

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Implications of Oxford's snub to Mrs Thatcher

From Mr Giles Radice, MP for Durham North (Labour)

Sir, You are, of course, entitled to your view (expressed in your January 30 leader) that Oxford University Congregation ought to have followed precedent and given the Prime Minister an honorary doctorate. But you ought also to have made the effort to comprehend how it was that such a traditionally conservative body voted so overwhelmingly against Mrs Thatcher.

The first point to grasp is the universities' recurrent grant, contrary to what you imply, has been cut. Peter Brooke, the Minister responsible for higher education, was forced to admit to the House of Commons last spring that the cash going to universities had been cut by 8.75 per cent in real terms between 1980-81 and 1983-84.

As a consequence between 11,000 and 12,000 well-qualified candidates are being turned away from our universities every year. I am glad that the dons of Oxford, which has itself been relatively well treated, have been prepared to speak up for higher education as a whole.

Another important factor was the deep concern felt by scientists that many top-class research projects are being rejected for lack of funds. They have advised the Government that the level of funding of civil scientific research is inadequate even to maintain Britain's present level of economic competitiveness.

Instead of fulminating against Oxford, it would have been better if you had shown more awareness of what is happening to higher education in this country. Then you might have understood why Mrs Thatcher was rejected.

Yours faithfully,

GILES RADICE,
(Shadow Education spokesman),
House of Commons.

From Mr Alistair Horne

Sir, May I associate myself vigorously with your leader (January 30) and Lord Goodman's wise, but sadly unheeded letter (January 29) concerning Mrs Thatcher's degree? Like Lord Goodman I, too, was ill, but additionally disqualified from voting on Tuesday, having received my MA at another - and apparently more liberal - university. I cannot, like Lord Goodman, say that I have never supported a Conservative government, but have strongly disapproved of the extent of Mrs Thatcher's educational cuts.

Fifteen years ago, however, I founded - out of private funds - at this Oxford college a small fellowship for historians, out of realization of the appalling cost problems involved in prolonged research on a specific book. (A Labour government was then in power, the Chancellor himself an eminent author). Over these 15 years, and with very modest funds, the fellowship has produced more than 15 books and their authors have gained several professorships through the distinction of those books. I would guess that most of the fellows have not been Conservatives, certainly not "Thatcherites", and at least one was a committed Marxist.

Also like Lord Goodman, I write

in a purely personal capacity, and whereas it would break my heart to have to dissociate myself or the fellowship from the college whence I, in turn, have received many benefits and kindness. I feel I must express utmost revulsion to Tuesday's rebuff to the Prime Minister. For folly and pettiness it is on a par only with the infamous "King and Country" motion, which stigmatised Oxford in the 1930s.

As Lord Goodman pointed out, the issue is not a political one, but a matter of recognising Oxford's woman graduate who has achieved the highest distinction in the land (not to mention an alpha-plus for physical courage).

For those who, like myself, may wish to go on supporting Oxford institutions privately, one can only hope that, in the course of time, it will repent its current fatuity, as it did after the 1930s.

I am, etc.

ALISTAIR HORNE,
St. Antony's College, Oxford.
January 30.

From Miss Gillian Peele

Sir, Your views on Oxford's decision to deny Mrs Thatcher an honorary degree will, I suspect, be shared by the majority of the British public. What is so distressing about the whole affair is indeed that nothing could have been better calculated to harm the cause of universities in general and Oxford in particular.

If universities in Britain are to continue to exercise any influence, whether in the realm of science or other branches of learning, of course they need money. But they also need to provide an environment in which scholarship can flourish - an environment which tolerates divergence of political opinion and encourages responsible debate.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the current Government's educational policy, it is a matter about which reasonable men may differ. Those who were so vocal last Tuesday in demanding additional resources for higher education were less forthcoming about where the money would be found, and they were similarly unwilling to answer the argument that Mrs Thatcher's policies have been twice preferred by the electorate to the other brands of medicine on offer.

One of the opponents of the award said that Oxford, by its actions, had sent out a message. The message that has been received by the general public is not that we are altruistic souls anxious to advance the wellbeing of humanity by the pursuit of knowledge. The message we have signalled to every MP and every voter is that Oxford feels that it ought to be exempt from public expenditure constraints and is entitled to behave selfishly and offensively to advance that view.

Those who engineered this outcome may not have intended these consequences. Unfortunately they have, by the activities, made it much harder to justify further claims on the public purse.

Yours faithfully,
GILLIAN PEELE,
Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford.
January 30.

From Sir William Hayter

Sir, Your leading article about Oxford's refusal of a degree for Mrs Thatcher consists chiefly of the expression of opinions, with most of which I disagree. It does, however, contain one serious misstatement of fact, which ought to be corrected.

You say that Oxford, while eager to raise money for new quadrangles and for the upkeep of gardens, is "less assiduous in trying to attract private money to the university's academic work". In point of fact every college appeal known to me contains a large and often predominant element for new fellowships, generally for research, but sometimes also for teaching.

Appeals for the upkeep of gardens if any can only constitute a very minor element. As for new quadrangles, they are not some architectural whimsy, but the necessary provision for the housing of students.

Yours faithfully
WILLIAM HAYTER
Bassetts House,
Stanton St John,
Oxford
January 31

From Professor A. A. Dashwood

Sir, Spitefulness and self-importance disguised by high-falutin sentiment are no strangers to academic transactions. Add to that the rage of an establishment whose comfortable defeatism has been successfully challenged and Oxford's decision to deny Mrs Thatcher an honour granted in the past as a matter of course seems sadly predictable.

The Prime Minister's standing in the nation will not be harmed by this affair. Oxford's and that of the academic world in general probably will be. It is a pity, because there really is a case to be made for a more coherent policy on higher education.

A system whose character was formed in the 1960s is ill-adapted to the more bracing economic and political climate of today. Painful decisions may be necessary but they will be accepted more easily if they can be seen to be linked to clear public goals.

The Government should take the universities and the polytechnics into its confidence in formulating a strategy for all our futures.

Yours faithfully,
A. A. DASHWOOD,
Faculty of Law,
The University,
Leicester
January 31.

From Mr R. G. Opie

Sir, In a friendly effort to help you to use the English language more accurately in your bicentennial year, may I refer to your editorial phrase (in "Sale of honours", January 30), "The Marxist dons who spearheaded this campaign"?

To the best of my knowledge, no such person was among us.

Yours faithfully,
R. G. OPIE,
New College,
Oxford.
January 30.