

FROM THE LODGINGS WINDOWS

I have recently been re-reading all my sixteen previous contributions to the College Record; not from nostalgia or narcissism, but because of a casual remark from a colleague, who admired the educational philosophy embedded in these annual views from the Lodgings. It was kindly meant, but it shocked me, for I would disclaim any kind of coherent framework of thought which might truly earn the title of a 'philosophy'.

What I did find were certain recurring themes, such as lack of finance, the importance of Colleges, and worries about pressures causing an overemphasis on research and a devaluing of time and effort spent on teaching. I also express strong opinions. I greatly dislike the simplistic use of statistics, and especially its modern guise which leads on to league tables and their associated performance targets. I believe in requiring very high standards when people are trained for professions but then in trusting them, when qualified, to behave professionally, with as broad discretion and as little interference as possible. For organisations, too, I believe in decentralisation, in the location of decisions as close as possible to the heart of the action. I mistrust the words 'management' and 'administration', whether as abstract nouns, purporting to encompass general principles applicable to a wide variety of contexts, or as collective nouns describing a group whose task is defined as managing or administering. One way of summarising these likes and dislikes is that I believe that my own subject specialism of economics is important; but that it is often very dangerous when it 'escapes', so to speak, from debate between professionals and is applied, without the necessary cautious footnotes and careful statements of stylised hypotheses, in the world of public decision-taking. I have never forgotten a gentle rebuke I received from the Chancellor of the Exchequer when, as a young man in H.M. Treasury, I made a technically correct but politically inept suggestion. Roy Jenkins paused, tapping his pencil on the table. 'I think there are objections,' he said, with a wry smile, 'to running the economy as an uncontrolled experiment for the benefit of economists. You economists are fine so long as you are not allowed anywhere near policy.'

So in accordance with what my gentle reader called my 'philosophy' (incidentally, why is it always a 'gentle' reader? I personally read with intensity, exhilaration, amusement, fear - especially when reading certain kinds of crime novel too late at night! - irritation, fury on occasion; but never gently), I should report that the most pleasing event outside the College this year was the defeat of the bureaucratic Joint Resource Allocation Mechanism proposals, about which I wrote at such length last year. Strictly speaking these proposals - for a new system of

allocating the taxpayers' money which used to come directly to Colleges via Local Authorities as 'College fees', but now comes from the Higher Education Funding Council as part of the 'single cheque' to the University - were not defeated: they were passed. But at a very tense meeting of the Conference of Colleges in December 2007 the proposals failed to reach the 75% majority required for the Conference's decision to be binding on all Colleges.

To an economist, the JRAM proposals were a model under which the flow of funds aligned the incentives for College decisions with those applying to the University's Divisions, Faculties and Departments. These incentives, expressed very crudely, are to maximise the resources going into research, subject to adequate provision for teaching. But from the start it was clear that at Oxford we would require some cross-subsidy from research if we were to be able to maintain anything like our current and, we believe, highly valued provision of very small group teaching in tutorials. Further, because the well-endowed Colleges are able to devote considerable resources to Research Fellowships and research generally, the proposed system would have resulted in large transfers between Colleges, in general from the poor to the rich. So the danger was that a vicious circle would be set in train for poor Colleges: a leaching of resources would make it difficult for them to support existing tutorial teaching and to appoint Research Fellows, whilst the richer Colleges would be able to sustain tutorial teaching and make research appointments, thus putting them on a virtuous circle. Those of us who opposed the new scheme were not surprisingly mainly drawn from the poorer Colleges, led with great professional determination by the Bursar of Keble. But there were opponents from amongst the well-endowed, too: for example, New College, whose Warden, Professor Alan Ryan, can always be relied upon for a robust and witty destruction of nonsense.

One of the arguments of the proponents of the JRAM was that in reproducing, to some degree, the system which HEFCE itself uses to allocate funds between universities, Oxford would please the authorities and deflect the criticism it was attracting following the defeat of the governance proposals last year. Could this be the same University which defied James II? (Appropriately, Magdalen itself was another rich College in our anti-JRAM group). Latterly, this argument was undermined by the Chairman of HEFCE himself, who confirmed that however that body calculated its own grant to individual universities it was for those universities themselves to allocate the resulting funds internally.

