

Money, Markets, Universities and the Good Society

Canterbury Christchurch University, 22 June 2011

A few weeks ago, an illuminating news item was captured by our greatest, most consistent and prodigal academic commentator as follows:

Our university has revealed that in common with the University of Glasgow it will be introducing plans to cut all foreign language provision.

Announcing the decision, our Director of Curriculum Development insisted she had nothing against students learning to speak languages other than their own but thought that, in common with other hobbies such as stamp collecting and quilt making, it was a pastime that people could very well carry out in the comfort of their own homes.

She described as 'perverse' the allegations by the Head of our Media and Cultural Studies Department that the cuts would mean that the only foreign language still represented at Poppleton would be that currently spoken by members of our management team.¹

My first concern is speech and, as the poet admonishes us, speech impels us 'to purify the language of the tribe / And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight'. The official speech used for the discussion of what universities are for is one in which it is impossible to tell the truth. One of the most painful injuries inflicted on any sensitive and intelligent person on becoming Head of Department is the lowering language which has then to fill your mouth with the dreadful polysyllabic phrases which, once swallowed, prove immediately emetic. All that prioritising, operational implications, outcome indicators, impact beneficiaries, incremental significance, and levels of robustness² can only cause abrupt and reverse peristalsis in anybody whose job it is to feel the force of Keats's remark, "English must be kept up".

Having the honour of speaking to my present audience and the certainty that it will share most of my precepts about language, I am nonetheless anxious to enforce a due sense of their weightiness. We wave away the monstrosity of managerial vocabulary too easily; it has to be fought, put down, criticised for what it is: a perversion of human exchange, a deliberate muffling of the hard, deliberate compulsions of ruthless and authoritarian models of how things must be. Neoliberal managerialism – to coin a nasty phrase – is the common parlance of our ruling classes, spoken as fluently by so cynical and intelligent a governor of ours as Peter Mandelson as well as by, let us say, the Secretary of State for Health.

¹ Laurie Taylor in *The Poppletonian*, *THE*, 10-16 March 2011.

² I am most grateful to Adrian Poole, Chair of the Cambridge English Faculty, for providing this list.

Andrew Lansley's creatures who drew up the Health and Social Care Bill gave it, no doubt at his instigation, the title *Liberating the NHS*. The effrontery would take one's breath away were it not confirmation of just that deadly combination of suavity and metallic hardness I have mentioned. This is the manner, or better in Nietzsche's deep, utterly amoral sense of the word, the *style* of ruling. ("To give style' to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye."³)

Here are the Lansleyites, explaining how little troupes of doctors ('consortia') will collect their money.

To further incentivise improved outcomes and financial performance, consortia will receive a quality premium based on the outcomes achieved for patients and their financial performance. Some of the outcomes from the Commissioning Outcomes Framework [a happy little acronym] will inform the premium [this, I take it, means that the size of cheques will go up and down] – but not necessarily all, since some may not be suitable for translation into financial incentives [such as what? Attentiveness? Consideration? Overwork? Loving kindness?] The Bill introduces the powers necessary for the quality premium, and we will discuss further with the BMA and the wider profession on how to shape it.⁴

It was George Orwell who, first and famously, saw how so much political language was assembled out of corpulent phraseology and rhythmic incantation in order, as he said, to "give the appearance of solidity to pure wind".⁵ What we have in front of us here, however, is mannerist evasion, deliberate muffling and imprecision, downright, palpable dishonesty. This is the language of propaganda and of advertising, and the broadcast intertwining of the two is one of the most horrible and successful creations of world politics and economics over the past ninety years. When I was a sixth-former I was given F R Leavis and Denys Thompson's *Culture and Environment* to study in order to learn the insincere and untruthful devices of advertising by criticising Leavis's own comical pastiches, and trying out a few of our own. Nowadays – I have seen it – children are no longer alerted to the abominations of advertising nor the abasement of public speech; they are set, in repellent little exercises in entrepreneurship, to mimic them.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, New York: Random House, 1974, para 290.

⁴ Quoted from the Government website publishing the Bill. See especially the section 'Equity and Excellence'.

⁵ George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, in *Collected Essays*, London: Heinemann, 1961, pp337-351.

