

IN THE PUBLIC EYE

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DR. ALBERT E. SLOMAN interviewed by GEORGE SCOTT

OFF TRANSMISSION: 23rd May, 1968.

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ANNOUNCER: In the 1963 Reith Lectures, A University In The Making, Dr. Albert E. Sloman, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex, put forward his ideals for the design of a modern university. During the past two weeks, he has become involved in an argument about discipline in the University, and this week as the speaker In The Public Eye, he talks to George Scott about his view of the dispute, and how it affects the kind of university he hopes to see emerging. The interview was recorded this morning.

INT: Dr. Sloman, your action in suspending three students provoked quite a row here at the University of Essex. Do you feel now you were wrong in doing so?

SLOMAN: No, I don't - I feel very strongly that the University should have acted, and had to act in the circumstances at the time. I think, as always in these things, one would have played things rather differently with hindsight, but I'm quite convinced that faced with that situation, assuming I had the courage to do it, I would have done the same thing again.

INT: You would still do it by the same means of summary jurisdiction without offering the students themselves a hearing without offering the right of..of appeal?

SLOMAN: Well, this raises an important question and if you wish, I could explain why..why I did it this way. The University does have established disciplinary procedures, and I think that these procedures are, as universities go, liberal procedures. They involve all members of the university, that is, students and staff - there is a

Disciplinary Committee of five, with two students and three members of staff - there is an Appeal Committee, with one student and one member of staff, and I'm Chairman of that Committee. The student is given an opportunity of knowing exactly what the charge is, of being legally represented, of having, calling witnesses. He has the right of appeal and so forth. Now this is the instrument which I would like to have used and which, in normal circumstances, would have been used. The difficulty was that the definition of breach of discipline did not include disrupting a lecture. I was faced therefore with taking no action, or taking action summarily, and I was so convinced that freedom of expression is an essential constituent of an academic society and this was an infringement of freedom of speech that I felt I had to take action.

INT: Yes, I think we ought, in fairness to you, to spell out briefly the..the incident which provoked this action on your behalf.

SLOMAN: I...I must be careful here because, of course, there is a Committee of Enquiry which is looking at these incidents, but the facts as I know them are that Dr.T.D.Inch, of the Chemical Defence Experimental Establishment at Porton Down, was invited to the University by the University Chemical Society to give a lecture, the advertised subject of that lecture was "Chemical and Biological Properties of Toxic Chemicals". The fact is that Dr.Inch did not give the lecture. He didn't begin to give his lecture. Now, I acted because, in my view, he was prevented from giving the lecture, but the Senate now has to act and it will, of course, take into account the report of the Committee of Enquiry.

INT: In plain terms, as far as the outsider sees it, you have now been forced to withdraw those suspensions, to undo your action.

SLOMAN: Oh, I'm sorry, that is not a statement of fact. The Vice-Chancellor can take action - I would hope that Vice-Chancellors would not have to act in the way I did, but I've explained why I thought it necessary, but in fact, the judgment on the students is made by the Senate. A Vice-Chancellor in this University can only exclude a student

for the period between two meetings of Senate, so when the Senate of this University had had its second meeting, automatically the suspensions, the exclusions terminated. The matter is now in the hands of the Senate, and it, quite rightly in my view, has set up a Committee of Enquiry which will look at the events which took place, it will, on the basis of the report of that enquiry, decide what action it should take.

INT: Given hindsight, how differently would you have acted?

SLOMAN: Given hindsight, we would have included disrupting a lecture, or an infringement of freedom of speech within the definition of breach of discipline.

INT: Do you feel now that the ideals which you set forward in the 1963 Reith Lectures, including a very much greater degree of responsibility for students in the running of the University, greater participation, that those ideals, your respect for them, has been diminished by what has happened here?

SLOMAN: Not at all, I think on the contrary - I think I now feel even more strongly about those ideals. 'A university, of course, must always be ^{reviewing} ~~re-evaluating~~ its own organisation and I hope that this University is constantly doing this and certainly after a crisis of this kind it will look at every aspect of the University. But I do feel very strongly indeed that the idea of a single academic community, that is a community which consists of students as well as staff and which involves students as well as staff in those decisions which are appropriate for students and staff, I feel as strongly as ever about this ideal, and I think that there is a very good chance that we shall achieve it in this University.

INT: You have deliberately got a very young staff here, I believe. According to all the reports on this particular incident, the majority of that staff have, in fact, been in sympathy with the students on this issue. Do you feel isolated from your staff as a result of that?

SLOMAN: Two points. You say we have deliberately a young staff - we didn't set out deliberately to appoint young staff. We

set out deliberately to get the best staff. If they turn out to be staff who are young, well then this is the way it's gone. I would prefer not to comment on your remark about the percentage of staff who have supported my action and those that have not, because there have been many different assessments of this, and it's a ^{very} personal assessment. I can only say that I've had the support of my Senate, I did, of course, consult with my senior colleagues before I took the action which I took, and in my view, the great majority of students and staff in this University would support any Vice-Chancellor who acted in the name of freedom ~~in~~ expression.

INT: Now, again, taking ^{it} from the outside, there is an impression, I suppose inevitably as a result of this, that something has gone wrong here at this University, that the high hopes with which you set out have somehow been frustrated or disappointed. Is this a superficial incident, or is there something deeper?

SLOMAN: I would take the view that this would have been a very serious crisis, and would be a very serious crisis if the University were split down the middle. I don't myself see it that way. I think that in fact there is a remarkable solidarity in the University and has been, in fact, during the crisis, a great many of my colleagues who - as I've said - would, I believe, have not hesitated to support me in the defence of freedom of expression have been concerned about the fact that I took summary action. But I don't - I don't myself share the pessimism of those who say that the University has been through a crisis and will not be the same again. I think we can learn a great deal from this and I would have thought that we may well emerge from this crisis a much stronger university.

INT: There has been, rising out of this, a good deal of discussion about how students should be disciplined, whether they should be subject to university discipline, or on all accounts, subject to the normal civil laws. What is your own view on this?

SLOMAN: I think there are difficulties about saying that

students should be subject only to penalties by the police. I think that a..an academic society must have a code of con..conduct and, in my view, it must be a code of conduct which is acceptable to all members of the society. This is why I feel very strongly that students must be involved in drawing up that code of conduct and indeed involved in seeing when there is a breach of ..of that conduct - a breach of discipline that suitable action is taken.

INT: But you think here that the students could have a greater degree of responsibility for administering themselves, for imposing their own discipline upon their fellows?

SLOMAN: They already have a good deal of - of..of..of freedom here - one of the basic points about the University of Essex is that as far as possible, the students should accept responsibility. In my view, this is the only effective way of running a university - I don't think that you can any longer assume that ^{draconian}...chonian rules are either effective, or the right answer. So I'm in favour of involving students as much as possible in this area, and indeed so far they have been involved. They haven't hitherto in this University, had much to say on the academic side. Long before the Inch incident we had, in fact, started discussions about this and we are actively engaged in these discussions now. This is the way in which a student, for example, should be able to comment on the courses which he's taking, the kind of examinations which he has and so on. These academic matters, on the whole, have been kept separate so far in this University, and the students have not had much say here. We've started on this - there are now departmental staff/student liaison committees - these are going extremely well - and we are looking at other ways in which we can involve the students.

INT: But in terms of arranging the academic courses here, who must have the last word?

SLOMAN: My person view is that on the academic side, there are areas which must be exclusively the responsibility of the staff. I'm thinking about ^{ad}missions, examinations, appointment of staff, commission of staff - but I think there are ways in which students can be involved in

academic matters. I think, for example, we can gain a great deal from the comments which students make on their courses, on the form that examinations take, and without saying that they should be the people who decide, I think a university can profit by encouraging the comments of students in this area. And this, on the whole, is pretty new in this country.

INT: You have been criticised for your views that universities nowadays must be run much more in accord with what you call national needs.

