10 The Government of Universities

My dear X,

My very sketchy answers to your questions about staff privileges and duties in universities have prompted you to inquire concerning the structure of government of such bodies—who controls whom, where initiative lies and what body is responsible for interpretation of the constitution and accountability for finance. This is the most difficult question you have yet posed, partly because university constitutions differ, at any rate in detail, so the precise answers to general questions are apt to be misleading; partly because matters of initiative and responsibility are usually so widely diffused that simple description even of any one university or university college is liable to distort the subtleties of interdependence. All that I can do, therefore, without departing from the informality of our correspondence, is to pick out salient questions of policy relating to the different functions involved and to discuss them in a broad way which I hope will be more or less generally applicable. I ought, however, to say at once that the degree of applicability will be very attenuated as regards Oxford and Cambridge because of their unique historical constitutions, and that it has no necessary connection at all with the vast variety of university institutions abroad.

Let me begin by a few observations on the effective head of a typical university, or large university college, the Vice-Chancellor, Principal, Director, Provost or by whatever other designation he is called.

I think it would be generally agreed among those who have had the responsibility of making such appointments, that of all posts connected with university life, this is easily the most difficult to fill nowadays. At earlier periods of which I have no intimate personal experience, this may have been otherwise. The number of vacancies was smaller and the duties were less extensive; and the number of
competent persons who were willing to be considered as candidates was proportionally greater. But, with the increase in the number of university institutions, and the multiplication of administrative functions, the range of suitable and willing candidates is proportionately less. Happy the governing body – and I was chairman of such a one – which is unanimous as regards what it wants and is successful first time in its approaches. I personally do not think that the number of persons who would be competent to discharge the necessary functions has proportionately diminished. But I do think that the burdens are so much greater and the increase in emoluments has been so much less, that fewer persons of the requisite qualifications are available for short-listing. In my opinion we do not pay vice-chancellors enough.

What are these qualifications? It goes without saying that they must include administrative ability in a wide range of connections. But they must also include ability to decentralise. A vice-chancellor who clutters himself up with extensive administrative detail will not have enough time to do the things which he and he alone can do properly, namely the external representation of his institution, the maintenance of quality in senior appointments and, generally speaking, leadership in the evolution of the broader aspects of academic policy.

I do not think it is necessary that the vice-chancellor should have been an academic, in the sense that he himself has made important contributions to the advancement of knowledge or has been outstanding as a teacher though, if such a qualification be combined with administrative ability and the capacity to handle difficult people, as it sometimes is, it is a very fortunate circumstance. But it certainly is an indispensible qualification that he should have a deep understanding of the academic function, both as regards teaching and research. The best administrator in the world will fail in this particular context if he is defective in this respect. The academics should have no justification for looking down upon him as regards this kind of insight; and he himself should not feel that, because of his different background, he has any reserves about the uninhibited discharge of this part of his duties.

It would be a great mistake to conceive of the vice-chancellor as a dictator. The ultimate responsibility for what goes on rests with the governing body, usually called the Court, and the committees to which it devolves its powers, about which there will be more to say later; and the vice-chancellor and his administrative subordinates