

Laura Spence and the hallowed halls of academe

The House of Lords debated higher education on June 14. They considered what to do about Government Ministers who play around in this area for crude political reasons, and came up with an answer. I will give the answer later.

The problem was perceived to centre on Gordon Brown's prevarications concerning the comprehensive school pupil Laura Spence, coupled with Baroness Jay's prevarications on what she alleged to be her "ordinary" grammar school education (in fact she went to a fee-paying Girls' Public Day School Trust school, such as the one my own three daughters attended).

In the debate Lord Skidelsky referred to the Chancellor's "recent clumsy attempt to make a class-war issue of the Oxford selection system". Ken Baker spoke of Brown's "infamous" attack on his old college, adding as respects the President of Magdalen's wining and dining of this man to explain to him what Oxford is doing to widen participation in its courses: "if you invite the Chancellor to dinner, remember that he bites the hand that feeds!" Baker went on: "He got his facts hopelessly mangled. Of the five students accepted at Magdalen, two came from state schools and three from ethnic minorities." Which of these worthies of our time does Brown suggest should have been discarded in favour of Miss Spence, who had not even taken her A-levels?

The Chancellor of Oxford University, Lord Jenkins, then weighed in concerning what he called Brown's "little blitzkreig on Oxford". He identified the historical event which Brown's attack most closely resembled as being Chairman Mao's cultural revolution in China. This, said the other Chancellor, was designed to achieve not any practical result but just to stir things up for political purposes, to spread unease and to create damage, which took a lot of repairing. Lord Jenkins added: "Mr Brown's diatribe was born of prejudice out of ignorance. Nearly every fact he adduced was false. I only hope he is better briefed when dealing with Treasury matters". Finally the Liberal Democrat leader in the Lords said there must be no question of governments, or agents of government, deciding which individuals should or should not be admitted to particular universities.

Baroness Young said Brown's attack was "extraordinary and intemperate". It was "utterly disgraceful" to use a young girl in this way. Oxford, said she, will not lower its standards, and should not be ashamed to be elite. "We surely do not want third-rate institutions of any kind."

Baroness James (the novelist P. D. James) agreed that the Laura Spence affair was a scandal, though not in the sense Mr Brown intended. She added:

"We have to assume that rational men intend the natural results of their actions. This means that the Chancellor, to propitiate those members of his party who require regular skirmishes of the class war to satisfy their passion for social indignation, and perhaps to pursue some private ambition, deliberately insulted one of the world's greatest universities, slandered a distinguished academic, and, perhaps most serious of all, put back, perhaps for years, the patient work of Oxford in persuading young people from the state system that Oxford welcomes them and that they can be happy there."

Winding up for the Conservatives, Baroness Blatch said that Baroness (Tessa) Blackstone, who was in her turn to wind up for the Government, must say precisely why Mr Brown

described what happened at Magdalen College as a scandal. She went on to give precise details showing why it was in no way a scandal, ending: “Finally, does the Minister believe that Magdalen College did discriminate unfairly against Laura Spence? If not, the college should receive an apology. Does the noble Baroness think that they will receive one?”

In fact the noble Baroness failed even to mention the Laura Spence affair or Magdalen College in her rambling winding up speech. Such is the way of politicians.

Before coming to the solution proposed I will mention one other relevant matter: government control over university funding brings insufferable bureaucracy involving innumerable quangos. Moreover the quangos get less and less efficient. Lord Morris pointed out that the old University Grants Committee was made up of experts who did not need to be taught what questions to ask because they already knew most of the answers. Their replacement, the English Funding Council, is far less knowledgeable.

The solution proposed was the obvious one: get Government out of higher education. Lord Skidelsky said that universities must wean themselves of their present dependence on the state. Lord Baker said they started as private institutions and should become private institutions once again. He added: “They should become independent, free-standing bodies, totally in charge of their own affairs.” Baroness Young agreed. Lord Desai said that option had great attraction.

Perhaps the days of clumsy politicians like Gordon Brown are numbered in the hallowed halls of academe.

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