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INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

FORCES FOR CHANGE IN THE GOVERNANCE OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Government control of colleges and universities has been increasing in recent years. The challenge for higher education is how to make institutions properly accountable but less controlled by government. The experience in this regard in the United Kingdom and the United States is compared. The danger in both nations is that, left unchecked, control will leave universities resembling regulated public utilities. American and British academics can learn from each other on how to avoid such a fate.

The independence of our nation's colleges and universities to chart their own destinies and bring them to fruition has diminished in recent years. While this trend has been attributed to federally spawned governmental regulations, the more significant loss of independence has come more as a function of decisions made at the state rather than at the national level.

The reasons for this trend are readily apparent: the rising unit costs of higher education in recent years; the increase in the number of colleges and universities, mostly publicly supported or assisted; the doubling of enrollments since the early 1960' with most of the increase going to

the public rather than to the private institutions; the loss of public confidence in higher education which accompanied student unrest between the mid-1960's and the early 1970's; the growth in governmental oversight and regulation of private and public endeavors including those of our colleges and universities; and the intense competition among institutions of higher learning for new campuses, programs, personnel, students, and resources.

Whatever the causes, the outcome has been to narrow the range of institutional discretion, to increase the involvement of state government in the internal affairs of our colleges and universities, to substitute bureaucratic for peer review judgments, and to homogenize rather than to differentiate the purposes, character, and funding arrangements for our universities.

Justification for these changes is referenced to the fact that our colleges and universities have been spending more of the public's money and, therefore, should be held more accountable for the use of these funds. Accountability for funds expended, of course, is one thing; control of expenditures before they are made is quite another. And it has been control masquerading as accountability that we have been experiencing in recent years. Thus, the need to examine ways and means of making our institutions properly accountable but less controlled by government is a matter of timely and significant importance.

THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN EXPERIENCE COMPARED AND

CONTRASTED. The financing and governing of universities in the United States compared and contrasted with the arrangements in Britain bear examination, not only for the insight one may acquire by analyzing historic and contemporary similarities and differences, but also because the conventions in each instance are currently under stress.

Universities in Britain are autonomous institutions, given life by statute or charter from which instruments they derive their essential powers, principal constraints, and major purposes. The generally held view that the autonomy of these institutions better serves the state's interest than the control of them by any other party has historically served to limit the exercise of state control over them.

The internal structure of the British universities may be grouped into three categories: "Oxford and Cambridge; the federal universities of London and Wales; and the rest, including the constituent university colleges in Wales and the dozen or so major nonmedical schools which make up the University of London."² The ultimate governing authority

at Oxford and Cambridge still lies with the legislative assembly of all resident masters and senior university and college officials--academic self-government still in its most untrammelled form. For the remainder, the universities' governance generally includes the active participation of lay persons (who comprise a majority of the "Court and Councils") and faculty (the Senate and faculty boards), the former concentrating on the management of the institution's physical and financial assets and the latter on such matters as who should be "admitted as a student, awarded a degree, appointed to the staff, or promoted, and according to what standards of judgment."³

British academics tend to be less often concerned with governing arrangements than are their American counterparts, because the laymen involved in Britain, in contrast to those in the United States, "have concluded from experience that a mixed academic and lay government is good for universities only so far as it can secure a very high degree of independent control by academic persons of all academic affairs."⁴ Moreover, matters of organization, administration, structure, and efficiency as these terms are usually understood, bear little connection to the university's central purpose; thus, they influence the context more than the substance of university life. This helps to understand why academics, especially at the better universities, are "peculiarly resistant to being governed at all."⁵

Academics, of course, are themselves not especially well prepared to govern universities. Indeed, with respect to governance and administration alike, they are some of the least prepared of persons, owing principally to the specialization and focus of their professional or academic commitments. But on the central activities of universities and on the circumstances precedent to a flourishing of their work, academics can lay claim to the matter, for more than anyone else they know most about it and are best qualified to regulate their common business.

Ashby has identified the four principal criteria by which the autonomy of universities in Britain is defined, namely, by measuring their control over (1) the admission and examination of students; (2) the curricula and courses of study; (3) the appointment, promotion and teaching of faculty; and (4) the allocation of income among the various categories of expenditure.⁶ The French universities possess the first but not the rest, the Germans the first and second, the United States the first, second, and third and a not insignificant portion of the fourth, and the British all four. Whether or not the British universities can long sustain their institutions as self-governing societies with

their now heavy dependence on the public purse and their complex and costly organization, is a matter of increasing speculation. The more important question for the purpose of this paper, however, is: how have they managed to preserve and sustain their autonomy for so long?

Governing arrangements in Britain's universities have generally been more informal and less structured than in the United States, and, at least since the nineteenth century, less politicized as well. The universities were and are still thought to be providing services to the country of a fundamentally vital kind, services regarded as essential to Britain's economic and political survival, and the rendering of them as autonomous rather than as state controlled institutions has similarly been seen as serving the nation's interests as well as those of the universities.

Significant state grants (£15,000) were first made to the modern English and Welsh universities as late as 1889, the Scottish universities having received nominal grants from the very earliest part of the Eighteenth Century and very small grants having been made to the colleges of the University of Wales and London University earlier in the Nineteenth Century. While small at first, the grants gradually grew to an approximate 30% of the universities' total income in 1919 to roughly 80% today. Governmental oversight of these grants, however, and the spending of them was unsystematic, hesitant and restrained, respectful of established conventions and without intent to fashion these independent institutions into a national framework or otherwise to coordinate or organize their efforts.

The creation by the government in 1919 of the university Grant's Committee (UGC), the first authentic effort to formalize the relationship between government and the universities, sought to legitimate the state's growing interest in the work of the universities without threatening or otherwise doing harm to their independence. The UGC was given life by way of a Treasury minute rather than by statute or other parliamentary act or by the Crown. Its membership, comprised principally of academics appointed by government (but not as representatives of their respective institutions), was to consult with the universities as to their need for government grants, and to advise the government through the Chancellor of the Exchequer on this and related matters. Although created by government, it was not bound to government policy. Neither was it obliged to agree with the universities. It acted independently but in close consultation with the universities and government.

The government grant was made on a quinquennial budget

cycle, given to the UGC as a bloc, without conditions. The grant reflected the government's considered view as to the appropriate share of public monies the universities should receive from the treasury relative to other state needs. It did not, however, reflect any judgment whatsoever as to the most equitable and effective allocation of the grant to specific universities. The latter task was the UGC's.

In making allocations from the bloc grant to the universities, the UGC has developed qualitative and quantitative measures that guide their deliberations and inform their judgment. Occasionally, allocations by the UGC have been accompanied by suggestions to the universities (e.g. UGC's repeatedly expressed desire to reduce the number and scale of Russian studies programs in British universities); but nothing even resembling the line-item budgeting so common in other countries has conditioned the UGC grants. When once received, the grant is spent by the university at its sole discretion. The university, however, can expect no budgetary relief from UGC if it overspends its grant. It can count, however, on any unspent part of the grant (or revenues derived from other sources) being left with the university at the end of the fiscal year rather than being taken back by either the UGC or government.

Such a system, of course, only works where there is a high degree of mutual trust and shared values, a confident acquaintanceship of both parties one with the other, a common understanding as to the proper role of government in university affairs, and a shared regard for the nature and purposes of the university in British life. These conditions, by and large, have been sustained over the years. However, the easy informality that so characterized the early years of the UGC's work has gradually given way, especially since the close of World War II, to a more formal and, some would say, a more bureaucratized relationship.

These changes have taken place for several reasons: (a) the unprecedented growth in the number of universities and students; (b) the fashioning of the binary system (i.e., the university system being one part and the polytechnics or "public" or "maintained" sector being the other) intended to differentiate a national system of higher education as to the purposes of its several parts and as each of them to the unity of the systems generally; (c) the government's effort immediately following World War II to fit the universities' work more closely to the nation's needs and engage them more directly in helping deal with the nation's problems; (d) the passing of the UGC from the Treasury to the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 1964; (e) the enlarged scale and cost of university operations; (f) the

growing involvement of the Association of University Teachers, the Research Council, and the National Union of Students in university affairs; and (g) the fiscal crises in the mid-1970's and early eighties.

