

HOWARD BENJAMIN FARNHILL

Mr Chancellor,

In the Discworld series of novels by that celebrated author of humorous fantasy Terry Pratchett, one of the principal figures of farce is a rather sad character known as The Bursar. The fragmentary accounts of the personal and professional development of The Bursar are distinctly unedifying. He is said to have applied for the role of Bursar on two grounds: Firstly, he had a genuine affection for numbers, and relished the prospect of living out his days quietly adding up rows of figures. Secondly, he was confident of getting the job, as no-one else seemed to want it! The Bursar's idea of excitement was, reportedly, "a soft-boiled egg" – though precisely which aspects of its preparation or use actually excited him goes unrecorded.

In other realms of popular culture, Bursars fare no better. The only memorable mention of a bursar on the silver screen occurred in the 1983 film *Educating Rita*, in a vivid expression explaining the depths of gross moral turpitude to which a tenured academic would have to descend before they'd be sacked ...

In stark contrast to this poor showing of bursars in the entertainment media is the exhilarating profile of Howard Farnhill, who recently retired as Bursar of our august institution after more than 18 years of excellent service. Although he clearly does have great facility with numbers, in contrast to Pratchett's hapless bursar

Howard Farnhill is also endowed with powerful eloquence. And far from getting his kicks from anything soft-boiled, Howard's pursues his delights the hard way: on foot in his beloved Lake District, or on a bicycle in the Northumbrian countryside. He was frequently to be seen arriving for work on the same bike, before performing a Superman-like transition to his impeccably be-suited self prior to entering the Finance Office.

I have already mentioned Howard's eloquence. His is of a type peculiar to the mill towns of the Lancashire Pennines; as the son of the owner of the erstwhile Farnhill's Mill in Colne, this type of eloquence is in Howard's blood. Its hallmarks are an economy with words, a merciless frankness, and an utter intolerance of nonsense. No doubt this oratorical tradition was nurtured by the need to convey urgent messages above the din of looms and shuttles. Those who have had the pleasure of working closely with Howard can attest that it is just as effective in the University Board Room. As a debate unfolds, Howard will typically maintain a brooding silence, as he weighs the arguments of others. When he has decided the fullness of time has come, he will deliver his sardonic thunderbolts. The effects on weak lines of argument are invariably devastating; yet, once the smoke and brimstone have cleared, a constructive way forward will always be found in their place. A master of effective analogy, Howard's instructive use of the meeting room biscuits to illustrate the concept of depreciation of assets remains imprinted on the memories of all who witnessed this act of quasi-transubstantiation.

It is precisely the combination of clarity of insight and rigour of analysis which lie behind the unblemished record of financial success over which Howard has presided as Bursar. Since Howard took office, the University's annual income has increased fourfold, from eighty-eight million pounds in 1990 to three hundred and forty-two million pounds last year. He leaves the University a much larger and much more financially-secure institution than he found it. Upon inheriting Howard's responsibilities recently, the University's incoming Executive Director of Finance, Richard Dale, commented:

“Howard has ensured that Newcastle is one of the most financially sound of the Russell Group universities, with six consecutive years of surplus, strong cash reserves, and a rock-solid balance sheet”.

The Honorary Treasurer of the University, Peter Johnson, and his predecessor, our late-lamented Honorary Fellow David Wilson, both developed excellent working relationships with Howard. Peter highlights their great admiration for Howard's professionalism, and particularly his ability to always target perfectly the nature and amount of information which these key non-Executives need to receive.

Notwithstanding the responsibilities and pressures of his day-job, Howard has always managed to find time to place his immense skills at the service of charity. A committed Christian, much of Howard's energy was devoted to Church activities. While he was working for Rowntrees in York, he volunteered as company secretary

for a Christian recording company known as Mustard Seed Recordings. During his years as Bursar here, he served as treasurer for Westgate Road Baptist Church. He has also managed to combine his professional skills with his passionate support for the performing arts, serving as treasurer for the Riding Lights Theatre Company in York, and later as a long-standing Board Member of that venerable Newcastle institution, the Tyneside Cinema.

Notwithstanding a very busy working life and his substantial voluntary commitments after hours, Howard always made a priority of spending time with his family. His four sons – Tim, Jonathan, Maurice and Ken – all recall with gratitude how caring and considerate Howard has always been in his fatherly role. A great fan of a hearty lunch himself, Howard would faithfully produce a top-notch roast chicken dinner for his sons every Sunday. Howard's daredevil spirit has been passed on to his sons, who have all come to share his love for the Great Outdoors, if not his predilection for other risky antics: Ken recalls the anxiety with which he used to look on as Howard, taking advantage of his lofty stature, would clean the house windows with one foot on the fire escape and the other on the window ledge!

Precarious as that procedure might have been, there is nothing the least bit precarious about the state in which Howard Farnhill has left the finances of this University. As a token of our enduring debt of gratitude for his many years of dedicated professional service, I now

ask you Mr Chancellor to bestow upon Howard Farnhill an Honorary Fellowship of the University.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger