

Hello to you all !

May I begin by thanking Mrs Miron and her colleagues in the Section for so kindly inviting me to speak to you today.

It's an important moment for me, coming back after 6 years to the place that was like home for so long. So full of happy memories.

As I was the first teacher in the Section when it opened, it became very much my professional baby. I was given the task of rearing it, making it grow strong and healthy and valued in the community. I enjoyed the challenge. As more teachers joined the team, we shared this task and it became our baby. Twenty years later it had become an attractive Section where students felt they could achieve their goals and for me the time had come to retire.

As I look at you today, I can see that it is a vibrant and thriving community. That through the empathetic guidance of your teachers and your own creative energy and genius, you have built together a fraternity where you can realize your aspirations, as students and as teachers.

I would like to consider with you possible reasons for coming to study here and will enlist the help of past students who were sitting in this very room some years ago. Why people might feel inclined to follow a bilingual and bicultural course of study and a widening of their horizons at a time when the forces of insularity seem to be gaining ground and shutting doors and windows.

Paradoxically this attitude coincides with a moment in history when the very serious economic, political and ecological problems we're facing demand, on the contrary, that we pull together to overcome the many obstacles in the way.

So **you** have made the wiser choice of opening doors. **You** would agree with the great American poet Emily Dickinson when she says :

« Not knowing when the dawn will come, I open every door »

This seems particularly true for your youthful selves. And more cryptically she adds :

« I dwell in possibility » as you do !

I used the terms bilingual and bicultural, but I find they can be a little narrow. The reality they cover is much richer and more spectacular.

English and French are languages and cultures that for some good and as many bad reasons have played a prominent part in shaping the world as it is today. We all know that French doesn't just mean France, just as English doesn't just mean England. That millions of people speak these languages the world over. The conquests of previous centuries mean that these languages and cultures have been adopted and filtered and transformed by many people who may have never set foot in either country. The empire not only strikes back, but more

importantly it **writes back** and offers a kaleidoscope of perspectives and ideas for us to consider. The Indian leader Ghandi tells us : « be the change you wish to see in the world ». And Nelson Mandela reminds us that « education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world ».

So here you are benefitting from this widening of cultural and linguistic horizons that will have an enormous influence on your personality and your life. You will have that broad perspective, best suited to exploring the bigger picture, fighting against isolationism and the narrow definitions of what constitutes 'us' as opposed to 'them'.

Part of this isolationist instinct was to have direct and immediate consequences for the students in this Section. The year I retired was the year when Britain voted to leave the European Union and to turn its back on its immediate neighbours. Of course Brexit cannot take away from us the pleasure and insights we get from reading English Literature or studying History and Geography with all those different outlooks.

But whereas before so many students from this Section went to Britain to do part or the whole of their university studies, or to do dual diplomas, often in Law, the situation has changed drastically. According to recent statistics the number of European students studying in Britain and vice versa has dropped by more than half. I am not suggesting Britain offers better higher education than other countries, not at all. But, nevertheless this was a vital element in cultural, academic and social bonding, establishing links between neighbouring countries. Building bridges, building cooperation and understanding rather than distrust and opposition are the key to our prosperity and mutual contentment. It seems to me that it is these fundamental principles that were thrown under that famous, or rather infamous, red bus.

In the heyday and heady days of globalisation some 30 years ago there was a ready answer to the need for bilingual and bicultural education : if you wanted to get on in life, be one of the elite, earn a good salary, enjoy a privileged lifestyle, this was the way forward. There was no escaping a globalised economy and the lingua franca of that economy was English. The golden boys and golden girls were traders, trading in equities and bonds for the benefit of investment banks and hedge funds. It attracted many students. Some wrote back with messages of thanks, thanks to the Section I now work in the City, I work as a trader in London, in New York, in Singapore.

But « the times they are a-changing », says a Bob Dylan song and the notion of what constitutes the good life is probably changing too. Making financial deals, from New York to Tokyo may have been important status symbols back then. Less so today, perhaps. Though you may well find you will one day be calling

'home' a place you never imagined becoming your home. Because nothing is set in stone.

Later, students who chose engineering and scientific courses wrote back excited about the difference their English marks had made to their ranking in competitive exams to enter the best engineering schools. Didier's career mirrors that of many others. After engineering school he went on to do a PhD, then spent time in Cadarache and the Max Planck institute in Germany and is now in MIT research on commercially viable fusion. He puts it modestly : « I wanted to do something where science and creativity would be used to understand things and serve society ». Serve society - a notion that is recurrent in many students' comments.

