

## Chapter 11

# **Massey today—and tomorrow? A valedictory lecture by a departing history professor**

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### **Introduction**

Academic staff are not servants and students are not children, and neither can be, nor should be, treated as such ... A University is a community within a community whose freedom is vital for the public good ... The function of the Council of a University is not that of [a] Board of Directors. — S.S. Orr, Open Letter to the Premier of Tasmania of 1954.

During 1995, reflecting on the completion of a happy quarter of a century in my position at Massey University, I came to the quite unexpected realisation that I could no longer occupy it in good conscience. At the time, I knew little about Sydney Orr, and had never read his Open Letter. But there are obvious parallels, for like him “my decision to step ... into the arena of public discussion” was founded on a need to defend fundamental academic freedoms and ultimately “the freedom and dignity of ... the larger community.”<sup>1</sup>

Like Orr too, I know that when academic staff feel like irrelevant flotsam rather than an integral part of their university, something is very wrong. I discovered just how widespread is that feeling of marginalisation within New Zealand universities from the wave of support generated by my valedictory lecture, reproduced here with a few additions. Alas, there is no sign that the feeling has diminished

since 1995. How can it, when more and more managerial decisions with vital educational consequences are taken out of the hands of those who ought to be shaping them? At the Victoria University of Wellington, for example, one Dean simply informed his colleagues that “it has been decided that each Faculty shall be governed by a Faculty Management Team.”<sup>2</sup> The team’s responsibilities were to include “allocation and duties of staff,” “promotions and leave,” “reviews and quality issues” and “encouragement of good teaching.” No wonder the Dean’s memo created dismay, and caused his colleagues to ask what has happened to academic freedom and to collegial decisions within a body corporate of scholars.

My lecture set out to clarify why the situation was so grave as to impel me to abandon an enjoyable and profitable career which I had always expected to follow through to normal retirement. Orr would have understood. Australian universities today confront the same issues as those in New Zealand, but recent developments in New Zealand have gone further down a path which challenges the ethos, values and whole *raison d’être* of universities. Hopefully a glimpse of some of the consequences of modern pressures across the Tasman will enable Australian academics to make better informed choices as they face their future.

A valedictory lecture must inevitably be born out of a particular work environment, in my case as lecturer, senior lecturer, reader and associate professor in the history department at Massey University. While the lecture is critical of some of Massey’s responses to the pressures with which it has been confronted, the same trends are visible everywhere in New Zealand universities, and my response would have been the same from within the walls of other institutions. Perhaps the only difference is that at Massey, which is by far the largest “open university” in Australasia, the need to teach extramurally as well as internally can create particular pressures for staff.

Some political circumstances have changed since the lecture was delivered at the end of the 1995 academic year, for example the then Minister of Education has long since been replaced, and there was a change of government in 1999. The nature of the lecture makes it impossible to adapt the text to accommodate such subsequent developments, but its central arguments remain as relevant as ever.<sup>3</sup>

### **Massey today — and tomorrow?**

After completing 26 years at Massey, I have submitted notice of early retirement. Why? I am only in my early 50s, and am in good health, with plenty of energy and enthusiasm. I have not been pushed to leave, rather kindly colleagues have encouraged me to stay. I have worthwhile research enough to last another lifetime, the will to undertake it and publishers ready to publish it — and I commend Massey on the genuine support it gives to research. I enjoy teaching, and surveys suggest I am generally on the right wavelength. My department must be one of the happiest and most united in any university in New Zealand, and has been for the whole quarter century I have been lucky enough to be part of it; and I have been blessed with very friendly and worthwhile student classes in the last couple of years.

Finally, I have no financial bones to pick with Massey. The university has always been a good employer to me, and I am not leaving to move to another university or indeed to any other paid employment. Rather I look forward to being fully occupied in an unpaid career.

In other words, I do not need to go. I do not want to go. I will make a substantial financial loss by going. Yet, go I must if I am to preserve my self-respect and a sense of integrity, for it is increasingly impossible to teach to the level that should be achieved within a university. The reasons have to do with what successive governments have inflicted on New Zealand universities over the past decade.

