

Gazette Supplement



Oration by the demitting Proctors and Assessor

The following Oration was delivered in Congregation on Wednesday, 19 March, by Jonathan Mallinson, MA PhD Camb, MA Oxf, Fellow of Trinity, on demitting office as Senior Proctor.

Senior Proctor: *Insignissime Vice-Cancellarie: licetne Anglice loqui?*

Vice-Chancellor: *Licet.*

Senior Proctor: There have been times in history when it has not been good to be associated with the term *proctor*. Thumbing through 19th-century dictionaries of regional English, as one does, one finds an article which evokes the unenviable fate of proctors in Tudor times:

Time was, when they were thought useful; for they were expressly allowed by a statute of 1 Edward VI. But within fifty years they became so great a public nuisance, by their impudence, importunity, threatening and abusive language, that it became necessary to put them down by the statute of 39 Eliz. c. 4. which makes them rogues and vagabonds.

Of course, you will realise, the article is not describing the Proctors of Oxford (or of Cambridge, for that matter); the proctors in question here were much more disreputable types, as the article makes plain:

...the greatest care must be taken not to confound those bullies and swaggerers with the officers in our Universities, who bear the same title...

Such times are long gone, of course, and nobody today would confuse the Proctors of our university with *bullies and swaggerers*. And yet, the Proctors do find themselves going back in time in many different ways, and history is an essential part of their life and identity. Indeed we, like many generations of Proctors before us, have taken

part in ceremonies which have their origins in the 16th century, from Encaenia to the Glove Ceremony and Court Sermon. Others, like the Chancellor's Court of Benefactors, are approaching a much more youthful quarter century. We also join each year with representatives of the city in communal acts of commemoration of our shared past, from the St Frideswide service in Christ Church to the Remembrance Day Service in St Giles'. To be a Proctor is to be part of a historical process, in which each year traditions of the University are re-enacted, revalidated.

Particularly memorable for us this year was May Day, celebrated on a crisp but glorious morning, from the top of Magdalen College Tower. To reach this exalted height required us to ascend what appeared from the bottom to be a sheer and endless ladder. To climb it at all was enough of a challenge; to do so in the early hours of the morning, in full sub-fusc, gown and cap, took us into the realms of the hysterical. It would not be the only time we were called upon to maintain composure, dignity and a sense of humour while finding ourselves an unintended distance up a wall. Memorable in a different way was the walk back to Wellington Square that same morning, through a bustling Broad Street, which brought together the most unlikely combination of Proctors, pagans and morris dancers. There we all were, each group purposefully going about its business, each clad in the robes of an ancient identity, each apparently quite certain that they knew what the day was really about and how it should be celebrated, each slightly bemused by the presence of the others, yet all come together in the one place, to share the same moment - it was a very valuable lesson in perspective, and in co-existence, a lesson which it is useful for a Proctor to learn in good time.

Proctors re-enact history, but each year they also bear witness to events which, in their turn and in their different ways, will become part of the history of the institution. These included for us headline moments like the completion and official opening of the Andrew Wiles building, or the munificent gifts from the Li Ka Shing Foundation and the McCall MacBain Foundation, which will take the University's global health research and the international graduate scholarship programme of Rhodes House long into the current century. This year also saw the successful outcome of major sponsorship bids or negotiations: the City Deal which promises £14m to the Begbroke Science Park and the Old Road Campus, and HEFCE grant funding, which will bring £3m of support for over 100 full and partial Oxford Graduate Scholarships. Of the greatest value, too, but of a different kind, were some truly classic exhibitions at the Ashmolean and the Bodleian, which brought into our midst Stradivarius and Cézanne, Bacon and Moore, Magical Books and Great Medical Discoveries.

Proctors witness history in the making. But not just history; it can be fantasy, too, which, as Julian Barnes would say, is really just history waiting to happen. One of the Senior Proctor's most unexpected tasks this year was to authorise (with the Vice-Chancellor) the Quidditch Club - which, for those who may not know, is now an international sport - to associate itself formally with the University of Oxford. I'm quite sure that some believe that quidditch is not the only manifestation of JK Rowling's fantasy world in this university, and that Voldemort or Malfoy already occupy buildings somewhere to the west of St Giles'. Be that as it may, it is certainly the case that if you walk resolutely towards what looks like a blank wall between the back entrance to the UAS

canteen and four large wheelie bins, you find a door – known to some as number 9¾ Little Clarendon Street – which is, in fact, the back entrance to the Proctors' Office. This is the setting of two as yet unpublished novels, *Junior Proctor and the Baptism of Fire* and *Senior Proctor and the Prisoner of Wellington Square*. A third part of the projected trilogy, *Demitting Proctor and the Council of Secrets* is currently under consideration by the Assessor, and our legal advisors.

