EDITORIAL

the challenges of the early twenty-first century

A recent paper in *Times Higher Education (THE)*, the main UK magazine for those working in universities and similar institutions, drew attention to the way in which a diversity policy aimed at preventing religious discrimination had provoked controversy at the University of Cambridge:

The university amended its equal opportunities policy to stress that it 'respects religious or philosophical beliefs of all kinds', but Ross Anderson, professor of security engineering at the university, warned that the wording of the policy 'might be interpreted to suggest that Cambridge is to promote the equality of evolution with creationism, or of cosmology with shepherds' tales. We must never accept any duty to promote the equality of truth and falsehood'. (THE, 2009)

In reminding us that the overriding duty underlying the academic calling is the disinterested pursuit of the truth, this episode draws attention to concerns that go to the heart of the remit of a journal such as *EPS*. One such concern is the issue of academic accountability. Many would regard academics' commitment to the pursuit of truth as analogous to the pursuit of justice on the part of judges – who in most jurisdictions are not publicly accountable in the way that legislators are, precisely in order to maximise the likelihood that their decisions deliver justice, uncontaminated by public opinion and popular prejudices. From such a perspective, the extent to which primacy of the pursuit of truth is compromised

when academic activity is subject to external scrutiny of the kind involved in the research assessments described by Schneider (2009) becomes a very pertinent question.

Clearly, in any 'ultimate' sense, the academic calling is necessarily constrained – simply by virtue of the fact that funds are limited and have to be distributed. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a genuine issue of academic freedom involved in tying funding to the fulfilment of externally determined performance criteria such as those involved in the Norwegian and similar research-funding models. For example, they may, as Schneider (2009: 374) notes, 'lead to "homogenisation" of research, discouraging experiments with new approaches and rewarding "safe" research, irrespective of its benefits to society'.

Of course, these issues are ones that have already been debated at length: the briefest of looks at back copies of a publication, such as the *THE*, is enough to establish that. In addition, they are ones on which there is scope for wide disagreement. We continue, as we have done in numerous previous editorials, to draw attention to them because we think they are significant; if they were not, then it would hardly be possible to justify the publication of a journal such as the present one.

If academic work *is* to be carried on within the constraints of government-imposed performance targets, then it behoves the editors of a publication like *EPS* to include papers providing readers – especially those starting out in the

profession – with practical advice on how to make their way in such an environment. For this reason, we are delighted to publish Tony Mason's (2009) paper on approaching publishers, the purpose of the piece being precisely to offer, from the perspective of one with many years' experience in the business, guidance to young academics on turning theses and other manuscripts into publishable books. Likewise, with the piece by Gormley-Heenan and McCartan (2009), this too can be read very much as an 'experience-based' piece offering information of a 'how-to ...' kind – in this case, how to make politics *matter* to undergraduate students of political science.

This has to be an issue of very considerable importance given current funding models: increasingly, funding is tied to *both* recruitment *and* retention (while being increasingly pared in absolute terms be it noted), leaving staff increasingly desperate in their efforts to find ways of reconciling these conflicting demands without compromising their professional integrity by marking less rigorously. The potential dangers in such policies are surely brought out by analogy with the American approach to health care, so ably described by Giorgio Freddi (2009) in his contribution: if higher education and its funding are being increasingly marketised, then it might turn out to be every bit as inefficient and ineffective in producing educated graduates as Freddi shows marketised provision to be in delivering health care in America – total expenditure on health as a percentage of GNP is 15.3 in the US, but averages 9.3 in Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK. The European nations extend medical coverage to 98–100 per cent of the population, whereas in the US 14 per cent are without any coverage whatsoever. European systems do definitely better in terms of life expectancy and are

dramatically better in infant mortality (Freddi, 2009).

Lest our friends on the other side of the Atlantic now begin to suspect us of anti-Americanism, let us at this point remind readers of the numerous papers we have carried comparing Europe and America in another – our own – field, concluding that European political science lags behind political science in the US, and asking what can be done about it. The paper by Harrison and Sáes (2009) assessing the state of political science in the UK might be thought to add grist to this particular mill. As is the case elsewhere in Europe (as we will see in a subsequent issue of this journal), the development of political science as an empirical discipline has been, and to some extent still is, inhibited by the influence of other approaches that, until fairly recently, were able to dominate the study of politics in a way they have never been able to in the US. And though the authors are rightly upbeat about the current state of the discipline in the UK, they also draw attention to its shortcomings – including the glass ceiling faced by women and ethnic minorities, which seriously diminishes research capacity.

The theme of European–American comparisons is continued by our symposium, which also takes us back to our point of departure, through its focus on the role of religion in contemporary politics on both sides of the Atlantic. As the papers by Green (2009), Klausen (2009), Laurence (2009) and Madeley (2009) show, transatlantic comparisons are complex, but what they do make clear is the growing significance in public life in both cases of the claims and demands of organised religious groups of whatever kind. This might worry academics for reasons that are rather similar to what we have said are the reasons why targets and performance-based funding might worry them. Academic life is based on the presupposition that all truth claims, whatever their

substance and by whomsoever pronounced, have exactly the same legitimacy before the altar of disinterested investigation. But organised religion denies this, claiming that, ultimately, access to the truth is dependent upon acceptance of its precepts. Therefore, freedom of thought and tolerance of viewpoints that clash with its teaching are not positions that make any sense within a religious paradigm: to tolerate an alternative point of view is implicitly to accept that one's own might be wanting – which from a religious perspective is blasphemous.

Together, then, what the papers in this issue can be taken as having in common

is that they all speak in various ways to the challenges, deriving from the political and social context of the early twenty-first century, to free exercise of the discipline. Readers will disagree about how significant these challenges are and about how, as political scientists, we should react to them. The role of a journal such as *EPS* is to provide a forum for their discussion so that they may be properly debated. Our role, as editors of the journal, is to encourage readers' contributions. We look forward to receiving them.

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