

Gazette Supplement



Oration by the demitting Proctors and Assessor

The following Oration was delivered in Congregation on 16 March by G Garnett, MA PhD Camb, MA Oxf, Fellow of St Hugh's, on demitting office as Senior Proctor.

At homo historicus quia sum, facere non possum quin memorem Procuratorem Seniore[m] illustrissimae universitatis nostrae Oxoniensis orationem suam latine pronuntiare antea consuevisse. Sed hoc saeculo post Christum natum vigesimo primo, ubi sunt qui veteris illam consuetudinem memoria retineant? Multa afferre possum argumenta cur hanc orationem meam tanti momenti et de rebus difficilioribus tractantem, Cimberia caligine - id est, accurata necnon decenti linguae eruditae obscuritate - prudenter involvam. Atqui, ut iam dudum dixit poeta graecus ille Constantinus Cavafius: εἶναι οἱ βάρβαροι να φθᾶσσουν σήμερα, hoc est latine, 'aderunt barbari hodie'; et, proh dolor, iam intra muros resident. Attamen nos, huius anni Procuratores et collega nostra quae Assessoris officium implet, tempora mutari, tam in hac optima litterarum republica quam toto orbe terrarum, satis intelligimus. Agnoscimus quanti nostra interest, nos quae de anno praeterito cogitaverimus quam plurimis auditoribus impertire: annus procuratorius enim fuit vere insolitus et varius et vicissitudinum plenus. Quapropter ego, aliquantulo licet gravatus et tempus actum adhuc desiderans, bona cum venia tua, Domina, allocutionem meam vulgari lingua prosequare.

[As an historian, I feel obliged to point out that the Senior Proctor's Oration was until quite recently - within living memory, just - by custom delivered in Latin. There are strong arguments for dressing up a speech of this sensitivity and moment in the precise and decent obscurity of a learned language. But nowadays, as the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy has so

memorably observed, the barbarians are coming, indeed, sad to relate, some of them are already within the gates. Let it not be said that this year's Proctors and Assessor are not alive to changing mores, within the University and the world at large. We recognise the importance of communicating our reflections on an unusually eventful proctorial year to the widest possible audience. For this reason, with a touch of nostalgic regret, I avail myself of your kind permission to continue this speech in the vernacular.]

Senior Proctor: *Insignissima Vice-Cancellaria, licetne anglice loqui?*

Vice-Chancellor: *Licet.*

I repeat, in case any of my remarks have proved obscure to some, it is unfortunately no longer possible to deliver the Proctors' demitting oration in the decent obscurity of a learned language, although this was a requirement until quite recently.

It has been a peculiarly eventful proctorial year. Its start was not auspicious. At this very ceremony 12 months ago the Bedels leaned their staves up against a barrier at the front of the seating. Just as the admission of the Senior Proctor began, the staff at one end slipped, and the whole lot proceeded to fall, one by one, like dominoes, sedately and noisily. If this incident had been recorded by an ancient historian, it would have been interpreted as an omen. And that is exactly what it was. Within an hour the then Vice-Chancellor had fled from the celebratory lunch at my college, having consumed only a few spoonfuls of soup. As he rushed away he was speaking with a preoccupied urgency into his mobile phone. While we, the newly admitted Proctors and Assessor, were still eating our respective puddings in our respective colleges, we were summoned to an extraordinary meeting of Council. There

it was revealed that the Vice-Chancellor had just tendered his resignation. He had understood what the omen portended, and had acted decisively. It was briefly rumoured that if there were to be an interregnum between his premature departure and the election of a successor then the Vice-Chancellor's role would in the interim be exercised by the Senior Proctor. The statutes were hastily and anxiously consulted, and the rumour proved to be unfounded. I shall have to await another occasion for greatness to be thrust upon me.

The falling staves at the admission ceremony might be seen as portentous in another sense too. This may well be the only year in the history of the Proctors' Office - we know that there have been Proctors since before 1209 - that the Office has had to be fumigated, and not once, but three times. The reason was that it became infested with small irritating creatures which bit the larger inhabitants. Now some of you may feel that the Proctors' Office is always populated by diminutive nuisances which bite the bigger beasts around them, so I hasten to add that I refer to cat fleas, not to the Proctors and Assessor. But it is nevertheless true that the Proctors and Assessor are bound by the oaths which our successors will soon take to ensure compliance with the statutes and to scrutinise decision-making without fear or favour. They are obliged to be independent, in the sense of being neither compliant nor deferential. They represent Congregation, the regent doctors and masters - with the accent on regent - in all the central counsels of the University. And because of this substantial foundation for their independence they can and do stand up very effectively for students who, in their view, are being treated unfairly - most recently, yesterday. We have done so on several occasions this

