

Developing leaders for a world of global forces and rapid change

**Speech by Dr Donald Markwell, Warden of Rhodes House, Oxford,
at a University of Oxford alumni reception,
Auckland, New Zealand, 6 August 2011**

It is a remarkable thing that, just as elsewhere in this city the All Blacks are about to play the Wallabies, you are kindly enduring listening to an Australian. Thank you!¹

It is, in fact, a great pleasure for me, as Warden of Rhodes House, to be with you here in Auckland, and to speak about, and I hope stimulate discussion of, one of the greatest ways in which Oxford, including through the Rhodes Scholarships, can contribute to New Zealand and to the wider world – through developing leaders for a world of global forces and rapid change.

The rugby is of course highly relevant to this. Sport is one of the crucibles in which leadership and teamwork are evident, and in which leadership capacity and an aptitude for teamwork are developed. I think, for example, of the leadership by the New Zealand Rhodes Scholar David Kirk of the All Blacks in 1986-87, including when the All Blacks won the inaugural World Cup. If I mention that I was present in Soweto, South Africa, a year ago when the All Blacks defeated the Springboks in the hugely exciting last 15 minutes of the game, I hope you won't mind if I mention an All Blacks defeat – shown in the movie *Invictus*, which reflects the leadership of a remarkable kind which Nelson Mandela, in the context of the 1995 World Cup, displayed in helping to reconcile a divided and tense society: leadership for which South Africa and the wider world owe him so much. The 19th century poem *Invictus*, which Nelson Mandela knew so well, reminds us of the possibility and importance of personal self-mastery as an element of leadership. It concludes with the lines:

*I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

I mentioned David Kirk, captain of the All Blacks when they first won the World Cup, who has acted as an adviser to the New Zealand Prime Minister, and now has a trans-Tasman business career. He is one of many New Zealanders who have gone from this country, as Rhodes Scholars or in other ways, to Oxford, and returned to contribute to New Zealand society, or played leadership roles in other ways around the world. It is invidious to name individuals, but you might forgive me for naming a few such Rhodes Scholars – our chair, Jane Harding, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) at the University of Auckland; Arthur Porritt, Lord Porritt, the Olympian who became Governor-General of New Zealand; John Hood, who – like Sir Colin Maiden before him - became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Auckland, and then contributed so much to Oxford as its Vice-Chancellor, and who this December will become Chair of the Rhodes Trustees; Professor Ngaire Woods, also a Rhodes Trustee, who has been leading the creation of the Blavatnik School of Government

¹ In the event, New Zealand's All Blacks defeated Australia's Wallabies in the rugby in Auckland that night, 30–14.

in Oxford. I also wish to pay a tribute to one Rhodes Scholar who died this year, Denis McLean, Deputy High Commissioner for New Zealand in London, Secretary of Defence, and Ambassador to Washington in complex times.

2011 has been, I think, a year of great lessons in leadership. The Arab Spring has reminded us that leaders who wish to conserve must in fact reform, and that to some extent their fate has been in their own hands; and it shows us again the power of people whose ideas of freedom are encouraged through modern media, and who can now organise through social media. The News Corporation phone hacking scandal has reminded us that leaders set the tone for what happens in an organisation, and that the culture created or condoned by leaders will shape what people in an organisation or community will believe is acceptable. Events in the United States – from the shootings in Arizona that nearly killed Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, to the avoidable and self-destructive crisis of the debt ceiling – show (amongst other things) how much damage rancour and the encouragement of ill-will can do. Responses to disasters – from the earthquakes in Christchurch to those in Japan, to the floods in my native Queensland, to the famine in East Africa, and many more – show the need for leadership in the face of disasters, natural and man-made. All these events have shown the difference that good or bad leadership can make, the challenges we face that require leaders, the possibility of leadership from people in all walks of life including active citizens who hold no formal office, and some of the constraints under which leaders operate.