Eventually, after a period of considerable tension between groups of Colleges, and some disgraceful impugning of the conduct of the Chairman of the Conference of Colleges, whose College, Pembroke, was

in the blocking minority, a completely new committee was empanelled, and a sensible compromise soon emerged which commanded the support of a binding majority of the Colleges. Not that this second committee was devoid of economists - we constitute the biggest single group by subject of Heads of House - but that it was less attuned to purity of doctrine and more to the political realities.

Of course internal re-arrangements of the way Colleges are funded cannot solve the financial problems which have been another of the recurring themes in my looks through the Lodgings windows: only a large increase in the overall resources of the University can do that. There are some who look forward to the present cap on undergraduate fees being lifted as a result of the review due next year: I am personally very doubtful about the grounds for this optimism. Again economic doctrine ('he who benefits should pay': a graduate certainly contributes to more output for society as a whole, but also reaps personal benefit in the form of greatly enhanced lifetime income) will come face to face with political reality. Is it likely that the present government, keen to hold on to its traditional working-class support and bidding against the other parties to retain the middle classes who were attracted to New Labour a decade or so ago, will double fees to £7,000 in 2010, still less raise them fourfold to something like their true economic level? Equally, could such proposals do anything but lose votes for the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats if they put them forward?

So I applaud the decision of the University to launch a hugely ambitious fund-raising campaign this summer. It has an intelligently conceived structure, a 'big tent' (to use a current political cliché) which encompasses the aspirations of all parts of the University: Divisions, Departments, Faculties, Centres, Institutes, Museums, Libraries, - and Colleges. Funds raised as part of College Appeals will count towards the overall target of £1.25 billion. This at a stroke removes damaging rivalries between the University and its constituent Colleges, whilst retaining the advantages of decentralised initiatives - another of the themes of these columns. For some reason five years is usually thought to be an appropriate length of time for a campaign, and so within the overall University structure we at Worcester will be focusing on our tercentenary in 2014, launching our special five-year effort next year.

This brings me to one of the disappointments of the year, namely that our fund-raising objectives will not now be able to include the redevelopment of the site of Ruskin College. I first reported the possibility that Ruskin would be sold in the *Record* for 2003. Part of the site was on offer, leasehold, in the Spring of 2007, but the terms were such that the College declined to bid. Eventually Ruskin returned to the market last

winter, this time with the whole site up for sale, freehold. Such a sale was not uncontroversial amongst Ruskin's alumni, who argued strongly that the College had been symbolically sited in the centre of Oxford in order to make important points, about access to Higher Education and adult learning, which are as relevant today as they were a century ago. So part of the competition came to involve the possibility of Ruskin's retaining some part of the site, even if the economies of re-locating most of its Walton Street/Worcester Place activities to its other, much larger, site in Headington were paramount. This protracted bidding process took over three months: the unfortunate result, for us, was that Exeter College substantially outbid us, in a contest in which, despite the general decline in property prices, the competitive level was four times the price per hectare paid by Keble College for the site of the Acland Hospital three years ago. We had to bid, and bid competitively; but I have to say that this level of commitment gave me many sleepless nights on the 'beware lest you get what you wish for' theme.

So we are now back where we were a year ago. Ruskin would have afforded us many facilities we need: more bedrooms, a large lecture theatre with a stage, which could have been used for music and drama too; more seminar rooms; and a dining room and kitchen, of which more anon. But Worcester is not short of land, and it could easily be argued that £15 million or so would be better spent on new buildings rather than on acquiring and modernising a mixture of Edwardian, 1960s and 1980s buildings. Yet the very extent and beauty of our grounds makes site choices very difficult. In our determination not to be delayed by the uncertainties about Ruskin, the College commissioned in 2004 an architectural master plan, which we have been following. That called for the development of the two sites on the northern perimeter of the College, which I described in the Record for 2006, and which were completed in March this year. The two new quads, to the North and East of the Sainsbury Building, comprise 136 new rooms, all en-suite, arranged, as in the Sainsbury Building, in groups of, generally, six around large communal kitchens. Also this year the redevelopment of 5-7 Beaumont Street, with 35 rooms, again all en-suite and clustered around kitchens, was completed. So all undergraduates can now live in College for the whole of their time. Further (and vital to the College's finances in which, because of our small endowment, conference revenues must play a large part), with the refurbishment of the Casson and Wolfson Buildings to provide en-suite rooms and kitchens, set to be completed in time for the start of the 2008-9 academic year in October, we shall have over 300 modernised rooms to offer: not the Ritz, but certainly three-star - and in lovely surroundings.

