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The conferment of the Degree of Laws, Honoris Causa, on Sir Thomas Davis

Oration by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor David Skegg, 14 May 2005

When Thomas Robert Alexander Davis graduated as Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery in this University 60 years ago, in 1945, he was the first Cook Islander to qualify as a doctor in New Zealand. Few could have predicted how varied and distinguished would be the career that lay before him.

The young Tom Davis had grown up in Rarotonga, that jewel in the Pacific, in the supportive milieu of a Polynesian extended family. He learned to fish and surf, and started a life-long fascination with outrigger canoes as a means of ocean travel.

The Cook Islands had no high school in those days, so at the age of 12 Tom Davis was sent to King's College in Auckland. The education there was modelled on the English public school system, an approach which Davis described later as "designed to ensure that those who make it through the system will never ever again find anything in life that cannot be taken in one's stride with aplomb, equanimity and forbearance". Desperately homesick at the beginning, he seemed to get caned every day during his first year. A ruder shock was the cold of the Auckland winter, which produced in him a nightmare of shivering in the dormitory at night. The fact that the local boys were not affected, and that he himself acclimatised, led to the main research interest of his later career: elucidating the ways in which human beings adapt to cold and other hostile environments.

As a medical student in Dunedin, Tom Davis pursued this interest in an unusual fashion. A keen surfer at St Clair, he and his friends were tempted by the massive winter waves - long before the advent of wetsuits. He bought a number of rectal thermometers and persuaded his friends to insert these five minutes before entering the water. While in the cold water, they read their thermometers every five minutes and called out the results for Davis to record in his notebook. Contrary to expectation, their body temperatures actually rose but then declined towards hypothermia after the students left the water. The thought occurs that anyone capable of persuading his colleagues to surf with a thermometer in their rectum has the ability to be a highly successful politician.

Tom Davis had come to the University in years of financial hardship following the Depression. He borrowed money from a school friend's father and took on numerous labouring jobs, as well as becoming a licensed taxi driver. In his autobiography he had praise for the university town of Dunedin: "Its forbearance of students was legendary. We, the students, can bear witness to that. Short of arson, armed revolution and murder, our goings on were tolerated."

After experience at Auckland Hospital, Dr Davis might have expected to be snapped up when the post of Medical Officer to the Cook Islands was advertised. In fact his application was turned down, even though the position was not filled. It was only after four rounds of advertising and four applications from Dr Davis that he was appointed. He believed the New Zealand Government at that time had a policy of not employing educated Pacific Islanders in their home islands, lest they became troublemakers. When Dr Davis eventually arrived in the Cook Islands with his wife and son, he presented himself to the Resident Commissioner who said: "You are not here. I have not been informed of your coming."

Over the next few years, Tom Davis transformed an antiquated and inadequate health system. He restored the operating theatre and dealt with a large backlog of surgery; he started a nursing school; and he promoted public health measures, always being aware that poverty underlay most of the health problems such as high infant mortality. The Assistant Medical Practitioners trained in Suva were fully integrated into a modern health service.

By 1952, after 7 years in the Cook Islands, Dr Davis was becoming restless because he felt that he had accomplished what he had set out to do. He was offered the opportunity for postgraduate education at Harvard University. Typically he set off not by conventional transport, but by sailing from Wellington to Boston in a 44-foot yacht with his wife and two young sons.

At Harvard he graduated as Master of Public Health, and became a researcher in the Department of Nutrition. There then followed a series of senior appointments to research establishments of the United States armed forces, in Alaska, Kentucky, and Massachusetts. Working as a research physiologist, he

was at last able to pursue his quest to understand how the human body adapts to cold. His papers in the American Journal of Physiology and the Journal of Applied Physiology are still being cited. He conducted field studies in Alaska and the Himalayas, and joined work on that ultimate environmental frontier: outer space. Initially for the Army, and later for NASA, he was involved in biological aspects of the space programme.

In the 1960s Dr Davis worked for a research and consulting firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But the call from his home country was becoming more insistent. The newly independent Cook Islands had economic and political problems, and relatives and friends were imploring him to return. He decided to try yet another career, as a politician.

It might seem surprising that someone who had spent most of his life in medical practice and research would enter the world of politics. But Tom Davis's interests had always extended well beyond the academic sphere. Among the many sports in which he had excelled, particular favourites were boxing and gun-shooting. And his greatest pleasure had come from driving racing cars. Indeed he had been elected as President of the Kentucky Chapter of the Sports Car Club of America. Whether or not such avocations point to an aptitude for political life, he set sail once again - for Rarotonga.

Politics in the Cook Islands are rumbustious at the best of times, but Dr Davis rode the waves like the breakers at St Clair. He became Leader of the Opposition in 1972 and Prime Minister from 1978 to 1987. While leading the Government he encouraged enterprise and a market economy, and consistently fought corruption. There were very significant increases in employment and in the average income of Cook Islanders, as well as social and cultural advances. Dr Davis was knighted by the Queen in 1981.

Since his retirement from politics, Sir Thomas has pursued many other interests. He has just completed a term as High Commissioner for the Cook Islands in Wellington. At the age of 87 he may have been the oldest diplomat in the world. Given his energy and accomplishments, there can be little doubt that his presence will continue to be felt.

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Sir Thomas Davis, Pa Tuterangi Ariki - doctor, medical researcher, politician and diplomat - for the degree of Doctor of Laws honoris causa.