

FILE ON 4

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THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

ACTUALITY OF DONS' DEMO

DONS CHANTING: More pay, not low pay, that's why we're here today.
More pay, not low pay, that's why we're here today. More pay, not low pay

WHITAKER: There is hardly a profession well known for its militancy, but Britain's university lecturers are up in arms over their pay and conditions. How much or how little they get paid depends on the core funding universities receive from the state, and this has declined in real terms over recent decades. But that universities are short of public cash is having a far wider impact on academic life. Large companies are proving more than willing to meet the shortfall, and campuses across the country now have research centres or professorships that bear household names, like Tesco's, Marks and Spencers or BP. University chiefs insist that there are no strings attached to this sponsorship. Maybe not. But individual academics are increasingly having to look outside their universities to find funding for their research. And there are growing fears that their financial dependence on either industry or central government is undermining the integrity of what they do. Do commercial considerations now have too great an influence over the work done within universities? And is the government trying to discredit or marginalize academic research that doesn't support its own policies?

SIGNATURE TUNE

WHITAKER: Two weeks ago, the Cancer Research Campaign announced that it was pulling out of funding a new laboratory at the University of Nottingham. The reason: the institution's acceptance, just before Christmas, of a £3.8 million donation from the tobacco company BAT - money that's to be used to create a new centre for the study of corporate responsibility. Nottingham's decision has been widely criticised and many universities have said that under no circumstances will they touch tobacco money.

ACTUALITY OF STREET NOISE

WHITAKER: One that won't is here in Newcastle upon Tyne, and it won't because five years ago it learned a hard lesson about the possible academic fallout from doing so. Its neuropathology unit, supported with public funds by the Medical Research Council, the MRC, embarked on some research looking into the possibility that nicotine could protect people from developing Alzheimer's disease - the commonest form

of senile dementia. It wasn't, at the time, an unreasonable hypothesis. But when the scientists involved found they didn't have enough money, they went to the research coffers of BAT, the British American Tobacco company. It was a decision that outraged Mary Rice, then the MRC's head of public communication.

RICE: I said that I thought it was hugely damaging to the MRC's reputation. The MRC is a publicly funded, independent scientific organisation. It uses our money to improve the health of the nation through medical research. Therefore it seemed to me to be quite extraordinary that it was taking money from an industry whose main objective seems to be to get people addicted to a product which will kill half of its users. And it also seemed to me quite evident that tobacco companies were hardly likely to be going round putting money into independent scientific research which was going to show that tobacco is bad for you.

WHITAKER: You were questioning the independence of this research?

RICE: I wasn't questioning the independence of the research. I think the research would have been carried out in a completely independent way. I was questioning the use to which the results would be put.

WHITAKER: Mary Rice tried to keep her head down, to keep her reservations to herself. But when a Sunday Times journalist, who was investigating the links between scientific research and tobacco money, found a reference to BAT funding in the Newcastle unit's annual report, he wanted to find out what the MRC's position on this was. And when he went to the council's public spokeswoman, Mary Rice, she told him what she thought – something that evidently didn't go down too well with her employers.

RICE: I was pretty surprised when I went into the office to find a note on my computer saying I was not allowed to talk to anyone at all, and a written explanation was demanded immediately, whereupon I had a short and rather unpleasant interview and was sent home on so-called gardening leave. And I never actually went back to do any work at the MRC subsequently.

WHITAKER: What reasons were you given for your being sent home in this way?

RICE: I had been disloyal in what I had said.

WHITAKER: Do you feel you had?

RICE: No, I don't. I feel, in fact, I had done completely the opposite. What really concerned me was that people might get the impression that there was a lot more of this sort of thing going on, that the MRC was in the habit of taking this kind of money without proper discussion and without any thought.

WHITAKER: The man who led the nicotine research project, Jim Edwardson, now the director of Newcastle University's Institute for the Health of the Elderly, insists that there was never any attempt to cover up their funding by a tobacco company, and that his unit drew up a watertight contract with BAT, ensuring that complete

control over the work and its publication stayed with the scientists. But the episode has left him, Professor Edwardson says, extremely wary about what companies might expect from scientific research.

