have been discussed and cleared informally by the Ramsay Centre Board'. This is lacking any evidence whatsoever. There was no such 'clearance' beforehand – informal or formal. But the confident assertion in your letter reveals the 'conspiracy theory' thinking informing some of your claims. And you more than many are aware of the conceptual flaws in such approaches when there is an absence of evidence.

· A further point of concern is the resort to the pejorative language of 'lucre'. Is it lucre when we raise funds to support Indigenous scholarships or research on childhood obesity? The fact is we are raising around \$100m annually from philanthropy to support staff and

students. This is vital support in an age of declining public funding. And, in fact, historically, until the 1950s, about half the University's funding came from philanthropy. As you know many of the great universities of the world (Harvard, Yale, Oxbridge and others) rely heavily (and sometimes almost exclusively) on such 'lucre'.

· The logic of the argument that if the funding supports one thing but doesn't support other things we think important then we shouldn't accept it escapes me. Does this mean we shouldn't accept funding for renal cancer because it is not also for bowel cancer, that we shouldn't accept a Chair in Celtic Studies because it is not more broadly European Studies, that we shouldn't accept funding for a position in Near Eastern Archaeology because it is not also Classical Archaeology, that we wouldn't accept it for Medieval History because it ignores Medieval philosophy. There is a logical absurdity in the complaint that the funds are for some humanities disciplines and not for some of the social sciences. Philanthropy is always a choice to support some things and not others. The role of the University is to seek philanthropic support for as many and varied things as we can. And if we get a donor for the social sciences let me assure you we would embrace the opportunity.

· More pertinent is your critique of the concept of 'Western civilisation' – it is a contested term. And this is where we probably disagree in principle. In the context of pedagogy, I see a contested concept like 'Western civilisation' as a great opportunity to open out for students important theoretical and conceptual questions, including questions around the singular and the plural. For me contested concepts are commonly good launching pads for an educational program. For you it is staining the pedagogic process with a political agenda. That is a valid and important concern, and one that underpins the protections outlined in the draft MOU to safeguard our academic autonomy and our ability to question received concepts.

· Of course, you, and a number of other staff, reject those safeguards as insufficient, although it seems that in this context there is no safeguard you would accept other than rejection. My concern is that there seems to be a type of Victorian miasma theory underpinning some of this anxiety (but that probably reflects my training in medical history). The frame of reference here is an implication that if we breathe any Ramsay air at all we will immediately become infected and diseased. I have far more confidence in the intellectual robustness and resilience of our colleagues than that. There are many 'inoculations' to prevent this – peer esteem, curriculum governance processes, Academic Board oversight, student evaluations and so on that operate for us all. We wouldn't appoint staff who would deliver a propaganda course. And, of course, we ignore the opportunity to offer jobs to emerging younger academics in the humanities at our peril. For me the assumption that academics are passive, vulnerable to external influence and easily corrupted by 'lucre', does not hold water. You clearly disagree.

· It is disappointing that 'many of us worry' that teaching core texts like Plato, St Augustine, Locke, Chaucer and Shakespeare, is 'old fashioned', when many of our finest colleagues already teach these texts and similar texts without feeling the need to go wider. They seek depth not breadth. This is a dismaying dismissal of much that is good in what we do. Of course, your response is rightly that a curriculum should do more than this and I agree. That is why we have insisted in our MOU that this be a program not a degree to ensure that there is space for students to explore other intellectual traditions (and 'other civilisations') as part of their candidature. More importantly, however, as the Vice Chancellor has said on more than one occasion to explore one set of intellectual traditions or one canon of texts does

not devalue other traditions or textual canons. Our role is to facilitate student opportunities to explore multiple traditions.

