Policy Study No.89

# Diamonds Into Glass

## the Government and the Universities

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**Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?**

*Ecclesiastes* viii: 4

# 1
# A glance backwards

A growing malaise has been afflicting British universities during the last ten to fifteen years, and of late it has intensified. The immediate reason is not far to seek: by far the largest part of the universities' income derives from government; and in common with other institutions paid for from public funds, universities have suffered stringency, the inevitable consequence of severe and continuous budgetary restraints. The ensuing retrenchment had brought out starkly, and has served to make even more pronounced, far-reaching and fundamental changes in the relations between the government and the universities.

Relations between the government and the universities! Should there be such relations? The question seems at first sight disingenuous. Do not Ministers, large numbers of civil servants, and Parliament itself, bend over with wise and solicitous care over university education, and do not they go to so much trouble in order to formulate and to execute policies for the welfare of higher education, and tirelessly work to disseminate its benefits widely, not to say universally? And is not the taxpayer, lastly, made to bring his tribute – by the £1000 million – to the sacred altar of learning and scholarship? Yet, not so long ago, in fact within living memory, these things had not even been thought of.

Of course, this is by no means to say that universities have ever been considered as purely private organisations. They were, and are, public institutions, the efficiency and good working of which are subjects of public interest. And this is not necessarily because they may be supported by public funds - as they are today in this country. By virtue of their royal charters, universities have licence to award degrees; and they benefit from charitable endowments, the proper use of which is subject to regulation and supervision. Indeed, the grant of charters to new universities in recent decades, public enquiries by royal commissions into the workings of Oxford and Cambridge, legislation such as that which set up the federal University of London, are so many tokens of their public character. What, until fairly recently, this meant was simply that the public weal

required universities to be well-run and able to discharge their duties. These duties are easily specified: to educate the young, to preserve and transmit traditions of learning and civility, and to promote the increase of knowledge. It was also believed – taken for granted – that these ends were achieved, could only be achieved, if universities were self-governing corporations, articulating for themselves the ends for which they existed, and pursuing these ends according to their own inner, self-moving dialectic. Those who remember the university as it used to be, only three or four decades ago, will know that here lies the secret of its extraordinary power to stretch the intellect of those within its portals, and to inspire loyalty and affection as the alma mater who bounteously bestows, on all those who work to possess them, the prodigious riches contained in the Aladdin's Cave of the mind.

The great value of Aladdin's Cave is that its riches are wholly unexpected and uncovenanted. The moment a licensed valuer is sent to make a survey according to ruling market prices, the charm is broken, gold turns to lead, diamonds to glass. Here is a list of books produced over the years by a university faculty: *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's Republic; Neolithic Cattle-Keepers of South India; A Nestorian Collection of Christological Texts; Water Rights and Irrigation Practices in Lahj.* Here is the 1905 volume of the *Annalen der Physik* with a paper on 'A New Determination of Molecular , Dimensions'. Which planner could have said beforehand that one or other of these subjects should or should not have been pursued; and which accountant or valuer can say that neolithic cattle-keepers in India are worth more, or less, than Averroes' commentary on Plato's Republic? The paper in the *Annalen*, it is true, is by one Albert Einstein and the valuer will, in retrospect, put a high price on it. But unless he is a physicist, can he say – as valuers are usually required to say – exactly, or even approximately, how much?

While Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, J H Newman wrote a lecture for the School of Science on 'Christianity and Scientific Investigation'. He told his audience that unless the scientist

> is at liberty to investigate on the basis, and according to the peculiarities of his science, he cannot investigate at all. It is the very law of the human mind in its enquiry after and

> acquisition of truth to make its advances by a process which consists of many stages, and is circuitous. There are no short cuts to knowledge; nor does the road to it always lie in the direction in which it terminates, nor are we able to see the end on starting. It may often seem to be diverging from a goal into which it will soon run without effort, if we are but patient and resolute in following it out; and, as we are told to gain the mean merely by receding from both extremes, so in scientific researches error may be said, without a paradox, to be in some instances the way to truth, and the only way. Moreover, it is not often the fortune of any one man to live through an investigation; the process is one of not only many stages, but of many minds. What one begins another finishes; and a true conclusion is at length worked out by the co-operation of independent schools and the perseverance of successive generations.[1]

Scientific activity, the characteristics of which Newman so precisely described, forms part of what in his fifth discourse on the idea of a university, Newman called Liberal Education. It is liberal, not servile, because viewed in itself, it is 'simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence'

> To open the mind [he went on], to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression, is an object as intelligible . . . as the cultivation of virtue, while, at the same time, it is absolutely distinct from it.[2]

Newman found it necessary to spell out the character of university education to his Irish audience, because the hierarchy in Ireland manifestly looked to the new foundation to buttress Catholics in the faith and preserve them from harmful and subversive intellectual contagion. Newman was however quite clear that this, like any other utilitarian calculation, would be merely self-defeating. As a catholic, he recognised and acknowledged the sovereign authority of the Church, but this did not mean that a Catholic university was simply its instrument or agent. To make his point he used an illuminating analogy. The

