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Tax reform, shopping week, enabling expertise

OUR TOWNS
I was pleasantly surprised to see that one place the Fallowses covered was my hometown and current place of residence, Sioux Falls (“Our Towns,” by Lincoln Caplan, May-June, page 44). After 17 years as a pastor in a Wisconsin suburb of the Twin Cities, I was also amazed to return here to find that, indeed, the place I’d grown up in, surrounded by descendants of immigrants from Scandinavia and other parts of northern Europe, was populated by tens of thousands of people from Ukraine, South and Southeast Asia, Lebanon, Syria, Liberia, Nepal, and Latin America, and that dozens of languages have enlivened the streets and dining scene. From my pastoral perspective of seeing a very diverse world now represented all around us here in the Heartland, perhaps the article could have been titled, “What the Heaven is Happening in America?”

While I no longer hear the Swedish my immigrant grandparents spoke, I do hear what may well be Swahili. Mirabile dictu!

Rev. Randy Fredrikson, M.Div. ’72
Sioux Falls, S.D.

Reading the recent article about puddle-jumping across the country in a private plane, trekking from one big-small-town jump to another, to get a journalistic sense of what the heck is happening out there, both fascinated and disturbed me. Romance and nostalgia reminiscent of Lindbergh, to be sure. Likely a trifle pricey, though bold and unique in conception.

But the need to criticize Trump administration policies that somehow run counter to what is “in the country’s best interests” confused me. Precisely which policies? The repatriation of trillions of dollars in business profits parked uselessly overseas awaiting re-introduction into our economy by way of tax reform…which we now have? Or the completion of the Keystone pipeline which we hope will avert catastrophic railroad disasters like what occurred in Quebec and Virginia? Is it the aggressive and successful stance taken against rogue militarism in North Korea, Syria, and now Iran? The willingness to protect our southern border with an effective wall and a network of judges doing the business of the people who placed them on the bench in the first place? It must be the positive attitude of our president about the dignity of work and his belief in perpetuating a durable middle class that is supported by rethinking our long out-of-balance pay scales. Surely that must rankle the privileged, the overpaid, over-educated, and the underworked everywhere.

What mental myopia is it that still invests the “best and the brightest”? I know not, but vow to be in-the-face of that self-serving myopia wherever I can. Elitism needs to come to an end, soon, or else colleges themselves may cease to be relevant.

Thomas M. Zubaty ’72
Marstons Mills, Mass.

THEN AND NOW: On the cover, Drew Gilpin Faust at Massachusetts Hall, May 9, 2018, and left, as Radcliffe Institute dean and president-elect, April 26, 2007, at Fay House (July-August 2007 issue). Her Commencement address, and valedictory, appears on page 21. An overview of her presidency begins on page 46.
Unfinished Business

THE CONCLUSION of Drew Faust’s presidency coincides with Michael D. Smith’s announced departure from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) deanship. Faust and Smith, like Neil L. Rudenstine and Jeremy R. Knowles, held their offices for the duration of a Harvard administration—in this case, since 2007. Though the interactions between Mass Hall and University Hall can at times seem more distant than their short physical separation implies, having a harmonious relationship (as this one certainly seems to have been) makes life within Harvard easier.

Faust was warm and generous in describing Smith’s tenure at the April 3 faculty meeting, the first following the news that he would step down. Nodding toward the financial avalanche that crashed down on FAS in 2008 (and the constraints that have remained since), she said he had led the faculty with a steady hand, and cited in particular his devotion to teaching and to diversity and opportunity for all. During the ensuing standing O, Smith, who is indeed steady and can even seem impassive, beamed and touched his hand to his heart before thanking all present and acknowledging the “incredible honor to serve this faculty” and to join in their work on behalf of students.

Before the meeting, president-elect Lawrence S. Bacow had already organized a search for Smith’s successor. There will be plenty for the new FAS dean to do: effecting the move of half of the engineers and applied scientists into their new home in Allston in 2020, ironing out the accompanying logistical kinks—and figuring out how to pay to operate the place; identifying the new (likely scientific) uses for the Cambridge quarters those traveling faculty members leave behind, and ditto on financing the required retrofits; establishing a permanent academic footing, and forward trajectory, for the undergraduate performing-arts concentration, research programs in data science and inequality, and other initiatives; et cetera.

