

Oration for Sir Maurice Shock

(Monday 13 July 1987 and Friday 17 July 1987)

On the conferment of a degree of Doctor of Laws

Delivered by Professor Aftab Khan

Almost by definition, Universities, being repositories of scholarship, need to be in a state of continuous expansion. That was the situation in this country until about ten years ago. Then, for the first time in modern history, they were put into reverse gear by the Government. To move forward in these circumstances clearly requires some kind of magic, and that is just what this university has had under the skilful managerial and academic leadership of our Vice-Chancellor, Maurice Shock. He came to us with an impressive academic record from Oxford where he was associated with a number of colleges, but it was in the managerial Midlands that he grew up: not in the East Midlands, though he did his best by being born in Birmingham. There he went to King Edward's School, where he had a successful career, finishing up as head boy. He then served in the Intelligence Corps – mainly playing games and reading a lot of English literature. But that was before getting married and reading Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Balliol College, Oxford, where he received the expected first in his finals along with fifteen others. The competition was tough. He held a few temporary posts at Oxford until he was appointed Fellow and Tutor in Politics at University College, with which he has had his longest association. For fifteen of his years there he maintained with distinction the office of Estates Bursar and was largely responsible for the erection of two new buildings. This job alone would have been more than enough for most of us. Yet, for much of that time he was heavily involved in the affairs of the whole University in addition to being a tutor.

Being a good debater he has had a long association with the Oxford Union, for which he was Senior Treasurer for eighteen years – years which included the then fashionable student revolutions, which he endured with good heart. He served on the Franks Commission of enquiry into the University of Oxford, and it was from this that he emerged as a really bright star on the horizon. He was one of the youngest people to serve on the University's Hebdomadal Council. He always seemed to have "serene and instantaneous comprehension" of the most complicated issues and was well known for being remarkably far-sighted and for speaking of "long term developments". His frequent references to the past and the future occasioned his colleagues some sport. They used to keep score at College meetings with some wagering whether, or by how much, the future would outscore the past.

These were admirable qualities which we recognise and have valued at Leicester. He came here ten years ago, just as the Medical School was starting and saw the Clinical Sciences Building through. He helped to build up the excellent relationship which the University has enjoyed with the Local and Regional Health Authorities and with the City and County as a whole. Our greatest anxiety during his time here was how to emerge from the cuts in a state ready for the challenges of the next century. Morale was beginning to fail. There were difficult and prolonged Senate debates on restructuring. These he dealt with like a super grand master playing simultaneous chess against sixty other grand masters, all with their own complicated gambits. With his sharp incisive mind he could produce the answer to extremely difficult questions in the time it takes to change a pair of spectacles, a ploy that he exercised with an exquisite sense of timing. To deal with the cuts themselves he masterminded the implementation of an elegant scheme which was essentially one of gradual retirement for overworked middle-aged academics, relieving them of them of burdensome administrative chores so that they could round off their life's work for the benefit of future scholars.

As his fame as a University administrator spread, it was natural that he should be in demand nationally. He was given the difficult job of being Chairman of the Universities Authority Panel on salaries; he served on the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council; and soon after joining the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals he was groomed to head it. He duly became its Vice-Chairman and then, until last month, its Chairman at the most difficult period in its history. He has ensured through his leadership that the Committee responded positively to the challenges facing Universities as a result of Government policies. He has had to spend a good deal of his time walking the corridors of power in Whitehall, winning Government support and confidence in the universities. This came fairly naturally to him for in his Oxford days he had much contact with former Prime Ministers back to Churchill and Attlee, and had as contemporaries, many of the present members of the Cabinet, including the Secretary of State for Education and Science.

From the relaxed, calm, kind and efficient way in which he dealt with matters of all kinds in this University – personal or otherwise – one would hardly be aware of the demands that national affairs made on his time. It is very surprising that in spite of his tight schedule things didn't go wrong – at least not seriously. He once left a long meeting in London, at which they were down to their shirt sleeves working very hard indeed, in a hurry to get back and sign the letters he dictated to his secretary shortly after breakfast, and, in the process of packing up, he put on the wrong jacket. He discovered the error when he was asked to show his ticket on the train and could only produce his commuting colleague's London season ticket! He didn't make the national news as a Vice-Chancellorial ticket-cheat because, fortunately, his colleague's wallet contained enough cash to pay the fare.

