

# OXFORD

## MAGAZINE

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This season's climate news fits an increasingly familiar pattern. At home there are shock, recrimination and hasty promises of future action following "once in a hundred years" floods. At the recent COP29 in Baku nations struggled to reach an internationally agreed outcome as more countries fail to attend or withdraw midway in protest. The COP's hard won compromise promises may well be meaningless given the prospect of the incoming Trump government's stated intention to withdraw from the Paris goals and its possible renegeing on the commitments signed up to by the US at the COP, along with reversing green initiatives brought in by President Biden.

As UN *Climate Change News* of 24 November 2024 reported; "The UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) closed today with a new finance goal to help countries to protect their people and economies against climate disasters, and share in the vast benefits of the clean energy boom. With a central focus on climate finance, COP29 brought together nearly 200 countries in Baku, Azerbaijan, and reached a breakthrough agreement that will:

Triple finance to developing countries, from the previous goal of USD 100 billion annually, to USD 300 billion annually by 2035.

Secure efforts of all actors to work together to scale up finance to developing countries, from public and private sources, to the amount of USD 1.3 trillion per year by 2035.

....The new finance goal at COP29 builds on significant strides forward on global climate action at COP27, which agreed an historic Loss and Damage Fund, and COP28, which delivered a global agreement to transition away from all fossil fuels in energy sys-

## Adaptation or mitigation?

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tems swiftly and fairly, triple renewable energy and boost climate resilience. ...The finance agreement at COP29 comes as stronger national climate plans (Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDCs) become due from all countries next year. These new climate plans must cover all greenhouse gases and all sectors, to keep the 1.5°C warming limit within reach.

COP29 saw two G20 countries – the UK and Brazil – signal clearly that they plan to ramp up climate action in their NDCs 3.0, because they are entirely in the interests of their economies and peoples."

The pundits are still trying to explain Trump's November election victory but it seems clear that climate change was not among the determining factors for voters, even though 48 of the US's 50 states were officially experiencing moderate or more severe drought at the time of the election, and Florida and adjacent states were recovering from September's Hurricane Helene, one of the deadliest, most damaging – and costly – in US history.

Breaking records apart, coverage of the ongoing environmental collapse only rarely merits mention in the crowded news cycle dominated by wars or the latest celebrity scandals. It is in the nature of 'news' that attention and newsworthiness are fleeting. Like the latest numbers of deaths in Gaza, the inevitable effect of the constant repetition of the same themes is desensitization, fatigue and eventually total disregard. The immediate impacts of the worst climate disasters may be well covered but how often do we get to hear about the later and long lasting consequences for the victims? The COP process itself has lost momentum and any sense of increasing urgency.

All of which highlights the need to consider how

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*...and much more*

public opinion is formed, the role of the various media through which the public are informed and influenced, and especially the nature of the message that is being conveyed. There is one overarching trend that is perhaps most concerning; the erosion of the distinction between adaptation and mitigation. COP29 was primarily concerned with financing ‘Loss and Damage’; i.e. remittance by developed countries of funds to developing countries with the emphasis on reparation and combating the already impacting effects of current climate changes. Although the policy does promote future-focussed clean energy the message is primarily one of adaptation while mitigation features confusingly as only an incidental side issue. Overall there is a crucial failure to deliver the fundamentally important point – that mitigating actions (including the inevitable prospect of restrictive changes in life style) are required *now* in order to forestall even worse climate impacts in the future.

The science of attribution is now well developed; the data are robust enough to justify the statement that a “once in a hundred years” extreme weather event is tending steadily to occur more frequently, and is made that much more likely due to the effect of increased human greenhouse gas emissions. But, unlike weather forecasts with their increasingly frequent yellow or red warnings, climate impact attribution studies do not warn of future predictions and implications. Overcoming the scientists’ understandable reluctance to make predictions which rely on statistical probabilities, the same robust attribution modelling data could equally well be used to produce regular climate change forecasts, say for five or ten years hence. In this way the public may come to understand the crucial need for mitigation as well as adaptation.

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“A magistrates court has acquitted four GPs who blocked Lambeth Bridge in the climate change protest [on 19th April, 2022] led by the Extinction Rebellion (XR). On Tuesday, seven healthcare professionals faced charges of ‘breach of section 14’ of the public order at City of London Magistrates’ Court. These include four GPs – Dr David McKelvey, Dr Chris Newman, Dr Mark Russell, and Dr Patrick Hart – as well as a hospital consultant obstetrician, a clinical psychologist, and a specialist nurse. XR reported that Judge Robinson, who ruled over the case, decided that the necessary steps required for imposing the ‘breach of section 14’ had not been taken. The judge was ‘impressed by the integrity and rationality of their beliefs’ and found doctors’ evidence ‘highly moving’.” (*Pulse*, 18th November, 2022).

Drs Warner and Benn have not been so fortunate. Not only did they go to jail but they were temporarily struck off by the General Medical Council and were no longer licenced to practice as a result of their criminal convictions. Diana Warner, retired as a GP after working for 37 years in surgeries around Bristol, was jailed for six weeks for blocking traffic on the M25 in a Just Stop Oil action, for gluing her hands to court furniture, and for breaching injunctions by protesting with Insulate Britain in 2021 and 2022 on the M25. Sarah Benn, formerly a GP in Birmingham, was arrested after taking part in peaceful demonstrations at the Kings-

bury oil terminal in Warwickshire and was jailed for 32 days. She said that as a doctor, she had a moral duty to take action to protect life and health. Despite there being no concerns over their clinical practice, the Medical Practitioners’ Tribunal Service of the GMC decided to impose a three-month registration suspension on Dr Warner and a five-months suspension on Dr Benn.

In defence of Drs Warner and Benn a 2000-strong group of campaigners have challenged the GMC’s account of its actions, as follows. “It would have been quite possible for the GMC to speak in defence of peaceful civil disobedience at the tribunal, and to stress the overwhelming nature of the mitigating circumstances in these cases. Instead, in both cases, the GMC instructed a lawyer to argue against the defendants’ conscientious insistence upon the ethical necessity of their actions. The lawyers argued that those actions constituted serious professional misconduct for a variety of reasons, and their arguments were then supported without demur by the tribunal. In short, the GMC actively pursued the suspension of Drs Benn and Warner, and the alleged independence for the MPTS is a smokescreen which disguises the responsibility of the GMC for the suspensions in question. Our [earlier] letter called on the GMC ‘to show its support for those’ who are attempting to defend humanity from an existential threat that may, in short order, cause billions of deaths. We are calling for a root-and-branch reassessment of the GMC’s stance in relation to climate protest, and for revisions both to its guidance and to its interpretation of that guidance, in accordance with its overarching duty under the Medical Act 1983 ‘to protect, promote and maintain the health, safety and well-being of the public’. The GMC has admitted past failings in relation to the suspension of homosexual doctors for what was, at the time, criminal behaviour (see <https://www.gmc-uk.org/news/news-archive/gmc-apologises-to-doctors-for-historic-sanctions-based-on-convictions-under-homophobic-laws>), and it will eventually be forced to admit to its failings in respect of climate protesters who have been subject to unjust convictions. The only question is whether it will act quickly enough to forestall societal collapse.”

In its 2024 ‘*Good Medical Practice*’ (which “sets out standards of care and behaviour expected of all medical practitioners”) the GMC says: “But it isn’t a set of rules. You must use your professional judgement to apply the standards in Good medical practice to your day-to-day practice. This means working out which of the professional standards are relevant to the specific circumstances you are facing, and using your knowledge, skills and experience to follow them in that context. If you do this, act in good faith and in the interests of patients, you’ll be able to explain and justify your decisions and actions.”

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“The Public Order Bill, which has now been passed by Parliament in the United Kingdom, is deeply troubling legislation that is incompatible with the UK’s international human rights obligations regarding people’s rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association”, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk warned... “This new law imposes

serious and undue restrictions on these rights that are neither necessary nor proportionate to achieve a legitimate purpose as defined under international law. This law is wholly unnecessary as UK police already have the powers to act against violent and disruptive demonstrations,” Türk said. “It is especially worrying that the law expands the powers of the police to stop and search individuals, including without suspicion; defines some of the new criminal offences in a vague and overly broad manner; and imposes unnecessary and disproportionate criminal sanctions on people organizing or taking part in peaceful protests”. The High Commissioner drew particular attention to Serious Disruption Prevention Orders introduced by the law that allow UK courts to ban affected individuals from being in certain places at certain times; being with particular people; or using the internet in certain ways, and could lead to the individual in question being electronically monitored to ensure compliance. “It is especially concerning that such orders can be made against people who have never been convicted of any criminal offence. Governments are obliged to facilitate peaceful protests, while, of course, protecting the public from serious and sustained disruption. But the grave risk here is that these orders pre-emptively limit someone’s future legitimate exercise of their rights,” the High Commissioner said. “I am also concerned that the law appears to target in particular peaceful actions used by those protesting about human rights and environmental issues. As the world faces the triple planetary crises of climate change, loss of biodiversity and pollution, governments should be protecting and facilitating peaceful protests on such existential topics, not hindering and blocking them... The passage of this Bill regrettably weakens human rights obligations, which the country has long championed in international fora. I call on the UK Government to reverse this legislation as soon as feasible...” (*Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva 27th April, 2023*).

