

THROUGH THE LODGINGS WINDOWS



The elegantly cantilevered semi-circular staircases which grace the Palladian west front of the Provost's Lodgings, scene of many a group photograph, lead to a door into the study: one which is designed to look like a window. So it was *through* the Lodgings windows that the last activities of my Provostship were conducted, as I removed the accumulations of the last twenty years. Lord Franks weeded his files systematically each Long Vacation; I, less disciplined, discarded seventeen bag loads of confidential waste in that last, frantic, week. Sue had warned me that reducing the contents to any amount suitable for my new study, about a quarter the size, in our Cranham Street home, would take far longer than the few hours I had forecast – but since when were economists' forecasts reliable? So we missed her planned quiet drinks, looking out over the lawn from our favourite spot, appropriately the kind of grotto formed by the very staircases up and down which I was now scurrying. No chance to recall past weddings, Commem. Balls, JCR and MCR garden parties, sculpture exhibitions or opera productions; nor the quieter times, watching the fox cubs or the enigmatic muntjak deer (which this year seems to have adopted the fox cubs, and has been seen licking their faces), or enjoying the *Meistersinger* contests between blackbirds perched on the highest

boughs to left and right, or savouring the two weeks when scent hovers above the restored Edwardian Rose Garden. Truly we have been privileged to live here in the Lodgings.

Still, when the last box was in my car, and I trundled the gardeners' hand-cart out of the shadows back across the orchard with fifteen minutes to spare before my Provostship ended at midnight, spooking a group of Summer School students returning to their rooms, it seemed somehow right thus to slip quietly away under cover of darkness. For the institution, the place, is what endures, and we who teach and study, work and play here over the years can only hope to have contributed to its improvement, knowing that we have gained far more than we have given.

Of course, it would be wrong to pretend that I had slipped away entirely unnoticed. There were many celebrations abroad, of which more later. At home a Gaudy for those who had read PPE and other subjects including Economics was preceded by seminars on political biography, led by Dr Anthony Seldon, and on the future of the Eurozone, given by Bernard Connolly; these proved a lively prelude to a splendid evening catching up with former pupils. The MCR garden party was, alas, rained off, though I watched with amazement as the graduates lowered their umbrellas and removed raincoats for the now traditional photograph; perhaps it was the bizarre nature of the occasion which led to their great good humour. A week later the JCR had their traditional good luck with the weather, and used the occasion of their garden party to present me with an engraved fountain pen, perhaps sceptical of my determination to improve my computing skills in retirement. The Music Society allowed me to choose items for a memorable concert¹ and recapitulated the delight by presenting me with a bound volume of the relevant scores. The Chaplain and Chapel

¹ The programme included 'I get around' (Beach Boys arranged Dow) performed by the Worcester College Chorus; the first movement of Rubbra's Cello Sonata played by Tom Shelley; negro spirituals and 'Ferry Cross the Mersey' (Gerry and the Pacemakers arranged by Matthew Cheung Salisbury) performed by the Worcester Fragments; pieces by Bizet and Prokofiev performed by the Worcester College Orchestra; and Handel's 'Zadok the Priest' performed by the combined college ensembles. [Ed.]

Choir similarly indulged my tastes by allowing me to choose the music for my last Sunday evensong; they had also recorded it all in advance whilst I was abroad, so I have a CD to preserve this memory. The Chapel community gave me the stunning OUP 400th anniversary edition of the King James Bible, together with a superb drawing, by Mark Bourne, the Senior Sacristan, of the front quad from just outside the Lodgings front door. At a warmly supportive dinner in Hall, the SCR gave me a beautiful cut-glass claret jug, and vouchers for an advanced cookery course. The non-academic staff seemed similarly determined that I should better myself and stay busy in retirement, presenting me with watercolours and an easel, membership of the National Trust, and a wonderful hamper of cooking delights ranging from a professional set of knives to exotic vinegars, with laminated cards from which I can re-create my favourite dishes from the kitchen's repertoire, and reproductions of the menus I have chosen for important dinners to show me how far my skills have yet to progress. The College garden staff gave me a Wollemi pine to remind me of the Provost's garden and, perhaps more doubtful than other groups of my skills, planted out the courtyard garden of my retirement retreat in Cranham Street, afforded by Walter Sawyer, representing the University Parks, where I have been Chairman of the Curators for the past six years. The Commem. Ball, also lucky with the weather, was excellently well-organised, and full of Worcester students, graduate and undergraduate, which gave me a further chance to say goodbye. But the biggest single occasion was a dinner at the Victoria and Albert Museum, hosted by the Worcester College Society, with so many former pupils, contemporaries and other friends amongst the Old Members that I barely had time for a word or handshake with them all. Although Sir John Weston, President of the Society, and Lord (Richard) Faulkner, Chairman of its Advisory Council, pressed me to choose a leaving present, I asked instead that the Society should contribute to the fund for Student Facilities which has been set up bearing my name; it was excellent news that the event raised £64,604 to add to the \$309,000 already pledged.

