

Professor Day,

It is our honour today to welcome a successful businessman, entrepreneur and food policy adviser, who has used his expert knowledge of the food system to tackle the health crisis and to change the way the nation thinks about food and nutrition. He co-founded the successful chain of Leon restaurants and went on to be the driving force behind the Sustainable Restaurant Association, the School Food Plan which led to the implementation of Universal Free School Meals for Infants, the groundbreaking and influential National Food Strategy, and the Chefs in Schools initiative. Our honorary graduand today is Henry Dimbleby MBE.

Henry was born and raised in London. After leaving Eton, he attended St John's College, Oxford and took a BA in Physics and Philosophy. Although the degree gave him a valuable training in formal logic, after university Henry hadn't quite worked out what he wanted to do and had no real ambitions. However, as his family had a background in journalism and food writing, it's perhaps no surprise that Henry's immediate post-university career saw him work first as a commis chef in the Michelin-starred Inn on the Park restaurant, and then as a journalist at the Daily Telegraph. Henry regards his time as a commis chef as "the hardest job he ever did", but he also credits it as instilling a work ethic which he has never subsequently lost.

After this, Henry decided on a career as a management consultant. Things didn't immediately go to plan. During an interview with one prestigious firm, he was asked: "What does leadership mean to you?" Stumped for a response, Henry improvised wildly and answered with a short homily he'd heard years before at the end of an episode of He Man and the Masters of the Universe. He didn't get the job. Eventually however he was recruited as a strategy consultant at Bain and Company and enjoyed several very successful years with them. The business acumen and strategic skill he gained in that part of his career was soon put to good use when Henry - alongside John Vincent and Allegra McEvedy - founded the restaurant chain Leon in July 2004.

The idea of Leon came about as a reaction to the limited options available for lunch in city centres. The premise was "why not McDonald's but in heaven?" and although this sounds simple, it was genuinely radical and required a huge amount of work to get off the ground. This was an intense and hectic period in Henry's life, and he now thinks that "if we'd known too much about the process in advance, then we'd never have started off."

In the end, Leon was a huge success and at one point the company achieved £100 million in revenue and had 70 branches in the UK. It introduced items such as superfood salads and sweet potato falafel to the nation's menu and has had a lasting impact on our eating habits. Leon was sold in February 2021, and despite all the difficulties involved in establishing the company, Henry now thinks that "Leon is very satisfying to look back on as an achievement." More enduringly, Henry met his wife-to-be Jemima at Leon's launch and wasted no time in asking her out the next day for a date. They married in 2006.

Because of Leon's success and high profile, Henry and John Vincent seemed the obvious choices to establish the Sustainable Restaurant Association. On the back of this, Lord Gove, then Secretary of State for Education, asked Henry and John to lead an initiative to transform what children eat at school and how they learn about food. The result was the School Food Plan, and amongst many other great benefits resulted in Universal Free School Meals for Infants. This remains one of Henry's proudest achievements, and it also resulted in him being honoured with an MBE.

When Lord Gove moved to Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs or DEFRA, he asked Henry to be the senior non-executive on the DEFRA board and lead an independent review of the UK food system, which led to Henry being dubbed "the nation's food tsar". He asked Tamsin Cooper to be the Director of the National Food Strategy and set about the review with great energy and enthusiasm. Tamsin says that Henry was clear the evidence base would need to be reliable, and the review team would have to understand the intricacies of the

food system better than anyone else. These intricacies are also being addressed by researchers at Newcastle, particularly within the School of Natural and Environmental Sciences, and we were one of the many academic institutions consulted by Henry's team as part of the review.

The result was the National Food Strategy which proposed that government intervention was necessary to tackle the country's growing health crisis. The strategy, although not acted upon initially, has become accepted as a pioneering piece of analysis. Its influence can be seen everywhere, not least in the current Health Secretary Wes Streeting's recent "Healthy Food Standards" policy announcement which was clearly indebted to the National Food Strategy.

The food system is so complex that attempting an in-depth review would be beyond most people. So how did Henry do it? Lord Gove says that there is always a risk in "involving people in the griminess of politics" but Henry seemed to thrive. His friends say that this is because he is non-ideological and transcends political divides and beliefs and has a strict facts-based approach to analysis. He was meticulous almost to a fault. Tamsin Cooper says that at one point when they needed to finish writing the strategy, Henry said "We should visit another farm!", to which she responded, "No Henry – we've visited all the farms, now is the time to finish." Henry's personality is another explanation for his success in so many fields. Lord Gove says that Henry is a "full spectrum glorious human being", and his wife Jemima describes him as "very funny and unnervingly eccentric... someone who can push past normal boundaries".

Henry left DEFRA in March 2023 so he could speak more freely about some of the issues inherent in the National Food Strategy. He then – with the assistance of Jemima – wrote the book *Ravenous*, which was very well received and spelt out very clearly what needs to happen if the health crisis, with its ever-growing strain upon the NHS, is to be fixed. Henry has also recently launched Bramble Partners, an investment and advisory firm which hopes to accelerate the transition to a

healthier and more sustainable food system. There's no sign of him slowing up anytime soon.

How does someone so energetic unwind outside of his many professional interests? As far as Henry himself is concerned he is “doomed never to relax” but according to friends and family he loves to cook and entertain friends for dinner parties, and he has a passion for sailing, and strenuous aerobic exercise. He is, of course, very proud of the many achievements I've mentioned today, but he is proudest of all of his wonderful family. His wife Jemima, an alumna of Newcastle, sons George and Johnny and daughter, Dory. I'd like to extend a very warm welcome to Jemima and George, who join us today – or in Jemima's case, – welcome back!

Professor Day, as a University that carries out leading edge research in agriculture, food economics and health, it is fitting that we recognise the outstanding contributions of someone who has woven these diverse and complex subjects together to raise awareness of the many challenges facing the UK food industry while also highlighting the stark consequences for the health of the nation if these are not addressed, and I am proud to present to you Henry Dimbleby, MBE for the award of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.

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