GREG SMITH

Chancellor Dharker,

Today we are honouring Greg Smith. An outstanding contributor to many areas of public life and to our University. It is rare indeed to have excelled in so many fields in a life well-lived.

A proud son of Norfolk, Greg Smith has been passionately involved in agriculture throughout his life and it was a place to study agriculture at Newcastle University that first brought him to the north. What was it that attracted him to the agriculture in Newcastle? Was it the world-wide reputation for the quality of the department? Was it, perhaps, that as a proud Norwich City supporter, he had an affinity for cities with struggling football clubs. Or was it the life of scholarship and quiet study typically lived by Newcastle “agrics”?

His time as an undergraduate led to a lifelong love of the North-East. He is still known to say “aah home” when crossing the Tyne Bridge on the train. He also developed a love of the Northumberland Coast, visiting his great aunt and uncle in Amble for Sunday lunch and returning to university with food parcels. One of the sources of real pride for Greg was that his son followed in his footsteps to Newcastle, studying ancient history and archaeology.

Throughout the numerous successes that Greg had in his business career he in many ways never left Newcastle. He has been a great friend and supporter of the University, serving on Court for many years. He perhaps made his greatest contribution to our university through his passionate support for Newcastle Business School as a member and then chair of the International Advisory
Board. He was integral to raising the profile of the School internationally, linking it with key international companies such as Santander in relationships that endure to this day. It is a sign of Greg’s outstanding commitment, that whenever help was needed, he stepped in, rolled his sleeves up to provide wise leadership and support. Not just words, deeds.

After graduating, Greg was highly successful in business. Something that made his support for our business school so very important and relevant. His many successful roles included Managing Director of Ipsos MORI, a role he held until 2009. He is therefore a man who is uniquely qualified to tell us why, despite there being so many opinion polls none of us have ever met anyone who took part in one. Truly one of life’s great mysteries.

A highly successful career in business, and many years of passionate support for our University are only the beginning of Greg’s achievements. Whilst building his business career he did what you obviously do which is join the Territorial Army as well. One of the proudest achievements of his life was to rise from being Private 517219 to the rank of 2 star general and the senior reserve officer in the country, serving along the way in Germany, Kosovo and Iraq. A truly astonishing achievement. His many promotions in the army led, however, to a cornucopia of new uniforms….and a takeover of wardrobe space from other members of the family. Never once did he lose his human touch, being as comfortable talking to a private in his unit as the Queen. Not bad for someone once described in a school report as “cheerfully incompetent” and who only made it to be head boy of Norwich School because he had to re-take so many exams he ended up by far the oldest boy in school. I would really like to see the rest of that school as it must have included some major over-achievers.
Greg is incredibly proud of his family. His wife Rebecca is here today for our celebration and it is a doubly happy occasion as they also celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary this week. He is incredibly proud that his three children all graduated at masters level and are successful and happy. He has 5 grandchildren with a sixth on the way (so if not quite platoon strength at least a section) and loves his life as “poppa” (although that should probably technically be General poppa). There is, however, another much-adored family member who has let him down by not getting a masters degree. This is Delilah. We should, however, let her off her graduation failure given that she is actually a sheep.

Delilah is no ordinary sheep. She has in fact just won the best of breed prize at the Royal Norfolk Show. This is something of great importance to Greg for the simple reason that he was the chief executive of the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association, the show organisers, for nine years and was responsible for taking the tough decision to cancel two successive shows to ensure that the association and the show could survive COVID. Difficult decisions taken in a sympathetic way whilst rolling your sleeves up to deliver things that really matter. There is a theme emerging I feel.

Although Delilah is a prize-winning sheep, she is also a very naughty sheep, eating the roses that Rebecca had been cultivating for a production of A Midsummer’s Night Dream. A crime that led to mention of the abattoir (sotto voce). It seems that Greg has forgiven her though, as there is a strong rumour that he was to be found sleeping next to her pen the night before her winning show appearance.

When Greg isn’t running the army and international companies, being a proud grandfather, saving the Royal Norfolk Show, winning prizes for his sheep and
helping Newcastle University over many years in its times of need, he is to be found sailing on the Norfolk Broads on one of his old sailing boats that have been in the family for many years. One can only feel that on past form the “round the world race” winner’s medal can’t be more than a year or two away.

Chancellor Dharker, for his service to our country and his outstanding contribution to the vision of our university, and its development over many many years, I commend General Greg Smith for the award of an Honorary Fellowship.

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