This is the moral and linguistic context in which we must place the Browne report,⁶ itself a more or less bipartisan document, commissioned by Lord Mandelson and endorsed by David Willetts. Once upon a time, such documents were the products of Royal Commissions chaired by notable academics. The secondary school *Reports* of, say, John Newsom or David Donnison forty-odd years ago were models of their kind, imaginative, understanding, generous. Lionel Robbins's *Report* which launched the founding of the plateglass universities in English county towns – Canterbury, Norwich, York and Lancaster, Brighton and Colchester – was not only signed off by a distinguished economist and director of LSE, it was presented to a Tory government which understood its necessary appeal to opportunity, to civilisation itself, and to the future. Lord Browne is less intellectually accomplished and so was his small committee, whose little website biographies are hard pressed indeed to sound formidable – a couple of McKinsey stooges, a jolly vice-chancellor, a greenish lady economist, a lad from Coventry City Council, and little else. Lord Browne himself had had to resign, in a state of sexual embarrassment, from the CEO's office at BP. While still in it, he had blankly ordered 25% cuts in a variety of expenditures including safety at all BP industrial sites across the world. The results had been fatalities in Alaska and at the colossal refinery in Texas, as well as the almost-certainly consequent defects which brought about the collapse of the Deepwater rig, seventeen deaths and the poisoning of the Gulf of Mexico. At the televised public hearing, Lord Browne said to his enormous audience, earnestly and charmingly, "I say this to you: we get it. We get it."

So, no Royal Commission of the mighty, nor even someone who had spent his or her life in universities, but a failure businessman was, without audible demur from the universities themselves, casually appointed by the Third Man, to set out the conditions of what was inevitably designated the 'sustainability' of Higher Education.

Sustainability, a neologism of infinite elasticity and murkiness, lent itself to the occasion as hinting at less of everything, at rationing and making do, while nonetheless keeping the show on the road. But certain of the committee's beliefs were set out with the indifferent finality which accompanies unshakable absolutism of the kind one hears from rulers whose authority and ruthlessness derive from the lethal combination of conviction and command, qualities instilled so successfully in the élite minorities of the private schools of the Headmasters' Conference.

⁶ All quotations from website, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*, national archives.gov.uk.

The first such belief shared by Browne's committee was that "competition improves quality". What it might mean, in the realities of contemporary Britain, for the University of Northumbria to compete with the University of Oxford, was not even broached as a question in the report, let alone misgivings expressed about the causal connections between indifferently unthought-about 'quality' and just what competition would do to and for it.

Competition, however, is so baldly invoked because of the absolute presupposition made by government and required by its hirelings such as Lord Browne that the undifferentiated, irresistible force of 'business' is all-powerful and that its requirements dictate the limits and direction of the universities' distinctive products, research and graduates. By now, enough has been said about the fatuous imperative, sanctioned by both the present and past ruling parties, that all research be measured for 'impact', that this impact must not be on narrow academic study but somewhere out there, benefiting the economy or society (both terms left, as usual, in unexampled opacity). Scanning this stuff, both in Browne's and his predecessor's directive from the wholly preposterous but omnipotent HEFCE in September 2009, one can only recoil in incredulous revulsion from the instruments fashioned, one assumes, by civil servants once our students, in order to provide a 'menu of indicators' as to research excellence, along with 'generic templates' round which, I suppose, one is to cut out the shape of the next bit of the department's research.

Of course, incredulous revulsion and hysterical laughter are useless weapons against the march of the morons, among whom they number enemies from within, a toadying Vice-Chancellor straining for a knighthood, say, or the administrator-quislings bravely named as such by Richard Drayton at King's College, London, or the managerialist undead presently dancing on spreadsheets before arranging redundancies for junior staff paid a sixth of their own salaries.

Indeed, I cannot restrain myself at this point from an aside about remuneration. The *THE* recently published⁷ lists of the salaries of all vice-chancellors, as compared with their juniors. I noticed that the highest such salary had been awarded to the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Gloucester, not an institution in very fierce competition with, say, the London School of Economics, whose Director recently resigned because of the institution's unfortunate propinquity to the chequebooks of the Gaddafi family. But that same Vice-Chancellor at Gloucester had also had to resign as having so presided over her University's overdraft that it has now to sell off the venerable buildings it owned in Cheltenham, once the

⁷ *THE*, 24-30 March 2011, pp32-44.

distinguished colleges of education, St Paul's and St Mary's. This embarrassing circumstance was not of course allowed to stand in the way of a quarter of a million quidsworth of redundancy payment. It seems to me that, if the national debt is throttling university finances to the degree that we are told is the case, that quite a tidy sum towards the total could be raised by lopping 20% off the salaries of Vice and Pro-Vice Chancellors, as well as all those Fellows of Royal Societies and British Academies who won stupefying salary increases by threatening to leave for the USA if they weren't forthcoming. Perhaps the reply should more often have been, "Well, off you go; we're not stopping you", and then we could have watched them weigh up the relative advantages of their Georgian houses and their children's posh school fees.