year, on examination and other matters. These proctorial characteristics don't always make the Proctors and Assessor popular in all quarters, but if they don't, perhaps especially when they don't, this shows that they are trying to do what they have pledged their faith to do. During the last three months very senior officers of the University have alleged in public both that I am deficient in niceness and that my birth was illegitimate. The former, at least, is sometimes required of a Proctor. The excellent Clerk to the Proctors has pointed to me that in French the word for flea, *puce*, is a term of endearment. Proctorially bitten colleagues must learn to channel their inner Frenchness.

The new, ingénue Proctors and Assessor are treated to a whistle stop introduction to the University's *arcana imperii*, to borrow a pertinent phrase from one ancient historian – Tacitus – whose works would be a very useful *vade mecum* for any incoming team. In most meetings unexplained acronyms are bandied about. Everyone else in the room appears to know what EBITDA means. The new Tribunes of the Plebs have no clue. Almost as obscure as the acronyms is the peculiar jargon of mangled mixed metaphor in which everyone else, with a puzzling absence of self-consciousness, speaks. 'Iterations' are said to happen, 'feedback', whether 'formative' or 'summative', to be given, by 'whole cohorts' of 'stakeholders', 'across the piste'. There is much 'kicking of the tyres'; 'dashboards' are 'rolled out'. The jargon changes quite rapidly. Over the past year 'iterations' have been in steep decline, 'feedback' and 'granularity' in the ascendant, the latter a consequence of 'drilling down', perhaps after 'doing the heavy lifting' and agreement to 'take it off line'. Two weeks ago we were informed, bafflingly, that 'several new catapults are in the pipeline'. This private, exclusive language is used in meetings which, almost without exception, happen in rooms without windows in that unprepossessing pile in Wellington Square. Sometimes during meetings the lights go out, because the lights are operated by motion sensors, and no motion has been detectable for quite a long time. The private language is as hermetic as the windowless and occasionally pitch-black rooms, which in themselves might be deemed an unfortunate metaphor – one which Tacitus, that incomparable analyst of the ironies of palace politics, would have relished.

The inmates of the building regard what they term 'the collegiate University' with some suspicion, a suspicion which is amply reciprocated, and which it is the

Proctors' and Assessor's job to ameliorate if not entirely to defuse. Each group refers to the other in the third person plural. Too many of the committees and still more of the working parties on which we have sat include too few representatives of those on whom their game-changing decisions will be imposed. Everyone is, however, twitchily aware of the dangers of waking that generally somnolent but potentially irritable beast, Congregation. This keeps everyone on their toes. One of the most memorable comments I have heard this year was made during our first fortnight by a very senior officer in a committee meeting, where it provoked no dissent: 'A system of democratic accountability might have been all very well in the middle ages, when this university was set up,' he said, 'but it is quite unsuited to the running of a modern university.' It was difficult to know where to start dismantling this observation, either with the historical misapprehension implicit in its first half, or with the sentiment expressed in its second. Suffice to say that in the view of the Proctors and Assessor it could not be more wrong.

Congregation stirs itself but rarely, and only under extreme provocation. But the fissure between Wellington Square and the rest of the University is primarily the fault of the latter. The representative mechanisms are there, but candidates need to stand for election and members need to vote. It is far too often the case that elections are uncontested, and that the name of a candidate for a vacancy is simply suggested from above. When there is a contested election, the turnout is often poor. Most members of the collegiate University just want to get on with their teaching and research, and in any case don't feel that they are grand enough for this sort of thing. In the latter respect they are wrong: every member of Congregation is eligible to stand, and it is not that difficult to get elected. The initiatives on communication from the centre manifest in the Vice-Chancellor's Question Time and Open Office sessions need to be reciprocated by a greater readiness on the peripheries to get involved. This can only be beneficial in terms of helping to defuse to some degree the tensions between periphery and centre.

