

The Chancellor
The Rt Hon Lord Patten of Barnes, KG CH

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Lord Patten,'.

In January last year when you became Vice-Chancellor of the University, a post in which you have made, as anticipated, such a sure-footed start, I said to you that once your term of office was under way, I thought we should discuss my own position as Chancellor. We have subsequently had that discussion.

I was elected as Chancellor in 2003 on the death of Roy Jenkins. By my reckoning, Chancellors, a post which has normally been regarded as primarily ceremonial, have, since before the Duke of Wellington in the 19th century, died in office. Going back to before the Second World War over a 90-year period, I am the fourth Chancellor - Lord Halifax was followed, after a term which ran from 1934 to 1960, by Harold Macmillan and he was succeeded by Roy Jenkins who was Chancellor from 1987 to 2003.

The latest University statutes in 2002 state clearly that 'the Chancellor shall be elected by Convocation and shall hold office during his or her life or until his or her resignation.' When even a Pope resigns from office it seems to me to be increasingly out of date to argue for ignoring the end of this sentence.

I have thought about this both in general terms and in more personal ones. The role of Chancellor is today far more than ceremonial, though I suppose it is true that the one specifically executive role is to chair the elected committee which chooses a Vice-Chancellor. But I know that when I became Chancellor I was expected to be more than a ceremonial figure. My principal role was to support the Vice-Chancellor and to spend as much energy and time on this as was reasonable and required. When she demitted office, the last excellent Vice-Chancellor, Louise Richardson, asked for a list of the main functions I had undertaken during her period of office. Discounting smaller meetings and dinners it was found that I had been undertaking (except during the COVID lockdown) about 60 principal events a year, speeches, conferences, travel to meet alumni and raise funds. As it happens, since I became Chancellor I have visited, with these aims in mind, the United States, Canada, India, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, as well as several EU countries.

Inevitably, a Chancellor will bring her or his own experience and views to this work. It surely makes good sense, from time to time, for a new person with fresh eyes and different opinions to do this job. For a start, the main problems facing the University today are not exactly the same as they were 21 years ago when I was elected.

So I believe that there is much to be said for the University choosing a new Chancellor, according to a timescale determined by the convenience and requirements of the University, not by the health or death of a Chancellor.

This year, I will have my 80th birthday in May. I hope that there will be many more birthdays to come. But it does not require an excess of pessimism to realise that the number of years that lie ahead for me will fall. I am unlikely to have another 21 years in the job. Moreover, I am kept on the road these days by the welcome, skilled and hugely professional work of cardiologists and, in addition, have to spend rather longer on my in-tray because I suffer from macular degeneration, for which I am also being medically treated. So to be selfish, I think it is in my own interest and that of the University for me to step down at the end of this academic year, giving the University and you personally, the opportunity to plan a sensible succession which matches the demands of the 2020s. As I said to you, personally, I would prefer to have a farewell dinner than a memorial service in which my part would be necessarily limited! I say all this with a heavy heart, trusting that I will still be able to work for Oxford University (which I love) from time to time. I am sure there will be an occasion when I can make clear how grateful I am to all those who have worked so hard to help me and whose friendship I greatly value.

There have been five Vice-Chancellors since I became Chancellor. I regularly attend meetings when I am the only person in the room still doing the same job after 20 years. It is not uncommon for me to be at meetings with, for instance, Heads of House, some of whom are the third or fourth in post since my own arrival on the scene. Looking towards Whitehall I can also count 15 Secretaries of State for Education since I became Chancellor. Government after government says that its priority is education. Whether this is demonstrated by the fecundity of appointments to the top ministerial job is a matter of debate. During Louise Richardson's tenure of seven years as Vice-Chancellor there were nine secretaries of state, the longest serving of whom was Gavin Williamson.

The University of Oxford has been a hugely important part of my life. I know that the same is true for you. I am, I suppose, a pretty typical example of a post-Butler Act 1960s scholarship boy, part of a meritocracy now sometimes derided. I won an exhibition at Balliol when I was 16 and spent, in due course, three extraordinarily happy years there with brilliant teachers. It was a really golden age for Balliol historians. Several of my best friends in life were my contemporaries. For example, there was Henry Hodge, who was a Labour Party solicitor and a leading campaigner against child poverty. Not the least virtue of the man with the biggest laugh in the world was that he was a superb goalkeeper. He became a High Court Justice and the President of the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal. He died at the age of 65. Edward Mortimer, a Liberal Democrat, was the cleverest of my generation. He would not have made a good goalkeeper, but was a brilliant scholar and linguist. He became an Examination Fellow of All Souls. After a distinguished career in journalism, with *The Times* and *The Financial Times*, he was appointed Head of Communications at the UN for Kofi Annan. If I was on the opposite side of an argument to Edward, I always used to question whether I had got things quite right. I speak every year at Gaudy lunches or dinners, aware of the annual fall in the numbers present. All those absent Henrys and Edwards.

