

Oxford dons split over award to Thatcher

Lucy Hodges, Education Correspondent

The controversy over plans to award Mrs Margaret Thatcher an honorary degree at Oxford University became even more intense yesterday when 275 dons urged their fellows to vote against it.

The dons' appeal based on the effects on education of the Prime Minister's policies, was countered by a statement from the university's governing body.

The outcome of the issue is not expected to be close. In order to win, Mrs Thatcher's opponents will have to get a majority of the votes at the meeting of the university's Congregation next Tuesday, when the award is to be decided.

The 275 academics against the award of Mrs Thatcher's honorary doctorate in Civil Law include 23 professors and Sir Kenneth Dover, president of Corpus Christi College.

Other signatories are the Archdeacon of Oxford, the Ven F.V. Weston, and Lord McCarthy, the Labour life peer and fellow of Nuffield College.

Their statement, which appeared in the *Oxford University Gazette*, a weekly newsletter, opposes the resolution to confer the award on the grounds that Mrs Thatcher's policies have done "deep and systematic" damage to the whole education system.

"Vice-chancellors, presidents of learned societies, and senior officials of research councils have recently warned of the grave and possible irreparable nature of the damage done to Britain as a scientific nation", it says.

"It would be inappropriate for any academic institution to respond by giving its highest token of approval, and especially inappropriate for



Oxford to do so. The university is widely perceived to stand at the pinnacle of British education".

In its counter-statement, the university council says that

since 1946, honorary degrees have been given to 19 people, of all parties, eminent in British political life. It points out that seven Oxford graduates since that date have held the office of Prime Minister. All, except Mrs Thatcher received an honorary doctorate of Civil Law, in four cases while in office. In the other two cases, the degree has already been conferred.

Attendance at next week's Congregation, the university parliament, which is by ticket only, consists of 2,500 dons, administrators and Oxford MAs. The meeting is expected to be packed. It will be extremely embarrassing to both Mrs Thatcher and the university if the vote goes against her.

The Prime Minister read chemistry at Somerville College, Oxford, between 1943 and 1947, and was elected to an honorary fellowship at that college in October 1970.

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