

## Trinity seeks special treatment – again!

### *“Trinity seeks exclusion from governance reforms”*

*Trinity College Dublin is seeking private legislation to exclude it from sweeping Government reforms aimed at strengthening the accountability of higher education institutions.*

*In an unpublished submission to Government, it says planned changes threaten to undermine its autonomy, damage its academic standing and end its tradition of “collegiate governance” which has served the college well for over 400 years..... Trinity said it has a distinctive status under law, with laws governing its relationship with the State stretching back to 1592.” (Irish Times 25/3/21 )*

What unmitigated nonsensical arrogance. Have Trinity boffins not noticed that state matters have changed somewhat since 1592? Who is qualified to make a judgement now on “*laws governing its relationship with the State stretching back to 1592*”? It’s surprising they have not suggested that the Privy Council is asked to come back and intervene.

If they are seeking to re-establish “*its relationship with the state*” of 1592 perhaps they should also attempt to exclude themselves from having to pay any taxes or other “*exactions*” as was originally granted them by the Tudor state. That was a nice perk to begin with. Its task then was quite clear – to make Ireland Protestant. It failed.

It was set up as college, which it remains, to be part of a university for Ireland. It failed. It remains a college of a non-existent University. It was expected and should have attained the standing of Oxford and Cambridge colleges but it failed in this also and became ‘*the silent sister*’ because it was so academically hopeless.

It tried to preserve the Penal laws by passing the last one for itself in 1808 to help preserve its ‘*unique status*.’ It considered itself so unique that it asserted the right to defy the laws of the land with its own laws. That is exactly what it is proposing to do now with the government’s proposals. It failed to preserve the Penal Laws.

Its failures were not due to any lack of resources. As well as the start up perk of no taxes etc it was showered with British state support and the main instrument was the land it acquired through the Plantations and confiscations. Beginning with its prime site on the ruins of the Monastery of All Hallows.

It acquired land of 200,000 acres in total, approximately the size of County Louth. And all the rental incomes from these acres through a pyramid of middle men with the usual rack renting that were bred by this system. This helped hide the extent of its lands. Daniel O’Connell was one such middle man.

It got a special deal under the Wyndham Act that gave it 23.9 times the annual rent in compensation and a 12% bonus for good measure. An enormous sum in total and a quite out of the ordinary deal compared with those made with other landowners. And there were many and varied donations to its coffers.

Yet it was an academic failure, a dud, to the extent that there were only 183 students attracted in 1902 because anyone from its ‘catchment area’ rich and serious about an education went to Oxbridge.

The Government decided something had to be done about this and as part of its policy of ‘*killing Home Rule with kindness*’ it proposed a University structure for Ireland in the Bryce report

of 1907 that would have TCD as a constituent college to cater for its Protestant ethos along with UCD for the catholic interest.

The Catholic interest was quite happy and more than keen to be on a level playing field with TCD. But TCD violently opposed it on sectarian grounds. Perish the thought! It was comparing apples and oranges, to put it benignly, being treated the same as Catholics!. The idea was abhorrent and they succeeded in squashing the proposal.

The present objection to the Government plans has the same undertone. We have the right to be responsible only to ourselves – dressed up in the fashionable terminology of collegiality. We are not as others. We are special. Period.

The first real setback came with the Articles of Agreement in 1922. Effectively Lloyd George forgot or ignored any pleadings about their self-importance. He said it had “*escaped his memory*”. And he was not a forgetful man. The Free State did not have any soft spot for it and particularly Fine Gael who was ensconced in UCD and availed of every opportunity to ignore any special pleadings from TCD and promoted UCD. This came to a head in the Coalition after WWII and Fine Gael made it clear that TCD would be treated the same as the other colleges. If that would not satisfy it could fall down for all FG cared.

The Provost, A. J. McConnell, complained that this was literally happening and people were in danger of being injured by falling masonry. So help was needed and he made an appeal to his mutual mathematically minded pen pal, de Valera, and the latter passed the problem on to his Minister for Education, Sean Moylan, who being the kind hearted man he was visited the place with McConnell and with his contractor’s eye appreciated the problem and said that TCD “*could not be allowed to fall down.*”

And as McConnell joyfully recalled, the government money started coming in, the scaffolding went up, year after year and TCD survived thanks to this man, Moylan. He who had put the fear of God into every loyalist in the Dail debate vowing to wipe them all out if necessary if they resumed their war on the Republic and he was quite prepared to die in the effort.

TCD should have a plaque to Moylan. Instead its late star of the History Department, Peter Hart, branded him a bigot in his infamous book on Irish history and was praised to high heaven by a host of TCD luminaries. If Fianna Fail had respect for its history it should make such a plaque part of any negotiations with TCD.

Donagh O’Malley tried to do the sensible things and merge both TCD and UCD but again it did not happen due to TCD’s efforts and delight.

The present government should not repeat the mistakes of the past in their endeavour to have proper accountability by Universities today. They cannot be a law unto themselves. They eagerly take the huge benefit of public sector pensions a few years ago and that alone entitles the government to have them accountable. A few years ago TCD made all its lecturers Professors. No doubt that alone added to the pension bill and the Government’s costs and Trinity should not have the sole authority to do such a thing - which no doubt had unanimous collegiate support.

The idea of TCD having ‘*private legislation*’ for itself should not be tolerated for a moment by any Government worthy of the name of Government.

**Jack Lane, April 2021**