

Graduation 2008 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Tim Melville-Ross CBE
Orator: Dr Tony Rich

Chancellor, the Senate of the University has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred on Tim Melville-Ross.

On last New Year's Eve, an esoteric question was posed in the local pub quiz: What do the London black cab, DTZ – one of the four big global real estate companies, Royal London - one of the country's largest insurance companies, and the University of Essex have in common? The answer is that all four parent organisations were chaired by Tim Melville-Ross. This is what Tim does – he chairs organisations. In the words of one former senior civil servant, he is the chair 'par excellence'.

The University is very proud that Tim has agreed to accept an honorary doctorate. Tim has served as Chair of the University's Council (its governing body) for more than six years, having previously been a member of Council and chair of the Foundation – the University's fund raising arm. One of Tim's oft-used remarks to draw a wide-ranging discussion to a close is to state "we are where we are". I've often wanted to ask where else might we be, but refrained from doing so as this could spark further erudite debate with my philosophy colleagues in the ascendant.

Another of Tim's frequently quoted adages is that a business person's career ought to be divided into three sections: 10 years learning, 10 years doing, and 10 years teaching. And this is what he claims to have done. Although when I do the sums, it seems to add up to rather more than 30.

Tim's secondary school years were spent at Uppingham (where he subsequently became chair of the governing body), which also numbers Stephen Fry and Boris Karloff among its more illustrious alumni. His background was somewhat exotic in that his father was either a novelist who wrote spy stories or a spy who wrote novels. Perhaps the latter was a factor in Tim turning down a place at Cambridge to read history. After unsuccessful forays into ice cream sales at Olympia and extracting worms overnight in the company of criminals from a golf course in the United States, Tim's early career was spent with BP, which included a posting to Libya just after the Gaddafi revolution. Such was his devotion to the corporate ethos that, when sent out into the desert to entertain the oil workers he was willing to take the lead role dressed in a tutu in an all-male ballet performance. Fifteen years later, at a time when he was chief executive of Nationwide, he was asked to give a repeat performance for a friend's 40th birthday party. Tim's dismissive response was that he couldn't possibly spare the time. Nevertheless, he did indeed perform a reprise of the ballet in full regalia in a field at nearby Dedham.

The second phase of Tim's career involved the 'doing', moving from BP to building societies and becoming chief executive of the Nationwide Building Society in 1987 before moving on to become Director General of the Institute of Directors from 1994 to 1999 – where, incidentally, he regrets not having done more to curb excessive executive pay.

The third phase involves 'teaching' or 'educating' and has led to Tim being described as 'one of the FTSE's busier chairs'. He very recently stood down as chair of Bovis Homes, one of our biggest housebuilders, after a decade at the helm. Tim has been chair of DTZ since 2000, chair of Manganese Bronze (manufacturers of the London black cab) since 2003 and chair of the Royal London Mutual Insurance Company since 2005. How does the business world view Tim? Malcolm

Harris, then Chief Executive of Bovis Homes, remarked that “he is very intellectual. He has a charming manner which is an ideal complement to his intellect. He has an incredible ability to consistently ask the right questions. And normally he has thought of the answer before you have.”

But what of the man? Tim is something of a polymath. Despite the 1.5 days a week he commits to each of his roles as chair, he finds time to pursue his hobbies of walking, reading and playing tennis. He has written books, including *The Business of Leadership* and appeared on *Question Time*. He challenges gender-based, multi-tasking stereotypes, with Sir Ivor Crewe, our former VC, reporting that when joining Tim for a charity walk around the perimeter of Suffolk, Tim would take the occasional phone call without breaking his rather large stride, deal with urgent business matters, which might for example involve the takeover of another company, and return effortlessly to the conversation of the moment with his companion. More exotic walking holidays with Camilla, his wife, have included the Inca Trail and the Ethiopian uplands. Tim is a man of unflinching courtesy that is evident in his dealings with everyone. He places great emphasis on the family and is a person of considerable generosity – it is now a matter of record that his salary as chair of the HEFCE has been donated to charity. Another of his attributes, envied by many, is to consume the numerous corporate lunches and dinners that go with the territory, but to remain in the words of *Property Week* “greyhound thin”.

The third phase has also involved a growing engagement with the public sector. Tim served as chair of *Investors in People* from 1999 to 2006 and he was awarded a CBE in 2005 for his services to workplace learning and development.

As his term of office as chair of our University Council was nearing its end, Tim was poached by the HEFCE to chair its Board from January of this year. David Eastwood, chief executive of the Funding Council, assessed the qualities that they were seeking in their new chair, which are those Tim possesses in abundance: the ability to steer and lead; to make sense of the items under discussion; to construct consensus; to be tactful; to have a strong strategic sense; to bring the necessary measure of propriety and legitimacy; and to respect the professionals and the executive. David Eastwood described Tim as the “finest chair I have worked with”.

As the equivalent of Company Secretary I have worked with Tim in a supporting role over the period that he chaired our Council, but having several current and past chairs in the audience, I can only echo the words of Michael Dobbs’ character Francis Urquhart in *The House of Cards* Professor Eastwood “might think that, but I couldn’t possibly comment”.

The HEFCE is an important buffer body in the HE firmament, sitting between government and autonomous universities and disbursing about £7bn of government funds. With increasing interference from ministers in the newly formed Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, HEFCE faces an uncertain future. Its Chief Executive has just resigned. Resources are increasingly scarce. The government is committed to reviewing the current fees cap in 2009, but taking any definitive action is not going to win votes for any party. In these challenging times, the university sector could not wish for any better chair to steer HEFCE through these choppy waters.

Chancellor, it gives me great personal pleasure to present to you Tim Melville-Ross.