

From practical idealism to the ideology of the market: Whitehall and higher education, 1963 - 1983.

Clay Heather, Spencer Maureen, *Middlesex University, UK*

The paper draws on research into departmental files in the National Archives, tracing the long march in higher education from the welfarism of the 1960s to the neo-liberalism of the 1980s. The paper outlines the provisions of the major report fashioning this history, the Committee on Higher Education chaired by Lionel Robbins (CHE). It then examines Whitehall's reactions to these. The paper concludes with a review of a Report which has recently been opened in the National Archives, namely a 1983 study commissioned by Thatcher from the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) of the Cabinet Office. The paper concludes by considering how this disclosure furthers knowledge of the administration of higher education.

The theoretical framework of the paper is provided by higher education historians (Shattock, Tapper, Kogan and Hanney) as well as political scientists (Harris, Marquand). It is submitted that research in primary sources suggests that the muted advocacy of public good values of higher education in Whitehall discussions the 1960s and 1970s contributed more than has hitherto been realised to making higher education all the more vulnerable to the market ideology which took hold in the 1980s. The archival research thus provides a fertile and under-used source of the intellectual history of liberal education principles and in particular the role of the state in facilitating them.

The Robbins Report was influenced by the consensus welfare state and public good assumptions which prevailed in the 1960s. The desirability of state funding and Whiggish optimism that the population would see higher education as a desirable object for their taxes was however assumed rather than argued in any sustained way. The archives reveal that the economic implications of implementing Robbins were an immediate cause of concern to the Treasury. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury was clear that an alternative funding model was required:

...we shall have to examine very carefully the extent to which we can go on carrying virtually the whole cost of higher education on public funds; and we should do nothing to prevent ourselves from making substantial change as soon as opportunity permits. We must also consider the question of student awards, and particularly the proposal of loans. (ED 188/12)

Related to the fiscal difficulties identified in funding the expanded higher education system, was the problem of establishing a more robust system of public accountability, an area where Robbins had proposed little change. The buffer provided by the University Grant Committee (UGC) largely staffed by academics and not responsible to Parliament was no longer appropriate now state funding had increased exponentially. The issue was to come to a head in Wilson's Labour administration in 1966 in a telling episode which reveals the reluctance of Crosland, who headed the Ministry of Education and Science (DES), to engage with the constitutional implications of reform proposals.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) had conducted an examination of university accountability in 1966 and was proposing more parliamentary control on university

finance. What ensued was a lengthy series of discussions involving departmental officials, the UGC and Crosland. Crosland agreed that the PAC should have a greater role in scrutinising UGC accounts but resisted the favoured DES proposal which would have involved parliamentary scrutiny and legislation. Crosland was opposed to public debate at this time and wrote to Wilson setting out his objections to the DES's proposed arrangement:

While it is conceivable that after running the gauntlet of public debate we should end up with no more than a statutory version of the present arrangements plus a Select Committee, the need for legislation would require precise definition of the future relationships between the Audit Commission, the universities, the Government and Parliament. Such a definition would be extremely difficult; and it would involve controversial debate both in Parliament and beyond about the exact status of universities and indeed the whole of our higher education policy. I do not think we want such a debate at this time... (T227/2519)

Crosland's reluctance to engage public support at a time when there was widespread support for public funding contributed to the vulnerability of higher education to the radical cuts in the 1980s. The Thatcher government's objective for all public services was a smaller, stronger state with effective monitoring of institutional performance to ensure compliance. In November 1982 Thatcher commissioned a paper on higher education from the CPRS titled 'The Responsiveness of Higher Education to Market Forces and Employment Needs.' The report was presented to her in July 1983.

The arguments it contains provide a rich source of neo-liberal thinking on the values expressed by Robbins twenty years earlier. Higher education institutions are pictured as resistant to making necessary changes and the Report is very critical of their current ethos, picturing it as rather a site of *Brideshead* nostalgia and elite discipline specialisms:

'Our present system of higher education has become hallowed by generations of tradition, personal loyalty, memories and myths. There is tremendous inertia in it, further buttressed by the mutual reinforcing links which have been forged between it and the specialised school curriculum. Overcoming this inertia so as to be able to implement the changes necessary to make the system more responsive to changing needs will require far more than exhortation'. (CAB184/715)

Our approach', proclaimed the Report 'is through the market'. The Government's role was to '...take steps to improve the flow and quality of information essential for any market to work effectively' and to '... use the financial levers available to it more positively with a view to giving the institutions of higher education greater incentives to respond to the need to change'. Specific proposals included separating the block grant for each institution into research and teaching components and a phased introduction of student loans for fees and maintenance.

The production and content of the CPRS Report demonstrates that, in the space of the two decades since Robbins, the ideology of the market in higher education had taken

hold and could be put coherently and persuasively within Whitehall. Its implementation has taken thirty years to reach fruition.

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