The need for leadership to confront global, or at least international, challenges is daily brought into sharp relief - the need to respond effectively to environmental issues, including those related to climate change, population growth, water, energy and other resource security; to respond effectively to economic crises, including the aftermath and risk of recurrence of the global financial crisis, the continuing recession or risk of double-dip in many countries, the successive crises of the Eurozone, and more; to respond to security issues, including terrorism, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the need for post-war reconstruction in many places, the complexities of humanitarian intervention, such as in Libya but not in Syria; and much more. And all this while the global distribution of power, economic and political, has seemed to be shifting rapidly, increasing the need for, but complicating the process of, reform of what we might loosely call global governance. The need for global solutions to many global issues has been evident, but the means of getting national, let alone global, solutions to them has seemed as elusive as ever, and the forces leading countries to be even more self-absorbed islands unto themselves have seemed stronger than for some time.

There are many definitions of leadership, but my own favourite is that leadership is the ability to get a community of people or an organisation to deal effectively with their real issues. A world that feels at times like white-water rapids cries out for leadership, leadership that is attuned to the real issues of our age, and that is effective in achieving outcomes. We need exemplary leadership in all walks of life, though my remarks this evening may seem to focus on leadership in public office.

As I have suggested, leaders today operate in a world that is marked by global forces – challenges that are international, and contexts for their solution that are international – and

in a world of rapid change. One of the great drivers of this change is rapid development in information and communication technology. This gives leaders new ways of communicating quickly and widely, and new 24/7 demands and intrusions on them. It gives publics more information more quickly, and better capacity to organise themselves to question and challenge leaders. The fact that sources of information and opinion have become more diverse perhaps paradoxically allows people to live more in a world – of Fox versus CNN - where they obtain only the opinions they like - thus promoting division, not consensus, in society. The growth of the internet, email, and social media has contributed to undermining hierarchies in many places and organisations, and so contributed to the process by which leadership has become in many contexts even more than it has always been, a matter of consultation, consensus-building, and influencing other participants rather than just a matter of leaders deciding and instructing those they supposedly 'lead'. This has contributed to increasing the importance of what Joseph Nye has called 'soft power', and reduced, in some circumstances, the effectiveness of 'hard power'. It has highlighted the fact that leadership can be exercised in a diversity of ways: the dissidents who conjure up a regime-threatening demonstration through Twitter or Facebook may be exercising leadership as much as, perhaps more than, the president who contemplates using force against his own people.

The fact that leadership can be evident in many diverse ways presents both challenge and opportunity to those of us whose own roles are to provide educational leadership in identifying in young people what Cecil Rhodes called 'instincts to lead', and in helping to develop that leadership capacity and encouraging it to be applied to the great challenges that face individual institutions and countries, and the world as a whole. One aspect is recognising that leadership can be exercised differently by different people, including that there may be gender differences in leadership style, and not applying outdated stereotypes to what we recognise as leadership or to how we think that it is best exercised or developed. The works of Amanda Sinclair² and Nan Keohane³, including the recent study of women's undergraduate leadership at Princeton⁴, remind us of this.

What are the qualities needed for leadership in the 21st century? Many are the same as ever; the flavour or importance of some has changed greatly. They include:

- Clarity about the key purposes one is trying to achieve, and propensity always to refocus on core objectives, or ultimate purposes
- The vision to see a better way, even a better world
- The ability to identify the potential for improvement in any situation, and the determination to turn problems into opportunities for transformation
- The ability to think clearly and creatively

² E.g. Amanda Sinclair, *Doing leadership differently*, Melbourne University Press, 1998 & 2005.

³ Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking about leadership*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

⁴ See <http://www.princeton.edu/reports/2011/leadership/> (accessed 9 August 2011)

- Idealism about objectives, and realism about the context in which they are pursued and the means by which they must be pursued
- The intellectual and broader personal flexibility or adaptability to respond to new and ever-changing questions or issues
- The ability to understand the global or international nature of so many issues
- The intellectual breadth and skills, in confronting issues that do not respect established disciplinary or other boundaries, to draw insights from different disciplines, and from people of different backgrounds
- The ability to work across boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, culture, and faith, to find solutions to shared challenges
- The ability and the inclination to communicate clearly, including creating persuasive, even inspiring, narratives of what is happening and why
- The ability to engage others in seeking, finding and implementing solutions
- The ability to recognise which style of leadership is appropriate when – when consultation is the key, as against when leadership must be from the front
- Emotional intelligence, both understanding and mastering oneself, and understanding others and being able to work effectively with them, in all their – and our – diverse human frailty and complexity
- Organisational skills, including the skills to organise information flows
- Remorseless focus on execution – on getting the job done, efficiently and effectively
- A sense of service, and a commitment to promoting the public, the common, good and not simply private interest
- What we might call ‘centredness’ - character that is marked by integrity, by courage, by humility and not by narcissism, by humanity and compassion, and by commitment to well-considered principles or values, with determination to do the right thing as best one can judge it, and not to pursue popularity for its own sake
- A willingness to take risks, and to risk great and conspicuous failure, not caring too much what others think of you
- Wise judgement, including the political skills needed to navigate through the threatening shoals of leadership,
- The ability to find mental space for reflection away from the incessant demands for quick action, and addiction to our Blackberries, and
- The determination to ‘see it through’, and the personal resilience to do this in the face of pressures, criticisms, and opposition – the resilience to pick yourself up in the face of defeat or failure, and get back on the job.

If you wanted to read more about this long list of leadership attributes, I recommend such books as Joe Nye's *The Powers to Lead*⁵, Heifetz and Linsky's *Leadership on the Line*⁶, Jim Collins's *Good to Great*⁷, and Nan Keohane's *Thinking about Leadership*⁸.

It is sometimes suggested that leadership capacity is innate, and cannot be taught – implying that it is an outcome of nature that cannot be nurtured to any significant extent. No doubt some is genetic: at least some of our intellectual capacity is a product of our genes. But if intellectual capacity cannot be nurtured, why on earth do we believe in education at all? Most, if not all, of the attributes I have mentioned are influenced by our environment, experiences, and education, not only by our genes, and can be significantly shaped by shaping that environment, experience, and education. Important lessons can be learnt by people with innate leadership ability, including through reflecting on their experiences and by observing or reading about or otherwise learning about the experiences of others. Sometimes those who do not appear blessed with leadership capacity can emerge as significant leaders. It is often said that one of the greatest tools for learning about leadership is reading the biographies of effective leaders. It is also often said that many of the world's greatest leaders have benefited from a period in the wilderness, of defeat or failure or struggle against adversity that preceded their finest hour. Think of Churchill and his wilderness years, Roosevelt and polio, de Gaulle out of power for a dozen lonely years awaiting the call, Nelson Mandela in prison for 27 years. In Australia, the two longest-serving Prime Ministers were both removed from the leadership of their parties after early failure, only to return after long reflection to sustained political success. All these leaders have learnt from experience, undoubtedly with the aid of comment, not infrequently critical and hostile, from others.

Oxford has a proud and unparalleled history of its graduates assuming leadership positions. Twenty-six British Prime Ministers, over a third of the current British cabinet, leaders in the British opposition, Presidents and Prime Ministers of many countries (not yet, alas, New Zealand) have been Oxonians. And there have been Oxonians in leadership in business, academia, the professions, the public service, international organisations, NGOs and advocacy, churches and other centres of faith, the media, and much more. Is this all by chance? Is it all because Oxford is a selective institution that chooses public-minded people of talent, from whom leaders are most likely to emerge? While selection is important, it is only part of the story. Oxford's academic programmes and its distinctive teaching methods encourage critical thinking and clear communication. They demand the ability to respond to the unexpected (sometimes very unexpected) and demanding questions and comments of tutors and supervisors. Some of Oxford's courses promote academic specialisation, while others promote breadth; some of the new offerings, such as the Masters of Public Policy

⁵ Joseph S. Nye, *The Powers to Lead*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz & Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the line*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

⁷ Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, HarperCollins, 2001.

