

FORUM

The Editor invited two recently retired professors to contribute a critical discussion of the past, present, and possible futures of the Faculty. Professor Rogers chose to focus on the state of university affairs in relation to present government, and Professor Champion on a 'case study' of his former department which raises the relations between Arts and Science. The present Dean, Associate Professor Sybil M. Jack, has commented upon their essays, and they in turn have offered rejoinders.

Hooroo To All That

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When the Editor invited me to contribute to a critical discussion of the past, present, and future of the Faculty of Arts, he expressed greater interest in 'reflections on academic principles, standards and practices than in the effect of present government policies, although I recognise that you may feel the two are not completely separable'. The conclusion I soon reached was that the two were not separable at all. Mr Dawkins and his White Paper may represent the culmination of well-established trends rather than any sudden new departure, but I think one may fairly use the word *crisis* in the sense 'turning-point' to describe the stage now reached in university affairs: things will never be quite the same again. Hence my title (which the literary will recognise as an antipodean adaptation of one by Robert Graves), and the following personal view.

For a general perspective, I turned first to the article headed 'Universities' in my 1956 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which provides a descriptive and historical survey of the world's universities. It covers some 900 years, from the mediaeval foundations of Bologna, Paris, and Oxford to the setting-up of the Australian National University in 1946.

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Chiefly in relation to Sydney and Melbourne, the article comments:

The earliest Australian universities successfully combined medieval and modern features. Each was established by the state legislature, yet constituted a self-governing corporation. Each relied for support upon both public money and private benefactions. Each was nonresidential, nondenominational and secular, yet made provision for including residential denominational colleges on religious foundations.

Writing in 1968, David S. Macmillan, then the Sydney University Archivist, noted that the financial independence which Sydney had at first enjoyed was soon compromised. A pressing need for funds 'led to a drastic amendment of the original Act of Incorporation in 1912, which gave to the Government of New South Wales a considerable measure of control over the University in return for a greatly-increased endowment.' The idea of the University as a 'social utility', largely funded by government and therefore accountable to it, was well on its way.¹

Not only has there been in recent years a further shift in the balance between public and private sources of funds; the public component has for some time been provided solely by the Commonwealth, the Government of New South Wales no longer contributing recurrent grants. The University did not collect fees, at least until this year, when the Higher Education Contribution Scheme tax was collected on behalf of the Commonwealth. (In 1987 and 1988, an administration charge was collected on behalf of the Commonwealth). Thus the University has become almost totally dependent upon the Commonwealth.

Federal Ministers of Education and their agencies (beginning with the Australian Universities Commission, set up in 1958 after the Murray Committee of Inquiry into the future of Australian universities had reported) have exerted a growing and increasingly direct influence over university affairs. An ever-larger proportion of money granted has been 'ear-marked' by the Commonwealth for this specific purpose or that. The consequence, naturally, is a limitation on the freedom of universities to allocate funds as they see fit.

Central bodies like the Australian Research Grants Committee (now replaced by the Australian Research Council) exemplify the same tendency. Money for major research projects was no longer granted by

1. *Australian Universities: A Descriptive Sketch* (Sydney University Press for Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee), 1968, p.70.

the Government in a lump sum to the universities for them to allocate to teaching and research staff, but was granted directly to individual staff by the Committee. Hence, a measure of financial control passed from the universities. Moreover, the focus of staff interest and attention was no longer the university to which they belonged: it was the government body controlling the funds. The 1988-89 Commonwealth Budget reinforces this tendency, as of course the Dawkins White Paper intends: although the Australian Research Council will have more money at its disposal, the universities will have less under their direct control.² (At the time of writing, this is all still under review; but the fact will remain that the universities get what the Commonwealth gives them).

