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PROFESSIONALISING PEACE RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIA: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract

This essay advances a number of reasons for the establishment of a professional peace research organization in Australia, including 1) promotion of peace research in Australia, 2) input into public policy, such as with the Australian National Commission for UNESCO, and 3) the promotion of peace and social justice in Australian public discourse. A number of possibilities are discussed, although the recommended option in this essay is for the formation of an Australian Council for Peace Research and Education. [This Abstract does not appear in the published article].

Article

One of the great Quaker dictums of nonviolence is that peace advocacy is a matter of speaking truth to power (American Friends Service Committee 1955). Yet one of the difficult issues arising from this dictum is exactly how ought truth be spoken to power. The traditional means that truth speaks to power has been understood as being from a position of vulnerability. In other words, the vulnerability of those who speak is an important element in the transmission of the message of nonviolence. The growth of peace research as a normative science within institutions of higher education is an indication that the process of speaking truth to power may, however, involve organisation and incorporation in institutions of power. Put simply, peace advocacy can be more effective through universities, and through centres dedicated to that purpose. The growth in peace research has been global, with UNESCO (2000) listing, at last count some 580 peace research and training institutions around the world, and it is arguable that this growth represents a widespread professionalisation of peace research. Moreover, an important and related dimension of professionalisation is the formation of professional associations. On a global scale we have the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) and the regional Asia Pacific Peace Research Association (APPRA). It does seem that it is appropriate to consider

whether it is now time for the establishment of a professional peace research organisation for Australia.

A number of reasons can be advanced for establishing professional peace research organisations, and in particular for Australia. Peace and peace research could well be effectively promoted and advanced through such an organisation, through providing publicity for the range of courses in peace research at relevant universities, through encouragement of cross-institutional enrolment, through co-ordinating co-operation in peace research with overseas institutions and funding bodies (such as the European Union), and through initiatives such as a national accreditation system for peace research. However it seems that the most persuasive reason for establishing such an organisation is that, especially in Australia, public discourse is becoming increasingly dominated by nationalistic and militaristic themes, with a propensity to see only military solutions to problems of violence. Moreover, the culture of violence seems to be growing stronger, and military organisations and quasi-military organisations seem to have a dominating influence in the media and in national policy. A professional organisation of peace research would be an important counter-voice, suggesting that there are alternatives to violence and alternatives to social injustice.

Perhaps the best instance of how there is a tendency for peace concerns to be marginalised in public discourse is the news commentary prior to Australia's commitment to the invasion of Iraq. There was no lack of popular opposition within Australia and indeed around the world to the war, including opposition to the war from churches and from the opposition political parties. However the expert opinion as presented in the media lacked a clear and articulate voice against war. The academics who spoke as experts in the media prior to the war tended to be individuals from strategic studies and defence institutions, and tended to see the imminent war as a technocratic and strategic exercise and to ignore the human and ethical dimensions of war. Such opinion is not overtly pro-war. Yet such strategic views tend to assume that the central question is how a war is to be fought, rather than whether the war ought to be fought at all. By contrast, peace research is a normative endeavour, with a committed view against war and in support of humane co-operation. Clearly, from a peace research perspective, what would be useful would be a professional organisation of peace research and education in Australia, to facilitate and legitimate expert opinion on issues of war, peace and social justice.

One option would be the formation of a professional [62/63] association, possibly called the Australian Peace Research and Education Association (APREA). This could have a wide membership, comprising teachers, researchers and research students within peace research. The precedent for this is the former Australian Peace Education and Research Association, which operated conferences and shared information over a decade ago. The strength of such an association would be wide membership. Moreover, it would also be possible to arrange a system of professional accreditation, such as that which operates with professional organisations such as the Australian Anthropological Society, with a small accreditation committee granting membership/fellowship status with the society, based upon completion of a higher research degree in a peace research or within a related area.

