

Loneliness of the University Liberal

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Ridicule and hatred are ritualistic hurdles for women rejecting the leftist emphasis of our campuses, writes Paul Sheehan.

At the start of her Sydney University orientation, Sasha Uher checked out the political clubs. She found the Socialist Alternative, the Greens, the Marxists, the anti-war party, the Labor Left, the Labor Right. "I knew university would be more left-leaning but the extreme nature of some of these clubs really concerned me."

She wondered why the choice was between soft left, mid-left, hard left, far left, lunar left. The Liberals, so important in national politics, seemed not to exist, but Uher eventually found them tucked away in a corner, and decided on the spot to join them.

The abuse started soon after.

"Liberals cop a lot of abuse from the Socialist Alternative, a radical leftist group on campus," she told me. "They label us racist, sexist, homophobic. During an election campaign one socialist came up to me and said 'I campaign against scum like you every day'. There is a particularly strong anti-Israel bias, crossing into anti-Semitism. An insult I've often heard thrown at Liberal students is that we are 'dirty, war-mongering Jews'.

"This is why I am such a passionate advocate for voluntary student unionism. It is a matter that has rallied the Liberals. We strongly believe in individual responsibility ... not expecting the government to be the solution to all problems."

A commerce student, she is president of the university's Liberal Club. Hate speech, Uher says, is not the biggest problem in campus political life because most students are apolitical and steer away from the obsessives and zealots. More insidious, she believes, is the ideological bias of the faculty, and the subtle pressure to conform. "Lecturers and tutors are predominantly left-leaning and this bias is often reflected in course material and in the way in which class work is marked."

Every young Liberal woman interviewed for this story said the same thing.

"Unfortunately the only acceptable view within the mainstream of university politics is that of the left," said Sarah Constable, 20, an arts student at Sydney University. "Of course, there is a minority of those who share Liberal values but we are often

ostracised. It is pretty tough on campus for us because the minute someone realises you are a Liberal, you are automatically branded a heartless extremist.

"I cannot quantify the countless times I have been called a fascist because I'm a Young Liberal. Tutorials are some of the toughest times. Politics tutorials in particular are filled with people who, if the name John Howard is mentioned, go into some sort of a frenzy. The worst part is that the tutors are often even more extreme.

"At first I thought it was just the Socialist Alternative-types who were extreme; however I have had to sit through countless America-bashing tutorials."

She joined the Liberal Club after returning from an extended period living in Britain. "Growing up under an ineffective Labour government just served to reaffirm my Conservative values. I want to see Australia grow and prosper, so I'll work to see the Liberal Party re-elected."

Prue Gusmerini, 26, studied law at the University of NSW, was apolitical at university, but came to the conclusion she was being fed rubbish by her teachers after two years of volunteer work for poor children. The work led her, after graduation, to her current job as campaign manager for Give Us A Go, a coalition of indigenous groups from Cape York. The campaign is headed by the Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson.

"I worked in some of the toughest neighbourhoods in Australia in an effort to understand how the world really worked," she said. "And let me tell you, that reality rarely accorded to the lessons being taught in university halls.

"The predominance of leftist thinking amongst the arts/law faculty was so strong that it took me almost two years to shirk some of its core teachings. I wasn't political at university, but I realised that the emphasis on leftist ideas divorced students from the political realities at play in the outside world."

Ideological pressure and unreality within universities is a serious issue, but most universities pretend the problem does not exist. An outspoken exception is the vice-chancellor of Macquarie University, Steven Schwartz. "Universities once had clear ethical purposes but over the years we have lost our moral direction," he said in a speech last month. "The central ethical premise of universities has changed fundamentally ... Postmodernists sneered at the achievements of the West and universities slowly sank into the morass of moral relativity."

Schwartz believes that theory-dominated universities are divorced from practical realities. He is implementing a radical measure to require all students to undertake volunteer work off campus.

He could talk to Prue Gusmerini: "My first gig in the real world was tutoring children at the Police Citizens and Youth Club at Waterloo, where most of the children were indigenous or the children of recently arrived migrants. From the get-go, it was obvious to me that there were massive institutional barriers to progress."

She said she later joined the Liberal Party "because the party's values complement my own conservative disposition, which is in part an extension of my childhood experiences and an extension of my experiences in indigenous politics and communities".

She was also offended by the left's sneering attitude. "Within the left there was a group of Howard haters who had no interest in fighting for a strong set of ideas or principles, which I respect, but were motivated by a deep hatred of and contempt for John Howard. It was this group that irked me the most. They stood for nothing."

Being a Liberal at university can be politically very lonely. Courtney Dunn, 19, has never knowingly met another Liberal at the two University of Western Sydney campuses where she studies for a combined arts and law degree. "The most visible political students on campus are the hard left, who the average student doesn't relate to, which is further reason why voluntary student unionism is such a positive thing.

"Our assigned reading materials clearly reflect ['progressive'] views. Texts can be so blatantly biased it can be frustrating. One of my lecturers even had the nerve to claim that Anzac Day is a celebration of war and touted it as a strange tradition. One textbook I had this year criticised the Howard government in almost every chapter and did not question a single Labor policy. It is obviously quite intimidating to challenge the views of your peers and ultimately the views of those marking their papers."

Dunn's family is largely working-class and Labor-voting. She grew up in Campbelltown, and joined the Liberal Party at 17, much to the dismay of Labor-voting uncles.

"I think one of the dangers facing upcoming generations, including my own, is that we are developing an attitude of 'what will the government do about it?' I think the Rudd Government is sending the wrong message to Australians that we can't function without the Government's help in each area of our lives and I feel that this is fundamentally wrong."

She expects ridicule for being a Liberal at the University of Western Sydney, but adds: "No-one should be ashamed of being a member of a political party in a country like Australia, which is a democracy and is supposed to be a fair country. Universities are meant to be centres of critical thought."

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