

## INSIGHT

# Pricey shoes, a Swiss trip, bullying claims: Inside the ANU revolt

With the university in financial crisis, staff and students are in open revolt, rebelling against the leadership team of Julie Bishop and VC Genevieve Bell, writes **Jordan Baker**.

If anyone is qualified to advise embattled Australian National University vice chancellor Genevieve Bell on the symbolic power of a pair of shoes, it's her boss, chancellor Julie Bishop. The sparkly red satin shoes worn by the former foreign minister when she resigned from a male-dominated cabinet became such a compelling statement of female empowerment that Bishop donated them to the Museum of Australian Democracy. Bell's choice of footwear has been interpreted differently. Amid anger at the ANU's decision to slash jobs and courses to dig itself out of a deep financial hole, the "derelict chic" Golden Goose sneakers she wore to the opening of the university's Lowitja O'Donoghue Cultural Centre earlier this year – which retail at between \$690 and \$1315 – prompted outrage. Bell says she bought them cheap on eBay. Her critics don't care.

The shoes have become a symbol of the rebellion against Bishop and Bell's leadership. "Resist Sneaker Capitalism. ANU fights back," read posters around the Canberra campus, while angry staff, students and alumni are posting pictures of their own footwear to a website called Shoes of ANU. "I just want to run away," posted one academic under a pair of pink Crocs. One posted a poem below a picture of his bare feet. "Solidarity is not a whisper," he wrote, "but a step taken in pain."

Many Australian universities are in financial trouble, and slashing courses and staff to reduce costs. But the issue is particularly fraught

at ANU, which was set up by an act of parliament to research subjects in the country's national interest. Consternation about the cuts are exacerbated by concerns about a lack of transparency at the top, allegations of strong-armed management, and claims the university's governing council was asleep at the wheel while its financial position nosedived. The university regulator is now investigating.

Further missteps by Bishop and Bell – such as Bell being on a US tech giant's payroll for her first year in the job, a \$186,000 executive trip to Switzerland to host a reception of dubious value to the university at the World Economic Forum, and claims Bishop bullied a senior academic (which she denies) – are intensifying the scandal. Some argue the campaign against Bell in particular is sexist, but many of the university's students, staff – even its "gender experts" – and alumni disagree. They want them gone.

"What's happening is a disaster for the ANU and its reputation," says senator David Pocock, who represents the Australian Capital Territory. "I just do not see how the current chancellor and vice chancellor can turn it around."

## Career turns

Bell is the daughter of ANU royalty. Her mother is pioneering anthropologist and feminist Diane Bell, who spent long periods of her career at the Canberra university and would take young Genevieve to remote parts of the Northern Territory while doing field work on

the role of women in Indigenous societies. Bell became an anthropologist too, and taught at Stanford in the US before her career took an unusual turn.

It was the late 1990s, and tech company Intel was looking for social scientists to study how people used technology in their homes. They wanted product ideas – the plan was to turn experts in human behaviour into technology soothsayers. During Bell's interview, she warned the company that she was "a radical feminist and an unconstructed neo-Marxist", *The New York Times* reported in 2014. Intel was undeterred. It welcomed her forthrightness, which, she told the newspaper, could be a liability in the academic world. "At Stanford, they didn't like it when you told the faculty they were dead wrong, whereas here, that was a cultural value," she said.

In 2017, Bell was brought back to Australia by another rock-star scientist, then ANU vice chancellor and Nobel prize-winning physicist Brian Schmidt, to lead a institution looking at the intersection of artificial intelligence, data and human experience (now known as the School of Cybernetics).

ANU's council, headed by Bishop, appointed her vice chancellor in September 2023 (VC is the equivalent of a company chief executive). Still, she remained on the Intel payroll until November 2024, 10 months into the top job (she reportedly earned about \$70,000 for 24 hours' work from the company in that time). When her secondary



ANU chancellor Julie Bishop and vice chancellor Genevieve Bell and their respective shoes.

employment was eventually revealed, it took many in the tertiary sector by surprise. "It was a shocking look," said an executive at another major institution, on the condition of anonymity so they could speak freely. "Being a VC is a full-time gig."

