

Mr. Chancellor,

Olivia Grant, whom we are honouring today, was born in Newcastle. She features prominently among those who have earned wide acclaim and respect not just in their local region but nationally and abroad for their strong leadership, professional dedication, and humane good sense. A director of many companies, promoter of education, employment, skills and training in the North East, one of her firm beliefs is that history teaches all that needs to be known about leadership. Indeed, one of her great heroines from the past, whom she resembles in some respects, is Queen Elizabeth I. Like the first Elizabeth, Olivia often found herself the lone woman among powerful men. Firm of conviction, she is respected for her queenly blend of integrity, frank opinion and great personal charm. She is regarded with enormous warmth by those who know her, both personally and professionally. She takes pains to get to know her junior colleagues by name, and to nurture their talent and personal development. Senior figures – from ministers of state and captains of industry to successive Vice Chancellors – have valued her wisdom founded upon experience and hold her in great respect, but take care not to cross her for fear of being summoned to ‘the headmistress’. Newcastle University Council, which she has chaired for many years, is not unlike the Elizabethan court. It is full of jostle, business and potential conflict, which she has had to master and smooth over to ensure good governance. For this dedicated service, the University is deeply grateful, and acknowledges this, among many other contributions, with the award of an honorary degree. But the laurels do not end here. Just as the dignity and grace of Gloriana was the favourite subject of artists, so the portrait of Olivia Grant has been commissioned to adorn the King’s Hall’s gallery of fame, the first woman to be thus honoured by the University.

And so, to consider how it all began. Her father, a design engineer at the Swan Hunter shipyard, instilled in his daughter a lifelong interest in science and engineering. At Dame

Allen School she discovered through her History teacher Helen Lawson an early interest in *people*, what motivates them, and how to unlock their passions. The Greek Myths and other works of classical literature were particular favourites. As the Roman playwright Terence has it, she discovered at a young age that ‘nothing that is human is not of interest to her’ [*humani nihil a me alienum puto*]. Though a modest person by nature with few ambitions for herself, she realised that her passion was to help people be as good as they can be. This drive to help others find their vocation has resulted in a supremely successful career in which she has opened up countless opportunities for other people to excel.

Olivia pursued her love of History as an undergraduate at the University of Leicester, which during the 1960s and 70s pioneered the field of Local History. During this time, she was the first woman president of the History Society, and was a student of the great historian W. G. Hoskins, whose unassuming manner appealed to her own belief that ‘doing good by stealth’ was the best way to proceed in life. Upon graduation, she became a youth employment officer with Lancashire County Council, and gained early hands-on experience of building networks among employers and business people. She was ahead of her time in her approach to careers advice: as early as the 1960s she already believed that it was more than simply finding and filling job vacancies. She had, and continues to have, the conviction that good careers advisors should take into account the circumstances of people seeking employment, helping them to connect with their passions, and providing a good fit between personal skills and new training opportunities.

Her natural flair for her chosen field, dedication to hard work, and ability to function with minimum sleep, led to quick promotion. At the age of twenty-eight she was put in charge of running the careers service in the Borough of Trafford, the youngest person in the country to hold such a position. The late-1960s and early 1970s were troubled times for industry. Olivia recalls seeing the slogan ‘Youth Wants Work’ appear on Byker bridge

shipyard walls. The threat of mass unemployment loomed as the traditional northern manufacturing sectors declined. Her strategic response was to create special programmes to give young people work experience, with great success. Further promotions followed, leading her to return in 1979 to her native North East to run the careers service in Newcastle, where she soon became Principal Careers Officer. She then ran the Training and Enterprise Council (or TEC), creating from scratch a business with a £45 million turnover. Under her leadership, imaginative, creative and enterprising projects flourished which brought real long-term employment and investment benefits to Newcastle and the wider region. One example was Folkworks, for which she provided start-up money, and the highly successful Students into Schools programme, which continues to enable students at Newcastle and Northumbria Universities to teach science and technology to schoolchildren. She persuaded leading businesses on Tyneside to pledge money towards retraining the local workforce in anticipation of shipyard closures, and coaxed companies such as Wellstream to come to the North East. Understanding the importance of face-to-face negotiation, she travelled in person to meet the Managing Director of Wellstream in Florida to convince him that Newcastle was a great place to do business. Her colleague on Newcastle University Council, Ashley Wilton, who has known Olivia since the late-1970s, experienced a similar personal touch when she came to thank him after he had given a careers talk at the Training and Enterprise Council, a task which many people in her position would have delegated, or not remembered to do at all.

In her 12 years of leading the TEC, Olivia worked tirelessly, overseeing the introduction of European Partnerships, the Education Business partnership, and the launch of Business Link. By the end of the 1980s, she had forged a national reputation for delivering excellence in training and skills development, and was soon invited to attend House of Commons Select Committees on education, employment and the environment under successive governments. She took a key role in developing public policy on regional

economic development, the education of 14 to 19 year olds, childcare and women's issues. In her many years of commuting between London and Newcastle, her personal assistant and 'right hand woman', Mary Smith, recalls a propensity of Olivia's to leave behind a trail of lost items, pens, papers and bags. Mary became best friends with the lost property office in Edinburgh.

Olivia was awarded an OBE in 1995 for services to Education and Training, and was made a Deputy Lieutenant by Her Majesty the Queen in September 2002. She was appointed to the Board of the Port of Tyne Authority in 2000 by the Secretary of State for the Environment, where she remained until 2006, and currently serves as the Director of numerous businesses, trusts and organizations, including Newcastle Building Society's Pension Trust, and Dame Allan's Schools. Her present and former Directorships reflect the diversity of her interests, including Culture North East Ltd., Business Link Tyneside, Northern Arts, the Tyneside Education Development Trust, and Bio Sci North Limited. Somehow throughout all of this she has also found time to raise three children, and in 2011 celebrated her thirtieth wedding anniversary to Bruce Grant, who teaches family law here at Newcastle University.

Her enthusiasm for Newcastle University predates her spousal connection, to her excitement at the issuing of the Royal Charter which marked its foundation in 1963. Since her appointment as Chairman of Newcastle University Council in 2002, Olivia has succeeded in making Council a more effective governing body and in recruiting and engaging high calibre lay members. She is credited with introducing a more balanced brief for Council, whilst respecting the role of Senate in academic matters. According to her former Vice-Chairman, Jacqui Henderson, 'Olivia is one of the most astute, kind and caring persons I have ever met. She is absolutely unflappable with a wonderful zest for life and has the ability to

make each person she talks to feel quite special. (She reminds me of when I met Bill Clinton who has the same sort of charisma). Olivia is a brilliant Chair and a wonderful friend.’

Mr. Chancellor, it is a rare person indeed who invites comparison with both Elizabeth I *and* Bill Clinton. And so, for her outstanding leadership and dedicated service to this University, I commend to you Olivia Grant, OBE for the award of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.