

IAN HUNTER FORSTER

Mr Chancellor,

You are no doubt familiar with the contemporary aphorism that managing academics is like trying to herd cats. Although less prone to scratching than *Felis domesticus*, *Homo academicus* otherwise resembles the cat in many respects: a tendency to leap to great heights at minimal provocation, a predilection for burying their discard under piles of litter, and a tendency to purr in a sustained manner when pampered. One thing neither species is noted for is discipline, though to be fair to cats some of them do learn to respond to simple commands. For the most part, therefore, a research-intensive university is managed by minimising provocation, not peeking too closely into other people's mess, and taking steps to ensure a reasonable amount of purring is underway at any one time. How different is the picture in the armed forces, in which *Homo militarus* will not jump unless acting under orders which favour such a drastic course of action; will keep everything spick-and-span; and will not display emotion even in the unlikely event that praise is administered.

Imagine then, the culture shock which must have been experienced by Air Commodore Ian Forster OBE, on leaving the Royal Air Force after thirty years of distinguished service to take up the post of Director of our Careers Advisory Service. Of course, as an alumnus of

University College, Durham, Ian was hardly venturing into enemy territory; after all, he'd previously been a Geography student, and everyone knows that students are far better at getting academics to do their bidding than are Heads of Schools or Deans, let alone Pro-Vice-Chancellors. Yet after reaching 'one star' commanding officer rank in Her Majesty's Armed Forces, it is hard to believe that Ian did not find the managerial climate of the university a little alien at first. Mercifully, with his RAF training, Ian was able to avoid giving any outward intimation of what he truly felt about the management culture of the University, and he took to his second career like a duck to water.

Culture of discipline aside, Ian's military experience had fitted him for subsequent university life particularly well, as he had worked almost exclusively in the education division of the RAF throughout his three decades of service. On leaving RAF College at Cranwell, Ian enjoyed a varied and fulfilling Service career in successive administrative roles, memorably serving in Singapore in the final days of British rule there. He attended Staff College in 1972 and was awarded an OBE by Her Majesty the Queen in 1976. Ian served as Deputy Director of Personnel and then Inspector of Recruiting for the RAF in the early 1980s, before moving on to become Coordinator of the RAF manifestation of the Armed Services Youth Training Scheme. Having reached the rank of Air Commodore, his final Services appointment was as Director of Training, in other words the head of education for the entire RAF.

Ian is a local lad and proud of it. He was born in Lanchester, in the beautiful Browney Valley of County Durham, and educated at the head of the same valley at Consett Grammar School. Lanchester was originally a civilian settlement beside a major roman military camp, but by the time Ian was born the town had become a pleasant centre of local commerce, marking the frontier along which the grime of the Durham Coalfield gave way to the bracing air of the Pennine foothills. Ian was well into bracing air, being an accomplished runner, at middle and long distances on the track, as well as cross-country. In his student days he was President of the Durham Colleges Athletic Union, and went on to develop great skill in hockey during his RAF career. Though by no means given to inappropriate histrionics, Ian also served with distinction as President of the RAF Theatrical Association.

Upon taking up his post in the Careers Service at Newcastle University, Ian instinctively convened an industrial advisory board, comprising the veritable captains of industry in the North East. This excellent example of engagement not only served the needs of our graduating students well, by ensuring all principal employers were aware of their capabilities; it also proved very popular with the captains of industry themselves, as a neutral forum where they could meet and discuss points of common interest.

Having noted Ian's flair for engaging with the business community, the Vice-Chancellor of the day, Professor Laurie Martin, asked Ian to

undertake a review of the then business management department – a task which had proved rather Sisyphean for several of Ian’s predecessors. Ian’s military training steeled him well for the task, and he set in train a series of reforms which eventually led to the successful launch of the present Business School, which is such a central element of the University’s strategy today.

As it was now clear that Ian had a great flair for fixing failing organisations, the Vice-Chancellor next asked him to review the university’s adult education division. Following a similar approach to the one he had successfully pioneered in the Careers Service, Ian used an engagement strategy to revitalise adult education, developing a new programme in management training for industry which won the backing of the NHS, Rolls Royce and other major employers in the region. Having reoriented the adult education programme, Ian stayed on as the Director of the then Centre for Continuing Education. He was particularly proud to occupy a desk which had previously been used by Garibaldi, when the latter had visited Joseph Cowen in April 1854.

By the time of Ian’s retirement at the turn of the new Millennium, he had become a national figure in the field of leadership and management. He remained highly active in this field after his formal retirement, serving as Chairman of the Management and Leadership Qualifications Forum until 2001, and as Chairman of both the National Examining Body for Supervision and Management and the

Institute of Leadership and Management until 2004. Ian also served as an advisor to the Public Services Diploma Development Partnership, and as a member of the Council and Executive Committee of City and Guilds.

Ian continues to serve the interests of the University and our wider community as Chair of the North of England Branch of the Newcastle University Alumni Association, and is currently Secretary of the Northumbrian Universities Military Education Committee, which is responsible for liaison between the five Vice-Chancellors in the region and the three University Service Units corresponding to the Navy, Army and Air Force. Ian plays a leading role in the University's annual Remembrance Day ceremony, as well as contributing to the success of many of our most prestigious public events.

Mr Chancellor, Air Commodore Ian Forster OBE has been a most effective servant of this University, both during his years of employment, and thereafter on a voluntary basis. He has never hesitated to go far beyond the strict call of duty where the interests of our institution could best be served by doing so. In recognition of his outstanding contribution to the success of our institution, I now ask you to bestow upon Ian Forster an Honorary Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger