

AN AMERICAN AT OXFORD

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In 1997 I took a chair at Oxford after 25 years at Harvard, Stanford, NYU, MIT and Cornell. Newcomers quickly see things that need to be changed, American newcomers especially, and it wasn't long before I had a list of dozens. I devised a chart of all the oddities of the Oxford system, with arrows from one box to another explaining for example how it is that the college system necessitates university-wide examinations, which in turn give rise to a Grey Book full of synopses that are hard to modify, thence implying that lecturers dare not innovate in the lecture hall; and so on in an elaborate model of all the forces and constraints that make Oxford tick so Oxfordly. Regrettably I did not find the time to share the details of this analysis with the many who might have benefited from it, and as time passed and my love of this extraordinary place grew, the urgency of my interlocking observations dimmed. Now I am preparing for a year abroad on sabbatical, and when I return, it will not be as a newcomer but as part of the furniture. If I am ever to share a few thoughts with others, now is the time, for I think I have reached some kind of maximum of the product of my growing understanding of Oxford and my diminishing recollection of another corner of the world; and because that list of dozens has settled itself down to two that really seem to matter.

One thing that strikes an American here is how few of us there are. It is not that Oxford is just English, as one might have imagined. What is curious is that the non-English among us seem divided in equal numbers into Scottish, Irish, Canadian, Australian, New Zealander, American, and Other. You would never know from an Oxford SCR that the population of the United States is greater than that of, say, Australia. The reasons for this are not hard to spot. One is cultural, for there are all kinds of bonds between Commonwealth countries that are distinctly closer than those with the USA. The other is financial, for whereas Australian and even Canadian salaries are not far off our scale, American academics travel Business Class. I took a 30% pay cut to come to Oxford, but the true disparity is greater than that, for my salary would have grown steadily in the US, whereas here, it pretty much sits still. And so it is that you will almost never find an American installed at Oxford who does not have family connections with the UK. With parents who studied at Cambridge and a wife from Lancashire, I am entirely typical. Will you think me a fool if I tell you that one of the satisfactions about working here is that I am surrounded by people a little less worldly than those I knew before?

Oxford is far more different organisationally from Harvard, Stanford, NYU, MIT and Cornell than any of these are from each other. Those universities differ about as our colleges do, which is to say, in ways that seem important to insiders but are pretty much invisible at a distance. By contrast an American arrival at Oxford quickly encounters the unfamiliar. There is the charming obsession with written committee minutes, that comfortable ritual of proceeding yet again from Matters Arising to Any Other Business -- with its happy corollary that a promise secured in writing will not be annulled when the current Dean steps down. There is the antenatal beat of the cycle of Weeks 1 to 8, so firmly established that it would seem that my college has held a College Meeting at 4pm on Wednesday of Fifth Week ever since the thirteenth century. There are the glamorous dinners -- who would have guessed that one of the great pleasures of Oxford is the food? There are the miniature lecture courses and the vast Easter vacations; the £30 termly payments for supervising graduate students; the oddity that student attendance at my lectures is optional whereas attendance at classes taught by my graduate students is mandatory; the disjunction of duties between tutors and professors; the peculiar usages of words I thought I knew like "teach" and "class", and of words I never knew like "consilium"; the walls between courses of study so high that numbers of students in each field are more or less fixed for eternity; and democratic management structures so entrenched that my department can hardly add a question about Runge-Kutta formulae to the numerical analysis exam without first soliciting comments on the proposal from Statistics, Chemistry, and Earth Sciences.

Observing these differences with fascination, I learned a couple of lessons. One was that although everybody here has spent a year at Colorado or Columbia, Oxford academics basically don't know how American universities work. They know how they feel, but that is another matter. Time and again in conversations I have discovered that the person I am speaking with did not realise that "need-blind admissions" does not mean that finance is no obstacle to attending a top American university, that graduate students in America usually begin their PhDs without knowing who their supervisor will be, or that faculty members in American science departments supplement their published incomes by an additional 2/9 of "summer salary". The other lesson I learned is that when you see a difference and point it out to somebody, they don't hear you. Of course, nothing is more tiresome than an American explaining how we do it better at Princeton or Yale; but I am convinced that even apart from my accent, there is a force that makes descriptions of foreign systems fail to sink in. Notions absorbed intellectually just don't take root if they haven't been lived. Novelists know this, but I was slow to know it. I now realise that Oxford and Harvard advance into the future only weakly coupled, communicating mainly by osmosis, and there is not much I'm going to do to change this. I used to wonder why a foreign student would talk about "my country" rather than Brazil or Malaysia, as if I couldn't possibly be interested in the particulars of his background, but now I think I am coming to understand.

Yet the facts remain that Oxford faces serious problems and that perspective from outside may help in confronting them. And thus I would like to propose two changes that Oxford could make, two that still seem to me important even as others fade. These proposals are not original, nor do I pretend that I can formulate them as well as others have done. One is small, and the UK would love it, but here at Oxford it is regarded as very big and is widely opposed. The other is very big indeed, and perhaps more agreeable to Oxford, but the rest of the UK would have to be carefully brought on side. It is worth the effort. These two changes could alter the shape of Oxford's progress into the 21st century from decline to advance.

