

Graduation 2006 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduannd Anne Owers CBE
Orator: Professor Geoff Gilbert

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon ANNE OWERS

Some time in the 1990s, a supermodel stated that she would not get out of bed in the morning for less than \$10,000. According to a recent national newspaper report, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, gets up in the morning knowing that prisoners are now getting clean underwear. Different values, but that is what marks out her life. And that is what motivates her.

Educated at Washington Grammar School, County Durham, she went on to read history at Cambridge. After graduating, she went to Zambia to teach and to do research. From 1981 to 1992, she was at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, its General Secretary from 1986. From there, she moved to Justice, the British section of the International Commission of Jurists. It is an all-party, law reform and human rights organisation that works to improve the legal system and the quality of justice. She was Director from 1992-2001. During that same time, she managed to be Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Refugee Legal Centre, a member of the Home Office Task Force on Human Rights, and to serve on the Legal Services Consultative Panel, as well as jointly editing Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1999, and publishing scholarly pieces on immigration and nationality law. Nobody tell the Vice-Chancellor that she did that without having any study leave! Her greatest achievement among many during her time at Justice, was to help secure the establishment of the Criminal Cases Review Commission. In 2000, she received a CBE and in 2001 she was appointed Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons. It is worth noting, in passing, that a former Director of Justice, Leah Levin, has also received an honorary degree from this University, and that a former Chief Inspector of Prisons, Judge Sir Stephen Tumim, received an honorary degree, too from this University. Anne Owers has been both Director of Justice and Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons - never let anybody ever tell you that obtaining a degree is becoming easier!

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons might have an office in the Home Office, but she is independent of the Home Secretary. She makes regular visits to all 139 prisons and other places of detention, including those for refugees who, let us remember, have committed no crime. In 2003, she was invited for the first time to visit the Military Correction Centre here in Colchester. She personally visits a prison about once a fortnight. She can also make visits unannounced and has free access to any prisoner and to every part of every prison. Her reports are published and she has access to the Home Secretary. It is worth noting that Anne Owers told the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, in 2003 that the foreign prisoner issue needed to be resolved, as his successor, Charles Clarke, was subsequently to discover to his cost.

The post of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons is admired throughout the world. In June this year, Anne Owers' predecessor, General Sir David, now Lord, Ramsbotham, was invited by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Committee Against Torture to speak at a conference, because the United Kingdom alone was regarded as having the necessary mechanisms in place to conduct independent inspections. It is surprising, therefore, to learn that Anne Owers may be the last Chief Inspector. The Police and Justice Bill, currently wending its way through Parliament, would subsume the office into the Inspectorate of Justice, Community Safety and Custody, that would take policy

guidance from ministers and where the Prisons Inspector would have no direct access to the Home Secretary. And the reason for this change is simply to save money....

Anne Owers, unlike her two predecessors, was a non-Establishment outsider with a substantial track record in human rights. She was also the first woman chief inspector in the male-dominated world of prisons, although that picture is now changing. She has quietly and patiently improved the life of prisoners since 2001. As she herself has said,

“We continue to be respected in all the places we need to be. We are thought of as robust and independent. It’s very encouraging that, although the prison service doesn’t have to, it nevertheless accepts about 95% of our recommendations.... Decency is now part of the prison-service agenda.”

In The Guardian last week, Anne Owers said that sometimes she gets angry, “The moment I stop getting angry, it will be the time to walk out of the door”. If the Police and Justice Bill becomes law, her entire Office will have been pushed out of that door. For the sake of prisoners, the prison service and even the Home Secretary, I hope that Anne Owers has an opportunity to be angry for a very long time to come.

Chancellor, I present to you ANNE OWERS