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Degrees of influence: the politics of honorary degrees in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, 1900-2000

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Title: DEGREES OF INFLUENCE: THE POLITICS OF HONORARY DEGREES IN
THE UNIVERSITIES OF OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE, 1900-2000

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ABSTRACT. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge developed different attitudes towards the award of honorary degrees through the early and middle decades of the 20th century. Recently, both have adopted a similar cautious and apolitical stance. This essay describes the role of honorary degrees in the production and reproduction of the cultural and intellectual authority of these two ancient universities.

INTRODUCTION

This paper offers the first systematic analysis of the politics of honorary degree conferment in Britain, drawing on the experiences of Oxford and Cambridge universities.¹ As medieval foundations with collegiate structures, Oxford and Cambridge stand apart from the other English universities, most of which received university status in the 20th century.² The term ‘Oxbridge’, coined in 1849 by William

¹ There is little serious research on honorary degrees. See, however, Brian Ward, ‘A King in Newcastle: Martin Luther King Jr. and British Race Relations, 1967-1968’, *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 79 (3), (1995), 599-632; Hsueh Yeh, ‘“He Sees the Development of Children’s Concepts upon a Background of Sociology”: Jean Piaget’s Honorary Degree at Harvard University in 1936’, *History of Psychology*, 7 (1), (2004), 20-44 and Forrest H. Kirkpatrick, ‘Of Unearned Finds: Honorary Degrees’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 61 (1), (1962), 77-85. For a related study, see Robert M. Friedman, *The Politics of Excellence: Behind the Nobel Prize in Science* (New York: Times Books, 2001).

² The official histories of both universities in the 20th century are Brian Harrison (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol. VIII – The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), and

Thackeray, perfectly encapsulates the mystique of these institutions. Their aura of ‘effortless superiority’, artfully cultivated in countless novels and films, has been sustained by an intense rivalry that permeates laboratory and library alike. Oxford and Cambridge have reputations for world-class research and teaching, an excellence regularly affirmed in ‘league tables’ that purport to measure university performance. The fact that Oxford and Cambridge are frequently ranked first and second among British universities suggests that their reputations are based on foundations of real achievement. Both universities have awarded honorary degrees to distinguished figures from Britain and overseas to reflect and sustain these reputations as internationally important centres of learning.

PRACTICES

Honorary degrees were first awarded at Oxford and Cambridge in the 15th century, and are now important events.³ Dressed in full academic regalia and accompanied by senior officers of the university (usually the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor), honorary graduands lead processions to the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford and the Senate House in Cambridge, where degrees are conferred following a Latin oration.⁴ In Oxford, degrees are awarded on several occasions during the year, the most important being

Christopher N. L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge: Vol. IV – 1870-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

³ The degree awarded by Oxford in 1479 to Lionel Woodville, Dean of Exeter Cathedral and brother-in-law of Edward IV, has been cited as the first ‘honorary’ award. The poet John Skelton, who received ‘honorary’ degrees from Oxford in 1488 and Cambridge in 1493, is probably the first person to have been honoured by both universities. See Robin L. Storey, ‘University and Government 1430-1500’, in Jeremy I. Catto and Ralph Evans (eds), *The History of the University of Oxford: Volume II: Late Medieval Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 735; and Damian R. Leader, *A History of the University of Cambridge: Volume I: The University to 1546* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 105, 119.

⁴ English translations have been provided in Oxford since 1954 and in Cambridge since 1959.

Encænïa in June. In Cambridge, degrees are normally awarded at the end of each academic year.⁵

The selection process is overseen by the Hebdomadal Council in Oxford and the Council of the University Senate in Cambridge, which consider names proposed by special standing committees that are chaired by the respective Vice-Chancellors.⁶ The names selected are then published in the Oxford University Gazette or the Cambridge University Reporter before being put for approval to the Congregation in Oxford, or the Congregation of the Regent House in Cambridge. If any names are opposed, a vote is required.⁷

Several kinds of honorary degrees have been awarded at Oxford and Cambridge, although most are in law, letters, science, divinity and music. These awards pre-date earned doctorates by research, a qualification familiar to German (and later to American) universities but not introduced until 1917 in Oxford and 1919 in Cambridge.

Figure 1 Honorary Degrees awarded by Oxford and Cambridge, 1900-2000

Figure 1 shows the number of honorary degrees awarded by Oxford and Cambridge during the 20th century.⁸ Oxford was noticeably more generous than

⁵ As we shall see, both universities have organised special ceremonies at other times and places. The most recent example was the ceremony at Buckingham Palace on 10 July 1996 at which Nelson Mandela received honorary degrees from eight British universities, including Oxford and Cambridge.

⁶ These standing committees date back to 1913 in Oxford and to 1933 in Cambridge. See Oxford University Archives (hereafter, OUA), Hebdomadal Council Papers, No. 97, January 14 - March 13, 1914, [9]-[12] and xc; Cambridge University Archives (hereafter, CUA), Min.I.23B, Council Minute Book, 1932-33, Council of the Senate, 30 October 1933, Minute 27 and 27 November 1933, Minute 20.

⁷ For much of the 20th century, honorary degrees required the approval of Convocation in Oxford and the University Senate in Cambridge which meant that non-resident MAs could vote on this matter. This authority was transferred to the more limited constituency of the Congregation in Oxford and the Congregation of the Regent House in Cambridge in 1969 and 1973 respectively.

⁸ The statistical data on Cambridge are derived from the annual lists of honorary degrees published in the *Historical Register of the University of Cambridge Supplements* (hereafter, HRUC) in 1922, 1932, 1942, 1952, 1956, 1962, 1967, 1972, 1977, 1984, 1991 and 1999, and in the *Cambridge*

Cambridge in this period, awarding 1,805 honorary degrees, of which 1,487 (82 per cent) were doctorates, as compared with the 1,310 honorary degrees awarded by Cambridge, of which 1,111 (85 per cent) were doctorates. Both universities awarded larger numbers, and a wider variety, during the first half of the century, although there was substantial year-on-year variation. Since 1950, the pattern has been more consistent and restrained, particularly in Cambridge. Since the 1980s, the number awarded by the two universities has converged and stabilised. Both universities now award between eight and ten per year.

HONORIS CAUSA? HONORARY DEGREES, 1900-1945

During the first half of the 20th century, conferments reflected the circumstances of the two world wars. Both universities limited the number of honorary degrees awarded during war-time, although Oxford awarded a significant number (and a higher than usual proportion) of honorary MAs.⁹ Following both wars, awards reflected the contributions of British and Allied leaders. Nineteen of the twenty-five honorary degrees awarded in Cambridge in 1919, and nearly half of those given by Oxford in 1946, went to military figures. Many degrees were awarded *jure dignitatis*, notably to leading figures in the Church of England, possibly in recognition of status rather than achievement. Oxford regularly issued doctorates by ‘diploma’ to members of the royal family and heads of state, and Cambridge awarded similar degrees to members of the

University Reporter (hereafter, CUR), volumes 120 (1989/90) to 131 (2000/01). The equivalent information for Oxford is derived from the *Supplements of the Historical Register at the University of Oxford* (hereafter, HRUO) in 1934, 1951 and 1970, and from the *Oxford University Calendar* (hereafter, OUC) in 1966, 1981, 1991, 1994 and 2003. Decisions were reconstructed from the minute books of the Hebdomadal Council at Oxford and the Council of the University Senate at Cambridge, and from the more detailed correspondence files in the University Registries. The latter are available in Oxford for the period 1921 to 1969, and in Cambridge for the period 1926 to 1967.

