Newman Lecture – The Idea of a University in the 21st century

Pichette Auditorium, Pembroke College, 24 May 2018

Newman Societies around the world, and indeed this series of lectures in Oxford, commemorate the life and naturally the elegantly written books and essays of Cardinal John Henry Newman (Ox, Trinity and Oriel), beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in Cofton Park, Birmingham in September 2010.

They also remind us of the termination for this University and other universities in Britain, of the world of the Test Acts, 'no Popery' and discrimination against non-Conformists, Catholics and Jews. I imagine that Archbishop Tait (Balliol), Bishop Bagot (Christ Church) and many of their mid-19th century contemporaries, not least the heads of several Oxford colleges, would have been disconcerted or worse that, one day, both the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor of this University would be baptised Roman Catholics. They might have been even more concerned by the fact that this is a matter for the University, and society beyond, of absolutely no consequence whatsoever. These days, there would be more interest in our views on Brexit, a present-day issue of almost theological intensity, with agnostics, traitors and a few martyrs waiting to be burnt at the stake. Don't worry: I won't go there. Brexit is out of bounds today. Phew!

In no particularly confessional spirit, however, I thought that the very name of this lecture should encourage me to set out some thoughts on the state and purposes of universities in Britain, some 160 years after Cardinal Newman gave his famous lectures in Dublin on this subject, lectures that were bound together in his later published and frequently cited book, 'The Idea of a University'. I hope no-one will take offence when I say that this is a book which I place high on my list of those volumes more referenced than read. Look at almost any book on universities, turn to the index, and you will find several references to Newman's long essay.

These usually cover a limited number of the same quotations, so you cannot help wondering whether these 'references have simply migrated from one index to another! I should say straight away that I absolve from that criticism the best recent book that I have read on British universities by David Willetts (Christ Church) and the most entertainingly polemical by Stefan Collini of Cambridge.

While Newman had many interesting things to say about a university education, his long essay is not usually put in its proper context. For example, I read a lecture the other day by someone who should know better about Newman’s ‘Idea of a University’ which included this extraordinary statement: 'Catholic schools used to have low educational standards, yet they produced strong adherents of faith, whereas today their high educational standards tend to produce successful
citizens weak in faith’. Several thoughts immediately spring to mind. First, there would have been outrage if an Imam had said something similar about Islamic schools. Second, I am sure that Catholic teachers think their task is to provide an excellent education and to do this in a Christian environment. I guess that would have been the view of my grandparents. Both head teachers at Catholic schools. Third, Catholic schools are so popular with parents because they strike this balance. (The lecture was not, of course, given by someone with children). I do not, for a moment, think that Newman would have thought it a good idea to be careless about the quality of a child’s education, provided he or she learnt the catechism. Sometimes Newman’s arguments are bent like this out of all recognition and they are sometimes disparaged for what are decidedly over-simplified, even skewed interpretations of them.

Newman was writing about what should, in his view, be the purpose of the university he had been asked to establish in Ireland. It was not to be secular, as Sir Robert Peel had hoped it would be when he first suggested its establishment. This was one of several measures to promote the emancipation of Catholics. When Newman gave his lectures, he was not only attempting to define a university which was Catholic, yet also open to all knowledge, he was - this was the background to his academic labours - trying to cope with the anti-Catholic fall-out of the Achilli Libel trial, the divisions in the Irish hierarchy about the whole university project, the personal management of some pretty high-maintenance Oratorian colleagues (just think about Father Faber, for example), and the problems of being an Englishman in Ireland. This lecture inevitably bore the stamp of a 19th century Oxford education, both good and bad. We should not forget the strangle-hold which Oxford and Cambridge exerted as long as they could over the setting up and development of other universities.

Newman’s rebuke to those who attacked the idea of a liberal education has often been unfairly exaggerated by critics to suggest a hostility to any professional or technical training at a university, a point to which I shall return. In addition, ‘The Idea of a University’ has not been sufficiently recognised as (what Ian Kerr, Newman’s biographer, calls) a ‘more or less covert attack’ on ‘the narrow dogmatism of a defensive clerical Catholicism’. I want to draw on one or two of Newman’s arguments, while certainly not thinking that his essay provides the template for a 21st century university. What he does still give us are the arguments for an unconstrained and uninhibited pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Too few do that today, and I cannot think of anyone who does it with such literary grace.

