Australian academics seem to be driven by self-advancement, writes Toby Miller.

I’m lucky enough to be an honorary professor at the University of Queensland between 2006 and 2009, which allows me to visit Australia twice a year for a couple of weeks in July and December.

I spend most of my time in Brisbane, which is the Australian powerhouse in my field (media and cultural studies) thanks to the presence of Mark Andrejevic, Belinda Carpenter, Stuart Cunningham, Liz Ferrier, Terry Flew, Melissa Gregg, John Hartley, Michael Keane, Albert Moran, Tom O’Regan, Jo Tacchi, Gordon Tait, and Graeme Turner, inter alios. I also drop down to Sydney, where my daughter lives, and a few smart academic folks in my area also congregate, such as Louise Katz, Noel King, Cathy Lumby, and Stephen Muecke.

After many years of infrequent visits, the arrangement offers me the chance to catch up with what is happening in Australia. That remains quite difficult from afar. The webpages of the putatively quality dailies are a joke, and Radio National and JJJ sound quaint from a distance, perhaps because of time delays. You really need to be pawing the ground, getting a feel. I enjoy doing that, and the experience of meeting up with leaders in my area is renewing and stimulating.

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Wherever I go during these visits, new people I meet want to know three things of me. The question I prefer - because it’s not entirely self-aggrandizing - is ‘Who’s going to win the presidency in 2008?’ People are rather shocked when I tell them that African-American intellectuals fear Barack Obama being nominated, then being assassinated. And they are at least surprised when I tell them that feminist intellectuals basically want any Democrat but Hillary Clinton.

The other two questions are quite different because they are careerist rather than disinterested. Query 1 reads: ‘How can I get published in the US?’ and Query 2 is: ‘How can I get a job in the US?’ I am perfectly happy to tell people what they need to do to attain these ends (though the answers are often frustrating, because they are not in line with what the Australian Government and its education apparatchiks think knowledge is).

But I am staggered that the questions aren’t prefaced or suffixed by talking about, for example, our field. Wouldn’t that be a polite, seemingly non-instrumental way of deriving goodwill from someone you don’t know? It might even generate better advice - and just possibly an intellectual exchange.

So why doesn’t this happen? I don’t really know. But I wonder if it relates to something seemingly quite separate. I’ve noticed a set of badges that people go by in Australia, such as ‘I’m an early-career researcher’ (who invents these disabling, infantilising, meretricious neologisms?) and an associated desire for formalised networks, mentors, paths, and so on.

This tendency seems to run alongside, and interconnect with, the vast array of people I meet in Australian higher education who exist to get grants, which beget grants, which beget grants. Their ideas are rarely tested in front of students - and rarely published in books and journals that have undergone the usual scrutiny. Ideas are there to, ahem, get more grants.
The tendency also seems to be part of the long run of those laughable, lamentable Dawkins-era reforms (subsequently lapped up by bombastic bottom-feeding Liberals) that created a new pedagogic class system by drawing ever tighter delineations between people and institutions within academia. Could hyper-governmentalisation, urgent psychologisation, and shameless careerism explain the rather gormless questions?

Whatever the reason, I get really tired of being asked to help people further their careers as if I were an adjunct of the ARC or the Federal Government, or perhaps a hair stylist with a sideline in amateur therapy.

All that said, it is always interesting being here and learning about what is happening politically. On a recent trip that meant observing not just the ABC but even the bourgeois media give the new Labor Party paradise a free pass (the fantasy that Australia was a major player at the Bali climate talks was a personal favourite). It meant sensing the relief that, unlike the US, Australia was no longer run by determinedly anti-intellectual servants of their class and no one else. And it meant hearing the palpable plea that indigenous and environmental policies and programs would be adequately addressed.

So I still consider myself a lucky honorary professor. I just think that the toolkit for becoming more than an ‘early-career researcher’ should include some tips on how to appear interested in ideas. It’s a better look than being transparently driven by self-advancement.

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