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Stand up for UK research freedom

A proposed higher-education and research bill would demolish the agreements that protect British universities from political interference. It must be opposed.

As publicly funded employees, British academic scientists are fortunate. They surfed the high-spending wave of the Labour government years, starting in the late 1990s. When the 2008 financial crisis hit, they were protected from the deep public-sector budget cuts that followed. Public libraries closed. Some of the poorest people lost welfare benefits, and university students faced trebling tuition fees. But for established researchers it was, on balance, business as usual. Now, that relative stability is set to change.

A draft law, the Higher Education and Research Bill, is making its way through the House of Commons. The bill amounts to the biggest shake-up in the sector for more than a generation. It is designed, among other things, to make it easier for private companies to set up universities, and to enable more researchers to commercialize their work. If it passes, existing funding bodies will close and replacements will be created. But in the process of change, the bill rips up an 800-year-old settlement between the nation's scholars and the state. It opens the door to unacceptable political interference. It must be resisted.

At the moment, scientists have a right in law to choose what to work on without unwarranted steering or instruction from government. This protection for the integrity of scholarship is enshrined in a centuries-old legal instrument called a royal charter. First used before the United Kingdom's parliamentary system was established, royal charters keep public bodies (including the BBC) at arm's length from meddling ministers, and so shield their activities from the prevailing — and changeable — political winds. Many scientists may not know it, but the royal charters of their universities help public funds for research and teaching to come with few strings attached.

The University of Cambridge received its royal charter in 1231, and dozens of other universities have been granted them since. Royal charters also govern each of the seven discipline-based research councils.

The UK government's proposed law would change that. The bill would dissolve the seven individual research funding councils; the body that would replace them, called UK Research and Innovation, would have no royal charter.

The bill also proposes to override the royal charters of universities. This would happen with the establishment of another governmental body, the Office for Students. This would regulate the expected flood of new private universities, as well as existing publicly funded ones. So even for those universities that have a royal charter, the creation of the Office for Students would effectively make that document worthless.

Why does this matter? As the draft legislation makes clear, ministers would then be able to suggest courses for universities to teach. Furthermore, the government would give itself the direct right to create and dissolve whole areas of research funding. At present, the risk to the autonomy of science and research is theoretical — but the implications for academic freedom are troubling.

So far, there has been little sign of resistance from members of Parliament (MPs). The opposition Labour Party is engulfed in a

divisive civil war and has not been able to focus properly on the bill, despite the best efforts of its science and higher education team. The government, meanwhile, has convinced its own rebellious MPs to support the bill.

Organizations representing scientists, along with pressure groups such as the Campaign for Science and Engineering in London, have largely maintained public silence. That is understandable to an extent,

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because they are used to having a positive relationship with ministers and are more experienced at advocating for their causes in private meetings.

But a government that is determined to have its way needs to be dealt with differently. It needs to be confronted in public.

That could happen as soon as this month, when the bill will be discussed in the House of Lords. Several research and higher-education leaders who now sit in the Lords plan to give the bill more forensic scrutiny than it has received in the Commons. However, without wider and more vocal support from the science community, their efforts will be no more than an inconvenient blip in the bill's journey into law.

Make no mistake. Britain's first all-Conservative government in 20 years sees science and higher education as vestiges of the big state. If its proposals become law, the government will upend globally accepted norms that protect independence and self-determination in science and higher education. If scientists and their representative organizations don't want that to happen, they need to speak up — and do it now. ■

A good prize

Nobel awards week shows the value of a strong brand identity.

As befits someone who made his fortune from dynamite, Alfred Nobel was worried about a premature death. The will that set up prizes in his name is most well known for his much discussed — if vague — intention that the awards should recognize work with a benefit for humanity. Less well known is that the will concludes with an instruction from Alfred for a doctor to open his veins, allow him to bleed out, and then, unusually for the time, to burn his remains in a new-fangled crematorium. This was a man determined to avoid being buried alive. (Given his fear of being wrongly diagnosed as deceased, it must have been a shock for him to read his