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British Higher Education Policy in the Last Twenty Years

The Murder of a Profession*

Preamble

This is the text of a lecture I gave on 7 January 2000 in Tokyo at the Graduate Institute of Policy Studies (GRIPS). The title – not the subtitle – had been assigned to me. I was asked to speak for an hour, which explains the rather unsatisfactory division of material between the main text on the one hand and the footnotes and appendices on the other. The lecture was simultaneously translated into Japanese. I have only added to the text as I delivered it a very few words of clarification.

In introducing me, Professor Aoki Tamotsu made it clear, at my request, that I was adhering strictly to the topic assigned, and it would be quite wrong to deduce that I saw no good in British higher education. Had I been asked to talk of that in general, I would have given a different lecture.

I also made it clear in answering questions that I had not the slightest wish to impugn the value of training people in special skills and equipping them for the job market. On the contrary, I recognise that every country has an obligation to do this for its citizens as well as it can. I do however see a crucial difference between education and training, and it is this which concerns me in the lecture.

British higher education policy over the last twenty years has been an unmitigated catastrophe.

When a stranger from a distant place pronounces so uncompromising a message of doom, the natural and sensible reaction must be to suspect exaggeration, maybe even hysteria or paranoia. Over the next hour I have two tasks. The easy one, alas, will be to justify my words.¹ The more difficult one will be to fit into the short time available enough facts, analysis and argument to do justice to the gravity of my topic. Most lecturers are megalomaniac: they think they are so worth listening to that they should be allowed to harangue the audience forever. So what is special about my talk today? I wish well to Japan in general and to Japanese universities in particular. I hear that you are in danger of repeating some of our mistakes. I fervently hope that I can prevent you from imitating a nation that has recently destroyed what I think *were* widely regarded as some of the world's best universities. To do so, I feel that I must not merely analyse what has been happening but also explain the fundamental reasons why we have gone so wrong. I think we have not even been asking

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¹ Before coming to Japan I told quite a few academic friends and colleagues of how I proposed to start this lecture. Not a single one demurred.

the right questions about higher education, let alone giving good answers. So in the last part of this lecture I shall explain my own starting point, and talk about three interrelated themes which I regard as crucial: about *truth* in human society, about *education* as a human activity, and about *professionalism*, or what it is to be a professional. On my way, I shall be illustrating the dehumanizing illusion of quantification, negative egalitarianism (also known as jealousy), and the arrogance of power.

So what should I do in my allotted hour? My first draft was far too long, so, for better or for worse, I have made two decisions. I have decided that my top priority must be to make clear the main lines of my argument; and that to convey to you a picture of what has happened I should not deny myself the use of what some call “anecdotal evidence”, with the implication that such evidence is arbitrary and selective. Both decisions make the lecture more personal. I have made them because the statistics and many other data are easily obtainable from published sources, and because the fact that my text is being circulated allows me to do what I normally avoid and provide extra material, including some remarks I think important, in footnotes and appendices which are only in the written version.

The most important published source is known as the Dearing Report.² In 1996 the government appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Sir Ron Dearing, who had recently re-organized the Post Office. Its remit was to consider how higher education in the UK should develop over the next twenty years. Its seventeen members were drawn mainly from higher education and from business and industry. Neither the British Academy nor the Royal Society (the organizations which embody our leading scholars in the humanities³ and science respectively) was represented, nor, so far as I know, were either museums or libraries. The committee was appointed with bipartisan support, so it hardly matters that it began under a Conservative government and reported, 14 months later, to a Labour one. The report has 466 pages and makes 93 recommendations. It was welcomed by the government and most of it is likely to be implemented. It begins by making the right noises: the chairman’s introductory comment ends with an elevating quotation from a British Poet Laureate, John Masefield, about the pursuit of truth and “the dignity of thought and learning”. These topics disappear after Chapter One, and the bulk of the report shows that the committee, if it ever kept these ideals in mind, was unable to find any link between them and the pragmatics of making policy. Thus, while the committee has lots to say about topics that government policy had already brought to the fore, notably quality control, access (who is to attend university) and finance, in my eyes it massively misses the point.⁴

1) Make-believe as government policy

In 1992 John Major’s government passed a Further and Higher Education Act which brought dramatic change to higher education. Since 1965, British higher education had been organized on what was called the “binary system”, binary because divided between universities and other institutions, mainly polytechnics and teachers’ training colleges. The degrees awarded by the latter institutions were validated by the Council for National Academic Awards;⁵ they had a strong bias towards vocational and applied subjects, and their teaching staff were not expected to publish research, though they were certainly not prohibited from doing so. The universities received block grants from the government through a small body of academics called the University

Grants Committee (UGC);⁶ the UGC had considerable autonomy and the universities had a great measure of discretion how to spend their grants, which until the late 1970s were given for five years at a time. Polytechnics, like state schools, were under local governments, which also gave them a more local character.⁷

In 1992 the binary system was abolished and the former polytechnics etc. mostly became universities, with corresponding changes in other areas of nomenclature, so that their executive heads became Vice-chancellors or Principals and most senior teachers became professors. (In Britain the title of Professor is reserved for those who in America are called “full professor”, and a professorship is the same as a chair.) There are now 132 members of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), and all the institutions they head answer to a huge new bureaucracy called the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales (HEFCE).⁸ HEFCE and the CVCP jointly finance another body called the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Money for research also comes to the universities through the Research Councils, and, for science, from contracts with government and industry. It is significant that the science research councils come under the government Dept of Trade and Industry and are formally required “to distribute their funds in such a way as to facilitate the creation of wealth (...); they have businessmen as chairmen and a substantial lay membership.”⁹

Since 1992, all universities compete for funds on an equal footing; all must follow the same rules and apply the same standards. Officially all degrees are equal. I doubt if there is anyone who believes this, but it is one of the lies we now have to tell. By nearly doubling overnight the number of university students,¹⁰ teachers and vice-chancellors the government cannot possibly have preserved standards in any of those bodies, but it is virtually tabu to say that this is government by make-believe and that the emperor has no clothes. The emasculation of the CVCP is particularly serious. This body never had much power but it would stand up for the universities. Now numbering 132, it is

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The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the learning society*, HMSO 1997.

3

The traditional British term is ‘arts’, but I take it that ‘humanities’ is more familiar in Japan. Like many other features of American education, it is also becoming familiar in Britain.

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The most recent official source on our topic is the debate on higher education held in the House of Lords in the week before Christmas. In my eyes it is not so woefully inadequate as the Dearing Report, but still fails to focus on the fundamental questions. For some details, see Appendix 1 below.

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I served as a member of its Theology and Religious Studies Board 1983–1990.

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In 1988 under Mrs Thatcher, this was superseded by the University Funding Council (UFC), which was directly under government control.

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The only private university in Britain, Buckingham, was founded in the late 1970s and is of no importance; nor has it escaped the bureaucratic control described below. At Oxford and Cambridge the colleges are private educational foundations, legally autonomous and with their own resources, but indirectly, through student fees etc., they are financially quite dependent on the state.

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Scotland and Northern Ireland have their parallel controlling bureaucracies.

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Quotation from Sir Keith Thomas’s Presidential Address to the British Academy, 1997, ms, p. 2.

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The number of students in higher education was of course unaffected by this move, but was expanding rapidly in any case.

far too unwieldy to be effective, and not only includes many men (of course, hardly any women) who are not academics at all, but plenty of yes-men¹¹ and careerists – some of whom make excellent use of their devolved power to determine their own salaries.