One critical piece of unfinished business relates squarely to Smith’s interest in teaching and learning, and the faculty’s obligation to deliver on same: populating the new General Education courses, and launching the program successfully for undergraduates in 2019. The faculty’s review of this part of the curriculum, concluded in 2016, found that it was a mess, and advanced a new and presumably more focused architecture for its future. In effect that means that Gen Ed was subjected to reconsideration under former president Lawrence H. Summers; legislated during the interim tenure of Derek C. Bok; implemented under financial duress in the Faust years; and now is scheduled to relaunch in the second year of the Bacow administration—15 years-plus during which apparently no one believes a significant, mandated part of students’ course of study has been up to snuff.

In a letter to colleagues at the beginning of the academic year just ended, Smith observed that the faculty had debated the what and the how of Gen Ed 2.0 (“to prepare students for meaningful lives of civic and ethical engagement in an ever changing world” via single requirements in four newly designated areas, plus exposure to a “quantitative facility” course, to be defined, and three distribution courses). What was lacking, he said, was any articulation of why.

He suggested that Gen Ed courses ought to challenge students’ “ingrained” ideas—aiming away from conveying facts and explicitly toward transforming and broadening how “students think about things that they enter the class thinking that they know.” (Thus, not “Who won the Battle of Bull Run?” but “Is the United States still fighting the Civil War?”) In a distressingly polarized, partisan time—what Smith called “a world where conversation and compromise seem unachievable”—he pointed to Gen Ed courses that “unsettle assumptions and broad perspectives,” developing students’ capacities to “enable them to connect with others, communicate effectively, and lead society into a better future.”

Done right, that might result in classes that students actually care about, and a basis for Gen Ed that could, one hopes, outlast the present moment. Arriving there will remain challenging: faculty members have to enlist and deliver; students have to perceive the change; and there is the enduring structural problem that FAS and Harvard are culturally inhospitable to a required core of specified courses—or even a defined set of skills that students are expected to acquire.

Smith has been recruiting possible teachers for the new courses. Professor of psychology Jason P. Mitchell, the newish faculty chair of the committee that oversees Gen Ed, is pursuing the mission with fresh energy, and refining the why in a way he hopes colleagues will embrace and bring into classrooms. The newly appointed dean of undergraduate education, Zemurray Stone Radcliffe professor of English Amanda Claybaugh (see page 31), will also have things to say about the execution of these plans.

Smith himself will not be in office come August 2019, when Gen Ed 2.0 debuts. But how it plays out will become an important element in determining his legacy. From students’ perspective, it is past time that the faculty get this right.

~JOHN S. ROSENBERG, Editor

Lincoln Caplan’s article on the flights of the Fallowes made me angry at first, then just sort of resigned. Your audience of educated Americans does not cotton to anger or any sort of negativity; it’s off-putting, but I fear premature optimism can derail reform. My take-away from this article is that “everything’s going to be OK here in the USA”—that there are many examples across the land of Americans doing excellent things to make America a better place.

I enjoyed reading the Fallowes’ diverse array of examples but...where I have lived during the past five years (Lebanon, Tennessee, countryside and Hoquiam-Aberdeen, etc.),
Washington), I see an incredible number of troubled, damaged, poisoned people—primarily at Walmart, which is the halfway point on my evening walk. The Walmart customer base in both Middle Tennessee and on the Washington coast tends to be grossly overweight, and far too many are morbidly obese. It is sad to see so many overweight young children and teens in my community. Obesity is a recent problem due to the toxicity of much of our food. Americans have been and continue to be poisoned by our food suppliers and drugged into oblivion by Big Pharma. I see many victims of drug abuse on the streets of my community.

As Americans try to rebuild, after the middle-class gutting of the past 30 years, they are battling (being cannibalized by) corporate monsters who are poisoning not just Americans but the citizens of the entire globe. It is Harvard’s responsibility to help fix this towering problem.

