Sunday 25 October 2026

Has the Master of Christ's College made proper use of his position in the House of Lords?

Dear friend,

The most recent twist of the Christ's College "mega-building" saga (The Telegraph, The Independent and the Daily Mail, 21 October) comes from Lord McDonald of Salford, the Master of Christ's College. He is a former head of the Diplomatic Service, whose letter to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards in July 2022 helped bring down a Prime Minister.

As the head of Christ's College, Lord McDonald has now put to the Government, in the House of Lords, the question on which his College's development turns: should the Secretary of State call in an application that councillors have voted to approve?

His question is framed in general terms. Yet it bears directly on one very specific case, in which he has a direct interest. On 13 October the Secretary of State, Angela Rayner, froze the Council's decision on the College's new application while she decides whether to call it in and decide it herself.

The Dates Matter

On 20 October the High Court quashed the first permission for this scheme on all four grounds of the claim brought by local residents, the Christ's Lane Action Group.

On 19 October, the day before the High Court heard the case, Lord McDonald had already tabled a written question in the Lords on call-in, declaring his interest. He withdrew it. On 20 October, the day the Court quashed his College's permission, he tabled it again, with one phrase added. It is due for answer by 3 November:

> *"To ask His Majesty's Government, in light of their renewed focus on localism, in what circumstances they deem it appropriate for the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to override a vote to grant planning permission by councillors on a local planning authority and call-in an application for central government decision."*

The local vote in his College's case is the vote of the same Council whose permission for this identical building the High Court had just quashed. On the same day, the College published its hope that the Secretary of State "will authorise the Council to issue the decision notice in the next few weeks".

How Often Does This Happen?

Peers declare an interest on about one question in a hundred. In twelve years and more than a hundred thousand questions, only three peers have asked about calling in a planning application while declaring an interest, and only one of them holds a paid post as Master of the applicant: the Master of Christ's College. In more than five years in the Lords, he has tabled only one written question before this, on fighter aircraft. Now he tables a question of direct relevance to him, to the department deciding his College's case.

Is This in the College's Own Interest?

But is the scheme Lord McDonald advocates as Master of Christ's College in the College's own best interests? As a statutory consultee, Historic England has warned that this scheme is "too big for its location" and "overdominant on this space", that it would harm the College's own Grade I listed buildings through its "excessive bulk", and that the massing should be reduced. It has not been. Several less harmful alternatives have been proposed, two of them previously approved and found by the Council to meet the College's needs, so why persist with this bulky, massive, oversized scheme, when a less harmful option would serve the College's interests just as well?

Is This Making Proper Use of the House of Lords?

The House of Lords does not decide planning applications. Its role is to scrutinise government. The Lords Code allows a peer with a declared interest to ask a question, and says that any conflict between a member's personal interest and the public interest "must be resolved at once in favour of the public interest".

We ask whether a written question, put in his capacity as a peer, to the very department deciding his own College's case, in the weeks of that decision, is in the public interest, as the Code requires. We do not allege a breach of the Lords Code. We ask whether this use of the House of Lords is a proper use of that privileged position.

The Latest Twist in a Controversy That Has Played Out on the National Stage

The national press has covered every twist and turn in the case of harm to Grade I listed buildings in the historic core of Cambridge, treating it as the national matter it is. The Observer called it "town v gown". The Telegraph, The Independent and the Daily Mail covered the court fight over a "mega-library". Building Design reported the day "Rayner freezes consent", and Planning Resource a council that "concedes members were misled". The BBC, The Critic, the Architects' Journal, Building, The Planner, Infrastructure Now, Cambridge News, the Cambridge Independent and Varsity have all followed it from the drawing board to the High Court.

What Would Best Serve the Public Interest?

The High Court has quashed the Council's first permission for this building on all four grounds, for what the judge called "errors of approach on each of the grounds". Thirteen days before that judgment, the same Council, told by its officers there was "no good reason" to wait for the Court, voted to approve the identical building again. Those same officers had found the scheme in

conflict with the Council's own heritage policy. They recommended it anyway. There is no confidence that local planning processes are fit to decide this complex and controversial case in a rigorous, fair and lawful way.

> *The only fair outcome is a public inquiry. A call-in means the Secretary of State decides the application herself, after a rigorous and independent public inquiry before a planning inspector, with the evidence tested in the open and all stakeholders, including local residents, taking part. That is where this building should be decided, in the open, on the evidence, by an inspector with no interest to declare.*

Five times as many people read this newsletter as at the start of the autumn. Forward it to one more. Follow the story so far, and what happens next, at christslaneactiongroup.org. The High Court's sealed order is attached.

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