



LUND UNIVERSITY

A Blogger's Manifesto: Free Speech and Censorship in the Age of the Internet

Ringmar, Erik

2007

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ringmar, E. (2007). *A Blogger's Manifesto: Free Speech and Censorship in the Age of the Internet*. Anthem Press.

Total number of authors:

1

Creative Commons License:

GNU GPL

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



LUND UNIVERSITY

Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE

Ringmar, Erik

Published in:

A Blogger's Manifesto: Free Speech and Censorship in the Age of the Internet

Published: 2007-01-01

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ringmar, E. (2007). Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE. In A Blogger's Manifesto: Free Speech and Censorship in the Age of the Internet.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Lund, August 10, 2016.

Dear reader,

This is the chapter on "Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE" that I wrote for my book *A Blogger's Manifesto* back in 2006. I had a blog at the time where I occasionally wrote about what it was like to be a teacher at the London School of Economics. I was trying to make jokes and I wasn't always suitably deferential towards my employer. Well, that's what my employer thought anyway. Naturally I defended my right to freedom of speech. The issue became a bit of a media story at the time.

For now the head of my department hoped an "informal oral warning" would be enough, together with my agreement to first "destroy/cancel your blog entirely and shut the whole thing down until further notice," and second "when representing the School in the future, do so in a positive way that does not risk bringing the School into dispute."

I haven't thought much about this brouhaha for years, and blogging itself lost its charm once everyone moved over to Facebook. The only reason I began thinking about it all again is that my daughter, Saga, was accepted to do an undergrad degree at LSE. Before she left for London, I thought I'd show her this chapter. No, she is not going to LSE anymore. Not because of what happened to me, I don't think, but rather because of the 9,000 pound student fee and the Brexit decision. A UK education no longer makes sense. After all, in Sweden or Germany you can get an English-language, and very good, education for free.

Looking back at this story a number of things seem unbelievable. Above all, that the LSE authorities were so clueless regarding the Internet and that they reacted so strongly to my attempts at irony. It was really a different era. What is eternal, alas, is the opportunism and cowardliness of academics.

Cite as: Erik Ringmar, "Freedom of Speech and Censorship at the LSE," in *A Blogger's Manifesto: Free Speech and Censorship in the Age of the Internet* (London: Anthem Press, 2007)

Thanks for reading.

Erik

3

Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE

After all the excitement of the first month of writing, I was looking forward to some peace and quiet. The entries about penis-drawing colleagues and scimitar-wielding Muslim madmen were archived by my blogging software and neatly stashed away behind a hyperlink where only the truly curious would find them. I began looking for new subjects. It was easy. Academics after all make a living out of pontificating. Give us today's headlines and we'll give you an instant lecture. It's like a pretentious version of 'Just a Minute' – except that academics deviate from the subject a lot, and endlessly repeat themselves.

Instead of news commentaries, however, I decided to use my blog for assorted critical asides. Lecturing and writing requires you to take on an official persona. You pretend to be a voice of authority, an expert, someone with unique and invaluable insights. Yet, this is of course only so much play-acting. Most of the time a majority of academics are about as ignorant and insecure as your average Joe (or Joanne). In a lecture or in a book you can never

36 A Blogger's Manifesto

admit this, but in a blog you can. My blog became my private confessional; ad libbed comments muttered to the people seated in the first row. 'I should have prepared better for the lecture this morning.' 'I can't stand grading exams.' 'I never actually read *Being and Time*, you know, I only pretended to.'

Such admissions are surely perfectly innocent. Yet in the context of English academia, they turned out to be surprisingly subversive. Much like the monarchy or the church, English academia relies heavily on secrecy and mumbo jumbo in order to legitimize its position in society. Secrecy and mumbo jumbo protect the university from being inspected by outsiders and they instill a sense of awe in the general public. Critical asides and innocent admissions tend to ruin the mystique.