2) The quantitative story

In 1961, 5% of young people in Britain received higher education; in 1997 the percentage was 34,¹² and the government's declared policy is to raise it to 50. Over the last twenty years the number of students has more than doubled, while the unit of funding per student (known as the "unit of resource") has fallen by 40% and is still falling: the government has announced plans to cut it by 0.8% in the current year and 0.9% in each of the next two years. Between 1980 and 1997 alone, the staff-student ratio almost doubled, from 9:1 to 17.1.

In 1994–5 university expenditure on books and periodicals had fallen to less than one and a half volumes per student per year. As for the academic staff, a report commissioned by the government¹³ recently showed that salaries since 1981 alone have fallen by 30% compared with the average earnings of all other non-manual employees. Perhaps even more shocking, by 1997–8 42% of academic staff were on fixed-term contracts, and if the present trend continues over 50% will be thus casualized by 2003–4. Even at Oxford, an increasing proportion of the teaching is being done by staff on short-term and part-time contracts, who are of course cheaper to employ. Such casual workers do not get benefits such as pension rights.

3) Mrs Thatcher's assault

Despite the steady increase in student numbers, Mrs Thatcher made savage cuts in higher education funding. In the years after she was first elected Prime Minister in 1979, there was much play with such clichés as "trimming the fat" and "cutting out the dead wood". Her idea seemed to be that universities with their staff were like barrels of apples, which could be picked over and the rotten ones rejected, and that she was the first person ever to get this done. So far as I know no attempt has since been made to show that the proportion of dead wood or rotten apples was decreased by all the upheaval, or indeed that it achieved anything positive.

Perhaps I should pause to emphasize this point, since I understand that you may face a similar danger in Japan. When the government wants to seize power over education it calls it "reform", but never explains what requires reform, what the universities have been doing wrong, beyond perhaps some meaningless phrase like "failure to modernize", or connecting us with some unsatisfactory condition which is nothing to do with us.¹⁴ This is because if they were told what correction was wanted, the universities could make it themselves without outside interference, whereas the real purpose of the "reform" is to make them impotent. Similarly, since the aim of the "reform" is so vague, it will never be possible to test whether the changes were justified by success.

Let me record two memories of those days of Thatcher cuts. Our Professor of Hebrew was retiring and we had to convince the authorities that the Chair should be maintained and a successor appointed. It is a Regius Chair, which means that the Prime Minister makes the appointment on behalf of the mon-

arch – though these days it is customary for the Prime Minister to ascertain the wishes of the faculty rather than exercise personal preference. However, Mrs Thatcher was never one reluctant to put herself forward, so we thought it wise to consult someone who had just moved to Oxford from a high civil service post, in which he had come to understand the Prime Minister’s thinking. We showed him our draft, which began, “The Regius Professorship of Hebrew at Oxford was founded by Henry the Eighth.” “Cut that,” said our advisor, “Her response will be ‘Then isn’t it time for a change?’” So much for the tradition of the humanities.¹⁵

But the scientists fared even worse. We had as a visitor at Balliol College the Harvard Dean Professor Don Price, who had advised the Kennedy administration on science policy. Sitting next to him at dinner one evening, I found him in a state of shock. That afternoon our Secretary of State for Education, Sir Keith Joseph, had visited Oxford off the record to address our assembled scientists. “If you want to do research,” he had said to them, “my advice to you is to emigrate.”

This background explains how it came about that when in January 1985 it was proposed to bestow an honorary degree on the Prime Minister, an Oxford graduate, the proposal was defeated in Congregation, the dons’ analogue to Parliament, by 738 votes to 319, the largest margin ever recorded. In thus snubbing the Prime Minister, the dons knew they were taking a political risk, but it was their one chance to record a protest which would be heard by the media. Professor Denis Noble, FRS, an eminent cardiac physiologist and founder of the organization Save British Science, made the most telling speech. He described the government’s education policies as

“... absolutely fundamental to the central purpose for which we and other educational institutions exist and to be producing possibly irreparable damage to those institutions. ... [S]he knows and has been warned that virtually everyone who knows what is happening in the science

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At times the CVCP even goes over to the enemy. “We were alarmed to see that the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals has recently called for ‘a national policy’ for the humanities, urging that a Research Council for the Humanities and Arts should identify ‘national aspirations, needs [and] objectives’. ... We are sceptical about so dirigiste an approach.” Sir Keith Thomas, loc. cit. in fn. 8.

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Figures in this paragraph have been supplied by the AUT; some of those in the Dearing Report are slightly different. For more statistics on the expansion, see Appendix 1.

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The Betts Report. There is no sign that it will be acted upon.

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In an open letter to the Secretary of State for Education in 1986, Oxford’s Vice-Chancellor wrote: “It is true that the economic performance of the country has been disappointing. It is also true that the universities contribute to the nation’s economic performance. But to infer, from a linking of these two statements, that higher education has been ineffective is

neither logical nor just. It would be truer to say that an economic performance widely recognized to have been outstandingly bad has occurred in spite of the contribution of a higher education system which is widely recognized to be outstandingly good, and that in those circumstances the causes of the poor economic performance must be sought elsewhere.” (*Oxford University Gazette*)

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Let me here make a point of substance. It escapes rulers of academia who are not academics that the most important difference between science and the humanities is not that science is more expensive. It is that they have a different primary purpose. Science does indeed progress by novelty, by finding new facts and interpretations. The humanities, with a few exceptions like archaeology, rarely make true discoveries. Their purpose is rather to preserve traditions of learning and understanding, and to convey (mainly by teaching and example) insight into a wide range of human experience. To make “research productivity” a measure of success in the humanities is thus pointless, even harmful.

laboratories of this country is extremely alarmed... Sir Keith Joseph in a [recent] speech ... said, 'Too many of our university laboratories are full of equipment that belongs in museums of industrial archaeology.' Yet, in Parliament, six days later, he announced a [huge] cut in the equipment grant."¹⁶

Professor Noble reported that the President of the Royal Society had recently predicted that if things went on like this, "the contribution made by Britain to world science will be severely reduced." Sadly, that prediction has been fulfilled. Just a month ago Prof. Noble published an article¹⁷ about the steep fall in Britain's share of Nobel prizes and other major international science prizes; he convincingly predicts that unless salaries rise dramatically, the decline will be irreversible.¹⁸

What laboratories are to science, libraries are to the humanities – though the libraries cost less. While expenditure on books and periodicals for university libraries was cut to the bone and beyond, government policy initiated in the Thatcher years and continued since has been to minimize the public subsidy of culture. Museums and libraries have been hit very hard. Even the British Library had its funds so cut that it had to curtail its purchase of foreign books to the point at which buying in some languages has stopped altogether. It may be believed that the Internet makes books redundant, but the very books the library is missing are most unlikely ever to be recorded electronically. Once such gaps in acquisition have gone on for a couple of years the lost ground cannot be recovered and the collection will never again be satisfactory. This means that in certain fields British scholars will have to rely on libraries abroad, probably the library of Congress.

