The new broom

A fiction for our times with true quotes

Arthur O'Neill

> A naughty person, a wicked man, walketh with a froward mouth.
> He winketh with his eyes, he speaketh with his feet, he teacheth with his fingers;
> Frowardness is in his heart, he deviseth mischief continually; he soweth discord.
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> *Proverbs, 6: 12-14*

António Coimbra, the first vice-chancellor of an Australian university to come from Portugal, was well-equipped for the job. In his elegant application, António played up to expectations that candidates should be able to demonstrate '>Outstanding communication, interpersonal and persuasion skills …' and '>High-level management, financial and fundraising expertise'. Two doctorates from north European universities – 'Endocrine secretions and polar bear mating' (Bergen/Spitsbergen) and 'Heidegger's influence on the formation of Japanese aesthetics' (Freiburg) – impressed the two deans on the search committee: António had the right combination of credentials, salving their respective worries that the anointed candidate might lean one way or the other. A search consultancy, Eagles & Onions, was more impressed by António's mid-life MBA from an esteemed American Business School. Its executive director told the consultants that António had shone by investigating the beneficial effect of demolishing silos in the higher education system of a former Soviet republic. The consultants advised that new leaders of that country had embraced António's conclusions and, further, had adopted them for health care and public transport reforms. Eagles & Onions had tested local stakeholder feelings at the highest political and business levels, finding that a new era in relations with the University could issue from appointment of this candidate. The unanimous recommendation to Council was that António get the job.

Trouble was soon to follow on his arrival. The university's top marketing man told António that he needed to do something quickly to match advertising by competing institutions. He suggested and António agreed to a campaign built around an invitation to 'Discover the difference' at the University; and advertisements for staff and students, banners for open days, even disposable plates in the cafeteria bore these words. Then a stirrer left over in an academic bolt-hole found that a funeral director used the adjuration as slogan. Wits made much of the discovery: a graffiti artist sprayed 'undertake the debt' on a sandstone wall of what used to be called the Old Arts building; and another, suspected of being from the Medical School, put 'coffin won't bring up the fees phlegm' on a side of the anatomy lab.

What was to be done? António, taught to turn every disadvantage into an opportunity, called the university's slogan an apophthegm (earning plaudits from rarefied minds); and changed it to 'Be the difference' which suggested existential propulsion rather than post-mortem apprehension. Then he moved out the marketing flack, upped the monetary ante and invented an astral title for a new bunny: Vice President, Division of People and Advancement. António knew that the thing to do was cast a wide net with an open weave: 'This is a new position which will be a pivotal role [sic] in the … Executive team as the University embarks on the next phase of its development locally, nationally and internationally.' The ideal candidate combined the grasp of a field marshal ('proven leadership skills in the development of high level strategy and policy') with the touch of a private ('a particular focus on the student experience, student lifecycle'); and – parenthetically – 'promotion of the university'. Not only did the role require 'the capacity

to work effectively across the entire organisation with a strategic and collaborative outlook' but also a baptism by total immersion was prerequisite: 'The successful candidate will be someone who identifies strongly with the University's mission, history and commitment to students, staff and the region'.

The one chosen to lead a university will start by framing another design for it, that is, by getting in quick before being obliged to face mounting tides of reserve about purposes and credibility. A public relations disaster became occasion for António to institute a root-and-branch review of organisational structures. There could be no better place to start than by cobbling-together a new school, the one he called School of Communication and Arts; and within that, to bring in new blood in (what else?) public relations. So it was that the University sought a Professor and an Associate Professor in Public Relations. The advertisement started by masking the school's combination of a hotch-potch with a deep perception:

> Despite the diversity of our disciplinary mix, the two parts of our name points [sic] to a unity: the acknowledgement that creative expression has to communicate and that every act of communication is expressive.

Mentors in the United States had demonstrated to António that just about any old scrap can be deemed admissible to the sacred precincts by invocation of the word 'scholarship':

> We are seeking leaders in Public Relations scholarship to develop our research reputation and our teaching program … We aim to educate the standard bearers for the profession of Public Relations with a global focus and to enhance the research field of Public Relations and strategic communication with an international perspective.