The Proctors are part of the University's public world, but we are also charged by statute to look behind the scenes. And what have we seen behind these scenes? Firstly, it is that behind every ceremony, benefaction or building, behind every exam session, admissions season or celebrity visit, behind every press statement, set of committee papers or investment figures there are committed and talented individuals whose ultimate criterion of success is, in effect, to remain invisible. It is the privilege of the Proctors, though, to witness this work on a daily basis, and it is a pleasure to put those behind it now, if anonymously, in the limelight.

The University does not just boil down to these two faces, though, the public and the private. The very word *university* focuses on unity, community, wholeness, but what that means in this particular place is not something which a single word – even a single word with a qualifying adjective, *collegiate* – can easily encompass. There is no doubt that in law, as in the public imagination, there is such a thing as the University of Oxford which subsumes all its constituent parts. In law, it is an entity responsible for the actions, good or bad, of its subsidiaries; and the legal autonomy of colleges does not prevent the world at large from associating any of their actions, good or bad, with the University of Oxford. And yet, as we know, the reality is very different: the University is anything but unified. Events, both this year and last, have led to serious reflexion about who, what or where the University is, and how it relates to the elements which make it up.

We are geographically dispersed, as even a cursory look at the map of the University's Functional Estate makes very clear. Finding a means of connecting all these elements, of dealing with all the data they generate, is the underlying challenge for IT services. The troubled progress this year of the new and highly complex SITS project, designed to produce an integrated student records system, gives some idea of the difficulties facing those who seek to ensure communication and compatibility across

the University, at the level of applicants and students, administrators and academics. The integrated communication project, which takes us beyond desktop phones to a world of instant messaging, video-conferencing and screen sharing, and which will make communication with Oxford colleagues easier and more flexible, wherever you, or they, are in the world, is another major undertaking to join up the University's dots, and is now entering its design and build stage.

At another level, of course, the University's watchword is actually *diversity*, and the launch of the Vice-Chancellor's Diversity Fund last summer was a powerful statement of this commitment. Earlier this month, a specially convened race summit brought together students and senior officers of the University to discuss the admission and experience of black and minority ethnic students at Oxford. In the area of disability, the Assessor has been working closely with the Disability Advisory Service to establish a common Disability Framework for departments and colleges. Similarly, the year has seen continued efforts towards gender equality. The University applied for the renewal of its Athena SWAN institutional award at Bronze level, but is setting its sights on silver in 2016. I have it on the highest authority that initiatives in other areas of gender imbalance are also underway. It is worth observing, too, that this year was the second year running that the elected trio in the Proctors' Office did not have a majority of men; less comforting, perhaps, is the fact that it is only the fourth time in the last 25 years that this has been the case. In this area, we like to think that progress would not be so difficult to achieve.

Inclusivity is an essential part of the University's sense of itself, and unity is not the same as uniformity. Diversity can be defended within a devolved structure of governance, but the right to be oneself, to do one's own thing, does have its limits. Diversity of practice or provision between departments or colleges can produce inequity; it is these very issues which the Proctors are often called upon to deal with.

The same question of identity has also occupied other committees in reflexions which can achieve all the magnitude and fragility of a theological system: the co-inherence of the Holy Trinity – in this case, Colleges, Divisions and Administration – each independent and yet interdependent, may easily be caricatured as the incoherence of institutional complexity; from the one to the other is just a short linguistic step. What is more, a devolved structure lends itself

to narratives of primeval struggle between centre and periphery, in which colleges and departments, academics and administrative offices are all assigned different roles, according to who the particular narrator is. And yet we have witnessed this year much very productive collaboration, one might even call it interdisciplinarity, a term which describes not just some academic endeavour or methodology, but which, more importantly, suggests the constructive exchange of different perspectives. It's that May Day morning moment writ large. The very process of electing Proctors and Assessor, plucked seemingly at random from the confines of college and department, and charged to work closely together for a single year, is testimony to the flexible, interactive nature of our system. To work at Wellington Square is neither to be pulled to the centre, nor to be despatched to the margins; it may appear to be in a different time zone, but it remains, more or less, on the same planet. The centre is not a place, it is a process; and it works through collaboration, pragmatism, trust.

