

Mr Chancellor,

I would like to tell you and everyone here a little about the Honorable Bruce Babbitt because, if you are not from the United States of America, it may be a name that is unfamiliar.

It may not look like it right now, but Bruce Babbitt is from the Wild West.

This is not a normal start to an honorary degree citation but it is true and relevant. He also has a formal training in geophysics and in firefighting, he has been a lawyer, a civil rights activist and a senior politician who played a key role in changing thinking about environmental sustainability. Best of all, he is an alumnus of Newcastle University so, for the new graduates here today, that makes him one of you.

So, Bruce Babbitt, welcome back to Newcastle, you have been pretty busy since you were last here.

Born in 1938 he was brought up in Flagstaff Arizona, in an area surrounded by a landscape now designated and protected as national forest and a short distance from the Grand Canyon. He came from a family of early settlers, ranchers in the real Wild West at the end of the 19th century. That dramatic and beautiful landscape of his youth, and its people, both indigenous and incoming, has had an important and lasting impact.

After his first degree at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana he came to Newcastle in 1960 as a “Marshall Scholar”. This prestigious scheme honoured George C Marshall, the architect of the European post war

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recovery, and it brought the brightest and best American students to study in British universities. For Bruce it was an opportunity to undertake a Masters degree in geophysics.

Two years later, he returned to the States, politically active and on a quite different trajectory. He became deeply involved in the civil rights movements in the southern states in the 1960s, he was with Martin Luther King Junior at Selma in 1965, and saw a degree in law as an entry to where he wanted to be; making a difference to the things he cared about.

By 1975 he had taken law into law making and was elected as Attorney General for the State of Arizona. I don't know this for sure but I am guessing that what happened next he probably could not have foreseen. In March 1978 his political career jolted forwards and upwards when the Governor of Arizona died suddenly and, through a constitutional quirk, Bruce found himself catapulted into power as the successor.

As Governor, he set about making a difference, with the environment at the heart of his agenda. As an example, here in Newcastle we take the rain for granted, in fact, let's face it we don't like it much. In Arizona it is a very scarce commodity and water resources require active management. Amongst a wide range of achievements in back to back elected terms, overseeing a rational long term framework for managing water resources in a sustainable way was perhaps one of the most noteworthy. The Arizona Groundwater Management Act of 1980 is, I believe, still in place.

By the late 1980s Bruce Babbitt was an accomplished, if sometimes unconventional, politician. His stock was high and growing. It was so high that he entered the field for the Democratic nomination for the 1988

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presidential election itself. Although this was not to be, by 1992 he was right in the heart of federal government and in high office. He served two terms as Secretary of the Interior under President Clinton from 1993 to 2001.

The Secretary for the Interior is responsible for land and resources; water, mining, minerals, landscapes, national parks and wildlife. This makes it a living conflict zone. Beyond a very thick skin and considerable courage, it is almost impossible to imagine just what it takes to reconcile and progress environmental legislation in a world where the most powerful and wealthy of interest groups are lined up against you. But for Bruce, this was a defining opportunity. He was able to bring together his profound passion for the natural world from his youth, his training in science from where we are now, and the legal and political skills honed over a quarter of a century. Time after time he pushed through legislation to allow the landscape to be properly protected: the creation of the forest plan in the Pacific Northwest, restoration of the Florida Everglades, passage of the California Desert Protection Act, and legislation for the National Wildlife Refuge system. He is even credited with bringing the Grey Wolf back to Yellowstone.

Putting the landscape at the heart of conservation underpins his philosophy – without their landscapes, species are diminished and the reverse is equally true. In his book *Cities in the Wilderness: A New Vision of Land Use in America*, published in 2005, using his unique experience he sets out his framework and philosophy for national land use planning in the US, urging that we dispose of the assumption that “progress always follows the axe and the plough” and that existing law, used appropriately, can go a long way.

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This is a remarkable political career, and one where the achievements are tangible, visible and above all sustainable, but I would like to return to the Newcastle of 1960.

On the face of it, Newcastle seemed an unusual choice for a Marshall fellow, most of the Marshall scholars chose Oxford or Cambridge but, in a way that was probably a precursor for many of his future decisions, the young Bruce saw the world a little differently and bucked the trend. As a young bright American from the wilderness of Arizona walking the streets of industrial Newcastle he was out of his normal habitat and he reckons he was seen as “somewhat exotic”. He was attracted here because of the pioneering work of Professor Keith Runcorn in plate tectonics and geomagnetism. The two years of lab and field work were transformational for him. “Well”, you may say, “if it was that important why did he become a lawyer and then a lawmaker and not stick to being a scientist?”

But this would miss the point.

He realized that a career in the highly focused, specialized and sometimes isolated world of scientific research was not for him. It was not where he could make the maximum impact but, he had received a formal and intensive training in science which was to prove pivotal in his subsequent career.

The political world, whether in the UK or the US is pitifully short of people with a “proper” scientific training but for Bruce Babbitt, when combined with political will and skill, time and again it made a difference in resolving the apparently unresolvable. He is cited in dozens of cases of environmental law and has engaged in countless negotiations on climate change or environmental protection. The appliance of science to lawmaking is rare

enough and I am sure we would like to think that the time in Newcastle made a contribution to his achievements.

There were a couple of other things that happened during his time here. The first was that it brought him to a new place and a new culture and he was able to travel around the UK and Europe, to read and think and see the world through a different lens. The second critical occurrence was that, as part of his fieldwork, he was sent to the Amazon basin. Remote as much of the Amazon basin still is, it is difficult to imagine just how challenging, remote and unspoiled it was in the early 1960s. It probably made the West of his youth look like Northumberland Street on a Saturday afternoon. This began an affiliation with South America that has been life long and it brings us full circle.

Now, nearly two decades after the height of his political career in the US he continues to be involved in the politics of the environment and specifically the Amazon; distant, remarkable and yet critical to all of us. Involvement with, amongst other ventures, the Blue Moon Fund, brings him into contact with governments in trying to manage the rainforest in a sustainable way, particularly in the face of growing pressures from the oil and gas industries.

A couple of weeks ago I was, quite by chance, chatting to an environmental lawyer from Canada. It was in the unlikely setting of a boat from the Farne Islands. Like Bruce, he had training and a higher degree in science and had then gone on to do law so I was interested in the parallel; this transition from science to law. I said to him that I had been speaking on the phone to another person who had made a similar transition, and asked whether it was common. He looked vaguely interested and gave a non-committal response.

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I thought I would push it and said it was the honorable Bruce Babbitt. His jaw dropped....

“The Bruce Babbitt?”

That hooked him. I played it quite cool. “Yes, I reckon so...”.

“Whoa you were on the phone to The Bruce Babbitt. He used to be Secretary of the Interior?”

I was now quite enjoying this. “Yes, that Bruce Babbit”, I said, casually, as if I was never off the phone to senior US politicians.

“He is named on hundreds of environmental cases!”.

The awe said it all so I thought I should come clean and explain that we were awarding this honorary degree today. He nodded his head and said;

“Great choice, really great choice”.

Mr Chancellor, for his contribution to politics, the environment and particularly for his tireless efforts to deliver a sustainable future, and because he is “a great choice”, I commend the Honorable Bruce Babbitt to you for the degree of Doctor of Civil Law honoris causa.

Citation by Professor Jimmy Steele, 9th July 2015