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16. Time to Change Partners Again

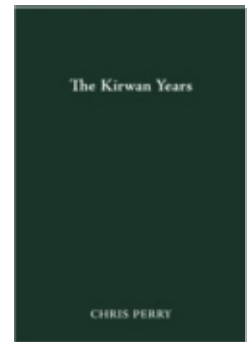
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Changing of the Guard: The Sequel

Time to Change Partners Again

The Jennings era lasted nine years; the Gee era, seven. The Kirwan era, while highly productive, was considerably shorter and, most believe, ended too soon.

Maryland, My Maryland

In December 2001 the media reported that some members of the Maryland legislature wanted Kirwan back as chancellor of the University System of Maryland, where he had served as president at the flagship College Park campus before coming to Ohio State.

“David Brennan, then chair of the trustees, asked me if they had to worry about this,” Kirwan said later. “No,” I said, “looking him in the eye. I have not been contacted.” Kirwan also knew that Governor Parris Glendening wanted the job himself and that some members of the Maryland Board of Regents, who would make the decision, were the governor’s own appointees. So far as he was concerned, the idea was a nonstarter, but while he continued to disavow any interest, his East Coast supporters were hard at work.

“About March, I started to get calls from members of the Board of Regents,” Kirwan continued. “Congressman Steny Hoyer, an old friend, wanted to talk to me about the position and called, he said, just to establish communication. He said it would not be the governor and that I was the right guy. He said he would call me from time to time and tell me where things stood. I had known him forever, and I listened but expressed no interest.”

“Every couple of weeks, I would get a call,” Kirwan continued. “I was told a groundswell was building. Also, during March I was in DC one night and agreed to meet with a few people. There was no offer, and I made no comment.

They said I was needed, that things were in turmoil, that some donors had said that if Glendening became chancellor, they would withdraw their donations. The Maryland papers were incensed over the idea [of Glendening becoming chancellor], calling him unqualified and conflicted since he named the board. They wrote that the credibility and integrity of the board were at stake.

“Then I was stunned one night, after returning from Chicago, when the phone rang. Eight or nine members of the board and search committee, including the university’s major donor, were calling to offer me the position. They said I had to come back. I said I was not prepared to answer; I needed time to think, talk with Patty, etc. I also told them I wanted it to remain confidential, that nobody’s interest would be served by going public, and I immediately began to discuss it. Unfortunately, it leaked in the *Post* or *Sun*, then the *Dispatch*. I told David [Brennan] I had an offer and would have to think about it.”

It was the time of winter commencement, and Kirwan worried that a media circus would draw attention from the graduates. He decided to say nothing about the offer until after commencement and a weekend at the family retreat in western Maryland.

“It was an awfully tough week,” Kirwan says. “Many expressed the hope I would not leave. When I marched into commencement, the students rose and applauded. They would not stop. They unfurled a banner: ‘Please Stay Brit—We Need You!’ At that moment, I would not have left.”

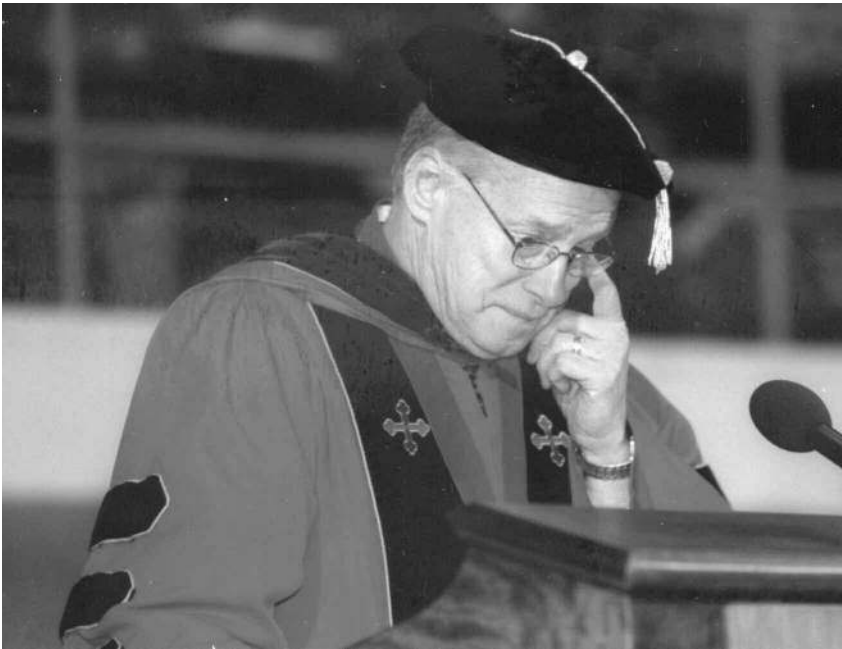
Three days later, on March 25, 2002, Kirwan announced that indeed he would leave Ohio State to become the chancellor at Maryland. He cited family as his primary motivation, playing a card others found impossible to trump. At a press conference in Maryland, his family was seated in the second row. As Kirwan walked in, he reached out to his two young grandsons, a scene caught by a *Baltimore Sun* photographer and reprinted on the front page of the *Dispatch*. “It made my rhetoric real,” Kirwan says. “Without the family consideration, perhaps there would have been some bitterness. By and large, the decision was accepted.”

