

## FROM THE LODGINGS WINDOWS

It has become almost a ritual. On the middle weekend of our annual summer holiday – that point where time, which passed so gently in the first week, suddenly starts to speed up; when you realise that unless you stir yourself the sites you had intended to visit will remain for ever stunning pictures and enticing descriptions in the guide books – it is then that I realise I must write my annual piece for the *College Record*. Serious authors call it ‘writer’s block’, but I recognise a phenomenon known to all students: procrastination. ‘The thief of time’, my father used to call it; but as so often with parents he was only half right: for it is not as if you do nothing in the time saved by deferring a task to tomorrow, just that you do something more congenial. And if procrastination leads to the common Oxford problem, the weekly, or even twice-weekly, essay/translation/work-sheet crisis, it teaches our students to work quickly and accurately under intense pressure – one of the features of their education here which they, and their future employers, prize most highly later in life.

So perhaps I should characterise the 2008/9 academic year as the Year of the Fruitful Procrastination, for the first, and best, feature of it from a narrowly-focused College viewpoint has been the excellent performance of those taking Finals, over 30% of whom got Firsts. With so many undergraduates now reading for four year degrees it is difficult to attribute this success to a particular matriculation year, and thus to refer also to the other achievements of one particular generation. But to those worried that such Schools success signals a decline in other activities, I would point out that the 2005/6 generation also gave memorable concerts and two short operas, produced two imaginative summer performances of Shakespeare, and were Cuppers or League Champions in 24 inter-collegiate competitions, including performing Cup and League doubles in Men’s Hockey (where we also beat the Cambridge champions), Men’s Cricket (twice), Women’s Tennis (twice), and Men’s Soccer. The cup for this, the oldest for which continuous competition is recognised by the FA, was burnished to perfection by the SCR Butler, and alternated between being on display in the JCR Bar and gracing SCR guest-nights until

March. All that and a notably successful Commem. Ball: truly this was a fine generation.

Particularly disappointing, therefore, that they have graduated into the most difficult labour market for many years. For this Procrastination Year might also loosely be interpreted not just as 'putting off until tomorrow' but also as 'holding your breath until...' The academic year began with the disastrous seizing up of credit markets. Defensively positioned as the College's portfolio was, the endowment lost 18.5% to 31 March. In one way Worcester's low endowment proved a blessing in disguise, for we rely on endowment income to finance a smaller amount of expenditure than many. And we were very pleasantly surprised, and immensely heartened, by Old Members' reaction to the 'Telethon' we conducted in March. To raise over £250,000 at close to the worst point of stock markets was a great tribute to the enthusiasm of the team of fourteen students telephoning and to the loyalty of those contacted. The final crumb of comfort in this financially depressing year was that the very low interest rates deployed to stave off overwhelming credit collapse and depression benefited us greatly in financing our building programme. Nevertheless, although we expect to report an operating surplus this year, unrealised capital losses will lead to a large overall deficit. Accordingly, although this would have been a very good time to carry out more building work, with contractors vying to offer the keenest prices, we felt unable to commission any new projects, giving a practical demonstration to any economics students who needed it that the multiplier is a deviation-amplifying process...

We did, however, indulge in some modest contra-cyclical expenditure with formal ceremonies in late April to open the 238 brand-new or completely refurbished bedrooms on which work was finished in time for the start of this academic year. We managed to find a coincident free morning in the busy schedules of our local Councillor, Susannah Pressel, who was Lord Mayor of the City of Oxford this year, and of Tim Stevenson, who read Law at the College in 1967-70, and had been appointed Lord Lieutenant of the County in the summer of 2008. Plaques unveiled and ribbons cut, on a mercifully rain-free morning, at both the Beaumont Street and the new Ruskin Lane quadrangles, there was an opportunity over lunch to thank

everyone – architects, structural engineers, quantity surveyors, builders, Fellows and senior College staff – who had contributed. Including the College’s bankers: as I said in my speech,

