

# Does Oxford speak for the nation?

Let us begin with the apparently trivial, though admittedly amazing case of Oxford University's refusal to give an honorary degree to the Prime Minister. How on earth did the university's "cabinet", the Hebdomadal Council, which put forward the proposal and which comprises some of the most intelligent men in the land, contrive to make themselves and the university look silly?

The short answer is: "By hopeless mistiming". The idea of giving an honorary degree to Oxford's most celebrated alumna has been going round the university, to my knowledge, for at least five years. The first time it was seriously considered - in, I think, 1980 - a majority of the council decided against it on the grounds that it was bound to be controversial. On two subsequent occasions the vice-chancellor, Sir Geoffrey Warnock, advised his colleagues to avoid splitting the university, and although there was mounting agitation from Conservative heads of houses such as Lord Blake, these arguments prevailed.

This time the Prime Minister's backers seem to have convinced the council (a) that it was becoming a real scandal after six years that Mrs Thatcher had *not* had the reward of every other Oxford prime minister, (b) that the university would take the "mature" view that an honorary degree expresses admiration for "achievement" and does not confer approval of the honoree's policies and (c) that in any case the hard opposition, being (as they believed) the usual "Trots from the sociology departments", could be steam-rollered. In effect, therefore, consensus politics was to be abandoned, in the best Thatcherite fashion, and principle forced upon a minority.

The nemesis visited upon this scheme is instructive. What went wrong was not the substantial argument itself; it was perfectly defensible to argue that Mrs Thatcher deserved to be honoured by her old university as soon as she became prime minister - and possibly as soon as she became the first woman leader of the Opposition. What ought to have been obvious to the council, however, was the madness of putting the matter to a vote at this moment.

Leaving aside the question of whether it is right to abandon the principle of consensus over the candidate's suitability - a condition which was bound to be unfulfilled at the controversial height of a very controversial political career - the council's main error was in not doing the necessary homework. Even if the possibility of losing seemed remote, the enormity of the embarrassment such a loss would inflict on the university should have made some fairly extensive preliminary canvassing obligatory.

The truth is that the council, consisting to an excessive extent of heads of houses, was out of touch with its constituency. It was ambushed by the extent and depth of anti-Thatcher sentiment - not simply (as has been alleged in face-saving speculations) among the medico-scientific fraternity but

among sober centre and centre-right dons of many disciplines who feel, that this government is composed of philistines who regard university education as just another lobby to be cut down to size, or another service industry which ought to be given the choice of "shaping up" or going under, rather than as a special activity at the very heart of the national culture.

We are touching here on a phenomenon of much wider political significance - the possible alienation of the professional middle-classes from the Government. This is beginning to worry some alert Conservative politicians. Some of the discontent is undoubtedly based on pure vested interest - as in the case of the successful recent agitation over university fees or the campaign against changes in the tax relief on mortgages. But one senses that something more fundamental is going on.

What is at issue is perhaps as much a question of trust as of immediate self-interest. The middle-class professional, cushioned by savings and his very real privileges within the system, has been able hitherto to accept the Thatcher era with a fair degree of philosophy if not actual enthusiasm. The government's battles have been for ends which, in principle, he has approved even if he may have had doubts about the means.

Within the last year, or perhaps in the last six months, a worm of real worry has begun to gnaw at this complacency - and not simply because Mr Lawson has begun to cast covetous eyes at some of the middle-class perks. The unease has more to do with the general political and economic environment - the decline of the pound, the perpetual unemployment, the low investment, the stories of shrinking market shares abroad, and above all the endless cuts in, and rows about, public expenditure which appear at last to threaten the general quality of British life. Some surprising people are beginning to ask themselves whether the government is not in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater - and without being able to prevent or assuage the symptoms of national decline.

That is why the universities come in as symbols of quality and not just as providers of employment to middle-class intellectuals - and incidentally why the arguments for public expenditure on infrastructure (rather than tax cuts) have made a remarkable appeal to a far wider audience than the Keynesian left.

These reflections bring us very sharply back to the present political situation. For Mr Kinnock is right; the miners' strike has indeed distracted attention. What he did not add was that it is the attention of Mrs Thatcher's natural middle-class constituency that has been most distracted and it is they whose concerns are going to be redoubled when there is no more Mr Scargill upon whom to concentrate their discontents. What has surprised the Hebdomadal Council may prove an even more unpleasant shock to the Government.