

## **An Open letter to Karen Bliksem**

Dear Karen

I was most amused by your rant last week about my opinion piece on free higher education. But *ag shame*! Here I am amused, when you were so obviously in a painful state of hyperventilation and apoplexy.

You clearly made no effort to seriously contemplate the opinion piece. Instead, you lunged for your keyboard and without further thought spewed out a diatribe clothed as comment.

No matter how distasteful to you, free higher education, like many other social policy issues, needs to be debated.

Your rant was most revealing.

In essence, how dare the Vice-Chancellor from 'little Grahamstown' question contemporary economic and social orthodoxies and policies and the thinking that informs them.

Perhaps this questioning challenges conventional wisdoms that you are smug with, but it is this thinking that without any effective restraints, to repeat, recently plunged the world into an economic recession, at great cost to millions of people.

And for the Vice-Chancellor to dare to suggest that free higher education and many other goals are matters 'of making reasoned public choices, and of understanding the consequences of public policies'!

But, perhaps, Karen, this is what it means to be a deliberative democracy in which we, as citizens, reason, search for alternatives, make choices, take decisions and make trade-offs – instead of simply ceding rule to those who claim to know what is best, not only for themselves but also for everyone else.

Worse, the gall of the Vice-Chancellor to even hint at the possibility of different principles and logics to order our society in contrast to those which have dominated thinking in recent decades! What a subversive threat to dominant ideas about the good society!

What to do Karen? Follow, of course the good old tried tactics: Snuff out the seditious thoughts of the Vice-Chancellor by a) recourse to exaggerated paradox ('Rhodes University - a colonial construct if ever I heard of one'); by b) labelling any voice that challenges neo-liberal orthodoxies and its prescriptions as devoid of 'sense'; and by c) mocking academic qualifications – but how does that distinguish you from populists who disdain knowledge, science and achievement?

And if all else fails, then there is, of course, the trump card: he is a dangerous and loony who wants us to 'rather follow the example of such socialist states as North Korea, or former East Germany'.

Recall that the late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara who worked among the poor of Brazil once observed that 'When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist'. And that before his murder Archbishop Romero of El Salvador observed that 'when the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises'.

Instead of a robust refutation of my views, your rant is akin to thuggery. I cannot say 'intellectual' thuggery, because that would do a grave injustice to the term 'intellectual'.

No Karen, such illiberal tactics will not do, especially in a constitutional democracy which guarantees freedom of expression and the right to freely reason and make public choices. Beyond your veneer of trying to be clever is an approach akin to fascism and the Gestapo.

In a nutshell, no you don't 'understand (me) correctly' because you are blinded by a certain kind of thinking and because you seem closed to any ideas that challenge your smug self-comfort.

In this regard, you personify the closing of the mind that has been so evident in economic and social thought during the past thirty years. You also convey disdain for generating knowledge and wisdom through respectful and vigorous intellectual debate, and for any notion of the public good. It is precisely, Karen, in such a context that self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests triumph.

You state that 'the good vice chancellor failed to consider who would pay'. Gosh, Karen, have you actually bothered to read the opinion piece. But you are especially trite when you say that 'everything comes at a cost (believe it or not, Dr Badat)'.

Karen, each year Rhodes University has to construct a budget of many hundreds of millions of rands and, through a budget process to which all constituencies are invited, we have to find our way to a zero-deficit budget which balances income and expenditure. We reason, explore alternatives, make choices, make trade-offs and take decisions.

We do so guided by various ideals – to be an outstanding university with the best pass and graduation rates in the country; to advance the production of knowledge and maintain our excellent research output; to cultivate high quality graduates who are aware of their citizenship responsibilities; to undertake community engagement in a way that contributes to socio-economic development, and to provide financial aid so that we can become a more socially equitable university.

Yes, all of this, of course, has costs. We establish the costs and we work out how we will pay and who will pay and in what proportions. And by the way, Karen, Rhodes is one of the few universities that not only still teaches 'the Classics' but at which the Classics are also thriving. Left to the 'free' market alone, Karen, without any consideration for the public good, Classics would die.

Ideals and dreams are important Karen. In the *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Arundathi Roy writes 'the only dream worth having ...is to dream that you will *live* while you're alive and only die when you're *dead*'. This means 'to never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of life around you'. To be obsessed, as you are, by only costs, is to sorely miss the point.

You are too quick to treat the views of certain economists as gospel. It is just not true that only 5.5 million taxpayers bear all the costs. Your economist friend seems to forget that over 25% of our tax revenue comes from VAT, to which *everyone* contributes.

At the risk of causing you more consternation I will repeat: free higher education exists in a number of countries and is not an impossible dream – in Sweden, Norway, Netherlands, Scotland, Germany, Italy and, until recently, England. None of these are 'North Korea, or former East Germany'. It is a matter of informed public choice.

Finally, it is not, as you seem to think, the market that I am opposed to. My concern is that in our new gilded age the unadulterated pursuit of power and self-interest, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses have come to be the sole new gods, at the expense of human development, equity and social justice.

Regards (and apologies for the apoplexy that I caused you)

Saleem Badat