

Rectorial Address

Younger Hall University of St Andrews

10th March 2006

Simon Pepper OBE

Vice Chancellor, my colleagues on the Court, members of the Academic staff, my student constituents, and just in case that doesn't cover everybody, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you. Thanks for your kind words; to the Court Office and the Academic Registrar staff for the arrangements today, to the choir for those delightful pieces - and to you all for coming, from near and far.

I'm delighted to be elected, and will be truly honoured if you think in three years time that I've delivered the goods.

But, what goods? I thought I would spend the next few minutes talking a bit about what you can expect from me - with some reflections on the ancient traditions of the post of Rector, some thoughts on its relevance today, and some advance warning of the causes which you can expect me to be supporting.

The post of rector is a remarkably stable tradition in the ancient Universities of Scotland. For all its potential for entertainment – and there have been some wonderful exponents of comedy at this rostrum in the last few decades, there is a democratic principle in here which, I'm sure they would all agree, is serious and shouldn't be overlooked or trivialised. Elected by the student body, the rector chairs the University Court, the supreme governing body of the University. Enshrined in statute, this is a duty which asserts something very important about the central place of students in the life of the University.

This precious right for you to elect the chairman of Court has survived the enormous growth of the University (a little over a century ago, there were only 130 students here, now over 7,000). And I think you should treasure this right as your opportunity to ensure that student interests are always to the fore, in this age when managing a University is – lets face it - a major complex business.

In many ways it's astonishing that the tradition has survived, when none of the newer Higher Education institutions have such an arrangement.

It's not as if it hasn't been questioned. And one can understand the anxieties of those who fear the impact of a daft election. I'd say that that view seriously underestimates the wisdom of students. But perhaps I'm biased! The history of elections here does seem to have been very sensible, and there have been few complaints over the years. But it's not an absolute right. If you want to keep this major safeguard for the interests of students, it's very important to make sure that you keep electing good rectors, and that you do what you can to help your colleagues in the other ancient universities to do the same. They will stand or fall together, and if they fall, that will be your precious right gone forever.

As regards this incumbent, well, time will tell, but certainly, I'm up for it. One of my first tasks was to appoint a Rector's Assessor – a student who can act as my resident representative – and the man I appointed - Ben Nicholson – is doing an excellent job. He and I are already determined to make sure that things are even better prepared next time for a meaningful contest among well qualified candidates for a post with a serious purpose. Preferably with some good fun thrown in, of course.

So I'd like to re-iterate that pledge which you heard me give in Latin, but this time in rather more colloquial terms! My promise to you as Rector is firstly to do my best to chair the court well, efficiently, impartially, whilst ensuring that student issues are given the attention they deserve. This will be helped by direct representation, on the Court, of the Students Association, and the SRC, as well as the Rector's Assessor – three of the 23 formal members of the Court.

Secondly, and outside the Court, I pledge to take a close interest in the issues which concern students - individually or collectively; to listen and assist where appropriate with guidance, advice, support, especially where things seem to have got stuck in the system as they inevitably do from time to time; and to be a champion for your causes if invited. I aim to be available, accessible and effective. In short, to be a 'working rector' - not an absentee who parachutes in just to chair the court - and to show integrity; to deserve your trust in this role.

I'm asking Ben to help me to be accessible for these purposes, and to keep everyone informed on the progress of these efforts, using all available communications including our website www.rector.co.uk. We also want feedback from you, to keep us on our toes.

So what about the causes?

Over the centuries, this post has been held by eminent church leaders, intellectuals, statesmen, benefactors, aristocrats, scientists, an explorer, a

sportsman, lawyers, journalists and recently a string of writers and entertainers. All widely admired public figures, each has offered their 'thing' – their special something attracting the majority vote.

It was against this daunting background that I had to respond to a phone call from my proposer, Laura Wilson, in October last year inviting me to stand. Why me? What, I had to ask her quite openly, would be expected from me? Few in St Andrews would know of me, compared with the celebrity status of at least one of my rival candidates.

Nor could I pretend to offer anything to compare with the intellect of John Stuart Mill (elected 1865), although I could be briefer (he spoke for three hours); and I could be around more often (like many rectors right up to the middle of last century, he gave his address and disappeared, never to be seen here again - without, as it were leaving his address); and I could try to avoid his reputation for vanity (legend has it that a certain archway in St Andrews would collapse when a real genius passes through. It's said he refused to go anywhere near it).

