

Comment



Have your say
Is the proposed boycott of
Israel's universities justified?
timesonline.co.uk/comment



Healthy Spending

Taxpayers need clear evidence of the worth of their NHS investment

The National Health Service ran a £510 million surplus in the past financial year. Add in the contribution from foundation hospitals and British healthcare ended the year in apparently rude financial health, with £640 million in the bank. Some will think that this is a good thing since it suggests the service is operating more efficiently. For others, however, the surplus will equate to a wasted opportunity to maximise the resources made available to patients.

Both views are valid, to an extent, but miss a more important truth. A surplus, just like a deficit, on a pre-agreed budget tells us that some managers are more efficient than others. Surpluses and deficits are not profits or losses: they are deviations from budgeted estimates. It is useful, up to a point, to know the size of the deviations — not least because healthcare expenditure is being reined in, albeit after five years when spending has almost doubled from £56 billion to £104 billion. Given that healthcare consumes nearly one in every five pounds spent by the Government, a £500 million underspend may be excused as a reasonable margin of error. But the deviations provide precious little intelligence on

how much should be spent on healthcare or about efficiency. We know budgets are being missed. We learn very little about the accuracy or appropriateness of those budgets.

Instead of concentrating on surpluses or deficits, attention should be paid to costs and standards. There is a role for targets and measurement but quantitative techniques can eclipse qualitative professional judgments. Counting heads on waiting lists and monitoring success rates of surgical procedures is all very well. But good healthcare does not always deliver measurable results as is the case, for example, with palliative care.

Good financial and administrative decisions can be made only if decision makers are in possession of accurate information. The data published yesterday paints no more than a partial picture. It is astonishing to see, buried deep in the small print, that the NHS employed 9,858 fewer people in 2006 than it thought it did. It is encouraging that the mistake was spotted. But it does nothing to bolster confidence in the administration skills of the NHS.

Decentralisation helps. The network of primary care trusts, NHS trusts and foundation hospitals

vests some control at a local level, but health services could benefit from greater autonomy. This may lead to "postcode lotteries" where standards differ in different parts of the country. But equality means settling for a common denominator. Inequality, as long as it inspires quality improvements for all, is preferable.

The overwhelming majority of doctors, nurses and other NHS staff work to the highest standards. But the overall achievement of any organisation can be greater than the sum of individual efforts. That said, gains will come if the all-encompassing role of doctors is challenged. And nurses and support staff must be more flexible in their work patterns, despite the opposition of unions that do not have the interests of patients or tax payers at heart.

Operating efficiency and healthcare standards will grow in a decentralised NHS equipped with the freedom to set budgets and measure results with flexibility. To achieve this the NHS must share accurate, comprehensive and independent information. Taxpayers need to see a medical chit that shows a clear improvement in the quality of their NHS treatment.

Drop the Boycott

The proposal to halt academic links with Israel is blinkered and perverse

There could hardly be a motion more inimical to the purposes and ethos of a university than the call for an academic boycott of Israel, tabled at the inaugural conference of the University and College Union. Britain's largest trade union for academics is to circulate a call to "consider the moral implication of existing and proposed links with Israeli academic institutions". If adopted, this will stop UCU members attending conferences in Israel or writing for Israeli journals. Yesterday Tony Blair told Parliament that the move would not help the peace process or relations in the Middle East. That is an extraordinary understatement. The move is a mockery of academic freedom, a biased and blinkered call that is as ill-timed as it is perverse.

Links between universities are often the only lines of communication open between countries when all else is obstructed. They keep alive the hope of dialogue even in nations deaf to the outside world. They appeal directly to the moral and intellectual elites who constitute the conscience of a nation. Even during the horrors of Stalinism, the universities of Cambridge and Manchester

maintained links with Soviet physicists and scientists. During apartheid, the liberal conscience of South Africa was kept alive by the brave staff of its universities. And amid the despair that is Zimbabwe today, the universities, still maintaining former Commonwealth links, are able to offer the moral support of the international community.

Israel is not deaf to world opinion, nor is there any threat to academic freedom. Its policies towards the Palestinians, however, may have evoked strong opposition among many academics and students in Europe. But nowhere in Israel are peace activists more strongly represented than in its universities and colleges. Such a boycott is tokenism of the worst kind — a meaningless gesture that sends a "message" to politically correct union members but does nothing to advance the cause that they purport to uphold: the freedom of all peoples in the region to live and study in freedom and dignity.

