

**TITLE: ANU's green investment policy reflects real world concern**

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If universities can't be trusted to make their own investment decisions, who can be? Indeed, if the federal Coalition wants to join in the mining industry's attack on the Australian National University for having the temerity to divest its shares in Santos and six other companies, why is the government proposing fee deregulation for the university sector? If the government doesn't trust the investment making ability of universities, why would it trust its price setting ability?

This week, the ANU announced it would join the ranks of Stanford University and 12 other international education leaders and divest its sizeable endowment from seven companies with questionable environmental credentials.

ANU is amongst the world's leading universities. It has long been at the forefront of Australia's research into climate change and what to do about it. Its student population is concerned with climate change, and 82 per cent of ANU students support a divestment campaign being run by fellow student Tom Swann.

With that in mind, the divestment move is entirely unsurprising. As its vice-chancellor, Ian Young, told the ABC's *Lateline*, "we need to be able to put our hand on our heart when we talk to our students, and to our alumni, and to our researchers, and be able to say that we're confident that the sort of companies we're investing in are consistent with the broad themes that drive this university."

The decision to divest is a personal or institutional one, but when a university of the pedigree of ANU commits to divestment it has broader consequences. And since the university's decision was announced, the political knives have been out.

The Whitehaven Coal chief called divestment "green imperialism at its worst." The Minerals Council of Australia's Greg Evans accused ANU of engaging in an "anti-mining campaign, an anti-business campaign." The Australian Financial Review used its editorial to compare ANU's divestment commitment unfavourably to banning the burqa, dismissing the move as poorly conceived "whatever the effects of carbon dioxide emissions on climate," as though that were some minor consideration.

What's going on? Since when did the representatives of big business have a problem with investors choosing how to invest their own money?

The underlying fear triggering the outrage of hysterical hyperbole is, at its heart, a simple one. ANU's decision to divest shows that, while the Coalition tries to wind the clock back on climate action at a government level, thought leaders in the community are getting on with acting all by themselves.

You would think the Liberal Party would applaud such individual initiative. ANU is showing that it is not just concerned about climate change, it's willing to do something about it. That's what has the polluters worried.

Until the divestment movement came along, the polluter's strategy had been to keep the government away from climate action under the guise of 'letting the market work'. Now that the market is beginning to work, and high-profile investors are divesting from climate change profiteers the polluters have begun to argue that individual consumer preference is a force to be resisted, decried, and even, if a surprisingly strident call by the mining lobby is adopted, made illegal.

The most powerful argument against tackling climate change has been that one person, one company, or even one country, can't tackle global warming by itself.

A global problem needs a global solution, we are told, so until everyone is perfectly coordinated and ready to move, we all have to wait. In such an environment, Tony Abbott, Canada's Stephen Harper or Russia's Vladimir Putin can effectively stymie global action.

Divestment is different. Divestment turns a simple, individual decision into a demonstration of intent. Research by The Australia Institute suggests that one in four Australians with super would prefer their retirement savings not be invested in fossil fuels. That's around \$250 billion worth of consumer sentiment.

As more and more individuals, institutions and companies demonstrate to their peers and to the wider community that, yes, they want effective action on climate change, and yes, they are willing to act to make it happen, the mining industry is becoming increasingly shrill.

In a recent debate between myself and the chief spin doctor for the NSW Minerals Council, my opponent criticised my research into the extent of taxpayer assistance for the mining industry as relying on "academic arguments".

The contempt laden upon "academic arguments" by mining lobbyists reveals a disconnect between what they perceive to be "real world concerns" and those concerns of the academy.

The interest and the flurry surrounding ANU's divestment commitment reveals exactly the opposite. It's not only universities, with their "academic arguments", that are concerned about the effects of climate change; nor is it only universities who are willing to do something about it. Simon Sheikh's recently founded Future Super, the first 100 per cent fossil-free super fund in Australia, took in 10 million dollars' worth of funds in its first month.

One can only hope mining is happy to rely on "academic" learning when it searches for minerals, tests for environmental impacts on soil, wildlife, plant life, and water, or checks the numbers for whether a project is profitable. It is rank hypocrisy to criticise academic learning only when convenient.

The mining industry is spending vast sums in PR fees to hold back the tide of public opinion. It is fighting tooth and nail to convince the public that individual investors should not make decisions that accord with individual ethical concerns. Of course, the free market is great and all that, but only when it's great for mining's interests.

So far, ANU has only decided to divest its shares in seven companies, or one per cent of its total portfolio. It's a first step, and is to be lauded, even if the sentiment is far bolder than the action. But far from minimising the significance of the historic decision, this fact belies how significant an overreaction the mining industry's response has been.

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