

Oxford's rejection of Thatcher 'spiteful'

By Lucy Hodges,
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Conservative MPs reacted angrily yesterday to Oxford University's rejection of Mrs Margaret Thatcher for an honorary degree and said the dons behaved in a petty and uncivilized manner.

Mr Nicholas Soames, Parliamentary Private Secretary to Mr John Gummer, chairman of the Conservative Party, wrote to Professor Denis Noble, one of the prime movers behind the opposition to the award, to say the campaign was "petty, spiteful and above all else political".

Arguing that the dons' action was beneath contempt, he said these "very small men" were objecting to taking the same cuts as the rest of the country. Mr Soames, MP for Crawley, added that the Prime Minister had contributed more to science than any predecessor and that Tuesday's vote was "a pathetic gesture and a total disgrace".

Mr Harry Greenway, Conservative MP for Ealing, North, said the vote was "the grossest discourtesy" and tabled a Commons motion deploring the prejudice of the academics involved. By last night more than 80 Conservative MPs had signed the motion.

This is the first time an Oxford-educated Prime Minister has been rejected for a Doctorate of Civil Law, the vote was 738 to 319, the second time in memory that anyone has been rejected by Congregation, the university's parliament. The first person was President Bhutto of Pakistan.

Downing Street said yesterday that Mrs Thatcher had no honorary degrees from any university, at home or abroad, nor was she due to receive one. She is, however, a fellow of the Royal Society, and an honorary fellow of Somerville College, Oxford, where she was an undergraduate.

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