



Mr Chancellor

In the 1970s, an entire generation of adolescent fans of Monty Python's Flying Circus were exposed to a series of sketches featuring accountants. Suffice to say it was not kind about the prospects for a thrilling life with a career in accountancy. In one famous sketch, an accountant is quite convinced that his true vocation is as a lion tamer. It finishes with a sombre plea to give generously to "the League for Fighting Chartered Accountancy" so that young people could be warned of the dangers.

Today we are to award a University Fellowship to Peter Johnson. As Treasurer of Newcastle University, and a card-holding chartered accountant, he calmly and efficiently oversaw the management of a budget of a mere £400M, advising Council and chairing Finance Committee for 9 years through some of the most challenging conditions in recent decades. He did this in a post-crash financial environment. An environment where public finances were uncertain, where we were, as a University, taking huge decisions about how to deal with significant cuts and tripled fees, about major and potentially risky investments to expand our operations abroad and where we were developing our financial plans in a very different world to the one that went before. Not only did he guide us through that period on matters financial, he did it... for fun. Mr Chancellor, my lords, ladies and gentlemen, I don't know about you, but lion taming sounds like the less terrifying option. I can also confirm that Peter IS an accountant and he laughs in the face of Monty Python because he IS, unequivocally, interesting.

He is, however, from Sunderland.

I shall temporarily suspend the stock Newcastle response whilst I qualify that statement. He was born in Jesmond, raised in Houghton-le-spring and "developed" in Sunderland and is the only person I have ever heard of who is brave enough to claim "dual nationality" to both the Geordie and Makem nations. He was, he proudly told me, at Wembley on 5th May 1973 to witness Sunderland winning the FA cup and I think Peter, most Geordies would say you had made your bed at that point.

Peter is not just an accountant though, he is a hereditary accountant. His father, grandfather and great uncle were all accountants before him. This simple observation suggests there may be a gene responsible, and he may count himself lucky that he is receiving this fellowship now as at least two of my recent predecessors would have had a needle in his arm to draw blood in an attempt to identify the guilty strand of DNA. They may of course have discovered the lion-taming gene by mistake.

Peter lost his father when he was just 9 but demonstrated resilience and ability in spades, undertaking his accountancy training by articles in the family firm. That firm merged with Thornton-McClintock which in time merged with KPMG, the global accountancy giant where Peter was a partner until the turn of the century when he decided that there were other things he could do, and do well. One of these was to serve this University.

And Peter is a man with a lot of other *things to do*. He loves sport, particularly cricket, and is a member of the MCC. When Richard Dale was appointed to the key University position of Finance Director, Peter could not attend the interview because he was at the test match; the Lords calling you might say.

On hearing that one can only conclude that when it comes to *things to do*, Peter is a man who is certain about his priorities.

When I started researching this piece I got an email from John Hogan giving me some tips and contacts. The email finished by suggesting I contacted Peter himself and it said “he does not have an email address but you can ring him on...”.

Well that was intriguing, because **everyone** has an email address, do they not?

Apparently not. Peter’s ability to resist modern life’s greatest tyranny, that is email, and the information technology revolution of which it is the most pervasive manifestation, is legendary. A number of friends and colleagues said, affectionately “yes, *Luddite*, that would describe him”. Except the Luddites of the 19th century smashed up the technology of the day in a slightly over-the-top approach. Peter’s response to managing technology has been every bit as effective but infinitely less histrionic which, it seems, is the mark of the man. In 2000, on leaving KPMG he was given a new computer as a leaving gift from colleagues. Rather than smash it up in true Luddite fashion he simply left it in its box in the garage for 13 years. Peter you can rest assured

that 13 years on, it will now be completely incapable of doing anything useful. There is nothing to fear. A 19th century Luddite loom could be repaired, or burned for warmth, that computer is now so out of date that it is beyond any useful purpose. Peter, again we should salute you, because I doubt that there is a person in this room for whom the prospect of a day without email, let alone a decade, is not a secret fantasy. Peter Johnson is a man who is certain about his priorities.

Peter is here with Sally, his wife and companion of many years. But he has another companion in his life who cannot be here tonight. At this point if we were on BBC Sports Personality of the Year I would turn round to a huge screen and say “but joining us from Peter’s kitchen... is Rory the dog”. Alas, no screen, but I can tell you that Rory, a companion of 14 years, is so cherished that Peter once bought him a birthday cake and an inscribed silver dog tag, from Sintons the jewellers no less, only to spectacularly mislay them. He is a dog so cherished that he would not change his car because his current one was just the right height for Rory to get in and out. Peter Johnson may be a man who absolutely knows his priorities....., but on Rory the dog he sounds to me like he is barely on the fringes of sanity.

We are very fortunate and very grateful that Peter made this University one of his priorities. Just a few months ago, he stepped down from his role as Treasurer after a dozen years of service but his contribution to Newcastle University will continue to be felt for many years to come. Mr Chancellor, for his distinguished service to this University, I ask that you award to Peter Johnson an Honorary Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Citation by Professor Jimmy Steele