EDWARDSON: With hindsight we realise now we were terribly terribly naïve, and the whole scenario is one which I've subsequently regretted, but we learn by our experience. The most distressing feature of the whole saga as far as I was concerned was to see the impartiality and wisdom of the Medical Research Council brought into question, and I was very very sorry that that happened, and it was why I resolved personally under no circumstances in the future would I take money from the tobacco industry.

WHITAKER: Do you worry about taking money from any corporate source?

EDWARDSON: All industry has an agenda which may not be identical to one's own, and therefore I think there is of necessity a huge amount of heart searching to be done whenever you are taking money from a body which might be able to use the results to its own advantage as against the public good.

WHITAKER: And for the past five years there's been a lot more than heart searching going on at the University of Toronto in Canada about the influence a commercial sponsor can have over both research and academic careers.

ACTUALITY OF CANADA AT FIVE, January 1999

NEWSREADER: Canada at Five. Good afternoon. The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto has reinstated a prominent blood researcher after a dispute over drug testing. Dr Nancy Olivieri of the hospital had been engaged in a bitter fight

WHITAKER: Dr Nancy Olivieri, the subject of this news bulletin on Canadian radio in January 1999, is a Professor of Paediatrics at the University of Toronto, based at the city's world renowned Hospital for Sick Children. She's an expert in the clinical treatment of thalassemia, a common form of inherited anaemia that affects hundreds of thousands of children throughout the tropical world. The disease can cause a fatal build-up of iron in the bodies of those who suffer from it. By the mid 1990s a drug had been developed to counter this, but it could only be administered through a slow and, to many patients, unpleasant transfusion. Dr Olivieri was keen to see if a simple pill could be as effective and was given funds by the Canadian pharmaceutical company, Apotex, to mount a clinical trial. But it wasn't long before she realised that the drug, in the dosage it was being given, was having the opposite of a beneficial effect.

OLIVIERI: Round the end of '95 I got a number of liver iron concentrations and said, 'You know, that seems very high, and this patient wasn't that high last year.' We slowly did a couple of other patients who were up for their annual liver biopsy, and again they showed that the drug wasn't working adequately. The following year we began to note that there was progression of liver damage in these patients. In 1995/96 I raised a flag about the lack of adequate effectiveness. In late '96, early '97 I raised a flag about toxicity of the drug.

WHITAKER: So the bottom line here is that you were suddenly beginning to feel that this drug was dangerous?

OLIVIERI: That's correct. So we were in a bit of a bind, and we went to the company and we slowly realised that they weren't going to accept our interpretation.

WHITAKER: At this stage, what were you asking the company to do?

OLIVIERI: We would have wanted them to change the consent forms, which are forms that every patient signs to enter a clinical trial, to reflect these new concerns, because they are concerns which might affect the willingness of patients to remain in a trial. We received, three days after we sent the proposed changes in consent forms to Apotex, I received a letter that said, 'You will be subject to all legal remedies if you tell patients, parents, regulatory agencies or the scientific community about your concerns. If you tell them this, you will be subject to legal prosecution.'

WHITAKER: But Nancy Olivieri didn't just tell her patients about the additional risks involved in their participation in the clinical trial. She also wrote up her findings and published them in the medical press. She was openly defying Apotex, and she needed and expected to be supported by both the hospital and her university. But far from support, she claims, what she got were threats of dismissal. Dr Olivieri's employers were evidently counting without an international medical community that holds her work in the highest esteem. Among those who know it well is Sir David Weatherall, who retired last autumn from the Regius Professorship of Medicine at Oxford, and who also specialises in the study of inherited anaemia. When he found out that Nancy Olivieri's job - and therefore the continuation of her research - was at risk, he contacted a longstanding colleague at Harvard, and the two of them set off hotfoot to Toronto. Dr Olivieri's work, Professor Weatherall says, was too important to lose.

