

# Pride and prejudice in a final analysis

IT is with mixed feelings that I am writing my last column for *The THES*. I have always found it a challenging, and sometimes even, a daunting activity. On occasions it has meant that I have received compliments beyond anything that seemed warranted (but which I was of course none the less delighted to receive!). And, happily less frequently, I have felt distinctly exposed to the criticisms, not to say prejudices, of some people who might have difficulty reconciling their views with even the most elementary requirements of equal opportunities policies.

It is quite hard to know how to strike an appropriate note on a valedictory occasion. While I am indebted to many colleagues and friends for their help and advice, I can barely turn this column into the equivalent of an acceptance speech at the Oscar ceremonies. It would be only slightly less inappropriate to use the occasion to start too many hares running. On balance, I thought I should use the opportunity to take stock of the changes which we have witnessed in the three and a half years that I have been writing this column. I will also try to make some evaluation of their current and potential effects.

The most striking change in our sector of education has to be the moves made in the direction of introducing a mass system of higher education. This is something which I should imagine even the harshest critics of the Government would readily concede stands to its cre-



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dit. I would not for a moment want to detract from steps which in my view were long overdue. The crucial issue though now is how to sustain this development and build upon its real potential.

The argument of those who wanted to maintain an élite system of higher education, that "more means worse" has not yet finally been refuted, though I am confident that it will be. It will be self-evident from the quality of the graduates of our "new" system. More problematically, we have seen an expansion during a period of recession. In some cases students are studying because it is preferable to being on the dole (not that this invalidates what I am sure they will learn).

What will happen in rosier economic times – or, dare I say, in the more likely event of gloomier ones? It is difficult fully to assess the effect of the changes in the way in which students are expected to finance their studies. While the "old" system clearly did not do enough to widen access (and is doubtless too expensive for a truly mass system), it is illogical to suppose that the less generous

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package of grants and loans will be more attractive to economically disadvantaged groups in society. And yet they are the ones who ought to be the beneficiaries of these developments. The system is in flux, and we must wait for some time before we can evaluate the effects of these changes with any confidence. At present, I would summarise my own view as certainty that we have moved in the right direction, tempered by a rather uncertain feeling that we will find the means of dealing with the problems

which inevitably arise from such large-scale and dramatic changes.

In terms of my own concerns, I also welcome the developments for their impact and potential effects on women's opportunities. It is already clear that the expansion has afforded new opportunities for women to participate in higher education at all ages and stages, but particularly as mature students. And they have begun to participate across the spectrum of disciplines and subjects, but especially in the humanities and social sciences, including the now burgeoning developments in business and management studies. On the other hand, the terms of that participation are not yet commensurate with the students' different needs for time or facilities. Nor do they take account of such students' potentially varied styles of learning. Given the changing times, it is difficult to judge whether these differences may be taken account of in the future.

It is even more difficult to assess how felicitous the outcomes have been for women participating in the academic labour market, rather than as students. In the time that I have been writing this column, there has been a doubling of the number of women vice chancellors (of the new breed of polytechnic director turned vice chancellor, of course). Since the numbers involve an increase from one to two, and one will be retiring at the end of this academic year, these are not figures which we can take too much pride in.

Indeed, within my own institution there has been a reduction in the number of women in the higher reaches of management. This does not, of course, denote some sort of counter-reformation: rather it makes the point that any advances made by women in such terms tend to be on a scale which makes progress tenuous at best. On the other hand, there has been an increase in the number of women afforded the academic title of professor. In my own institution, again, this increase has been apparently massive – of the order of 500 per cent – but given that there was only one when I began this column, this is yet further indication of the slender chances of progress for women.

Nevertheless, I want to end on an optimistic note, befitting the opening of a New Year, and hopefully a new era in the lead up to the *fin de siècle*. It is, in any event, my New Year resolution always to try to look on the bright side of things. I would hazard a guess – as a social scientist, of course – that the "new realism" of more cautious developments in government policy will help to consolidate and stabilise the new system of mass higher education in which women as well as men, from relatively new walks of life, stand together to be the beneficiaries. Hopefully, too, these will have felicitous effects upon the wider society and economy (including for professional social scientists to continue to contribute to their analysis and evaluation), in Britain, Europe and beyond.