

The noted Oxford scientist takes issue with the Chancellor on his view of Oxford 'elitism'

Dear Mr Brown

As Chancellor you surely formulate your policies in the light of meticulously researched statistical facts and figures. Yet this week you behaved like a Chancellor who is informed by a single shopper that the price of Woodbines is a bleeding liberty, believes it, and bases an important part of his budgetary policy on it. This week you have listened to tabloid tittle-tattle; you have used it to make political cheap shots; and above all you refused to climb down even when you had passed the point where you must have known you were mistaken.

The facts are these. Medicine is a notoriously over-subscribed subject, and many superb candidates are routinely beaten by even more superb candidates. As Alan Ryan pointed out in The Guardian last week, that doesn't make them bad runners. They enter another race and next time may outrun the competition. The young woman at the centre of your fuss went in for another race, at Harvard, and this time she outran the competition. Good for her. It doesn't mean the original race was unfair. Of the 23 candidates for only five places to read medicine at Magdalen, 12 had GCSE scores at least as good as hers.

It was reported - and you swallowed it - that she won a 'scholarship' at Harvard. By now somebody will have told you 'scholarship' in this context refers to the ordinary means-tested financial assistance Harvard hands out to its students. It does not carry the connotations of honour we associate with 'Scholarship'.

Moreover, Harvard have not accepted her to read medicine. If she had applied to Oxford to read almost any other scientific subject than medicine she would almost certainly have got in. She might have won a scholarship. I mean a real scholarship trailing clouds of glory - except that Oxford gave up Entrance Scholarships some years ago on the grounds that they were too elitist.

In your bullying tactics, you have been unfair to those successful candidates who were accepted. Surely you must realise that in order to make way for your favoured candidate, one of those superbly qualified young people would have had to have been rejected.

I genuinely believe that Oxford is not elitist, and this is supported by the recent Teaching Quality Assessment, which awarded Oxford full marks for its entrance procedures. But, important as that is, it has been overtaken by the fact that a holder of one of the three great Offices of State has been shown to be so wrong, yet refuses to acknowledge it.

Here at Oxford, we teach students not to base generalisations on one anecdote. We also teach them to admit it if they are conclusively shown to be wrong. 'New' Labour? You'll be really new if you now depart from all political precedent and apologise.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Dawkins,

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