

Dear Professor Steger:

Thank you for your response to my email about the dismissal of Dr. Austin. Yes, there are always at least 2 sides to every story. But your side is the accusing side, so let's see what Dr. Austin and some of his student supporters have to say about your statements below. I am sending this message to them for their response to your statements and I will then forward your comments and theirs to the same individuals and organizations addressed on my "circular."

You realize of course that the information that you have revealed about Dr. Austin in your email below to me breaches the prevailing legal norms of confidentiality concerning the employment status of professional personnel such as Dr. Austin.

Sincerely

Richard L. Harris

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Dear Professor Harris,

Please find below my reply to Professor Steger's response to your letter to the VC; I'll fax two documents cited which are only in hard copy. You are free to publish this reply as desired. RMIT management has gone to some lengths to suppress debate and unfettered information flow, including legal threats. As public intellectuals, however, I sense that we honour higher obligations.

Un abrazo solidario, Robert Austin

"Manfred Steger" <manfred.steger@rmit.edu.au> writes:

Dear Professor Harris,

I am bewildered by your efforts to disseminate a circular regarding Dr. Robert Austin which bears absolutely no resemblance to the actual events surrounding this case. As the former "Head of School" mentioned in the circular, I had hoped you would at least make the effort to contact me to get the other side of the story. For example, do you know that ALL faculty in the Language Program at my former School signed and submitted to me a petition urging me not to renew Robert Austin's contract (he was on probation) because of consistent rude, uncollegial, and harrasing behavior?

RWA: In relation to my tenure-track (not contract) position, the RMIT branch president of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has written to the Vice Chancellor: "Our dispute is based on the University's failure to properly apply the principles of natural justice as it applies to academic probation policy ... If complaints have been made against Robert then he has a right to know who has made them and to be given an opportunity to respond. At no stage has Robert or the NTEU been provided with copies of these alleged complaints or been given the opportunity to respond to any issues raised." (Pierce to Gardner, 6 December 2005). In response, the VC wrote: "The misconception that the University based its decision to not confirm the appointment of Dr Austin on the basis of alleged complaints from staff and students is unfounded." (Gardner to Pierce, 9 December 2005). Beyond this refutation of Steger's claims from senior management, does he tell us that one of the alleged complainants was an unsuccessful applicant for my job? Does he say that when she made a complaint of harassment against another staff member that I, unlike him, followed RMIT procedures and resolved the matter? Does he mention ignoring the corruption that I uncovered in the program? Does he mention my public opposition to the creeping privatization of RMIT's technical education sector consummated during his five-month reign? Or to the right-wing curriculum shift in the school, co-led by a nominee for international adviser to the reactionary Bjelke-Petersen "Joh for Prime Minister" campaign in 1985 (whose tenure, in contrast, Steger endorsed)? Does he mention that the university's Director of International Relations has written effusive praise for my collegiate relations? Or the number of students heading for Venezuela, Chile, Cuba, Spain and Argentina under agreements I've fostered less than 12 months from arrival (see Hill To Whom it may Concern, 16 November 2005)? Does he cite confirming discussion of my "work plan" at a probation meeting four months ago although that plan does not yet exist? (see Steger to Austin, 23 December 2005, attached).

Does Steger say that he has, in effect, admitted on record to having breached university procedures throughout? Or relate the frenetic political censorship which has marked his leadership? Does he deny the storm-trooper tactics that he and Pro-VC Cumming visited on Spanish colleagues, an NTEU delegate and myself meeting off-campus on 30 September last? Or that he relied on a lawful directive to compel staff attendance at an in-camera "confessional" two working days later? Or that, like 80 per cent of ICS staff, all those so compelled are untenured? Or is this all simply inconvenient history?

MS: Or have you been informed that students have been complaining about Dr. Austin? Most recently, one student complaint sent to the Vice-Chancellor states that the student has been consistently subjected to unwanted and harrassing emails by Dr. Austin, who sent them from his office computer, thus violating RMIT policy?

