

The Power of the Unlike-Minded: Reflections on Leadership in a Fractured World

Dr Elizabeth Kiss, Warden of Rhodes House, Oxford
Rhodes-APS Singapore Annual Dinner and Address
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It is such an honour to be here with all of you this evening in this distinguished gathering of Rhodes Scholar alumni and Scholars in Residence, our current and former National Secretaries, Rhodes Selection Committee Chairs and members, noted leaders from the Singapore business community, family and friends.

I am especially thrilled to have with us both the oldest and the youngest in our small but mighty community of Singapore Rhodes Scholars – Dr Eng-Liang Tan (Singapore & Balliol 1961), the first Rhodes Scholar ever selected from Singapore, and Mr Hazeem Abdul Nasser (Singapore & Green Templeton College 2022), who will be coming to Oxford to begin his studies in a few months' time.

On behalf of all of us at the Rhodes Trust, I want to thank my dear friend Raymond Lim and his colleagues at APS Asset Management for hosting us, and for their magnificent benefaction which made it possible to reinstate the Rhodes Scholarship in Singapore in 2018 after a gap of 13 years. Thanks to them, we now have a permanent endowment in place to support the selection of a new Rhodes Scholar from Singapore every year. In addition to Hazeem, we have with us this evening our 2020 Singapore Rhodes Scholar Brendan Loon and our 2021 Singapore Rhodes Scholar Poh Yong Han.

In a world of many excellent scholarship programmes, the Rhodes Scholarship remains unique. Established in 1903, we are the oldest international graduate scholarship and send our Scholars to the University of Oxford, the world's oldest English-speaking centre of higher learning. We have a distinctive place-based approach to selection, with 61 final selection committees on 5 continents selecting our new cohort of Scholars every year. Our selection criteria have become a model for other scholarship programmes worldwide. We seek to identify young people who combine academic excellence with excellence of character, an instinct to lead and make a difference, compassion and kindness for others, and a commitment to use their talents to the full to make the world a better place.

We help to nurture these qualities of character and leadership through our signature Character, Service and Leadership programme, which brings our global cohort of Scholars in Residence together to reflect on their values, explore topics including courage, risk and failure and the meaning of a good life, and forge bonds of friendship and solidarity we hope will be a source of inspiration and strength to each throughout their lives. We are also focusing more and more on connecting Scholars across the generations, so that our Scholars in Residence not only learn from each other, but also from others in a vibrant community of 5,000 living Rhodes Scholars around the world.

In my four years as Warden, I have come to appreciate more and more how important the ideals of the Rhodes Scholarship are today as a powerful and positive response to a world of wicked problems and cascading crises.

This may be a bit surprising, since the Rhodes Scholarship was dreamed up in response to what a very different world. Our founder, Cecil John Rhodes, an English immigrant to southern Africa who became an immensely influential as well as controversial mining magnate and politician, envisioned a scholarship that would bring young men from the far reaches of the British Empire, the United States and Germany to Oxford where their studies and the friendships they forged would prepare them to “fight the world’s fight” and create a better and more peaceful world. For Rhodes, the British Empire lay at the very heart of that vision of a better world.

Of course, within just a few years of Rhodes’ death, the world was at war, and soon the British Empire was no more. Other core elements of his original vision have also been criticised and superseded. I am particularly grateful that Rhodes’ restriction of the scholarship to men was eventually abandoned, after years of debate and an act of the U.K. Parliament, enabling women finally from 1977 onwards to apply for and become Rhodes Scholars. Today, we are committed to widening our outreach and recruiting broader applicant pools to enable young people from previously excluded racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups to apply and win. And at first through fits and starts, but now with strategic focus and resolve, the Rhodes Trust is transcending the scholarship’s original geographic footprint and becoming truly global.

Today, we select 103 new Rhodes Scholars a year, and in addition to an increasing number of new geographic constituencies – including West and East Africa, China, Israel, and Syria-Jordan-Lebanon-Palestine -- we also make it possible, through our new Global constituency, for young people from any country in the world to apply for the Rhodes Scholarship.

But we want to do more! Our goal for our 125th anniversary in 2028 is to have 125 permanently endowed Rhodes Scholarships. And Asia, particularly this incredibly dynamic and important region of Southeast Asia, is vitally important to our vision. Our goal is to secure the resources to add a second Rhodes Scholarship for Singapore – along with a second scholarship for Malaysia and Hong Kong. We also hope to expand the scholarship to countries across the ASEAN region and to double our numbers in mainland China.

Moreover, our efforts at Rhodes House now go beyond the Rhodes Scholarship. We run several partnership programmes that have similar values but a different focus. These include Rise, a global initiative through which we select 15-17 year-olds and supports them in their educational and public service journeys, Schmidt Science Fellows, a global interdisciplinary postdoctoral science fellowship, and the Atlantic Institute, which works with a very diverse global community of midcareer fellows who lead efforts in different sectors to promote social equity.

