

JONATHON PORRITT DCL

Mr Chancellor,

Jonathon Porritt, whom we are honouring today, is an eminent writer, broadcaster and commentator on sustainable development. Born in 1950, he grew up (perhaps surprisingly for someone so closely associated with nature) in London, near Hampstead Heath, which for him was a 'precious oasis of semi-natural green'. The Heath is 'small, in real terms, no more than a couple of hundred acres', but he recalls that through the eyes of an eight-year old boy, it was 'absolutely huge and much too large to be properly encompassed at ground level,' requiring the vantage point of the nearest tree for proper inspection. Jonathon has speculated about the origins of his lifelong passion for the natural world. He reflects, 'I often wonder how trees get into one's blood. Neither of my parents had the remotest interest in trees, and my mother would endlessly wax lyrical about the landscapes of Lincolnshire (where she grew up), which for me border on the God-forsaken precisely because they are so tree-less'. A self-confessed dendrophile, he recalls that he first learned about nature and his interdependence with the natural world by 'hanging precariously out of the branches of wonderful, long-suffering trees, taking equal pleasure in the sense of danger, the sense of isolation and the sense of being utterly at home.'

Jonathon received his education at Eton and Magdalen College, Oxford, after which, by his own account, he spent some time ‘dossing around planting trees and farming in New Zealand and Australia’. He first got involved with environmental issues in 1974, at the same time as he became a teacher in a West London comprehensive, an experience which he says he absolutely loved. By the early 1980s, he was co-chair of the Green Party, of which he is still a member. In 1984, he left teaching to become Director of Friends of the Earth where he stayed until 1991, just prior to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – which for him, was a life-changing experience. He had completed a book called *Save the Earth*, which by then had sold nearly a million copies, and he organised the Tree of Life Initiative for the Global Forum in Rio, which drew in hundreds of thousands of environmental pledges from all around the world. Those two weeks in Rio in 1992, he says, opened his eyes ‘to the idea that sustainable development could be articulated as THE big idea for the 21st century, not just for governments and public bodies, but [for] businesses, professions and universities. And that’, he says, ‘is basically what my working life has been all about for the last 20 years.’ Jonathon has been a Director of Friends of the Earth (1984-90); Chairman of Sustainability South West, the South West Round Table for Sustainable Development (1999-2001); a Trustee of WWF UK (1991-2005), and a member of the Board of the South West Regional Development Agency (1999-2008).

One of his major recent achievements is to have been the first Chair of the UK Sustainable Development Commission (or SDC), a

position which he held between 2000 and 2009. The SDC was set up by former Prime Minister Tony Blair to be the principal source of independent advice to all branches of government – and across the whole of the UK. It started small, but gradually established its role, and after the publication of the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy (which transferred responsibility for scrutiny of government performance from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to the SDC), it grew to an organisation of about 70 people. It is now widely recognised that this put the UK out in front in terms of equivalent sustainable development initiatives elsewhere in the world. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown both respected the independence of the Commission – though as Jonathon himself acknowledges, ‘they didn’t always like the advice we gave them!’ The SDC reflected the full breadth of the sustainable development agenda, with as much of a focus on education, health, the economy and governance issues as on climate change, land use, transport, food and farming. The Commission produced a huge volume of work, from sustainable development strategies to Departmental Action Plans, procurement to policy appraisal – and by his own admission ‘all sorts of geeky things that never saw the light of day!’ Jonathon attributes the SDC’s success to an extraordinary combination of ‘a really smart, highly-motivated Secretariat, and the Commissioners themselves – all experts in their own respective fields, all sharing a passion for sustainable development as the central organising principle for the whole of government’. The SDC fell foul of the incoming Coalition Government’s ‘bonfire of the quangos’ – or rather it was a victim of what Jonathon calls ‘a craven reluctance to expose government

performance to any kind of independent scrutiny’, an act of ‘cretinous vandalism’ about which he blogged fiercely in 2010.

In 1996, he established Forum for the Future, which is now the UK’s leading sustainable development charity, with 70 staff and over 100 partner organisations including some of the world’s leading companies. He is also a Non-Executive Director of Wessex Water, and of Willmott Dixon Holdings. He is a Trustee of the Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy, and is involved in the work of many NGOs and charities as Patron, Chair or Special Adviser. He is also currently a Co-Director of the Prince of Wales’s Business & Sustainability Programme, which runs seminars for senior executives around the world.

The dominant mindset at the time of the Rio Summit in 1992, he recalls, was hope, fired up by a new-found sense of purpose amongst politicians and business leaders. Twenty years on from the Rio Summit, Jonathon finds it difficult to capture even a fraction of that hopefulness regarding next year’s ‘Rio +20’. The dominant mindset he now characterises as ‘frustration and anger, particularly at the chronic failure of political leadership.’ One thing that keeps him hopeful today, however, is the ‘steadfastness of leading companies and business leaders as they seek to make their own companies more sustainable’, in particular the huge amount of progress on corporate sustainability that has been made in recent years.

He married Sarah in 1986, and has two daughters: Eleanor, who has just graduated from Durham University, and Rebecca, who is at the University of Leeds. Somehow he has found time to write extensively on sustainability and environmental issues. His latest books are *Capitalism As If the World Matters* (published in a revised edition in 2007), *Globalism & Regionalism* (2008) and *Living Within Our Means* (2009). Jonathon received a CBE in January 2000 for services to environmental protection. In November 2011, his appointment as the next Chancellor of Keele University was announced, to which he responded rather modestly that he was a bit taken aback, ‘not really having seen myself as ‘Chancellor material’ before now’.

Mr Chancellor, for his lifetime’s work towards the cause of sustainable development, I present as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, honoris causa, Jonathon Porritt, CBE.

Citation by Dr Helen Berry