

Interviewee: Professor Tom Cannon
UoS Dates:
Role(s): Business Studies | Head of Department



Interview summary:

Summary of content; with time (min:secs)

00.00 Professor Tom Cannon (TC), interviewed by Angela Smith (AS) explains his reasons for coming to Stirling were that he was at a point in his career at Durham University Business School where he wished to move on. He had read about Stirling and his then Head of Department spoke of interesting developments at Stirling. He also spoke very highly of the incoming Vice-Chancellor, Sir Kenneth Alexander. TC had not met Sir Kenneth but knew a bit about him. TC was involved in the Labour Party and was happy with Sir Kenneth's political orientation. At his interview he was impressed by Sir Kenneth and by the professionalism of the then University Secretary, Bob Beaumont. Two of the external members of the panel, Simon Cope and David Weir were people he knew of and respected. They became friends and kept in touch. Sadly, Simon Cope died a few years ago, but TC is still in touch with David Weir.

02.13 TC's initial role was as Head of a new department which had 6 students and one part-time secretary, but a lot of applicants. His first task was to build on this good number of applicants. Business education was starting to boom and his job was to turn that into a programme. He also sought to build links with adjacent departments. The Management Science department was strong and had a tremendous reputation due to its work in technological economics, the economics of technology. The head of that department was due to retire and they were keen for TC's interest in entrepreneurship and their interest in technology to come together. Another task was to retain students who applied to do business studies, but, as there was no business studies programme in the open first year, students took courses in economics, sociology, accounting and related subjects and some drifted off into these areas. These areas were better resourced and had programmes to offer. The applicants were a mix. Many students from England had taken economics and business-related subjects at school. Scottish students had taken Highers, more broadly-based, so there were students from a wider range of subjects applying. At first, TC also handled Admissions.

05.10 TC explains his own background. He had a Jesuit education at a grammar school in Liverpool. He went to university in London where he got very involved in student politics. He recalls going to Paris in 1968 to take part in a protest and sleeping one night in the Gare du Nord. He was President of his student's union. He went to work with a statistician, a very generous academic, called Andrew Ehrenberg who gave him very good advice about his research, namely to make sure he was named on research papers. AE

always put TC's name on any papers he'd worked on. TC mentions situations where people who've worked on research papers are only mentioned at the end. TC tried to ensure anyone working on research with him featured in the authors. TC later went to Durham as a lecturer where his mentor was Allan Gibb who is considered Britain's greatest expert on small firms' development. He shaped the way small firm education developed in the UK. He highlighted the importance of getting out and dealing with small businesses on their territory. AG sent TC out all over the north of England when there were Industry Training Boards. TC recalls going out with the Furniture, Timber Training Board or the Shipbuilding Training Board or the Rubber and Plastics Industry Training Board doing courses. As an example, TC recalls courses for plastics processors on how a plastic processor becomes an exporter or improves his marketing. TC spent a lot of time on the road and his wife was left looking after the children. He moved the family directly from Durham to Stirling.

00838 His first impression of Stirling was very positive. There was an idea that English people moving to Scotland were sometimes unwelcome, but TC's experience was of people being welcoming and helpful, from hotel staff through university staff, such as the secretary Marianne, Bob Beaumont, staff in Admissions and in the Finance Office, when TC was doing things which perhaps weren't properly funded. TC wonders if being a Scouser was a help. He had debates with people in other departments like economics, accounting or sociology, for example, but these were always good quality arguments without bitterness or resentment.

10.33 TC explains that the department built up very quickly, in part through the input of Ken Alexander. KA had networks which were invaluable, such as his connections with the MacRobert family and with large retail groups. TC also mentions the importance of local companies and the local councils as being very helpful in terms of supporting small business development. The first Professorship in Entrepreneurial Studies in Europe was made at Stirling, funded by Scottish Widows. It was funded for 5 years and the first appointment was Mike Scott. A trust funded a Chair in Retailing held by John Dawson. ICL helped fund a chair in New Technology-based Development. Thus, the private sector was putting in a lot of support and Ken was opening doors. The development of Wang accelerated that as it put Stirling in the public eye locally, across the UK and internationally. TC found this work hard but very satisfying and enjoyed dealing with people, who might not always have agreed with him, but whom he could trust.