⁸ Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking about leadership*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

being developed in the Blavatnik School of Government, will explicitly seek to develop leaders for tasks that demand breadth and the ability to draw on the specialist expertise of others as well as of oneself. The life of Oxford's colleges is necessarily broadening, with students of different disciplines living, eating, talking, partying, and engaging in diverse extra-curricular activities together. They are environments that encourage the conversations that shape thought, values, and character. They are environments that provide great practical opportunities for developing both leadership and teamwork. Oxford is a place where the tradition of leadership encourages young people to believe that they can do it too. And Oxford is a remarkably *international* university – perhaps the most genuinely and deeply international of all the world's major universities.

It is an important historical fact that the internationalisation of Oxford, and indeed the internationalisation of higher education around the world, has been greatly encouraged by the Rhodes Scholarships - the first great international scholarship programme in the world, and one that has inspired many others, including – for example – the great American programme that bears the name of the Rhodes Scholar who initiated it, Senator J. William Fulbright. It is also an important historical fact that the Rhodes Scholarships have, year after year for well over a century, brought to Oxford exceptional young people with an action-oriented focus on public issues. Their presence has necessarily helped to shape the character of Oxford. Many of them have stayed in Oxford, and three have become Vice-Chancellor of Oxford.

The Rhodes Scholarship explicitly aims at nurturing 'leaders for the world's future'. How? We seek to do this in many ways.

First, the Rhodes Scholarship stands for certain values or ideals – of all-round excellence, of service in the public good, and of promoting international understanding and indeed peace through 'educational relations' between countries. The Rhodes ideal is one of excellence in intellect, character, leadership, and commitment to service. These are the values we declare, and the criteria on which Rhodes Scholars are chosen. The Rhodes Scholarship recognises and encourages desirable breadth, as well as appropriate specialisation; takes students to Oxford precisely because of the benefits of its collegiate educational environment; and is closely aligned to the basic philosophy of liberal education.

Like other students coming from overseas to Oxford, Rhodes Scholars chosen on the criteria I have mentioned – of intellect, character, leadership, and service – obtain the benefits of international study and an Oxford education, not least the exposure to the wider world, learning to adjust to the unfamiliar, and gradually learning how to perform confidently and well on this wider stage. Rhodes Scholars enter into a tradition in which it is seen both as possible and as one's responsibility to be in some way a leader who promotes the public good. There are, of course, many ways to do this – in the private and so-called social sectors as well as in the public – and the Rhodes Scholarship is not prescriptive about the ways that Scholars should do this. While encouraging academic excellence – and the academic results of Rhodes Scholars today are extremely good – we encourage Rhodes Scholars to participate actively in their colleges and departments and in university activities, and this they do – from college and university sport to debating and drama and many other activities

besides, to MCR leadership roles around the University, to Junior Deans in many colleges, and more. Many of them also gain much from vacation travel in many countries.

Just as Rhodes Scholars, like other Oxford students, get to know fellow students of many countries in their colleges or departments, we at Rhodes House provide many opportunities for them to get to know Rhodes Scholars from other of the 14 different countries or regions around the world from which Rhodes Scholars come. We do this through social activities and through speaker events of various kinds which focus attention on world issues, and on life skills, including leadership, and career choices. Over the last year, for example, we have had – just to choose some interesting African examples – talks at Rhodes House by George Bizos SC, who for over half a century has been Nelson Mandela’s lawyer; the man who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Mr Mandela, F W de Klerk, speaking on leadership in South Africa’s transition; Mo Ibrahim, the Sudanese-born telecoms entrepreneur who has created the Ibrahim Prize to reward excellent leadership and good governance in Africa; and Elias Chipimo, Jr, a Rhodes Scholar who is running for President of Zambia, and who stresses the importance of developing leadership capacity at all levels for Africa’s future. Rhodes Scholars have also had opportunities to meet the Oxford-educated former President of Botswana, winner of the Ibrahim Prize, and Rhodes Trustee, Festus Mogae.

