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£1.00

Friday 16.07.10

Published
in London and
Manchester
guardian.co.uk

the guardian

Cable begins universities revolution

Graduate tax and private colleges at heart of higher education blueprint

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The government yesterday signalled the biggest shakeup of Britain's universities in a generation, with a blueprint for higher education in which the highest-earning graduates would pay extra taxes to fund degrees, private universities would flourish and struggling institutions would be allowed to fail.

Vince Cable, the cabinet minister responsible for higher education, also raised the prospect of quotas to ensure state school pupils were guaranteed places at Britain's best universities, breaking the private school stranglehold on Oxbridge.

Comparing the existing system of tuition fees to a "poll tax" that graduates paid regardless of their income, the skills secretary argued it was fairer for people to pay according to their earning power.

He said: "It surely can't be right that a teacher or care worker or research scientist is expected to pay the same graduate contribution as a top commercial lawyer or surgeon or City analyst whose graduate premium is so much bigger."

Graduates earned on average £100,000 more than non-graduates in their lifetime, Cable said, and there are significant premiums for degrees such as medicine.

Cable said he had asked Lord Browne, the businessman conducting a review of student finance, to look at a variable graduate tax tied to earnings. Low earners may end up paying less than they currently do for their degrees while those with high incomes pay more. A spokesman for the inquiry said Browne was not unhappy about the apparent pre-empting of his report.

The graduate tax would replace the current system, under which the government lends money to students to cover the cost of their degree courses and graduates pay this back once they start earning more than £15,000.

Phasing out tuition fees is a crucial part of Liberal Democrat education policy. Any

moves by the coalition to raise fees - or even keep the status quo - could prove divisive. Lib Dem MPs will be allowed to abstain from any vote on fees under the coalition agreement.

Cable warned that the Labour government's target of extending higher education to 50% of the population was likely to be scrapped, questioning whether it was sensible or affordable. Figures from the university admissions service, Ucas, underlined the pressure on university places: universities have received more than 660,000 applications and a record 170,000 students are thought likely to be denied a place this autumn.

Cable told an audience of vice-chancellors at South Bank University in London: "There will probably be less public funding per student ... quite possibly fewer students coming straight from school to do three-year degrees." Universities had to be prepared for a period of contraction. "Britain is a poorer country than two years ago and future spending had to be adjusted accordingly."

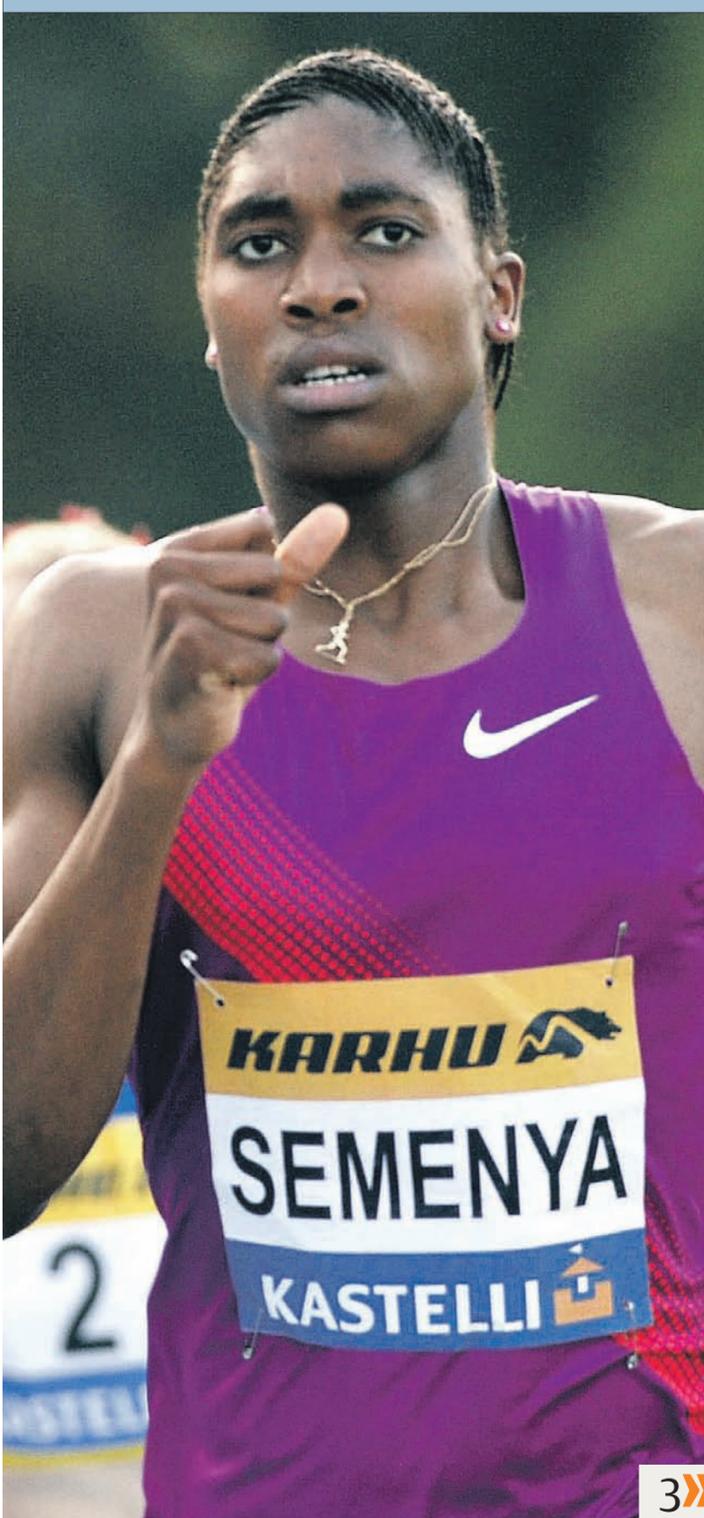
He stunned the vice-chancellors by announcing that struggling universities would be left to go bankrupt. But he said students would still be protected. "It would be similar to banks," he said. "They can fail, but their depositors are still protected."

