

Gazette Supplement



Oration by the demitting Proctors and Assessor

The following Oration was delivered in Congregation on 15 March by the following on demitting office: M Whittow, MA DPhil Oxf, Fellow of Corpus Christi, Senior Proctor; Elizabeth Gemmill, BA PhD Manc, Fellow of Kellogg, Junior Proctor; and Luke Pitcher, MA Oxf, PG Cert Durh, Fellow of Somerville, Assessor.

Senior Proctor: *Insignissima Vice-Cancellaria, haec oratio ita divisa est ut primum dicat Assessor.*

Assessor:

*Annus habet finem; crescit tamen inde
camena.
sic canat ut docili mollis amica Numae.
pauca quidem loquimur; micat et scintilla
favillis
impositis, si vult mittere flabra Pater.
da, Domine, indoctis lumen, precor, atque
peritis;
tam novus est nemo qui sciat omne puer.*

[The year has its end, but a Muse rises from it. May she sing as his sweet friend sang to studious Numa. We are saying few words, it is true, but even a spark swamped by ashes shines, if the Father is willing to blow the coals. Grant light, Lord, to those who know and those who don't; we are none of us infallible, not even the youngest among us.]

Senior Proctor: *Insignissima Vice-Cancellaria, reliqua oratio ita divisa est ut Procurator uterque vicissim loquatur.*

Insignissima Vice-Cancellaria, licetne anglice loqui?

Vice-Chancellor: *Licet.*

Senior Proctor: You will have realised already that this year we have broken with tradition. Rather than the Senior Proctor speaking for all, we have decided to share the oration - to do anything else would not be an accurate representation of a year in

which Assessor, Junior Proctor and Senior Proctor have acted as a close team.

We have also tried to reflect the experience of the year by structuring what we have to say round a series of FAQs. Not just because this has been a year of acronyms - how many people in this room, we wonder, have the meaning of BSC, BESC, PRAC, PCMI, DPAG, SWSS, BDI, EPS and OSCAR at their fingertips? (And if you know those, we can come up with many, many others; indeed, the Assessor has come up with a list, and it runs into the hundreds.) No, our FAQs are the Frequently Asked Questions that really do come up - often several times a day.

The first, especially these last few weeks, starts with 'You must be so glad it is coming to an end; isn't being proctor a dreadful chore?'

To which the answer is no. It has been a hugely entertaining and interesting year; and an enormous privilege, for which we are very grateful to our respective colleges who elected us. It is always a privilege to be a member of this great and ancient university, but it is particularly so to spend a year at its heart, having access to all aspects of its work, and to spend time with the extraordinarily able and committed people who at every level devote themselves to its success: from the Registrar - and I am particularly impressed to have the real Registrar here present, rather than an Assistant Registrar substituting, given that he has come directly from dealing with pressing matters of great importance - from the real Registrar to the gardeners and arborists of the University Parks team, from the heads of division to the staff of the Examination Schools, the Sheldonian, and the University's box manufactory. Indeed how many of you knew that existed? It has been a privilege to sit on the Investment Committee and to appreciate the quality of advice we receive

from external members, leaders in the sector who give their time for free; to sit on the Finance Committee of OUP, and see at first hand exactly why the press is the world's leading academic publisher. A privilege, too, to work with the sabbatical officers of OUSU, whose energy and dedication to doing good deserves to be widely recognised. All of this is driven by a commitment to Oxford that visibly goes far beyond any tangible reward. In all corners and at all levels we have seen people willing to work long hours, for which they have no contractual obligation, because they believe the University and what it represents is something that really matters. If you feared we were becoming a less altruistic world, the University of Oxford would prove you wrong.

Junior Proctor: The second FAQ, which follows from that, and is asked every day, is 'What do the proctors do?' The title, it is true, doesn't help you much: dictionary definitions speak of agents in courts of law or of those in charge of enforcing discipline. But we have whittled our answer to the question down to this: our role consists of four main things: participating in University ceremony, hearing complaints and appeals, overseeing the examination system, and most importantly, exercising a general oversight of the governance and operations of the University: a duty summed up in the statutes as that of ensuring that 'the statutes, regulations, customs, and privileges of the University are observed.'

Ceremony isn't just the icing on the institutional cake. It matters. It is something that the public - members of the local community, visitors, as well as the parents of students and the University's friends and alumni - admire and appreciate. If the University is going to have a ceremonial face, it needs to do these things well. We have been hugely impressed this year by the professionalism of the team of bedels and

proctors' officers, the University's events staff, and the care and commitment of the Vice-Chancellor, and the heads of houses, and other Pro-Vice-Chancellors and of course the deans of degrees. Time and again we have heard the praise at Encaenia, at degree ceremonies, at memorial services, sermons, and at events such as the Queen's ninetieth birthday and the enthronement of the new bishop of Oxford: the University does these things so well. Long may it continue.