WEATHERALL: Every group that have tried to repeat her work have shown quite unequivocally that the drug is not effective at this dosage, so there's no question she was right. When we heard that the hospital and university where she works was not supporting her, we went to Toronto to see if we could do anything about it. We had a meeting with the President of the university, who wasn't too pleased to see us, but then said, 'Since you're here, try and sort it out.' We really stuck to our guns on two issues. One, the fundamental right of a scientist to tell the scientific community of their findings, and secondly the absolute right and importance of a scientist to give information that they have obtained from a trial of this type to their patients and their community.

WHITAKER: If you hadn't gone there, do you think they would have succeeded in getting rid of Dr Olivieri and hushing the whole thing up to some extent?

WEATHERALL: I hope not, but I suspect that if we hadn't gone at that time, it's quite possible that they might have got away with dismissing her. I think these two kind of elderly outsiders coming in probably did shake the university into a bit of action.

WHITAKER: File on 4 was unable to find a senior administrator at either the Hospital for Sick Children or the University of Toronto who was prepared to be interviewed about their treatment of Nancy Olivieri. But, while she disputes some aspects

of the paediatrician's allegations, saying she was only dismissed from administrative and not clinical duties, Cyndy De Giusti, the hospital's chief public affairs spokeswoman, admits that her institution didn't do all that it could to protect and defend a member of its staff.

DE GIUSTI: One of the things that we found in the long investigation that has been undertaken on this issue is that while the hospital and the university did the right thing quietly, they certainly did not show enough visible support for Dr Olivieri and her position, and for that we have apologised.

WHITAKER: Why did you not do so?

DE GIUSTI: I think the people involved took the action that they thought was important, but they didn't let Dr Olivieri know what they were in fact doing, and that was a mistake.

WHITAKER: So you were not publicly supporting her?

DE GIUSTI: Not publicly enough.

WHITAKER: This long and complex story of relations between a researcher, a company and a university hospital has become hugely significant for those in Canada who fear for the future of academic freedom. And according to Sir David Weatherall, people who argue that a similar train of events couldn't happen on this side of the Atlantic are just burying their heads in the sand. Could what happened to Nancy Olivieri in Toronto happen here?

WEATHERALL: Yes. I think so. If there was sloppy contracting and a very aggressive company I think it could happen. I'm not sure that any of us have really got to grips with these complex partnerships with industry yet, to the state where it couldn't happen. I think there are a lot of time bombs around waiting to go off, like the Toronto time bomb.

WHITAKER: And though such a time bomb has yet to emerge from the world of biomedical research within British universities, a remarkably similar scenario is playing itself out behind the august doors of the London School of Economics. In October 1997, the institution entered into a three year contract with a lobbying organisation by the name of the World Travel and Tourism Council. They were offering funds for detailed research into the economic impact of tourism, especially its ability to create employment. The economist employed to do the work was Thanos Mergoupis, now a lecturer at Queens University in Belfast, and he soon found out, Mr Mergoupis claims, that he and the sponsors of the research had very different academic approaches in mind.

MERGOUPIS: They would pretend to listen and then they would start talking and you would realise that they hadn't really listened to what we were saying. They were telling us, basically, quite openly to do what they wanted to do. They treated me as an employee really. The methods that they are promoting basically examine the tourism industry by itself without comparing the job creation potential of tourism with any other industry, and as an economist I am interested in comparing the job creation potential for tourism with other industries.

WHITAKER: Is it valid to isolate tourism from other industries?
Do you learn anything by that?

MERGOUPIS: Well, it's not valid from an economist's point of view. In economics we learn from the very beginning that we must see alternative uses of resources, that's the very first thing that we teach in our introductory economics classes.

WHITAKER: Weren't you a bit naïve? WTTC is a commercial operation. They're not going to spend money unless it's to their own advantage, are they?

MERGOUPIS: If they saw their interests as doing good tourism research, that's not really different from my interest. For a long time I thought that that was the motivation, so with hindsight you can say that I was naïve, but at that point I thought it was a reasonable expectation.

WHITAKER: In January last year, the World Travel and Tourism Council decided to pull out of their contract with the LSE. They evidently didn't want the research to continue. But their precise reasons for coming to this conclusion were not, and have never been communicated to Thanos Mergoupis. What's more, he suddenly found himself out of a job.
How did you first hear that you had lost your job?

MERGOUPIS: I was in the United States, presenting the results of my research in a conference, and I emailed my supervisor, telling him what a good reception the work received, and I get an email saying that actually the LSE had decided not to enforce the contract and that they had decided to give me notice. So basically dismissed me summarily.

WHITAKER: So you send your supervisor an email saying the work's gone down really well at this conference. He replies saying, 'Great, but you're sacked.'?

MERGOUPIS: Exactly, yes, exactly.

WHITAKER: It seems that the LSE were accepting that the WTTC had the right to withdraw their funding. Did you immediately feel no, they don't have that right? And did you challenge the LSE about it?

MERGOUPIS: I challenged them immediately. The letter of my dismissal said that the WTTC will do the funding and therefore LSE had to dismiss me. To me that logic was amazing. They knew about my concerns and the kind of pressures and any disagreement, given these concerns I never thought that they would go ahead and dismiss me. And by dismissing me basically they were sending the signal to academics everywhere that there's really no differentiating barrier between corporations and universities, and in effect corporations have firing power over academic personnel.

WHITAKER: We wanted to ask the World Travel and Tourism Council why they decided to cut off Mr Mergoupis's research funds, but they refused to be interviewed. We also wanted to ask the London School of Economics why they didn't challenge the WTTC's decision to simply terminate the contract for the research, but they too turned down our request for an interview.

Thanos Mergoupis has issued a formal complaint against his former university, and the LSE say they can't comment publicly on the matter until their internal procedures have been completed. Despite his speaking out on what he sees as a sell out of research integrity to commercial interests, Mr Mergoupis is managing to pursue his academic career. But several other academics told File on 4 that while they share his concerns, they can't risk expressing them publicly. One who is prepared to do so is David Packham, a senior lecturer in materials science at the University of Bath. He's found clear evidence, Dr Packham claims, that the commercial funding of research is resulting in a piecemeal privatisation of the knowledge produced in universities.

PACKHAM: Many research contracts actually give a sponsor the right to control publication, and in principle it does put the control of the research into the hands of the sponsor, even in a case of research which might be largely paid for through Research Council money and university time and facilities. I was aware of an MSc project done in a reputable university, in an area in which I had some interest, and I asked if I could have sight of the thesis, and I was told this had been industrially sponsored and therefore was not available. They would have to go to the industrial sponsor, and I was told by the supervisor they are often quite difficult to get permission. In many universities there are theses in the library which are not publicly available. They are put under embargo, perhaps for three years. One case I came across recently was for something like twenty years, which seems an incredible long time.

WHITAKER: It's government policy that academic research in science and technology should increasingly service the needs of the British economy, and companies are only too willing to pay to see that it does. Between 1994 and 1997, the most recent period for which there are accurate figures, the amount industry spent on university research rose by 30%. But when it comes to social science, to research into issues such as crime, welfare, poverty, health or education - -politically the key issues for any administration - then by far the largest funder of university work is the government itself: either directly through departmental commissions or indirectly through grants from the Economic and Social Research Council. New Labour has put new money into social research, but it's also indicated its frustration with academic work that comes to conclusions it doesn't like. In the autumn of 1999 the BBC's 'Today' programme ran an item on how landlords were using new powers they had been given in law to deal with tenants who behaved in antisocial ways. Among their interviewees was Caroline Hunter, a senior lecturer in housing law at Sheffield Hallam University, who was researching the subject at the time.

EXTRACT FROM 'TODAY' PROGRAMME, November 1999

HUNTER: There are certainly some cases that I've seen the files for, and it seems to me the action that was taken was inappropriate and over hasty. The consequences can be very severe if they lead to people losing their homes, and I think we have to remember that that in some ways is worse than a criminal punishment.