RWA: Aside from the VC's refutation above, Steger's own probation report lauds all aspects of my teaching. Further, RMIT has a policy on student complaints and if made, they must be made in the appropriate way. Not only have none been made; reports have been consistently effusive: see the samples from an incomplete archive of probably several hundred at <http://defendrobert.blogspot.com>. Typically, Steger attaches no evidence to support his claim that one of 300 student recipients of the

attached email allegedly complained. Please note the content of the circular in question (below): is Steger saying that job experience, cultural, academic and political announcements are harassment? Does he speak for the 299 who did not complain, and in many cases have complimented the Spanish program as by far the best informed of any within the School? His simplistic reliance on RMIT email policy to censor conceals his ideological claim that when management speaks it does so objectively, but that the Left does so politically (and should thus be silenced, precisely what management seeks to achieve).

MS: Or are you aware of the fact that there are official cases lodged with the NTEU union against Dr. Austin by other faculty members?

RWA: Professor Steger threatened the NTEU with legal action in early October for exposing his conduct and by implication his position on natural justice. Evidently he has never been an NTEU member, despite claims of a gung-ho union past. Moreover, the NTEU has never provided any evidence of a complaint. As with his deception, hyperbole, innuendo and outright defamation above and elsewhere, one cannot escape the conclusion that in Steger's hybrid Bush-Disney world even a rumour of an anonymous "official" complaint, which might or might not exist, by someone who may or may not be an NTEU member, or may have joined just in time to complain, is more than enough to convict. Demonisation fits this schema well. Didn't Arthur Miller once write on theme?

MS: As a fellow scholar in global studies, I would assume that you'd be more careful in researching the issues surrounding this case before sending out slanderous and misinformed circulars that are designed to taint the reputation of your colleagues. I'd be happy to hear from you should you be open-minded enough to discover the other side of the story.

RWA: As distinguished labour historian Rowan Cahill has noted in relation to the case, this is the vampire-like approach of those who thrive on darkness and mystique and perennially pretend to be in possession of "secret" material, but cannot stand the light of day. In practice, Professor Steger's alliance with shock-jock media commentator Andrew Bolt links him to one of Australia's premier racist polemicists. When one-time apartheid supporter John Howard denounced distinguished scholars Henry Reynolds (*The Other Side of the Frontier*) and Raymond Evans (*Writing about Race*) as "black armband historians", Bolt was at the forefront of the Howard supporters (see Stuart Macintyre & Ana Clark, *The History Wars*, passim). As when he enlisted Bolt's article attacking my endorsement of students' right to protest Howard's anti-student legislation, his latest edict (23 December) presumes that free speech requires management approval.

Professor Rob Watts of the School of Social Sciences and Planning (SSP) debated Bolt on the future of public universities before an overflow audience on 25 November last, on campus. But in International and Community Studies (ICS) - please note the name - publicity was systematically torn down (even in staff-only areas) and replaced by "authorized notices only" directives. Despite requests from some ICS staff, and postponement of several other major RMIT events in deference to the "Great

Debate”, Steger persisted with his “free pizza” social function for ICS staff at precisely the same time. The School of ICS briefly headed by Steger has now been amalgamated with the School of SSP. ICS agreed to accept the incumbent SSP head as interim head of the new school but according to management SSP, with 50 per cent more PhDs and triple the union membership of ICS (60 plus vs under 20 per cent), has refused to accept Steger.

If, as the ICS NTEU delegate has stated publicly, there has not been anything in 15 years at RMIT to rival this witch-hunt, the broader implications of authoritarian censorship, the privatization of public space, conformist pressures and the intimidation of staff can only diminish the status of the institution. Such practices are abhorrent to public higher education. Their class character has been clear from April 2005, when management advised that the Latin American Studies course I am developing should paint a rosy picture of capitalism so as not to offend Business students.

The NTEU has now resolved to test this dismissal in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. The groundwork for resistance laid by the Defend our Universities campaign, punctuated by protests from around the globe, a vibrant end-of-year public meeting and student demonstration, have opened the way to defeat of this quintessential assault on free speech, student rights and academic independence. But more is needed ...

