

FORUM

Comment

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To attempt a simultaneous comment on Professor Rogers's and Professor Champion's contributions is to attempt a concurrent running commentary on a football and a cricket match: the objects of discussion have little in common except the shape of the ball. Champion has chosen to illustrate the effect of structure and its limitations in controlling and shaping the development of a discipline, while Rogers is concerned primarily with autonomy as classically asserted and defended in the last fifty years. One may, in the present climate, take some slight comfort from the capacity for survival shown by Psychology even when the artificially rigid distinction at Sydney University between what is classified as Arts and what is classified as Science creates unnecessary hurdles. Most of Professor Rogers's arguments about autonomy and tenure apply not so much specifically to the humanities as to academia in general and not so much to the problems possibly arising from new funding directives as to matters of internal management structures.

The basic problem of resting one's apologia for the humanities either on Rogers's or Champion's argument is the classical nature of the case they present. These arguments have, presumably, been made to several generations of students, a large body of people, many of whom are now influential, and have evidently failed to impress upon them the values of the institutions as Rogers and Champion see them. If we are now to make headway, therefore, we need not to reiterate but to reassess, and to develop stronger, more cogent, representations. To do this we must listen to our graduates and to those who employ them and consider what they have to say carefully, responding either by changes or by more persuasive arguments.

It is unrealistic to assume, as in their different ways both Rogers and Champion do, that there should be, and need be, no debate about the values inherent in an Arts degree and the conditions needed to realise them. The return to first principles which Rogers admonishes us to undertake is certainly required but I would not accept that first principles are commandments graven in stone by the Almighty in person from which all else is derived by deduction and conveniently summarised in

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the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* supplemented by notes on Sydney made by the late David Macmillan. First principles - the underlying laws which provide coherence - *are* subject to change, however slowly. I do not think that Professor Rogers would find that sixteenth century fundamental laws are quite the same in all respects as those he accepts today.

The institutions also have to consider why, when they are protected by tenure from the nastier immediate effects of blunt speech, precisely because, according to Professor Roger's doctrine, academics have a duty to voice the unpalatable and unpopular, the system has so singularly failed to produce top administrators prepared to speak out fearlessly against the propositions advanced by government. When academic leaders say 'yes but' rather than 'no', the value of such protection becomes questionable. Why has the existing structure muted the academic voice?

That the university will in the future be a different kind of body from that with which we are familiar may be true but is it, equally, regrettable? Structures both visible and invisible are, after all, only more or less temporary arrangements for achieving certain objectives. Armies, governments, universities and churches - to name a few of the more enduring - do not always or inevitably assume the same enduring form. They may not always exist at all. How much difference the new structure, of which Professor Rogers speaks, will make to academia is primarily up to us. His concerns over matters of internal structure relate to matters of interest to society only insofar as they involve natural justice, discrimination and harrassment. Presumably we do not wish to argue in favour of injustice. 'Dismiss or leave alone' are alternatives which may involve a choice between injustices. Moreover, if the community is calling for procedures to ensure that behaviour patterns deemed to be appropriate in the present day are introduced it implies distrust in our existing self-regulating practices which we need to overcome.

Professor Rogers is concerned about aspects of the internal power hierarchy which he believes are not in need of improvement which are affected by the introduction of such mechanisms and which affect the role, power and position of the professor. In an institution with few professors and many other academic staff of varying expectations of continuance, should this be our major concern? Should we not be devoting thought to more academic problems such as the means for reshaping a faculty which will maintain the best of the traditional disciplines while making room for new within a fixed and limited budget? The academics at colleges in the Oxbridge 'corporation' have not been

spared these problems although they may have taken a somewhat different shape.

What concerns me most about both comments is more what is omitted than what is included. Their limited approach and narrow focus are hard to relate to the problems with which tertiary institutions are presently grappling: proposals for privatisation; various proposals for user-funded education, from vouchers to loans and deferred taxes; more generally, the new instrumentalism in higher education which believes that results must be direct rather than indirect; the idea of a contract which lies behind the notion of profiles; and the uncritically blazoned buzz words of 'efficiency and effectiveness' and 'relevance' which are to be the mottoes of the institution of the future: *effectum facere tyrannum*.