Questions linger about the disclosure of the Intel gig; Bishop has said she approved the paid nature of the arrangement, but ANU then told the Senate that its council did not require members to disclose remuneration when calling for disclosures of interest.

Stepping into the VC role wasn't an easy personal transition for Bell. She'd explained to the *Times* that she embraced her femininity while

working in the masculine computer world by wearing French perfume and high-heels. But in the first few weeks of her job as vice chancellor, she was told to adjust her image. "She was advised to fix her wild red hair, to watch her weight, swap her backpack for a briefcase," her head of public affairs, Amy Capuano, wrote on LinkedIn, posted in response to the sneaker saga.

But Bell's professional challenge was far greater. She took over a university in bad financial shape. Before COVID, Schmidt had deliberately kept a lid on student numbers to stop the university from becoming mass-market education like major institutions in

## Working until they could not walk: The

The UN has criticised Australia's patchwork laws protecting people from slavery, warning of "severe patterns of exploitation", write **Tania Ewing** and **Amber Schultz**.

In the searing Queensland heat, the Tongan man was forced to sit in the field, his pay docked for an hour. He was being punished for leaning instead of kneeling to bud young mandarin trees.

His employer had been watching him through his gun scope, the farm's former workplace supervisor told *The Age*.

"They would work until they couldn't walk, their legs would seize up," the supervisor said.

She said men often passed out and that she once had to perform CPR on a worker having a dehydration-induced heart attack.

The man was then flown home instead of being placed on WorkCover. The supervisor resigned shortly afterwards. She requested anonymity to protect her

future employment. The farm is now under new management.

Australia's anti-slavery laws have been criticised by the United Nations after an in-country assessment, warning Australia's legal approach to protecting human rights is piecemeal. The report, published last week by Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery Tomoya Obokata, found migrant workers face "alarming and sometimes severe patterns of exploitation" by employers, labour hire companies and migration agents.

Workers were exposed to deceptive recruitment, excessive wage deductions, hazardous working conditions, harassment, threats, violence and sexual assault, the report stated.

Stakeholders have told of women choosing abortions to keep their work visas, while *The Age* has uncovered allegations of coerced marriage, while worker payslips sighted by *The Age* have also revealed poor payment practices and inflated fees.

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM) scheme is a temporary visa program for workers from Pacific islands and Timor-Leste, with 31,500 employed, mainly in agriculture and meat processing.

## Abortions with no choice

A NSW parliamentary inquiry into the risk of slavery for temporary migrant workers, held in June, was told that workers were choosing to have abortions to keep their work

visas. Trudi Beck, a Wagga GP, told a regional hearing that about 95 per cent of visa workers she saw chose an abortion "not because of personal choice" but to keep their visas. "They know they will breach their visa requirements to be able to work – either because they're in a physical job ... or if they keep the baby, they will have to go home because they won't be able to work as per the conditions of their visa."

Paul Mayton, a former mayor of Leeton in the Riverina, told the inquiry he had spoken to one woman who had left her job after becoming pregnant. Her income, accommodation and health cover were tied to the employer. She had no access to health services when she gave birth two months premature. With nowhere to stay, her baby was taken into state care. It was the second child she had in Australia that had been removed from her. "She said, 'I didn't know what to do, Paul, because I have no money, so I agreed to it. But I want

my babies back', " Mayton told the inquiry.

Worker advocates Geoffrey and Jane Smith told *The Age* they witnessed a coerced marriage on a farm in 2020. The employer, a preacher, allegedly told the couple they would lose their visas if they didn't marry, and wouldn't let the couple live together without the ceremony. "We had to hastily prepare a wedding in a backyard. And it was a lovely day, but they still married under coercion," Geoff said.

Australia's Anti-Slavery Commissioner Chris Evans said 3000 PALM workers now in Australia had left their employers due to concerns. "They are the truly vulnerable and are a major focus," he said, calling for extra protection for the increasing number of women in the scheme.

## Common practice

Illegal deductions, non-transparent payslips and surplus



says Andrew Norton, a higher education policy expert who worked at ANU until last year and is now at Monash University. "On the other hand, you've got to think of the appointments that council has made; two VCs in a row without extensive prior university administration experience."

