

28 March 2007

Media release

For comment, please contact Clive Hamilton 02 6162 4140 or 0413 993 223

ANU betrays democracy

The decision by the Australian National University to award an honorary doctorate of law to Lee Kwan Yew is a betrayal of the principles on which the modern university is founded, according to the Executive Director of the Australia Institute, Dr Clive Hamilton.

“As Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew for decades violated the principles and practice of democracy and refused to allow basic human rights to prevail in his city state,” said Dr Hamilton.

“He used the legal system to intimidate and punish his political opponents. The award of a doctor of law is particularly offensive given that the ANU Law School is renowned for its expertise in international and human rights law.

“Today’s award will damage the University’s reputation in the eyes of the world.

“ANU Chancellor Allan Hawke has said that, in assessing Lee’s worthiness for the award, ‘the good outweighs the bad’. What is the price of democracy? How much economic growth is needed to wipe clean a slate of abuses including torture, the jailing of opponents and suppression of dissenting views?

“At a time in Australia when academic freedom is imperilled by commercialisation and an increasingly vindictive approach to dissent from the Federal Government, universities should be defending the principles of free speech and democratic participation rather than sacrificing them for expedient goals.

“Instead of defending the right to dissent, the ANU is honouring a former world leader famous for silencing critics and independent voices. The decision sends a signal to autocrats around the world that their abuses will be forgiven. And it signals to those who are punished for speaking out that their victimisation will be air-brushed from history.”