

The Chess Player vs. the Prime Minister

By Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics, University of Warwick

Our universities are in a mess. A chess player will go for a graduate income tax. A workaholic will want to introduce fees. Therefore it is likely that Britain is going to end up with some mixture. I think that will be a shame, but I am not in charge of the country.

Let us trace the path to this conclusion.

The first thing to grasp is that at a world-class level we are now badly behind, and Mr Blair, thanks in part to the persistence of some admirable advisers, has finally grasped that fact.

Worrying new information has just been released by the Institute of Scientific Information, for instance, to demonstrate that in lots of fields Great Britain is severely short of world-ranking scientists. The numbers can be found at website isihighlycited.com.

Of the 100 top physicists across the globe, just 2 now work in Great Britain. Yet Princeton University alone, a tiny university in New Jersey USA, has 8.

In agricultural science, just 4 out of the world's best 100 researchers are in this country. Immunology is similarly unimpressive. The United States walks away with it at 78 of the globe's top one hundred researchers. The British Isles can manage 4. In engineering, too, we have only 4 out of the best one hundred people world-wide. In molecular biology and genetics, it is 3.

Great Britain is pretty good at biology and biochemistry. In this area, there are a respectable 10 of the world's leading one hundred scientists. Admittedly the USA has 64. But our country is still ahead of Germany at 5, France at 3, and Japan at 6. In microbiology, however, we have only 6 out of 100. Chemistry is better. Within our shores are 11 of the globe's one hundred star people.

Yet overall the picture is poor.

Unfortunately, almost all the important contributions in science come from a tiny group of outstandingly creative people. When God made creativity, she was having a bad, inegalitarian day. This fact is largely missed by the so-called Research Assessment Exercise, which is the government's way of assessing the quality of research in our university sector. The RAE is obsessed with the average person in each department in each British university. Yet, if we are to be intellectually honest, and there is presumably not much point in having universities otherwise, then we have to put disproportionate weight on the cream of ideas. Textbooks are filled with the ideas of only a small number of people.

In Great Britain as a whole, we now have just 80 out of the world's best 1200 scientists. The ISI company measures this by studying the bibliographies (that is, the reference lists) of published articles. These trace citations and thus the twisting thread of ideas through the generations.

I happen to know that the government has been won over by such unpleasant facts. Nevertheless, I do not know how the politicians are going to react.

When in doubt, go back to psychology. In trying to guess what the Cabinet will do about university funding, I thought it would be useful to find out more about the new Education Minister. So I looked up Charles Clarke in Who's Who, where I found that he lists his recreations as "accidental happenings" and "stimulating conversation". I don't know about you, but this made me laugh, and everyone in the library then stared, muttering to themselves, presumably because the English, and especially economists, are not meant to be cheery in public places.

However, it turned out it was the wrong Charles Clarke's entry that I was reading (a Baron who runs Bibury Cricket Club). The compressed life story of the avuncular Member of Parliament in fact lay below, and, somewhat unpersuasively, because my hunch is that those in Who's Who with the blandest list of recreations are the ones

with the most exciting lives behind the black and white prose, he lists simply chess, reading and walking.

Then I looked up Tony Blair. Remarkably, the man has no recreations.

How do we put all this together?

A chess player and a workaholic meet up to solve a problem. The chess player says: if we go for fees we are going to lose half the middle class vote because they are interested in their wallets not logic or fairness. The workaholic says: you worry too much and forget that the British are a sensible race and I can persuade them if I put my mind to it and expend enough energy and go on TV enough.

No Tony, says the chess player.

OK, let's have a bit of both, says the workaholic.

In such a way will 'fees-tax' probably be born, which will be very British, and probably confuse everyone.