In any case my straightforward, bipartite division between centre and periphery is misleading. Wellington Square is not a coherent bloc. It embodies all sorts of tensions and conflicts; rumour and *sotto voce* confidences are rife, they are often the most reliable source for what is really going on. Tacitus would have found this peculiarly familiar: the moveable walls have ears. We

know this to be the case because there have been complaints from neighbouring offices about the amount of laughter emanating from the room in which the proctorial team holds its weekly meeting. And the complexities of the different *loci* of power in the wider University, including the colleges, mean that it is also riven with conflicts and tensions. In the course of this year I have listened to repeated handwringing about this fundamental truth. Influential voices lament that Oxford cannot be line-managed, as most other universities and all businesses are. It is sometimes asserted that the University of Oxford is not greater, but less, than the sum of its parts. The implication is that it could only become greater if it were transformed from a republic into a monarchy, ruled from the top. In my view this fails to acknowledge that on almost any measure – or, in the jargon, 'metric' – this is the most successful university in Britain, and one of the best in the world, despite drawing on resources which amount to a small fraction of those of its main global competitors. In that sense, we are knocking our rivals into cocked hats. Why is this the case? Might it have something to do with the fact that, despite the efforts and aspirations of some, the University remains decentralised, and that within this decentralised structure many intersecting interest groups pursue their individual objectives? This allows for, indeed facilitates, innovation and initiative.

I have throughout this oration used the language of and drawn on examples from ancient Rome. The Roman historian who seems to me to have most to teach us is not in the end Tacitus, but his forebear Polybius. It was Polybius who explained the unique success of the Roman Republic in terms of the way in which its institutions channelled internal tension and conflict through its constitutional structure – a mixed constitution. The whole was greater than the sum of the parts because of the way in which the rivalries and conflicts between the parts were balanced through that structure, and thereby directed towards common objectives. It was this characteristic which made the Republic so adept at responding in flexible and advantageous ways to new and unexpected challenges. Now of course long after Polybius wrote it all ended in tears, and ultimately in monarchy. But that was because one of the parts was allowed to become too overbearing, and destabilised the whole structure. This was the lesson that Machiavelli, a revered theorist of republicanism, drew as he developed Polybius' analysis. The lesson would appear to be that provided we do not

allow this to happen, provided balancing internal tensions are preserved within a mixed constitution, the University will keep what I have argued is the characteristic which renders it so successful. That is the main conclusion we have drawn from our proctorial year.

Machiavelli is notorious for qualities other than his republicanism, but his exploitation of Polybius would nowadays be notorious for a reason which would never have occurred to a 16th-century humanist. Machiavelli never once acknowledges Polybius, though his whole analysis is lifted from Polybius. In other words, in modern terms he plagiarises Polybius. This prompts me to descend from our overall reflections on University government to a few particular problems which have occupied a great deal of our time. Most of the disciplinary cases which we have investigated have concerned plagiarism in examined work, and the vast majority of those have involved postgraduate students on taught Masters' courses in a small number of departments. The total number of such cases this year has been 30, so it might be inferred that this is a minimal problem which does not merit treatment in a demitting oration. These, you might think, represent a short tail of less able students. The problem with that further inference is that the other submitted work by these same candidates often turns out to have secured respectable and even high marks. Why the discrepancy? Well, on investigation it transpires that the writing of examined essays in these particular programmes sometimes consists of cutting and pasting material from the internet, and then paraphrasing the cut-and-pasted text, and smoothing out the joins. That is what can pass for essay writing. When for some reason that final stage of adjustment and blending has not taken place, the derivative, or in Oxford terms plagiarised, nature of the work is easily detectable to Turnitin software. On many occasions this turns out not to be a conscious attempt at deception, but a reflection of the prior absence of the right sort of critical appraisal of unexamined essays – or, in the jargon, 'formative assessment'. Such critical comment is a matter of routine in most of the University; indeed, many of us think it is a key aspect of tutorials, and therefore of an Oxford education. But we now realise that there are a few pockets of the University where it does not happen. We have three suggestions. Unexamined pieces of work should always be dissected closely by tutors, because that is a central aspect of Oxford teaching. One benefit will be that taught Masters' students

will learn what is not acceptable. Second, all essays and dissertations submitted for examination should as a matter of course be subject to Turnitin testing, as happens in most other universities. Third, the assessment system for taught Masters' should always include some element of unseen written examination.

In addition to cases of plagiarism brought to our attention by the examiners, we were disconcerted – it is the natural condition of a Proctor to be disconcerted – to have an examiner shopped to us for plagiarism by a candidate. The candidate had spotted that the examiner had simplified his task by lifting a number of well-crafted questions from a textbook. This was one of those unexpected incidents when the independence of the Proctors enabled them to intervene and correct a wrong in a way which is unlikely to happen in most other universities. We also had the power to order an entire resit of an examination paper which had been so bungled by the examiners as to render the results unreliable. Our powers of intervention are not limited to examination matters. Not only, therefore, are the Proctors and Assessor Tribunes of the Plebs as far as Congregation is concerned, we can also act as *dei ex machina* for students. The variety and complexity of cases means that we rely on the wise counsel, investigatory ingenuity and legal acumen of a select team of Clerks to the Proctors. Their Stakhanovite work ethic has enabled us to clear a backlog of peculiarly intractable cases, a few of which dated back several years. Of course it is not possible to leave an entirely empty casebook for our successors, because new cases come in most days. But we have left the shortest list of unsettled cases which anyone can remember. And so far as we know, there has been no appeal against any of our determinations to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