“A severe crackdown on environmental protest in Britain with “draconian” new laws, excessive restrictions on courtroom evidence and the use of civil injunctions is having a chilling impact on fundamental freedoms, the United Nations special rapporteur has said” (*Guardian, 23rd January, 2024*). “As the world faces a triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, environmental protesters were acting for the “benefit of us all” and must be protected, Michel Forst, the UN special rapporteur on environmental defenders, said on Tuesday. Forst said that during a two-day visit to the UK earlier this month he uncovered worrying information on the treatment of peaceful protesters. Rules imposed on defendants in one London court have prevented them from explaining their motivations to the jury. At Inner London crown court, peaceful protesters have been forbidden by court order from mentioning the climate crisis, fuel poverty or even the US civil rights movement in their statements to the jury. “It is very difficult to understand

what could justify denying the jury the opportunity to hear the reason for the defendant’s action, and how a jury could reach a properly informed decision without hearing it, in particular at the time of environmental defenders’ peaceful but ever more urgent calls for the government to take pressing action for the climate,” Forst said. He said the prosecution of peaceful protesters under “regressive” new public nuisance laws in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which carried a 10-year sentence, and the use of the Public Order Act 2023 was criminalising peaceful demonstrations. Forst highlighted the case of a peaceful protester jailed in December for six months for walking slowly down a road for 30 minutes during a climate protest under the new public order law. “It is important to highlight that, prior to these legislative developments, it had been almost unheard of since the 1930s for members of the public to be imprisoned for peaceful protest in the UK,” said Forst, in a statement issued on Tuesday morning. “I am therefore seriously concerned by these regressive new laws.” Forst also picked out the harsh bail conditions imposed on climate activists for peaceful protests. These include being forced to wear tags while awaiting trial, restrictions on movement, and bans on speaking to other environmental activists. “Some environmental defenders have also been required to wear electronic ankle tags, some including a 10pm-7am curfew, and others, GPS tracking,” said Forst. “Under the current timeframes of the criminal justice system, environmental defenders may be on bail for up to two years from the date of arrest to their eventual criminal trial. Such severe bail conditions have significant impacts on the environmental defenders’ personal lives and mental health, and I seriously question the necessity and proportionality of such conditions for persons engaging in peaceful protest.” He condemned the widespread use of civil injunctions to stop peaceful protest and the “toxic” discourse in the media and among politicians about climate protesters. The toxic discourse may also be used by the state as justification for adopting increasingly severe and draconian measures against environmental defenders, he said. “In the course of my visit, I witnessed first-hand that this is precisely what is taking place in the UK right now. This has a significant chilling effect on civil society and the exercise of fundamental freedoms.” Forst said he was speaking out because of the gravity of his concerns about the widespread restrictions on peaceful protest.

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It is unlikely that the new Labour government will revise the law governing protests. But it could revise GMC statutes to allow – on the model of conscientious objection in wartime – the conscientious beliefs of doctors to be protected.

T.J.H



# Reminders



This account of the development of climate attribution studies is extracted from the *Carbon Brief* website;

<https://www.carbonbrief.org/qa-the-evolving-science-of-extreme-weather-attribution>

In these early days of attribution science, experts used statistical methods to search for the “fingerprint” of human-caused climate change in global temperature records.

However, the 1990 report says that “it is not possible at this time to attribute all or even a large part of the observed global mean warming to the enhanced greenhouse effect on the basis of the observational data currently available”.

As the observational record lengthened and scientists refined their methods, experts became more confident about attributing global temperature rise to human-caused climate change. By the time its third assessment report was published in 2001, the IPCC could state that “detection and attribution studies consistently find evidence for an anthropogenic signal in the climate record of the last 35 to 50 years”.

Just two years later, Prof Myles Allen – professor of geosystem science at the University of Oxford – wrote a *Nature* commentary from his home in Oxford that would open the door for attributing extreme weather events to climate change. The article begins:

“As I write this article in January 2003, the floodwaters of the River Thames are about 30 centimetres from my kitchen door and slowly rising. On the radio, a representative of the UK Met Office has just explained that although this is the kind of phenomenon that global warming might make more frequent, it is impossible to attribute this particular event (floods in southern England) to past emissions of greenhouse gases. What is less clear is whether the attribution of specific weather events to external drivers of climate change will always be impossible in principle, or whether it is simply impossible at present, given our current state of understanding of the climate system.”

Just months after Oxford’s floodwaters began to recede, a now-infamous heatwave swept across Europe. The summer of 2003 was the hottest ever recorded for central and western Europe, with average temperatures in many countries reaching 5C higher than usual.

The unexpected heat resulted in an estimated 20,000 “excess” deaths, making the heatwave one of Europe’s deadliest on record.

In 2004, Allen and two other UK-based climate scientists produced the first formal attribution study, published

in *Nature*, which estimated the impact of human-caused climate change on the heatwave. To conduct the study, the authors first chose the temperature “threshold” to define their heatwave. They decided on 1.6C above the 1961-90 average, because the European summer of 2003 was the first on record to exceed this average temperature. They then used a global climate model to simulate two worlds – one mirroring the world as it was in 2003 and the other a fictional world in which the industrial revolution never happened. In the second case, the climate is influenced solely by natural changes, such as solar energy and volcanic activity, and there is no human-caused warming.

The authors ran their models thousands of times in each scenario from 1989 to 2003. As the climate is inherently chaotic, each model “run” – individual simulations of how the climate progresses over many years – produces a slightly different progression of temperatures. This means that some runs simulated a heatwave in the summer of 2003, while others did not. The authors counted how many times the 1.6C threshold temperature was crossed in the summer of 2003 in each model run. They then compared the likelihood of crossing the threshold temperature in the world with – and a world without – climate change. They concluded that “it is very likely that human influence has at least doubled the risk of a heatwave exceeding this threshold magnitude”.

A *Nature* commentary linked to the study called the paper a “breakthrough”, stating that it was the “first successful attempt to detect man-made influence on a specific extreme climatic event”.

In the decade following the heatwave study, more teams from around the world began to use the same methods – known as “probabilistic”, “risk-based” or “unconditional” attribution.

Prof Peter Stott is a science fellow in climate attribution at the UK Met Office and an author on the study. Stott tells *Carbon Brief* that the basic methods used in this first attribution study are “still used to this day”, but that scientists now use more “up-to-date” climate models than the one used in his seminal study....

As the 2004 *Nature* study demonstrated, probabilistic attribution involves scientists running climate models thousands of times in scenarios with and without human-caused climate change, then comparing the two. This allows them to say how much more likely, intense or long-lasting an event was due to climate change. Many studies since have added a third scenario, in which the planet is warmer than present-day temperatures, to assess how climate change may impact extreme weather events in the future.

## Fact Checks

- WHO data indicates 2 billion people lack safe drinking water and 600 million suffer from foodborne illnesses annually, with children under 5 bearing 30% of foodborne fatalities.
- In 2020, 770 million faced hunger, predominantly in Africa and Asia. Climate change affects food availability, quality and diversity, exacerbating food and nutrition crises.

- In 2020, 98 million more experienced food insecurity compared to the 1981–2010 average. The WHO conservatively projects 250 000 additional yearly deaths by the 2030s due to climate change impacts on diseases like malaria and coastal flooding.
- Temperature and precipitation changes enhance the spread of vector-borne diseases; deaths from such diseases are currently over 700 000 annually.
- Recent research attributes 37% of heat-related deaths to human-induced climate change. Heat-related deaths among those over 65 have risen by 70% in two decades.
- Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, stat-

ing that peace – the United Nations’ *raison d’être* – “is now under grave threat”, observed that people’s sense of safety and security is at an all-time low in almost every country. Six out of seven worldwide are plagued by feelings of insecurity, the world is facing the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War and 2 billion people – a quarter of humanity – live in places affected by such conflict. Recalling the Secretary-General’s words that “the world is at a key inflection point in history,” she underscored the need to rethink efforts to achieve sustainable peace.

- In 2023, the IPCC stated with very high confidence that “There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all.”

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# How to restructure the COPs

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BENITO MÜLLER

Our ‘*Quo Vadis COP? Future Arrangements for Intergovernmental Meetings under the UNFCCC – Settled and Fit for Purpose*’ (March 2021) was premised on the fact that the purpose of the multilateral climate negotiations had shifted from negotiating multilateral treaties to implementing them. This shift of focus, our Report argued, needed to be reflected in a shift in the role and functioning of the involved multilateral bodies, in particular the Conference of the Parties (COP) and its Subsidiary Bodies (SBs). Did it?

Our assessment in this 2024 Update of the 2021 Report is that the current arrangements, to be blunt, are not fit for the current purpose. We argue that it is time to make urgent and important decisions to guide the reforms needed as early as possible. Not doing so would have major negative consequences for the multilateral climate regime, exactly at a time when we most need a well-working system the most.

*The challenges and dangers of a system that has clearly veered off course*

There has been an extraordinary growth in the size and complexity of the annual sessions of the governing bodies of the existing multilateral climate treaties – generally referred to as “COPs” – not only in terms of participant numbers (see figure below), but in the number of co-located events and associated costs.

The 2024 Update focuses on three major issues arising from such ‘mega-COPs’:

- Equity concerns – the most climate vulnerable states can no longer afford to preside over or host a COP and showcase their plight; indeed, even larger countries with higher capacities shy away from hosting mega-COPs, drastically reducing the inclusiveness of the multilateral process.