Senior Proctor: Hearing complaints and appeals, and overseeing the examination system, also matter; though these are the aspects of the Proctors' duties which are likely to appear most off-putting to any potential Proctor. Before this year I confess I had imagined the Proctors as something akin to a team of junior deans, but one acting at the level of the University rather than the college. When I was first asked to stand for election as Proctor I confess that my instant reaction was to say no. What I had not appreciated was that everything the Proctors do rests on the support and advice of the highly professional clerks of the Proctors' Office: headed by the supremely efficient Douglas Thornton, and the Deputy Clerks, Esther Villiers and Stephen Hearn. There have been occasional moments this year, when the Proctors have felt as if they were part of an extended episode of *Yes Minister*, with Douglas as Sir Humphrey; but the reality is that the Proctors you see are akin to ministers backed by a formidable civil service. Proctors bring experience and knowledge of the academic world; the clerks bring continuity, and a command of the University's regulations, and of the law – and whenever there is doubt, we can also draw on professional advice from the University's outstanding legal and welfare services. It adds up to a powerful system for ensuring the smooth running of the University; and, we have come to realise, for doing good. A summons to see the Proctors does sometimes quite usefully put the fear of God into members of the University at all levels, but it is always with the aim of making things better. Often the Proctors are there simply to give advice and help, and where we do not know the answer, we can easily find out who does. The fact that so few Proctors' decisions are ever appealed tells a story, as do the many occasions when students and colleagues have told us, sometimes with emotion, 'Thank you so much for sorting this out.'

Junior Proctor: The third part of the Proctors' duties is that of exercising a general oversight of the governance and operations of the University. It has taken up the greatest

part of our time, has involved participating in the work of many committees and, of course, reading all the papers. We have come to realise that this aspect of our role is essential to the workings of the system as a whole. The Proctors bring the potential for well-informed but independent scrutiny. They owe their legitimacy to having been elected by their college colleagues, and to the fact that their period of office is only a year. They are insiders yet outsiders, well informed yet newcomers to the committees on which they sit. They are not supposed to lobby for their college, department or faculty, but rather to be the voice of the academic community as a whole. It is for that reason they wear this peculiar dress (and I must admit I have become rather fond of subfusc). But we have become something that we were not before: the holders of an office. In the ordinary run of things, no one would expect to pay particular attention to the views of Mark Whittow, Elizabeth Gemmill or Luke Pitcher. But as proctors and assessors we can identify and pose the difficult questions, and must press for answers and explanations. This is not to be awkward, but to make this wonderfully complex academic republic work to best effect.

We all know the value in any system of the new appointee who can see old problems with new eyes. What the proctors bring is that opportunity on an annual basis. Rome had the consuls; Oxford has proctors. The office serves us well.

Senior Proctor: A third, and very frequently asked question, is: 'How is the Vice-Chancellor doing?' Louise, I suspect, is too tactful to say in public exactly what she thinks of the Proctors, but on our side we have no such hesitation. We see her regularly, not least for an hour-long meeting every week, and I think it is true to say that the Vice-Chancellor and Proctors have got to know each other well. The answer is that the Vice-Chancellor is doing very well indeed, and Oxford is lucky to have her. The ability, sharp intelligence, courage, tact and charm that got her the job in the first place was evident from when we first met this time last year, but since then it has struck us that over the last twelve months she has gone increasingly native. When the Vice-Chancellor declares her commitment to Oxford and its success, and a growing admiration for the peculiar qualities of the place, she is not bluffing: watching her at close hand we have come to see she speaks from the heart. We have in Louise Richardson a Vice-Chancellor who believes in the republic of letters and academic democracy, and in the need to protect and

nurture the values we share. Oxford, in other words, has found in Louise a natural Oxonian.

But here lies something of a rub. Too often behind the question, 'How is the Vice-Chancellor doing?' lies an implicit hope that the Vice-Chancellor will solve with the magic wand of decisive leadership all the University's problems, can make it rich, successful, happy, creative or whatever, so that I, as the ordinary academic, do not have to think about it. But our experience as Proctors this year has convinced us this hope is vain; and this Vice-Chancellor would be the first to say so.