⁹ Honorary MAs have more recently been awarded in recognition of contributions by non-academic staff.

royal family, leading members of the clergy and judiciary, and to heads of colleges within the University.¹⁰

A more stable and modest pattern emerged during the middle decades of the century. Reforms during the 1920s effectively ended *jure dignitatis* degrees on the reasonable grounds that awarding degrees to ‘persons not necessarily eminent in scholarship’ was ‘unfair to those who took the degree in the ordinary manner’.¹¹ At the same time, political controversy reduced the number of honorary doctorates. In 1926, Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister of Britain’s first Labour government, was nominated for an honorary doctorate at Cambridge by Sir Joseph Larmor, Lucasian Professor of Mathematics, who was a Unionist MP for the University between 1911 and 1922.¹² Several academics, from across the political spectrum, were disturbed by this proposal. Conservatives regarded MacDonald as a dangerous radical who had openly opposed Britain’s entry into the Great War, whilst socialists were angered by his condemnation of the 1926 General Strike.¹³ When his name was announced by the

¹⁰ Royal recipients of Oxford degrees have included Victor Emmanuel III of Italy (1903), Wilhelm II of Germany (1907), Albert of Belgium (1918), the Prince of Wales (1919), Queen Mary (1921) and Alfonso XIII of Spain (1926). See OUA, UR6/HD/1, Honorary Degrees & Degrees by Diploma, General File, File 3, September 1956 – July 1969 (hereafter, UR6/HD/1, 3), Note on ‘Degrees Conferred by Diploma on Heads of State and Royal Personages since 1900’, undated. For the equivalent Cambridge list, see HRUC, 1922, 53-63 and HRUC 1932, 95-97.

¹¹ CUA, Degr.M.9, Registry’s Memoranda on Honorary Degrees, 1926 and 1943-1952 (hereafter Degr.M.9), File 1: Principle 1945/6, ‘Note on Degrees *jure dignitatis*’, to Members of the Committee for Honorary Degrees, 11 January 1946. See also OUA, UR6/HD/2C, Honorary Degrees, File 1 (hereafter, UR6/HD/2C, 1), the Registrar, Oxford to the Registry, Cambridge, 30 April 1936.

¹² National Archives (hereafter NA) PRO 30/69/1478, Larmor to MacDonald, 2 June 1926.

¹³ The Vice-Chancellor informed MacDonald on 25 May 1926 that his name would go forward to the Senate on 5 June, but anticipated ‘the possibility of opposition’. This came more quickly than expected, and in a letter of 31 May to MacDonald’s cabinet colleague Sir Samuel Hoare (a former Foreign Secretary who was also due to receive an honorary degree), the Vice-Chancellor confirmed that ‘considerable opposition’ had arisen ‘based in some degree on events connected with the recent General Strike’. For the correspondence on this matter, including statements confirming that MacDonald requested that his name be withdrawn, see CUR, 8 June 1926, 1106; CUA, Degr.M.9, File 2: Ramsay MacDonald: Honorary Degree, Vice-Chancellor to MacDonald, London, 25 May 1926 and Vice-Chancellor to Sir Samuel Hoare, Air Ministry, 31 May 1926.

Council of Senate, several expressed their intention to *non placet* his nomination. Rather than risk humiliation, MacDonald withdrew his candidacy.¹⁴

To avoid future discord, a group of senior Cambridge academics, including John Maynard Keynes, met to review the University's procedures. They recommended limiting the number of awards to around eight per year, and avoiding overtly political nominations.¹⁵ These recommendations were not rigorously followed, but Cambridge subsequently concentrated on scientists and academics. Oxford, on the other hand, was firmly committed to rewarding politicians and other non-academic dignitaries, a reflection of the University's traditionally close relationship with government.

By the 1930s, an Oxford honorary degree was regarded by the Foreign Office as a diplomatic tool. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to discern from the archives whether proposals originated in the University or in Whitehall. The decision in the spring of 1932 to award a degree to the German President Paul von Hindenburg is a good example.¹⁶ This was an extremely contentious idea, given Hindenburg's role in the Great War, but it was warmly supported (and probably initiated) by officials who were anxious to build bridges with Weimar Germany. Although hardly a liberal figure, Hindenburg's unwavering protection of the Weimar constitution had won respect in Britain. Despite his age and failing health, Hindenburg had been persuaded to stand for re-election against Adolf Hitler in the presidential elections of March 1932. Hindenburg's contempt for the Nazi leader was well known in the Foreign Office, where it was hoped that a decisive presidential victory would fatally undermine Hitler's support, secure a conservative constitutional government, and preserve a fragile German

¹⁴ The historian J. R. M. Butler, Fellow of Trinity College and subsequently Regius Professor of History, drafted a letter to MacDonald, eventually signed by 170 resident members of Senate, including Edgar Douglas Adrian, Arthur Eddington, Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, John Maynard Keynes, Joseph Needham, Sir Ernest Rutherford, and Sir John Joseph Thomson expressing regret that the degree had not been awarded. See Trinity College Library, Butler Papers, C12; NA PRO 30/69/1478; *The Times*, 3 June 1926, 16f. MacDonald's grateful reply was printed in *The Times*, 16 June 1926, 16b.

¹⁵ A vote to limit honorary degrees to academics was narrowly defeated. See CUA, MIN.I.22A, Council Minute Book, 1926-27, Council of the Senate, 31 May 1926, Minute 5; 1 November 1926, Minute 10; 15 November 1926, Minute 20; 22 November 1926, Minute 1; 17 January 1927, Minute 16.

¹⁶ OUA, UR6/HD/6, 1, Veale, Registrar to Sir John Simon, the Secretary of State, 15 March 1932.

democracy. The Oxford plan involved sending a delegation of senior academics to Berlin soon after Hindenburg's anticipated victory.¹⁷

The idea was being enthusiastically discussed by the Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, when it transpired that Hindenburg had failed to win an overall majority, triggering a second round of voting.¹⁸ When the Foreign Office realised that Hindenburg's support, although sufficient for victory, would not seriously compromise Hitler's power-base, the proposal was quietly dropped. Annoying the Nazis by honouring Hitler's rival would have been wholly desirable; but offending them as their support increased was quite another matter.

Such political calculations were rarely necessary, but they became critically important after 1933. This was an unfortunate year for Oxford in more ways than one. On 9 February 1933, a mere ten days after Hitler's triumphant entry into the Chancellery, the Oxford Union passed the famous resolution that '[T]his House will under no circumstances fight for its King and Country' by a resounding majority of 275 votes to 153. The resolution, eloquently defended by the socialist philosopher C. E. M. Joad, was condemned in the press. According to Winston Churchill, it was an 'abject, squalid, shameless avowal' that would actively encourage Nazi aggression.¹⁹

It remains a moot point whether the Oxford Union resolution reflected the general mood, but the idea that Britain should avoid another war enjoyed widespread support. Lord Halifax, who succeeded Lord Cave as Oxford's Chancellor later that year, opposed the Union motion, but certainly shared its aversion to war.²⁰ As Secretary of State for War (1935-1938) and Foreign Secretary (1938-1940) in the administrations of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, Halifax became a leading advocate of appeasement. While there is no evidence that he used his status at Oxford to further his policies, the University did make some questionable decisions in the early years of his Chancellorship.

¹⁷ OUA, UR6/HD/6, 1, Veale to Simon, 24 March 1932.

¹⁸ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 1, Foreign Office to Vice-Chancellor, 19 March 1932.

¹⁹ Martin Ceadel, 'The 'King and Country' Debate, 1933: Student Politics, Pacifism and the Dictators', *Historical Journal*, 22 (2), (1979), 397-422.

²⁰ Viscount Halifax was known officially as Lord Irwin until 1934.

One example arose in 1935, in relation to Hugo Krüss, Director of the Prussian State Library in Berlin. Krüss was not formally associated with the Nazis, but a few months earlier, along with dozens of other German intellectuals -- including Martin Heidegger -- he had signed a declaration of support for Hitler.²¹ He had also made several speeches that sought to diminish the significance of book-burning, and even defended such actions.²² Krüss joined the Nazi Party in 1937, and while his wartime efforts to save literary treasures preserved an important part of Europe's cultural heritage, his 'reorganisation' of the library systems in Germany and the occupied territories in accordance with Nazi ideology was less noble.²³

As the nature of the Nazi regime became clearer, Oxford's policy shifted from cautious conciliation to outright condemnation. Its decision in 1938 to award an honorary doctorate to Eleanor Rathbone, the campaigning feminist MP and passionate opponent of appeasement pre-dated the humiliation of the Munich Conference later that

²¹ The declaration, entitled 'Deutsche Wissenschaftler hinter Adolf Hitler', appeared in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19-20 August 1934, 2.