The huge financial benefactions of the Marquis of Bute or Andrew Carnegie are also a little beyond my pocket; and I'll never be as entertaining (well, not intentionally anyway) as John Cleese, Alan Coren, Tim Brooke-Taylor, Frank Muir, Nicholas Parsons, Clement Freud, all of whom have served their term as rector here in the last 35 years.

So why me? The answer to my question seemed to be quite clear, actually: my proposers wanted a candidate who stood for something – a cause. And not just any cause but one which is increasingly pre-occupying the whole world. It's about the importance of meeting our needs without wrecking the Earth and jeopardising the interests of others, here at home and in other countries, now and in the future. (This of course is a bundle of issues now wrapped together under the rather technocratic heading of 'Sustainable Development'). To your enormous credit, many of you students here in St Andrews are determined not to sit back and appear to condone the way that our consumption causes serious and long term impacts on others. I must say I've been inspired by the passion shown here for these issues.

Well, this is my home territory, if you like, having worked for an environmental charity. WWF is famous for the high profile it gives to so called 'charismatic' species, which has helped to focus world opinion on environmental degradation. But its much wider mission - going right back to its foundation in the 1960s – is to help restore the balance between humanity and the natural world. All this is part of a widespread environmental movement, mobilising the support of millions of ordinary citizens, to campaign for reform.

And I strongly believe in the power of the individual in this effort. It is too easy to be deterred by the huge scale of it all. Too easy to blame someone else - the government - for not taking the lead. But you get to learn that

governments don't really lead at all, any more than the surfer leads the wave – it just looks that way, especially if they do it well. On the whole, the system resists change; political leaders pretend to pull, but really they are pushed, by waves of public opinion; someone caught the essence of this when he said 'reform happens when it can no longer be resisted'.

So my campaign for Rector was based firstly on a commitment to support you in these concerns, in the belief that you should be encouraged to play your part in building the 'wave' which will drive change. In your own lives, in your community, in your university, and in the wider world. I do believe everyone's life is enriched by aspiring to make a difference, and by contributing in some way to making the world a better place.

And secondly I made a commitment, as I said earlier, to listen to your concerns and help where I can. This will be a developing picture as time goes on. Items arising early on my agenda include ethical investment, library services, affordable accommodation, funding for sports and student activities, and fulfilment of the Principal's excellent initiative under the title of 'the student experience' for both undergraduates and postgraduates. As I spend the first few months finding my way around, I've been exploring the background to these issues, and they remain very much on my radar. Watch this space.

These sorts of commitments were very ably publicised by my excellent campaign team, to whom I am pleased to pay tribute today. And it was gratifying to win an emphatic mandate to serve you as Rector, by 62 to 38% of the final count.

Incidentally I must stress that these elections aren't about party politics - I have no affiliation with any party – but it's interesting that the same unambiguous message of concern for the environment is being picked up from the population at large by politicians of all parties, including our esteemed new Chancellor of the University, Sir Menzies Campbell. The environment is at last entering the political mainstream.

In actively supporting your causes, I do feel in good company. Many of the best rectorial addresses have used the opportunity to offer campaigning advice to their constituents. JM Barrie stood at this rostrum in 1922, just 4 years after the slaughter of the Great War, and famously addressed the student body with great poignancy on the subject of Courage. He spoke in favour of a kind of intelligent courage, not the blind variety, learning from the awful lessons of the war. He urged the students to question the wisdom of their so-called betters 'The war' he said, 'and other happenings have shown you that age is not necessarily another name for sapience [wisdom]'.

The League of Nations – the progenitor of the United Nations - had just been created in 1920, but Barrie was calling for a League of Youth, of all countries, who would be prepared to stand up for themselves and say 'we will fight each other but only when we are sure of the necessity'. (A message, you

might say, of some resonance today). But to get the full impact, you should note that the audience included not only a number of survivors from the Front, but the person in that seat (*the Chancellor's*), listening to this address, was the University's Chancellor of the time, a certain Earl Haig. By the way he – as Sir Douglas Haig - had served as rector of this University during the war years when he was also directing hostilities on the Front.

Barrie advised youth not to start a rebellion but to look for – to 'fight for' - a partnership with their elders. 'Doubt all your betters who would deny you that right of partnership', he said. 'And be adventurous. But don't think only of yourselves'.

That sounds like good advice today. And I think this is the spirit behind the discussions currently underway in this University on ethical investment. A partnership between young people and their elders, blending ideals with weighty responsibilities. It's a powerful combination.

