

Graduation 2008

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Tim Melville-Ross CBE

Chancellor, Tony, fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

I can't tell you what a delight and honour it is to receive an honorary doctorate from this great university, with which I have been associated for the last 12 years. I am deeply grateful.

I am also very touched by Tony Rich's kind words. If my parents had been here today, my father would have enjoyed them, and my mother would have believed them.

It's a pleasure and a privilege to be here to join you in your celebrations for what you have already achieved. Rightly, that will be uppermost in your minds today, but perhaps tomorrow you will be thinking about what happens next. Having said that, beware of predictions. It was the American baseball manager Casey Stengel who said "never make predictions, especially about the future."

How wise he was. The editor of The Times said in 1905, "all attempts at artificial aviation are not only dangerous to life but doomed to failure from an engineering standpoint." In 1927, during the age of silent cinema, the founder of Warner Brothers asked "who the hell wants to hear actors talk?" And as recently as 1943, Thomas Watson, Chairman of IBM, said "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers".

Against that overwhelming evidence that I should not, I will make a prediction. And that is that everyone graduating today (with the possible exception of me) will make a big impact on the lives of others, and society generally. And that implies leadership.

You are already leaders in what you have achieved, and I believe you will want to go on to lead in whatever you do.

What is leadership? Nothing to do with hierarchy. Everything to do with inspiring others to achieve more than they otherwise would. I suggest you've all done this already, perhaps unconsciously, and will want to continue doing it in future.

My own experience is in what you might call formal leadership roles, but I believe the thoughts which follow are valid in any situation involving other people and the need to achieve a certain result. I hope they may be particularly helpful to anyone pursuing a career in Accounting, Finance and Management. So, you need to do just three things to lead effectively:

Define the task – vision, strategy, whatever.

Get the best people around you to help you do it.

Communicate repeatedly with everyone who can help, or hinder, what you are trying to do. I say "repeatedly" to be sure of getting the message across. If they haven't heard it (or understood it) you might just as well not have said it.

Do you have what it takes to be a good leader? Much good research points quite simply to just two key characteristics in the best leaders.

The first, not surprisingly, is drive. This is borne out of confidence, and in the modern idiom pursuing GSD as well as perhaps an MBA. GSD means simply Getting Stuff Done. As the white

suited journalist and maverick MP Martin Bell puts it in his autobiography, “all the regrets of my life are about occasions when I had the choice of doing or not doing something, and I chose not to do it”.

The second characteristic, more surprisingly, is humility. Listen. (As one famous but not very successful businessman once admitted, “I always knew leadership was about listening. I just hadn’t realised it was I who had to do the listening”). So listen, admit mistakes, adapt, encourage and praise others. US President John F. Kennedy said in his inaugural address, “civility is not a sign of weakness.”

I would simply add, be yourselves, don’t take life too seriously. Taking all these things together, you should be able both to enjoy life and to succeed. They are not mutually exclusive.

Finally, if you would prefer a different formula for leadership, I can offer you the advice given by a retiring Bishop of Norwich to his successor. “If you want to lead people round here, I suggest you find out where they are going, and then walk in front of them.”

Whatever, just try to do better than the young army officer whose appraisal included the comment, “his men will follow him anywhere, if only out of a sense of idle curiosity.”

Thank you for listening to me, and again for this signal honour.