But the Browne report, more or less endorsed by the coalition, demands something tougher and harder, as well as more comprehensively argued and collectively fought out, than name-calling, such a relief as it is. Browne is just one congenial weapon to be used by a Prime Minister and his deputy, both from Oxbridge, in order to create a rigged market in higher education, one which will confer and confirm privilege among the privileged, riches upon the rich, and ensure the complete control of demand and supply of students and of research. Its creature in so subordinating what is, on the whole, one of the more admirable and impressive achievements of the country since 1945, is to be Browne's Higher Education Council, arrogating to itself the funny little outfits of quality control and so forth, as well as the imposing premises of HEFCE.

I don't need to say much about 'impact'. Only, perhaps, to tell two parables, both true. The first is Wittgenstein's life story. No-one doubts by now that Wittgenstein changed the subject of philosophy and a lot of other people's minds as well, worldwide and for ever. The contents of his greatest work lived for years on scraps of cut-up foolscap in a shoebox, his name and influence kept alive by a tiny number of his students. His greatest work, *Philosophical Investigations*, was assembled by his admirers from the shoebox and published in 1953, two years after his death. *His* impact would have been hard to discern by the new HEC.

The other tale concerns the recently retired Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, Quentin Skinner. Skinner is certainly well enough known for his astonishing work in redefining the historical formation of our political ideas, for insisting, in a relevant instance, that the idea of the State itself retains its terrific force, even in the teeth of the Conservative Party's efforts to dissolve it, because since Thomas Hobbes's first conceptualisation in *De*

Cive of the state as "the moral agent of the people",⁸ the State has possessed vivid and effectual life in a nation's imagination while always remaining a fiction.

Skinner initiated what is now known as Cambridge historicism, and his work is translated into forty languages. More than that, the series of textbooks edited as *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, in their elegant royal blue and vermilion livery, have sold over a million copies worldwide; who knows what impact the editions of More or Mill, Diderot or Constant might have had in China, Egypt, Iran or Brazil? But the series' 'impact' according to the useless and inane criteria of the business-oriented huckstering of research would be confined, presumably, to the balance sheet at Cambridge University Press.

The word 'crisis' has been printed in bold and declared upon us on our screens so often that no-one now turns round to attend to its latest advent. Politics itself – that is, the everyday conduct of government – is critically ill, obviously in those several countries which attempt to make politics and tyranny identical by means of tanks and secret policemen, but also in putative democracies such as our own, where the best we can hope for is hardly democratic government and more merely *responsible* government. That we do not have the latter is my occasion for asking what is happening to our country – to *most* countries, certainly the United States and to all in the European Union.

II

I suggest that our epoch is tearing itself away from the narratives which have bestowed meaning and continuity upon the northern hemisphere since 1945 and lost reason in 1989. In Gramsci's famous words:

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears.⁹

Lords Browne and Mandelson, the oh-so-intelligent and utterly lost David Willetts are morbid symptoms all right. What is dying is plain enough, but what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards us to be born remains unimaginable.

The death is of a world economic order, and therefore the social system it subtends. At the same time, the whole of public policy remains an attempt to reconstitute an economics which

⁸ Quentin Skinner, 'A Genealogy of the Modern State', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 162, 2008, pp325-370.

⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q Hoare ed, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p276.

has reached its end. There is then a double inevitability: that the old order, still mortally wounded by the unhealed devastation of the estuaries and of the heavy old manufacturing industries of the North, now shockingly divided between vast and irresponsible wealth crammed into comparatively few wallets, and the hapless nihilism of the underclass, will fight blindly and ruthlessly to resurrect what is dead. It will move deeper and deeper through crisis after crisis in a doomed attempt to regain a familiar world. The double inevitability is that these efforts will fail, and that nothing else will be tried until there is some sort of agreement about the revolutionary reach of the transformation required. Such a recognition is a long way off.