Jim Blake, M.Arch. 79
Hoquiam, Wash.

Two gems struck me in the May-June issue: Eunice Shriver's founding of the Special Olympics (Vita, by Eileen McNamara, page 42), and Deborah Fallows's dedication to family over career.

Shriver employed her advantages in life to dignify the disadvantaged. Fallows lived the vital truth that “parents are the most important factor in their children’s lives.” Thank you for recounting their inspiring actions and words.

Martin Wishnatsky ’66, Ph.D. ’75
Prattville, Ala.

TAX REFORM
In his article, “Tax Reform, Round One” (Forum, May-June, page 57), Mihir Desai states: “A major rationale for the corporate reforms is to incentivize corporate investment, prompting…ultimately, greater wages for workers.” The article also notes that that “[t]he most significant individual-tax changes...largely accrue to high-income individuals.”

However, what incentivizes businesses to invest is a perception of greater demand for their goods and services. Lacking that perception, a business will not invest to expand its operations no matter how much additional cash flow tax reform provides. It would be folly to do so. And if the business perceives a greater demand, it will generate or find the funding to expand without the need for a government subsidy.

Further, the given in economics is that consumption—the demand for goods and services—is the most powerful of economic forces. Consumption is what makes economies go ‘round. Even economies that rely on exporting their products depend on the demand for those products elsewhere.

Surely, then, moderating the corporate and individual tax changes to favor the lower- and middle-income earners would directly and immediately lodge more cash to spend in those people who most support our economy by their consumption of goods and services. It’s called trickle up economics.

Peter Siviglia, J.D. ’65
Irvington, N.Y.

What would “tax reform—Round Two” look like? Round Two exists!—It’s been long buried in Congress, the biparti-

SPEAK UP, PLEASE
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[Image of a letter]
san 2017 Fair Tax Act (HR25, S18). The act was first introduced in 1999, thoroughly researched and developed by some 80 leading economists, including a Nobel laureate.

It’s the best tax plan ever, but Congress won’t mention it. Why? Because it abolishes the IRS, and members of both parties would lose their power and money-selling tax favors.

The proposed legislation rids businesses and individuals of the income tax, replacing it with a retail sales tax. Instead of raising government revenue by taxing the relatively few who have income, the Fair Tax Act taxes everyone in the U.S., not only citizens but all who buy services or new goods. For the first time, undocumented aliens and criminals pay taxes, plus the hordes of tourists visiting the U.S. No one avoids paying taxes!

To make the tax truly fair, all citizens receive a monthly sum based on family size—their yearly total depending on the government’s definition of poverty.

With the Fair Tax the government’s revenue may exceed what the income tax now brings in. Prices may drop significantly as the huge, unacknowledged costs of the income-tax system evaporate: businesses and individuals will no longer waste time confirming earnings and justifying deductions; tax-avoidance experts won’t need to be paid; non-productive tax record-keeping will be eliminated; and businesses that collect tax revenue will file a vastly simplified, one-page monthly form.

All will love the Fair Tax—except congressional leaders losing their power!

Richard G. Rettig ’51
Oceanside, Calif.

Mihir Desai’s article on the tax law presented a very enlightening outline of its multitudinous features. I cannot, however, agree that the provision for expensing of new investment in equipment ensures “no distortion to investment decisions.” This provision gives preferential treatment to equipment investment not in line with economic reality, biases decisions among categories of investment, and distorts decisions on investing versus leasing of equipment.

Robert Raynsford, Ph.D. ’66
Washington, D.C.

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Robert Raynsford, Ph.D. ’66
Washington, D.C.

The article on the tax bill only touched lightly on hidden taxes. When deficit spending raises prices, goods and services are taken from the public, the same thing as taxes. If one is given a tax cut of 5 percent and the price level goes up 12 percent, the tax level actually went up 7 percent. Keynes pointed out that government can live a long time on “note printing,” but the longer it lasts, the worse the eventual outcome.

Edmund R. Helffrich ’49
Allentown, Pa.

