

14th March 1980

Thank you very much for your letter of 13th March about liaison with academics.

Oh dear! It seems we both assumed the other had cleared the wires with Mark Carlisle. I'm sorry about this, having been through the Brittan and Hampson appointments, I ought to have known better.

I have always understood that the purpose of the "academic" job was to plug sympathetic university dons into Party committees, the Research Department and so on. It was never meant to be part of the job to act as a spokesman on Higher Education, although I suspect in an effort to balance Rhodes Boyson, Norman St John Stevas used to put Keith Hampson onto the Conference Platform in Opposition although the latter was not in fact a front bench spokesman.

Mark Carlisle has every right to feel a little perturbed, as does Rhodes Boyson. It may not be too late for the Prime Minister to write formally to Robert Rhodes James setting out what she wants him to do. Perhaps it would go some way towards claming Mark Carlisle and Rhodes Boyson. On the other side of the coin Robert Rhodes James might feel we were being rather heavy handed were the Prime Minister to write to him (without reference to the TES piece).

Another option might be for either you or Mark Carlisle to spell out the role to Robert Rhodes James. If Mark did it, then perhaps there would be good reason for Rhodes Boyson being present.

If you would like me to talk about this, I will gladly come and see you. Meanwhile if I might express a view, I have a feeling that Robert Rhodes James is not the sort of person to confine himself to acting as a postbox and touring the country to make contact, without passing several judgements during the course of his journies!

Richard Ryder
Political Office



Government Chief Whip
12 Downing Street, London SW1

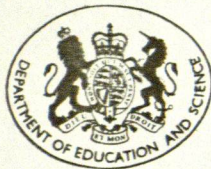
CONFIDENTIAL

13th March 1980

I am afraid we are in some difficulty with regard to Robert Rhodes James's academic liaison appointment. Apparently nobody consulted Mark Carlisle, who has been astonished to find various reports of Robert's views appearing in the press. I had assumed that you were in touch with Mark, but it does seem that we have both slipped up over this. Mark is especially concerned about the article which I enclose, with a copy of the letter he has sent me.

In any case, I am intending to have Robert in as I am extremely unhappy about his position as PPS in view of this. However, if you have any comments, perhaps we could talk it over before I see him.

R. Ryder Esq.,
10 Downing Street.



FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

ELIZABETH HOUSE,
YORK ROAD,
LONDON SE1 7PH
01-928 9222

12. March,

Dear Richard,

As promised I enclose the article written by Rhodes James - or rather the interview he had with the Times Educational Supplement.

I don't want to make too much of this - but I do feel (a) that I was never officially consulted or told about his appointment

(b) I do think it is very important that it is made crystal clear that his job is on behalf of the Party a Not the Government

(c) I think his printed remarks about Rhodes Boyson are unjustified in view of the fact that he is the Junior Minister responsible for higher education

(d) I think his critical comments about
our policy on Overseas Students are somewhat
surprising since he is P.P.S. - to the G.D. Minister
in the Foreign Office - our Policy on Overseas
Students is Government Policy with some
alterations thought up by the Department of
Education!

(e) In any event I wonder how his party
post fits in with his P.P.S. appointment -
See advice on P.P.S. in the Document "Question
of Procedure for Ministers" - Note by the P.M.

A personal note - hon Rhodes Boyson
is somewhat upset!

James

North

Mrs Thatcher's outspoken one-man think tank

Robert Rhodes James says he was surprised when Margaret Thatcher asked him to take on the job of Conservative Party liaison officer for higher and further education. Yet there can be few people more obviously suited for the position.

He is an academic with an unimpeachable record as an historian and published his first political biography at the age of 25. He has an intricate knowledge of the workings of the House of Commons, was a Commons clerk for eight years and became MP for Cambridge in 1976.

He has been a Nato research fellow and in 1972 was for four years a senior adviser to the United Nations secretary-general. He has visited almost every university, has taught at Sussex and in America and is a fellow of All Souls, Oxford.

He is currently Parliamentary private secretary to Nicholas Ridley and Neil Marten at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and cares passionately about overseas development.

But more important than his experience or qualifications is his attitude to his task. He sees himself acting as a conduit between the Government and higher and further education.

