**Prize Day, 2022**

Good afternoon everyone. Thank you very much, Mrs O’Hare, for the very kind invitation to be here today. It really is a privilege to be back at Wallace. And it feels as if it’s been no time at all. Now, I’ll shortly be attempting to offer you some words of wisdom, as is the expectation in any Prize Day speech, which is a prospect that both excites and terrifies me, because in many ways I feel as if I could use much more advice than I could possibly give. But if there’s one thing I can say with complete assurance, it is simply that time really does fly, so buckle up. And since I’ll be up here rattling on for about an hour or so, I thought we could put that idea to the test. Just kidding, I’ll rattle on for at least two hours.

Now, the last time I was on this stage it was for my own year’s Prize Day, for the Class of 2010. So we’re talking *five* prime ministers ago. And the time beforehand also stands out quite vividly, because on this stage in December 2009 I actually had a very public and heated row with Mrs O’Hare – in this very spot. Now, I should probably clarify at this point, that the row in question was part of a scene in Christmas Pie – probably an important detail.

Now, down to some serious business. A few years down the line, what have I learnt since my time at Wallace that might, just might, in some way be useful for some of you sitting here this afternoon? Because the things we learn in this place are of course important and help prepare us for what comes next. But there are many things that we’ve yet to discover or experience for ourselves. The learning never stops.

For me, it didn’t take too long to learn a pretty big lesson: how to deal with things when Plan A doesn’t work out. I’ll be honest, at school, I was used to things going fairly well. A notable exception, I should say, was in PE. In my Year 10 report I didn’t mind getting something like an E for performance, because my performance was worthy of an E – at best. At all. I did take the E for effort a bit more personally, well, I did actually try; it just didn’t make any difference! But for most other things, things generally went well at school. I knew that it was important to have a plan, and it seemed to be the case that working hard led to that plan working out. Until that wasn’t the case.

After I left Wallace, I was excited to be heading to university in London. I went on to study International Relations at the London School of Economics, LSE, and that was all part of the plan – get my degree there, work in the Foreign Office, and eventually work at the United Nations. That was the dream. That was the plan. But it turned out that I actually didn’t like studying International Relations very much. It wasn’t what I thought it would be like. I also didn’t like studying at the LSE. It’s one of the top-ranked universities in the UK, indeed in the world, but I didn’t enjoy learning there. And I didn’t like living in London. It’s a city that I loved, and still do love, but it wasn’t a place where my 18-year-old self could easily settle. So I had a bit of a problem. The plan wasn’t working out, and it was particularly tough because I wasn’t sure how much this had to do with mere teething issues – things that are an inevitable part of any big transition and would fizzle away over time – or something more fundamental. I decided it was the latter. Plan A wasn’t right for me and I needed a Plan B.

While this was by no means a case study in extreme adversity, it was still very hard to admit and hard to deal with. I realised that I needed a bit of time to think, so I took the rest of the year out – worked a café and did volunteered to help out in a politician’s office. And the next year I activated my Plan B: a degree in Politics at Queen’s, which I loved. Even though it was Plan B, I really wouldn’t have done anything differently. Trying something that wasn’t meant for me only made me more confident that the path I chose instead was the path for me.

I realised that I was quite good at studying politics and I didn’t really want to stop. I figured that there were plenty of problems in the world and I wanted to learn more about why they existed – and how they might be fixed. At this point I felt ready for a new challenge, a new adventure. That took me to Canada for my Masters degree, back to Northern Ireland for my PhD, and then onto Belgium for a research position, before coming back to Queen’s for my current job. I feel privileged to have been able to take this path, but it didn’t unfold in a straight line: as I moved from one part of the journey to the next, at each point along the way it was because I was rejected from something else.

You’ll be glad to know that I’ll not go through each of these twists and turns along this journey; suffice to say there *were* twists and turns. This leads me to emphasise again the value of Plan B, even Plan C, and embracing it for those times when Plan A doesn’t work out. We can learn a lot about ourselves along these scenic routes, as well as the very purpose these journeys might actually serve. It’s a different kind of learning than the kind we do for coursework and exams, but just as – if not more – important.

By far the most scenic place along my journey – scenic, this time, very much in a literal sense – was Vancouver, on the west coast of Canada. When I first arrived and went along to the induction session as part of my Masters programme at the University of British Columbia, I was introduced to the motto of my new university: *Tuum Est*, meaning, “It’s Yours,” in Latin. So, all very inspirational; a fitting way of getting everyone motivated to seize this opportunity to learn in a wonderful place, use it to meet their goals, pursue their master plan. “It’s yours.” But *Tuum Est* can be interpreted another way. It’s usually translated as simply, “It’s yours,” but it can also mean, “It’s up to you.”

From time to time, words really do have a way of resonating with us, stopping us in our tracks, and staying with us, for some reason. In this case, I think it’s precisely because of the ambiguity, not just in the *meaning* of *Tuum Est*, but in how we *feel* in response, or at least how I felt in response. “It’s yours,” brings a sense of comfort, security. “It’s up to you,” seems to do just the opposite, shifting the focus away from what we *have* to what we *give*.

But through that tension, I think, is what can really bring out the best – for us, and the world around us. We need to feel a certain amount of comfort and security to be able to fully function, but feeling some discomfort from time to time can help us grow. We can come up with our Plan A based on what we think is best at the time, but we should be prepared to switch to Plan B when we need to. We should be guided by the things we enjoy and the things we’re good at, but we can think of them as part of a bigger picture. We can and should celebrate our achievements, but also to keep in mind that we have a responsibility to put them to good use. That’s why today is so important to celebrate your success, and also why you always have to listen to someone like me to give you the chance to think about and reflect, in some way, what you want your success to be for. It’s yours, and it’s up to you.

You’ll already be very familiar with another motto. It’s on your blazers, it’s on the lectern, it’s on the wall. *Esperance*, hope. Sometimes the words that we’re used to can become so familiar that they lose their meaning, or at least fall dormant. But sometimes they can really resonate at just the right moment. I can remember very well my very first day in this place – when I was about four feet tall, walking down Clonevin, and through the gates towards this imposing building. I felt many emotions – you’ll remember what it was like for you.

One of these emotions was a real sense of hope. And I guess, that was for myself: simply hope for an exciting and rewarding future. Now I also have a great deal of hope, this time not because of what lies ahead in my future, but because I see all of you sitting in this hall in front of me. I know that every single person has achieved so much, I know that you’ve all received or are still receiving an amazing education from exceptional teachers who really care about you, and whether you take the scenic route or another path, I know that you’re going to go on and do amazing things for yourselves and for the world around you. It’s yours, and it’s up to you.