As a further preliminary to hunting big game, António dabbled in the nether reaches. When a professorship in philosophy was up for grabs, a dolt from Exercise Science asked an applicant what philosophy was, and she explained that it was what you were thinking about when you were thinking about yourself thinking. The frisson he experienced on hearing that settled António's preference. The University needed a zest of postmodernism in its mix. Staff would be kept on their toes, and provided with a target other than the Vice-Chancellor.

Reforms did not end there. With many having taken scholarship a little too seriously and so losing relevance, or 'impact' as António was wont to call it, the Business School needed gingering-up. While appreciating that it was people who did things (as he did), António's copy-writers kept to the illusion that positions acted and had roles. Thus the 'position' of Professor of Marketing was said to be 'responsible for conducting high-quality relevant and impactful research in marketing …'. Having an impact on stakeholders in business was accomplished by inviting expressions of interest in twelve part-time 'Professors of Practice' positions in the School.

The general plan was to ruffle feathers in the academic dovecotes and make changes stick with selective inducements. António's next steps were to consolidate a Praetorian Guard and to reward the loyalty of its members with the donation of subordinates. After a review of executive ranks, assisted by Eagles & Onions, the word went out that: 'Following the recent appointment of its new Vice-Chancellor … [the University] wishes to strengthen its leadership capability with four key appointments to its senior executive team.' Looking after research was getting too much for one senior executive to handle, so throw in a Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research): 'Supporting the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), she/he will have executive responsibility for a portfolio that spans [the University's] international research strategy, research partnerships, grants management and research ethics and safety compliance.' He/she would be rewarded in turn: 'The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research) will also provide strategic leadership to a large team of professional staff.' And there was another 'key strategic leadership role':

> As Director of Research Strategy, you will drive strategic research development to ensure the University enhances it's [sic] research profile and increases the level, quality and diversity of research funding.

This Director 'will lead the staff of the Research Strategy Office'. It was just as well that no-one in these arrays was expected to do research. That would have resulted in the appointment of too many research assistants.

Add a Senior Adviser to the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Academic): '… the position of Senior Adviser is responsible for providing high level executive and management support to ensure that the work of the portfolio is managed efficiently and its strategic priorities are achieved in a timely and effective manner.' Don't forget the place of education in the university's mission statement. Have a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Students). Add an Assistant Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) and give punch to that job:

> Teaching and Learning is a key strategic priority area, and the university is currently undertaking large-scale transformation in student learning (Learning 2014), thus distinguishing itself as a world-leading university of technology....

> ... Your demonstrated track record will include driving cultural change and engaging others in a vision and direction to deliver and implement strategy. Your comprehensive understanding of current issues affecting the higher education sector, international postgraduate education and the online learning environment will underpin your ability to leverage online resources to enable innovations in teaching and learning that will enhance the student experience and performance.

Eagles & Onions had identified Deans as managerial hitches in the chain of command. Years earlier, a former dean had written about the 'contradictory structural or authority relation' of the role:

> The dean is both champion of the troops (faculty members) and their claims, and key figure in the larger management structure, at the point where senior management and Mission meet the essential educational purposes of the university. As we all know, it is hard to serve two masters, and consequently deans tend to become protectors of their own realm or mouthpieces of central authority, or to move backwards and forwards across no-man's land, sometimes under fire from both sides simultaneously, unable to wave a red or even a white flag convincingly in either direction. Living a conflictual role, the dean sees but can rarely resolve the educational and organisational crisis of the modern university.

António had a better idea than helping deans to solve their conflictual roles: get rid of deans by getting rid of faculties. Herd incumbents into cowpats like the School of Communications and Arts. Or, pulling another rabbit out of his hat, António turned five faculties into two Colleges, each run by a Pro Vice-Chancellor 'who reports directly to the Vice-Chancellor'; and, of course, they had Associate Pro Vice-Chancellors reporting to them, as did a 'Head of School Education' [sic] 'who reports to the Pro Vice-Chancellor [of the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce] and will be 'joining [the University] at a unique and exciting time'.

