

Gazette Supplement



Oration by the demitting Proctors and Assessor

The following Oration was delivered in Congregation on 18 March by K L Blackmon, BS Clemson, MBA PhD North Carolina, MA Oxf, Fellow of Merton, on demitting office as Senior Proctor.

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

Vice-Chancellor: *Licet.*

Mr Vice-Chancellor, Doctors, Masters, Scholars, and Officers of the University and esteemed guests, I speak to you today under these gloriously sunny/hideously gloomy/slightly cloudy with a chance of meatballs (strike as appropriate) Oxfordshire skies on behalf of both Proctors and the Assessor.

Before I begin my Oration proper, the audience may be grateful to hear that in 1954 this meeting of Congregation was moved from 2pm to noon. Not only is this *an alteration which increases the pleasure of the Proctorial lunch and no longer imposes a test on the sobriety and diction of the outgoing Proctor*, it also imposes brevity on the demitting Senior Proctor so as to ensure that everyone's lunch is not ruined. The Assessor's party may be particularly grateful that the whole procession no longer troops from the Sheldonian to the Vice-Chancellor's residence, then to the Senior Proctor's college, then to the Junior Proctor's college, and finally to the Assessor's college, which would add 2.6 miles to the Assessor's 0.1 mile procession.

Let us first turn to our summary of this year. Most of you will know that Senior and Junior Proctor describe only the order in which we matriculated, and both Proctors take an equal lead in the active business of the University. That said, the Junior Proctor's children believe that their father will succeed me as Senior Proctor next year, although they are not very sure what I will be doing.

The Junior Proctor has noted that this year has been unusually 'eventful', and has shown how fantastically diverse and sometimes complex this university is. The University has experienced two occupations of University

buildings, an OUSU referendum that went askew, and the search for a successor for the Vice-Chancellor. Despite the Jackson 5's claims, 123 turned out not to be *as easy as ABC or Do-Re-Mi*. There were concerns about free speech and counter-terrorism, but in the end the debate in Congregation passed off peacefully.

The Proctorial year has been equally eventful. The Proctors oversee the conduct of University examinations. By tradition, the Junior Proctor takes responsibility for taught undergraduates and postgraduates, and the Senior Proctor for research students. We are admitted just in time for the Junior Proctor to deal with the undergraduates' Preliminary and Final examinations in Trinity. Although the rest of the University knows the terms as Trinity, Michaelmas and Hilary, the Proctors and Assessor know our terms as Finals, Freshers and Fleeing, aka Exhaustion, Exasperation and Exiting. We were impressed by the ability of Student Administration and Services staff not only to manage 50,000 exam sittings in Examination Schools, and over 1,000 in colleges, but also to keep calm and carry on in the face of students suffering from minor bicycle accidents or the effects of dodgy prawn curries, as well as a complete loss of power during a very busy examination sitting.

Examinations inevitably lead to marking. As well as approving over 800 forms for the nomination of chairs, examiners and assessors, we faced the threat of a marking and assessment boycott from the UCU in each of our three terms. This boycott, despite being in place for just two weeks, demonstrated how reliant the University's exam system is on academics acting as chairs, examiners and assessors. The increased number of cases where complex medical information needed to be taken into account is making the chair of examiner's role much more challenging. Plagiarism also continues to be a problem, especially with international taught postgraduates in non-residential programmes, but we have made progress this year on new policies.

Overall, ours was a year of embedding changes to examination procedures set in train in the previous year. Douglas Thornton, the new Clerk to the Proctors, has strengthened our back-office processes, both within the Proctors' Office and in the links with the other areas of the University with whom we work most closely. Some tasks traditionally carried out by our office are now delegated to staff based at the Examinations Schools, working in close collaboration with the Proctors, with the result that those examination-related tasks are now carried out closer to where exams are sat, increasing the timeliness and robustness of, for example, alternative arrangements for students sitting exams.

As part of the reorganisation of the Proctors' office last year, the Assessor dealt with factors affecting performance in Trinity, and throughout the year with deadline extensions. This required the Assessor to read 'hundreds and hundreds' of medical certificates. He notes that a substantial number of our students are affected by mental health problems, the effects of sexual violence and indeed violence, and welfare issues, which calls for keeping our modes of summative assessment under constant review.

Trashing after examination exits has been a perennial concern of the Proctors, but the new arrangement between the University Security Services and the Proctors' Officers has resulted in noticeably fewer complaints about litter and mess this year and no fines to students. Thanks are also owed to Oxford City Council for closing Merton Street when needed and for its very efficient street-cleaning crew. Sadly, the octopus and baked beans failed to put in their customary appearance this year.

