



«What's a pinko like you doing at a dinner like this?» some of my chums have been asking. Let me remind you that the first of the string of European revolutions of 1848 was precipitated by a clumsy attempt by the police to close down a dinner held by a contrarian banqueting club.

The idea of the Worcester SCR as a contrarian dining club is particularly apposite tonight.

Now I haven't mastered the art of false modesty well enough to be able to respond to Don's and Dan's kind words in the customary way.

And I am very sorry that nearly everybody here has heard nearly all of my anecdotes.

That is not so much an apology as a regret -- over the years you have all heard slightly different variants of these anecdotes. And sometimes the differences have not been so slight.

So if I were the kind of person who prays, then I might have prayed that you never compared notes on these. For as my close friends and family will tell you, and as you

may well have figured out for yourselves, I am not one to resist the temptation to turn a SHORT story into a TALL story.

My psychoanalyst told me once that I shouldn't feel so guilty about this and that people should think of my embroidered stories as parables -- fictitious narratives by which moral matters are conveyed.

At least if I had had a psychoanalyst this is surely what she would have said.

Linda, Sam, and Laura have been less forgiving than the psychoanalyst would have been, and they have been training me to dispense with the embroidery.

And I must say that in recent years there has been no need for embroidery. The unembroidered truth has been enough to satisfy anybody with a taste for the surreal, the comic, or the bizarre.

I don't know quite how the official history of the University of Oxford will record the battles against the attempted managerialist coups that took place from 2005 to 2008. Official histories tend to present such battles as if they are

conducted rationally and decorously, and respecting the constitution. But this one wasn't.

If Robin Briggs and I ever get round to writing the participants' account of the governance battles that we promised ourselves we'd write, then we will have a lot to relate that is undecorous. A few more of the great and good will have to be allowed to discredit themselves before some of this can be told without more spurious libel writs.

This brings me to my first thank-you. To the College as a whole for giving moral support and comfort to those of us who were closely engaged in this battle for so long. From the senior members who backed us in Congregation, to the SCR staff and Porters who fed us Guinness and cheered us as we went off to yet another debate, there was nothing but support. Even if you thought we were self-important and quixotic loonies you never told us that. At least not to our faces.

Our side won the first match in Congregation with a large majority; and at this point Worcester began to get a reputation for being a college of contrarians.

This is said to be why the former vice-Chancellor wrote to Dick Smethurst to ask him to «call off your Hounds.» And it is why the core of the organised opposition started calling ourselves «the Hounds» and meeting every Thursday lunchtime.¹

We won the second match with an even larger majority after two well-attended Congregation debates and a postal vote. Many Congregation members were irritated that after the passing of an amendment that we had opposed at the first debate, the University Press Office forgot that it was not the mouthpiece of the University executive but of the

University as a whole and announced a victory for the vice-Chancellor's party to the Press.

After these debates the vice-Chancellor withdrew from the fray -- somewhat to the frustration of his lieutenants and his patrons. He deserves much more credit for this than he has been given.

And then there was a third match -- this time a proxy match with HEFCE, which still had the managerialist bit between its teeth. It was played out in the Audit and Scrutiny Committee over the most stressful 18 months of my life. If we prevailed here it was because we constructed a coalition on that committee, and later on Council, that saw the wisdom of the governance ball being kicked into the long grass. The spectacular evidence, arriving during the opening spasms of the credit crunch, of the failures of corporate governance methods identical to those being pushed by HEFCE meant that this could no longer be presented by our opponents as a battle between portswilling reactionaries and businesslike modernizers.

I learned during this period that we should look very carefully at the intellect, at the level of commitment, and above all at the true extent of the independence of people that head hunters deliver to us in packages labelled *pro bono*.

Our tendency to Hyacinthe Bucket class-consciousness too often makes us defer to the currently very rich, currently very well-connected or currently very powerful. We really should keep our critical faculties intact in this domain.

More recently there have been further signs of contrarianism rooted in Worcester, and they also deserve celebrating.