Catholic University, he told the science students, 'is ancillary certainly, and of necessity to the Catholic Church; but in the same way that one of the Queen's judges is an officer of the Queen, and nevertheless determines certain legal proceedings between the Queen and her subject'.[3]

Newman saw that the aims of Archbishop Cullen in Dublin were just as inimical to the purposes of a university as the very different ideals of Lord Brougham and the Edinburgh Reviewers. The latter

> insist that Education should be confined to some particular and narrow end, and should issue in some definite work, which can be weighed and measured. They argue as if every thing as well as every person, had its price; and that where there has been a great outlay, they have a right to expect a return in kind. This they call making Education and instruction 'useful', and 'Utility' becomes their watchword. With a fundamental principle of this nature, they very naturally go on to ask, what there is to show for the expense of a University; what is the real worth in the market of the article called a 'Liberal Education', on the supposition that it does not teach us definitely how to advance our manufactures, or to improve our lands, or to better our çivil economy; or again, if it does not at once make this man a lawyer, that an engineer, and that a surgeon; or at least if it does not lead to discoveries in chemistry, astronomy, geology, magnetism and science of every kind.[4]

Archbishop Cullen and Lord Brougham are the mirror-image of one another; brothers under the skin.

George Bernard Shaw was yet another brother. In 1894, Sidney Webb received news that a benefactor who was unknown to him had left a large sum of money to set up a trust, of which Webb was to be a trustee, to carry on propaganda on behalf of the Fabian Society and its Socialism, and to forward its other purposes. But Webb sought to find a way of using part of the Hutchinson money to establish a London School of Economics devoted not to the propagation of socialism, but to the impartial study of economics and cognate subjects. Webb took legal advice from Lord Haldane who asked him 'whether he remained a convinced Socialist, and whether he believed that the more that

social conditions were studied scientifically and impartially the stronger the case for socialism became?' Webb answered yes to both questions, and Haldane declared that the project could go ahead. Webb believing that 'to know the causes of things' – which became the motto of the School – would ultimately redound to the advantage of Socialism is akin to Newman in his belief that the disinterested pursuit of scientific truth would end by fortifying Catholic truth. At the opposite pole of one another in belief, temperament and cast of mind, yet Newman and Webb believed, both of them, that to harness a university to the promotion of a religious dogma, or a particular kind of social organization would be useless and self-defeating. But Webb had a vehement and noisy antagonist, his fellow-Fabian Bernard Shaw. In a letter to Beatrice Webb he demanded that Hewins (the first Director-elect of the LSE) should be told 'flatly' that he had to 'speak as a Collectivist and make it clear that the School of Economics will have a Collectivist bias'. Again, 'the Collectivist flag must be waved and the Marseillaise played if necessary to attract fresh bequests'. And again, one had 'to avoid shocking the common sense of the public . . . by talking about academic abstraction and impartiality'.[5] If Shaw had had his way, the London School of Economics would have become a sectarian conventicle.

## 2

# A common crusade

And now we find the present Government making common cause with Archbishop Cullen, Lord Brougham and Bernard Shaw in a tough-minded, no-nonsense crusade for utility as the alpha and omega of university education. In exchanges about government and education which raged, all last spring, in the columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Mr Robert Jackson MP intervened at one point. Mr Jackson is now the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in charge of university education at the Department of Education and Science, and his views have therefore attached to them all the weight of office. Mr Jackson holds up for our inspection – and no doubt discomfort – a picture of universities as cartels of 'producer-interests' sunk in a 'rentier culture of wealth-consumption' – mercilessly battening like harpies on a national economy with an 'increasingly pitiful relative performance'. The 'apparatus and ethos of the self-regarding academic producer-monopoly', proclaims Mr Jackson, 'must be dismantled'. Shooting from the hip he discharges on his cowering targets a stream, a hail, of accusatory questions, to wit, 'Are your students getting from you what you are paid to give them? How good is your research, actually? Are you working hard enough? What attention, if any, do you pay to the real costs of what you are doing? Does anybody outside the secret garden have the remotest interest in what you are doing? . . . What sort of responsibility do you feel to that world outside which pays for your work?'[6]

The academics are of couse, no doubt as they are meant to be, struck dumb. Who, then, will answer the question? It is obvious: the Minister himself. He it is who will decide if the third-year undergraduate in engineering at Hull University is getting more, or less, value for money than the second-year undergraduate in Kurdish at London University. The Minister will set up time-and-motion studies to establish whether the Lecturer in Thermodynamics at Strathclyde University is working harder than the Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University. He will commission market research in order to determine whether the public is more interested in Pharaonic

archaeology than in the theory of speech acts. Nor must we think that such aspirations are original to Mr Jackson. For in the last two or three decades such, remarkably, have been the burdens which wise and experienced eminences have, step by step, found themselves tempted to bear. A landmark and watershed in this development was the Committee on Higher Education, headed by Lord Robbins, which was appointed in February 1961 and which reported in September 1963. To follow this development we now have an excellent account of the making of this Report and the working out, over the years, of its consequences.