²² See Pamela S. Richards, 'German Libraries and Scientific and Technical Information in Nazi Germany', *Library Quarterly*, 55 (2), (1985), 151-173; and Werner Schochów, *Die Preussische Staatsbibliothek 1918-1945* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1988), 27. Librarians made unlikely Nazis, but it is worth noting that Krüss's colleague Rudolf Buttmann, Director of the Bavarian State Library in Munich, was a founding member of the party.

²³ Jacqueline Borin, 'Embers of the Soil: The Destruction of Jewish Books and Libraries in Poland during World War II', *Libraries and Culture*, 28 (4), (1993), 445-460; Marek Sroka, 'The University of Cracow Library under Nazi Occupation, 1939-1945', *Libraries and Culture*, 34 (1), (1995), 1-16. Other German scientists who received awards during the 1930s were only slightly less contentious. Cambridge awarded an honorary doctorate in 1936 to Ludwig Prandtl, Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Fluid Dynamics in Göttingen and an important researcher for the German air-force. Oxford made a similar award in 1937 to Walter Nernst, the Nobel Prize winning chemist. Nernst was not openly sympathetic to the Nazis but, like his fellow German Nobel laureate Fritz Haber, had worked on chemical weapons during the First World War. Haber, a deeply conservative nationalist, was obliged to leave Germany in 1933 as a consequence of his Jewish origins, settling initially in Cambridge and then in Basle, where he died in January 1934. On Haber, see John Cornwall, *Hitler's Scientists: Science, War and the Devil's Pact* (London: Viking, 2003), 47-70; and Fritz Stern, *Einstein's German World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 59-164.

year.²⁴ The speed with which Oxford honoured the anti-Nazi Orientalist Paul Kahle, who was informed of his degree just a few weeks after arriving in Britain in the spring of 1939, underlined its new attitude.²⁵

Once the country was at war, Oxford degrees became an even more conspicuous element of Foreign Office calculation. The University awarded relatively few honorary degrees to foreigners between 1940 and 1945, and those that were conferred required careful political calculation.²⁶ The decision in 1940 to award a degree to Edouard Benes, leader of the Czech government in exile, was an important statement of support for small nations destroyed by war. But it raised the embarrassing prospect of the last president of a free and independent Czechoslovakia receiving a degree from the British Foreign Secretary whose policies had led directly to the dismemberment of his country.²⁷ In the event, Benes received his degree at an earlier ceremony from which Halifax discreetly absented himself.

Most Oxford war-time awards to political leaders were allocated *in absentia* at special overseas ceremonies, where the University was represented by a delegation of senior academics, or by members of the British diplomatic community.²⁸ The most notable examples were the ceremonies in 1941 that honoured the Portuguese Prime

²⁴ Rathbone's views had been powerfully expressed in *War Can be Averted: The Achievability of Collective Security* (London: V. Gollancz, 1938), which called for an alliance between Britain and the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany.

²⁵ Kahle was founding Director of the Oriental Studies Institute at the University of Bonn and a leading authority on the Hebrew Bible. The Kahle family were not Jewish; indeed Kahle had signed the 1934 declaration of support for Hitler (*op. cit.* note 22). However, following a series of attacks on Kahle's wife and son for assisting Jewish store-owners during *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, the family were forced to leave Germany. See Paul Kahle, *Bonn University in Pre-Nazi and Nazi Times, 1923-1939: The Experience of a German Professor* (London: Private Printing, 1945); and Maria Kahle, *Was hatten Sie getan? Die Flucht der Familie Kahle aus Nazi-Deutschland* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1998).

²⁶ OUA, UR6/HD/1, 1, Douglas Veale, 14 July 1944.

²⁷ In the autumn of 1938, Halifax began to change his views about Nazi Germany, distancing himself from Neville Chamberlain and other appeasers. See Andrew Roberts, *The Holy Fox: The Life of Lord Halifax* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 128-9; and Ian Kershaw, *Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry and Britain's Road to War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 262.

²⁸ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 16, Note in Instances of Honorary Degrees Conferred in Absence, 30 November 1967.

Minister António de Oliveira Salazar, and the US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt - the former in Lisbon on 19 April, the latter at Harvard University on 19 June. Both men were leaders of neutral countries, but in Roosevelt's case, the objective was to underline the ties linking Britain and the US in anticipation of American support in the war against Germany. The decision to honour the authoritarian Salazar, ostensibly to coincide with the 800th anniversary of Portuguese independence, was designed to prevent an alliance between Portugal and the Axis powers. While the Harvard ceremony sought to bring the US into the war, Lisbon was a play to keep Portugal out of the war, and so continue eight centuries of peaceful co-existence.

To the satisfaction of the Foreign Office, both events were favourably reported in the US and Portuguese press.²⁹ However, whilst the Harvard ceremony was a relatively minor event, Lisbon was an important victory for British diplomacy. In a congratulatory letter to Douglas Veale, Oxford's Registrar from 1930 to 1958, the Foreign Office noted with delight that the Portuguese press had given Salazar's degree 'considerable notice'. According to the British Ambassador in Lisbon, 'no event could have had a happier effect in correcting the idea so carefully nourished in Portugal by our enemies that British opinion is hostile to Dr. Salazar's régime.'³⁰ In a subsequent letter to the Vice-Chancellor, a Foreign Office official described the ceremony as 'first-class propaganda for our cause', and noted that '[t]he Germans in Lisbon are said to be extremely irritated by the success which has attended the delegation's visit', not least because Salazar had previously declined offers of honorary degrees from German universities.³¹ The destruction 'by enemy action' of a parcel sent from Oxford containing Salazar's ceremonial regalia emphasized the desired contrast between British academic civility and German military aggression.³²

²⁹ Halifax, who was present at the Harvard ceremony in his capacity as Ambassador to the USA, waxed lyrical about the event in his memoirs, describing how moved he was that 'Harvard should be converted into Oxford', despite the fact that Roosevelt himself was unable, 'at the last minute', to attend. See Earl of Halifax, *Fullness of Days* (London: Collins, 1957), 268-9.

³⁰ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 1, Foreign Office to the Registrar, 13 December 1940.

³¹ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 2, Foreign Office to the Vice-Chancellor, 13 May 1941.

³² OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 2, J.K. Roberts, Foreign Office, to J.R.H. Weaver, President of Trinity College, 13 October 1941. Other *in absentia* degrees were awarded in 1940 to the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in Santiniketan, and to the Argentine physician Mariano Castex in Buenos Aires. The former

Britain's desire to keep a balance in Iberia was also evident in discussions about an honorary doctorate for Joseph Trueta, the distinguished Catalan surgeon, who had recently arrived in Oxford from Spain. Trueta's pioneering surgical techniques had been developed during the Spanish Civil War, in which he had been a prominent Republican. Despite his reputation, Oxford decided that to honour an exiled Republican could risk offending the still neutral Franco regime. These anxieties diminished, noticeably so after US entry into the war, and Trueta was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1943, a year after he had become Director of the Accident Unit at Oxford's Radcliffe Infirmary.³³

The country most conspicuously absent from Oxford's roll-call of war-time honorary graduates was the USSR. Whilst degrees for Soviet citizens were unthinkable while the Hitler-Stalin pact remained in force, the German invasion of the USSR in the summer of 1941 changed everything. The University decided that the best Soviet candidate was Ivan Maisky, the USSR's Ambassador in London and a principal architect of the Anglo-Soviet alliance. Oxford's Vice-Chancellor, Sir David Ross, sought the advice of Anthony Eden, Halifax's successor as Foreign Secretary in Churchill's war-time cabinet.³⁴ However, Eden rejected the idea on the grounds that Maisky had already turned down an honorary doctorate from the University of Birmingham. In Eden's view, an invitation from Oxford would cause Maisky, and the Soviet authorities, unnecessary embarrassment. Eden's swift reaction underlined the importance the Foreign Office attached to Oxford's decisions, and the complexity of the calculations involved.³⁵

was designed to secure 'good-will from the 'left wing' side of Indian politics'. A decision was also taken in 1942 to award an honorary degree to Chiang Kai-shek, the nationalist Chinese leader, but this never took place. See OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 1, Lord Hailey, Ministry of Information, to the Vice-Chancellor, 9 October 1939; OUA, UR6/HD/1, 1, Hebdomadal Council Acts, 27 July 1942; NA FO 371/31654.

