

Farewell to Sir John Daniel



*After-dinner remarks at COL Board of Governors
Farewell Dinner for Sir John Daniel
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In 2000, Sir John came to give a keynote address at an international conference that I was organising in Delhi. He was the first speaker of the day and I rushed to the venue to ensure that all arrangements were in place. I was surprised to find that he was already in the hall, working with the technicians to load and test his presentation! I frequently cited this episode to my IGNOU colleagues as an excellent example of meticulous professionalism, prior planning, and attention to detail—something I later realised was his unmistakable trademark. As an IGNOU academic, I was an avid reader of almost everything he wrote—not only does he make even the most difficult concepts crystal clear, he does so in a style that is wonderfully witty.

His wit and delightful ‘English’ expressions which livened up even the most serious meetings, will be missed by all of us at COL. He could ‘rain on the parade’ if he thought colleagues were ‘off to the races’ or ‘sing like a canary’ for any one that needed support. Sir John and I did several ‘dog and pony shows’ at which we ‘motored along nicely’ while sometimes trying ‘to knock people’s socks off!’. While he could ‘butter the cat’s paws’ when necessary, he didn’t suffer anything that was ‘loosy goosy’! Always practical, Sir John didn’t see the point in consultants ‘borrowing our watch to tell us the time’ or allowing our RBM approach to become ‘too catholic’!

Many have not had the honour of seeing this side of Sir John. For the Commonwealth community, Sir John is seen as a larger than life persona, a mega personality who coined the term ‘mega university’. When I asked some key people around the Commonwealth to send me a personal note about Sir John, it invariably highlighted his tremendous contribution to open and distance learning. His predecessor at COL, Tan Sri Raj Dhanarajan said: “*Advocacy of an idea or innovation needs champions with knowledge, oratory and charisma. John Daniel possessed all three in abundance as he spoke for open and distance learning worldwide. He is truly a ‘poster boy for ODL[in the nicest sense]bridging 20th century ideology through 21st century technology*”.

I received this message from Prof. A.W. Khan, his former fellow ADG at UNESCO: ‘*I had the pleasure of working with Sir John at UNESCO. I don’t know of anyone who has contributed as much to the theory*

and practice of open and distance learning as he has. I pay my most sincere tribute to his outstanding leadership as the President of the Commonwealth of Learning.'

Prof. Olu Jegede , Secretary General of the Association of African Universities continues in more or less the same vein, *'Sir John helped craft the establishment of the Commonwealth of Learning in its early days.... Almost two decades later, he was leading COL and putting into practice what he had helped plan on paper. No wonder, COL has become a household word in all the nooks and corners of the globe.'*

While the men focused on his great contribution to open and distance learning, its interesting that the three women whom I approached for messages, took a more personal approach. Peecheeta Spencer from Antigua and Barbuda, for instance, recalls *'My first impression of Sir John was that this tall gentleman with the husky voice is an intellectual giant. Sir John's influence is far reaching, yet, he is very approachable. Sir John was always eager to meet with persons at the chalk face as he was to meet Presidents and Prime Ministers. As a result, he tended to appreciate the challenges on the ground wherever he visited. In this regard, I consider Sir John to be a citizen of the world who genuinely cares for the plight of people in under-developed countries.'*

Sir John has this magical quality of not only communicating effortlessly with heads of state, ministers, professionals and academics but he drew equal applause from illiterate women even when they did not understand a single word of what he was saying.

Nancy George, another friend of COL in the Caribbean recalls your visit to UTech: *'I was assigned the task of writing an introduction of you for the assembled masses... How to do justice to a man of such renown and so many singular achievements? I had GREAT fun exploring your diverse achievements and your firsts - including being the first person to speak from the pulpit of your church using a laptop for your remarks! And I remember that you were so pleased with the introduction, that you asked for a copy of it... your recognition of something you considered well done charmed me and made me your advocate forever.'*

Sir John's successor at the Open University of the UK, Prof Brenda Gourley remembers: *"I once asked John how he, unlike us mere mortals, managed to be immune to jet lag. He said that he never stays in the same place long enough to get out of his own time zone! This is not a man that lets the grass grow under his feet, yet he always seems unruffled and totally calm. His life story tells you that he is one of the most focussed, disciplined and hard-working people you are ever likely to meet".*

Just as many have marvelled about Sir John's conquest of the jet lag, I have often thought, with Shakespeare, about how 'age cannot wither him nor custom stale his infinite variety'! And the only conclusion I have come to is that this is due to his tremendous intellectual curiosity and zest for life.

My last message is from Caroline Seelig, Chief Executive of the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand who writes: *'In our advocacy of ODL in New Zealand, we've shamelessly quoted Sir John many times!. I've personally appreciated Sir John's wisdom, warmth and collegial good will. All of us here at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand thank him for his profound contribution to our field.'*

COL has been very fortunate to have Sir John at its helm for eight years. We are all enriched because of the many things we have learnt from him. We will miss his counsel, wit and wisdom. We wish him the very best as he takes up his many assignments in the Commonwealth and beyond. Thank you Sir John.