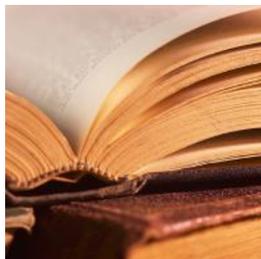


[Paying the piper](#) [1]

Written by [Jan Boucek](#) [2] | Monday 4 April 2011



Another bun fight has broken out between the UK government and the nation's academics. In return for maintaining government funding at £100 million a year, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) will have to spend a 'significant' amount on studying the Big Society.

Academics see this as a violation of the so-called Haldane principle whereby academics have the right to decide where research funds should be spent. The Royal Historical Society described the government's stance as a 'gross and ignoble' move to favour research into a 'party political slogan.' (See [this article in The Guardian](#) [3] for all the sound and fury.) Labour MP Tristram Hunt has weighed in with the comment that 'it is disgraceful that taxpayers' money is being spent on this bogus idea.' And petitions are circulating.

Where does one begin to unpack the contradictions and hysteria?

Well, let's start with the easy one. In that perfect world of ivory tower inhabitants, money rains down from heaven and the priests' superior intellect will decide where it should go. Of course in the real world, Mr Hunt's taxpayers actually do want some input. After all, he who pays the piper, calls the tune.

Money from the government will always come with strings attached but in a really perfect world of really independent research, funding would come directly from the people via self-funded think tanks, endowments and the like. (Please click Support Us at the top right corner of this page to get into the spirit of things.)

In any case, academics with any sense of the real world have always pitched their research applications with an eye to prevailing prejudices in the government of the day. Would there have been an uproar under Labour if it sought to steer research into income equality or executive compensation? Just ask climate change sceptics how difficult it is to get government funding.

Most predictably, of course, is Mr Hunt's dismissal of the Big Society as a 'bogus idea.' Does he have the research to back up this assessment? To be honest, it isn't clear whether the Big Society is a good idea or not but what is clear is that the policies of the past decade are unsustainable. We simply can't go on like this anymore.

So if we are saddled with taxpayer funding of academic research, a bit of a nudge to poke around the Big Society seems eminently reasonable.

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