In Giovanni Arrighi's last, splendid book, *Adam Smith in Beijing*,¹⁰ he saw the *longues durées* of the capitalist order as being four in number, each lasting roughly a century and a half. The first was Genoese-Spanish-Portuguese, the second based in the Netherlands, the third British, and the fourth, American, now on its last legs. Each system drove production and expansion to a limit at which it had accumulated more capital than its trade could absorb or its production find consumers numerous enough to ensure returns.

When over-accumulated capital fails to keep up the payments (of income), it switches to a new centre, promoting a new surge of growth often used to pay for the wars incurred by the upheavals and which the now superseded old centre cannot afford, but in any case replacing the ailing and elderly centre of capital growth with a new economic power racing into the markets perforce abandoned by its old rival. Thus Britain displaced the Dutch, swamped the Empire with its products, could not retain capital sufficient to hold its territories down and then suffered the ignominy of seeing the USA finance the second world war and be rewarded by the mammoth profits which paid for Cold War weaponry, until such time as, having led international capital into Asia, the new giant found that it was living on tick and, over-consuming but under-accumulating, is now propped up by Chinese credit, such that the People's Republic is poised to launch the fifth cycle of capitalism.

There is nothing reassuring about these inevitable usurpations. China, as Will Hutton shows us,¹¹ has nothing like the political structures nor even the economic institutions capable of the peaceable assumption of global hegemony. In his two most recent books, David

¹⁰ Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, 2007.

¹¹ Will Hutton, *The Writing on the Wall: China and the West in the 21st Century*, London: Little Brown, 2006.

Harvey¹² contends that capital intrinsically seeks new geography as well as new zones of culture. It is, in other words, imperialist by nature. It swept across China, having elsewhere invaded the cultures of childhood, sport, sex.

The crises Harvey locates take place at the systemic centres of the day. Too much capital piles up in places or practices in which it cannot make its anticipated profits. Homeless capital roams about, seeking whom it may devour, made visible in unemployment facts and figures, empty high street shops, static stock on the shelves and in the warehouses, money lying inert in banks, firms bankrupted for want of access to liquid cash. In such familiar circumstances, a large segment of over-accumulation is assigned to be devalued until such time as the remnant can be sent out to look for new profits.

Capitalists, with their ferocious energy, created out of nothing a new resource with which to ease or, it was hoped, eradicate these passages of devaluation. That creation was credit, 'fictitious capital' as Marx called it,¹³ that is to say, money only to be validated in the future, unbased on any service or commodity presently made or stored. This is the promise presaged on the banknote: that the 'bearer' of credit will be understood as empowered to hold money against what he or she will one day do to retain it.

Credit is trust in action. As Harvey says, the function of credit is to hold the balance between production and consumption; a builder uses his credit to build houses; necessarily, mortgage companies must lend their credit so that people can buy the houses. Great tracts of present-day Ireland bear witness to the loss of balance in these relations. A crisis begins in a failure which damages trust in the fictitious forms of capital. Thus, Lehman Brothers, AIG, Northern Rock, Royal Bank of Scotland.

Trust, however, is always a delicate plant. For markets to work, producers must also be sufficient consumers; wages, that is, must leave enough spare for retail therapy in the shopping mall. Yet for the past thirty-odd years – since, let us say, the election to power of those two economic ignoramuses, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher – wages across the USA and the EU have been held down so thoroughly as to cause consumption to fall to crippling levels, had not fictitious capital been summoned by plastic cards to fill the gap.

¹² David Harvey, *Limits to Capital* and *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, London: Profile, 2010. I am also grateful to Benjamin Kunkel for his excellent exposition of Harvey, *London Review*, 3 February 2011.

¹³ In Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, pp840-1.

Strictly social values affected this economics. For a tiny percentage (of late, including senior academics) there was no need for rescue by credit card. It is now a commonplace to open incredulous eyes at the amounts of money paid to or won by the very, or as one would prefer to say, stinking rich. Their high visibility has surely intensified the mindless rapture with which so many people have, as they say, lived the dream (for some, of unlimited wealth and acquisition, for others the realisation of a related but humbler fantasy, a home of one's own).

Property speculation thereby became the lever beneath the edifice of capital which brought it, in 2008, tumbling down. David Harvey calls the physical location of building development "a *pure* financial asset".¹⁴ Value is ascribed to postcode. Returns rise or fall according to land values; fixed capital is embedded in the land, quite unrelated to production (the buildings only come later). The over-accumulated capital, unable to find a rewarding home in traditional manufacturing, looks forward to futures maturing in long-term infrastructural profits. In the meantime, credit is assured and the reckoning won't arrive just yet.

