

[article for Jane Richardson, *HES*]

Rethinking the Role of the Humanities and the Social Sciences

by Don Aitkin

In the last couple of months five decently lengthy volumes have been published on the present situation and future possibilities of the Humanities (three volumes) and Social Sciences (two volumes) in Australia. Published by the Australian Research Council, in its series on disciplinary research strategies, the volumes are the result of some impressively collaborative work on the part of the relevant learned academies. There are many fine and informative individual chapters, lots of statistics, and a reasonably comprehensive coverage.

And yet ... My guess is that these books will quickly disappear from the sight of Government and the ARC, though perhaps not so quickly from the attention of the learned academies. There are recommendations aplenty, and no doubt some of them will be acted upon. But I don't see them changing things, for there is a great gap.

To explain what it is and why it is great involves a little history. The ARC established the disciplinary research strategy series nearly ten years ago, as a means of involving the peak bodies representing academic fields of activity in accepting some responsibility for direction-setting. Occupied as it was in funding individuals to carry out research projects or to work on them, the Council felt the need of some allies in assessing the contributions, directions and needs of whole disciplines and fields. The first of these partnerships, with the geosciences Council of Australia, produced an excellent forward-looking account of the Earth Sciences, and there have been a number of others.

The volumes for the Humanities and Social Sciences (hereafter, HSS) are a little different, because the spread of the Humanities alone is very much greater than that of the Earth Sciences, and the label 'Humanities' is one that we use mostly for brevity and convenience. Few scholars describe themselves as 'social scientists', and there is no useful collective noun for Humanities scholars. Understandably, we (I would include myself in both groupings) self-describe as 'historian', 'anthropologist', 'philosopher', or some other disciplinary noun. While the ARC says in the Foreword that 'it wants to know what each discipline sees as its future', the volumes can't do that collectively, and don't do it uniformly well at the level of the separate fields of study. In short, the volumes will not greatly aid discussions about funding or direction-setting.

The opportunity to be involved in one of these surveys is not a thing to be sneezed at. While the ARC emphasises that those involved should look further ahead than now, and have concerns other than funding, every field has a first-class opportunity to argue for more funds, and all take advantage of it. These volumes are no exception, but their persistent tune is that somehow money is being diverted away from HSS. Only those who take part in the funding decisions of the ARC and its panels can say whether there has been a deliberate move of this kind. There certainly was not one in my

day, though there is no doubt that 'science and technology' has an easier row to hoe in getting attention for new initiatives beneficial to its funding.

It needs always to be remembered that research is something you do, in large part or in whole, with other people's money. The great bulk of that money, as far as the universities are concerned, comes from the public purse, and it is getting harder to obtain. It has not been easy since the 1970s, and the need to show that research funding actually paid off for the country was part of the context for the decline of the Australian Research Grants Committee and its replacement by the Australian Research Council in the late 1980s. But how much are we talking about? If you add up all the HSS research funding for 1992/3, the total comes to a bit over \$600 million. Extrapolated for a decade, that's \$6 billion.

In Australian terms that is a tidy sum, and you might ask what the public has received for it. On this the volumes are rather silent. The first Social Sciences volume says firmly that the Social Sciences have had 'a profound influence on many aspects of Australian life' (p. 3), but doesn't go on to say what the influence or the aspects have been. On the following page the reader is given nine examples of 'generic benefits' which include 'the elaboration of information generating technologies' and 'the development of locational analyses'. On the last page of the second volume, after more than 600 pages, comes a brief section on 'The Importance of Research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences' — in the context of the training of graduate students! This wouldn't cut much ice with the parliamentary Education committees on both sides of the House. How could you use these volumes in mounting a case to Government for more funding? How long would anyone listen if the case was made in the context of an election campaign?

In truth, all five volumes are inward-looking. They take completely for granted that which should have been argued for again and again — that HSS research underpins our whole culture, our very sense of who we are, the enormous achievement of a tolerant, curious, progressive, educated Australian society in the past fifty years. It has made modern 'Australia'.

