

Graduation 2006

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate The Right Honourable Sir Philip Otton PC

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, members of the Senate. Fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the honour which you have just bestowed on me, it is an enormous privilege for somebody like me to be recognised by an academic institution of such prestige as your University. Thank you, Mr Orator, for the kind words you said about me, and the perhaps too fulsome praise that you've heaped upon me.

I must say, Chancellor, that the Senate took a grave risk in inviting me to accept this degree. They perhaps didn't realise that I might have been a soft judge. I think perhaps I was not because I always bore in mind the approach of an American judge in Colorado. A hundred years ago, six prospectors set off into the mountains of Colorado to find gold. The winter closed in, they were snow bound, they could not return to base. Two of them did. When the snows melted, they found three bodies, badly mutilated. One of the survivors was charged, and convicted, of cannibalism. When coming to sentence, the judge saw fit to pass sentence in these words, "You god damn son of a bitch, there were five good democrat votes in this here county and you ate three of them! You shall hang, until you are dead! Dead, do you hear me? Dead!" No sound or sign there, Chancellor, of executive interference from the Minister in the Home Office but I must confess the judge was perhaps pushing his luck a bit in the exercise of judicial discretion!

I want to say a few words to my fellow graduates. My degree came up like a gift out of the blue but yours are real degrees. You have earned your degrees by your hard work and you have reaped your just rewards. I also want to say something to your relatives, your parents, and I've been looking around and, as you've come up, I have witnessed smiles of warmth and appreciation from you at the achievement of your offspring. I know, from when I graduated more than fifty years ago, what a proud day it was for my parents and I hope you have enjoyed this wonderful ceremony as much as I did then. They say behind every man of some achievement there stands an astonished mother-in-law; if she were here today she would be truly astonished at my being here receiving this great degree!

You graduates, my fellow graduates, are poised on the threshold of your careers, but before you cross that threshold, I am going to ask you to give time to pause and reflect. You must know, in your heart of hearts, each and every one of you, that you have been privileged to attend this prestigious University. You will also know, I know, that you will remain privileged and advantaged over others throughout the rest of your life. Recently I was asked to judge in a different capacity. I joined a distinguished panel who had had to identify, from a host of young people, those who have contributed most to society. Let me share some of those experiences with you.

There was Dick. Dick was an extraordinary fellow, he came from the Gorbals in Glasgow and went to live in Angus, which is one of the most deprived areas in the United Kingdom. He was appalled at the poverty that he witnessed and he founded, aged 20, CAFE, the community alcohol free environment. He organises leisure and cultural activities, and keeps off the streets those who would be committing violence, drinking alcohol to excess and indulging in illicit drugs. He's organised youth exchanges from Scotland, Germany, Lithuania and many other countries. But, his simplest achievement, so simple that if we thought about it we might have thought about it first, he organised street football matches, between streets in Angus, and he organised a league. All run by the boys themselves but what a wonderful achievement, so much so that other cities in Scotland have taken up the idea and there is now an inter-city league of boys who kick a football, in their old shoes in the Gorbals and in the backstreets of Angus. He managed to do that and still keep down a full-time job.

What impressed me more were the more modest endeavours of those who, whilst still pursuing their careers, like you will be doing, also found time to give something back to society. Milly, now aged 17, has been busking, playing her harp outside supermarkets in Yorkshire for the last three years. And the money she collects goes to Candlelight. Candlelight is the children's cancer charity. She took twenty young people from one-parent families on a trip to Harrogate Theatre, providing for most of them their first direct experience of a performing art. She has been acclaimed as the Yorkshire Young Woman of Achievement of the Year. And then there was Jane. Jane was inspired to make property history. She was 15 and she played a trombone in the local brass band. She founded, on her own, Brass Band Aid. Tracked down top brass players throughout the country who agreed to play together at concerts and make records, and she's raised £20,000 at one concert which has established a library at a school in Ethiopia.

There are opportunities for each and every one of you, wherever you're from, and wherever you're going back to, to volunteer and make life a bit better for others. There are blind people who find life difficult, they will never see the inside of a university but they are intelligent, who enjoy being read to, sharing music and good conversation. There are illiterate people, who desperately want to learn to read and write, and learn about IT. They need your patience, enthusiasm and encouragement, which clever people like you can bring to them. For them, for you, what they seek to achieve is modest but for them, it is like graduating at a university.

Go into a hospice and befriend a young person of your own age. Give him or her a helping hand, how to live out the few weeks or days that they have, suffering from an interminable disease and their imminent death. I could go on but I hope I have inspired you to think about what I've been talking about. I give you a slogan, GOHAW. What on earth does that mean? Give one hour a week, GOHAW. If you need help, I'll give it. You write to me at the Vice-Chancellor's office and Vice-Chancellor, you will forward on the letters to me won't you? There you are, he will.

A recent Home Office poll among young graduates who had done just that, were asked about their motives for doing so. You can imagine what they replied but one question and answer caught my mind. 62% said that it looked good on their CV. Think about it! Thank you Chancellor, and the University, for allowing me to have the, privilege of being your Visitor. It was indeed, a calm period of my life, the students always behaved themselves and even the staff, on occasions, did so. And thank you for allowing me the privilege of addressing this distinguished company and the talent coming into the law, who we have honoured today.

Thank you.