

Dead Centre?  
An open letter to Gerhard Leitner and Walter Veit  
John Milfull (Sydney)

**Berlin, 20 March 2004**

Dear Gerhard, dear Walter,

I read your recent article on the "one true and authentic history" of the Australia Centre (Berlin?) with a good deal of amusement and a great deal of sadness. There is always a feeling of relief when the glass wall surrounding "open secrets", to borrow a phrase from Goethe, is finally shattered. But it is the sadness (and a degree of anger) that remains: how was all this allowed to happen? whose interests did it serve? and what remains of the aspirations and dreams of the discussions in Australia and Germany that preceded the "founding" of the Centre and to which it bears so little relation? I could go further and ask, in the Centre's own language: what product is it marketing? Does anyone want to buy it? Has it done anything that would not have happened without it, and probably more effectively?

It was, I think, no coincidence that the first discussions took place against the background of German unification, and with considerable interest and support from the Brandenburg state government. While not many of us shared Helmut Kohl's strategic optimism on blossoming landscapes, we all felt the need to express our solidarity with this vast project and to participate in some small way in its shaping. In the course of the nineties, much of this enthusiasm was extended to grasp the new European project to which it was so intimately related, and in which Germany continues to play such a vital role. As a friend from the Goethe Institute said to me later, we were in the process of realising that the topics really worth discussing went well beyond national borders, and there was no longer much point in trying to establish or project a "German" or an "Australian" view on such matters. But there was a great deal of point in sharing German and Australian perspectives across the whole spectrum of problems we both faced, from the political, economic and cultural to the ecological and technological. Within the Australian context, it was becoming depressingly clear that we needed to search for alternative agendas to the increasingly dominant British-American neo-liberal paradigm, and that an engagement with the New Europe might prove a vital counterweight.

But let me return to those early days. Most of us had simply assumed that a German-Australian Centre would build on existing good relations between German and Australian colleagues in many spheres of interest, and would give them a strong intellectual focus near the centre of the new Germany. It seemed obvious that the core of its activities would be shaped by Germans with a strong interest in Australia and Australians with a strong interest in Germany, who would together provide the "cross-cultural competence" with which to achieve such a focus. Although the failure of the

planned Berlin-Brandenburg "fusion" clearly represented a serious setback to such plans, there were many reasons to expect that further progress would be made in the future in cooperation with other Berlin universities. The continuing generosity of the University of Potsdam and the state of Brandenburg should be specifically acknowledged in this context, and I should like to record my personal regret that they received so little intellectual or financial return on their investment.

It had already become clear at an early stage that Dr Bartels was determined to marginalise two groups whose support was essential to the success of the project - German Australianists and Australian Germanists, and that she favoured an administrative structure which left control in the hands of the Australian "consortium" of participating universities and, ultimately, of Bartels herself. The current situation (which you describe so accurately in your article) in which the German (or, for that matter, Australian) universities have no effective input into the work of the Centre, is only the logical extension of that approach, "remote control" from the Director's office.

What was (is) it, then, that the Centre was supposed to achieve? It was clearly intended to "market Australia", the question was only what was marketable and who could market it. Clearly, the GAs and AGs referred to above were excluded on both counts, as producers of non-marketable knowledge and lacking in the necessary "management" skills, even if many of them had occupied senior executive positions with considerable success.

What *could* be marketed, or perhaps more accurately, presented as a profitable operation of the new Centre? In the first place, Bartels clearly intended to build on and expand her success in furthering cooperative research in science and technology while attached to the Australian Embassy in Bonn. A worthwhile aim, but it needs to be pointed out that the funding for such projects came almost entirely from German sources - the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the German Academic Exchange Service are recognised world leaders in this area. It is not clear that the foundation of the Centre was necessary to improve or extend their work; in fact, if I am not mistaken, there has been something of a drop in Australian participation.

A second area, very fashionable at the time, was the export of education or, more accurately, the import of fee-paying students. Australian universities have come to depend on this income more and more. But it represents a considerable ethical and political problem in the German-Australian context. Not only have German universities resisted the trend to charge such fees, hundreds of Australian undergraduate and graduate students have further been awarded DAAD and Humboldt scholarships to study in Germany, and it remains a key (and most enlightened) element in German cultural policies to increase the attractiveness of study in Germany. I have witnessed few more embarrassing occasions than the attempt by Dr Bartels and some hand-picked representatives of the Australian "education industry" to convince a dozen visiting German registrars of its virtues. They were not impressed.

Determined efforts were also made to “export” our Higher Education Contribution Scheme to Germany, and to explain the virtues of Australian tax reform to backward Germans. Certainly, both arose from initially intelligent attempts to arrive at more or less defensible compromises in the struggle against the “low tax” dogma of the neo-liberals, but by the time they were packaged for the German supermarket shelf they were already showing definite signs of having passed their use-by date. For the first time, I was genuinely relieved not to have been asked to participate – criticism was neither desired nor scheduled.

Lately, there has been something of a U-turn; faced with the difficult task of demonstrating its relevance, there have been attempts by the Centre to present a “showcase of Australian culture”. This may be desirable, although it really only begins to become fruitful where genuine dialogue and cross-influence develops (as in the case of Pina Bausch and Meryl Tankard), but again it is hard to see what equips the Centre, with its present management and structure, to “run” such an activity. Again, the comparison with the long and valiant efforts of the Goethe Institute in Australia to perform a similar task is simply embarrassing.

Let me return to the deliberate provocation of my title: the Australia Centre is dead, it has failed to realise the hopes many of us attached to the proposal, and it is hard to see how it could achieve any of them with its current structure and management. For the time being, we may well be better off without it. Ultimately, an Australian government needs to face up to its long standing obligations to return at least some of the generosity and effort German governments of all persuasions have extended to Australian guests. I still remember a whispered comment by Heinrich Pfeiffer, much-loved long term general secretary of the Humboldt Foundation, as we sat through a wish list session with former Australian Humboldtians: “But Australia is not a developing country [*Entwicklungsland*]!”. Perhaps it is time we stopped acting like one. I, for one, would welcome the chance to say thank you properly.