There is a rather awful self-regarding poem by Hilaire Belloc called 'Balliol made me'. Of course, I owe a great deal to my College, not least meeting my best friend at a party there. She was an undergraduate at St Hilda's at the time. We first met by chance at a beer and Bulgarian wine bash given by my moral tutor at Balliol, Christopher Hill, one of the greatest

Marxist historians of the last century and a very kind man. Lavender and I have now been happily married for over 50 years.

Like many alumni from Oxford, which is of course a collegiate university, I feel a huge loyalty to my College. But I would not go as far as Belloc. I think it is true to say that Oxford as a whole made me, not just because of the three happy years I spent there as a student, but because of what Oxford has continued to mean to me over the years right up to the present day. There would be no colleges without Oxford, and no Oxford without colleges. For all its occasional quirkiness, I love Oxford.

It has helped me to learn the difference between an argument and a quarrel. While personally opinionated, I think I now appreciate much more today the importance of tolerating other people's opinions, and of moderation (both genial and I hope purposeful) in public service and in life generally. I regard universities as an important part of the value system of open democratic societies. They should not simply be regarded as part of a certification process for the job market. We should certainly not allow them to be dragged into the centre of so-called culture wars which have usually little to do with culture, but are invariably a clash between the ideologues and heresy hunters from the extremes. Scholarship is often abandoned in these somewhat demeaning fights. We should certainly do everything we can to avoid what has been happening on the campuses of some great universities in the United States. Bitterly and often ignorantly contested so-called culture wars are usually a distraction from serious political debate and from the real business of universities – scholarship and teaching.

So, while I think the time has come for me to give up my responsibilities as Chancellor, I would be sad if I was not able to continue to work from time to time to safeguard the interests of our own University and that of others too. I intend to say more about the future of higher education in due course.

We know how much has changed in the last 20 years in higher education. From about 1975 to the end of the last century the number of students at our universities and colleges has more than doubled after the Robbins report, an increase which was paid for by halving the amount of support, by and large provided by the taxpayer, for every student. I was able to see, a few years ago when I was Chancellor of another excellent research university, Newcastle, the impact of this on academic salaries and higher education infrastructure. Since the beginning of this century, the system of funding further and higher education, which was falling apart, partly because governments did not think they could afford to sustain it, has been followed by another system now threatened by complete collapse.

This recent system is based on a pseudo-market mechanism, which whatever their exact functions, treats 150 institutions in the same way and acts similarly in relation to individual academic courses at the same universities. It has shown itself incapable of balancing the utilitarian case for higher education and the value-driven arguments about personal and social development.

Higher education funding is predicted by Vice-Chancellors and others to fall to its lowest level in real terms since the 1990s. Students are loaded with debts. Academic salaries fall. Because foreign students pay higher fees, some universities put a priority on recruiting more of them in order to try to balance the books. The quality of some of the degrees they are taught is sneered at behind their hands by ministers who are responsible for the present situation. The demographic forecast is that there will be 100,000 more young women and men in the university age group in the next few years.

The wonder is that despite all these problems, international comparisons of higher education suggest that we have 17 universities in the world top hundred, second only to the United

States. Provided we do more to protect and build on this position, it should be a cause of hope for the future.

Oxford University itself comes top or near the top of most of these international league tables because of achievements for which you and your colleagues are responsible and for which you should all take the credit.

But competition heats up year by year, not least from Asia. We need to raise our game, especially since political leaders continue to set out our national objective of being a world-class science and research superpower. This is plainly an imperative if we are to improve our pretty abysmal recent record of economic growth in Britain.

As you have pointed out, what we need today in higher education is root and branch reform. Thanks to history, good academic leadership and outstanding performance in teaching and research, Oxford is better placed than most others to deal with the headwinds that threaten our universities and to argue the case for reform. We have, of course, internal challenges like continuing to broaden and diversify admissions without any lowering of quality and to find more funds for younger academic staff. But we have a superb record in attracting philanthropy and research grants from industry which will continue to be a great asset. I hope that I will be able to continue to take a full part in the debates on these issues in the years ahead. But it is surely plain that the best way of securing the global leadership role to which we aspire is by political leaders working together for the change necessary to sustain such an important national cause. It is abundantly in the national interest that political parties should do this. Politics today, maybe more than ever, should be about building bridges rather than driving wedges.

I hope you will excuse the length of this letter, but I was keen to underline my continuing love and support for Oxford even though I think it is now in the University's interest and my own to accept the need for change. In the Thames Valley as elsewhere, time has moved on. I will in due course give all my support to whoever succeeds me.



James