In particular, they have been responsible for leaving them chronically underfunded, and for foisting on them a wholly inappropriate model whose targets are misplaced. Taken together, these two developments amount to a fundamental attack on the purpose and the nature of the universities. It is high time it was said openly that higher education is in disarray, disarray of the same order of magnitude as is the New Zealand health service. And we all need to hear the alarm bells, because unless the present drift is abruptly checked and reversed, the word “university” will be gutted of any real meaning over the next decade.

## Chronic underfunding

We can start with staff-student ratios, and with an international comparison. In Britain the staff-student ratio has deteriorated enormously over the past few years, so that the cries of concern can be heard 12,000 miles away. The sudden change has come about because in 1992 the university system was transformed by the admission as “universities” of 41 higher education colleges and former “polytechnics,” so that the number of universities nearly doubled overnight, from 45 to 86.<sup>4</sup> As a result, average staff student ratios have sharply deteriorated. By the mid 1990s, they ranged from around 1:10 to 1:21. Oxbridge and most of the major Red Brick universities have staff:student ratios up to 1:13. The institutions with ratios of 1:16 or worse are normally recent polytechnics currently struggling to establish their identity as universities.<sup>5</sup>

As a university in a New Zealand system that has not been diluted in the same way, Massey should compare well. Unfortunately, with a staff-student ratio of 1:18 in 1995-96,<sup>6</sup> Massey is among the ex-polytechnics. This makes it more than a little difficult to fulfil the Vice-Chancellor’s vision of Massey as the Cambridge or Harvard of the South Pacific.

If Britain be thought too remote, consider the comparison with our trans-Tasman neighbours. In 1990, Australian universities were funded at a rate per student place which was almost 35% higher than New Zealand. Since then the gap has widened further, until by 1994, the funding gap between Australian and New Zealand universities had reached nearly 38%. If a combined listing is made of all Australasian tertiary institutions in terms of subsidies received per student place for 1993, the highest ranking New Zealand university, Otago, appears in 27th place on the list. The University of Canterbury comes in at 34th, Auckland at 38th, Massey at 47th. The University of Waikato and the Victoria University of Wellington rank a miserable 56th and 57th respectively, below five New Zealand Colleges of Education and nine New Zealand polytechnics.<sup>7</sup>

It must also be borne in mind that support staff are far fewer in New Zealand than in overseas universities. According to the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors’ Committee Newsletter for November 1993, New Zealand academic staff receive only half the support that their Australian colleagues have, and only a third of the support that United Kingdom academic staff members enjoy.

In other words, we are chronically underfunded. So what has happened? Why are we in such a bad state? The answer lies in the actions of successive Labour and National governments in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1979, Massey had a staff:student ratio of 1:11.5. This declined steadily to the 1995-96 figure of 1:18. Extrapolating, the figure will soon pass 1:20.

To set this trend in perspective, it should be recalled that the Brownlie Committee of 1981-82 concluded that a staff:student ratio of 1:10 was needed to allow adequate performance of the teaching and research duties of university staff.<sup>8</sup> My own department at Massey, under Professor Colin Davis, did its best in the late 1980s to establish what we needed to operate efficiently, and concluded that for History we could live (though not in comfort) with a ratio of 1:13.5. At present the anticipated norm for Arts is 1:20.<sup>9</sup> The Faculty cannot act at a respectable university level under such circumstances. It is hard to understand why the universities have been so complacent — or at least why they have not been much more vocal — about the situation over the past two decades.

Moreover staff-student ratios can only deteriorate further, unless the government is prevented from continuing the damage it is doing to higher education. For one thing, yet more cuts in resources, in real terms, are planned and have already been announced for each remaining year until 2000. For another, it will not be possible to deny staff salary increases for much longer; a recent decision of staff at Victoria University to take strike action was significant, and if something is not done soon, the quality of new entrants to jobs will deteriorate. Moreover student resistance to ever-increasing fees is inevitable, and will be further fuelled as students realise that the quality of what they are being offered is deteriorating, and contact with staff being lessened, even as their fees are rising.

So staff-student ratios have constantly worsened, and are set to continue deteriorating. This affects the quality of what university teachers do, the quality of what students are offered, and the morale and nature of the university. The issue of morale is particularly important: good morale is central to dedicated teaching, and so to the whole educational process.

