

**‘Instincts to lead’:
leadership for Africa’s and the world’s future**

Welcome address by Dr Donald Markwell,
Warden of Rhodes House, Oxford,
for the Archbishop Tutu Leadership Programme,
Rhodes House, 1 September 2010

It is a great pleasure for me as Warden to welcome you to Rhodes House, the home of Scholarships which, like the Archbishop Tutu Leadership Programme, aim to nurture leaders for the future – leaders for Africa’s future, and leaders for the world’s future.

In doing this, I am, on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor, warmly welcoming you to the University of Oxford – a university which has done its fair share of nurturing leaders for so many countries around the world, including in Africa, as well as, for example, 26 British prime ministers and over a third of the current British cabinet. Amongst the African leaders nurtured by Oxford, I think, to give just one example, of Festus Mogae, for a decade president of Botswana, one of only two recipients of the Mo Ibrahim award for African leaders who govern well and then retire, honorary fellow of Oxford’s University College, and someone who himself has worked in this room as a Trustee of the Rhodes Trust since earlier this year.

The Rhodes Scholarships, like the Archbishop Tutu Leadership Programme, have their origins in Africa, and aim to contribute, not least, to the future of Africa as well as to the wider world. It is not surprising, I think, that development of the African Leadership Institute owes so much to the work of three African Rhodes Scholars, Peter Wilson, Michael Stone, and the late Norman Swanepoel – ‘Swanie’ - to whose memory it is fitting that we pay tribute today.

It is also fitting that we should meet in the Beit Room, named for Rhodes’s business partner and Trustee, Alfred Beit, himself an enduring benefactor of educational opportunities for Africans through the Beit Trust. It is in this room that, at the Oxford launch of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation several years ago, Nelson Mandela was photographed sitting in a chair carved with Cecil Rhodes’s initials, seated here beside this white marble bust of Alfred Beit. That symbolic photograph hangs in this building, just around the corner in the Milner Hall – named for another figure significant in the history of southern Africa and of the Rhodes Trust – and it hangs also in the Mandela Rhodes Building in Cape Town, which I visited just last week, and which is the home of the Mandela Rhodes Scholarships, another programme working hard and well to promote exceptional leadership for Africa.

It is hardly possible to visit Africa, as I have just done - visiting Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa over the last two weeks, and following a trip last November to Kenya – without being struck by the fact that the quality of leadership is literally a matter of life and death for millions of people, whether from disease such as HIV/AIDS, or from civil conflict, even genocide, or from political oppression, or from malnutrition and starvation. The difference

between the impact of high-quality leadership and the impact of low-grade leadership is immense, and the contrast of leadership quality between places and between times is stark. We see this in, for example, the impact of leadership on the chances of fragmented societies somehow over time being made whole, on the prospects for achieving or sustaining democracy with a free media and the rule of law, on the likelihood of corruption and even kleptocracy, on the prospects for private or public sector action to alleviate poverty and gross inequality, including through creating a climate favourable to business and other private action that will help raise living standards, and more. As you know better than I do, all these are live issues in many African countries, including – avoidably – in South Africa today.

While the examples I have given seem to relate especially to political leadership, it is important to stress that the world needs, Africa needs, exemplary leaders in all walks of life: purposeful leadership in service to the public good is possible, indeed needed, in all sections of a society, polity, and economy. Archbishop Tutu is himself an example of this, leading in and from the Church with great social impact. One question for many African countries is what constructive role Church leaders will play in securing the future.

We like to say that the Rhodes Scholarships, aiming to nurture ‘leaders for the world’s future’, seek young people of exceptional intellect, character, capacity for leadership, and commitment to service. In his will, setting out the criteria for selection for his scholarships, Cecil Rhodes said that he wanted young people who exhibited ‘moral force of character’ and ‘instincts to lead’, and who would come ‘to esteem the performance of public duties as [their] highest aim’. What are ‘instincts to lead’? How do we recognise them? How do we nurture and develop them in others, and in ourselves?