³³ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 2, Ross to Eden, 9 February 1943. By this stage, Franco had withdrawn the logistical and military support previously offered to Germany, and was openly supporting the Allied cause.

³⁴ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 2, Ross to Eden, 2 November 1942.

³⁵ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 2, Eden to Ross, 10 November 1942; and Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham to the Vice-Chancellor, Oxford University, 16 November 1942.

The success of war-time *in absentia* degree ceremonies greatly pleased the Foreign Office,³⁶ but Oxford feared it might prove difficult to persuade foreign dignitaries, ever mindful of protocol, to receive in person degrees that other political leaders had received by delegation.³⁷ Soon after the Harvard ceremony in honour of Roosevelt, Veale suggested to Eden that the University had made more than enough *in absentia* political awards, and ‘should for a while go slow, reserving our golden shower of DCLs... for the end of the war’.³⁸

A GLOBAL ELITE? OXBRIDGE HONORARY DEGREES, 1945-2000

In November 1945, Oxford reviewed its procedures in the light of practices adopted in Cambridge, and firmly rejected a more cautious, apolitical stance.³⁹ The Vice Chancellor, Sir Richard Livingstone, acknowledged to Halifax that most war-time honorary degrees had been ‘conferred for political reasons at the insistence of the Foreign Office’.⁴⁰ But this news would not have surprised Halifax, who was in any case determined that Oxford should provide unwavering support for Britain’s interests in the Cold War. Put simply, this meant reinforcing the ‘special relationship’ with the US, and ignoring worthy candidates from behind the Iron Curtain.⁴¹

³⁶ Most foreign recipients of honorary degrees during the war, whether they received their awards *in absentia* or in person, accepted on behalf of their country, particularly when that country was under Nazi occupation. The letters of thanks and acceptance from Alf Sommerfelt, the Norwegian historian and philologist; Stanislaw Kot, the scientist and member of the Polish government in exile; and Claude-Frédéric-Armand Schaeffer, the leading French archaeologist of the Middle East and prominent member of De Gaulle’s Free French, all made this point. See OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 2, Kot to Veale, 22 May 1941; Sommerfelt to Veale, 16 March 1942; Schaeffer to Veale, 30 May 1942.

³⁷ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 1, Veale to Halifax, 14 May 1940.

³⁸ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 2, Veale to Eden, 20 August 1941. A DCL is a doctorate in civil law. Post-war discussions re-confirmed the wholly exceptional nature of *in absentia* ceremonies. See UR6/HD/2C, 8, Note by the Registrar on Honorary Degrees Conferred in Absence, 11 June 1955.

³⁹ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 3, Hebdomadal Council, Acts, 12 November 1945; 19 November 1945; ‘For the Hebdomadal Council Only’, Committee on Honorary Degrees, 28 November 1945.

⁴⁰ UR6/HD/2C, 3, Vice-Chancellor to Chancellor, 27 December 1945.

⁴¹ As many prominent scientists and intellectuals in the communist world were hostile towards their governments, the latter aspect of this policy was also designed to reduce east-west tension. Isaiah

Figure 2 Countries of Residence of Recipients of Honorary Doctorates, 1951- 2000

After the war, both Oxford and Cambridge used honorary degrees to reinforce the UK's alliances with the USA and its western European allies, principally France and West Germany (see Figure 2).⁴² This was not always a straightforward business.⁴³ Oxford's decision in 1952 to award an honorary degree to Dean Acheson, the US Secretary of State and the architect of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, reveals the complexities involved. Acheson, a committed Anglophile, initially seemed a

Berlin's rather casual suggestion (apparently made to the Vice Chancellor on a railway station platform) that Boris Pasternak be awarded an honorary degree is a revealing example. This was immediately rejected on the grounds that it would be politically contentious, though the force of this argument was somewhat diminished by the Vice Chancellor's frank admission that he had no idea who Pasternak was. See Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1998), 166.

⁴² This led to a significant decline in the proportion of degrees awarded to UK residents and former students. Thus, in the 1950s, 54% of Oxford and 62% of Cambridge honorary degrees were awarded to British subjects; by the 1990s, the comparable figures were 44% and 56%, respectively. Overall, since 1951, some 15% of Oxford and 13% of Cambridge honorary degrees have been awarded to American citizens. In the 1990s, Oxford awarded more than a fifth of its honorary degrees to Americans.

⁴³ Both universities were anxious to avoid the embarrassment of a rejected invitation but despite their best efforts, several offers were declined. In 1950, Allan Gregg, the American physician and Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation, refused Oxford's offer on the grounds that his position obliged him to 'remain an unbiased adviser... regarding the potentialities of any – and of many – institutions'. On the role of the Rockefeller Foundation and other US agencies in Europe, see Giuliana Gemelli and Roy MacLeod (eds), *American Foundations in Europe: Grant-Giving Policies, Cultural Diplomacy, and Transatlantic Relations* (Brussels: P.I.E. and Peter Lang, 2003) and the special issue of *Minerva* 41 (2003) 93-176. King Frederik of Denmark declined a Cambridge invitation in 1957 because he did not feel qualified; Pablo Picasso declined Oxford's offer in 1958, as he was 'deeply absorbed in a bout of work'; and Charles de Gaulle pre-empted initial discussion in Oxford in 1960 by making it known that he would decline an degree if offered one. See OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 5, Gregg to Veale, 6 November 1950; CUA, Degr. M.13, File ii, Bredsdorff, University Lecturer in Danish to Lord Adrian, Vice-Chancellor, 19 January 1958; OUA, UR6/HD/6, 8, Douglas Cooper to Sir Douglas Veale, 30 May 1958; OUA, UR6/HD/1, 3, Macmillan to Vice-Chancellor, 13 February 1963.

safe selection.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the 1952 US presidential elections, which set Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower against Democrat Adlai Stevenson, provided a perfect opportunity for Acheson's opponents to attack his foreign policy. Acheson's principal tormenter was Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose anti-communist campaigns were reaching their peak. McCarthy loudly insisted that Acheson was 'soft' on communism, and had turned the State Department into a haven of left-wing sympathisers. In this paranoid climate, Oxford's decision, given with the backing of the Foreign Office, suddenly seemed a serious miscalculation. In the event, Eisenhower was elected by a massive majority, and Acheson received his degree, but some Republicans believed that Oxford's decision was a deliberate gesture of British support for the foreign policies of the Democratic Party.

The prospect of such unintended consequences persuaded the Foreign Office that Oxford should proceed with caution. When, two years later, the Vice-Chancellor wrote to Eden about a proposal to award a degree to former President Harry Truman, the FO's response was an unequivocal 'no'. Mid-term US congressional elections were to take place in the autumn of 1954, and an Oxford award to a prominent (albeit retired) Democrat would be seen as another unwelcome intervention in domestic politics.⁴⁵ However, Halifax, who had enthusiastically supported both Acheson and Truman, was in no mood to accept this advice. He re-submitted Truman's name in December 1954, immediately after the US elections.⁴⁶ The nomination was agreed, but Truman indicated he would be unable to attend the ceremony in Oxford until the following year.⁴⁷ This set alarm bells ringing in the Foreign Office, now directed by Harold Macmillan, because

⁴⁴ On Acheson's appreciation of Britain's imperial past, see John T. McNay, *Acheson and Empire: The British Accent in American Foreign Policy* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

⁴⁵ OUA, UR6/HD/6, 6, Bowra to Eden, 15 February 1954. See also OUA, UR6/HD/6, 6, Veale to Halifax, 8 March 1954. There was some disquiet within Oxford at the idea of awarding an honorary degree 'to the individual who had given the actual order for the first atomic bomb to be dropped'. See OUA, UR6/HD/1, 3, Note for File by the Registrar, undated.

