

Graduation 2007

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Professor George Monbiot

Thank-you very much indeed Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Professor Pretty and all the rest of you. It's a tremendous honour for me to be given an honorary doctorate at the University of Essex and I am very honoured and flattered by it. When they were putting on my robes, the thought passed through my mind that I was being prepared for a sacrifice – it has that sort of ambiance in the robing room but I was assured that thanks to the new University funding formulas that this will no longer be necessary.

I wanted to make a plea, which really builds on what Lord Philips was saying and indeed on what Jules was saying in his oration. Because there are many people and I am speaking primarily here to those who have just graduated and many congratulations to all of you.

There are many people who have your best interests at heart who will advise you how to climb the greasy pole. How to pursue that path of wealth and power, which will bring you the rewards which graduates expect. And sometimes those people will argue that if you are confronted with a choice between liberty and security you should choose security. Now I don't know whether or not I have your best interests at heart but I would like to argue strongly that you should choose liberty.

Your freedom is the most precious, the most remarkable thing that you possess. In fact very few generations of people in any country on earth have as much freedom as we do right now. And we have a duty towards ourselves to use that freedom; we also have a duty towards other people to use that freedom. We inhabit an extraordinary period, we are perhaps the most fortunate generations that have ever lived. We are surrounded by the fruits of fossil fuel use, by the extraordinary prosperity, which that has permitted us. We might also be the most fortunate generations that ever will live and the decisions we take will affect not just ourselves, but affect people for hundreds of years to come. And I urge you to choose wisely and to use this extraordinary freedom that you have right now, that you might not have for much longer if you don't choose wisely, but to use that freedom to make the kind of decisions in your own life which will positively affect the lives of others for such a long time to come.

Now during my third year at university I was struck by an extraordinary phenomenon that many of my friends, people who I thought I felt alike with, had promised for the last two and a half years that they were going to go off and save the world in one way or another: they were going to stop the rainforest from being cut down or prevent hunger in Africa or they were going to follow their hearts, they were going to become artists or photographers or composers. And then in those last few months at university, one by one I saw them taking jobs in the City – I was astonished by this. And they said to me 'well, no, no don't worry, I'm just going to go into the City for a couple of years, make some money and then I'm going to go off and save the Amazon or become a photographer or become a composer and the rest of it' and I sort of believed them. Well, twenty-two years later, they are still there. They have got their big salaries and their lifestyles to match and they are no more likely to go off and save the Amazon than I am to go into the City. And of course there are many people who have a genuine vocation for financial services and it's what they have always wanted to do in which case, do it. But if that's not your vocation, if you are doing it because you think you ought to, because somebody has persuaded you or flattered you or lured you into doing it, I would strongly urge you to think again. And I would strongly urge you to review that amazing commodity that you possess, that freedom and see whether or not it is being best used. And it is not in any way to disparage people who have taken that decision and of course, there are many who have taken it, knowing that it is exactly the right thing for them to do. But if you doubt that it's

the right thing for you to do, then really I would urge you to revise that decision. And the reason for this I suppose just comes down to one very simple thing that for your own sake but also for the sake of those to come, I want you to be yourselves rather than the shadow of the person that other people think you ought to be.

Thank you very much.