WHITAKER: Hardly the stuff of controversy, one would have thought, an academic describing her research findings on Radio 4. But someone who appears on 'Today' with far greater regularity than Caroline Hunter - the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett - was that morning among the programme's listeners, and he didn't like what he heard. He immediately and publicly condemned Dr Hunter's research.

READER IN STUDIO: If this is what our money is going on, it's time for a review of the funding of social science research.

WHITAKER: A reaction that both astonished and appalled
Caroline Hunter.

HUNTER: It felt quite a personal attack on our integrity as researchers. It was an attack both in terms of saying that it shouldn't have been funded, but also quite personal in the sense of saying that we didn't live within a million miles of the problem and therefore we couldn't possibly know about it.

WHITAKER: Do you think he had any grounds at all for the criticism he made?

HUNTER: No, I don't think he did. When we later did publish the report, it was actually welcomed by the government, so it just seemed a bit of a knee jerk reaction to an issue that clearly is high up Blunkett's agenda, but made without informing himself of really what we were saying. It worries me that he can make a comment like that without knowing what the research was saying, effectively making a threat about it.

WHITAKER: And Mr Blunkett, ironically, hadn't done his homework on who was funding Caroline Hunter's research. It was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and no public money was involved. While the particular way in which the Secretary of State for Education responded to Dr Hunter's radio interview may have been, as she says, a knee jerk reaction, Mr Blunkett soon made clear that his seeming mistrust of social scientists was a more considered position. In a speech to leading members of the profession three months later, in February last year, he complained that too much of their work was:

READER IN STUDIO: Seemingly perverse, driven by ideology paraded as intellectual inquiry.

WHITAKER: And he expressed his disappointment at the fact that:

READER IN STUDIO: Some of the most gifted and creative researchers seem to have turned away from policy related issues, preferring to work on questions of little interest to those outside the research community.

WHITAKER: Mr Blunkett also made clear in his speech that he wants closer links between government policy and the funding strategy of the Economic and Social Research Council. Such links are vital, the government argues, for its ability to put in place what it calls 'evidence-based policy'. It's a phrase now much in vogue in Whitehall, and we would have liked to ask Mr Blunkett exactly what it means and what the government wants from social scientists, but he was unavailable for an interview. We were, however, able to put the questions to Malcolm Wicks, Minister of State in the Department for Education with particular responsibility for research.

WICKS: We are asking them to be aware of the government's agenda, because we need their contribution, so we are asking them to develop research ideas and projects which are helping us as a government tackle key issues on our agenda.

WHITAKER: So you're telling them what to research?

WICKS: You're putting it in a very sort of pejorative way, aren't you?

WHITAKER: No, I'm picking up here on the speech that David Blunkett gave a year ago in which he attacked a social scientist for producing research which was – I'll use his words – irrelevant and ideologically driven. Do you agree with that?

WICKS: Some of it is ideological, there's no doubt about that. But I think what I'm about is trying to build a more positive relationship between the research community and the world of policy. I think to characterise that as we're telling researchers what to research is, frankly, a bit silly.

WHITAKER: But isn't it for academic social scientists to make their own decisions as to what they want to research, rather than having to do what you want them to do?

WICKS: Well, yes in part, and that is why, you know, we have universities where academics in the university can pursue academic freedom and can consider ideas, and sometimes to develop research which may or may not embarrass the government of the day. But I would also say that alongside all of that it's surely legitimate that government says, 'Look, here are particular issues on our mind, things that we as government need to tackle. We need the help of the research community.'

WHITAKER: When social scientific research that's been funded by government is published, the relevant departmental press release opens, more often than not, with the words 'Independent research shows that ...' – a phrase the Liberal Democrat MP Dr Evan Harris, his party's spokesman on science, has long mistrusted. Wanting to find out what control government retains over the research it commissions, especially over its final published form, he asked to see what was in the small print of departmental research contracts. Some ministries wriggled out of replying by invoking the handy formula of 'This information can only be obtained at disproportionate cost.' But eighteen did respond. And what their contracts revealed was, for Evan Harris, genuinely disturbing.

