

Why Scotland Matters:
devolution, neoliberalism and the fight for the future of the
public university in the UK

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This informal paper² aims, first, to draw attention to the Scottish Government's Review of Higher Education Governance, presented to the Cabinet Secretary (minister) for Education and Lifelong Learning, Michael Russell MSP, early in 2012;³ second, to outline some of its main recommendations and reaction to them – and what seem to me the opportunities the Report has created; third, to explain how and why I came to be a member of the reporting panel; and finally – most important – to emphasise the argument that more attention should be paid to the Report by all those fighting in defence of the public university throughout the UK.

I

When I spoke about the Review to UCU Scotland Congress in Edinburgh in March, the newsletter of Glasgow Caledonian UCU reported that: 'The debate on [the] current misgovernance of Scotland's universities set the tone for the rest of the congress.' It underpinned delegates' anger with a system, 'which, some felt, [is] not fit for purpose.' As one speaker proclaimed: 'Good governance is an idea whose time [has] surely come ...' By that, I think, was meant that the reassertion of collegial values as the basis for running universities is a pre-condition for resisting the seemingly relentless advance of the managerial corporatism and privatising initiatives that has been the effect of global neoliberalism on higher education institutions, especially, though far from exclusively, in the UK.

It was greatly to the credit of the chair of the reporting panel, Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, Principal (vice-chancellor) of The Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, that, from the outset, he interpreted his remit from Cabinet Secretary Russell in the broadest possible way, allowing for the production of a report that invites such enthusiastic (but, it is to be hoped, not uncritical) debate.

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² What follows is a partially-documented work in progress towards a more reflective account of the von Prondzynski process. It draws, *inter alia*, on a short article 'Good Governance: "an idea whose time has come"', published in the newsletter of Aberdeen UCU, *Agora*, summer 2012; and my notes for a talk at the seminar 'For a Public University', University of Nottingham, 15 June 2012.

³ The review can be accessed at: <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0038/00386780.pdf>>. It was published on 1 February 2012.

What was needed, insisted von Prondzynski, was not simply a technical exercise making suggestions about matters such as the size of academic boards (hereafter ‘senates’) and governing bodies (usually in Scotland called ‘courts’). This was to be a report that, as far as possible within the panel’s very real constraints in terms of time and resource – and also the desirability, if its recommendations were to gain Governmental assent, of achieving the greatest possible degree of consensus amongst a disparate group – had something to say about the nature of the institutions whose governance was under review.⁴ Four of the five panel members were clear that, however real the recent successes of Scottish universities, notably in international reputation, which are often boasted about both by principals and Scottish Government ministers,⁵ there is ample room for much greater ‘transparency’ and ‘democratic’ accountability, both internally within campus communities and externally with regard to the university’s role in wider society.⁶ It was quickly agreed amongst the panel majority that the reforms to be proposed should seek to correct a widely perceived dual ‘democratic deficit’ in the governance of Scotland’s universities.

My personal objective in contributing to the von Prondzynski Review was to argue for changes to the decision-making process in higher education that would see a culture of *dismissive superiority* (‘we note your view but we decide’!) replaced over time with one of *meaningful consultation*. A modest enough aim – but one, I think, that expresses in a realistic way the crisis of democratic accountability in a university system in which the degree of *management* necessary to facilitate collegial governance has been substantially – and is being increasingly – replaced by a culture of aggressive and largely unaccountable *managerialism*.

⁴ Appointed in the early summer 2011, the panel first met in late August, was scheduled to report by Christmas, and actually did so in January 2012. It had civil service clerical support, but no research or overseas travel budget, although some evidence was taken from European countries and the USA by video- or audio-conferencing.

⁵ ‘Scotland, with a population of only five million, has eight universities in the world’s top 400 and five in the top 200,’ is an oft-repeated mantra, dependent of course on international league-table scores.

