

Mr Vice-Chancellor,

How do you define the role of a University Chancellor? There is of course the ceremonial aspect – presiding over the formal graduation of generations of students, but what else does this unique and distinctive role involve? I am indebted to Emeritus Vice-Chancellor, Professor Chris Brink, for further insight. Whilst observing that the role is not responsible for any constituent part of the University, he feels that it transcends all other functions. Or as he succinctly expressed it, “The Chancellor is the visible manifestation and vocal exponent of the values of the University.” And since our core values are Excellence, Creativity and Impact, we need a Chancellor who can speak to those values. We have, therefore, been most fortunate in having Professor Sir Liam Donaldson as Chancellor of Newcastle University for the last ten years.

When appointed as Chancellor, Sir Liam was Chief Medical Officer for England and the United Kingdom’s Chief Medical Advisor. He fulfilled this role with distinction for twelve years, and is currently the longest serving holder of this important office in modern times. During his tenure, he produced several landmark reports which have had a lasting impact on health policy and legislation in fields as diverse as clinical governance, quality and safety of health care, stem cell research, patient empowerment, smoke-free public places and organ and tissue retention. Dr Paul Rutter, who was a Clinical Advisor to the Chief Medical Officer, told me that whenever Sir Liam was planning or executing health policy, he would always have individual cases in mind. He never lost sight of the people affected by the policy. Which is why, in Dr Rutter’s view, Sir Liam is still the “go-to” person for patient safety in the UK and globally.

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Sir Liam was born in Middlesbrough in 1949, which in local parlance means he is a “smoggy” - but we won’t hold that against him. Soon after his birth, the family moved to Rotherham, where his father was Medical Officer for Health. After completing his Medical studies, Sir Liam initially specialised in surgery. However, after a few years as a Surgical Registrar, he shifted his focus to Public Health Medicine, where he felt he could have a positive impact on a greater number of people. In 1986, he became Regional Medical Officer for the Northern Regional Health Authority, later becoming Regional General Manager and Director of Public Health. Sir Liam told me that the local press announced his appointment as Regional Medical Officer with the headline “chip off the old doc” - a neat reference to the fact that he had followed his father into the realm of public health. By the time the Northern and Yorkshire Regional Health Authorities merged in 1994, Sir Liam was responsible for the health and well-being of over seven million people. His work in regional healthcare was an excellent preparation for his subsequent role as “The Nation’s Doctor.”

So what skills has Sir Liam brought to the role of Chancellor from his extensive professional experience? Sian Jarvis, who worked with him when he was Chief Medical Officer, praised his finely honed communication skills. She told me that not only did he have a great gift for translating complex medical matters into clear, concise briefings for the media and wider public, and that the way he transformed the style and substance of the Chief Medical Officer’s annual reports had a hugely positive impact on policy and legislative change. Sir Liam doesn’t just excel at polished prose, he is a master of improvisation. Commenting on his speeches to graduating students, Emeritus Vice-Chancellor Chris Brink observed that, “ many a time have I marvelled at the way in which a few scraps of notes, visible to me, but not to the audience, were transmuted into a simple, profound message for that particular cohort on that important day

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in their lives”. Sir Liam has also been a wise and effective Chair of Court, managing its meetings with good humour and great insight.

Numerous colleagues have praised Sir Liam’s creative approach to finding solutions to intractable problems. I was particularly taken with Dr Andrew Carson-Stevens’ description of how they worked together: “Liam and I first met in Wallace Space - a central London office space where you can be creative, write on the walls, fuelled by caffeine and an endless supply of waggon-wheel biscuits...we’ve not stopped writing on the walls together ever since, devising strategies and solutions to make healthcare safer.” Sir Liam is also renowned for his ability to swiftly get to the heart of the matter, or as Dr Ed Kelley, Director of Integrated Health Services at the World Health Authority, described it to me, “he is the best person I know at looking at an issue, sifting out the extra noise and finding the nub of the matter that helps you move the question along.”

In researching this citation I’ve spoken to colleagues from around the world. It is clear they hold Sir Liam in the highest esteem and great affection also. Dr Shams Syed, who worked with Sir Liam at the World Health Organisation, described his skillset as “E squared – extreme expertise”. Dr Syed also told me that, “Often in WHO chaos, we would wait for Liam’s visits. It would almost be like the hobbits waiting for Gandalf! His visits would be sudden, full of excitement, and gave us the energy and hope to continue on our path”. Professor Chris Day, our Vice –Chancellor and President, who has known Sir Liam for over thirty years, told me that, “throughout this time, he has been a wonderful source of advice and wise counsel to me; never more so than the two and half years I have spent working with him as Vice-Chancellor. The courage, honesty, and integrity he has demonstrated in all of his roles has been a true inspiration to me.”

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In reflecting on what he has achieved in the role of Chancellor, Sir Liam is proud of having changed the way we do Honorary Degrees and feels they enhance the experience for students and their families now they are integrated with student graduations. He has enjoyed visiting academic departments to find out what they do, and has used this knowledge to celebrate and promote their work in the wider world. Sir Liam specifically requested that his honorary degree cover both the Humanities and Science in recognition of his support for the full panoply of University subjects. He has also been inspired by the University's sector-leading work to facilitate widening participation. He mentioned a phrase which particularly resonated with him in relation to access - some people walk through a door without realising it's a door, whereas others have to fight to get through it. We want all potential students to feel the doors to Newcastle University are open and inviting.

So what does the future hold? As you might expect, Sir Liam will ensure that any free time is put to good use. He remains firmly committed to his role as the World Health Organisation's Envoy for Patient Safety and Chair of the Independent Monitoring for the Global Polio Eradication Programme. Of course there is that managerial vacancy at St James' Park, where they could certainly do with some compelling, compassionate and principled leadership. Sir Liam told me that he would like to do more writing and is proud of the fact that the book he wrote with his late father – Essential Public Health, has been in continuous print for thirty five years, with the most recent edition published in 2017. According to his wife, Lady Brenda, what he certainly won't be doing, is cutting the grass! I know that he loves his music and with that in mind, I'd like to conclude my citation with some lines from one of his favourite musicians, Bob Dylan: "May your hands always be busy, may your feet always be swift, may you have a strong foundation, when the winds of changes shift. May your heart always be joyful, may your song always be sung..."

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Mr Vice-Chancellor, in recognition of his wise, loyal and exceptional service to this University and his transformative improvements to healthcare in the UK and abroad, I present to you Professor Sir Liam Joseph Donaldson as a candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Humanities and Science, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Jill Taylor-Roe, Senior Public Orator

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