Then it did. The streams of finance, like lava, either flowed elsewhere or became blocked by falls in profit. What Harvey calls a "switching crisis" ensued. This was no unhappy accident. The credit system had been trusted to hold the balance between production and consumption, in particular with regard to the construction industry. But more buildings had been built than could be sold, more mortgage debt had been handed out than there were wages to pay for, money lay unprofitably on the building site, dead to accumulation.

The story of the bubble has been enacted many times since July 1720 when the South Sea Company bribed its way along the government benches by way of favourable legislation, charging lower interest than the government itself and selling shares prodigiously until the floor of confidence caved in and the King himself, among many others, lost a packet. In 2008, after twenty-five years of (as we've all learned to say) outsourcing and outreaching and the recruiting of a huge new army of wage slaves in Eastern Europe and Asia, world wages have been, notoriously, held down at exploitative levels but also travelled a flat line in the West, such that exactly those people required by the system to spend and consume their way to paradise finally didn't have the surplus with which to do so. The sole weapon in their hands with which to lever up pay levels – the strike – had been taken away by legislation, expendable assets like North Sea oil in Britain had paid for unemployment, and fictitious capital had done the rest until the collapse. Then it became a question of who it is would have most to endure in the process not of devaluation but of a permanent, steep fall in living

¹⁴ Harvey (2010) p152.

standards. In this country those victims are not only the underclass but also those far from wealthy, ununionised members of the service classes, many in rented houses, whose precariously situated jobs can anticipate no pay rises nor safety of employment nor expectation of better times for their children.

Of course there have been plenty such occasions for disappointment in the past. This time however, disappointment will be permanent and expectations will have to be devised out of other materials than modest pay rises, well stocked homes and the lives of more prosperous children.

When Harvey refers to a switching crisis, he means the drastic transposition of the dominant centre of capitalist accumulation from one geography to another, at the present moment from the USA to China. Europe, fractious and factious, a queasy agglomeration of rich and poor economies, stumbles after the USA trying to mimic America's amazing powers of production without lapsing into its sentimental self-pity and the collective view of its people of themselves as a chosen race and the apotheosis of history. Just how completely the economies of Britain, as modelled on the USA, and of the USA itself were bouncing along on a bubble of air is brought out by learning from Harvey¹⁵ that already nine years ago 20% of growth in the American Gross Domestic Product was due to refinancing mortgages and to spending the new debt on consumption. (One of the more flagrant tricks of late capitalism has been to relabel debt as credit.) In the last quarter of the same year, 2002, British consumers borrowed £19 billion against their houses.

The so-called 'switching crisis' which will switch the systemic centre from the USA to China will be much bumpier and more protracted than the switch from Britain and parts of Europe to the USA in 1945, unless that is one counts, as one certainly could, the Second World War as caused by that switch. China itself, Will Hutton tells us,¹⁶ is wholly unprepared to reconcile absolutist rule by the Communist Party with the terrific zest of its new middle class for all the domestic delights of American consumerism. Hutton has nonetheless his hopefulness. He writes, "China, riven with contradictions and full of potential menace, is coming to terms with the bankruptcy of communism *and* the logical impossibility of continuing to grow as it has".

¹⁵ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Clarendon Press, 2005.

¹⁶ Will Hutton, *The Writing on the Wall: China and the West in the 21st Century*, London: Little Brown, 2006, pp319-357.

Whether or not 1.3 billion Chinese or merely the Party's Central Committee can attain any such self-knowledge, the latest switching crisis, aiming at the renewal of equilibrium, will be – is being – marked by a vertiginous loss of control, by the rise of new and horrible political parties, already formed in the USA, in Denmark, Holland and Turkey, by the sudden necessity to reorganise production and renew technology, by the discovery of drastic weaknesses in infrastructure (rail, airports, bridges, harbours), by the imperious demand that labour forces migrate in bulk across continents.

All these hazards are about us now, as well as impending. This being so, it is the height of hubristic insanity to launch, as the present government has, upon a vast venture to demolish the state and those many of its institutions which provide such needful protection for the people against the storms which are blowing through their country. It is the duty of a government of any colour to do everything possible to repair the damages of history and to assuage the open wounds of forced migration, miserable poverty, helpless unemployment and waste.