But with the flair that marked him out as riding on a new organisational wave, António kept one of his predecessor's attempts at modernity – an Executive Dean of Human Sciences. Why have an Executive Dean when other disparate tribes gathered under the banners of Pro Vice-Chancellors? António explained that Human Sciences was a hybrid faculty ('distinctive in its unique combination of teaching and research strengths in health, education, hearing, mind and language'). He preferred a hybrid rather than a unitary system of organisation for the University. He had even created a Dean, Academic (responsible to a Pro Vice-Chancellor) for another invention, what António called a Group: 'The Group hosts seven Research Centres, and is comprised of eight Schools and Colleges across five campuses'; and 'The Group hosts several areas of Strategic Investment – Criminology with a Focus on Crime Prevention, Music, the Arts and the Asia-Pacific Region, and Education.'

Another of those malcontents who fester in the halls of academe defined 'hybrid system' as the system you have when you don't have a system. If not a system, dissidents voiced a hidden agenda: to foster divisions, the better to govern. António countered by asserting that hybridism promoted healthy competition. He had toyed with making some alphabetical combinations (such as putting together chiropractic, chiropody, classics, criminology and Celtic studies), then gave up the idea. Competition was fine but he did not want to create a nest of hornets.

Long before all this juggling with nomenclature, the departed dean had seen through yet-to-come reforms:

> People hide in the hierarchy, avoiding proper professional and open relationships with the developing subaltern class ...
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> … One form which the new management may take is that of a kind of Boy's Club, a congenial group helping cocoon the Vice-Chancellor from the actual world he inhabits. Providing accounts of the world which make him feel good, they become primary sources of the misinformation which prevents understanding within the vice-chancellories. They are flawed and sometimes devious conduits.

António knew that could happen. He saw through but used sycophants; and a rule of self-preservation set him against ever becoming the patron saint of their lost causes. Internal causes, that is. To deal with 'the external environment' he needs must make common cause with his nominal ruler, the Chancellor, with most other vice-chancellors, and preferably with all of those at top-drawer universities (for António had his future employment to consider). Happily, he and the Chancellor read from the same page, which was not surprising since António had been steered to his present eminence by he who chaired the Search Committee and the Council. The Chancellor was on record as believing 'that in time a deregulated market would force greater transparency, competition and quality' on universities. His cheering faith extended to considerations weighing on the minds of potential students: 'With the wealth of information there will be less reliance on world rankings driven by research'; and, in the event of deregulation, he is reported to have played down the prospect of Group of Eight universities being able to leverage their prestige to charge high prices. The Chancellor explained:

> To date, with no price differential, students have generally followed the brand without too much question, but with the introduction of price competition it is potentially a new ball game … For the research-intensive universities, the competitive pressure of the market will demand that there is substance to back up any price premium that they seek to apply and there is a tangible limit to the price elasticity that the Australian market will accept.

Ah, brave new world that hath such chancellors in it to prognosticate about what markets think and do: 'He said the market can be expected to be sophisticated in weighing up student outcomes, and the relevance of courses, and students would be helped by the likely growth of entrepreneurial websites providing information on courses and fees.' So there is to be an increase in the price premium? That would be of mutual benefit. 'He said the lack of a price signal created complacency in teaching and learning.'

Verily, António might say unto you that a Skinner box is the best model for higher education. Instead, he stood shoulder to the Chancellor's shoulder, while expressing the same desired result in dulcet terms. That damned external environment was to blame, namely actions taken by successive federal governments. Deregulation was necessary to cover the fiscal gap caused by reductions in the percentages of running expenses met by their subventions. What was a rent boy to do but charge what the market would bear? As a fellow vice-chancellor said, things were crook:

> Australia shares this trend with other nations. Direct public funding at Oxford in 2013-14 met just 16 per cent of running costs. The University of California, Berkeley, received less than 15 per cent of its income from base funding. Yet Oxford and Berkeley retain the goals, ethos and culture of public universities – as do their Australian counterparts.

