



Graduation 2007

Response by Honorary Graduate Lord Justice Sedley

Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen and above all, fellow graduands who, unlike me have had to work extremely hard for the degrees that have been conferred on you today. I have to tell you Chancellor, it may disappoint you, that as a former member of the Musician's Union I couldn't possibly sing without a proper fee!

I also intend to spare you the fate of the audience at Yale University some years ago, which was addressed by a freshly honoured Honorary Graduate who decided that he would resort to the old speakers trick of taking each letter of the university's name and hanging a short homily or perhaps a not so short homily on it. So he began with Y for youth and then moved on to A for ambition and then L for learning and as the sun dropped below the horizon, moved on finally to E for enterprise and a visitor on the platform turned to the President of the University and said 'how much longer is this going on'. The President said 'just be grateful we are not the Massachusetts Institute of Technology!' So like Hamlet, I shall begin by being brief.

It is true, however, as the Orator has said that my Who's Who entry includes 'changing the world' among my hobbies. I think I owe an explanation for this hubristic entry. When you become a QC Who's Who sends you a form to fill in for an entry in that fat volume. It contains elementary things like your name and address and who your parents were - most of us manage that without too much difficulty! Then says decorations and you sit there, chewing your pencil, thinking does ink monitor count? Would cycling proficiency award get by? So by the time you have reached the end of the form, there's almost nothing on it except you, your parents and your job and then it says hobbies and you have to put in something of interest and you scribble down 'changing the world' and find that years later the University Orator is making fun of you for doing so!

Although the majority of you have graduated in Law, I don't think it matters what you study at university or what you go on to do having graduated. What a good university does is something that no other institution can do and that is to teach you to think. I realise that that is not always an unmitigated blessing. The prison service used to have a course which prisoners were required to do in order to become eligible for parole called 'enhanced thinking skills' and they abandoned it when they realised that teaching prisoners not to act impetuously but to think through the consequences of their actions before they took them was resulting in so many of them becoming much more effective criminals when they were released! But for you, this is not a problem. And learning to think straight seems to me to be of enormous value of a good university course. The other thing that I think universities in the twenty first-century have an obligation to teach is the difference between belief and knowledge. To believe anything you wish is a fundamental human right but nobody has the right to pretend that belief is knowledge and it is the mission I think of universities in the twenty first-century to insist upon the difference between those two things. Examples come again and again across ones radar. Earlier this week, looking at a transcript of one of the very few trials actually to take place in Guantanamo Bay. The transcript goes something like this:

The President of the Tribunal: You are accused of having had contact in Bosnia with a known Al-Qaeda operative.

The Prisoner: Who was that?

The President: We can't tell you that.

And faced with this kind of retreat from reason, I do think that universities and law schools in particular have a very important function in keeping the world and its graduates of the university on track, and sane.

Essex is particularly fortunate, to my personal knowledge, in having a law school which is one of the very best, certainly in the English speaking world. I have the highest regard for the teachers here, many of whose work I know personally and a number of whom I have worked with professionally in the past. I think those of you who have graduated in Law are extremely fortunate to have graduated here.

So it remains for me only to thank the University very warmly for the enormous honour that they have done me in admitting me to a doctorate of the University today and to say that I hope that what I do in the future will not let the University down.

Sir Stephen Sedley

20 July 2007