

9 THE ACTIONS OF A SENATE WORKING PARTY ON A MATTER OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In November 1990 a meeting of the Board of Studies of the School of Education considered a letter I received from the Secretary and Registrar in June 1987 in which it was claimed that my activities and writings were a challenge to the present and proper organisation of the University and not consistent with the duties that the University wished me to pursue in terms of teaching or research. The Board of Studies passed a motion that it was alarmed at evidence of a prima facie case of a breach of academic freedom with respect to the teaching and research activities of a member of staff. At the meeting of Senate of 5 December 1990 it was noted that the Board of Studies had passed this motion and Senate agreed that the Vice-Chancellor should establish a small independent Working Party to consider further the matter claiming a prima facie case of breach of academic freedom. The Working Party could seek as necessary fuller and further information than was available to the Board and to take evidence from any source thought appropriate to satisfy the Working Party's enquiry.

I was asked by the Working Party of Mr. Brian Meakin and Professors Collins and Burrows to provide a list of constraints on my academic freedom in my work within the University. I sent a reply listing seven constraints and saying,

I am providing this list on the assumptions that,

A) "...academic staff have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at their institutions." (Education Reform Act 1988)

B) "Academic Freedom requires that individual members of universities and polytechnics are able to voice their criticisms and not be subjected to loyalty tests." (Council for Academic Freedom and Democracy 1991)

The overall conclusion of the Report of the Working Party on a Matter of Academic Freedom of May 1991 included the statement that,

The Working party did not find that, in any of Mr. Whitehead's seven instances, his academic freedom had actually been breached. This was, however, because of Mr. Whitehead's persistence in the face of pressure; a less determined individual might well have been discouraged and therefore constrained. Mr. Whitehead confirmed to the Working Party that, with the exceptions of the local-authority data, and the right to question formally his examiners' competence, he was not being prevented at present from publishing any paper that he wished to publish, or prevented from speaking in public as he wished. However, Mr. Whitehead undoubtedly feels intimidated by the possibility of disciplinary action, and the Working Party wished to see a safeguard built into the University's procedures, for all staff, which would reduce the risk of any breach of academic freedom.

I would like to acknowledge that in my three meetings with the Working Party I considered the quality of dialogue and the conditions within which it took place to embody the values which the Academic Assembly of the University have used to characterise the Idea of a University. These are quoted in my paper to the First World Congress on Action Research and Process Management. I think they bear repeating here,

High sounding phrases like 'values of freedom, truth and democracy', 'rational debate', 'integrity', have been used. It is easy to be cynical about these and to dismiss them as hopelessly idealistic, but without ideals and a certain agreement about shared values a community cannot be sustained, and will degenerate. These are the phrases in which members of Academic Assembly have chosen to convey their concept of this community. (The Idea of a University, Academic Assembly, University of Bath, 1988).

I presented the paper which follows to the Second World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management in Brisbane in July 1992. It shows my direct engagement with the ideas of Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, an academic in the University of Queensland who is promoting action research approaches in staff development in higher education. I am relating the propositional form of her analyses to the dialogical and dialectical form of my own educational theory. I am now moving to a position of testing the validity of my ideas on educational theory and educational knowledge in an international arena. Whilst I imagine that the searing experiences I have described above will always be part of my psyche they did not prevent me from experiencing some delight on the quality of the conversation I enjoyed with Ortrun and Orlando Fals-Borda who also contributed to the discussion on the paper at the Congress. I anticipate that such conversations will form an increasing part of my educational development in higher education.