Of course, the question of identity is not just to do with organisational structure, it is also to do with money. There are very real issues of balance and priority in an organisation where each element – Faculty, Division, College – has different ambitions, size and wealth, but is yet part of a greater whole. No individual component can prosper without (not to say, outwith) the University, its name or its reputation; even our most successful departments clearly recognise that. At the same time, we benefit already from a controlled measure of cross-subsidy, between colleges, and, to a limited extent, between divisions; and the University, on a larger scale, benefits to an unimaginable degree from the cash transfers of OUP. The challenge faced by the University is to find a balance between the independence of its different constituents and a spirit of corporate responsibility.

These relationships have been the object of particular attention this year, not least in the review of our processes for distributing income and costs across the University, the J-RAM and the 1-2-3. It is evident from many discussions this year that the principle of equity is paramount, and that the most objective measure of fairness is not rhetorical but numerical, not words but numbers: numbers have clear values, they can be put in order of size. The need to quantify means that the activities of departments are translated into terms which can be measured and compared, a common language, recognisable by all: income

earned, resources used, space occupied. But like all translations, of course, these can only ever be an approximation, a compromise.

These questions have had a particular urgency and pertinence this year against the background of a significant reduction in the capital grant from HEFCE. Important questions have followed from this, related to the means by which capital projects are to be identified, prioritised, financed. Increasingly, the value of a subject, or a post, or a project, is defined – or, one might say, calculated – with reference to its ability to pay its own way. And in these straitened times, there is a duty to do so. Words can fail us, but you can count on numbers; and we do, after all, require an argument to add up. There is, though, a lesson to be learned from words. In language, if not in arithmetic, two negatives do not simply cancel each other out; the two statements *We can afford to do this* and *We cannot afford not to do this* do not amount to the same, and both have their validity. These issues have informed many discussions this year; they will continue for sure into the next, and the next...

Diverse, independent, collaborative... this all brings us back seamlessly to the Proctors. It may be easier to define what the Proctors do than it is to define what the University is, but their ways of working, and their place in the University structure, became in their turn this year the object of some reflexion.

We witnessed in 2013 the end of an era, the retirement of two mainstays of the Proctors' Office, who had come to represent the office which they had done so much to create over their 40 years of joint service: Linda Mason and Brian Gasser. To lose one may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both... well, I can't quite remember the rest of the quotation. Linda Mason provided unerring advice on exams process and precedent for pretty much a quarter of a century. And as for Brian Gasser, first Clerk to the Proctors, generation upon generation of Proctors, Senior Tutors, Academic Administrators, Deans, Deans of Degrees, and many others besides, can all bear witness to his wisdom, integrity and clarity of mind, to his advice and support given unstintingly, with great courtesy and calm. It may be that only a very small proportion of our students have troubles during exams, but when all these troubles focus on the same office, one needs very special qualities. Brian had those. The University owes him a great debt of gratitude.

The volume of work coming through the office – requests for special provision, exams appeals, complaints and disciplinary cases – have all increased steadily over the

last few years, and successive generations of Proctors have drawn attention to it; this year has been no exception. It fell to us to think through new ways of dealing with this. New casework management systems, more electronic communication and a clearer distinction between the routine and the exceptional will, we hope, lead to an effective streamlining of cases. This has been accompanied by close working relationships with different units in the University: the Examination Schools, Education Policy and Support, Legal Services, the Disability Advisory Service.

These changes typify what we see to be the unique role and value of the Proctors. The Proctors have a long historical tradition behind them, but it is not the antiquity of the office which gives it value in this university, nor is it the quaint clothes which define it. It is through the Proctors that the University demonstrates its capacity for impartial self-scrutiny, with regard both to its own governance and to its relationship with its students. Proctors represent no individual constituency, but they bring to their work their own unique perspectives, a mixture of department, college and other experience, each year very different. It's perhaps not surprising, then, that when you put together an engineer, a social scientist and a linguist, processes, policies and words all come under scrutiny. And yet, it must be remembered, their authority is invested in them by statute; they are, in this very obvious sense, a part of the University. Proctors occupy, then, a middle ground, a neutral space. Their office is situated in a corridor which links the University Administration and the outside world, with a door onto each. And the Proctors' daily work is a negotiation of various borders: between individuals and regulations, policy and practice, letter and spirit. And when we say Proctors, we include also, quite emphatically, the Assessor, whose function is much less clearly codified and arguably underexploited. At the end of this year, the current Assessor put forward a set of proposals for a review of the office. Much college and University money is put into this role, and it is important that it should be used to best effect.