Had the UCU taken the trouble to look at the record, they would have found that, far from condoning the aggression, as the motion naively maintains, Israeli universities have, on the

whole, done much to mitigate the effects. They have opened their doors to Arab students and given both sides opportunities to discuss the roots of their mutual animosities. Only this week the presidents of four prestigious institutions, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Ben-Gurion and Haifa universities and the Technion technology institute, called on the Israeli Defence Minister to lift the sweeping travel ban between the West Bank and Gaza so that Palestinian students could pursue their education. Israel, they said, should be a state that "supports the principle of academic freedom and the right to education".

The UCU call for a boycott comes two years after the Association of University Teachers approved a similar move that was later overturned. The AUT was one of the unions that merged to form the UCU — which appears to have learnt nothing from the earlier outcry at this arbitrary, misguided and discriminatory proposal. Instead, the UCU should do all it can to cultivate every contact available with Israeli universities. The academics calling for the boycott have much to learn.

Crease Lightning

Isn't it time that the batsman Mark Ramprakash was enlisted to dance for England?

Is England's best cricketer — or at least the English batsman most on form — not playing against the West Indies at Old Trafford today?

Is there no room, even in a side that has recently relocated the knack of hitting the ball so that it stays hit all the way to the boundary, for a batsman such as Mark Ramprakash? He is nursing an average this season of 117, having last weekend notched up his 92nd first-class century.

It has not escaped our attention that Ramprakash's continuing renaissance has come after his triumph in the TV show, *Strictly Come Dancing*,

where — frilly shirt slashed provocatively to the waist — he reminded female viewers that not all men are incapable of dancing with both a rhythm and that certain something.

Dancing is emerging as a secret weapon of great cricketers. Sir Jack Hobbs, whom some rate as England's finest Test batsman, used to say that he kept fit in the winter through ballroom dancing, which he considered good for his footwork. Looking at the other side of the same coin, Sir Donald Bradman attributed his agile footwork on the dancefloor to his training as a cricketer. Many

Asian cricketers eke out a second career dancing their way through Bollywood movies. Who can say what it might do for Andrew Flintoff's recovery if he were to spend a little less time in pedalos, a little more polishing his paso doble?

As we report in our sports pages today, Ramprakash — voted the Professional Cricketers' Association Player of the Year last season — has not given up all hope of an England recall. After all, when England is batting, it needs a man at each crease. It takes two to tango. Why shouldn't one of them be the nimble Mark Ramprakash?

Giles Smith
Notebook



A prince in tune with the masses

The Prince of Wales has gone out and got himself a new harpist. Who wouldn't, in his position? Her name is Claire Jones and she is the third Official Harpist to the Prince of Wales since the Prince revived this historic role seven years ago. Jones's first gig under the terms of her new deal was last night, at a black-tie dinner hosted by Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall at Cardiff Castle. Over the next year she will receive £3,000 — which is something, though considerably less, one can't help noting, than it would cost to book Bobby Davro.

For hundreds of years it was accepted as a matter of course that the Prince of Wales would have his own harpist. Presumably, in the days before helicopters and reinforced Bentleys, it was one of the job's chief perks. However, the routine appointment of a personal harpist to the Prince of Wales lapsed in 1911, when for reasons not easily explained, the buzz engendered in royal circles by the live harp experience fizzled out.

Revived by Charles, the post now resembles a spectacularly elite accoutrement. Even the Queen, one learns, does not have her own harpist. Nevertheless, it would be disappointing if news of the latest appointment caused eyebrows to raise, as they did when it emerged that the Prince has someone to squeeze his toothpaste on to his brush for him. That level of domestic service felt alienating to the wider world, whereas having a harp played is a job for which, surely, we can all agree, it is worth getting a man in. Or, as may be, a woman.

In any case, for all the pleasure it may bring him personally, the Prince's design here is essentially selfless, promoting a rare and valuable skill by royal patronage. Some may darkly note the highly selective nature of the Prince's willingness to get behind the effortlessly glamorous harp, rather than one of the more workaday and undersung instruments, such as the sousaphone. But that's an outcome that will be familiar to fundraisers for endangered species. Money tends to go to the pretty ones with the big eyes.

Of greater concern is how the Prince's ongoing decision to support his own harpist squares with the desired image of a Royal Family committed to modernising and keenly in step with the lives of its subjects. In which case, one wonders if any unlooked-for effects in this area couldn't be straightforwardly offset, in the manner of carbon emissions, by appointing, concurrently with the Official Harpist, an Official Mash-Up Artist to the Prince of Wales.

Mash-up is the art of taking an existing recording — *Shine* by Booty Luv, for example — and superimposing it on, say, Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf's Concerto for Harp and Orchestra, to create an entirely new sonic entity. It might not go down comfortably with black-tie diners at Cardiff Castle, but it would speak well for the Royal Family, going forward. The Prince might need to dig deeper than £3,000 per annum, though. Mash-up artists don't come cheap.