Deteriorating staff-student ratios are a statistical way of saying that staff have less time to devote to each student, whether internal or extramural. That means less time for innovative teaching, less time for marking, and less time to assist struggling class members. It means

greater reliance on lectures, which every educator knows are not an effective method of teaching, and less project and small-group work. It means less individual attention. It renders impossible the speedy return of more substantial pieces of work from extramural students. It encourages computer-marked assignments, rather than questions and approaches which grapple with issues at depth. In some quarters it is now encouraging taught PhDs instead of the genuine article.

Let me offer a couple of examples from my own experience. In the early 1980s, admittedly only in one year, I achieved a personal target I set myself of returning every 2000-word assignment in an extramural course within 24 hours of receiving it. The educational advantages were huge, because students got their essays back while they still remembered the problems they had had in writing them. It would be quite impossible to repeat the achievement today. Also in the early 1980s, I was regularly engaging in an innovative programme of audio-tape discussions with extramural students.<sup>10</sup> They too have gone by the wayside, not because they didn't work — they did — but for lack of time.

More serious for the institution as a whole, during the 1980s Massey University began to build up some system of regional tutors to support our extramural teaching. It was long overdue; the universities around the world, like the Open University, which have made extramural degrees accepted have done so only by developing strong regional teaching support. But in recent years the number of regional tutors, already far too few, has stalled and actually declined, the result of staffing funding cuts and other pressures.

Library spending, an excellent measure of a university, confirms the severity of our underfunding. Again, we can compare the situation with the United Kingdom. By comparison with half the university institutions there, Massey is a well established, fully fledged university. In library spending per student it ought to compare favourably with the normal run of more established English universities because books cost far more in New Zealand than in the United Kingdom and because Massey, with its large extramural sector and developing library at the new Albany campus, has special library needs.

Alas, however, again we compare very badly. Oxford and Cambridge spend most, with £1040 and £613 respectively. Most of the established Red Brick institutions spend more than £300. Massey, with an expenditure of £180, would fall in the bottom twelve of 86 British universities.<sup>11</sup> Under the circumstances, the Massey library

must be applauded for doing a remarkably good job with inadequate resources. But the fact is, we are chronically underfunded.

Yet the National government clearly intends to worsen this, unless it can be restrained, by imposing an assets tax, so that universities would pay, say, 10% on their capital assets. This would be unproductive and inappropriate: inappropriate, because it is not related to the prime task of universities, which is to educate people, not to have economic “outputs”; unproductive, since incentives to use capital resources wisely already exist. Further, it would increase student fees greatly, perhaps by \$1000 per student.<sup>12</sup>

This raises the question of student fees and debt. The total cumulative outstanding student debt in New Zealand is already over a billion dollars; by 1998 it is expected to more than double to \$2.3 billion.<sup>13</sup> During the next decade it will surpass the national debt. Like other university teachers, I run into the consequences of this growing debt in various ways. Some students are absent from class because they are earning to pay for their studies. Others who are physically present might as well be absent, so mentally drained are they from trying simultaneously to do a paid job and academic study. Some intelligent students refuse even to contemplate doing Honours because they are so weighed down by their accumulating mountain of debt. (The majority of students in my discipline are female, and Minister of Education Lockwood Smith acknowledged in reply to a parliamentary question that it would take the average female 38 years to repay a student loan.<sup>14</sup> What encouragement is that to young people to develop themselves to meet the wider world?)

Moreover student fees will double over the next five years, given the declared government policy that they are to rise for 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000. As the Vice-Chancellor of Waikato commented, “this will take the student fee in New Zealand to a much higher level, proportionately, than is charged in any other comparable country.”

At the end of the day, we — both this university and the country as a whole — are competing internationally. Staff members simply cannot do an adequate job if they are denied adequate tools to do it with. And the country cannot hope to compete in the longer term if it does not encourage its brighter brains to pass over the chance of earning cash in hand today in order to be better prepared for tomorrow. Deterring students from low-income homes or from homes which lack a family tradition of study is no way to face the 21st century.<sup>15</sup> We should be striving to lift education standards, not cut them back.

### **A wholly inappropriate model**

The short-sightedness evident in discouraging students is equally evident in the inappropriate model and language used by our current politicians and bureaucrats. They want to talk of “performance indicators,” “inputs,” “throughputs,” “outputs” and “product.” In the process, they have — and in some cases, like that of Alan Barker of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), with most deliberate intent — confused education with training.