All of these things are being pressed on us in the form of reports imperfectly faxed from the United Kingdom. There has been no serious independent local analysis of the appropriateness of these structures for Australia, where tertiary education has over the last fifty years diverged significantly from the traditions of the 'mother-country'. Surely if we cannot provide such discussion in an Arts Faculty we demonstrate our unfitness for office and should thankfully accept early retirement. We are being asked to justify our existence and it is appropriate that we do so: human institutions exist to serve human needs of many different sorts; if they serve none, then oblivion is appropriate. If we claim to be as the lilies of the field which 'toil not, neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these', then let us say so. Beauty is not the least of the justifications for being.

In the United Kingdom the debate over the justification for the humanities is under way. In the *Times Higher Education Supplement* of 2 December 1988, Sir Keith Thomas offers a trenchant analysis which has given rise to a spirited debate about essentials. That I profoundly disagree with some of his analysis is not the point - his, in any case, is a noticeably culture-specific construction, and, existing as we do in a rapidly diverging culture, we should attempt our own independent critique. Let us attempt to define for ourselves the function of a university in Australia by distinguishing the substance from the accidents and separating the merely preferable from the fundamentally essential. Let us ask ourselves what should be protected, if necessary by the shedding of academic blood. What we would die to protect is likely to be important. One must hope that we would not go down in flames defending the indefensible. At the

same time let us acknowledge our defects, and those aspects of our current ecology which make our lilies less than perfect blooms.

In formulating the questions we should ask ourselves, we need to be aware of, but not unduly dominated by, the world in which we live, and to identify anything which is special and distinctive about the Australian system. We also surely need to separate a justification for the survival and development of the humanities from considerations of the relative size of the student body in the humanities. The question of the justification for the precise size of the graduate output in the humanities is a different one. Per 100,000 of population Japan produces 228 humanities graduates, Canada 148, the USA 138, the UK 67 and West Germany 49. On the other hand in straight science Japan produces 12, West Germany 16, Canada 47, UK 51 and the USA 60. Australia produces 96 and 56 respectively. Is this the appropriate number?

The question may of course be seen as a dependent variable. First we need to know why students should study humanities before the desirable numerical parameters can be logically debated. There is, however, a tendency to by-pass the primary issue and to assume that the desirable proportion can be established by the criterion of the economic success of the country, that is, that we should aim to replicate Japan and West Germany. This presents, given the above figures, something of a logical problem.

There is also a tendency to prefer the identifiably useful. In the United Kingdom there is currently an instrumentalist tendency which threatens to split the languages from the other humanities and associate them with economics and accountancy in the interest of promoting 'business efficiency'. This has its followers here amongst businessmen and government representatives, but it represents a real danger of denaturing the subject. We need to be clear why we study the subjects the way we do.

One could, for example, envisage re-orienting the teaching of English from its present rather contemplative approach, with its concentration on the use of words and the written text - if you will, the older role of the *grammaticus* - to the more active discipline of the *rhetor* with its training in argumentation and debate, thinking which needs to be at once flexible, critical and contextual. This might be more suited to modern multi-media employment, but that should surely not be the primary reason for a shift of focus if we see ourselves as something more than a 'service department'. While there may be some need to use our perhaps somewhat rusty rhetorical arts to meet an instrumentalist government

and society on its own grounds, it is well to be aware that the ground is slippery and should be approached with great caution. If this represents intellectual compromise, it almost certainly leads directly to the erosion and distortion of surer foundations. Like bad money, bad arguments tend to drive out good. It is here that Professor Champion's concerns about the definition of a discipline need to be taken very seriously and extended to our other established and emerging disciplines. He asks, and we should from our varying perspectives be trying to answer, the question of what an arts, as opposed to a science subject is, and the equally relevant question of what constitutes a sensible combination of subjects.

Amongst the other questions to which we urgently need to provide an answer are, what is the general value of studying, say, Wordsworth, Greek epic, medieval history, or Taoist religion? If the response is that hard thinking about difficult questions sharpens and trains the analytical and critical capacity of the brain, it is still necessary to show that certain classical *topoi* are better subjects than others which may be more immediate.