- Negotiations benefit from serendipitous encounters between participants, but the size of mega-COPs prevent this from happening easily.
- Last, but not least, mega-COPs pose a serious reputational risk for the multilateral climate change negotiations. Not only is there the risk of the mega spectacle leading to an inflation of the general public’s expectations on outcomes, but they may even pose an obstacle to appreciate the successes of more focused outcomes such as the Global Stocktake, enhanced transparency reports, and new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). The hype may lead to expect outcomes which are not meant to be delivered by negotiations in implementation mode, leading to the perception of these events as overblown multilateral jamborees/junkets.

*Our Recommendations*

Our Update identifies a triad of distinct events happening at current COPs: Negotiations (sessions of the governing bodies and SBs), summit meetings, and trade expositions. All are, no doubt, important but they do not have to happen at the same time in the same place. The fact that they currently are co-located at take place concurrently was not a matter of design but happened mainly for the sake of organisational convenience.

*Decentralisation.* This is why we propose to spatio-temporally disaggregate the mega-COP triad as follows:

- COPs: To be held (purely as sessions of the governing bodies and SBs) in Bonn at the World Conference Center (where capacity is 5,000 participants), following the model of the mid-year SB sessions (without a ministerial high-level segment).
- COP Presidency (Climate) Summits: To be held (if possible, only in specific years when political leadership is

required) in the COP Presidency’s region (possibly in conjunction with the Expos) or at the UN in Geneva. For NDC submission years, the Summit could be held nine months before the COP, when NDCs are due.

- COP Presidency (Climate) Expos: To take place in the UN Region holding the rotating COP Presidency (but not necessarily in the country of the Presidency).

*Partial Repurposing of the Governing/Subsidiary Bodies.* Regarding the Governing/Subsidiary Bodies, we furthermore propose that their purpose be modified to suit implementation better. While negotiating of texts with a view to produce consensus documents (such as a ‘Decision’ of the relevant body) may still from time to time be required, it stands to reason that there may be other activities which these bodies could engage in to facilitate an ambitious implementation of the existing treaties.

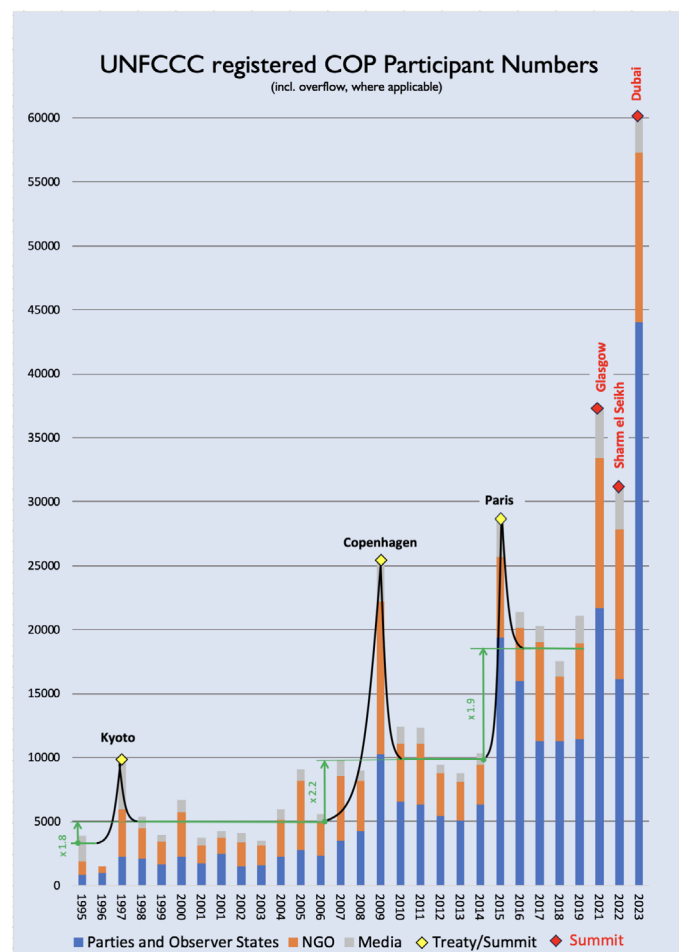
### How to do it? (COP 30)

The first thing to remember is that the proposed decentralisation of the event triad currently co-located at mega-COPs does not require a multilateral decision. It is in the mandate of COP Presidencies and, therefore, nothing stands in the way of this happening if the Brazilian Presidency [in 2025 COP30 will take place in Brazil] decides that this is what it would like to do: to start, for a historic transformation of the COPs, while at the same time addressing the challenge of hosting a COP in Belém. Thus, one could have the following decentralisation:

- COP30 Presidency NDC Summit in Belem: Held nine months before the COP when NDCs are due, the event would provide incentives for leaders to arrive at the Summit with ambitious pledges. Few would want to be the laggards.
- COP 30 Presidency Climate Expo in Rio: Leveraging Rio’s infrastructure for hosting large events, this event would encompass pavilions, exhibition stands, the Global Climate Action Hub, and other information-outreach events (including an expanded roster of side events).
- COP 30 (governing bodies session) in Bonn (or Brasilia/Belem): For negotiators and some civil society representatives (i.e., those directly engaged in the negotiations), this would enable time and attention to the mandates for COP30, including revising the ad-

aptation communication guidance and any follow-up work related to the new collective quantified goal on climate finance and the 2023 Global Stocktake.

This would increase engagement and economic benefits across Brazil. Media could better follow the key stories at various sites. Negotiators could focus on their tasks, while others could showcase their climate action to a more dedicated audience. It also must be emphasized that attendance at COP Presidency events that are not co-located with the negotiations can be capped by the Presidencies in question (which is not possible if pink badges are involved). This means that if, say, the Summit and the negotiations need to be held in the same place (Belém), then they must be temporally separated so pink badges will not grant admission to the Summit.



### NOTICE

The Editors of the *Oxford Magazine* regret that they cannot publish any material submitted to them anonymously. If the author requests publication on the basis that the author’s name and university address be withheld from the readership, the Editors will consider the reasons given and in their discretion may publish on that basis; otherwise the material will be returned to the author.

The next issue of *Oxford Magazine* will appear in noughth week

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# Climate change as a challenge for journalism

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KATHERINE DUNN

*The following article (addressed originally to fellow journalists at a conference held in Tbilisi in August 2024) describes the work of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network (part of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism) and in particular some of the difficulties journalists meet in presenting the climate emergency to the public – ed*

Our work is all about helping journalists improve their climate literacy, and also connect climate to all the other roles and beats in the newsroom. And that includes conflict.

But less than two months into the start of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network at the beginning of 2022, this new, shiny experiment faced a stark challenge. Because, of course, Russia invaded Ukraine. The questions about better climate coverage we were gathered to ask suddenly seemed like they might be overtaken by other questions. Those included: how do we talk about this moment? How do we be in a room together? Can we cover climate change this week, or next week? Why do this right now?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was also grappling with this. This is the UN body that brings together climate scientists around the world, often across huge geopolitical divides. And just days after the invasion, their latest report was due to come out.

Now as many of you will know, these reports take years to be put together. But they're difficult to cover at the best of times – they kind of embody what can make climate coverage challenging in the first place. They're usually terrifying. They're huge. And they're often very technical. And this particular report was now going to compete for newsroom attention with a war, while the Ukrainian scientists were literally heading for the bomb shelters. My colleague Diego and I wondered how journalists in the wider region would manage to cover the report, or if they would at all. So we asked them.

One of our members, Patryk Strzałkowski, a reporter at *Gazeta* in Poland, told us that he wrote an article on the report during a night shift while doing live coverage on the war. This turned out to be pretty typical. Several other journalists in the region covered the report in between war coverage, and trying to reach or help friends or colleagues get out of Ukraine. Others were immediately taken off the climate desk and put onto covering the war full time, sometimes permanently. Others told us later they had covered the IPCC report, only to watch their story go unpublished. Since the invasion, this question – of how conflict and climate intersect – has only gotten bigger, and more complicated, and put more demands on our members around the world. Demands on their time

and energy, of course. But also on their sense of urgency and their sense of hope.

Of course, on October 7, Hamas' attack on Israel killed more than 1,200 people. And Israel's bombing of Gaza has now killed at least 40,000 people, and threatened to destabilize much of the wider Middle East. We are seeing rising conflict and geopolitical tension around the world. From Sudan to the Sahel to Taiwan. Many of our members are living with a constant level of conflict and political uncertainty. Often the crises in their regions are little-covered in international media. And I know the question that often gets asked of them, when they try to cover climate change amid so much instability and so much uncertainty. They get asked: there's so much to worry about already. Why cover climate change, too?

## *The historical links between climate and conflict*

If you're a keen reader of history, you'll know how deeply the connections between conflict and climate go. The struggles over natural resources. The fall-out of climatic disasters. The race by European powers to extract the natural bounty of much of the rest of the world. But I want to take you back to a moment that has recently captured my imagination.

In the early 1950s, a group of American scientists suggested that they should try and revive a famous scientific collaboration: the International Polar Year. The first International Polar Year was held in the 1880s, and one of the key ideas was that it wasn't possible to study the polar regions without international collaboration. Twelve countries participated. The second International Polar Year took place in the early 1930s, and attempted to study both the Arctic and the Antarctic in greater detail. The teams set up 40 permanent observation stations in the Arctic alone. This time the project brought together 40 nations. Not surprisingly, World War II put a stop to international scientific collaboration for many years.