Our ministers speak of the national interest. The nation is interested in the sufficient personal safety of its jobs, its homes, its children. But one cannot escape the conclusion that the present crisis is being deepened and rendered insoluble by merely ideological convictions on the part of politicians with a horizon only the length of the next parliamentary election away, along with a blind and ignorant belief in policies whose principal consistency is to turn as many state institutions as possible into the likeness of their privately run, profit-seeking and intellectually impoverished equivalents in the USA.

Given these states of mind, there is a consequent and utter disregard for those shocking extensions of social inequality which disfigure our polity. (Set aside the sheer inefficiency of steep inequality as a structural constant in modern society.¹⁷) The super-rich, supremely the bankers who were prime cause of our immediate crisis, are being left untouched by cuts or by the sack or by abrupt reductions in their pay. Their private health insurance, the fees falling due for their children's private education, their electronic gates closed at the bottom of the drive against the anger and misery on the other side, are all untouched and untouchable. The immediate crisis has been transformed by sheer and arrogant effrontery from a crisis of fictitious finance into a crisis of the state. Our coalition government, the Liberal Democrats usefully concealing the class and strictly political obduracy of their not very clever partners

¹⁷ There is no room here to expound the efforts of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett to establish this truth. See their *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone*, Penguin: London and New York, 2010.

with empty mouthings about fairness, could have allowed slow economic recovery to help balance the books by rises in the tax revenue; could have charged the banks a much heavier windfall tax than the trivial sum proposed; could, simplest of all, have raised income tax on a progressive scale.

In the dark and filthy economic weather of the present, people have been unable to see lies for what they are. The Chancellor gets carried away on mendacious tides of rhetoric: there is absolutely no likelihood of British debt carrying the country over the same precipice as the Greeks. The ratio of debt to GDP in 1946 was very much higher than it is now, when Bevan set the NHS in train and Attlee nationalised coal, steel and the railways. The government is *pretending* things are far worse than they are in order to clear the debt at a crazy rate, and then be in a position to bribe the electorate in the last year of the parliament.

It is in this way that they traduce their duty to act in the much-invoked 'national interest'. While there is no question but that the aggregate crises of capitalism are deepening from one to the next along the swooping cycles discerned by Kondratieff, there is no call to make the transitions worse than they need be. No call, of course, unless you have spotted the chance to fulfil the old dream of the new Right, and set about the State with a butcher's knife in order to render things in as American a way as possible, and at just the moment at which America itself is juddering to a halt.

To repeat: a government's duty is, so far as lies within its powers, carefully and slowly to bring under control the economic storms which beset the little world of its own country, to mitigate the fearful dangers of global politics as they press upon their nation, and to protect their own best principles in such a way as to endorse a future which settles people, gives them work and brings them home. The measure of good government is that it always act in the light of the best values it can imagine in the present and on behalf of a future the horizon for which should be thought of as, at most, three generations away.

Even these pious bromides would test most governments to destruction. For what has lapsed in our polity, as well as throughout the Western hemisphere, is any shared historical narrative with which to hold together the disparate policies, world-pictures, ambitions and aversions which attach a government to a society and enable popular appeals to endurance and revolution. What the French call '*les grands récits*' have broken up as the successive crises of capitalism effect their massive transfers of energy, and the doctrines of both socialism and liberalism (whether with or without the prefix 'neo') can neither of them provide an adequate vision of a safe and happy future.

These dark tones are rendered even more sombre by the so far unmentioned menace of climate change, the worst cases for which make such precautions as have already been agreed upon laughably inadequate. But one has only to mention the vast and unassimilable subject of the weather to see that the narratives of progress inherited from the 19th century and transformed into world propaganda by the 20th century's extremes of creation and destruction, can no longer function as vehicles with which to carry the past across the present into a continuous future.

So there impends, indeed has arrived, a drastic tear – a hiatus – in the continuing tapestry of time. History itself is at a pause, as the dominant sources of its energy, which presently are the armies of trade and production as given shape by an angry and thwarted Mother Nature, look for meaning and direction.