Nevertheless, as Berdahl has observed..."state influences have not yet operated to damage the essential attributes of university autonomy... [which is] contingent on the sustained exclusion of university affairs from partisan politics, the avoidance of a major financial disaster, and the continued mutual sympathy and understanding between the principal officials in government and those in the universities."

Thus, while the core of university autonomy remains essentially intact, a nibbling around the edges has alerted the universities to the possibility of more direct government interest in their internal affairs. Changing conditions have also awakened government's interest in the prospect of exerting more control than they historically have been wont to do or thought possible. Moreover, the UGC's role as a buffer between government and the universities has been severely tested with the former seeing UGC as too much an advocate of university interests and the latter perceiving UGC as increasingly responsive to government policies and pressures. Nevertheless, the sustaining of UGC's basic independence is of crucial importance to the integrity of the entire governing process and the maintenance of a free and fairly funded university system.

The strain on the established conventions of university finance and governance in Britain has been taken note of recently in the form of a major study, now underway, to examine the system's health generally, to reconsider the underlying assumptions of the Robbins Report and its major premises, and, to help chart higher education's course for the next several years in respect to demand and access, enrollments, the binary system, the curricula, teaching, research, finance and governance (including the government's place in it). Privately funded by the Leverhulme Trust and to be overseen by the Society for Research into Higher Education, the study should be completed and the report made by 1983. DES and Parliament's Education, Science, and Arts Select Committee are also much involved in examining important aspects of British higher education and the place of the universities within the overall scheme.

There is a new handle being fashioned in British higher education and the grip sometimes seems to tighten and other times to loosen the relationship between government and the universities just as it sometimes seems to sustain and in

other cases to challenge the binary system in its present form. The pressure to compose a relationship between the maintained sector and the universities, however, will very likely persist. So also will the tendency to further centralize and bureaucratize the governing arrangements even if they should occur mostly outside of DES itself.

LESSONS FROM THE BRITISH UNIVERSITY SYSTEM. What is there in the British experience that we in America might explore to help stem the erosion of our universities' independence while assuring the public and public officials of the effective use of public monies in the affairs of our institutions of higher learning?

Funding Arrangements. The most promising possibilities for the United States, it would seem, offer themselves not at the national but at the state level. The federal interest in higher education tends to be confined mostly to the funding of peer review research grants and contracts, the provision of student financial aid in its many forms, and categorical grants targeted to accomplish certain national purposes and institutional needs. Recently, a plethora of nationally sought social and political objectives have been advanced by conditioning federal grants to higher education on the institutions' willingness to comply with regulations intended to further such purposes. This practice, of course, has moved the federal government more and more into the internal affairs of our institutions. Nevertheless, it has been at the state level that the budgeting and political pressures have been most discernibly and effectively brought to bear; at least this is true for the public universities and to a lesser extent for the private ones receiving some form of state assistance.

The greatest threat to institutional independence may very well stem from the growing involvement in university affairs of the executive and legislative branches of state government, not so much from elected state officials (albeit they are not reluctant participants), but rather from budget analysts and officers, directors of finance, legislative analysts and similarly positioned public servants, whose views and opinions have been tending to supersede those of the governing boards, the administrators of our institutions, and the collective judgment of the faculty, staff, and students of our colleges and universities.¹⁰ A similar trend, albeit less pronounced and insistent, is evident in Britain as well.¹¹

In Britain, the UGC still allocates the government grant according to its own best judgment, after consultation with government and the universities. While the level of funding

of the bloc grant is fixed by government, the grant itself is not encumbered by conditions, except in rare instances, e.g. the government's recent decision to charge the full economic cost of education to overseas students. The allocation of the grant by UGC to the universities is accomplished free of earmarking, although the UGC's suggestions and rationale accompanying the grant tend increasingly to be perceived by the universities as expectations to be accommodated if not directives to be followed, e.g. UGC's views on Russian studies programs. Nevertheless, the grants remain in the form of blocs, the universities are free to do with the money as they wish (assuming a reasonable capacity to justify decisions which may be at odds with the UGC's advice), and the funds are not earmarked or line-itemed. Thus, the long-established conventions, while under stress, remain basically unimpaired as of this writing.