J P Carswell who published in 1985 *Government and the Universities in Britain: Programme and Performance 1960-1980*, brings to his book the instincts, talents and experience of an accomplished historian who expresses himself lucidly, strikingly and felicitously. Mr Carswell was very well placed to observe unfolding events since during this period he was successively a member of the division of the Treasury concerned with university finance, served as an assessor to the Robbins Commitee, desk officer responsible for universities in the Department of Education and Science, and Secretary of the University Grants Committee.

The nineteen-sixties saw an enormous expansion in university education. The expansion had indeed been underway before the Robbins Committee reported. The Committee recommended that this should continue, and its Report armed the movement for expansion with a beguiling, a conquering ideology, and gave it a momentum which almost no one in politics, and scarcely anyone in the universities, wanted to, or could resist. Political leaders of all colours, beginning with the Prime Minister, Mr Harold Macmillan, believed that university expansion was a vote-winner, while academics and civil servants provided cast-iron, scientifically attested reasons which proved that expansion was absolutely necessary and wholly beneficial.

Mr Carswell takes us back to that far-away age, and provides many arresting *vignettes* of those strong-minded personalities who gave it its innocent, blessed certainties. There was, first, Sir Keith Murray, Chairman of the UGC: 'In manner large, benevolent, persuasive, in action almost inexhaustible, he was a convinced and consistent expansionist . . . He was a man for the times.' But expansionism, not unexpectedly, also meant

restrictionism, for Sir Keith Murray was the creator of the University Central Council for Admissions (UCCA), to which all candidates for admission as undergraduates are compelled to apply, specifying five, and no more than five, universities to whom their particulars would be sent. Mr Carswell admires the invention, declaring that without UCCA 'a university system on a national scale matched to opportunity would have been grossly inefficient, probably impossible'. It is by no means obvious that he is right, or that such a serious restriction of choice – unique in civilized countries – is necessary for the welfare either of students or universities. The United States, for instance, contains a vast multitude of institutions of higher education. They and their students seem to manage without the benefit of such rationing, with neither chaos nor anarchy ensuing.

Then there was Sir Richard Clarke, (Otto to his familiars), Third Secretary in the Treasury: 'He had some of the characteristics of a high officer on Ludendorff's *Grossgeneralstab:* massive presence, neurotic mannerisms, sparkling intelligence, a rather squeaky voice. A more relentless man I have never met . . . He was essentially a man of ideas, all of which seemed to him unquestionably right so that those who opposed them, once he had explained them, were in his eyes simply lacking in intelligence'. Lord Robbins: 'When I first met him he impressed me as a bland silver lion, all mass and whiteness . . . I have never encountered anyone except Otto who was more confident that he was right. It was a friendly, comforting confidence, and disagreement was tolerated: but made no impression'. Sir Philip Morris, Vice Chancellor of Bristol University: 'the most potent member of the Robbins Committee'; he was 'almost clerkly, precise, unobtrusive and hard as a diamond', 'one of the great men of the Attlee years', 'probably the most powerful man in the West of England'. 'He was at heart', Mr Carswell tells us, 'a unifier, above all in education, which he saw as moving inexorably towards a co-ordinated, if indirectly administered, publicly supported system. No member of the Committee, not even the Chairman himself, had more influence over the final emphasis of the Report: indeed it could almost be said that he was its architect'. Morris was 'a convinced expansionist' and had 'a high regard for the Whitehall estabishment as it then was, and for the arrangements it had for financing the universities'. There is

one paragraph[7] in the Robbins Committee Report which Mr Carswell says bears the stamp of Morris rather than Robbins. Refusal to 'co-operate in national policies or to meet national emergencies is an unsympathetic attitude' declares the Committee, 'and it would be easy to think of reasons why it should be over-ruled'. But it is better to show forbearance, though the recalcitrant institution 'must not complain if various benefits going to co-operating institutions do not come its way'. The self-assured certainty that national policies as formulated by authority are here by definition infallible, and the tone of polite menace pervading the paragraph are harbingers of much that was to come.

The great theme which these self-confident and categorical men launched upon the country was that of a publicly funded and open-ended commitment to provide a university education to all those qualified to receive it, and desirous of doing so. This splendid vision was rapturously welcomed by those who had authority to speak for universities, and endorsed by the Government – indeed by successive Governments, who undertook to provide large and ever-increasing funds for the purpose. What was even more onerous, though Ministers, gluttons for decision-making as they often are, may not have thought so, was that governments now had to formulate policies and plans for their charges. The 1972 Education White Paper was entitled 'A Framework for Expansion', and the less ambitious Brown Paper of six years later still took it as axiomatic that it was the responsibility of the Government to finance, and also to plan, higher education. Now more than ever, the authorities work in the belief that they must have a policy for the universities, thus increasing the burden of over-government under which they, equally with those who have become their dependants, must labour.

