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Politics and Higher Education

The relation between government and the universities is close and should be formally recognized.

Eric Hutchinson

In thinking about the mutual influence of politics and higher education, I have been interested by a number of remarks that British professors have made in recent times concerning the very rapid expansion of colleges and universities in Britain. Indeed, if one reads such magazines as the *Listener*, it almost seems that a person tuning into the B.B.C. programs today hears scarcely any other topic than that of how to deal with expanding educational facilities. And since the expansion of universities in Britain stems quite directly from explicit political decisions made in the late 1940's, it might be of interest to look briefly at the ways in which government and colleges interact, for in the next decade Britain should provide an unusual laboratory study of these processes.

I find it quite amusing that whereas, when I was an undergraduate in Britain, we had little but contempt for American universities and their (as we perceived them) low standards of learning, nowadays the stream of British academics coming here to find out how to deal with large-scale higher education has reached flood proportions. It would appear that, although there are still some British intellectuals who regard American education as barbarously crude, the British consumer and his supplier are showing as large an ap-

petite for our exported academic ideas as for such cultural exports as movies and rock and roll, to say nothing of the cult of youth.

The new universities, such as York, Lancaster, and Essex, are posing problems of a kind that the British have not had to deal with before, because higher education for a large fraction of the population has not until now been a component of their cultural or political pattern; and the general impression seems to be that, even if Americans do not have all the answers to these problems, we nevertheless have a good many. This, also, I find rather amusing since, unless my judgment in these matters has gone badly awry, we are ourselves in the middle of a fairly profound change concerning (i) the opinion of leading academics as to what the role of universities should be; (ii) the opinion of many government officials as to what the role of universities should be; and (iii) the opinion of the lay public as to what the role of universities should be. (Many of the questions raised by these groups are described in Kerr's book on the "multiversity," (1) but I do not find that there are many satisfactory answers.)

In considering this question in recent weeks, my thoughts have been influenced by an article "Education as a political exercise" by Brian Chapman (2); by Jacques Barzun's *Science, the Glorious Entertainment* (3); and by a series of articles by Christopher Rand

in the *New Yorker* (4). Fred Hechinger's article "Couch on Campus" (5) provides a useful glimpse of some of the personal problems which stem from practices in higher education.

The most comprehensive statement of educational policy in Britain has been the Robbins Report (6), and Chapman's analysis of the political and social implications of the Report is as clear as any that I have read in the British press. Although I do not agree with all of Chapman's conclusions, I think his article is useful reading for Americans, because our own problems are not essentially different from those of the British and, at least in California, are having to be answered by what are basically political decisions—for example, the Master Plan for Education in California.

Chapman sees the following pressures operating to bring about expansion of universities.

1) A purely social (and leveling) pressure that will, it is supposed, do away with what Anthony Sampson (7) calls the "old-boy network" which still dominates the Establishment. There is clearly a rich vein of political ore to be mined in this area, one that will become increasingly important in this country as civil rights programs and the war on poverty gather steam.

2) A purely utilitarian pressure that stems from the belief that an army of technologists and technicians is needed to prevent a nation from sinking in the quicksands of international competition in trade and political influence. When all else fails, this argument continues to command political support and can be used by almost any party with an axe to grind in the educational business. (There appear to be some serious doubts about the validity of this argument raised in Galbraith's *The Liberal Hour* (8), but Galbraith's questioning seems largely to go unnoticed.)

3) A more sophisticated pressure, which casts the argument in terms of intellectual wealth rather than technical utility. This pressure combines some of the features of utilitarianism with some taken from academic self-interest, to be discussed next. This argument

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states that knowledge is power (though now this is to be taken to mean power in a cultural sense) and that any nation rich enough to enjoy the benefits of the arts can afford to support the majesties of the intellect. It is a powerful argument because, in addition to being true, it provides the politician with a dual set of answers to still the cries of heavily burdened taxpayers in at least two constituent classes.

4) A fourth, now very powerful, pressure comes from universities and professors who can use any of the foregoing arguments to their own advantage in demanding expansion of university facilities. For expansion creates new posts, just as increase in prestige brings about higher salaries. As Chapman puts it, "In an expanding market the seller is king." Academic imperialism has flourished since World War II and has caused real difficulties in staffing weaker colleges and universities, giving considerable bargaining power to those who possess the traditional *carte d'entrée* of the doctor's degree.

Academic Influence on Government

Now if education can legitimately be viewed as a political exercise, it is clear that it can be seen in terms of two reciprocal actions, the impact of education on government and the impact of government on education.

