

Academic Tenure

The rather bland response by the DES to Sir Peter Baxendell's comments on academic tenure is not very encouraging. It amounts to saying that

- (a) it is neither practicable nor desirable to legislate on this issue before a General Election,
- (b) universities are not making many tenured appointments in any case, and
- (c) you can rest assured that the Secretary of State intends "to keep up the pressure for the universities to rationalise and become more efficient."

This sounds marvellous, but what precisely does it mean? How will the pressure be kept up? And how will changes in the universities be monitored?

My own reading of the situation is as follows. Until 1980 universities were a classic producer dominated industry, largely funded (85%) by government money, with no competition between institutions over fees, in which tenure was just another example of their being run in the interests of university staff rather than the students.

The cuts of the early 80s were a traumatic experience. Changes had to be made. And indeed have been made. But apart from reduced funding, the structure of universities remains

unchanged. The ethos is still one of universal tenure. Sir Peter Swynnerton-Dyer recently told me that in the area of tenure we were all "walking around in a bog".

Statistics given by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (or indeed by individual Vice Chancellors) on this subject can be very misleading. The current practice is to offer new staff 3-5 year appointments. The firm expectation remains that they will be promoted to full tenure when the opportunity arises. However as these appointments have only been made in the last few years universities have not yet had to make difficult decisions over their future. It is misleading therefore to look at current decisions on tenure as universities have deferred the key decisions themselves.

The Way Forward

(a) Changing current expectations on tenure requires legislation and that is ruled out until after the next election. Making this a Manifesto commitment would win few votes. It is difficult therefore to tackle the problem head-on.

(b) It would be far better to find out how the Secretary of State intends to keep up the pressure to make Universities more efficient.

A key question to put to Kenneth Baker in your next bilateral is:

"In view of (a) the increased PES funding for universities (b) the decision that no universities

shall close, what pressures will be applied to prevent universities falling back into their own ways and how will the implementation of these be monitored?"

RM

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