TRUANCY: A RESEARCH AGENDA

In “The Power of a Postcard: Trimming Truancy” (May–June, page 8), Harvard Magazine quotes the research of Todd Rogers, in which using postcards mailed to students’ homes to inform parents of their children’s absences from school was successful in reducing student absenteeism. The article goes on to say, “Schools are paying attention [to this research]. The federal government’s new education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, has led at least 36 states to select student absenteeism as one of the metrics on which their educational quality is evaluated.”

I applaud Rogers for his work, but I wish we knew the outcome of the reduction in student absenteeism. Do these reformed “truants” become more engaged in the educational process when their absenteeism decreases, thus improving their academic performance, or do these students, who perhaps never wanted to be in the classroom in the first place, become classroom disrupters who prevent other students from learning and thus reduce everyone’s academic performance?

Using absenteeism as a metric is measuring a process; it is not measuring an outcome.

Michelle Hutchinson, D.M.D.-M.P.H. ’87
Marietta, Ga.

Editor’s note: In reporting on the research, we were not expressing an opinion on it. The research continues, and, as Michelle Hutchinson notes, now that Todd Rogers has discovered an effect, it will be interesting to determine its wider influence on schooling outcomes—particularly for those students who attend classes and might not have otherwise.

SHOPPING WEEK

It is regrettable that the Harvard faculty is once again talking about eliminating the “shopping period” during which students can try out a number of classes at the beginning of the semester before making a final selection (“Toward Preregistration?” May–June, page 27). The faculty tried to eliminate it in 2003, and fortunately they did not succeed then. The extraordinary value of the shopping period should not be weighed against small inconveniences for the faculty, such as those described in the recent article in Harvard Magazine. The suggestion that students could get the same information from video clips during a pre-registration period as they get from sitting in a classroom during shopping period is misguided and shows a lack of appreciation for the importance of live interactions.

The shopping period is a unique Harvard activity with creative educational benefits. It encourages students to try new areas of Harvard’s wide offerings. This is true for students of all backgrounds, because most students arrive at Harvard with pre-conceived ideas about what they want to study, and they come from secondary schools where courses can be chosen only within certain limits.

In my own case, I arrived at Harvard as a freshman in 1965 planning to take government courses because I had spent the previous summer working at the U.S. Senate. The shopping period encouraged me to explore the richness of Harvard’s course offerings, and I ended up taking an anthropology course, a philosophy course, and a psychology course, as well as auditing a second philosophy course, during my freshman fall semester.

Edward Tabor ’69
Bethesda, Md.

ENABLING EXPERTISE

The letters of Don Kingsley and, to a lesser extent, Howard Landis, appearing in the May–June issue (pages 4 and 6, commenting on “The Mirage of Knowledge,” March–April, page 32), betray a fundamental unawareness of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. They both recite how alleged “experts” screwed up presumably better systems that existed before the experts got their hands on them.

But that’s not how the universe works. We are constantly battling the tendency toward disorganization, and there is no evidence whatsoever that the efforts of our experts prior to the “horribles” of the last 30 years fared any better. Failure should not lead to abandonment of whatever expertise seemed most appropriate at the time, but to a renewed and stronger effort to increase the information that will underlie whatever
expertise we will appeal to in the future.
More and wider education is the only answer, especially of women!

Bruce A. McAllister, J.D. ’64
Palm Beach, Fla.

Donald Trump and the movements that contributed to his political success are not solely to blame for the distrust, disdain, and cynicism about “experts.” More plausible reasons are: 1) experts who step beyond their boundaries for ignoble motives; 2) corruption among experts (who are as human as anyone else); 3) the mistaken conflation of credentialism with expertise; and 4) the hyperbolically superlative adulation for fraudulent celebrity experts—some famous recent examples including (Harvard-educated) Albert Gore and Barack Obama—which would be comical if their influence weren’t so destructive. Just because Donald Trump can be crude and gauche when he wields his convention- and status quo-smashing sledgehammer doesn’t mean that his targets don’t deserve it.