⁴⁶ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 8, Halifax to the Vice-Chancellor, 18 December 1954.

⁴⁷ OUA, UR6/HD/6, 6, Truman to Halifax, 18 March 1955.

the US was gearing up for another presidential election in the summer of 1956.⁴⁸ On 10 August 1955, Macmillan advised Halifax that ‘having offered the degree it might be embarrassing... to make difficulties about presenting it to Truman... next summer.’⁴⁹ He agreed to ‘let it be known’ in the US through the usual diplomatic channels that the award was in fact a ‘holdover’ from the previous year.⁵⁰

In 1962, Oxford attracted more unwanted attention in the American press, following its nomination of the British-born comedian Charlie Chaplin. Some Oxford academics, led by Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History and a prominent Fellow of Oriel College, said that the University was demeaning itself by honouring a comic actor, but the degree was duly conferred at a widely reported Encaenia.⁵¹ Sitting alongside Chaplin was Dean Rusk, the US Secretary of State, who had been nominated the previous year. The irony was not lost on conservative Americans, for whom the Left-leaning Chaplin was something of a ‘hate figure’. Chaplin, who had retained his British citizenship throughout his movie career, was condemned as a communist sympathiser and retired to his villa in Switzerland in 1952. He was then formally banned from re-entering the US. According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, Oxford had made a ‘snide attempt to place Chaplin on the same plane with Secretary Dean Rusk’, a suggestion most Americans would reportedly find ‘unpalatable’. The Chicago Daily Tribune agreed, attacking Chaplin’s degree as evidence of the ‘somewhat confused state of contemporary law and letters, of culture

⁴⁸ Eden succeeded Churchill as Prime Minister in April 1955, and Macmillan moved to the Foreign Office. Eisenhower was again victorious in 1956, defeating Stevenson even more comfortably than in 1952.

⁴⁹ OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 8, Macmillan to Halifax, 10 August 1955.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See also OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 8, Veale to Halifax, 10 October 1955. Stevenson was awarded an honorary degree from Oxford in 1957. The idea of an honorary degree for President J. F. Kennedy was also discussed in Oxford, though Prime Minister Macmillan suggested that an offer should only be made once an official visit had been confirmed which would allow Kennedy to visit Oxford and receive a degree in person. See OUA, UR6/HD/2C, 13, Hebdomadal Council Acts, 11 February 1963; UR6/HD/1, 3, Macmillan to Vice-Chancellor, 13 February 1963.

⁵¹ Only eight people attended the Convocation where Chaplin’s nomination was presented, and no-one raised objections. See OUA, UR6/HD/6, 10, Murphy to Oxford University, received 24 April 1962; Lewis to the Registrar, 28 May 1962.

and comedy, of diplomacy and slapstick, of morals and manners, of anti-communism and anti-anti-communism'.⁵²

Turning to Cambridge, Figure 1 reveals that the University awarded more honorary degrees than usual after 1945, but soon reverted to a more restrained policy. This approach was pursued by Robert Mantle Rattenbury, the University Registry from 1953 to 1969, who regularly resisted overtures to adopt a more political stance. Among candidates considered but not carried forward were the Shah of Iran (1959 and 1964), Charles de Gaulle (1959 and 1962), Konrad Adenauer (1962), Harry Truman (1962), and Hubert Humphrey (1965).⁵³

If some Oxford academics viewed Cambridge's policy as less accident-prone, some Cambridge academics envied Oxford's overtly political approach. Among them was Noel Annan, the youthful Provost of King's College. Annan successfully proposed Acheson for an honorary doctorate in 1958, but was unimpressed by the procedure he encountered.⁵⁴ In a forthright article, Annan called for a 'more imaginative policy' that would be both transparent, and properly represent the arts, public life and the wider world. 'Are Poulenc and Shostakovich unknown in Cambridge?' asked Annan; 'Are our

⁵² OUA, UR6/HD/6, 10, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 June 1962, 12 and *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 July 1962. It is worth noting that the more liberal *New York Times* used Chaplin's Oxford degree to call on the Eisenhower administration to lift the ban on Chaplin entering the US. See *New York Times*, 2 July 1962, 28.

⁵³ CUA, Degr.M.13, Files iv and v; and CUA, Degr.M.14, Files i, ii, iv and v. The response of the Vice-Chancellor, the Reverend J. S. Boys-Smith, to Lord Butler of Saffron Walden, who had recommended President Ayub of Pakistan in 1965, summed up the university's policy: '[W]e should much prefer that a suggestion of an Honorary Degree should not be put to the University. The main difficulty we have felt about Honorary Degrees for Heads of State is that if a Degree is conferred upon one it becomes very difficult to refuse it to another.' See CUA, Degr.M.14, File v, Boys-Smith to Lord Butler, 21 June 1965. For Foreign Office concerns about the Shah of Iran receiving on honorary degree from either Oxford or Cambridge, see the memorandum on this, dated 14 May 1968, in NA FCO 17/384. Despite this, degrees were awarded to prominent political leaders, including President Giovanni Gronchi of Italy (1958), Jawaharlal Nehru of India (1953), Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj of Malaya (1960), Robert Gordon Menzies of Australia (1960), and Harold Macmillan (1961).

⁵⁴ CUA, Degr.M.13, File ii, Annan to Lord Adrian, 16 January 1958.

hard-worked administrators too busy to read, see or hear the works of contemporary artists or even, perhaps, to have heard of their names?’⁵⁵

Annan cited Cambridge’s belated acknowledgement of the German writer Thomas Mann, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929, as an example of the unnecessary caution that damaged the University’s reputation as a centre of liberal and enlightened values. In the 1930s, Mann received honorary doctorates from several universities, in an effort to repair the damage caused by the University of Bonn’s decision, under Nazi pressure, to revoke the honorary degree it had awarded him in 1919. A ceremony at Harvard in 1935, at which Mann received a degree alongside Albert Einstein, reflected America’s commitment to values the two exiled Germans embodied. Oxford followed suit in 1949, but Cambridge waited until 1953, just two years before Mann’s death.

Cambridge’s hesitant moves towards greater political engagement were undermined by the controversy in 1963 surrounding the proposal to award a degree to Viscount Hailsham, Leader of the House of Lords and Minister for Science in the second Macmillan cabinet. The honour was intended to acknowledge Hailsham’s status as the UK’s first cabinet minister concerned specifically with science and technology, but seventy-one academics threatened to *non placet* the proposal.⁵⁶ Some disagreed with Hailsham’s political views, but most were opposed in principle to awarding honorary degrees to serving politicians. The fact that Hailsham was directly responsible for formulating policy on science and technology seemed especially unfortunate, as it implied that Cambridge was willing to dispense honorific titles to win advantage.

⁵⁵ Noel Annan, ‘Honorary Degrees’, *The Cambridge Review*, 11, (October 1958), 4-6. As Annan almost certainly knew, Oxford had awarded an honorary degree to Dimitry Shostakovich that year, although not everyone welcomed the decision. When asked by the University Registrar whether All Souls would be willing to accommodate the composer during his stay in Oxford, the splendidly eccentric Warden, John Sparrow, rejected the idea out of hand: ‘No favours from me for any Soviet citizen’. See OUA, UR6/HD/6, 8, Registrar to the Vice-Chancellor, 23 June 1958. For an account of Shostakovich’s visit to Oxford, see Ignatieff, *op cit*, 232. On the hard-drinking Sparrow and other British ‘dons’, see Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Geniuses* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), and John Lowe, *The Warden: A Portrait of John Sparrow* (London: HarperCollins, 1998).

⁵⁶ CUA, Degr.M.14, File ii, Korner to Rattenbury, 22 March 1963.

