

FOCUS

DARK BLUE TURNED DEEPEST RED?

Has the dark blue of Oxford turned deepest red? Are we to witness an alliance between Scargill and the senior common rooms? Watching the recent dons' debate which refused an honorary degree to Margaret Thatcher, one might for a wild moment have thought so. Honorary degrees to Oxford-educated prime ministers are well-nigh automatic, though usually awarded the moment the recipient reaches Downing Street. One of Oxford's mistakes in this farcically bungled affair was to wait until the lady had lain waste to Britain rather than to nip in quick, thus absolving itself of political prejudice.

The dark blue has not, alas, turned even the palest pink. Oxford University may be crammed with Conservatives, but they are for the most part Tories of the old school: genteel, paternalist, Disraelite. The abrasive, loud-talking, lower middle-class upstart at number 10 may be more to their taste than Neil Kinnock, but she is not really their kind of politician. The only nakedly Thatcherite speech of the whole Congregation debate, delivered by a snappy young academic too flashy and plausible for the elderly port-swillers of Oxford, was too populist in style to cut much ice, laced as it was with the odd sidesmack at Oxford privilege and patronising, speciously 'radical' appeals to Thatcher's sex. In proposing the degree, the Oxford establishment carefully distanced itself from Thatcher's educational butcherings: the head of her old college made a perfunctory speech which sounded about as convincing as a *Private Eye* apology. The surreal figure of the Warden of All Souls could manage little beyond a lame appeal to tradition, a tradition which in Oxford terms is pretty recent. The improbable figure of the Professor of Military History remarked that his friends in the army wouldn't look kindly on a put-down of the PM, a comment which curiously failed to sway the hearts of listening scientists fearful of the future of their research programmes.

In the end, it was such considerations which carried the day. For each out-of-touch conservative who tried to defuse the whole debate into frivolity (a move usually instantly successful in any Oxford gathering) there was a coldly angry scientist waiting to stalk to the rostrum, to denounce Thatcher's educational policies and plead for solidarity with Salford, Bradford and Aston. Those dons who thought these were the names of 18th



Ivory becomes victorious over iron. Will the tower continue to challenge the lady?

century politicians were soon to be undecieved. The vote against Thatcher represented a momentary victory of intellectual seriousness over Oxford levity; a triumphant reversal of the usual power-relations between sleek humanists and scruffy scientists; and a most uncharacteristic recognition that Britain contains educational institutions other than Oxford, with which a ritual show of sympathy might not be out of place. Oxford colleges are swaddled by the wealth of centuries of endowments against the educational cuts; but the science laboratories are more vulnerable, and - untypically for the residually anti-scientific Oxford - it was this which finally counted. To be a successful Oxford classicist, historian or literary critic you really need culture in your blood, which means rich parents and a public school background; to be a good scientist you just need to be clever, which sometimes involves retaining a whiff of leftist sentiment and no-nonsense anti-traditionalism from a less

reputable social background.

There was, undeniably, a dash of Oxford charade and perversity about the whole affair. Arrogantly idiosyncratic, the dons were out to demonstrate that nobody has an automatic right to their precious degrees, not even someone engaged in the much-neglected task of trying to smash the entire labour movement. To be an Oxford don is to have a vicarious sort of power: you train the ministers and generals of tomorrow while cutting a shabbily ineffectual figure yourself. The vote was an exercise in such ambiguity: in one sense it meant very little, directed as it was at a woman with nothing but philistine contempt for the life of the mind. But in another sense it was all Oxford could do to manifest its concern for less well-heeled students and academics throughout the country, and it would be churlish to look even such a thoroughbred gifthorse in the mouth.

Terry Eagleton