

## **Michael Wilshaw: Fellow of Birkbeck**

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming Sir Michael Wilshaw as a Fellow of Birkbeck.

Wilshaw has made a difference to the lives of millions of young people. This is no exaggeration. Between 2012 and 2016, he was the Chief Inspector of Schools in England and head of Ofsted.

Wilshaw was born in 1946, in Simla, the elegant summer-town on the south-western range of the Himalayas, much celebrated by Kipling for its Hindu temples, forests, and the bird-sounds of the Himalayan barbet. His parents' families had come to India in the late eighteenth century. His father, Norman, had worked as an engineer on the railways and was based in Nagpur in the Northern Provinces. His mother, however, had gone to the milder climate of Simla after the death of a baby daughter in a house fire. That was where Wilshaw was born. On Indian Independence, the family returned to London. But his father struggle to find work, eventually being employed as a postman.

Wilshaw is rightly proud of the dedication of his parents. He has recently recalled that "Economically I am working-class, but in terms of attitude, middle-class because my parents were always aspirational, even though they didn't have any money". Despite financial insecurity, his parents paid to send him to private tuition in order that he could study at the grammar school, Clapham College. There, an inspirational teacher – Cecil Pocock – sowed in him a great enthusiasm for history and teaching. He went to St Mary's Teaching Training College in Twickenham and became a teacher.

That was 1968. His first job was teaching in Dockhead, Bermondsey. He admits that "it was a tough introduction to teaching, but I loved it from the outset and particularly enjoyed

teaching disadvantaged youngsters”. Wilshaw recalled being influenced by the formidable headteacher Bridie Burns, whom he described as a “four-foot-nothing Irish ball of fire who moved around the school as if she was on wheels”. He also recalls being reprimanded by her. “Mr Wilshaw”, she scolded: “I know you’re a new, young teacher but should you be wearing short-sleeved shirts? Please change it tomorrow”. He got the message: schools need leadership if they are to instill respect for authorities and love of learning in their students.

Without a degree, however, Wilshaw realized that his career prospects were limited and so he enrolled to do a History and Politics degree at Birkbeck. In other words, like so many of you graduating today, Wilshaw juggled the demands of working full-time as well as studying. He speaks warmly of his time at Birkbeck. In his words, “I only survived and stayed sane because the course was so stimulating, the teaching by people like Eric Hobsbawm so inspiration, and the pastoral care provided by the university so wonderful”. In 1972, he graduated.

His career took a second major turn when, in 1985, he was appointed head of St. Bonaventure’s Catholic School (or St. Bon’s) in Forest Gate. By 2003, he had turned it into one of the most improved schools in the country.

In 2000, he was knighted “for services to education”. His belief was unwavering: schools provide “the glue that helps hold our society together”.

In 2003, he was appointed Executive Principal of Mossbourne Community Academy in Hackney. The school was near Pembury estate, one of Britain’s poorest housing estates and one that had experienced riots and other disruptions. Two-thirds of students at the school come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Forty per cent depend on school meals; 30 per cent are on the special needs register.

Wilshaw took command. He instigated discipline. Students dress in red-trimmed grey blazer uniforms with V-neck pullovers. They are required to walk quietly down corridors and let adults walk through doors first. At the start of each class, pupils pledge in unison:

I aspire to maintain an inquiring mind, a calm disposition, and an attentive ear so that, in this class and in all classes, I can fulfil my true potential.

Under his leadership, many did.

82 per cent of students achieved five A\* to C GCSEs, compared with 59 per cent nationally. 65 per cent won places in some of the country's best universities.

Famously, at the 2012 speech to the Scottish Conservatives, then-Prime Minister David Cameron declared that Mossbourne Community Academy was “working miracles in some of the most deprived parts of our country” and claimed that was a “great revolution in education”. Was it any wonder that Wilshaw was dubbed the “miracle worker”?

In 2012, after being courted by the Education Secretary Michael Gove, he began work as the head of Ofsted. He accepted the job because he had found Ofsted helpful in raising standards at the schools where he had been headteacher. He believes strongly that “Inspection is a powerful lever for improvement”: teachers as well as parents needed evidence-led judgements about their quality.

His time at Ofsted had many highpoints. One was his success in shifting the emphasis from pupil attainment to pupil progress. For Wilshaw, the whole point of education is social mobility. This meant for all students, and not just the top 20 per cent. His teachers were encouraged to become “surrogate parents” for the children of “dysfunctional families”. Teachers make a difference to the lives of millions of children. They need to be rewarded and celebrated.

The reforms he instigated required major changes: in-house inspections (as opposed to the use of third-party commercial contractors), training of inspectors, rigorous reviews of quality, external scrutiny panels, and simplified inspection frameworks.

Wilshaw is a firm believer in leadership, believing it to be the “most important factor in improving the quality of our school system”.

His aim was to develop in every school a culture for learning. Bullying, radicalization, and disruption were his enemies. He bravely tackled child sexual abuse. He was profoundly concerned with improving underperforming areas of the country, especially the growing North-South divide and specific problems in coastal and post-industrial communities.

Wilshaw announced, loud and clear, that England’s education system was just not good enough. England schools, he maintained, were

a bit like its football team – better than many, but hardly top-notch. We comfort ourselves with past success, illusory as that might be, dream of future glory then collapse into despair when we come across superior play.

Nevertheless, there had been huge progress. Two decades before he took over, “standards were truly dire”. Whole generations of children were being let down. Twenty years ago, less than 1 in 5 students achieved benchmark GCSE grades. Now, although the examinations are much harder, 60 per cent achieve such grades. Remarkably, in some areas, A-level children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to go to university than their advantaged peers.

Mediocre schools were never good enough for Wilshaw. He scrapped Ofsted’s “satisfactory” grade and replaced it with “requires improvement”. It worked. Within five years, the proportion of “good” and “outstanding” secondary schools rocketed from 66 per cent to 78 per cent.

Unsurprisingly, his plain-speaking, “Dirty Harry” approach, ruffled feathers. But he was unrepentant, insisting that Ofsted’s primary function was “to champion the right of every child to a decent education”.

When he left Ofsted, I am told that his wife hoped he would start leading a quieter life. She was wrong. He travels all over the world, mentoring teachers in Argentina, for example. Recently, he could be found talking about leadership, educational standards, and private schools at the Varkey Foundation's global summit in Dubai. From 2017, Wilshaw has been a board member of the think tank, Education Policy Institute at Westminster, which conducts data-driven research into improving educational outcomes for all young people regardless of social background.

But who is "the man"? Well, Wilshaw likes a sip of good Scotch whiskey, walking in the countryside, and political debates. He is also a sincere Catholic and a dedicated family man. In his words, his family have been "a great support and served to remind me that home is the great educator and that schools only build on the values that parents and the wider family give children from the earliest age".

Teaching is a great profession. It may not, he once said, "be the best paid job in the world but, done well, there is no better job to satisfy the soul and energise the spirit. There is no better job to bring out the altruism in us all".

And there are few people who have done more to support teachers and students than Sir Michael Wilshaw. This is why we are incredibly proud to welcome him as a Fellow of Birkbeck.