

## Speech Night 2011

Deputy Lord Mayor, Lord Hunt, Lady Hunt, Mr Chairman, Governors, Foundation Members, Honoured Guests, Parents, Colleagues, Former Pupils and Pupils,

It must be acknowledged that an occasion such as this fills many pupils with anticipatory boredom. For them, it is the annual torture of listening to various adults, including the Principal whom they hear quite often, describe the wonders of their school.

So I know my enthusiasm for this evening is not shared by all. Indeed I asked a pupil recently if he was looking forward to Speech Night. He shall remain nameless but there was a look of shock and horror in his eyes. He understood clearly that an honest answer would hurt my feelings. I was reminded of the withering verdict of PG Woodehouse when asked about a play he had just seen: "Please understand, Sir, I saw the play in unfortunate circumstances, the curtain was up."

But I can promise this young man something good. Lord Hunt is a wonderful speaker and noted for his concision. His experience of Liverpool College was not without hilarity, and perhaps he will share some of this with us. It is an honour to be able to welcome him on this occasion. For years, he has been supportive of his old school, as a Foundation Member, as president and patron of the OL Society, and as a host of OL functions in London. I cannot say we knew he would be the Chair of the Press Complaints Commission with an interview on the front page of the Guardian website on the Monday before Speech Night when we invited him, but then again neither did he know, but it is wonderful that his public service which has included stints as an MP and cabinet minister will continue in this new role. Lord Hunt, we thank you for agreeing to be with us today and we especially welcome Lord Hunt's Wife Paddy, who has honoured us by her attendance.

In preparing for this speech, I was struck by how easy it is to state the obvious, to boast of our achievements, to list accomplishments. Last year certainly gives ample scope for such an approach. IB results placed the school as high as 25th among independent schools in the 2010 tables in the country, the average UCAS score per pupil was 398 points equivalent total A\*A\*A, an absolute record. GCSE results were once again very good with 45% of all grades at A\* or A, with solid added value. The school completed more refurbishments, a new dining room, a new biology building, refurbishments to the Pre-Prep and Prep. We have now invested more than 2 million pounds in the last three years in our facilities, helped by the 1840 Foundation and the support of our friends. We recruited a fantastic Year 7 and retained all but one of our Sixth Form Scholarship winners for study in the Sixth Form. Our Sixth Formers took a course in philosophy at the University. Mr Lock led the introduction and development of a Sixth Form lecture programme. We improved, with the help of then Ms Dolowitz now Mrs Harvey our careers guidance and provision, even our rugby improved with the arrival of a new coach. We expanded the number of subjects studied in Year 9, and introduced a course of philosophy called the arête project. Our chaplains created a course for Year 11. We extended our cooperation with the university by making arrangements for gifted and talented classes in ancient history, and piloting a scheme for personal education using interns from the philosophy department at the University. Our boarding house began last year and has already grown from 6 pupils in the beginning to 18 today under the excellent leadership and care of Mrs Kendall. Our boarders hail from 9 different countries. They live and study together, imbibing the spirit of our school and

contributing an international flavour to our school. Our pupils once again travelled the world, pursuing D of E awards, CCF camps and expeditions, and, in one of my favourite examples of our spirit, our Year 9s walked through the Atlas Mountains and broke bread with Berbers in remote villages and the hills. We introduced a new qualification: the Extended Project Qualification, the EPQ, the results of which have surprised and pleased even the cynical among us with the clear evidence of our pupils thirst for knowledge and independence of spirit. We won a national trophy in football, our first national trophy ever. Our hockey players continue to dominate the city championships. We staged a wonderful production of Oklahoma, while winning a multitude of medals in music and performing arts festivals. We put on a combined art festival which showed off our talents and creativity. Through the appointment of assistant heads for teaching and for extra-curriculars, we are focusing much more on the overall experience of our pupils and the ways in which we can inspire them. Our Parents' Association continued to raise funds for myriad projects while bringing our families together and providing opportunities for fun and enjoyment. We all owe the Association our thanks for their tireless efforts. Mr Othen wrote yet another Latin oration. The list goes on and it is a tribute to our extraordinary staff that this list seems to grow and grow, that there is an insatiable appetite to improve every aspect of the College experience. Mr Doran and Mr Ekenel's recent installation of a new IT network is an example of this dedication, but it extends to all areas of the school. Our maintenance team have worked tirelessly to build and refurbish many new spaces. Without them we could never have achieved our transformed campus. Mr Kerr, one of our lab technicians, has inspired pupils with his science club and with his tireless search for exciting educational opportunities at the University and beyond. Even this evening is the result of exceptional efforts from Ms Bamber and Mrs Wynne. It is the commitment of our staff which makes such achievements possible.

But when I made that list I was reminded of the Levi's advertisement which I have included in your programme. It is now much praised and discussed in seminars and books as the summit of the art of advertising. "If the world zigs, zag". All headmasters list achievements, and sadly many measure themselves and their schools by the length of these lists. The reason the Levi's add has become a work of art and is viewed as containing some transcendental truth is that it captures something beyond the sale of jeans, or the colour of sheep. It makes a very simple and powerful point: we live in a paradoxical age. Our freedom is great but the forces which compel toward conformity have never been more enormous or effective. Everyone does indeed wear Levis jeans, everyone does have a face book account, and yes, everyone does or has done the same GCSEs and seemingly everyone does apply to a very limited number of universities and a very limited number of courses, everyone more or less thinks and does the same thing, not only in school but everywhere. We feel instinctively that our much asserted freedom is in fact a mirage and that our possible selves, our future possibilities have already been absorbed in the monolith of self-imposed sameness.

So I have talked about the zig, the way we have focused on systematic, even systemic ways, to improve teaching, results, athletic performance, communications and pupil experience. Every school does that, although I feel we work harder at it than most. But the real wonder of a school is its zag, its ability to inspire and guide pupils to resist the conformity and mediocrity imposed by every system, even, I shudder to say, the school itself.

I will always remember a moment in my own life as a teacher when I saw something truly strange. Wendell was an enormous boy who played line-backer and was much admired for his skills and atavistic aggression as an American football player. The old boys inquired after

him constantly, concerned that any injury to this mountain of a boy, would harm the chances of the football team. One night, we all attended the game which drew thousands every Friday night and to our amazement Wendell stood in the middle of the pitch, clutching a microphone, and sang the national anthem in a soft and gentle tone and in a key usually reserved for a mezzo soprano. I turned to the man standing next to me, a local Arkansas farmer. "That is strange", I murmured. "Yes it is strange", the farmer said, "but then again have you ever seen green grass go into a brown cow and come out as white milk."

This Saturday I watched our 1st XV overwhelm Arnold school. To me the true marvel of this event was watching Ben Lewtas smash through some defenders in his role as flanker. Ben who is a fine mathematician and an absolute gentleman and a gentle man has always imagined himself as a rugby player, even when others did not, even when he himself might easily have despaired of his vision, but he dared to do what he wanted to do and there he was, hammering Arnold together with 14 teammates. Friday, I attended a music concert in the Palm House, there were many wonders there. Asha Ray and Lois Slaughter and Helen Teiman had the courage to perform songs, totally different, utterly personal, and therefore compelling. Cara Howard, fresh from our excellent prep school, had the courage to enter a national newspaper cartoonist competition. She finished runner up. Anyone who has ever conversed with Tom Martin or seen him on stage knows what Zag is. His most recent idea is to create a "Cambridge footlights" at Liverpool College. Daisy Watson loves to read books, and is a member of the Literacy quiz team, but I was equally amazed to see her running like a whippet around a 400 meter track or acting in front of a camera. Emma Lathar plays the drums, including a drum at our Remembrance Day service last Sunday, but she also designed an I Phone application to help doctors in third world clinical situations to prepare the exact safe dosage required. Julien Toh did not only go to Malawi, he has been on a crusade to do something about conditions there, raising money and awareness among his peers.

Ultimately, as Robert Frost lyrically expressed in the poem printed next to the Levi's add, education is about the road taken, and the road not taken. Our lives are journeys where our decisions and our courage lead to either the fulfilment of our true selves and possibilities or the slow death of our possible selves. A school must create the space and encouragement for these discoveries and decisions to happen. It must zig as well as zag, it must pride itself on teaching, on results, on academic, artistic, sporting and spiritual excellence but also on that invisible, silent, and most powerful achievement of its pupils: pursuing a standard of personal excellence and commitment, and having the confidence and the skill to start that very personal and exciting journey to become ourselves. We must sing like Wendell, Asha, Lois and Helen, and play rugby like Ben, and raise funds like Julien and run and read like Daisy. All of us here tonight, parents, pupils and especially teachers, make Liverpool College a school where we zig and zag, where we take the road less travelled, and where we focus remorselessly on the dignity of the individual's search for their best selves.

Lord Winston, a scientist, introduced me to Blake's painting of Newton measuring light. I think this painting provides a metaphor for our challenge better than any words of mine can, and as such I wanted to share it with you. It is depicted in your programme. Blake depicts Newton measuring and in some sense discovering light, mastering a mystery of nature itself. Newton is in bright light, he is intent, he is focused. But for Blake, Newton has obtained the knowledge of light but lost the beauty of colour. He no longer appreciates the colours of nature. As the Tate guide says: Blake was critical of reductive scientific thought. In this

picture, the straight lines and sharp angles of Newton's profile suggest that he cannot see beyond the rules of his compass. Behind him, the colourful, textured rock may be seen to represent the creative world, to which he is blind.

Newton is no longer able to integrate knowledge and wisdom, science and creativity. He has lost a human vision. Education cannot be reduced to measurements, to subjects, to marks, to qualifications, to syllabuses, to tests, however much governments, headmasters and inspectors try. Our consciousness emanates from about slightly more than 1 pound of grey material in our brains, powered only by the energy equivalent of 20 watts, a dim refrigerator light. Your computer requires a million times more energy to operate for each of its calculations. It all sounds simple enough, and indeed many educators and scientist believe it is simple and want it to be simple, but we are nevertheless, each of us, an utterly unfathomable mystery, capable of creativity and nobility, of knowledge, as well as wisdom. We are able to see the roads diverge in the wood, we are able to choose the one less travelled by. This vision of the integrated person, on a journey toward his or her true self, exploring every element of the curriculum and learning in a number of settings both in and out of the classroom, animated the founders of our school. It animates us today and inspires our excellence. It will guide our course in the future.