



**Eulogy for John Taylor**  
**Holy Trinity Cathedral, Parnell**  
**Thursday, 4 April 2024**

It must say something about the man we gather to honour this morning, that it takes more than one of us to speak to his full and vibrant life, well-lived. And yet despite that, it's all but inevitable that even between us all, we can hope only to cover part of what John managed to squeeze into his 82 full years.

This packed Cathedral and the many connected remotely, speaks to the breadth of John's benign influence across so many endeavours. It is apt that Sarah has asked that this morning's service be a celebration of a full life, well-lived. What a life to celebrate, because John Taylor touched so many, so beneficially, across a startling range of activity. Everywhere he went and in everything he did, he drew us together. He encouraged us. He inspired us. He enthused us and he made us laugh. He made friends everywhere he went.

I start from where Ken stopped; 1988, the year John and Sarah arrived in Otahuhu from the Wairarapa with their young family. It was a big step up and John was determined from the get-go to stamp his unique mark on Kings.

It started at his first assembly. Unbeknownst to John and unrecognised by anyone else, the new Headmaster's wife had sneaked into the back of the hall to watch how John fared. Sarah will tell you that it all seemed to go quite well. But as John began to exit and before he had left the stage, a disrespectful chatter broke out amongst the audience. John stopped. He said nothing. Few better understood and deployed the dramatic power of silence than JT. He simply stared out over the school. Slowly the chatter died down, replaced by a profound and slightly nervous silence. All eyes turned on the new Headmaster. Only then did John leave the stage. Kings College had just had its first taste of the man who would lead it to new heights and spectacular successes over the next 12 years.

How does anyone measure success in an educational leader? JT's natural modesty was such that even if asked, you probably wouldn't get a straight answer. But you might think that three of the most transformational changes over those 12 years were, first, his innate and instinctive understanding of core standards and values and incorporating them in the operation of the College. Secondly, increasing the racial and cultural diversity of the College, and thirdly, building a sustainable, critical mass of girls, thereby improving the educational outcomes of both genders. Of course, to that list you would add academic and pedagogical excellence but that is a given and I shall touch on how John promoted that later.

As for the first, John was no apologist for maintaining those core values sometimes dismissed as old fashioned and irrelevant. These included his deep faith, which was the glue binding together the other values he held dear such as kindness, respect, tolerance and social

morality. It may not have been everyone's cup of tea, but these were the principles which informed his approach to all aspects of his leadership.

It was probably most on display at the prospective parents' information evenings. At these John was welcoming. He was disarmingly charming, and inclusive. But no one in that particular audience was left in doubt about what was expected of them as parents. The ground rules were set there. If there was any question over whether you could meet John's standards, then Kings was probably not the school for you or your child. It was refreshing stuff and it worked. The College's roll swelled.

This is not to mean that there was anything pious or morally judgmental about John. Nothing could be further from the truth. He was wonderful company. He could be irreverent. He had those distinctive smiley eyes, expressive eyebrows and mischievous grin; all accompanied by a voice of such seductive and sonorous richness. JT had that rare ability to make you feel special, perhaps even interesting. In any room, no matter what size, that JT trademark laugh operated like a social magnet. It filled the room with its resonance. There was, and never will be again, a laugh of that infectious quality and distinctiveness in the history of mankind. If you weren't part of his group, you yearned to be. You knew that wherever John was, so too, would be the fun. The expression FOMO was probably invented with John in mind.

My first experience of that laugh was at a pre-enrolment parent interview, not that John was at all interested in interviewing the parents. He wanted to get to know the kid. We were just hand wringing by-standers.

The question-and-answer sequence went something like this:

"Well, Edward, what is your favourite subject?"

"English" came the answer.

"That's great. English is my favourite subject too. What part of English do you like most?"

"Punctuality, Sir"

John's reaction, a smile and a kind and gentle laugh, put everyone at ease, even if Edward didn't quite understand why what he had said made these strange grown-ups think it was so funny.

As for the second, racial and cultural diversity, it struck both John and Sarah within a very short time of landing in South Auckland, that Kings was something of a mono-cultural enclave paradoxically set in the middle of the most ethnically and culturally diverse community in the country. This had to change. And John set about effecting that change. He proved remarkably successful in recruiting Māori and Pasifika boys and girls and introducing innovative changes to the curriculum such as Te Reo and a re-energised and award winning kapa haka roopu.

There were other collateral advantages to this strategy. With a new talent base, the inter-house music competition morphed into an artistic extravaganza drawing such huge crowds that the venue had to be shifted to the Telstra Events Centre. Debating, a particular favourite of John's, flourished. And suddenly it became cool to be in the choir.