The Robbins Report began by making a novel and controversial point which, however, it obviously thought there was no need to justify. It saw the universities then existing as forming, or having to form, a system which required 'co-ordinating principles' and 'a general conception of objectives'. Indeed, 'the needs of the present and still more of the future demand', no less, 'that there should be a system'.[8] The Committee then went on to specify a variety of objectives the

'system' had to fulfil. It declared, harmlessly enough, that it wished 'to state unequivocally that . . . there is a broad connection between the size of the stock of trained manpower in a community and its level of productivity per head'. It went on, more urgently, to lay it down in one of those sentences which those who draft official reports will deprecate as needlessly giving hostages to fortune that: 'Indeed, unless this country is prepared to expand higher education on something like the scale we recommend, continued economic growth on the scale of the targets set by the National Economic Developmment Council is in our view, unlikely to be attainable.'[9] The targets set by the National Economic Development Council! What a powrful whiff of nostalgia the words carry! A following paragraph[10] wafts an even headier whiff:

> We are reinforced in our conclusion by recollection of a conversation with the authorities in the Soviet Union. In the Soviet system of planning much reliance is placed upon projections of manpower requirements and these are made on a most ambitious scale. When we indicated difficulties in understanding how, with all the uncertainties as regards invention and the advancement of knowledge generally, reliance could be placed on statistics of requirements for more than a few years ahead, we were met with the reply that in the Soviet Union there would always be use for people who had been trained to the limit of their potential ability.

Manpower planning, as in the Soviet Union, was not the only objective prescribed in the Report. Other kinds of social engineering are also described. We are told, for instance, that it is 'not a good thing that Oxford and Cambridge should attract too high a proportion of the country's best brains', and we must enquire whether their present methods of selection are 'socially just'.[11] The Committee also believed that disparity between the incomes and prospects of persons doing similar work in different universities is 'unjust'.[12]

All these contentions are clearly question-begging. Equally so is the analogy[13] between decisions taken by individual families to spend more of their income on education, and a decision by the Government to do so. The Committee were clearly not willing to see the difference between decisions freely taken by families

about the manner in which they wish to spend their income, and official decisions financed by taxation abstracted from private pockets and implemented by ministers and officials according to their lights and in response to the political convenience of the hour. In line with this analogy, the Committee laid it down[14] that there had to be, in the interests of 'national needs' 'a greater degree of survey and co-ordination of higher education than has prevailed in the past'. The Government, all-wise and all-seeing, should preempt all strategic decisions on university education, which individual universities were incapable of taking on their own:

> It is unlikely [the Committee bluntly affirmed] that separate consideration by independent institutions of their own afairs in their own circumstances will always result in a pattern that is comprehensive and appropriate in relation to the needs of society and the demands of the national economy. There is no guarantee of the emergence of any coherent policy. And this being so, it is not reasonable to expect that the Government, which is the source of finance, should be content with an absence of co-ordination or should be without influence thereon.[15]

This unashamedly *dirigiste* and openly interventionist document received a tumultuous and enthusiastic welcome. The prospect for universities was believed to be of a bonanza hitherto undreamed of. Mr Carswell writes that 'It was contrary to the scheme of things to discuss student numbers in figures of less than a thousand or finance in sums under a million'. No wonder that it became the fashion at the time to put such emphasis on numeracy. I happened in those days – those palmy days – to attend a seminar on university education, addressed by a very high official of the Department of Education and Science. I still vividly remember the nonchalant and assured air, the effortless superiority (said to be the hallmark of the administrative class of the civil service), with which, like an accomplished conjurer, he blithely plucked out of the air marvellous and imposing statistical castles, complete with their projections of student numbers and forecasts of expenditure per capita.

In this, of course, he was only echoing the assumptions and conclusions of the Robbins Report which had quickly become gospel. But the Report did not anticipate the difficulties and

tensions likely to be experienced by universities as they competed for the favours of government with a thousand other deserving causes. The ecstasy soon dissipated, as financial incontinence and mismanagement plunged one government after another into successive crises. Ministers, beset by multitudinous demands and pressures, besieged with fiscal embarrassments, were likely, as time went on, to become more and more irritated by perpetually importunate, seemingly idle and useless dependents, even though it was government itself which had created the dependency, which had, like a blundering magician, conjured up those monstrous blocks of concrete and glass, with their daubings and their graffiti, their regiments of clamorous teachers, their hordes of dissatisfied and mutinous students. Listening to Ministers like Mr Jackson and his predecessor in office, Mr George Walden[16], chastising their charges with whips and scorpions (with no hint of a recognition that what they so disliked was the very handiwork of official wisdom and benevolence), no one can doubt that there is nothing more corrosive and demoralizing than the relation between a harassed, grudging benefactor and a helpless, perpetual supplicant. A prudent and reasonable man would have foreseen and tried to avoid such a state of affairs. The Robbins Committee did not. The omission is one more striking peculiarity of the Report, since one of its great themes is that universities are and ought to remain autonomous in their activities. Such an assumption, as might be expected and as events soon proved, is not to be reconciled with dependence on public funds.