· In that context, I'm equally puzzled by the discourse of 'competition' that has been deployed in some of the responses. Surely all disciplines in the university are in one sense in competition with each other. That is the point of the university – to offer a variety of perspectives and approaches not a singular methodological canon. The fact that colleagues in GIR teach Locke, some in Philosophy teach Locke and some in History might teach Locke is not egregious competition but exactly what we should be about – offering a variety of perspectives on texts. At a more mundane level how a program with a very small commencing cohort (30-60) can threaten disciplines like History and English is equally puzzling (are these disciplines really that vulnerable? If students are leaving these disciplines then they have more to worry about than Ramsay). Moreover, what if the great books program brought in additional students over and above our normal quotas? Or alternatively stopped 30-60 of our best students going to another university that did offer a Ramsay program? But more fundamentally, this is exactly why we have insisted that this be a program so students in the great books program are required to do majors and minors in other departments and schools, to open them up to other ways of reading texts. Universities must be about plural rather than singular (to use your language) ways of reading texts. Competition is at the very heart of the pedagogic mission.

· You read some of this as 'dog whistle' politics. Perhaps your point is less a miasma metaphor than a question of 'legitimation'. A valid concern, but again that is why we have insisted that it be a University program (with Ramsay funding). Again, I have more faith in our colleagues to develop and deliver a high quality 'great books' program that would withstand review by serious scholars in these fields. These types of courses are found at some of the great universities of the world and their reputation has not suffered. But it is important to say again that the program has to be the University's program, developed by our staff and not dictated by the Ramsay Board. This is precisely the purpose of the draft MOU, to ensure our independence but to also acknowledge that all donors have the right to say they do not wish to fund what we propose.

· Some colleagues, especially evident in the thoughtful, considered but no less critical letter from English, have raised concerns about the lack of a coherent rationale for the program when we teach so much already in this area. As we have said before, the curriculum is yet to be developed (beyond a very preliminary list of key texts). But, of course, many universities in the world have great books courses that sit alongside deep disciplinary programs in the humanities. At a general level the rationale for such a program is that while much of what might constitute a program in the Western tradition already exists in the University (and not just in FASS, also Science, the Conservatorium, Architecture and others) this is done in disciplinary and departmental contexts. In other words, it is structured by student choice of majors and minors and none of it is stitched together as an overall program of concentration (as we have done in the past around things like Asian studies, American studies, Film studies and the like). Ramsay funding is to support such a stitching together of what we do into a structured interdisciplinary program to sit alongside disciplinary approaches that increase student choice. Any rationale should highlight the inter-disciplinary strengths of the 'great books' approach. But the key will be in designing a good curriculum.

· A further important point raised in the English response (and some others) is the question of texts and context. A vital question I agree and of course many of our disciplines

offer exemplary ways of exploring texts and contexts and from a variety of perspectives. But the implication seems to be that ‘great books’ approaches do not do texts in context. I’m not sure I understand that argument. Great books might explore a different mode of exploring the questions of texts and contexts but I can’t quite see why it doesn’t place texts in a context as seems to be implied in some of the current commentary.

· As to your point about philanthropy let me object to the subtle slight-of-hand in your formulation – ‘the University has never rejected donor funding from organisations whose politics are objectionable’. That is not what I said. What I said was ‘it has never been University policy to reject funding from a donor simply on the basis that we did not like the politics of the people on the Board’. I have to insist that your formulation is a misrepresentation of what I wrote. We of course reject philanthropy from organisations on the basis that they support ideas or products that do demonstrable harm (tobacco companies for example) or promote ideas that contravene the law (Neo-Nazi organisations for example). But to reject funding from an organisation that might support the mission of the University and grant us the freedom to do so as we see fit just because we object to the views of two members of the Board is not a valid ground for making judgements to accept or reject funding and no university would do so merely on this basis.

· Universities, however, do make mistakes as you point out. The example you cite at LSE is a case in point but those few examples are far outweighed by the vast amounts of philanthropy that passes through the hands of many universities in the world. Harvard does not reject funding from donors whose political agenda might be seen as well to the right of many members of the Ramsay Board just because of their political views and it would be absurd for them to do so. If this became the guiding principle for philanthropy we would be in a sorry state because the university is a very diverse community (as the consultation over Ramsay demonstrated) and thus on this basis almost every bit of funding we received might be contested by someone else in our community who objected to someone on the Board of the donor organisation.

That is something that would do us serious reputational damage.

Stephen

PROFESSOR STEPHEN GARTON
Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor