

HERIOT-WATT UNIVERSITY

L A U R E A T I O N

PAUL RENNIE, OBE

BY RUTH MOIR • WEDNESDAY 19 JUNE 2019

Chancellor, I have the honour to present for the Honorary Degree of Doctor of the University, Paul Rennie.

Paul was born here in Edinburgh and educated at George Heriot’s School. Foreseeing the man he would become, and reflecting on Paul’s achievements at Heriots, his teacher said “he was an obvious choice for School Captain: unafraid to make decisions; utterly loyal but prepared to criticise”. Going on to describe him as articulate, thoughtful, affectionate and clever, she refers to his “no problem” philosophy, and his energy, lust for life, and sparkle that was reported even at primary school. Paul went on to graduate with an MA in Economics & Politics from the University of Edinburgh and an MSc in Economics from the University of York. He is a skilled orator, poet, a family man and a truly global citizen; describing himself as an ‘education futurist’, he speaks English, Portuguese, Dutch, French and Hindi.

Paul entered into a diplomatic career as a professional economist with the British Government in 2001. Currently Director for Diplomacy and Networks, he is leading the strategic programme to transform the Foreign and Commonwealth Office into a more expert and agile organisation by 2020. He has served at the United Nations leading UK negotiations on the Economic and Social Council; in Brazil, as the Head of the Economic Department; and in India, as Head of Political. He has also spent time on secondment to the Cabinet Office and as a Programme Manager at the Department for International Development in India.

In 2015, he was appointed Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the Queen’s New Year’s Honours List for services to UK-India relations. When the Scottish comedian and actor Billy Connolly received his knighthood in 2017, an interviewer said “this must mean a lot to you, with you coming from nothing” He looked at her and laughed. “I didnae come from nothing” he told her. “I come from something”. And this is true of Paul Rennie. You could say he comes from an ordinary working class family; but that wouldn’t be true. His family is extraordinary. He comes from immigrant roots – Paul’s maternal grandfather escaped Poland in the second World War via an incredible journey to Scotland; his paternal grandfather joined the navy at 16 and shared stories of Africa and the world; his mother had an HGV license at 21, and was one of our first female taxi drivers; his engineer father built their home, alongside his normal work. Both parents instilled strong values sharing a passionate belief in diversity and respect and in education as the means to transform lives, to create choices and the route to fulfil a useful place within the world. And we are delighted that Paul’s mother and father – Morag and John Rennie are here with us today.

We first encountered Paul through his role as Deputy High Commissioner in Malaysia, leading on Education Strategy for South East Asia and responsible for launching the UK Government Initiative, Education is GREAT, promoting UK education overseas. A local Head Teacher describes Paul’s significant contribution to British Education in Malaysia and the wider region as “a clear reflection of his ability to lead at the highest levels. It shows his passion for education and his belief in its capacity to change lives and make a difference in our world.”

Paul has been a passionate advocate of Heriot-Watt University in Malaysia, engaging with many students on campus and using the stunning Heriot-Watt University campus in Putrajaya as the location for the launch of Education is GREAT, bringing Ministers of Higher Education and senior leaders from Industry and Academia to Heriot-Watt. He is a strong advocate of the university, supporting Heriot-Watt and the work of British schools and Universities in Malaysia.

Paul’s wife – also a career diplomat – says that “the greatest miracles happen with the smallest audiences” and there is something here that characterises the contribution Paul makes to the world. Not only creating major stage presence for the UK through Royal Visits and VIP events overseas, but bringing these to bear on individual children and local schools and colleges, raising aspiration and changing individual lives.

Chancellor, in the name of the University and by the authority of the Senate, in recognition of his passion and contributions to UK education overseas and to Heriot-Watt University, I call upon you to confer the Honorary Degree of Doctor of the University on Paul Rennie.