

Graduation 2008 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduated Her Excellency President Michelle Bachelet

Orator: Professor Valerie Fraser

Vice-Chancellor, the Senate of the University has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon HER EXCELLENCY PRESIDENT MICHELLE BACHELET

The election of Her Excellency Michelle Bachelet to the Presidency of the Republic of Chile in 2006 serves as a fitting metaphor for the country's social, economic and political transformation over the past 20 years. Her personal experience of political repression in the aftermath of the coup of 1973 only strengthened her resolve to work for a better Chile. Her extraordinary achievements provide a mirror for others striving to advance the vital processes of truth and reconciliation, of strengthening democracy and justice; in short, building the Chile of the future.

To expand briefly on a few aspects of this.

First - most obviously, but none the less remarkably: she is a woman. She is Chile's first woman president, and I believe the first in the Americas to be freely elected on her own merits. It would have seemed impossible even a few years ago that this could happen, but as well as being an appropriate symbol of the way in which the country has changed, and a role model for young women everywhere, her election is also in a sense a product of the country's recent history. The death and disappearance of so many men under the Pinochet regime meant that women had to take control of their own lives, as President Bachelet knows from personal experience. As a result, since 1989, women have made significant contributions to the democratisation of the country.

Secondly, having herself experienced torture under the dictatorship, President Bachelet has very real, personal commitment to Human Rights. She chose a career in medicine as a concrete way of helping people, especially children, cope with pain: emotional pain as well as physical. One could say that the Hippocratic Oath is a good summary of the precepts by which she had chosen to live: she believes human life deserves the utmost respect, and that Human Rights violations are inexcusable always, anywhere, and everywhere. In Chile admitting to the Human Rights violations of the past is an essential part of moving on.

And moving on involves reconciliation with the past, and reconciliation between different points of view. Many people have told me that it is her personal tact and sensitivity, together with her accessibility (gifts, as someone said, not common in Latin American presidents), that account for her success in this area. President Bachelet has devoted a great deal of time and energy to building bridges with different groups - most notably, with the military. She recognised that the development of a healthy democracy in Chile required good, trusting relations between civil and military worlds, and that this in turn required good relations between politicians and the military. So in the 1990s she took the highly unusual step of returning to college to study military strategy, taking courses in Santiago and Washington. She proved an outstanding student and in 2002 the then President Ricardo Lagos appointed her Minister of Defence – the first woman to be appointed Minister of Defence in Latin America. She has been highly successful in getting the military on board: she has earned their respect.

President Bachelet represents hope for Chile's future. And Chile holds a very special place in many people's hearts, in the UK as elsewhere around the world. The 1973 coup, the other September 11th, marked the end of the age of innocence for many of my generation, and not only for those on the Left. The terrible stories that came out of Chile, the personal contact with traumatised exiles, shook many people in Britain out of their comfortable complacency: how could this happen in a country like Chile? The shock triggered unprecedented efforts to provide help for exiles and refugees: in the UK the then Labour government made available substantial sums of money to the World University Service (WUS) through the ODA, Overseas Development Agency, (forerunner of DfID). The group 'Academics for Chile' was established to place exiles in education in the UK, to pressurise universities to waive fees and accept students with non-standard qualifications, and in some cases to negotiate the release of political prisoners with the promise of a university place. 900 grants were awarded under this system and Alan Angell from Oxford and Christian Anglade of the University of Essex were key members of the Academics for Chile group. A number of those early refugees, including several that studied at Essex, returned to make valuable contributions to the strengthening of democracy in Chile. As indeed have subsequent Essex graduates, particularly from the departments of Government and Sociology, and from the Human Rights Centre; and we are proud of them. And there are also those who have remained in the UK, where they maintain links with Chile while also contributing to their adopted home. We are proud of them too. So our links with Chile are strong and deep. We wish to mark our respect for President Bachelet's remarkable achievements, and to strengthen the ties that bind our University to her country.

Vice-Chancellor, the Senate of the University of Essex has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Her Excellency Michelle Bachelet, President of the Republic of Chile. Vice-Chancellor, I call upon you to present Her Excellency Michelle Bachelet with her degree.