

Money, Management, Universities and the Good Society¹

Only the incomparable house journalist of *The Poppletonian* can capture the farcical compound of phoney science, flat obduracy and lethal money-grubbing which now passes for the language of academic policy. Even Laurie Taylor's satire is, however, impotent before the facts of political life. For the Minister himself put parody in the shade with a gobbling and hapless effusion, culminating in the complacency with which Willetts declared to the *London Review*, "I plead guilty to believing in choice and competition".

"Pleading guilty" like this is a familiar piece of class diction with which to dismiss subordinate insistence that one fashion a rational argument. For what if the choices made by half-a-million 16-year-olds for their preferred A levels led to the evisceration of, say, all engineering departments? What on earth does it mean to claim that the Universities of Cumbria and Gloucester, both of them in by no means trivial difficulties as to cash, are in competition with the London School of Economics, whose director recently resigned because of the institution's unfortunate propinquity to the chequebooks of the Gaddafi family?

What is at stake in the present waste and incompetence under which universities still labour to cherish and recreate the best aspects of our civilisation – and it *is* still ours, all of us together (as they say) including millions of citizens indifferent, in a not unkindly way, to all that universities do and stand for – is the language of moral and political thought. The official speech used for the discussion of what universities are for is one in which it is impossible to tell the truth. There again, truthfulness is a threadbare quantity in daily political life.

If, however, truth and truthfulness, and the slow and patient definition of the changeful conditions for establishing each, are not central to the idea of the university then we have indeed handed over meaning and livelihood to the gangsters of propaganda and their hirelings in advertising.

This is no mere abuse. 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

¹ A longer version of this article was given as a public lecture at Christchurch University, Canterbury at the end of June this year.

beneficiaries, incremental significance, and levels of robustness (the list was compiled by Adrian Poole) 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". 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.

Such is the moral and linguistic context in which we must place the Browne Report and the new White Paper. There isn't space here to do any more than remark the Government's contemptible disregard for due procedure in publishing the White Paper *after* announcing all the crucial decisions for which it was supposed to provide the material for Parliamentary correction.

In both documents, the authors' beliefs were set out with the indifferent finality which accompanies unshakable absolutism. The first, omnipotent such belief - that "competition improves quality" - could be so baldly invoked because of the absolute presupposition made by government and its hirelings 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, whose only function is to benefit 'the economy', a term left, as usual, in unexampled opacity.

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. These latter creatures must be our immediate targets. Unlike the leaders of the medical profession and the solidarity of its half-million strong staff, the PVCs and their ludicrously overpaid senior staff are to a monstrous degree complicit in the muffled mendacities and self-serving mutilations of the new policies. 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 an easy 20% off the salaries of Vice and Pro-Vice Chancellors and a few of their greedier coevals.

The changes being hurried through, unimpeded by a docile and nerveless workforce, demand of us (whoever 'we' are) something tougher and harder, as well as more

comprehensively argued and collectively fought out, than name-calling, such a relief as it is. For the White Paper summarises a new order. It will 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.

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, and 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. 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 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.

Capitalism, as it is a necessary commonplace to repeat, has been characterised throughout its 600-year history by what David Harvey calls "switching crises". Each capitalist order, more or less nationally rooted, 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, racing into the markets performace abandoned by its old rival.

The "switching 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.

Capitalists, with their ferocious energy, created out of nothing a new resource with which, it was hoped, to eradicate these passages of devaluation. That creation was credit, "fictitious capital" as Marx called it. Credit is trust in action. The function of credit is to hold the balance between production and consumption. 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 forty years, 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.

The story of the bubble has been enacted many times since July 1720. If the bursting bubble is big enough, it presages a "switching crisis", which is to say the drastic transposition of the dominant centre of capitalist accumulation from one geography to another, at the present moment from the USA to China.

The burst which brought this about had as immediate cause, as everybody now knows, over-accumulated capital sitting expectantly in land values quite unrelated to production. The credit system (one of the more flagrant tricks of late Anglophone capitalism has been to relabel debt as credit) was 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.

Thus and thus the collapse of 2008. As is the human way, everyone assured everyone else that it was a recession, it would be over in two or three or four years, and good times would

return. But for twenty-five years of (as we've all learned to say) outsourcing and outreaching, world wages have been, notoriously, held down at exploitative levels, such that exactly those people required by the system to spend and consume their way to paradise don't have the surplus with which to do so. The sole weapon in their hands with which to lever up pay levels – the strike – was taken away by legislation, expendable assets like North Sea oil in Britain had paid for unemployment, and fictitious capital did the rest until the collapse. Now the question is who it is will have most to endure in the process not of devaluation but of a permanent, steep fall in living standards.

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. Such circumstances are already plain to see, and accompanied by the usual filthy uproar from new and horrible political parties, the excrescence of bloodthirsty racism, the smashing of the shop windows of the customless poor by the criminalised poor.

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 the waste of lives.

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 an 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.)

The super-rich 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 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, and knocked a wallop off VAT. The government is traducing its duty to act in the much-invoked 'national interest'.

To repeat: its duty is, so far as lies within a government's 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 acts in the light of the best values it can imagine in the present and on behalf of the future.

There is presently, however, no common agreement on a historical narrative which could give those values concrete actuality and motion. 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 . "The best that has been thought and said" – and done and made, the best that we can do for ourselves, our country and, where possible, for the world – these things are the subjects and objects of our livelihood and our vocation. The ordinary conversation of our culture still tots up along the bottom line confident judgements as to the good, the true and the beautiful, each as essential nourishments, of domestic and, dammit, political life. We name, with justification, certain lives as good lives, certain objects as beautiful, and could not move through the crowded world without determining the truth about things, and the truthfulness of others in reporting them.

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. But there looms over us a hateful 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 heart of the threat to the meaning and purpose of the university. For the principles of the market and its managers more and more deeply suffuse

the 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. The centuries-old and valid tradition which taught 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.

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. For example, a conscientious teacher of nurses might not put things in any such exalted diction, 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 working map of nursing knowledge enough to feed both judgement and wisdom even when faced with a sickness unto death.

Whatever new kind of civilisation is made out of a future certain to be compounded of a new economics with China and India in charge, 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, theorist of novelty, 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, they will more or less manage to play the system. 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. The enemies of the good society are powerful, and can only be faced down by arguments and actions designed for victory. The amiable indolence of the academic life must needs be abruptly shaken off. The Philistines are upon us, they are in the Senate House itself, and it is well past the time for rewriting the ludicrous research excellence framework (the very phrase an affront to our vocation) with a vehement call to scholarship of a more cutting, angry and indomitable style.