



Head of Scotland visits 'wild west'

On quest to reform education in home country, First Minister makes trip to MVHS

by Steffi Lau

editor in chief

The excitement is almost tangible as students, a mass of cowboy hats and leather boots, mingle just before school begins. The student body that would typically be straggling to school in sweatpants has put on a burst of spirit for Homecoming Week's Wild Wild West Day. However, amongst this annual tradition, a different level of excitement is brewing in the Main Office for an even rarer occasion. As the bell rings, conspicuous among the cowboys who flock to class outside, Principal April Scott sits in her office, clad in a red plaid tartan.

It's slightly unfitting for a principal who usually takes part in the spirit days of the school she governs. But her Scottish attire is no mistake. As she and the assistant principals step outside, the reason is made clear when two boys saunter up and ask, "Is it true? Is the Prime Minister of Scotland coming?"

On Oct. 18, a very unusual morning in MVHS' history began to unfold as Administration waited by the bus circle, craning their necks to look for cars coming down McClellan Road. In fact, they were waiting for the First Minister of Scotland, second only to U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair. First Minister Jack McConnell was to visit with the goal of looking at MVHS'

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top-ranked math and science programs as part of his plan to improve science education at Scottish schools.

The anticipation seemed to buzz in the air as last minute preparations like "Should we move colorguard practice?" were radioed through Assistant Principal Brad Metheany's walkie talkie.

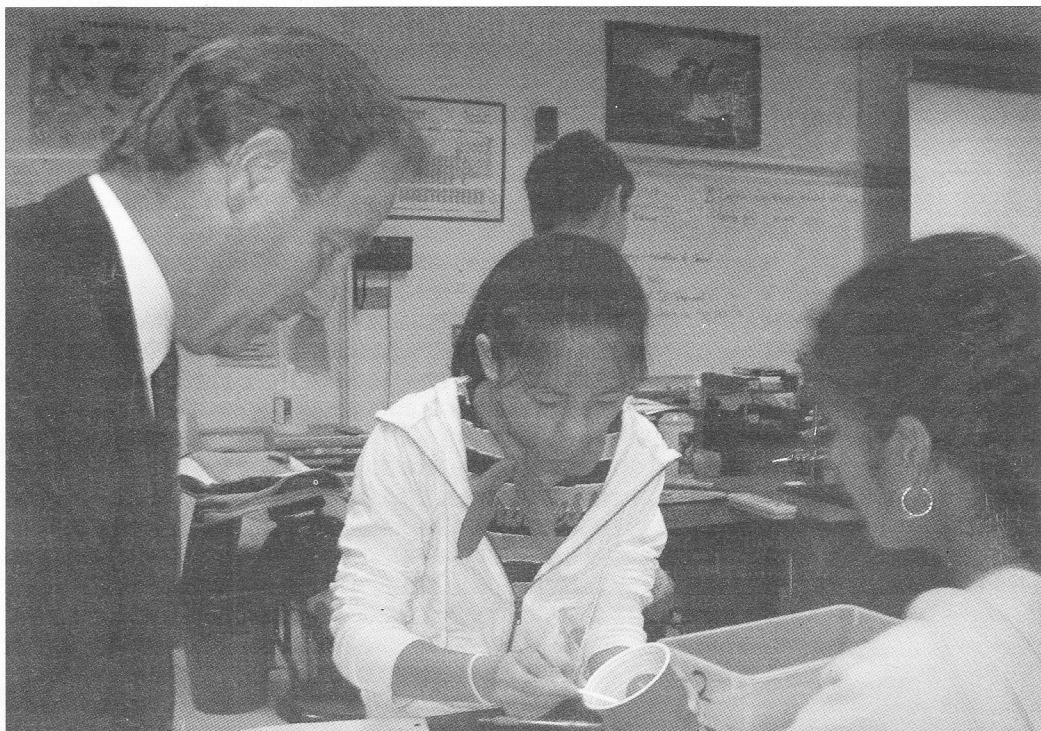
The day was made more unusual by Wild Wild West Day. Assistant Principal Dennis Plaza laughed and said, "What I'm afraid is that he'll think Americans are really cowboys. Like when I imagine Scotland, I imagine kilts and bagpipes. I guess it's better than Rockstar Day though."