The Senior Proctor traditionally takes a special interest in research degree students, and this year has seen new policies developed for electronic copies of theses, late submissions and alternative arrangements for examinations. Although fewer than 0.5% of research degree students file complaints or

academic appeals, these are often complex and time-consuming, and I have written over 150,000 words in determinations. I plan to submit these for a DLitt shortly.

The Proctors and Assessor also accompany the Vice-Chancellor to University ceremonies and events. We have attended University sermons, the Encaenia, the Vice-Chancellor's Oration, the Ceremony of the Glove, the Chancellor's Court of Benefactors, the Vice-Chancellor's Circle, various lectures, and many other events including awards ceremonies for students, teaching, and civic engagement. With our Pro-Proctors – John Eidinow, Pegram Harrison, Simon Bailey and Alison Reid – we attended 33 degree ceremonies here in the Sheldonian Theatre. These were mostly uneventful, but the Vice-Chancellor nearly had to intervene with one graduand who insisted on taking selfies.

Special ceremonies and events this year included the installation of the new Dean of Christ Church, the re-naming of the Business School's West Wing, the commemoration of the 350th anniversary of John Radcliffe's death, and the 'soft opening' of the Weston Library. It was truly moving to be present at the Remembrance Day observance marking the 100th anniversary of the start of the Great War. Other special events included exhibitions at the Bodleian on the Great War, the Ashmolean on William Blake (and Tutankhamen), and the Museum of the History of Science and the Botanic Garden on crystals. We have also benefited from many kind invitations from colleges, including Encaenia lunch at All Souls, a generous number of college feasts, and May morning with Magdalen's tower *swinging beneath us to the swinging of the bells* (all three of us having heeded Professor Mapstone's warning not to wear high heels).

The Bedels and Verger, the Proctors' Officers and the Vice-Chancellor's Office have guided us through this bewildering but enjoyable year of University ceremonies and events. This academic year sees the retirement of two longstanding Bedels, Mrs Valerie Boasten and Mr Kenneth Howson, who will be known to every member of the University by face if not by name. They will be much missed.

According to Edward Schein's model of organisational culture, these 'rites and rituals' reflect the University's deep underlying beliefs and values which are otherwise unobservable. We have concluded from our experiences that the value of the Proctors lies in dressing up and adding gravitas as the VC's 'groupies'. Casual spectators were mystified in April by the appearance of a peculiarly-dressed trio on the top deck of the No 2 bus from Summertown – no, not Batman, Robin and Catwoman but the Proctors and the Assessor. Seeing us in our caps and gowns at the Queen's Garden

Party at Buckingham Palace, several guests congratulated us on having just graduated! Mature students outwardly, if not inwardly. White tie, bands, gown and hood impressed far fewer in Oxford, where at one University event we found ourselves unceremoniously ejected between the drinks and the dinner as being unlikely to make a substantial donation!

We have also made efforts to better understand parts of the University with which we were less familiar, including visits to Wytham Wood, the Bodleian's Packaging Facility, the Swindon Book Depository, the University Security Services' headquarters, Tubney House, the Pitt Rivers Museum after-hours and the Old Road Campus, places where we would not have had access in our normal academic lives. These perustrations not only provided us with a better understanding of the diversity and complexity so characteristic of this University but also with a better basis for playing an active role in committees such as BESC, PRAC and Council. We also enjoyed away days to the Cambridge Proctors, where we climbed to the top of King's Chapel and played bowls with somewhat idiosyncratic local rules; to the Boat Race; and to the Varsity Match at Twickenham.

The second function of the Senior Proctor's Oration is to report on matters that we wish to bring to Congregation's attention. The first of these is governance, which inevitably involves committees, including Council (and its subcommittees), divisional boards, Conference of Colleges, the Oxford University Press, and the libraries, museums and University collections. Between us we have chaired or attended nearly 100 committees *ex officio* and another 70 as observers, and received the papers of 40 more. By my calculations, we each averaged 30 hours in meetings per week during term time, and collectively read 300,000 pages of committee papers. I have taken over 1,100 pages of notes; the Assessor has produced a similar volume of doodles. We have surely consumed more than our bodyweight in biscuits by now. Fortunately, things were not quite as bad as in this description of an Oxford committee:

Dr X provided a draft paper to the committee, but as this was not received as he hoped, he withdrew the draft, never attended another meeting, and died soon after. Dr Y provided the next draft to the Chair of the committee. That was his only copy, and he never saw it again. When it was published, Dr Y found that many things had been added that were not in his draft, and many things that had been in his draft taken out. When the Chair then asked Dr Y to write the Introduction to the published report, he was too indignant at this treatment to do so, until promises of promotion were held out to him.

