

Universities shouldn't be forced to spy on students

The counter terrorism bill is following a sinister path

Academics are not by nature censors, and we can agree that this is just as well. The tools of their trade are exposure and analysis, discourse in clean air. In lecture halls and laboratories debate is good and silence is not encouraged. When Europe's first university was founded, in Bologna in the mid-11th century, its charter embraced the revolutionary principle that scholars (and so ideas) should be free to pass without hindrance: they should not be oppressed by borders. This notion was both real and a metaphor and its message has chimed down the ages, including here in Britain where our universities quickly became one of the glories of our civilisation. That they remain so today does not necessarily mean, of course, that they always shall.

The Counter Terrorism and Security Bill, the latest in a regrettably long line of recent security legislation, will be debated in the House of Lords tomorrow (Wednesday). Its provisions place for the first time a duty upon universities to play a role in the detection and reporting of extremist activity on campus. Of course no one would quibble with the idea that terrorist activity, or even propagandising for terror, should be picked up and acted upon by university authorities. Indeed these obligations are already present under the existing criminal law.

Equally, it is obvious that even within the minor constraints necessary to keep us safe, we live in a free society. Our security and intelligence agencies are broadly benign in character, and they are led by people who have some understanding of the tensions that exist between rights and security: we may argue between ourselves over precisely how those tensions should be resolved, but comparisons between, say, GCHQ and the Stasi are absurd.

Institutions of higher learning must also acknowledge that the risk that radicalisation presents to some young people, and therefore to the rest of us, is very real and has to be managed. We have passed into a world where some young men have graduated not in history or maths, but from terror porn on the internet to the real thing in Syria and Iraq. This matters a great deal when they decide, if they survive, to come home.

Yet the idea that our universities should play a formal role in an apparatus of surveillance, detection and control is a new one and the nuances matter, because they envisage a relationship, up till now undeveloped, between institutions of higher learning and the security and law enforcement agencies of the state. It seems obvious that we should tread this unforgiving ground with very great care.

But, in ways that are depressingly familiar, the Home Office grabs at the germ of a plan, shuts its eyes tight and stumbles on blindly. For proposed

guidance accompanying the bill requires a university to do much more than to report a terrorist in the nest if it can possibly find one. It also requires our academics to ban and report to the police what the guidance describes as “non violent extremism”. In future, apparently, it will be forbidden for anyone at a university to argue that democracy is wrong in principle (goodbye Plato), or to give a talk that fails “to respect individual liberty” or to offer “mutual respect and tolerance (to) different faiths and beliefs” (adieu to whole swathes of our Western intellectual history).

So it seems that we shall be bequeathed professors of morals in a more sinister sense than we are presently used to. And we shall have new-style professors of textual analysis too. Fourteen days’ advance notice of any “events” will have to be given and content, notes and presentations handed in to the university authorities for prior scrutiny and approval. Perhaps our academics shall no longer represent the living channel through which ideas flow freely, but rather the dam built to break them. Ministers would have lecturers spending solitary hours grimly policing other people’s poorly argued speaking notes.

None of this, of course, has anything to do with what a university is there for and it won’t make any of us one jot safer, or rescue a single young person from a sought-after death in the desert. Rather worse, it seems to speak of a society that, far from feeling secure in its values, determined to defend them with confidence and pride in the face of faux-medieval darkness, offers up a feeble gasp of defeat, the surrender of the essence of academic freedom - the belief that the state should lay off the intellect unless thoughts amount to real crime. It is not encouraging that the Home Office fails to grasp that this is an equation we should make with vanishing rareness, proposing instead an unworkable intolerance.

It is in our universities that Britain’s future is engineered. These institutions are oases of thought, feeding the brains that comprise our most valuable capital. In truth, and despite all the mistakes that necessarily accompany nationhood, our small outward-looking islands and our universal language boast an embarrassment of intellectual and moral riches. These represent both our greatest defence and our brightest distinction, and as shiny as anything within this arc of treasure is our attachment to academic freedom. We plough up the delicate borders of this beauty at our peril.

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