It is because education and training are not the same thing, although they can overlap, that the NZQA’s focus on standards-based assessment and on standard transferable packages of knowledge is unsuitable for universities, whose function is primarily to deal with a different sort of learning applicable to broader purposes.

The NZQA poses a challenge to the universities more insidious, but even more dangerous than that of the politicians. The NZQA standards imply that it is the NZQA that is the gate keeper of knowledge, and it clearly wishes to control what is taught and how it is assessed. Moreover, although what it has done seems plainly contrary to the law, the NZQA has been allowed to get away with it and the universities are now in great danger of being sucked into its machinations. For example, the excellent University of Canterbury post-graduate Diploma in Journalism found itself removed from the list of “industry-recognised courses” because it did not teach the Journalist Training Organization’s NZQA-registered units.

The introduction of business jargon into university discourse is very dangerous. Professor McLennan (Sociology, Massey) recently noted the way in which the whole discourse of the guidance material for introducing quality audits in academic departments “mimics the pseudo-technical bureaucratise of corporate businesses,” and argued that since Universities depend essentially on goals that are not business goals, “it cannot be right to inhabit and reproduce the language and assumptions of the dominate ideological interpretation of ‘effectiveness’.”<sup>16</sup> McLennan is right: universities are not business corporations or enterprises, and they should not be structured or measured as though they were.<sup>17</sup> It is the quality and calibre of staff and their scholarly flair that are central to the total quality of the university. A focus on “outputs” might lead to an increase in the number of graduates — but at what cost to standards?

Alan Barker of the NZQA is very clear indeed about the critical importance of this language; what he wants is to “force universities to use it, on the grounds that they will then eventually come to believe it.” His writing shows that he well knows too that “the language will be intensely resisted.”<sup>18</sup>

The universities have been too slow to comprehend the threat, and too prepared to use this language, albeit reluctantly. It is misleading, and subversive of all that universities ought to stand for. We should refuse to use it at all.

One argument put forward in association with the “business speak” is that our “customers” need to know what they’re getting, to inspect the fish on the slab before they buy. The result is the over-emphasis on accountancy that is typical of New Zealand business in a phase when for every 10,000 workers, it employs 97 accountants, while Japan, for example, employs less than two.<sup>19</sup> Applied to universities, it is dreadfully damaging. This is not just a matter of mere folly, or a waste of time and money that would be better spent in more staff-student contact or more research. The argument implies that education is no more than a commodity, a sale of a fixed bundle of knowledge, whereas in fact the essential purpose of university work is to show that the boundaries of knowledge are *not* fixed, and to encourage a search for further knowledge or different interpretations. Education is not a bundle of anything, but a process of developing understanding. Moreover the excessive emphasis on accountability wants everything to be measured, but an educational process is not inherently measurable.<sup>20</sup> So the emphasis focuses on the wrong things, and on the short term rather than the long term.

At the same time as we are coping with this anti-productive accountability, staff are also being confronted by a flood of other material of borderline relevance to genuine education. At a typical 1995 staff meeting in August, for example, my department discussed the release of Student Evaluation of Teaching information, the Privacy Act (74 “necessarily brief” pages of “Interim Guidelines” — and that was just part 1, Student Issues), Equal Employment Opportunities/Disability provisions, government restructuring of National Archives, Guidance for the Assessment of Quality Systems, the Qualifications framework, the Tertiary Action Group, and changes in the points system. A final item on our agenda concerned starting the university year a week earlier; no wonder someone enquired if that was to give us time to read all the papers. None of these things started

primarily from real educational needs; those that were primarily intended to affect the university system started from a misunderstanding of what education involves, coupled with an intent to cut costs in any case.

These reforms, and others sweeping the university at the moment, assume that formal structures are all-important. They aren't, and indeed they are often counter-productive. As a friend pointed out, the university used to have many plays performed publicly. Now the plays have largely gone, but we have a committee for the performing arts. That could stand as a parable for the general drift of tertiary education: the university system has gone bureaucracy-mad. Reflecting on the mess the government has made of health, it is sobering to recall that the June 1995 budget announced the intention to spend "half a million dollars more ... on tertiary management reform, than on student growth."<sup>21</sup> If the NZQA has its way, things will get much worse. Polytechnics, informed sources suggest, estimate that \$500 per full-time student goes in meeting the costs involved with the NZQA framework.