Asher Korner, a leading Cambridge biochemist and one of the leaders of the anti-Hailsham group, released a press statement attacking a speech that Hailsham delivered in the House of Lords in February 1963, during a debate on a Royal Society report about the ‘brain drain’ of UK scientists to the US.⁵⁷ The report concluded that the scale of this emigration was unsustainable. Hailsham robustly challenged this view. The unchecked loss of scientific and technical skills was a cause for concern, he conceded, and the government was seeking to diminish and even reverse the flow; but the emigration of British scientists demonstrated the excellence of British science and technology. The real problem was the inability of the US to meet its own demand for high-level scientific and technical personnel, despite its enormous financial resources.⁵⁸

In Korner’s view, Hailsham’s speech combined ignorant complacency with cultural snobbery:

Many of us deplore his remarks that America needs to live parasitically on other people’s brains because [of the] inadequacies in its educational system... We believe that this view is incorrect, is impolite to Americans (who pay for much research in Britain), and, most important, evades tackling the main issue: the need for adequate finance from the Government for education and research in this country in the interests of the community as a whole.⁵⁹

Hailsham was in no mood to retreat. In a stinging rejoinder to Sir Ivor Jennings, Cambridge’s Vice Chancellor, Hailsham dismissed Korner’s arguments as:

so illiberal and uncivilised and inconsistent with accepted standards of academic conduct in this country, that if it were decided to yield to them, a disastrous precedent [would be set] for the future of the Universities in this country... [T]he amusing thing is that being half American, I am absurdly ‘pro’ that extraordinary people. But what I said... is, with respect, not an opinion, but a fact, as everyone with a nodding acquaintance with the American situation knows. Ce n’est que la

⁵⁷ Royal Society, *Emigration of Scientists from the United Kingdom* (London: Royal Society, 1963).

⁵⁸ Hailsham’s speech was reported in *The Times*, 28 February 1963, 4, f.

⁵⁹ CUA, Degr.M.14, File ii, Suggested Notice for Publication in the *Reporter*, 22 April 1963.

verité qui pique. But why should Cambridge get so angry? I have never concealed my belief in the need for University expansion here, or ceased to strive to that end.⁶⁰

Jennings agreed. In a letter to Korner, he insisted that ‘a most dangerous precedent’ would be set if the University refused an honorary degree simply because some members of the Senate disagreed with views honestly expressed by a recipient. This would make it ‘impossible to confer a degree on any politician, any theologian, any lawyer, any historian, any economist, or any unorthodox scholar’. Now that opposition had been voiced ‘in the most public manner possible’, Jennings urged Korner and those who opposed Hailsham’s nomination ‘in the interests of the University quietly to drop the matter’.⁶¹ Korner and his supporters refused, and a formal vote of the university took place in the Senate House on 11 May 1963. Of the 586 votes cast, 304 were in favour, 284 against. An unabashed Hailsham received his doctorate the following month.⁶²

The Hailsham affair, like the MacDonald controversy, provoked fresh calls to tighten Cambridge’s procedures. The outcome was a more restrictive policy designed to head off controversy. The University replaced its requirement of a simple majority of the Council of Senate, by a rule requiring the support of a nomination by at least thirteen of its seventeen members.⁶³ This accentuated a shift towards academics. During the 1950s, 44 per cent of Cambridge honorary degrees were awarded to academics, and

⁶⁰ CUA, Degr.M.14, File ii, Hailsham to Jennings, 26 March 1963.

⁶¹ CUA, Degr.M.14, File ii, Jennings to Korner, 2 April 1963. A number of senior Cambridge academics defended Hailsham’s nomination, including the astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle. See *The Times*, 25 March 1963, 10g.

⁶² *The Times*, 10 May 1963, 7f; and *The Times*, 13 May 1963, 5e; *The Times*, 7 June 1963, 16b. According to Hailsham’s biographer, the Latin eulogium read at the conferment included the lines ‘Not without the dust of conflict has the man who is now brought before us won this palm of ours’. See Geoffrey Lewis, *Lord Hailsham: A Life* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 42-3. Hailsham smiled at the time, but wrote with real bitterness about the episode in his memoirs. See Lord Hailsham, *A Sparrow’s Flight: The Memoirs of Lord Hailsham of Marylebone* (London: Collins, 1990), 328-330.

⁶³ CUA, Degr.M.14, File iii, Council of the Senate, 11 November 1963, Minute 84.

just 17 per cent to serving or former politicians and heads of state. By the 1960s, the analogous figures were 62 per cent and three per cent, respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1 Professional Backgrounds of Honorary Doctorates,
1951-2000 (as percentages of total)

	Oxford (N=581)						Cambridge (N=450)					
	51- 60	61- 70	71- 80	81- 90	91- 00	51- 00	51- 60	61- 70	71- 80	81- 90	91- 00	51- 00
Academics I: Sciences	19	20	24	24	23	22	21	30	28	26	27	26
Academics II: Arts, Humanities, Social Sc.	27	31	24	26	19	26	23	32	33	24	20	26
Literature & Fine Arts	13	22	23	16	27	19	14	14	10	12	16	13
Business & Industry	7	4	7	3	2	5	7	3	4	9	16	8
Politics & Royalty	23	13	12	19	17	17	17	3	14	11	10	11
Other	11	11	10	13	12	11	18	18	11	18	12	16

By the 1970s, the difference between the two universities was quite marked. Oxford rarely awarded more than 45% of its honorary degrees to academics, and frequently gave over 20% to politicians. But Oxford was obliged to review its policy following two high-profile disputes.⁶⁴ In 1975, a proposal to award an honorary degree to President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the Oxford-educated Prime Minister of Pakistan, was contested by academics led by Richard Gombrich, then University Lecturer in Oriental Languages and a Fellow of Balliol College. In Gombrich's view, 'If it is the custom to give honorary degrees to Oxford men who attain power, without any regard to how the

⁶⁴ The waning of government influence on Oxford and Cambridge during the 1960s was discussed in a memorandum, prepared in February 1966 by the Foreign Office Cultural Relations Department. This ruefully noted that both universities had 'shown little willingness to respond to Foreign Office recommendations since the war'. See NA FO 924/1579 and FCO 17/384.

power has been gained or used, I condemn that custom'.⁶⁵ Bhutto's opponents cited his shaky commitment to democracy and his alleged protection of West Pakistani soldiers accused of murder and human rights abuses in the former East Pakistan.

Congregation met on 11 February 1975 to debate the matter. To the dismay of the Foreign Office, and despite support from Hugh Trevor-Roper -- who lauded his old friend's 'consistent commitment to civilian government' -- and from H.L.A Hart, the distinguished lawyer and Principal of Brasenose College, Congregation narrowly rejected Bhutto's nomination by 155 votes to 153.⁶⁶ A bizarre twist followed when it was discovered that two anti-Bhutto votes had been cast by a pair of suitably attired but constitutionally ineligible postgraduate students who had wandered into the Sheldonian to listen. The embarrassed Vice-Chancellor (the economic historian and Master of Jesus College H. J. Habakkuk) was obliged to announce a second Congregation on 25 February which turned out to be both better attended and better organised.⁶⁷

This time the result was beyond question, and Bhutto's nomination was rejected by 239 votes to 183. Trevor-Roper was unimpressed: 'It has been a most disagreeable episode', he informed journalists, 'which has been damaging for Mr Bhutto politically and has brought the university into disrepute'.⁶⁸ Bhutto did his best to dismiss the humiliation, joking that 'If I'd sat for the damned thing I'd have got it easier'.⁶⁹ The farcical initial vote provoked a vigorous critique of Oxford as a cloistered haven for sherry-sodden, politically irresponsible academics who had refused to acknowledge the serious consequences of their 'parlour games'. In a leading article tellingly entitled 'Humiliation by Degrees', The Times sounded a note of caution: 'When universities

⁶⁵ 'Oxford Don Opposes an Honour for Mr Bhutto', *The Times*, 22 January 1975. Dr Gombrich was elected to the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford the following year.

⁶⁶ 'Oxford Vote Rejects Degree for Mr Bhutto', *The Times*, 12 February 1975, 1a. For comments on the debate, see the letters pages of *The Times* on 7 February 1975, 15d; 17 February 1975, 17f; 19 February 1975, 15g; 21 February 1975, 15g; 25 February 1975, 15e-f.