Yet another major theme of the Report was that the greater share of the expansion was to go to providing more places in science and technology, to be divided equally between men and women. But this aspiration did not take into account whether girls' schools were really able to produce qualified entrants in the numbers envisaged, or the outlook and wishes of women students, or of their prospective employers in industry. In the upshot there was a very large over-provision of places in science and technology faculties – of the order of 136,000 places, the equivalent, Mr Carswell remarks, of at least a dozen universities the size of Oxford. This large misallocation of resources puts one in mind of so many other grandiose ventures undertaken by government – ventures the archetype of which is the notorious

East Africa ground-nuts scheme. Committees, civil servants, ministers are not, after all, endowed ex officio with superior wisdom or second sight. The large undertakings on which they are tempted to embark, perhaps in a fit of hopefulness, or out of gullibility, or in pursuit of momentary advantage, are more likely than not to come a cropper. How can government, brilliant Soviet planning notwithstanding, possibly determine how many doctors or nurses or accountants or linguists or chemists should be trained? And yet time and again we find it engaging in such costly, fruitless and absurd exercises. Medicine is a case in point: a committee decided in the early nineteen-sixties that too many doctors were being produced; a while later, a commission found that there were too few.

Cry cry what shall I cry?

The first thing to do is to form the committees:

The consultative councils, the standing committees, select committees and sub-committees.

(TS Eliot, *Difficulties of a Statesman*)[17]

# 3
# Guessing

Government, then, has taken upon itself to determine the quantity of resources to be devoted to higher education, and to articulate the public interest in respect of it. It has assumed the novel, heavy and perilous burden of formulating policies for higher education on the basis of what can be no more than guesses, hunches, gropings in the dark, or those fashionable nostrums which academics themselves invent and persuasively propagate.

Before Robbins, British universities were considered, rightly, to be at the forefront of higher education. They were academic republics – the only genuine republics to subsist in the modern world – well-run, efficient and economical in their teaching methods and in the use of their comparatively modest resources. Those who taught and studied within their precincts, and those who sought the services of their graduates, were better suited, through their successive and cumulative decisions over time, to articulate the public interest which higher education represents. Better suited, because their judgement whether to teach this subject or that, in this or that manner, or to pursue this or that enquiry, or that this university or department was better than that one – such judgements were informed judgements arising out of a living, intimate and lifelong engagement with the matter in hand. These judgements did not issue from the desire – benevolent as it may be – to execute social justice, or in pursuit of the illusion that universities can be made into instruments of social engineering.

The capacity to make such judgements has of course by no means disappeared, but it has lost much of its value and efficacy. Instead, we have haphazard and hasty exercises such as the one which the University Grants Committee conducted recently. The Committee took upon itself, or perhaps had imposed upon it, the task of evaluating the contribution to research of British universities. Using its own private criteria and on the basis of what can have been no more than quick impressions and sketchy information, the Committee proceeded solemnly to bestow on every university department in the land a gold, or a silver, or a

bronze star. An impressive exercise in comparative science – a science in which it is inexplicable that the Government has not pressed every university to establish at least one chair.

But this kind of haphazard exercise simply bears no comparison to the more strict, systematic and centralized official planning of academic activity which we have seen in the last two decades or so, and which, if recent official statements are any indication, promises to spread over the whole university field. The Social Science Research Council was set up in the nineteen-sixties. From its inception, the Council operated a system of allocating scholarship quotas among various subjects and universities. Such a rationing system could be nothing but arbitrary. It seems to have rested on extra-academic and essentially misconceived considerations. There seems to have been a desire to maintain a balance between various universities and departments. But the very notion of balancing must militate against the objective of maximum academic excellence. Initiative and innovation in teaching and research, or the value of a particular subject or line of enquiry, cannot be planned for or appraised in advance by a committee however wise and judicious its members. The fruitfulness of a particular teacher's research will appear only in the sequel. A *sine qua non* for the vitality of teaching and research is to let 'a hundred flowers bloom' or, as the case may be, wilt and die. The straitjacket of these quotas was out of place. This *dirigiste* system also meant that the best students in a given year might not receive an award, or that they might not be able to pursue the subject of their choice, or go to the university of their choice, even though they might have otherwise gained admittance. What is true concerning these graduate scholarships would also hold good in relation to research projects to promote which the SSRC had large sums at its disposal. One central body composed of so-called subject committees, made up of academics nominated to them by the SSRC Council, which in turn was nominated by the Secretary of State, and which required a large number of officials to service them – all this meant a high risk of decisions being hidebound by precedent (the necessary lifeblood of bureaucracy) or blinkered by ruling orthodoxies (the blight of teaching and research).

The same hankering for *dirigisme,* presumably in the belief or hope that it would, with the smallest outlay, produce results

both unimaginably brilliant and extraordinarily lucrative, is manifest in a recent paper, *A Strategy for the Science Base,* published by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils. The Board, standing at the apex of a pyramid of Committees and Councils, proposes to classify universities into three categories, namely type-R, type-X and type-T. The first are adjudged to be centres for excellence on whom much will be bestowed; the second are half-and-half, good only in some kinds of research; the rest – T presumably standing for mere teaching – are the lowliest, to be deprived of all research facilities. A somewhat similar trisection has been recently effected by a committee which investigated and reviewed economic and social history departments. The eminent persons who have been engaged in these taxonomies are no doubt sound in their judgements, but since in teaching and research the wind bloweth where it listeth, there can be no assurance that the excellent will remain excellent, or that the last shall not, some time, become the first. Such reversals and peripeteias are very common in the annals of universities. In the United States, for instance, it is common knowledge that universities which at one time were not associated with any expertise, let alone excellence, in a particular subject, did manage within a decade or so to turn decisively around. But'then, they were not frozen into a type-casting which ineluctably had to govern the flow of funds from the single, unique official source. Such type-casting can, in any case, be no more than an arbitrary judgement based on some idea of a university's past performance.