The idea to revive the Polar Year came during the Cold War. It was renamed the International Geophysical Year, and the idea was that the collaboration would stretch across the Iron Curtain, and 67 countries participated. The focus now wasn't on just the poles, but earth itself, including its shape and gravitational field. The ocean tides, the ice sheets, the mysteries of the atmosphere. Of course, such a collaboration was never as simple as the search for knowledge. Obviously not. It was the Cold War, and the IGY quickly evolved into a largely two-sided race: the race to build the world's first satellite. This competition led to the launch of *Sputnik* in 1957, then the launch of the first American satellite. It was essentially the beginning of the Space Race. And with it, it became a landmark mo-

ment in the acceleration of the nuclear arms race. There were many remarkable characters involved in this project, and frequently their motives both overlapped and contradicted one another. To better understand space. To better destroy their enemies. And to better understand earth itself.

Because the IGY also marked the start of a new era of climate science. The IGY was responsible for the world setting aside the Antarctic for scientific study. It directly led to a lot of the satellites that measured the ice sheets, sea level rise, and levels of CO<sub>2</sub>. All of this owes a debt to the IGY. (And the next polar year, which was in 2007-2008, focused explicitly on climate change.) The discoveries of the IGY showed the globe for the first time from a distance – a bird’s eye view – and revealed that the planet is not only not perfectly round, but a complex, and dimpled and ever-changing sphere. A truly remarkable place. The push to understand our world, and to destroy it, were in that one international project, deeply intertwined. Two sides of the same coin, reinforcing and emboldening one another.

### *Inter-linked climate and conflict*

Today, we see those same interrelationships on the ground, and we see them all over the world. One of our OCJN alumni, Murtala Abdullahi, is a journalist and analyst from Nigeria who covers the vast Lake Chad region of west and central Africa. Climate and conflict are not a one-to-one relationship, but more like a “prism” or a “web”, that touches everything, Murtala says. As the Sahara encroaches on what was once family farmland, it results in a loss of livelihood, community, and stability. It also produces a crisis of food and water insecurity, and often creates conflict between communities fighting over increasingly scarce resources. And it often creates a gendered crisis, as members of families – often men – move to growing cities looking for work.

This in turn is contributing to vast migration. Due to a combination of conflict and climate change, the UN says that a record-breaking 110 million people were displaced globally by the end of 2023. Our members all over the world can see it with their own eyes, whether they’re in Turkey or Namibia. Often the causes are so intertwined that it’s hard to say where one begins and another stops.

### *The links between climate and conflict especially disinformation*

Climate disinformation is also now being used as a weapon. In July, NATO said that the Russian government and Russian state media has routinely spread climate denial and disinformation, and that there has been a notable uptick in this spread since the invasion of Ukraine. The disinformation often frames global warming as a “hoax” and a form of “Western imperialism” designed to keep poorer nations from economically developing – when in reality we know that poorer nations are simply more vulnerable. And Russian disinformation has been linked to campaigns to undermine and attack climate activists – and to use gendered harassment against female activists in particular. But members tell us that disinformation, often sown by governments, impacts their work and puts them at risk around the world. That’s whether they are covering

air pollution in India or deforestation in Brazil. The year after Russia invaded Ukraine, one of our alumni, a Kyrgyz journalist called Baktygul Chynybaeva, wrote an essay for us on the importance of documenting the reinforcing loops between climate and conflict, looking overtly at Russia. “But although it’s challenging for journalists to truly connect the dots between conflict and climate change, it is crucial to do so,” she wrote, after detailing her own challenges covering these links. “Though the war has woken the world up to its energy dependence on Russia, and the implications for both the climate and geopolitics, Kyrgyzstan is a telling example.”

### *Barriers to covering climate change*

We can see that climate both feeds conflict and is impacted by it. It is interconnected. But do we cover it that way? Often, the answer is no. The striking thing about working with nearly 600 journalists over more than two years is that there is no country on earth in which a journalist isn’t being told: “we have bigger problems than climate change right now”. In fact, from countries who are being wracked by conflict and war, to those that are, by every metric, peaceful and prosperous, there is always something more pressing than the future of the natural world. What is often striking about climate journalism is not how different we all are, but how similar. It’s useful that we have so much in common across the world, because when it comes to the region we are in now, we have a remarkable lack of information.

The Reuters Institute’s own Digital News Report, which studies 47 countries does not include Georgia. Nor do most other major studies about climate communication and journalism. So you’ll forgive me for speaking broadly about many of the challenges journalists face both in general, and when covering climate and conflict. Of course, around the world, journalists are struggling with a lack of resources, widespread harassment, and political pressure. This cuts across most topics. On climate, this is both general political pressure and interference. But also the weaponised, incorrect claim that covering climate change is inherently biased or a form of activism.

There are also the regular claims that climate coverage is technical, boring, and depressing – and that audiences simply don’t want to consume it. This is something we hear anecdotally again and again. *People just don’t want it.* But here is the counter argument. There is compelling evidence from around the world that audiences do actually care, and deeply, about climate change.

In a study released this February, nearly 60,000 people across 63 countries were surveyed on whether they “believed” in climate change. Eighty-six percent of respondents said yes. And by “believed” the surveyors clarified: 1) whether humans were causing climate change, 2) whether it was a serious threat to humanity, and 3) whether action was necessary. The country with the lowest level of belief of those 63 countries, Israel, was still 73%. Ukraine was also polled on the level of belief in climate change and whether action was necessary. The figure was 88%. You may have wondered, as I did, when this data was collected. It was collected between July 2022 and July 2023. And you may wonder, as I did, if this was a one-off conclusion. But in fact, multiple studies have found that the level of concern for climate change, and desire for action,



is actually extremely high across the world. The other astonishing fact is that we tend to doubt how much others feel the way we do. In fact, around the world people seem to *systematically* underestimate how much their fellow citizens care.

*If people care, then what...*

We know that there is often a very big gap, on all kinds of different issues, between what people say they want, and care about, and what they actually *do*. But for us as journalists, this information shows us that we're often dealing with the wrong question. That question isn't how we get audiences to care about climate change. The question is: how do we better cover climate change, *knowing that people already do*.

Looking at the reasons behind the high rates of news avoidance, the Institute's Digital News Report notes that news organisations can draw different conclusions, depending on their own mission and target audience, but ... "Taken as a whole, it is clear news consumers would prefer to dial down the constant updating of news, while dialling up context and wider perspectives that help people better understand the world around them." "Most people don't want the news to be made more entertaining, but they do want more stories that provide more personal utility, help them connect with others, and give people a sense of hope." There is never going to be a one size fits all prescription for climate coverage. There's no one size fits all prescription for *any* coverage, or any conflict, or any approach to climate action. But there's a clear demand for a kind of journalism that goes back to many of the core ideas of our profession, and of storytelling.

Audiences are telling journalists that they want context. They want to follow the news in a way that gives them agency. They want stories with real human beings in them. And they want us to *connect the dots*. It really requires us to do the kind of journalism that can't be done on autopilot, or to formula. We have to think about why we're telling a story, and how. The other piece of good news is that climate change is a really good laboratory for

tackling so many of the problems we have in journalism. Get this right, and it can help us across all kinds of beats. Get this wrong, and we relegate the biggest story of our time to a sidebar. In this sense, climate and conflict struggle with many of the same challenges.

There are so many of the same emotional questions of despair and hope, the balance between technical details and human loss and survival. These stories require us to remain in touch with what really makes life worth living, what it is in the future we want to see. Here, as with conflict, false positivity, or the search for simplistic or easy solutions, often aren't helpful either.

I often go back to an essay an OCJN alumna called Lameez Omarjee, who covers climate change at News24 in South Africa, wrote for us. Her essay was on the importance of these kinds of human stories – in this case, how to connect climate change with human stories and what we value. She chose to focus on heritage, and in particular national parks – and how they were being impacted by climate change. And she chose a very personal reason. "As a person of colour growing up in South Africa, I and many others had parts of our heritage taken away by the apartheid regime," wrote Lameez. "There are now parts of my family tree, my heritage, that are missing. I carry that loss now, and I wouldn't want others and future generations to experience the same thing, especially if it can be avoided with meaningful action to limit climate impacts."

It is this interdependence between the natural world and human conflict that is so fundamental to why we can't cover one of these topics without the other, and why neglecting climate is not an option we have. I want to finish with one of my favourite quotes. In 1961, Walter Sullivan, a science journalist at the *New York Times* wrote a book about its history looking back on the International Geophysical Year, with the space race already well underway. And he finished by noting that, "in studying itself, the world has grown closer together." "We have come to learn that hurricanes, drought, and pestilence know no national frontiers," he wrote. "And we have come a little closer to a cosmic view of our planet – a water-crusted sphere, crusted here and there with continents upon which there is the fragile green hue of life."

The editors invite and welcome contributions from all our readers.  
The content of Oxford Magazine relies largely on what arrives spontaneously on  
the editors' desk and is usually published as received.

Our contact address is: [tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk](mailto:tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk)

Ben Bollig has stepped down as co-editor during his term as Assessor.

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# Background Briefing for the New Chancellor

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PETER OPPENHEIMER

It is a pleasure to welcome Oxford University's new Chancellor, and to congratulate him on the remarkable scale of his electoral victory. One wonders, indeed, whether the voters were sending a message, hoping for some shift in the Chancellor's leadership role. It is impossible to know. But it is also unreasonable to expect the new incumbent to arrive adequately informed about the present state of the University and the future directions he may help to promote. What follows is therefore a concise briefing on relevant aspects of Oxford's recent history.

