

CONVOCATION JUNE 2013

Presentation speech for Sir John Ritblat for the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters of the University *honoris causa*

Vice-Chancellor, It was President George W. Bush who once remarked of our Gallic cousins: ‘The trouble with the French is that they have no word for “entrepreneur”.’ Whatever the truth of this claim, there is no doubting that Britain excels in producing the real thing; and among British entrepreneurs few have been distinguished in their chosen field than Sir John Ritblat.

Sir John served for more than three decades at the helm of the British Land Company; and while it would vulgar to mention actual sums on occasion such this, suffice it to say that when he acquired the company in the early 1970s it was worth relatively little, and at the end of his service it was a massively valuable FTSE 100 company – contributing massively to the national prosperity, back in the happy days when there was such a thing.

Every now and again, however, there comes along an entrepreneur who is not only a figure of vision and accomplishment in business and public life, but who is also a man with a taste and passion for the arts. Rome

had its Maecenas. Renaissance Florence had its Lorenzo de' Medici. London has its Sir John Ritblat. Whether it is in music, or architecture, or bibliography, or opera, or education, or the visual arts, there is scarcely an aspect of our cultural life that has not been enlivened by John Ritblat's enthusiasms and advanced by his munificent support.

All around the capital, the jewels in our cultural crown – the Wallace Collection and the British Library, to name by two – sparkle the brighter for the burnishing they have received from Sir John. The Ritblat Gallery in the British Library conserves and displays in optimal conditions some of the most precious works in the national patrimony: from the library's copy of Magna Carta to the manuscripts of *Alice in Wonderland* – that indispensable guide to the academic life. Across London, at the Wallace Collection, the entire building breathes a new vitality and splendour – the result of the happy collaboration of Sir John, as Chairman, and an inspirational Director who will be the subject of another speech.

Nor are his enthusiasms, or his generosity, confined to indoor pursuits. For Sir John has for more than thirty-five years the principal sponsor of the British Alpine Ski Championships; and he diverts himself, in the warmer months, as Vice President of the Tennis and Racquets Association.

Vice-Chancellor, when I survey Sir John Ritblat's multiple interests and the range of organizations, large and small, that have benefited from his generosity I recall Shakespeare's lines on Henry V:

A largess universal, like the sun
His liberal eye doth give to everyone.

Here, truly is England's Renaissance man, and I am honoured to present him for the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil

6 June 2013