⁶⁷ 'New Oxford vote on Bhutto degree', *The Times*, 20 January 1975, 1f-h. If the two ineligible votes had been discarded, Habakkuk's casting vote would have decided the matter in favour of Bhutto.

⁶⁸ '56 Oxford Votes Cost Mr Bhutto Honorary Degree', *The Times*, 26 February 1975, 2d-g.

⁶⁹ George Hutchinson, 'That Oxford Degree is the Least of Mr Bhutto's Troubles', *The Times*, 8 March 1975, 12a-f. Bhutto was hanged four years later, following a military coup and a controversial conviction for allegedly arranging the murder of a political opponent.

involve themselves in political judgements they must do so with their eyes fully open. The repercussions of mistakes can extend far beyond the academic world and affect the national interests of Britain and other countries'.⁷⁰

The same arguments surfaced a decade later in the most hotly disputed of all Oxford's degree controversies. In late 1984, the Hebdomadal Council announced its intention to award an honorary degree to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. As an Oxford graduate, Thatcher might have expected to receive an honorary degree from her *alma mater*. The preceding six Oxford-educated Prime Ministers had been so honoured, either before or early in their periods of office.⁷¹ Media coverage had been entirely celebratory, the highlight being the 1958 Encænna, when degrees were awarded to the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, and the Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell, both Oxford alumni.⁷²

Thatcher's candidature had been considered on several occasions, dating back to her initial election as Conservative Party leader in 1975, but was each time rejected as politically contentious. The landslide Conservative victory in the 1983 general election persuaded the University that an honorary degree could safely be proposed in line with custom, although it was deemed prudent to delay matters by a year to avoid any impression that the award was a partisan celebration of her electoral victory. By the time the degree was awarded, Thatcher would be in her second term and sixth year as Prime Minister; long enough for the antipathy she aroused among liberal academics to have mellowed.

This calculation proved wildly optimistic. Thatcher's populist conservatism was opposed by the widest spectrum of political opinion, from 'one-nation' conservatives to die-hard socialists.⁷³ The fact that her nomination came in the wake of public expenditure cuts, and amidst the 1984-5 coal strike, a defining event in post-war British labour relations, lent political 'edge' to the proceedings. Within days of its

⁷⁰ *The Times*, 26 February 1975, 15a-c. See also the letters page in *The Times*, 28 February 1975, 15e-f.

⁷¹ The only non-Oxford post-war Prime Ministers were Winston Churchill and James Callaghan, neither of whom attended university. Churchill received an Oxford honorary degree as early as 1925.

⁷² 'Oxford Honours Mr. Macmillan and Mr. Gaitskell: 'Schizophrenic Task' for the Public Orator', *The Times*, 26 June 1958, 6, f.

⁷³ The antagonism was mutual as Thatcher was deeply suspicious of academia. See John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Vol. II - The Iron Lady* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), 395-400.

announcement, a statement appeared in the Oxford University Gazette opposing Thatcher's nomination on the grounds that her government had 'done deep and systematic damage to the whole public education system' and threatened the very status of 'Britain as a scientific nation'. The statement, signed by 275 academics, including twenty-three professors, and subsequently endorsed by a petition signed by thousands of the University's students, concluded that 'it would be inappropriate for any academic institution to respond by giving its highest token of approval [to Mrs Thatcher], and especially inappropriate for Oxford to do so. The university is widely perceived to stand at the pinnacle of British education'.⁷⁴ Prominent among the signatories were Sir Kenneth Dover (a distinguished classicist and President of Corpus Christi College), Lord McCarthy (a specialist in industrial relations and Fellow of Nuffield College), Denis Noble (a leading cardiovascular physiologist and Fellow of Balliol College) and Peter Pulzer (Gladstone Professor of Government and Political Administration and Fellow of All Souls).

The University's counter-statement appealed directly to custom and precedence. According to this argument, Thatcher's nomination had no political purpose, and simply acknowledged the remarkable career of a former student who had democratically attained highest office. The fact that Thatcher was Britain's first woman prime minister added lustre to her achievement.⁷⁵ Despite these soothing words, the scale of the opposition was sufficient to require a formal vote of Congregation, which was held on 29 January 1985. Most commentators, including the educational correspondent of The Times, assumed that the University's appeal to tradition would win the day. Most letters received by the Conservative broadsheets before the Congregation lamented the fact that a vote was taking place at all.⁷⁶ Max Beloff, doyen of political scientists at All Souls and one of Pulzer's predecessors in the Gladstone chair, mounted a spirited defence of Thatcher. Contrary to the popular view, Beloff insisted, the Prime Minister had shown a 'constant interest in the advancement of science... and [a] willingness to

⁷⁴ Quoted in Lucy Hodges, 'Oxford Dons Split over Award', *The Times*, 25 January 1985, 1b; and partially in Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 402.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Hodges, *op. cit.* note 74, 1e.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, a.

discuss the conditions for such advancement with the scientific community'.⁷⁷ Lord Goodman, Master of University College and a former legal advisor to Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, added an eloquent justification of the official university line from the perspective of a long-standing opponent of the Conservative Party.⁷⁸

The Sheldonian debate attracted unprecedented media attention. Over 1,000 academic and administrative staff secured tickets for the two-hour event, while hundreds of journalists huddled beneath umbrellas outside. Opposition speakers included Noble, whose comments were greeted with 'long and loud applause', and Pulzer, who clashed with the Warden of his own college, Sir Patrick Neill, whose task it was to issue the formal nomination on behalf of the University. In a speech that deliberately went beyond educational policy, Pulzer claimed that traditions sometimes had to be overturned. Rejecting the nomination would send a clear message 'to the government over which our Prime Minister presides... that enough is enough... To say 'no' is to draw attention to the chasm which now exists between Government and the academic community in this country'.⁷⁹

The scale of the anti-Thatcher victory, by 738 votes to 319 votes, surprised even its proponents. The opposition Labour Party wasted no time in exploiting the Prime Minister's embarrassment. Giles Radice, Labour's education spokesman, expressed 'delight' at the result. Downing Street, on the other hand, issued a brief comment stating the Prime Minister's view that 'if they [the Oxford academic community] don't wish to confer an honour, she is the last person to wish to receive it', a comment one biographer rightly claims contained 'an undertone of contempt rather than bitterness'.⁸⁰

Those who supported Thatcher's nomination were outraged. In a leader mysteriously titled 'The Sale of Honours', The Times thundered against the 'militantly left-wing... Marxist dons' who had 'spearheaded' what it called a 'nasty campaign which has oscillated between political spite and logic-chopping'. By rejecting the Prime Minister, 'Oxford has made it clear that an honorary degree for anyone in public life

⁷⁷ Max Beloff, 'Degree for Mrs Thatcher' [letter], *The Times*, 28 January 1985, 13g.

⁷⁸ Lord Goodman, 'Degree for Mrs Thatcher' [letter], *The Times*, 29 January 1985, 11d.

⁷⁹ Lucy Hodges, 'Oxford votes to snub Thatcher', *The Times*, 30 January 1985, 1h.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, back page, a; Campbell, *op. cit.* note 73, 399; and, for the assessment of Thatcher's response, Young, *op. cit.* note 74, 402.

who is concerned with politics is now no more than a political award.’⁸¹ Nicholas Soames, MP, Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Conservative Party Chairman, wrote to Noble denouncing what he called a ‘petty, spiteful and above all else political’ campaign orchestrated by ‘very small men’. The vote, Soames concluded, was ‘a pathetic gesture and a total disgrace’. Another Conservative MP, Harry Greenway, tabled a House of Commons motion attacking Oxford’s ‘grossest discourtesy’ which was signed by over eighty MPs within the first few hours.⁸² A less impassioned debate followed in which the anti-Thatcher vote was repeatedly compared to the 1933 Oxford Union resolution. Both events were depicted as important moments, perhaps even turning points, for the University and for the country as a whole. In one of the more thoughtful commentaries, David Watt argued that Oxford’s rejection of Thatcher revealed ‘a phenomenon of much wider political significance – the possible alienation of the professional middle-classes from the Government’.⁸³

In an interview given to CBS Television in 1985, Thatcher insisted that the Oxford vote had not surprised her because she knew that the University’s arcane procedures could be exploited by her political enemies: ‘that is the way the socialists work. We Conservatives... would never have dreamed of opposing Harold Wilson as a Labour Prime Minister for an honorary degree’.⁸⁴ But it is difficult to believe that she was unmoved by Oxford’s rejection. Following her retirement, her official papers were deposited at Churchill College, Cambridge, and her foundation provided a £2 million endowment in 1997 to Cambridge’s Judge Business School. She even accepted an invitation to become a Companion of the Guild of Cambridge Benefactors.

