

Graduation 2011 Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Kier Starmer

Thank you very much indeed.

We have a little three year old boy, and every morning we have a conversation, sometimes far too early in the morning, where he says to me, "Daddy, are you going to work today?" To which I invariably answer "Yes", he then asks me "What are you going to do today?"

And I said this morning "I am going to go to the University of Essex and enjoy a celebration with lots of students, who are going to get a degree". To which he said "Will they be happy?"

And I said "They'll be happy, but they'll also be very proud". Which of course invited the obvious question from him: "What is proud?"

(These questions are always difficult with a three-year-old, on Saturday he asked me, "What do you call a baby giraffe?" And I couldn't answer - I can now)

But back to Proud. On the question of proud, I gave the best answer the best I could, but if he had sat where I have just sat in this ceremony, that would have been a much better description of 'proud' and 'pride' than anything I could have given him this morning. Because as I watched all of the students go from here over to the Chancellor, I saw pride of every single face, and I saw that reflected in the audience, and I think that is what today is all about. It's about the people up there and I salute you. You should be proud, it's a special day, it's a fantastic achievement, and as the Chancellor said at the introduction, the degree that you've received today is something to which you are entitled. You've worked for that and you should be proud of that.

This is the next stage of an important journey for all of you, whether it is in mathematics or whether it is in law, I hope that it's going to be an interesting and fulfilling journey, mine has been so far, and I personally wish you every happiness and every success in whatever you choose to do.

I'm proud today too, proud to cement my relationship with this University, as you just heard I've been a fellow here for some time, but I have also had the privilege to work with some of the leading academics of this University during my career. As a student I read the works of Professor Sir Nigel Rodley, and as a practicing barrister I relied on his works in support of the arguments that I was advancing around the world relating to prisoners and the death penalty etc. I had the privilege of working with Professor Paul Hunt when I was starting out on my journey. In 1989 I was the legal officer at Liberty, and Paul Hunt was the general secretary there. And Françoise Hampson is a professor who I've worked with on cases. Her intellect is respected by all.

But today I want to highlight one individual in this university that I worked closely with, Professor Kevin Boyle. Everybody no doubt shares the sadness at Kevin's death. I, of course, like every student of Human Rights, had heard about Kevin well before I met him, I'd heard about him because of his trailblazing work in the European Court and Commission of Human Rights, well before others were developing arguments in those courts. And I had the privilege of getting to know him. I travelled with him and lectured with him in Egypt and many other countries. We worked together on books, and co-wrote a number of articles. He had a wealth of experience, always an interesting argument, and respected wherever he went, and eventually we persuaded him to become an Associate Tenant at my chambers, where he remained an Associate Tenant when I became head of Chambers, and we were all very proud of Kevin.

So cementing my relationship with the University means a lot to me, and I'd like to pay tribute to Kevin as I do that today.

Thank you very much.