

Free-market Gaffney fights for freedom on all fronts

ACADEMIC freedom is at stake in a battle between Professor Mason Gaffney and the corporate interests linked to the University of California at Riverside.

Professor Gaffney teaches economics. He labels himself as a Jeffersonian free marketer whose strictures against monopolists has brought him into conflict with the major vested interests — and particularly those who own land and rake in fortunes from public subsidies.

Two years ago attempts were made to deprive Professor Gaffney of one of his platforms: he was offered a shortened two-year term — instead of the usual four-year term — on the influential Public Utilities Board.

His opponents claimed that he had a poor attendance record. Professor Gaffney countered by bluntly saying the charge was a lie.

The head of the local Chamber of Commerce, Art Pick, attacked by claiming that “Everyone around here knows that Gaffney does not understand economics”.

His backers, including an economics professor from California State University at Fullerton, say that Gaffney’s alleged absences were a “red herring” designed to discredit him because of his straight talk.

Professor Gaffney is an authority on the economics of natural resources. He has testified to Congressional committees, and published many authoritative papers on the subject. He was hired 10 years ago to strengthen the university’s economics department.

That was when he stirred up a hornets’ nest. He outspokenly employed a radical analysis of private property rights in land, which was originally articulated by Henry George in *Progress and Poverty*.

Professor Gaffney commended the free market in which the small entrepreneur could flourish without governmental interference.

And that was bound to lead to a clash. For, as Peter Asmus, writing in *The Orange County Register*, noted: “It was these beliefs that threaten the very fabric of life here in the ‘Inland Empire’, where things like huge governmental subsidies for big corporate and agricultural outfits have become institutionalized practices.”

● Gaffney attacked the low utility rates paid by Rohr Industries, the giant aeroplane engine manufacturer and the largest employer in the area.

Small businesses, he said, ought to get some rate relief instead. Pick



● Professor Gaffney

retaliated and was quoted as characterising small businesses as “parasites”.

● Gaffney attacked the local politicians who, working with the Metropolitan Water District Board, borrowed heavily to finance irrigation systems which push up rural land prices.

He advocated free-market water pricing, to conserve water. Lois Krieger, a member of the MWD board, retaliated by claiming that Gaffney’s free-market concepts did not belong “in the real world”.

Krieger is also a member of the University of California Riverside Foundation, a group of wealthy university patrons who encourage the university to undertake research on behalf of commercial and industrial enterprises. Professors share in the profits of their inventions.

Professor Gaffney, a small farmer in his own right, did not court popularity when he bluntly exposed the

way in which agri-business used the university for its commercial ends.

“The agri-business giants get their way in these parts,” he says. “They try to paint themselves as self-reliant frontiersmen, but a more accurate depiction would be a welfare-taker.”

“Agricultural people see this place as a big industrial laboratory to serve agriculture. The university has become an attachment to the industry, and it shares its viewpoints and vested interests.”

Now Professor Gaffney has been barred from teaching resource economics — the result, he believes, of his outspoken views about local water and land policies.

The economics department has acquired a reputation over the years for its Marxist bias. And this has forced Professor Gaffney to fight on a second front: against the lecturers who want to turn the department into “a monolithic, intolerant bastion for a single ideology”.

But it seems that, when it comes to a choice between marketeers and Marxists, the tax-subsidised entrepreneurs know where their interests lie. After investigating the row, Peter Asmus concluded that Professor Gaffney’s days at the university are numbered.

“Riverside’s university and business community would, it seems, prefer to work with Marxists whose teachings are delegated to the ivory towers of the classroom, than a free-speaking free-marketeer who tries to apply his ideals and theories to the local economy.”