About twenty years ago, the commentator and broadcaster, Fareed Zakaria, wrote an essay (which was turned into a book) called ‘Liberal Democracy’. Zakaria’s argument was simple, but horribly accurate as a prediction. He was writing within ten years of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with it the
collapse of Russia's European empire. We had all celebrated what seemed to be the triumph of democracy and capitalism. Authoritarians had lost hands down. The future appeared to belong to democracy.

Zakaria pointed out that democracy was simply the way you chose your leaders and that what was most celebrated in Europe and North America was liberal democracy. The notion that a good and open society was just based on the ballot box and the polling booth was nonsense. Many authoritarian regimes had been built on an election - with one citizen, one vote, once. Others simply had the Potemkin institutions of a democracy, in practice facades for show. Others, still, had systems which gave all the power to a majority group, which rode rough-shod over minorities. This was what happened in some Balkan countries, and is often the result of government by referendum.

Yet liberal democracies are not simply a matter of giving people a vote. Democracies, as I have just said, suggest the way you choose your leaders. Add liberal values - institutions and norms of behaviour - and you have liberal democracies which go beyond the choice of a government and which define how you actually govern communities. They combine the best of classical traditions - individual freedoms and rights - with constitutionalism and the rule of law. You add Greece to Rome, and lean heavily on Aristotle.

The Founding Fathers of the United States did not think they were establishing a democracy, but a constitutional republic, the checks and balances of which would make it difficult to produce an authoritarian ruler - a Hanoverian king or a corrupt, populist huckster.

In a liberal democracy, elections take place in a community where there are institutions and rules which safeguard individuals and minorities; they mediate or channel the popular will. These institutions and values - the hardware and software - include the rule of law, independent courts, due process, freedom of speech, worship and assembly, and vibrant civil society including universities. The behaviour of politicians in a liberal democracy respects the right of others to disagree with them, refrains from bending the law to attack critics and opponents, respects minorities, and values a free press and autonomous universities that decide for themselves how and what they teach and research. It might be recalled that Thomas Jefferson thought that a liberal education was good for democracy.

In his book, Zakaria expressed his concern that some of the foundations of liberal democracy were already being eroded; the safety barriers of freedom were being taken down. This has, alas, happened at an accelerating pace. Larry Diamond, who charts these developments, reckons that 25 or more countries have turned their backs on liberal democracy since 2000. Newspaper columns
and book titles are full of gloomy forecasts of the decline in western liberal values and increasing authoritarianism as the case for liberal democracies is shredded by economic failure and social inequity, by the effects of the Internet on both identity politics and the traditional media, by the undermining of civic institutions, and by a decline in the self-confident assertion of liberal values.

Among the most important institutions in free societies are autonomous universities. That is why authoritarian leaders and governments attack them. In China, President Xi Jinping has purged universities, clamping down on free expression and research, even recently seeking to stamp out students’ protests against sexual harassment. He has said that universities should be party ‘strongholds’ with the ‘sacred mission’ of helping students ‘to improve in ideological quality [and] political awareness’. In Turkey, President Erdogan’s assault on his political critics and opponents has included a crack-down on universities, causing anxiety about the Islamisation of campuses and the cutting of their links with foreign academics. Hungary’s Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, an alumnus of this university where he studied at Pembroke College on a Soros scholarship, has openly expressed irredentist Islamophobic support for illiberal democracy. He has attacked the Central European University, founded with financial help from the same George Soros who helped pay for his education here.

