

## Graduation 2006 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Shami Chakrabarti  
Orator: Professor Maurice Sunkin

### **Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon SHAMI CHAKRABARTI**

Shami Chakrabarti is now one of the best known and widely respected advocates for human rights in Britain. She has gained the respect not only of those naturally sympathetic to her position, which is often critical of government and authority: but also of those that she challenges. She is respected because she is a well informed, straight talking advocate for human rights who combines passion and pragmatism in equal measure together with a very high level of legal expertise honed by experience as an adviser in government and as the Director of Liberty, the human rights pressure group.

Shami was born in London in 1969 of Indian parents. Her sense of the power of authority had early beginnings. She went to school in Harrow in North West London and remembers being an anxious pupil at primary school somewhat under the 'tyranny' of a single class teacher. Moving to middle school came as something of a relief, as she now had several teachers and she gained an early insight into the importance of a separation of powers. She clearly did well and moved from her comprehensive school armed with ten O-levels to Sixth Form College and then on to the LSE to read law. Here, she says, she concentrated her scholarly efforts on Public Law and Constitutional Law, and her leisurely pursuits on film acting: a combination that was to serve her well in her future career.

When she is asked what ignited her initial interest in law and human rights, Shami refers to an argument she had with her father when she was 12, "We were watching the news during the hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper. My father says that you can't possibly support the death penalty. I said I did. He responded, 'You don't understand: there is no justice system in the world that will be 100% perfect and you have to imagine what it would be like to be the one person in a million who was wrongly convicted of this terrible murder. And nobody believes you. You have been convicted and you're taken to the scaffold.'"

This exchange sparked her interest in the importance of justice and the huge potential and dangers of injustice.

Ironically, on graduation she decided that she wasn't going to be a lawyer but instead would get a job as a trader in the City and earn enough to pay for her to study at the New York University Film School. This she may well have done, had she been able to do mental arithmetic. Doing mental arithmetic was necessary in order to pass the stiff tests that aspiring city traders must undertake.

As it was she got a job serving drinks at the bar in the Middle Temple common room. There she met her husband and decided that she too would become a Barrister. Shami was called to the Bar by Middle Temple in 1994 and secured a funded pupillage at 39 Essex Street, one of the leading public law sets.

After working briefly as a Barrister, in 1996 she joined the Government Legal Service as a lawyer in the Home Office. Here she worked initially advising the Conservative Home Secretary Michael Howard, who was reviled by civil rights campaigners. Later she advised Labour Home Secretaries.

One of her first tasks was to work on the 1996 Asylum Bill, which was considered draconian at the time. She also worked on policy, legislation and litigation in a range of highly sensitive areas including counter-terror and criminal justice, as well as on the new Labour government's Human Rights Act. During this time she gained a unique understanding of authority's view of human rights. Certainly, as a government lawyer, she would have found herself advising on how best to defend challenges to the United Kingdom before both the House of Lords and the European Court of Human Rights.

Shami left the civil service in 2001 and on 10 September 2001 – one day before the attack on the twin towers - she joined Liberty as an in-house barrister. She became Director of Liberty in September 2003. Her predecessors at Liberty (or the NCCL as it was previously known) have included Harriet Harman and Patricia Hewitt, both Ministers in the current Government. At the time some supporters of Liberty were said to be disappointed that a higher profile appointment had not been made. Few, if any, of these critics can remain disappointed still.

Indeed, no one has done more to raise the profile of that organisation, nor indeed of the importance of human rights in the UK, than has Shami Chakrabarti. Since being at Liberty she has written, spoken and broadcast widely on the essential role played by human rights in democratic society. She has become a well known face on the TV and is now often invited to participate in the BBC's high profile Question Time. She is one of a very few lawyers who has become a household name. The resulting accolades are many and diverse.

In 2004 The Guardian newspaper included Shami amongst the 80 'prodigiously talented young people it believed will most shape our lives in the early 21st century.'

She was runner-up to Jamie Oliver in the vote by viewers of Channel 4 News to identify the most inspiring political figures of 2005.

She is the subject of a single by the Birmingham band, the Dastards – which applauds her as a fighter against "government by tabloid". I will not be tempted to sing their words, but a short extract provides a flavour:

"She should be running the country  
At the Head of her party:  
Shami Chakrabarti,  
She's a fighter for liberty,  
for kindness and decency.  
She champions dignity  
Defending humanity..."

More recently, The New Statesman listed Shami along with four other British women within the top 50 'Heroes of our Time'. The other four were: Lesley Abdela, Queen Elizabeth II, Helena Kennedy QC and Margaret Thatcher.

As well as her wider public role, Shami is a Governor of the London School of Economics and sits on the Advisory Board of the British Institute of Human Rights and the Executive Committee of the Administrative Law Bar Association. She has also published important articles in leading scholarly journals.

Shami believes that, "human rights are not merely the business of lawyers, but are central to a healthy society's values and sense of identity..., human rights are not at odds with matters such as child protection and counter terrorism – on the contrary, they are vital to both."

Shami is now one of the principal advocates for human rights. Her task is not always easy and what she has to say is becoming less and less popular amongst certain circles. However controversial, the part she plays is crucial within our democratic society and she plays that part with ever increasing skill and confidence. She is an outstanding advocate for human rights.

It is for these achievements that the Senate has resolved to confer upon Shami Chakrabarti the Degree of Doctor of the University of Essex.

**Chancellor, I present to you SHAMI CHAKRABARTI**