These successive inquiries, probings, inquisitions acquire their own obsessive momentum, aspiring to a scientific exactitude which, from the circumstances of the case, must be forever unattainable. Thus a Working Group drawn from the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the University Grants Committee has now compiled a list of no less than thirty-nine (!) 'performance indicators'. Further precision will most likely increase the number to three times thirty-nine, and the proper comparison between the 'indicators' for successive years supplied by the several universities will no doubt require the services of a powerful computer. And then? Who can digest and master the evidence comprised in such a *grimoire* and reach decisions on its basis? Who? The answer is simple: the new

professors of comparative science, who will thus signally demonstrate the ability of their subject, and so prove that they are worth their weight in gold.

There can be no doubt that this busy whirl in search of so-called facts and figures is the outcome of the hasty and injudicious expansion of the nineteen sixties -- an expansion dictated by government, which government now finds itself unable or unwilling to fund in the manner to which its dependants had become accustomed. Government has thus to pre-empt those decisions which go to make up the character of a university, and which have slipped out of the hands of those who, in effect, are the university. The funding of a university has now come to be governed by the number of home (and EEC) students admitted and, to control the total UGC budget, the authorities have imposed quotas which a university must not exceed. These quotas and their sum depend, ultimately, on budgetary calculations very remote from, not to say irrelevant to, the interests and welfare of universities and their students. Arbitrariness is inherent in the situation. But the arbitrariness of the restriction is the mirror-image of the previous open-handed arbitrariness of expansion. A recent comparative exercise, for instance, placed Aberdeen university in an unfavourable position. In a letter to *The Times* of 22 June 1987, Professor R V Jones commented on this outcome:

> The university [he pointed out] yielded to the temptation of over-rapid expansion in the heady years following the Robbins report of 1963, and in the process lost quality in staff and students alike. Undergraduate numbers rose from 2,071 in 1961 to 4,573 in 1967. Staff numbers were increased proportionately and to fill the ranks tenure was given to staff who at no other time in university history would have found a place.
>
> All this was amply obvious by 1973, when undergraduate numbers reached 4,833; but, instead of suggesting any restraint on further expansion, the University Grants Committee not only endorsed the university's own proposal to expand to 10,000 by 1981 but asked it to raise this target to 10,500.
>
> On July 31, 1973, the Chairman of the UGC wrote to the Principal of the university: 'Do you think you could

possibly plan for another 500 arts students?' And when on August 2 the Principal replied 'I would expect my colleagues to be unwilling to go beyond 10,000 students by 1981-2', the Chairman pressed on August 9 for Aberdeen's agreement, concluding his letter, 'The Committee will be disappointed if it is negative'. The university duly agreed to 10,500.

The small minority who pointed out that such figures were far beyond realism, especially since the UGC had also endorsed the creation of many new universities, have since had the bitter satisfaction of seeing their doubts substantiated by subsequent events.

After two decades of government-sponsored excess and prodigality, we see now abroad a vague but powerful discontent and impatience with the ways of universities, laughably described as ivory towers, a nameless yearning for some formula or recipe – more science perhaps, more information technology, more questionnaires, more monitoring – which will scientifically (or better, magically) prove that they are not wasting their time, which will hook them up with the humming conveyor-belts of industry. Such yearnings radically misunderstand the character of universities, and so are doomed to the same disappointment as the visions of the Robbins Report which began by speading a manic euphoria, and now inspire gloomy despair.

Official discontent and a restless quest for new and better methods of controlling universities and their activities are amply evident in a clutch of documents which appeared in quick succession during 1987. These were: *a Review of the University Grants Committee* by a committee under the chairmanship of Lord Croham, formerly Head of the Civil Service (Cmd. 81, published in February); a white paper, *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (Cmd.114, published in April); and two 'notes' by the Department of Education and Science (both published in May) on *Changes in Structure and National Planning for Higher Education*, one dealing with a proposed Universities Funding Council, and the other with Contracts between the Funding Bodies and Higher Education Institutions. The thrust of these documents is unmistakable. They all start from the assumption that universities have to have their goals prescribed by government, and that the realization of these goals is to be closely monitored

through a new body employing a new method of control, which the Government is to set up.

