



Notes from Cambridge

THE season for debating academic freedom has arrived once more in Cambridge. The University authorities are trying to 'reform' Statute U, that part of our constitution which deals with discipline, redundancy and dismissal.

This has developed into an annual winter sport. After a working party had considered the matter for four years, we had a Green Paper in January 2008, which didn't impress people much. The second season saw a White Paper in December 2008, which was robustly criticised in a Discussion in the Regent House in February 2009. Since then we have had a 'consultation': Pro-Vice-Chancellors preparing the piste for this year by taking the proposals on a 'road show' of presentations to staff. (A freedom of information request revealed that no notes were taken of the comments made by the staff 'consulted'.)

The current winter sport season opened on October 30th with the publication in the *Reporter* of the same proposals, with very minor tweaks; we are promised another Discussion on November 24th and perhaps even a vote in the New Year. (See www.freecambridge.org for details.)

The 'reforms' are a set of complex changes to Statute and Ordinance that will amend the employment conditions of both academic and other staff in ways both gross and subtle. The heart of the matter is to make redundancy and dismissal easier. The story starts in 2004, when our authorities tried to close our department of architecture (it had got a 4 in the 2001 RAE and thus became unprofitable). There was an outcry; celebrities rallied round, and two thousand students sat down in the Senate House yard. The Vice-Chancellor blinked first. Had she held her nerve, then under our statutes she would have had to win two votes in the Regent House to make the architects redundant. Reducing that number to one, or preferably to zero, became a managerial objective.

Another proposed 'reform' is to curtail academics' right of appeal. At present, a lecturer facing the sack for disciplinary reasons has a final right of appeal to the Septemviri, a court made up of seven senior academics (often Heads of House). Ordinary academics will lose this right; the Vice-Chancellor, however, will retain it. It's an interesting question whether a controversial Vice-Chancellor should be easier or harder to sack than a controversial Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology.

The arguments used to sell these changes to Council and to staff have changed continually. Last year we were told that our existing Statutes were incompatible with employment law; our scholars duly demolished that. We are now told that the changes are necessary because our existing procedures do not set time limits for the adjudication of grievances. And indeed it is true that our existing Ordinances give little explicit guidance to our Grievance Committee how to proceed. But that can be fixed by a letter from the Registry reminding the Committee of the relevant employment law; by no stretch of the imagination does such an omission neces-

sitate a change of Statute.

And academic freedom itself? Statutes would retain the 1988 language, but we would acquire Codes of Practice, as an annex, incorporating the Unesco declaration. This not only grants academics rights but also imposes many responsibilities; any administrator worth his salt could find some technical violation in there. What's more, the freedoms are only 'within the university', raising the issue (discussed in *Oxford Magazine*, No. 291) of the protection enjoyed by a professor who criticises government policy before a Select Committee. Together with the loss of the right to appeal to a senior committee of academic peers, these changes would seriously undermine our traditional protection.

Cambridge is celebrating its octocentenary. For eight hundred years we've been producing iconoclasts who changed the world by challenging error. And thinkers like Erasmus, Cranmer, Newton, Darwin, Russell, Turing and Keynes often made powerful enemies. It's not enough for a university to be an ivory tower; it has to be a great fortress, staunch in the defence of truth and freedom. Its administrators must not have the power to defenestrate a turbulent priest, lest they be asked to use it!

We live in an age when ministers sack science advisers whenever the tabloids don't like the science. The duty of universities is to provide a platform from which the truth can be spoken. As Archimedes said, *Πα βω και κινω ταν γαν*: give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth. We are the fulcrum, not the knowledge manager.

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