⁶ The panel member who disagreed – and whose underlying premise, like that of Universities Scotland in its submission to the panel, seemed to be that there was little in the way the universities are being run currently that requires external scrutiny – was Alan Simpson, the chair of court at Stirling University, appointed to the panel because he was the ‘chair of Scottish chairs’. His letter of dissent to the Cabinet Secretary focused on three important points (the election and modest remuneration of governing body chairs, and trade-union representation on governing bodies). It can be read at <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0038/00386356.pdf>>.

II

The von Prondzynski Review was commissioned by Cabinet Secretary Russell, in the aftermath of the dramatic election victory of his party – the Scottish National Party (SNP) – in the May 2011 Scottish parliament (Holyrood) elections. The panel was asked to take evidence, and make recommendations, about reforms to university governance. It was to consider whether current institutional governance arrangements in the higher education sector in Scotland deliver an appropriate democratic accountability given the level of public funding institutions receive; to identify and examine proposals for change which observe the benefits of an autonomous sector while considering the importance of full transparency; to examine the effectiveness of management and governance, the clarity of strategic purpose and its efficient implementation; and to explore any other key areas thought relevant.

Amongst the recommendations attracting broad union and staff support are: (i) academic freedom and institutional autonomy should be protected as core principles. It has to be recognised however that, while in the past the two things were very closely connected, this is no longer necessarily the case: the way autonomy is managerially exercised today can actually threaten academic freedom; (ii) there should be two nominees of both staff and student unions on governing bodies and proper representation on committees; (iii) there should be greater transparency in appointments and remuneration of senior management; and in how senior management salaries are determined, with top salary increases limited to the level of the annual rise for all staff until reform has taken place. The practicality of determining *all* salaries through the national pay framework should be seriously examined); (iv) the chairs of governing bodies should be elected in the way that rectors, who are student (and in one case, also staff) representatives on courts, already are in five Scottish universities; (v) there should be a broadening of the experience of governing body members and greater transparency in appointment procedures; (vi) there should be a serious move towards gender equality and other changes in the practice of governing bodies to make their operation much more transparent and less intimidating for academic staff, student and lay members; (vii) senates should be more genuinely representative of staff as a *whole* and of students, and should be of a manageable size; (viii) there should be a Scottish supervisory forum representing the university community as a whole at which general policy ideas can be exchanged amongst managements, academic team representatives, all campus unions, the Scottish Funding Council and the Government; (ix) a permanently updated and accessible evidence-base about the way higher education in Scotland works is needed to inform further reform; (x) the process of amending university regulations should be transferred from the Privy Council in London to a committee of Scottish ministers and legal figures and subjected to parliamentary scrutiny at Holyrood; and (xi) there should be a new Scottish higher education act, defining universities as ‘autonomous public bodies’ and spelling out their rights and responsibilities.

These are some of the details important for the campaign for university governance reform Scottish campus unions are now undertaking with the support of UCU and others at UK level. '[I]f implemented in full as the Minister wishes,' UCU Scotland stated, the Report 'will go some way to addressing our concerns about the breakdown of governance and the lack of accountability in decision-making in universities.'⁷ However the Cabinet Secretary statements accepting the Report and its main recommendations have not been free of possible ambiguity, particularly with regard to some of the changes known to be unpopular with many senior managers and governors: consultation is ongoing, with announcements likely later in the year and legislation in 2013. Some recommendations would require amendments to regulations not directly within government's power to impose; although legislation could set minimum standards. Amongst the recommendations that will require the greatest argument are the three that the panel member appointed as the leading chair of a governing body, Alan Simpson, has publicly rejected: that chairs should be elected, primarily by staff and students; that there should be a modest level of remuneration and adequate administrative back-up for chairs to enable them to be drawn from any social background and to act effectively in ensuring governing bodies are well-informed and encouraged to exercise critical scrutiny over senior management; and that trade unions should be directly represented on governing bodies.