And maybe that's why I went on doing it. I was never big on academic pretentiousness and I never understood why some academics take themselves so extraordinarily seriously. I decided to use my blog to do something about it. To open a few doors and to kick a few butts. To turn my critical faculties on myself and the institution — the London School of Economics, LSE — where I worked.

Why is it, for example, that no one ever talks about how much money academics make? Surely, such secrecy only benefits the employer. Each employee can be made to think that they make more money compared with others when in reality they make far less. In this way, one person is pitted against another. As a modest contribution to the class struggle I published my salary — in pounds and pennies — online. Yes, students were amazed that an academic didn't make more. On the other hand — and I made this point as well — English academics don't really work more than about five months in a year. The remaining seven months are referred to as 'research' — that is to say, a bit of reading, a bit of interviewing, and a lot of bugging off. Yes, bugging off became the topic of another blog entry.

Next came student fees. The LSE is highly dependent — one could say addicted — to student fees. If the government can't feed us,

Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE 37

the students have to. Student fees have gone up dramatically in the ten years since I started at the LSE, and there is no doubt that PhD students in particular are being overcharged. For the 12,000 pounds they fork out they get little more than a few chats with an absent-minded supervisor. Many PhD students can't afford to remain in London and end up going back to whatever country they come from. Sitting somewhere in Bangladesh, Botswana or Bolivia, desperately trying to finish their PhDs, they transfer what most likely is the equivalent of their family's combined yearly income to the LSE and to the British economy. Very generous, one could say. Like an aid programme in reverse. Or perhaps it's just really, really stupid. Well, that's what I said in the blog anyway. 'Kids, whatever you do in life, don't do a PhD! Or at least do one in the US where you get generous funding and proper PhD-level courses!'

Considering the price of an education, the very least one can expect is that the university provides prospective students with adequate information. If an education is to be sold like so many sausages, universities should be forced to declare what kind of meat, artificial colouring and pig fat the courses contain. An obvious step is to make the course evaluations of previous years' students available online. According to the university authorities, there are a thousand reasons why this cannot be done, but they all come down to a fear of the truth. Bad teachers will be named and shamed, and so will bad universities. Again, I decided not to wait for official permission. My blog had given me the opportunity to put my student evaluations where they belonged – at the fingertips of prospective students.

Another topic was the strange ethnic mix of the Government Department where I worked. Of the 49 full-time academic staff, including tutorial fellows and lecturers on temporary contracts, there were 16 professors out of whom 14 were English and only two non-English. Conversely, out of the non-professors, 25 were non-English and eight were English. In other words, the non-English get hired but for some reason the English keep the professorships

38 A Blogger's Manifesto

for themselves. It seems that the English establishment, in my Department as elsewhere, rely on imported, exploited, foreign labour to do the dirty work for them. 'The professoriate constitutes a club', I concluded.

As all clubs they are ruled not primarily by intellectual principles but instead by social psychological. Above all it is important to make sure that no one rocks the boat. This is difficult to assure since, famously, all professors always are at each other's throats. This is why it is important only to include people who are like the already existing club members. Picking people with an Oxbridge background assures that a semblance of peace and order is maintained. It is at Oxford and Cambridge after all that you learn the 101 of gently nodding while ferociously stabbing each other in the back.

My Open Day speech

Are you allowed to say such things about the place where you work? And are you allowed to say them in public? I clearly thought so at the time, and I still do. After all, what else could freedom of speech possibly mean? Obviously public criticism is not encouraged in most ordinary workplaces, but universities are different. No university, surely, could be critical of critical thought? Certainly not the LSE? Innocently, I put a link to my blog in the signature of all my emails. Some people clearly clicked on it since my blog by this time began picking up readers – a dozen or so a day.

But it was offline rather than on that the shit eventually hit the fan. Real fan, real shit. On 22 March 2006, I gave a speech at the 'Open Day' – a recruitment event – organized for prospective LSE students and their parents. No, I wasn't the best person for the job. Yes, I had been at the LSE for ten years, and I had

Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE 39

taught various undergrad courses, but I never really bothered to learn anything about the undergraduate degree as such. Panicking a bit in the morning before the speech, I tried to wiggle out of the responsibility, but the Convener of my Department, Professor George Philip, told me to rely on the official information pack I had received. I was to be the 'face' of the Department, Philip said, and a 'reassuring academic presence'. All that was needed 'is someone who knows how to operate PowerPoint'.

