

**UNIVERSITY REFORM:
A LETTER TO LORD
JOHN RUSSELL**

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University Reform: A Letter to Lord John Russell by Edward Arthur Litton

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EDWARD ARTHUR LITTON

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UNIVERSITY REFORM.

A LETTER

TO THE

RIGHT HON. LORD JOHN RUSSELL, M.P., &c.

BY

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A LETTER.

MY LORD,

The commission of inquiry into the state of education at Oxford and Cambridge having been actually issued, it only remains for all who, from former or present connexion with those universities, feel an interest in their well-being, to express their wishes for the successful issue of the step that has been taken. They whose conviction it is that important improvements remain to be made in the university system as it stands at present, (constituting probably a large majority of those who are not officially connected with the institutions in question,) will rejoice that the attention of government has been drawn to the subject, well aware as they are that corporate bodies are rarely reformed save by a power external to themselves; while the opponents of the government measure, having, as they were fully

entitled to do, given expression to their sentiments of disapprobation, will, it is to be hoped, now that the commission is, in French phrase, an "accomplished fact," lend a cheerful and ready co-operation in promoting its objects, and do what in them lies to render the labours of the commissioners productive of benefit to the universities, and through them to the country at large.

That the commissioners will discover in the present state of academical education several deficiencies, and recommend suitable reforms, can hardly be doubted. Indeed, the most strenuous opponents of the government measure admit that much still remains to be done in the way of improvement, and ground their opposition on the plea that the university authorities have been for a long time past, and are at this moment, occupied in endeavouring to remedy existing defects, and introduce such alterations as the circumstances of the times may seem to require. That there exists the power, however much there may be the will, on the part of the authorities, to make the universities, considered as places of education, what they ought to be, may perhaps be doubted, when we recollect that, after all that has been done in the way of reform, the benefits of the university of Oxford are participated in by only about 1,600 students; that the expense of a

university education is still such as to place it beyond the reach of all but the wealthier classes; and that the standard of literary and scientific attainment required for an ordinary degree has, hitherto at least, not been such as to convey to a foreigner a very favourable impression, as regards this particular point, of our great national seats of learning.

On the other hand, nothing can be more true than that the defects in question have been long felt, and the appropriate remedies attempted from time to time to be applied, by those to whom the government of the universities is entrusted. Your Lordship is probably too well acquainted with the facts of the case not to be aware that the statements which prejudice, or party spirit, have prompted, to the effect that the university authorities are, as a body, unmindful of the trust committed to them, or reluctant to advance in the path of progress, are altogether unfounded. No one who has had actual experience of the spirit that prevails in our academical establishments will hesitate to bear witness to the anxiety evinced by all who bear office in them to promote the intellectual and spiritual progress of those committed to their charge; no one who has availed himself of the advantages thus held out to him can feel otherwise than grateful in the retrospect. Nor have these laudable exertions on

the part of the university authorities been without spirit. The learned persons who recently deprecated the interference of government in the internal affairs of the universities may point, not without legitimate exultation, to the present state of those bodies as compared with what it was half a century ago. In truth, in the general tone of morals, in the conscientious discharge of the duties incumbent upon the teachers, in the social habits of the community, and in the range of academical instruction, the change for the better appears to be prodigious. Yet this improvement, it is urged, has been spontaneous; it has emanated from the universities themselves, which are now as willing and as able to adopt such further measures of reform as may appear advisable, as they formerly were to introduce those, the operation of which has proved so beneficial:—what pretext then can there be for an interference *ab extra* with the natural, and because natural, more safe and valuable, course of improvement, in which, as past events evince, the universities are perfectly capable of advancing by their own unaided efforts? Have not both these learned bodies recently given ample proof of their desire to keep pace with the requirements of the age, by introducing into the previous course of academical instruction additions of a very extensive character?

That these considerations are not without weight must be admitted. And, in truth, if the object of the commission is understood to be merely the suggesting of certain improvements in the present system, leaving it in all essential points the same, it may well be questioned whether it was worth while, for such an object, to excite the suspicion and opposition of those who certainly cannot be accused of indifference to the responsibilities of their respective offices, and yet whom the issuing of the commission does seem tacitly to inculcate. On the other hand, if there is a probability of the commission extending its inquiries into the causes of certain radical defects under which the present academical system appears to have long laboured, and suggesting the necessary remedies, to be, by the aid of government, effected, every one who has at heart the interests of these noble institutions, and yet is convinced that such deficiencies exist, must regard the inquiry about to be instituted as a circumstance full of hope for the future. Being myself one of those who entertain apprehensions that the labours of the commission may, by not embracing a sufficiently large field, prove less useful than they might otherwise be, I feel impelled to draw your Lordship's attention to what has always appeared to me to be the principal imperfection in our academical system: in the

hope that the observations which I am about to offer may at least have the effect of directing the minds of other more influential persons to the subject. A commission into the state of the universities is so rare an event, that, when it does come, we are naturally anxious to make the most of it.

If any reflecting person were to put the question to himself, what specific difference exists between our universities, as they are constituted at present, and the great public schools which are usually considered as preparatory to them, he would, I think, find it very difficult to discover the answer. Differences no doubt, and they important ones, might occur to the mind. Such are: the more advanced age of students at the university, as compared with those at a public school; the mode of discipline adopted respectively in the two cases, itself the natural consequence of the difference of age; the social influences at work, which are by no means the same at a public school and at the university; the substantial rewards, in the shape of fellowships, &c., held out to literary merit; and the higher standard of classical and mathematical attainment required of candidates for honours, (for it may be questioned whether the standard of attainment necessary for a common degree is, or will be even under the new system, higher than that