SLOMAN: This is a difficult point. A university must, of course, be concerned with the discovery of truth. In my view, however, it is no longer practical to say that a university is simply concerned with the training of minds. My personal view is that universities will gain a great deal from the role - a new role of the University Grants Committee. I think it has a national view which the individual universities do not have - I doubt whether we can talk any longer about the autonomy of universities. But there are areas where a university, in my view, must be totally independent. I think it would be intolerable, certainly in this country, if some outside body were to tell a university what student it should admit, were to tell the university what member of staff it should appoint, or indeed were to tell the university that a particular member of staff ought not to be allowed to continue as a member of that university. This seems to me to be an area where a university should be totally independent. On the other hand, I don't think any longer that it's any longer practical for a university to claim the right to put on any subject it wishes to do. A clear example would be if a university said it would put on - have a medical school. Clearly someone has got to look at the medical provision for the country as a whole.

INT: Doesn't this presuppose that you accept that the kind of society we have is the right kind of society?

SLOMAN: I would hope it does not. I would feel, for example, that it would be shown that there is a national need for

people trained, say, in electronics, or certain aspects of physics, or certain aspects of mathematics, and I would hope that universities would respond to that need. Indeed, universities in this country have been very ready to respond to national needs of this kind. But, of course, a..a university consists not only of ..of the natural sciences, it consists of/^{the}social sciences, and the humanities, and here there is no clearly-defined national need, unless it's a need for people who are trained to ask questions, to dissent.

INT: What kind of characteristics would you like somebody leaving Essex University to possess?

SLOMAN: Oh, in a single word, independence - intellectual independence, a person who can make up his own mind, who can think clearly and personal independence, a person who has learned to live responsibly, who has developed a sense of ...of self-responsibility in the university-the whole personal side of the university, the life of the university outside the class-room is based on this principle that a..a student will learn self-responsibility.

INT: Would you say that you've found the work of a Vice-Chancellor disappoint compared with what one would think of as the more creative life of a teacher?

SLOMAN: I wouldn't put it that way. I would say, and say very frankly that I miss teaching - I miss it more than I can say, and I also miss the opportunity of going on with my research, but one goes into this job, I hope, with...with one's eyes open, and there.. there are other advantages. I have been involved in building up a university from scratch and this is enormously thrilling, it's very exacting. Despite what's happened in the last week, in the last fortnight I am very optimistic about it.....

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I think that we have built up an academic community here which is peculiar to Essex. I think that the staff here have great distinction.

INT: Why do you think you were picked out from so many others to become the Vice-Chancellor?

SLOMAN: I haven't the faintest idea.

INT: What qualities do you think distinguish you from other people?

SLOMAN: Oh again, this is a very difficult question for me to answer. One of the problems about the appointment of Vice-Chancellor is that since on the whole it's felt (I think this is true) that they should be academic people, they take a job which is an administrative job and of course they haven't really had much experience, so you are really buying a pig in a poke with a Vice-Chancellor and you just have to hope, I think, that he turns out to have certain administrative qualities.

INT: You fought in the war as an ~~ant~~^{night} fighter pilot, I believe, and according to the record books it would appear that it wasn't until after the war that you really started on your academic career. Now it seems unlikely that somebody who has enjoyed a war - enjoy may not be the word - as a...a fighter pilot, should turn to university life.

SLOMAN: Well my position was simply that I went to the university at the beginning of the war. I there became far more interested in flying than in my academic work, and I decided, in fact, to become a pilot. I spent the war as a pilot, but immediately after the war returned to university, and was then persuaded to work for a research degree. Subsequently I was appointed to a post in the University of California and I'm afraid that I have kept in academic life ever since.

INT: You say afraid. Is that just a man..mannerism or does it mean something more?

SLOMAN: No..LAUGH.. Quite frankly when I went to..went up..

went up to university just before the war, I had no clear idea of what I wanted to..to be, and to do, and occasionally since, I suppose it's not unnatural, one's wondered whether perhaps one would not have preferred another career, but I have no regrets whatsoever.

INT: One of the places to which your career has taken you is the University of California which, in terms of student unrest, has become almost notorious. Now do you see that kind of unrest coming here?

