

# DEBATE

THE OXFORD UNION REVIEW

## MONEY

## FEAR

## SIN

*Hilary term blues . . .*



# 'THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS'

A close reading of the Hilary 1988 termcard will, as well as revealing some of the President's underlying pre-occupations, yield the tentative promise of a moveable feast. "This House believes that Oxford and Cambridge are too élitist" is flung in, it seems almost as an afterthought, but it is potentially the most important debate of term.

Its date is not fixed yet for a variety of reasons. The difficulty of securing our American speakers, the problems attendant on televising and the vagaries of the theatrical ego make it a more fragile construct than most of our debates which only have to contend with three line whips and confused ministerial diaries in their genesis. However, when it does happen it will be important for a number of reasons. On a superficial level the potential speakers are important names both here and in America and the televising of their speeches makes it an 'event' which lends their words that degree more influence and permanence.

On a more important level, the debate is important both for the University and the Union. Arguments bedevil the Union, its image and the composition of its membership, with élitism a handy word to use as easy criticism. On a wider stage the same charge is levelled against the University as a whole.

One can appreciate the point of view. Some things about the University, and by extension the Union, have changed little in the past forty years or so. Oxford is still irredeemably middle-class. There are hardly any more working-class undergraduates at Oxford now than there were before Atlee became Prime Minister. The main change in undergraduate composition has been the marked increase in woman. While it is true that some 52% of our population are female and only around 35-40% of undergraduates are, it is also true, and more noteworthy that whereas only 7% of our popula-

tion is privately educated, over half those at Oxford have been. Therein lies the great divide. Oxford changed only in its admittance of the daughters as well as the sons of the well-heeled middle-class.

However this, despite a cause of concern, is not due to Oxford being too 'élitist'. The word is misused and wrongly applied with a frequency which makes me weep. Oxford may pander to privilege, it may be unjustifiably and insufferably smug and self-serving. It may be a creaking anachronism and bound together by too many old school ties but it is not truly élitist. It would be a better place if it was.

Elitism is not a bad thing. Unjustified or corrupt élites are wrong but the concept of striving after excellence which underpins élitism is entirely worthy. If our state schools were a little more élitist, if they tested their pupils with greater rigour and frequency and brought home the difference between failure and success more forcibly they would have more pupils at Oxford. If Oxford itself were more élitist that would not mean more Sloanes and fewer scholarships but rather the reverse. If we perceived Oxford as the place where our future leaders were educated rather than where our present leaders sent their children to be finished then we might have a healthier society. I do not appeal to any mythical ideal when arguing what has just gone before, merely the examples of France and Germany and my own experience. I am, as those who know me will bear out, cursed with arrogance and sloth in equal measures. If I had not been tested, cajoled, frightened by failure and stimulated by success I would not be at University. I was lucky. There are a great many in this country whose sloth, peculiar arrogance and distaste for privilege mean that they do not think of trying to come to somewhere like Oxford. If the University challenged rather than merely being content to rest on its laurels then it might attract them. If schools pushed and brought people

up to face failure and enjoy success rather than merely laddling out a thin gruel of no-risk conformity then they might be attracting them to Oxford.

In a sense élitism is like roughage. The system works better and more cleanly and blockages are eliminated by the introduction of a little fibre.

In a sense the foregoing is what one might expect from the President of a society as 'élitist' as the Union but it is important to defend what makes the society successful. That it is successful there is no doubt. It consistently attracts the bulk of freshers and it commands, periodically, the attention of the nation. That it is élitism which is the key to that success is I feel important to note.

I cannot over-emphasise what élitism is *not*. It is not about back-slapping cliques, reactionary chic or Old Etonian egos. It is a spirit of unashamed glamour, excitement and competition. In a debate both ideas and individuals compete for our attention and our vote. It is the essence of a civilised democracy — the best will out, the people choose. So it is with the Union's functionaries and luminaires. Time and again the best speakers become President, not the best connected. That is élitism working. It re-affirms the individual and his or her qualities to convince. The Union should not be afraid to own up to its nature and it should encourage others to strive for excellence.

We should all recognise the importance of eschewing mediocrity. We are all, here, part of an élite. It is our duty to bear that in mind. Societies fail when they chose their élites, either completely or to new influences. An open élite is the surest guarantee of success — that is why I urge you to speak, compete and involve yourself so that we can build on what has been achieved in the past. I came to Oxford because the idea excited me. I got involved in the Union because it seemed to exude excitement. Can you bear to be boring?

Michael Gove