



## The Curse Of The Honorary Doctorate: The Case of Former Australian PM John Howard

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The honorary degree system at universities tends to be a rotten business, though Stephen Edward Epler, in his *Honorary Degrees: A Survey of Their Use and Abuse* (1943), regarded them as “perhaps the most important honorific in the nation.”

Left to lauding the achievements of the exceptional, notably those who might not have spent much time in the direct line of research or squirrel scholarship, such awards have their place. But the modern honorary awards system reflects the modern university funding environment. Awards follow the money – and the donor.

Corruption often gets a helping hand; officials long past their use as researchers or teachers find themselves in the trough of gratitude. Then comes the largesse given former political figures, be it in terms of professorial appointments or degrees that say more about the institution awarding it than them.

Universities have also shown themselves susceptible to bestowing honorary doctorates to the celebrity figure, a fairly nonsensical and utterly needless exercise that has done wonders to diminish institutional value.

Comedian Bill Cosby, to take a notable, flawed example, has received a whole stash over the years, though that number has declined of late. Accusations of drugging and molestation led such universities as Marquette, Fordham and Brown to withdraw their ill-considered awards.

Brown’s president, Christina Paxson, said in a campus-wide email that the withdrawal was necessary, given that the award had been based on good university values: “honesty, fair play, love of family, and respect for humanity.”

Such statements seem spectacularly disingenuous when you consider that universities have even gone so far as to regard entities not deemed *Homo sapiens* eligible. A moronic Kanye West might well qualify for the wooden spoon, but even that would be stretching it.

Ever wanting to surprise, the officialdoms of universities have engaged in a form of one upmanship, finding ever stranger recipients. That Kermit the Frog somehow qualifies shows how the celebrity figure, notably fictionalised, trumps academic sobriety. On May 19, 1996, the long-time figure of children’s program Sesame Street received an Honorary Doctorate of Amphibious Letters from Southampton College, New York.

This was hardly even daringly amusing but when the Oxford Union permits the puppet figure

to give voice to the idea before 1,000 students that, “The responsibility of representing an entire species rests on my shoulders, ”the world has truly been turned on its injudicious head.

Former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, was never as popular as Kermit, and the decision of Sydney University to award him an honorary doctorate was initially going to be one of those dull affairs. Other Australian prime ministers who had graduated from the institution had been similarly rewarded.

Last Wednesday, the institution stated that Howard’s doctorate acknowledged his achievements in instigating “world-leading gun law reform” while also providing leadership in East Timor and contributing to “economic reform”. How many of these categories would have merited a honorific is hard to say, but such institutions have form.

Protestors thought otherwise of the decision. On Friday morning, some 150 gathered outside the Great Hall lead by academic of English and linguistics Nick Riemer. There were also 50 agitated students who, according to *The Guardian*, “splintered off to lead chants of ‘Racist, sexist, and anti-queer – Howard is not welcome here’ and ‘John Howard, blood on our hands’.”[1]

Riemer’s points were cogent enough in describing a view alien to genuine academic practice. Howard famously avoided the painstaking world of evidence and verifying the case for many of his policies. His Australia became a surlier, more mean spirited place, one suspicious of phantom threats of terror or refugees. The economy boomed, but reasoning fell sharply.

As a letter with more than 100 signatures of Sydney University staff and PhD students opined, “To confer a doctorate on him is an insult to Indigenous people, refugees, and anyone committed to multiculturalism, peace and social progress in this country and the world.”

Importantly, it was also an Australia that went to war in the Middle East in the absence of any credible evidence that a sovereign country posed a threat to its security interests, or for that matter the interests of any of its allies. As his predecessor, Paul Keating, explained, “there was never any evidence that such weapons [in Iraq] existed and that fact was established following the exhaustive UN investigation led by Hans Blix”. [2] Not one for evidence, old Howard.

In truth, there is something to be said about awarding the corrupt, the questionable, and the non-human with degrees that speak volumes about modern research and teaching institutions. Howard’s abuses in office were exceptional by Australian standards, but university management has proven to be an indifferent beast to such achievement.

Notes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/sep/30/150-protest-against-sydney--university-honouring-john-howard>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/jul/08/paul-keating-says-john-howard--should-hang-his-head-in-shame-over-iraq-war>

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