

## Graduation 2009

### Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Sir Ivor Crewe

Chancellor, graduates, friends and colleagues, in lapidary inscriptions Samuel Johnson said “A man is not upon oath” and evidently Professor King believes that what holds the tombstones applies equally to orations. I shall respond as President Lyndon Johnson did, to a chairman’s over-flattering introduction at a political meeting. I wish my dear parents could be with us today to hear what you have just said; my father would have enjoyed it and my mother would have believed it. I find it difficult to express adequately, the sheer depth of pleasure that his honorary degree gives me. But I feel that the powers that be have got things the wrong way round; it is I who should be paying tribute to the University and not vice-versa. The University has been an invigorating and fulfilling part of my life for 38 years and it will continue to be so. To be associated with an outstanding department of Government, to have fathered the flourishing Institute for Social and Economic Research, which in 20 years has exceeded my highest hopes and to have presided over such a successful University have been strokes of extraordinary personal good fortune. I am delighted that the department and the institute and the University are all thriving; even if I am amazed that you’ve managed to do so well without me in the last two years.

My debt to the University, in fact goes back further than the orator implied because what first set me on the path are studying Politics and Economics, were two books that I picked up in my last year at school and both happened to be written by founding Professors at Essex. One was Richard Lipsy’s *Introduction to Positive Economics*, and the other was Jean Blondel’s *Voters, Parties and Leaders* and I am delighted that Jean Blondel is here today, sitting on the front row, here in the audience.

Now you may wonder what kind of nerdy 17 year old I must have been to pick up and enjoy such books but you must remember that this was in a bygone age before iPhones, MP3 players and Twitter. Anyway, these books convinced me of two things; firstly that Politics and Economics could be studied objectively, that there was much more to them than mere opinion or assertion and that the pictures painted by the press and television were caricatures of reality. And secondly, that Essex was the mecha of the Social Sciences, so it was a thrill to join the department of Government a few years later still at a young age. The three Social Science departments at Essex, Government, Economics and we must not forget Sociology even though the Sociology students are attending a different degree ceremony, are exceptional by the most demanding of international standards; you will already have heard about the Research Assessment Exercise that put them at the very top of the rankings.

Recently, I met the head of the Department of Politics at Oxford who did not know of my background and I should tell you that the Department of Politics at Oxford is three times the size of the Department of Government here, who told me that he always regarded Essex as the department to beat and how disappointed he was that once again it had failed to do so. And I purred with pride and delight.

But what I really want to say, particularly to the graduates here and their parents and partners and supporters, is that these accolades are the outcome, not the essence, of a great department. For a great department one needs two ingredients, teachers and scholars with a depth of knowledge, and a range of imagination but even more important, a culture that combines robust free enquiry with a committed tolerance of a plurality of views. The department that I joined, back in 1971, was at the cutting edge, fizzing with ideas to bate an argument, it was a world in which no proposition was treated as so sacrosanct and theoretical, as to be exempt from scrutiny. In which the only

proper response to any assertion was probing examination. In which orthodoxy was automatically suspect, doubt was heroic and cliché was immediately pounced upon. And if this sounds as if people were constantly at each others throats, let me add that it was also a community that accommodated a wide range of strongly held but never imposed opinions in which colleagues and students comfortably argued but rarely quarrelled. It was a department as we've heard, that produced the new Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow who was a model student at the time, passionate about political ideas, argumentative, scornful of political correctness, a pain in the part of the anatomy that it would be indelicate to mention at such an occasion, but someone who always operated within the academic culture. And I don't believe that over its 40 years of outstanding achievement, the department has been anything else but that.

The best departments and universities offer more than courses and qualifications, they are not just in the knowledge and skills business, they are in the judgement, imagination and wisdom business, they instil habits of thinking whose roots spread and deepen over time, a cast of mind that is independent, sceptical and questioning that gives precedence to evidence, testing and reasoning over faith and fashion that is always open but never captive to new ideas, that has the confidence to know that much of the world is inherently uncertain and who have the confidence to change their own position.

Now when I moved to the Vice-Chancellors office, I was told that when I did that, I would lose almost all contact with intellectual and academic endeavour. There is no joke about this, what's the difference between Vice-Chancellors and supermarket trolleys and the answer is, you fill both up with food and drink but it's only the supermarket trolley that has a mind of its own. And it is true that I found myself reading balance sheets and strategic plans rather than good books. But I tried always to keep in mind that the job of a Vice-Chancellor is to nourish across the whole University, the intellectual culture that I grew up with in the department, to protect the liberal idea of the University against the encroachments and blandishments of Government, Business and Media.

Over the course of my time at Essex, the balance of power between the state and universities has flipped; Government cease to ask how they can best serve the purposes of universities, and now ask how universities can best serve the purposes of Government and the answers they give, that universities should create useful knowledge and transfer it to businesses, that they should revitalize the local economy, re-skill the labour force and so on. While of course hard to object to, are far too narrow and short-term; they miss the point that the greatest benefit that universities provide its students and the wider society and that universities are uniquely designed to provide, are the training of minds and imaginations that the great Social Science departments of Essex have been engaged in since the foundation of the University.

I congratulate each and every graduate and I wish you all good fortune for the future. I hope that your time at Essex has been as rewarding as it has been for me and that as it recedes in the past, the University will retain a special place, not only in your memory, but in your affections.

The Chancellor has gently encouraged you to remember the University in direct and countable ways should you be in a position to do so. But whatever your circumstances, there is one other way even more important of expressing gratitude, which is to champion and defend the liberal and independent University whenever and wherever it is under threat, direct or indirect, crude or subtle, so that succeeding generations can benefit as I hope you have done.