D. C. Alan ’86
Washington, D.C.

For a perspective on how we arrived at our current climate of rejecting expertise, allow me to recommend an article by Steven Brill (“How My Generation Broke America,” Time, May 17, 2018). To summarize the argument of that article, and with apologies for any misunderstanding I may convey about Mr. Brill’s views, the experts of the last 50 years have spent a disproportionate amount of time, effort, and, yes, expertise in enriching and protecting themselves and their employers.

For example, the rewards for corporate attorneys have vastly outpaced those for attorneys who choose to serve lower- and middle-class individuals or the public interest. Consequently expertise has flowed away from the latter and to the former. Investment expertise, similarly, has flowed away from helping the public avoid destitution and toward creating financial instruments for specialized corporate use. When those instruments failed, the public was left to their own devices but the experts’ employers were bailed out.

Consider the impact of expertise on the public. Dr. Nichols believes that the failures of expertise are “spectacular but rare,” but the victories of expertise are a two-edged sword. The creation and marketing of opioids was a victory for Big Pharma but a tragic failure for many thousands of addicts. The invention of labor-saving devices was a victory for manufacturers but a failure for the displaced machinists. Collateralized mortgage obligations were a victory for investors who held them, at first, but a failure for those whose homes were foreclosed and under water.

Where will it end? The Republic has survived far worse, but only when it was forged in the crucible of an existential threat that extended to the elite and the 99 percent equally. In war and economic crash, the elite and the plebe were in the same foxhole. A modest proposal: universal two-year national service where the elite would at least be working side by side with the 99 percent toward common goals.

Steven Law ’71
Windsor, Conn.

CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION
The may-june issue included a letter from Doug Kingsley (pages 4 and 6), referring to
“...bullies in Washington who weaponized the IRS against patriots and forced the Little Sisters of the Poor to offer abortion coverage [Editor’s note: The issue was coverage for contraception.] against their religious convictions.”

The bracketed editor’s note is at best disingenuous. The Affordable Care Act required coverage, under 2011 Health Resources and Services Administration guidelines, for all FDA-approved contraceptive methods [77 FR 8725]—however these include morning-after pills like Plan B® and ella®. Interim final rules that became effective in 2017 noted that FDA “includes in the category of ‘contraceptives’ certain drugs and devices that may not only prevent conception (fertilization), but may also prevent implantation of an embryo, [including] several contraceptive methods that many persons and organizations believe are abortifacient—that is, as causing early abortion—and which they conscientiously oppose for that reason distinct from whether they also oppose contraception or sterilization” [82 FR 47792].

Peter Jacobson ’75
Livermore, Calif.

YESTERDAY’S (SEXIST) NEWS

Cute sexist quips aren’t cute. “Commencement-week protest [in 1973]..., meanwhile, shifts from politics to plumbing as women distressed by the general shortage...of toilet facilities for their sex stage a protest...” (Yesterday’s News, May-June, page 20).

That this quotidian problem for women required a protest for it to be addressed, in fact required political action, is a reflection of the pervasiveness and subtlety of sexism.

In the recent movie Hidden Figures the black woman who calculates John Glenn’s trajectory has to run across the NASA campus in the rain to use a segregated bathroom. In the movie Kevin Kostner, the head of the space program, fixes the problem with a sledgehammer to the restrictive signage.

If the problem at Harvard had been addressed by Derek Bok wielding a sledgehammer against restrooms designated as men’s, perhaps we’d look back with more inclusive bravado and less bemused condescension.

John Crawford ’68, A.M. ’69
Cape Elizabeth, Me.

Editor’s note: The point isn’t to be cute or de-meaning, or to justify sexism. It is to show the kinds of language, policies, and attitudes pervasive at the time. The review of Hanna Gray’s memoir in the same issue (page 72) indicates how recently things were outrageously deplorable for women at Harvard—so people will remember and learn from that.

ERRATUM

“VISITING HOURS” (Montage, May-June, page 66) erroneously reported that Jack Lueders-Booth, Ed.M. ’78, was 30 when he decided to pursue photography full-time; he was 35.