The force of destiny: Industrial relations in Australian universities

There is an atmosphere of the theatre about industrial relations in the traditional sense of the term — the direct negotiations between employers and employees. The situation usually involves only one or two union representatives and the employer's legal representatives. This is true even in cases where there is a complex of universities or a large number of employees. The atmosphere is often one of formality and lack of enthusiasm. There is a sense of resignation and acceptance of the status quo.

Secondly, there have been structural difficulties in the operation of industrial relations processes. Staff associations have had an identity problem in deciding which employers they represent, either large universities or smaller colleges or trade unions, a dilemma that still falsely persists. The development of conventional industrial relations in universities was inhibited until recently by the narrow interpretation of what constituted an industry. Finally, until universities became large complex organisations with a bureaucracy of their own, there was not an overwhelming need for awards and negotiations.

So much for our overtures: the lights are dimmed and the curtain rises on Act I. We are in a calm peaceful setting dated about 1974. The old system is about to topple. The Federal Government has announced it will fund the universities rather than rely on joint funding with the states. The minute of relaxed discussion between the vice-chancellor and a few senior staff about academic conditions or a chat between the rector's department and a co-operative member of the general staff association about an unimportant minor incident, federal monies are becoming interested in universities.

Operation first. Let us introduce the major characters, develop a little skullduggery between them and end with some dramatic incident, often a number of comedians, culminating in a splendid curtain that will dominate the remaining action.

J.F. Scott
Vice-Chancellor
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It would be unfair to portray anyone in this drama...
“When federal registration is achieved, the AUA will do its utmost to ensure that all major disputes are heard before the Federal Conciliation Commission.”

While this may happen in the short term, I do not believe that it represents a continuing pattern of activity in the future for a number of reasons. First, the AUA is genuinely anxious to secure federal registration in any area in which to discuss salaries and similar conditions than the Academic Salaries Tribunal. A federal award is binding and not subject to government intervention. When federal registration is achieved, the AUA will do its utmost to ensure that all major disputes are heard before the Federal Conciliation Commission rather than in the states, for this would avoid a piecemeal formation of action in various states that may improve conditions in an uncontrolled way. FAUNA, also, would be concerned too much actions being generated by state or individual associations but it frustrate the overall strategy. It seems likely that academic staff industrial relations will within a year or so mainly take place federally, leaving the state jurisdictions to deal with problems that remain unsolved.

This will have considerable consequences. On the universities side, AUA will have to handle the employers’ case. The three universities have now the right to absorb them, the Association now distinct from the AVCCs with its own staff, and procedures, but will it face major difficulties.

The governing bodies of universities have rigidly considered themselves as autonomous bodies able to determine conditions for their staff. Although they have given their vice-chancellors authority to negotiate on their behalf, councils will find it difficult to accept that proceedings conducted elsewhere will override the desires policies. It will not be easy to formulate policies such rules in my case. Councils traditionally have significant staff membership, often active members of their staff associations, and will have to formulate procedures by which industrial relations can be served to save the interest of the whole university.

Equally, AUA will have to ensure that lines of communication with industrial universities are sufficiently swift and secure that such policies can be taken into account. Inevitably, however, decisions will sometimes be taken that run contrary to the wishes of some councils and their vice-chancellors. That will cause friction, tension and unease, particularly if the context of the decisions is more concerned with conditions than salaries. In time, I believe that the whole concept of collegiality will be destroyed.

Another difficulty may be connected with the inter-union rivalry and the problem of the employers having to negotiate with several unions representing academic staff. The original concept was that AUA and the FAUNA industrial organization would be the prime parties, with the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation having a small role in that state. However, we are now an industry and, over time, will find ourselves behaving like an industry. It is unlikely that there will be prescribed hours of work, the institution and ad hoc, but the flexibility and freedom that we have all appreciated will decline. The Force of Mercy may be stronger than the power of the old. But there is a future at least. The curtain is almost up. At this time this was written Professor Scott was Chairman of the Australian Universities’ Industrial Association. He has since been succeeded by Professor D. Carloo. In view of the considerable concern over the minority status of women academics (it is surprising that many women postgraduates have attracted so little research interest) when it would be safe to assert that a doctorate is now a universal prerequisite for an academic career. By examining some statistics and collating the few studies that have been conducted, this paper reviews what is known about the current position of women in postgraduate study. The figures for women postgraduates are some commonly known facts. Women now constitute almost half of the university undergraduate population.

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Table 1

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<th>Females %</th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Females %</th>
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