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**Peasants and presidents: dynamics of change within the university system**

Dr David Shankland, University of Bristol.

**Abstract**

The series of reforms that our universities have undergone in the United Kingdom is so very great that academics such as myself, who are not researchers into the theory of education, but nevertheless interested in the institution of Higher Education itself, should perhaps reflect and contribute in greater fashion to the debates surrounding these changes.

This thought, naturally, is hardly original but it does force us to ask, given the desire to engage, what form should that engagement take? In this presentation, I suggest that one of the reasons that the academic body has been so ineffectual is that it has, and is, going through a process of self-inflicted politicisation that draws largely upon the rhetoric and style of the workers’ unions. In itself a form of ‘dumming-down’, it hardly leaves the academic body in a position to react intelligently to the ‘dumming-down’ that is imposed by central governments.

My second initial proposition is this. Universities in Britain appear Now almost given up the idea that the point of university life is to Develop intellectual freedoms. The absurd destruction of the polytechnic tradition means that now they are supposed to indulge in vocational training at all levels. This, combined with their closeness to government, means that they are in very grave danger of becoming so restricted in their operating procedures that they themselves not longer seek to preserve the traditional framework of the university tradition. This does not mean that universities will disappear, but it does mean that outside some purely technological innovation, they will no longer become able to develop innovative and creative humanitarian research with the same facility that they were able to do throughout the previous two centuries.

Of the very many different reforms and changes with which it may be possible to begin to place these thoughts within the framework of a specific example, I concentrate initially on the question of the appropriate unit of academic research and the occasional desire that universities have evinced to swop from a departmental system to a faculty-based, flatter one, where large accumulations of academics work within a wider setting. I believe that this question is far more significant than simply a reorganisation, but one that goes precisely to the heart of the place of the university within contemporary life in Britain. I conclude with reflections on the wider organisation of universities within Britain, wondering whether its distinctive structure has not in itself contributed toward the way that modern reforms have been instituted.