

Sturgeon's uni power grab

What Scotland's professors have to fear from the SNP's latest bright idea

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In the grounds of Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University stands a one-tonne sculpture. Roughly hewn and about five feet high, it carries in its top corner an ill-carved sun. Beneath it are some words of Alex Salmond, half-sunk in the sandstone, as if they were the thoughts of a Scottish Ozymandias:

'The rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees to be imposed on Scottish students.'

This clunky celebration of SNP policy should raise a few doubts. Free higher education is not free for all in Scotland. Edinburgh can afford to pay the fees of only 124,000 students in Scottish universities. Their contemporaries might have the grades, but they must go elsewhere because Scottish universities need fee-payers from England and Wales to balance their books. More pertinently, the Heriot-Watt stone ignores the class warfare in Scottish education. To fund free university education for largely middle-class students, the SNP has hit the budgets of the further education colleges of the working class.

But the biggest question is the most basic: what the hell is a university doing plonking a lump of rock covered with party political propaganda on its campus?

Scottish universities are meant to be independent, but the SNP will not allow them to stay that way, for a reason that lies at the root of its political success and wider failure.

On the one hand, it is the best election-winning machine in Britain. It has majority control of a Scottish parliament, and possesses nearly every Scottish Westminster constituency. Its opinion-poll ratings are so high that Scotland can seem a one-party state. For all that, the SNP lost the independence referendum, the one vote it had to win to justify its existence. If it is to win next time, if indeed there is to be a next time, the SNP has to achieve what we old Marxists call 'hegemony': the cultural as well as the political domination of Scottish society.

To achieve hegemony, 'opinion formers' must assure the public that independence is the only way forward. Nationalism must become the common sense of Scottish life. If the opinion formers lack the required

enthusiasm, the SNP must persuade them to think twice before speaking out.

Nationalists are not planning anything as vulgar or blatant as the march on the BBC during the referendum campaign or the abolition of academic freedom. Instead, they are quietly proposing to bring universities into line by nationalising them.

At the last minute, the SNP has slipped three clauses into the Higher Education Governance Bill currently before the Scottish parliament. They give ministers the power to use secondary legislation to impose unspecified conditions on universities without consultation. Universities Scotland, which represents the principals and

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directors of Scotland's higher education institutions, says that it fears the 'control' the SNP is amassing will lead to the Office of National Statistics reclassifying universities as 'public' rather than independent bodies.

This is not a mere slip of the bureaucrat's pen. Public bodies cannot budget for deficits. They need the approval of government for major projects. In short, Scottish universities will be under SNP rule.

The SNP does not say as much. It has secured the services of one Ferdinand von Prondzynski, vice-chancellor of Aberdeen's Robert Gordon University and an academic politician who combines the most striking

traits of Uriah Heep and Kenneth Wilkie. 'Von Pron', as he is called with affection by his colleagues, tells anyone who cares to listen that his family was originally of Pomeranian-Kashubian origins and can be traced back to the 14th century. Born in Germany and raised in Ireland, he was a professor of law at Hull University, moved on to Dublin City University, and finally ended up in Scotland. He held up a finger to the wind direction when he arrived in his new homeland and decided to be the Sturgeon main man in the Scottish academe.

His fellow professors weren't bad scared, he concluded. Many were 'genuinely intelligent and clever'. But university life had made them conservative. 'Universities are the Catholic church are the only institutions that have survived intact since the Middle Ages,' he declared, and it was time to put a stop to all that fuddy-duddy nonsense. University governing bodies must be democratised by having elected chairs and trade union representatives.

It sounds terribly liberal until you learn that universities already have staff representatives. The SNP proposes to grant favours to trade unions because it wants to detach them from the Labour party and increase its hegemonic control. As for elected chairs, the SNP can reasonably calculate that, given its electoral dominance, the winning candidates are likely to be sympathisers, or at the very least will deem it politic to pretend to be sympathisers.

Principals and vice-chancellors are frightened of making public criticisms. They say that Scottish civil servants and no less a figure than Von Pron himself have warned that objections to the bill must be handled carefully. On condition of anonymity, one told me that the superficially democratic argument came down to a question of power: 'If you are a nationalist government with only one political ambition — independence — centralisation of power is a clear policy focus, and getting control of your university sector is an early priority.'

Don't think the SNP won't use its power. During the referendum campaign Louise Richardson, principal of St Andrews University, warned that it would be 'catastrophic' for the universities if a 'yes' vote cut them off from the research centres of the rest of Britain. The SNP bombarded her with emails demanding that she praise the Scottish government and tone down her criticisms. One astonished observer told the press, 'She is the principal of an independent Scottish institution. You don't expect the First Minister of Scotland to call up and try and put words in her mouth.'

The way the wind is blowing in Scotland, you will see more SNP politicians putting more words in the mouths of formerly independent academics, and more sculptures celebrating the glory of their achievements when they have done it.



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