He is going into it, he says, "gently", but with the intention to learn, to travel as much as his brief and other commitments will permit and to meet the people on the spot. He wants to be a friend, although he accepts that sometimes friends must impart unpalatable news.

He is softly spoken, but will be outspoken. "I will not be inhibited in the slightest about speaking out in public and ventilating issues. It is no secret that my views and those of Rhodes Boyson are not exactly identical. There is a certain difference of philosophy.

Ngaio Crequer talks to Robert Rhodes James who has become Conservative Party liaison officer for higher and further education

"I have no ministerial power but I shall be keeping closely in touch with Mark Carlisle and if I identify problems I shall let him know. And I do have access to Margaret Thatcher. It does mean that I can say to her, say, over a drink, that there are things that we ought to be looking into."

Rhodes James is still working out the approach he will make to his job but one of the areas he is concerned about is long-term research into some of society's problems where education and Government could do more together, such as environmental issues.

The Open University and adult education are two areas in particular he wants to look at, and he thinks the colleges of further education should be more involved in the mainstream.

An area he has had much to say about, at least privately, when policy was being formed, was the government decision to charge overseas students full-cost fees. He is quite clear about this. "I greatly regret it is necessary to do this. I do accept there is an awful lot of money involved and I am worried about it. There is a theory that as some students come from richer countries that the students themselves are rich. That is not the case."

He is concerned mainly about those students already here, those covered by ODA programmes, and many postgraduates. He thinks the bursary scheme for overseas post-

graduate students an important achievement although he recognizes that the money in the scheme may well prove to be inadequate.

"When the Labour Government introduced a quota and put up fees I criticized that strongly. I think the surprising thing about the current overseas policy is that the principal opposition has come from the Conservative benches and not the Labour Party. I thought that was unfortunate. There has been none of the hullabaloo which I would have expected."

He thinks that in the past some universities have made the position worse for themselves by lobbying abroad for more overseas students. He genuinely cares about the cross-fertilisation of ideas that overseas students help to bring to higher education. This, he says, is not in itself justification but he would be saddened if it disappeared entirely.

"No one knows what the effect of the policy will be but we are hoping desperately that the economy will improve. I would hope that the whole thing would be reviewed sympathetically. Mark Carlisle is under terrific pressure at the moment.

"I am a loyal member of the Government but I was one of many Conservatives deeply unhappy."

He accepts that some universities will be hard hit by the overseas policy but he thinks that some vice-chancellors have over-reacted. He makes the same point about British Council cuts: he regrets the



"I do not think you can have too many universities but I am unhappy about the general standards of one or two of them. I will not name names but the difference in ability is very marked.

"One of the real problems of the new universities was that they were formed at such a rate that a number of people got high sounding positions who really were not up to it. In a normal situation they would not have got chairs. They were second-raters.

"This is very bad luck for first rate people who are finding it very difficult to get any job at all because the machine is not expanding.

"There is an extraordinary disparity between vice-chancellors and heads of colleges. Some of them are outstandingly good, some others have been appointed out of desperation because nobody else applied. Leadership is tremendously important. A dud can really start trouble at the top.

"One of the problems with the polytechnics is that in some cases they have tried to become mini-universities and expand their field of activities without enough people of ability to make a success of it."

There is a problem with overlapping and duplication of courses but he would be anxious not to downgrade the polytechnics.

Higher education thinks it has been unduly battered by the present Government and that its problems are not fully understood by policy makers.

In Rhodes James they may have found a man who is temperamentally disposed to listen and who shares the concern expressed by many. It will be interesting to see to what extent he will be able to impress his views on his colleagues in power.

need for some of the measures, but says that they can be lived with.

And a small majority of students have, he said, acted "very stupidly" over the cuts, which has been counter-productive.

He lives in his constituency at Cambridge and is very much aware of the needs of the 8,000 students. He tries to improve the relations between town and gown "in a very quiet way" but is mindful that the students are only there for three years and that he represents the whole constituency.

He sees the Select Committee as a useful forum for ideas, but he is keen to recognize the different character of institutions. "I am instinctively opposed to the idea of giving the Department of Education and Science more powers of direction. Most people in higher education just want to be left alone to get on with their own teaching and research.