Commentary on the issues currently facing all Britain's universities is of course widespread. Oxford's problems, however, are largely *sui generis* and self-inflicted. Not quite forty years ago, in the mid-1980s, the University unexpectedly found itself in a painful financial squeeze. This was imposed by Mrs. Thatcher's Government in reaction to earlier student demonstrations which she (and in particular her lieutenant Sir Keith Joseph) viewed as a symptom of general sloppiness and self-indulgence in the academic domain. Addressing this became, so to speak, the fourth major campaign of her reign, after fiscal and monetary restraint (to curb inflation), the Falklands War, and the miners' strike (of Arthur Scargill and company).

In those not-very-distant days the University's governance was in the hands of the academic staff community – of those persons, in other words, who conduct both the University's teaching and its "cutting-edge" research activities. This meant that the University was run both democratically and very efficiently. Secretarial and administrative support at the centre (in managing finances, buildings, legal compliance and so forth) was provided by a tiny number of officials, some 200 in all, about one-tenth – repeat, one-tenth – of the corresponding number on the payroll in 2024.

Democratic governance did not (and does not) mean governance by Congregation, the University's sovereign assembly. Congregation is a forum for occasional debate on matters of principle. Week-to-week governance was in the hands of two medium-sized executive committees – the General Board of the Faculties and the Hebdomadal (= Weekly) Council. Their membership, be it noted, was not elected by ballot. Persons on the General Board were nominated by Faculty Boards; those on Council were decided mainly by agreement among Heads of Colleges. Their operating procedures were subject to a small number of important conventions. For example, members of the General Board were not permitted to advocate for the wishes of their own Faculty or Department. The latter had to submit a case in writing, precisely in order to persuade members of other Faculties in the General Board at large. The overall result was that the University's policy-making rested on grass-roots academic consensus.

In the financial emergency triggered by Mrs Thatcher,

the action adopted by the two executive committees, chiefly the General Board, was to contain overspending by imposing an immediate freeze on the filling of academic vacancies. Posts were filled as and when sufficient funds became available, and in order of perceived urgency, the latter being greater in (for example) the case of "unusual" subjects taught by only one or two persons across the University than in areas where more people were available to share the teaching load.

Looking to the longer term, the obvious need was to reduce the University's reliance on British government funding. That objective was pursued in several ways. Fundraising became a permanent activity both for the central University (where the late Henry Drucker from Edinburgh proved an outstanding pioneer organiser) and for its constituent Colleges. Efforts to profit from the University's research activities by establishing spin-off companies were massively increased. And recruitment of students from overseas – basically to graduate taught courses – was stepped up.

All this meant a significant increase in University overheads. The central bureaucracy tripled in size, to around 600, by the late 1990s. Put differently, there was a sacrifice – measured and rational, but a sacrifice nonetheless – of efficiency in governance. At the same time, the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 amalgamated the university sector with its more vocational and less expensive cousins, the Polytechnics. The delusion became rife in Whitehall and Westminster that all universities would cost less if only their managements learned to run them as if they were profit-seeking corporations. Variations on this theme filled a sequence of reports by eminent persons (such as Ronald Dearing) with slight knowledge of the higher education sector.

In the final quinquennium of the twentieth century Oxford succumbed. It first produced and then adopted a badly argued report by the North Commission. This made two crucial changes. (a) It fragmented the University into four rivalrous, non-communicating Divisions. And (b) it abolished both Hebdomadal Council and the General Board in favour of a single University Council. The joint result of (a) and (b) was to make the new Council – its agendas, *modus operandi* and decisions – an elaborate offshoot or rubber stamp of the central bureaucracy.

By the same token, (c) external constraints on the size of that central bureaucracy vanished. As noted above, its numbers climbed to some 2000 by 2024, a good 50 per cent of them surplus to any intrinsic requirement. Among the consequences of this expansion was that the more senior grades of administrator were eligible for membership of Congregation, which no longer represented the academic voice. Finding the money to pay all their salaries became one reason for further boosting student numbers

from overseas, mainly onto one-year graduate courses of varying quality. Roughly speaking, annual fees accruing from five such students pay for one bureaucrat. We may politely overlook the effects on Oxford's urban environment and on housing needs, as well as assorted misuse of resources on 'prestige' buildings.

Not to be ignored, on the other hand, is (d) erosion of academic standards. The charging of undergraduate fees (since 1998) and resulting student indebtedness has gradually encouraged students to view themselves first and foremost as entitled customers. The denizens of Wellington Square raised no objection. For one thing, it is hard (and maybe impossible) to reconcile academic grading with a commitment to the social objectives of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. For another thing, it was convenient to put extra pressure on academic staff to raise research funds and to publish, rather than to spend time teaching and examining. Examinations have thus become increasingly meaningless, with students expecting questions to be revealed in advance, extra leniency accorded at the drop of a hat, and virtually no Finalist ending up with less than a 2:1. The logical end-point, however, is to abolish examinations altogether, rather than merely empty them of content or otherwise infantilize them.

For the time being Oxford is living heavily off its reputation, plus the tourist trade. The speed of its decline into mediocrity is difficult to gauge. The reason for welcoming the new Chancellor, however, and for reposing great hopes in him is crystal clear. Unquestioning taking of cues from Wellington Square, and acting as a mere publicist or flag-waver for the University in its present state, would be a betrayal of what the University has stood for over the centuries. What is needed is an incursion on the executive function, sufficient to unscramble the governance calamity arising from the North Report, and to put routine control of the University's affairs back into the hands of its academic legions.

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## Cutlery Drawer

Despite the percussion,  
everything ordered, still  
in its place. However  
many times a day  
you slide it open,  
hip it shut, does it  
ever cross your mind  
the metal will outlive you,  
all that weight?

---

## Car Park

Nothing in the pockets  
behind the front seats.

The headrests won't slide.  
Tugging the seatbelt as far as it goes.

Not even five minutes yet.  
Your choice not to go with them.

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## Neighbourhood Watch

At right angles to chimney stacks,  
aerials like electric hedge trimmers  
against the sky, doing their thing

silently. Most face south  
for transmissions from Central,  
a few north west for Granada.

But what of that oddity  
pointing east? And the bungalow  
without one, who lives there?

PHILIP HANCOCK

Philip Hancock's *House on the A34* was published by CB editions in 2023, and *City Works Dept.* in 2018. His debut pamphlet *Hearing Ourselves Think* (Smiths Knoll) was a *Guardian* Book of the Year choice. *Jelly Baby*, a film-poem screened at various short film festivals, was published by *Areté*.

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# An Epistle from Ephesus

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DON CARLETON

Sir David Behan, the new head of OfS, spoke recently of the financial pressure on universities. He predicts great troubles and proposes harsh remedies. His remarks are not just a straw in the wind. They declare a veritable storm-tormented haystack with a high quotient of unlooked-for needles within it. The age of the 'Ephesian University' is at hand.

The term refers to the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) which enforced a unity on churches everywhere. If they were to receive state support, the emerging churches, abbeys and monasteries were all to teach the same thing in the same way. The Emperor Theodosius probably required little more than a broad measure of peaceful agreement, but churchmen, inspired by Saint Augustine of Hippo, went further. Supreme Authority was vested in the Pope and in whatever councils he chose to call.

Sir David's words take us into that territory. His remarks reveal that he (and perhaps the Government) conceives his job as that of a sole leader, a 'Super-Vice-Chancellor' or 'Overall-President', a sort of 'quasi-Pope' equivalent. His remedy for the impending crisis is financial/administrative. He foresees mergers of departments and institutions. There is to be no wasteful duplication. A subject called, say, 'Physics' is thought, in Sir David's argument, to be the same everywhere. It is 'Ephesian'.

How did we come to this pass? Consider the history of universities. They began in the deserts of Egypt when Pachomius decided to repeat the forty-day sojourn of Jesus in the wilderness (*Scientific experiment*). News of his progress spread (*publication of results*). He was joined by others trying to repeat with him what he had found (build-up of a research team – the '*department*'). Many other people – both men and women – came to the desert. They came not as applicants but as supplicants. They wanted to be taught what the desert fathers had found (*students*). Student admissions were standardised (*UCCA*). They all said, 'Speak to me a word, Father, that I may live'.

That request was important. This was not a contract for supply as in modern universities. It was a request for admission to a collegiate way of life and to a rational and considered way of looking at life (*university practices up to about 1970*). Admission to the collegiate side of academic life in the desert essentially involved an acceptance of the learning offered by the teacher. It was not to be determined by the emotions, tastes and predilections of the student (as in *Ephesian universities*).

Pachomius quickly found that the conditions he needed for his own work (*isolation*) were hard to maintain. He was forced to build separate houses for men and women (*student accommodation*) at a distance from his work-place (*laboratory*). The broad lines of the sort of academic community we know, a place united in the goals of research, teaching and communal living, began to appear.

But, of course, the monasteries of the desert fathers, like all churches, were subject to the rules laid by Ephesus. In

matters of authority, the Pope (*the sole leader*), and the councils called to assist him, were supreme.

After hardly a century had passed, that Ephesian unity was challenged by an Irishman Columbanus. To defend the spirit of free enquiry, the Irish monasteries developed the argument that God was incapable of mistakes or second thoughts. Creation, the world around us, was perfect. Men could not discover anything new. They merely brought to light what God had decided should now be revealed.