That is what has to be argued for, and demonstrated. Not once or twice, but as a steady theme in the Australian conversation. In accepting that this is what they have to do HSS scholars would be doing no more than accepting that they are part of the Australian university system, which desperately needs to engage the Australian people in a dialogue about the supreme importance of the proper public funding of education — not simply higher education, and not once or twice, but continuously. To adapt a line from Stephen Parker's perceptive essay on 'What Legal Scholars [Do] When They 'Research' ...', the HSS 'must communicate a more convincing and detailed account of what they are doing when they are 'researching', and of the fundamental value of that research'.

Why is it necessary? There are a few important reasons. The first is one recognised and lamented in the volumes: in our society, in our day, it is science and technology which get all the attention. The Co-operative Research Centre scheme is built on an understanding (quite false, in my view) that 'science' has produced our present, and will, if properly managed and

funded, produce our future. Science seems to have Government's ear. Science has a Ministry. Science has confidence. And so on.

Some of this is myopic. Science alone could have produced nothing. Without the emergence of the nation state and systems for generating public revenue and notions of public welfare and the fact of electoral democracy — without political science and economics, if you will — science would be where it was in the early 19th century, a hobby for gentlemen with adequate means. This is well-known within parts of the HSS, but it is not argued for in these volumes, or very much at all. And the laments about the excessive influence of science can be turned right around. Science might have part of a Ministry, but it is a little part, and it is HSS graduates who run the big departments and the country. The academies may lament about how little money they have for research, but the \$6 billion spent over a decade on HSS research would run the whole university system very comfortably for a year. One is entitled to ask what the HSS are trying to do, and why \$6 billion is not enough. The danger is that it will be seen as too much.

And that points to the second reason. There is no collective sense of purpose or mission in these volumes, and there needs to be. Yes, it doesn't fit comfortably with traditional notions of academic research, but these traditions are not very old (there was no public funding for university research of any kind until 1964). And the dreaded Science manages to have one. The fact that both the Humanities and the Social Sciences are built on the notion of critique, and are sceptical rather than believing, doesn't help. Scientists 'believe', some of them passionately, in the importance and virtue of 'science', and many devote considerable personal time and energy to serving it. The two academies that sponsored these volumes need to put their minds to these issues, and it is plain from the recommendations that they see the need. One can only wish them well.

For — the third reason — they are dealing with a political economy which is very different from that which saw the establishment of research funding in the 1960s. Notions of nation-building and public welfare are very much in decline, individualism is rampant, public money is scarce, tax cuts, not increases, are the order of the day, unemployment is high and the balance between the young and the old has shifted towards the old. If this were not enough, the very success of universities has led to a profound loss of mystique and respect for them. The number of university graduates is numbered in the millions, but that has led not to the development of powerful alumni associations so much as a widespread view that universities are rather like high schools, only less disciplined.

Almost nobody outside the university world believes that teaching and research are inextricably linked. The supposed link is not obvious to undergraduates, to say the least, and the clear priority inherent in the view that an academic's 'real work' is his or her research is unfortunately easily recognised by students. Now for the hard part: Mr Howard and Mr Beazley are both graduates; so are most of their senior colleagues; so are virtually all the people who advise all of them; so are the people who run the major pressure groups, even some of the unions. None of them will do as I have done, and read all five volumes. But if they did, what would they think?

That there was some kind of time warp and that HSS scholars were firmly in it.

The universities have a huge task, and one for which there is no obvious body of talent. It is to explain to the Australian people, who provide the money, what it is that they do, and why that is hugely important for today's Australians and even more important for their children. We have to stop talking to ourselves, and stop talking to Government, and start talking to our neighbours and fellow citizens. If we don't, then further financial cuts are inevitable. People in the Humanities and the Social Sciences are at least as likely to do this well as people from other parts of the academic enterprise, and they have a fabulous story to tell.

Telling it, in my view, is the real task for the learned academies.

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