

# THE TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT

March 4, 2010

## LET FREEDOM RING

By **Zoë Corbyn**

**Cary Nelson's latest book considers the dark forces ranged against free speech in the academy. Only collective action can save higher education, the activist and AAUP president tells Zoë Corbyn**

Its cover is intriguing: crystal-clear water surrounding a tiny tropical island on which stands a university tower. It was the publisher's idea, recalls Cary Nelson, who considers the image for his book "absolutely terrific". "I tell people: 'This is the new university - we don't pay very well, but we guarantee an office with an ocean view.'"

NO UNIVERSITY IS AN ISLAND is the 25th book written or edited by Nelson, the 63-year-old Jubilee professor of liberal arts and sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He also happens to be the 49th president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP); he will stand for re-election for a third time this April, and is the odds-on favourite to win.

"It is my attempt to theorise this crisis of higher education," Nelson says of the book, which offers a detailed account of the social, political and cultural forces that he believes are undermining academic freedom.

"I provide people with the tools they need to understand the realities. And I have a vantage point that relatively few people have. Because I am president of the AAUP, the information just flows into me. I get 200 emails a day related to higher education, and I constantly travel to all kinds of different campuses. "There just aren't that many people who are lucky - or burdened - enough to have that perspective."

The book, which incorporates numerous anecdotes drawn from academic environments, including Nelson's own department, is certain to be read attentively in the sector. Nelson may look better suited to fronting an ageing rock band, but he is regarded with reverence both for his scholarship in the field of modern American poetry and his work in support of the academic cause.

The premise of *No University Is an Island* is that scholars' cherished right to speak truth to power, to set their own research and teaching agendas and to voice their opinions is under threat.

It pinpoints 16 current and emerging dangers, from the ethos that sees higher education first and foremost as job training (thus hampering the education of critical thinkers), to institutions' claims that managers must be afforded free rein in the midst of the financial crisis (thus wresting control of universities from scholars). The response of the US Government to terrorism, which has denied some visiting scholars entry visas to the country, has barred academics from engaging; and scientists' research agendas are increasingly falling prey to commercial interests.

But most terrifying of all, Nelson says, is the disappearance of academic tenure. "The position of the AAUP since 1915 has been that job security and academic freedom are linked. You

cannot be intellectually forthright unless you have job security. So now that 70 per cent of the (US academic) workforce doesn't have tenure, that is pretty much a guarantee that their vulnerability is massively increased."

The statistics he cites are stark. In the 30 years between 1975 and 2005, the proportion of US academic faculty members who either had tenure or were on the tenure track fell from two thirds to one third.

"It is the most fundamental change; it has changed the nature of the beast ... and I am worried that the system of higher education we have, in which academic freedom still significantly prevails, will not survive another generation," Nelson says. "I just don't think the system that sustains academic freedom can last without job security."

As AAUP president, he is observing the chilling effects of the shift. These include academics who are so afraid of losing their jobs that they comb their syllabuses to remove controversial material, and more and more institutions where faculty members no longer have control over the design of the curriculum or hiring decisions. "This is not higher education as I think it should be conducted," he says.

One of the most fascinating facets of the book is its account of the AAUP's fight against a campaign to control academics' political speech in the classroom. The campaign has been spearheaded by right-wing activist and writer David Horowitz, who formed the group Students for Academic Freedom and set up the David Horowitz Freedom Centre. Its central argument is that tenured academics in liberal-arts faculties are steamrolling students with their political biases and indoctrinating them with leftist and "un-American" thought. It calls for government intervention to address the

issue.

Although the campaign's force is now greatly diminished, with Horowitz's attempts to introduce legislation in more than 20 states having been defeated largely due to a lack of evidence, Nelson says it has bruised the academy.

At least one institution, Pennsylvania State University, has changed its regulations to allow students to file complaints against political speech in the classroom. There have been more widespread and insidious effects, too, including a reduction in the public's faith in faculty members and a rise in self-censorship.

"The AAUP has been inclined to say we have slain the dragon," Nelson says. "But I think the dragon has left its eggs here and there, and they have hatched in other forms ... A lot of people now back off from saying controversial things to avoid getting themselves into trouble. They don't want to end up in kangaroo courts where universities interrogate their teaching and question whether it is appropriate."

Horowitz's campaign has coincided with Nelson's time at the helm of the AAUP. He took office in June 2006 just as it was gathering steam and, despite the reservations of some AAUP members, he threw himself into meeting the criticisms head-on, publicly debating with Horowitz in front of hostile audiences and ensuring that the AAUP was armed to fight the legislative fires the campaign ignited.

The AAUP's "Freedom in the Classroom" statement, issued in autumn 2007, is an eloquent and thoughtful riposte to Horowitz's arguments. Nelson was instrumental in delivering it; indeed, he cites it as one of his proudest achievements as president.

Most political remarks that faculty members make in the classroom are not speeches in favour of candidates or causes, but are analogies and parallels that simply grow out of the material the class is studying, Nelson argues. Suppress that kind of conversation and you eviscerate the educational process. Politics can't be taken out of the classroom any more than it can be taken out of life, he adds.

"Some AAUP members say: 'You should just ignore Horowitz,'" Nelson admits. "But we certainly couldn't at the legislative level; and given that he makes a lot of campus appearances, I think it is safer to engage with him. Plus, I think I can win the debate and defeat him."

So how did Nelson become such a passionate fighter for academic rights? He says he has always been an activist and a fundamental believer in the power of non-violent political protest to raise consciousness: "I am a child of the 1960s."

Born and raised in Pennsylvania to a left-wing Jewish family, he attended Antioch College in Ohio - "the most left-wing college in the country" and the only place he was interested in going. He participated in the famous 1963 civil rights march where Martin Luther King delivered his "I have a dream" speech, and was active in opposing the Vietnam War. Nelson remembers a march on the Pentagon in 1967 where Allen Ginsberg read his poem Pentagon Exorcism from the top of a truck in front of thousands of marines brandishing bayonets.

Then, in 1970, fresh from gaining a doctorate at the University of Rochester, he found himself at the University of Illinois "teaching anti-war poetry". It is the social function of poetry, and how it has been marshalled by the Left for its causes, that has become one of the key areas of his

scholarship.

Nelson's leap into advocacy for the national AAUP came in 1995, after he began interviewing academics about the problems they faced. "The move from activism to the classroom and back to activism has always seemed very natural," he says.

In fact, his first action after he was elected AAUP president - a job he does full time, although he still takes the odd poetry class - was to get arrested. Students at New York University asked him to join a protest that would involve the risk of arrest. He sat on the street and chanted slogans and was taken away in a police van. "I wanted to symbolise what an activist presidency might be," he says.

As to saving academic freedom, Nelson believes it is only through collective action that the academy stands any chance.

"It is people banding together behind a cause ... and no, that isn't something only communists and fascists engage in."

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NO UNIVERSITY IS AN ISLAND: SAVING ACADEMIC FREEDOM is published by New York University Press.

Zoe Corbyn is a journalist who writes regularly about research and science policy. "Let Freedom Ring" was published in tandem with Charles R. Middleton's review in THE TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT.

