

A catholic woman is appointed master of Balliol College, Oxford



Oxford flyer: as debate over the glass ceiling intensifies a catholic woman is appointed master of Balliol College

When The Tablet published its list of the 100 most influential Catholics two years ago, during its 175th anniversary year, Dame Helen Ghosh told me that her children devoured it, fascinated by the prominent public figures whose bedrock is their faith. Ghosh herself was at number four, a reflection of her role as Director-General of the National Trust.

If The Tablet were to publish the list today, Ghosh might be at number one, given her achievements in the Civil Service, the charity sector and now at the top in education.

Last week, it was announced that she is leaving the Trust to become Master of Balliol College, Oxford. The appointment made headlines, not only because Oxbridge affairs still count as newsworthy but also as evidence of women breaking the glass ceiling, during a week dominated by the debate over gender inequality at the BBC. But Ghosh's story is significant also for reasons that bring us back to that list of influential Catholics.

Her CV tells a tale of Catholics moving from being outsiders to insiders, from being distrusted as not quite properly British to becoming, in the words of the constitutional historian Peter Hennessy – also a Catholic – “the entirely trusted stealth minority”. The appointment of a Catholic Director-General at the BBC in 1969 provoked Home Office memos; it is unlikely that the dons at Balliol will eye Ghosh over the dry sherry as not quite the ticket.

Helen Ghosh was born in 1956 and had a schooling typical of middle-class Catholic girls of the time; she was educated by nuns at Farnborough Hill Convent School in Hampshire. From there, she went to

Oxford where she read history and met her husband, the historian Peter Ghosh. It was also there that she first encountered the Dominicans at Blackfriars, who have provided her with spiritual nourishment ever since.

She entered the fast-track Civil Service graduate training scheme, rising seamlessly through the ranks, becoming Permanent Secretary at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2005. Ghosh entered Whitehall at a time when the impartiality of civil servants was taken for granted.

While Ghosh was no tub-thumping Catholic, she was always open about her beliefs. Keith Leslie, a former consultant for Deloitte who often worked closely with civil servants, recalls: “Helen had a commitment to the public good and great professionalism. She also engaged in quite subtle proselytising. She would talk about liberal Catholicism and say: ‘I bet you think that is a contradiction in terms.’ If she was working with someone she knew, she would talk about faith.”

Ghosh’s Catholic faith played a part in her growing profile in Whitehall. Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O’Donnell, himself a Catholic, appointed her to chair the Whitehall committee coordinating the Civil Service’s role in the 2010 visit to the United Kingdom of Pope Benedict XVI. It quickly became apparent to her that most of the Civil Service is tone-deaf on religion; it was discovered that the “blue-sky thinking” of the junior staff had included the bright idea that the Pope should launch his own brand of condoms during the visit. The Vatican was furious. The ambassador to the Holy See had to apologise in Rome, while Ghosh had to issue a rather public mea culpa to the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, and to the nuncio, Archbishop Faustino Sainz Muñoz, at an Archbishop’s House reception.

This wasn’t just a job; for Ghosh as a Catholic, aware of the nation’s history, the visit of a pope to Britain was a deeply moving moment. She later said a shiver went down her spine when Benedict addressed the country’s leaders in Westminster Hall, the very place where Thomas More was tried. In terms of security, the visit was perceived as a dry run for the Olympics, held two years later, which no doubt helped Ghosh to land the job of Home Office Permanent Secretary, where she worked for Theresa May. Here were two highly intelligent Oxford graduates, sharing a deep Christian faith, who had risen to the top in a male-dominated world. In theory, it should have worked. But it failed spectacularly.

May, used to the “what Theresa wants, Theresa gets” approach of her special advisers, Fiona Hill and Nick Timothy, found Ghosh’s impartiality hard to take. With an eye on public opinion, she had little time for a senior civil servant who felt obliged to point out the legal constraints to ejecting Islamic preachers, whom May found distasteful, from the country.

Within two years, Ghosh departed for the National Trust. It was to be no easy ride. She was criticised regularly for what was perceived as her ideological commitment to sustainability, especially when she described wind turbines as “rather beautiful” and complained that stately homes contained “too much stuff”. Art expert Sir Roy Strong complained that “under her leadership the shift downmarket has accelerated”. Earlier this year, there was a fuss when “Easter” was removed from the Trust’s marketing of its egg hunt. Her nemesis, Theresa May, stepped into the row, declaring the dropping of the word “ridiculous”.

The conversations over high table at Balliol are likely to have more intellectual firepower than spats over chocolate. It will also mean that Ghosh will be working in a city that she has never really left since she arrived as a ex-convent schoolgirl. It has been her home for years, and she has kept up links with the Dominicans, including chairing their charity, the Blackfriars Overseas Aid Trust.

Some years ago, she spoke at a private meeting at Blackfriars of the balancing act that faithful Catholics have to perform in a secular society, which increasingly demands that religious views should be kept private. Now that her days in the Civil Service are behind her, she may feel more confident about speaking out about the challenges of being a Catholic in public life. Catholic undergraduates considering a career in public service will have an ideal mentor in their midst, able to explain just how to keep edging successfully along the high wire while staying true to one's convictions.

Catherine Pepinster's book *The Keys and The Kingdom – the British and the Papacy* will be published by Bloomsbury/T&T Clark this autumn.

Catherine Pepinster - The Tablet