In regard to the first, there is an interesting contrast between Britain and the United States. Since the 19th century, when the reforms begun by Macaulay had the result that the administrative officers of the civil service were recruited from the universities, Oxford and Cambridge have enjoyed a virtual monopoly of these posts. So far as I know, no such monopoly has existed in our own civil service, though the foreign service has recruited from a narrower spectrum of universities than has the civil service. Even so, the influence of higher education on government has been as great in this country as in Britain, for at least twice in recent history—during the Roosevelt and Kennedy administrations—highly articulate professors have moved into Washington and have exerted an influence which has no counterpart in British experience, except for isolated examples in World War II. The executive branch of our government with its multiplicity of presidential advisers offers far greater scope for prominent academics than

anything in the British system. (Perhaps Royal Commissions are fairly rare and, in general, not very effective in introducing changes in policy.) Professors have not been slow to grasp the power that resides in the offices of administrative assistant and special adviser.

Twice in recent history we have seen the essentials of an academic oligarchy established in Washington. And in the foreseeable future at least two important government areas, those of the Presidential Science Adviser and the higher management of the Atomic Energy Commission, seem likely to remain firmly in the hands of academics. Moreover, in a nation as chronically litigious as ours, the judiciary and the legal profession are very susceptible to academic influence. The Harvard Law School, for example, has exercised an influence, direct and indirect, on government that would rouse envy in any British university, not excluding the London School of Economics during the Attlee governments. I wish I had the technical competence to make a comparative study of the influence of Oxbridge, through the largely anonymous but very powerful administrative ranks of the British civil service, with the more overt influence of Harvard professors on the government of this country. I can only guess, but my intuitive appraisal is that, notwithstanding the extended influence of Oxbridge on the Establishment, the greater influence has been exercised by Harvard.

The Prospect for Scientists

One may make the generalization that the principal areas of academic influence on government in past history have been legal, political, and economic. It is probably correct to predict that in the future very much greater power will be exerted by those academic constituencies associated with science and technology. There has been, for example, a hard fought battle between military authorities and the academic-technological expert, and present indications are that the academic technologist has emerged the winner. Hence, even under a Secretary of Defense less technologically oriented than McNamara, the influence of the Cal-Tech-M.I.T. contingent and their satellite pseudo-industries is likely to be dominant for some years to come.

Here again we have an interesting

contrast between Britain and the United States. In this country no scientist holds cabinet rank. Yet such men as Jerome B. Wiesner (now replaced by Donald F. Hornig), Glenn T. Seaborg, James E. Webb, and Leland J. Hayworth have an enormous influence on our legislature and budget. In Britain, on the other hand, though there now is a Minister for Science of cabinet rank, the office is filled by a man who has had little, let alone sophisticated, training in science. Moreover, the British counterparts of Presidents Lee DuBridge and Julius Stratton have only a limited influence on government policies. Thus although Alexander Todd, an outstanding chemist, sits in the House of Lords, he actually has far less opportunity to influence policy than a noted American professor enjoys through testimony before congressional committees. The difference stems only partly from the different mechanisms of government. It results largely from our belief in the value of experts and the British concept of government by broadly educated amateurs. The "muddle-through" mentality, as Sampson describes it (7), has by no means disappeared from the British scene; the Labour Party is a good deal more hospitable to the expert than the Conservative Party (a fact by no means insignificant in accounting for the relatively large amount of support for Labour in academic society in Britain), but even there distrust of the expert continues to flourish with remarkable vigor.

It remains to be seen how well scientists and technologists perform in government. So far it has not been easy to judge their performance, since most of the influence exerted by scientists to date has been in the Department of Defense, whose operations are largely clothed in secrecy. However, in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration our far from outstanding success in rocket-powered missiles provides no great reassurance that the results of defense technology justify its enormous cost.

Research Grants Affect Education

World War II and its aftermath have led to one kind of involvement of government in education, that is, in support of research in the physical, biological, and medical sciences. Even though the federal government spends

much more money on defense contracts than on university research, one-third to one-fourth of grants from the National Science Foundation alone are made to universities. Adding the considerable volume of university-executed defense research to this, we find that three or four of the leading institutions in the country derive more than half their income from government sources.