So as you can see, many aspects of today’s Rhodes Scholarship and Rhodes Trust would be unrecognisable to Cecil Rhodes. But the core insight behind his vision – that the world needs ethical, public-spirited leaders who have a global frame of reference and whose networks of friendship and understanding span national boundaries – is in fact more relevant than ever.

Looking at the community of Singaporean Rhodes alumni, I am struck by the remarkable range of fields and social sectors you represent. Just in this room, we have educational leaders, distinguished scientists, government ministers and public servants, business leaders, investors, founders of NGOs, Olympians, and more. We have students of economics, literature, public policy, anthropology, physics, chemistry, and many more. We have people of diverse views about politics and policy.

Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the Rhodes Scholarship and the Rhodes community is that we are **unlike-minded**. This unlike-mindedness has several dimensions.

From the beginning, the scholarship did not dictate what students should study or what issues they should be passionate about. Today our Scholars can apply to pretty much any full-time degree offered by the University of Oxford and we are a significant funder across all four of Oxford's academic divisions: medical sciences; mathematical, physical and life sciences; the humanities; and the social sciences. We have Scholars who are passionate about education, about climate change, about economic development, about AI for good, and much more.

The scholarship has also never dictated what **careers or fields** Scholars should pursue, except to challenge them to esteem public service, broadly defined, as their highest aim. So our alumni can be found in many levels of government, politics and law – including heads of state, mayors, government ministers, and constitutional court justices – but also as business leaders, tech entrepreneurs, artists, journalists, scientists, heads of NGO's and universities, and more.

Finally, you layer these diverse disciplinary perspectives and careers with the extraordinary **diversity of backgrounds** our Scholars represent. They come from big cities and small villages, from deep poverty and privilege, from Israel and Palestine, China and the United States, Saudi Arabia and the American South.

This unlike-mindedness makes the conversations within our community incredibly interesting, vibrant, challenging, and occasionally a bit messy. But what makes them so productive is that we combine unlike-mindedness with **like-heartedness**... with a shared passion to contribute, to make a difference, to use our talents to make the world a better place.

One of the things I love about our Scholar community is the **spirit of curiosity** which brings engineers to our humanities gatherings, Israeli Scholars to our Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine conference, and poets to our session on the pros and cons of Universal Basic Income.

I was reminiscing earlier today with Raymond Lim about our conversations when we were both studying in Oxford and how much I appreciated learning about Singapore from him, how much more vivid and meaningful that was than any kind of reading about the region. Today, we have created many more opportunities for these conversations by bringing our Scholars together for discussions and retreats at Rhodes House – and I am sure that in the years and decades to come, Scholars will look back at those connections and realise how transformative they were in their lives.

But the real value of a community of the unlike-minded but like-hearted is not what happens to the individuals within, but what it prepares them to do and be in their lives. For the formative experience of learning how to navigate membership in a global community of the unlike-minded helps prepare people to be the kinds of leaders the world needs today.

Our world is fraying and fracturing in frightening and dangerous ways. We are seeing dramatic declines in trust in core institutions from government to universities to the media. We are experiencing leadership crises and government breakdowns, from Boris Johnson's resignation to Donald Trump's insurrection against the U.S. Capitol to the breakdown of Sri Lankan government. Russia is waging an aggressive and indiscriminate war against the Ukraine and the spectre of nuclear war has been publicly raised by Vladimir Putin. China-U.S. relations are at a low point as are Hindu-Muslim relations in India. All of this is occurring against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation, and the ever-more clear and present danger of climate change.

These crises are fundamentally crises of human leadership, character and imagination. There aren't technical fixes for any of them, though of course science and technology have much to contribute. Rather, they will require public-spirited leadership in all its forms – from government to business, the arts to science, the media to the NGO community.

Today's fractured world needs leaders who see the big picture and take the long view, who can disagree yet coexist with others, who understand not only with their heads, but also with their hearts, that no human culture or system of government is without its flaws and who know from personal experience that we all have lessons to learn from people very different from ourselves. We need leaders who understand they don't know it all, and can draw on and appreciate others' diverse talents and contributions, who have a commitment to inclusion in everything they do because they understand that we gain new understanding and get better results when we include diverse perspectives.

In short, we need leaders who are unlike-minded yet like-hearted.

I see this in the Rhodes community every day. Let me share just two examples: global health security initiative, Masref

This is why even in the face of today's profound challenges, I take hope from the work we are doing together with the help of so many of you in this room and around the world, to keep programmes like the Rhodes Scholarship vibrant and strong.