The University's increased emphasis on performance measures of supposed "outputs" is likewise counter-productive; it takes away from staff time they desperately need to do their job properly, and (at least in well-run departments like mine) it achieves little that is positively beneficial to students.

Leadership is another area of concern. Companies need boards of directors to provide leadership. Universities do not; they need an effective framework whereby the academic community can reach its own decisions. At the end of the day it is the academic community as a whole that has to be responsible to society at large, and it is the academic community that should take the key decisions. It is not university councils but academics who will be blamed if, say, our doctors are not well trained. The Minister of Education's push for university councils based on the corporate board-of-directors model<sup>22</sup> is quite inappropriate.

Most serious for the future of the country in all this is that we have been encouraged to look for the readily measurable, which is just what universities should not do. As we have been enveloped in the knowledge explosion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, so we have tended to focus on smaller and smaller units of understanding: at Massey, on 21 papers rather than 9 units to make up a degree; then on 300 points rather than 21 papers. We also now teach them in shorter blocks of time, in

semesters rather than across the year. Semesters mean fewer contact hours, and less time for students to read and assimilate. This encourages learning rather than education, the mastery of small chunks of knowledge rather than the development of a broader vision. Too many specialised, vocational degrees have worsened the trend. We have also tended towards a “pick and mix” degree, towards conceding coherence in the name of consumer choice.

Yet in an age in which computers are making it easier and easier to do the number crunching, what is important is the ability to see the broad picture — to ask the questions that matter, and to be able to interpret the results intelligently. Technology has opened the gates to knowledge without frontiers; the students of the future will be well able to find information on anything when they want it, through computers which will direct them to massive quantities of information, any time, in any place they may be. Students will have access to many learning locations, not one. Given that future situation, our job more than ever must be to explain, to help students develop a sense of judgement, to assist them develop their full potential, to get them to think creatively and ask questions that are worthwhile. And none of those things can properly be done through the “bite-size chunk” approach to knowledge: none will be achieved by emphasising what managers and government can easily measure. It is remarkable that our business and political masters, who talk of the need for “flexible” and “innovative” workers, nevertheless encourage the very methods which inhibit the development of such qualities.

What we have seen, then, is that the university has been enfeebled by chronic underfunding, and misdirected by a wholly inappropriate model. Taken together, these amount to a

### **Fundamental attack on the nature and function of the university**

Universities exist to educate people in a community of scholars seeking to pursue truth and knowledge in a cooperative environment free of interference from politicians and vested interests. They imply interlinked concepts of scholarly research, inspiring teaching, academic freedom and liberal education. The purpose of universities is to educate people, to make them think. They ought, as New Zealand educationist Jack Shallcrass puts it, “to be places where you are able

to reflect and refine and see what other people have experienced.”<sup>23</sup> Universities do not exist to get students to regurgitate lectures or other material learnt by heart. As Bishop Stubbs (of *Select Charters* fame) said in the last century, in objecting to exam candidates serving up his own lectures, “Do they expect me to drink my own piss and eat my own dung?”<sup>24</sup> Students are not passive empty vessels in which information is simply to be poured.

Nor is education the same thing as the passing of examinations or the gaining of qualifications, although that may be the obviously measurable end product. The 1925 Royal Commission on the Universities in New Zealand was rightly clear about this distinction. New Zealanders, it noted, had excellent opportunities for acquiring degree qualifications (through the University of London), but lacked opportunities for a university education. What is happening today threatens to put the clock back three-quarters of a century, to when the Royal Commission noted the “confusion in the public mind” that existed “between university education and a university degree.”<sup>25</sup>

That is why the NZQA tendency to believe education and training are identical, and its focus on standards-based assessment and on standard transferable packages of knowledge, is so unsuitable for universities. Our prime function is to offer a different sort of learning, one which has broader application.

The pressures of the 1990s are undermining the nature of the university as a community of scholars (and *universitas* means community). The Minister of Education has said that “unnecessary representation” on Council must go;<sup>26</sup> but what is “unnecessary”? Staff representation? Student representation? Both are essential to any idea of community.

As a staff member, I did not choose to enter university life in the 1960s as an employee, nor as a competitor with others for promotion or financial reward. If my primary aim had been money, I would have taken up the partnership I had been offered in a commercial firm. No, I took up a vocation; I came to be a member of a community in pursuit of knowledge. If, as the Minister would, you undermine the sense of community, you will lose vocation and commitment and vision: and the university will be the poorer.