The University's success is not in spite of its democratic governance and the reliance on committees that entails, but because of it. Oxford is too large, too complex, and has too many independent stakeholders to be anything else. It is often said in a lazy way that the University is inefficient and resistant to change: this simply isn't true. Indeed for anyone who has been here more than a decade or two the speed of change is positively dizzying. The current system has its weaknesses, but as the Proctors have seen at first hand, on the whole it works well – very well. The real problem going forward remains the one last year's Proctors also picked out: the reluctance of too many colleagues to serve. Not out of selfishness, but more, we believe, from a failure to appreciate just how valuable their contribution to the University could be, and how much good they could do. And we think, too, from a fear that standing for a committee would be seen as an unjustifiable diversion from their prime role as teachers and researchers. As the Senior Proctor said last year, every term there are requests for candidates to stand for position after position, ranging from Council to Curators of the Parks. To all postholders, the message must be this year as last, stand up and be counted: take charge of your university.

Junior Proctor: Oxford is an ancient institution: more than 800 years old as we remind graduands in this building at every degree ceremony. The rituals of the ceremony provide a continuity with the past. The University has witnessed crisis and change, as its rich archives housed just a few yards from here attest. Last year – this proctorial year – the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. It is safe to say that if the decision had rested with the regent masters of this University we would not be going. But we have trodden this path at least twice before. The University in some ways owes its existence to a medieval Brexit: in 1167, 850 years ago this year, King

Henry II forbade English scholars to study at the University of Paris. That fostered the development of opportunities for scholarship in this country that had not previously existed. And the break with Rome and much of Europe in the sixteenth century – whose effects on the landscape in Oxford we see all around us – spurred the development of a distinctive Anglophone intellectual culture. Perhaps Oxford would not have chosen to leave on either occasion. But following such earlier Brexits, and in the face of many other adversities, perceived and genuine, Oxford has adapted and flourished. Clearly if we are to do so again, and if we wish to be here for centuries to come, we cannot look to a *dea ex machina*. One final question, then: ‘Where is the locus of decision-making in the University?’ The answer is that it lies with each of us, individually and collectively: the regent masters of the University.

Proctorial Year 2016–17

Summary of Complaints Cases

University regulations for complaints, including academic appeals, changed during the proctorial year. For all cases in hand at the start of the academic year and all those submitted thereafter, the changes introduced a three-stage process (an informal first stage, a formal second stage and a review stage).

No information is collected centrally about the majority of matters resolved informally (ie directly with the provider of a service). Certain matters – such as administrative results checks – are handled via the Proctors’ Office in view of the requirement for students and examiners not to communicate directly about an examination. The handling of such matters does not result in a proctorial decision and does not preclude a subsequent appeal against results; they thus form part of the informal stage. However, in previous years these matters were included in the overall total. This year’s figures are reported in alignment with the new regulations and so the overall figure no longer includes informal action. The prior-year figures have, where relevant, been restated for comparability (prior-year statistics in brackets).

During 2016–17 the Proctors received 113 (119) complaints and appeals, of which 12, or 5.7%, were upheld in whole or in part. The great majority of these complaints and appeals – 96, or 85% – related to examinations and research student candidatures.

Taught-course examinations (undergraduate and postgraduate): 83 (109)

6 of these cases were upheld in full or in part.

Additionally, the Proctors’ Office handled 96 straightforward administrative checks, of which 2 resulted in changes to marks.

Research student candidatures: 13 (9)

3 of these cases were upheld in full or in part. These cases were mostly hybrid cases, with the outcome of milestone or final examinations being accompanied by concerns about supervision.

Taught-course non-examination:

teaching and supervision: 9 (6)

feedback: 1 (0)

discrimination: 1 (0)

other: 3 (1)

2 of these cases were upheld in full or in part.

Research student non-examination (other): 3 (1)

1 of these cases was upheld in full or in part.

Some complaints/appeals remain in progress at the year end.

Summary of Disciplinary Cases

BREACH OF STATUTE XI CODE OF DISCIPLINE

Engaging in offensive behaviour or language: 2 (2)

Breach of IT regulations: 2 (0)

Breach of Library regulations: 2 (0)

Dishonesty: 1 (3)

Other: 1 (2)

BREACHES OF THE PROCTORS’ DISCIPLINARY REGULATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY EXAMINATIONS

Academic misconduct (plagiarism): 36 (30)

Of these cases, 21 were referred back to the examiners. None were referred to a Student Disciplinary Panel.

Academic misconduct (other than plagiarism): 8 (4)

1 case was taken to a Student Disciplinary Panel.

Some disciplinary cases remain in progress at the year end.

HARASSMENT

Non-sexual harassment: 6

Sexual harassment: 4