Robert Austin, BA (Hons), Dip. Ed., M.Ed, Ph.D

Melbourne, 10 January 2006

>>> Robert Austin 4/12/2005 3:52 pm >>>

Subject: Protest 5 December; HR Day; Language exchange; CELAS; ILAS summer school; conference 06

Estimados/as Estudiantes y Colegas,

1. Protest against Spanish Coordinator dismissal, 1 pm tomorrow, 5 December, Chancellery

Around 50 people attended the public meeting on this dispute last week, discussed its broader implications for civil liberties and the role of universities in society, and carried the attached resolution.

A protest has been called for this Monday, 5th December at 1:00 PM, outside Building 1 in Bowen Lane (the Chancellery Building) - enter RMIT from La Trobe Street. Full details posted to: <http://www.defendrobert.blogspot.com/>

Regular updates can also be found there, including links to articles, the formal appeal statement, and the academics union (NTEU) position. If the internal dispute procedure continues to be blocked by management, the NTEU will take the case to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

Lisa Farrance and Liz Thompson, for the *Defend our Universities* campaign.

2. International Human Rights Day events, 10 December

These include a major rally at 1 pm, Saturday 10 December, State Library, Swanston St; and a Latin American Solidarity Fiesta at Brunswick Town Hall from 7 pm. Please see attachment.

3. Melbourne Spanish English/Inglés Language Exchange Group (repeat for new students)

As new-ish students may not be aware, there is an opportunity for Spanish conversation practice as per attachment. As this is not an RMIT activity, I have secured guarantees from the organisers with respect to protecting student privacy and the non-commercial nature of the group's activities.

4. Internship and voluntary work option in Melbourne (repeat for new students)

The management of the Centro Español Latino Americano de Asistencia Social, Inc. (CELAS - Spanish Latin American Welfare Centre, Inc.) have offered to negotiate potential internship and voluntary work options with students. Information on the work which CELAS does is available at <http://www.celas.org.au/welcome.htm>

If interested, please email myself with a copy to Robbie Guevara <E54664@ems.rmit.edu.au>. We will then put you in touch with our contact people in CELAS. Alternately, contact CELAS and keep us informed. Gracias. Options include:

1. Volunteering through the friendly visiting program. This program allows elderly isolated people to receive a visit from a volunteer. Please advise students interested in this program to contact Celina Rojas at CELAS on 9687 0181 or via email at c.rojas@celas.org.au. Availability is dependent on the number of clients who seek out this service.

2. Volunteering at the Adult Day Care Centre. The ADCC is a planned activity group funded through Department of Human services designed to keep elderly people active, both physically and mentally and provides a forum for those most isolated to interact with people their age as well as giving their carer's a rest once a week. Please advise students interested in this program to contact Hernando Albornoz at CELAS on 9687 0181 on Mondays and Fridays.

3. Reception and Administration. These students would need to have a very advanced level of Spanish, as reception is the first contact clients have with CELAS.

Some clients may be quite distressed when ringing due to their individual circumstances and hence we need students who are able to really understand client concerns. Please advise students interested in this program to contact myself at CELAS on 9687 0181 or via email at alexandra.sosa@celas.org.au

4. Volunteering with our Computer Classes Program. This program is run solely by the work of volunteers. I am currently trying to put together a course for mid October but have no volunteer teachers available. The majority of participants in this program are over 55's and most have never touched a computer in their lives, hence the skills taught are very very basic and anyone with minimal computer knowledge would be able to teach a class. We don't have set curriculum's so another possible job for a volunteer would be to put some manuals together in Spanish which can accompany these classes. Please advise students interested in this program to contact myself ASAP at CELAS on 9687 0181 or via email at alexandra.sosa@celas.org.au

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5. La Trobe ILAS Summer School

Students wishing to enrol for credit at the Institute of Latin American Studies' Summer School (see attachment) should consult their School and program manager/s, as well as the La Trobe contact, to resolve the issue of available credit before enrolling. These courses have been running successfully for several years and, as I am familiar with the staff and course content, am happy to recommend them.

6. Conference on Fiction & Documentary Film in Latin America - June 2006

Please see attachment for details.

Feliz fin de año, Robert Austin