

## DAVID ANTHONY KING DSc

Mr Chancellor,

On August 12<sup>th</sup> 1939, the Foreign Ministers of Nazi Germany and Italy met with Hitler to plan the ruthless subjugation of poorly-defended countries which might declare themselves neutral in the coming war. On the same day, 6000 miles away in Durban, South Africa, David Anthony King was born. The pleasant days of spring in Natal must have seemed blissfully remote from the gathering gloom in Europe, where armed racists were already tearing communities apart in the name of government.

Twenty-four years later, the same David King left his native land for Britain. This was 1963, the same year in which the apartheid regime imprisoned Nelson Mandela. The two events were not unrelated. David King was no ordinary economic migrant: he had been banished from his native land by the white minority government, which had become enraged at repeated criticisms of their racist practices on the letters page of a national newspaper. The author of the letters was an upstart PhD chemistry student at the University of Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, who for some reason wouldn't restrict his writing to scientific matters.

Needless to say, David King had not neglected his scientific writing, and had in fact just completed his doctoral thesis before being asked to leave the country. That thesis, which focused on the catalysis of ammonia synthesis, marked the beginning of what became a dazzling research career, focusing on the chemistry of solid surfaces and their interactions with gases. Forty years and more than 400 papers later, the scientific work of David King is widely renowned for its relentlessly logical, evidence-led approach to the description of real-world phenomena.

When the exiled David King took up a scholarship at Imperial College in 1963, he faced the daunting prospect of proving himself all over again in a new country. While London was gripped by Beatle-mania, David King had to get his head down and work. Happily immersing himself in his science, success followed success. After eight years as a lecturer at the University of East Anglia the excellence of David's science was acknowledged in his appointment as one of the youngest professors of his generation.

In the Brunner Chair of Physical Chemistry at Liverpool University, David provided first-class academic leadership to his colleagues. A great believer in people, he empowers others by insisting that they are capable of great things. Thrown in at the deep end, they respond brilliantly.

Friends and colleagues speak warmly of David King as a multi-dimensional man. He has never forgotten his African roots, and still works tirelessly to improve the lot of the most stricken corners of the continent. His current efforts relate to promoting reconciliation and reconstruction in Rwanda, and establishing an institute to retain and recruit scientists and mathematicians to work in Africa.

A passionate devotee of the visual arts, David served for many years as Chairman of the Bluecoat Arts Centre in Liverpool, and then of the Kettle's Yard Gallery at Cambridge University, to which David moved in 1988 to take up the 1920 Professorship of Physical Chemistry. After election as a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1991, David went on to serve both as Master of Downing College and Head of the Cambridge Chemistry Department, all the while remaining hyper-active at the cutting-edge of his research field.

Professor King was appointed Chief Scientific Advisor to Her Majesty's Government in October 2000 and was knighted in 2003. Until you stop and reflect on the singularity of both achievements, these seem natural, even inevitable, developments in the career history of David King.

Taking up the role of Chief Scientific Advisor just as the 'mad cow disease' inquiry was making its report to Parliament, Sir David could have been forgiven

for feeling relief that the BSE crisis had not occurred during his watch. If he felt any such relief, however, it was rudely dispelled four months later with the advent of the foot-and-mouth crisis, which proved to be literally a baptism of fire for Sir David in his new role. Not only had he to provide scientifically-based advice to ministers in real-time; Sir David was also in the front line explaining the rationale for the contiguous cull policy to incredulous farmers.

Then and since, Sir David has never shrunk from the challenge of presenting scientific evidence and the logical conclusions which arise from them, irrespective of whom they may not suit. Sir David has provided a global lead in rigorous thinking over climate change, speaking with a refreshing frankness which has earned him great respect amongst scientists and the public. By the same token, he has also attracted much odium, manifest in hostile commentaries in the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph*, and in organised heckling from paid lobbyists of neo-conservative campaign groups. New battle lines are now being drawn over Bird Flu, between Sir David's evidence-based judgements on the one hand and unsubstantiated tabloid hysteria on the other.

As a passionate and prolific researcher, Sir David King still dedicates at least one day per week to hands-on laboratory science, despite all the burdens he carries as Chief Scientific Advisor. Throughout his life he has stood by principles of honest intellectual endeavour which do himself, humanity and our

country proud. In recognition of the phenomenal contribution that he has made both to science and to public policy, I now ask you, Mr Chancellor, to bestow upon Sir David King the degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*.

**Citation by Professor Paul Younger**