

GRADUATION 2008

Presentation speech for Professor Alistair Alcock for the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws of the University *honoris causa*

Chancellor, Freidrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844) gives a decidedly unflattering account of Salford:

If anyone takes the trouble to pass through these lanes, and glance through the open doors and windows and cellars, he can convince himself afresh with every step that the workers of Salford live in dwellings in which cleanliness and comfort are impossible ... in such dwellings only a physically degenerate race, robbed of all humanity, degraded, reduced morally and physically to bestiality, could feel comfortable and at home.

I do not know if Salford has changed for the better in the past 150 years or so. Perhaps it has, perhaps it has not. But one thing is certain – it soon will. Salford is surely experiencing that remarkable phenomenon we in Buckingham call 'the Alcock effect'. We saw it in all of Alistair's many roles in the University – in the Law School, as Senior Tutor and, above all, during his time as Deputy Vice Chancellor. It is difficult to sum up the Alcock effect in the brief time allowed on these occasions, but I think it involves a number of stages.

The first, though always salutary, is often unpleasant. The current situation - and hopes and aspirations to improve it – is subjected to rigorous scrutiny. The verdict is that the position is bad, very bad, much worse than anyone has realised. Suggestions that things will look up eventually - if only bold new initiatives are undertaken - are dissected and shown to be naïve. The proposed remedies will fail and their failure will make things even worse. Despair is universal; all seems lost and so we are ready to eat out of the hand of anyone who can show us a way out.

We move to stage two. Although things are bad, Alistair hints that total annihilation might perhaps be avoided. There is after all a glimmer of hope and we turn to Alistair to save us. He says that we must concentrate on the things we are best at doing, get the details right, work hard and always be aware of the bottom line.

Then we go on to stage three – implementation. Here Alistair does not spare himself. He works to the point of exhaustion. He is well-informed, precise, articulate, analytical and always around. For the most part, he is calm – though there are occasional but very memorable explosions.

Finally there is stage four. After a while the results begin to emerge – better figures, better administration, a future after all. Alistair is modest and takes little credit himself. He still warns of future dangers, but we all know how much we owe to him. In essence, this is the story of Alistair as Deputy Vice Chancellor. Along with Terence, he has undoubtedly been one of the key players in the recovery of the University in recent years.

Of course, the relationship between the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor is crucial. At first sight it is hard to think of a more unlikely double act. Chalk and cheese would be an understatement. Terence says 'lets do that at once and – now I come to think of it - something else that has just occurred to me'. Alistair's 'yes' is more drawn out than any I have ever heard and raises more questions. Terence and Alistair are each other's opposites in almost every way – one inclined to optimism, the other to pessimism, one to boldness and the other to caution – but they made a wonderful team. They respected each other qualities even when they disagreed and were united in their hard work, their intelligence and their love of the University.

Chancellor, it is not, I believe, my role today to provide you or this distinguished company with an extended biography of our honorand. I could talk of many things – of Alistair's background, his time at Cambridge or in the City, his distinction as a lawyer, his wonderful singing, his memorable performances at 'Christmas Crackers' and much more besides. But I prefer to try to evoke the character of the man and leave no one in doubt as to the immense contribution he made to Buckingham over many years of service. We wish him well at Salford – which is fortunate to have lured him away from us.

I try to keep my ear to the ground to pick up the phrases used most widely about the University. There is one I hear more than any other - from people in all areas, at every level, even from those who can agree on little else. It is 'Oh, I do miss Alistair'.

Chancellor, I call upon you to confer the degree of Doctor of Laws on Professor Alistair Alcock, *honoris causa*.

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil
23 February 2008