Speech by Lord Hague of Richmond, Chancellor of the University of Oxford

Sheldonian Theatre, 19 February 2025

Ōrātor Publice, ita exordīrī velim ut grātiās tibi ex animō agam, ut quī tali benignitāte sīs locūtus, adeōque familiāriter salūtātiōnibus, adeō cūrātē officiīs decōrīs operam dederīs, quae laudem quandam peperērunt huīc Ūniversitātī. Vice-Cancellāriae quoque grātiās habeō, necnōn Bedellīs, et eīs omnibus quī haec officia perficienda cūrārunt, praecipuēque chorō cantantium meī ipsius Collēgii dīlectī, quī ita venustē cantāverint, et vōbīs dēnique hīc convocātīs, quī mē Cancellārium creātum nūper summō studiō excēperītis.

Expedit nunc, ut opinor, me libertatem lingua vernacula utendi mihi adrogare.

Public Orator, I begin by expressing my heartfelt thanks to you for such generous remarks, and for your dedication to the fine ceremonies and warm welcomes for which Oxford is known. I thank the Vice-Chancellor, the Bedels and everyone who has made today's proceedings possible, in particular the magnificent choir of my own dear college for their beautiful singing. And I thank all of you, the Convocation, for electing me as your chancellor and for your enthusiastic welcome in recent weeks. Every visit I have made so far and every conversation, has intensified my excitement about the years to come. I happily dedicate myself today to working with you and for you.

It is a wonderful event that we have a Chancellor Emeritus here. The last chancellor to relinquish the role in their lifetime, the 2nd Duke of Ormonde in 1715, fled the country immediately. I am very pleased that Chris has seen no need to do so. It means I am the first occupant of this office in centuries who can benefit from the advice of a hugely respected predecessor. Twenty-eight years ago, I was part of the UK delegation at the handover of Hong Kong, waving off Chris on the Royal Yacht as he ceased to be Governor. I saw then that he left admired by all and loved by many: such is his dedication to public service that, here, in an entirely different place, the same is true again.

Lavender has so often added to that service with her own presence and enthusiasm, and Ffion is, like me, beyond delighted to be able to return to Oxford for the many hundreds of occasions we hope to share with you over the coming years.

I am fortunate in having known not just my immediate predecessor, but two more before him. Harold Macmillan was ninety when I, in my twenties, eagerly told him of my plans

to enter parliament and ambitiously asked for his advice on running the country once I got there. There was a long pause as he took me in, with the penetrating gaze of those hooded eyes. “Young man”, he said, “don’t do too much, too soon”. That was it – useless, I thought. But ten years later when I had rashly allowed myself to be elected leader of my party, I realised how very shrewd that advice had been.

Roy Jenkins gave me more detailed advice, and this time I acted on it. Hearing that I intended to write a book on Pitt the Younger, he took me out to lunch. If you are picturing claret flowing in a smart London club, you are correct. He asked me what word limit my publisher had given me. “150,000 words”, I said. “Well, the first thing you need to know”, he said, “is to take no notice of that whatsoever. If you are enjoying writing, the readers will enjoy reading it – you can add another 100,000 words and they’ll publish it anyway”. I did. And they did, which is why both of my books are much longer than anybody intended.

“The next thing to know,” he said, “is to start tomorrow. Far too many people waste time mapping what they are going to do. Just get going and work it out as you go along”. This might not be good advice for every DPhil. But Roy saw writing a book as a thrilling exploration, a mystery journey to be enjoyed to the full, and he thought the same of being Chancellor of Oxford. Having adopted entirely his approach to writing, I see no reason not to adopt it as Chancellor – my own thrilling exploration starts today.

I have much in common with these three predecessors. We have all been politicians. We have all worked across parties as well as within them. We have all adored Oxford. But in one crucial respect we part company. They were all from Balliol. The last Magdalen alumnus to be elected Chancellor was Cardinal Pole in 1556. He was a divisive figure, served for two years, and would certainly have been one of those predecessors who fled the country when Queen Mary died, had he not promptly died himself. Perhaps it’s no surprise that 469 years have had to pass for Magdalen to be given another chance.

At my matriculation as a Magdalen undergraduate here in the Sheldonian I sat with a group of friends I had just met. I am very touched that the same group of friends is sitting here now: we have kept in contact ever since. Today, it seems extraordinary that the day of our matriculation, less than fifty years ago, was the first on which the majority of colleges, including our own, admitted women. Their arrival seemed entirely normal to us state schoolboys but it was a shock to our privately educated colleagues, even though they soon judged it an entirely agreeable one. It is a reminder to those of us who remember the Oxford of half a century ago, that it has changed radically in that time, and very much for the better.

Oxford is dramatically more diverse, on every parameter of gender, ethnicity and ways of thinking, than on the day we first walked in here. It is more global, largely due to the huge increase in the number of graduate students. Walk down Broad Street and you could bump into members of this university from any of 175 countries and territories, the vast majority of nations. Pause at the Clarendon Arch and you will find etched into it another change: the huge expansion of our list of the most generous benefactors, whose philanthropy has helped transform this university. Walk on in almost any direction and you will see the results: a school of government, a business school, a centre for humanities under construction and much more. Chat to an undergraduate and you will find many who benefit from what you cannot see: scholarship schemes like Crankstart that make all the difference to the ability of thousands of students to come here. This is why we carve the names of our benefactors in stone.

The Oxford that has resulted from this, the Oxford of 2025, has renewed and reinvigorated its engagement with the world. Stroll further and you will pass Oxford Science Enterprises, the Oxford Internet Institute and Oxford University Innovation. You will see science parks and medical centres on which humanity is coming to rely. This is the Oxford whose Covid vaccine saved over 6 million lives, and whose malaria vaccine is even now being rolled out across Africa. Here we have by far the highest research income of any UK university. Recent months have seen remarkable innovations in life sciences, highly successful student-led enterprises, the deciphering of ancient scrolls and now quantum teleportation: many of the world's most important breakthroughs are being made here.

This is a very outward-looking Oxford, with brilliantly successful spinouts expanding around Oxfordshire, and major programmes on global education and modern slavery reaching across the world. In the 1830s our forebears initially resisted the construction of a railway to London for fear of the habits that students could form there; in the 2020s we are positively delighted with the idea of a railway to Cambridge. You can't get more open-minded than that.

To have moved Oxford on so successfully in the last half century is an immense achievement, by vice chancellors and heads of departments and many brilliant academics. So while the body of this ceremony consists of granting honours to me, for which I am deeply grateful, I honour and thank you for ensuring that, incredibly, a university that is one of the very oldest – the first document requiring the appointment of a Chancellor is older than Magna Carta – is at its strongest today and is recognised as one of the greatest centres of teaching and research that has ever been created.

Today's modern university has been built on its enduring strengths: dozens of colleges and halls, four of our nation's finest museums, the oldest botanical garden in Britain

and some of the foremost libraries of human civilisation. The reason we speak Latin today even though we all understand English, and hand over keys even though we no longer know which doors they open, along with a magnificent seal even though we could perfectly well send an email, is that we recognise we are the beneficiaries of the labours of centuries, and we are acknowledging that our labours must be equal to passing on to future generations this priceless inheritance.

Our challenge in doing so will be that history is accelerating. Lawrence Brockliss, in his masterly history of the university, identified four major epochs, some of them lasting for centuries. But I suspect the next four epochs might pass in eighty years rather than eight hundred. We are entering an age of economic, social and political upheaval, requiring of our great institutions and all of us individually both deep resilience and constant reinvention. Sir Tony Blair and I have written – you can find the fact we agree on so much these days either reassuring or alarming as you wish – that the arrival of artificial intelligence along with engineering biology and the accompanying pace of technological change is the greatest ever challenge for the modern state. It will also be the greatest ever challenge for the modern university.

We cannot know all the implications. We do not even know which forms of AI will become pre-eminent, although since we have been ranked as the number one university in the world for computer science, we have a good chance of working that out. But I offer four thoughts as to what this acceleration of change might mean for Oxford.