Government support of university research is not necessarily undesirable, but it does bring in its train a number of possibilities that are undesirable. In the first place, as I have pointed out elsewhere (9), we may need a one-sided emphasis on and prestige for scientific studies far less urgently than we need studies in the humanities. In the second place, it is no doubt inevitable that when government agencies provide funds for the support of academic research they turn to universities for advice. This is perfectly natural, yet when these advisers are drawn from the ranks of the academic Establishment—which is well organized and quite exclusive—there is a real danger that government support may become concentrated in a relatively small number of institutions, these being the very ones which, by virtue of their prestige, also have greater access to private benefactions. This is a very difficult problem, for it can readily be conceded that there is good *a priori* reason to associate probable wisdom in the use of government funds for academic research with the prestige of the institution using them—that is, if one presumes that research should have a tangible product. But the undesirable cumulative effect of this reasonable policy is to make it possible for already prestigious institutions to attract even more outstanding faculties. Consequently we may be seeing the emergence of a small number of super-universities of extraordinary prestige. That the rich get richer and the poor get poorer is true not merely in the sense that a few rich institutions become still richer in government support but also that, far more seriously, the poor institution gets poorer and poorer in the quality of its faculty.

It would probably be unfair to conclude that universities of the first rank have exploited this principle cynically, but it is a fact that, though the situation has been clearly recognized, leading institutions have not worked vigorously to reverse the trend. For the lure of the government dollar has quite

noticeably affected academic values. It has increased the competitive spirit between institutions and has led academic scientists, particularly the younger ones, to the firm conviction that the government owes them support for their research, even though the fringe benefits of academic science, such as lucrative consulting practices and participation in the ownership of scientific industries, have never been greater.

Thus, what started out after World War II as influence of universities on government in the execution of scientific research has been reversed, so that government support of research now represents a powerful influence of government on education. It is true that government funds have been used to improve the quality of equipment and facilities in a number of weaker institutions through so-called curricular improvement grants made by the National Science Foundation, but the program is very limited and I have heard it advocated that even this limited program should be abandoned in favor of spending the same amount of money where it would do more good, that is, in the better universities! It is still too early to judge what will be the effect of the Health, Education, and Welfare Department's recent program of providing funds for undergraduate facilities, but it is hard to avoid the suspicion that those institutions which are already expert in the techniques of writing proposals will be presenting well-written proposals far in advance of those whose need is perhaps more urgent.

The Need for a National Policy

Now, even if we can justify on purely utilitarian grounds large government expenditures on scientific education and research, there are nagging questions that remain to be settled. If utilitarianism is to be the touchstone, do we, in fact, advance our cause by a policy of support that leads to the establishment of a few "really good" institutions and a host of "poor" ones? It may well be that a system of elite institutions is indeed the most effective utilitarian system, but one would like to see this advocated by arguments drawn from reason and history rather than asserted or assumed as an axiom. Moreover, if utilitarianism really is to be the basis for the support of education in the sciences, we would seem, since this is a matter of national concern, to have

reached the point at which a truly national policy is called for, involving a separate Department of Education with a Secretary of cabinet rank. I am aware that this proposal would not be universally popular in this country, and I am well aware of the hazard that would result if the Secretary of Education were to be appointed for political rather than professional reasons. But the fact is that even in the sciences, with a half dozen agencies contributing funds, we have no coordinated policy. Still less do we have any national policy for education as a whole. And the advantages of having a Department of Education outweigh the disadvantages, for with our present agencies, such as the National Science Foundation, which have to respond to advice from the academic establishment on the one hand, and to the pressures of congressional parochialism on the other, there is every reason to anticipate an unbalanced growth of higher education.

I do not wish to imply that I regard a centralized federal bureau as the answer to all problems in higher education. But because of the almost certain increase in federal involvement in higher education, the increasingly high cost of higher education, and the risk of wasteful duplication and overlap, we need an agency whose sole concern is for the wise national planning of higher education. Hence, just as we now recognize that the nation may not be able to afford a three-kilometer accelerator on every campus, we may have to decide that even one accelerator is too many if it can only be had at the expense of studies in history and language.

Even in California, where the taxpayer has so far been reasonably tolerant of the increasing cost of higher education and where his aspirations for higher education for his children run high, it has been necessary to develop a comprehensive master plan for higher education. If this is true at the state level in such a wealthy state as this, then the same principle holds at the national level.