Academic staff themselves have become more subject to Canberra in a number of other ways. For example, study leave to enable staff to go abroad was once a matter of contractual agreement between Senate and staff, but its granting became subject to rules laid down by Canberra, with the University governing body acting, in effect, as the Government's agency. In theory, the salaries of university staff are determined and paid by the Senate; and I remember being a member of Staff Association delegations (this would be about 1959 or 1960) to Sir Stephen Roberts, the Vice-Chancellor at the time, to discuss salary increases. The Vice-Chancellor then negotiated with the New South Wales State Government. What was decided in the case of Sydney then became the bench-mark for the rest of Australia. But salaries and conditions have for a long time now been both uniform and determined by the Commonwealth.

The 1958 issue of *Arna*, the journal of the Sydney University Arts Society, which I recently came across (it's an interesting issue, with material by Bob Hughes and poems by Clive James) illustrates another aspect of the shift in status that has taken place. The issue includes a long account by the late Professor Alan Stout of what came to be known as 'The Orr Case'. Sydney Sparkes Orr, Professor of Philosophy in the University of Tasmania, was summarily dismissed in 1956 'on a group of allegations, including the charge that he had seduced one of his own students.' The case created a national and international furore.

In the *Arna* article, Alan Stout devoted considerable space to the question of whether professors (by which Stout explained that he meant all permanent academic staff) stood in a 'master-servant' relationship to the body corporate of the university (in Sydney, the Senate). The special status of university staff had often been recognized, at least informally. It

2. *The University of Sydney News*, 6 September 1988.

was perhaps felt that university teachers were professionals, like lawyers or doctors, or that there was a kind of spin-off from the special case of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, in which the fellows are academic members of the body corporate, and thus govern themselves (as if, say, the University of Sydney Senate was composed of professors). In the Tasmanian case, however, the judge concerned rejected any such view: academic staff were servants, employees.

I do not know what the legal rights and wrongs were. What interests me about it here is that no-one in 1988 would devote time and space to the question: Stout's opinion that there was something special about academics would not now be worth confuting. This, surely, is another measure of how far the status of university teachers has deteriorated.

To me, then, Mr Dawkins and his White Paper represent merely another stage in a process which began two or three generations ago and which has been accelerating since the end of the Second World War. What has been happening outside the walls has been mirrored inside them. Sad to say, there are always treasonous clerks within who embrace innovations imposed by Canberra with indecent enthusiasm, for no better reason than that it suits their ambitions and interests. The management of the University of Sydney is certainly far more centralised and bureaucratised than it was thirty years ago. There are more senior administrators, a number of them superior to professors in the hierarchy, many receiving higher salaries or additional allowances and enjoying other special privileges. In terms of money and fringe benefits, the University values its administrators more highly than it does its best teachers, scholars, and scientists.

There are plans in the University of Sydney to extend the bureaucracy further, and to make Deans of Faculties into full-time administrators too. The academic government of the University will then have been quite transformed: the restructuring begun by the former Vice-Chancellor and continued by the present one will be more or less complete.

The Faculty of Arts, like the other faculties, will become a different kind of body, no longer concerned exclusively with questions of courses, examining, and the supervision of degrees, but having administrative and financial functions. Structurally, it will be a federation of Departments, each of which has a Head with administrative and financial responsibilities. The new managerial chain of command structure will evidently be Vice-Chancellor --- Dean of Faculty (appointed by Vice-Chancellor?) --- Heads of Departments (appointed by Vice-Chancellor).

All this clearly implies a measure of managerial control by the Vice-Chancellor and his surrogates which did not exist even fifteen years ago.

The present cover for this is 'devolution'. This is a good word, suggesting as it does that power will generously be decentralized by the Administration and that Faculties will enjoy the benefits of controlling their own destinies. What it will mean in fact, though, is that power to implement budget cuts already determined in outline by the Administration is conferred upon those who will suffer from them. In the Vice-Chancellor's own words: 'When hard decisions have to be made, they are best made by agreement among those actually engaged in research and teaching.'³

The extent of the revolution that has already taken place in university government and administration may not be obvious to outside observers. The grand plan, indeed, is not obvious to many insiders either: there has been more *perestroika* than *glasnost*.

