

Michael Mansfield QC

Statement for Chancellorship

I am very honoured to have been nominated to stand for the post of Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. It is rare for this post to fall vacant - the present incumbent has held it for 35 years - and elections are even rarer. It is important, therefore, that this opportunity to vote is not missed, because whatever the result it will set the seal on how you wish Cambridge to be viewed both nationally and internationally over the next decade or more.

I have spent 42 years as a barrister specialising in cases which involve human and civil rights. The right to a fair opportunity to access education at all levels is enshrined in the normative instruments of the United Nations and UNESCO. This is because it is recognised to be essential for the exercise of all other human rights, and for the empowerment of the individual.

It is salutary to bear in mind the words of the covenant to which the UK is a party, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966, and which forms a trilogy of human rights with the Universal Declaration at the centre.

Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights is unequivocal:

- (1) The states parties to the present covenant recognise the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity....
- (2) (c) Higher education *shall* be made equally accessible to all on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of FREE EDUCATION.

This is highly relevant to the election in October. It comes at a critical moment in the University's illustrious 800 year history. An unprecedented threat is posed to its integrity. What is at stake are the fundamental principles of 'independence' and 'diversity'; the 'Independence' to take unfettered decisions about the provision of high quality education across a broad spectrum of subjects for a diverse population of students.

The threat comes, I believe, in different forms but the main ones are derived from the forces of the 'market place' described by the Government as the need to introduce 'the cut and thrust of competition'. This is closely allied to the Government's policy based on its perception of economic exigency, namely swingeing cuts.

The effects are twofold, both of which are disastrous. The first is massive reductions in funding, up to 80% in some cases. Universities have been driven to raise money in other ways, most obviously through an increase in tuition fees. A cap of £9000 was announced by David Cameron as an exceptional measure. We now know less than one year later from a report by the Office of Fair Access that it is in fact to be the rule. One third of all Universities are charging the maximum and three fifths are charging the maximum for some courses.

The ramifications are iniquitous, especially when you consider the rapid transition from free higher education to tuition fees with interest free loans and now loans plus interest combined with the plaintive cry 'but it's free at the point of delivery'. What students or families are in a position to afford such amounts either in the short or in the long term? The median income in the UK is around the £22,000 mark, at least for those lucky enough to be in work. The economic prognosis is not exactly rosy, so it is highly likely that potential students from the average family will be unable and unwilling to incur the lodestone of long running debt.

The second effect is the growing privatization of management and course providers. What is taught will increasingly depend on what is regarded as profitable. This also runs the risk that the provider may, wittingly or unwittingly, influence the nature of the subject matter within the course.

At the same time, and quite incongruously with these economic imperatives, the Government is attempting to impose a liberalised admissions policy which is unattainable under the circumstances.

Cambridge should be in the vanguard of resistance to these confused policies which trample all over an important heritage and resource, and treat education as some kind of commodity. If there is to be any prospect of national recovery, investment in education has to be the bedrock not the victim.

Throughout my career I have been confronting similar situations. At the University I attended, (Keele) founded by A. D. Lindsay from Balliol, the Robbins Committee slashed a fine liberal degree course in the interests of savings. As a Governor and a parent, I have also been closely involved with two excellent London comprehensives in their battles for survival. Lately I have been intimately concerned with challenging the 40% public spending cuts to civil legal aid.

Generally we are being hoodwinked into believing there are no alternatives to the austerity package put forward by the Government. The shadow economy was not created by the Universities or the public sector. The sector that was responsible and which has emerged largely unscathed must be made to face the consequences. There is a tranche of measures which would raise billions towards the debt crisis - a financial transactions tax on speculative deals, the recovery of tax being avoided or evaded, the termination of an outdated Trident missile system estimated to cost £30 billion, and the non engagement in expensive and illegal wars.

I believe the mantle of the Chancellor must retain the dignity and traditions so long associated with the University but also reach out to embrace the sacred principles of independence and diversity which are in serious jeopardy from the craven demands of the market place. If elected, it would be my intention to maintain a robust defence of the University against these incursions.

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Please see my full CV at www.tooks.co.uk, the website of my Chambers.