

Mr. Chancellor,

The conundrum that I would like to pose in relation to our Honorary Fellow this evening, Mr Michael Bird, courtesy of Richard Dale, our Executive Director of Finance, is: what do Johnsons the dry cleaners and Edinburgh Airport have in common? All will be revealed shortly.

Michael Bird was appointed to the Retirement Benefit Pensions Board of Newcastle University as a Trustee Director from August 2008 until he retired at the end of December 2012, and chaired the Investment Sub-Committee during this period. He also served as a Trustee of the University's Development Trust from 2006 to December 2013, and was Chair of the Trustees from April 2010. The performance of the RBP investments is crucial to the sustainability of the scheme, which provides pensions for thousands of administrative and support staff at Newcastle University. Michael brought significant investment management experience and great leadership skills to his role as Chair of the Trust. He was very influential in the ongoing exercise of realigning the purposes and use of the Development Trust endowments with the current priorities of the University. Former Assistant Director of Human Resources, Richard Burrow, serviced the Retirement Benefit Scheme whilst Michael advised on investments. Richard describes Michael as bringing a 'quiet yet very thoughtful focus to bear on the RBP's investments. His focus was on diversification of our investment portfolio as a way of alleviating risk. He had a very good relationship with the investment consultants, yet he also excelled at challenging them and keeping them on their toes. His connection with the University has been worth millions because of the way he has helped steer our investment strategy for the local pension scheme and the substantial funds still held by the Development Trust.'

Richard Dale also remembers how ‘Michael took over as chair of the Pension Fund Investment Sub-Committee just as I joined the University. My job here was my first real encounter with management of pension funds so I faced a huge learning curve. Michael was a tremendous support during that period which included the stock market crash of late 2008 and early 2009 when the pension fund lost a huge proportion of its assets seemingly overnight. He ensured we all kept level heads through the aftermath and guided us to a sustained recovery. Newcastle has one of the few final salary pension schemes in the country which is in surplus and a lot of that is down to good investment management, built on the foundations laid by Michael and his predecessor Glenn Wilson (also an Honorary Fellow). The fund has more than 3,000 members, deferred pensioners and pensioners all of whom owe a debt of gratitude to Michael for his wise stewardship.’

Another colleague, Richard Warhurst, remembers that Michael ‘was a very good chair of the Investment Sub-Committee, his knowledge was excellent. But perhaps more importantly was the way he ran the meetings. Always friendly, he had a great sense of humour and always encouraged everyone to have their say. I remember after his first meeting he asked me if he had done OK and should he do anything differently. He certainly wasn't a push over and if he thought the contribution from AON fell short of his expectations he let them know about it.’ Simon Wilmot, another member of the committee, remembers that ‘Michael was knowledgeable about the pensions environment. He was very professional but easy to work with and was keen to listen to everyone's views.’ Our Registrar John Hogan also pays tribute to Michael’s fine, understated sense of humour – ‘He is really strong on people relationships, making others feel at ease and encouraging participation.’

The Birds are a family with many north-east connections and a history of public service. Michael's sister Liz reports that their mother, Sybil, and Aunt Connie were both graduates of Newcastle University - then King's College Durham. Michael's mother went on to become a barrister of the Middle Temple. His aunt graduated in medicine in 1938 and became consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist in Gateshead. Their family business still exists as Birds Laundries, founded by Michael's great grandfather and his father was brought up living above the shop on Claremont Road. By the time Michael joined the business it had become part of the Johnson Group, where he held national and international directorships until leaving in the mid-1990s to become Chief Executive of the North-East Chambers of Commerce, which flourished under his direction, reaching over 5000 members and 225 staff in 11 locations. Michael is one of the few lay people to have played an active role in governance at both Newcastle and Durham Universities. He was on the Durham University Council and is a former Vice-President of St. John's College Durham and Deputy Chairman of the Durham University Retirement Benefits Plan. He served as High Sheriff of Tyne and Wear from 1999 to 2000 and is a Deputy Lieutenant of the County.

Michael married Pol Cummins in 1969, also from a local family - her parents lived in Fenham, the other side of the Town Moor, and she herself taught privately for many years. They have three grown-up and successful children Miles, Alasdair and Julia. Michael is Chairman of the Governors of Dame Allan's, where his children went to school, as did his maternal grandmother, his paternal grandfather having attended RGS. Michael also has a gang of six grandchildren aged from 3 to 11 years old, Lola, twins Angus and Minty, Eleanor, Ethelie and Edson.

‘Being involved in the life of both Newcastle University and the University of Durham’ says Michael’s sister Liz, ‘has meant a great deal to my brother. He was only 15 when our father died suddenly in an accident and consequently when he left school after taking A levels in Greek, Latin and Ancient History it was felt that he should go directly into the family business and he did not have the opportunity to go to university. He has always regretted this and is now two thirds of the way through a BA with the Open University, specialising mainly in history and philosophy, I believe he is just about to start a unit on Empire.’

Michael has somehow found time to take on voluntary roles in many North-East organisations, for example the Glass Museum in Sunderland. His most recent commitment was to be elected as Church Warden of St Oswin's Wylam, the village where he lives and where he and his family grew up.

And so, what of the conundrum posed at the start of my oration? The part about Johnson’s the dry cleaners is, I hope, self-explanatory; but the second part of the answer is that Michael helped shape the University’s investment policy during volatile times at the Investment Strategy Committee in a unique way. Simon Wilmot recalls how Michael [urged us] to ‘take advantage of alternative investment opportunities such as GIP, an infrastructure fund that he guided us to which has produced huge financial returns for the pension fund. This fund owns a number of very interesting assets including Edinburgh Airport - and not a lot of people know that Newcastle University (via its pension fund) is a part owner of Edinburgh Airport.’

Michael Bird’s legacy is a strong and financially robust basis for a pension fund upon which thousands of our employees rely. Moreover by his demeanour and collegiality he has proven to be a model not only of probity, wisdom and far-sightedness, but kindness and courtesy too. It is for his many years of dedicated

service to Newcastle University, Mr Chancellor, that I commend him to you for the award of an Honorary Fellowship.

Helen Berry

Public Orator

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