Until about 1970 it could be said that the University of Sydney was run by a small central administration and by a professorial oligarchy. There was only one Deputy Vice-Chancellor, no Deputy Principal, no Pro-Vice-Chancellor, no Bursar; the Registrar had no other title or function. Departments had no legal existence: they were not defined in University By-laws. Administratively, the Vice-Chancellor dealt with professors; and he regarded himself, and was so regarded, as one of their number, *primus inter pares*, first among equals. This is now a pleasant occasional fiction, usually after dinner. Academically, the Professorial Board and the Faculties were the bodies concerned with teaching, examining, scholarship and research; and they were in effect controlled by the professors. Deans were almost always professors.

In 1975 the Professorial Board was replaced by the Academic Board, a body including professors, other teaching staff, and student members. Departments were given legal definition, and power to appoint or reappoint their Heads was given to the Vice-Chancellor. The change did not have immediate effect in all cases, because many professors were Head of Department by terms of their existing appointments: that is, they had contractual rights, conferred upon them by Senate, to be Head of Department. But as time went by the connexion between being a professor and being Head of Department was broken. Many professors still are Heads of Department, but they have no contractual right to be. This is one of a number of changes that has greatly increased the powers of the Vice-Chancellor, and not only over professors, for appointment or

3. *The University of Sydney News*, 6 September, 1988.

reappointment as Head of Department may be contingent upon what a Vice-Chancellor regards as good behaviour.

I am anxious that what I have said about professors and their changed role in the University should not be misunderstood. It has never been my concern to defend professorial privilege as such. Some things, indeed, I should have preferred to have changed more rather than less. For instance, it is obvious that Sydney (except for the Faculty of Medicine) does not have nearly enough professors: the expansion in academic staff numbers has not been matched by a corresponding expansion in the number of chairs. Financial limitations prevent the creation of personal chairs in all but the most exceptional cases. Consequently, there are too many associate professors and readers who are fully qualified to hold chairs, and in many large departments there are too few professors to provide the leadership and personal support that are so essential to the life and health of a flourishing teaching and research unit.

Some of the changes have undoubtedly been for the better. For example, it was evident that not all professors made good Heads of Department; some were the despair of the Administration and of departmental staff alike. On the other hand, there are associate professors who are first class teachers, researchers, and administrators, who are successful Heads of very large Departments or Schools. It is an improvement, too, that non-professorial staff should play their part in the government of the University. What I am objecting to is not the 'democratization' that has occurred, but the erosion of academic independence (and I mean *academic*, not *professorial*) that has accompanied it. The 'democratization' is in any case partial; it does not extend to the election of Heads of Departments, and it may soon not extend to the election of Deans of Faculties either. And I suppose I should admit to a certain cynicism about what often passes for 'participation'. In the hands of astute practitioners it is a marvellous device both for getting one's own way without seeming to and for shifting responsibility for the consequences.

Another indication of the decline in status of the university teacher is to be found in the chapter of the University By-laws headed 'Discipline of Academic Staff', which confers upon the Vice-Chancellor powers 'to take disciplinary action against an academic staff member for misconduct'. The Vice Chancellor formerly had no powers to censure, reprimand, or suspend, though the Senate could dismiss professors (and other staff) for misconduct. It was *either/or*: either dismiss, or leave alone. (The position of professors was analagous to that of judges, that of university teachers as

a whole analogous to that of members of the professions.) There is now a real difference, which goes to the heart of the changed relationship between academic staff on the one hand and the chief executive officer of the University on the other. There may be further changes yet, in consequence of union agreements with the Government on pay and conditions: predictably, they will lead to a further widening of the gap between administrators and academics.

You will I hope understand why I am conscious of a certain irony when the lamentations of Australian Vice-Chancellors about the 'regulatory control' adumbrated in Mr Dawkins's White paper fall upon my ears. The microcosm and the macrocosm seem to me to be all of a piece, with the University taking on the appearance of a government department, its Vice-Chancellor that of a divisional head, and the academic and research staff that of public servants. After Dawkins (unless there is a change of heart), universities will be self-governing only in a trivial sense, within narrow constraints imposed by the Commonwealth.