4) The motives for the assault

On 8 June 1984 *The Times Higher Education Supplement* published a long and densely argued editorial entitled "Popper's nightmare". Karl Popper, I am sure you know, was a philosopher famous for his attacks on totalitarianism and his warnings against allowing too much power to the state. The editorial discusses the "grand political irony" that "No previous government has so successfully aggrandized the power of the state while simultaneously and loudly proclaiming its deepest wish to roll back its frontiers." The editor says (disingenuously, in my opinion) that all governments would like to "centralize the power to take decisions", but "the early 1980s will be regarded in the future as a decisive episode in the creation of a tightly coordinated system of higher education under strict national direction. ... Sir Keith Joseph ... is the first secretary of state with the power to set a national policy." He acquired this power through the cuts, and "the stick is mightily more effective than the carrot." After commending Sir Keith for thus acquiring the power to "make education more relevant to the conditions of modern society", and reassuring the reader, rather unconvincingly,¹⁹ that he would not abuse his power, the editorial quotes Karl Popper:

"The holistic planner overlooks the fact that it is easy to centralize power but impossible to centralize all knowledge which is distributed over many individual minds, and whose centralization would be necessary for the wise wielding of centralized power. But this fact has far-reaching consequences. Unable to ascertain what is in the minds of many individuals, he must try to control and stereotype interests and beliefs by education and propaganda. But this attempt to exercise power over minds must destroy the last possibility of finding out what people really think, for it is clearly incompatible with the free expression of thought, especially of critical thought. Ultimately it must destroy knowledge; and the greater the gain in power, the greater will be the loss of knowledge."²⁰

The editor concludes that “perhaps there may be some substance to fears of a Tory offensive against intellectual dissent. For what from the top of the system can appear nothing more than a sensible administrative policy may seem at the bottom a deadly ideological assault. So we arrive at Popper’s nightmare.”

Mrs Thatcher made her name as a free marketeer, believing that the economy did best if economic agents were allowed autonomy. In particular, the state should not try to “second guess” the decisions of businessmen. By contrast, she was the greatest centralizer of power Britain has known in modern times²¹ and energetically promoted the state’s “second guessing” the decisions of local government and the professions – in fact, of everyone except businessmen. I shall discuss to what extent her policies for higher education, and those of subsequent governments, have followed mercantilist and to what extent they have rather followed dirigiste principles. First, however, I must try to explain the thinking – or, more accurately, the attitudes – which underlie this approach to educational policy.

In this period, the early 1980s, Enoch Powell²² published an article in *The Times* in which he protested that economic growth should have the purpose of promoting education, not *vice versa*. Nothing could be more alien to Mrs Thatcher’s mind set. While many have noted her hostility to the professions, few seem to have understood its roots.

Lawyers, doctors and teachers are “professionals” in the sense that they profess a “calling”, analogous to a religious calling, to promote a general good, be it justice, health or education. To carry out their work requires both expertise and an ethical commitment.²³ They get paid for their work, but it is

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Professor Noble’s speech in Congregation on 29 January 1985 was released to the Press. He prepared a copy of it with invaluable footnotes; it will be deposited in the GRIPS library.

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Denis Noble, “A Future for Science”, *Oxford Magazine* 172, Eighth Week Michaelmas term 1999, pp.1–5.

18

There was little remission in the decline of funding for science over the period. For example, much damning information appeared in a short article by the Science Editor of the *Independent* newspaper entitled “Science chiefs’ budget attacks were suppressed”. (*Independent*, 10 September 1992, p. 6) The government had grossly falsified the figures by double-counting some allocations, and had suppressed publication of a warning letter sent them in May 1990 by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils. Its chairman had written: “On present government plans, the proportion of the nation’s wealth deployed through the science budget will have declined by 15% between 1981 and 1994.”

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The editor goes so far as to admit that in “some recent decisions” he had “confused his constitutional authority with his private

prejudices”, and mentions his “hostile scepticism about social science”. In conversation with a Balliol colleague of mine, Sir Keith said that the social sciences were “inherently left-wing”.

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For current evidence of this, see Appendix 5.

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It is only fair to point out that the subsequent governments headed by John Major and Tony Blair have been happy to inherit this centralized control. Blair has granted considerable autonomy to Scotland and Wales and allowed London once again to have its own unitary local government, but has done nothing whatever to restore power to the professions.

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He had been a minister in an earlier Conservative government, in the days when the name ‘Conservative’ still meant that, rather than ‘right radical’. Earlier he had been a Professor of Greek. Though I abhorred some of his views, for he was an extreme British nationalist, no one could deny his intelligence or his independence of thought.

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For doctors this is embodied in the Hippocratic Oath.

virtually impossible for outsiders to evaluate it, so one of their commitments is not to overcharge. They take *responsibility* for exercising their *judgment* in the interest of their clients. The public, though suspicious of lawyers, has generally been inclined to *trust* the professions and to allow them to regulate their own affairs through professional councils.

For Thatcherism, this is all cant and hogwash. The professions are interest groups, just like other interest groups, and interest means only one thing, economic interest. If doctors want money to be spent on health, that is just because they want to get richer. Words like responsibility, judgment and trust are just a smokescreen. Just as the government must act in the economy to see that business interests have what is nowadays called “a level playing field”, it must unmask the pretensions of these so-called “professional” interest groups and level the playing field to ensure that doctors have no more privileges than, say, butchers.

In her belief that only the economy is real, the rest is just rationalization, Mrs Thatcher echoed Marx’s distinction between base and superstructure. The irony goes far deeper than that identified by the *Times* leader: Britain’s most right-wing Prime Minister was also the most Marxist. Les extremes se touchent.

This belief that in the end only money counts has led our rulers into a logical fallacy which explains many of the disasters that have befallen our education system. If the economy is all that is real, everything has its price, which means that everything, or at least everything that matters, can be quantified. Moreover, only quantity can be accurately measured and hence evaluated by bureaucrats. If something cannot be measured, it is literally of no account.

Marxism was not the only major influence on Mrs Thatcher. She came from a cultural background of Protestant non-conformism.²⁴ The oldest strain of such non-conformism is Calvinist, Puritan. Puritanism is at the same time both pro-wealth and anti-luxury. The Calvinists have always believed that the righteous are marked out by achieving worldly wealth, a sign of God’s favour. So getting rich is not just pleasant, but even morally desirable. Luxury, however, is an impediment to wealth; gratification is to be postponed to the afterlife. When Mrs Thatcher visited her Oxford college and was told that a girl student to whom she was being introduced studied mediaeval history, she exclaimed, “What a luxury!” That was not an approving remark.

The non-conformist movement that had the most influence in Britain was the Methodism of John Wesley. Wesley was suspicious of the intellect. The Protestant tradition since Luther has held that salvation comes about through faith alone, and the intellect is generally more an enemy than a friend to faith. It tends to make people think they know better and thus to indulge in the sin of pride. British culture has a horror of “showing off”. Even in schools, teachers will reprimand children who get too many answers right too fast: “Be careful, bighead, not to bump your head on the wall.”

English may thus be the only language in the world where the word “clever” is not necessarily a term of praise – though you cannot learn this from a dictionary. It is fine for a dog to be clever, as shown by its catching a ball, and it is all right to be clever at a specific task, or even to be clever with your hands. So “clever” is a term of praise when it means skilful or well trained. But for a person to be described as clever in the sense of intelligent, of having general potential rather than a specific accomplishment, carries a strong overtone of moral dubiousness. This has enormous, and in my view disastrous, consequences for the British view of the relation of education to training. It also

helps to explain Mrs Thatcher's distrust (if that is not too weak a word) of academics and intellectuals.

5) The main strands of policy: mercantilism and dirigisme

By 'mercantilism' I here mean belief in the value of a free market. We have not yet seen much of that in higher education, for all the rhetoric.