HARRIS: The majority of departments were able to exercise a veto on publication. Many departments could make amendments and could expect and implied could sometimes insist researchers made amendments to the draft before the final report was published. And the majority, the vast majority, set a condition that the researcher needed prior permission from the government to discuss the project with the media. Indeed some departments went even further, said that researchers couldn't discuss with third parties without permission ever, even long after the research is in the public domain.

WHITAKER: But isn't Mr Blunkett right to say that much social science research over the years has been irrelevant to the most important concerns of ordinary people's lives, and that it can only be to the good then for government policy and the research community to come closer together?

HARRIS: I fundamentally disagree with that. The government can commission the research it wants. What it can't do is commission the findings it wants. I think there needs to be an arms length relationship, not a closer relationship between government and so-called independent, so-called academic researchers. And I think the sort of sabre-rattling that we've heard from David Blunkett about social scientists not producing the right sort of results when he is the person that funds that sort of research in the main, is exactly the sort of example of an abuse of a power relationship that is so worrying.

WHITAKER: If New Labour is committed to the notion that policy must, as far as possible, be supported by research evidence, it's also – as is well known – committed to raising educational standards. Yet the area of academic research that the government has consistently been most critical of since it came to power has been that on education. And there's worrying evidence of its willingness to both ignore and disparage any research that doesn't support its own very particular and very determined strategy on school improvement.

ACTUALITY IN SCHOOL CLASSROOM

BROWN: You had to get three bananas, and the bananas are 9p each, and you wrote 27. How did you know that?

CHILD: Because I added 9 and 9 and 9, and then I counted on my fingers.

BROWN: Right, that's very clever

WHITAKER: Margaret Brown, a Professor of Education at King's College, London, has devoted her academic life to the study of how maths is best taught and learned. Numeracy – and therefore maths – is central to the government's drive to raise basic standards. So one would have expected Professor Brown's work to be required reading at the Department for Education. But the opposite seems to be the case. Last autumn she and two colleagues published the findings of a long term study into whether their being in sets according to ability helped or hindered children's learning of maths. The government is deeply committed to setting. But Margaret Brown's research, she says, shows that it probably shouldn't be.

BROWN: The results suggested that actually setting was having a deleterious effect, particularly on the children at the top and the bottom, that the children in higher sets were being pulled very fast and sometimes were feeling they couldn't keep up and were wanting to drop sets, and the children in the lower sets were feeling that they were given baby stuff and that they weren't being stretched as hard as they might be. And this seemed to be confirmed by some of the results we've got on attainment as well, that there were children who were definitely under attaining because of the sets structure.

WHITAKER: Were you surprised by the government's commitment to setting before there was any great research evidence in its favour?

BROWN: Yes, we were very surprised, because I think, you know, knowing that particularly the results about low attaining children were so consistent, we felt that actually this was a government that should have the interests of low attaining children in mind particularly, and we were rather surprised that they hadn't bothered to do any homework to find out whether this policy would be likely to improve the standards.

I'm all for evidence based policy. You just have the feeling that actually they want to decide the policies and then to gather up the evidence which supports them.

WHITAKER: An obvious problem with the very notion of evidence-based policy is that were government to take on board evidence which seriously questions a particular policy, they would then be faced with the political risk of having to make a u-turn. But there was enough solid evidence against the wisdom of setting in schools, Margaret Brown thinks, before New Labour came to power. And when she saw a commitment to it spelt out in their election manifesto, she and some colleagues wrote to David Blunkett, suggesting that this might be a mistake, and asking if they could meet him to talk about the issue.

BROWN: We got a very angry letter to say that we were clearly ideologues. We were old Labour, this was an out of date policy that we were suggesting, and really the minister wanted to have nothing more to do with us.

WHITAKER: This letter was from whom?

BROWN: This was from David Blunkett.

WHITAKER: How did you receive that letter?

BROWN: We were rather surprised. We wrote back just to point out that we were not particularly old Labour. In fact we weren't members of any political party, we were simply researchers who were trying to study the literature and work out what seemed to be the most appropriate way of raising attainment, so we had the same aims as he did, but we felt that it was necessary to look in a more objective way at the evidence.

