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**British School Cairo**

**Rt. Hon. Boris Johnson**

**Introducer: Mr. Ahmez Ezz, Chairman of BISC**

**Cairo, Egypt**

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**RT. HON. BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, good morning, everybody, and it’s fantastic to be here. Thank you very much, Chairman Ezz, for your very, very generous invitation. Wonderful to be here at the BISC, the British International School in Cairo, and famous training ground, as I can see, for leaders in so many fields. It’s great to be back here in Egypt, which is the cradle of civilization, where the banks of the Nile are so pregnant with romance that they produced my own family.

I want to begin with a love story. You’ve heard of Akhenaten and Nefertiti. You’ve heard of Antony and Cleopatra. Let me tell you about Wilfred and Irene. Sometime in the 1930s, a young man was sitting in the bar of Shepard’s Hotel that still exists in Cairo, and he observed a young woman not far away trying to get a gin and tonic. This was in the 1930s, the Belle Epoque.

She was beautiful, certainly in his eyes, and that’s what counts. She was blond. She was statuesque. She looked as though she might be good at things like lacrosse or hockey or the shotput, which indeed she was.

Another man, an older man was forcing his attentions upon her, and he was clearly trying to persuade her to let him buy her the drink. Although she wanted to have nothing to do with him, there came a moment when he was so bold and so foolish as to lay a hand on her.

But to the utter amazement of the young man at the bar, the blond woman caught the older man’s hand in her own, pulled it across her shoulder, and then tossed him across the room as if he were a bale of hay or a sack of potatoes. He watched this fellow crash and sprawl across the furniture of the bar in Shepard’s Hotel, and the young man said to himself, “Wow, I am going to marry that girl.”

I’m proud to say that young woman was my half French grandmother, Iréne – or Irene, and the young man was my grandfather, Wilfred, who was then farming cotton, would you believe it, in the Nile Delta. Shortly thereafter, Irene Williams was married to Wilfred Johnson, who was really actually an Ottoman Turk called Osman Ali.

That is how Egypt is the origin of just about everything from papyrus to paper to toothpaste to pyramids, and the birthplace of every branch of human intellectual endeavor, from astronomy to zoology, but also the origin of the Johnson family.

Thank you from the modern Johnson fan. Thank you, Cairo. Thank you for bringing us together. And thank you to BISC for bringing me back here to Cairo and to celebrate your achievement, your achievement, you graduates in completing your studies.

Today is the great moment when we collectively launch you on the World, BISC Class of 2023. Like some new oceangoing vessel, this is the moment when we break the bottle of champagne. Well, not the bottle of bottle champagne, a bottle of alcohol free champagne, when we break the bottle of alcohol free champagne across the bows of the class of 2023.

As we’ve seen, wasn’t that moving to see that parade, that amazing constellation of talent, Olympic athletes, musicians, environmentalists – I was trying to write it all down – financial geniuses, show jumpers, research chemists, surgeons, biotechnologists and many, many other stars of all kinds, and so many academic stars that I could barely list them all. I think many of you have got more than 40 points, is that right, in your International Baccalaureate? Unbelievable. It’s superb.

As these graduates now, they are now teetering on the side of the great swimming pool of life, waiting to plunge in, and I’ve got to tell you, it’s now 40 years, almost exactly 40 years since I was in your place, bursting with enthusiasm, and also full of misconceptions about just about everything. I barely understood the opposite sex. In fact, I didn’t think I’d met many members of the opposite sex, except possibly at school debates. I had no qualifications, except a more than average ability to translate English into Latin and Greek, which is pretty useless since neither language is spoken today. Ancient Greek, that is. I had never turned on a computer in my life. I’d never used a laptop, let alone an iPhone. In fact, they didn’t even exist.

The only game which I truly excelled was called the wall game. It involved trying to crush your opponents up against a Victorian red brick wall and trying to abrade their faces against the wall. In fact, it was a game so brutal and pointless that no other school was remotely interested in playing it, and my skills were wholly redundant. In fact, my friends, when I was your age, I was in most important ways, spectacularly ill equipped for the modern world.

I look at this group of graduates today, and I see a younger generation that, in my view, is what I feel for talking to audiences in the UK as well, far better adjusted, less prejudiced, more caring about the environment, more idealistic in some ways than my generation.

Looking at that video. I am full of confidence that you will fix the problems that my generation, our generation has helped to create. You will tackle illiteracy and extremism and desertification, habitat loss. And as the world population finally stabilizes, you will bring ever more brilliant technical solutions to the problems of climate change, from low carbon vehicles, which I think somebody was going to make in the graduates, to power from the wind and from the sun. And you will find the ways of making limitless, cheap green energy to desalinate the seas and make the desert bloom.

