

Oxford votes to snub Thatcher

By Lucy Hodges
Education Correspondent

Oxford dons threw tradition to the wind and delivered a strong rebuke to Mrs Margaret Thatcher and her education policies when they voted yesterday by 738 votes to 319 to stop her being awarded an honorary degree.

This is the first time an Oxford-educated Prime Minister has been rejected by his or her alma mater and it is a measure of how deeply academics feel about Government cuts in education spending. One speaker said Mrs Thatcher was responsible for actions which seriously jeopardized the central purpose for which the university existed.

More than 1,000 dons crowded into the Sheldonian Theatre to hear some impassioned speeches at the special meeting of Congre-

*In all for biting
the hand that
doesn't feed us..*



gation, the university's parliament. It lasted two hours and had to be cut short. Six other people were awarded honorary degrees on the nod, including President Sandro Pertini of Italy.

The only other person since the war to be rejected for such a degree was President Bhuto of Pakistan in 1975.

Professor Denis Noble, a Fellow of the Royal Society and Professor of Physiology, whose speech won long and loud applause, said that Mrs Thatcher knew and had been warned that scientists were extremely alarmed and deeply worried about what was happening.

"This may be the last chance for any serious academic institution to stop the catastrophe that we face as a scientific and educational nation," he said. "In two or three years' time it will be too late."

On top of the cuts there was chaos, he added. The research councils were faced with not knowing from week to week how much they had to spend. This was simply unbelievable.

Earlier Professor Peter Pulzer, Gladstone Professor of Government and Public Administration, took issue with Sir Patrick Neill, Warden of

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Dons exercise a degree of choice



Waiting to vote: The Rev Graham Midgley Fellow of St Edmund Hall (left) sharing umbrellas outside the Sheldonian. (Photographs: John Voos).

Oxford's dons vote to snub Prime Minister

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All Souls, who proposed the award of an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree to Mrs Thatcher on the grounds of tradition. Professor Pulzer said there was a time to respect tradition and a time to subvert it.

"To say no to the special resolution is to send a signal to the government over which our Prime Minister presides; a signal that enough is enough and that we urge an immediate drastic and radical reassessment of the policies which she has pursued.

"To say no is to draw attention to the chasm which now exists between Government and the academic community in this country. It is in nobody's interest to deny or to minimize its existence."

Sir Patrick Neill, the mover of the motion that Mrs Thatcher receive the award, was supported by Lord Quinton, president of Trinity college, and Miss Daphne Park, principal of Somerville, where Mrs Thatcher was an undergraduate and of which she is an honorary fellow.

One of Mrs Thatcher's most spirited supporters was Dr Nick Shrimpton, a lecturer in English, who declared: "The lady is not for spurning." He said to reject her was a characteristic piece of Oxford arrogance.

● A Downing Street spokesman said last night that Mrs Thatcher had thought it "very gracious" when the university's hebdomadal council originally proposed she should be given an honorary degree. "However it is entirely in the hands of the university. If they don't wish to confer an honour, she is the last person to wish to receive it."

Mr Giles Radice, Labour's chief education spokesman, said he was "delighted" because the Government had done so much damage to universities. "Mrs Thatcher has got her just reward. It would have been ridiculous to give her an honorary degree," he said.

● The Association of University Teachers, which represents 32,000 members, welcomed the vote. Leading article, page 13



Professor Denis Noble, of Balliol, one of the speakers in the debate.