

# Living History



**Michael Burleigh**

**'A future Conservative government should be concerned about the hegemony of the Left in higher education'**

Misery seems to be prevalent in British universities. Take, for instance, the lengthy *cris de coeur* published by the Cambridge English Professor, Stefan Collini, in the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Before Christmas, Collini was banging on about the Research Excellence Framework, which the Higher Education Funding Council for England and its Celtic analogues plan to substitute for the earlier and equally contentious Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). His main gripe is that "impact indicators", used to gauge the wider economic or social "impact" of research in engineering, medicine or public policy, are going to be foisted on the Humanities. He fears that this will invite someone studying a second-rank Victorian poet to find that his subject had a colourful sex life, if only to secure measurable "impact" through a couple of minutes on BBC Radio 4.

Of course, his is an insider's view of academia, where such parochial concerns are bound to loom large. But British universities have been in the news lately for other reasons, notably whether they are committed to free speech as they habitually claim. The University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit attracted the hostile glare of the media when emails came to light, which, according to the *Daily Telegraph*, indicated that evidence was being suppressed.

In a minor key, in his response to a mean-minded review of the historian Andrew Roberts's latest book, Simon Heffer wondered whether the reviewer, a Cambridge professor and rival author, was committed to free speech, since he apparently objects to Conservatives writing history.

I have also heard of attempts to block university appointments on the grounds that "X" or "Y" is a neocon or rumoured to be Islamophobic. Those who engage in such attempts should beware, since their emails too may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Some subjects, notably climate change or human rights law, have moved to the level of pseudo-religious dogma, making it impossible for critical voices to be heard within academia. One shudders to think what may go on in some of our proliferating institutes of Islamic Studies.

This touches on a much deeper problem than pervasive demoralisation or the monitoring regime to which research and teaching have been subjected. Wherever I go, both senior politicians and other historians find

it mysterious why, for example, virtually every British academic historian of France, Germany or Spain is a Leftist, in contrast to the more balanced arrangements prevailing in those countries. The eminence reached by Karl-Dietrich Bracher, Alain Besançon, the late François Furet, Klaus Hildebrand or Horst Möller, is unimaginable in a country that regards Eric Hobsbawm as the apogee of academic excellence. Yes, there have been some exceptions, such as the late historian-peers Robert Blake and Hugh Trevor-Roper, or the very much alive Sir Michael Howard, but such figures are no longer emerging.

A future Conservative government should be concerned about the near-total hegemony that the Left has achieved in higher education, for the problem is by no means confined to the universities, old or new.

The path of least resistance would be to enable other types of institution where serious thought is conducted to organise courses which could be awarded formal credits. I experienced such a summer course, organised by the Fundación para el Análisis y los Estudios Sociales think-tank in Madrid, where high-level seminars on public policy counted towards the students' degree work. It would be easy to imagine similar arrangements at, for example, Policy Exchange.

A harder approach would be to introduce mechanisms to prevent the informal bias that seems to influence academic appointments. The RAE introduced limited representation of non-academics to ensure that society's interests were reflected in the distribution of taxpayer monies, although that has not attenuated "research" on body-art (tattooing to you and me) or medieval hermanophobia in the 13th century. We may have reached a point where outside non-academic assessors, from such fields as business or journalism, need randomly to be introduced to monitor the fairness of all tenured academic appointments, with powers to scrutinise internal email traffic and such things as references, where pitches are routinely queered.

In an important lecture, the philosopher Onora (now Baroness) O'Neill emphasised the need to restore trust in the learned professions and society in general. But until we can be sure that trust will not be an excuse to perpetuate academia's community of the politically like-minded, politicians need to deal with some of its grubbier present-day realities.