There remains confusion over the extent of the financial problem at ANU, and how it got so bad. Bell and Bishop say it's dire; in a statement in late July, Bell said ANU had been operating with a deficit since COVID and last year spent \$2.7 million more a week than it earned. The 2024 annual report outlines an operational deficit of \$140 million. They say the financial crisis position justifies the plan to cut \$250 million from the budget, of which \$100 million involved staff cuts; more than 220 people have already left through voluntary or forced redundancies (on Wednesday, Bell said there would be no more forced job cuts).

Pocock, however, says the extent of the financial problems remains unclear. "Because there's such a lack of transparency, [it's uncertain] whether the finances actually warrant this level of cuts."

Norton says if the university's position is as bad as Bell says, its council will need to answer questions. "This is one of the key issues TEQSA [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency] is looking into," he says. "If the ANU's finances are as bad as Bell and Bishop say they are, why wasn't this issue addressed earlier on? How did [ANU] get into this situation, and being in that situation, did it hire the right people to get it out?"

The fury of staff, students and alumni has been inflamed by revelations about the cost of supporting the chancellor, Bishop (chancellor is like a company chair, and works with the vice chancellor on strategy and financial oversight). In 2023, the university spent \$186,000 flying Bishop, Schmidt, Bell and three other executives to the World Economic Forum in Davos, where ANU hosted a \$78,000 reception. Bishop doesn't receive a salary for the role (she is entitled to an honorarium of about \$75,000), but her costs are signifi-

cant; her Perth office, travel expenses and staff cost about \$790,000 last year, *The Australian Financial Review* has reported. Bishop has also been accused in the Senate of hiring her former media adviser, friend and business partner Murray Hansen to write her speeches (ANU says this was done by the events team at arm's length from Bishop).

The scandal intensified last week when Dr Liz Allen, an ANU demographer and former council member, told a federal committee Bishop had laughed at and blocked her from leaving a room when confronting her with allegations of leaking confidential information to the media.

## 'What's happening is a disaster for the ANU and its reputation.'

Senator David Pocock

"I believe chancellor Bishop is hostile and arrogant to staff," she told the Senate inquiry. Bishop rejected the allegations, saying she always showed staff members respect.

### Glass cliff position

Bishop has been at the university since January 2020, but Bell has been there for only a year and a half. Some say the vice chancellor is being pushed off a "glass cliff" (a descriptor of jobs given to women when there's barely any possibility of succeeding in them).

Bell has described the campaign against her as tall poppy syndrome. "Sexism is alive and well and living in Australia," she told the ABC, pointing out the campaign has been personal in a way her male predecessor never experienced. Some agree. In a *Canberra Times* piece decrying the National Tertiary Education Union's campaign against her, ANU professor John Blaxland argued Bell was in an invidious position. "Now is not the time to push beyond the glass cliff," he said. "Now is the time to recognise the scale of the challenge she faces and get

behind her." But female academics hit back. An opinion piece by anonymous "ANU Gender Experts" argues they have seen no evidence of sexism in the union's campaign, and that Bell was a privileged woman who was failing in her job. "Women in powerful positions cannot be immune to criticism, nor should their gender protect them from scrutiny," they wrote, expressing their frustration "with what we see as a blatant weaponisation of gender and to raise our voices against it."

Pocock also disagrees with the glass cliff argument. He gave Bell the benefit of the doubt at first, but "that argument wears very thin when you see the way things are being managed", he says. "A lot of the issues now are of their own making, clearly under the decision-making of Bishop and Bell and a council that's potentially been starved of information or hasn't been willing to stand up to them."

The matter is now in the hands of TEQSA. Its chief executive wrote to Bell in June, raising issues ranging from a lack of financial transparency to the management of the cuts and concerns staff were too intimidated by senior executives to speak up about the process. "TEQSA is concerned ANU's council may not have fulfilled its obligation to exercise competent governance oversight of, and be accountable for, all ANU's operations," Dr Mary Russell wrote.