So many people have been so generous and thoughtful over these past six months that it would be invidious to single out anyone. I do, however, very much want to thank my old pupil Mark Jones for delaying his retirement so that he could still be in post as Director of the V & A

to preside at my farewell dinner there. And of course I wish Sir Mark all good fortune as he takes up the role of Master of St Cross College here in Oxford.

Graduate colleges such as St Cross have hitherto been relatively lightly affected by the vagaries of government policy. Research activity has been reasonably well-funded, the concentration of research funding has favoured Oxford, and graduate numbers have been growing, with buoyant demand for places; indeed last year graduate applications slightly exceeded undergraduate, although the ratio of numbers in the university is two undergraduates to every graduate. Now, however, graduate recruitment from within the UK, except Scotland, is threatened by the increase in undergraduate tuition fees. Will those emerging in 2015 or 2016 with their first degrees funded by £27,000 or £36,000 of debt (let alone what they have borrowed for board and lodging) be willing to undertake graduate study even where it is fully funded? Worse, in the Humanities and Social Studies it is quite common for graduate studies to begin with a Master's year which is self-funded. A government devoted to seeing students as 'consumers' – which I discuss extensively below – should bear in mind that evidence suggests a lower 'rate of return' from graduate than from undergraduate study. So research teams may have to look abroad for their graduate students. But there is already some evidence that such recruitment is being hampered by new, tighter, visa control arrangements. In any case would this be a sound base on which to build British higher education into the future, or to promote the knowledge-based competitive economy?

The long-awaited White Paper on 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System' typically brushes the problem aside (the Higher Education Funding Council for England is invited 'to monitor and review' it 'as undergraduate reforms take effect'). Published at the end of June, it deals in any case only with undergraduate teaching, with a cursory mention of taught graduate courses: the research function – inseparable for a university such as Oxford – will be the subject of a further report.

Even by June, however, the vehement, and at times, regrettably, violent protests which had accompanied the Government's decision to allow universities virtually to triple tuition fees, to £9,000 per annum,

had died down. The White Paper permits us to evaluate the thinking behind that decision; in my view it is pretty shoddy.

The way was paved by the publication in early October 2010 of the independent review of Higher Education Funding, chaired by Lord Browne of Madingley. That review recommended that there should be no cap on what institutions could charge for tuition. Above a fee of £6,000 per annum, however, they would have to return a progressive 'levy', which would contribute to offsetting the cuts incurred by the Government in providing the up-front loans which students would use to pay for their tuition. The worked example provided by Browne stops at tuition fees of £12,000. This might be thought too low; universities, after all, face many of the same costs as independent schools, for whom a fee of £12,000 would be in the lower range. But perhaps Browne did not want to scare anyone. Even at £12,000 universities would be taxed 27%.

Browne was not set up by the Coalition Government, although as I pointed out last year it was clearly subjected to strong lobbying by it. However, the recommendation of no cap on tuition fees landed unerringly in one of the areas of greatest divergence between the partners, the Liberal Democrats being committed to abolishing the fee introduced by the Blair Government in 2006.

The policy adopted, with a cap at £9,000, was clearly a compromise, probably arrived at by working backwards from what the Treasury calculated to be the cost to public expenditure of the necessary up-front loans. It has become clear, however, that someone estimated that the average fee which universities would charge would be £7,500, whereas in the event it is likely to be well over £8,000 even after all the bursaries and remissions for which Ministers have been pressing have been taken into account.