It is, of course, a considerable distance from these blatant assaults on the academy to the sniping, carping and querying of the good faith and integrity of universities in America and even our own country: Erdogan and Orban are in a completely different league to these critics of university autonomy and the values of a liberal education. There is, however, a growing tendency to question some of the fundamentals of university education: for example, self-governing independence in teaching and research and the commitment to evidence and fact-based argument. We have also witnessed an assault on science and the scientific method and a persistent and growing tendency to regard universities and their central mission as part of a liberal conspiracy directed against the majority of the community. In Britain, the fact that seventy-five percent of those with a university education – and probably a higher figure among the university-educated young – voted in the 2016 Referendum to remain in the EU must, of course, be the result (so suggest those who hunt avidly for traitors and ‘enemies of the people’) of warped and propagandising teaching and curriculums. We need today to speak out for the role of universities as bulwarks of liberal democracy. If we do not ourselves do that in universities, it is unlikely that anyone else will do the job for us.

There has recently been a suggestion, backed up by box-ticking exercises, that British universities have less academic freedom than any others in the European Union. Stefan Collini latched on to this in an article in the Guardian. I am hugely sensitive about government meddling in our universities. I
would prefer our governments to make a better fist of their principal tasks, not meddle in
universities which do pretty well left alone. But the Collini argument is ill-judged and seems to
depend a good deal on whether countries have written constitutions or not. The idea, for example,
that Hungary has more autonomous universities than us is absurd. On the other hand, a much more
realistic study by the European University Association, suggested that academics in the UK had more
autonomy than their counterparts in other European countries, thanks to the high levels of
organisational freedom and independence in recruiting staff – and, I would add, freedom over
admissions. Having visited and spoken at many European universities, this would certainly match my
experience. So we are far from perfect, but better than most others in Europe.

The issue of autonomy is not, in fact, the present fulcrum of the debate on universities. Most of the
arguments seem to concentrate on how and how much universities are funded, and - almost in
passing - the purposes for which they spend these resources. We are about to traverse this terrain
once more with the Government enquiry into student fees and related issues. I shall begin by
stating the blindingly obvious, which determines the parameters of any enquiry, in the past, today,
or in the future. Unless universities strike oil beneath their quadrangles, there are only four ways of
funding them. They can raise their income from taxpayers, from students, from research or from
endowments. In Britain, the contribution from taxpayers, as a proportion of GDP, is lower than in
many of our competitors.

The welcome expansion of universities in Britain after the Robbins Report in 1963 was funded by
reducing the spending per head of those being educated. Public expenditure on universities was
never given the same priority as spending on schools, not least spending on early-years education.
At the other end of education, spending on 16-18 year olds, especially in further education colleges,
has been curtailed so that it is now at a similar level to the figure 30 years ago. In passing, I note
that if we were as concerned about the low productivity in Britain as we should be, we would be up
in arms about the fall in spending on 16-18 year olds and on further education colleges.

As for universities, there have been real terms reductions in the public resources provided to
universities in 18 of the past 25 years. This has inevitably caused a real squeeze on university
salaries, described charmingly by the Treasury as part of the increase in university productivity! This
undoubtedly contributed to the storm over pensions. I hope the problem can be sorted out this
summer. The long-run cost to this government of higher education, that is the difference between
up-front spending and the expected repayment of student loans by graduates, has fallen by one
third in six years.
As direct taxpayer support for universities has fallen, a growing share of higher education costs has been carried by student fees and income contingent loans. The view of the OECD is that this is a sustainable system that is probably fair (not least as between more and less academically able young women and men) and certainly efficient. It does not appear to deter those from less well-off backgrounds from going to university; comparisons with Scotland, where there are no fees, support this argument. The system is not perfect. Turning maintenance grants into loans has been a big mistake and it is wrong to apply an usurious interest rate to loans.

The scale of fees – mainly as a result of public spending constraints - is not caused by senior salaries; a populist headline. Nor (my personal bet) is the system going to be scrapped and replaced by public grants by any government of any political colour, whatever promises are made. To do this would either require huge cuts in the universities' budgets, or a national economic miracle sustained by years of unprecedented growth in our GDP. Dream on? Moreover, if that were (improbably) to happen, other priorities, like paying for the NHS would be ahead of universities in the queue for more expenditure. There is a huge difference between the real world grind of government spending rounds, under both left and right wing administrations, and soap-box oratory through a loud-hailer. My guess is that most students understand this very well.

There are plainly utilitarian arguments for spending on education at every level, though I doubt whether there is the sort of umbilical relationship between expenditure on students, colleges and universities and levels of economic growth that is sometimes claimed. But there is plenty of evidence that learning and training do have a role in economic development, not least when girls and young women are given greater educational opportunities. So when political leaders strut their stuff about the importance of creating a knowledge-based economy, how can we do other than concur? Who, after all, advocates working for the establishment of an ignorance-based economy, though I suppose that one can inadvertently stumble into one?

The fact that we are often swept along by other risible arguments about this or that effect of education on GDP should not encourage us to dismiss out of hand these economic claims. Indeed, while they are not the only reason for investing in learning, they are a pretty important one and are directly relevant to the university's roles in safeguarding liberal democracy. After all, populism is frequently engendered by economic marginalisation, itself created by the redundancy of former skills and the failure to attain new ones. Globalisation requires changes to meet competition and this in turn entails raising the quality of what is taught in schools, work places and colleges. It is worth noting, in looking at the political consequences of the left-behind communities in the United
States, that Americans spend one sixth of the OECD average amount devoted to labour market re-training.

But what, you may ask, does training for skills, vocations or professions have to do with universities? Did not Newman himself argue that the emphasis on the core importance of a liberal education at universities meant that there was no place for sciences or for professional training? No, in fact he did not. That was not what he argued nor what he practised in his efforts to establish the new university in Ireland.

A liberal education had an idealistic purpose, but the way to achieve this had to be practical and practicable. Whilst noting that the humanities, theology for example, and science lived in different domains and needed to be kept in balance, they intersected in any search for knowledge and the pursuit of learning. While the objective of a university was to impart knowledge, he did not want everything except the liberal arts to be excluded. Taking the example which he knew best, Newman noted that there was a difference between theological training (for example in a seminary) and a theological education in a university.

Training, or vocationalism, was grounded in general learning and comprehension.

These distinctions are, I suppose, a pretty good argument for the sort of tripartite, hierarchical system of higher education established in California by Clark Kerr, running from free community colleges through state universities to research intensive universities with easy transfer between the three different sorts of institution. Our own system, not least because of its early domination by Oxbridge, and much later the ending of the binary distinction between universities and polytechnics, has made this interaction more difficult. But some universities have sought to bridge these divides, for example with the partnership at Sheffield with apprentice training. At our own university, I seem to recall that the debates years ago about the establishment of a (now very successful) Business School, reflected the sense that such an institution would cross the red line between what was academic and what was professional or vocational. That is a debate long since laid to rest.

So what universities offer is germane to attempts to promote what the French would doubtless call social solidarity, through the improvements of the job and remuneration prospects of those whose life chances have been blighted by generational change in industry. That in turn, to rehearse one of President Trump’s favourite metaphors, would help to drain the swamp in which populism and hostility to liberal values and institutions flourish.

This does not validate the rather chilling argument of the Chairman of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education that ‘the sole purpose’ of higher education was to give young people the
more developed skills that would earn them bigger pay packets. Nor is it a justification for another flawed utilitarian argument that research (and even teaching) at universities should be funded by government primarily to meet their centrally determined priorities for economic growth.

What first of the question of learning and teaching? For Newman, a university was – in his lyrical phrase – a place where 'inquiry is pushed forward ..., discoveries verified and perfected ..., error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge'. A university served the present by helping us to understand the past and preserve the best of it; it served the future by shaping the citizens, who could help create it, by passing on a legacy both of knowledge and of civic commitment and attainment. Economic usefulness might be a by-product of these purposes. But universities are different from factories or vocational institutions; they have laboratories, but are more than laboratories. They are, as I have argued, a pillar of liberal civilisation and order, not primarily agents of GDP growth. They are usually more likely to contribute to that utilitarian goal when their liberal purposes are understood.

