

Fellows who are anti-female

The supreme virtue of a university education is that it teaches you not to take dons seriously. The hawk-eyed genius who interviewed you for admission turns out, on three years acquaintance, to be an earnest old fustpot with an endearingly blinkered view of the world, and his place in it. The razor-sharp mind which marks your essays also loses its way in its own lecture notes and sometimes forgets which day of the week it is.

Students learn this refreshing lesson at first-hand. The public was reminded of it on Tuesday when Congregation, the Oxford dons' parliament, voted by 738 to 319 to deny Mrs Thatcher an honorary doctorate of civil law. Crammed into the Wren splendours of the Sheldonian Theatre, and buzzing with righteous indignation, a thousand academics addressed themselves to the unfamiliar essay topic of Government education policy.

Tense though the atmosphere was, there was an unmistakable air of holiday about the proceedings. Playing truant from library and laboratory, the black-gowned figures assumed their walk-on role on the fringes of British politics with innocent relish.

First on-stage was Hebdomadal Council, the body responsible for proposing the honour in the first place. This meant that it was also responsible for failing to propose it in 1975, when Mrs Thatcher became leader of the Opposition, and again in 1979 when she first became Prime Minister. Like any body which has spent 10 years sitting on its hands, their gestures were somewhat stiff. Propriety, consistency, and the need to dissociate academic honours from any consideration of political self-interest were politely appealed to.

Of course, none of this washed with the left, who wanted a dons' demo, or with the scientists whose grants had been trimmed. "Deep and systematic damage to the whole public education system in Britain" was what they wanted to talk about, a claim which combined altruistic references to nursery schools with a harrowingly autobiographical account of cuts in the research laboratories.

The pain was real and nobody in the theatre was a masochist. What was surprising was the absence of hard facts. Your present correspondent, with the embarrassed air of an arts don trespassing on other people's territory, strove to introduce some. Despite an 8.5 per cent cut in the university block grants in 1981 (which I, like any other academic, have personal reasons to regret) there were 59,000 more students in British higher education in 1983-84 than there were when Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1978-79. Participation rates in higher education have risen from 12.6 per cent in 1978-79 to 13.8 per cent now. Universities' current expenditure has risen (in 1984-85 prices) from £1.194m in 1979-80 to £1.339m in 1984-85 (12 per cent real growth).

These figures seemed, somehow, not easily reconcilable with talk of deep, systematic and deliberately philistine onslaughts on public education. Is the position any clearer if we turn to total expenditure on all education? In constant 1984-85 prices the figure was £13.613m in

1979-80, and is £13.753m today (a 1 per cent increase). Class sizes in schools are the smallest ever, the pupil-teacher ratio is the lowest ever, and spending per pupil has never been so high.

Scientific research, which provoked the most articulate cries of outrage, proves to be even more puzzling. Nobody doubts that particular research projects are currently threatened. But national expenditure on research and development has actually increased over the last five years, and the part of it borne by central government represents precisely the same proportion of Gross Domestic Product as it did in 1972 (although this has dropped slightly in money terms - by £23m - since its peak in 1979). Direct government expenditure on science, through the research councils, has grown (in cash terms) from £340m in 1979-80 to £550m today and will grow, by more than the rate of inflation, to £584m in 1985-86.



Thatcher: victim of emotion

Nobody had an explanation of these paradoxes (opponents of the degree took refuge in the "lies, damned lies and statistics" gambit). Has academic research grown disproportionately more expensive in the last decade? Does serious science require perpetual growth rather than a static state? How long can a third-rank economic power expect to be in the front rank of fundamental scientific research? How long can we persuade ordinary taxpayers (and voters) to put their money where our mouth is? Congregation decided not to worry its pretty head about such questions, and divided as its emotions dictated.

The true historical significance of Tuesday's events is, I believe, that the university has celebrated the centenary of its grudging admission of women by, characteristically, failing to applaud the eventual arrival of a woman at the pinnacle of the British political system. The first women's colleges, Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville, were founded in 1879. Not until May 1920, however, were women fully admitted to the university, and some restrictions endured into the 1950s.

I work for one of those pioneering women's colleges and to this day the Fellows do not wear gowns in Hall, in proud memory of the years in which we were not allowed to. I am ashamed of the university for denying Mrs Thatcher her honorary degree. Its absence is the badge of her radicalism, and some of us at Oxford salute her for it.

The author is a Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall.

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Nicholas Shrimpton.

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