

Nº 3

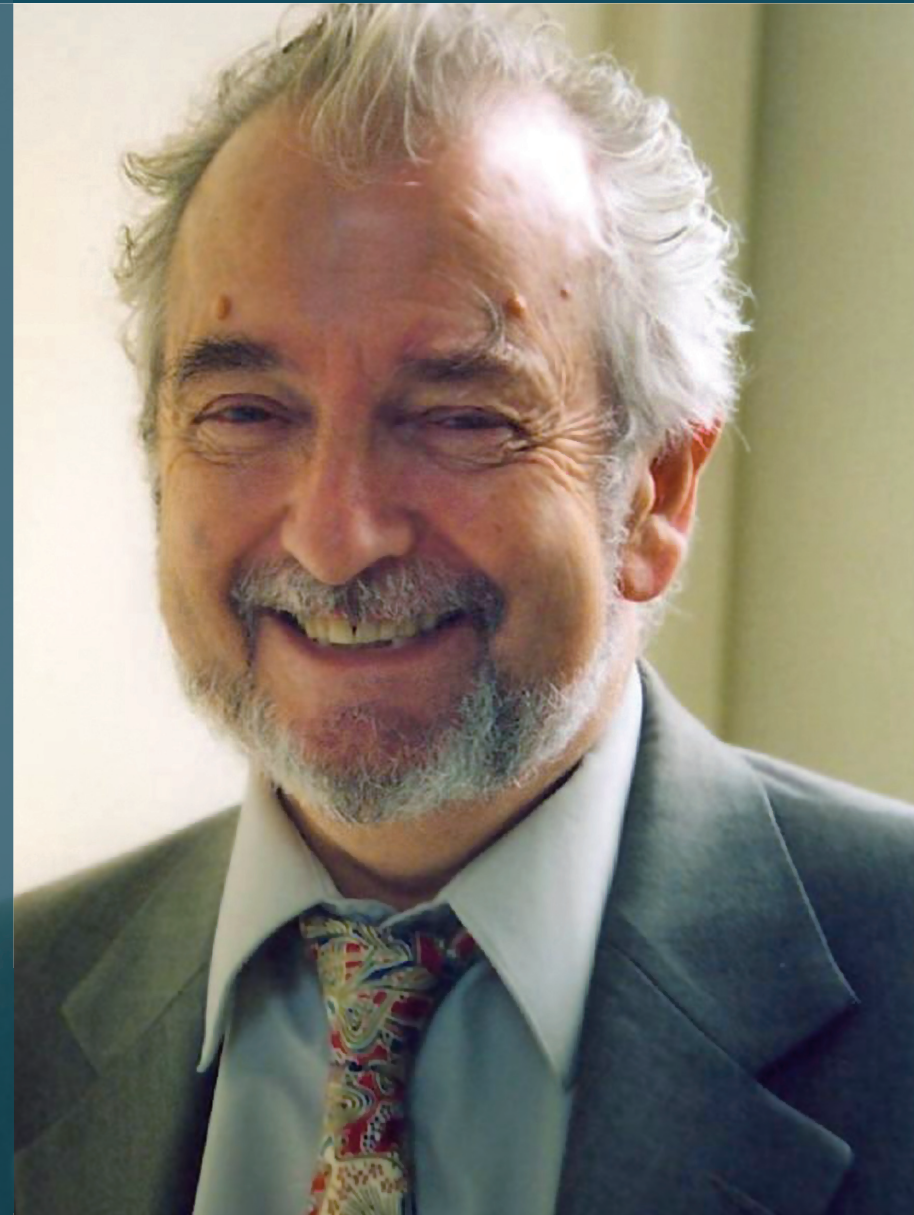
AN APPRECIATION OF  
**PROFESSOR ALAN RYAN**  
DLITT, FBA

TUTORIAL FELLOW 1969-87 AND WARDEN 1996-2009

NEW COLLEGE BULLETIN

NEW COLLEGE  
OXFORD

NEW COLLEGE, HOLYWELL STREET,  
OXFORD OX1 3BN, UNITED KINGDOM





# AN APPRECIATION OF PROFESSOR ALAN RYAN

DLITT, FBA

TUTORIAL FELLOW 1969-87 AND WARDEN 1996-2009

THE NEW COLLEGE BULLETIN  
IS A PERIODIC PUBLICATION  
THAT ADDRESSES TOPICS OF  
INTEREST TO OLD MEMBERS  
OF THE COLLEGE. HERE,  
THE COLLEGE PAYS TRIBUTE  
TO ITS LONG SERVING  
WARDEN, ALAN RYAN.



Alan Ryan's retirement as Warden in September 2009, forty years after joining the College as a Fellow and Tutor, will not end his distinguished academic career: he is heading back to Princeton University, where he taught in the interregnum (January 1988 to July 1996) between his two New College stints. Happily, it will not terminate his association with us either, as he will be a Senior Research Fellow in 2009/10 and an Honorary Fellow thereafter. Sadly, however, it will end the dynamic phase of his invaluable contribution to our intellectual and corporate life.