For some, this traditional idea of the university – for example, as acknowledged by Newman and Humboldt in Germany – is so much old hat; universities are apparently being 'MOOCed' out of any 21st century relevance. Now, for a start, we should beware prediction. This is true in politics, as we recall the election of President Trump, or the outcome of the EU Referendum campaign here. It is also true in economics where 'black swans' add randomness to the hazards of prediction. And it is true about social and educational developments, like the future of books. Yes, we have moved on from the Gutenberg bible; and yes, e-books have taken a toll on traditional hardbacks and paperbacks. But there are unlikely to be fewer books in future; we will just find them differently. Reading is not passé; it is part of our DNA. Res ipsa loquitur.

So the way in which technology has democratised access to knowledge does not amount to a death sentence for the universities of Heidelberg or Leiden or Louvain or Cambridge. Universities need to adjust the way they operate, making these choices autonomously. What they should not do is to choose, or be pushed into choosing, to change their basic purpose, their core values and attributes in free, plural societies. What exactly are these purposes and values?

In my own view, we pay too little attention to the learning experiences of students, and I fear that this problem may be exacerbated by a simplistic focus on the contribution that on-line resources can make to courses. After all, the aim of pedagogy should not be simply to transfer information. University teachers should get their students to think – to know how to frame the right questions (and the wrong ones), to search for the knowledge that will help them to produce answers, to embrace complexity, to argue rationally, to question and to dare to have their own opinions. Can
we do that without close contact between students and their teachers? Can we do it in systems that fail to insist on good academic performance and that tolerate drift, dragged out courses and high drop-out rates? Can we achieve it without placing a high value on the pedagogic role and insisting on the highest teaching standards? Can we manage it when universities sometimes seem to be mainly in the business of providing the obligatory pre-workplace ticks in the box? School done; university done – now for the job market. Universities are for learning not 'creditentialing'; we should not simply teach for tests. Students are not customers in an academic supermarket.

Newman would have found this idea pretty well incomprehensible. We should expect more of the experience university provides for young people if we want not only a properly skilled graduate workforce, but rounded citizens. We all know the Plutarch quote that ‘the mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled’. How often is that reflected in what we say and do about higher education?

Two things follow from this argument. First, we should want as many young people as possible, who have the ability to benefit from a university education, to be accepted at the most appropriate place of learning for them. The objective should be the same everywhere. But given the different academic strengths and cultures at universities, the attainment levels of would-be students will inevitably differ from one institution to another. This is the issue that provides the most frequent criticism of our own university and of Cambridge. We are two of the greatest universities in the world and because we are ancient and better known than others, we attract criticism that others – like the great London universities – tend to avoid.

Because we are both very good and well-known (worth a newspaper story any day of the week) we are described as elite, like I suppose Manchester City Football Club, or even Chelsea. But to be elite does not mean we are elitist, a word associated with an in-built sense of superiority and membership of a free-masonry of the clever, powerful and rich. That is a silly argument in a country that could do with more elite institutions like, for example, some that we already have: the British Museum, the Royal Society and an uncorrupt, meritocratic, unpolticised Civil Service. What we are not is exclusive. We cannot make good all the failures in British society, like social inequality and (in some parts of the country) inadequate state education. Nevertheless, we have to be a force for social inclusion, an institution that understands this obligation in a meritocracy. We should not be expected to lower our standards or accept as students young men and women who might be uncomfortable with the intellectual demands made on them. No one would thank us for teaching courses on which there were high drop-out rates.
That said, our policy on access needs to be imaginatively proactive so that we can show that Oxford is genuinely ability-rich and means-blind, with a wide, diverse academic community. We do much more about this than we are given credit for. (I note in passing that one or two independent schools which used to criticise us for not taking more of their pupils, now suggest that it may not matter that we take more students these days from state schools since going to Oxbridge is not in any event all that is it cracked up to be. Maybe they prefer American universities with their little tilts towards what is called ‘legacy preference’.)

Our own efforts to promote diversity have grown exponentially over the last few years from the hugely successful UNIQ summer (and for this year, Easter) school, to our Oxprobe digital outreach programmes for 11 to 16 year olds, to targeted outreach programmes to UK students from ethnic backgrounds, to teachers’ awards for those working in state schools who have encouraged their pupils to apply for Oxford, to individual student outreach programmes like those associated with Pembroke, Wadham and University College. Those who want us to show our commitment to inclusiveness are pushing at an open door, provided they don’t want the door to be wide open regardless of the particular talents (not the only talents in life) of those who want to cross the threshold.

So what should we hope, here at Oxford for instance, our students will have learned from a liberal education in every subject from philosophy to physics? What Newman hoped for was that a good university education would produce a gentleman, which sounds these days rather old-fashioned, snobbish and – that word again - elitist. How would we translate the idea for today? It is surely reasonable to assume that if you educate very able young women and men, many of them will aspire to doing responsible jobs and to playing leadership roles in the national and international community. This is, as we know, for many students what actually happens. I do not think it is something of which we should be ashamed. Universities themselves are the most meritocratic part of our education system. Where there are problems in Britain of inadequate social mobility, they tend to lie elsewhere in society. It is not unusual for the cleverest young people in any country to rise to the top after having gone to the most demanding universities. But what values and responsibilities would we hope they had acquired, not because civic leadership is a taught course, but because it is a by-product of academic study at our university? We should not, of course, regard our main task to be to produce generations of (what one of our most distinguished scholars calls) ‘plausible bullshitters’. What we should aspire to is to educate young women and men with a sense of civic responsibility, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and an understanding of how to tell the difference between truth and reason on the one hand and nonsense and mendacity
on the other. This may seem prosaically obvious, but it is a central part of our contribution to the marriage in the outcome of a university education of private and public good.

We should also stand up for liberal values within the academy. If we allow ourselves to be colonised by illiberal political correctness, this will be used against us by people who wish us ill. It follows from what I have said already, that universities should be bastions of freedom in any society: free from government interference in their teaching and research while promoting the clash of ideas. Freedom of speech is fundamental to what universities are, enabling them to sustain a sense of common humanity and to uphold the national tolerance and understanding that underpin any free society. This is what makes universities dangerous to authoritarian governments which seek to stifle the ability to raise and attempt to answer difficult questions.

When some students and teachers in America and in Europe contend that people should not be exposed to ideas with which they disagree, they are plain wrong. No ‘ifs’, no ‘buts’. ‘No platforming’, to use that graceless phrase, is wrong. So too the call for ‘safe spaces’. A university should not be a ‘safe space’. That is oxymoronic. It is true that liberty requires the existence of some limits (decided freely by democratic argument under the rule of law). Some ideas – incitement of racial hatred or political violence, gender hostility and hostility to sexual preferences - are anathema in almost every free society. Universities should be trusted to exercise this degree of control about these matters themselves. But intolerance of debate, of discussion, and of particular branches of scholarship should never be tolerated. As Karl Popper taught us, the only thing of which we should be intolerant is intolerance itself. It is ironic that in Hong Kong and elsewhere students are being pilloried and disciplined for arguing for the very freedoms against which some in the West campaign.

The answer to bad free speech is good free speech. The answer to bad historical research is better historical research. If we wish to apply a calculus of morality to events of the past, it should be based on fact and historical understanding, not on subsuming discussion in today’s majority opinion or what is assumed to be contemporary morality. Consider, for example, the story of our country’s colonial history.

Edmund Burke savaged the Indian Raj. Fortunately, there was no British tabloid press in those days to attack him as anti-British and unpatriotic. I recall, on the other hand, that the former Congress Party Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, found some good things to say, in a speech a few years ago in Oxford, about the decidedly mixed legacy of the British in India. He got into great trouble for doing so when he got back home. I agree with both of them. Should I be ‘no platformed’ as a result? Discuss!
I am, of course, a little biased. I ran what was pretty well the last of Britain's colonies. When I came to hand over sovereignty to China, I made clear that no-one at the end of the 20th century should try to excuse or justify the fact of colonialism. But, equally, some of the things that happened in colonies were good and beneficial. That was certainly true in Hong Kong, a city of refugees many of whom had fled from the effects of totalitarian communism in mainland China. How can it possibly be outrageous to look soberly at this balance? If members of an academic community are thought to behave intolerantly to one another, they are likely to encourage outsiders to behave intolerantly to their own institutions.