These are modest enough reforms. The three Scottish 'ancients' (St. Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen) and the late-sixteenth-century foundation, Edinburgh, already have student-elected 'rectors' (in the case of Edinburgh staff also elect), who have the right to chair their courts and usually do. (Dundee – a 1960s offshoot of St Andrews – also has a rector but without the chairing role.) The idea is simply that all universities should have such a figure (not necessarily called 'rector') to ensure campus confidence in how governing bodies are operating. An election every four years or so would also bring democratic attention to how universities are acting to fulfil their academic, educational and social goals. As to the presence of trade unionists on governing bodies, this would merely be a minor modernising measure reflecting the way in which university staff are increasingly treated as employees rather than members of a collegial community. Even if that trend can be slowed or halted, developments in employment law, amongst other things, mean that it is unlikely to be entirely reversed. Most courts already have trade union members, and, although they are usually not on court as union nominees, the argument that a trade unionist is incapable of distinguishing between his or her role as a responsible court member, subject to rules of confidentiality when it is genuinely necessary for commercial, legal or data-protection reasons – whereas other categories of court member are – is scarcely tenable. But the exaggeratedly hostile reaction to these minor reforms by some managements and governors is significant as it indicates a different perspective from that of most university staff on the *trajectory* of change. For the latter, it should be towards collegial accountability and meaningful consultation; for the former, towards increasing management control and the ongoing march of business models?

⁷ See < <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5894> > for UCU Scotland comment on the von Prondzynski Report.

Criticism of the proposal to elect chairs has also come from an opposite direction. It is held by some to be far too limited, a mere sop to still demands for more radical, democratic reform. Why not elect principals? All court members?⁸ As to the former, this was considered by the panel and put on one side, *pending further research*. It was felt that we neither had the time nor the resource to reach an evidence-based recommendation that would command sufficient consensus. It was also argued on the panel that the example of Trinity College Dublin suggests that the modern history of Provost elections there shows a bias towards internal candidates which *may* not always be a good thing; and that to elect principals without also electing courts would actually enhance the authority of senior managements over governors. But further reform to develop the practice of electing senior university figures much more widely is certainly not ruled out by the von Prondzynski Report – and, in my own view, this should be a matter of ongoing democratic debate, to which the Scottish Government should pay attention.

A striking aspect of negative responses to the Report of which I am aware – and this leads into my main emphasis in this paper which is on its broader and longer-term implications rather than the immediate union campaign for specific reforms – is that they largely ignore its historically-informed introduction. This is of some significance if the von Prondzynski process in Scotland is to help inform a more serious public debate about the future of universities in the UK as a whole than the changes driven through by the current Westminster Coalition allow.⁹

The point about the Report's brief introductory section is that it draws attention to aspects of Scottish history and tradition, which provide the rest of the Report with an underlying rationale. This is in contrast to the general assumption in recent UK documents on university policy that the only context within which higher education systems should be discussed is the demands of the system of global capital and of international competition as measured by world ranking tables and the like. Opponents of the general drift of the von Prondzynski Report show little sign of wanting to engage with alternative visions. They prefer to pick and choose particular proposals for decontextualised criticism. For them, the idea that there is a 'Scottish university system' with its own history and important traditions, as opposed to a group of discrete institutions open for operation on business lines as competitive corporations, is something either to be ignored or dismissed as of no practical relevance. And this approach is very much in line with the de-historicised nihilism on which neoliberal ideology depends.

⁸ The latter was recommended by a former employee of Universities Scotland, now of the left-leaning think-tank, the Jimmy Reid Institute, in a striking opinion piece, Robin McAlpine, 'Our universities cannot be run like banks', *The Scotsman*, 12 July 2012; my letter in response appeared on 14 July.

⁹ Key texts in this developing discourse will be familiar to most readers of this paper. They include various articles by Stefan Collini, Howard Hotson and others in the *London Review of Books* (see *LRB* website, www.lrb.co.uk) and, of course *The Alternative White Paper* on English Higher Education (2011): see <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/interactive/2011/sep/27/higher-education-alternative-white-paper>>.

