



## GRADUATION 2011

### **Presentation speech for Len Evans for the honorary degree of Doctor of the University *honoris causa***

When people disagreed with Winston Churchill, he would often say, 'History will prove me right and you wrong.' By way of explanation he would sometimes add, 'You can be sure of that because *I* shall write the History.' As I begin thinking about my *History of the University*, some colleagues should perhaps bear Churchill's words in mind. But Len Evans need have no fears on that score. Over our many years at Buckingham there have been a few occasions – not many – when I have disagreed with Len. But I have already decided that there will be times in the *History* when it will be a matter of saying 'Evans was right and Clarke was wrong.' In any case Evans is clearly going to be one of the key figures in the story.

Chancellor, we are unique in so many ways. Of all the universities in Britain, not only does Buckingham have the best staff/student ratio and the highest level of student satisfaction – but we are also furthest from the sea. In the past, I have argued that our independence from the state gives us some independence from time. Perhaps it gives us independence from geography too. To be honest, I am not quite sure how the link works but it must be there. After all, despite our remoteness from the sea, in Len Evans, we have in our midst a colleague who is probably the world's greatest expert on sea weed.

It is sometimes said that writers and academics come to resemble the things they study. According to Horace Walpole, Edward Gibbon thought he *was* the Roman Empire. I know it is hardly a conventional compliment to liken someone to sea weed – but I am sure that Len would say that it is only because people do not think enough about sea weed. Its conditions constantly change - immersed in salt water, dried out in the hot sun, battered by storms and rocks. In short, it is astonishingly resilient and strong – and Len is like that too.

But people are shaped by more than their subjects – roots and careers are important too. In the past, I have noted the immense contribution of Welsh

people to the town and later to the University of Buckingham. Len Evans continues that noble Cambrian tradition. He grew up in Cardigan and then studied Botany and Marine Biology at Bangor – where he obtained a PhD for his work on the cytogenetics of seaweeds. It is true that that Len does not sound Welsh but a few minutes in his company leaves no doubt as to his country of birth. He has a very Welsh sense of enthusiasm – and more than a hint of Welsh theatricality.

There is, however, another geographical dimension to Len. He moved to Leeds where he led a large group studying the way marine organisms adhere to ships – and the development of technologies to prevent this. So there definitely a Yorkshire side to his personality – cautious, perhaps a little stubborn, meticulous and anxious that everything should be done by the book. Leeds clearly made a deep impression on Len. In discussions about University practices and policies, Len's contributions usually contained the phrase, 'Well, at Leeds, we ... ' and as far as he was concerned that virtually settled the matter.

Len came to Buckingham as Professor of Life Sciences. I can say that he was a brilliant lecturer – able to make what appeared to me unlikely subjects seem fascinating and even understandable. But the most important step came in 2004 when he took on the role of Registrar. In the last six or seven years this University has experienced a remarkable transformation. Our reputation has risen, our finances have improved and student numbers have risen sharply. There really has been a 'Buckingham Renaissance.' Of course, in part, this Renaissance has been caused by outside factors. Things have been going our way – but it was still essential to have the right people and the right policies to get the most out of the situation. Here I think there can be no doubt that Len has been an absolutely crucial figure. His support for and implementation of policies that allowed us to gain significant income from collaborative agreements and above all for involvement in the Quality Assurance Audit and participation in the National Student Survey – ultimately leading to back into the League Tables – have provided the solid foundations for our recovery. Sometimes Len's ideas on these issues were not popular, but History really has proved him right. Without Len I am not sure we could have done it.

It was said of Mr Gladstone that he was 'Oxford on top and Liverpool underneath. ' I think we could say of Len that he is 'Leeds on top, Cardigan underneath but Buckingham through and through.' Chancellor it gives me great pleasure to call upon you to confer upon Professor Len Evans the Degree of Doctor of the University *Honoris Causa*

**Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil**  
**26 February 2011**