The famous example of a higher education system based on free market principles is that of the United States. Admiration for that system must presumably explain why in recent years British universities have been forced to follow the American model in certain respects, even though those changes have nothing to do with a free market. All English universities except Oxford and Cambridge have switched from our traditional three-term academic year to the American system of two semesters. They have also abandoned the traditional one-subject or two-subject BA degree courses, intended to promote depth, in favour of the American "modular system", in which students take courses which mostly last only one semester. Since each course is examined, there is far more examining than under the old system, in which exams were confined to the end of the academic year.²⁵ Examining, like all evaluation, is a form of administration and takes time away from what used to be considered the essential duties of university teachers: teaching and research. At some of our universities there is now hardly any teaching between the Easter break and the summer holidays: the teachers are examining full-time.

Twenty years after Thatcher's arrival, there is no free market in British higher education, for the simple reason that universities are not even free to set their own prices. It is the government that sets the level of fees. There is a debate nowadays about how much students should pay and how, but as it is unresolved I shall not discuss it except to say that universities are so desperately poor that what matters most is for them to get some more money, however it may come.²⁶ If a university is to be modelled on a commercial enterprise, it is also wholly unclear who the customers are: the students or the taxpayers. The model vacillates. It is also unclear what the product is: sometimes it appears to be student qualifications, at other times national wealth. With such muddle and ambiguity in the policies which are supposed to guide them, it is no wonder that the universities are easy targets for criticism, which then is used to justify ever greater control.

Rhetoric tends to place the student as customer; John Major's government was especially fond of this switch in perception. But only the stupidest customer buys a pig in a poke, so the student must be able to see what she is buying. Education used to mean placing yourself in the hands of a teacher whom

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I do not know whether she is personally religious, though I doubt it, but that is not relevant.

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Oxford, an extreme case, examines even less: there are no formal exams in the second year of the 3-year BA course. There is plenty of informal feedback from tutors, but the idea is, or used to be, that students should take some responsibility for pacing themselves and monitoring their own progress, rather than being nannied like small children.

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"Only about one third of the total income of the University of Oxford is now derived from the Higher Education Funding Council." Lord Butler, Master of University College, Oxford, quoted in the report of the House of Lords debate (see footnote 4). In the same source, the parallel figure for the London School of Economics is only 26%.

you trusted to give you what you needed. To some extent this model still works for doctors, since few people feel competent to judge their own medical requirements; accordingly, doctors have not wholly lost their professional status. One of the words most heard in higher education nowadays is “transparency”. You must lay out your wares for the customer to see while considering purchase. This means far more than advertising on the Internet what subjects a course will cover. It is not enough to promise your pupil to exercise your professional judgment on her behalf; that is considered “subjective” and hence undesirable. The bureaucrat requires allegedly “objective”, quantitative criteria.²⁷ The word ‘education’ etymologically contains the Latin root meaning ‘to lead’, but a vendor cannot lead his customer, only mislead her. “The customer is always right” is the basic mercantilist adage.

In fact, of course, most students have more sense than to behave like commercial customers. The client we really have to try to satisfy is the government. The government says it is only acting as agent for the taxpayer, but we can hardly treat the taxpayer as a customer, since it is hopeless to try selling to a customer from whom you can have no feedback. Here too there is no market. In free markets some businesses fail and others succeed, even predominate. But on the one hand, our government does not want any university to fail and go bankrupt, as this would waste the public money already invested. On the other hand, no university must be too commercially successful either. When recently a Vice-Chancellor asked “that state funds should be made available to match money which has been raised by universities’ own efforts,” a member of the Commons Education Select Committee killed the proposal by merely saying: “My worry is that ... that will lead to universities like Oxford and Cambridge simply getting a lot of money.”²⁸ We shall see more of this very British form of egalitarianism. What is on view here is not mere jealousy. It is also the confusion between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome (“all shall have prizes”), especially common in the Labour Party, that bedevilled the introduction of comprehensive secondary schools in the 1960s and ‘70s.²⁹ Markets do imply competition, but about that too we have much talk and little action.³⁰

While there is really no market in British higher education, I suppose that begging is a kind of commerce. We call it fundraising. It is an established feature of the American scene, in which universities all employ beavies of professional fundraisers and there is what they call a “culture of giving”; even in the income tax system there is a presupposition that one will make donations to charities. In Britain people think that their taxes support cultural institutions, including universities, and resent the idea that they should give extra. Now, however, any university teacher who cares for his subject had better raise money for it if he wishes it to survive. I know that when I retire there will be no Buddhist studies at Oxford unless the money has been raised from private sources. I do not enjoy fundraising and have not been trained in it, so am probably not good at it; but there is no real choice.

Dependence on fundraising has its drawbacks for institutions concerned with the truth. Is advertising the most veridical form of human communication? For all its good qualities, we know, alas, that American universities are riddled with hype, exaggeration beyond all reason. Americans seeking a reference from a British academic usually feel the need to remind us that we cannot write for their market as we would write at home. No one there will get a job unless he is a “mega-star” at least, and the very word ‘average’, in any context, is the kiss of death. When we raise money, it is hard not to bend the

truth. Most money comes from businessmen, and they naturally prefer to give money for subjects they regard as useful. I believe that management studies is the only field at Oxford which is not short of funds.³¹ It is hard to raise money for economics or sociology, much easier for an applied field like marketing; so the academic is likely to face the choice between pretending he is doing what he is not, which is dishonest, or doing just what he is paid to do, which is prostitution. The choice is somewhat humiliating.

We are about to have more commercialism at Oxford. Budgets will be devolved to individual faculties, which will be called “cost centres”, and there will be considerable financial autonomy. Instead of paying the salary of a professor of Sanskrit, the faculty will be able to use that money for teaching Turkish, equipping a new common room, or giving everyone a new computer. I can see a positive side to this, but it will also mean that we spend even less time on teaching and research. But who cares about that except an academic? The recent trend for us to raise our own money and maybe even decide how to spend it is the only mercantilist strand in British higher education policy, which is overwhelmingly dirigiste. We are bureaucratized beyond belief. I have connections with a new university and helped them to set up some courses in Indian studies. For this I had to wait around all day to be interviewed by two committees. While I was waiting I talked to a history professor who was being interviewed with me and he told me he had to attend so many meetings that he had time to lecture for only one hour a week. After the meeting I had to fill in a three-page form, with questions on my opinion of the room in which I had been interviewed. This is called “quality control”. It is Orwellian Nusspeak, for it really denotes controlling quality only in the sense of pest control, i.e. keeping it down.

The central plank of the ideological platform of our “quality control” is the concept of “value added”, which of course comes straight from Marx.³² This is “value added per student”. To calculate this figure, you take the value of the student when she enters the university, her value when she leaves (typically 3 years later, with a first degree), and deduct the former figure from the latter; you then take the average for the students who have passed through in the period under consideration. Marx wrote of the alienation of treating people as objects, but I doubt that even he envisaged that students could be so commoditized. It is hard for Oxford or Cambridge to score well for “value added” because we take students who are already “valuable”, i.e., well qualified; so this calculation works somewhat like the English schoolteacher’s reprimand and warns us not to get bigheaded.

Above all, “quality control” is a means of denying academics the right to act as professionals. On a recent inspection of Oxford teaching, the inspector sat

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We have even been warned about the use of qualitative judgments in testimonials: we should “stick to the facts”.