WHITAKER: Margaret Brown says that now she wouldn't even think of going to the Department for Education in search of research funding. Despite the fact that she's a past president of the British Educational Research Association, her work has, she fears, made her persona non grata. And if it's over education that the government has been most explicit in its condemnation of a particular academic research community, it's also in relation to education that it's gone furthest in giving institutional form to its belief in evidence-based policy. Just over a year ago, it announced the establishment of a new body called the National Educational Research Forum, whose stated aim is 'to develop a strategy for educational research'. The nineteen members of the forum were chosen by the Department for Education, and in December they sent out a consultation document to the wider research community, asking for responses to how they proposed to set about their business. A copy arrived on the desk of Phil Hodkinson, Professor of Lifelong Learning at Leeds University, and he was horrified by what he read.

HODKINSON: It posed some quite frightening questions. It actually asked how can we ensure that agreed quality criteria are applied by researchers, funders, journal editors and others. Now that implies a sort of totalising control of the education research community that we've never ever seen in the UK before. It would mean, if taken literally, that anybody whose views, no matter how deeply held or how carefully thought through, were outside the parameters of the criteria, they may not get funding, they may not get published and their work would not be listened to or taken seriously.

WHITAKER: Is that to say that you think there will be some research questions which it will become more and more difficult to ask?

HODKINSON: I suspect it will become more difficult to get funding to ask certain questions. If the proposals were introduced in the way in which they are described in the consultation document, censorship of at very least a minority of education researchers would be inevitable.

WHITAKER: Censorship is a strong word to use to describe the possible impact of the National Educational Research Forum. But Phil Hodgkinson's fears are, it seems fair to say, about where the logic of evidence-based policy might possibly lead. And they are shared by other members of the British Educational Research Association. But when File on 4 put them to Malcolm Wicks, Minister of State at the Department for Education, with responsibility for research, he dismissed them out of hand.

WICKS: I think that's nonsense and it's daft and it may reflect the fact that one or two members of that association were disappointed not to become members.

WHITAKER: So that's just sour grapes on their part?

WICKS: I think in part, yes.

WHITAKER: But let's look at a particular example ...

WICKS: Can I say that, can I just say to you that you clearly, you've clearly got the story on this File on 4 thing, and somehow it's going to be about how government, for whatever reason you're going to put forward, is trying to stifle the research community or knock it into such a narrow shape that academic freedom is jeopardised and independent research will not be published. And I just want to put it to you – and you may or may not want to include this in the edited highlights of my interview – that that's totally daft, that's totally nonsense, and I think you're producing a very biased theme.

WHITAKER: I'm not putting to you an argument that is File on 4's. I am putting to you arguments which have been put to me by members of the academic community in this country.

WICKS: Well, some of them.

WHITAKER: Let me mention one of them. Professor Margaret Brown of Kings College, London has recently published some work, suggesting that pupils' ability to learn maths is seriously impaired by setting. Setting is government policy. Will you take her research seriously?

WICKS: Yes. This is the purpose of research, and the task of government is to look at research findings and, where they're compelling – I'm not talking about this area of setting, I don't know the subject very well – where they're compelling, one has to re-evaluate policy and practice. I mean, that's the point of research, isn't it?

WHITAKER: But such promised openness to research evidence, however difficult it might prove for government to take on board, isn't easy to square with Professor Margaret Brown's personal experience. That there should be closer links

between universities and government and between universities and the wider social and economic world in which they exist is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the radical transformation of British higher education that's taken place over the past thirty years – one that's seen an elite system replaced by a mass one. Few would argue against the far wider access that it's created. But it's also meant students losing their former right to free tuition and their institutions having to look for money wherever they can find it. And the implications of the transformation for those who work in universities are perhaps only now becoming clear. They have two equally important jobs – to teach and to research. Who they teach and why is easily answered. But the question of what they research – and for whom – is, it seems, increasingly problematic.

SIGNATURE TUNE