

CE 10

University of Essex

Department of Sociology
Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex
Tel: Colchester (OCO 6) 5141

From Professor Alasdair MacIntyre

To Committee of Enquiry

Universities exist in order to pursue intellectual enquiry and a condition of such enquiry is that it be pursued critically. At any given time a distinction can be drawn between what is taken to be certainly known and what is taken to be essentially problematic or disputed. But what is thought to belong to the former and what to the latter changes; and change in the direction of a greater grasp of the truth depends on the upholding of a strongly critical attitude, above all to one's own present beliefs. Sceptics and dissenters who are unwilling to be critical or allow others to be critical of their own scepticism and dissent are as likely to paralyse thought as the adherents of orthodoxies. I ~~therefore~~ take the right to freedom of speech in a university to be a more important and a more crucial matter than it is elsewhere in society. For if the right to develop any argument upon any subject-matter so that it may be critically judged and, if possible, refuted is not upheld here, then it is much less likely to be upheld elsewhere. It follows that I accept paragraph (b) of the committee's statement, but also that I have some doubts about (a) and (c). About (a) my doubts may only be a matter of wording. But I would want it to be clear that just as any member or group of members of the university have a right to ask a speaker or to discuss among themselves any subject, so no member or group of members of the university have the right to force anybody to listen to them. About (c) what I am sure of is first that just as to interrupt a chemistry lecture to warn of a fire in the laboratory would be right, so in moments of urgent social crisis the same right would hold (see Rex Warner, The Professor), but we are certainly not now in such a state of crisis; secondly that the university ought neither to admit as moral justification what any individual may conscientiously take to be such - white racists can be conscientious when they justify killing black men - nor to set itself up as a judge on moral issues, deciding which moral justifications are really justifications (universities are not competent in this respect and this view can all too easily be used to justify ~~sexual~~ and political impositions). I conclude that in very rare circumstances the right to freedom of speech may legitimately be interfered with and then ought not to be punished; but that on every other occasion moral considerations should not be allowed as extenuating circumstances. Since Dr. Inch's lecture did not fall within the former class of case, and since on the facts as reported to and by the Tribunal it appears that it was both the intention of

/...over

CE 10 p 2

2

and the effect of the actions of at least some of the demonstrators to prevent Dr. Inch's lecture, I take it that the principles of freedom of speech were seriously violated.

Alasdair MacIntyre

13.3.68
AM/BJW

Alasdair MacIntyre