28

Quoted in Jasper Griffin, “A Don’s Dilemma”, *The Spectator*, 25 September 1999, pp. 20–21.

29

We shall meet this again in Appendix 4, where we discuss access (equality of opportunity) and dropout rates (equality of outcome).

30

See Appendix 3 for a discussion.

31

I am sure they would deny this; but appetites are great, and management is not the most modest of subjects.

32

The German term is *Mehrwert*.

in on a history tutorial. The student read an essay, the teacher discussed it with him. In the course of the discussion the teacher rose and pulled a book out of his bookcase to show it to the student. The inspector asked if it was on the syllabus. It was not, so the teacher was officially criticized for introducing an element into his teaching which had not been previously announced. Spontaneous interaction with a student and the exercise of judgment are both frowned on.

The model for the university is now the factory. The factory mass-produces qualified students, thus adding value to the raw material. The academics, the workers on the shop floor, are there merely to operate the mechanical procedures which have been approved by the management and checked by the inspectorate. Since they are mere operatives, they can of course be paid accordingly. Recent job advertisements show that a secretary in the university and a young lecturer get the same salary – something over sixteen thousand pounds a year. In Oxford you cannot buy even a tiny house, or raise a family, on that money.

Our rulers claim, of course, that they are not controlling what we do, only how we do it. This claim is either stupid or disingenuous, for the two cannot be separated – as was realised by the editorial I have quoted. So how are we now regulated? I could tell you of the horrors of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA), but those come only every 4 or 5 years. I have chosen instead to take examples which impinge on my life almost daily.

6) Removing professional responsibility

My first example concerns something that we have imposed on ourselves at Oxford, but it is in accordance with the ubiquitous principles of “quality control”. These are now so pervasive that probably few people would understand what I am complaining about.

The career of a research student at Oxford is organized broadly as follows. On admission by the graduate studies committee of the appropriate faculty, she is assigned to a supervisor. The supervisor writes termly reports three times a year on the student’s progress; they are read by the chairman of the graduate studies committee and by the student’s personal advisor at her college, either of whom can intervene if anything seems amiss. The student can change supervisor at the request of either party – though such requests are infrequent. When the student submits her thesis, it is examined by two people not the supervisor, who are chosen by the graduate studies committee, often on the supervisor’s advice and always with the student’s consent, in the sense that the student has the right to object to a particular nomination. One of the examiners is usually from outside Oxford; both may be. The supervisor is rigidly excluded from the examining process. The career of a doctoral student between admission and submission is formally divided into three stages; to proceed from one stage to the next she has to submit written work and the supervisor recommends the promotion on a form.

Within the last decade, this progression has been greatly elaborated. At both the intermediate stages, the student’s written work must now be assessed by two people not the supervisor; they also interview the student and send written reports to the graduate studies committee.

Any supervisor worth his salt will advise a student to consult specialist colleagues when appropriate; there has never been any bar to this. Moreover,

there are few matters in life on which it is not worth having a second opinion. Here, however, we have bureaucratic overkill. The present system has four drawbacks, two for the student and two for the teachers.

Firstly, students see themselves as undergoing three examinations instead of one, and so suffer more nervous tension. Second, there are few topics on which five or more academics will entirely agree, so that the student often receives conflicting advice.

For the teachers, the amount of examining everyone has to do is multiplied, whereas – I repeat – examining is a form of administration and so should be minimized to leave time and energy for teaching and research. But the last drawback is the worst. The traditional relationship between teacher and pupil is replaced by an impersonal mechanism. The teacher’s responsibility for the student is removed; in fact, no individual now takes responsibility: if anything goes wrong it is just system failure and nobody takes the blame. Nor, if all goes well, does anyone deserve credit: why should a student be grateful to a supervisor who is just doing his job along prescribed lines?

The supervisor has even effectively lost the power to decide when a thesis is ready for submission. For this it is the higher powers, the agencies of government, who are responsible. To their undying shame, the British Academy, which for a while acted like a research council (though an exceptionally poor one) for the humanities, decided³³ in 1991 to recommend to the government, which of course accepted,³⁴ that students should finish their doctorates in three or at most four years of graduate study. The motive behind this was power, not saving money. Scientists, who begin their research careers in a far more tightly controlled environment, are normally set a piece of work for the doctorate, which is completed in three years. Humanities research students were taking far longer, though less long than their American counterparts.

If one is lucky enough to be among the very few students who get a state grant to pursue research in the humanities, that grant is given for three, or in very few cases for four years of study. If the student studies for longer, it is entirely at her own expense: she costs the State nothing, and the marginal cost of her presence at the university is incalculably small. Nevertheless, any department in the humanities or social sciences in which students are taking over four years to complete their doctorates is penalized by no longer being allowed to take research students who are on state funding. The reason for delay is irrelevant: whether the student was ill, employed, or fulfilling family responsibilities makes no difference to the operation of the policy.³⁵

To earn a doctorate, a thesis used to have to be judged “an original contribution to knowledge”. This wording has been changed to “a significant and substantial contribution”, which is thus glossed in the regulations: “Examiners shall bear in mind that their judgment of the substantial significance of the

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Strictly, the proposal came from a Joint Working Group of the British Academy and the CVCP.

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In 1988 the government had proposed a target for theses to be submitted in 4 years.

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One of the first departments to be hit was economics at Cambridge. This is, or certainly was, the most distinguished economics department

in Britain. Its research students tended to be employed, before finishing their doctorates, at such prestigious institutions as the World Bank and IMF. So the department’s four-year completion rate was poor, and soon it found itself with only foreign research students, plus perhaps the rare British student rich enough to pay the fees from his own pocket.

work should take into account what may reasonably be expected of a capable and diligent student after three or at most four years of full-time study.”

The British Academy document actually says (in paragraph 8) that “the standards set by some scholars and institutions for doctoral theses in the humanities, although commendable, are too high.” In February 1992 Balliol College wrote a letter of reasoned protest to the President of the British Academy,³⁶ but of course it had no effect. The new policy would mean, wrote Balliol, that “the theses produced in British universities would cease to be serious works of scholarship comparable with the theses produced in any other European university.”

Some supervisors are still taking the risk of maintaining standards, though this means being badgered with inquiries from the authorities, and may lead to the blacklisting of their departments. Their replies may have to bend the truth, but at least they avoid the far worse lie of pretending that an Oxford doctorate is still what it used to be and conniving in the policy of make-believe.

7) The modern consensus: universities as instruments of social and economic policy

Early last month the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, lectured in Oxford on education. Of higher education he had only two things to say: that it should take more young people from the working class³⁷ and that it should keep Britain internationally competitive (in economic terms).³⁸ The promotion of social equality and economic growth are indeed the main two topics nowadays when universities are discussed. I wholeheartedly support both these aims of government. But are universities the instruments which can realize them?

Universities can draw a small percentage of young people from the working class into the middle class, but nothing like enough to make a great impact on society. Besides, the less the university they join is like a real university, the less it can do for its students. The problems of class division require remedial action on many fronts, and those remedies need to reach the child long before he or she is old enough to attend a university. The biggest problem of all is parental ambitions, and to change these could well take a whole generation.

The main contribution of universities to economic growth must be through applied science. That will not flourish if we neglect fundamental scientific research, nor can any science flourish at universities if there is no money to pay for salaries or laboratories. British science has been starved of funds for years, and with so little input it is again sheer make-believe to expect much output.

