

THE RT HON OLIVER LETWIN MP'S SPEECH AT THE GUILDHALL PRIZE WINNER'S DINNER WEDNESDAY 26 FEBRUARY 2014

Thank you very much. This is really very unfair, in the first place I am performing after one of the most beautiful duets, numinously beautiful, I've heard in many years and I have no singing voice. Secondly I am appearing in front of some of the nation's most distinguished academics and I am addressing you as a failed academic. Indeed one that failed so badly I had to become a politician. It can't get much worse than that. And third, it is very unfair because I am intensely conscious that I am keeping you from your main course. However, this has the great advantage that I can be brief. I understood when I was trying to find out about this Prize that it had three basic criteria: excellence; innovation and impact, and I was delighted when I heard this because it seemed to me that that was exactly what I wanted to speak about, so I'll say a word or two about each of these phenomena and then I shall shut up and you can have your main course.

Excellence first. I want to make a plea, an unabashed plea, for the continuation of a belief in excellence. It seems to me that our institutions of higher and further education are nothing if they don't believe, absolutely and without qualification, in excellence. There have been times in our nation's cultural history when there were doubts cast on whether excellence was excellent. There is a paradox lurking in that question but above all there is a cultural disaster lurking in it. Somebody, in any great nation, has to value the excellence of learning, the excellence of scholarship, the excellence of research and the excellence of teaching as things which are worthwhile in their own right and regardless of any further effect they may have on society or the economy or the world, and if there aren't persons who do that in institutions of higher and further education, then there will be no other people doing it either. The people in this room and the people that the people in this room represent up and down the country have to be the guardians of excellence. So it's wonderful to see people parade before us who stand for institutions that are doing and have done something truly excellent, and we should welcome that and take huge pride in it. And, although we are in the presence not only of the former Secretary General of NATO but also of the Canadian High Commissioner, I hope the High Commissioner will forgive me if say that I think actually we in this country really do have something particular to be proud of in the excellence of our institutions of higher and further education. There are many aspects of our country which could be improved, but no country on earth, no country on earth could claim to have a greater concentration pro rata to its population of excellence in its institutions of higher education than ours. That's quite a claim to be able to make, and one I think we should spend a great deal of effort over coming years and decades trying to preserve and protect and enhance.

But it isn't just a matter of excellence and that's why I am delighted to see that the second item in this list of criteria for this Prize is innovation. Most of the most important things that have ever been done or said in any institution of higher or further education anywhere in the world caused a frightful bother and were regarded by many others in those institutions as abominable or even heretical. We haven't for some while, thank goodness, in this country

seen people burned at the stake for innovation, but there is always an enormous amount of power and inertia behind the institutional resistance to innovation which one sees in every corner of the globe. Our institutions of learning have to be places where there is a sort of unrestrained exuberance for innovation because it is only in that way that they can keep at the frontiers of knowledge. It is only in that way that they can break down the barriers that otherwise the establishments that grow up will all too easily create. And it's only by encouraging that spirit in the students that those students can go on to do great things in our economy and our society. In the end, the miracle of human history is that after many thousands of years and after vast increases of population we are still able to feed and clothe ourselves and to live indeed a much richer and pleasanter life than our predecessors; and the reason for that is innovation. Innovation is at the centre of the progress of human history; and innovation has to be spread to a population; and that has to come from our centres of learning. So it's absolutely wonderful to see prizes being given for people who have innovated in every dimension, not just in pure scholarship or in pure research, but also hugely in applied research and indeed in learning how innovatively to transmit ideas, knowledge, understanding and skills to the succeeding generations.

And then we come to impact, the third of the criteria, and it seems to me that there are three things that need to be said about impact. The first is that there is a danger in measuring the impact of our institutions of higher and further education because there is a philistine tendency that we have to resist of supposing that what goes on those institutions is of value only if it has an immediate impact where any slightest reflection on our intellectual history will reveal that the opposite is in fact the case. Some of the most important things that have been done and thought and said and discovered in our institutions of learning over the centuries have had, to begin with, no impact whatsoever; often the deepest things rise to the surface last. So we must resist the idea that everything should be judged only by its immediate impact. Having said that, the second thing I want to say is that there is an equal and opposite danger and that is to assume that somehow it is ignoble or improper or unnecessary to concern oneself with impact. The fact is that our institutions of learning also have to justify their existence, and indeed the, if you'll forgive me ladies and gentleman, very large sums of public money that are administered to you all each year by our hard pressed tax payers, many of whom have never been anywhere near an institution of higher or further learning. And we have to justify to them what goes on in your institutions, by pointing out that actually although impact is not its only justification, it has a colossal and immediate and sustained impact. That impact is of course economic but it goes way beyond the economic; it stretches into every aspect of our social life. And that leads me to the third point that I want to make about impact - and I was delighted to see that in the prizes that were given, (or rather, will be given by Her Majesty tomorrow), this was fully recognised - which is that we should by no means see impact only in terms of the effects, however wide, however important (and in some cases it is enormously wide and important), of research but also, and I would say almost primarily in terms of the effect that institutions of learning have on the students that go through them. I think there have, from time to time, been thoughts that it is really the research and the applied research and the development that springs from it that matters. And research does matter, colossally, but that fact is that the formation of the minds of the succeeding generations of our country is the foundation stone for everything that will happen for our country in its future. Nothing could be more important than

that, and I hope that even in our greatest research universities, even in the most abstruse and the most refined and the most distinguished of faculties, even amongst those professors who acquire the greatest laurels there will be, and will continue to be, a feeling that it is a noble, I'd almost say a holy trust, to hand on the learning and the knowledge and the skills of one generation to the next. This is an extraordinary thing to do. It marks us out, us human beings, from other animals. It is the foundation of our society and our economy and we should never lose sight of its value in our search, our righteous search for excellence and impact in our research.

Well, I've said everything I could possibly say on these three points, and now I hope you will have the pleasantest dinner.

- The Rt Hon Oliver Letwin MP, Minister for Government Policy