Scottish education is one of the social institutions that has been, since the Treaty of Union between England and Scotland in 1707, a key element in preserving a sense of separate identity which has survived decades of the integrative pressures of modernisation within the UK. The Union was accomplished by treaty not conquest and Scots law, the Scottish church and the then-linked educational system and traditions of local government remained independent. At the end of the nineteenth century the development of state education was central to the UK government's need to set up a separate Scottish department of state with a Secretary of State for Scotland, which, with the evolution of the Welfare State, became a major multi-functional administration doing most of its executive work in Edinburgh. This meant that political devolution, when it came in 1999, was a relatively simple matter of transferring democratic policy direction and scrutiny of social administration already being carried out in Scotland from Westminster to an elected parliament at Holyrood.¹⁰

The Scottish universities' distinctiveness *as a system*, moreover, is not simply a matter of administration. The development of Scottish nationalism in the twentieth century cannot be gone into here, except to say that an important, even central, element in its intellectual rationale, as opposed to its pragmatic justification and emotional appeal, is the idea – advanced by a Tory politician in the 1930s and developed by the philosopher-historian G. E. Davie in the 1950s, 1960s and beyond – that the national outlook is characterised by the myth (but it is an operative myth) of 'democratic intellectualism'. Davie, in his *The Democratic Intellect*,¹¹ made this the core of a study of nineteenth-century university reform that was flawed as empirical history but powerful as intellectual critique. The Scottish education tradition, he in effect argued, centres on democratic access and providing specialist scientific and professional training that is founded in basic philosophical understanding. Actually the 'lad o' pairts', the poor boy advancing through the system to university and the professions, though a real phenomenon, has been a much-exaggerated one. But the idea that a university system should promote social mobility and the production of professionals with a sense both of the interconnectedness of different areas of specialist knowledge and the social purpose of acquiring higher education (and not simply employment-oriented training) remains powerful. All this helps to explain why the Scottish *National Party's* recent electoral success has depended on the support of many non- or even anti-nationalists who see its values as more effectively *social-democratic* than those of New Labour. And, moreover, why, in the 2011 Scottish election campaign some surveys suggested that the SNP's pledge to retain a no-fees policy in higher education was ranked the third most important issue by voters.

The point here is not to examine the realities behind the 'democratic intellect' but to stress the potential significance of the existence of such a 'myth' for advancing a serious campus-wide and

¹⁰ Responsibility for the administration of Scottish higher education was devolved at the time of the 1992 reforms, several years before political devolution in 1999.

¹¹ G. E. Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her universities in the nineteenth century* (Edinburgh, The University Press, 1961), and *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh, Polygon, 1986).

public resistance to neoliberalism. In a speech at a conference organised by the leading Scottish education unions on 'The Future of Scottish Higher Education' in early 2011, Stefan Collini put it like this:

South of the border the intellectual and educational case for the distinctive value of universities is poorly articulated, and as a result it is not a political force with which the government has to reckon. Instead, we get third-hand clichés about promoting economic competitiveness and training an adaptable workforce. Of course, we get a lot of that in Scotland as well, and it is obviously easy to fall into a cheap romanticisation of the 'lad o'pairs' tradition and all that. Nonetheless, [Scotland's] advantage lies not just in having such a tradition to appeal to, but in the fact that it is a tradition with built-in democratic purchase and appeal. It is very cheering – and, for an Englishman these days, all too rare – to come across a sentence in an official document that declares as roundly as the Green Paper does when discussing where the main burden of funding higher education should lie: 'The Scottish government believes that the prime responsibility should lie with the state'. I wish my Scottish colleagues every success in translating that admirable sentiment into a workable system that shows up the narrow-minded philistinism of the 'English solution' for what it is.¹²