Compared with the new *dirigisme*, the Robbins Report is a monument to *laissez-faire*. Higher education, the white paper lays it down, must serve the economy more effectively and have closer links with industry and commerce and promote enterprise[18]. Funds to be made available to universities would now 'properly reward success in developing co-operation with and meeting the needs of industry and commerce'.[19] The Government will investigate by means of an interdepartmental review the 'prospective needs for new graduates by industry, commerce and the public services', and if it is found that 'graduate output' is not 'in line with the economy's needs, the Government will consider whether the planning framework should be adjusted'.[20] Individually and collectively universities 'should do more to reassure the public about the ways in which they control standards', and it is to this end that 'performance indicators are to be developed'.[21]

This particular paragraph is curiously followed by one which seems to adumbrate an opposite line of policy. The paragraph deals with polytechnics and colleges in the public sector whose standards and courses are under the oversight of a chartered body, the Council for National Academic Awards. The work of the Council was investigated by the Lindop Committee which reported in 1985. As the White Paper says, the Lindop Report found that 'quality in higher education was best assured when polytechnics and colleges accepted maximum responsibility for their own standards'. This the White Paper approves of, while universities, as has been seen, are in contrast to be submitted to a finicky system of continuous monitoring. The methods of the Council prior to the Lindop Report were engendering veritable mountains of paper to make sense of which required yet more paper. The new arrangements proposed for universities bid fair to produce similar mountains.

The Croham Report was as *dirigiste* as the White Paper which it preceded. It proposed to replace the University Grants Committee by a University Grants Council with greatly enlarged powers, but which was also directly subordinated to the Secretary of State. The Council's 'principal responsibility' was to 'construct a national strategy for the investment of public funds'

and to reconcile the separate strategies of individual universities with 'perceived national needs'. But the Secretary of State was to have 'a reserve power to issue directions to the Council,if need be'[22], the Secretary of State presumably being the judge of such a need. Indeed the Croham Committee is emphatic that the Government should have policy objectives and should state them clearly.[23]

This full-bloodedly interventionist view is a far cry from the objectives originally set for the University Grants Committee. When it was first established by a Treasury Minute in 1919 the Committee was required to enquire into the financial needs of universities and advise the Government on the application of any grants made by Parliament for this purpose. The terms of reference were considerably enlarged in 1946. It was now required, inter alia, 'to assist, in consultation with the Universities and other bodies concerned, the preparation and execution of such plans for the development of Universities as may from time to time be required in order to ensure that they are fully adequate to national needs'. Operating with these enlarged powers, the UGC presided over the expansion of sixties and seventies and now, in a climate of financial stringency, manages whatever contraction of university education is believed to be needed.

But a body with these large powers, or even with the much larger powers proposed by the Croham Report does not seem to satisfy Ministers. They wish, instead, to establish a Universities Funding Council. This new Council will receive from the Government, according to the 'note' published by the Department of Education and Science, 'strategic guidance on the size and broad balance of the university system'[24]; the Secretary of State will 'regularly' offer 'guidance and information' on 'the nation's needs as regards the size and broad balance of the university system' and on 'specific policy developments'. The Secretary of State is also to have a 'reserve power to issue directions to the Council'. The establishment of the Council will be provided for 'in primary legislation'. But 'more detailed statutory provisions' would be 'provided by means of statutory instruments'; the reason for this is said to be 'the difficulty of securing Parliamentary time for amending provisions required in the light of changed circumstances'.[25]

The other 'note' which was published at the same time, on Contracts between the Funding Bodies and Higher Education Institutions describes the novel mode of operation proposed for the Funding Council. There will no longer be either block or earmarked grants to universities. Instead the Council will enter into 'contracts' with universities. This is said to make for 'greater precision in the specification of what is expected of institutions in return for public funding', and for 'closer links between funding and institutions' performance in delivering specified provisions'. This manner of proceeding will also make possible 'periodic re-negotiation of contracts'[26]. To enable the Council to judge whether universities are fulfilling their contracts will require 'the introduction of more systematic review and monitoring of what institutions achieve with public funding'. This will require the 'timely' collection and analysis of information about performance.[27]

'Contract' is a legal notion. It assumes at least two parties to a contract who enter freely into specific and mutual obligations, and who make provision for arbitration in case of dispute about the fulfilment of the terms of the contract. Contracts are also, ordinarily, enforceable in the courts. But it turns out that the Secretary of State does not exactly have in mind a contract as commonly understood. In an address to the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals on 30 October 1987, Mr Kenneth Baker declared that he did not intend that these contracts should be 'a narrow set of legal arrangements' or that they should be enforceable in courts of law. It turns out, then, that this talk of contract is simply metaphorical – on a par with the social contract, known to historians of political thought, which was so frequently paraded to rhetorical effect during the Labour administrations of 1974-79. But why have recourse to such a metaphor? It is not clear. In a recent pamphlet, *The Attack on Higher Education*, Professor John Griffith has suggested that 'the use of this device may be to try to avoid the legal complication that might arise if a university resisted the imposition of detailed controls by reference to the purposes and obligations set out in its royal charter'[28]. He may be right.