If our universities maintain a good reputation abroad, they can earn by attracting foreign students – and they have indeed been doing so. To continue to do so, however, they must maintain the value of British degrees. There is alas the plainest of evidence that the lure of short-term gain is killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. The substitution of something called “quality control” for the true quality of professionalism is make-believe of Orwellian dimensions.

8) A fundamentally different view of universities

Our Prime Minister apparently thinks that the purpose of universities is to promote social engineering and economic progress. I would like to put forward, as briefly as I can, an alternative view.

Institutions work best if they have clear goals and are designed to achieve those goals. Hospitals are for care of the sick, orchestras for playing music,

and they should be used for those goals, entrusted to the professionals who understand them, and only judged by how well they fulfil them. Universities are for truth: to promote its pursuit (curiosity) and encourage its use under all circumstances.

Two questions arise. Do we need to pursue truth? And are universities the only institution to do that? To take the second question first: religious bodies may claim to, but they are only interested in a few issues and perfectly indifferent to most of the questions asked in academia; moreover, they are not prepared to question absolutely anything or to follow the truth wherever it leads them. It is academic scientists who are, they say, on the verge of creating life in a laboratory. They are probably wise to ask the churches what they think of this, but the churches would never have made the discoveries, nor are the scientists bound to heed their advice.

But do we need institutions committed to truth? Just think of the many places where there have been or are none, the countries ruled by Hitler and Stalin. Britain gave to the world, through its Parliament, the concept of Her Majesty's loyal opposition. It is very odd and very sad that our politicians today cannot see why the country should need a permanent and flourishing loyal opposition, trained to question and not to accept shoddy answers. Worse, academics are being forced to lie and to connive at half-truths. But truth matters everywhere, not just in politics. Think of how little has been achieved intellectually under Hitler, Stalin, or any totalitarian regime. Truth can more than pay for its keep pragmatically. But it has a more than pragmatic value.

This brings me to education. I suppose that society requires from government four things: security, justice, health and education. Health and education, full use of one's body and mind, are surely analogous. Unfortunately, they are viewed differently, at least in Britain. Sickness of body is regarded as exceptional, requiring remedial action, full health as normal, the default mode. The mind is regarded in the opposite way: untutored ignorance is thought of as natural, and any interference with that ignorance is a kind of bonus or, as Mrs Thatcher would say, a luxury. Can poor Britain afford such luxuries? Well, in the eighties someone had the bright idea of printing a button for people like me to wear; it said: "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

As I have indicated, the English are afraid and ashamed of "cleverness". That is a major reason why universities are justified as places of training for the job market, and not for the education they provide. The latter squeezes in, in today's vocabulary, as "transferable skills": ability to reason or to express oneself fluently can enhance performance in any job and so can be justified in pragmatic terms. So perhaps can some of the subtler dispositions which education can enhance, such as curiosity, critical acumen, a sense of responsibility, a catholic range of sympathy, aesthetic sensitivity, an independent spirit. Incidentally, my scientific colleagues agree with me that these can be enhanced by, and are certainly needed by, the study of the sciences as much as that of the humanities. But their ultimate justification is not pragmatic. They

36
This was A.J.P. Kenny, who had been Master of the college. He was subsequently knighted by John Major's government.

37
The technical term for this issue is access. See Appendix 4.

38
On this see footnote 14 above.

are the qualities which make us fully human. As Dante has Ulysses say: “We were not made to live like brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge.”³⁹

What our rulers have wholly failed to realize is that education is a *human* activity.⁴⁰ It has to be human in its methods as well as its results, for the two are not entirely separable. Getting programmed information from a computer is valuable in its place, but it is training, not education. If we think back to our own education, most of us will remember very little of the specific things we were taught; what we remember is our teachers. It is our good teachers who have influenced us and to whom we feel grateful long after the examinable content of what they taught has been forgotten.

The reason for the success of Oxford and Cambridge is terribly simple: the students are taught individually. More than that, the college system breaks up the large numbers of a modern university into communities small enough for us all to know each other individually, and as we meet in all kinds of activities, not only at lessons or lectures, we see each other as whole people. That is why my students are my friends and keep in touch for years after they have left Oxford. This is an expensive system, but even so I think it gives value for money, and if society decides it can no longer be afforded, something special will have been lost. Diamonds are indeed expensive; but who cares about the price of fake diamonds?

Education occurs in human relationships, not only between teacher and pupil but also between fellow-students and between colleagues. That is why we need academic communities. These communities will be as full of failings as human beings always are. What should be special about them is that they should know and admit it. The good academic very often says, “I don’t know” and “I am not sure”; he also says what one might do to find out, or explains why certainty will never be possible.

This intellectual honesty is being systematically destroyed. Like trust, judgment and responsibility, intellectual honesty is thought to have no cash value and thus to be worthless. In the kind of society we now inhabit, pay is an accurate index of esteem.⁴¹

In 1993, Conrad Russell published a book called *Academic Freedom*.⁴² Most of it had been written in 1991, but there is a despairing “Epilogue (April 1992)”, written in the light of the Further and Higher Education Act of that year. I only wish I could read to you the whole of that epilogue, for it describes the demise of the academic profession more elegantly and forcefully than I ever could – but it is too long. Let me however quote just one paragraph:

“[T]he idea of academic freedom must involve some sphere of autonomous professional judgment. There must be some things recognized as academic questions, to be decided by academics according to academic standards. It is this sphere which is now being whittled away to nothing. ... If we cannot decide how to teach, what the standard of the degree should be, what its justification and purpose are, or whether students are good enough to be admitted, what academic freedom do we have left? Professionals must have standards: without them, both grounds of self-respect and utility to society disappear. If, one after another, every one of these standards must be sacrificed on the altar of ‘efficiency’, what sort of professionals do we have left when the job is done? Almost everything academics are now asked to do, most of them believe to be wrong. Even if they are in error in that belief (and the possibility must be admitted), so long as they hold it, in conscience they ought to act on it. If they do not, their claim to society’s respect, and indeed to their own, is forfeit. No one who has lost his professional self-respect can long remain good at his job.”⁴³

The academic profession, as some still call it, has been demoralized, pauperized and humiliated. The best a young academic can hope for is to take Sir

Keith Joseph's advice and emigrate to America.⁴⁴ Was my opening sentence an exaggeration?

Tokyo, January 2000

A) Appendix 1: Academic Recruitment Today

The House of Lords debate mainly interests me for what it said about academic recruitment. I rely on the report published in *The Times* by William Rees-Mogg, who edited that newspaper before it was bought by Rupert Murdoch. He summarizes:

“There was a general consensus that British universities are underfunded for the work they have to do, and our best universities are handicapped against those of the United States; that salaries are too low – well below those of the Civil Service; too much energy is taken up responding to bureaucracy; dropout rates are too high; students are accumulating large debts; and recruitment to academic posts is inadequate, particularly in science.”

He then quotes a statement that a quarter of all chairs in surgery are vacant and so are 74 clinical chairs in medicine, of which half have been vacant for more than a year.