Whatever their failings at the highest strategic management level, the Royal Bank of Scotland locally has been wonderfully supportive. Not the least of the tragedies of the last few months has been the way in which honest, hardworking bank employees, not just in RBS, have suffered loss of jobs, pension, public esteem, whilst the true culprits are hidden away, knighthoods intact, pensions enhanced. I want, therefore, especially to thank Denise Blackwell and Fiona Townsend, and hope that they come through these difficult times unscathed. I shall long retain the picture of Denise, hard hat at a fetching angle, climbing with graceful agility to the very top of the scaffolding at the back of the Beaumont Street houses to see for herself the bulges which were ominously developing there. I can only say that if her colleagues in the more fashionable and much higher-paid parts of the bank had shown equal curiosity and concern (known in banking circles as ‘due diligence’) over some of the assets on which they were lending we all of us – architects, builders, entrepreneurs, pensioners, academics – would not be in the mess we are in today.

Thus far, the features of this Year of Procrastination, of Bated Breath almost, have been common to most institutions: waiting to see if the banking system would collapse, waiting to see what would happen to the ability to spend, waiting for projects desirable but not absolutely essential to become affordable again. But there have been other pauses which have characterised this Year of Waiting for us in College: waiting for Ruskin; waiting for the RAE; waiting for the review of student fees; waiting for the implementation of charities legislations; and, most recently, waiting for influenza.

We have been waiting for definite news on the Walton Street site occupied by Ruskin College for so long that uncertainty seems a permanent feature of our lives: I see I first mentioned it in these pages six years ago. Last May we thought all was decided when Exeter College outbid us in the competition for the site. But then Ruskin’s plans to consolidate on their Headington site were thrown into disarray, like those of so many other institutions in the Further Education sector, by the extraordinary behaviour of the Learning and Skills Council, which seems to have been infected by a variant of the

fever which has spread over the banks – in their version promising to lend for new buildings funds which totalled far more than the resources they had available. Unlike many others looking to the LSC for help, Ruskin has not in anticipation demolished any existing buildings: good in one sense, for it has thus avoided having to put students into temporary structures; but bad, by the same token, because its plight is therefore not as serious as that of some FE Colleges, and its priority may not be very high in what is likely to be a grim outlook for even capital projects within public expenditure. Decisions are now expected in the autumn.

The RAE – the Research Assessment Exercise, under which the flows of funds for research are allocated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England every five years or so according to immensely complicated grading schemes, with the ‘output’ of those academics who are entered by their universities as ‘research active’ evaluated by subject panels of academics, some from overseas, and, in some cases, ‘end-users’ such as industrialists – has been a major factor, perhaps the dominant force, in university decision-making for the last few years. The reason is simple: within small variations all universities receive the same amount of public funds, through HEFCE, for teaching (subjects are funded in ‘bands’ according to whether they require expensive laboratory support or not: medicine for example is funded at the highest rate.) Universities are also allowed to charge fees for teaching, but these fees are tightly constrained, and almost all universities therefore charge at the maximum allowed. Student numbers are also contractually agreed by universities with HEFCE. So the only way in which one university can attract more publicly-funded resources than another is through a superior research performance.

I have written before of the potentially very damaging effects of this – quite understandable – concentration on ‘research output’ (‘research-active’ academics X the assessed quality of what they produce – notice this wholly *excludes* any measure of the amount and quality of their *teaching*). But it was of course pleasing to discover, in late December, that Oxford had come top of the research league table (or more accurately of that league table which Oxford preferred: a different measure reversed the top two places, putting Cambridge in the lead!) But if the rejoicing was heartfelt, since it was about two years

since academics here first had to submit their research outputs to internal scrutiny to determine whether they should be reported as 'research active' in the exercise, it was short-lived. For the Government had decided that research in subjects of national importance – 'STEM' subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) – should be protected, and as a result many subjects, particularly in the Humanities, with research ratings of international excellence, found their allocation severely cut when HEFCE announced its funding decisions in March.

What universities receive from HEFCE is a block grant: they are not obliged to replicate the way it has been calculated in the way in which they distribute the funds internally. And to its credit the University of Oxford has not done so for the 2009-2010 academic year. This has not only protected Humanities: it has also protected Colleges which, because in general they pay proportionately more of the joint salary of a Humanities Fellow than of a scientist, would have suffered a proportionately bigger reduction in their share of the block grant. But it remains to be seen what the Strategy Committee which the University has set up will recommend for the longer term. Worse still, by midsummer HEFCE was suggesting that it should meet some of the public expenditure cuts it is being required to make by its parent department (now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills: ludicrous to suggest that universities have anything to do with education any more!) by abolishing the special allowance it makes for the costs of occupying old buildings – an allowance which benefits most older established universities but Oxford and Cambridge in particular.

For many, the solution to these problems lies in lifting the cap on student fees to which I referred above. Then, it is argued, a fully-functioning market could develop, with élite universities charging the full cost of educating their undergraduates, variously estimated for Oxford at between £9000 and £12000 above the public funds currently allocated to teaching by HEFCE. It is claimed that students or their parents would be prepared to pay such sums as an investment against the higher incomes they would expect over their lifetimes. This is clearly extremely contentious: so much so that even the review of student fees promised, when they were first introduced, for the coming

autumn, has been postponed: exactly the same tactic as when the late Lord Dearing's Committee was set up to look into universities, but asked to report *after* the election of 1997. So you might have expected me to include 'waiting for the election' in my list: but in reality I doubt whether it will make much difference. A generation ago, when only some 10% of eighteen year olds went to university, radical reform of our funding would have been possible: but at that stage it did not seem necessary. Now it is vital, but politically close to impossible. With the official target (based, it has to be said, on some pretty dubious economic reasoning) now 50% of the age group, the funding of higher education is an issue which reaches far into many families whose votes could decisively swing elections. Raising fees to £9 or £12 thousand is not likely to be popular, even right at the start of a new government; how much more unlikely is it if other parts of public expenditure are also under pressure, and if the immediate outlook for jobs for new graduates is correspondingly poor?

Furthermore, even supposing a government willing to allow a substantial rise in fees, a new element might well need to be considered: the Charity Commission. The Charities Act of 2006 brought Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, hitherto 'exempt' charities, under the purview of the Charity Commission, and we have been waiting for much of the year to learn when we would have to register, what information we would be required to provide, and what changes we might need to make to satisfy the Commission that we are behaving appropriately as charities. Few can doubt that the legislation was not just a sensible tightening up of the burgeoning charity sector, but also a convenient vehicle for appeasing those on the Government's backbenches who wished to attack independent schools. Which is where the connection with a possible increase in University tuition fees might be felt. Early pronouncements by the Commission seem to place great emphasis on the extent to which independent schools offer scholarships and bursaries to those unable to pay the fees. At present Oxford has nothing to fear from this: the central university and its constituent colleges combine to offer one of the most, if not the most, generous of the bursary schemes which all universities are required by the Office of Fair Access to produce: the establishment of OFFA to regulate admissions and bursaries was the concession the government

needed to make to get even its initial tuition fees proposal accepted. But Colleges are independent charities: were fees to rise substantially would the Commission supplement OFFA's role by looking at the resources available to each College? Could this substantially change the competitive position of less well-endowed Colleges?

At present, it should be said, the Charity Commission is taking a very courteous and helpful stance towards the registration of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, which is set to begin at the end of November, though some of its enquiries have raised eyebrows – for example whether it would be advisable for all Fellows to be CRB checked (not wholly inappropriate of a College admitting undergraduates, but this was to a graduate-only institution). Like many other colleges, at Worcester we have been working on revising our Statutes, though in truth the limpidly clear set devised in 1966 by Francis Reynolds has served us admirably, and requires mainly to be amended to reflect changes in circumstances over the past forty years.

Nevertheless over time regulation by the Charity Commission may prove to be a very important factor in the governance of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges: regulation rarely gets lighter, for if it does the regulator takes the blame even if it was the Government which urged a 'light touch', as the Financial Services Authority has recently found to its discomfort.