What, indeed, is leadership? Of the many definitions available, I like especially the one that regards leadership as inspiring, challenging, pushing, perhaps even compelling, a community of people or an organization to deal effectively with their real issues.

If leadership is about dealing effectively with a community’s real issues, then it follows that leadership is not simply about the holding of office – being elected or chosen to be president of this, or chair of that – though holding office can be a necessary but not sufficient condition for exercising some forms of leadership, and election or selection by others can be a pointer to capacity for leadership. Leadership is more than holding a position; it is about being an agent for real improvement. Alas, too many holders of office are not agents for real improvement, not exercisers of what I think truly qualifies as leadership.

Conversely, leadership can be exercised by people who do not hold formal office – for example, the asker of the hard questions, the gadfly, the proposer of ways forward, the pourer of oil on troubled waters (if one can use this image today, given BP’s troubles in the Gulf of Mexico), the active citizen, the civil dissenter who refuses to comply with oppression, the whistle-blower: the person who, from any position or none, acts as an agent or catalyst of positive action in dealing with the issues that matter most. In saying this, I cannot help but think of the work of a Nigerian Rhodes Scholar, Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, whose life was tragically cut short last year by a car accident in Kenya, and whose book of

African 'postcards', written from the perspective of the pan-African activist he was and published posthumously under the title *Speaking Truth to Power*, was launched here at Rhodes House just weeks ago. Speaking truth to power is a form of leadership. And I think also of Bram Fischer, who sacrificed his privileged Afrikaner life to defend Nelson Mandela and others on trial for their lives, and who himself died not long after his own release from prison under the apartheid regime, and who is remembered in Oxford with an annual memorial lecture. This lecture will be given in 2011 by another of Nelson Mandela's lawyers, Advocate George Bizos, and in 2012 by Justice Edwin Cameron of the Constitutional Court of South Africa.

It is widely believed that the nature of leadership has changed over recent decades. One person who has publicly espoused this view is, like you, a sometime visitor to Rhodes House, whose photograph, like Nelson Mandela's, hangs here: Her Majesty the Queen. In early July, the Queen spoke at the United Nations in New York for the first time, she thought she recalled, since 1957.¹ She said that, since then, she had 'travelled widely and met many leaders ... from around the world'. She continued:

I have also witnessed great change, much of it for the better, particularly in science and technology, and in social attitudes. Remarkably, many of these sweeping advances have come about not because of governments, committee resolutions, or central directives – although all these have played a part – but instead because millions of people around the world have wanted them.

Referring further to what she called 'these subtle yet significant changes in people's approach to leadership and power', the Queen said:

It has perhaps always been the case that the waging of peace is the hardest form of leadership of all. I know of no single formula for success, but over the years I have observed that some attributes of leadership are universal, and are often about finding ways of encouraging people to combine their efforts, their talents, their insights, their enthusiasm and their inspiration, to work together.

In saying this, it seems to me that the Queen – drawing on her own extraordinary vantage point for the observation of leadership - was very much agreeing with those analysts of leadership who say that, by comparison with decades ago, it is today in many (though certainly not all) contexts more about influencing and less about instructing others to act as you wish them to act; more about 'soft power' and less about 'hard power'; more than before about consultation, consensus-building, communication, and co-operation; and more about active listening as well as active signal-sending. We can all readily think of exceptions and qualifications to this; and yet there is a real point.

¹ The Queen's speech at the United Nation General Assembly, New York, on 6 July 2010 may be found at, e.g., <http://ukun.fco.gov.uk/en/news/?view=News&id=22520836>

The scholar of leadership and power, Joseph Nye – also an Oxonian and Rhodes Scholar - has said that what he calls the 'big man' view of leadership, so powerful in earlier generations, is increasingly out-dated in the information age, in which networks replace hierarchies, and it is important to think of leaders being, in his words, 'in the centre of a circle rather than at the top of a mountain'.²

It is, Nye has argued, increasingly important for leaders to exercise 'soft power' - the exercise of attraction - rather than the giving of orders. This may be especially so given the challenge and opportunity of leading inclusively in culturally diverse environments today, when perhaps more than ever before it is recognised that the contributions of women and men of all backgrounds need to be engaged for optimal or even sustainable solutions to problems.

If there is truth in all of this, it has important implications for how each of us should exercise leadership ourselves, and how we might identify and encourage 'instincts to lead' in others.

There is an important gender aspect to this. Joe Nye believes that women are, in general, intuitively better at exercising 'soft power' than men. Whether that is true or not, it is widely agreed that, in general, women exercise leadership differently from men, and that those whose task it is to identify and nurture leadership should be open to the gender differences in leadership styles, as well as to other diverse forms of leadership – as Amanda Sinclair has put it, of 'doing leadership differently'. You hardly need me to remind you how important the pursuit of gender equality is for the future of Africa; Nick Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn have indeed described it as the great moral challenge of this century as well as a key to development and much more.³

In the days (now, happily for them, long gone) when I used to inflict speeches on audiences of school children and undergraduates, I thought it important to stress that leadership, for example student leadership, though of course it needs very much to take account of the views of others, is not about the pursuit of popularity, and that it is far better to do what you believe to be right and to seek to persuade others to share your view, even at the risk of unpopularity, than to engage in the ultimately self-defeating pursuit of popularity, which will often result only in being bought into contempt. Today, when my job includes inflicting speeches on postgraduate students and distinguished mid-career professionals such as you, I prefer to say that it is important that leadership be based on values, on character, on integrity, on principles, on the selfless pursuit of the public good and not the selfish striving for private gain. Again, it is hardly possible to visit many countries in Africa today without being struck by the importance of this – the blessing of the presence of such leadership and the calamity of its absence; and it is hard to imagine that leaders inspired, as I am sure we all are, by the extraordinary example of Cape Town's Archbishop Tutu would not seek to base their leadership – your leadership - on ethics and integrity. Please forgive me from again quoting an earlier Capetonian, Cecil Rhodes, who sought Scholars who, in his words,

² Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *The Powers to Lead*, Oxford University Press, 2008. See also <http://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/page/engaged-intellectual-joseph-nye-speaks-on-leadership-in-the-21st-century>

³ Nicholas D Kristof & Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turing Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2009.

exhibited qualities of 'truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness, and fellowship'.

Yet in all this there are paradoxes and pitfalls to watch out for. How do we combine these qualities of unselfishness with the ambition and drive necessary for most effective leadership? One form of answer to that is, of course, what Jim Collins, author of such books as *Built to Last*, *Good to Great*, and *How the Mighty Fall*, calls 'level 5 leadership'⁴ – the combination of personal humility with resolute professional focus and will – and what others have called the combining of *meaning* in our work, the pursuit of noble goals which motivate us and others, with remorseless discipline in their execution. How do we encourage people, such as (I suspect) many in this room, who have only ever really known success in their activities to be willing to run the risk of failure, which willingness to run, even seek, risk is essential to real leadership?

Archbishop Tutu is well familiar with the biblical injunction to be as 'wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove'. The wisdom of a serpent is what we might call political skill; and political skills are ordinarily essential to the effective exercise of leadership. I commend to you a superb book on this, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky's *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*⁵. It shows us that because leadership is about change, it is bound to provoke resistance from those who fear the risks of change. Avoiding or overcoming such resistance requires political skills of a high order, as well as courage.

In his book *The Powers to Lead*, Joe Nye, whom I mentioned earlier, presents Machiavellian political skills as one of the six critical skills needed for leaders. He presents these skills as what he calls the 'soft power' skills of emotional intelligence, vision, and communication; the 'hard power' skills of organisation (including organising information flows well), and the Machiavellian political skills I have just mentioned; and the 'smart power' skill of 'contextual intelligence', the ability intuitively to identify a strategy that will work in the context. The form of leadership most likely to be effective depends highly on the context, Professor Nye argues, and part of the skill is in identifying the best forms for the context and issues faced. It is not for nothing that Richard Stengel in *Mandela's Way: Lessons on Life* entitles one chapter 'Lead from the Front' and the next chapter 'Lead from the Back'.⁶

However the tactics may vary, at the heart of the most effective leadership, I believe, is clear focus on the core purposes a leader wishes to achieve, and approaching problems with a view to transforming them from negatives to the greatest positive that is possible. In leadership, it is crucial continually to ask such questions as: what are we fundamentally trying to achieve? What are the key elements of our strategy toward that goal? What are the most significant obstacles, and how shall we deal with them? What are the most important sources of support, and how can we deploy them to greatest effect? Above all, we need continually to sharpen our focus on, and refresh our thinking about, what our fundamental goals are, and how everything we do moves us closer to those goals. We need to see opportunity where others see only problems; to identify the potential for something

⁴ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*, Random House Business Books, 2001, ch. 2.

⁵ Harvard Business Press, 2002.

⁶ Richard Stengel, *Mandela's Way: Lessons on Life*, Virgin Books, 2010.

wholly new or better, and to make the most of that potential. We need to step back from the immediate details and take in the whole landscape in order to understand the environment in which we are operating, and what the big strategic needs and opportunities are.⁷

Yet there is no escaping the fact that such creative leadership is hard, often thankless and lonely, unavoidably conflictual, and frequently even overwhelming. It can be helped by having mentors and coaches to turn to for disinterested discussion and even advice, as well as having other refuges from the storm – perhaps in music, exercise, religion, or meditation. It requires some focus on self-preservation as a person, and on refreshing yourself – intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It requires the development of positive psychology while being honest, at least with yourself and in supportive contexts with others, about your own insecurities. It requires a commitment to continual learning and renewal, such as you have reflected in your participation in this leadership programme; on the strategic use of time; and on stepping outside the immediacy and busy-ness of the day-to-day to focus afresh on long-term goals and the things that matter most for your organisation and in your own life. It requires that we discipline ourselves, perhaps remembering those lines of poetry again made famous in a recent movie, *Invictus*:

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

It can be helpful in all this to have likeminded people with whom you can talk candidly, and I hope that you will find staying involved with the African Leadership Institute and the alumni community of the Archbishop Tutu Leadership Programme will help you in this.

Much can be learnt about leadership from the examples – the successes and failures - of significant leaders. I am struck and delighted by fact that some of the most important writing about Nelson Mandela has been done by Oxonians and indeed by Rhodes Scholars: for example, Richard Stengel, whom I have already mentioned, who collaborated with Madiba on *Long Walk to Freedom*, has more recently published *Mandela's Way*, which has much to teach us about leadership; Oxford's Professor Elleke Boehmer has published her own analysis of Mr Mandela⁸; and Shaun Johnson, now director of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, is the author, amongst much else, of *Strange Days Indeed*, which Madiba has described as 'a unique, vivid, eyewitness diary of the rebirth of a country' from apartheid to democracy.⁹

When Nelson Mandela came to Rhodes House, and was photographed in this room, he also signed our visitors' book. So too have many other leaders of note – Mahatma Ghandi, the Dalai Lama, Margaret Thatcher, Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton, and many more. In welcoming you to Oxford and to Rhodes House this afternoon, may I ask that, at an appropriate time later today, you join them in our visitors' book, signing the page that will

⁷ See also D Markwell, 'The challenge of creative leadership' (book review), *Pacifica*, June 2007.

⁸ Elleke Boehmer, *Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁹ Shaun Johnson, *Strange Days Indeed: South Africa from Insurrection to Post-Election*, Bantam Books, 1994, p. 1.

record for posterity your presence here as a participant in this Archbishop Tutu Leadership Programme?

You could not be more welcome, and I wish you well for the discussions to come, and for your contribution today and over the years ahead to meeting Africa's, and the world's, urgent and sustained need for excellent and ethical leadership. Your continent needs you!

The warmest of welcomes, and the best of luck.