

AUB – the dangers of secrecy

by Chibli Mallat

There are, in Lebanon, rare 'outsiders' to AUB, since the university has made such a mark inside the country, and throughout the region, that few are not involved, indirectly or directly, in the giant intellectual network that it has woven over the century of its enriching existence.

To that extent, I belong to the unhappy few who have remained outside the pale of its benevolent comucopia. I took the odd literature course at AUB in my youth, and have given the odd lecture in my less innocent years. This qualifies me, at best, as an interested outsider.

But this may make it easier for me to write about the American University of Beirut – especially as what I want to call for are more transparency and public participation in the choice of its new president.

The appointment of the next president of AUB is important for three reasons. Usually, the presidency tends to cover the better part of a decade, or more, and this means that the next president will usher the university into the 21st century. The investment in a good president is decisive for the future of higher education in the region.

Secondly, it is clear that the departure of the incumbent president has been precipitate. What precipitated it is unclear, but president Haddad's tenure has been fraught with crises, some apparently caused by his abrasive style with colleagues, which has forced his absence from the country.

Matters have not been helped by his uninspiring intellectual achievements – I know only one rather slim book he published back in the 70s, an interesting though not groundbreaking contribution to the literature of Middle Eastern minorities.

No doubt abrasiveness can also be the other side of courage or frankness, and he certainly suffered from the ban on his continued pres-

ence away from campus: this simplified appreciation of character commands the basic lessons for the next president. He cannot manage AUB by remote control.

Thirdly, the country is intellectually unwell. Self-censorship hovers over the press and legal and judicial circles. This affects academia and AUB in a direct way: there is nothing more damning than academic self-censorship.

The atmosphere of Middle Eastern studies on America's campuses through the 80s meant that any academic opposition to Israel was a sure element for a witchhunt. I recall myself, at the University of California, an instance when a colleague had to recant in public some criticism he had directed towards Israel.

This operates in reverse in Lebanon. AUB is at the heart of a similar atmosphere of intimidation (even if the content is opposite), and the sacrifice of Malcolm Kerr 13 years ago remains an ugly blot in the history of the institution.

Against this triple wall of a stifling background, the present call for a more open choice of a president sounds particularly hollow. This wall, however, may well start being breached by the policy adopted for choosing a new president.

The president is chosen by the university's Board of Trustees, usually a collection of wise old men (and, more rarely, women) who are attached to the idea of AUB, and to the dissemination of the best American culture in the world. They are dedicated to the university, they do not get paid for what they do, and they give a lot of their time, contacts, and money,

to improve it.

This is a typically old-boy hush-hush network, meaning the process of choosing the AUB president is as mysterious and medieval as that of choosing the pope. This process, however understandable in terms of habit and convenience, needs to be improved, for the sake of both AUB and the Lebanese society it serves.

The key word is transparency. Although it may be difficult for some of those who are approached by colleagues on the Board, or who would like to postulate for the presidency of the institution, to declare their interest in that position, there should be a point in the process where the candidates who have been shortlisted come out in the open.

This can be done in two major, civilised, ways. Each candidate can be asked to give two public lectures: one lecture would be in the area of the candidate's expertise, in medicine, or in histo-

ry, or in political science...

Whatever the field, his peers can appreciate the seriousness of his scholarship for an institution whose major reason for existing is to further higher education and world-class scholarship.

The second lecture would outline the vision a candidate has for the future of AUB. It is true that the appreciation of the workings of a large university requires time, and that inside candidates may find an advantage in that over outside recruits. But the audience of faculty, staff and students, is sophisticated. It knows the balance between habit and hope. Vision, particularly for an institution facing the walls

I have described, is crucial, and the adumbration of a would-be president's vision would allow for a new dynamic and the beginning of accountability.

Ideally, once all the short-listed candidates have given their lectures and visions, some electoral process could be organised. One knows that this is not easily attainable, because the electorate, in the case of a university, is ill-defined.

In addition, a sharp competition may become counterproductive, even if the better colleges at the University of Oxford, which has some experience in academia, have adopted straightforward elections by their 'fellows' (in other words, their professors) for their warden-presidents. While a straight election by its professors and trustees sounds far off in the case of AUB, it might not be a bad goal for the next century.

A final humbling thought on the subject: most universities in the world do not allow for public lectures for short-listed candidates to the presidency.

The mere idea of such an exposure to transparency was swept under contemptuous silence, for example, when I raised it for the School of Oriental and African Studies, at the University of London, which was looking for a new director two years ago.

But transparency is the key word for the future, in a world where money and old-boy networks tend to easily overshadow the more difficult, but so much more civilised, efforts to establish a more democratic and open society. AUB is only a microcosm for the larger region. If it opens up for the choice of its head, the region will take notice.

Chibli Mallat directed the Centre of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law at SOAS, University of London, until September 1996. He is a practising attorney and a professor of law at Saint Joseph's, and, occasionally, at the newly established Islamic university, Beirut

The process
of choosing the
AUB president is as
mysterious and medieval
as that of choosing
the Pope