ANU acknowledged the changes had been challenging and said it had already achieved \$59.9 million in savings. "We know this period of transformation hasn't been easy and we thank and acknowledge the work and dedication of our community to support ANU during this time of change and continuing to strive for collegial relationships," it said.

In Capuano's LinkedIn defence of her boss last month, as the shoe issue blew up, she wondered why, in 2025, people were still questioning a woman's decisions about her shoes. "I can't seem to remember any commentary about the last VC's choice of footwear."

Undeterred, the Shoes of ANU campaign marches on. Pictures mount of worn-out work boots, flimsy thongs and "UGGs of despair".

Sydney and Melbourne, which were trying to recruit as many international students as they could. The university was also rebuilding ageing infrastructure and fixing damage caused by wild weather in 2018.

All this meant ANU had no financial buffer when the pandemic hit, and the then-Coalition government refused to allow universities to claim JobSeeker payments. Budgets were further eroded by the Coalition's Job-ready Graduates package, which cut Commonwealth funding for teaching local students across many courses and therefore reduced the viability of smaller courses for many universities, not just ANU – a policy Labor has not

repealed. Bell also walked into cultural problems. A report on the former ANU College of Health and Medicine by former Victoria Police chief commissioner Christine Nixon, published in May, found staff described "a deeply dysfunctional culture across the college and the broader university marked by bureaucracy, territorialism, bullying, entitlement and resistance to change", adding that the university could not provide an environment of psychological safety while this behaviour was considered acceptable.

"You could argue that she inherited a situation that had been building for a number of years,"

# 'alarming' situation for migrants on farms

fees are a common practice among horticulture labour hire firms and employers, found a Fair Work report published in June.

Madec is one of Australia's largest labour hire firms. In 2022-23, the registered charity made nearly \$200 million in revenue, with 84 per cent generated from labour hire.

The company legally charges workers' deductions for accommodation, transport, flights home, bed linen and kitchen utensils.

A Senate inquiry into job security heard evidence that one worker took home just over \$100 a week after Madec's deductions.

*The Age* has reviewed a contract, signed late last year, between a PALM scheme worker from Vanuatu and Madec, showing a proposed deduction of \$1900 for a "return international air fare and domestic travel". Return flights between Brisbane and Vanuatu, the worker's home country, on average, cost between \$550 and \$800.

The worker was also charged \$185



The PALM scheme is a temporary visa program for workers mainly on farms.

a week for accommodation, \$50 a week for transport and one-off fees of \$100 for bed linen, \$200 for a mobile phone and SIM, and \$60 for a refundable kitchen pack. Her take-home pay for the first three months of work was \$224 a week.

In 2022, Madec was investigated

by Victoria's Labour Hire Authority for charging workers for substandard and overcrowded accommodation. Madec agreed to repay workers a portion of their rent, and agreed to audit their processes of payment, deductions and accommodation standards.

Madec has been contacted for comment.

Similarly, this *The Age* has sighted a contract with McCrystal Farms in Bundaberg where hundreds of dollars were deducted from a worker's pay for superannuation, with no details about the hourly rate or superannuation fund listed.

Last year, McCrystal faced legal action by the Fair Work Ombudsman for unlawfully fining workers \$500 for drinking alcohol while on work site accommodation. The organisation charged 29 workers a total of \$14,500 in three months. The Ombudsman also alleged the company charged workers inflated fees for health insurance. McCrystal Farms was contacted for comment.

### Crackdown needed

Penalties to crack down on unscrupulous employers aren't strong enough, says NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner Dr James Cockayne. "The risks of serious

penalty for engaging in these practices are so low that it is rational, from an economic perspective, to take that risk and engage in overcharging, deceptive recruitment and effective debt bondage of these workers," he said.

Cockayne called for the federal government to introduce legislation to allow workers to change employers more easily.

"It's very difficult for people to switch employers... it's an extremely long, complex [and] bureaucratic process. They end up very vulnerable, and in particular, vulnerable to exploitation," he said.

About one in five PALM workers are hired via a labour hire company. Sixty-two PALM workers died in Australia between June 2022 and August 2025. A Department of Employment and Workplace Relations spokesperson said the government takes the "welfare and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers seriously and continues to work with ... employers to promote safety".