ROSIE KINCHEN MEETS MARCUS DU SAUTOY

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The star mathematician with the job of promoting public understandi even has twin daughters. No wonder he is pleased the chancellor wan

On a normal day the mathematician Marcus du Sautoy is the happiest man in England and this is not a normal day. He greets me in an upstairs office at the Serpentine Gallery, dressed in a red stripy shirt and bright blue trousers, beaming in a way that is quite disturbing. Because life teaches us that when something looks enjoyable and straightforward it almost always isn't.

Especially when it comes to maths. Sure enough, the reason for this cheer lies tucked away in last week's budget — where George Osborne revealed plans to evaluate the teaching of maths with a view to extending obligatory maths lessons from age 16 to 18.

Which meant that an unintended consequence of this budget for the young is that it made most of us feel relieved to be old.

Du Sautoy, 50, chuckles merrily after sparring entertainingly with the columnist Simon Jenkins on Radio 4's Today programme that morning. As a maths professor at Oxford University and the Simonyi professor for the public understanding of science, he is one of the few people in the country who is happy about Osborne's proposal.

"There is a lot of evidence that a mathematically literate society is an economically successful one," he says and points to a Nuffield survey of young adults which showed that out of 24 nations "we're the only ones that have less than 20% carrying on doing mathematics".

This may be true, but forcing teenagers to do something they hate seems unnecessarily cruel, even for the Tories. It is also quite clever, as the people who would really like to object can't vote. "It was actually part of Labour party policy," he beams. "I was very impressed that they put it in their manifesto."

Being the ambassador for a subject that is generally loathed has given du Sautoy an impenetrable shield of enthusiasm that seems only to grow stronger in the face of moaning.

He nods patiently as I tell him about the pain of my extra maths lessons and of my extra extra maths lessons and that I scraped through my maths GCSE on a diet of Pro Plus and panic. There is now a condition called dyscalculia, which I would almost certainly have been diagnosed with if only it had existed at the time.

"You just have to do it more and then you start to see the pleasure in it. Like running," he grins.

Can't I just use a calculator? But this, apparently, is missing the point. "I don't do mathematics to make the world a better place, I do it because I get a real buzz out of solving a problem," he cries.

Besides, he believes that "we don't realise how much interconnection there is, mathematics is actually hiding underneath everything". It's absolutely fine when it's hiding, I point out, it's when I can see it that the problems begin.

He believes so many of us hate mathematics (he never abbreviates it to "maths") because we are teaching it wrong. It is not about "doing arithmetic all the time, just as music is not all about scales and literature is not about learning to spell".

To appeal to students, especially those who are over 16, we need to "look at the big ideas" such as "does infinity exist? We have now discovered all different sorts of infinity. About teaching the history of the subject like the moment we came up with the number zero."

Just as Professor Brian Cox is everything you would least expect to find in a physics professor, du Sautoy is a very unusual maths boffin. He is a passionate Arsenal fan, a trumpet player, an art enthusiast who has spoken at more of the Serpentine Gallery's annual "marathon" events than anybody except Gilbert and George.

Most recently he has co-written and starred in a play about contrasting world views (he ends up being stuffed in a bag). He is also a natty dresser who likes to contrast spots with stripes. What unites all of these is that he "finds beauty in patterns", he explains.

Among his many academic achievements he once discovered a new symmetrical object that exists in a nine-dimensional space. I briefly consider asking him about this and
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