

Ian Brown's speech to the ICAEW (Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales), March 21st 2009

Good afternoon,

It really is a privilege to be invited along to speak to you today. My thoughts today are about a lifetime of **you** *inspiring confidence* in your future careers and **me** and my lifetime – thus far – *confidently inspiring others*.

First things first; a big and genuine “well done” for getting here today... I'm not a natural academic but having done a dissertation for a Master's degree once (well, **three** times actually, but that's another story!), I do know the sacrifices those graduating have made... and it is dwarfed possibly only by the sacrifice of those around you who have made the space in their lives to facilitate your achievement of three years of professional experience/training plus some difficult exams.

Keith Proudfoot “inspired” me mid-week by passing on Theresa Graham's speech from last year's graduation – she is a chartered accountant and Commander of the British Empire, and it was a riveting read that had me typing in competition rather than following my more natural inclination to 'wing' it.

However, two things struck me from what she had to say. One is that her personal story – like mine – will probably be of interest and inspire you, and secondly that everything that is said in 2009 has to be set against a world that has changed in places beyond belief... by the way, I believe wholeheartedly it is good news for graduating chartered accountants. I am an eternal optimist, but even discounting that factor...

My career path I will come to in a minute, but as a retired farmer I was briefly tempted to stand before you and say that I'm a only a tenant farmer and will be speaking for the next half an hour on the importance of the humble turnip to the agrarian economy!! – but I wouldn't be so cruel.

I normally speak to mixed... sometimes they have indeed been very mixed... audiences, so to get a room full of a single profession is rare and I could not help but Google the collective noun for accountants. I'm reliably informed it is a '**balance**'. I thought in 2009 a '**crunch**' of accountants has a better ring; being in Brussels on Thursday I had this translated into the main languages of the 27 European states and it came out as '**Le Crunch**' of accountants. Of course the collective noun for farmers is a '**grumble**' – or is it perhaps a '**whine**'? – (with an 'h').

So as indeed English is becoming the common language of the world (after numbers, of course), it would appear you are uniquely placed to go from this place and conquer the world... an ex politician (like what I am) can't help but be aware and in awe of Barack Obama. I am indeed keen to send you away with a “**yes you can**” attitude. Hell, I have, and that in itself should encourage you.

So I'm told that those qualifying today will have a varied career, with some being in Practice, others going into business and some perhaps running their own business. Firstly, before you set off on that professional journey through life, pause for thought; the plans you have need to reflect on a given in life. That given is that change is the only constant, and if the last 12 months have not reinforced that then nothing will.

Two hundred years ago, in 1809, Charles Darwin was born, and it strikes me that **evolutionary improvement** through **natural selection** is something farmers may well understand better than some politicians at this current time. As a board member of One North East – our regional development agency – I am corporately linked in to making some judgements about business success here in the north east and placing interventions to help some businesses here. It is my view that the graduating accountants in this room will have a similar impact on the economy with their timely advice and counsel.

You are trained now to inspire confidence as an accountant; you will generally wish to make things clear for your client, deal with accuracy, simplify the chaos, and allow the journey to business expansion to be

understood. Of course your skills may be used to contract the business, to reduce a liability, or indeed you may be asked to use your numeracy in a hundred other ways to save or generate your client cash and improve their decision making.

This is where I smile... I am not correctly wired to be an accountant. Nor, by the look of it, is my 13-year-old son, Jordan: he hates Thursday mornings, which start with triple maths. I have though been mistaken for an accountant over the years. I was not unhappy at their guess – given I was probably a politician at the time, virtually any profession would have been an improvement, and my real career of Northumbrian peasant is hardly the pinnacle of achievement! Well, not until after the revolution. (I say that in the 700th year that the Percy family, my landlords, have owned land around Alnwick, in Northumberland – a 700-year-old business must have had some excellence in bookkeeping a long the way!)

The first time I was mistaken for an accountant was by one of the very best businessmen I ever did a deal with anywhere in the world. He was selling wooden elephants on the sand outside the Shelley Beach Hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, and after haggling for a while he said, “You just have to be an accountant, or perhaps you are one of those Olympian haggling Northumbria farmers I have been told to watch out for?”... Otherwise it tends to be cockney London taxi drivers and Australian barmaids... bless, I wish I'd met more of the latter than and less of the former, ho hum – perhaps in my next life!