I am inevitably reminded of the limerick,

There was a young man who said, Damn!
At last I've found that I am --
A creature that moves
In determinate grooves,
In fact not a bus but a tram.

Of course it would be useless to propose that the clock should be put back. If the general history of universities world-wide proves anything, it proves that universities have been established in response to perceived social needs and have adapted themselves, or have been forced to adapt, to changed circumstances. 'The Reformation marked the first great turning point in the history of the universities; the 19th century can lay good claim to having marked the second'. + In Australia now, as elsewhere, we are witnessing a further development, as governments, having assumed direct responsibility for finance, demand ever closer control over how the money is spent.

It is not merely special pleading to say, however, that a practical limit must be set to government interference. A recent letter in *The Australian Financial Review* provides a case in point. The State Chairman of the Institute of Chartered Accountants complains that accounting departments

4. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. *Universities*.

are under-funded; that academic salaries for teachers of accounting are too low; that student: staff ratios in accounting departments are too high; and so on. His solution: 'The Federal Minister for Education, Mr Dawkins, *must direct institutions* [my italics] to allocate the full dollar value of federal funds for accounting students to schools of accounting ... Academic salaries must be deregulated ...' And so on. ⁵

I do not deny that a problem exists, or that the Institute of Chartered Accountants has a right to be concerned about it; but this is clearly ridiculous. Ministers of Education could not possibly exercise effective detailed supervision over the administration of all tertiary institutions, even if it was desirable for them to do so. That great observer of governments C. Northcote Parkinson (whose famous First Law is 'Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion' and whose equally famous Second Law is 'Expenditure rises to meet income') put it better than I could:

It may seem logical that the government which provides the money should decide how it is to be spent. But for it to insist on this right of control is very much as if the patient were to instruct his medical adviser, saying, 'Since I am to pay the bill, it is for me to decide what the symptoms indicate and what the treatment should be.' To this policy, one objection (of several) is that it means paying the doctor for nothing. His advice, if it is always what you want it to be, is worthless. If you are to tell him his business, you might just as well do without him altogether. ⁶

'Waste', Parkinson observes with what now seems prophetic insight, 'is the result of control being excessive, not of its being absent.' An enormous amount of time, money, and resources is presently devoted to the non-productive aspects of the tertiary education system. I mean the Reports presented; the Forms filled in; the Tables constructed; the bound volumes of Statistics produced; the Plans drawn; the Proposals made; the Committees travelling about the country and even overseas; first-class and all expenses paid, their meetings duly minuted. Many of the resulting products are in duplicate or triplicate; in draft form, revised form, or final form; multi-coloured like Joseph's coat, yellow, green, white. This kind of bureaucratic busy-ness, it is well known, soon reaches a critical mass.

5. *Australian Financial Review*, 2 September 1988.

6. *The Law and the Profits*, London, 1960, p.124. This, and the earlier *Parkinson's Law, or the Pursuit of Progress*, London, 1957, should be required reading for all politicians, public servants, and university administrators.

capable of generating itself perpetually without any further input from the real world or practical effect upon it. What else, after all, is Canberra for?

Universities cannot reasonably be expected to respond in a knee-jerk way to every passing shortage of graduates. Of course, it is an important function of universities to produce the teachers, lawyers, doctors, veterinarians, economists, engineers and so on which the community needs; and a university which loses sight of this social function does so at its peril; but a university which concerned itself exclusively with professional training would rapidly cease to be a university at all. Besides, the accurate forecasting of employment opportunities for particular sorts of graduates is known to be practically impossible.

It is not my place to offer advice to present members of the Faculty of Arts about the future direction to take, but if I may express a hope it is that the Faculty will return to first principles, and will keep them resolutely in view. Universities and Faculties are not for administrators; they are for staff and students, for teaching, research, and the award of degrees. The Faculty of Arts is centrally concerned with the permanent values of a liberal and humane education, not with questions of immediate utility. And every scholar in the Faculty of Arts has one private and secure refuge: the scholarly interest that brought one into university life in the first place. Hooroo.