

Graduation 2006

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Anne Owers CBE

Thank you very much for that and thank you very much for the honour you have given me. Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, the whole congregation, and I'm particularly pleased to be here in the presence of those who have worked so very hard for the degrees they have got today. I'm particularly grateful because of the work that is done in this University and I will mention particularly the work of the Human Rights Centre. I hope the other Schools will forgive me but I have always made it a practice in my professional life to speak about what I know about rather than what I don't. And the Human Rights Centre, and the human rights work in this University, is something that I know a great deal about. Indeed, two people connected with the Human Rights Centre both gave me my first job and encouraged me to apply for my second. I don't blame them for that and I hope nobody else does either!

Many of the areas that I have worked in have involved working with marginalised people, with people who exist at the edges of society and who are not necessarily very popular. And, if you look at areas like asylum, economic and social rights, human rights training, criminal justice, the rights of detained children, what occurs to me in thinking about that is that, unlike T.S. Eliot's *Macavity: The Mystery Cat*, people from the Human Rights Centre in the University of Essex are almost always there; working in those areas, working with people who are working on the frontline, and working to make a difference. And it seems to me that the work that is done there and the work that I've had the privilege of having something to do with, is not so much an ivory tower as a scanning tower. It's a tower that illuminates what is going on in society in this country and in other countries. But, having illuminated it, then wants to do something about it or to encourage others to do something about it. And that I think is a very good place for an academic institution to be, at the interface between thought and action, providing support, providing thought but trying to make sure that things change.

The work that I do is also about illuminating. It is about shining a light into hidden places, into some dark corners, into some places that people would rather we didn't see and maybe would rather you didn't know about. It is also about assembling information, it's about gathering evidence, it's about testing evidence, it's about writing reports. But more than that, it's about trying to make sure that something changes as a result. A report is no use to anybody, it does not look after a prisoner, it does not protect society. The difference is when something changes.

If I am thinking about the work that I have done, and the work that the orator was kind enough to read out, it would be very clear to you that I did not enter university or leave university with the ambition to be chief inspector of prisons, it did not cross my mind. There will be those of you here who are very clear what you are going to do next and where you want to go next. But there will be those of you who are really unsure about what happens next and for whom what does happen next will be much more of a meander than a straight line. For those of you in that position, and particularly for your parents and friends who've supported you through this and are probably even more panicked than you are, I offer, if I can, a little encouragement. I have always been fortunate to do things that I enjoy, things that I believe in and that things that people have been prepared to give me a chance at. I have been extremely fortunate, I have not known where it would end up but I have tried at each point to repay the trust that people have given me in doing that. I think a lot of careers, a lot of life experiences are now like that. And so, in so far as I can encourage you in anything, it would be to go for what you believe in. I would also encourage anyone who is even remotely thinking about it, to test out the notion of an idea working in prisons. Prisons sound like very scary places, they are not. They are places that can do a great deal of good in the right circumstances and they are places where all kinds of disciplines can interact to help individuals and through that helping society, so that is my plug for today!

But I'll end on this very hot afternoon again by saying that the work that's done in the Human Rights Centre says a lot about the work of this University, and says a lot about those of you are involved with it in any way. I am honoured to be associated with the University. I thank you very much and I wish you all well in whatever meanders your careers take from now on.

Thank you.