It can be argued that any national policy for education (even when flexibly applied) would represent an intrusion of the federal government into the affairs of many private institutions, which would see their autonomy being threatened. There is no doubt that this would be so, but the argument is weakened by the already critical dependence of many leading private uni-

versities on federal funds for science and engineering. Many universities appear to like the present hodgepodge arrangements, saying that they are the least intrusive method of support, but against this, as I have pointed out, is the fact that this method makes any real policy impossible. Furthermore, I believe that when the necessary discount is made for all the *talk* about independence, American private universities probably do not behave any more independently than British universities, which have learned to live peaceably with a national policy expressed through the University Grants Committee. I am not sure that we have yet reached the stage at which a similar structure could be put into operation in this country, but my guess is that inside a decade or so a group much like the Grants Committee will be established. Once parochialism has been dealt with, such a committee working through a Department of Education should be able to handle federal aid to higher education with the minimum of abrasion.

If and when that stage is reached there will be a need in Washington for a definite kind of individual to administer the program. Then, as now, there will be a need for specialist advisers who will doubtless be recruited on a volunteer basis from universities. But there will be a need for permanent civil servants of outstanding generalist abilities, and this presents a problem. The current trend in universities is to train specialists, and it is difficult to see how we can accord enough prestige to generalist studies at, say, the doctorate level to ensure that this kind of scholarship shall thrive. Yet Dean Robert Wert of Stanford University has recently made the point that our present emphasis on specialist graduate studies, which at first sight may appear inimical to generalist undergraduate education, may in fact prove to be a boon. Already a number of types of graduate schools, for examples, medical and law schools, have indicated their eagerness to take in broadly educated students. This affords the good undergraduate colleges an opportunity to enrich their curricula by reducing narrow specialist influences. I suspect that we may see an increase in the kinds of programs represented by the Humanities Honors Program at Stanford, and I hope that we shall establish similar Science Honors programs. Although acceptance of the need for com-

parable programs at the graduate level may require a greater effort, almost every section of industry is expressing the need for just this kind of education for management. We are only beginning to recognize clearly the fact that the activities of any group of specialists must be directed by a generalist—indeed, this is the simple truth behind much of the mystique associated with “higher management.” This is an area in which federal influence, through programs such as Stanford’s, may be all-important. And the interest of the federal government in “area studies” at the graduate level gives ample grounds for optimism about the extension of the concept to broader scholarly disciplines.

Education is a Political Matter

Almost certainly federal involvement in higher education will increase during the next decade. It may continue to be predominantly in the form of support for science, though any large-scale attack on the problem of poverty deriving from educational disadvantage may greatly widen the scope of federal support. But before really massive federal funds are channeled into education we shall have to face quite honestly the problem that now troubles Britain as she is establishing new universities. What is the principal function of a university? Is it to provide a place where an intensive search for knowledge takes place? Is it to provide a utilitarian training ground for the skills demanded by an advanced economy? Or is it to provide a broad education for a wide spectrum of the population? These are all political questions in the last resort.

Ideally a university combines all three roles, but ideal conditions rarely obtain. At present, federal support tends to emphasize the second role, whereas many professors interpret federal support as favoring the first. I see in this situation a danger to which I have referred in an article dealing with science and responsibility (10). There are signs that professors have developed what Barzun calls a lust for learning. In scientific areas this learning is for all practical purposes incommunicable to the major part of the public whose taxes support it. Furthermore, the public sees and appreciates only the technological results of the search for knowledge carried on in universities

and yet is required to invest enormous trust in the value of pursuing research.

It is no extravagant exaggeration to remark that scientific learning has acquired for the public the aura of authority and desirability that was enjoyed by theology and Scholasticism in the Middle Ages. Indeed the parallel goes a long way, in that the medieval citizens taxed themselves for the construction of great ecclesiastical monuments, while today’s citizens acquiesce in being taxed to support lunar laboratories.

I began this discussion with a quotation from Chapman’s paper, and I will close it with another (2, p. 1065).

The political importance of education can, therefore, safely be taken as a datum of experience. Yet it is well to remind ourselves of this elementary truth for . . . so much of the chatter about education . . . has come from trained and untrained social psychologists that the general public occasionally reacts as if education were a non-political matter in which there are important experts, in the same way as there are experts in engineering or in dentistry. Now this has helped to persuade the inarticulate part of the population and the less sophisticated members of the intelligentsia that education is primarily a social matter, and not what it is, primarily a political matter. . . . To understand a political exercise correctly, it is necessary to understand the factors present at the moment of conflict—or the moment of truth, whichever taste dictates—to understand the terms of the political dialogue which is then undertaken, and to understand the conclusion of the exercise. Where the conclusion is enshrined in a piece of legislation, or, as in the case of education, in reports . . . one should try to understand the logical implications of the proposed changes.

We may have failed to follow Chapman’s advice in the past. We need to look to these principles in contemplating further federal involvement in higher education.

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