

GRADUATION 2012

Presentation speech for Professor Philip James for the honorary degree of Doctor of Science of the University *honoris causa*

Chancellor, for most of human history, the poor were thin and the rich were fat. Thus fat was a sign of success, and fat people were to be envied and admired. As President of the International Association for the Study of Obesity, however, our Honorand today takes a somewhat different view. I hope that Professor James will forgive me if – as an historian – I hazard a guess about the ultimate origins of his ideas. I think they go back to 1872 – to Lewis Carroll's *Alice through the Looking Glass*, particularly to the poem 'The Walrus and the Carpenter.'

But wait a bit, the oysters cried

Before we have our chat,

For some of us are out of breath

And all of us are fat.

Here surely we have a foretaste (if that is the right word) of the links between obesity and ill health that dominate the work of our Honorand. In a recent work, *Comparative Quantification of Health Risks*, he points out that there are more than 300 million obese and 750 million overweight individuals in the world. He investigates the links between excess weight and a wide range of diseases including diabetes, heart disease, strokes, osteoarthritis and various types of cancer. He believes that it is actually possible to estimate the burden of disease attributable to obesity as indicated by a high body mass index (BMI), by age, sex and subregion. His analysis of the relationship between BMI and mortality and morbidity suggests that the theoretical optimum mean population BMI is approximately 21kg/m². This value is far removed from those now found in many parts of the world and things are getting a lot worse. Unless something drastic is done the problem will become almost overwhelming by 2030. In order to tackle the problem, he works closely with the World Health Organisation. It seems he does not have much time for

voluntary codes of practice and favours strong legislation of the kind that now exists in France and elsewhere.

To be honest, I was not sure what to make of this. I wondered if Professor James might be some dreadful killjoy who wanted to use the power of the state to deprive people of the very real pleasures of eating. At Buckingham we are rather fond of our pleasures and highly suspicious of the state – after all we are an independent university. Yet my fears were allayed when I came to the ‘Recreations’ part of our Honorand’s WhosWho entry. He mentions ‘report writing’ and - to my great relief – ‘Eating, preferably in France.’ We must therefore discard any notion that Professor James is either a killjoy or an apologist for starvation diets. He wants us to eat better. Now that I do approve of. According to an admiring posting on the web from a Mr Bennett, he believes that poor people can only afford ‘good value’ food are actually being fed nothing but disease, disability and early death. Mr Bennett adds, ‘He is my hero’: would that we all were worthy of such plaudits.

Professor James has had a tremendously distinguished career – setting up the Dunn Clinical Nutrition Centre in Cambridge, Director of the Rowlett Research Institute in Aberdeen and creator of the International Obesity Task force. Of course the issue of obesity and its consequences raises the old question of whether people should be forced to be free – or even forced to be better. There are many areas where strong legislation probably does more harm than good – not least as far as universities are concerned - but legislation to improve health has a better track record than most forms of state intervention – and this has been true every since the Public Health Act of 1848.

Although there may be some slight philosophical differences, what strikes me most are the ways in which our honorand’s career, concerns and interests coincide with notable features of this University. Above all I think of the Clore Lab’s work on Diabetes and Obesity and our Colleague Karol Sikora’s expertise in cancer. These are all very good reasons for the award of an honorary degree. In this case, however, there is another rather unusual one. Many of you here will recall that one of the most important figures in the story of Buckingham was another Professor Philip James – for many years Dean of our Law School and an inspiration to so many of our students. Sadly, Professor James is no longer with us but it will be wonderful to have his namesake with

us. Chancellor, I call upon to present Professor Philip James with the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil

16 March 2012