

NEWS

VICTORY AT SWANSEA

Visitor's Report Reinstates Rebel Lecturers

The three lecturers at the centre of the long-running row over academic standards in the Philosophy Department at University College, Swansea are to be reinstated, following the publication of a 173-page report on the affair by retired High Court judge Sir Michael Davies.

Two years after the publication of the previous report (commissioned by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales), which unequivocally vindicated the lecturers' complaints and condemned the administration of the Swansea MA in the Philosophy of Health Care, the College Council has finally bowed to the inevitable and accepted the return of the rebels: Michael Cohen, Anne Maclean and Colwyn Williamson.

The details of this increasingly Kafkaesque drama, dating back to 1989, were reported in the News sections of *Radical Philosophy* 56-59 as they emerged. Since then, after Ann Maclean's enforced 'resignation' (the third of the dispute), and Cohen's and Williamson's confinement to the limbo of a compulsory leave of absence (served in Rooms 19 & 20 of the college Maintenance Department), the scandal has continued to devour its cast. Although now it is the other side in what the report refers to as this 'war' who are providing the casualties.

Prof. D. Z. Phillips, formerly Head of the Philosophy Department and instigator of the disciplinary measures against the lecturers (a process described by Sir Michael as 'getting his retaliation in first') resigned in May. As did Professor Brian Clarkson, Principal of the College, after losing a libel action brought against him by Cohen and Williamson in March. Clarkson was forced to pay each of the lecturers £1500 in lieu of damages, to pick up the bill for the legal costs of the case, and most damagingly of all, to write a letter of apology to every lecturer at the College withdrawing his allegations.

After the verdict, Clarkson remained defiant, claiming that if he had been the managing director of a company 'those people

would have been up the road the moment they kicked up the fuss they did'. Yet it is precisely this desire to run a university college like a company that is highlighted in the report as the source of the problems:

neither the University of Wales nor the University College of Swansea is a "company" in the profit-making or any other sense. They are academic institutions. ... this has not always been remembered in Swansea.

Nor, one suspects, in quite a few other places. It is for what it has to say about academic freedom and the distinctive character of the university that the report is to be most welcomed. Hopefully, other universities will also take note.

Apart from the behaviour of the various individuals concerned, it is the College procedures which come in for harshest criticism. The report comments on the foolishness of the failure to set up an independent inquiry at an early stage. It notes crucial decisions taken by College officers without the authority of Council (such as that to spend over £27,000 on legal expenses for Professor Phillips). And despite the opinion that the agreement with Anne Maclean was 'probably' valid 'in strict law', Sir Michael was left 'with the distinct feeling that she was not treated with what in all the circumstances a reasonable person would say was Natural Justice'.

So is this, finally, the end of the affair? One might be forgiven for hoping so, but also for having one's doubts. The capacity of the Swansea establishment for what Mao used to call 'protracted' warfare has been amply demonstrated. And as the meetings to negotiate the working conditions of the three lecturers begin (I write in July), the stirring of a last stand by the old guard can already be felt.

Professor Beardsmore, who took over from Phillips as Head of Department, has indicated that he plans to stand by his threat to resign if Williamson is not sacked. Although other threats of resignation, clearly designed to put pressure on Sir Michael's inquiry, are unlikely to be carried out. Meanwhile, Beardsmore and Phillips are trying to organise a petition urging the College Council to reject the findings of the report. They are also said (once again) to be considering recourse to the courts, to seek a judicial review on the grounds that 'no reasonable person' could have written the report. But then 'reasonable person' does not appear to be a concept on which Professors Phillips and Beardsmore have too firm a grasp.

Peter Osborne

Copies of the report are available to anyone who makes a £5 contribution to the copying and mailing costs from: Academic Standards Fighting Fund, Rooms 19 & 20, Maintenance Department, University College of Swansea, Swansea SA2 8PP.