That meant that the Irish were free to look at everything. Initially they called the focus of their enquiries *de natura*<sup>1</sup> but, by about 1200 AD, it was called 'Natural Philosophy'<sup>2</sup> and across Europe it was taught in a quasi-monastic place called a *studium generale*. *Studia* offered teaching to students from anywhere<sup>3</sup>. They offered research and learning in arts, law, theology, science and medicine. And they produced cadres of learned people qualified and licensed by each *studium* to teach and practice these matters anywhere without further examination. Academic communities, researchers and teachers had begun to award degrees.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, the *studia* changed over time. A human institution which does not change will not persist. The great monastery and library of Bobbio, for example, at first followed the rule of its founder Columbanus. Not long after he died, it adopted the Rule of St Benedict. St Benedict set out rules for how an abbey or a *studium* could organise itself into harmonious relationships which might make its teaching and research, the whole scholarly community, work in a collegiate way.<sup>5</sup> The most important part of the Rule was about governance. If the monastery or a *studium* faced a problem, it was to be discussed by everyone. Particular attention was to be paid to the views of younger teachers. In the end the decision lay with the abbot. Those who lost the argument were urged to accept the decision, and not let the rejection of their ideas fester in disappointment.

These monastic rules have worked in their amended and secularised forms for almost a thousand years because they permitted a culture of mutual respect among junior and senior members. That culture enabled the work of teaching and research. It was adaptable to a range of circumstances. It enabled *studia* to achieve different forms and approaches. That difference has been the key to great achievement.<sup>6</sup> No one has been hide-bound by convention, tradition, or social and political pressures. Many 'truths about Creation' have been revealed.

The last forty years, however, have witnessed an academic tragedy of epic proportions in Britain. Bodies, set up to see that research and teaching were of a proper standard and that students were not paying high fees for worthless qualifications, have produced a new university world. University culture is now demonstrably Ephesian. Differences are being eroded by an insistence on standardised practice in teaching and central control over research.

Even at its best, academic life is becoming a consensus of mediocrity supervised by a Government-appointed leader and the enthusiasms of councils of like-minded zealots. The Ephesian university is at hand.

We have not got here by a failure of judgment or lack of consultation. No one in assemblies of university teachers in any institution approved this bleak unoriginal unventive future. No one ever argued that institutions which changed their teaching, research subjects, and recommended sources of wisdom to accommodate and ameliorate the discomfort of students would thereby become better and more rigorous universities. No one argued that universities should abandon the critical and analytic tradition which had served them well for almost two thousand years. No one in a university thought such changes of practice and precept necessary.

There were, however, powerful external voices. In 1976 in a speech at Ruskin College, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan called for 'a Great Debate'<sup>7</sup>. There was not much of a debate (the Civil Service already knew the answers) and it was not great (not much discussed in or by universities)<sup>8</sup>. It did produce the Robbin's Report on the future of universities (1961-63). The Report, which set out important principles, was nodded through by a Conservative Cabinet convinced (wrongly) that Prime Minister Harold MacMillan was dying. After an election, Labour's Harold Wilson announced his government's support for 'the white heat of the technological revolution'. He seems to have been totally unaware that at that time cooling computers was the main technical problem in innovation.

The university system was expanded rapidly as Robbins suggested, but without much regard to cost. It even included halls of residence not unlike those created by Pachomius. Its effects should have been benign, but it was not, as a system, funded and it was divorced in governance from those who did the teaching and research. Unchallenged legal opinions converted students from supplicants for knowledge into customers purchasing a way of spending three or four years in congenial surroundings. Students as customers did not face or fear exclusion for poor behaviour. As customers, they were always right and it was the teachers who had cause to fear. They faced at best, interruption to a career and, at worst, dismissal. Young university teachers and researchers now do not put their heads above the parapet by public comment on governance and scholarship. They self-censor what they teach. They are encouraged in their timidity by in-house experts in EDI.

The present generation of university teachers has thus been forced to become the first in nearly two thousand years to fail to transmit the culture of university life. It is not a moral failure by young or even old academic staff. It is the price we will all pay as citizens for allowing consumerism into the concept of a University.

What can be done? Universities in general, and Oxford, need to resume or revive the Great Debate. I take no view about the form of the debate or the specifics of the questions to be addressed. We might, however, usefully start by revisiting the Robbins Principles<sup>9</sup>. We might also go back usefully to the Rule of Benedict or of the desert fathers<sup>10</sup>. We should, like the old monks, pay particular attention to the views of younger teachers. We might even dream of aiming for what many in academic life regard as the 'ideal

university' – Abraham Flexner's vision for the Princeton Institute of Advanced Study<sup>11</sup>.

But if we are to have a decisive debate, one which will carry weight and serve us all as a society as well in the future as the old regimes did in the past, it must be done to 'University standards'. As Jim Callaghan said at Ruskin, 'There will be discussion. If everything is reduced to such phrases as 'educational freedom' and 'state control' we shall get nowhere'. It may be even better for our discussion to take the advice of John Prescott. Prescott, who died very recently, said about his time at Ruskin, 'It taught me not to be afraid of asking questions'. We might add, in his honour, 'and not to be afraid of the answers'.

The 'how' of the new Great Debate may be straightforward. Universities like Oxford have the means and the methods to set examples for such discussions. The rules for logical discussion and decision are actually taught in all universities which have a Philosophy department versed in the logical techniques of people like the American philosopher C. S. Peirce. He said we should be careful that we do not select a way of reasoning that leads us directly to the result of our desire. Our syllogisms should accurately denote the issues, not the desired ends of differences of opinion.

When I was a student, the Scottish philosopher W. B. Gallie used to tell me how to deal with differences of opinion, these 'contested concepts'<sup>12</sup>. Before you could have a culture, you had to agree premises. That, *in pace* Jim Callaghan, does require attaching meaning to concepts like 'Academic freedom', 'the idea of the University', 'student discipline' and so on. If all those affected (which must include – to match the standards of Peirce – not only 'traditionalists' and 'Robbinsites' but also 'The Ephesian University', or 'the OfS-guided', or 'Ofsted-guided' or 'EDI-driven universities'), can agree premises, then agreement given by each academic community will give licence and validity to ideas which emerge. The future could be evaluated. A new culture which allows universities to work better could be established.

But if new cultures for the universities and solutions to financial and other difficulties are to be imposed by bureaucracies or non-Government agencies or by Government itself, in the way that led universities seamlessly from Labour PM Jim Callaghan's Ruskin speech to Ken Baker's Education Act under PM Mrs Thatcher,<sup>13</sup> then university life will lose all validity. Degrees and qualifications and research findings will lose all worth, currency and use. If there is no real discussion, or merely a consultative exercise to endorse some shape or notion already decided, then we really will have to return to what Bryce Gallie used to say: 'The only valid discussions are those which take place on licenced premises'. There's the logical conclusion inherent in Sir David's declared dilemmas. If we can't have free universities, we might as well go down the pub. Licensed premises, you see. *In Vino veritas*. Drowned sorrows. *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*.

1. Isadore of Seville's book of that name may have Irish origins.

2. Thus leading to Doctor of Philosophy Ph,D or D,Phil. Irish *Bacaill* from Latin *baculus* a staff is the root of Bachelor degrees. *Bacaill* was the name for an ordinary monk in Ireland. The staff was not a 'pilgrim's staff'. The Irish were not on a journey to a shrine. They were walking to God and God might be anywhere where there were people who needed the Light. They reached Kiev to the East and America in the west. The earliest maps

of North America call the land *Terra baccalorum*. The Viking name was *Irland er Mekla*, 'Ireland the Great' by analogy with *Magna Graecia*, the old name for Sicily and Southern Italy.

3. The Cornish historian W. Borlase noted Egyptian students at Bangor in Ireland and Columbanus abandoned his student Gall, an overseas student at Bangor from Alsace, when he fell ill.
4. Among the first were Salerno, Bologna and Paris. Al Azhar in Cairo is the oldest still functioning (founded around 970 CE). Irish Bangor (founded c.550 AD) was destroyed about 570 and Italian Bobbio, its daughter house, lasted until 1803.
5. Boisterous behaviour was not permitted. Students who offended were reminded of the rules. If they persisted, two stout monks were to take them aside and explain the matter to them more fully. In the end, wrongdoers were expelled either temporarily or permanently. They were good rules in their time, and they still underlie much modern practice. Some American universities, for example, still exhibit and obey Benedict's rules about social behaviour in their staff common rooms.
6. A version of the account of Tacitus: 'They made a desert and called it peace'. The late Oxonian Dr Michael Pasternak Slater suggested an unknown Greek poem was involved: Could Tacitus have had a Greek source for the famous and bitter quip he puts into the mouth of a Caledonian chief: "*ubi solitudinem faciunt pacem appellant*" If we put this (back?) into Greek, we find a pun in the contrasting nouns, and a rhyme in the contrasting verbs:  
Ερημιαν ποιουσιν, ειρηνην καλουσιν.  
Or perhaps a line of verse:  
Ερημιαν εποιησεν, ειρηνην καλων. It is a mark of the 'old Oxford' that Dr Slater, a mathematician, should notice this point which is largely, if not completely unremarked, by historians who look at the Roman Conquest of Britain. If it is valid, it tells us a lot about Tacitus, and may indicate Greek contact with the British Isles. See also 'The Great Market of the Greeks' – an Irish place-name.
7. Oxford's great strength is that it is not Cambridge. Cambridge in the same way is stronger because it is not Oxford. And both have been strengthened from time to time by attracting talented individuals who developed their skills in other universities. Diversity is strength at the university level.
8. On 18 October 1976. Tony Blair made a speech at the same place twenty years later. By then the Callaghan speech had taken on a sort of cloak of prophecy.
9. A legal case making the student's relationship with his/her University a contract rather than a voluntary association like joining a football, rugby or tennis club was thought by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals to require only a brief statement in the General Prospectus. In

fact it has become the basis of fees, EDI and much else that is central to universities and how they work.