The university community is supposed to be engaged in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, but we find ourselves caught in a web of deceit. The framework for that web has been spun at a political level. Consider the National Party’s 1990 manifesto, for instance. In August

1990 Dr Lockwood Smith, soon to become Minister of Education, released his party's educational policy. What he said was this:

UNDER NATIONAL: Labour's \$1250 fee will be scrapped.

UNDER LABOUR: The tertiary fee will be increased in 1991 by the rate of inflation.

UNDER NATIONAL: Tertiary students' living allowance will no longer be means tested on parents' incomes.

UNDER LABOUR: The means test on parents' incomes will ensure that some tertiary students will receive negligible living allowances.

UNDER NATIONAL: An expanded scholarship scheme will fund post graduate study paying both tuition fees and an enhanced living allowance.

UNDER LABOUR: All post graduate students will pay tuition fees.

Announcing this very generous policy, Dr Smith said:

Students have been taken for a ride by Labour. They promised you wouldn't have to pay more and then hit you with the tertiary fee. National has pledged to scrap the fee. We've done our homework. We've done our sums and we know we can deal with it in our first Budget. It will be gone by the end of next year. We are not making any promises we can't keep.

My future is on the line. I have publicly signed a pledge that [the fee] will be scrapped before the start of the 1992 year.

Given such a statement, and the repeated solemn promises with which it was promulgated around the country, it is quite extraordinary that Smith remains an accredited member of cabinet. It is certainly no good example of public morality to a new generation when statements are made and pledges undertaken without the slightest intent that they be honoured. Far from student fees being scrapped they have risen sharply and steadily through the 1990s. Even the amount of debt simply written off as students are declared bankrupt, die or fail to repay the interest on their loans is due to surpass \$105,000,000 by the year 2000.<sup>27</sup>

Further strands — and they are particularly sticky ones — are added to the web of deceit through the use of “business-speak” language. Business is about competition, about making greater profits than one's competitors. Education is about cooperation: cooperation

between staff and students, cooperation between staff and if necessary between institutions in the best interest of students, cooperation where possible in research. If it is true, as I am led to believe, that a recent memo circulated within the Wellington College of Education has made collaboration with a colleague from elsewhere a dismissible offence, that is a dismal portent for the future. In any case, the whole language of competition implies two things that are anathema to all that universities must stand for.

First, it implies secrecy. At Massey this is shown by the use of part 2 of Agendas to prevent the discussion of things that ought to be in the public arena, on spurious grounds of business sensitivity, even when they are matters of obvious public concern. The practice is all the more objectionable in that the 2-part agendas arise out of the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987 which was intended to provide greater freedom of information in the public domain, not less.<sup>28</sup> Student representatives and the media should have spoken out far more strongly than they have about this denial of the public interest. There is very rarely any justification within the university system for using part 2 other than to protect individuals.

Secondly, competition also implies dressing up and disguising what is happening. Within a competitive framework, it is very difficult to be open publicly about failings, because students may go elsewhere. So universities always stop short of saying they cannot cope; they say instead, “if there are further cuts we may be unable to cope,” or, “if there are further cuts the standard of our degrees may be undermined.” I believe that our educational standards have already *been* compromised. But I cannot prove it, because true education cannot ultimately be measured, and it will always be possible to fudge the statistics. Universities and departments can easily learn to comply and play the quality assurance game; simplistic quantitative performance indicators will mostly produce misleading results. For instance, the second report of the Australian Federal Government’s quality audit team on its quality assurance program praised the universities for their “improved standards” and the “attitudinal and procedural change” that had recently taken place in the higher educational system.<sup>29</sup> But had standards actually improved, in a remarkably short period of time? Or was the apparent improvement just the result of the “procedural change”?

