

Asking a Favour

A speech given by David Cadman at the graduation ceremony of the
Faculty of the Built Environment, University of the West of England

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Like others this morning, my first and pleasant task is to congratulate all of you who have graduated today. And I include in this not only all of your friends and family but also your teachers and tutors, all of whom will have helped you in this achievement, and all of whom celebrate with you.

Now given my allotted 7 minutes, I could talk about the wonders of the property industry and I was told that I might make a joke. But actually I have decided to do neither of these for, if you will forgive me, I want to ask you a favour.

You have now done all that has been asked of you. Each year, for something like five or six years, if not more, you have passed one examination after another, each time jumping through the hoop that has been put in front of you. You deserve a rest, but in fact I want to ask you to face up to another and different kind of challenge. A challenge that might lead you to question some of the driving principles of the world that you are about to enter.

In my lifetime, I have seen the growth of a dangerous fantasy – a fantasy that gives us the illusion that we can all have, all that we want, all of the time; and that we have a right to consume all that we desire. Indeed, I have heard it argued that our well-being depends utterly upon the pursuit of this fantasy; that the very health of our economy depends upon our unbounded and ever increasing consumption. The danger is that, although this is a fantasy, it is very attractive and compelling.

In fact, it is so attractive that we want to believe that it is true. Indeed, often without question, we have come to believe that it is the only truth and that all other propositions are, in some way, ‘unreal’. And so it is that we have been happy to go along, adjusting the deck chairs on the Titanic of blind consumerism. But I am afraid to say that the reality is that there is an iceberg in our path. Only this time the iceberg is melting!

The evidence of global environmental degradation and social instability is overwhelming. For, as our consumption has grown, it has become increasingly dependent upon an ever distant, and therefore, uncertain supply chain. Whilst, at the same time, it has put under stress the very systems of life upon which we, our children and our grandchildren depend. This is not sustainable.

And, as recent research suggests, the irony is that for all of this, we feel no better off than we felt 30 years ago. Despite all of the apparent growth – an almost doubling of GDP – with its consequent pollution and waste, our sense of well-being, the ‘life satisfaction’ index, has remained static. No progress at all¹. And yet, despite this evidence, the fantasy grows. And the gap between the image and the reality is ever wider.

And the evidence is there in the faces of the children of Africa, in flood and famine, in increasing storm and tempest, in ugliness and brutality, and in the violence of the few and the suffering of the many. For, although the problems often seem far away, far from our place of privilege, it is worth reminding ourselves that it is this distance and this privilege that gives us an awesome responsibility for the lives of others.

So the favour that I ask of you is this: Look at your world and check it out! Check it out with an open mind. But be persistent in your questioning. Check it out even when others tell you that you are just being difficult; and, most especially, check it out when they say that you are being ‘unrealistic’. For it is, after all, this definition of reality that is being questioned.

What you do matters. You are blessed with skills and intelligence, with energy and comparative wealth. Use them. And use them more wisely than those of us who stand on platforms and speak to you. You have the imagination. You have the opportunity to decide the road that you will take. You have the future. Use it well, for it is all that we have.

So that’s it! When I told Professor Fudge what it was that I proposed to say this morning, there was some sucking of the teeth. Perhaps even some wishing that he had asked someone else to speak. And so I can only ask you to forgive me for not telling you about the property industry and for not telling you that joke. In any event, I am sure that you already know much more about these things than I do, and have already formed your

¹ New Economics Foundation, *The Power of Well-being*, 2004.

own opinions. For like King Lear, I now stand somewhere between a king and a fool, whereas you, no doubt, like the army at Agincourt, “stand like greyhounds in the slip, Straining upon the start.” Or perhaps not!

In any event, whether you are ‘straining upon the start’ or just looking forward to a bit of a rest, I hope that you will find that which you seek. And, if you can, I hope that you will do so in a spirit of boldness and determination. I wish you all the very best.

David Cadman, 2004.

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