13.30 TC outlines how Stirling was developing this new area of Business Studies at a time when there was a lot of interest from potential students who were thinking of a career in business and were interested in a creative approach to Business Studies. Stirling, as a new institution, was able to find routes into business education which TC didn't think could have been taken elsewhere. Stirling was able to develop the first Chair in Entrepreneurship and the first Master programmes in the field. TC recognizes that Glasgow University had been working in the area for 10 years, but the idea of a degree or professorship had not impinged. Glasgow had a great tradition in the field, and a brilliant leader in David Weir, but staff at Stirling were pioneers and working in an environment where you could try things out. Whereas elsewhere some academics would look down on entrepreneurship and question who would want to obtain, for example, a Master's qualification in Public Relations, who would fund it or lead it, Stirling could take risks. People like Danny Moss with his passion for Public Relations, came from Manchester and his networks and other networks people could use brought some of the top PR companies in the UK to give money for scholarships and sponsor students. Stirling could take risks in a supportive environment. Edinburgh and Glasgow ended up envying Stirling's situation because, when the first Research Assessment Exercise took place, Stirling was the highest-ranking Business School in Scotland. Stirling got a 4 ranking and the nearest to this was a 3 or a 2. So, Stirling outranked them in the thing that mattered most in academic terms, research. This enhanced Stirling's credibility and perception in the wider academic community. The only problem was that Glasgow, Edinburgh, Strathclyde and other universities started poaching Stirling staff. So, Stirling became a conveyor belt for St Andrews and, particularly, Edinburgh. However, if these universities are poaching staff that is status for a new university. TC appreciated that from day one at Stirling there was a culture of creativity and innovation and of being willing to stand up for itself. People like Bob Beaumont, not just Sir Ken, and Duncan Timms and others were willing to give support if there was evidence to justify your position. It was very positive.

18.00 Asked whether poaching of students was an issue, TC explains that this was less of a problem as time went on. In TC's first period at Stirling, there was no first-year business course, so students studied

accounting or economics and academics teaching those subjects would tell students how good courses were, and not suggest they moved on to the second or third year courses in business studies. However, once there was a first-year business course, then those teaching on it could advocate for their own programme, and also to students who had applied for cognate subjects, such as economics or sociology. There were lots of applicants and there was a flow of students and change. However, TC didn't experience any nastiness or negativity about this from Heads of Department and that was unusual. He found that at Stirling people defended their corner with candour and honesty.

19.42 As regards the relationship with other Boards of Study, there was good work with Social Sciences, in particular. One of their strengths was the CQSW certificate in Social Work and they were interested in aspects of how technology was changing and, as the Business department developed strength in computer sciences, TC taught courses for Social Sciences. People working in social services were finding themselves running organisations and Business Studies staff were teaching organizational behaviour. Business also recalls the strength of the Management Science Department, where the then Head of Department was a pioneer in technological change. He built up links with aquaculture and there were very good links with people like Susan Shaw from the Economics Department. There was quite a lot of recruitment of quality staff from within the university, people like Sue Shaw who was a great asset, a driving force, and others who moved from other departments because our interests were more cognate with theirs. TC did not see any evidence that such a move affected someone's career. At Stirling, unlike some other places TC felt, staff moving over from other departments didn't experience any barriers.

22.10 Asked if there was interaction with the language departments, TC mentions that his wife did an English degree and he knew Tommy Dunn. There were also good links with psychologists. There were also personal links since, when TC arrived, he stayed in the group of buildings next to the Vice Chancellor's lodge. He got to know Arnold Schamhoff who was the primatologist and kept monkeys, but, as resources got tighter, it was harder to maintain the primatology section. As Schamhoff was very rich, he bought an island in the Forth and placed the baboons there as no zoos would take them. He made sure they were looked after. All was well until they escaped and swam ashore, causing havoc. This was all over the newspaper 'Scotland on Sunday' who called Schamhoff 'The Monkey Man'. The story ends happily, as, since the monkeys became famous, Edinburgh Zoo took them in. Stirling was the kind of environment where Arnold could do that type of thing. Tolerant, but also rigorous with respect to, for example, the RAE. People in academic departments set high standards and the researchers got good RAE results. Similar high standards were applied to PhD students, TC himself being a tough supervisor and examiner. There was a good flow of international students as well as those from the UK. TC's first PhD student was from Glasgow and had a Marks and Spencer's scholarship as a result of KA's links with Marks and Spencer. She did a brilliant study of the impact of new technology on book retailing. Many doctoral students came from abroad, some supervised by TC or by John Dawson and others in the department. When Business Studies merged with Management Science that gave access to additional expertise and additional rigor and discipline.

25.50 Angela Smith, interviewer, relates TC's interest in welcoming overseas students to his support for International Week. She recalls, from the committee set up at the time, that he was interested that overseas students be incorporated fully into the university and be able to express themselves fully, by cooking for International Banquets or by dressing in national dress. AS recalls the first meeting of the committee where people were thinking in terms of lectures on this or that topic and TC suggested 5-a-side football. All of the events put on were very popular, exciting and bonding. TC jokes that in suggesting 5-a-side, he knew he was likely to be picked for the team, in spite of there being better players. TC points out that at the time Scottish universities had very good connections with US universities and a large cohort of Texas students came to Stirling. He then spent a sabbatical at Texas A & M University where he attended a wonderful International Dinner, a model he took back to Stirling. Five International Dinners were held at Stirling Castle thanks to the support received from Stirling Council and Central Regional Council, whose leaders attended. The events brought those wonderful overseas students into the mainstream.

28.27 Asked about further important matters, TC mentions the importance of the Wang development as it was important for the city for the university to lead on that. TC doesn't know how often the university took the lead on things in the city, although they do have a symbiotic relationship. TC recalls how the city had won a competitive process to have Scotland's newest university. The Wang development was a great collaboration between the city and the university, even if Wang did not stay forever, there have been successor companies. The city council and the university worked very hard to persuade the Scottish

Development Agency to choose Stirling. He recalls staff coming in on Sundays to meet with people from Wang and the SDA. The SDA was looking at other sites right across central Scotland and further north. They could have gone west nearer IBM or east where there were companies like Fortronic and the development of what became known as Silicone Glen. TC notes that the university didn't get the revenue it had hoped from payment for the site as conditions meant payment had to go towards the Student Union building. However, the collaboration put the partnership between the university and the council very much on the map. TC recalls that the announcement of the development was delayed 48 hours so that Margaret Thatcher, as Prime Minister, could make the announcement in Parliament. That shows how important the Wang development was. TC also thinks it was important for the transition of the university which had had a few question marks, particularly after the Queen's visit. This development transformed the region's view and Scotland's view of this university as an institution. TC thinks that in this development, as throughout his time at Stirling, the university staff and departments acted as one to do the best for the university. There was also a great atmosphere with the students. It was a very student-oriented university.

32.45 TC is asked how he got on with the next Principal, Professor John Forty (JF). He got on well with him and noted that Professor Forty said very nice things about him on this website! JF came from a very different background. When Ken was Principal it was a fairly laissez-faire institution, not a faculty system, and this allowed heads of departments to pioneer on their own terms, providing they met high academic standards and didn't alienate their students or colleagues. An example was TC and John Dawson going to London to meet Secretaries of State. Even if Ken didn't know about this, it didn't matter provided they were doing the right thing for the university. JF came from a very different culture at Warwick. TC was on the interviewing panel and found JF a very impressive candidate. JF wanted to impose structure and for the institution to be much more cohesive, less entrepreneurial, more organized and structured. In the event of meeting a Secretary of State in London, JF was to be informed about the meeting and content to be discussed. It was a time when Stirling needed that structure – a university could only operate quite so creatively, innovatively, entrepreneurially for a period of time. TC felt JF was the man to bring in those structures that were necessary. He was never unfair to TC and when TC announced he was leaving, JF asked him to stay. He talked as if a deputy principal role might be a possibility, but TC felt it was time to go.

35.15 TC is asked if there is anything else he wishes to say and remembers Stirling as a good place with great students and colleagues, even if TC had disagreements with colleagues at times. He recalls another innovation launched at Stirling, the Graduate Enterprise Programme. Eventually, all 8 Scottish universities joined Stirling in this programme where they ran events to identify students to go on to the Graduate Enterprise Programme. There were events such as an Open Day when students could show their business ideas and the best of them came to Stirling. It was a good thing for a new university like Stirling that any Scottish university was saying we'll send you our best students for this programme. Graduate Enterprise was adopted in England, at Cranfield but three years after it had been started in Stirling. Entrepreneurs starting business is still an issue. The programme showed Stirling's willingness to do things and that other universities respected what we were doing.

37.15 TC finished by contrasting the styles of Sir Kenneth Alexander and Professor John Forty and the value of both approaches. He states his appreciation of Bob Beaumont and the teams in admin and finance for all the help he received. He recalls particularly the support he got when things went wrong. He also records the contribution of Penny Nishu who was invaluable in the running of the department.

38.25 Angela Smith finishes by thanking Tom Cannon for giving a wonderfully vivid sense of what it was like at Stirling, how exciting and dynamic and what a special place it was for him and his subject.

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