

## **Professor Day,**

Nick Forbes is a civic leader of the highest stature. For over 20 years he has been a relentless advocate for Newcastle and the North East, an innovative and resilient council leader, and a champion for his vision of a city in which no-one should feel like an outsider.

Nick was born in 1973 and brought up in Wearhead in County Durham where his mother ran a café and his father was a postman. There were close connections to labour – with both a big and small “L”. Indeed, his father’s passion for the region’s rich industrial heritage drove the development of the Killhope Lead Mining Museum. Nick jokes that in many of his childhood photos he and his sisters were just there for scale beside some pieces of industrial equipment!

The family still feel keenly the loss of Nick’s father earlier this year. It is a pleasure to welcome them, and especially Nick’s mother Pam, who – remarkably – has chosen to celebrate her birthday today by listening to speeches in the King’s Hall!

Family life was close, but growing up in a small community posed challenges, especially for a bright, intellectual, gay youngster, and Nick recalls being badly bullied at School. This was the era of Section 28, legislation that in practice legitimised homophobia but was nevertheless a great recruiting agent for activists. It was a major motivation for Nick’s joining the Labour Party at 17.

Academically capable and independently minded, Nick wanted to go to university after A-levels. Told by his school that kids from his background didn’t go to university, he worked for a year at McDonald’s in Bishop Auckland, but applied to university anyway, and went to Cambridge to study social and political theory. He was active in student politics, and presidency of the Students’ Union gave him a first taste of elected office. It taught him how different marginalised communities shared common experiences. As he put it, “fights for better equality aren’t just for those people who will immediately benefit, they’re for all of us.”

After graduation, Nick worked in the NHS and later the voluntary sector. He was first elected as a Councillor in 2000, representing our neighbours to the west of the campus. Following Labour's defeat in the 2004 Council election, he became the group's deputy leader, then leader in 2007. Labour won majority control in 2011, and Nick began an 11-year term as Leader of our City Council.

When I asked Nick's husband Darren for his insights on Nick, he sent me a proud and striking rollcall of dozens of achievements, from the Fairness Commission to free community WiFi. If Darren will forgive me, I'll not list them all but mention some that have profoundly affected the University.

Nick's vision was of economic growth and job creation, but he was faced with austerity. His response was innovative: he secured new financial powers by negotiating one of the first City Deals with the then Conservative government. That created a continuing legacy of joint investment by the city, private sector and University. Newcastle Helix is just one example of this, now a buzzing home to tech enterprises alongside our Business and Computing schools, and the UK's National Innovation Centres for Data and Ageing. The University's national recognition as a leader in knowledge exchange and business creation is a consequence of Nick's capacity to build relationships and confidence.

A vocal champion for local decision-making, Nick made tough choices to go with the North of Tyne devolution deal, paving the way for the Combined Authority with whom we work so closely today. The connections between our place and our values as a university can scarcely have been stronger than they are now, and we owe much of that to Nick's ability to bring ideologically diverse groups together to solve shared problems. Those partnerships were tested in our collective response to the pandemic, holding the city together amid ever-changing announcements from Whitehall.

Nick's experience growing up meant he knows the strain that LGBT+ people deal with every day, judging how openly to respond to others, negotiating a minefield of reactions. He knew that, for the Council, inclusion could not mean flying rainbow flags every so often. By working from the ground up, he led Newcastle to the top of the national tables for inclusive culture and practice; a source of pride to many more than Nick himself.

He has fostered numerous initiatives that give a voice for the North, including the Convention of the North and Core Cities. He led the Local Government Association Labour Group for 7 years, served in Shadow Cabinet, Labour's National Policy Forum and National Executive Committee. He was awarded a CBE in 2019 for services to Local Government.

Although he has left Council politics, he has lost none of his commitment. He is a Non-Executive Director for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and an honorary patron of LGBT+ Labour. He is a Senior Political Advisor at Strategy International, and Engagement Director at the Purpose Coalition, working across party lines to break down barriers to opportunities in a range of businesses and organisations. Importantly for us, he remains a member of University Court.

Emily Cox, chair of Gentoo, of which Nick is now a non-Executive director, says that Nick is a person of principle, but "When I think of Nick, I think of him making me laugh". He has a mischievous sense of humour and makes his points through vignettes told with gusto. Our Pro-Chancellor Pat Ritchie worked alongside Nick for nearly a decade at the City Council. She says that he is "political to his core", but not averse to setting the world to rights with his Chief Executive over a glass of something on a Friday.

Nick finds solace in walking in the Scottish Highlands, and in music. In fact, he's intensely musical. He's been singing with the Royal Northern Sinfonia Chorus for over 25 years and describes the absorbing joy of choral singing. But I think there is a deeper resonance: choral singing is a uniquely communal activity. I think, for Nick, beneath the ebbing, flowing, ever-changing voices of daily politics, there is a *cantus firmus* – a longer, ancient, northern song of shared purpose, solidarity, welcoming everyone in.

**Professor Day**, for his commitment to local democracy and its power for good, for giving his voice to this region and its people, for turning his talents and personality to creating a city of inclusion, I present to you Nick Forbes as a candidate for admission to the degree of Doctor of Civil Law *honoris causa*.

Prof. J S Fitzgerald  
Senior Public Orator  
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