The government is not dealing with the universities in a direct, bilateral fashion, but through the UGC; and the reverse is also true. Government remains restrained in its relations with the British universities, notwithstanding the hard talk in recent months about reduced government spending which has affected universities along with all other publicly-funded programs and agencies and the efforts of DES to encourage more coordinated planning between the maintained sector and the universities.

In America, by way of contrast, state funds for higher education are generally appropriated by the legislature directly to the institutions, with much of the appropriation being earmarked or line-itemed and accompanied by intent language that, if not legally binding, is regarded nevertheless as a legislative preference to be ignored only at risk.

The dynamics of the budget process itself, at one time a function of rather straightforward and uncomplicated discussions between institutional representatives, including trustees, the governor, and the interested legislative committees on appropriations, now encompass an array of technicians and specialists within the institutions themselves and at the system level as well in those states having unified governing boards. Budget analysts, planning and fiscal specialists within the executive branch and a raft of fiscal officers and budgeteers in the legislative branch add to the bureaucratization of this process, not to mention the burgeoning staffs of the legislative committees themselves and of those serving individual legislators as well.

The participation of more and more players, of course, tends to formalize, bureaucratize, homogenize, and codify the funding process. This is so not only because of enlarged

scale and scope but also because of the comfort interested parties have with objective and quantifiable data as the basis for decision-making in contrast to their unease with the more subjective and qualitative judgments that are so vitally important if a generalized mediocrity is to be avoided.

Governance. The American university's claim to autonomy, while more successfully secured in practice than many may suppose, is a claim in need of constant nurturing for it is regarded by the executive and legislative branches of state government more as a privilege than as a right. The American university's autonomy is a function not of ancient origins, customs, or historical and contemporary practice, but of a careful and cautious nurturing of the ideal together with a quiet effort to fix it in practice through persuasion; whereas in Britain it is rather taken for granted and invoked only under extraordinary circumstances or in response to untoward action by government.

As they presently function, the governing boards in our institutions of higher learning are peculiarly American, although their origins are traceable to even the earliest of British institutions. Board members are in some instances elected by region or at-large within a state, in others appointed by the governor with the advice and consent of the state senators, or in the case of the private institutions, they are self-perpetuating. In the case of the privates, the trustees are responsible for a single institution only, even if it should have more than one campus. In the instance of the publics, the trustees, regents, governors, or whatever they may be called, may have responsibility for a single institution or for more than fifty, as in the case of the State University of New York. In any case, the members of these boards are predominantly persons of means and/or political influence and are only infrequently academics.

Subject to the ordinary law, the authority of these boards to govern is absolute in the case of the privates (unless the state charter should be modified or revoked) as it is also in a handful of public universities, the University of California and the University of Michigan as examples, which owe their independence to provisions embodied within their respective state constitutions. The vast majority of governing boards, however, in addition to being subject to the ordinary law, are subject at the state level especially to actions of the legislative and executive branches of government which are quite willing to instruct them in their duties, even with respect to the most central of university functions, i.e. teaching loads, admissions, courses, and so forth. Such intrusions, however legal they

might be, are, however, not often enacted into law, for it is more often the threat of enactment rather than the fact of passage that successfully coerces.

The governing boards in America are decision-making bodies, far more so than in the UGC or councils in Britain. They govern directly rather than indirectly; and while the manner and focus of decision-making varies significantly around the country, the authority of the board ultimately to decide virtually all university issues is rarely in doubt. The boards, especially in the less substantial institutions, tend to exercise their oversight with more assertiveness and greater detail than in the more established and prestigious research-oriented universities where conventions have evolved over the years which vest the administration and faculty with de facto if not with de jure authority to act on most issues of educational consequence.

Within the American experience, startling exceptions to the generalization notwithstanding, strong governing boards (especially those enjoying constitutionally derived authority) have been indispensable to the development and to the attaining of high reputation by a university. Unlike the UGC, which is in reality an extension of government (albeit a peculiarly free-standing and independent one) and whose members are mostly academics, such boards sense no special need to acknowledge, much less to accommodate, government pressure nor are they reluctant to advocate their university's cause whether it conflicts with state policy or not. Weak or politically dependent boards not only fail to advance their institutions' interests in proper government circles, but, often as not, serve to accommodate rather than to resist the exercise of political pressure and influence on the very institutions they are by custom and expectation duty-bound to protect. This becomes especially apparent as state systems develop in ways that require governing boards to be concerned with more than one institution and sometimes with several kinds of institutions. (The UGC oversees many institutions, but of one type.) This arrangement tends to formalize and bureaucratize the governing process and spread the board's interests over so many kinds and numbers of institutions that individual acquaintance with any one of them too often holds less of a claim on priorities and loyalties than do political and governmental ones.

A UGC agenda reads very much like that of a board of regents or board of trustees overseeing a comprehensive, multi-campus, research-oriented university, e.g. budget matters both operating and capital, programmatic review, special reports on libraries and scientific instrumentation, land acquisitions, management information systems, and the

like. While UGC's deliberations are private, in stark contrast to the public nature of most governing board meetings in the United States, the issues coming to its attention are very similar but its handling of them is remarkably dissimilar. The UGC acts on most matters by way of advice to government or to the universities, except for the obvious exercise of final authority in such matters as the allocation of bloc grants. In the United States, the board also advises the government but also acts as a final authority instructing the institution for which it is responsible in virtually any aspect of the operation it chooses. The American governing board wields a capacity both in law and in custom to decide with a finality not to be found in the UGC's portfolio or inclination.

However, the university in America is much less its own master than in Britain only if one regards the governing board as a body unrepresentative of and separate from the university; but if the board is seen and behaves as an integral part of the university itself, then, in the absence of direct interference by government, the university in America is as substantially autonomous in practice as it is in Britain.

Enjoying no real legal basis for their independence (except where constitutionally provided), most American universities rely upon a congenial and restrained attitude on the part of government and a sympathetic, nonintrusive but protective governing board for whatever independence they hope to possess and exercise. If the governing boards in America, however, possessed authority derived from their respective states' constitutions, exercised it aggressively in their dealings with government, broadly delegated their authority within the university to those best able to exercise it intelligently, and identified themselves as structurally and conceptually inseparable from the university itself as against regarding themselves as representative of outside interests, the effective outcome would be to yield up a system of universities in America as free as their British counterparts, excepting for the inherent and undissoluble autonomy which the latter have possessed for so many centuries.

In Britain, on the other hand, the UGC is not commissioned, nor because of its being an arm of government is it enabled to assert a decision-making role for itself paralleling that of the American governing board. While the UGC has served as an effective buffer between state and university for over a half-century, it is presently under special strain, owing in part to Britain's economic plight. If the UGC does not fully cooperate with government, DES will

very likely pursue its own policies unilaterally; if, on the other hand, it does cooperate with government, the universities will tend to lose confidence in UGC as an independent force capable of effectively brokering the relationship between government and the universities. Should the latter occur, the universities would be well reminded that, at present, they have little recourse available to them under the present system.

In other words, the mostly unwritten understandings which have enabled British universities to pursue as well as to exercise their autonomy worked well when the number, size, scope, and cost of the universities were of a smaller order and when their affairs were not so complex as to preclude the handling of them informally by persons on both sides who just as easily by training and perception could be on the other. The gradually increasing bureaucratization of much of the governing arrangement, however, calls for a more contemporary response, one which would allow the UGC to resist undue government interference and untoward pressure by the universities, thus preserving its capacity to act according to its own judgment and, hence, to sustain its credibility. The present circumstance is clearly threatening to that historic role. In many respects, therefore, the British universities are prospectively more vulnerable than their American counterparts for at least the latter possess the structure, the conventions, and the political experience and monied influence among the members of their governing boards which equip them to cope reasonably well with governmental bureaucracy in its many forms.