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The single most astonishing thing about Oxford is the way in which we admit undergraduates. This is done independently by 30 colleges, and within each college, independently by more than a dozen subjects. So across Oxford, roughly speaking, you have 500 two-man admissions committees acting autonomously and imposing different standards. They communicate, sharing candidates and information to a degree, but the communication is imperfect and there is no sharing of power. The great majority of Oxford's academics belong to one of these bodies: all of them, roughly speaking, apart from the Professors. Thus each December, a thousand of the world's finest scholars devote a week of their lives to the task of separating one 18-year-old from another. Meanwhile the lucky 18-year-olds come to town for an extended visit. Many stay for two or three days, during which time tutors make noble efforts to get to know them individually as people, to get beneath the surface, to discover what sort of thinkers they really are. By contrast, when I was flown across the Atlantic as a candidate for lifetime appointment as a Professor, each member of the Electoral Board asked exactly one question and the interview lasted 45 minutes. Then I took the bus back to Heathrow.

I promise you, our friends at Harvard have no idea that Oxford spends its time like this. In a university on that side of the water the process is different. Freshmen are admitted centrally by an admissions office with the help of a few dozen academics rather than a thousand. To most academics, therefore, the exercise is invisible. If you told an American faculty member that everybody at Oxford gives a week to admissions work each December, they would think you were exaggerating. If you told them that this procedure is defended as necessary for forming a personal relationship with these students, their eyes would open wide indeed, for the one thing that is known about Oxford and Cambridge is that

we spend innumerable hours teaching students individually in tutorials. Surely those hundreds of tutorial hours, the envy of other universities around the world, are sufficient for bonding with the students?

As I have watched Oxford's admissions process, I have come to see that it is a lose-lose-lose arrangement. The first loss is this enormous cost in effort, tens of thousands of man-hours, year after year. The second is the inequality of treatment that results. 18-year-olds choose colleges largely at random -- maybe they have a teacher or an uncle who went to X rather than Y -- and then they pay the price when X turns out to be twice as hard to get into. This isn't a matter of bias or incompetence, but of statistics, for inevitably, 500 little applicant pools will have disparate means and variances. Yet the human impact is very real. A centralised committee will never match the heroic care that we currently devote to admissions, but there's the paradox of it: it will yield truer results nonetheless.

The third cost is that the British people condemn us for clinging to this system. They think our admissions processes are antiquated and biased. We eloquently defend ourselves, arguing that we are not biased, quietly not mentioning that even without bias a system can be unfair. How can we go on, year after year, refusing to change precisely the thing that symbolises to the nation what they think is wrong with Oxford?

So we expend unparalleled effort running a system that gets unfair results and is offensive to the population. We must change this. We must move to centralised admissions.

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We could change our admissions procedures next year, and we should do so. The other item I want to mention is bigger and will take longer.

We hear a lot, and care a lot, about "world-class universities". Administrators are cagey about providing a list, but the fact is, many of us believe that the universities that are really at the top worldwide are Oxford, Cambridge, and a handful in America, notably Harvard, Stanford, Princeton and Yale. The world has many excellent universities besides these, and yet, excellent as Paris or Berlin or Tokyo may be, most of us believe that they are not in the same league. Thus, as is often pointed out, the competitors we at Oxbridge really care about are all American. What is less often mentioned is that they are all private.

Our VC sometimes makes a comparison with the University of California, Berkeley. Berkeley is outstanding, the very best of a dozen first-rate big "state schools" in the USA. Yet it is not Harvard, and it is not Oxford either. The anomaly, as the VC then points out, is that Oxford's budget is comparable to Berkeley's, not Harvard's. In our self-selected peer group, we are poorer than Yale, poorer than Princeton, and far, far poorer than Harvard or Stanford. How do these four do it? They are private universities. They receive large sums for research from the US government, which also helps students with Pell Grants and other schemes, but they don't get a dollar of direct per-student maintenance support. Their budgets are vast -- more than two billion dollars per year each for Harvard and Stanford, three times the figure for Oxford. Besides research foundations, the money comes from big tuition fees, big annual gifts, and big endowments. The gifts and endowments, as we well know, come from successful and wealthy alumni operating in a culture where giving to one's alma mater has long been customary and respected.

What would change if we were private? Money first of all. It would take time and effort, but Oxford is world-famous and we could do it. Second of all, spirit. In today's climate we are endlessly chipped away at, just like the U. of Delaware this year or the U. of Washington last year or UC Berkeley the year before. We are perpetually criticised and monitored and assessed and controlled, and it saps our courage. Meanwhile Harvard is cocky and dares to lead the US with bold educational experiments. If we are a world-class university, we should be cocky too.

We can go on reasoning with Parliament, begging HEFCE, entreating the UK to fund us better and control us less. We can continue on our course of trying to ratchet up the gifts and bequests from Old Members to this famous British state school on the Thames, just as Berkeley and Delaware and the other state schools across the Atlantic are already doing. Or we can take the decision to lift the whole process to a higher level. We can embrace the reality that there is not a single state-run university, not one on earth, that Oxford and Cambridge are worried about. It is private universities that we are watching pull ahead. If Oxford is to be great in the 21st century, _we must become private_.

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Let us make these changes with boldness and style! Let us centralise admissions not as an act of defeat but as a step forward! Let us pursue the possibility of going private loudly and proudly, persuading our alumni that this would be a historic moment at which we would need a historic flood of support! Let us persuade the nation to let us build an Oxford greater than ever, more determined than ever to welcome talent from every corner of society, more passionate than ever about contributing to the future of Britain! Let this wonderful university which I have come to love, for the first time since I crossed the Atlantic, stop reacting to public opinion and start to lead it!