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## **The Case of Gill Evans Reflections on Promotion Procedures**

**Andrew M. Colman**

Gill Evans has finally won her battle for promotion to a Personal Chair at Cambridge University. This is the culmination of a long struggle involving several tribunal and court cases – unlike Leicester, Cambridge has no Visitor. Because of the apparent injustice of the case, it was widely reported in the press, and it became increasingly acrimonious over the years. But it was occasionally leavened by humour.

An episode worthy of Tom Sharpe occurred on 10 October 2001, during a Regent House debate about revisions to the promotion procedures, which were being driven largely by Gill Evans. David Dumville, Professor of Palaeography and Cultural History dramatized – perhaps I should say melodramatized – the unfairness of the existing procedures as follows. First, he displayed a “modestly gusseted A4 envelope” containing the entire published output of an unnamed professorial colleague. Then, “by contrast”, he wheeled in a trolley piled high with publications of Gill Evans, who had been passed over for promotion yet again.

The Dumville trolley and the modestly gusseted professor, whose identity is common knowledge in Cambridge, are now embedded in the folklore of higher education.

### **Hoist with his own petard**

When the nomination of Gill Evans for promotion was reported in the *Times Higher*

*Educational Supplement* on 8 November, Donald Welbourn, an octogenarian engineering don, wrote a letter to the *THES* (15 November), the spitefulness of which was extreme even by Cambridge standards. Her promotion would “diminish” Cambridge, he said, and he drew attention to an ancient procedure whereby it could be blocked by a ballot of the entire academic community. As I write, a ballot remains on the cards.

Donald Welbourn could have ended his letter there, but he made the mistake of attempting to prove his point by disparaging Gill Evans’s scholarship. In the *Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*, he had found a sentence of hers implying that ordinary people in parishes understood Latin during the early Middle Ages. “When did ‘ordinary people in parishes’ speak Latin?” he sneered. Surely “they still spoke Anglo-Saxon, with perhaps a little Norman French”. But he was hoist with his own petard when medieval scholars pointed out politely that the early Middle Ages predated the Norman Conquest and that, during that period, ordinary people did indeed speak Latin.

### **Reasons**

What a Cambridge professor recently described as an “ancient injustice” might look to many people like a straightforward case of misogyny. But although Cambridge seems to have its quota of misogynists, and only 15 per cent of its dons and 6 per cent of its professors are female, Gill Evans doesn’t believe that misogyny was at the root of her problems.

A more likely explanation is her outspokenness and her involvement in university politics. Although her medieval scholarship has been prodigious, and had already earned her DLitt degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge twenty years ago, she has also written books such as: *Raising Concerns and Handling the Consequences in*

*Further and Higher Education: A Handbook* (1996); *Calling Academia to Account: Rights and Responsibilities* (1999); *Universities and Students: A Guide to Rights, Responsibilities and Practical Remedies* (2001); and *Academics and the Real World* (2002). She also writes a regular column on university matters in *The Guardian*.

Closer to home, she has battled long and hard to reform Cambridge's arrogant and amateurish management and protect its historic democratic governance. She's a prominent member of the Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards (CAFAS), in which capacity she has assisted many students and staff members in their disputes with Cambridge and other universities. I was one of the beneficiaries of her help in my own widely publicized battles over bullying and promotion. Her advocacy and dispute counselling are informed by a vast knowledge of administrative law – she recently qualified as a barrister. Any or all of this could have turned powerful people against her.

## **Academic judgement of heads**

Being a whistleblower or a thorn in the side of a University can scupper an academic's chances of promotion at any UK university. Even a purely personal antipathy from a Head of Department can make promotion virtually impossible. Promotions are governed, to a large extent, by the twin evils of patronage and prejudice. This will remain so as long as "academic judgement" is used to evaluate promotion cases, and as long as departmental heads play a key role in promotions.

"Academic judgement" gives far too much scope for bias, especially when, as is often the case, those exercising it know little about the applicant's research field. Furthermore, the pivotal role of departmental heads is fundamentally corrupting. It can encourage a

relatively benign head to dole out promotions, or to dangle vague promises of promotion, to gain compliance of "agreeable" underlings, and it can turn a malign head into the academic equivalent of a school bully.

