

LORD PETER MELCHETT: DCL

Mr Chancellor,

I have taken the liberty today of bringing a prop with me for the citation of our honorary graduand, Peter Melchett. I believe this is without precedent since the prop is in the form of a turnip. I do not wish to undermine the dignity of the occasion, nor suggest that the said vegetable might replace the honorary degree certificate that you are about to confer upon our honoured guest. I could, however, think of no better way of encapsulating his achievements. For this is no ordinary turnip. It grew in the good, honest soil of the North East – on my allotment, in fact. It is an organic turnip, a descendent of the very same seed grown by Lord Townshend, who, like Peter Melchett, was a great pioneer of Agricultural Revolution – which is to say sustainable farming founded upon the principles of harnessing nature, respecting biodiversity, and providing nourishment both for the soil, and for the general population. Such was Lord Townshend's enthusiasm for this noble root that Alexander Pope mentions him in his *Imitations of Horace*, Epistle II, as a 'turnip obsessed person'. Pope observed, in a footnote, that 'the kind of rural improvement which arises from turnips' was Townshend's favourite conversational topic.

Like this eighteenth-century antecedent, our graduand today is a pioneering Norfolk farmer whose passion for the soil is at the heart of his career, although (unlike Lord Townshend) Peter Melchett's conversational range and expertise are highly varied and interesting. Since 1973, Peter has managed the 890-acre Courtyard Farm in Norfolk, which went fully organic in the year 2000. The pride of the farm is a

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herd of fine Red Poll beef cattle, an ancient local breed. Crops include barley, wheat, peas and vetch, clovers and grass. The farm is also well known for the wildlife conservation work done there over the last 50 years, and for the high level of access it affords to the public.

After Eton, Peter Melchett graduated with a BA Hons degree in Law from Cambridge University in 1969, and Keele University, where he gained an MA in Criminology in 1971. His career began as a research worker in Criminology at the Institute of Psychiatry and London School of Economics in the early 1970s. It may be possible to reflect without cynicism that this was an excellent grounding for a career in politics. According to Harold Wilson, who gave him his first Government job, Peter Melchett was the youngest Government Minister appointed in modern times (and, as an eighteenth-century historian, I can confirm that he was pipped only in youthful precocity by William Pitt the Younger). He was promoted twice within two years, and took particularly controversial legislation through the House (including pensions legislation, and bills nationalising the aircraft and shipbuilding industries). In the mid-1970s, he became the Government Whip in the House of Lords, representing the Department of the Environment. Here, he chaired a Government enquiry into the enduringly controversial subject of pop festivals, leading to legislation still in force today, and ensured that some of the UK's first wildlife protection laws were passed. He later rose to become Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Industry, and a Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office. By the early 1980s, he was the Opposition Front Bench spokesperson on the Environment. He led the Labour Opposition in the Lords on the highly controversial Wildlife and Countryside Bill, securing major amendments, and introducing the system of protection for the UK's

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top wildlife sites that changed official and landowners' attitudes to wildlife site protection, a system that was subsequently to form the basis of the European Habitats Directive.

At the Department of Industry, he was responsible for small firms and workers cooperatives, a clue to his political sympathies. Though himself a hereditary peer, the comparison with eighteenth-century nobility meets an abrupt end, since Peter Melchett campaigned (successfully) for an end to hereditary peers in the Upper House - a rare example (if he will excuse the farming metaphor) of a festive bird voting for Christmas.

Peter Melchett's influential work has extended well beyond government from the 1980s to the present day. For many years he was Chair of Community Industry, a Government-funded organisation employing over 1,000 adult staff and 8,000 disadvantaged young people throughout England, Scotland and Wales. He was also formerly a Trustee of the World Wildlife Fund, President of the Ramblers' Association, Council member of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and Chair of Wildlife Link, the national liaison organisation for over 30 wildlife and environmental organisations. He has also been Patron, Vice-President and Council member of many other voluntary bodies involved with farming, the countryside, wildlife conservation and the environment. He became a well-known spokesman on the environment as Chair of Greenpeace UK, member of the International Board of Greenpeace, and eventual Executive Director of Greenpeace UK between 1988 and 2000. He was also Chair of the Board of Greenpeace Japan for six years, a challenging position given that nation's well-known fondness for eating, rather than conserving large marine mammals. Under his Chairmanship, Greenpeace Japan became the third largest and most influential

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environmental organisation in Japan, securing a number of significant changes in Government policy and corporate behaviour.

In terms of the career achievements of which he is most proud, Peter played a major role internationally in Greenpeace's continued growth and achievements. Greenpeace UK grew eightfold to a turnover of £7.5m, 80 staff and over 200,000 supporters. Greenpeace campaign successes included a decrease in whales killed world-wide, international treaties banning the dumping of nuclear, industrial and oil industry waste and human sewage in the North East Atlantic, an international treaty protecting the continent of Antarctica, the treaty banning nuclear weapons testing world-wide, and the extraordinary success of Greenpeace's world-wide campaign against Genetically Modified crops and food. Peter found himself briefly detained at Her Majesty's pleasure in 1999 following his participation, among a group of 28 volunteers, in direct action to destroy a Genetically Modified crop trial. All volunteers were found not guilty in the court case that followed.

His current position, which he has held since 2001, is as Policy Director at the Soil Association, the UK's main organic food and farming organization, and Peter's job involves work on campaigns, organic standards and policy. He is a member of the Board of the European Union's Sixth Framework Programme, a £12 million Research Project examining 'Quality Low Input Food', and a Board member for two further EU research projects on low input crops and livestock. All three programmes are led by Professor Carlo Leifert of Newcastle University. His work at the Soil Association has included continuing the successful campaign against the introduction of GM crops, and special support for English organic farmers through the Government's Organic Entry Level

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Scheme. Peter is also an enemy of the turkey twizzler. A former Member of the Department of Education's School Lunches Review Panel, he was responsible for launching the Soil Association's successful school food programme, Food for Life, and the Food for Life Catering Mark, which now covers 130 million meals annually. He is the first Chair of the Food for Life Partnership, led by the Soil Association, which was awarded a £17 million Heritage Lottery Fund award. This resulted in direct engagement with 20% of English schools in order to make radical improvements in school meal take-up, with consequent and significant improvements in attendance, behaviour and academic achievement among pupils, and major improvements in the diets of children and their parents. Peter and his partner have raised two grown-up children, who went on to become a barrister and a farmer. Under Peter Melchett's Policy Directorship, the Soil Association continues to publish reports and campaign on organic farming and climate change, the nutritional value of organic food, resource use in agriculture, feeding the world, GM, pesticides, the abuse of antibiotics in livestock farming and animal welfare.

Mr Chancellor, I hope you will agree that a turnip is a rather inadequate and perishable gift with which to honour so illustrious a contribution to societal challenge themes in farming and global environmental campaigning. I therefore commend Peter Melchett to you for the award of an honorary Doctorate of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.