

# SALE OF HONOURS

There is no possible argument on which the decision by the congregation of Oxford University to refuse Mrs Thatcher the proposed honorary degree is worthy of respect. It is the culmination of a nasty campaign which has oscillated between political spite and logic-chopping. Every Oxford graduate, of whatever party, who has previously attained the high office of Prime Minister since the war has been awarded an honorary doctorate. Mrs Thatcher alone has been refused because the dons campaigning against her resent her government's policies and particularly those which affect education. By doing so, Oxford has made it clear that an honorary doctorate for anyone in public life who is concerned with politics is now no more than a political award.

That, of course, is the opposite of the way in which the case has been presented. Though the Oxford anti-Thatcher campaign began very much as an exercise by militantly left-wing dons it has gathered other and apparently more respectable support which objects to the award on the grounds that the Government's policies have damaged higher education. Thus Sir Kenneth Dover, the President of Corpus Christi, argues that since the tradition of giving this honour to Prime Ministers was established, the whole situation

has changed because governments now have more and more control over university policy.

Therefore, he concluded with idiosyncratic logic, it was impossible to give an honorary degree without supporting these policies and Mrs Thatcher should not have one. But that, of course, leads to a further, and more impeccably logical conclusion: that any future Prime Minister to whom the donnish majority was prepared to give an honorary doctorate would be one whose policies found favour with them. To escape from the difficulty that an Oxford honorary doctorate was a seal of political approval, Sir Kenneth, like some of the Marxist dons who spearheaded this campaign, says that no politician should be so honoured, and that such doctorates should go only to people who have achieved distinction in scholarship, the arts or the sciences.

Where this leaves a distinguished economist who is a monetarist (or if the political thoughts of the Oxford majority changed) a Keynesian is now also surely a matter for Oxford. Indeed, where is it going to draw a distinction between those in public life too tarnished by political activities to merit an award and those who do qualify?

Even the argument that the Government's policies have damaged education is flawed.

Mrs Thatcher has cut education they say. Yet total spending on education in 1979/80 was £13,613 million at today's prices. This year it is £13,753 million. Current spending on universities has risen from £1,194 million in 1978/80 (at today's prices) to £1,338 million in the current year and although it will fall somewhat in the next three years it will still be more than when Mrs Thatcher took over. As for Oxford itself, its total cash income was £69 million in 1979/80 (today's prices) and is nearly £71 million this year, which is at least not deprivation.

Always eager to raise money through the college connections for new quadrangles and for the upkeep of gardens, Oxford is less assiduous in trying to attract private money to the university's academic work, which of course is what it should do if it dislikes the Government's control over its policies because the Government provides the money. What seems to lie behind this sorry business is that Oxford now sells its honours, giving doctorates when the Government provides money enough, and not otherwise. For there is not the slightest doubt that Mrs Thatcher's case would not have precipitated a change of principle had the Government been prepared to make an exception for education, preferring a cornucopia.