It is a simple enough matter to suggest that standards are improving; all that is needed is a devaluation of assessment grades. But it has

nothing to do with quality, or indeed with education. For the record, the devaluation is occurring, and not only in New Zealand: we are following the American example here as in so many unfortunate experiments being wished on us. Thus at Duke University in 1994, 42% of all grades awarded were A's, and at Stanford the average grade is now A-.<sup>30</sup> So when we at Massey are asked, as in a recent question in our *Guidance for the Assessment of Quality Systems*, "Is the student performance showing that the quality of the teaching ... is continuously improving?"<sup>31</sup>, we need to bear in mind the folly of the question. There is no necessary connection between overall student performance and quality teaching, because students in one year may be of different backgrounds and intelligence and motivation to those in another year — all things that cannot be measured. And yet it would be easy indeed, though wholly unhelpful educationally, to adjust the grades to conform with the implied specification.

The university community should be operating in a cooperative environment free from the interference of politicians and vested interests. This has, since their origins in the Middle Ages, always been the special and necessary privilege of universities, and it is supposed to be enshrined in the 1990 Education Amendment Act: "It is declared to be the intention of Parliament in enacting the provisions of this Act relating to institutions that academic freedom and the autonomy of institutions are to be preserved and enhanced."<sup>32</sup> It is therefore particularly dangerous that, although the state is paying less per student as students have been asked to pay more and more, it is trying to extend its control of what is taught and how the university is administered. The threat behind Lockwood Smith's views on university councils, his push for streamlined councils based on the corporate board-of-directors model,<sup>33</sup> is quite apparent. As the Massey University Chancellor reminded us at graduation in 1995, universities have the right and duty by the 1990 Act "to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions," and to "accept a role as critic and conscience of society."<sup>34</sup> That cannot be achieved if the majority of members of university councils are government appointees: interest in particular social and economic objectives is far too close to any government's heart. Already the Minister is "asking for an indication of proposed council members' "business expertise," and there are signs that the Business Roundtable is being consulted on ministerial appointments to councils.<sup>35</sup>

The universities must have independence to educate students as they choose; this is threatened by the ambitions and obsessive attitude of the NZQA. And they must be able to organise themselves, to explore concepts and pursue knowledge without interference from politicians or vested interests; this is threatened by the Minister.

These threats must be countered. The question is, how best to do it? They are essentially political threats, and need a response at a political level. Massey's response has been to go along with the government line on the grounds that it is better to try to modify from within than to oppose. I believe we have been far too accommodating, and sold short not only ourselves but other universities prepared to mount a more robust defence of our true needs. We have tended to pride ourselves on not being seen as negative, on being "flexible." But there are times when, as Chamberlain found out after Munich in 1938, accommodation is not the answer.

In all this, it is very hard for an individual staff member who is not in a position of authority within the university to have any impact, because one result of the pressures has been the effective destruction of those mechanisms which once allowed some genuine input into the decision-making process. For example, in the 1970s staff at Massey discussed at length the best shape of degrees, how many papers it was appropriate to require students to do. The discussion centred around the right consideration — what was academically desirable. Recently we changed the number, but for purely bureaucratic reasons and with no opportunity at all for academic input. Staff have been disempowered. In one of the faculties of which I am a member, with some 280 members, normal attendance at faculty meetings has reduced to about 17 as staff have voted with their feet against participating in what has become a sham. What is the point in attending meetings to hear what has already been decided? In an institution which should be a community, it is simply insulting.

My personal response to the critical situation confronting us is that I am not prepared merely to continue drawing my salary while New Zealand universities face the effects of a sinking lid policy on an already chronically underfunded service, and I cannot stay with integrity. The wholly inappropriate model being imposed makes it impossible to enjoy the work, and a researcher who is involved not in a 40-hour week but in a life-style commitment needs to enjoy what he or she is doing. A frustrated and demoralised staff is no use to a university.

I find myself in total agreement with the end point of Ruth Butterworth and Nicholas Tarling's recent book *A Shakeup Anyway: Government and the Universities in New Zealand in a Decade of Reform*. The citizen is not just a consumer, and when public activity is privatised on the assumption that that is all he or she is, the very idea of society is undermined.<sup>36</sup> I must oppose the damage being done to society, and specifically to an institution to which I have given my working life, but it is impossible for me to resist it from within the system. That is why I am leaving.

H. A. L. Fisher, well-known for his history of Modern Europe but also Lloyd George's President of the Board of Education, once remarked that "there is always a haunting feeling that learning and scholarship and the literary life can bring content only if linked with some practical form of active service to the community."<sup>37</sup> My active service is to resist as far as I can the damage done by successive Labour and National governments. So I will be doing voluntary work for a political party with the vision, the integrity, and the commitment actually to do something about the situation.