Before I leave the issue of your lifetime impact on the economy, a quick plea for the north east region. It's a fantastic place to live, work and rear evolutionarily improved children. If you go elsewhere in the country or world I wish you well, but do consider a return later in your career, having learnt much. As we launch an 'enterprise surge' here in the north east we will need accountants to keep these new enterprises on course, and if you stay here there are many ways to use your new talents for social, economic and environmental betterment.

I am born and bred north east, back to the 1600s and into the border mires, passing by the thicker cousin of Capability Brown in the 1700s. Don't be fooled by my lack of a local accent; I spent the first few years as an adult in a kind of Archers-esque pantomime, so rumours that I actually swapped my Geordie accent for five magic beans early in my early twenties are only half true. My mother was very angry when I returned home without the dairy cow... sorry; local accent. I listened to my Mum because we have a farming partnership, my mother and I, in which the business distributes both profits and losses 50:50 – unless there are good taxation incentives to alter that to, say, 99:1.

Seriously, I do want to know when I became posh, because my first nickname at public school was 'pudding' and my son also reminds me not to go 'housy touty class' on the trains – 1st class to you and I! Anyway, Mother's day tomorrow, so it had better all be smoothed over by then – some solid catering and a bit of thoughtfulness should do the trick. My restaurant – 12% mine actually – at The Baltic may have a few places left for lunch tomorrow if you have left it to the last minute. (My apologies, this speech is no place for product placement – even though I am the private sector!!)

So, before a little canter through the chaotic existence that I call my “portfolio career”, a little bit more about quality of place and life/work balance. You are about to spend a good chunk of your life in and around work and for some of you the lines between work and life will blur. At this point in the speech more than 20% of you – my audience – may have already considered checking or indeed have checked your Blackberry? I absolve you of your sins!

You are in good company I had the privilege to be at the 'Lord Mandelson meets cup of green custard' incident a fortnight yesterday... I was inside and got to hear your Prime Minister crack a joke about Lord Mandelson turning green. Being inside the building and not watching Sky News live, we didn't get the joke – so we all laughed enthusiastically without knowing why... when the PM tells a joke those with a planned future career do tend to chuckle enthusiastically. Lord Mandelson is a consummate checker of emails while on stage at meetings; it is not a criticism, but I think you must try to be in control of the 'beast' that is your career for towards 80% of the time. People – indeed friends – are more long-lasting than things; you will get joy from both. Set your targets for success in such a way that there is a balance, so you have no more regrets than you can laugh off.

That last thought reminds me that my father suggested that a good talker like me might consider the church as a career. He pointed to the 1-day week; I have occasionally made this comment to overworked and underpaid rural clergyman, and it has brought about several non-Christian responses from them. Before you chuckle at this next line, realise that I **did** say it to the moderator of the United Reformed Church on Holy Island, at a religious retreat, while discussing dwindling congregations and rising costs. I said: “You need a benchmark financial figure, perhaps cost per church member per sermon delivered.” I think that day we were both fluent... sadly in different languages. I have been a church elder so I say it in the right spirit. I do work with both state and church, which is challenging – that is when I'm not trying to make a living from profitable business and generating income for the nation's greatest and neediest charity – HMG treasury.

You too will have such fuzzy moments when you speak to people like me... if you are lucky you will not have to deal with too many people like me. I am unsure whether “chameleon” or “rural enigma” is the best descriptor for myself... if only you had your Sky remote you could have voted with your red button.

The true things can be the funniest. I occasionally get asked to do Q&As in business magazines, and one such time I was in a classic ten-words-will-do mood – pithy and to the point. I then picked up a back copy of the magazine and saw the last month's victim was far more verbose. Two days go by, the phone rings and I'm asked to clarify a few points, by somebody sounding and behaving very junior. They proceed to start rearranging phrases and claim they have never heard of the word “blue screen”... perhaps they never had a Microsoft programme on their computer before... I used the phrase “diversified farm” and they wanted me to say “farm diversification”... and then, in the spirit of leaving the best till last, they said that I'd claimed to be a rural enigma: could I expand? I kinda hinted that I could not – by definition! This person then phoned my wife and said “your husband said he's an enigma: can you explain what he meant?” My wife of 18 years is – of all people – qualified to endorse the description without adding a word; a deep sigh is, or should have been, enough!