SLOMAN: I would hope not. Incidentally it's rather ironic that Berkeley (✓) has in fact had two periods of student unrest, and I was at Berkeley during the first period, and strangely enough I was involved with a group who protested and protested very loudly when the authorities in California, in 1946, were unwilling to admit certain speakers onto the campus, so I've been involved with the principle of freedom of speech for quite a long time. To answer your question, I think one of the real dangers - and I would emphasise this - I think one of the real dangers about the publicity which has been given to student unrest, outside this country, and indeed within this country, is that a view of students is growing up in this country which I think is ~~false~~^{false}. The great ^{are,} majority of students/I am absolutely convinced, sensible and moderate people. Certainly, the great majority of students in this university are sensible and moderate. I think there is only a small - it may even be a tiny ~~minority~~^{minority} - who are irresponsible. On the other hand, students are and always have been idealist and what happens during crises is that, or what can happen, is that the moderate element are swung over to the viewpoint of the extremist, and I think it's extremely important - first, that the general public should know that the great majority of students are sensible and moderate and extremely important that university should

try to involve these sensible and moderate students as far as is possible in the activities of the university, in decision-making, in..certainly in certain areas, it should take them into their confidence and should make them feel that they are part of a single academic community.

INT: But what do you think it is in the present atmosphere which is causing students to behave in this way? Is it something completely outside the university life? Is it some other factor which is imposing itself upon them and causing this reaction?

SLOMAN: I can only give you my own opinion. Students have always been naturalistic and idealist. They feel, they have always felt strongly, and they feel strongly now about national issues. They feel strongly about racial prejudice. They feel strongly about poverty. They feel strongly about germ warfare. I think students have always had issues with which they've associated themselves, and it's quite right that they should and universities should not deplore this. They should deplore it if this were not so. The difficulty, I think, is that a great number of students who do feel very strongly about these issues feel, at the same time, that there is nothing they can do about it. I think for whatever reason they feel that no political party is putting the viewpoint, their viewpoint, and some, at least, would argue, that the only way in which they can call attention to the strength of their feeling, about these issues, is to behave in a way which is so disruptive that something dramatic has to happen.

INT: Would you say there was anything new in the resort to violence by students?

SLOMAN: This is new for me, and ^{as} ~~these~~ I've said, I think it's only a very tiny minority who would wish to resort to violence. I find it very disturbing and very shocking. A university is a place in which you meet argument with argument,

and if un..members of a university resort to..to violence, I think this is death to the university. I don't, myself, see how you can reconcile violence with membership of a university.

INT: What would you say are the views being expressed by those who are practicing violence? What is their motivation?

SLOMAN: I find it very difficult to understand their motivation. It could be, perhaps, that they wish to destroy universities or universities as we've known them. There have been a number of cases in the last few months where speakers have been shouted down or ~~whether~~ ^{where} they have been the victims of violence, and one reaction to this has been for university authorities - very understandably - to say we must not allow a particular speaker to be invited. I find this extraordinary. I can understand it in particular..in a particular case, or at..at a particular time, but speakers - whatever their views - simply must not be intimidated. If universities cannot provide an audience for every kind of view, then, as I have said, I don't think ^{that} they deserve the name of the university, and I, for one, am not interested in being the head of such a university.

INT: But how are you going to achieve this? Of course one sympathises, but the fact is speakers have been intimidated, they have been subject to violent attacks?

SLOMAN: Well I don't want to under-estimate the difficulty of this, but I think a method has got to be found. I think such people have no right to be members of university, and perhaps universities will have to be tougher about this. I think, in any case, it's extremely important, that this view, the whole importance of freedom ~~and~~ ^{of} expression, the concept of freedom ~~and~~ ^{of} expression, should be argued out with students as a whole, so that every student understands what's at stake here, and when an incident like this takes place, that the university authorities can

count on the, not just the co-operation, but the enthusiastic support of students as a whole.

INT: Finally, Dr. Sloman, what do you say to parents, ordinary people you may meet outside the university, who express their anger and impatience as tax-payers, saying, we are paying for this shower, and look at the way they behave?

SLOMAN: I think this is a very understandable reaction. After all, I am a parent myself, and as you might have guessed, I have had a pretty large correspondence in the last few days. I think people outside the university are very disturbed indeed, and this is why I feel very strongly that universities, all the members of universities, staff and student, must see that this is extremely serious, and they must see that activities by a small group, which, in my view, deny the right of an institution to the name of a university, that these activities are not tolerated.

ANNOUNCER: Dr. Albert E. Sloman, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex, was interviewed by George Scott. We shall be announcing in the course of the week the speaker IN THE PUBLIC EYE to whom George Scott will be talking next Thursday.