Whatever our own personal answers to the dilemmas before us, we all need to be aware that as a nation, we do not need to go down the path along which the government is propelling us. It would be perfectly possible to take a different route. In Ireland, for instance, the 1995 budget abolished undergraduate tuition fees, and a white paper on education published in Dublin in April 1995 underlined as key principles (1) regard for proper institutional autonomy coupled with appropriate public accountability, and (2) affirmation of the ethos and tradition of the universities, together with changes to reflect the role of universities in modern society.<sup>38</sup> That would be a far more satisfactory path than the plank we are being asked to tread.

## Notes

1. Also from the Open Letter.
2. Memo from Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 14 May 1997.
3. For recent further discussion of some of the issues developed here, see Rob Crozier (ed.), *Troubled Times: academic freedom in New Zealand* (Dunmore Press, 2000).
4. *Financial Times*, 19 April 1995.
5. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 19 May 1995.

6. Massey University Annual Report 1996, p.12.

7. Research submitted to the Todd Committee by Bruce Parr of Auckland.

8. University Grants Committee Review Committee Discussion Paper 4, Academic Staffing, October 1981, recommendation 1, p. 16. At the time of the Final Report, in November 1982, the staff-student ratio in New Zealand was about 1:12.5 (p.10).

9. In 2001, the ratio for History is believed to have slumped to 1:26.

10. Robin Gwynn, 'Tutorials without a Tutor: Encouraging Student-Student Contact at a Distance', *Aspesa Forum 1981 Papers* (1981), 83-94.

11. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 19 May 1995; Massey figures for 1994 (NZ\$453 per effective full-time student).

12. Estimate by the University of Canterbury, *Campus Review*, 16-22 March 1995.

13. *AUS Bulletin*, No. 25, pp. 2-3; *Dominion*, 10 October 1995. Later figures suggest the amount will grow to \$4.6 billion by 2001 and some \$19 billion by 2024 (*Evening Standard*, 2 March 1996). Government research shows that half our students burdened with loans will not repay them until they are 40 years old.

14. House of Representatives *Replies Supplement*: 28 March 1995, No. 95.03, pp. 54-55.

15. See Bruce Parr, *The Tertiary Education Participation Study: an investigation of the plans of seventh formers and their outcomes* (Auckland, 1995).

16. Massey University, SScF 95/15, p. 2.

17. Moreover, it might be added, no business is subjected to the central interference and overhead 'compliance costs' imposed on universities.

18. Alan Barker, 'Standards-based Assessment: the vision and broader factors', in Roger Peddie and Bryan Tuck (eds), *Setting the Standards: issues in assessment for national qualifications* (Dunmore Press, 1995), p. 19.

19. *Scinet* [New Zealand Association of Scientists Newsletter], April 1992.

20. University processes are and have long been evaluated through tutorial participation, laboratory notes and the like. But the focus on *measuring* and *outputs* is quite unhelpful.

21. *Dominion*, 28 October 1995, p. 7.

22. *Campus Review*, 16-22 March 1995. Unfortunately, there has been no sign of improvement in this critical aspect following the change of government in 1999.

23. Neville Glasgow, *Directions: New Zealanders explore the meaning of life* (Shoal Bay Press, Christchurch, 1995), p. 162.

24. *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 September 1995, p.10.

25. *Report of Royal Commission on University Education in New Zealand* (Government Printer, Wellington, 1925), pp. 11-12.
26. *Campus Review*, 16-22 March 1995.
27. Figure from Parliamentary Question 9136, May 1997.
28. The clauses used to justify the secrecy are normally section 48(i) of this Act and, particularly, section 9(2)(i) of the Official Information Act 1982.
29. *Campus Review*, 16-22 March 1995.
30. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 11 August 1995.
31. P1.5.8, p. 34.
32. Cl.161 (1).
33. *Campus Review*, 16-22 March 1995.
34. 1990 Education Amendment Act, c1.161 (2)(a) and c1.162 (4)(a)(v).
35. *New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee Newsletter*, No. 34 (May 1995), p. 3.
36. Auckland University Press, 1994; p. 251.
37. Quoted in *History*, no. 255 (Feb. 1994), 58.
38. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 19 May 1995.