On the other hand, the American university is decidedly more vulnerable to attack on its independence than is the British university unless the governing board in America can secure constitutional standing for its authority and then exercise it as part of the institution rather than as an entity outside of it.

MUCH AT ISSUE. One thing is clear: government interest in both the British and American university is rising, government policies are impacting them both directly and indirectly in fundamentally important ways, government spending on them as a share of the national wealth is declining, and government regulation of them is increasing. Left unchecked, these trends will find our universities within a short time resembling regulated public utilities, being instructed as to the rates they charge for services, how much of the return they can keep, who they will serve and under what conditions, the nature and quality of the service itself, and so on.

To prevent this outcome, Britain can learn more than it

supposes from the United States' governing experience which, in general, better equips the American university for the rough and tumble of politics than its counterpart in Britain. The American university can learn much from the British experience, especially as to the confident and settled position of the autonomous university in a free society to which those involved in its immediate governance are faithfully committed.

The university in Britain and in the United States will find itself more secure and free if it takes definite steps now to counter the already evident trends that would, if left unchecked, make the governance of these institutions nearly indistinguishable from a government bureau or agency or a regulated public utility, outcomes anathema to the peculiar and special place our universities have secured in our societies and on which their respective countries depend so heavily for the sustaining of their security, the education of their leadership, the vitality of their economy, and the advancement of science and humane learning.

NOTES

¹ Graeme C. Moodie and Rowland Eustace, Power and Authority in British Universities (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1974), pp. 45-46.

² Ibid., p. 48.

³ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴ Sir Charles (Lord) Morris, "Organization and Control of Universities in the U.K.," Yearbook of Education 1959, p. 265.

⁵ Moodie and Eustice, op. cit., p. 22.

⁶ Sir Eric (Lord) Ashby, "Self Government in Modern British Universities," Science and Freedom, Vol. 4, No. 7 (1956), p. 4.

⁷ Gareth Williams, "The Buffer Under Pressure: An Examination of the British System of Financing Higher Education in Periods of Affluence and Stringency," in Henry Wasser, Ed., Economics of Higher Education; A Comparative Perspective of Policy and Dilemma, Proceedings of a Conference held on March 30, 1978, Graduate School, City University of New York, a publication of Center for European Studies, p. 10.

⁸ For a useful reading of the informal nature of British

politics and public administration, see Richard Rose, Politics in England (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 3rd edition. Also Hugh Heclo and Aaron Wildavsky, The Private Government of Public Money: Community and Policy Inside British Political Administration, (London: MacMillan; Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974).

⁹ Robert O. Berdahl, British Universities and the State (Berkeley: University of California Press and Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 176. The current financial problem confronting Britain today, however, has, in the view of many, caused Berdahl's assessment to be far less true today than when he made it over two decades ago.

¹⁰ Lyman A. Glenny, The Anonymous Leaders of Higher Education (Berkeley: Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, 1971); and Lyman A. Glenny, et. al., State Budgeting for Higher Education; Data Digest (Berkeley: Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, 1975).

¹¹ For example, the administrative staff of the UGC grew from about six in the early 1950's to over 140 in 1975. See Burton R. Clark, Academic Coordination, Yale Higher Education Research Group, Institution for Social and Policies Studies, Yale University, Working Paper, April 1978, p. 33.

POLITICIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRITAIN AND FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

The more highly politicized nature of French, as compared to British, universities can be explained only partially in terms of such cultural and political differences as the greater strength of the revolutionary tradition in France and the more conservative tenor of French governments in the 1960's and 1970's. Political tensions in French higher education are also in part the result of policy choices, notably the greater speed of expansion of enrollments in France as compared to Britain and the form of French university elections, which strengthened politicized unions.