

Open letter to the Premier concerning the University of Tasmania

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**Honourable Jeremy Rockliff MHA
Premier of Tasmania
Parliament House, Hobart 7000**

Dear Premier

You will already be aware of a very significant level of public concern about the proposals on the part of the management of the University of Tasmania for development of the University's Sandy Bay campus and a relocation of its activities to the Hobart CBD.

The level of public concern about developments in Hobart has only been exacerbated by the University management's aggressive campaign to promote a 'yes' vote in the current elector's poll. That campaign effectively diverts public funding for teaching and research into a dubious attempt to intervene in a democratic process—an attempt unprecedented anywhere in Australia, and in which the University Chancellor, traditionally a more neutral figure, has been an active participant. Equally unprecedented is the renewal of the contract of the Vice-Chancellor as an open-ended appointment – no other University in the country has done this just as it would not be done in the Australian corporate world.

The publicly available submissions to the current Legislative Council Inquiry confirm what has already been apparent from the course of events and the character of public discussion over what is now a very long period: namely, that there is considerable evidence of a serious breakdown in good governance within the management of the University of Tasmania that threatens the future of the institution. The University's own key officers and governing bodies seem not to be operating in accord with the role and function of the University as set out in the *University of Tasmania Act 1992*; there appears to be a serious issue concerning an endemic culture of institutionalised bullying within the University; a range of questions hang over many of the University's property and financial dealings; and there are significant concerns, within the academic community and beyond, about the capacity of the University, in its current configuration, to meet the genuine teaching and research needs of the State.

We would draw to your attention that the University, as defined in the Act, is not simply comprised of Vice-Chancellor, its Chancellor, or its Council. The University is the body of staff and students. Moreover, at a broader level, the University exists to serve the Tasmanian community and any social licence it possesses derives only from that community.

While the response from government to the University's current plans has been to point out that it is an independent body, it is critical to note that the independence of the University does not mean, or imply, any unconstrained power and authority vested in, or possessed by the Vice-Chancellor, Chancellor, or Council. Any power and authority that may be possessed by the latter can only be exercised in a way that must be answerable to the staff and students of the university and to the wider Tasmanian community. That the University must be accountable and answerable as described above derives from the very fact that it is governed by the Act, passed by the State Parliament.

When the institutional structures of answerability and accountability internal to the institution fail, then the management of the University has to be called to account by the only body that has over-arching authority here – the body by which the University was indeed established, namely the State Parliament, and so, ultimately, the State Government and the Premier.

Given the dire situation in which the University now finds itself, we call upon you, as Premier, to take heed of the responsibilities of the Government in relation to this key institution.

We fully understand that it would be unusual for the Premier to intervene directly in the affairs of the University, but this is a highly unusual situation (although not without precedent in the history of the University of Tasmania). We also understand that there are severe constraints on possible intervention and that, short of certain extreme measures (and outside of the broader legislative and compliance requirements by which the University's management must abide), neither the Premier nor the Parliament can compel the University's management to take any particular course of action.

Nevertheless, we believe that a full inquiry into the University is required and that it would be ill-advised and against the public interest for the University's management to continue to press forward with its plans until such an inquiry can be undertaken.

We therefore request that, as Premier, you give full support to the process already underway in the form of the Legislative Council Inquiry into the Act (though we leave open the question as to whether any further process may be required).

In addition, we request that you advise the University's management to respect that process by immediately suspending all activity in relation to its current development proposals until such time, at the very least, as the Legislative Council Inquiry has been completed and its recommendations considered.

We look forward to your response to what is an urgent and pressing issue for *all* Tasmanians.

Yours

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