Through one-on-one mentoring meetings, email ‘updates’ from the Warden, and – for example - books on leadership in the Scholars’ common room at Rhodes House, Rhodes Scholars are encouraged to reflect on their own passions and aptitudes, and what best use of their talents will give them a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, and to reflect on the development of leadership, including on the qualities of character that it requires, and on the development of personal resilience.

Rhodes Scholars enter into a community which, like the broader Oxonian community, spans the generations. At the urging of current Rhodes Scholars, we are not only working to create more opportunities for Rhodes alumni to connect with each other across generations and countries, and to connect on issues they share interest in; but we are also working to create more opportunities for current Rhodes Scholars to connect more with our alumni, from whom they know they have much to learn, including about the responsibility, opportunity, challenge, and pitfalls of leadership in diverse fields and places. Having mentors and coaches can be hugely valuable: in the Rhodes community we create opportunities for such relationships to develop organically, as they often do, but do not seek any *formal* programme of mentoring.

As we all know, the benefits of mixing in Oxford with students of other countries are enormous. When in 1901, Cecil Rhodes provided for Rhodes Scholarships for Germany, in addition to those he had already provided for from the United States and much of the then British Empire, he said, and I quote: ‘The object is that an understanding between the three great powers will render war impossible and educational relations make the strongest tie’. Today, in sustained consultation in the Rhodes community, we have been asking – how should we think about this today? From what countries should Rhodes Scholars come in the 21st century? I am cautiously optimistic that, in time, this will (for example) lead to Rhodes Scholars from China, and from other countries, including several in Africa, not currently served by Rhodes Scholarships – at the same time as we work hard to raise the funds

needed to fund the Rhodes Scholarships we currently offer, including three each year here in New Zealand. By doing this, we can better develop a globally-connected network of exceptional young people who will become leaders in diverse fields in their various countries, better able to take on the problems of this century of hope and challenge.

Many of the challenges of leadership are great. Leadership in *public* office is generally badly paid by comparison with private sector leadership, all too rancorous, facing endless media and other criticism and intrusion, and remorseless in its public demands, which seem hard to reconcile with private life. Many people of civic commitment and idealism are deterred from pursuing public careers. But, of course, remorseless demands are a fact of life for leaders in perhaps all fields and sectors. In a world of constant change, there is little or no time that is steady state, no time of settlement or consolidation. The physical and emotional demands and stress on executives are great - from constant change, constant availability, global reach, and the need to manage ambiguity and anxiety, their own and others. The risks of burnout are also great. Governance bodies that should support their executives seem unable to identify effective ways of doing so. Not least, they must learn to do so by taking the long view, and not succumbing to short-termism, demanding apparent short-term successes that are not the best way to achieve the long-term objective. The delegation that should enable leaders to cope is possible for some, and seemingly impossible for others. Learning to delegate and to manage others, to manage oneself to ensure self-preservation and renewal, to manage stress, to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, and to manage change are all important skills for leaders to learn. One area for political leaders is how simultaneously to ride the bucking bronco of the 24/7 media cycle, and to transcend it, so that it does not overwhelm them.

It may be that the very scale of the challenges facing leaders today – issues which include the future of the planet! – discourages bright and civic-minded people from seeking leadership in public life. Yet it is the very scale of the challenges that makes it all the more important that good people be willing to face them. One of the roles for educational leaders, certainly one of the roles of those of us responsible for the Rhodes Scholarships, is to encourage young people who can make a difference to do what they can to do so, now and in the future.

Oxford has made an outstanding contribution to developing leaders for many countries in the past. I am confident that it will do so in the future, and your support will help it do so. New Zealand's links with Oxford are an important part of this legacy, and Oxford and New Zealand must play important roles in each other's futures.

Tonight, as the All Blacks take on the Wallabies – or is the other way around? – we might think again of that 19th century poem, *Invictus*, with its reference to 'my unconquerable soul', and the verse that says:

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

Whether 'bloody' or not, may 'unbowed' be true tonight of the All Blacks, and of the Wallabies, and of the Oxford we all love, which helped to make us who we are, and which can do so much for future generations.