In a letter to the campus community, Kirwan wrote, “The decision has caused me great anguish because I feel enormously proud and privileged to serve as president of this university. Until this offer came, . . . it had been my expectation to remain at Ohio State for at least another year or two.”

Looking back, a June 1998 Kirwan *onCampus* interview is revealing. “The long goodbye at College Park has been difficult,” Kirwan told Jeanette Drake. “I told some people the other day [that] my father was at the University of Kentucky for thirty-four years. And I had been at the University of Maryland for



Students demonstrated their desire during the winter 2002 commencement.



And the president was deeply moved.



President Kirwan's young grandsons were on hand in Maryland when Kirwan announced he was returning to become chancellor of the University System of Maryland. (Photo courtesy of *Baltimore Sun*.)

thirty-four years and really not thinking about leaving. It's just not in the Kirwan genes to move around. So this has been an adjustment." Later, referring to his first two years at Ohio State, Kirwan told the *Lantern's* Shannon Wingard that the experience "is not for the fainthearted," adding that "it's been a learning experience."

But why did he leave when he did?

"Such decisions are not made on any one factor," he says in retrospect. "There were several things. My disappointment with the way the tuition proposal was dealt with by the board and governor. I was frustrated that the state wasn't really going to make a commitment to supporting OSU."

There was also an issue over his contract. "I was in the fourth year of a five-year contract," Kirwan says, "and the Board of Trustees had begun to talk about extending it. I would be sixty-five when the contract expired in 2003, and the board initially suggested a year-to-year extension. 'No,' I said, 'I wanted something more than that.' They said they would do whatever I wanted. I was

a bit put off that the board suggested a year-to-year agreement. It was a slight negative, not huge.”

Kirwan contrasted that with the chancellor’s job offer, where a five-year contract meshed well with his interests. “I still had a tremendous amount of energy and enthusiasm for work,” he says. “I was too young to retire now or in a couple of years. Plus, Patty made this point often: We were always going to move back to Maryland, where we had a vacation home and where our kids had settled and where our three grandchildren were. Are we going to wait three, four, or five more years when our grandchildren would be that much older or do we go back now and be part of their growing up? That was probably the largest single factor, an overwhelming consideration. And the position gave a time frame that seemed right.”

“I called David [Brennan] to tell him of my decision,” Kirwan continues. “He was very disappointed. He said, ‘Just tell me what you want and we’ll do it.’ He was very magnanimous, suggesting some compensation things and to do some things at the house. He then came to my office and sat with me to reinforce the desire that I stay. For David, family has deep and personal meaning. He respected the decision. We continue to have a very good relationship.”

“We clearly would have loved to have had Brit stay,” says Dimon McFerson. “We were very comfortable with him, but we also very much understood. You can compete on money, you can compete on perks, but you can’t compete on heart and family ties.”

Kirwan’s new job paid a base salary of \$375,000 plus \$100,000 to cover lost pension revenue (federal law prohibits drawing salary and pension at the same time), versus the \$275,000 at Ohio State and the \$345,000 that the previous chancellor earned. He would live at Hidden Waters, a handsome Georgian mansion near the Baltimore Beltway. However, Kirwan assured the *Washington Post*, “This is not about the money.”

“Maryland is where his heart is,” said a University of Maryland insider. “This is where his wife wants to be. This is where he wants to end his career in higher education.”