But we should not wait to see if a 'workable system' does in fact emerge in Scotland. *The incorporation of the reform discourse in Scotland into the campaign for the public university throughout the UK needs to take place now.*

From this point of view, a helpful recent development is the publication of the HEPI report on devolution and change in UK higher education. Written by Tony Bruce, it usefully documents the increasingly divergent trajectories in university policy in the four component parts of the UK.¹³ Scotland receives particular attention with the strong implication that the decision not to place the responsibility of paying tuition fees on students represents a sacrifice of 'freedom' and the choice is between 'autonomy', dependent on making students pay and state control. This was certainly how *THE Higher* reported the matter. But this is not the real choice as I argued in a letter to the paper.¹⁴ In a subsequent article, moreover, John Holmwood spelt out why interrogating *how* autonomy is

¹² Stefan Collini, 'The English Problem and "the Scottish Solution"', paper delivered at a conference on 'The Future of Scottish Higher Education' organised by UCU Scotland and the University Lecturers Association of the Educational Institute of Scotland, Scottish Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh, 22 February 2011.

¹³ Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), *Universities and constitutional change in the UK: the impact of devolution on the higher education sector* (2012) at <<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/455-2053/Universities-and-constitutional-change-in-the-UK--the-impact-of-devolution-on-the-higher-education-sector.html>>. The report, by Tony Bruce, draws attention for the first time in the official documentation to the increasing diversity of policy and experience in the component nations of the UK, with particular emphasis on the England-Scotland contrast.

¹⁴ 'Time was when the concepts "university autonomy" and "academic freedom" were interchangeable: the former was necessary to protect the latter. What [the] von Prondzynski Report recognises – as do the key UNESCO statements on these matters – is that that is no longer self-evidently or unambiguously true... [For] those who sustain what is excellent about UK higher education – lecturers, researchers and support staff ... academic freedom (underpinning *critical* autonomy) is the core value of a university and they feel increasingly excluded from how the institutional autonomy that once protected it is now exercised.' *THE Higher*, 26 April 2012.

exercised is necessary if the principle is to be – as it should be – vigorously defended.¹⁵ The important choice is not between ‘freedom’ dependent on market economics and state control. It is rather between academic freedom protected by a democratic state and commercialism, which threatens academic freedom; and the terms of public debate need to be reframed along these lines.

III

Behind the Scottish Government’s decision to establish the von Prondzynski panel lay a number of factors. These included political and public disquiet about disputes involving principals relations with their governing bodies, or with academic staff and students in a number of Scottish universities, notably but far from exclusively Glasgow and Abertay; questions being asked by more than one government minister about the performance and remuneration of some HE senior managers, with the Cabinet Secretary raising the question of whether principals should be paid so much more than democratically elected and responsible cabinet ministers; Universities Scotland’s demonstration of its members’ remoteness from Scottish opinion when it lobbied – very overtly but unsuccessfully – for student tuition payments; and a sustained campaign by UCU Scotland to put education unions in the forefront of public debate about the future of Scotland’s universities.¹⁶

It is impossible to say how influential this last factor was but the union clearly did have an impact. In Scotland, ever since the devolution of higher education policy in the early 1990s, UCU Scotland, while continuing to prioritise its strictly trade-union functions, had sought a public profile in policy discussion. This process reached a new level with the 2007 Holyrood elections that resulted in a minority SNP government. Rather than give in to the general labour-movement bewilderment at having lost office in ‘social-democratic’ Scotland to the Nationalists, UCU sought to engage the new government in discourse about what ‘the democratic intellect’ might mean in practical terms today. Excluded from the so-called ‘Task Force’ – comprising only principals, the Scottish Funding Council and the Government – set by the then education minister, Fiona Hyslop, to report on the future of the universities in the light of the SNP decision to abolish graduate payments, the Westminster move to increasing fees and the SNP Government’s first (unfavourable) funding settlement – the union embarked on its own policy process. In addition to some effective lobbying, this included three important meetings: two Edinburgh conferences – ‘Intellect and Democracy’ in 2008 and ‘The Future

¹⁵ John Holmwood, ‘With managers in charge, autonomy isn’t what it used to be,’ *THE Higher*, 17 May 2012.