The Browne Report has intellectual coherence; the actual policy does not. But how could it, given the prior positions of the Coalition partners? Camilla Cavendish railed in *The Times* on 17 March:

Either the Government wants to create a market or it doesn't. Either it wants to free universities from state control or it doesn't. At the moment we are headed for the worst of all worlds: students forced to take out big loans that some will avoid repaying by skipping the country; universities fined if

they take too many people or the wrong sort; government retaining control of research, place allocation, targets and quotas; and none of the change in culture urgently needed to improve degrees.

Unsatisfactory (indeed, interesting how one has to struggle to avoid the cliché epithet ‘shabby’) compromise of course, but the White Paper adds insult to injury by supplying a kind of philosophical framework, in the hope of papering over fundamental coalition differences. Building on the Browne Report, and with some echoes of the Blair Government’s 2003 White Paper, it places the sovereign student ‘consumer’ at the heart of the system. He or she will be equipped with purchasing power (albeit borrowed) to spend on a course at a university which has been intelligently chosen on the basis of lots of information, some factual, provided by universities in a ‘Key Information Set’ including student satisfaction indicators, costs of tuition and accommodation, the proportion of students employed in a full-time ‘graduate’ job six months after completing the course, and the salary earned, and the salary for that subject across all institutions forty months after graduation, together with other information produced as a result of student surveys. Such information might then be summarised by organisations such as ‘Which?’ or ‘Opinion Panel’ whose ‘recent publication, *The Student Fact File 2011*, includes information ranging from the socio-economic background of applicants to higher education institutions to how often students go “clubbing”.’ The section concludes:

Wider availability and better use of information for potential students is fundamental to the new system. Students will increasingly use the instant communication tools of the twenty-first century such as Twitter and Facebook to share their view on the student experience with their friends, families and the wider world. It will be correspondingly harder for institutions to trade on their past reputations while offering a poor teaching experience in the present. Better informed students will take their custom to the places offering good value for money. In this way, excellent teaching will be placed back at the heart of every student’s university experience. (2.24)

We are in the world of first-year Economics textbooks, as well as of Lewis Carroll. And sure enough to respond to ‘many purchasers, each perfectly informed’ we come, two chapters later, to ‘many producers, with free entry and exit in the marketplace’:

The main barriers faced by institutions seeking to expand and new providers who wish to enter the market are student number controls and the complicated and slow processes for obtaining university title and taught degree-awarding powers. To help more students attend the institution they want, and drive competition and innovation across the sector, we will free up student numbers and consult on changes to the criteria and process for granting university title and taught degree-awarding powers (4.37)

Leave aside that this is neo-classical economics as its most simplistic, that it ignores much of what we know influences the behaviour of consumers and producers in the real world. Let us concentrate on the nature of the ‘good’ – education – which is being ‘consumed’. In the first place education is not a consumer good at all, since it yields its benefits over a long period of time, far longer than the forty months which the White Paper arbitrarily chooses for the measurement of benefits. In a world in which politicians endlessly describe as ‘investment’ any expenditure of which they approve, it is curious that the White Paper does not recognise the true nature of the good, perhaps because it is beyond the time-horizon of Facebook and Twitter.

Further, education is not simply a ‘private’ good either; it is also a ‘public’ good, a ‘merit’ good, and sometimes even a ‘positional’ good. To be sure, individuals benefit from their education, and not just in the measureable changes in their earning power. But so too does society at large. This is easy to see in the early stages: communication costs in society are reduced if everyone speaks the same language and spells similarly; accidents are reduced if everyone recognises a pedestrian crossing, or interprets traffic-light sequences in the same way. Later, education ‘spills over’ into a more humane and cultured society – and one better qualified to hold political elites to account. Indeed some types of educational experience are more important for society than unfettered individual choice might provide, so the state feels it right to

influence the market to produce sufficient engineers or physicists; where these ‘merit’ goods are concerned it could be damaging to society to wait until scarcity drove up the rewards sufficiently to influence subject choice. Finally, certain types of education may yield a benefit – attract recognition – simply as a result of their scarcity; indeed one theory of education is that it is primarily designed to sift and screen its participants. Thus FRS or FBA, initials at the pinnacle of the education system, as it were, are valued because they have been competitively earned; and so, too (to a much smaller extent, of course) for BA (Oxon). Which is why there is so much Government emphasis on the connection between social mobility and entry into the most selective universities.