In hindsight, was it the right decision? “Being here has been an important blessing over the last year,” he said in the summer of 2003, “everything I had hoped it would be and more. Although I miss Ohio State and get pangs of homesickness from time to time, it was the right decision.”

Among the many who were sorry Kirwan was leaving were members of the Board of Trustees. “While the Board of Trustees is saddened by President Kirwan’s decision, and will miss him greatly,” said Brennan, “we appreciate his many contributions to Ohio State, particularly his leadership in developing

and implementing the Academic Plan. The trustees remain fully committed to that plan.”

Acknowledging the role of family in Kirwan’s decision, many trustees understand that the budget battles—and especially the tuition issue—played a role also. “The fight with the governor over tuition took the wind out of Brit’s sails,” Brennan added later. “It became too much. When the board backed down, I could tell by the tone of his voice. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Trustee Karen Hendricks agrees that the incident “was a source of misunderstanding and mistrust between Brit and the board.”

Many did feel that Kirwan had left too soon.

“I was very disappointed Brit left when he did,” says Alex Shumate, who had recruited Kirwan to Columbus. “He did good things, but his best work was yet to come. It was a solid four years, and he handed off a better university than he received.” Asked if there were any disappointments in Kirwan’s presidency, Fisher College dean Joe Alutto replied: “To be candid, the biggest disappointment was his leaving when he did. We were just reaching a point where I think everyone was benefiting from all the investments that had been made.”

The *Washington Post* cited a special irony about the departure, noting that when Kirwan was president at College Park, he had lobbied against creation of the chancellor’s job and had chafed under it. The Ohio media mourned his impending departure. “[M]ake no mistake,” editorialized Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer*, “this is a profound loss for OSU and for the future of public higher education in Ohio.” “OSU and Ohio are losing a leader they can’t afford to lose,” wrote Joe Hallett in the *Dispatch*.

Clearly, the Kirwans are a very close family and the parents missed their children and grandchildren. “Whenever we came to meetings in DC,” Patty says, “it would be strange to leave the kids. When we moved to Columbus, they were very supportive. They loved to visit. After visiting, Ann decided to get married there, rather than at the chapel at Maryland, and have the reception at the president’s house.” When she became pregnant and her water broke, Ann called her parents in Columbus at 11 PM, and they were in the hospital room early the next morning. Ann, who along with her brother loved Columbus, had hoped her dad would stay. “It was a great place,” she says. “We had mixed emotions. Leaving broke his heart, but the third grandchild did it.” “It was hard for him to leave Ohio State,” seconds Bill. “It was earlier than he wanted, but the opportunity to return to Maryland was too good, with their eventual plans to go back and the third grandchild on the way.”

Kirwan promised to be “the best lame-duck president ever,” saying “it is the least I can do to demonstrate my deep and abiding affection and appreciation

for The Ohio State University community.” His agenda over the next ninety days, he added, would include the full implementation of the four Academic Plan initiatives—compensation, undergraduate enhancements, the Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in the Americas, and biomedical research—plus moving forward with the Gateway Project.

He did all that and more, pressing to see that, to the extent humanly possible, every project then underway was completed by June 30. This included the announcement from the NSF of the Mathematical Biosciences Institute and the report on regional campuses.

John Meyer recalls that during his final weeks in office, Kirwan made two quick development trips. One was a final visit to Dutch Knowlton in Florida, an unsuccessful attempt to close a \$3 million gap in funding the new architecture building. The other was to Boston for lunch with Frank Stanton, an alumnus and former president of CBS, who had earlier endowed a chair in psychology in honor of his professor, Harold E. Burtt.

Kirwan had an excellent relationship with Stanton and hoped to attract one more gift before he left for Maryland. Through active listening, Kirwan determined that Stanton’s Ohio State passion was veterinary medicine and left with Stanton’s commitment to endow a chair in that college. Only later did the university learn that many years earlier the Vet Med School had saved the life of the Stanton’s Boston Terrier. In gratitude, Stanton named the chair in honor of his wife, Ruth, with whom he had happily roamed the banks of the Olentangy, adjacent to the College of Veterinary Medicine.

Introducing . . . The Holbrook Years

The trustees wasted no time in searching for a new president. Ten days after the announcement, at their meeting on April 3, Chairman David Brennan expressed an eagerness “to complete this process as soon as possible without sacrificing in any way quality, thoroughness or due diligence.” The board named an eighteen-member search committee chaired by incoming chair Jim Patterson and including trustees Robert Duncan, Karen Hendricks, and Dimon McFerson along with five members of the faculty, two deans, three students, two administrators, an alumni representative, and a staff member. The trustees also voted to retain a search consultant and to delegate transition details to the president’s planning cabinet.

