



Democratic councils are crucial to academic independence

New Zealand's Minister of Tertiary Education, Steven Joyce, recently said he intends to reform university councils because he believes they are 'large and unwieldy'.

In 2009, the Government pushed through similar changes for polytechnic councils. Those changes reduced councils down to eight members, four of whom are directly appointed by the Minister and those first four get to choose the remaining four. The Minister appoints the chairperson and gives her or him the casting vote. Council members may also sit on multiple councils. Staff representatives, student representatives, union representatives and Maori representatives all lost their seats on the new councils.

Ironically, a few weeks after the Minister announced he intends to reform councils the University of Canterbury's Council voted to retain two courses that the Vice-Chancellor and his management team had wanted to close. After a public campaign by students and staff at the University, the Council voted to retain Theatre and Film Studies by nine votes to eight and the Cultural Studies program by eight votes to seven.

The staff and student representatives on that council were crucial in standing up to the Vice-Chancellor, voting against him and challenging his 'austerity' plan to cut courses. They saved jobs and they saved opportunities for students.

Emma Johnston, one of the student leaders who drove the campaign to oppose the closure of Canterbury courses, said staff and students would never have had any success at Council had it consisted only of senior management and government-appointed members, nor would there have been three hours of debate and cross-examination leading up to the vote.

'If university councils cease to be democratic, our universities will cease to be democratic, and our educational futures will be dictated by a privileged few and prone to corruption,' said Emma Johnston.

The University of Canterbury's council voted twice to oppose the Vice-Chancellor's plans to close arts courses, thus saving cultural studies and theatre and film studies. A vote to close American studies only passed after the Chancellor used his casting vote to split a voting deadlock. In each instance, the four staff representatives on Council consistently opposed the closures, thus saving jobs and learning opportunities for many staff and students.

When the Government imposed business-style reform on polytechnic councils two years ago, experienced, democratically-chosen community people were sacked from the boards and replaced with

expensive ministerially-appointed bureaucrats. Unsurprisingly, costs went up and accountability to communities diminished.

At Wintec, for instance, fourteen people sat on Council before the reforms and collected \$93,000 in Council fees. Then, in 2010, the eight councillors, appointed by either the Minister or the ministerial appointees took pay rises of between 17 and 131 per cent, and collected just under \$109,000, despite being half the size and less representative. At Unitec the 15 councillors in 2009 received a total of \$99,000 (an average of \$6,600 each). The eight councillors in 2010 appointed by either the Minister or the Council itself, took \$116,000 (an average of \$14,500 each).

That pattern was repeated around New Zealand.

NZTEU is campaigning with students and others to protect the right of staff and students to have a say in how our universities are governed. Importantly we are also campaigning for the right of councils to remain independent from government and business.

The Minister is perpetuating a myth that good business leaders make good leaders of public institutions such as universities and polytechnics.

And it is even more of a myth that just because someone is a business leader they are good

at governing – we need look no further than the Global Financial Crisis to see what a good job publicly governed democratic and representative university councils have been doing compared to so called entrepreneurial and streamlined business directors.

Universities have a legal duty to challenge received wisdom and be the critic and conscience of society – including challenging government. We question how councils can do that when the majority of their council owe their seats to the minister who appointed them.

Why would the Government want to replace diverse, democratically elected people who have a range of skills and a passion for their local university, with a more expensive, less diverse team of ministerially-appointed bureaucrats? **A**

Sandra Grey is National President/Te Tumu Whakarae, New Zealand Tertiary Education Union/Te Hautū Kahurangi o Aotearoa

TEU 🌐 www.teu.ac.nz

The Minister is perpetuating a myth that good business leaders make good leaders of public institutions... we need look no further than the Global Financial Crisis to see what a good job publicly governed democratic and representative university councils have been doing compared to so called entrepreneurial and streamlined business directors.