If we wish to argue that the humanities are primarily concerned with values, particularly perhaps, moral and ethical values, and the critique of values, then we must develop that clearly and cogently. The essential role of logic in rigorous thinking and the fundamental role of philosophy is one which should be espoused and defended by all academics in the humanities, before the death of philosophy destroys our true defence. If there are approaches which the humanites peculiarly promote - the value of reflection, the spirit of enquiry, the desire for comprehensive understanding, and a critical sceptical attitude even to the most venerable tenets of scholarship and the culture we seek to preserve, let us agree upon them and develop a method of presenting them which will catch the attention of today's eighteen and nineteen year olds. Some at least may be prepared to listen; some are still looking for the truth; we should be thankful that they are.

The most damaging criticisms in the eyes of the public undoubtedly come from academics in other faculties. A recent article by Trevor Cole from Electrical Engineering attacked the university's 'fossilised values', unchanged, in his view, from those of the English universities of the 1850's, as a means of promoting his own concept of 'operacy'. Survival, according to Cole, will result not from the 'traditional tools of logic' but from the technological approach to problem solving. While we may ourselves shrug off a tirade based on remarkable ignorance of the distant origins of his 'new' heuristic approach and the nature of universities in

the 1850's, we should be bombarding the media to get our own voices heard - no easy task, since the interlinked corporate interests of our present media owners have their own propaganda to promote and no longer, apparently, pay even lip-service to any concept of 'equal time'.

We should perhaps take some heart from the fact that while the government may see national priorities in engineering, science and economics, a surprising number of our real clients, the students, are not diverted from a commitment to the humanities. Demand for Science places is visibly limited, demand for Arts places is holding up remarkably well. Some students, at least, appear to have different priorities from government.

How important, then, are the issues of tenure, autonomy, and privatisation to the maintenance of the core values of an Arts degree? The content of certain ideas can completely reverse itself, as is well illustrated by Rogers's use of their term 'treasonous clerks' to refer to academics who 'defect' to the government position. As he well knows, in the Middle Ages the problem with treasonous clerks was the reverse. Thomas Becket, the original treasonous clerk, had displeased Henry II by his overenthusiastic adoption of the idea of clerical autonomy. Treasonous clerks were a problem to the secular government because their privileged clerical position protected them from the normal rigours of the secular law. Similarly, the original idea of tenure was not based on concepts of protection for unpopular opinions. The idea was that an office was property, freehold, and like any other form of ownership protected by the law. A writ of *mandamus* could be issued to recover the use of such a public office, which could also, often, be bought and sold. Certainly, this form of possession meant that the individual thus privileged was able to exercise a great deal of freedom denied to less fortunate mortals but this was not the justification used. Moreover, while it was hard, if not impossible, to remove people from such public offices, access to them often depended on extraneous factors. In the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries the requirements were that you be male, unmarried (at least publicly celibate), and prepared to subscribe to the thirty nine Articles of the Church of England. Forms of selection have never guaranteed that a full range of opinions was able to be voiced. The concept of *auctoritas* has always advantaged the so-called mainstream.

At the same time, the relationship between the intellectual supports for social order (whether they were church, university or law) and the secular arm have always been delicate. The public assertion of church independence was always a front for private, and not-so-private, compromises on the selection of personnel and policies. University protection of the religiously unacceptable went only so far. The strenuous

assertion of the stance that 'I totally disagree with your views but I will go to the stake to defend your right to express them' has been only one side of the coin. Governments, in fact, always threaten the autonomy of quasi-independent institutions but rarely wish for the citadel actually to fall, since support from the notionally independent is usually more valuable than support from a minion. If we are seen to be valuable, then threats to our autonomy are likely to be feints rather than serious attacks.

Privatisation may seem the least of the threats, since tertiary education was for so long maintained principally in that form with fees, foundations and scholarships. Certainly, the humanities have flourished in times when private patronage was the key to success. It may, however, be the most serious threat because of the distorting effect individual benefactions for particular purposes may have on the overall programme, so that research and scholarship is driven not by intellectual perceptions but by the vagaries of private funding preferences.

One thing is very clear. The debate on the role of Arts in Australia needs to move from the sphere of grumbling in Faculty corridors to the public arena. If it does, we may find we have some surprising, and probably surprisingly numerous, friends.