10. The Robbins Principles:
  1. University places should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment
  2. Instruction in skills
  3. The promotion of the general powers of the mind
  4. To maintain research in balance with teaching since teaching should not be separated from the advancement of learning and the search for truth
  5. To transmit a common culture and common standards of citizenship.
11. In more recent days a new principle, student welfare and social care, has been added as EDI. E (Equity) might usefully be extended to teachers. No statistics are publicly available, but an appearance has been created that teachers of non-British origin have been disproportionately involved in disputes. This may indicate a culture clash or unconscious racism by complainants. In equity it should be examined.
12. Do universities have a real or implied duty of care for female or other vulnerable students that might lead them to the provision of safe spaces for anyone experiencing sexual, social, political or religious pressures? A version of the separate provisions of Pachomius.
13. Flexner's judgment was not always right. He doubted that motorcar engineering would ever generate enough intellectual interest to become a 'University' subject to be studied; modern Formula One cars certainly meet his test. But when he considered the ideal state of a university, he came up with a triumphant vision: 'It should be small, its staff and students or scholars should be few. The administration should be inconspicuous, inexpensive, and subordinate. The members of the teaching staff, while freed from the waste of time involved in administrative work, should freely participate in decisions involving the quality and directions of its activities; the living conditions should represent a marked improvement over contemporary academic conditions; its subject should be fundamental in character and it should develop gradually'. A friend, who was a Professor of Physics in England, was invited to Princeton. He told me that what Flexner created there from about 1930 was like a vision of what heaven should be like. Of the twenty or so leading physicists and mathematicians in the world at that time, around half a dozen (including Albert Einstein) had offices on his corridor and every morning he could have coffee with them and listen to them. *Mutatis mutandis*, we might all dream of such a place for our own subjects. Flexner is worth reading on his Institute (see its website). It is not an end; it should be the starting point.
14. Gallie was strongly influenced by the American C. S. Peirce who warned us that our premises should not assume a desired answer.
15. A rare example of a Right-Wing Tory Government adopting as its own a measure set out by Labour years earlier.

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# Mergers, collaboration, expansion; challenging choices across UK higher education

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G.R.EVANS

'Place-based' collaboration has been found to have many benefits, stimulating 'economic growth' by 'co-locating' the 'physical assets of universities, research institutions,

high-tech companies, advanced civic infrastructure and thriving ecosystems of entrepreneurs, businesses, and investors'.<sup>1</sup> This is not confined to Britain. Australian uni-

versities too are being found to ‘anchor communities’ as ‘builder, beacon, broker, base’.<sup>2</sup> But the ‘place’ of its universities has particular features in England.

The area between Oxford and Cambridge is the subject of a National Infrastructure Report, *Partnering for Prosperity*.<sup>3</sup> This proposes ‘a new deal for the Cambridge-Milton-Keynes-Oxford Arc’. A recent *Report* of the Higher Education Policy Institute on a future of the ‘Oxford to Cambridge Arc’ explores the desirability of the working together of the local universities for regional social and economic benefit as well as their own.<sup>4</sup>

This chimes with a geographically wider policy proposal. Universities UK’s publication of *Opportunity, Growth and Partnership: a blueprint for change from the UK’s Universities*<sup>5</sup> seeks to ‘maximise the contribution of UK universities to economic growth and widening opportunity for all’. The authors of its chapters variously seek ‘new group structures akin to the University of London federated model’; ‘collaboration between regional providers’ to ‘reduce duplication’ and ‘unproductive local competition’; it would like to see ‘collaborative tertiary education’, ‘generating local growth’ through ‘partnership’. Partnership with business is also strongly recommended, for both economic and research-related reasons. In the case of funding for research it is suggested that ‘businesses should fund 100 per cent of industry-sponsored research’ and ‘funders should review requirements that universities match-fund projects, lowering the amount they are expected to contribute to below 20 per cent’.

With Oxford and Cambridge as its ‘book-ends’, the ‘ARC’ includes Cranfield University, the University of Buckingham,<sup>6</sup> Buckinghamshire New University, and the Open University, all clustered in or near Milton Keynes. There are also half a dozen further education providers in or near Oxford,<sup>7</sup> and a similar number between Cambridge and Bedford.<sup>8</sup> Some of the FE providers offer a range of courses from level 1 to degree-level courses offered in partnership with the universities, not all local. The Bedford College Group, for example, offers Higher Technical qualifications and has partnerships with the Universities of Bedfordshire, Huddersfield and Northampton.<sup>9</sup> Buckinghamshire New University, ‘where education meets employability’<sup>10</sup> has campuses in High Wycombe, Aylesbury, Uxbridge and Great Missenden. It says that it ‘is committed to empowering members of the community to generate knowledge with transformative potential in their local area through community research’.<sup>11</sup>

HEPI’s recent publications include a call for ‘a holistic tertiary approach to post-18 education and training that: breaks down the policy silos around these sectors’ in a ‘tertiary education system’ bringing together ‘further and higher education, apprenticeships and adult learning’. It is argued that ‘skills’ would benefit by conjoining ‘place-based’ collaborative ‘provision’ of further and higher and apprentice-based education.<sup>12</sup> This is likely to fit well with meeting local needs.

\* \* \*

However the ‘book-ends’ are unlikely to give priority to such collaborative local activity in the ARC between them. They are constitutionally different. They have never needed the royal charters which were granted to English universities. They simply invented themselves as corporations at the beginning of the thirteenth century, called

themselves *universitates* (the Latin for ‘corporations’) and took the authority to grant degrees of their own choosing (*gradus*) of their own choosing. Governments have held back from giving them directions and they have not been keen (or eligible) to join all the ‘clubs’ or ‘association’ to which other local providers belong. GuildHE describes itself as ‘the advocate of choice for smaller and specialist higher education institutions’.<sup>13</sup> Oxford and Cambridge fit neither description. The Open University belongs to the European University Association. Neither Oxford nor Cambridge is a member. Nor do they belong to the Committee of University Chairs. Under the *Further Education and Research Act* of 1992 other English universities are required to have governing bodies with a maximum of 24 members with a Chair. Oxford and Cambridge have democratic governing bodies of several thousands and have no Chairs.

Their difference from other English higher education providers has meant that Oxford and Cambridge enter into ‘partnerships’ in only very limited ways. Even mutual recognition between Oxford and Cambridge is limited, though in certain circumstances they will incorporate one another’s graduates (and for historical reasons those of Trinity College, Dublin), making them their own, under Oxford’s Statute X, 5. (1) and Cambridge’s Statute B, II, 2.

Buckingham University lists Oxford and Cambridge among its ‘collaborators’ but that does not seem to be noted as mutual by either of the ancient universities.<sup>14</sup> They form only limited ‘partnerships’ or the sub-contractual arrangements entered into by other providers. They do not permit another provider of higher education to grant their degrees. Oxford’s India-Oxford Initiative merely seeks ‘to develop and sustain equitable partnerships between the University and institutions and individuals in India’.<sup>15</sup> Cambridge has a Strategy Office, acting subject to a Protocol which includes a warning that legal liability will lie with the University if a ‘University body, grouping or individual’ enters into an ‘agreement’.<sup>16</sup>

Business Schools have proved to be valuable earners to the universities in the ARC, not least because they have helped to attract international students, who can be charged much higher fees than English undergraduates. A survey of Deans at a conference of the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) suggested that ‘parent universities’ finances were to some extent reliant on business schools’ ability to recruit international post-graduates, and on average 60 per cent of the net income generated by business schools was creamed off by their parent institutions’.<sup>17</sup> After initial uncertainty about their acceptability Oxford and Cambridge now both have flourishing Business Schools.

Partnerships linking a University with a local business have been favoured in the ARC. Buckinghamshire New University, for example, explains enticingly that such arrangements are of benefit to businesses as well as itself:

*‘A KTP starts with the business’s vision to innovate and diversify its products or services, or develop new and improved ways of working. By collaborating with the university through a KTP, your business will access expert knowledge from our academic team.’*

It adds that funding through Innovate UK<sup>18</sup> enables the business to recruit a highly-skilled individual who is ded-

icated to delivering a specific, strategic, innovation project for the business.<sup>19</sup>

The general value of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships was assessed by UKRI in an *Evaluation Report* in 2023.<sup>20</sup> It asked 'whether there is scope to maximise place-based impacts further in future', but suggested that 'this would need to be actively instigated by Innovate UK and/or by local partners, likely on a case-by-case basis'. In 2017 a Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) was added to the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) and the REF (Research Excellence Framework). Its purpose was to 'assess' not only 'an institution's research' but also 'how that was applied and used by others' in ways 'valuable to both the economy and society'.<sup>21</sup> It is also beneficial to the universities' funding as well as to their reputations, as Oxford and Cambridge have found.