More recently, in the Scottish Parliament, Geoff Mulgan, former head of the Strategy Unit at No 10 Downing Street, gave an inspiring talk charting the role of social innovation in driving change. He showed how all the great reforms in our democracy have been driven – not by politicians who often get the credit for the culminating legislation - but by individuals or groups in society, creating a case for reform which eventually had to be incorporated into the mainstream.

Many of the good ideas which end up being accepted as self-evident truths – have actually started out attracting ridicule and opposition from vested interests. Take the Fair Trade movement - a topical point in this Fair Trade fortnight. Here it is, bursting unstoppably into the mainstream. It's excellent to see the University about to join the town itself in securing Fair Trade status.

I do think it's important for us all to engage in these issues, in whatever way we can, not just because they are worthy, but because they are increasingly urgent.

The new, really compelling dimension of climate change, for example, is its urgency. The evidence is that we are on course to trigger really dangerous change in the next 50 years unless we take serious evasive action. The government chief scientist, not a man for hyperbole, recently described it as a bigger problem than terrorism since it has already killed many more people.

Make no mistake, coping with these issues is desperately hard for us all. The danger is that we ignore or – worse - deny it for too long, exhausting the potential for relatively painless remedy, which does exist if we can change our ways.

I can't help reflecting that, when the people of Easter Island were about to cut down their last forest to meet their immediate needs, there were no

doubt some who said hold on, maybe we had better think again. But the decision went the other way. Jared Diamond has written compellingly in a recent book about the history of collapsing civilisations. It's chilling reading. He argues that an environmental meltdown has often been the main catalyst, particularly when combined with the oddly perverse response of societies - to disregard the coming disaster, perhaps because it is too difficult to confront. This time we're dealing with issues affecting not just an island, but the whole planet. It is quite scary.

But like any crisis, the answer is to be calm and decisive. Faced by seriously worsening problems, we have an enormous – but perfectly achievable - task of re-ordering the way we live and meet our needs. We can't go on consuming as if there were another couple of planets like this one zooming round the sun. The sooner we start, the less difficult it will be. It's a challenge for everyone on Earth, but surely especially so here in developed countries where the most privileged 1/5th of the world's population currently consumes 4/5^{ths} of the world's resources. And it comes closer to home than that. For the future surely holds a special role for the top slice of academic achievers who make it to University and are destined to be future leaders. Especially therefore at places like St Andrews.

So far, universities have tended to distinguish themselves mainly on the research side of these issues, rather than the teaching. Too many graduates still go out into the world without the least grasp of these issues, the need to address them, or the best ways of doing so. Take construction, for example. There are some great exceptions, but new buildings, roads, and infrastructure are still based too often on designs which commit us to gross energy wastage for a hundred years and more – a completely needless millstone round the neck of future generations, especially with utility costs going through the roof, along with the heat.

But it's good to see St Andrews bucking the trend: one of a very few UK universities with undergraduate degrees in sustainable development, in both the arts and science faculties, involving eight different schools from all parts of the university, with modules which can be followed as additional by anyone doing any degree. All led by world class researchers and educators. On the whole, employers have been slow to catch on to the need for this kind of qualification, but the current explosion of interest is bound to change that.

The important thing is that these skills are like literacy – not a specialism for some to follow while others get on with business as usual. It's for everyone. I plead with you to see yourselves as global citizens, broaden your horizons while you are here – there are few better places to do it – learn about these things, question the established ways, the profligate use of resources. Consider the issue of justice for others in the world, and for future generations. Remember, we are in an age when the consequences of our decisions will last millennia. If nuclear power had been invented in the Stone Age, we would still be caring for their waste today.

But be 'cool'. Don't over-reach, aim too high, expect too much, too soon. Ghandi said 'be the change that you want to see in the world'. That's enough. It can be a liberating experience.

And it doesn't matter what degree you are studying for or wherever you will go in your career. Or whichever of the 90 countries represented here that you belong to. You can be part of the solution – we all must be. Acting on our principles, we can all help build the wave. And then we can all applaud when our political leaders perform the right way!

And - a final thought - remember how precious this all is. Draw some inspiration from being here in this very special part of the world, in this historic town, amongst Scotland's great expanses of wonderful open landscapes. Look up into the night sky whenever you get the chance – with so little light pollution it is a good place to see out into the Milky Way, with its 400 billion stars like our sun. I do find it puts things a bit in perspective! Ponder your place on this extraordinary planet, at this particular, crucial time in history, and in this special University of St Andrews. Please don't waste it.

Thank you for having me.