As I sit for the last time producing these notes, gazing at brown hills and the deep blue Tyrrhenian Sea,² I think of a market not wholly dissimilar to education for which the Government’s model does work – tourism. Consider a plane-load of British travellers landing at Palermo. They have studied the many possibilities and chosen their tour operator. They have provided their own finance, and if they have borrowed it their bank or credit-card provider will not have been greatly concerned about what they are planning to do, only that they will be able to meet the repayments. Some will want to walk through the Madonie National Park, others to lie on a beach, others to trace Carthaginian or Greek, Roman, Arab or Norman influences; some will stay in tents, others in hotels, apartments, or self-catering villas. There are many tour operators and other providers, some of which go out of business, whilst others are free to enter the market. It is no business of the Government’s whether the plane carries the ‘right’ social mix, or how many visit Monreale, Mozia or Marina di Ragusa.

But for the allegedly sovereign student ‘consumer’ of Higher Education the Government does, indeed must, care. It has provided the finance, lest not enough young people go to university (the ‘social’ good argument); it has provided more generous funding for some

² I am grateful to the Old Member who wrote from Italy in response to last year’s ‘Windows’ to urge me not to convert a house in Sicily; he can relax, for it was never more than a pipe-dream. It has been gratifying to learn, as I approached retirement, how many read this feature. Thank you.

subjects (Medicine, Science and Engineering) than for others (the ‘merit’ good argument); it will strengthen the Office for Fair Access and require universities to offer scholarships and bursaries to increase social mobility (the ‘positional’ good argument, as well as elements of the other two).

Does any of this matter? At one level, for Oxford at least,³ probably not. I do not myself agree that the Government’s describing them as consumers will fundamentally change our relationships with our students, though I know that many of my colleagues do. But I do worry that in the longer term this extraordinary misuse of an economic model, signed off by a Secretary of State and Minister who do know some economics, betrays deep in the Civil Service a highly instrumental view of what education is about, which keeps surfacing (there are many similar elements in the 2003 White Paper). True, from time to time a broader view peeps out, for example:

Higher Education is a good thing in itself. Students may study a subject because they love it regardless of what it means for their earnings.

But it soon moves on to:

Graduates are more likely to be equipped with the skills that employers want if there is genuine collaboration between institutions and employers in the design and delivery of courses.

³ I have not gone into the new system for allocating student numbers, a bizarre and Byzantine process which divides applicants into ‘high achievers’ – those with AAB or above at A Level – and others, to whom it applies a ‘core and margin’ regime. Devotees of crime novels by Georges Simenon will recognise the plot in which a small mistake (in this case assuming that universities would only raise fees to £7,500 on average) carries the central character into more and more complex evasive action. (See the Report by the Higher Education Policy Institute No. 54 at www.hepi.ac.uk for a full description and analysis.) Many universities will be seriously affected, but the system is so ridiculous I cannot believe it will survive long enough to do lasting damage. Why public sector administrators should have to spend so much time and energy making sense of ill-thought-out ideas from the latest Government is an interesting question, maybe even a retirement project.

Leave aside the point that no truly well-informed seventeen year old ‘consumer’ would bind him or herself to a particular firm or industry in this way, recognising that in a world of rapid technical change training, re-training, and yet further training will be needed. So the sensible course would be one which provided transferable skills (on which the White Paper is surprisingly silent, presumably because such skills – communication; co-operation and teamwork; ability to analyse, synthesise and quantify; the will to set and meet objectives; and the will to innovate – are present in very many Humanities and Social Studies courses, whose funding the Government needed to cut.) What is missing is the recognition that education is a *process*, a drawing out of talents and interests, as the Latin roots of the word reveal. The later teens and early twenties are a period of big changes, physically, emotionally, intellectually. Few applicants to university know with great clarity what they want to do with their lives. This is not an excuse for allowing students to sit around idly ‘discovering themselves’; rather it is the reason for challenging them, stretching them, exposing them to new materials, disturbing them.

A century ago the secretary of a Workers’ Education Association class conducted by the great Oxford social historian R.H. Tawney captured the ideal, to my mind:

The class meeting is over and we sit at ease, taking tea and biscuits. Talk ranges far and wide – problems of philosophy, evolution, politics, literature. Then R.H. Tawney reads us Walt Whitman’s ‘When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d’; this moves a student to give us his favourite from the same source, ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers!’. Another follows, quoting from a poem of Matthew Arnold that evidently has bitten him, one ending with the magic line, ‘the unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea’. And for some of us as we sit listening a new door opens.