This was bad news. What the event required was obviously someone with a sales pitch. Someone who could tell the official story of the School and the Department the way it should be told, and convince prospective students to choose the LSE over its rivals. This, after all, was the first year that undergrads were going to pay real money for their education. Per head they would bring 3,000 pounds to the ever underfunded institutions of higher education. In this situation we were asked to swallow our pride and take the money. 'Fire up PowerPoint and start flogging the wares.'

Problem is, I'm not very good with PowerPoint, I'm not a 'face' of anything except myself, and I never aim to provide 'reassuring presences'. Above all, I'm not a salesman. I don't approve of the commercialization of higher education and I resent the fact that academics are asked to deliver sales pitches. My views on these matters were all over my blog, but George Philip was clearly not one of my regular readers.

Since there was no way to get out of it, I decided to give the speech, but to do it my way, the only way I know how – to speak as truthfully as possible about what it's like to be an undergraduate student at an elite institution like the LSE. The point was not to slag off the School but to give prospective students a sense of what actual students have told me about their experience over the course of the years. The LSE is a great institution – I never questioned this fact – and surely, it should be able to use the truth as a recruiting tool.

40 A Blogger's Manifesto

Yes, I did mention that undergrad teaching comes very far down on the list of priorities of most LSE academics and that teaching alone will never give a lecturer a promotion. 'If you want a high-flying academic career you have to publish.'

This means that first-class teachers usually will have their minds elsewhere than on undergraduate teaching. They might be away on conferences, and even if they are not absent in body, they may be absent in mind.

To make things worse, I argued that the in-class experience of LSE students differs only little from the in-class experience of students at lesser universities. But as it turns out, I happen to believe that this is the case. And it's not difficult to explain:

The kinds of courses taught at undergraduate level are pretty much the same everywhere you go. The courses use the same kinds of reading lists, with the same kinds of books, set the same kinds of exam questions ... The lecturers too are not that different from each other. More often than not we went to the same universities and it's only coincidence that lands us at the LSE rather than at, say, London Metropolitan.

What really makes the LSE different are instead the students. 'We are', I said, 'able to recruit some of the smartest, most interesting, intelligent, rich, successful and all-round attractive people on the planet'. This is the real reason why you should choose the LSE.

As an LSE student you will be a part of this extraordinary multicultural collection of bright and fun and ambitious people. These will be your friends and peers; you'll make girl and boyfriends among them. They are you! And for the rest of your life you will be a part of a network of LSE alumni spreading out across the globe.

The LSE's reaction

Returning home in the afternoon, I put the whole speech online and proceeded to blog about it. I didn't expect any reactions and I didn't get any. For a few days. Then there was an email from George Philip. As it turned out, an administrator from student recruitment – present at my speech – had denounced me to her boss, and her boss had been in touch with mine. An investigation was quickly put together and witnesses were called. What I had said, George Philip argued, 'departed from the prepared message'; I had 'embarrassed colleagues and discouraged prospective undergraduate students from applying'. He reprimanded me for the Open Day speech and for maintaining a blog.

The blog, he said, 'makes statements that are enormously damaging to your own reputation ... and potentially damaging to the School'. For now, Philip hoped, an 'informal oral warning' would be enough, together with my agreement to first 'destroy/cancel your blog entirely and shut the whole thing down until further notice', and second 'when representing the School in the future, doing so in a positive way that does not risk bringing the School into disrepute'. Philip also asked me to apologize to a long list of people, including the staff at undergraduate recruitment.