That detailed controls are in contemplation cannot be doubted. Thus the recently published Education Reform Bill makes provision for compelling universities to end the practice of

academic tenure. So intent is the administration on this abolition that it proposes to make it retroactive, by forbidding tenured appointments from the day when the bill was published. Why this drastic and exceptional proceeding which sits ill with constitutional government? It is also proposed that universities should be able to declare a teacher redundant on the grounds, *inter alia*, that the requirements for him 'to carry out work of a particular kind . . . have ceased or diminished or are expected to cease or diminish'. Such requirements will now of course be prescribed in 'contracts' made with the Universities Funding Council – 'contracts' which universities will be in no position to reject. The Council, in turn, 'shall comply with any directions given to (it) by the Secretary of State'. And unto the Secretary of State there is none who may say, What doest thou? Is it so sure that academics over whom hangs this perpetual sword of redundancy will be better teachers and scholars? Have the dangers of pressures on teachers to conform to scholarly or even political orthodoxies to which this change opens a door been weighed and considered? All this is paradoxical at a time when the cry is so loud for parental choice in school education, and opting out of local authority control. Why it should be thought right and necessary for universities to be submitted to a regime akin to that of a command economy is quite obscure. Nor is it clear how a Universities Funding Council, however eminent its chairman, knowledgeable its fifteen members, and energetic its chief executive officer could possibly have the necessary knowledge to write up-to-date contracts with fifty-three universities on subjects ranging from aerodynamics to zoology. So far, it has to be said, universities have shown themselves reasonably competent to run their own affairs successfully. Is there reason to think that a Council made up a chairman, prince of (part-time) chairmen though he be, supported by fifteen (part-time) Renaissance men (and women) as they no doubt will be, and served by a nonpareil among chief executives, would do for universities what full-time university teachers in daily touch with their requirements in various subjects have long been accustomed to do with fair efficiency? It is much to be feared that the outcome of this activity would be a creeping rigidification of teaching and research. Also an increasing politicisation, since university affairs would be bound up with who knows what

irrelevant considerations and calculations made within the Sublime Porte at Whitehall, as when, on a day in 1975, scales of pay for university teachers, already agreed, were summarily cancelled at the sovereign wish of Mr Jack Jones, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union. Malcolm Bradbury's *History Man* encapsulates all the charm of the post-Robbins academy. What prodigies, what monsters will the contract machine of the Universities Funding Council bring forth from the womb of Time?

be beyond the wit of fiscal experts to make suitable provision for the hard cases. What cannot be sensible is to devise a method of university finance the over-riding objective of which is to cater to hard cases. Hard cases, as is well-known, make bad law.

It is obvious that to function properly, to keep up and improve their fabric and their facilities universities need more than current income to cover current expenditure. Universities need a capital endowment. Two British universities, Oxford and Cambridge, are fortunate enough to enjoy the security and elbow-room which a large endowment confers. But it has become apparent that the existing endowments are by no means adequate to present and prospective needs. Oxford, it has recently been reported, is to launch a £200-million international appeal 'to rescue it from bankruptcy and the clutches of what it sees as a Government determined to undermine its autonomy'.[31] It has to be said that tax law here has not encouraged the private benevolence which makes possible the building up of a large endowment fund. The Royal Commission on the Taxation of Profits and Income, the Final Report of which came out in 1955, had occasion to examine this issue. The assumption from which they started was that 'taxes themselves are raised to be spent in meeting the immediate needs of the whole community'.[32] It is a very surprising statement to have made in an era when unimaginable and delightful vistas of income redistribution, demand management and fine tuning by taxation had opened up for Chancellors of the Exchequer through the scientific sorcery of Hugh Dalton (the songster of progessive taxation) and Maynard Keynes. However, as a matter of 'pure theory', the Commission might have prefered to see the tax concessions to charity given in the form of an allowance to the subscriber rather than to the recipient, as is done in the United States and Canada, but administrative convenience forbade; 'giving a personal relief to each individual taxpayer for sums paid by him to valid charities would be a very considerable addition to the present work of returning tax on covenants to the charities themselves'. 'On the whole', the Royal Commission concluded, 'we do not recommend it'.[33] There the matter has rested, except for a very recent concession allowing taxpayers to recover income tax above the standard rate on their charitable donations. This attitude to private benevolence has reinforced the prevailing assumption

that if education and the like are to be promoted, the cost has to come out of taxation.

The Government now spends annually very considerable amounts in direct grants to universities. How then if a capital sum representing the present discounted value of, say, ten or fifteen years' subventions were to be given to each university which would be told that henceforth, given such a handsome dowry (or better, alimony) it would have to fend for itself?

Each one of these measures has probably been proposed and been duly rejected by the powers that be. And no doubt they have pleaded cogent or weighty reasons, administrative and fiscal, to reject them. What is now needed is a turning round of the policies which have been increasingly pursued since Robbins, and which have led to the present situation. It is, one suspects, unwillingness to reconsider existing policies – whether in the DES or in the Treasury – which transforms every administrative difficulty which might conceivably be encountered in implementing any of the proposals sketched above, into a mountain. *Non possumus* is the standing response. But there are pressing reasons why this negative attitude should be abandoned. It is in the public interest that there should be lively, efficient well-run universities. It is not in the public interest, not in the interests of universities and their inmates, that they should be tied to, and dragged behind, the chariot-wheels of the Government.

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