⁸¹ ‘Sale of honours’ [leader article], *The Times*, 30 January 1985, 13a-c.

⁸² Lucy Hodges, ‘Oxford’s Rejection of Thatcher “Spiteful”’, *The Times*, 31 January 1985, 3c.

⁸³ David Watt, ‘Does Oxford Speak for the Nation?’ *The Times*, 1 January 1985, 12f-g. For other remarks, including an waspish comment of disapproval from Lord Stockton (Harold Macmillan), Oxford’s Chancellor, see *The Times*, 1 February 1985, 13d-f; 2 February 1985, 6f-g; 2 February 1985, 7d-f; 4 February 1985, 1f; and 3 March 1985, 22c-f.

⁸⁴ Campbell, *op. cit.* note 73, 399; Diane Sawyer, ‘TV Interview for CBS with Margaret Thatcher’ in Christopher Collins (ed.), *Margaret Thatcher: Complete Public Statements 1945-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), on CD-Rom. There is a revealing silence on the Oxford vote in Thatcher’s memoirs. See Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993).

The Thatcher row persuaded Oxford that a more cautious stance - precisely the position taken up in Cambridge after the Hailsham dispute - was the only way to avoid controversy in an era of intrusive media scrutiny.⁸⁵ In an interview in 2000 with Boris Johnson, then editor of *The Spectator*, Lord Jenkins, Oxford's Chancellor from 1986 to 2003, dismissed speculation that the University was poised to nominate Prime Minister Tony Blair, another Oxford graduate, for an honorary degree. '[W]e have rather lost our nerve about politicians now', Jenkins ruefully observed.⁸⁶

In recent years, the policies of the two universities have converged, and it seems that Cambridge, rather than Oxford, has made the more controversial decisions. In 1992, a proposal to award an honorary doctorate to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida provoked a *non placet* vote, initiated by philosophers who challenged the originality and significance of Derrida's ideas. Some 103 academics signed two

⁸⁵ Oxford's inability to control the media during the mid-1980s can be contrasted with its influence over the press in earlier decades. When the *Daily Telegraph* ran an article on 14 October 1952 about Oxford's proposal to award an honorary degree to Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, the millionaire South African diamond and gold entrepreneur, in which it was gently suggested that 'it is not impossible that Sir Ernest will return the compliment in his own fashion', Veale reprimanded the editor for allowing such an 'extremely inopportune' comment to appear. 'Degrees are the one commodity in the world that cannot be bought', insisted Veale. See OUA, UR6/HD/6, 6, Veale to Coote, 18 October 1952.

⁸⁶ Quoted in John Clare and George Jones, 'Brown's Oxford row costs Blair honorary degree', *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 June 2000, 12a-c. Despite this general mood of caution, both Oxford and Cambridge have in recent years awarded honorary degrees to foreign heads of state, including Queen Margrethe II of Denmark (Oxford 1992, Cambridge 1975), King Juan Carlos of Spain (Oxford 1986, Cambridge 1988), Queen Sophia of Spain (Cambridge 1988, Oxford 1989), President Mary Robinson of Ireland (Cambridge 1991, Oxford 1993), President Richard von Weizsäcker of Germany (Oxford 1988, Cambridge 1994) and President Nelson Mandela of South Africa (Oxford and Cambridge 1996). Cambridge's decision to award an honorary degree to the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1998 in recognition of his role in the re-unification of Germany and the introduction of a common European currency, survived a *non placet* vote by 1,089 to 321 following criticism that the award was too close to the German general elections and would be construed as interference. See CUR, 22 April 1998, 551-553. Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratically elected but imprisoned Burmese leader and winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, was awarded an *in absentia* Cambridge degree at the same 1998 ceremony. The chair in which she would have been seated was left symbolically empty.

petitions, one of which insisted that Derrida's ideas denied 'the distinction between fact and fiction, observation and imagination, evidence and prejudice... [and] make complete nonsense of science, technology and medicine. In politics, they deprive the mind of its defences against dangerously irrational ideologies and regimes'.⁸⁷ Their campaign was supported by nineteen philosophers from other countries who signed a letter in *The Times*.⁸⁸ Derrida survived the vote -- which was widely interpreted as a collision between Anglo-Saxon and continental modes of philosophical inquiry -- and later criticised his opponents for misusing the press to acquire 'a semblance of authority that has no relation to their own work', although he also noted that the controversy had only increased public interest in his writings.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

Despite their many similarities, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge have contrasting reputations in British cultural life. Oxford has traditionally been seen as an outward-looking, politically-preoccupied, arts-dominated university with close connections to political and financial power in London. Cambridge, on the other hand, is often regarded as introspective and science-dominated, set apart from the grubby worlds of politics and commerce in the isolation of the misty Fenland. The list of Chancellors selected by the two universities since the beginning of the 20th century underlines this distinction.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ CUR, 20 May 1992, 687-8.

⁸⁸ Barry Smith et al, 'Derrida Degree a Matter of Honour' [letter], *The Times*, 9 June 1992, 13c-d. See also Matthew d'Ancona, 'A Storm in the Cloisters', *The Times*, 9 May 1992, 12a-e.

⁸⁹ The votes were cast 336 in favour, 204 against. See CUR, 20 May 1992, 68. Derrida criticised comments on the episode appear in Jacques Derrida, '*Honoris Causa*: This is also very funny', in Elisabeth Weber (ed.), *Points : - Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 399-421.

⁹⁰ Oxford's Chancellors included Lord Curzon (1907-1925), Lord Cave (1925-1928), Viscount Grey (1928-1933), Lord Halifax (1933-1959), Earl Stockton (1960-1986), Lord Jenkins (1986-2003) and Lord Patten (2003-date), all active politicians before or during their tenure. Cambridge's Chancellors include the Duke of Devonshire (1892-1908), Lord Rayleigh (1908-1915), Earl Balfour (1919-1930), Earl Baldwin (1930-1947), Jan Smuts (1948-1950), Lord Tedder (1950-1967), Lord Adrian (1967-1976) and the Duke of Edinburgh (1976-present), a far less overtly political group.

The honorary degrees conferred by the two universities in the early and middle decades of the 20th century also demonstrate the power of self-perpetuating historical tradition. Both universities sought to use honorary degrees to establish new international ‘alliances’, within and beyond the academic world, in line with their distinctive self-images. Their decisions were often controversial, especially in Oxford where the government intervened directly and consistently. The two universities observed each other carefully, however, and gradually re-defined their policies in relation to one another and in response to controversies. As a consequence of this ‘saga of mutual imitation’, a common policy on honorary degrees emerged in the latter part of the 20th century, shaped partly by a general desire to avoid controversy.⁹¹

Current procedures are extremely rigorous and only the most internationally renowned academics and public servants are considered for honorary degrees. Those deemed worthy join a very select group whose numbers have become smaller and more international with the passage of time. Within this constituency is an even more exclusive ‘club’, the past and present members of which number just 360, who received honorary degrees from both universities in the course of the 20th century. Oxford and Cambridge now disperse honorary degrees to reinforce their wider cultural and intellectual authority, and to underline their political independence rather than their connections with government.

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⁹¹ Quotation from Brooke, *op. cit.* note 3, 16.

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Figure 1: Honorary Degrees awarded by Oxford and Cambridge, 1900-2000

Figure 2: Countries of Residence of Recipients of Honorary Doctorates, 1951 to 2000