The moment arrived when a black car pulled up at 10:15 am. McConnell along with Chief Inspector of Schools Graham Donaldson, First Secretary of Affairs Michael Kellet, Director of CBI (Confederation of British Industry) Scotland Iain McMillan and a few personal secretaries stepped out. Scott stepped forward to shake McConnell's hand. He remarked in surprise, "You've got a tartan." She returned, "It's the Scott family plaid, of course." The group laughed, setting the mood for a whirlwind and very surreal hour and a half.

The group proceeded to tour classrooms. The first stop was science teacher Michael Hicks' Biology class in which they were conducting an osmosis lab. Though they only stayed for ten minutes, McConnell, a former math teacher, didn't wait long to immerse himself. He immediately mingled with students, asking specific questions about the lab's concepts.

"I really liked his accent," freshman Pooja Kundargi said. "He seemed really down to earth, not powerful and mean."

The group proceeded to math teacher Scott Deruiter's Calculus BC class. McConnell was intrigued by Deruiter's contraption that allowed



Steffi Lau | staff photographer

EXPERIMENT During the tour of the classes, director of CBI (Confederation of British Industry) Scotland Iain McMillan looks on as students conduct a science experiment in a freshman Biology class.

him to hang his laptop from his shoulders. "That idea I will definitely take back to Scotland with me," he joked.

As the group passed by the drama room, they met sophomore Angel Yamsangsung who was painting chairs for a drama production. "My friends had passed by earlier and told me they were going to see him speak and I was so jealous," she said. "But then he walked by and I was holding this paintbrush and wearing short shorts and boots so it was awkward. But I shook his hand and suddenly I'm surrounded by his entourage. He wanted to talk to me instead of just standing and watching."

After the tour, the Scottish group and the Administration went to the auditorium where McConnell gave a brief speech. He then allowed students to question him on topics ranging from "What do you think of the situation in South Korea?" to more lighthearted ones like "Have you met J.K. Rowling?" (yes, it turned out). The charismatic McConnell captured the audience with his

jokes, saying "Did I give the wrong answer?" when the bell rang and answering "Snow Patrol" when asked what music he liked, much to the pleasure of the cheering students.

The entourage then headed to a round table discussion in the library that included math teachers Van Hoy and Heng McComb, science teachers Birdsong and Travis Hambleton, seniors Anshul Bhagi, Katherine Maslyn, ASB President Kim Ang, and Student District Board Representative Peter Lu. After unwrapping his gift of a staff shirt, McConnell posed the question, "What's special about this school?"

Bhagi, chosen to participate for his interest in science, answered, "A lot of it is the students who want to pursue their passions outside of class. We have so many math and science clubs and teachers who support us." Each student and teacher had a chance to speak, giving answers that drew many appreciative comments from the group.

Variations came in to sing as a farewell at the end as McConnell presented Scott with a gift in a green plaid bag. Reflecting back, McConnell said, "In Scotland we have some schools like this, but I want to have more schools with the same level of motivation."

Scott thinks the visit went exceptionally well, saying, "Even when Al Gore came in 1996, it wasn't like this. So few students saw him. It didn't have the warmth, the interactive feel that today had. It's something I'll never forget." Though the visit was for the sake of McConnell, it was a blessing for MVHS as well. "This was a wakeup call that reminded us that Monta Vista is a special place," Scott said. "One of them commented, 'It's so beautiful, the hills.' And how often do we come to school and look at the hills? They were able to see things we don't see everyday."

As for the cowboy getups, McConnell said, "If only I had known, I would have come in an outfit."