III

It is the purpose and function of the University to propose such meanings and interpretations of history as will take bearings as to the moral direction of a society or, come to that, of a world. Once upon a time, this was the duty, indeed the whole point of the church, but church lost its authority under the assorted pressures of schism, science, rival churches, old dissent and new atheism. Even John Henry Newman when appointed Rector of the new Catholic University of Ireland in 1851 had to note regretfully¹⁸ that "it is the fashion just now ... to erect so-called universities without making any provision in them at all for theological chairs", seeing plainly, as he did, "that a Divine Being and a university so circumstanced cannot co-exist".¹⁹

Nowadays the divine being is too polymorphous to receive unitary acknowledgement or justify Newman's claims to universal knowledge. But the grandeur of his conception and the diction in which it is couched retain their nobility and their appeal even in universities whose daily business is so often conducted in the unspeakable but, alas, widely spoken language of managerialism with which I began. For Newman, like Arnold his coeval, made unhesitating reference to "the best that has been thought and said", and neither moral relativism nor social individualism have yet rendered such embodiments of thought and action undiscoverable. Indeed, I declare my own innocence roundly enough at this point, for I am sure that the ordinary conversation of our culture still makes confident and necessary

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, New York: Image Books, 1959, p61.

¹⁹ Newman (1959) p65.

reference to the good, the true and the beautiful as part of the essential judgements of domestic life. We name, with justification, certain lives as good lives, certain objects (landscapes, people, artefacts) as beautiful, and could not move through the crowded world without determining the truth about things, and the truthfulness of others in reporting them.²⁰

The trinity – goodness, beauty and truth – remains in the care of the university whatever its modern, protean mass. Of course, it has had to become, as Ronald Barnett has it,²¹ bureaucratic, corporate, therapeutic, custodian of authenticity and, in Barnett's slightly blurred enlargement of the university's significance, ecological. It is required to serve many more instrumental purposes than Newman could have even comprehended, and it has never been enough characterised by courage, or disobedience towards the fatuity or wrongness of its paymasters, or by a collective responsibility for the common good.

But any undergraduate course, whether in, say, physics, literature, nursing care or sports science, retains implicit and explicit reference to the trinity, towards the public duty of the discipline, to that corner of the good society in which the principles and content of the discipline may flourish.

I take for granted the close, unseverable bond between teaching and research. That is to say, one's best thoughts are discovered and formed – one finds out what one thinks and those feelings which best conduce to such thoughts – in the conversations of pedagogy. That such conversation is as likely to be with one's peers or one's masters as it is with one's students goes without saying.

The terms of such a conversation cannot, in any simple way, be Newman's. They can still, however, be those of a different prophet, armed on behalf of an ideal of the university for which he himself stood with some heroism, even while his own university betrayed and denigrated him. F R Leavis wrote his manifesto for "the essential discipline" of English literature.

His language, as befitted a world at war for the second time in twenty years, is morally much more provisional than Newman's, and attentive to the demands of a far more formless discipline than controlled either the Classics or Theology in the mid 19th century. My point, however, is that the habits and principles of mind and spirit which Leavis sought out as the

²⁰ I depend blithely on Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

²¹ In Ronald Barnett, *Being a University*, London: Routledge, 2010.

product of his essential discipline are those for which all serious teachers in the university seek and to which they give their hearts and lives.

Leavis wrote (in 1942):

... we want to produce a mind that knows what precision and specialist knowledge are, is aware of the kinds not in its own possession that are necessary, has a maturity of outlook such as the study of history ought to produce but even the general historian by profession doesn't always exhibit, and has been trained in a kind of thinking, a scrupulously sensitive yet enterprising use of intelligence, that is of its nature not specialised but cannot be expected without special training – a mind, energetic and resourceful, that will apply itself to the problems of civilisation, and eagerly continue to improve its equipment and explore fresh approaches. The education proposed is necessarily full of incompletenesses and imperfections. It is a training in carrying on and going forward in spite of, and in recognition of, incompletenesses and imperfections – the only way in which the required kind of thinking (without which the specialist is frustrate) *can* be carried on.

