

Dawkins attacks 'mob rule' that cost scientist his job

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Richard Dawkins has condemned a "baying witch-hunt . . . unleashed among our academic thought police" that led to the resignation of Sir Tim Hunt over his remarks about women scientists.

Professor Dawkins, the University of Oxford's evolutionary biologist and writer, said that he did not personally enjoy the Nobel laureate's joke, in which he called for single-sex laboratories and said women cried too much, but he said that calling the reaction disproportionate "would be a huge underestimate".

In a letter to *The Times*, he said the past week had been "nothing less than a feeding frenzy of mob-rule self-righteousness".

Sir Tim, the winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, has had to resign from an honorary position at University College London and from committees at the Royal Society, after addressing a meeting of women science journalists, saying, "the trouble with girls" in science was "three things happen when they are in the lab . . . You fall in love with them, they fall in love with you and when you criticise them, they cry".

An online petition calling on UCL to reinstate him had received more than 2,000 signatures last night. Nassim Taleb, the professor of risk engineering at New York University and author of *The Black Swan*, was one of those who criticised the university for what has been perceived by some as an over-eagerness to cut ties with Sir Tim.

"It is easy to be politically correct under no skin-in-the-game, when it represents no personal risk, or doesn't harm one's profits," he said. He added that the behaviour of British universities was also deeply hypocritical, given that one of the largest donors to British academia was Saudi Arabia, "where women can't drive and bloggers are whipped and jailed".

"They gladly take the money. But the administration of UCL takes it out on a defenceless 72-year-old scientist who doesn't represent any danger and potential profit. This is a combination of hypocrisy, cowardice and prostitution."

Sir Tim's wife, Mary Collins, herself a professor at UCL, has said that on the day the story broke she received a phone call from the university asking him to resign. "Tim was still on the plane from Seoul when a senior manager at UCL phoned me and said Tim had to resign his honorary position."

"They had not even spoken to Tim at that point. He just said Tim had

to resign or we fire him. It was very upsetting. We are both extremely angry."

According to a report in the London *Evening Standard*, this happened without consulting the full council of UCL, leading to anger among its members. Some academics at UCL have privately expressed disquiet at his treatment. One, speaking anonymously, said: "UCL's move was too hasty."

Others have backed the university. David Colquhoun, a professor of pharmacology at UCL, said it was entirely

appropriate for Sir Tim to resign from an honorary position, in which he was meant to be a positive representative of the university. "He's entitled to hold this views but he's quite sensible enough to see that UCL would be criticised harshly if he were to remain . . . All you have to do to see the problems is to imagine yourself as a young woman applying for a grant or fellowship, in competition with men, knowing that Hunt was one of her judges."

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A manager phoned Mary Collins saying that her husband, Sir Tim, had to go

'It is easy to be politically correct when it represents no personal risk or doesn't harm one's profits'

Richard Dawkins described the reaction to Sir Tim Hunt's comments as a mob rule of self-righteousness

