

# Editorial: Lord Crowther-Hunt

In January 1975 it would not have mattered if Mr J. C. Hunt, Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, and University Lecturer in Politics, had made some foolish remarks about universities and their place in society. But by May 1975 Mr Hunt had moved from politics to Politics, and he is now Lord Crowther-Hunt, Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science, with particular responsibility for higher education. His foolish opinions are therefore also dangerous opinions.

In his speech last May the Minister espoused a philistinism so extreme that he has been suspected of not believing it himself. Those who express this suspicion think that they are defending him when they accuse him of cynicism and dishonesty instead of blindness and folly.

Detailed answers to Lord Crowther-Hunt's detailed suggestions—the abolition of the arts graduate, subject-quotas, man-power planning, differential grants for students of technology—have been given by many critics of his speech. A cogent comment on his underlying principles was written in Australia before he spoke, in these two paragraphs from the Sixth Report of the Universities Commission:

The Commission's commitment to university autonomy reflects much more than a desire to protect the formal status of the universities. Rather it stems from a conviction that universities will in general better achieve their purposes by self-government than by detailed intervention on the part of public authorities. The purposes for which universities are founded and for which society continues to maintain them, include the preservation, transmission and extension of knowledge, the training of highly skilled manpower and the critical evaluation of the society in which we live. No university performs its functions perfectly; and it is not difficult to criticize aspects of university teaching and administration. Nevertheless the Commission is convinced that society is better served if the universities are allowed a wide freedom to determine the manner in which they should develop their activities and carry out their tasks.

In a free society, universities are not expected to bend all their energies towards meeting so-called national objectives which, if not those of a monolithic society, are usually themselves ill-defined or subject to controversy and change. One of the roles of a university in a free society is to be the conscience and critic of that society; such a role cannot be fulfilled if the university is expected to be an arm of government policy. Moreover, universities must prepare their students for life in a world the characteristics of which are necessarily imperfectly foreseen. An institution which geared its activities to known requirements could hardly provide an education appropriate to meet as yet unknown problems