¹⁶ For an account of the latter conference and a link to video coverage, see the UCU Scotland website at <<http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5240>>, where there is also a link to the published version of the first conference submitted to the Cabinet Secretary in 2010 and to some of the papers delivered at the second.

of Scottish Higher Education' in 2011 – and an open meeting with The Cabinet Secretary, now Michael Russell, in late 2010, at which a copy of the edited transcript of the 'Intellect and Democracy' conference was presented.

This work bore fruit after the SNP overthrew all expectations in the May 2011 election and, benefitting from disillusion with Labour both at UK and Scottish level and fear of the coming to office of the neoliberal coalition in London, won an absolute majority – despite the proportional electoral system devised in the 1990s with the intention of ensuring that no single party (least of all the Nationalists) could govern alone in what was to be a single-chamber parliament. Cabinet Secretary Russell had now to deal, without the constraints of enforced compromise, with his party's potentially contradictory pledges not to charge students for tuition and to ensure that Scottish universities were not at a competitive disadvantage financially with institutions in the rest of the UK (the RUK as it is now known by policy-makers north of the border); and to do so when he was clearly at odds with at least some leading principals. He has begun with three key decisions: to take money from other areas of public spending, notably further education (which he was also subjecting to a process of structural reform) to give the universities a remarkably generous financial settlement; to allow individual institutions to charge RUK students and retain maximum fees (up to £9,000 a year – making a four-year degree at the top-charging Edinburgh and St. Andrews for example, at £36,000, the most expensive in the UK for non-Scottish or EU students)¹⁷; and, in the early weeks of the new government, to set up the von Prondzynski review panel.

Apparently learning from the unpopularity of his predecessor's limited Task Force, and, I think, influenced by the UCU campaign, the Cabinet Secretary made the panel surprisingly representative, including, as well as to management/governing bodies figures (von Prondzynski himself and Simpson), a Rector (the distinguished journalist whose opposition to student fees had been very public. Iain Macwhirter), the leader of the Scottish NUS (Robin Parker) and a trade unionist. That I filled the latter spot came about as I proved, after some negotiations, acceptable to the other campus unions, not least because I had served a year (2009-10) on the General Council of the Scottish TUC.

¹⁷ This comes about as a result of the increasingly resented anomaly that EU students have to be treated on the same terms as their Scottish-domiciled colleagues; but that, because the relationship between Scotland and the RUK, as far as EU regulations are concerned, is an internal one *within* a single member state, it is not subject to EU rules. Should Scotland become an independent EU member, RUK fees, and the income 'elite' universities will get from them will disappear.

I was not initially an enthusiastic STUC nominee, fearing that the exercise would produce disappointing results and create the dilemma as to whether or not to submit a minority report, with or without the support of my rectorial and student colleagues (this would have produced the anomaly of a majority submitting a minority report!). But Professor von Prondzynski – despite an initial tension between us owing to a difficult union-recognition dispute he inherited on his recent arrival from Dublin to take up the principalship at RGU – proved himself genuinely interested in debate, lacking in the complacency about governance exemplified by the Universities Scotland submission to the panel, and interested both in understanding the Scottish system better and in subjecting it, as far as possible, to international comparison, drawing particularly on his Irish experience. While the resultant report is not – nor could possibly have been in the timescale and in the light of the limited remit – by any means all I would have wanted, far less the *Scottish Robbins report for the twenty-first century*, for which UCU Scotland had called, it proposes a shift of trajectory in the right direction.¹⁸ Seeing it potentially as the beginning of a process, rather than simply as end in itself, I had no difficulty in deciding that submitting minority views would have been pedantic and ineffectual. It was to be the governing-body chair who found himself isolated in his partial (but very significant) dissent.

IV

The von Prondzynski Report, then, represents a step forward for those who want to see the education unions move beyond their (increasingly desperate) defensive role to exercise influence in the discourse of higher-education policy-making. It makes immediate proposals which, if fully implemented, could at least begin to shift a trajectory that has recently proceeded in an apparently inexorable neoliberal and managerial direction. More than that, it puts into the public domain in the UK some officially sanctioned proposals that rest on the need for universities to remain public institutions, open on grounds of talent and ability not privilege and private wealth. It defends academic freedom, but, in the manner of the UNESCO statements the Report references, makes a distinction between the core principle of responsibly-exercised academic freedom and the important principle of institutional autonomy, which can only be justified if it is used to defend academic freedom and contribute to the democracy of the wider society. It seeks, at a minimum to restore the

¹⁸ Something like the Robbins Report is, in practice, difficult to imagine as it would depend on restoring the relative social consensus that existed in Establishment circles in the 1950s and early 1960s but has now disappeared. Yet the demand was not irrational as the appeal of the SNP depends in good measure at least in the idea that Scottish social values remain predicated on a high degree of consensus about the need to preserve a welfare state. It remains to be seen how long this idea would survive ‘independence’ within a neoliberal world.

balance between the necessary management of complex institutions and collegial values: it is for good management but against corporate-style *managerialism*. It is in favour of replacing an encroaching culture of 'dismissive superiority' with one of 'meaningful consultation'. It proposes that future higher education policy should be informed by objective, publicly-accessible research. Above all, the Report is there to be publicly debated – in the UK, not only in Scotland – and critiqued, to use shorthand, from the progressive left as well (inevitably) as from the Establishment right.

Two aspects of the context of this much-to-be-desired public debate should be alluded to in conclusion. First, the aforementioned HEPI Report, by Tony Bruce, on the impact of devolution on higher education is important in at least bringing attention to the divergent trends in the component parts of the UK. In Scotland it can be argued that it was the need for sensitive state oversight of its distinctive education system – with universities as arms-length, or autonomous, institutions, at its pinnacle – that was amongst the *social* issues that drove the movement towards political devolution, not the other way round. Debate about its universities has played a part in preserving a sense of Scottish identity within the UK, and higher education was devolved several years before the late-1990s political settlement. 'Free' (that is free of student tuition fees) universities, like the Health Service, are as much an expression of social solidarity, as a pragmatic policy to be discussed in terms of 'affordability'. It was recognition of this that led the SNP to campaign on a no-fees platform in 2011 and – more striking still – led the other parties (with the exception of the relatively insignificant Tories) to follow suit.

And this leads to the final contextual point. Barring a complete global economic meltdown, there will be a referendum on Scottish independence probably in the autumn of 2014. Although this will be a vote for Scots to cast, its implications are UK-wide. The debate needs to be both widened and deepened so that it can become the occasion for a discussion about the future of Britain, not as a *nation* but as a *social formation*. Is Scotland really to become – as SNP leader and First Minister Alec Salmond sometimes suggests – a model society within the British Isles demonstrating to the 'RUK' the viability of humane social institutions? To sustain this as even a debatable proposition, the Nationalists will have to spell out *policies* not just aspirations. They have begun to do this on matters such as retaining the monarch as head of state, sterling as the currency and membership of NATO – creating increasing confusion as to what actually *would* be so different from simply enhancing the devolutionary process over time. But political point scoring is not the main issue. Rather we need to know – and not just to hear from on high but to have input into – a vision of social Scotland post-independence, and that includes, amongst much else, how its universities would be run, for whose

benefit and to what purpose. Here is an opportunity for those with the future of the public university – and not in Scotland alone – to participate. The future governance of Scottish universities is a matter of concern not only for the Scots but for all UK citizens. Academics and university trade unionists should lead the debate.