

Oxford University's rebuff to the Prime Minister

From Sir Ian Percival, QC, MP for Southport (Conservative)

Sir, Can there ever have been such reason to feel ashamed of one of our great institutions?

The world knows that Margaret Thatcher is one of the very finest people who has ever passed through any university. Oxford could and should be justly and immensely proud to honour her as their own. And all credit to those of its leaders who wished to do so in the traditional way.

But what shame on those who have thwarted that wish. Such bigotry is beyond belief. The discourtesy defies description. That so many should so behave for political purposes – men and women who no doubt pride themselves on practising and protecting the freedom to differ – is surely deplorable.

None of this will do our Prime Minister any harm. And she is too big a person to allow the very real personal hurt which she must feel to interrupt her endeavours or colour her approach. But what a terrible reflection it is on the university. What harm it may do to Oxford.

So many of its leaders have shown themselves to be such small people swimming in a pond which seems too big for them. It is as sad as it is anger-making to find that so many of those to whom the achievements and glories of Oxford over the centuries have been entrusted are not up to that trust – and that so many of our young people should be at risk of indoctrination by them.

A sad day indeed for the Oxford of which all of us, of whatever university, or of none, have always been so proud.

Yours etc,
IAN PERCIVAL,
House of Commons,
January 30.

From Professor Denis Noble, FRS, and others

Sir, We are delighted to see Oxford University's refusal of an honorary degree to the Prime Minister vindicated so promptly by your leader writer's splenetic response. What could he do but overlook a serious case seriously argued, and the reasoned statement signed by 278 members of Congregation before the vote? "Spearheaded" by "militantly left-wing dons"? A "nasty campaign" indeed – but not by us.

But let us have some facts:

1. The impression of an increase in real Government expenditure on education and science can be given only by taking as a base year 1979-80, the year in which Mrs Thatcher came to power. The estimated outturn for the current financial year, £13,125m at 1983-84 prices, is lower than in any year since 1979-80 (Cmnd 9482-II, p12, table 2.6).

2. Estimated expenditure over the next three years is scheduled to decline by a further 7.7 per cent to £12,110m in 1987-88, still at 1983-84 prices (same source). That is £880m less than when Mrs Thatcher

first took office, over a period in which GNP is projected to grow by at least 10 per cent. Is it not better to sound the alarm when we are only half-way down the slope than to wait until we have touched bottom?

3. As regards universities in particular, the Government takes pride in declaring, in the same White Paper from which we have been quoting, that since 1980 "overall funding for the universities has been reduced by 8 per cent in real terms". (Cmnd 9428-II, p151, 1.12). It is the Government's own published figures, not the militant conspirators of your imagination, that contradict your assertions.

4. Oxford's position in these tables is neither here nor there. Our protest is against the cutbacks in the educational system as a whole.

It is unprecedented for 738 dons to vote against an honorary degree for an incumbent prime minister. But so is our deep and real concern for the future of education at all levels in this country. It is only in your leader writer's imagination that "buying" and "selling" are the sole conceivable motives for action.

Yours etc,
DENIS NOBLE,
PETER OPPENHEIMER,
PETER PULZER,
JIM REED,
Balliol College,
Oxford,
January 31.

From Dr P. J. C. Chapman

Sir, What we would do well to remember is that the Prime Minister has done more to educate the people of this country into the realities of life than all of the Oxford dons put together.

Yours faithfully,
PETER J. C. CHAPMAN,
Whitestone,
Highbrook,
West Hoathly,
Sussex,
January 30.

From Professor Emeritus Bernard Crick

Sir, It is never easy to know why people vote. Your remarkable editorial, "Sale of honours" (January 30) suggests that the campaign against giving Mrs Thatcher an honorary degree was got up by "militantly left-wing dons" and "Marxist dons" who gained "more respectable support" from those who object to the Government's policies in higher education.

Your assumption is questionable. The vote was very large and very decisive, 738 to 319. Few Oxford dons are either militant or Marxist (are you joking?); overwhelmingly they are of a conservative disposition, very unlikely to reject either a "customary civility" or a Conservative prime minister; and certainly very few Oxford dons, except leading scientists, have much knowledge of or care for the higher education system outside Oxford. Oxford has been cut the least.

Many of the votes cast must have

been from Conservatives wishing to show that they think that she has *uniquely* divided and polarised the country. No one else has so broken from Baldwin's conciliatory tradition except Edward Heath in his brief "Selsdon" phase.

This vote shows once again that some of the most important political divisions are *within* the two main parties, not just between them. You are very sensitive to divisions in the Labour Party, perhaps a bit less so among Conservatives.

Yours sincerely,
BERNARD CRICK,
Nether Liberton House,
Old Mill Lane,
Gilmerton Road,
Edinburgh,
January 30.

From Countess Badeni

Sir, When the Beatles were given the MBE some members of the order sent their medals back.

Now that Oxford University has devalued its honorary degree by refusing it to one of our greatest prime ministers, will those who have it feel it worth keeping?

Yours faithfully,
JUNE BADENI,
Norton Manor,
Malmesbury,
Wiltshire,
January 30.

From Lord Orr-Ewing

Sir, Your timely second leader (January 30), on the day after the Oxford University's vote, points out that in real terms expenditure on higher education has, since 1979, increased and not been cut, and this applies to Oxford as well.

We are told that it was the science faculties which objected to the alleged cuts. As an Oxford science graduate, I was trained to research and to quantify facts before drawing conclusions. Have these disciplines been forgotten?

On the evening before the vote I watched *Panorama* on BBC 1. I was not surprised that their commentator mentioned cuts throughout the programme. It seems that their current-affairs researchers were also ignorant of the facts or had allowed political motivations to distort them. If your leader had been published a day earlier, it would have offset *Panorama's* distortions and the shameful outcome.

Yours faithfully,
IAN ORR-EWING,
House of Lords,
January 30.

From the Master of St Edmund's House, Cambridge

Sir, I am sorry to note that The Other Place is ceasing to be the home for lost causes.

Yours sincerely,
JOHN COVENTRY,
St Edmund's House,
Cambridge,
January 30.