To summarise then, being better trained, better educated, benefits students without us needing to look any further. There are naturally other accrued advantages, including (as David Willetts' book has noted) better health and enhanced life expectancy. But I want, finally, to say something about the research role of universities to which those who are taught at them make a significant contribution.

Wilhelm von Humboldt argued that one of the principles on which a university's objectives should be based was unity of teaching and research. They reinforced each other. Not every university has the resources or capability to do very much research. Indeed, one reason why research spending in some American universities is so massively effective is that the Federal Government and other public and private benefactors focus research investment on a very limited number of academies. I would not advocate any government trying to make hard and fast distinctions between those universities in this country who are allowed to do research, and those who cannot. Nor am I in favour of governments trying to determine the research that universities undertake. There are those who argue that universities live in Ivory Towers. In Canada, a few years ago, the Harper Government tried to base policy on this idea. It wanted curiosity driven blue-sky research to be put on one side in favour of work that the government thought might be directly relevant to industry's current requirements. But was it in fact useful? The evidence of a government's ability to make these choices sensibly is not at all compelling. The Commission set up by President Roosevelt to advise on likely innovations in the thirty years after 1937 missed nuclear energy, computers, lasers, jet engines, Xerox, radar, antibiotics, sonar, the genetic code, many pharmaceuticals and so on. To take a more recent example of usefulness, when do you suppose we began to recognise that climate scientists belong to the useful category? Whatever the climate predictions, I prefer blue skies to government committees!

The impact that research makes is not an unreasonable concern for those who fund it. More important is the excellence of the work done, and I doubt the ability of funders to ascertain with
much precision (if at all) the likely outcome of free-ranging academic inquiry. Good research in the sciences answers the ‘whys’ and entrepreneurial innovation provides a bridge to the ‘hows’ of developing technologies and business models. The basic contribution that universities make to innovation is that research; they are not in the first place entrepreneurial motors, though some may prove adept at such activity. But I doubt whether there is a simple model to take off the shelf of the ideal university contribution to discovery and innovation. What is required is an environment which makes this creative process more, not less, likely. Features on this landscape will almost certainly include public investment, tax policies, workforce skills, physical infrastructure, land-use planning, and access to talent from other countries. It helps, of course, to add to that North California’s climate! But I doubt the ability to re-create exact replicas of Silicon Valley, without begrudging those who think it worth making the occasional study visit there.

What will not work, in my view, is to try to constrain scholarly inquiry, and to direct it to those areas which governments believe most likely to give swift economic results.

I have left to last a question that would have been given short shrift by Cardinal Newman, if indeed he had felt it necessary to give it any shrift at all. Why bother, some ask, to study and research the humanities? Why do I cherish the work at this university of all those academics whose work on literature, history, music, philosophy, classics, theology, foreign languages and so on does not obviously add to British capacity to innovate, to our national productivity or our GDP?

The answer is simple. We must support the humanities because we are human. Because the humanities help to answer the question of why we need universities at all. Because they provide us with a fuller understanding of our world and of one another. Because they enable us to think creatively and critically. Because, as Newman would have argued, they inform our moral sense. Because they teach us to love jazz and Beethoven, Raphael and Cézanne, a Shakespeare sonnet and a Flaubert novel. Because they teach us about life and beauty and love and death.

I am sure that a few of our students of the humanities – and others, too – will read Cardinal Newman (the ‘Apologia’ as well as the ‘Idea of a University’) and that this will encourage them and those who teach them to speak up and defend the liberal values which universities must continue to assert. It is not alarmist to point out that in a world of growing authoritarianism, when liberal institutions and norms are under threat, we are in the front line. We may not need to wave placards or build barricades. But we should certainly be on our guard and pretty vocal about it too, both in Britain and (as a great world university) abroad too. No one else will do the job for us.

Chris Patten