It seems that the very notion of being one of the elite has been tarnished to some extent, has come to mean a sense of entitlement and privilege, to raise one's own expectations at the expense of those who are not so high flying. We need a new definition of what it means to be part of the elite. what it will mean for **your** generation. The old system, let's face it, has shown its limits : income and wealth inequality, climate change, mass migration, depletion of resources... But is it all doom and gloom ? Certainly not ! It's incredible how resilient people are and how quickly they are adapting and taking up the challenge of fighting to improve the situation. So there is also a lot to be optimistic about for the future. You and your skills will be vital in bringing about the transition. So I would say, with Didier, that being part of the elite is about taking some responsibility for the world we live in and working to improve the lives of those who will not be in a position to operate those changes. You will be among those who will have the privilege, the skills and the duty to reduce the existential threat we're facing and to keep the life support systems going. You **know** the way forward is through cooperation. You **know** that bilingualism isn't just about making you more efficient for a career in Marketing.

I come to the bicultural element. Having taught Literature for so many years it never ceased to amaze me that we could be reading a writer who had lived 400 or even 500 years before and he or she could speak to us suddenly so clearly and directly, reach out to us across time and space. It was literally like a flash, lighting up the darkness and abolishing the distance because the words, if you didn't mind a few archaic expressions, were so pertinent to present circumstances, so luminous and powerful.

Why do we feel this proximity when it comes to Shakespeare, for example ? Because like Shakespeare we live in a volatile world of accelerating change. A world that is exhilarating but also unequal, divisive and violent. Great writers have a knack for finding the words that hit home. Shakespeare : « we know

what we are but know not what we may be ». What we may become. And that's so true for us all and even more so for you !

And thinking about the nature of our lives he says : « We are such stuff as dreams are made of and our little lives are rounded with a sleep ».

Or the poet Wordsworth telling us that « the child is the father of the man » A powerful paradox and so true, that what you live through now will shape the person you will become.

« What's past is prologue », Shakespeare again.

I can't help quoting to you from the English poet John Donne, one of my many favourites, who was writing in 1600 and what he had to say still hits home :

« No man is an island, entire unto himself. Every man is a piece of the continent. A part of the main ».

At no time in recent history has this message been more appropriate than today as we face so many challenges on our little planet, and realise our lives are more intricately bound together than we care to think.

Some messages offer a more personal angle on how the Section has helped them. Often these thoughts come at important moments, when they have achieved a particular goal and need to look back.

Here is someone who took up a teaching career 3 years ago:

« I've been doing some thinking, mostly thanks to my friends and teachers from the Section in Duby. I can now see how much of a pain in the neck I must have been and how you always tried to make us better people. Not just by helping us to succeed in our careers, for which we got a lot of support, but by discreetly sowing the seeds of generosity and kindness in our minds. I believe you all succeeded very well in your mission ». I am convinced this student will succeed with the mission of teaching too.

Another student who worked for TV and films tells me :

« Although the Metaphysical poets have not proved directly useful in my profession, they have been invaluable when I faced the greatest trial of my life so far : that of seducing my wife who spoke no French. All that I had learnt and polished in the section was put to the best possible use on this decisive occasion, and the poem we studied by Andrew Marvel saved the day ». I feel that I should explain that the poem in question is about seducing a lady who is coy and refuses herself. The poet says :

« Had we but world enough and time, this coyness lady, were no crime, but at my back I always hear, time's winged chariot hurrying near. »

Further on he mentions his baby son and says that « Shakespeare's iambic pentameter lines proved surprisingly useful when putting my baby back to sleep in the middle of the night. I would repeat them again and again as one would a

mantra. » There's a use for great literature you may not have considered !
Possibly making you an even better parent one day !
And this last comment from a young man who couldn't believe his luck at being accepted into the Section and how it transformed his life :
He says : « Because you helped me break my chains. And my chains were invisible. They were self-censorship and mediocrity, and the fear of failure and the fear of success also ».

I hope you will make the most of your years in Duby, make the most in every single way. Studying and obtaining diplomas, of course, is part of the job. That's what we are here to celebrate today ! But there is so much more, because these are the formative years, they will stay with you and the child is truly the father of the man (and the woman of course).

Make the most of your teachers, make the most of your friends. Make the most of all the people you will meet and the books you will read. Above all enjoy yourselves ! The memories will accompany you. Build the bonds that will give you the strength to face life's challenges. Break any chains holding you back and later help others to break theirs.

And when the going is hard, as it will be, inevitably sometimes, remember the advice of the Irish writer, Samuel Beckett who wrote 'Waiting for Godot' :
« Ever tried, ever failed, No matter. Try again, fail again. Fail better »
There's another meaningful paradox !

So congratulations on your achievements and remember that you can count on the English Section teachers to breathe softly on the spark of your ambition to light up the future !