“One of the first things the committee did was invite Kirwan to talk about the job,” said senate secretary Susan Fisher in a June 2003 *Columbus Monthly*

article. “He spent fully an hour and a half just listing—not describing but listing—the things he has to do. It was mind-boggling. How can any human being keep up with a schedule like that?” And at an exit interview with the board, Kirwan shared a list of potential candidates, just as Gee had done five years earlier.

At the May 3 Board of Trustees meeting, Patterson outlined the search committee’s progress, which included a series of meetings with selected individuals and groups inside and outside the university, including leaders of national educational organizations. Besides advertising the position broadly and establishing a Web page to provide information and facilitate comments and suggestions, the committee held two public forums that month. Patterson emphasized the importance of discretion, noting that, “[a]s is true in comparable private sector searches, [attracting the best possible person] cannot be accomplished if the entire process and all of the candidates are subject to constant, intense public scrutiny.”

The next report came at the June 6 meeting, at which Patterson—now chairman of the Board of Trustees as well as the search committee—made three important announcements. First was the hiring of A. T. Kearney, Inc., of Alexandria, Virginia, a firm experienced in academic searches and led in this instance by Jan Greenwood. Second was the adoption of a presidential profile representing input from many sources and featuring six key attributes: exemplary integrity, trustworthiness, and wisdom; superb interpersonal and communicative skills; a breadth and depth of intellect; a high level of energy; tenacity and judgment; and self-confidence. As noted earlier, one requirement for a new president was his or her absolute adherence to the Academic Plan. The trustees believed strongly that they had the right plan in place and were not interested in an alternate vision or different approach.

And third was the appointment of former president Ed Jennings as interim president, effective July 1. The trustees deliberately avoided choosing someone who was a candidate for president, selecting a man who not only had served as Ohio State’s tenth president but also had remained active on the faculty at Fisher College and maintained strong relationships in the community.

“We are fortunate,” Patterson said, “to have an ideal candidate available to us who brings great familiarity with the university and considerable experience in raising academic quality, working with faculty and addressing budget issues.” His tenure, Patterson added, “could last anywhere from one week to several months.”

On July 25, four months after Kirwan announced his departure, the Board of Trustees met in special session to elect Dr. Karen A. Holbrook, provost at the



Ed Jennings, Ohio State's tenth president, was recalled to duty to serve on an interim basis when Kirwan left for Maryland.

University of Georgia, as Ohio State's thirteenth president. The search committee, said Patterson, had "reviewed well over one hundred names, narrowing the list first to about fifty names, and met face-to-face with more than a dozen individuals. For the most part," he continued, "these candidates were presidents or provosts at major American universities." The committee concluded that Ohio State would be best served with someone from a public university, he added, eventually recommending "a small number of candidates to the Board of Trustees," which voted unanimously—"and I should add, enthusiastically—for . . . Dr. Karen Holbrook." "Holbrook," Patterson said, "meets or exceeds all the attributes in our Presidential Profile." He singled out three specific factors that attracted her to the search committee and board:

Her "total, unequivocal commitment to academic excellence and the Academic Plan" and her "passionate interest . . . in Ohio State." "More than any person that we spoke to," he said, "Dr. Holbrook conveyed a

thorough understanding of our vision . . . and what it will take to achieve it.”

Her broad experience at the Universities of Washington, Florida, and Georgia, three land-grant institutions “that bear many similarities to Ohio State.” Patterson specifically cited her “experience with academic medical centers, medical research, and biotechnology.”

Her “extraordinary set of interpersonal skills.” “Her marks in developing positive relationships with faculty, staff, and students,” Patterson said, “are more than high—they are stratospheric.”

In expressing her delight at the board’s decision, Holbrook noted that “The Ohio State University stands especially tall among land-grant research institutions because it has it all, and I do mean all. It has the people, a broad array of undergraduate and professional programs, including an outstanding medical center complex, a statewide purview of education and outreach and an unparalleled infrastructure.”

The new president would be paid \$325,000 a year, up from the \$275,000 base salary Kirwan had received. She started work October 1.