You’ll tackle all the problems of modern life – obesity. Some of us worry about it more than others. Terrible, new scourge of the middle classes everywhere, with strange new appetite suppressing drugs. Have you heard about these? They make your body think it’s a Gila monster. The Danes have come up with an artificial hormone that replicates the slow metabolism of a giant Mexican lizard. I was talking about it the other day to Donald Trump, and we agreed, frankly, that it still needs work. Obviously, he needs it much less than I do.

But you will fix this problem, you in the younger generation, and you will fix obesity and dementia and cardiovascular problems and find ways to ensure that more people live longer and happier and more productive lives. You will explore the heavens with an energy and drive that makes Elon Musk seem, frankly, unambitious and unimaginative.

It’s only because we’ve come to this crucial moment, the climax of your studies, and only because I have a 40-year head start that I feel able to offer any advice at all. I hope you won’t mind if, in all humility, I offer some pointers about the way ahead. Is it okay if I just give you a quick bit of advice?

Number one, try to take some exercise at the beginning of the day. Go for a run start of the day. Nothing can conceivably seem worse thereafter. Get the pain out of the way, and you’ll feel better for the rest of the day. First piece of advice.

Second piece of advice, don’t be frightened of change, doing things differently, innovation. Ever since Prometheus took fire from the gods and gave it to mankind in a in a tube of fennel, we’ve been somehow conditioned to be nervous of technological change. Remember what happened to Prometheus? He was punished by being chained to a Tartarian crag, and his liver was pecked out by an eagle. Every time his liver regrew, the eagle came back and pecked out his liver again, a bit like being stuck in a lift and being forced to listen to Muzak, all because he dared to give humanity the gift of fire.

For thousands of years, we’ve been scared of our own inventions. When the motorcar was first used in Britain, someone had to walk ten feet in front carrying a red flag. Even today we hear that the human race is going to be supplanted by technology, by ChatGPT.

Have you heard of ChatGPT? Have any of you used ChatGPT? Are you allowed to use ChatGPT?

Well, we’re told that all the wonderful jobs, many of the wonderful jobs that you’re going to do in financial services, accountancy, journalism, whatever, all of them are going to be lost to red-eyed robots terminating these professions, like something from an Arnold Schwarzenegger film. People seem to be terrified.

Experts are telling us that we will soon have computers so clever as to represent an existential threat to the human race, and instead of having live human beings deliver commencement addresses at the BISC, you’ll be using a hologram of me with a ChatGPT generated speech. Would you prefer that? Are you sure?

All right. Well, let me ask you, are you worried about it. Is anybody worried about ChatGPT and the progress? Are you worried about it? No, no, no, no, no, no, no. I’m not worried about it, and this is the important point I want to make. I’m not worried about this stuff, and we mustn’t be scared of new technology.

The other day I got ChatGPT up on my computer, and I said, “ChatGPT.” And ChatGPT said, “Yes, sir.” You can immediately see who is the boss in this relationship. And I said, “ChatGPT, write me a poem in the style of Virgil in Latin dactylic hexameters on the subject of Boris Johnson and how he cut crime in London during his eight years as mayor, with special reference to how he reduced the murder rate by 50% and made London one of the safest big cities on Earth.” And I said, “Can you do that, ChatGPT?”

But already the honest fellow was toiling away, and I had hardly finished speaking when ChatGPT was already producing reams of Latin poetry. Eventually he came to a halt. I said, “ChatGPT,” and he said, “Yes, sir.” I said, “What is this, ChatGPT?” You need six feet in your hexameter. You need either dactyls or spondees, right? You need six. The dactyl has got to be tum-diddy or tum-tum, right, in the feet. I said, “Some of these lines have only five feet.” I said, “ChatGPT, go away and have another go.”

Well, the poor dolt had another go, but it was still hopeless. And after a while, and I used to be a teacher, I remember, it’s very, very difficult, you can’t push them too hard. I realized it wasn’t fair. And I said, “Don’t worry, ChatGPT. Let’s come back to it next week.”

To all those who are nervous about this technology and who want to put a big keep out sign on the door, and you see it in the papers every day, I say, this is not an enemy; this is a tool. It is one of the most magnificent tools we have ever invented, perhaps even on a par with papyrus or the gift of fire, and it’s going to be of immeasurable value in helping this generation of leaders, you, you, to crack the problems we’ve been discussing, whether they’re Alzheimer’s or global warming.

