

Wokingham Choral Society on Saturday 11th November

I attended the Choral Society's Remembrance programme of music and readings held at All Saints Church on Saturday night.

The singing was wonderful, with a particularly moving and powerful rendition of part of the Mass for Peace, the Armed Man. The choir allowed the Sanctus to ring out sonorously.

I would like to thank all involved in organising and producing such a great event on the eve of Remembrance Sunday.

PESCO and EU defence

As I understand it the UK will not be signing up to PESCO, the new system promoting more EU defence integration. This is a system under the control of the EU institutions and therefore would not be appropriate for the UK as it leaves. The UK is offering defence collaboration, mainly through NATO. The UK is offering a bilateral Agreement UK/EU where both sides keep a veto.

The CBI gives bad advice again on the EU

I see the CBI is going to Downing Street to urge delay in leaving the EU and urge that we keep as many of the features of our membership as possible.

We should remember how they lobbied and lobbied to get the UK into the European Exchange Rate Mechanism which gave us boom and bust, and a large recession, which did considerable damage to their member companies.

They then thought the Euro a good idea and claimed we would lose out by not joining it, especially in the City. Instead the City grew and flourished outside the Euro.

Now they want to prolong the period of uncertainty by demanding a Transitional period, and delay making our own trade agreements. Above all they seem to want to cripple the UK economy for longer with large transfers

of money to the rest of the EU, with the consequent big drag on our balance of payments.

They could be helpful to their member firms if instead they concentrated on lobbying the EU not to impose any new barriers on their trade with us when we leave. It's the EU which pretends to want new barriers, not the UK.

Government stability

Remain, Labour and many in the media are running endless stories about the possible fall of the PM or the government. These stories are false mischief.

Let me remind you of the process to remove a Conservative PM. 15% of the Conservative MPs have to ask for a Confidence vote in the leader. Then more than half the MPs have to vote No Confidence. As most Conservative MPs support the Leader neither of these two events are about to happen.

For there to be an early General election the government would have to lose a Confidence motion in the Commons. I know of no Conservative MP who would vote to do that. The DUP are not after an early election either.

Getting in to Oxbridge

I have read with interest the allegations that Oxford and Cambridge do not admit enough pupils from poorer and non professional backgrounds. From my regular contacts with Oxford I think it is a much more welcoming institution than when I went there, which does much more to reach out to people who do not come from communities with strong Oxbridge links. The University spends time talking to schools that have no history of sending pupils to the university, time encouraging more students to apply, and provides a range of bursaries and scholarships to help some students with costs. It has made good progress in changing attitudes within the University and in welcoming people from all backgrounds.

I was the first person in my family to go to university. I was surprised when a teacher suggested to me that I put my name in for the Oxford entrance exam at the beginning of my fourth term in the 6th Form. I was just 16, as I had jumped a year at primary school. What little I knew about Oxford made me think it was unattainable. They told me at school I would be in with a chance, and I am grateful to them for putting opportunity in my way. Everyone with a chance needs an adult in their school or family circle who suggests they try. Governors, Councillors and teachers must ensure all state schools

look out for talent to apply to the best universities.

I was very self critical in the 6th form, struggling to develop a well informed voice I was happy with. I pitched myself against the great minds I read in books and thought I always fell short. I tried out various styles of analysis and writing. One essay attracted particular criticism from a teacher which it doubtless deserved. When challenged why I was writing like that, I replied defensively without thought or good reason that I assumed that was what Oxford would want.

Then came one of those defining moments that teachers sometimes achieve without realising it. He replied, "In that case why do you want to go there?" The sheer irreverence of the quip made me realise Oxford could be for people like me, and was only worth going to if it could further my development. He in a way liberated me from possible failure, and confirmed a realisation I had often flirted with that study was about me, the quality of my enquiry and the development of my ideas. There are strict limits to how much anyone else can teach you once you have grasped the conventional wisdom of your subject. I was already grappling with what I thought were the imperfections of the contemporary work in my discipline.

I was invited to interview. The system was you went to stay at your first choice College, but had to stay for longer in case other Colleges in their group – there were 3 groups – also wanted to interview you for a place.

I was staying in a noisy room in an annex building on a main road. It was cold and the room friendless as the student that usually lived there had had to strip the room for my arrival. I waited and waited until I was finally summonsed to an interview. It was perfunctory. There was no apparent intellectual challenge. I assumed they were going through the motions and had decided against me by the time I got there. I had not researched who was likely to be interviewing me and felt cheated there was no good argument. I did not understand the significance of the hypothetical question about which year I could turn up if offered a place. I waited and waited for an interview elsewhere but none came. I was finally told I could go. By this time I was thinking I was glad I would go off to London who had already offered me a place if I got 2 E grade A levels. In London they had engaged with my views at the interview.

I was amazed when a letter came some time later offering me a place and an Open Scholarship. My bad feelings about my sojourn at Oxford were banished by the offer and by the positive reaction to it of my school. It certainly changed my life. Oxford did not need me to take any A levels but I stayed at school to complete them. 2 Es were needed for a local authority grant. Although that took all the pressure off, for me it did the opposite. I now felt I had to live up to the faith placed in me. I got permission to go to the local university library to work, as I had run out of books to read at school.

In those days we were not to my knowledge invited to any preparatory or introductory discussions. There was no attempt to reach out when you arrived for interview. The Oxford I went to was full of ex public school boys who

were better prepared. They were more used to the College life as it reflected patterns from the richer boarding schools. They had been tutored for the exams and made conversant with the dons who would interview them.

The modern Oxford I meet has a much better range of people from a wide range of backgrounds. There are many more women with the strict segregation of old Oxford with just 5 women's colleges broken down completely. The student groups I have spoken to do not see their past school or social origins as significant as it was in the Oxford I attended. Oxbridge provides a good home for those with the discipline of self instruction and study. I just hope every school does encourage their brightest and best to apply. One of the best features of Oxford when I was an undergraduate was the open lecture lists. You could go to any lecture in any subject. I tended to go to the most interesting lectures in some other subjects to provide a more rounded education, rather than to the ones in my subject which did not normally present new material if you had read enough.