

Oxford, Cambridge prepare to widen net

Nicholas Bagnall

Oxford and Cambridge are under attack from the left. Giles Radice, shadow education spokesman, had made it clear before election that if Labour got back into power, he would ask them firmly to move towards a "more acceptable" social mix.

Eric Robinson, director of Lancashire Polytechnic and the voice of fundamentalist socialism in such matters, has spoken of the "dismantling" of Oxbridge and "an immediate shift of financial guidance and incentives" to persuade them to take fewer pupils from the privileged classes.

"Even by Mrs. Thatcher's standards," says Mr Robinson, "the present position is indefensible. Pouring public money into wealthy private institutions without knowing what they are doing with it or how

much they already have is extremely corrupt." Meanwhile, there might have to be penalties for universities which fell short of their quota of publicly-educated entrants.

The more moderate Mr Radice is thinking in terms of incentive rather than sanctions: more from the Treasury for universities which behave, rather than less for those which do not, though some might say it came to the same thing.

But, whatever the weapons being deployed, dons are indignant. First, they say Oxbridge is no longer rich. Treasury squeezes have seen to that. Second, they would dearly love to take more people from the state schools—if only the schools would send them.

Colleges at both universities are urgently competing with each other to woo shy sixth-formers who might think them

too posh or snooty. Prospectuses get brighter, playing down the architectural grandeur and emphasising happy social atmosphere. Videos are in the making. Admissions tutors are on the road, anxious to spread the word to the state schools that Oxford and Cambridge are good places to be.

Not much of this is to do with social conscience. The aim is to widen the net to catch more talent. Colleges that have made big efforts to get state school applicants have improved their academic ratings. Nearly 20 years ago Hertford College, Oxford, a pioneer, started offering places to pupils with only four terms in the sixth form alongside public school boys with seven terms' sixth-form teaching behind them. "Our standards rose spectacularly," says the principal, Sir Geoffrey Warnock.

King's College, Cambridge, did the same. Nowadays it takes about 70 per cent of its undergraduates from state schools, against only about 40 per cent in the university as a whole. It is near the top in the degree tables.

"The hard truth is," says Sir Geoffrey, "that whatever you do about the procedure, the highly efficient racing stables of the independent schools are going to do it better." ("Even, as someone else put it, 'if it's a funny hats competition.'") Last year 47 per cent of Oxford's intake came from the maintained schools. Cambridge's score was 43 per cent.

Colleges traditionally dominated by public school types are now playing the field. Magdalene (Cambridge) has lately gone co-educational (the last Cambridge men's college to do so) because it feared being

single-sex was putting off pupils from state schools. Dr Ray Mitchell, its admissions tutor, says: "We're not so much worried about the balance as about having enough applicants." Magdalene takes 25 per cent from the colleges' common pool of people who have not chosen any particular college.

Last year state school applications showed a decline in both universities—in Oxford by an alarming 12 per cent. Disruption by teachers is partly blamed.

But why hasn't Oxbridge done better, despite its efforts? Few say the comprehensive schools cannot produce the goods. There are two long-term difficulties. One is that talent is more thinly spread among a number of schools, each perhaps with only a handful of high-fliers. Such talent used to be concentrated in a

smaller number of grammar schools and was easier to seek. The other difficulty is more serious. "Sadly," says Dr Peter Henderson (Sidney Sussex, Cambridge), "we find people being put off by peer-group pressure. Their friends say: 'Going for Cambridge? Who do you think you are?'"

In the cause of academic equity, both universities have revised their admissions procedures. Two years ago, Oxford abolished the seventh-term entrance exam altogether because it was thought unfair to state pupils who rarely stay in the sixth-form a third year. The new papers, designed to test potential rather than measure past achievements, cannot be taken later than the fourth term in the sixth form. Extra swotting will not help, so state schools should be starting even.