

Academic suicide in South Africa?

The outspoken universities of South Africa are under new threat from the government that supports them. Academics elsewhere must rally round, in their own interests if not South Africa's.

THE government of South Africa has moved with its customary guile against the universities it supports. Earlier in the year, the government decreed that universities must impose sanctions on students and teachers who engage in public demonstrations against the government, and against its policy of apartheid in particular, and must report to the government the disciplinary measures they have taken so that ministers can decide whether their financial support should be reduced. The edict has been well calculated to madden the liberal English-speaking universities and the radical University of the Western Cape, at all of which the new academic year has been marked by demonstrations of the kind the government wishes to ban, together with the now familiar display of police in riot gear firing tear-gas shells. The next few weeks should show how the five universities concerned will be punished. Most probably, the first penalties will be moderate. But whatever they are, the South African university system will be further damaged. In the long run, the government of South Africa itself will be counted among the losers.

But, for the immediate future, the government will believe it has won a tactical success, in which it will be correct. The new edict has already forced South African universities into two camps. Although the past few years have seen even the Afrikaans universities veer towards opposition of apartheid, the government could well have calculated in advance that they would reluctantly knuckle down to the new edicts. By doing so, they have isolated the more outspoken universities and made them more vulnerable to further threats to their independence. But most of those living in South Africa will see the developing situation in a different light. Surely, a majority of voters will say, the government is asking only that public institutions living on public funds should behave in a seemly fashion, not making a show of biting the hand that feeds them? The government will be able to count on the support of the growing body of opinion in South Africa hostile to the outspoken universities. With its long record of double-speak, the government will soon be pretending that it has erred in not moving against the outspoken universities much sooner.

Damage

Even the immediate damage will be serious. However modest may be the first round of financial penalties, their consequences will be serious. The three largest English-speaking universities (Cape Town, Natal and Witwatersrand) are already in a precarious financial condition because of their commitment to the relatively expensive process of educating non-white students. With their eyes open, they have been skimping on resources for more conventional activities.

The result is that even marginal reductions of the government subsidy will further undermine the well-being of these universities. Is it too much to ask that universities and academics elsewhere, and especially the private foundations in the West (which have already done much to launch non-white higher education), should put their hands in their pockets, however empty, to help sister institutions threatened as are the five front-line universities of South Africa?

Recent correspondence in *Nature* has shown that the academic community elsewhere is divided in its opinion of the role of the outspoken universities of South Africa, but there is sense in which the new situation in South Africa, by threatening the independence of a small group of universities, provides a precedent that threatens all. The sad case of the University of Malta, virtually extinguished a decade ago by a hostile government, should be a warning of the fragility of the university as an institution.

Indeed, there is an uncanny similarity between what is happening in South Africa and the British government's plan to require that British universities should guarantee "free speech" to all visitors to university campuses, and that they should call in the local police if free speech seems threatened.

Opponents

Again, the government's requirement seems only reasonable: why should students be allowed to behave badly at meetings addressed by their political or intellectual opponents? As in South Africa, the government seems merely to be asking that universities should behave in a seemly fashion, which is fair enough. But governments seem congenitally slow to understand the difference between a demand that universities should conduct themselves reasonably and a decision to legislate for reasonable conduct. Robbing a university of its responsibility for the conduct of its own affairs is a means by which its social value is impaired.

That is how South Africa as a whole will in the end suffer if the present threat against outspoken universities is carried out. The turbulence of the outspoken universities is a fair measure of the degree to which the intellectual community in South Africa is opposed to the government's policy on apartheid. But the whole of the university system in South Africa is the government's best hope that some successor will be able to navigate a course to a more just and stable society. The University of Natal has already played an important part in suggesting how novel constitutional forms might help solve the country's glaring problems; even the present frightened government seems to find that development interesting. Academics at the Afrikaans University of Stellenbosch (but not the institution as such) have played an important part in persuading Afrikaans opinion that the encouragement of change is an urgent need.

As the opportunities for peaceful change in South Africa become more remote, politicians there will come to value the work being done by the host of research institutes now working on the definition of what is called the post-apartheid society, and will come to recognize how great a contribution could be made by the present graduates of its sometimes-uppish universities. Even now, there is a clamant need, which the government accepts, to strengthen the infrastructure of non-white education. To punish the universities whose members do not hide their opposition to the government's stand on apartheid will attenuate their capacity to contribute to the solution of commonly recognized problems. That is not the course of rationality, but of folly. Academics elsewhere should say so, and do what they can to help. □