Alan's retirement also concludes four decades in which a remarkable Balliol quartet has done us proud: Alan was an undergraduate at that no less distinguished college from 1959 to 1962, overlapping with Richard Dawkins (also 1959-62), Chris Allsopp (1960-63), and David Clarke (1961-64), the last three having retired in 2008 after together accumulating 120 years on New College's governing body in the service respectively of biology/the public understanding of science, of economics/energy studies, and of engineering.

Alan's retirement further draws attention to the achievements of another extraordinary academic quartet drawn from the same age-cohort, the other members being Jerry Cohen, John Dunn, and Steven Lukes. All these four friends and rivals were born between May 1940 and April 1941 – not otherwise an uplifting twelve months in world history – and went on to be major political theorists.

Having duly secured his brilliant PPE First in 1962, Alan embarked upon graduate work, but within a year was hired to lecture at Keele and then in 1966 at the even higher-rated department at Essex. In 1969 he was snapped up by New College to be its fourth-ever Fellow and Tutor in Politics, following James Joll and H.G. Nicholas, and working alongside Saul Rose, who had been appointed as half-time Bursar and half-time academic.

For further information or to feedback on this document contact:

**William J. Conner**, Development Director, New College, Oxford OX1 3BN

Email: [william.conner@new.ox.ac.uk](mailto:william.conner@new.ox.ac.uk) Tel: +44 (0)1865 279 261



As well as teaching undergraduates with demonstrable success, Alan contributed significantly to the University's burgeoning graduate programme, though, contrary to rumour, he did not teach Bill Clinton. His impact was such that in 1978 he was one of a very small number of University Lecturers promoted to a Readership in a fiercely competitive internal-promotion exercise. The consequent reduction in his tutorial stint, and the College's decision to make Saul Rose full-time as Bursar, led to the creation of my own Tutorial Fellowship in 1979, for which I am ever grateful.

In 1985, however, the Chichele Professorship of Social and Political Theory became vacant at All Souls; and the electors had to decide which of the stellar quartet of Blitz-era babies – Cohen (then in London), Dunn (in Cambridge), Lukes (at Balliol), or Ryan – to appoint, which must have been difficult for all concerned. They chose the first of these; and not long afterwards the two Oxonian contenders accepted chairs elsewhere.



Even before Alan – by now deservedly a Fellow of the British Academy – left for Princeton (being replaced by Elizabeth Frazer, a choice in which he of course could play no part but of which he strongly approved), he had been talked of as a future Warden of New College. The retirement of Arthur Cooke in 1985 had come too early for him: that of Harvey MacGregor in 1996 was much better timed. The field Alan then beat was particularly strong, both his runners-up almost immediately becoming heads of house elsewhere in Oxbridge.

During Alan's absence in Princeton, the University of Oxford had introduced titular chairs, so on his return he was able to become a Professor of Politics too, in recognition of his highly regarded scholarship, notably on Mill and on property and political theory, but also, and with impressive diversity, on Russell, on Dewey, and on higher education.



As Warden, and in conjunction with the unusually strong team of College officers that he further built up, Alan raised student academic performance another notch, improved provision for graduates, and helped the Bursar, our financial advisers, and our generous alumni and alumnae strengthen the finances to a point at which the College can face the current period of economic turbulence with less foreboding than would otherwise be the case.

His Wardenship has been 'a golden age for the Fellows of New College', as one of them recently put it in my presence. Our trust in his leadership has resulted in a significant reduction in the time consumed by governing-body meetings as we have delegated more business to him and his team, confident that key issues would always be referred back to us.

Strongly committed to the teaching of both undergraduate and graduates yet sensitive to the enhanced pressure on Fellows to undertake and publish research, Alan has helped us strike a better balance between the different parts of our job. His intellectual power and range have also made him an exemplary chair of appointing committees, helping New College make some spectacularly good elections to Fellowships in recent years. And his wit and affability have invariably enhanced social gatherings.

Colleagues elsewhere in Oxford, aware of Alan as a prolific public commentator on university and educational issues who rarely pulls his punches and who has never surrendered his impish zest, have sometimes been surprised to learn that throughout his time in charge of New College he has always nurtured collegiality in its truest sense, consensual and congenial. Even the occasional and inevitable moments of slight administrative chaos in his time have been negotiated with good humour. The College's sunny mood recently helped it elect a successor with great smoothness: all the short-listed candidates who met the governing body commented upon its evident ease with itself.

Like all successful institutions, New College looks to the future whilst appreciating its past. It anticipates the arrival of Sir Curtis Price as its next Warden with great confidence. It is also aware that, having latterly had to adjust to the transition to emeritus status of the rest of the 'Balliol gang', it has to accept a significant loss at its apex, just as the

broader community of academic political theorists has to adjust to the passing beyond official retirement age of four of its leading figures. The College regrets the departure of Kate Ryan, a most engaging member of the Senior Common Room (the first Warden's spouse to be so elected) and among her many accomplishments a gifted tragi-comedian on the difficulties of achieving twenty-first century standards of comfort and convenience in fourteenth-century lodgings. It is particularly aware that Alan Ryan's withdrawal from active service after eighteen years as a Tutorial Fellow and thirteen years as Warden is a major turning point in its life. He can be very proud of his achievements, both institutional and scholarly. We are unreservedly grateful to him.

