

Alan Langlands

President, Master, Distinguished Governors, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

Today it is my great honour to welcome Alan Langlands to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.

Education, research, knowledge exchange, social mobility: these are the values that Sir Alan emphasized at the conclusion of HEFCE's annual meeting in 2012, the last one he was to chair as Chief Executive. And they are values that Sir Alan has worked for all his working life.

He has also always championed a profoundly compassionate, humanist sensibility: a desire to make a difference in a world that is often harsh, unsympathetic, and complex. But, as he once admitted, "I like complexities", and he has a knack at solving what seem to be intractable problems.

There can be no doubt: nothing beats "difficult" than being Chief of the National Health Service Executive in England between 1994 and 2000 and Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) between 2009 and 2013. Becoming the Vice Chancellor of the University of Dundee and now Leeds present their own challenges but must seem a "doddle" in comparison.

Only Sir Alan knows how he went from a council estate on the south side of Glasgow to some of the most challenging jobs in British political life and culture. Grit as well as intelligence and political acumen clearly played their part.

The man who was to become Sir Alan was born on Oak Apple Day in Glasgow, at a time when the city was in uproar. On the day he was born,

800 printers and mill-workers in Glasgow were striking for the “fundamental principle of the right of workers to join a trade union”;

Labour had just regained control of the Glasgow Council;

there was a controversy about the selling off of council houses on the Merrylee estate (they were sold for less than £2,300 each);

and the Scottish Covenant Association were demanding that “the rights of Scotland under the Treaty of Union... be properly defined”.

Into this turmoil, a child was born. A son, named Robert Alan Langland, born to a man who worked hard all his life. Alan Langland’s father was, at different periods, a sailor, carpet weaver, shipping clerk, and transport manager. He taught his son the value of hard work. As Sir Alan later recalled, “I saw him struggle with redundancy, technology, young brash managers who knew half as much as he did.... And he never gave up” .

Neither does the son. He attended the Allan Glen School, which had been established a century earlier to “give a good practical education to... the sons of tradesmen or persons in the industrial classes”. The school was renowned for its excellence in science and engineering, which set Sir Alan up for his degree in biological sciences at the University of Glasgow.

That was when he became smitten with the National Health Service, and it became his first life mission. By 1994, he was its chief executive in England.

It was one of the toughest jobs in the UK. When he was there, the NHS employed over a million workers; it had a budget of £34 billion; it was constantly in the eye of an often hostile political and media elite. Not to mention, it was (and is) a business in which people literally live or die.

He had to fight for change and reform – no easy task since, as he once admitted, “public acceptability, political will, capital investment, commitment from the opinion formers among the staff, and very capable transition managers” have “never been present at one time to allow those changes to occur”.

Nevertheless, Sir Alan helped to create an NHS that was more efficient and effective. Less than four years after taking on this formidable job, he received a knighthood in the Queen’s Birthday Honours for his services to the NHS.

By 2000, however, it was time to move on. Those of us here in this room are all beneficiaries of the fact that he shifted his energy towards education, his second life mission. The Vice-Chancellorship of the University of Dundee was his first move. There, he transformed the university, materially benefiting not only those students who gathered, as we are doing today, in their black and gold robes trimmed with white fur, to graduate but also the local economy. He was supportive of the access programme, enabling more students from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to university. Indeed, under his leadership it was discovered that a higher proportion of Firsts and 2.1s came via this route.

This did not mean that he gave up on health. As Chairman of the UK Biobank, he oversaw one of the world’s largest genetic epidemiological studies. He was also Non-Executive Director of the Office for the Strategic Coordination of Health Research

and the UK Statistics Authority, as well as chairing the boards of charities such as the Health Foundation.

But, truth be told, HEFCE beckoned. In April 2009 – coincidentally on April Fool’s Day – Sir Alan became its Chief Executive. It was a position he held until 2013. As an important broker between Government and the higher education sector, every person in this room have benefitted from Sir Alan’s work during this time. Typically modest, he claimed that “If I take any credit or satisfaction” from the role, it was “in trying to successfully guide the sector through a period of really quite difficult political and economic uncertainty”.

Crucially, he has always been a strong supporter of part-time education, supporting Birkbeck in its mission to provide the highest quality education to all people who both want it and are intellectually rigorous.

He is also passionate about advancing and expanding education, believing in the need for governments to invest in research infrastructure and basic science if the UK is to remain competitive internationally. Now, he is Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds and Chair of the N8 Research Partnership, which aims to maximize the impact of research carried out in the eight most research intensive universities in the north of England.

I trust Sir Alan will forgive me for not mentioning each and every one of his honours – there are far too many to list, and there are some graduands present who want to see their degree awarded. So, let me just ask: What kind of leader is Sir Alan? There is more to leadership than the aggressive, macho variety. As he once told an interviewer, true leadership is much more subtle. It is

about influencing skills, about being able to understand the problems of working across professional boundaries, about releasing creative energy within organisations

He is approachable, resilient, diplomatic, always calm, and also impartial when chairing controversial panels. He is a subtle thinker. He is respected, even by those disagree with the decisions that he makes or has to enact. He is no pushover: he is known to be a “stickler for detail and a hard driver of people”. But he is trusted.

Alan Langland has held some of the most influential and challenging positions in the UK. When reading about his achievements, however, I kept returning to the early start given to him by his family, friends, and educators in Glasgow. Perhaps this sounds strange but, for me, his close ties to Glasgow makes his fellowship at Birkbeck particularly pertinent. Our founder, George Birkbeck, was a professor of natural philosophy at the Andersonian Institute in Glasgow. Indeed, John Anderson inspired George Birkbeck to establish The London Mechanic’s Institute, which later became Birkbeck. So, as Birkbeck staff, students, graduates, alumni, and supporters, please join me in welcoming Sir Alan to a fellowship here. We are greatly honoured.