So I am programmed to do complex and joined up! I have 7 offices I can work from, 10 business cards, and I am to hats what Elmeda Marcos was to shoes. I peaked during my political days at 89 committees and that's why I struggled to look you in the eye during the work/life balance bit of my speech. An aside was 202 free meals in the tax year of 1999.

I'm driven... I once said to a bank manager (now there's a profession with a falling share price) that I was guilty of nothing more than optimism. That was true: I had performed well as an entrepreneur and he poorly as a bank manager. I have since learnt that risk money rarely in the old days and never nowadays comes from a high street bank – or quango, as some have almost become. (A quango being a quasi non-governmental organisation.)

I have been unusual in finding my way into 'the world of quangos' **almost** as an innocent... almost can be the largest word in the dictionary. At 26 I had joined Ofwat, the water watchdog, a secretary of State appointment. Sad, I know.

Okay, I will relent, and give you a précis of my 43 years in a series of short phrases and descriptions. You'll be glad it is one per eight-month period, and I'll whistle through!

- born as baby – 8lb 6oz
- toddler – ran away looking for conferences to attend
- toddler with horse's hoof mark on head – following equine/canine incident
- toddler – tethered to washing line following risk assessment
- attended first school – had picked up stutter and a patch, my aunty was 50% of teaching staff
- moved to Methodist boarding school in Yorkshire following their misplaced scholarship decision
- academia and I parted here for the next two decades – aged 14 – good 'O' level results
- linkage between good Yorkshire ale and lowering of 'A' level results proved conclusively
- flunked 'A' levels led to rejection from Newcastle University – forgiveness still not given!
- ran 5th/6th form tuck shop – learnt about trading within closed economy
- worked on farm in Northumberland... fire in baler later proved to be an accident
- 18, joined Young Farmers' club – made vice treasurer at inaugural meeting 'cos I had a maths 'O' level
- gave speech to 250 people in castle in front of Duke of Northumberland and others
- did HND in agriculture at Edinburgh University/East of Scotland college as mum had before me

- milked cows in Fife for a year for a giant
- came back to college for a few weeks, only to receive phone call to say my father had died – he was 54
- inherited business aged 21 as only child; a tenancy and a liability greater than the assets is mine
- carried on at college while still running a farm business in partnership with my mother
- having asked what the pass mark was got HND in agriculture – just
- went round the world for 8 weeks
- sold father's collection of 600 pieces of vintage farm machinery
- convinced myself the wings on a ford fiesta were designed to be renewed every 2,000 miles
- came 2nd and 3rd in the Tenant Farmer of the Year competition
- planted 1000 oak trees
- dug 7 ponds and restored 5 miles of hedges and planted lots more trees
- realised other careers existed but did like the views and the Georgian farm house at Lee Moor Farm
- did the National Farmers' Union to national level
- married Lindsay Anne Bell – trainee accountant, later becomes sales negotiator for an estate agent
- found source of mineral water on farm
- measured CO2 output from business in 1995
- travelled to 35 European conferences all over an expanding EU – about the CAP
- Natalie Elizabeth Brown born
- Jordan Alexander Brown born
- became county councillor; planned to be MP or MEP for Lib Dems
- Caitlin Anastasia Brown born
- started a Master's degree from Durham University in Entrepreneurship
- my wife joked about millennium child
- Amy Larissa Brown born – year 2000
- regretted committing to writing 25,000 word dissertation for MA but waded through and passed
- left politics – rewarded with honorary alderman status for Northumberland County Council
- converted farm buildings into business park
- installed broadband by satellite ahead of local town having it
- Minister of Agriculture Nick Brown MP opened business park
- HRH Prince of Wales visited farm/business park post foot and mouth
- worked for Business in the Community for 15 months... commuting, proper job and pension
- Secretary of State appointments to Environment Agency and ONEnortheast
- started Fresh Element Ltd – catering business
- started social enterprise Local Living Ltd
- started and finished game (fur and feather) business
- did two weeks studying future of farming in hotel in Devon... came home and stopped farming
- started renewable energy business Sustainable Heating Solutions UK Ltd – used to be Toasty Heating
- started TV enterprise concept
- started hotel concept called “Lamberts... trust in Lamberts”
- realised an 'expert' is anybody competent working more than 50 miles from home
- realised you can earn more £500/day and keep your clothes on
- failed applicant for The Apprentice (second series) and Dragons' Den (third series)
- became one of the very same usual suspects I fought hard to counter 20 years ago