### MARTIN CEADEL

Professor of Politics, University of Oxford; and Fellow & Tutor of New College.





## TRIBUTES TO ALAN RYAN



**CAROLINE KAY** (1979; JCR Steward 1980-81)

'Alan's great talent is making enjoyable occasions even more so, and the less enjoyable significantly more fun. I've had the pleasure of serving on two committees with Alan throughout his time as Warden – that of the New College Development Trustees and the Governing Body of Winchester College. Volunteer governance roles are greatly

enhanced if there is someone there whom you are always pleased to see, who makes the business more entertaining, and who brings a left-field and provoking perspective to the matter in hand. Alan admirably fulfilled those criteria! I'm also eternally grateful to him and Kate for letting me use the Warden's Garden for my wedding party, an act of personal kindness which we and all our guests remember with warm pleasure to this day.'



**RUSSELL JULIUS** (1978)

'My first experience of Alan Ryan was during the entrance interviews in late 1977. He was kind enough not to point out that one of my essays had been lifted in its entirety from Ralph Miliband's "Parliamentary Socialism", although it was pretty obvious then and remains a source of considerable embarrassment now. Subsequent dealings (undergraduate

and beyond) confirmed not only that kindness but also an enormous capacity to both listen and teach. This was true even when confronted by those who hadn't read nearly as much as they should have done before questioning him, even on matters related to JS Mill or Bertrand Russell. 30 years on, all of those talents still seem extremely well entrenched, and will be much missed by the next generation of New College PPE students.'



**KIRSTY ROSS** (2002; JCR President 2004-05)

'I first got to know Alan properly throughout my year as JCR president, during our weekly Wednesday morning update sessions. After the first few of these, I concluded that Alan was the wisest person I had yet met. Yes, he had a keen perspicacity which saw to the heart of any problem at once, and such a store of knowledge and anecdotes that

always could be relied on to produce an edifying parallel...but these things you might expect from an Oxford professor. What really made Alan stand out was his wry sense of humour, his fond appreciation for humanity's foibles and follies which enabled him to set any problem in its proper perspective with an ironic chuckle. I have to admit the slightly owl-like eyebrows may have contributed to my first impressions also...

Coming up to Oxford as a young Classicist, I had a set of very romantic notions about what such a venerable institution would be like. Alan helped make these expectations real for me, and I will always be very grateful to him for that: not least as my host for that most Oxford of experiences, my first and last sniff of snuff!



**EUGENE LUDWIG** (1968)

'Alan Ryan has been my tutor, friend and warden of the Oxford College I most admire. He combines a keen intellect, generous spirit, warmth and more than just a touch of humour. In many ways he is the don's don, understated demeanour, overstated academic prowess. Many of us are so much better for having had him cross our paths.'

## COMMON ROOM REFLECTIONS...

One can presume that some undergraduates were abandoning their dreams of entering a magical, Harry Potter-esque world at the beginning of Freshers' Week; after a deliberately grotty club-night, and countless health and safety talks, we could not have been blamed for feeling underwhelmed. Yet there was something about meeting the Warden on our second day at New College that reinvigorated our thirst and wonder; a man who looks like Alan Sugar and speaks like Dumbledore is interesting enough, yet when he possesses such clear genius as well as sincere warmth, he's utterly enthralling. Further Alan Ryan encounters reveal the genuine concern that he has for College students; usually, we're asked "have you made enough friends?" rather than "why are your tutors angry at you?". And, if a student is able to get to know Alan personally, whether as JCR President or as his pupil, he or she befriends a man who can input a witty analogy into any conversation; a man who has an inspiring enthusiasm for all academic disciplines, his College, and, moreover, life.

Graduates also have preconceived ideas of the world they are entering at New College. With nearly half the MCR from overseas and many more from Europe or other (less quirky) UK universities, it is only natural for fresher graduates to conjure up an image of the college Warden as something like the college itself – steeped in tradition, authoritative, somewhat pompous and set in stone. To surprised delight of all, Alan Ryan is none of these things. This immediately becomes apparent from the Warden's relaxed, playful manner in conversations at High Table, his ease of interaction with any manner of intellect or personality at graduate events and his frank disclosures about the realities of Oxbridge institutions. Whether one encounters Alan Ryan as an MCR Officer, where he displays genuine concern for graduate's particular needs; as a political philosopher, where Professor Ryan's analytical mind rivals the discipline's best; or as college member, where he helps breath life and dynamism into a 600 year old institution, you will begin to understand how not only manners, but charm, compassion, humility, honesty and insight have helped makeyeth this man.

