Helena Kennedy, principal of Mansfield College, Oxford University, doesn't do self-deprecation. “I’ve run big organisations, I’m entrepreneurial, I’ve got a good business head, I’m very outcome-driven,” she tells me at the House of Lords where, she says, she doesn’t just hang her hat but works her socks off. Winston Churchill (allegedly) described Clement Attlee as “a modest man with a lot to be modest about”. Kennedy may be described as an immodest woman with a lot to be immodest about.

Her life has been one of mind-boggling activity, which makes you exhausted just thinking about it: distinguished QC; chair of the British Council for six years; chair of the Human Genetics Commission for nine years; a decade as presenter of Channel 4’s After Dark late-night discussion show; author or joint author of five books; chair of inquiries into further education, political apathy (or, to use her preferred term, “democratic disengagement”), safety at Aldermaston atomic weapons establishment, and sudden infant death; board member of the Independent newspaper and Hampstead theatre; trustee of the Man Booker prize; mother of three.

All that and much more has been achieved from humble beginnings in Glasgow as one of four daughters of a newspaper print worker. “I still think of myself as working class,” she says, which, since she and her husband, a surgeon, live in a former Victorian rectory in Hampstead, north London, may raise cynical laughter in some quarters.

Her latest enterprise is a human rights institute based at Mansfield College. Human rights is her legal specialism - “it’s what I care most about” - and her role in getting a Human Rights Act into Labour’s 1997 manifesto and on to the statute book is something else she is rightly immodest about. One aim of the new institute, which has just opened for business, is to increase public as well as academic understanding of the field. “Oxford has huge convening power,” Kennedy says. “Judges from countries where legal systems are fragile will come here for summer schools. We can attract business people, who should be looking at whether their supply chains exploit workers and children in the third world, because they will be flattered by an invitation from Oxford. Human rights is a whole set of values, a template against which we should measure ourselves.”
Kennedy raised £23m to start the institute. “It’s a joint thing with the law faculty,” she explains, “but they didn’t contribute finance to it, nor did the university. When I first mentioned it, they said: ‘Good idea, but you’ll have to raise the money!’ I sensed them thinking ‘Well, that’ll put paid to that.’” She later tells me she didn’t intend to be mean about the law faculty, which was run by excellent people who were fully supportive.

This is typical of Kennedy, whose sharp lawyer’s tongue frequently competes with her warm, expansive heart. Having said that the higher education reform bill “sickens” her, she assures me Jo Johnson, the minister piloting the bill through parliament, is “a decent man”. Likewise, though lifelong learning, which she passionately advocated in her FE inquiry report in 1997, is “certainly not happening now”, Robert Halfon, the FE minister, is another good egg, “very open and listening”.

If she is bitterly critical of Tory policies, she was scarcely less so of Labour during the party’s 13 years in power. Labour gave her a life peerage and she still takes the party whip, despite her doubts about Jeremy Corbyn. He is, she says, “a man with a great heart ... but transitioning to leadership is presenting challenges for him”. Nearly a fifth of her votes in the Lords have gone against the party line. She fiercely opposed Labour’s illiberal approach to fighting crime and terrorism, and accused David Blunkett, when home secretary, of taking lessons from Robert Mugabe. “I am an independent spirit, a champion of the underdog,” she says.

It was Mansfield’s underdog status as the second poorest college in Oxford (measured by endowment income) that persuaded her to accept an offer to become principal in 2011. “I like poor,” she says. Mansfield recruits more than 80% of its students from the state sector, against less than 60% across the university, and 20% from the most disadvantaged postcodes, against an Oxford target of 9%. This, Kennedy admits, is partly attributable to Mansfield’s 19th-century origins as a college for nonconformists, which gave it strong links with northern towns where religious dissent flourished. Soon after taking over, she said that Mansfield’s fellows “are not taken in by the veneer and the polish ... produced by a certain kind of education” and that if she had so many state-educated students, other Oxford colleges, recruiting relatively few, must have “a very bad story to tell”. The comments went down badly but Kennedy still doesn’t mince her words.

“I think Oxford is working hard at widening access. But we should be more prepared to take risks and accept that sometimes we’ll get it wrong. Those smart-alec questions in interviews supposedly test quickness of thought. But if you’re asked something like “if I were an alien and I arrived on Earth, how would I distinguish between a human and other animals?”, you can be completely discombobulated and not make the most of your natural wit.”

Would she support quotas? A rare second of silence follows. “I’m not against quotas. I’m very big on quotas for women all over the shop. But let’s start with the targets and see how that goes.”

We move on to the current universities bill. “We’re commodifying higher education,” she says. “There’s going to be a serious hierarchy. Elite universities will be allowed to charge huge fees and they’ll be like Harvard and Yale - costing £12,000, £15,000 - and they’ll have to persuade the rich to sponsor scholarships for the occasional talent that might trickle through from the working classes.” As for private, for-profit universities, they will “rip-off” the children of the poor.
Kennedy never went to university. She planned to take English at Glasgow University when, aged 18, she went to London for summer holiday work. There, she met law students from the London School of Economics who suggested she should join their course. It was too late to enrol that year so she opted to train as a barrister, which was then possible without a first degree. “I loved law, and I turned out to be good at it,” she says. “But everybody spoke with posh accents and I thought they must all be incredibly clever and I hardly opened my mouth in my first term because I thought I’d be found out.” She qualified in 1972 but, struggling to find chambers, started her own. Its unique selling point was that it dealt with defendants being failed by the legal system, particularly prostitutes and women suffering domestic abuse. Women’s rights are among the abiding causes of her life.

Another is FE. Her inquiry, reporting in 1997, said all post-16 learning should be funded on the same basis, putting FE colleges and their students on a par with school sixth-forms and universities. The report was well received. For a time, it seemed FE would receive serious investment. But Labour, Kennedy says, didn’t deliver. Proposals for a university for industry “disappeared into the night”. A scheme for individual learning accounts – giving adults cash incentives to enrol on training courses – collapsed after being hijacked by fraudsters. FE colleges, she says, “don’t have purchase on governments”, mainly because MPs’ own children don’t go to them. Nor, she could have added, did her own children, though one of her sisters, after leaving school at 15, took the FE route to university in her 30s. I point out that, while she describes FE as “my sector”, she has become the principal of an Oxford college, not an FE college in a northern industrial town. “Nobody ever asked me to consider it,” she replies. “I’ve become too grand, I suppose.”

There is also the Helena Kennedy Foundation, which provides mentoring and disburses scholarships worth £2,000 (rising to £3,000 next year) for highly disadvantaged FE students who want to progress to university. “I’m talking about girls who get pregnant at 15, boys who get into trouble and drop out of school, women who suffer domestic violence, people fleeing persecution, people who can barely afford a travel pass. We give out the awards at the Lords, inviting them and their beloved to tea overlooking the river.”

For all her achievements - and her many good deeds in an imperfect world - there is a faint air of sadness about Kennedy as she plans to step down from her Oxford position in summer 2018. Almost everything she fought for is under attack. “We’re making a society that’s hard, celebrating money as the only thing that really matters. There will be a reversal, but it will come too late for me.” She adds however: “I still believe in the common good. I can’t reconcile myself to this market-led world. I shall fight it till my dying breath.” Given her record, you have to believe her.