At a loss for what to do, I emailed the colleagues in my Department hoping for support. I was livid – at being censored by a member of the administrative staff, at being misrepresented, at being told to shut up. No one can tell me what to say in my own classroom – no secretaries, no convener, not the devil himself. Of course I didn't expect my colleagues to agree with everything I had written, but I did expect them to have a few Voltaire-style words to say about the right to freedom of expression. The big professors got back to me quickly and publicly and they all agreed with the Convener. Clearly, they concluded, I had overstepped the line and obviously there could be no such thing as a general right to blog. 'Enough of this juvenile posturing', these 'crass generalizations' and 'solipsistic ramblings in blogland'.

42 A Blogger's Manifesto

I needed to 'get real'. If my comments were picked up by mainstream media they

would be highly damaging to the Department's reputation for undergraduate teaching, and which if it were at all widely disseminated would be inimical to recruiting students and hence very clearly damaging for the economic life-chances of your colleagues in our joint enterprise.

This is not about blogging, this is about willfully damaging the reputation of the Department and the good intentions of your colleagues.

I completely disagree with your statement that faculty mainly care about their own research but I'm away on a conference right now and I don't have the time to comment in detail.

And even if the Department indeed did have some dirty laundry, why on earth was I washing it in public? 'I would suggest that you take down all the LSE-related aspects of your blog immediately while you ponder on the meaning of freedom.' 'In many institutions and many companies an employee who vilifies his employer and colleagues in the way you did would most probably be sacked. So consider yourself lucky.'

The consensus was not complete. There were a few dissenting voices. A couple of junior, and very courageous, faculty members defended my right to speak – although they carefully pointed out that they did not necessarily agree with what I had said. More support arrived in private emails. But the majority of my colleagues just kept their heads down. Why take a stand on such a controversial issue? Why risk antagonizing the very people who are in charge of promotions?

Hoping for a clarification of the rules that apply to bloggers, I contacted Sir Howard Davies, Director of the LSE. He didn't get

Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE 43

back to me for a few days, but eventually there was an email. This is what he said:

I entirely support your Convener's views. I looked at the blog and it seemed to me to be damaging to the School and to contain criticisms of your colleagues, and of the School's promotions procedures, which are inappropriate. You accuse the School of systematic discrimination against non-British staff which I reject, and you say teaching is ignored in promotion decisions, which I know to be untrue.

Your further messages to your colleagues and to me are disingenuous. The issue here is not a policy on blogging, it is whether a colleague can publicly abuse his employer and his colleagues without consequences. I further understand that you repeated these slurs to parents and prospective students, which is further cause for complaint. I think you should reflect carefully on your behaviour which I find most disappointing.

I was shocked and suddenly very worried. But while my fears no doubt were justified, my surprise was not. Howard Davies has a background in business and not in academia. Before he came to the LSE, he was Chairman of the Financial Services Authority and Director General of the Confederation of British Industry. His instincts are those of a boss, not an academic. He gives orders and expects to be obeyed. Like many others in the English establishment he knows very much about rules and very little about principles.

Let's be clear about this. It is not that the LSE is opposed to freedom of speech as such. Not at all. In the fall of 2006, for example, one LSE academic made national headlines by predicting that human beings in the future will evolve into two distinct subspecies – the tall, genetic, elite and the dwarfish illiterates with low foreheads and even lower IQs. Meanwhile, another LSE academic argued that the problem of poverty in Africa is the

44 A Blogger's Manifesto

result of the inferior intelligence of black people. In both cases, the LSE authorities were quick to stand up for the right of the respective academics to state their unpalatable views.

My mistake was to use the freedom of speech to discuss the institution itself – the LSE and English academia. Freedom of speech is fine, everyone including Sir Howard Davies was endorsing the idea, but only as long as speaking freely did not deter prospective students from applying. In an era of commercialized education, the limits to freedom of speech are set by the market.

Neither George Philip nor Howard Davies ever retracted their threats and I remained under surveillance. There was an LSE computer that checked out my blog over 1,150 times, and there were several other computers that clocked up many hundreds of hits. These could of course have been fans of mine, but somehow I doubt it. This is not freedom of speech. You cannot think and write freely as long as you are afraid of intimidations.