It will not cost jobs – very, very important. It will not cost jobs. Of course, some professions may be radically reshaped, but there will simply be new jobs. When the motor car started to hit the streets of England at the end of the 19th and early 20th century, they said, no, no, no, no. It will destroy thousands of jobs, the motor car. Think of all the coach drivers and the grooms and the hostlers and the fettlers and the people who sell the horse feed and the people who make a living, lots of them, by sweeping up the vast piles of horse dung in the streets.

The motorcar – this is what they said. They said the motorcar is going to be a jobs destroyer. It’s going to be an economic disaster. Were they right? Of course not, because that amazing technical advance produced millions of new jobs.

That is why we shouldn’t worry about the arrival of AI or close down ChatGPT, because whatever tools we fit to our hands, there will always be the need for the human factor and that divine spark of emotion and feeling and intuition that I do not think a machine will ever have.

I may be wrong, by the way, but I bet I’m not. To a great extent, the job of all leaders is to make those bets on behalf of everybody and decide when a risk is worth taking. And so, my next point to you all graduates as you hover on the great big, wonderful swimming pool of your adult lives, waiting to plunge in, tentatively adjusting your swimming costumes, my next point is that you should be confident and willing to take those risks, because unless you have leaders who are willing to take calculated and sensible risks, humanity will not move forward.

I remember when I was mayor of London, we put in a cycle hire scheme, a huge bike hire scheme, bicycles, and everybody went crazy. The taxi drivers wanted to see the color of my insides and the motorists said it was too dangerous to put all these inexperienced cyclists wobbling around on the roads like French onion sellers.

I said nonsense. In fact, the number of cyclists increased so fast that the motorist simply learned to avoid them, and the result was that cycling increased massively and people got fitter and healthier and happier, and the number of cycling fatalities, the people who were killed and seriously injured went down so substantially that cycling actually became about four times safer. It was a risk worth taking.

I remember when I was foreign secretary, I came out, had a wonderful trip here, and I had one of my first conversations with President Sisi, with whom I’ve always had a very, very good and friendly relationship. He explained the problem of Sharm El Sheikh Airport, because in those years, we were actually forbidding British, we the Brits were forbidding British tourists to fly to Sharm El Sheikh.

I went back as foreign secretary and I looked at the data and the actual security assessments, and I found it was all nonsense. To fly to Sharm El Sheikh was about as dangerous as flying to Düsseldorf. But the problem was the politicians. I won’t mention her name, except to say she was the Prime Minister immediately before me. They were just too worried to start the flights again because of the risk that if something went wrong, the vanishingly small risk, that they would be blamed. That was what it was about. The problem wasn’t about a real calculation of the risk; it was about politics.

I was proud when I became prime minister that President Sisi and I were able to fix the problem immediately. Mr. Ambassador, Your Excellency, Sir, Gareth, I think I’m right in saying that the Brits are arriving in droves. Good. I’m delighted to hear it.

That is the essential function of politicians, to be willing to take risks, in the knowledge that you will be blamed if something goes wrong. You will be, and that’s what you’ve got to do. You’ve got to soak it up.

As Chairman Ezz has just said, you may have heard, ladies and gentlemen, my friends, great graduates, that my country has left the European Union. I won’t hide it from you; I campaigned for that to happen, because I believe in democracy. Much as I love all our European friends, I didn’t think it was the right future for Britain to be part of a federal European Union, ever more closely centralized in Brussels. That was just what I thought, and I think I’m right.

When I was campaigning for that, everybody said it’d be disaster. They said that millions of people would be thrown out of work. Like the people who said the motor car would be a disaster. Actually, in the UK we have now the lowest unemployment we’ve had since 1974. You don’t hear any apology, by the way, now from the people who made those points.

They also said there would be no advantages in taking back regulatory and legal control, as we have done. Well, let me ask everybody in this audience. Anybody here get COVID? I got COVID. Yeah, it was a real bummer. Anybody have a vaccine? Anybody have a vaccine. Fantastic.

Well, can I ask you a question? Which was the first country in the world to put an approved and effective COVID vaccine into the arm of a patient? Anybody know? It was the United Kingdom, under the government I led. But the only reason we could do it was because we had come out of the EU regulatory framework and out of the European Medicines Agency, and we were therefore able to approve both AstraZeneca and Pfizer long before other European countries, with the result that by March 2021, we had vaccinated about 45% of the entire UK population, while the EU had done 10%. There were literally hundreds of thousands of elderly people who had a protection against the next wave of the disease.