The reasons why 'vice-chancellors support aspects of an unpopular deregulation agenda' were: 'The current settings are unsustainable' because maintenance of the status quo would lead to continued declines in teaching, research and student support; an 'unprecedented boost in public outlays' in higher education implied 'a major shift in public opinion, and a willingness by government to contemplate higher taxes' – running 'counter to the trend of the past 40 years, and against trends in comparable nations'; and so on to the conclusion:

> Current funding rates mean the tertiary education offered to Australians at times falls short of global practice. In the absence of public appetite to invest in public education, a measure of fee deregulation is the only way left to fund education quality to a reasonable standard.

These were slippery arguments. What went for places with boxed sets of silver cutlery did not go for those reliant on wooden spoons. Straw men were set up to be knocked down. There were other unmentioned choices like: compacts to maintain standardised, nation-wide and cost of living adjusted fee levels; a co-operative networking of universities, leading to shared rather than duplicated material resources and courses of study; giving priority to jointly-proposed research projects; reducing the centralisation of power and the hordes of deputies, pros, assistants, advisers, market spinners and weavers. In short, to supplant the god of competition and to strive for reforms deserving of the name: the realisation of collective purposes.

If you caught António in his cups after dinner with a bottle or three of 1994 Quinta da Pellada from the Dão region, he could be scathing about another university that boasted of 'being known for its entrepreneurial and "can do" culture'. In raised voice he said that such brash institutional self-promotion aligned universities with firms hawking rubber goods. Things were different, infinitely better back in the home-town university when he had been an undergraduate student. True, many teachers kow-towed during the decades-long ascendancy of an authoritarian state regime (whose leader had graduated and taught at the same university). But after its fall, and in António's time, the institution went back to formal espousal of liberal virtues, letting him get away with all manner of dereliction. The idealist of those days had long since turned into a realist man-of-the-times. A reluctant pragmatism, represented as vision, had helped get him the job.

A morning sky saw António back as vice-chancellor. 'The world, it was the old world yet,/ … /And nothing now remained to do/But begin the game anew.' On a sunrise jog to work, he passed a large sign attached to the railings of a cemetery: 'Limited premium graves available.' That set him alight. Why not sell premium enrolments? Bring back the sense of exclusivity that marked university attendance? Charge a special corporate rate, offer additional benefits: reserved library and lecture room seating, fast-track degrees, a platinum student card, frequent scholar points, discounts for university merchandise (caps, beer coasters, tee shirts, ties, etcetera). Throw in a complimentary set of learning aids.

Further along, António jogged past another sign:

> Saint Mary of the Cross
> Gallery of Angels Mausoleum
> Crypts now available.

That fired him up anew. Why not build Japanese-style tube hotels on under-utilised garden areas around colleges and halls of residence? (Memo to self: make sure that they are not only for Asian students). Another thought entered António' thinking about entrepreneurial possibilities. The sign also said: 'Featuring the gallery of Angels from Rome's Ponte Sant' Angelo'. The University was loaded with theme-based courses so why not offer, at a premium, themed sleeping places, like 'gaytime hollow' or 'cognoscenti cylinder'?

He'd show those other blighters what a can-do culture was all about!

Arthur O'Neill is a graduate of the School of Hard Knocks at the University of Life. Although he was never enrolled at Monash, he still insists 'I am still learning'.

Sources

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'Discover the difference':
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'The dean is both champion of the troops (faculty members) … ':
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'Limited premium graves available':
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'Saint Mary of the Cross
Gallery of Angels Mausoleum
Crypts now available
Featuring the gallery of Angels from
Rome's Ponte Sant'Angelo':
announcement attached on the street-side of a railing fence near the southern, main, gate of the Melbourne General Cemetery, February 2015.