

VERYAN JOHNSTON

Mr Chancellor,

Veryan Johnston, whom we are honouring this evening, served the University with distinction for eighteen years, until her retirement as Executive Director of Human Resources in 2015. During this time, she established herself as one of the most authoritative and influential HR directors within the higher education sector. She chaired the Russell Group HR Directors Network and served on the Executive of the Universities HR Association, initially as its lead on Continuing Professional Development and subsequently as its Chair. She was also a member of the Diamond Review of efficiency, effectiveness and value for money in higher education. In June 2017, Veryan's outstanding achievements were recognised by the award of an MBE for Services to Higher Education.

So where did it all begin? Veryan is a local lass, who was born in Corbridge in 1956. She spent her early years on the family farm up at High Shield, near Vindolanda, later moving to Settlingstones, where her brother Hugh still farms. I am indebted to the Registrar, Dr John Hogan, for pointing out that Veryan's first name is derived from a Gaelic surname meaning "bolt of lightning". Her middle name is Steele. John thinks these are great names for an HR Director. In her youth, she was a star performer in the Young Farmers' Debating Team and a regular attendee at local dances. Her sister Sharne described a particularly stylish pair of pink satin hot pants that Veryan wore to one such event, but sadly we couldn't find any photographic evidence.

After completing her A Levels at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Hexham, Veryan initially planned to read English at University and to pursue a career in teaching. However, Miss Carruthers, one of her form teachers, encouraged her to think more broadly and in the autumn of 1975, she headed off to Durham University to study Law and Sociology. She has never regretted that change of direction.

Veryan joined Northumbrian Water in 1978 as a graduate trainee, based in the personnel department. She freely admits she didn't know what on earth she was letting herself in for. The company culture at the time reflected its largely white, male, engineering-based workforce. Her first boss, Phil Phillips, was ex-Navy and had a very disciplined but effective style of management. Veryan learnt a lot from him, and also valued the support and guidance she received from Alison Cook, one of the very small band of women employed there at the time. She and Alison are still friends today. In 1979, Veryan met her future husband, Frank, through a mutual friend who also worked for Northumbrian Water. They married in 1981, and their son, Duncan, was born in 1985. By the time Veryan left Northumbrian Water in 1994, she had risen to become Group Human Resources Manager, and was the first woman in the company to become head of a division. She told me that she had to put up with lots of jokes about whether she'd be putting up net curtains in her office. Needless to say, Veryan took this all in her stride. If only they'd had some Equality and Diversity training...

Following an MBA at Durham University, Veryan lectured for several years at both Teesside and Durham Universities, which she thoroughly enjoyed. The post of Director of Human Resources at Newcastle University came up just as she was looking for a new challenge. Under her leadership, the HR function at Newcastle was transformed from a

central administrative function into an integral and highly effective component of the core business. She led on numerous key initiatives including the design and implementation of pay modernisation and harmonisation for all staff and pioneered the introduction of employee opinion surveys and follow-up action plans. None of this is easy. What was the secret of her success? Friends and colleagues have highlighted her clarity of thought, personal integrity, wisdom, and political astuteness as being key to her achievements. These skills were also recognised and highly valued by the wider HE community. Helen Scott, Executive Director of Universities UK, describes Veryan as the person “to whom colleagues would turn for expertise and advice when facing new or challenging problems.” Her advice was always pragmatic and grounded - she never shied away from difficult situations and could be relied upon to give tough advice, if that was what was needed.

Veryan was noted for never losing her cool, even in the most challenging situations. However, according to Professor Tony Stevenson, our former Deputy Vice-Chancellor, there were some subtle signs that Veryan might be cross with you with you if she addressed you by your full name and title, whilst looking at you over the top of her glasses. Having heard about Veryan’s hair-raising experience with the electric car which Tony persuaded her to pilot, I wonder if Tony was reflecting on that incident when he told me this. Not only did the car have an alarming tendency to cut out when being driven downhill, but after one particularly challenging journey home, the engine burst into flames when Veryan parked up on her drive. Fortunately for all concerned, her husband Frank, a former senior officer in the Fire Service, was on hand to promptly and professionally extinguish the fire.

Something which came across most powerfully in my conversations with colleagues who worked with and for Veryan over the years, is the care and attention she invested in

advancing the careers of others. She always valued and recognised their contributions and was deeply committed to helping them develop. As Lynne Howlett told me, “She developed and believed in others to the point that they achieved things they never believed they could... She took great joy in others’ achievements. She was proud of us.” Veryan, I think it is fair to say that we are very proud of you too.

Mr Chancellor, in recognition of her exemplary and pioneering leadership in the field of Human Resource Management, both within the University and the wider UK HE Community, I present to you Veryan Steele Johnston, MBE, for the award of an Honorary Fellowship.

Jill Taylor-Roe

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