Archbishop Laud's reform of the statutes was more successful than this committee! But let us return to the script.

Even these calculations present a somewhat inadequate description of how large governance looms in the Proctors' and Assessor's year. We have attended standing meetings, working parties, working groups, task forces and nominating committees, and have contributed to Policies and Procedures on Harassment and Bullying, Sexual Violence, Free Speech, Gender Segregation at Events, Plagiarism, Disability, and Complaints and Academic Appeals. We have met with student members, JCR/MCR Presidents, OUSU, and college deans in various contexts.

As well as our contribution to the work of individual bodies, the Proctors and Assessor bridge 'organisational silos', areas of the collegiate University that normally do not come into contact or even communicate with each other. We have come away knowing much more about how the University works, although this is essentially unknowable – perhaps a task for the Big Data Institute.

Wellington Square is often used pejoratively, but this is unfair. We have seen that the University works well at a local level, with conscientious and hard-working committee members and secretariat. We do have some remarks about governance, particularly its relationship with Oxford's structure and strategy.

The University has spent considerable time and energy developing its five-year strategic plan, which describes where the University intends to be in 2018, and how it intends to get there. Whilst few would disagree with the vision that the strategic plan sets out to accomplish – *to lead the world in research and education* – keeping the University aligned with this vision seems increasingly difficult. First, the University is subjected to external shocks including policy changes by government, capital markets, international competitors and technological change. The General Election in May, the Comprehensive Spending Review, and the imposition of the 5% EBITDA by HEFCE are likely to propagate even bigger shocks in the near future.

Internal shocks include the discussion in Congregation in Michaelmas on Statute XII, and the debate and postal vote this term about Castle Mill. Changes in USS pension arrangements, the Employer-Justified Retirement Age (EJRA), and variation of duties will no doubt be equally contentious. The University's assets and capital consist of its people and their capabilities, so attracting and recruiting the best academics and other staff, despite the country's least-affordable housing prices, traffic congestion and scarce childcare,

will undoubtedly be top of our agenda for the near future.

Alan D Meyer described such internal and external shocks as *environmental jolts*, or more poetically as *seismic tremors* that reveal aspects of the organisation that are normally hidden. I argue that these shocks are illuminating Oxford's decision-making structure in new ways. Strategic plans are disseminated top-down, but strategy is implemented day-to-day and bottom-up by committees. If committee decisions lose alignment with strategy, there is a real danger of 'strategic drift', losing sight of where we plan to go and ending up somewhere completely different. The new Capital Master Plan, for example, is already under strain from unforeseen major research initiatives (RPIFs) with very short turnarounds and substantial capital requirements.

Bouncing back from shocks requires being able to anticipate, adjust and reinvent the organisation repeatedly and at short notice. Such agility is not necessarily compatible with Oxford's complex and somewhat rigid organisational structure. Wellington Square, colleges, divisions and departments/faculties each have their own parallel committees and processes, and grind exceedingly slowly. Oxford's complex committee structure is designed around thorough consultation and consensus, not the speed and responsiveness demanded in a rapidly changing environment. We also have similar concerns about OUSU's structures; for example, whether they are allowing student representatives to work to their full potential.

So what can the University do about this? The answer to problems cannot always be more committees. The North Report called for the University to conduct a sweeping review of committees and decide which ones were no longer needed and whether their remits are right, and it is time for another such review. It is perhaps past time to conduct a review of divisionalisation called for in the North Report, with a particular focus on the balance between centralisation and decentralisation. Like the Queen Mary, the University can take time to change its course, but our system of governance has been able to evolve over the past 800 years through even more turbulent times than this.

Finally, whilst we have observed that Oxford's senior academics and staff work diligently and conscientiously, decision-making processes are not always transparent. It can only be a positive development that better communication is being taken very seriously at the University's highest levels.

This has been a year of both change and continuity for the Proctors' Office, after nearly two decades with one Clerk. We were welcomed after our election by Dr Brian Gasser,

the then Clerk; greeted after admission by Mr James Bufford, interim Clerk; and guided and supported for the rest of the year by Mr Douglas Thornton, the new permanent Clerk. Ms Esther Villiers and Dr Katy Fifield, the Deputy Clerks and caseworkers, have provided superhuman support for investigations of discipline, complaints, and academic appeals, often knowing what we should think before we even knew we thought it! Caroline Barnes keeps all the plates spinning, whilst Clare Brennan juggles the clubs. Over the course of the year, a changing cast of characters in the Proctors' Office examinations team has dealt efficiently with the floods of extensions and medical excuses.

