CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHO HAS THE POWER?

WHO HAS THE POWER NOW?

Using the governance of higher education as a case study this book has examined the shifting relationship between the state and society in contemporary Britain. Higher education represents an interesting case study because it resides on the very boundary of state and society: universities are supposedly autonomous institutions engaged in teaching and research on terms determined by their academic members but heavily dependent upon the public purse. Furthermore, there is the acceptance of an obligation to fulfil national needs and a recognition of the fact that both the understanding of those needs and the means by which they should be fulfilled will be shaped politically.

The institutional symbolisation of the growing dominance of the state was the replacement under the terms of the 1988 Education Reform Act of the UGC and NAB with the funding councils. Increasingly the UGC may have fulfilled the function of a planning body but it belonged (or at least was perceived as belonging) more to the world of higher education than to the political or bureaucratic structures of the state. Although there has been a higher education story to tell, it is essentially an episode in the unfolding of a wider narrative. In the 1970s the post-war political consensus that had underwritten the governance of Britain broke down in the face of an economic and political crisis of major proportions. The British economy appeared to be in danger of descending into absolute as well as relative decline and the political system seemed incapable of resolving the danger. The path to recovery is a wider story but integral to it is the recognition that there needed to be a restructuring of the funding, delivery and purposes of public policy, of which higher education was but a part.

Within this context education, and more particularly higher education, had an interesting part to play. From the 1980s onwards it is the wider significance of higher education for the knowledge-based economy that comes to the fore. Thus higher education becomes a resource that will enable Britain to compete in a global economy. There is not only the need for technically trained personnel but also a workforce with the appropriate transferable skills. Moreover, as centres of cutting-edge research universities – with the appropriate incentives – could feed into the process of knowledge-transference so that blue skies academic research becomes an applied economic resource. Some have argued that this is more wishful thinking than concrete reality but, regardless, it is has become a central component of the contemporary higher education discourse in Britain.
Drawing upon the work of Christopher Hood this book has argued that the process of change in higher education policy is dependent upon the interaction of a number of key forces:

Economic and political crisis

The generation of new ideas (or dormant ideas find a new lease of life)

The realignment of interests within the policy sectors

The formation of new policies with different policy goals

These are broad descriptive themes that enable complex historical events to be fitted into a convenient organisational framework. But at the centre of this book, as it was in 1994 at the centre of *The State and Higher Education*, is the argument that the process of change has been driven forward by the state. *The State and Higher Education* emphasised the critical role of the state’s central educational apparatus, the then Department of Education and Science, with its ability to orchestrate the new ideological themes, to respond effectively to the changing political context, to liaise more closely with the UGC, and its dissemination (in conjunction with government) of policy proposals.

In *The Governance of British Higher Education: The Struggle for Policy Control* there is an equally strong emphasis upon the state’s efforts to restructure the governance of British higher education in a manner that redraws where higher education lies on the boundary between state and society. But what is now different is the need to incorporate in the equation the hollowing out of the central British state with the governance of higher education in England, Scotland and Wales following separate paths. This is coupled with the increasing fragmentation in England of state responsibility for higher education policy to the point that it is reasonable to query whether the Department for Education and Skills in fact remains the dominant force in shaping the development of English higher education.

But what has become evident is the overwhelming political support for the idea that higher education is essentially an economic resource. Rather than higher education policy being driven forward by one particular department of the state, the evidence points to a synergy of political and bureaucratic forces within particular apparatuses pushing for policy change, and also at times in conflict with other another. Because the boundary between state and society has been redrawn, it does not follow that politics has disappeared and henceforth policy outcomes will be more integrated. Ironically, because of departmental rivalries, enhanced state control may well result in greater rather than less policy confusion.

*The Governance of British Higher Education: The Struggle for Policy Control* besides stressing the importance of the interaction of the political and bureaucratic dimensions of state power in forcing the pace of policy change in higher education has also recognised the complexity of the concepts both of power and of policy-making. Interestingly, although from 1945 onwards British higher education institutions were overwhelming dependent upon the public purse (the state possessed dominant economic power), their development was at best guided (with a light touch) by the state. If any institution could be said to control the development of