

Graduation 2012

Acceptance Speech from Honorary Graduate Ruth Lister

Chancellor, Professor Busfield, or Joan as I can't help but think of you as from when you taught me, members of the university, fellow graduands, parent and friends: it is the greatest honour possible for me to receive an honorary degree from the university from which I graduated more years ago than I like to remember. I am therefore very grateful indeed. It's particularly pleasing to be here today because like many of my contemporaries I did not attend my own graduation day – it wasn't considered cool to do so in those days. Having since participated in many degree days at Loughborough University and seen what they mean to graduands and their families and friends, I came to realise what I missed. So it's wonderful to have the opportunity to make up for lost time and share this day with those of you who are graduating – the real stars of the show.

My decision to come to Essex constituted my first act of rebellion. I went to a girls' boarding school on a scholarship and was being groomed for Oxbridge or one of the London colleges. Thanks to an inspiring history teacher in my sixth form, I discovered sociology and knew that that was what I wanted to read at university. Somehow I found out that this very new university was the place to read it even though we didn't have the web to research universities in those days and even though it was still partly a building site. So I was subsequently in effect ex-communicated by my school when I made the decision to come to what I saw to be the best sociology department in the country. And it remains one of the best sociology departments – I have to say *one* of the best or else my own department at Loughborough would lynch me! And it was a real pleasure to be able to meet (or re-meet) some members of the department – staff and students - earlier in the year when I gave a departmental lecture.

One reason for coming to Essex was the presence of the late Professor Peter Townsend, another inspirational figure in my life. Peter was one of the most important sociologists of his generation as well as being an indefatigable campaigner against poverty and social injustice – indeed in a recent book dedicated to his legacy he was described as 'one of a handful of global academic giants of the 20th century'. What a privilege it was to have been taught by him. Totally coincidentally he chaired the Child Poverty Action Group, which gave me my first job and a wonderful opportunity to work for an organisation able to make a real difference in the world and now, following Peter, to continue my association with the Group as honorary president. However, we have never made a sufficient difference and it's depressing that, despite the last government's best efforts, there are more children living in poverty in the UK today than when I took over as director of CPAG in 1979 and that our society is considerably more unequal than it was then.

I never regretted that early rebellion. I suspect my career trajectory would have been very different had I done what my school wanted me to do. I say career trajectory but none of it was planned. I was very fortunate to be able to move from CPAG into higher education and I certainly never thought I would end up on the red benches of the House of Lords opposite to your Chancellor, the noble lord Lord Phillips of Sudbury! It just shows you how a sociology degree from Essex might take you to the most unexpected places.

Your degree is a precious thing for which you have worked hard. I hope and trust that you will be as fortunate as I have been in being able to pursue an interesting and rewarding career along whatever path you choose to travel. But whatever path you do choose, the most important thing is that you lead a full and good life. You are graduating at a difficult time but I nevertheless wish you every success and hope that you will look back on today and your time at Essex with real pleasure.