The Assessor is uniquely concerned with student welfare. In addition to the normal Assessorial duties with respect to hardship, clubs and car parking – the last of these inspiring the only recent known instance of a death threat to the chair of a University committee – she chose to focus on the promotion of race equality. She was instrumental in establishing the new race and curriculum lecture series, and prevailed on Sir Hilary Beckles, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, to deliver the inaugural lecture. In addition, she conducted a special investigation into race equality in Oxford. A report summarising her findings will be available on the Proctors' Office website. She wants me to express on

her behalf her gratitude to those officers whose calmness, thoroughness and patience have enabled her to deal with the myriad matters which are her peculiar remit.

I want to close with a mention of two other aspects of the job which have greatly impressed us. The first is the University Press. The Delegates meetings have been a fortnightly haven of civilised, intellectual good sense and humour, away from the tempests of other committees. The Press's success in communicating Oxford's values to the whole world, and earning substantial sums to support the University in the process, is not sufficiently bruited. No other so-called global university is global in this sense, on this scale. The second is the importance and the splendour of our degree ceremonies, the public face of the University at its best. These are a success because of the extraordinary dedication of the Bedels and other support staff, one of whom, you may be startled to learn, commutes from north of Morpeth in order to play his part. But please may we again employ an organist, so that we can avoid the current piped music? Last week we had to process out to the *Ride of the Valkyries*. A Degree Day at Oxford should not be compared, even implicitly, to *Apocalypse Now*.

I have drawn extensively on ancient Rome in this oration. But the University is of course a medieval institution. If one sets aside a very few states and churches, it might plausibly be argued that this University has played a more inspiring and enduring role in the post-classical development of western civilisation than any other single institution. The Proctors have from the beginning had a modest but key part in that story, and have done so since the very beginning. Afforded by the Assessor in recent times, each team does its bit only for one year. In that respect they resemble not only the Tribunes of the Plebs, but also the Consuls, of whom there were also two. After their transitory elevation, the office-holders revert to their former humdrum status, but their offices continue, as they have, to repeat, since before 1209.

In the dog Latin of a late medieval Proctor's book is written: '*procurator laetus intrat, sed iucundior extrat*'. The Latin is so horrible that I shall paraphrase: 'A Proctor enters happily, but it is sweeter to demit.'

Proctorial Year 2015–16

Summary of Complaints Cases

During 2015–16 the Proctors received 219 complaints/appeals, of which 23 (11.05%) were upheld. In addition, they completed a number of cases carried over from previous proctorial years. The great majority (197: 94.7%) of these complaints/appeals related to examinations and research student candidatures. (Totals for previous years are given in brackets.)

Taught-course examinations (undergraduate and postgraduate): 219 (127)

110 of these cases involved a straightforward marks check, of which 5 resulted in changes to marks. The Proctors upheld a total of 23 complaints relating to new cases. Some complaints remain under consideration.

Research student matters: 10 (20)

The Proctors upheld 2 cases (in whole or in part), with a further 4 still in progress.

Inadequate assessment at viva: 2 (0)

Maladministration: 1 (7)

Continuation of studies: 3 (0)

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

Other matters: 1 (1)

Summary of Disciplinary Cases**BREACH OF STATUTE XI CODE OF DISCIPLINE**

Forgery/falsification of University document and/or other dishonest behaviour: 3 (6)

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

Engaging in offensive behaviour or language: 2 (3)

Engaging in activities likely to cause injury or impair safety and/or disorderly behaviour: 0 (1)

Other: 2 (2)

BREACHES OF RULES COMMITTEE REGULATIONS

Disorderly behaviour after examinations: 0 (0)

BREACHES OF THE PROCTORS' DISCIPLINARY REGULATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY EXAMINATIONS

Academic misconduct (plagiarism): 30 (41)

Plagiarism was the most time-consuming disciplinary issue dealt with by the Proctors' Office. There were 30 new cases of alleged plagiarism during this year. Of these, 15 were taken to the Student Disciplinary Panel; and 15 were referred back to the examiners.

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

Some disciplinary cases remain in progress at the year end.