It was all too much in the end. I'm not much of a fighter, I don't like confrontations with people in power, and I'm not used to taking on the English establishment. Reluctantly, and after much agony, I took the blog down.

Saved by my students

After a few days, however, defying my Department's ban and the threats made by the Director, I decided to put the blog back up. The reason was the reaction of my students. Students are always naive and often very idealistic. Give them a lost cause to fight for and they'll leap at the opportunity. They clearly believed all the hype about universities as centres of critical thought.

Very, very early one morning I sent my undergrad students a link to my blog. They, after all, are the only true authorities when it comes to questions of student experiences. I wanted to know if they recognized the description I had given. Only an hour or so later I heard back from the first student. She said she had just

Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE 45

returned from a night on the town. 'WOAA MAN!' she screamed, 'finally someone who tells it the way it is. A teacher who has the guts to tell the truth about what all LSE students are thinking. Respect man, serious respect.' OK, I thought, she may be drunk, but I'm on to something here.

The first trickle of emails quickly grew to a torrent and the vast majority of messages echoed the initial one:

I really enjoyed reading your Open Day speech. I think it was right on target. If the university has a problem with it, I can only imagine that it is because it is 'too' honest.

I speak for nearly every LSE student I have met in endorsing wholeheartedly what was contained in your speech. ... Good luck, the students are with you all the way!

Just read your speech, and honestly think it's one of the most accurate accounts of life in the Government Department that I've ever read. Most of it is also accepted truth among both students and staff in the Department, and to the extent that it's inaccurate, it's probably on the flattering side.

Several students also insisted that a realistic description of the university was more likely to recruit students than a slick presentation. 'We aren't stupid, you know?'

A small number of students were hostile. Some clearly felt that I had besmirched a university which they had made great sacrifices in order to attend. On the other hand, prospective students from as far afield as Nigeria and Mexico contacted me saying that my speech had encouraged them to choose the LSE.

One very entrepreneurial student created a petition on the *Facebook* website – 'In Support of Erik Ringmar' – and it soon had over 380 signatures. The LSE student newspaper, *The Beaver*, had an article about my case – 'massive student support for threatened lecturer' – and a very well-argued editorial which defended the right of academics to speak freely. Students of mine reported

46 A Blogger's Manifesto

overhearing conversations all over campus with references to 'that lecturer in the Government Department'. And for a while I was, in the words of a teaching assistant with her tongue in her cheek, 'a student hero and an urban legend'. Now that's what I'll put on my gravestone!

That's where the *Guardian* and the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* picked up the story with headlines like 'A Blog Too Far at the LSE' and 'Lecturer's Blog Sparks Free Speech Row'. A spokeswoman for the LSE tried her best at damage limitation. My blog had contained 'offensive and potentially defamatory material', she explained, but magnanimously the School now 'regarded the matter as closed'. Yet most of the *Guardian* article consisted of long quotes from my blog. I came across as a lovable eccentric, my wife insisted, and in a public showdown between a lovable eccentric and a repressive bureaucrat, the lovable eccentric will always win.

At the bottom of my *Guardian* article there was a hyperlink to my website and before long the number of page hits soared. In a single day, on 4 May 2006, my blog had over 5,000 visitors. As an academic author you have many readers if you have 500, but now I had ten times that number in a single day. The really cool thing was that the hyperlink put me in direct contact with the *Guardian's* readers. I commented on the article in my blog and by clicking on the link they instantaneously got my reaction. The poor LSE bureaucrats were completely out of the loop. *The Guardian* couldn't link to them. They have no blog.

And then the blogosphere started buzzing. My website climbed the *Technorati* rankings and people linked to me from all over the world. The predominant reaction was surprise. 'Curious goings-on at the LSE ...' 'A strange story just in from London ...' 'Un exemple très drôle ici chez nos amis de la L.S.E.' Chinese websites were interested in my arguments in favour of American grad schools and Malaysian sites wondered if English academia was losing its self-confidence. American websites just laughed and laughed and laughed. 'Trust a stuck-up tea drinker to fight for freedom? Where would y'all be but for the good ol' US of A?'

