



GRADUATION 2011

Presentation speech for Lord Lawson of Blaby for the honorary degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*

Chancellor,

On occasions like this, I often begin my speech with a quotation from someone not normally associated with the traditions of this University. Recent examples include Friedrich Engels and J M Keynes. Today I turn to another 'unlikely source', to the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan. On the eve of the 1979 election, Callaghan confessed to his political adviser, Bernard Donoughue, that the Attleeite settlement that had dominated politics since the war had probably run its course:

You know there are times, perhaps once every thirty years, when there is a change in politics. It then does not matter what you say or what you do. There is a shift in what the public wants and what it approves of. I suspect there is now such a sea change – and that it is for Mrs Thatcher.

Much of the significance of Nigel Lawson's career can be seen in terms of his role in giving practical shape to the change in public mood correctly identified by James Callaghan. The story is wonderfully told in Lawson's great book, *The View from No 11* – incidentally first recommended to me by Max Beloff, a man who had at least some things in common with Nigel Lawson: both descended from Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, both devoted to many aspects of British culture and tradition, but capable of viewing them with a critical eye.

Many of the names who figure prominently in *The View from No 11* also played crucial roles in the story of this University: Keith Joseph, Ronald Halstead and – of course – Margaret Thatcher. Indeed I think that we should come to see Buckingham as constituting a small but vital ingredient in the great sea change of the late 1970s. Indeed, the more I read *The View from No 11* the more I appreciate how closely his values correspond to our own ethos.

Our experience over 35 years has shown us that, as an institution that must pay its own way, we must be flexible. We cannot afford to be too doctrinaire or utopian. That does not mean that we cannot be idealistic – an entirely different matter. Lawson too specifically warns against both utopian socialism and utopian anarcho-capitalism, fundamentally because neither pay sufficient attention to the flaws in human nature and hence to the value of tradition and the necessity of an ordered and orderly society. It is very Burkean – and I am delighted to note that our colleague Dennis O’Keeffe has recently published an excellent book on Burke.

Anyone who understands the importance of tradition becomes interested in its transmission to future generations; in other words they become interested in education. While like a good Conservative or Classical Liberal, Lawson sees why states are necessary but he also thinks that they have done some things very badly – and education is his prime example. Although I don’t think Nigel Lawson was very closely associated with the Buckingham project during his years in government, I have come to appreciate how much we owe to him.

When Buckingham began, we were at an enormous disadvantage compared to state supported universities. In large measure that disadvantage sprang from the little known regressive element in the Attleeite welfare settlement, which actually involved the transfer of resources from the poor to the rich. Low earning tax payers (whose children were less likely to go to universities) actually paid for the costs of the university education of the children of richer people either from this country or even from abroad. It was really rather immoral. Nigel Lawson and his colleagues began the process of reform by charging economic fees to overseas students and preparing the way for the eventual introduction of student loans. These changes have been vital to Buckingham’s own survival. We can now say with truth that the costs of study here are very competitive with those in the state sector.

Of course, it is the economic sphere that Nigel Lawson’s time in government is best remembered - his length of service as Chancellor of the Exchequer exceeded only by Lloyd George and Gordon Brown. As with all economic policies there were ups and downs but overall there was a remarkable revival of and growing appreciation of the advantages of economic liberty – lessons absorbed as far away as China. Lawson certainly made Britain seem more alive

than in the rather soporific seventies. And he has continued to keep it alive and awake through his robust questioning of the more extreme theories of climate change – an issue which interests many of my colleagues here. And then there is the interesting question of AV...

It has been a remarkable career and shows no sign of flagging. I think we can say the same of this university. Chancellor, I call upon you to confer upon Nigel Lawson, Lord Lawson of Blaby, the degree of Doctor of Science, *Honoris Causa*

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil
26 February 2011