

PREM SINGH RANA DCL

Mr Chancellor,

Look to the back of the room today into the young faces of our new graduates. You will see joy, satisfaction, bright eyes not yet dulled by celebration or wrinkled by the years, but most of all you see potential. No doubt, as they stream past to shake your hand you wonder where their careers will take them, will this young musician perform at the Albert Hall, will that cell biologist win a Nobel Prize? 24 years ago, the then Chancellor met briefly a young man from India. Not quite as young as the rest for he was here in his mid thirties to complete a PhD. Had he stopped him for a chat the Chancellor would have discovered that Prem Singh Rana had completed his thesis on the riveting topic of the “Reliability of urban bus services as an indicator of their operational effectiveness”. I wonder what thoughts this would have generated.

Twenty years after that handshake, another handshake marked the completion of Dr Rana’s rise to global recognition in the business world when he was promoted to Chairman and Managing Director of HUDCO, the Housing and Urban Development Corporation of India, an organisation responsible for having built or enabled to be built 15 million homes in India of which 12 million were for the lowest income groups. HUDCO has rehabilitated or constructed 4.1 million dwellings following disasters, most recently after the 2005 tsunami.

Prem trained as an engineer, completing his Bachelor's degree at the highly regarded Indian Institute of Technology in 1970 followed by a postgraduate diploma in Town and Country Planning in 1972. In 1975 he became a traffic planner at the Delhi Transport Corporation to which he returned, armed with his Newcastle PhD, to become its General Manager in 1986. Four years later he joined HUDCO.

HUDCO was established in 1970 to address the needs of India's huge population, now a billion people and the second most populous country on earth. He began his HUDCO career as Executive Director for Environment and Technology followed a year later by a transfer to become Executive Director for Urban Infrastructure. During his 6 years there he was responsible for appraisal and monitoring of several large projects such as the airports in Calicut and Cochin. I can vouch from personal experience for the quality of the latter! His next step up was to become Chief Vigilance Officer then a year later he moved into the key position of Director of Finance which he combined with responsibility for Corporate Planning.

Not surprisingly, leading an organisation which has turned over £15 billion has made him a figure of great prominence, highly respected and consulted by political leaders. He has the ear of the Prime Minister and rightly so. In 2005 he was awarded the Rajiv Ratna National Gold Award for being the Best Chief Executive in India. Last year he received the

Distinguished Alumnus award from his first alma mater the Indian Institute of Technology. Combining his expertise in transport and housing he pioneered the concept of urban development along defined transport corridors, with a preference for a rail based transport spine. I hope he was inspired by the success of the Newcastle Metro.

He has always been driven by the need to find pragmatic solutions; in response to the challenge of declining supplies of wood as a building material, he was responsible for the establishment of the a National Resource Facility and established Chair devoted to bamboo technology, aimed at exploring the best uses for what is a cheap sustainable alternative source of building material.

Following his recent retirement from HUDCO, Prem has continued to work with and for the poor of India. He has established a new private company which is exploring a new concept, PURA - Providing Urban Services to Rural Areas. The aim is to develop ways to link together groups of villages so that they can benefit from industrial and commercial development without the necessity to destroy communities. With 600,000 villages in India to work with, he has plenty to keep him busy.

Prem has become an international figure; his grasp of the challenge of urban planning in the face of a large population, many of them poor, has made him a valuable source of guidance.

The leaders of post-apartheid South Africa, for example, beat a path to his door. His own family reflects that international flavour. Prem and Usha have a daughter studying in Chicago and a son pursuing his career as an engineer in Australia. They are part of the new India, a nation which will soon be at the high table of world economics, as it was prior to the industrial revolution in Europe.

It is interesting to reflect that thanks to the existence of the British Empire, our language has become the lingua franca of the Indian sub-continent. Our days of world naval domination are long gone. Indeed one modern day Hornblower appears to have been defeated by having his iPod confiscated, but the heritage of those years which linked India and our nation could prove to be one of the UK's greatest assets in the coming century. I would urge any who have not visited India to try to find the means to do so. It is an inspiring and challenging experience.

Mr Chancellor, look with me one more time into a face, this time the pleading face of a young mother, little more than a child herself, who stood before Linda and I on our first visit to India. Cradling her tiny baby, she reached out her hand in desperation. Linda offered a few rupees only to trigger a stampede of others, desperate for help. We retreated to a nearby hotel shaken by the experience. The sheer scale of the challenge of the poor of India leaves the average visitor paralysed. We should be grateful that there are some able to

confront this challenge. We should be proud to have played a part in the education of one such person, proud to call Prem Singh Rana one of us. I am honoured to commend him to you for the award of the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor John Burn