It is becoming quite common in Oxford for first choices to turn down chairs, and not only in the sciences. Anyone who holds a chair abroad can hardly afford to move to Britain. I know of a recent case where the person invited to a prestigious Oxford chair would have had to take on about three times the work for a salary one third of what he currently earns. It is in the nature of things that such cases of appointments refused cannot be publicized; but they are extremely serious. At the other end of the scale, no bright young person is likely to become an academic in Britain when they could certainly earn twice as much elsewhere, and will not even have the time or opportunity to do much of the research which might attract them into academia. There are of course no statistics on brain drain, and even if there were any, they would record neither the people who have made their academic careers abroad from the beginning, nor the non-British academics who have tried a spell at a British university but decided – sometimes reluctantly – that they cannot afford to stay. The academic staff at all top universities is, after all, recruited internationally – as our rulers choose never to remember.

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Fatti non fummo per viver come bruti. Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.

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Given that Thatcher, Blair, and several of the Ministers of Education have themselves been to Oxford, their blindness to educational values is, I must admit, a serious indictment of the education we have been providing. They simply do not realize what it is they have received. I think Oxford should make much more systematic and explicit efforts to eradicate anti-intellectualism among its students. How deeply ingrained such attitudes are!

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I am accordingly astonished and grateful that anyone who earns as little as I do should be thought worth listening to!

42

Conrad Russell, *Academic Freedom*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993. Conrad Russell (Lord Russell), son of the philosopher Bertrand Russell, is a Professor of History at the University of London. He is also now the Liberal Democrat Party spokesman on higher education.

43

Russell, op. cit., p. 109.

44

“[A]lready people are leaving Oxford and Cambridge for the USA in order to recover the opportunity to do research.” Russell, 1993, loc.cit.

I come from an academic family and my own two children, now in their thirties, got excellent first class degrees at a top university, one in science and the other in humanities. It has never occurred to either of them to pursue an academic career.

Conrad Russell (see main text, fn. 42) wrote in 1992: “Those who can get off the sinking ship, to America, to early retirement, or to another occupation, will presumably do so in growing numbers. This, though, gives no clue to policy for those left in charge of what remains.” We are still awaiting that clue.

B) Appendix 2: The Statistics of Expansion

The first major planned expansion of British higher education occurred as the result of the Robbins Report (1963). At that time there were 31 universities in Britain. Since then there have been plenty of statistics published, but they are not easy to evaluate, because criteria and methods of counting have been changing. Accordingly, these statistics should only be used as giving an approximate idea. It is helpful to remember that over the period under consideration the population of Britain has hardly changed in number.

Full-time students in higher education

1960	just under 200,000
1970	just over 400,000
1980	almost the same
1990	about 650,000
1997	about 1,160,000

Figures for the number of universities vary bewilderingly. In 1997 the Dearing Report wrote: “Today there are 176 higher education institutions in the UK of which 115 are titled universities...” (para.3.83). The figure I have given for membership of the CVCP, 132, is more up to date but may slightly over-estimate the number of universities.

Chapter 3 of the Dearing Report has many statistical tables and charts, some with interesting international comparisons.

C) Appendix 3: Competition

There is no free market competition in British higher education, but disjointed fragments of policy have introduced certain competitive elements. Let me illustrate.

As part of a pay settlement for academic staff in the late '80s, it was prohibited by Mrs Thatcher's government to pay a flat rate at a given grade. Hitherto, all professors (in the British sense: the top academic grade) at Oxford and Cambridge had been paid the same salary. This peaceable arrangement saved much time, energy and emotional turmoil, and at Oxford a vote in Congregation confirmed that at least a majority preferred it. However, the government now forbade it. In the United States there is a free market in professorial salaries, so senior professors often move to more highly paid jobs, or use higher offers elsewhere to lever raises from their own universities. Since British universities cannot afford the cash to run such a system (which would also

expose them even more blatantly to American competition), various compromise systems have been tried.

At Oxford there are now seven professorial salary grades. When a chair is being offered, the Vice-Chancellor has the power to negotiate the salary. Once a professor is in post, he or she can apply when the grading is being reconsidered, once every two or three years. In theory, grades are then awarded by “objective” criteria, in accordance with the principle of “transparency”; the level of excellence required in order to be classified at each grade is expressed in an official formula. In practice, however, there is a predetermined sum of money available for distribution, so that promotion cannot but be competitive. The whole process of application and award is confidential, so the system is only relatively “transparent”, and seems to me to be an unsatisfactory hybrid between our old, now forbidden, system and true competition.

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is nominally just that, an assessment of how good university departments have been over the past few years at producing research. But it also contains an element of competition. Let me describe the system as it operated in 1996, when I was an assessor for the second time.

Individual researchers are assessed at one of five grades, from A to E. Their departments, which submit their names and publications, are assessed at one of six grades: the top is 5*, the rest go down from 5 to 1. A complicated formula is prescribed to the assessors for converting a department’s set of individual grades into a single joint grade. The individual grades remain secret; the joint grades are published and determine the department’s level of research funding until the next RAE.

How is this calculated? The HEFCE assigns a sum of money to each joint grade from 5* to 1. Let us call these unknown figures u , v , w , x , y and z . (I suspect that z has a value of zero.) The values of these figures are not announced until the assessment is complete, nor is the total sum of money available for distribution. The money awarded to the department is then the value corresponding to its joint grade multiplied by the number of names submitted.

Let me give an example. Prof. P. heads a department of 9 academic staff, 5 of whom he knows to publish good research, even though he cannot be sure how good the assessors will think it. Another 2 of the staff have published nothing worth mentioning, so he is disinclined to submit their names at all. There are however also two who have published research in the relevant period but he finds their work undistinguished. If he submits their names, his department will probably get a lower joint grade than if he left them out. He guesses that without them his department will get a 5 and so be at level v ; with them, he expects a 4 and level w . So if their names do not go forward he expects to get $v \times 5$ pounds, with them $w \times 7$ pounds. The trouble is that he has no idea of the values of v and w , so even if he is clever (and lucky) enough to predict the ranking correctly, he cannot calculate his better tactic, but has to guess. In the end it might even turn out, to his frustration, that he should have submitted all 9 names, because even though the other two pull the joint grade down to a 3, $x \times 9$ pounds turns out to be the biggest of the three sums.

Is this a serious way of funding academic research, or a kind of sadistic party game?

One does not have to be a social Darwinist, as I think Mrs Thatcher was, to agree that competition has value in many areas of human life. Academics naturally compete to make discoveries and to impress their peers and students.

It is possible (though untestable) that the British university system for a long time profited from being bicephalous: the friendly rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge is harmless and may be beneficial. However, competition for limited resources, as in both cases given above, is another matter, and in many cases seems an insane way of running the university system: co-operation would be both pleasanter and far more efficient.

Take the example of subjects with low student demand, like oriental languages. If universities co-operated, they could jointly offer a good range of options without great expense. Students would have to move (either change residence or commute), but other countries have managed that, and indeed it ought to be a benefit of the modular course system. But competition prevents a sensible solution. Funding goes with the student, so no university wants a student to emigrate. For instance, some years ago I had a research student at Oxford who needed to learn Nepali. This language is taught only at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. The teacher was happy for him to join the class. However, the SOAS administration said that piece rate payments would not do: if he wanted to attend a SOAS class the student would have to enroll in SOAS and pay the full fees. Since he also needed to study some things at Oxford, and had paid Oxford his fees, that was of course impossible.

Competition means that academic hospitality is officially a thing of the past. What a nasty world we live in! I do still admit casual students to my classes free of charge, because luckily no one can stop me, but in doing so I am defying government policy.