These would have been, in modern terms, socially deprived adult students, drawn from Staffordshire industries, intent on ‘bettering’ themselves, and doing so in a co-operative enterprise with the University of Oxford. What a vision we have lost!

I have spent much of this year travelling to visit Old Members. My by now annual American visit included dinners in Dallas, New York,

and Boston, a meeting in St Louis, and breakfast in Washington. I am immensely grateful to Mike Decker, David Kemper, Jerry Howe, Ned Rubenstein, Dennis Sullivan and Sir Hans Kornberg for acting as hosts, and to all who attended to mark the end of my Provostship and to share memories of my tutoring. Crystal mementoes of Washington and New York remind me of many happy and productive visits; American Old Members remain immensely generous supporters, this year of my fund for student facilities to bolster the resources available to the JCR and MCR, the Music Society, the Buskins, Arts Week, and the sports clubs.

After the PPE Gaudy we immediately flew out to Malaysia as the guests of another PPE Old Member, HRH the Crown Prince of Perak, Raja Nazrin Shah, at the memorable birthday celebrations of his father. Later in the week he generously hosted a meeting of the Oxford and Cambridge Society, where I spoke after dinner on the changes in Oxford over my years as Provost and, indeed, over the half century since I came up; lively (and difficult!) questions followed. From Kuala Lumpur, via Singapore, to Sydney, where at a lunch organised by Rick Lee and a dinner hosted by Tim Sims, I met yet more former pupils and other old friends. In Auckland a dinner was hosted by Mark Woolford, whose genealogical interests proved we were probably related through my mother! Back via Melbourne to catch up with other former PPE students to a final dinner in Hong Kong, organised by the husband and wife (and formidable rowing) team of Alice Page and Mark Stamper. Still to come, as I write, South Africa.

Two themes predominated in all these thousands of miles of travel. First, how much Old Members, perhaps particularly those who had come to Oxford after a previous degree abroad, had valued the encouragement and friendship of their tutors. As I said earlier, I do not believe that of itself the new fees regime for England, and the absurd rhetoric of student ‘consumers’ which accompanies it, will destroy such precious, collaborative relationships – after all overseas students have been required to pay high fees for years. But I do think it is vital to retain the co-operative, tutorial model, and it was a great delight to have this emphatically endorsed by one of my earliest pupils – Barrie Wigmore, and his wife Deedee – in their very generous gifts to endow permanently Fellowships in History, Economics and Philosophy.

Secondly, everyone felt that the College had been a major influence on their lives, indeed opening ‘new doors’. And in this their extra-curricular experiences played as important a part as the inspiration and support they gained from their tutors.

Had I seen them now, with the 2011 Schools results out, showing that forty-four out of our 120 candidates got Firsts, putting us in sixth place in the Norrington table, in the same year that the Buskins won OUDS Cuppers, the Women’s 1st VIII blades, and we won Men’s Soccer and Cricket Cuppers, I could have assured them that the idea of a first-rate all-round College, for which we have long worked, is very much alive. Indeed *Cherwell* calculated that even on a sequence which ended with last year’s eighth place in Norrington, Worcester was the top performing College in relation to its endowment. This does not imply that we should cease to try to increase that endowment, at which I have had less success than I had hoped; rather that we are truly worth supporting.

I know that you will afford my successor and his family the same support with which you have always sustained Sue and me, and for which I give you my warmest and most sincere thanks. The College will surely renew itself under the first Jonathan as its head, not least because for the first time there will be more women undergraduates than men, as he takes over from the fifth Richard.⁴

For myself, I have the opportunity to develop many interests from the leaving presents I received, particularly water-colours and cookery. I hope also to go back to teaching economics to adult students for my old Department for Continuing Education, if only to encourage more to be able to criticise shoddy White Papers! And I hope to attend similar courses myself, in Ancient History and Italian, so that I can truly enjoy Sicily. Though it will seem strange not to be writing this column ...

R.G.S.

⁴ Richard Ryngrstede(c.1452), Richard Eden (c1563), Richard Blechinden, Richard Cotton, Richard Smethurst. [Ed.]