

GRADUATION 2013

Presentation speech for Dr Anthony Seldon for the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters of the University *honoris causa*

Chancellor, Britain is strangely schizophrenic about its private schools. For odd reasons they are known in this country as public schools, but, since they are charities, it would be more appropriate to call them independent schools. Every two years the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development publishes its PISA report comparing the quality of education globally. And every two years the OECD concludes that the very best schools in the whole world are the independent schools of Great Britain: Eton, Charterhouse and Stowe are not just symbols of the Bullingdon Club privilege but are also the benchmark for excellence. Yet our independent schools are strangely apologetic and they rarely challenge their many denigrators.

The great exception to this institutional greyness is Dr Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College, who consistently and fearlessly champions the virtues of educational independence at every opportunity. The Annual Festival of Education, which he launched at Wellington College in association with the *Sunday Times* is enlivened every year by his extraordinarily bold and direct attacks on government ministers and bureaucrats for the failures in the state sector, and for their lack of appreciation for the independent sector. The sort of courage that

Anthony Seldon demonstrates in public is truly rare in Britain today.

Anthony Seldon is the son of Arthur Seldon, one of the founders of the Institute of Economic Affairs, which was the think tank that incubated the University of Buckingham in the 1970s. Arthur Seldon was a great man and it seems that his son has inherited his views along with his greatness.

Anthony Seldon's first major impact in this country was his headmastership of Brighton College, turning that small, previously unconsidered school, into a modern success story; and in taking over Wellington Dr Seldon has transformed a long established, but perhaps slightly sleepy school, into one of the most oversubscribed educational institutions of the planet.

As most people here will know, for several years running, the University of Buckingham has come top in the National Survey that measures levels of student satisfaction. Our success in this survey has made a huge contribution to the recovery in student numbers. Satisfied students are happy students and, despite occasional appearances to the contrary, the University of Buckingham is a very happy University.

It is especially appropriate that our honorand should be a co-founder of Action for Happiness. He is so convinced that truly happy people are made, not born, that when he became Master of Wellington, he threw out GCSEs and established his own curriculum – which includes lessons in happiness. He identifies five really important things he has learned in life:

- Stop worrying
- Happiness is the opposite of selfishness
- Live by water
- Learn from experience, not just university
- Be yourself

Like us he believes passionately in independent education, noting quite rightly that independent schools provide disproportionately high numbers of top entrants into universities. They've educated many of the country's top sportsmen and women. The upper echelons of British theatre, film and the arts have been saturated with independent school products. He thinks this is because independent schools see their role as educating the whole child; character building is essential to everything they do. I like to think that the success of our own graduates owes something to the university equivalent of the same environment.

Yet as Anthony Sheldon appreciates, the independent sector cannot afford to be complacent – and this is absolutely true of the University of Buckingham. The best way that we can face up to the accusation that we foster a less equal society is to take up the cause of social mobility, that was so shamefully betrayed by the destruction of the grammar schools in most parts of the country, though happily not in Buckinghamshire.

Anthony Seldon's innovations are wide ranging and include promoting active teaching through the Harkness approach, setting up the first 'carbon copy' schools in China, establishing the first Mandarin Centre in a UK School and campaigning for Shakespeare to be studied and acted in all Schools.

To cap it all, our honorand is a prolific author, the writer or editor of some 25 books. Many are devoted to recent British governments and why they failed. I must confess, Chancellor, I really do not know how he does it all – but if that is what results from his five lessons, then we should take them very seriously indeed.

Chancellor, I call upon you to confer on Anthony Seldon the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil

15 March 2013