Deputy Marshal Tim Pearson and the Proctors' Officers, Pip and Paul, have also played a vital role in keeping the Proctor's Office functioning. We welcome the permanent appointment of Mr Paul Sullivan as University Marshal in addition to Head of Security Services. We have worked closely with many other parts of the University and we would particularly like to thank Student Administration and Services, Student Welfare and Support Services, graduate studies directors and officers, divisional and departmental staff, Senior Tutors, Deans, the Council Secretariat and all those others with whom we have worked, whether every single day or just once during the year.

Many in the audience will no doubt be aware that last year the Proctors' Office underwent radical change. To put it mildly, the Proctors have not always embraced change gladly. In 1996, the demitting Senior Proctor noted that 'Both Proctors now have basic computing facilities at their desks, and can be reached by email.' I am happy to confirm that this is still true: we have been dragged, kicking and screaming, into the late 20th century. Snapchat and Reddit are beyond us, however, and I fear that student complaints over social media will continue to outpace our technical capabilities, although the Assessor can 'Facebook' expertly.

Despite this inherent conservatism, many of the changes set in motion last year have succeeded or are progressing well, and the Proctors' Office has continued to function much as normal. However, there are still many areas in which the Proctors' Office can still improve. When the Proctors' Office was tidied up last year, we found many quaint but obsolete objects, such as the green headlamps that undergraduates had to affix to their motorcars and the mourning bands and bells used to announce the death of a monarch. As with any 800-year-old institution, the Proctors' Office must be refreshed and re-evaluated periodically, and what is obsolete discarded but what is valuable retained and nourished.

Changes to the Proctors' Office were intended to provide better support for our role in University governance. There has been little time and insufficient resources to take this aspect forward, but it should not be lost sight of. Fears that the Proctors would significantly lose their independence were perhaps overblown, but pressures to engulf the Proctors' Office in the rest of Wellington Square must be resisted. Generations of Proctors have noted our value as independent *ombudsmen* within the University, and this role in particular makes us special. We are ordinary academics when elected, and return to being ordinary academics when we demit, and so are closer to students and examiners.

The Hart Committee's report in 1969 recommended that the Proctors-elect take a more active part during the year before they are admitted, which led to moving of the Proctor's elections from one term ahead to a full year ahead. Incoming Proctors are presented with nearly 40 briefings whilst being expected to get on with examinations, casework and committee meetings. Whilst we would not go so far as to make incoming Proctors and Assessors Pro-Proctors for a year, as in Cambridge, we do think that they would benefit from more involvement early on, including earlier briefings where possible, more shadowing, and a longer handover of casework and other duties.

We also think the role of the Assessor should be strengthened. The exact role of the Assessor is infamously less clear than that of the Proctors, particularly to incumbents. The Proctors' and Assessor's Memorandum says simply that the Assessor has 'especial' – not merely special, but especial – 'concern for policies on student health, welfare and financial issues'. But those policy areas are nowadays as thoroughly and professionally staffed, and as rationally managed, as any other area of the University. The room for substantive input from a one-year amateur is, quite sensibly, somewhat limited.

The Assessor has therefore taken on responsibilities that were once reserved for the Proctors. The Assessor chairs a range of committees, and the current Assessor would particularly like to thank the people who have provided administrative support to committees he has chaired. Past Assessors quake at the mention of the Car Park Working Group, but this year its meetings and activities have been largely peaceable and straightforward. The Clubs Committee has pursued the intractable task of enforcing a uniform clubs constitution, as instructed by Rules Committee in previous years. A review of clubs governance is likely to enable closer working with OUSU as well as simpler procedures for University Clubs. Work on fees and hardship through their respective committees has confirmed the

crucial importance of clear, fair and consistent communication with applicants and students about fees and costs. Students who arrive with not quite enough funding to see out their whole course – three years for a three-and-a-half-year doctorate, say – pose a problem to which we do not currently have a solution, but which clearly causes significant worry and hardship for many students.

The very long-running working group on provision for disabled students, chaired by many successive Assessors, this year obtained both college and University approval for a common framework statement. Building on the result of hard work mainly by the 2013–14 Assessor, the working group is now producing an online handbook to put these principles into practice, and we hope that its initial elements will be online by the end of the academic year. Approving this sort of policy can seem endlessly Byzantine, but it promises much improved arrangements for students.

