

Chancellor Dharker,

A sunny September day in 2017 and a news crew is outside Sky UK's headquarters in West London filming Plasticus the whale, a 10-metre long sculpture made from a quarter of a ton of single-use plastic – the amount dumped in our oceans every second. Plasticus has been touring the UK highlighting Sky's "Ocean Rescue" campaign to reduce such plastics. Many Chief Executives aren't at their best giving interviews to camera on environmental subjects, but Sky's then-CEO, Jeremy Darroch, is passionate, committed, and not mincing his words about the need to tackle environmental loss and damage. Not the usual CEO, audibly a proud Northumbrian, and no shy bairn, he's not interested in greenwash, but action.

Born in 1962, Jeremy grew up in Alnwick. He describes a happy community and family life, his father working as an accountant, his grandfathers in the mines and on the railways. Like many of us born in the 60s, he witnessed the decline of traditional industries, as coalmines and factories closed with little to take their place, leaving the generation that Jeremy so admired largely unable to work again. It seems to have lit in him an ambition to work in businesses that bring opportunities, choice, and some happiness to as many lives as possible.

He studied Economics at the University of Hull before returning north to Newcastle. It was here, while training in accountancy with Deloitte, that he met his wife Rachel, who was studying Medicine – it's a great pleasure to welcome Rachel back to her university today. The two have a long and happy association with the city. Rachel tells me that Jeremy proposed in the Free Trade Inn, which many of us know well and has an (arguably) romantic location above the Quayside. They married in 1987, two of their children were born here, and they retain many close friendship and family ties to this region.

In 1988, Jeremy joined Procter & Gamble, the global consumer goods company, in Gosforth. It was a formative period. He says there was a simplicity to it: the importance of brand and trust; a collegial team wanting to succeed; understanding and caring about their consumers. He remembers being impressed when P&G singled out a small hair oil maker called Pantene and built it into the biggest hair care brand in the world. "You have this whole pipeline of ideas", he says, "and often it is quite unpredictable which ones will land and be successful."

From P&G, he moved to DSG International (formerly Dixons group) and then in 2004 to Sky as Chief Financial Officer, becoming CEO in 2007. When he joined Sky, the business was built around broadcasting sport, movies, and news, and some felt it was reaching the limits of its potential. He didn't – he refused to see Sky as defined by a product, but rather by its talented group of people with the ideas to broaden the business, use new technology, and create original arts, comedy, and drama. As in P&G, this was about embracing changes in consumer needs and meeting them well.

The computer scientists who have just graduated in this congregation know something about the pace of innovation and change. Jeremy describes innovation as a state of mind, which, if coupled with an understanding of consumers, is a powerful force. He promoted such innovation at Sky, which first launched a streaming service as early as 2006 and changed the whole industry by promoting the high-definition video that so many now take for granted. How education drives creative thinking and sustainable business is a subject of real interest and concern for him today.

By 2018, Sky's value had trebled under Jeremy's leadership. At the same time, he was instrumental in leading Sky's commitment to environmental sustainability. He led major initiatives including Rainforest Rescue that helped save more than 1 billion trees in the Amazon Rainforest, and Ocean Rescue that raised awareness of the devastating effect of plastics on ocean health – and brought us Plasticus the whale. They might have stopped at awareness, but Sky committed to action, eliminating single-use plastics from its own operations, products, and supply chains while supporting innovation to combat the damage that plastics cause, partnering with the World Wide Fund for Nature to adopt Marine Protected Areas.

In 2020, Sky pledged to achieve net zero by 2030, and in 2021 became a principal partner for the COP 26 conference in Glasgow. In his final public statement as CEO, Jeremy said, "This is no longer a game of numbers, or greenwashing, or pass the parcel. It's about achieving fundamental and sustained change in how businesses operate – investing in the future, not clinging to the past."

Jeremy was awarded the inaugural MIP United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Award in 2020 and serves as an ambassador for the WWF. He chairs the Trustees of the National Oceanography Centre, one of the world's most innovative oceanographic institutions. He has served on the boards of household names including Marks & Spencer and Burberry and is now on the Board of the Walt Disney Company and Chairs the Board of the Reckitt Benckiser Group. In 2018 he was appointed Chair of Business in the Community (BITC) which he helped transform into a world-leader in responsible business practice. BITC describes Jeremy as having invested more in the organisation than any other Chairman in its 40-year history. In 2023 he was knighted for services to Business, Charity and Sustainability.

What is this leading CEO really like? Debbie Klein, who was Group Chief Marketing & Corporate Affairs Officer at Sky, tells me that "He cares deeply about the people he works with and has invested time and energy in helping colleagues fulfil their potential ... He is also brilliant at simplifying the complex". She describes him as "very grounded and humble despite all of his success!"

It's little surprise that he enjoys the natural world and sport. He's been going to St James' Park since he was a lad, a lifelong supporter of NUFC, though – like so many – he describes it as “a lifelong sentence”. He's not the big-shot CEO there – just a fan, revelling in the roar from the stands, raucously connecting him to this place, these people, this culture.

I wonder if there is still something of the Northumbrian youngster there, valuing community and family, finding positive opportunity in almost any situation, who has seen the power of business to shape lives and is determined to use it well. We should welcome him “hyem” – home.

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of his contributions to our cultural economy, his commitment to the potential of creativity, technology, and business in transforming our society and planet for the good, I present to you Sir Jeremy Darroch for admission to the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Prof. J S Fitzgerald  
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