**ALAN RUSBRIDGER & JONATHAN AITKEN**

**Charity Commission must resolve Christ Church dispute**

Alan Rusbridger, Jonathan Aitken

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Imagine this: a charity so wealthy it can spend £2.5 million on trying to oust its own chief executive. A charity that hires a flash City PR company to [brief against its own leader](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/christ-church-oxford-tries-to-silence-defence-of-dean-rsbt7zv5t). A charity whose trustees are deliberately kept in the dark about the one truly independent analysis of its own affairs.

Such a charity would surely be investigated by the Charity Commission. Anyone who has ever sat on the board of a charity receives mandatory training about the fearsome powers of the commission when things start to go wrong. But what if the charity is the most august college of Oxford University, with its own cathedral, an endowment north of £550 million and the Queen herself as the Visitor? Does it become too big to fail?

This article has an unusual authorship. One of us was a newspaper editor, the other a high-flying cabinet minister. In 1997 we were implacable adversaries in a hard-fought legal battle over truth. Today we are friends, long since reconciled. We have a shared interest in seeing justice done to Martyn Percy, the dean of Christ Church, but also in seeing a proud Oxford college thrive again. One of us is a fellow head of house, though writing in a personal capacity; the other an alumnus of Christ Church. Both of us read Andrew Billen’s [recent detailed account](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/christ-church-scandal-lavinia-woodward-college-dean-martyn-percy-and-the-censors-xkxwr0qmd) in *The Times* of the breakdown in relations between the college’s governing body and its dean with mounting astonishment.

Both of us have also now read, which apparently the trustees of Christ Church are forbidden by their own leadership to do, the 2019 report by the retired high court judge Sir Andrew Smith, which, as Billen reports, exonerated Percy on both the main charges and all 27 supporting charges.

The picture drawn by Billen is one of an institution that is literally incapable of governing itself. Oxford University is powerless to intervene. It is unimaginable that the Queen or her representatives will be drawn into the dispute. Only the Charity Commission has the powers to take decisive action to resolve the situation. In saying this we do not take sides. We merely point to a truth that is surely self-evident: the governance of a great seat of learning is broken. It needs help in the form of external management to sort things out even-handedly. The process of healing and reconciliation is not quick, nor is it painless. But maybe the friendship between the two of us shows it is possible.

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