First, it is in the public interest, and in the critical national interest of the United Kingdom, that we remain at the very forefront of the science and the applications of this change. What happens here is more fundamental to British prosperity than it has ever been. That means we must always maintain the highest and most rigorous standards of excellence, welcoming the most brilliant minds irrespective of background. But it also means governments, of any party, should invest in our success. The growth they are looking for can be found here, almost under their noses. It does seem they have noticed. The recent announcements by the chancellor of the exchequer of support for the arc of innovation between Oxford and Cambridge and an Oxford Growth Commission are very welcome indeed. I will regard it as part of my job to heap praise on ministers who make these things happen and be an unsparing critic of any who don't.

Second, the pace of change in sciences and medicine will mean we need humanities and social sciences more than ever. New technologies are changing politics and transforming the way culture is developed and communicated. They need ethics, philosophy, language and history to guide them. Universities like ours, cherishing the full range of academic disciplines, will have a vital role in showing how sciences and

humanities can inform and strengthen each other.

Third, in an age in which ideas will change so rapidly, freedom of speech and of academic work and research will be of paramount importance. We cannot prepare for the turbulent decades to come by shielding ourselves from inconvenient arguments, wrapping ourselves in comfort blankets of cancellation, or suppressing minority views because they conflict with the beguiling certainty of a majority. I strongly welcome the decision by ministers to revive most of the provisions of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act.

Oxford is a home of free speech within the law, coupled with the understanding that such rights involve a duty to listen to and include others, to have an open mind, and to regard diversity of thought as a strength. A university is not an island: the controversies and conflicts of the world reverberate here. We are only yards from where martyrs were burnt in the Reformation. We are in the same room as the tragic matriculation year of 1913, thirty per cent of whom soon lay dead on battlefields. We must hope these agonies of previous centuries never become the story of our own. Our university is a place where we can disagree vigorously while sheltering each other from the abuse and hatred that are so often a substitute for rational opinion. Here we can debate the big global issues while understanding that those can never be an excuse for antisemitism or any other kind of religious or ethnic hatred, the great evils of history.

We do not need to agree on everything, indeed we should not. I am pleased to say we do not need a foreign policy: we are not a country. Nor do we need a view on every daily occurrence: we are not a newspaper. The concern of a university is that opinions are reached on the basis of truth, reason and knowledge, which in turn requires thinking and speaking with freedom.

Fourth, we will be in the front line of fighting the darker side of the new technological age, that a world of unlimited digital connection contributes to anxiety and loneliness, especially among young people. This new age will only turn out well if it allows us more scope to enjoy being human, rather than form our relationships with machines. In Oxford we have the great strengths of personal tuition, college communities and high achievements in sports and music. It should always be a place where we seek each other's company, not stare into smartphones. Coming here should be to experience what it is like, not only to pursue excellence, but to be irrepressibly and exuberantly human. That includes understanding that we are part of nature. Encouraging and highlighting the work of botanists and biologists in and around Oxford is a task Ffion and I will particularly enjoy.

These then are four possible tests for great centres of learning in a time of scientific

revolution – to maintain world-leading standards and research, to intensify work across disciplines, to encourage free thought and speech without hatred, and to maintain our essential humanity. I will look forward to debating them, as I understand very well that one of the great strengths of Oxford is that no individual decides what is going to happen, least of all the Chancellor. The vast variety and heterogeneity of this place is its decisive advantage. With 56 departments, 43 colleges and halls, 43 institutes and 78 committees of the Council of the University alone we will make mistakes, but we will never all make the same mistake at the same time.

The demands of this age of change will require funds, and larger endowments. I will do everything I can to support the efforts to raise them. I am looking forward to meeting thousands of our alumni at home and abroad, and to encouraging even more of them to give their time, service and resources to the university that helped release their talents.

The role of the Chancellor always evolves, and if you are the 160th it is not easy to define yourself by reference to all your predecessors. I am sure you will find me less interfering than Lord Curzon, not so dogmatic as Oliver Cromwell, a touch less strict than the Duke of Wellington, hopefully more unifying than Cardinal Pole. But I will do well to follow the example of my most recent predecessors in upholding the idea of a great, liberal university built on ancient traditions but at the cutting edge of modernity, opening brilliant minds with the power of debate, inquiry and reason. I will celebrate and articulate your achievements, urge you on when you have doubts and help protect you when your freedoms are under threat. I look forward, more than anything I have ever done, to representing and championing one of the greatest institutions in the world, the University of Oxford.