So my friends, here’s the truth: Brexit saves lives. Brexit saved lives. You won’t hear that much, I’m afraid, in the UK media, but it’s true. In thousands of ways, Brexit is giving us the chance to do things differently and better, from genomic editing to AI, which we’ve already talked about. It’s incredible.

I read the European Union Commission is thinking of putting regulations on this stuff that will make it very difficult. The Italian government wants to ban it. We want to have freedom to experiment, to do things, to make the UK a place to come and invest, financial services, biotechnology, much more besides. The benefits of this freedom will play out for generations to come because we took that risk back in 2016.

I’m proud, too, of the role that the UK has played, as Chairman Ezz has said, in arming and protecting the people of Ukraine, because they, the people of Ukraine, are fighting for freedom and democracy everywhere.

What Putin has done is evil. It is neo imperialist. It is unimaginably cruel and costly in human life and suffering. And it is the clearest case I have seen in the last 50 years of the difference between right and wrong. Putin will fail. He will be defeated mainly because of the heroism of the Ukrainians, but also because we in the West have given them so many weapons.

I have to tell you that when I first wanted to send the Ukrainians shoulder launched anti-tank missiles in the autumn of 2021, I read Putin’s mad essay when he was clear that he didn’t think Ukraine was a real country. They came to me, Gareth. I’m afraid they came to me from some of your distinguished colleagues in the Foreign Office, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, I should now say. They came to me, and they said “Are you sure, Prime Minister? Do you want to take this risk? What if it provokes Putin?” And I said, yes, I do, because it’s clear he’s going to do this anyway, and we have to protect these people. I had to make this point to them several times, and I’m very glad that we did, because those missiles were crucial in the battle for Kiev and in sending Putin’s tanks scuttling backwards.

I suppose you may be asking yourself at the end of this slightly self-glorifying account, you might be asking yourself, well, if this fellow has had all these successes as prime minister, getting Brexit done and delivering the fastest vaccine rollout in Europe and the fastest economic recovery, and if he’s helped to save Ukraine from Putin, and if he won the biggest majority in electoral election victory for 40 years, then quite frankly, what’s he doing here? You might be asking yourself, why aren’t I still prime minister? It’s a very good question. I haven’t got time to go into the details of it today except to say the reasons are mainly petty and ridiculous.

But my final piece of advice to you all, serious piece advice, don’t worry about setbacks. Embrace failure. Without failure, you know this, without failure, there can be no possible success. You learn from it every time.

Yeah, it’s true that that my experience is that democracy is a demanding environment, and I suppose people might argue that it has its drawbacks if leaders can be removed. But if Putin had mutinous backbenchers, if Putin had the 1922 Committee on his case, he would never have been so mad as to launch his insane, miscalculated and self-destructive attack on Ukraine. If Putin had a free press, he would have known that he was going to fail. And so actually, I believe that the last 18 months have been a great advertisement for liberal, open capitalist democracies.

Now, I wouldn’t presume to advise any of you here where to go to university, but I guess most of you have made your choices. I’m proud that so many of you seem to be going to the United Kingdom, where, by the way, did my grandmother that I spoke of earlier, where did she learn her judo. She’s got a half blue. That was at Saint Hughes College, Oxford, where she read, I think, German and Russian.

It’s wonderful to see the illustrious names of the universities to which you’re applying and going. But if you want a clinching argument for coming to the UK, we have more top 100 universities than I think any other country outside the United States, and one Cambridge College has more Nobel prizes than Russia and China put together, a point that I often make. I don’t think I made that point much when I was foreign secretary, but I make it now.

I believe that after this amazing experience at the BISC, you are all, you graduates, the living embodiment of what is best in both countries, the living embodiments of the historic and intensifying cooperation between our countries, from Mo Salah, the Liverpool football player – anybody heard of him – yes – to all the various wonderful transport schemes that I’ve talked about over the years with President Sisi that I know that Gareth is pursuing the investments that we’re making together, not just in monorail schemes, but also the educational projects that the UK and Egypt are driving forward together. You are the incarnations, the embodiments of that cooperation.

My final message to you all is I’ll just sum it up and just check whether you’ve been paying attention. Have fun. Take exercise in the morning because nothing can conceivably be worse than the rest of the day. Take sensible risks for a reasonable reward. Yes, risk it for a biscuit, BISC graduates. It might be your school motto actually. Risk it for a biscuit, as we say in the UK. Don’t worry about failure. It’s only deferred success. Embrace change in new technology, and good luck in everything that you do.

Many congratulations. Many congratulations on your wonderful achievements and thank you all for listening today. Thank you.

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