

Thinking the unthinkable

The privatisation of the railways was an astonishing leap for Margaret Thatcher's government. Her adoption of the so-called free market ideology propounded by the Chicago school of economists had already led to the privatisation of British public utilities; but many of us thought at the time that surely no-one would be foolish enough to impose this religion upon our railways. We were wrong: she was; and we have had to go on living with the consequences.

Memories of this are prompting me to wonder where we might be heading with our universities. Clearly the Conservative members of our government are convinced that degrees from some universities are better than degrees from others. These tend to be the universities that they attended which have for years been funded by government at a far higher level than other universities: hardly an endorsement of their ability to provide value for money. Clearly government also sees that one way of providing degrees for those not attending well-resourced universities is to make them do at least part of their degree at a local college of further education over two years rather than the normal three (not an entirely new idea). This fits in with the current Conservative belief in no-frills public service. If you cannot afford it and wish to avoid a large student debt then stay at home and go to your local F.E. college for a two year intensive programme validated by a university that is short of cash and unable to set high fees. If, however, you can afford it then you can attend a more prestigious and higher charging university for three years.

The term 'two-tier' has already been used to describe this. The basic notion is that if a university has prestige and resource people will be willing to pay more to attend it; but if a university does not have the necessary combination of prestige and resource it can only maintain a workable income by piling students high and selling courses cheap. F.E. may like this idea because they will get to do more H.E. work; but if students are going to have to work intensively and cram three years' work into two then so must the staff and F.E. teachers are already working incredibly hard.

Let us take this further. The U.S.A. has lots of private universities. We do not. Our governments borrow a lot of ideas from the U.S.A. Central and local government used to pay the fees of all university students and, for those whose parents could not afford to help, grants were available upon which it was possible to live for the duration of the degree programme. The education policies of our present government have, however, so far been overwhelmingly dominated by neo-conservative Chicago style thinking. Schools are fast heading away from local government accountability. The system is being shaped by central government to construct a contrived free market in which companies can, just like train companies, obtain contracts to provide profit making schools. So why not create something similar for higher education?

My experience of how recent governments have gone about their business is that they propose something silly and socially destructive; after much ridicule and rational argument rebutting the proposal they push their policy even harder; we then begin to accommodate our thinking to theirs and to speak in a new policy dialect; hard working professionals whose lives have been subject to overwhelming pressure to conform then start turning poor policy into something of reasonable quality; the flaws and faultlines in the policy emerge but are ignored; and then, guess what, a new secretary of state or minister or government arrives to write-off the old policy and introduce yet another silly idea and the cycle begins again. The problem is that some silly ideas make such big changes that it is extremely difficult to reverse them quickly and without paying a price.

As an external examiner at many universities I am able to say that if a student had taken part in a similar programme at any other university they would, in my judgment, have obtained a similar result. I can say this not only on the basis of my experience but also because much work has taken place to ensure that the sector works to a common understanding of standards. This does not make universities uniform or sterile but it does mean that they make sense of the learning of students in a way that is sufficiently similar for us to know that we can trust a result. Unfortunately, talk of such things as 'double firsts' creates the impression that at certain universities it is possible for really clever people to obtain a degree worth twice as much as one obtained at less prestigious universities. This is nonsense but the use of such quaint and peculiar terminology suits those that would build brand value.

I fear that the process of privatising or at least partially privatising, and thereby increasingly socially differentiating, universities is already gathering pace slowly and when, one day, we wake up to what we are about to lose it will be too late to reverse it. A nation that has accustomed itself to so much foolish policy-making will accept this latest attack upon our chances of creating a fair society. Academics in H.E. will follow the example of headteachers and convince themselves that by rolling up their sleeves and getting stuck in on behalf of their brightly re-branded universities they can experience the entrepreneurial thrill of the market place; believe me, it can be attractive. In any case we may be told that the economic situation means that there is no alternative (a phrase much used by Margaret Thatcher and often abbreviated to T.I.N.A.): that competing in the market place is the only course open to us.

But do we want this? Is it too late to build a case for a fair and fulfilling H.E. sector that does not encourage some to seek brand value at the expense of others? Is there no other way? What values are being promoted if we take this route?

For what do universities stand? Are they for society or for themselves?