

The Oxford Higher Education Debate V: Please don't put marmalade on a turd

BERNARD SUFRIN 14 February 2011

The Oxford University 'Congregation', the University's sovereign body which includes all permanent academic faculty, met in the Sheldonian theatre on 8 February to debate whether it should raise student fees in the context of a fierce wider debates. Some students were allowed to take part while others demonstrated outside. This is the fifth in the daily series of contributions OurKingdom is running see [Stuart White](#), [Kate Tunstall](#), [John Parrington](#), and [David Barclay](#), tomorrow [Rowan Tomlinson](#).

The Congregation that is meeting inside this building is the Sovereign Body of the University, and we are here to discuss how the University should respond to the draconian cuts in the higher education budget that will be implemented over the next four years.

On the face of it this requires us to do no more than consider the nuts and bolts of the response – such as what level of fee to set, what the fee-waiver tariffs will be, what scholarships might be funded, what steps to take to satisfy access requirements, and so on.

But there is another congregation, meeting outside this building. They believe that the University is in a position to make significant choices about the nuts and bolts questions. They want the University to make a stand against higher fees. And I think they need the University to speak truth to power.

And I think we need that too. We have been publicly timid on today's questions for a bit too long.

At each stage in the deterioration of the financial climate for Universities or for students we seem to have accepted the assumptions made in Whitehall without public demur, prayed that the consequences of the decisions wouldn't be too dire for Oxbridge, and then gotten on with business as usual.

Perhaps it has been with the goal of maintaining good working relationships with our Whitehall masters, but if our officials have argued with them, it has been in private; or from behind the smokescreen of the Russell group; or from within the Sheepfold of Universities UK.

We have missed some important opportunities to provide moral and intellectual clarity.

One exception was Congregation's revolt in 1985 against Council's proposal of an honorary doctorate for Mrs. Thatcher. I still meet colleagues who think that this was a political mistake; but I agree with Denis Noble that the "... mammoth majority against the degree demonstrates the seriousness of Oxford's purpose in protesting against the damage inflicted by government policy on science, education and health."

What we should challenge now, is the idea that higher education is no more than a private benefit, and that the only beneficiaries of a university education are the higher-earning graduates.

We should be articulating a different vision – based on the principle that higher education contributes to the greater well-being of society at large, independently of the increased earning power of its graduates or the short-term impact of its research.

We should take seriously the call by Professor Sretzer of Cambridge for free post-secondary education and training for all. Higher education should no longer be the exclusive preserve of the children of the upper and middle classes and the very few underprivileged who can win scholarships or bursaries that take them into private education. And we should challenge the false nostrum of "access"; the myth that the Universities can make up for the malign effects of the UK's caste systems of primary and secondary education by admitting a proportion of state-educated students that some secretary of state or access-Czar mandates from time to time. This has been as effective as putting elastoplast on a gangrene (or marmalade on a turd). Something more radical is needed.

I shall close with an uncomfortable truth about the proposed new system of loans. Susan Cooper did her usual meticulous job in the last Oxford Magazine¹ explaining it. I wish more people did their homework as effectively as she does ours for us.

On the face of it the system will provide more money for the Universities while at the same time costing some lower-paid graduates less than the current system. But these days we need to look behind the face. And two of the system's aspects pose big risks for graduates, and for the taxpayers 30 years out.

First: the legislation calls for a real rate of interest of at least 3% to be charged to the better-off graduates. But there is also a clause that permits this 3% to be increased, and there is no upper bound in the

legislation.

Second: Cooper has shown that even at 3% real interest it is inevitable that a large proportion of graduates will not have paid off the full amount of their loan at the 30-year write-off point. Thus, as she says, "The old system of the government paying up-front and able to see its costs as they are incurred is replaced by unknown losses that will appear 30 years later."

I don't think it takes too much imagination to see the dangers of cash-strapped and ideologically-driven governments playing fast and loose with the real interest rate on loans; or simply privatising the loan books, and giving the plutocrats a further cohort of hostages. We need look no further than the U.S. to see what the consequences of that step would be. Just Google "SallyMae, Citicorp and student loan default".

If the UK is destined for plutocratic governance for a while then there's certainly something for an aspiring student to be anxious about here; for the idea that we are all in this together has already been tested to destruction.

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