Another option would be the formation of a professional council, possibly called the Australian Council of Peace Research and Education (ACPRE). A Council would have a limited membership, namely, the heads of peace research at Australian universities. One of the effective models for this type of professional organisation is the Australian Council of Deans of Education. Like the Australian Council of Deans of Education, an Australian Council of Peace Research and Education would have the opportunity to liaise with the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee and the Commonwealth Government, as a recognised professional organisation. Perhaps more importantly, the strength of such a professional organisation is that it would be possible to have a representative appear on the media as a spokesperson on peace and justice issues, given that the Council would be an elite organisation and thus carrying some national credibility. Some might claim that the elite nature of such an organisation is counter to the idea of a peace research movement, and especially the idea of the peace movement itself as being a grass-roots and participatory movement. There is no doubt some truth to this objection. And yet the importance of having a strong and organised voice speaking against violence and in support of social justice would seem to be more compelling.

One specific area where a peace organisation might become involved in policy-making and advocacy on a national level is through working towards the reform and re-invigoration of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO. The National Commission for UNESCO is the agency that represents UNESCO and its policies within a particular member-state of UNESCO. Given that the encouragement of peace and a culture of peace is central to the UNESCO constitutional mandate, and has been repeatedly endorsed within UNESCO forums, the National

Commission for UNESCO ought to be at the forefront of both peace advocacy and advocacy for peace research. Currently the Australian National Commission does very little in either respect. There are many specific reforms which could be taken by the Australian Government to re-invigorate and peace-activate the Australian National Commission for UNESCO (Page 2002), most notably introducing specific legislation to establish the Australian National Commission as a public institution in Australia. However it does seem that only a Council of Peace Research and Education, that is, as a national organisation, would have necessary authority to lobby for such change, as well as eventually nominate members to the Australian National Commission for UNESCO.

One of the obvious developments in the past decade has been the growth of information exchange through the Internet. For instance, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, affiliated with the University of Sydney, operates an active email advisory service, with reports from around the world on issues of peace and social justice. One of the remarkable aspects of the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq was the mobilisation of peace protests around the world, on a scale and with a rapidity which had never been seen before in history. This was accomplished largely through email lists and websites of existing peace advocacy organisations. It thus seems that a professional peace research organisation could do little in terms of networking which is not already being done. In other words, the potential role of a peace research organisation in providing information to members would not seem as important as would have been the case a decade ago.

There are clearly advantages and disadvantages to any form of professional organisation. However, given the importance of having an organisation with an authoritative public presence and given the importance of an organisation with sufficient authority to lobby government in matters concerning peace and peace advocacy, my argument is that the most appropriate organisation would be a professional Council, with membership consisting of the heads of peace research in the respective universities.

How could such a Council commence operation? One way would be to commence with a simplified version [63/64] of the Constitution of the Australian Council of Deans of Education. At this stage it would be important to define the objectives of the organisation as involving a commitment to the normative study of peace. The Council might then commence with some of the more established peace research centres at Australian universities, who would in turn invite representatives from less

well developed peace research programs at Australian universities to join. This process in itself might well be advantageous, in that it could subtly deal with the problem that peace research at Australian universities is usually poorly funded, such that there may not be a specifically designated head of peace research at the university. What could happen in this instance is that the existing Council would write to the governing council or senate of the university, explaining the nature of the Council, and inviting the University to nominate a head of peace research to become a member of the Council. One outcome of this process might be that, in order to participate in the Council, the university would be forced to establish a head of peace research. Put simply, the existence of a Council could be a means of legitimating and strengthening peace research at individual universities. The competitive nature of universities would also mean that it would be unlikely that any individual university would want to be left out of such a Council. In other words, the competitive nature of tertiary education in Australia could be used to advantage.

Of course, there may well be internal problems with such a peace research organisation, be this a Council or Association. It is possible to state in general terms that peace research is a field which has a normative commitment to peace and social justice. However there are differing emphases within what is known as traditional and critical peace research. Moreover, the scope of peace research can be extremely extensive, and what to some might be validly within the scope of peace research to others may well be considered extraneous to the task of peace research. The above factors suggest that there could be considerable differences of opinion between members of any Council, and this poses challenges for the notion of having a spokesperson for a Council. The endorsement of particular political parties might also be a potential source of contention. The answer is in part for the processes to be regulated by the constitution of any research organisation, with democratic processes to deal with the election of public officers who would speak for the peace organisation and the circumstances under which such officers might speak. For any potential problem there is a peaceful solution.

There are thus problems for the establishment of a professional peace research organisation in Australia, although these would appear not insurmountable. If the establishment of such an organisation can assist in the process of peace advocacy, that is, speaking truth to power, then we should do it now.

References

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