The hypocrisy of expertise

If I had worked at Wal-Mart or McDonald's these reactions of my employer would have made perfect sense. Wal-Mart and McDonald's are not in the business of promoting freedom of speech. The LSE, however, is. The School likes to present itself to the world as an authority in matters of civil liberties.

This noble tradition goes back to the LSE philosopher Karl Popper who in his book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, presented a powerful argument in favour of openness and critical thought. History, Popper argued, follows no predetermined course and society can only make progress as long as we are free to ask questions. At the time, during the Cold War, this argument constituted what perhaps was the most powerful weapon in the West's intellectual armoury.

Georg Soros, Popper's student at the LSE, redeployed these ideas when setting up his Open Society Foundation. Through his philanthropy, Soros supports independent newspapers, websites and civil society organizations throughout the post-Soviet world. Of course the LSE loves him, and Soros is a frequent visitor to the School. The LSE wants his money and I suppose he craves the intellectual legitimacy his alma mater can bestow.

The LSE is consequently full of civil rights experts. The School has a Center for Civil Society, a Center for the Study of Human Rights, a Center for the Study of Global Governance, in addition to the Law and Media Departments with their respective experts on new media and free speech. There are also authorities like the political philosophers in my own Department who make a living explaining the European tradition of liberal rights to undergrads from around the world. There is also a person like Andrew Puddephatt, who founded *Article 19*, an international human rights organization that promotes freedom of expression. You might even find Sir Howard Davies himself banging on about the importance of free expression. At least, if you catch him on a good day.

48 A Blogger's Manifesto

As one would expect, freedom of speech is well protected by LSE's statutes. The School's 'Code of Practice on Free Speech' explicitly incorporates Article 19 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his or her choice.

I'm not much of a lawyer but 'any other media of his or her choice' should surely include blogs. In fact, the LSE's code goes a couple of steps further and introduces a disciplinary procedure for those who prevent the free speech of others.

Action by any member of the School or other person contrary to this Code, will be regarded as a serious disciplinary offense and, subject to the circumstances of the case, may be the subject of proceedings under the relevant disciplinary regulations.

It seemed pretty obvious to me that Howard Davies and George Philip were in violation of this code. In the summer of 2006, I lodged a formal complaint with the LSE's 'Free Speech Group'. One committee member got back to me saying he was away on vacation. After that there was no further communication from their end. I repeated my complaint right before Christmas 2006, this time with a copy to Howard Davies and to the student newspaper. I heard back from Howard Davies' secretary but never from the Free Speech Group itself. As far as Free Speech groups go the one at the LSE is very tight-lipped.

What is going on here? How can a leading institution of higher learning be so obviously hypocritical? I've pondered this question for a year now, and I think I finally have figured it out.

Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE 49

The problem is the LSE's status as a centre of expertise. Experts are people with in-depth knowledge of specific techniques or fields of scholarship. The solutions experts provide are derived from the theories they embrace. Such expert knowledge is what gives the LSE its unique position and its staff its unique pretentiousness. LSE's professors, they like us to believe, have answers to the questions asked by decision-makers the world over.

But it just doesn't work that way. Expert-driven social engineering has a disastrous historical record. Witness the problem of economic development or Third World aid. Often, the experts have little impact on the situation and occasionally they make the situation far worse. The reason is that theoretical knowledge just isn't enough. In addition you need local and hands-on knowledge, information about the situation on the ground. This knowledge is not theoretical nor even possible to express in words. All local people know this and they make fun of the experts behind their backs. Once the experts fly home, they get busy rectifying their mistakes.

The LSE too – like all universities – contains a lot of local knowledge. You can't run the place according to abstract schema. You don't need theory but instead concrete knowledge of actual human beings and actual places and things. This is basically what everyone including Howard Davies was trying to tell me. This is what the oft-repeated admonitions to 'get real' came down to. Abstract principles are fine, they said, but don't overdo it. Someone, at the end of the day, has to sponsor our next research leaves.