But all those developments are around the periphery of the College. Ruskin could have been regarded as the 'periphery' too. Where next, and what, are very difficult questions. We need perhaps another 50 rooms for graduates – instructive, on my trawl back through my 'Lodgings Windows' pieces, to see that in 1992 the College comprised 334 undergraduates and 110 graduates: this year the figures are 417 undergraduates (including 19 American students on the one-year Visiting Student Programme) and 184 graduates. The Library has now used virtually every corner possible for shelving, and there is no proper provision for the College's archives. A large flexible space - lecture theatre-cum-arts auditorium - would be very desirable, as would four or five more seminar rooms ('breakout rooms' to conferences), and proper music practice rooms. We still need to replace the squash courts, which were demolished to make way for the new student accommodation (Worcester players in the meantime have special times set aside in the University Sports Centre at Iffley Road).

Perhaps most difficult of all, the kitchens badly need rebuilding. This problem is not unique to Worcester: Merton, Univ, Jesus, Exeter and Queen's have either completed or commissioned work on their kitchens. Worcester's were built in 1844, and their arrangement of quite small rooms makes it very hard to run a modern, efficient catering operation. Yet redesigning the kitchens would be relatively easy: keeping food service going whilst the work was proceeding would not. (Here, the dining facilities which Ruskin would have provided would have been a great help.) More importantly still, would it be worth spending maybe £2 million on redeveloping the kitchens when the food would still have then to be loaded into trolleys, trundled across 20 yards of open air through the Pump Quad, and then lifted into the Hall? Clearly the radical solution is to build a completely new dining hall and kitchen somewhere else, most obviously on the North side of the Provost's Drive. But apart from the loss of car parking spaces, (during construction at least, if not permanently), and the need, on such a prime site, to employ distinguished (and therefore expensive) architects who would duly design expensive - though beautiful - structures, there are more intangible, but ultimately more important, considerations. What effect would such a new site have on the central nexus of the College, so faithfully portrayed in Edward Halliday's famous painting of 1937, with undergraduates in every manner of summer sports attire - and even one with books! - congregating around the steps outside the Hall leading down to Pump Quad?

Apart from the disappointment about Ruskin, the year's news has been mixed. We have opened over a hundred attractive new rooms: perhaps as a result the freshers who joined us in October 2007 have been chosen from the largest number of applicants to any College - indeed we believe

the largest number any College has ever had. Of course this is a mixed blessing: more applicants for a limited number of places means more disappointment, though many of those whose first choice was Worcester were taken elsewhere. Still, one might have expected there to be an adverse reaction in the December 2007 applications: there was indeed a reduction, but Worcester remained the most popular choice. As the reports later in these pages reveal, undergraduate and graduate activities have been very lively and successful: a smoothly organised and magically lit Commem Ball; a notable performance of *The Tempest* by the Buskins (completely different in style from the famous OUDS staging of 1948, with no use of the lake at all); lots of excellent music, including for the second year running the staging of an opera, *Acis and Galatea*; and many victorious sports teams. Nor were these activities responsible, so far as I can discern, for a most disappointing plunge in our Norrington Table placing, since many of those who performed very well in Schools were active in the College's other successes, and few of those who performed less well than had been hoped had been distracted. I have written far too critically in the past about the Norrington Table to spend much time on it again. But in looking back over all those past issues I could not help noticing that the 21 Firsts (no less than 7 of them in Maths, or joint Schools with Maths) which were achieved this year were the cause of much congratulation in my piece in 1993, when they brought us tenth place (this year's was 27th). Or, to put it another way, had we repeated last year's 11th-placed performance, with 33 Firsts, we would still have gone down by four places this year. Random fluctuations? Grade-point inflation? Realistic measurement of genuine improvement? You choose: for myself, as for any fan at the start of a new season, there is great comfort and promise in the excellent performances of the First years!

So, looking once more through the Lodgings Windows, have I done so philosophically? Yes. But in accordance with a conscious philosophical framework? No, save for a Greek delight in balance: 'μηδὲν ἄγαν'¹; or as our Benedictine predecessors' Rule said, combining balance with community: '*Omnia tamen mensurate fiant propter pusillanimes*'.²

R.G.S.

¹ 'Nothing in excess'. Inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi.

² 'Let all things be done with moderation, however, for the sake of the faint-hearted'. *Rule of St Benedict* §48 'Of daily manual work'. (With apologies to those many readers for whom such information is unnecessary!)