D) Appendix 4: Access

‘Access’ is the technical term employed in education policy for making the social composition of the student body more closely reflect that of the population at large. It thus deals with the recruitment of women, ethnic minorities and “mature” students (i.e., those over 25), as well as with the working class (nowadays called socio-economic groups D and E, or IV and V). But it is the working class who are the real problem; those ethnic groups, for example, who are under-represented at university are those who identify with the working class rather than the middle class.

This problem has a peculiarly English flavour. It is no accident that Marx wrote his theory of class in England. Economic class is of course a universal phenomenon. What I think (I am no specialist) is remarkable about England is this. Certain values, such as delaying sensual gratification, which translates into trying to save money, are perhaps typical of the middle class everywhere. In England, however, not only does the middle class set itself off from the working class with a set of self-conscious values and attitudes: the working class reciprocates. Just as the middle and upper classes are permeated by snobbery, the working class responds with a reverse snobbery. Enormous numbers of working class people do not want their children to join the middle class; they have a real counter-culture.

Obviously this is a vast and complex topic. British working-class counter-culture has more or less captured pop culture and the media, so that all young people feel it obligatory to flirt with it. Young members of the upper middle class, privately educated at expensive schools, arrive at Oxford and Cambridge affecting working class accents and dress styles; some even wear tattoos – though theirs are usually washable.

By and large the working class see universities as middle class institutions – which of course they have been – and hence reject them. I see this as part of the amazing hostility of the media to universities in general, but particularly to Oxford and Cambridge. The media cater to the mass market and love to portray Oxford dons as idle rich who spend their time swilling port and sherry at the taxpayer's expense. This image of dons as a kind of decadent aristocracy provides a hate object for the working class and the puritan middle class (like Mrs Thatcher) alike, and Edward Gibbon's strictures on Oxford when he attended it in the middle of the 18th century are still quoted as if they applied today.

It was only after the Second World War that Oxford and Cambridge became anything like what most of the world today thinks of as a university. They had hardly any graduate studies – even the dons did not have doctorates – and they were quite small, sub-divided into many colleges with perhaps a couple of hundred students apiece.

Rather few aristocrats bothered to go to university. Oxford and Cambridge recruited both students and teachers mainly from the upper middle and especially the professional classes. They also knew that they were training an elite to rule not merely Britain but the British Empire.

A Balliol colleague of mine, Jasper Griffin, recently published an article which begins as follows:

“There are few things on which mankind is so well agreed as on the unfairness of admission to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. That agreement does of course disappear as soon as we ask in what way it is unfair. ... On the left, it is an article of faith that the ancient universities grossly favour the wealthy products of private education. The present government actually plans to penalise Oxford and Cambridge by reducing their grants from central funds if they do not admit more undergraduates from comprehensives. ... Opinion in the *Daily Telegraph*, however, both of columnists and of correspondents, is convinced that Oxbridge already has an indefensibly biased policy of favouring comprehensive school pupils and is determined to exclude the academically more deserving products of public schools.”⁴⁵

The fact is that while Oxford has been trying for many years to devise an entrance procedure which will not disadvantage pupils from comprehensive schools, we also feel that we should take those students who show through academic achievement and potential, including attitudes, that they will profit from what we have to offer. Proof of our success in admitting suitable candidates is that only one or two percent drop out of the course, and even the percentage of third class degrees is down to around ten – though one must also remember that if there were no Thirds, a Lower Second would change its meaning. On the other hand, whatever we do, we never get more than about 50% of our undergraduates from the state sector – and I believe that Cambridge has the same experience. There are many schools from which pupils never apply to Oxbridge. Under government threat we are spending a disproportionate time and effort on persuading them to give us a try. It is disproportionate because we are already quite meritocratic. So the bright working class pupil who has been cajoled into applying may turn out not to be quite bright enough, and returns disgruntled from his interview, muttering “I told you so.”

The problem of Oxbridge access is an acute form of the problem of access to the university sector as a whole. If one bends over backwards to recruit

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See fn. 28 for reference. The *Daily Telegraph* is a Conservative newspaper.

students whose home and school have not prepared them for it, is one doing them a real favour? Concentration on “access”, i.e. on social background, at the expense of academic prowess and inclination, cannot but lead to a high drop-out rate – unless academic standards are abandoned altogether. In other words, equality of access cannot be made to yield equality of outcome.

The way this is distorted in the media, even those media one might expect to sympathetic to universities, is extraordinary indeed. I quote almost at random from an article I saw by chance in *The Independent Education Supplement*.⁴⁶ It is headed: “New tables will lift the lid on university life. For years, universities have successfully sidestepped government attempts to establish performance indicators for what they do, but all that is about to change.” The first paragraph explains: “New data about to spew forth from the Higher Education Funding Council will let newspapers compile ‘official’ league tables comparing universities for their drop-out rates, or how good they are at attracting students from deprived backgrounds and State schools.” Then we shall be “named and shamed.”

E) Appendix 5: Academic Misery

To have pursued this topic further in the main text might have made it monotonous, but I conclude by compiling a few more data.

Every year every academic has to fill in a form of “self-appraisal”. For two years it was my task to read those completed by the members of my faculty. The last question was: “What has given you the least satisfaction in your job this year?” Every single person answered either “Filling in forms like this one” or “Lack of time for research”.

The Dearing Report says (p. 218, para. 14.17): “A survey carried out among academic staff in one English institution found 25 per cent of respondents reported the reason for stress to be ‘too much work – no time to complete it’. Our survey of academic staff indicated that stress levels were a significant consideration ...” I can report that my own doctor in Oxford has told me that hardly a day passes when he is not consulted by an academic suffering from stress.

The RAE has certainly contributed to this level of stress. Each academic is invited to submit up to four publications for assessment. It is officially stated that what is assessed is not quantity but quality. Not surprisingly, this message does not filter down. To my personal knowledge, university administrations tend to tell their staff that they have to submit four publications and that if they do not they may be invited to take early retirement. Staff are well aware that they are thus being constrained to publish work prematurely, or artificially to split what should be a single publication into two. Another abuse is that since universities are credited with the research of the staff they employ at the time of the assessment, regardless of where that research was done, people with good publications are hired for the year of the assessment and then “let go”.

The TQA is even worse. Departments reckon that preparation for an assessment takes months. The documentation required beggars belief. For example, every course given has to show the inspectors not merely the syllabus and all hand-outs, bibliographies, etc., but samples of the best, the worst and the average written work produced by students on the course. I know of one department, employing six teaching staff, which weighed its submission; it came to 45 kilos of paper.

All exam scripts written in the department over the last five years are to be shown. My department lost a mark (which is serious, as overall marking is out of 24) because on looking at an old exam script the inspectors could not find physical evidence that it had been marked by two examiners. It had, of course; but in order to ensure that the examiners judge the script independently we ask the first reader not to write on it.

Before the inspection, a department has to write a 6,000 word self-assessment along minutely prescribed lines. "Objectives" have to be keyed into "aims", which in turn have to be keyed into the university's "mission statement". Since I was in charge of my faculty's submission, I took this to my 30-year-old daughter, who is a writer and a master of parody. Her product so pleased the inspectors that it was borrowed by another university who were being inspected after us.

This illustrates that the only way to live under such a regime is by cynical opportunism. Asked to predict the results of one's research, the only safe tactic is to put down the results one has achieved already. Genuine research, after all, may turn out to be going up a blind alley. One works out what it is that the authorities want to hear, and tells it to them. That is one reason why the centralization of authority leads to ever increasing inefficiency, as Karl Popper pointed out. It also leads to a collapse in morale.