To compare this kind of fervour as well as its judicious resolution with the contemporary advocacy of skills, innovation and all that cant is enough to make the cat laugh. Indeed, the abuse of the concept of 'skills' is pertinent. Skill formerly meant a specialised, teachable technique for the achievement of a specific purpose in the practice of a craft. According to more recent accretions of meaning, however, 'skill' has, along with 'technique', become separated from individual human purposes. In thus making both 'skill' and 'technique' impersonally scientific, the coordinating framework of a craft is disintegrated and skills are, so to say, demoralised. They are transcribed into the handbooks of technology.²²

According to this critique, each skill (that is, accomplishment or competence) is divorced from inner meaning; it is an outer attribute. This serves a new ideology which may be called 'technicism', and which justifies an absolute severance between the knower and the known. This deep cultural tendency is at the centre of the threat to the meaning and purpose of the university. For the principles of the market and its managers are more and more the managers of the policy and practices of education. Market relevance is the key criterion for the selection of intellectual discourse. Knowledge is divorced from persons, their allegiance to value, their life-commitments. Knowledge, as Bourdieu told us years ago, is become capital. Policy demands that creating and moving knowledge about should be as swift and electronic a process as moving money. The centuries-old and valid tradition which taught

²² I am endorsing here an argument of Richard Sennett, in his *The Craftsman*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2009. See also Fred Inglis and Lesley Aers, *Key Concepts in Education*, London: Sage, 2008.

the inwardness of knowledge, its pertinence to the deep structure of the self, the defining relation of one's discipline to one's self, is all being thinned out to the point of fracture.²³

This, in Leavis's telling phrase, is the "blind, enlightened menace" which, in the shape of such earnest mediocrities as Lord Browne and David Willetts, is set upon doing deathly harm to universities as one of the remaining opponents of capital's penetration into and dissolution of human meaning.

This is no mere bearing aloft by a staring-eyed hysteric of a board saying "the end is nigh". The first importance of universities to the good society is that they hold and renew the bond between the individual and the strictly impersonal life-allegiances and principles which give the personal life mass and energy. When Leavis talks of "special training" he is of course a very long way from the curricular distinction routinely made between 'academic' and 'training' modules. Modular definition nowadays deliberately cuts out questions of human meaning, of skills as part of the moral and intellectual framework of a craft, in order to put down 'academic' matters as subordinate to practical competences devoid of inward rootedness.

Let us take for our attention not Leavis's polemical concern to validate the then newish subject of English literature. Take instead those indispensable segments of, by and large, 1992 universities including this one, which teach a nursing degree. A conscientious teacher of nurses might not put things so high, but she would certainly intend that her best students be sufficiently inspired by their studies to transform their new knowledge into energy and resourcefulness, so enlarging the debauched concept of 'training' that, discovering in the study the 'courage of enormous incompleteness', each finds the determination to draft a map of nursing knowledge from the evidence provided, itself, given limited opportunity, necessarily patchy and sketchy but enough to feed both judgement and wisdom when faced with the job.

The professional code of conduct for nurses doesn't, as you'd expect, use such terminology. 'Professional' itself is an adjective nowadays asked to do far too much work, standing in, as it does, for a large family of concepts such as duty, responsibility, a lively awareness of the moral weight pressing on the job, a trained, spontaneous honesty as mingled with delicacy of response to the predicament of others. These, and much more are, one takes it, the qualities to be looked for in those women and men who carry their small, inextinguishable

²³ I paraphrase Basil Bernstein, in his *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, pp81-86. I have also learned much of a relevant kind from Abigail Sabey, Senior Lecturer in Health Care, UWE.

torch on behalf of that aspect of our civilisation embodied in the National Health Service, ringed about by the barbarians right now.

I have tried to take the capital letters off the big words: civilisation, responsibility, truthfulness, evidence, wisdom. No-one can doubt that, whatever new kind of civilisation is made out of a future certain to be compounded of a new economics, a natural world heading out of control, the likelihood of barbarism implicit in both phenomena, and our trusty old weapons of hope and resilience, for now the University remains at once court of appeal, workshop of restoration, custodian of the good.

To keep itself that way, university teachers will need to cultivate a hardness and bitterness which sorts ill with their still easy-going assumptions about the world, and the supposition that, whatever the clowns in government do, universities will more or less manage to play the system peaceably. But as Edward Thompson once said, culture is less a way of life than a way of struggle. If a passably good society is to be made under very stormy-looking skies, universities will need, at least, a lively commando of tough and intransigent thinkers. For post- Cold War politics have failed. A whole generation – mine, as it happens – is rotten with failure. This has been a failure to speak the truth, to stand to on behalf of a sufficient picture of the good, to fight, bloodily enough, for the beauty of common lives. The enemies of the good society are extremely powerful, blind and unwitting, and can only be faced down by arguments and actions equipped with staying-power, fortified by courage and rational conviction, and designed for victory. This isn't yet our language. We had better learn to speak it.