However much such regulatory bodies proclaim their independence from central government, and however much politicians vow to uphold that independence, the desire of governments to bend us all to their will, usually in the name of transparency and accountability, and ultimately of democracy, means that they seem unable to resist leaning on intermediate regulators who, in turn, seem to have lost the will to resist. All kinds of subtle forces are at work here: not just the age-old rewards of the Honours List, but the less open ones of targets, the achievement of which leads to bonuses for staff in an often inappropriate mimicking of the commercial world. It is impossible to envisage Sir Keith Murray, as Chairman of the old University Grants Committee, bowing to pressure from the Ministry of Education to the extent that HEFCE nowadays does, but that is a world half a century ago. Even a few years ago, however, it would have been impossible to imagine the head of a body

distributing funds for research in the Humanities arguing that it is vital for scholars to be clear about maximising the impacts of their output.

So, gentle as the Charity Commission will be for some years, I do worry about the longer term. Yet the choice which faced Oxbridge Colleges was not regulation or no regulation, but which regulator: HEFCE or the Charity Commission. This was clearly no contest. Not only are the Commission not academic bureaucrats, they are also dealing with a very wide variety of charities. This, we hope, will be some protection against that other bureaucratic delight – homogeneity. Federal systems are awkward to manage. Earlier this year Oxford University was subjected to an ‘institutional audit’. Those who have seen the draft report say that whilst it begins with generous praise for the vibrancy of the college system, it soon moves to recommendations for centralisation. ‘Unity in diversity’, Oxford sometimes proclaims of itself: the latter part of the phrase needs as much emphasis as the former. But I suppose that having the central University regulated by HEFCE and the Colleges regulated by the Charity Commission will one day strike some civil servant as accidentally anomalous rather than as deliberate. If at the same time Oxford or Cambridge Colleges have angered the government or there is political capital to be made from attacking the only two European Universities consistently in the world’s top rankings, no-one will wonder whether the independence of Colleges has something to do with that success, and the ‘anomaly’ will be ‘regularised’.

Let us hope this is a very long wait. The shortest wait, in this year of waiting, has been for ‘swine ’flu’. Would the threat have had the same impact if it had acquired a less pejorative name, or if it were widely realised that the prefix ‘pan’ simply means ‘all’, and that its connection with ‘panic’ is via a – usually charming and musical – goat-god? (Now there’s an ‘impact-statement’ for classicists to use when arguing for more research funds). Anyway, the Dean has led a planning team which has worked very hard to prepare us for the worst, if indeed that is what the new academic year brings. And to be optimistic, remember that exactly ten years ago we were all very concerned about the millennium bug.

A year of putting things off, of holding our breath, of waiting, then: but a year when within the College much was achieved. And talking of



waiting: it is 30 years since the College first admitted women. That year's intake was 26 women and 58 men: this year's will be 63 women and 54 men. Including the Junior Year Abroad programme there will be a total of 211 women and 214 men studying at undergraduate level in the College; and the Presidents of both the JCR and MCR will be women. 18 of this year's 37 Firsts were gained by women. Of the sports successes of the 'graduating class of 2009' which I mentioned earlier, 6 League and 5 Cup titles were gained by women's teams, 5 League and 5 Cup titles were gained by men, and 3 Cup successes were recorded by mixed teams. We have taken a generation to achieve such equality at the undergraduate level: now within the College we must work even harder to remove the obstacles which women face as they seek to continue to graduate work and thence to progress to established academic posts, whilst in society at large we must make full use of the talents of everyone.

**R.G.S.**

*The Provost's year began with having a (third!) new knee fitted: recuperating gave him a strange feeling of detachment during the most serious phase of the financial meltdown. Despite this replacement of an 'Oxford' artificial knee with an 'American' one, he finds passing through American airport security no easier, but he did make it to New York and Washington for College events connected with the launch of the University's fund-raising campaign 'Oxford Thinking' in early May. As a Pro Vice-Chancellor he chaired the electoral boards of the Professorships of Abrahamic Religions, Mathematical Modelling, Musculoskeletal Sciences, and Operations Management. He continued to chair the Colleges' Accounts Committee, the Curators of the University Parks, and the Trustees of the Higher Studies Fund, and joined the University's Student Number Planning Committee as a representative of the Conference of Colleges. He continued as Honorary Treasurer of the Oxford University Society and as the University-appointed Trustee of the Oxford Philomusica Orchestra, of whose Finance and General Purposes Committee he is a member.*