**Defying authority**

BY WAQAS YOUNAS 2022-04-06

NOTHING perturbs one more than the sight of the powerful playing their games while the sorry state of our education on which depends the prosperity of our children, our f amilies and our nation cries out for help.

When you observe public strife between those responsible for educating our children, you fear the state of education is in peril.

This is the impression we get from a recent article by a former chairman of the Higher Education Commission criticising the credentials and policies of the current HEC chairman, Dr Tariq Banuri.

Here, as a concerned citizen, who has nothing to do with the current or former chairman, I share my thoughts.

The article indicated that the incumbent chairman`s credentials would not even make him eligible for a job at a public-sector university in Pakistan. Brutal. It also alarmed me. Had we handed the job of a chairman to a quack? Concerned, I looked up the profile of Dr Banuri. He has a PhD from Harvard University. Additionally, he held research positions at international institutions for years. These appeared to be the credentials of a reasonable man, not of a quack. The government of Pakistan itself had awarded him the Sitara-i-Imtiaz in 2003 for his services to research and education.

I then turned to a former professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, a respected intellectual. He rates Dr Banuri highly and thinks he has a broad vision and `anindependent mind`. Maybe,we should seek more input from other respected scholars.

The article referred to also hinted at publications in `recognised journals` as a crucial criterion for sound intellect. Extraordinary interest in this trend of `professionalisation` among academics must be resisted, for it can shut out insights from individuals who don`t fit the narrow criteria defining good intellect. These brilliant individuals often don`t display unquestionable obedience to the authorities. Philosopher Walter Kaufman`s work influenced this thought; please allow me to expand on this.

There was a time when people outside academia could dabble in subjects and shake the world with the fierce force of their intellect, without being looked down upon by academics and without being a slave to the professional criteria thatis considered so crucial today.

For example, one of the foremost thinkers of the Enlightenment, Baruch Spinoza, earned a modest living grinding lenses during the day, but stirred the world with his radical theories. Anotherinfluentialthinker, John Locke, didn`t run an education commission, but forever changed the course of political philosophy with his remarkable intellect.

The foundation of the outstanding work ofLudwig Wittgenstein, arguably the 20th century`s greatest philosopher, was laid not in a public-sector university, or publications in `recognised journals`, but in a remote village in Norway.

These people wrote penetrative and profound treatises, not publications in `recognised journals`. Today, thousands of people are employed in universities to teach and think, but they don`t seem to shake the world in the same manner.

When many people are employed in universities for jobs and promotions, the need for professional criteria is somewhat understand able. But to see excellence only through the lens of the number of publications one has is hardly prudent.

Also brilliant individuals of yore challenged views, even if they were cultivated by authority. Their independent minds sometimes put their own lives at risk, but still they carried on. Today, thousands of people are employed by universities, but the majority is so absorbed by criteria, so burdened by triteness, so snubbed by authority that they of tenend up not challenging authority. Not one widely acclaimed sharp critique of our higher education policy do you find from among the younger lot employed in our higher education sec-tor. Such scarcity of thought originates in a culture of obedience to authority. Such scarcity of thought stalls progress. Such scarcity ofthoughtisdangerous.

When you keep upright and competent individuals out of office for defying authority, you betray honesty. You betray young minds when you train them in the culture of blind subservience. You betray innovation when you don`t train young minds to challenge views, no matter to whom they belong.

You betray prosperity when you lend your support to an education system that has no ability to cleanse itself.

Those responsible for our education ought to engage with such individuals; their chief concern ought not to be a job title or big of fice, but the truth.

Truth is important, not power. When Socrates was put on trial and facing death, he said that, even if the jury acquitted him, he would still pursue the truth and the perfection of soul and not money. That he would still remind the people not to seek reputation but the truth. That he would still be a gadfly.

O Fortune, where are our gadflies? m The writer is an author and entrepreneur.

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