It is remarkable that in spite of the negative environment of the last decade, our Vice-Chancellor leaves us with a number of prominent monuments – including the Biocentre, sponsored industrially, which is his own personal achievement; the Fraser Noble Building for the School of Education; the new Sports Centre at Manor Road; efficiently run and well maintained Halls of Residence; the development of education in professional subjects. But the most important legacy of all is that he has built up the standards in this University so that it can hold its own with any in the world in the subjects that we do, and has thus secured our future into the next century.

He leaves us, not to retire, but to face a different kind of challenge in a more domestic environment as Rector of another University College, Lincoln, where he will continue with the scholarly work which was interrupted when he came here. They are very fortunate indeed to have acquired someone who is recognised as a genius in University administration.

In honouring him today, we express our gratitude and warm affection with a permanent seal of membership.

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Response by Sir Maurice Shock

You will see that I am not about to change my glasses. Doctor Johnson is often quoted on these occasions to the effect that in lapidary inscription no man is on oath, and you will have gathered that applies also to Public Orators. But on behalf of Dr Thornton and myself I do thank the two Public Orators most warmly. I have seen many stand on that spot and face the ordeal. I think we have come off very lightly and are gratified for having done so.

It is particularly pleasing to me that Dr Thornton and I should have been honoured together this afternoon. This is a very great honour and we come together in friendship, tied by the splendid service that he gave to the University as Treasurer, and by all that links us to the local community.

I was very glad that the Public Orator said quite a bit about the University. For this University in many ways different from all others. Unlike the modern universities it was not planned by a Committee, clutching first-class return tickets, and going off to view some remote green field site to see if it would do. It began as a War Memorial after the First World War – a memorial to the most terrible event of this century, which in innumerable ways has marked all our lives. It began without a single penny of public money, national or local. Money was raised by such devices as *thés dansants* in the Granby Halls. And when the doors opened, it was to nine students, all girls, who perched in a corner of the old County Lunatic Asylum.

Now if I can pick up a point that the Public Orator made, but put it in a different way. I do know quite a lot about universities and I can say flatly that if you make the acid test – is there, for the money spent on it, a better University anywhere (and I don't just mean in this country) than Leicester? – I can only say that I do not know of it. We are now at a stage where in many spheres we can cope perfectly well with the competition of the very best universities in the world. That can only be the consequence of an enormous and extremely hard working collective enterprise, and I pay tribute to my many colleagues – many, many colleagues – who played their part long before I came but also, of course, from my point of view, while I have been here. It was great good fortune that brought me to Leicester and I have benefitted enormously from my experience here.

The Public Orator also referred to the difficulties and hazards of the last ten years. But just as it is worthwhile reminding ourselves of what this country has done, not just at Leicester but elsewhere, it is also, I think, worth recalling what the outcome of those ten years has been. It seems incredible looking back that there was a real feeling a year or so ago, that the whole future of the university system in this country was at hazard – real hazard – and that there was deep concern that our research base would go so steeply on the slide as never to recover. I believe that debate is now over; I believe the argument has been won; that the debate will not revive. So it is on to the next phase.

Our central national position remains unaltered. We are fifty million people living on a small offshore island whose natural resources, early in the next century, will largely have run out, because that is when North Sea oil will be gone. What we shall then have to live by are our brains and our wits. The next phase is about how we are going to rise to that challenge; what direction higher education and the research potential of this country are going to take; how they are going to be organised; what scale they are going to operate on; at what velocity they are going to be driven, or rather, self-generated. If we do not get very high marks on all that we are not going to be well equipped to meet the competition of the rest of the world. In facing that challenge I can only say that I believe this University now stands to play a major part.

Sitting up here for the past ten years, I have often thought that at these ceremonies parents don't get their proper due. There is much talk about the young, and about the future. So I thought I would

end by giving parents some hope. The famous son of the main founder of this University, Dr Astley Clarke – the son is the great geneticist, Sir Cyril Clarke – was asked at a dinner party not long ago, at the height of the controversy about the embryo: “But tell me, Sir Cyril, when does life really begin, at conception, overnight, two weeks, fifteen weeks, when?” “Madam,” said Cyril, “life begins when the children leave home and you’ve got rid of the dog.”

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