As a relatively new trustee, Patterson had been honored to participate in the 1997 search that landed Kirwan, which served as something of a pattern for the 2002 exercise. There were differences, of course, including how the search committee members were chosen. In 1997, campus organizations were asked to submit names; in 2002 Patterson did some consulting, then made the choices himself. And while this search seemed to be conducted very quickly, Patterson notes that both searches consumed about the same four months. (The Kirwan search did not start until several months after Gee announced he was leaving, while the Holbrook search started within days; also, the Kirwan transition lasted six months, versus two months for Holbrook.)

“When the trustees met with Brit,” Patterson says, in contrasting the searches of 1997 and 2002, “it was like, this is our person unless we reject him. This time, we talked to two or three. Before, it was very much Alex’s pick. People now probably say Karen Holbrook is pretty much my pick. That’s never the case, but the chair has a lot to do with it.”

Patterson also ran names by Kirwan, who was, he says, “extremely helpful.” “He talked with Karen before she was hired,” Patterson adds, “and told me, ‘You have found a good person.’”

McFerson, whose considerable experience on search committees was limited to business and nonprofit organizations, is complimentary about the



President Karen Holbrook at her first Board of Trustees meeting.

search process. “Chairman Patterson did an outstanding job,” he says. “I think we were very thorough and that the board did a professional job.”

Hail and Farewell

Kirwan’s announcement was followed by a series of tributes and farewells. “As the period of time between March 25, when Brit announced he was leaving, until June when he left, the longer the time, the more goodbyes we had for him, the tougher it seemed for him to leave,” Jim Patterson recalls. “I just wonder if you’d asked him in June if he wanted to change his mind, what he would have said. It was too late, of course. The decision became tougher after he made it rather than easier. There was such an outpouring of support and genuine respect and love that it was hard.”

“It was a redo of what happened when I was leaving Maryland, although I was not there [Ohio State] as long,” Kirwan notes. “I am a very emotional



President Kirwan and his tennis partner and friend, David Frantz, hug during a farewell reception in June 2002.

person and develop bonds of affection to institutions and people. I got very emotional on many occasions. I remember a very difficult meeting with the planning cabinet. I was sobbing. I was very touched by the outpouring of appreciation and support.”

And an outpouring it was. At a farewell reception at the Blackwell Inn on June 21, Susan Fisher accorded Kirwan the ultimate faculty tribute. “Brit has shown,” she said, “that it is possible to fundamentally change the way business is done even at a place as big and bureaucratic as OSU. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Brit’s stewardship of the university is that, in every case, the changes were made not by presidential fiat or ultimatum but by reasoned discussion and consensus.”

“He stood up for what he believed,” said USG president Eddie Pauline, “and he compelled the rest of us to do the same thing. Through financial struggles, day-to-day dilemmas, and the plethora of problems and worries that plague any university president, he held true to his heart and as a result, we are, today, in a place that four years ago was hardly imaginable.”

Perhaps the strongest words came from David Brennan at Kirwan’s last Board of Trustees meeting, who called Kirwan “the finest president this university has had” and “the finest university president now sitting at any university in this country.”

“Brit never created undue problems for himself,” Patterson recalls. “People could agree or disagree with something, but nobody ever got out of joint with Brit.”

“He was on a roll,” trustee Dan Slane notes. “It was very exciting. He was right on target. We were getting better. I was extremely depressed when he left.”

“The word that best describes Brit is genuine,” says Judith Koroscik.

“He is a truly genuine, down-to-earth person,” seconds University Relations’ Sue Jones, who recalls seeing Kirwan at the Race for the Cure and waving hello. “He ran up and gave me a big hug and directed me over to Patty and his daughter,” she adds. “Here I was cautious that he might not recognize me and he treated me like family.”

“It feels kind of like the Kennedy presidency,” says one colleague, “that it was Camelot. It was absolutely wonderful, and it was way too short. I am very sad about that.”

“We had three great presidents in a row: Kirwan, Gee and Jennings,” adds Mike Hogan.

Before leaving, Kirwan participated in an exit interview with the Board of Trustees conducted at the Fawcett Center. “Brit shared with us quite candidly his thoughts on Ohio State and where we are,” recalls Jim Patterson. “He shared his thoughts on some individuals. The challenge he saw was the legislature and public funding. He was very much worried about that. I think he felt good about some things he had done, which he had every right to do. And he talked about the Academic Plan.

“Don’t lose it,” he implored us. “It’s too good. Keep it updated annually. Don’t forget it.”

