

Graduation 2010  
Oration for Honorary Graduand Katherine Rake  
Orator: Professor Pam Cox

Chancellor, the senate has resolved that the degree of doctor of the university be conferred upon Katherine Rake.

For many of you here today, graduation is a family affair. It's a day to stop and celebrate – not just for the students here who have worked so hard to get these degrees but also for their families who have, in so many cases, done so much to support them.

Families are at the heart of Katherine Rake's work. She has made huge contributions to public discussions around family life over many years. She is currently the Chief Executive of the Family and Parenting Institute – a large independent charity which champions families and which is at the centre of national policy debates.

In preparing for this event, I discovered a startling fact about families. The average British family now spends a total of just 49 minutes a day together – this was the finding of a poll commissioned for National Family Week earlier this year. Some may say that's 39 minutes too many - but this remains a startling fact.

The study involved over 4000 parents and children and found that one in eight families say they spend no more than two hours together each week. When they do spend time together, they tend to spend that time on family meals, watching TV or going out.

At least the families here today can spend more than 49 minutes with each other. In fact – if you're spending the whole day together today you'll bump up the national average quite considerably!

Katherine Rake's work – through her research, advocacy and campaigning- asks how it is that we've come to live this way, how we compare with other countries and cultures, what the effects of this might be (on, for example, our relationships, our job satisfaction, our stress levels, our finances), whether or not we're happy with this and – if we're not happy with this – what we might do about it. Could we work more flexibly, could we strike a better life-work balance, can we make caring responsibilities (whether for children, elderly parents or friends) more central to our lives?

Katherine has been described recently as 'a calm presence, with an unnerving ability to pluck silver linings from clouds.' One significant silver lining in this area in the last few weeks – and one on which Katherine has herself commented - has been the new coalition government's extension of rights to request flexible working for everyone – not just for those with young children.

No doubt students and parents here are more concerned with the here and now question of *finding* work rather than worrying too much about whether that work is flexible or not. That's very understandable, of course, but it's still important that we think about and debate the *kind* of work cultures we want to build, given that so many of us spend so much of our lives at work than anywhere else.

I'm sure Katherine would agree, though, that there are still many clouds out there in dire need of silver linings when it comes to equal opportunities. We've certainly come a long way – and graduation ceremonies around the countries speak to this - but we still have a long way to go. For

example, we still have a big gender pay gap in Britain – over 40 years after the first attempts to legislate it away - which means that women still earn 17% less than men, even when they are working in comparable jobs.

Katherine has been a major player in debates around these issues. As a lecturer at the LSE she was seconded to the Labour government's women's unit within the Cabinet Office, where she pioneered the gender auditing of policy and was involved in promoting a ground-breaking report on "the lifetime cost of the pay gap". The report concluded that the lower pay can cost skilled women up to £250,000 over their whole working lives – and a lot more if they have children.

Katherine spent seven years as Director of the Fawcett Society, the UK's leading campaign for women's rights, where she worked with others to push for change on equal pay as well as on issues such as maternity discrimination – Fawcett estimate that 30,000 women are effectively forced out of their jobs each year simply because they become pregnant. Beyond the sphere of work and family, Katherine has also campaigned for an end to the 'post code' lottery for rape victims and a better deal for ethnic minority women.

As you can see, Katherine has had a very varied career. She studied at Oxford and then at the London School of Economics. She has held academic posts in London and Paris (at the LSE and the Institut de Gestion Sociale). She has worked as an advisor to Tony Blair's Policy Unit and the Treasury and has chaired the UK Women's Budget Group. As I've already mentioned, she has headed two national campaigning organisations. She is also a regular media voice – and is one of our public faces of feminism.

Katherine's career is a wonderful example of what universities now refer to as 'knowledge transfer'- involving dialogues, networks and connections between academics, employers, policy makers and others. Whatever term we might use, Katherine's career testifies to the value of these kinds of connections between sectors. She has a fantastic record of using critical research findings to challenge policy makers to do better on equality issues. In turn, she's used her experience of campaigning to shape her university teaching. We'd love to see more of her at Essex now that we have this new link with her.

Katherine's contributions to public life have been widely recognised. She has been commended by the Institute of Directors as a 'Good Director' and by the Social Policy Association for her outstanding research. In 2008, she was awarded an OBE for her services to equal opportunities and was also shortlisted for the 2009 Women in Public Life Awards when she was described as 'not just an influential woman, but a woman whose life is dedicated to furthering women's rights and equal opportunities for all in the UK'.

We are delighted that she has accepted our offer of an honorary degree.

Chancellor, I present to you Katherine Rake.