

I stand here as the Chair of Trustees of the Central Foundation Schools of London whose work began almost 150 years ago. Today, we rejoice at the achievement of this splendidly equipped, state-of-the-art, school which is now up and running, ready to go. Of course, there are still builders' snags to sort out and some parts of the old buildings have merely been given a lick of paint. But the overall outcome of so much hard work is wonderful to behold. We can only congratulate the Head and her magnificent staff for managing such a long period of transition so well. They deserve all the facilities which these new buildings will give them.

Our Foundation must now turn to effecting a similar transformation of its Boys' School in Islington. We must commit our energies and a great deal of our financial resource to bringing a similar transformation there to the one we're enjoying here today. I suppose there will always be parts of our old, Victorian buildings there too which will receive a mere lick of paint. But I long to see a new school emerge from the old there just like the one we see here today.

I want to share my dream for this school as it begins this new chapter in its history. It's a dream that's rooted in the story of my own life and I hope you'll excuse the intrusion of my story into the grand narrative of today's event.

I was born into abject poverty, destitution; I was raised by a single mother in one room in a brickyard. It was education that opened doors for me and gave me my life's opportunities. I want this school to do just that for all its pupils.

I was once a teacher, a university lecturer, and my field was Ancient and Medieval Studies. I can tell you about the populations who've lived in this country, who've bequeathed to us a many-layered, richly-textured society – Celts and Romans; Angles, Saxons and Jutes; Scandinavian Vikings; French, Scots and Irish; Jews and Moslems; people from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Across time and space these populations have left (and are making) a deep and cultured subsoil into which to plant our lives. I want this school to equip its pupils to make the most of this great heritage and add their own contribution to it.

I'm part of a family that has invested a great deal of itself in the Borough of Tower Hamlets. My wife spent 25 years of her career at the London Hospital at one end of the Mile End Road and our son and daughter-in-law have spent the whole of their married life at the other end (blessed five years ago by a son, our grandson). Our son spent x years on the governing board of this school. I

want this school to give its pupils an active sense of citizenship so that they can add value to this Borough and any other community they go on to live in.

I'm a Christian clergyman. My values and perspectives have been shaped and coloured by my beliefs. At the heart of my religion lies a saying I'd hold up to you now: "Perfect love casts out fear." I want this school to help Muslims to become good Muslims, Christians to become good Christians, people of other faiths to become good members of their faith communities and those of no religion to become good-hearted humanists.

I spent ten years of my life in (and I still work hard for) one of the poorest people on earth, the people of Haiti. I want this school to form pupils who are aware of a world where so many people suffer, where the gap between rich and poor is wide and getting wider, and I want them to work for justice and peace in our troubled world.

I'm a member of the British parliament where, months before a general election, a rhetoric that demonises immigrants is heightening to a pitch. I want this school to be a living proof that multiculturalism works, that trust and affection between ethnic and religious groups are real, and that we all stand united against racism, fascism, narrow nationalism and discrimination of any kind.

This is my dream. These are my hopes. Dreams and hopes can be such fragile things, evanescent, chimerical, delusional. The great thing about the hopes and dreams I've tried to describe is that they are not just the fantasies of an old man, a dry-as-dust chairman of committee who's been parachuted in to speak today. No. Not for one minute. These are dreams and hopes that are daily being put into practice by Esther Holland and her merry band of teachers and general staff. This school will educate, is educating, its Borough, our City, and our Nation in the values that can help create a better world. These dreams and hopes are embodied and active, fleshed out and alive, in the young women we prepare for the big wide world into which we send them.

I'm proud of my association with this school, proud to be the dry-as-dust chairman of committee parachuted in to speak today. I wish you all, - governors, head teacher, members of staff, parents and (especially) pupils well. The promise of a day like today is now waiting to be fulfilled in your work and lives. God bless you all.