It is surprising how many people, including some who look as though even soft margarine wouldn't melt in their mouths, have latent authoritarian and sometimes even sadistic impulses, which are manifested only in positions of power. This is a repulsive spectacle in any hierarchical organization, and it is especially dangerous in a university, because a departmental head is a virtual dictator with no clearly identified superior to whom a victim can effectively complain. This is unusual in other organizations.

The pivotal role of departmental heads in promotions encourages obsequious behaviour from ordinary staff members and turns many of them into acquiescent sycophants. What is worse, it also creates the occasional Uriah Heep, feigning humility while simultaneously plotting to undermine the boss.

## **Solutions**

What are the solutions? First, in my opinion, departmental heads should cease to play any significant role in promotions. That would at least put an end to a corrupt and corrupting feature of departmental politics. For professorial promotions, at least, I believe that applications should be considered by external panels of academics who do not know the candidates, have no personal axes to grind, and can judge cases purely on their merits.

Second, it could be argued that fairness requires a transparent system based on objective criteria. The objective criteria might include such factors as formal qualifications, length of service, number of postgraduate

students supervised to completion, and above all objective measures of research performance.

In some disciplines, research performance might be objectively though roughly measurable in terms of numbers of books or peer-reviewed articles. In others, bibliometric measures such as citation counts or journal citation impact factors might be more suitable. A recent unpublished study by Andy Smith and Mike Eysenck (*The Correlation Between RAE Ratings and Citation Counts in Psychology*, June 2002) showed that, for the psychology unit of assessment in the RAE, mean citations per staff member correlates so highly (as highly as  $r = 0.91$ ) with RAE ratings that the whole exercise might as well have been done by citation counts.

Citation counts can be criticized, of course, and other objective criteria would also be controversial. But subjective academic judgement is controversial too, and I'd go further and argue that it is unacceptable in today's universities. At least objective criteria could be made clear, transparent, and relatively impervious to bias and manipulation, and they would *appear* fairer, which is also important. If Gill Evans had been judged against almost any set of objective criteria, she would have been promoted long ago.

Third, we need a robust and effective appeals procedure. Most universities, including Cambridge and Leicester, have "appeals procedures" that are nothing of the sort. Appeals are allowed on procedural grounds only, and even if it is proved that the university failed to follow its own procedures correctly, the remedy is merely to send the case back to the same promotions committee to be reconsidered with the procedural defect remedied. Appellants need not hold their breath. In fact, hardly anyone ever appeals, and it's not hard to see why.

That just isn't good enough. Injustices can occur without any breach of procedures. In other cases, the procedures themselves may be intrinsically unfair or defective. Above all, appeals should be allowed on substantive issues, where *prima facie* grounds are established. Applications can be unfairly judged through honest errors or misunderstandings, or through deliberate misdirection, and the basis of rejections can sometimes be refuted convincingly.

Lawyers make a clear distinction between reviews and appeals, and what Cambridge, Leicester, and most UK universities have are review procedures masquerading as appeals procedures. We should stop pretending that we operate genuine appeals procedures.

## Reward and recognition

It takes intrinsic ability and years of hard work to train for an academic position. Academics are nevertheless appointed on modest starting salaries, often comparable to those that firefighters consider insulting. Although we have a reasonable pension scheme, we get no perks – no company car, no share options, not even private medical insurance. Once we've settled down, it begins to dawn on most of us that the career structure offers rather limited room for manoeuvre. Ambitious and able lecturers may be promoted to senior lectureships and readerships after many years of service, and a few may aspire to professorships after many more, but that's it.

Promotions mean a lot to us, precisely because that's all there is. They're virtually the only tangible ways in which excellence is recognized and rewarded by our employers. The promotions procedures at Leicester are vastly fairer than those operated under the Ken Edwards Vice-Chancellorship, but many staff members still believe that outcomes are deeply tinged by favouritism, and they may

be right. It is a familiar tenet of the common law that we need systems that are not only fair but are seen to be fair.