Oh, and of course, Kings rugby also enjoyed some modest benefits too. The first XV's drubbing at the hands of Wanganui Collegiate was never repeated and the College's somewhat dismal stats against our traditional nemesis, Grammar, finally took a turn for the better. It is in this context I must make particular mention of Sir John Graham, Grammar's legendary leader and one of JT's closest friends and confidante. They were cut from similar cloth. When Kings beat Grammar on 15 June 1996, the much-vaunted centennial contest, it was John Graham who was the first to cross the field to shake JT's hand. In his other hand he carried a bottle of single malt. The Grahams and the Taylors shared a close bond. JT delivered the eulogy at John's funeral, and I know Sarah has found great comfort in recent times from Sheila Graham's friendship and support.

The bonds formed with the Kings' Māori and Pasifika diaspora have endured. Quite recently, when Simon was desperately unwell and much of John and Sarah's time was spent visiting him in hospital, three young Pasifika doctors, all old boys, arrived in the ward. They descended on John and smothered him in a wordless embrace. Nothing needed to be said. It is difficult to imagine a more sincere demonstration of love, respect, and gratitude. John was deeply moved. I also know Sarah has found the many messages of goodwill from this particular quarter of the Kings family of great comfort.

The beautifully carved tokotoko, or walking stick, on top of John's coffin, is another tangible reminder of this connection. Amongst the kowhaiwhai scrolls, is a book, a rugby ball and the College's motto, Virtus Pollet. It was presented to John at his last assembly (which Sarah also attended although this time not incognito). John's tokotoko bears the scars of regular use, as it should, because it was much loved and treasured by him.

On that same note, it is so fitting that John's legacy will be on display after the recessional; a haka performed in his honour by present students and old boys as he leaves this Cathedral for the final time.

The third component of transformational change was JT's determination to increase the cohort of girls in the school. He considered that until there was an effective critical mass, girls would always remain as something of an oddity; a curious add-on to a boys' school. John firmly believed that boys in their first two years at the College needed to be allowed to be boys. But beyond that he saw the mutual benefits of a co-educational learning environment. For boys it softened their natural macho tendencies, self-harm risk and bullying. Faced with stiffer competition they also tended to try harder academically. For girls, it provided a more natural and stable environment within which to flourish. As with every other endeavour JT threw his energy into, his subtle under-the-radar marketing strategy bore dividends. According to Warner, who I am confident would never put me wrong in these things, the girls' roll nearly doubled in just two years. That the College's first day-girls' house was named after John by his successor Roy Kelley, is a worthy tribute to his commitment to co-education at Kings.

John will forever be remembered as one of the College's "great Headmasters". He led from the front. He consistently set for himself standards higher than those he expected of others. He surrounded himself with like-minded professionals and was no apologist for his

intolerance of those with unreasonable expectations of entitlement. In John's book you had to earn your place.

On that topic, I can think of no better example than the rugby team he coached. Although JT undoubtedly had the skills to do so, he considered it was not appropriate for the Headmaster to coach the 1<sup>st</sup> XV or one of the other elite rugby teams. Instead, he adopted what was arguably the least talented, group of sporting "no hopers" in the whole school. I'd like to say that just as it is in the movies, they pulled together and against the odds won the Auckland competition. But the unadorned truth is the very opposite. They didn't win a single game all season, but what they may have lacked in raw talent, they more than made up for in enthusiasm and esprit de corps. John aptly named them "The Invincibles". There was just one rule he insisted on. No team member was allowed to criticise another. At the end of the season, they celebrated with a slap-up dinner at John and Sarah's followed by a prize-giving at which the more memorable moments of their sporting deficits were relived.

After 14 years at the top, it was finally time for John and Sarah to move on. It took everyone by surprise. There was widespread disappointment. But John was determined to leave at the top of his game. He had achieved everything he had hoped for and more. Many said it was premature because he still had so much more to give. They were right about the latter, but the time had come to look to fresh challenges; reinvention and a second career.

Unsurprisingly, John's announcement was greeted with offers of work from all quarters. He turned down most, but it was the exciting proposal offered by John Hood, the then Vice-Chancellor of Auckland University, which he was unable to resist; to head up the University's new Alumni Relations and Development Office as its first Director. It was a role he held for 10 years until 2012 and he loved it.

John accepted the challenge. He was perfect for the job. He built up a cohesive team and in short order was the very public face of philanthropy and fund raising at the university. He was a natural for the job. His years at Christ's College, Rathkeale and Kings had opened up a formidable personal network of national and international connections. But, importantly, he was also a career educationalist who understood the needs of students and academics alike. His natural gregariousness, charm and irrepressible enthusiasm were also key assets in the new job.