The government wants to increase the number of private companies offering higher education that is not subsidised by the state. This increased competition would mean some publicly funded universities could struggle to recruit enough students and be forced to close. Experts said at least 20 universities could close in the next few years if this were allowed to happen. At least five universities are known to be on an "at risk" list because they are heavily indebted.

Cable's proposals mark a departure from the current regime and the biggest change to universities since the early 1990s, when at least

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She's back **Semenya's winning return**



Caster Semenya, the South African at the centre of a sex test controversy, on her way to winning her first race for almost a year Photograph: Roni Rekomaa/AFP

Vatican rules ordination of women is as bad as abuse

John Hooper Rome

The Vatican yesterday made the "attempted ordination" of women one of the gravest crimes in church law, putting it in the same category as clerical sex abuse of minors, heresy and schism. The new rules, sent to bishops around the world, apply equally to any woman who agrees to a ceremony of ordination and the bishop who conducts it. Both would be excommunicated.

Since the Vatican does not accept that women can be priests, it does not recognise the outcome of any such ceremony. The "attempted sacred ordination of a woman" was classed as a crime against the sacrament of the Eucharist, along with the defiling of the host. Catholics equate with the body of Jesus.

Erin Saiz Hanna of the US-based Women's Ordination Conference called it "appalling, offensive" and "medieval at best". She added: "The idea that a woman seeking to spread the message of God somehow 'defiles' the Eucharist reveals an antiquated, backward church that still views women as 'unclean' and unholy."

The latest move came in a week when the Church of England took a step closer to the consecration of female bishops. It formed part of a revision of a 2001 decree, the main purpose of which was to toughen the rules on sex abuse by priests in reaction to the scandals that have swept the Catholic church since January.

In 2008, the Vatican published a decree saying those who ordained women and women who received ordination were subject to automatic excommunication. Yesterday's document adds that the ordaining bishop could be forced from the clergy. The revised norms were presented at a previously unannounced press conference, and the accompanying explanatory documentation made scarcely any reference to the changes regarding women's ordination - a possible indication that the Vatican was anticipating criticism of its initiative.

The Vatican teaches that women cannot be ordained because Christ's apostles were all men. In 1976, however, the panel that advises the pope on Biblical interpretation was unable to find a scriptural basis for the ban. It said it did not seem "the New Testament by itself alone will permit us to settle in a clear way and once and for all the problem of the possible accession of women to the presbyterate".

Homophobia still rife in public life, says outed BP chief

Rajeev Syal

Lord Browne of Madingley, the former chief executive of BP who stepped down after failing to halt the publication of details of a gay relationship, has expressed fears that homophobia still thrives in British public life following the resignation of David Laws, the former chief secretary to the Treasury.

In a revealing article for today's Guardian, Browne writes that the downfall of Laws, who left the coalition government amid allegations that he had claimed parliamentary expenses for accommodation owned by his male partner, shows that prominent gay men and lesbians continue to believe they must hide their sexuality

to succeed. This, Browne believes, leaves them open to further tabloid stings.

Browne's comments will spark further debate over the levels of homophobia in British society, and the rights of prominent lesbians and gay men to keep details of their sexuality out of the public domain.

In his resignation letter in May, Laws wrote that his reason for the way he had claimed expenses had been to keep pri-



Lord Browne, who was outed by a former lover, says he wished he had been more truthful about his sexuality to his family

vate details of his sexuality and claimed that he had not benefited financially from this misdirection.

Browne, 62, who kept his sexuality out of the public domain until his former boyfriend sold his story in 2007, said: "The recent resignation of David Laws ... suggests that public figures continue to feel they have no choice but to cover up their sexuality."

"Let's be clear: if he [David] was indeed concealing the fact that he was claiming money for a partner, then he was doing something wrong."

"But it is a great shame that a public figure, a generation younger than me, still feels the need to hide his sexuality."

Laws had claimed over £40,000 on his expenses in the form of second home

costs, from 2004 to late 2009. According to the Daily Telegraph, he had been renting rooms at properties owned by his "long-term partner", James Lundie. Parliamentary rules ban MPs from "leasing accommodation from ... a partner".

Laws, one of the Liberal Democrats' leading lights, was chief secretary for just 17 days.

Browne highlights commerce and sport for particular criticism for failing to welcome "out" lesbians and gay men.

"My sense is that the business world remains more intolerant of open homosexuality than other walks of life such as the professions, the media and the arts. And it's extraordinary how few openly

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Tiger who?
21-year-old Rory McIlroy shoots record round to take Open lead Sport, page 1 »