This time last year, when the autumn's Tygers of Wrath had been caged and

¹We continued to meet under this name for several years, but there was a risk to this that we didn't anticipate: when I left a notice up on my College room door one day, saying «Hounds Meeting, 1 o'clock», the door was vandalised by animal liberationists. I guess I was lucky not to have been given the Blakemore treatment (nail bombs).

kettled, and while the Horses of Instruction were conducting business-as-usual, and in the face of passivity and despair about the Coalition government's emerging marketization programme for the Universities, the Oxford University Campaign for Higher Education was founded here -- in this very room -- and decided to go on the offensive.

OUCHE! took the series of initiatives that led to Congregation declaring that the University has «No confidence in the policies of the minister for the Universities», and this helped to kick-start a much broader «No Confidence» movement in Universities.

Shaming the scholarly nomenclature of the UK into putting up some kind of argument against this very damaging programme may not, in the end, prove enough to defeat it. But it would have been truly shameful if Oxford had simply kept its head down as it has so often in the past.

Robert Gildea, Conrad Leyser, and John Parrington played important roles in this; and David Barclay's and Kate Tunstall's contributions were decisive. I thank them all for their tolerant comradeship, their sense of purpose, and their commitment. And maybe one day you will thank them too.

When I retired from Worcester, it was -- at least in principle -- a retirement from my day job here, which was to teach Computation: «Computer Science» as I must now remember to call it. In that job I was blessed with nearly thirty cohorts of students who collectively gave our college the reputation of sustaining the best results in the computing sciences of any in Oxford. I thank them all for this.

My contribution was minimal -- I admitted talented students and then got out of their way. By this I mean that I avoided the needless testing regime that can be so enervating and demoralising for students with great potential. We should trust ourselves to trust our students.

Working with Tony Corner and Dan Lunn, when I first arrived, was extraordinarily easy: they encouraged me to take risks at admission time; they gave me all the credit when the risks paid off; and shared the blame with me when they didn't. More recently Richard Earl and Endre Suli and Robin Knight were wonderfully unselfish in their approach to the students we taught together. And Dick was always generous enough to treat our students' successes as if they were mine.

Michael Goldsmith has, for a decade, been -- well -- a Goldsmith *sui generis*. Without him the reputation for Computer Science here would be much diminished. I have been lucky in being allowed to maintain the fiction that I ever taught him anything. I want to thank him; and you should continue to treasure him.

I used the word «extraordinary» in relation to starting here because I know that Computation tutors in other colleges have always had a hell of a time convincing their colleges that our subject is worth teaching. I thank you for keeping the the faith and appointing a new Tutorial Fellow: I wish him well.

When I first came here, some humanities colleagues evidently thought I was going to keep hand-operated adding machines in my room. But as you know, the closest I got to that was to keep a giant pinball machine there for many years as a prophylactic against being given responsible jobs here. My stratagem *almost* worked. But then the pinball machine broke, and you gave me the committee from hell to chair for several years. But at least you believed us when we told you what you needed to do to fix IT here; and I can tell you now, with a term at Magdalen under my belt, that you should thank yourselves warmly for believing us. Worcester has unparalleled IT facilities and support. They could serve the College even better if only there were less overt suspicion of students knowledgeable in the technologies. When our alumni reminisce

even a spurious memory of a single officious encounter can trump hundreds of benign tutorials.

Now's not the time for an exercise in etymology, but «retirer» means, literally, «to withdraw.» I have kept my word to the colleague who reminded me of this a couple of years ago, and have indeed withdrawn. I suppose you could measure the extent of my institutionalization at Worcester by my initial surprise at being able to survive outside the psychological curtilage it provided for me for so long, and by my amazement that Magdalen would welcome a wanderer like me. They have generously given me a stipend and a lovely room to continue plotting from for a while.

But my heart is still here. No doubt nostalgia modulated by narcissism leads us all to see the institution we need to see; and one's short memory for pain helps.

Even what I long ago and stupidly took to

be a feud with Edward Wilson seems in retrospect to have been conducted in spring sunshine. The very ferocious affairs of the «lucidity prize» and its ilk now look a whole lot more like performance-art than quarrels. May he and his apples continue to flourish!

My devigorniansation has been conducted in the manner of the Cheshire-cat. I leave you with my smile and with my sincere thanks for your patience, your erudite conversation and your camaraderie over the years.

Government has not given you enough time to resolve hard issues by waiting. Things are going to be much tougher, and it will take skill and empathy to dispel the fog of *sauve-qui-peut* that could so easily envelop academia. I wish you and our college good luck.

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