

GRADUATION 2010

Presentation speech for John Blundell for the honorary degree of Doctor of Science of the University *honoris causa*

Chancellor, when presenting Alistair Alcock, a couple of years ago, I fear I may have caused some alarm by quoting a few sentences from the works of Frederick Engels. Today, when presenting John Blundell, I begin with a quotation from J M Keynes – at least in the Buckingham context perhaps an even more provocative choice than Engels. In his *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Keynes insisted:

... the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist ... Soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.

John Blundell also quotes these words in his own important book *Waging the War of Ideas*. He does so with apparent approval and suggests that Hayek subscribed to the same view – perhaps the only time when Hayek and Keynes agreed.

The rare consensus between Keynes and Hayek – and by implication together with Blundell – raises the vital question of the role of the intellectual in society. Blundell tells us that when Anthony Fisher asked Hayek for advice, Hayek told him not to waste his time going into politics - because it was the intellectuals, whom he characterised as ‘second hand dealers in ideas’, who wielded the decisive influence in the battle of ideas and policy. Hence, Hayek counselled Fisher to join with others in forming a scholarly research organisation to supply intellectuals in universities, schools, journalism and broadcasting with authoritative studies of the economic theory of markets and its application to practical affairs.

Of course, the IEA ultimately arose out of that advice. As John Blundell puts it, the story can be told in nine words:

Hayek advised Fisher;
Fisher recruited Harris;
Harris met Seldon.

He might have added 'and then Blundell came along too'. The IEA has been described recently by the BBC's Andrew Marr as 'undoubtedly the most important think tank in modern British History'. But it has also been tremendously important for Buckingham; its culture has helped to mould our own. So we must revisit Hayek's advice to Fisher. As Buckingham academics, we may feel a warm glow when we learn that Hayek thought that intellectuals were important but we are brought up sharp when he describes us as 'second hand dealers in ideas'. This sounds quite insulting, quite as bad as Keynes reference to 'defunct economists'. But it isn't really insulting and I believe that we have to probe this idea to see the real significance of the IEA, of John Blundell and quite a lot of Buckingham too.

I think what Hayek meant was that most of the basic principles of a free market and a free society had been established by leading thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thereafter, however, these principles had been partially forgotten – largely due the efforts of intellectuals who subscribed to other ideologies. Now it was the duty of those who believed in free markets and free society to rediscover the old truths, to proclaim them as effectively as possible, to produce factual information to support them and above all to demonstrate their relevance to modern needs. If this is being a second-hand dealer in ideas it is a very noble occupation indeed. Although he did much more, it was certainly a role our late colleague, Norman Barry, very much relished.

After an interesting career in the Federation of Conservative Students, as a member of Lambeth Borough Council and as president of several research centres in the USA – most notably at the Atlas Foundation - John Blundell became Director General of the IEA in January 1993. His contribution to its success has been enormous. He repositioned the IEA towards academia – helping to launch what were later become the International Policy Network and the EG West Centre at the University of Newcastle. The IEA's Health and Welfare Unit was spun off and developed as the independent think tank Civitas. The IEA building was purchased and a major new function room – named after Arthur Seldon – added to allow a much-expanded diary of events. Under John's direction, all publications were redesigned and more than £3 million raised to further the IEA mission. He also helped to create new IEAs in countries as diverse as Croatia, India, Japan, Malaysia and Panama.

It is remarkable that, amidst all this work, John has also managed to be a prolific author. He has written literally hundreds of articles, covering such subjects as the politics and economics of contracting out, enterprise zones, regulation, foster care and adoption, and police reform. Particularly notable were his articles explaining the real nature of the EU to American readers, his best selling *Waging the War of Ideas* and his biography of Lady Thatcher. And to all of this he has added notable achievements in the establishment and running of charities.

Chancellor, Buckingham owes so much to the IEA – I don't think we have ever had a better friend than Lord Harris – and the IEA and Buckingham owe so much to John Blundell. I call upon you to confer on him the Degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil
27 February 2010