Both universities stand out in the level of their earnings from such non-academic partnerships. Oxford stresses the local benefits too:

*'research and education aims to benefit the wider public in the Oxford region, across the UK and globally. To this end we work in partnership with public, private, voluntary and commercial organisations and our alumni to enhance public engagement and knowledge exchange.'*<sup>22</sup>

Cambridge says it sits at the heart of the 'Cambridge cluster', 'powering world-leading research, driving a thriving ecosystem of hundreds of spinout and start-up companies, and nurturing an environment for business services and investment'.<sup>23</sup>

Plans for their geographical expansion across the ARC have been less warmly welcomed by Oxford and Cambridge. In 2017 Oxford University took out Bonds worth £750 million.<sup>24</sup> In 2018 the University of Cambridge took out Bonds worth £600 million. Both had in mind expansion further into the ARC.

Oxford University has been building along Botley Rd. and to the north of the ring-road, some to add laboratories, others less lab-based. It has added a Science Park on the outskirts of the city at Begbroke intended as 'a place to carry out cutting-edge research, to collaborate with industry and to develop innovative ideas into new products and technologies'.<sup>25</sup> The University had bought the site, including green belt land. The District Council had permitted its development to meet the University's 'unmet need'.<sup>26</sup> The relevant parish councils complained that they had not been consulted about the creation of the necessary footpaths.<sup>27</sup> 'Affordable housing' development followed, but that too has been subject to criticism.<sup>28</sup> New ventures continue to be announced,<sup>29</sup> with a continuing focus on adding housing.<sup>30</sup> The movement onwards across the ARC continues slowly and uncertainly to expand. In September 2024 planning permission was granted for 'the development of a 170-acre innovation district' around the Science Park.<sup>31</sup> The Ellison Institute of Technology, owner of the Eagle and Child in St. Giles, has ambitious and varied plans for its new Oxford campus, designed by Foster and to be completed in 2027.<sup>32</sup>

Cambridge has found its similar expansion beyond the city limits repeatedly challenged. The first *Report* on the North-West Cambridge project appeared in 2000, the second in 2004, and another in March 2005 on 'emerging spatial options'.<sup>33</sup> A series of enabling *Reports* followed

in 2011-14. The West and North West Cambridge Estates Syndicate was 'authorized' in 2011 'where relevant' to 'exercise in the name of the University the powers of the University' for the purposes of disposal or allocation of its land.<sup>34</sup> There followed some mission drift. The *Reporter* of 24 October 2012 said that while the University intended 'to maintain over the long term its freehold interests in much of the site', 'for commercial and other reasons it is proposed to dispose of freehold interests for private housing, with some commercial disposals by long leaseholds'. There was mention of '700 units for sale on a market basis by residential developers under land sale agreements'.

In July 2015, 'the Finance Committee was formally notified that the cost of Phase 1 had increased significantly'. Price Waterhouse Cooper were engaged to conduct an independent review. The findings of the Property Board's own ensuing financial review were discussed at its meeting on 11 January 2022. It is admitted that:

*'the cash-flow generated by the development will be insufficient on its own to consistently meet the annual coupon obligations and the scheduled contribution to the bond repayment reserve (both in respect of the 2012 bond) until the 2046-47 financial year.'*<sup>35</sup>

Cambridge has continued to work on a Masterplan for its North West Cambridge Development, despite continuing concerns on the quality of the housing and lack of available amenities.<sup>36</sup> In Eddington, Knights Park houses are now for sale freehold. On 29 August this year *The Times* carried an article claiming that Cambridge was about to see the 'first houses built for rental'. 'Present Made, family rental division of Apache Capital' had 'bought land' from the University, 150 hectares to build 373 houses, a 'communal pavilion, a gym, playgrounds and co-working space' worth £160m.

Money talks. A high level of external funding has been available for the Cambridge Biomedical campus. In November 2024 the campus was 'set to receive £500 million in investment from US firm Prologis'.<sup>37</sup>

\* \* \*

A *Report* of the Office for Students on the *Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England* in November 2024,<sup>38</sup> took a gloomy view of the growing risks to the very survival of many. It was widely reported that three quarters of universities were in serious financial difficulty. Among its recommendations was an increase in collaboration locally by 'working with other organisations to reduce costs or identifying potential merger partners or other structural changes'. That was taken up in media coverage of the *Report*, with suggestions that local providers should not duplicate their provision of courses. This marks a reversal of the policy of the last two decades to encourage competition with multiplication of 'alternative' providers. Susan Lapworth, Chief Executive of the Office for Students warned of 'difficult but necessary decisions... radical steps such as mergers' and the closure of courses.<sup>39</sup>

The effect on the future of the providers in the Oxford-Cambridge ARC is hard to predict though Oxford and Cambridge seem safe enough. It is highly unlikely that



either Oxford or Cambridge will decide to sacrifice degree courses in any of their subjects in favour of the other doing so. But the trend towards geographical expansion seems to run counter to another trend. Working from home is now more common, despite the continuing need for face-to-face teaching in tutorials and supervisions. More and more of both Universities' business can be conducted online. A debate and vote in the Sheldonian still takes place live in the building but Cambridge's Discussions no longer involve wearing a gown and speaking in the Senate House. If the date and time is inconvenient, 'remarks' can simply be emailed to the Proctors who will read them in a Zoom Discussion at 2.00 on a Tuesday afternoon. Voting in the election of both Universities' Chancellors is now digital.

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5. [https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2024-09/opportunity-growth-and-partnership-a-blue-print-for-change\\_0.pdf](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2024-09/opportunity-growth-and-partnership-a-blue-print-for-change_0.pdf)
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# TO THE EDITOR

Sir – A brief comment about Audit, Scrutiny and Audit&Scrutiny in Oxford based on the articles in your latest issue (*Oxford Magazine*, No 470, 5th Week, MT 2014).

I was Assessor for 2023-24 and attended the Audit & Scrutiny committee during this period. Certainly, in terms of the skill-set of the membership and how it functions, my view is that Audit&Scrutiny committee is optimised towards audit and financial scrutiny of the University, in that the University is a complex institution involving money in and money out and also subject to many legal requirements.

What was not properly touched on in the various articles is the role of the Proctorial team (the two Proctors and Assessor) in Scrutiny in terms of broader matters of governance and also the many other aspects that make up a world-class university. These roles in Oxford are more substantive than their Cambridge equivalents. The Proctorial team sit on a very large number of University committees, see much business passing through the University committee structure and have an explicit mandate to be interested in the governance of the University.

Yours sincerely,

JOSEPH CONLON

*Department of Theoretical Physics*

## How to initiate Congregation actions

### *How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation*

It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (*i.e.* a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8<sup>th</sup> day before the meeting.

### *Questions and replies*

Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18<sup>th</sup> day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in *Gazette* in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

### *Postal votes*

Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present (“on the floor”) at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6<sup>th</sup> day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

### *Flysheets*

To generate a flysheet for publication with the *Gazette*, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml>  
Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the *Gazette*.  
The Congregation website is at: [www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation).  
Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: [congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk)).

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## The Swing

I hold you on my lap; I think you're dead.  
Next to us hangs a rusty, creaking swing.  
I look down as my white dress blooms with red.

Such fun to pull the seat right back, then fling  
it free. You're two, I'm four, so I'm to blame;  
now I'm screaming bloody murder to bring

someone to the garden to witness my shame  
where swaying grimly like a tolling bell  
the swing is the proof of the deadly game.

It's a story my mother liked to tell  
while tracing the faint white mark on your brow:  
how she found me soothing you after you fell.

The truth is, I can't remember why or how  
I hurled that dead weight directly at you.  
Did she wonder at all, as I do now

if I pushed it so hard because I knew  
the swing's unpredictable to and fro  
showed love and jealousy can both be true?

You never reproached me, but even so  
I still bear the scar of that reckless throw.

---

## The Male Gaze

*after Dante and Beatrice by Henry Holiday*

Every morning when I take my walk  
you're there, leaning on the parapet  
of the Ponte San Trinita: grey hair,  
drab green robes, a scholar's cap.

At my feet, pigeons search for crumbs  
trapped in the paving and I can feel  
people talking about me. Her hand  
on my shoulder, Vanna looks at you,  
wondering why you're here again.

As for me, I keep one hand safe within  
the folds of my gown, while the other  
clasps a rose I picked from the garden  
this morning, white with the faintest blush.

LOUISE WALKER

Louise Walker read English at Magdalen College and has been teaching English for over 30 years in girls' schools. Her collection *From There to Here* (in which 'The Swing' appears) has just been published by Dithering Chaps.

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## Gift

Someone is knocking,  
so go to the door, accept

the parcel. Please don't  
put it in the cupboard with

the others, but open it now  
parting the tissue paper

to find this year's folded  
cashmere, soft as a kiss

then wrap it closely round  
you in place of love.

I fear that one day,  
like a burglar, I will push

the door open, to find  
the flat as you left it:

nothing but milk in the fridge  
and next to your chair, opposite

the blank landscape of the TV  
a bowl of sherbet lemons

their Technicolor brightness  
bitter with reproach.

---

## Tidings of comfort and joy?

What cheer?  
What cheer – at tail-end of the year  
When days are dark and nights are drear  
And all too many live in fear?  
What cheer? – beyond another beer?

What news?  
What news is good when missiles cruise  
When nurses kill and bullies bruise  
And even dads their own abuse?  
What news can solid hope infuse?

What chance?  
What chance from humble circumstance  
Springs one who can the light advance  
Who bids us join his different dance?  
What chance he'll get our second glance?

ROBERT GRAYSON

Robert Grayson writes a poem each week for the staff bulletin at NDORMS where he works as Graduate Studies Assistant. Previously a pastor and primary school teacher, he loves playing with words.

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