So in answer to the question from the taxi driver, “what is it you do?”, “enigma” or “professional chameleon” is preferential to choosing from the list of:

- farmer
- sustainability expert
- plumber
- entrepreneur
- father x 4
- businessman
- son
- professional chair
- usual suspect
- licensed victualler
- professional lay person

- caterer
- social entrepreneur
- wood fuel salesman
- amateur raconteur
- ex politician
- forester
- farm worker
- holder of firearms and shotgun certificates
- networker extraordinary
- democracy commissioner
- retired water watchdog
- retired church elder
- retired chair of school governors

It is non-deniable, I stand before you guilty as charged: I am complex.

If I could make money from one thing would that satisfy me? Probably not; I'm too far gone. Interestingly, professionally as accountants you will come across people with complex affairs, many bank accounts, several trading names, a story that sounds credible but the figures don't always add up. Treat these people with caution: the majority of them are indeed fraudsters – but a percentage are the type of entrepreneurs that will bring this recession to an end. Now **I know** never to put more than 10% of my expenditure in sundries, it only encourages you number folk to have a rummage. I once blogged that I had only had three VAT inspections over my business lifetime, and within 18 hours I had a phone call from Birmingham organising a random inspection... I did link my blog to the HMRC website – it was a coincidence, I'm sure!

So how can rabid entrepreneurs and chartered accountants work in synergistic harmony?

I must break off at this point and apologise for not passing around my “buzzword” bingo cards. My social enterprise business Local Living had a board meeting on red nose day, last week. I won on a line and shouted out “affordable social house”, winning half a dozen organic free range eggs. The government has suggested 100 of the words that are not to be used with and to civilians... I would have said “stakeholders”, but you guessed it – that's banned too. I have the list; I have probably used 20% of the banned words in my speech already.

The definition of a stakeholder is, of course, anyone who can sink your business!

Right, back to my advice on dealing with the Uber businessperson or serial entrepreneur. You could recommend them to a competitor... on the grounds that they are high-maintenance clients and untrainable. Or maybe you could see them as the grit from which pearls will grow?

Did I tell you that entrepreneurs speak mainly in metaphors, and dream in colour? You can tell a real entrepreneur by their reaction to the sensible advice: “Have you completed a business plan?” They will of course come up with 100 reasons why this is below them, and they just don't have the time, and it's all about intuition. The entrepreneur is often not very empathetic; they are narrative people who would rather talk about their ideas for an hour than write them down, even onto a fag packet. I fall into this camp; I had months to complete this speech and it came onto paper yesterday. Had somebody come to me at 3:30pm yesterday with a boutique hotel project for me to look at, guess what, the speech would have been done this morning – which would have had consequences.

The answer to this is that your experience in shuffling numbers has to be supplemented with a skill in shuffling people. Entrepreneurs... I was once introduced as an ex-entrepreneur, I remember the time and place, I was mortified by the description; can I fill you in on this? – there are dead ones and living ones; they, entrepreneurs, **don't** retire. I remember a conversation with a very significant regional figure – whose identity I will protect. I explained on a long train journey that in the event of my winning a million on the lottery – oops, lack of positive thinking: **when** I won a million quid on the lottery or pools I would utilise it to lever in and borrow several millions more to carry out the big ideas still left in me. I could see a look of horror spreading over my companion's face. At this point I realised my wiring digram for my brain was simply different – not wrong, just different. I know I'm not stupid – thanks to my Mensa membership I know

I'm a jolly good fellow... no, that'll be the RSA membership. I know I'm a farmer: I get subsidies not to farm and am a member of The Farmers Club in SW1 (No.3 Whitehall Court, to be accurate)... but being an entrepreneur does scare as many people as it impresses.

