Dear Sir/Madam,

THE HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE BILL

As a graduate of the University of St. Andrews, albeit a long time ago in 1958, I recall with pleasure learning of the tradition of intellectual freedom which was a characteristic of the university’s history and which was still treasured by the student body during my time as an undergraduate.

Nothing exemplified this proud tradition better than the pier walk after chapel every Sunday, when the student body continued the centuries-old tradition of accompanying the visiting preacher to his boat to ensure that he ... and in the past it was, I think, always ‘he’ ... was not intercepted and detained by the authorities for some alleged heresy spoken from the pulpit. Just as the church was a place where intellectual freedom could not be constrained by the secular authorities, so the university was a self-governing institution where freedom of thought and freedom to express that thought was cherished.

I view with alarm some of the proposals contained within the proposed Higher Education Governance Bill which, it seems to me, threaten the very foundations of this freedom by making the university vulnerable to overt political influence ... to put it kindly ... or political interference, to be more blunt. Just as we see local authorities’ priorities ‘influenced’ ... to be generous ... by the fiscal priorities of the politicians forming the ruling elite in central government, so I fear that universities will be open to similar ‘influence.’ (As an instance of my fear, who can argue that the BBC’s traditional impartiality in political matters is not under threat at this very time by politicians determined to bring the broadcaster to heel?)

Many of the proposals contained within the proposed Higher Education Governance Bill are, quite simply, unnecessary. You will be familiar with the views expressed by the Royal Society of Edinburgh ... that the proposals are inappropriate, unnecessary and potentially counter to good governance; that they outline a level of governmental intervention that is entirely inappropriate for an autonomous sector; and that they only be justified by clear evidence of serious, systematic deficiencies in the governance of the sector.

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