Proctors may have almost limitless statutory powers, but they cannot work alone, and it is our pleasure to thank all those who have assisted us in our year of office; we name no names, time is too short for that. We do recognise, though, the outstanding contributions of our own office staff, who have worked with great fortitude and commitment through this year like no other, and of our interim Clerk, James Bufford, who

has given us limitless support in this time of transition. We are delighted, too, that a new Clerk will be taking up office in some two months' time. We hand over to our successors an office which is rather different from the one we inherited 53 weeks ago, but one which is, we believe, ready for business.

It is quite right that this annual ceremony should be referred to as the Admission of the new Proctors, rather than as the Demission of the old. It is important always to look forward, not back. As you are about to begin your year of office, we hope you will take courage from the legend of the French martyr St Denis, beheaded for his faith in the third century. Not that I'm equating the admission of Proctors to martyrdom, let me hasten to say. Legend has it that St Denis, after his decapitation in Montmartre, took up his head and proceeded to walk a distance of six miles to the spot on which a church would subsequently be built in his name. When, in the 18th century, the cardinal de Polignac recounted the tale of this miraculous journey to the celebrated wit, Mme du Deffand, she is reputed to have replied with characteristically dry humour: *It really makes no difference how far he walked; it's taking the first step that's difficult.* We wish you *bon courage* as you take your first step now, and we wish a fulfilling year for you and for those who accompany you on the many steps which will follow.

Proctorial Year 2013-14

Summary of Complaints Cases

During 2013-14 the Proctors received 226 complaints, of which 33% were upheld in whole or in part. In addition they completed some cases carried over from previous proctorial years. The great majority (85%) of these complaints related to examinations and research student candidatures. (Totals for previous year are given in brackets.)

Taught-course examinations (undergraduate and postgraduate): 190 (192)

107 of these cases involved a straightforward marks check and led to no further action being taken. The Proctors upheld, in whole or in part, a total of 68 complaints relating to new cases. 7 complaints remain under consideration.

Research student matters: 12 (8)

The Proctors upheld 4 cases. 5 remain outstanding.

Equal opportunities: 0 (2)

Harassment: 3 (1)

While harassment cases remain rare, the Proctors continue to take these complaints seriously. Two of the cases this year related to one individual.

Maladministration: 13 (4)

While the statistics show an increase from 4 to 13, a more detailed examination of these cases reveals that this increase is mainly due to the way in which cases are classified and are not symptomatic of a trend in the University's processes.

Quality of/access to teaching, learning, support facilities: 6 (2)

These complaints typically concerned dissatisfaction with delayed or reduced tutorial provision or delays in the appointment of thesis or project supervisors.

Suspension/rustication: 0 (0)

Student Union: 0 (0)

Other matters: (3)

These three cases related to articles published in student newspapers. Two cases were brought to an informal settlement; the other is ongoing.

Summary of Disciplinary Cases

BREACH OF STATUTE XI CODE OF DISCIPLINE

Forgery/falsification of University document and/or dishonest behaviour: 4 (4)

Misuse of property (Information Technology facilities): 2 (0)

Engaging in offensive behaviour or language: 6 (2)

Engaging in activities likely to cause injury or impair safety and/or disorderly behaviour: 1 (3)

Inciting or conspiring with other persons to engage in any of the conduct prohibited under the Code of Discipline: 0 (1)

Misappropriation of University property: 0 (1)

BREACH OF RULES COMMITTEE REGULATIONS

Disorderly behaviour after examinations: 10 (19)

BREACH OF THE PROCTORS' DISCIPLINARY REGULATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY EXAMINATIONS

Academic misconduct (plagiarism): 33 (17)

Plagiarism was the most time-consuming disciplinary issue dealt with by the Proctors' Office. There were 33 new cases of alleged plagiarism during this year. Of these, 11 were taken to the Student Disciplinary Panel; and 22 were referred back to the examiners.

Academic misconduct other than plagiarism: 14