

Stuart Godfrey Popham

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

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming Stuart Godfrey Popham, described by those in his field as the most “connected lawyer in the city” and by The Times as the “King of Global Finance”, to a Fellowship at Birkbeck. His extraordinary dedication to our college and its unique mission where he has served as one of our Governors, has earned him our fervent gratitude.

Let me start, by paying respect to Popham’s love of the sea. I have always understood the pleasures of sailing although, not possessing a yacht myself, I usually have to resort to reading about sea-bound adventures. The best, in my view, is Andrew Motion’s Sailing to Italy, which was published in 1997. At one point, he describes approaching the place where the Battle of Trafalgar was fought. He writes:

We're in Trafalgar.

Trafalgar. On land, history leaves its scar however we plough up battlefields, tear down buildings, spread new estates and factories. Out here it leaves no mark; it just survives in the names. The Solent, where people watched the Spanish Armada blow past, then waited

for Napoleon, and Hitler. Corunna, which we passed the day before yesterday. Cape St Vincent and Trafalgar... Their names roll through my head and I see ripped sails, cracked masts, blazing rigging – but none of it for long. In a moment I'm watching the waves again. The one to come like the one gone by. Always new but always the same.

I was rereading Motion's book when I was given the good news that Popham had agreed to become a Fellow. Popham comes from a long line of seafarers (6 generations of sea captains, in fact) and is himself a passionate yachtsman. He admits to having attended the Law School at the University of Southampton at least in part because it meant he would be close to the Solent's sailing opportunities. More recently, he has had the windows at his house in Chichester lowered so that he can see the sea while lying in bed – at least so the Financial Times (that hotbed of gossip!) tells me.

This love of the sea and sailing seems unsurprising given the battles on terra firma he has faced and conquered: as Motion put it, "The one to come like the one gone by. Always new but always the same".

To be honest, I didn't think we would have the privilege of meeting Popham. Five years ago – almost to the day – the professional journal called The Lawyer posted the following notice:

“Word is that Stuart Popham has room in his diary in 2023”.

So, we are all immensely privileged to get a sighting seven years before anyone else.

Popham is an extraordinary man. He was born in Southampton in 1954 to an engineer and a domestic science teacher. He grew up in Surrey but returned to Southampton to go to university. He graduated from the Southampton Law School in 1975. Initially, he worked as a litigation lawyer but shifted to the faster-moving world of banking partly because he lacked interest in court cases that lasted “years and years”. As he admitted, he is “more of a sprinter than a long-distance runner”. The year after graduating, then, he joined Clifford Chance, one of the world's leading law firms, with a turnover of £1.4 billion and offices in 25 countries. From 1981, he was based in the firm's Singapore office, returning to London in 1984. That was the year he was elected to the Partnership, an astonishing 8 years after he first walked through their doors. While there, he has held various roles, most notably leading the banking and finance practice areas between 1999 and 2003, when he became the senior partner. After 35 years of navigating them through many narrow straits, he retired in 2010. The following year, he was made Queen's Counsel (honoris causa).

Retiring from Clifford Chance did not mean putting his feet up. In 2012, he joined Citigroup, the leading global financial services company with 200 million customers in more than 160 countries and jurisdiction. He became vice chairman of Banking for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA). He has also been a member of the Confederation of British Industry's (CBI) International Advisory Board, chair of the London Council of the CBI, chair of TheCityUK, which promotes financial services. He was active on the boards of Legal and General Insurance and The Barbican Centre Trust, as well as the advisory forum of the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford. He is also chairman of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the understanding of major international issues. It is the world's most influential non-US think tank. To put it mildly, his experience in senior corporate, governmental, and regulatory roles is unrivalled. His reach is global.

What is perhaps the most amazing thing, however, is that he is notoriously well liked by everyone. He is famous for his bonhomie and "clubability". He has a consensual way of doing business. In the words of a colleague, "He has become one of the titans of the worldwide legal profession without making enemies".

He also cares for the lives of people less fortunately to himself. For example, he was a director of PlaNet Finance (now known as Positive Planet), for example, a charity

that promotes microfinance to assist the alleviation of poverty. He was also a trustee of the Tower Hamlets Business Education Partnership, attempting to build closer ties with the community. It was no surprise to hear him arguing eloquently about the need to open up the judiciary to a wider range of people – such as women and ethnic minorities. Popham urged people to get away from the idea that judges were only chosen from senior barristers. He saw the benefits of widening the range of experience of those who serve on the Bench. He is also a loving husband, father, and grandfather.

But, finally, his work on behalf of Birkbeck has been formidable. On the Board of Governors, he is an energetic presence. Indeed, I am told that he quite literally never sits still – constantly moving in his chair as he thinks of new solutions to problems and networks with the people that we need to achieve our goals. He knows everyone who is worth knowing and has helped broker connections with Clifford Chance, the City of London, and numerous public bodies and charities. Like all of us in this room, he believes in education, education, education – at the highest level and open to all who yearn to understand the world. Indeed, we are very sad that he is stepping down from the Board of Governors at Birkbeck.

Our loss is the seafarer's gain, however, because he has just become Chair of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. It is not a surprising choice: Popham has been on its Council since 2011, a member of the RNLI Audit and Risk Committee since 2012

and a Trustee since July 2013. He is now devoting himself to helping those with “ripped sails, cracked masts, blazing rigging”, as Motion described it. He will now have time, not only for sailing but also for theatregoing, his other passion.

We wish him the very best and trust that by being a Fellow of Birkbeck, his ties will remain as strong as ever.