So, learning from this for you: encourage all businesses and organisations you work with to create a balanced portfolio of skilled and rounded people. I will be quoted in a magazine in 10 days' time as saying: "I'm as rounded as a pebble at the bottom of the Niagara falls."

I feel by now we have known each other long enough to talk about the R word: Risk. I'm afraid I do struggle to see it; **these** are special glasses that see only opportunities. Very dangerous without some balancing people and processes!

However, here's a nugget – I could have put it in the first paragraph but I think it needed the context of my story – there is a **new normality** to be found, in farming, in banking, in accountancy, **in life**. There is a race on and whoever finds the new normality makes a lot of money and becomes the new guru. If an expert is more than 50 miles from home a guru may well have to fly business class somewhere – followed by carbon offsetting, clearly.

I want you all to think about your success criteria because shortly – as this chapter closes and others simultaneously open – you'll be galloping off and events will dictate. This is just as it is in business – you need to be sometimes working in the business and other times on the business. Alter that to working in your life and sometimes on your life and it makes just as much sense.

Anyway, I can't believe I am old enough to lecture you on life skills but I have seen more than this recession. I know you're now judged not by how old you look but how many recessions you've seen; I am a three 'rec' guy... from the back of the room hard to believe I know, under candle light and soft focus I look barely a single 'rec' man!

So Farmer Brown's top tip might be try and have a good supply of friends in a range of disciplines. I'm staggered by acquaintances on Facebook with 500 friends; I barely have 40 and my new restaurant, Six, which opened in The Baltic barely four weeks ago, had 57 the last time I looked. Podcasting, blogging, twittering and LinkedIn all appeal to my pioneering spirit. Plus I can tell them all how busy I am... my 89-year-old granny started her diary with the word '**busy**' every day of her life; back to Darwin and those damn genes again!

I have though worked out that it is often the second mouse that gets the cheese and that in a race away from a lion the task in hand is outrunning your colleague – not the lion! As a pioneer and innovator I'd love to believe that I would get the credit and benefits from being years ahead – but social justice is rare. One lifelong friend – having conferred with others – suggested listening to my ideas, waiting 5 years, and then implementing them. I get equal measures of pleasure and pain from this truism.

Goodwill accounts should never be overdrawn – except in absolute emergencies – and in a knowledge-based economy, be reasonably generous if you can. In a region such as the north east I think you can work your way up. Respect is earned and I think the bit you may find difficult is delivering unwelcome news. Small business, and particularly family business, is very personal, and I for one very much live 'above the shop', so treating a business as just a set of numbers can be seen as antagonistic.

The analogy I use on the other side of the desk is that the businesses should hold money and that business is in two types – shredders and copiers. You put money in both; with one you get guinea pig bedding, with the other, more money... It's a metaphor; try not to think about the validity of the money. I realise that now printing money that can't really be spent but helps society is called quantitative easement... as I keep saying, we are in uncharted waters and there is need for skilled mariners... in terms of my business life it is true to say that a skilled mariner never learnt to sail on still waters. (Notice I have avoided the use of pirate or adventurer comparisons.)

My story in business began with the 5th-form tuck shop at Ashville College and I was introduced as an entrepreneur to the rotary club in Harrogate by our school bursar for my contribution to capitalism. My

invested directly in restaurants and fine wine a cynic may argue I have simply cut out the middle person in the chain. Better I get gout than have a trader acting on my behalf!!

I have invested in myself and you could argue I have lived my life in reverse, by which I mean I have been round the world, planted a thousand oak trees, done 20 years of philanthropy and started a career – in that order. Unusual, for sure; I understand there is a film about being born old and growing young; I'm not that mixed up but from where you have sat for the last 20 minutes it may be a close-run thing.

Thank you for listening. I pay tribute to the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. I have been impressed with your regional activities here in the Northern society and it is good to see professional organisations that don't start and finish at professional development points. Keith serves you well and I thank him again for allowing me to attempt to **confidently inspire** a group of men and women who will spend their careers **inspiring confidence**.

I look forward to following your careers and I trust part of today is about saying “thank you” to your guests for their help. If there was a toast it might have been to the guests.

Thank you for listening and God speed.