

Australia Centre (Potsdam) down under. A sequel

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In *GASt Newsletter 17* we surveyed the history of the AC. There are two reasons for a brief sequel. The first one concerns an inexcusable gap in the story we told, the second is that the centre has finally closed its doors.

As we narrated the efforts in Berlin and in Melbourne to spell out in details a concept for an Australia Centre and to create the necessary support structures inside and outside academia, we gave the impression that the University of Potsdam and, above all, its English Department were passive recipients of goods to be delivered. That was, of course, not so and it is sad we gave that impression. There is one weak reason to explain why we could commit that error: relationships with our colleagues and particularly with Professor Achim Hoffmann at the University of Potsdam were so good that we rarely wrote to each other. Writing was not the central way of communicating. Even as the first submissions were drafted, Professor Hoffmann was present and actively involved. And it was for that reason that we could even think of Potsdam University being an alternative when it became clear that Berlin would not have the means and incentive to establish the centre.

The second remark is caused by the fact that the AC in Berlin closed down in June this year. We were reasonably restrained from commenting critically on its activities during the time of its existence in Berlin. We closed our history with these words:

While the IZ was a far cry from the initial proposal, it was located inside a university whose infra-structures it could use and influence. It could and did – on a small scale – offer Australian-related courses ... and ... had the potential to expand and become a centre with a regional function for the Berlin-Brandenburg. ... The new Berlin AC, in contrast, has severed institutional academic ties and has no direct link – nor can and does attempt to draw on local academic support. Importantly, it reflects a very different monopolistic cultural policy. Which of the approaches – a collaborative or a monopolistic one – are more successful is a mute question. The time may yet be too short to make a valid comparison with the IZ in Potsdam. But the Menzies Centre and – from a different angle – the British Council and others provide yardsticks by which the cultural policy approach of the Berlin centre must be measured.

The AC has not lived up to these expectations, nor to any that could conceivably have made sense for an area centre. Its activities were limited to a few 'high profile' events such as with the *Deutsche Hochschulrektorenkonferenz* in 2003. For a very brief period it ran a lecture series entitled "Who's Australia?" in collaboration with Professor West (Freie Universität Berlin). It was a platform for (mainly) Australian academics and a few others to talk about a range of subjects. Surprisingly, it explicitly rejected *Australian perspectives* on non-Australian topics (cf. John Milfull above) and thus did not even wish to contribute to a two-way dialog. It also was a 'place of call' for Australian visitors who were listed as 'visitors' in the *newsletter* – whatever they might have done there. But above all it was to be a sales place for the consortium of

universities who wished to sell their degrees, persuade German students to study as full-fee students, etc. Did they not know that the market would be small, that there are other agencies, often supported by those same universities, who act as clearing agents? That was the fundamental contradiction in the role that the consortium assigned to the Centre: the role of *representing* and *presenting* Australia's cultural, political and other realities and the commercializing intent of those who paid for it.

The demise of **that** AC is not particularly sad – it had no function anyway. But what is sad is the waste of

- an opportunity to create a bilateral, region-oriented area centre that would have fed into the universities in the region, nation-wide and into Central Europe
- the chance to become a catalyst for inter-university collaboration and for a business-politics-university nexus
- thousands of *deutschmarks* and Australian dollars, as well as the seeding funds of AUS \$ 40,000 from the Australian government, which were intended precisely to create such an area centre in Central Europe
- the Australiana library which was left at the University of Potsdam where it is housed as an esoteric sort and is a neglected resource for the region

Above all, there is a waste of people's engagement and interest in creating something for Australia, an engagement that is even belittled at government level.

There may not be another opportunity for a joint German-Australian venture that provided the initial stimulus for creating the Potsdam Centre. But we hear there will be a third attempt at setting up an Australia Centre – this time next to the Australian Embassy's offices. The search for closeness, locally, intellectually and, no doubt, financially can barely be overlooked. We look forward to hearing more. One would hope that it does not repeat the mistakes of the past and

- avoids the nexus of academic commercialism and cultural diplomacy
- seeks a true partnership with the academic and other bodies such as the Gesellschaft für Australienstudien that have done the work over the last 30 years and have acquired the expertise to engage in cross-national collaboration
- will, as a result, involve and support initiatives put to it by such bodies
- gets an a true interest in cross-national perspectives and does not pursue a narrow-minded "Australiana" concept: Australians should be able to cast an Australian angle on German matters, just like Germans should be able to do so with regard to Australian issues! The "Leichhardt Lectures", at any rate, provided an opportunity for Australians to talk about German literature.

If the Third Centre will go some of this way, we are sure it will have more success and more quickly. One might then begin to consider collaboration on a broader range of issues such as periodicals, publications, degree courses, summer schools, etc.