



## A tall poppy worthy of worship

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*“The very essence of leadership is you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision you articulate forcefully on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet.”*

Rev Theodore Hesburgh

Rev Theodore Hesburgh was one of the longest serving and most successful university chiefs in the recent history of the United States. He demonstrated unparalleled success in developing Notre Dame University, simultaneously distinguishing himself as an advocate for human rights. This activity was underpinned by a focused commercial strategy that saw an eighteen-fold growth in the university's revenue.

It was fitting that Hesburgh was recognised for his contribution when President Bill Clinton presented him with last year's Congressional Gold Medal – one of the highest civilian awards in the United States of America.

In Australia we have our own academic visionary with the very same courage and commitment to access as the fabled leader of Notre Dame. I'm talking about the VC of the University of Melbourne, Prof Alan Gilbert.

Unlike Americans, we lunge at the tall poppies like Alan Gilbert and hope that they will fail. Our newspapers investigate their every venture and turn over every detail and regurgitate every nuance, never satisfied until one more creator, one more visionary, one more lifeline for Australian intellectualism is left exhausted and bitter.

Well Alan Gilbert won't become bitter or exhausted because he is driven by a worthy and powerful vision for Australian adult learning. With the establishment of Melbourne University Private he has set out to establish a new model for delivering commercially-based learning which ensures that corporate customers no longer leach the public system.

Similarly, Gilbert has been a pioneer in establishing the concept of a global network in adult education and research with the highly ambitious Universitas 21 – aimed at

establishing sustainable, global economies of scale for the universities of the future.

For this determination Alan Gilbert and those who support him have been pilloried, instead of being acclaimed for the spirit and the purpose behind their innovative concepts. Australians have ignored the fact that every successful innovation in the world's industry and academia has had its teething problems. Centuries old traditions and customs all started somewhere and the values that they enshrine, and which we celebrate, have all started off with the odd raising of the eyebrow.

Like every other VC, Alan Gilbert has inherited massive cuts in government funding for his university and faces the same tough choices in making his budget work. Gilbert however, has refused to take refuge in government criticism whilst all around him crumbles.

Without compromise, Alan Gilbert has set out to create new models of delivering adult learning whilst allowing the main body of his institution to observe, contribute to, and learn from, these experiences. He has emphatically resisted the temptation to turn the university and its academics, staff and students into guinea pigs.

It is therefore more than a little ironic that his most constant criticism comes from the academics and students he has fought so hard to protect. The most strident criticism and personal abuse comes from those he has championed, and sadly and ignobly, the academic criticism has been predominantly expressed from his own ranks, behind closed doors and between closed minds.

For those of Gilbert's colleagues, students and stakeholders who did not grow up with the comfort and wealth of Gilbert's detractors, Melbourne's VC is a giant amongst heroes. He deserves support, recognition and acclaim, and will ultimately receive it. The job at hand is to ensure that he is still a resident of Australia when he does.