This is why freedom of speech, as LSE experts see it, always concerns others. It concerns poor, faraway, or post-Communist countries. It doesn't concern us right here and now. This is also why freedom of speech is about big, important topics, but not about the mundane and trivial. Our expertise is something we apply to the outsiders; to ourselves we apply only local knowledge. We save the lofty principles for after-dinner speeches and rely on practical experience in order to get things done. This, I believe, is

50 A Blogger's Manifesto

why most experts reveal themselves to be hypocrites, and why the LSE is unable to apply its own principles to itself.

Are they right about this? Must a university be run by rules rather than by principles? Are universities really different from other workplaces? We'll return to this question in the next chapter.

Learning my lessons

Instead of trying to close down my blog, my Department tried to dig up dirt on me. Clearly they were preparing some kind of a process. A well-placed source assured me that the Convener of my Department was convinced I had lost my mind, and rumours regarding my madness began circulating. For a while, I was banned from grading exams on account of my impaired judgement. A woman from Human Resources began asking detailed questions about an operation I had had a few years earlier. One day, a motorcycle courier delivered a confidential invitation to go on a medical leave. Needless to say, I declined. I was very angry, but I was not mad.

One of my teaching assistants reported:

you might be interested to know that I recently received an email from [the Government Department] asking me the way to provide them with feedback about the way you were supervising undergraduate teaching (how often you met with me, whether you monitored me, etc.). I don't know if it is a regular procedure or a way of trying to intimidate you, but I made sure that nothing of what I replied could be held against you.

One day an email appeared in my in-box, circulated to everyone in my Department, detailing how I had let a certain undergraduate student down a year earlier and neglected my duties as a

Free Speech and Censorship at the LSE 51

teacher and tutor. A disgruntled PhD student was also produced and he provided further evidence against me. There was going to be an investigation, a process, a disciplinary hearing.

It was standard bullying tactics, and pretty clumsily executed at that, but I didn't react at all well to it. In the end I was not courageously standing up for civil liberties at all, I was at home cowering under a blanket. The more they threatened me, the more defiant I became, and the more terrified. I stopped coming to work by mid-April, and by mid-May, I was no longer reading emails. By the end of it all I was too upset to even get back in touch with my friends and supporters. I held my office hours in Starbuck's and stole into my office very early in the morning to pick up mail. I didn't sleep enough, and I probably drank too much.

The situation was untenable of course. As a tenured member of the permanent faculty, it was next to impossible to get rid of me, but they had endless means of making my life unbearable. In the summer of 2006, I was fired from the LSE Summer School after working for them for some eight years. The Summer School had always provided a much-needed extra pay cheque, and the courses had been fun to teach. But this gig was not a part of my regular contract and once my blog became a national news story, I was not asked to teach there again.

In the fall of 2006, I went on a long-planned sabbatical and on 1 February 2007, I resigned from the LSE. I work at a university in Taiwan these days. Yes, I sort of fell off the map. Then again, Britain and the LSE don't show up very prominently on the mental maps of people here in East Asia. National Chiao Tung University, NCTU, in Hsinchu, is a world-class institution with a great faculty and ditto students. I brought my wife and my children with me of course and we are thoroughly enjoying ourselves, discovering the Taiwanese mountains, planning to build a house, learning Chinese.

Best of all, my new employer couldn't care less what I write about in my blog. NCTU is not a commercial venture and they

52 A Blogger's Manifesto

don't worry much about student recruitment. They take the curious view that university professors should have the right to say whatever they like, both in their classrooms and online. In general, Taiwanese democracy, introduced in the 1980s, is still young enough for people to take its values seriously. There are plenty of people around who remember risking their lives in defence of the right to speak freely. Yes, I'm still blogging, but no longer about the LSE or about English academia. There are many far more interesting topics to write about.

In the past year my blog has had 97,467 visitors and some 12,543 people have read my Open Day speech.