

UNIVERSITY WAY OUT OF ITS SCOPE OF LEGITIMACY

THE Talking Point parade of UTAS supporters continues, with Michael Field pointing out the dangers of what he calls nostalgia, and “the pull of fond memories”.

Michael wants us “to look optimistically to the future”, but there are some difficulties that need to be teased out for citizens before they can embrace the optics of optimism.

Optimism without appropriate legal authority might be a fantasy.

First there is great uncertainty about the vision, or rather the fuzziness of the visions, being provided. The UTAS Hobart City Master Plan seems a bit odd. UTAS wants to move to the “heart of Hobart”, the CBD, but the move itself is a relocation of the Sandy Bay campus. Michael suggests that UTAS will “create opportunities to build new parks and green the city”. The Master Plan suggests that green space will be required in Melville, Murray, Bathurst and Campbell streets. The CBD will host UTAS and be changed into a student campus.

This thinking seems really odd. UTAS has decided to transform the city of Hobart. UTAS does not have this authority.

Michael notes that opposition to the move really started when the Sandy Bay campus plan was announced. Michael then lists all of the good things that will occur at the present education precinct. There will be “much-needed housing ... opportunities for child care, education and aged care, commercial, tourism and innovation spaces”.

UTAS will be doing Hobart a great service by providing 2700 residential properties. UTAS does not have the authority to do this.

Michael makes a contentious point that is at the essence of the UTAS development problem. He says “the University Council is the correct and appropriate body to make such a decision”. As chancellor Michael should have been seeking an amendment to the University of Tasmania Act. The existing legislation gives UTAS delegated authority to pursue excellence in teaching and research and to provide appropriate educational and research facilities. UTAS has no legislated authority to play at town planning, to even contemplate transforming the CBD or the Sandy Bay education precinct. Real estate development and the creation of equity funds are not

included in the existing Act. This is a serious and eventually fatal flaw in the “big move”. There is no “big authority” to validate the “big move”.

There is an urgent need for the University of Tasmania Act to be reviewed; but not to extend the authority of UTAS, but to be called to account. We live in a representative democracy. We elect our government and consent to be governed, the cycle is repeated when the citizens re-elect, or not, their members of parliament.

The Hare-Clark system in Tasmania gives voters the added opportunity to get rid of the underperforming MPs. Some authority is delegated by the parliament. Police, teachers, public servants and statutory bodies exercise delegated authority on behalf of the parliament and answer to a minister. All can be called to account for their actions and have these measured against appropriate notions of fairness, equity and the rule of law. This should be happening with UTAS. UTAS has no legislated authority to do as it likes.

It is time for the UTAS to return to accountability. Public policy is the domain of the parliament. If the Tasmanian government wants to turn an educational precinct into high-density housing, that is fine, that is what governments do, and they make these plans knowing that the electors will sit in judgment on election day. UTAS is exercising limited delegated authority and has no place making public policy.

UTAS sits outside our democratic cycle of accountability. The Victorian-based Chancellor will not face scrutiny or an election, nor will the mainland-based members of the University Council, nor will Rufus Black. The lack of accountability has led to strange decisions. Teaching is moved to “online” delivery at the same time as the university moves from Sandy Bay to the city. This is self-contradictory nonsense. An

80-member Shake Up committee is selected to have input into a decision that will not change, more nonsense.

The university changes its focus from teaching and research to real estate development, more nonsense.

We are invited to imagine a northern suburbs uni student who could not find his way to Sandy Bay as a justification for moving the campus 3km into the city centre, patronising nonsense. UTAS offers \$30m for K&D on the market for \$15m, financial nonsense. UTAS is in serious need of a policy and financial audit.

The entire “re-imagining” of the Hobart CBD and the Sandy Bay education precinct has proceeded without the parliamentary authority and without adequate scrutiny.

Michael’s nostalgia might be for a long past time when the university acted within the scope of its enabling legislation. The optics of optimism need to flow from legitimate community consensus.

The UTAS exercise of authority without accountability is undemocratic.
The UTAS strategy lacks legitimacy. Michael Field led the university to
embark on a policy adventure without an appropriate legislated mandate.

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