We urge the forthcoming review of the Assessor's office to be open to all possibilities, including making the Assessor equal to the Proctors. The division between Assessorial and Proctorial responsibilities – as we have seen – is open to change. The Junior Proctor is hugely overloaded due to the increase in taught postgraduates, especially non-traditional students, the Senior Proctor has a full load with research students, and a third Proctor would help relieve this burden.

The Assessorship began in 1960, making the office of the Assessor barely five years older than the demitting Assessor himself. A report from 1967–8 concluded, rather unenthusiastically, that 'the possibility of the eventual emergence of a need for an officer such as the Assessor... should not be lost sight of.' A 1976 report considered abolishing the role but instead women's and graduate colleges were allowed to elect Proctors and Assessors along with the men's colleges. In 1985, elevating the Assessorship to a third Proctorship was considered but strongly opposed by the Proctoriate. Their objections strongly reflect the original creation of the Assessorship to prevent the women's colleges from electing a Proctor. We believe that the arguments against a third Proctor are now irrelevant, not least because the Assessor's role has evolved into one much more similar to the two Proctors.

Indeed, as the Proctors noted in 1968:

The Proctorial office has adapted itself through the centuries to changes of university administration, of law, of custom and convention, of public taste and morality. There is no reason to suppose that it will prove unable to do this in the future, and that this may not someday require the re-allocation of duties and even, perhaps, the

creation of a third Proctor. [...] We are aware of these possibilities and we cannot believe that our successors will not also be aware of them and ready to envisage adaptation of the office and its duties to deal with them.

Although a third Proctor **would** break with a tradition that dates back to the University of Paris, we note that the Proctorship has survived major changes such as the switch to election by colleges, the advent of women Proctors and – even – American and German Proctors in the same year.

On a final note, I have appreciated my Proctorship falling during Merton's celebration of its 750th anniversary – after all, the Proctorial Cycle *was* invented by a Mertonian in 1628 to facilitate just this. The histories of the Proctors and Merton have long been intertwined. I have not been able to top the Proctorial achievements of Robert de Brydlington, Merton Proctor in 1311, who climbed up an Oxford tower to quell a riot between the northern and southern students by shooting them with his bow and arrows. I hope, however, to outperform one Christopher Dale, Merton's Proctor in 1603, who was jeered all the way back to Merton by the undergraduates after his demitting speech.

Having reviewed our year and made some comments as to governance and the Proctors' Office, it is now time to hand over our insignia and welcome the new Proctors and Assessor. We hope that your year is as rewarding as ours has been. Our year was terrifying but also terrific. The Junior Proctor found the key to the safe in the Proctors' Office only last week before we demitted, but when we opened it, it didn't contain a magic guidebook about how to be a Proctor or Assessor. There are no magic bullets. I leave you instead with these words from Karl Weick, who said: 'When all else fails, drop your tools and run.'

Proctorial Year 2014–15

Summary of Complaints Cases

During 2014–15, the Proctors received 160 complaints/appeals, of which 17.5% were upheld in whole or in part. In addition, they completed some cases carried over from previous proctorial years. The great majority (79%) of these complaints related to examinations and research student candidatures. (Totals for previous year are given in brackets.)

Taught-course examinations (undergraduate and postgraduate): 127 (190)

66 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 23 complaints relating to new cases. Some complaints remain under consideration.

Research student matters: 20 (12)

The Proctors upheld 6 cases (in whole or in part). 7 are in progress.

Harassment: 1 (3)

Maladministration: 7 (13)

Quality of/access to teaching, learning, support facilities: 3 (6)

Other matters: Student societies: 2 (3)

Summary of Disciplinary Cases

BREACH OF STATUTE XI CODE OF DISCIPLINE

Forgery/falsification of University document and/or other dishonest behaviour: 6 (4)

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

Engaging in offensive behaviour or language: 3 (6)

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

BREACH OF RULES COMMITTEE REGULATIONS

Disorderly behaviour after examinations: 0 (10)

BREACH OF THE PROCTORS' DISCIPLINARY REGULATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY EXAMINATIONS

Academic misconduct (plagiarism): 41 (33)

Plagiarism was the most time-consuming disciplinary issue dealt with by the Proctors' Office. There were 41 new cases of alleged plagiarism during this year. Of these, 7 were taken to the Student Disciplinary Panel; and 28 were referred back to the examiners.

Academic misconduct (other than plagiarism): 4 (14)

OTHER

Criminal convictions: 1 (1)

Some disciplinary cases remain in progress at the year end.