John Hood was succeeded by Stuart McCutcheon as Vice Chancellor when the former took over the leadership at Oxford. Stuart and JT forged a formidable combination, perhaps best known for their highly successful "Leading the Way" campaign, launched in 2006. Its \$100m target was met with scepticism from some quarters that nothing so ambitious could possibly succeed in this country. How wrong the "naysayers" proved to be. Such was John's conspicuous success, that the original target was revised upwards to \$150m and then to a seemingly impossible \$200m. It closed at a remarkable \$203m, making it the single most successful philanthropic campaign ever undertaken in New Zealand.

Such was John's well-earned reputation as an expert in modern fund raising that his advice was sought by a host of agencies including schools, other universities, the New Zealand Olympic Committee and the NZRFU, to name just a few.

John never abandoned his interest and expertise in education. For example, for 12 years he sat on the Board of King's School. He made a massive contribution there, both strategically and professionally. He was instinctive and always a voice of reason, informed by decades in the industry. I know that the Prep's Headmaster Tony Sissons and his staff will feel the loss of JT's guidance acutely. On that point, I remember a discussion the Board was having about how best to deal with over-protective parents. All heads turned to John for inspiration. He rolled his eyes before commenting that he doubted his input on the topic would be of much use because one of the best things about Kings College is that it was in Otahuhu.

The last job the Board tasked John with was to find his successor. We needed another national leader in the sector. John gave us one in the form of Stuart McCutcheon who sat on the Board for seven years until his tragically premature death early last year.

On top of all this, John convened and chaired the New Zealand selection committees for the two most prestigious local undergraduate scholarship programmes being the Sir Douglas Meyers and Julian Robertson Scholars Leadership Programme. He was a founding trustee of the Mike Cormack Foundation, set up in memory of his great friend to support disadvantaged children.

For some years he sat on the Board of the Auckland Theatre Company, reflecting his passion for the performing arts going back to his days as a co-producer at Christs College and Rathkeale. Kit Toogood, a fellow Board member described John as the kindest and charming of men. How right.

In 2016 John was rightly recognised by the Queen when he was awarded an MNZM for his services to education. It is hard to imagine a more deserving accolade. For many years John had been a prominent and, frankly, courageous critic of what he considered to be a dangerous trend by successive Governments to tinker and experiment in the educational sphere. Years of experience had shown him that the basic building blocks for success remained unchanged. You might think his gong was something of an admission by the Executive that he was right after all.

I don't think it can ever be said that John retired. Sure, he and Sarah were able to spend more time together at their beloved Omaha; bought nearly 30 years ago; a place of refuge and very much their joint "happy place", shared with a large and loyal cadre of friends. Tennis had to give way to golf when John's chronically dodgy knees finally gave way and had to be replaced. His regular Wednesday group played at Royal Auckland for many years before John transferred to Omaha six years ago and as John Goddard's first lieutenant, set up the Friday FOGs group. I had uncharitably assumed FOG was an acronym for something unrepeatable in this refined company, but, sadly, the reality is much more banal; it stands for Friday Omaha Golfers who now number more than 40. As you might expect, John was front and centre. He enjoyed the fun and camaraderie of the 19<sup>th</sup> every bit as much as he did the game. It was John who explained to me with that wry grin of his that he had found golf to be a uniquely generous game; every shot pleases someone.

Mention must also be made of John's regular Monday night on-line bridge four with Mike Benjamin, John Henley and George Hunter; hardly an intense or humourless contest as you might imagine, but nonetheless highly competitive.

But back to Omaha. That close knit group of beachside friends has been a rock to John and Sarah especially through those dreadfully difficult and profoundly sad couple of years as Simon's health deteriorated. That same group now finds itself folding around Sarah as she confronts the incomprehensible reality of John's death.

John leaves behind many fine legacies. But none is more enduring nor of greater value than the family which he and Sarah created. With Sarah on his arm, he was invincible. They were the consummate team. Together they could take on anything and together they did. Theirs was an indivisible partnership, whether expressed in the workplace, on the sports field or, most importantly, as the loving parents of Lucy, Simon and Sophie.

John was rightly and desperately proud of each of his three children. Family was everything to him and last Christmas, with all the family around him, he was as happy and complete as he could ever have been with Ed and Lucy, Georgia, Angus and Phoebe, and with William and Sophie, Walter, Tommy and George. What a wonderful legacy. What a wonderful family.

Even at the age of 82, such was John's vitality and interest in life, that it is hard not to feel a bit cheated he has left us as early as he has. On the other hand, it's hard to think of anyone who has run their whole life at such a sprint and squeezed so much into the time given. JT wasted not a minute and thanks to his efforts he has left this world a much better place than it was when he first entered it.

Farewell our dear friend.

**Hon Justice Simon Moore**