

Graduation 2012

Oration for Honorary Graduated Ruth Lister

Orator: Professor Joan Busfield

Chancellor, the Senate of the University of Essex has resolved that the Degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Professor the Baroness Ruth Lister of Burtersett.

We are honouring Baroness Ruth Lister today both because of her public service, in particular for her work for the Child Poverty Action Group, and for her work as an academic – two areas of activity which for her have often been intertwined.

It is a particular pleasure for me to introduce Ruth Lister to you since she is a graduate of this University, indeed of my own department, the Department of Sociology. Ruth arrived at Essex in 1967, one of only the third cohort of students to be admitted and, though it may be hard to imagine, when she arrived the total number of students at the University was not much more than one thousand. At that time even though there had been rapid expansion from 1960 onwards, well under 10% of 18 year olds in Britain went to university and only a little over a quarter of full-time University entrants were women. In that respect she was privileged – privileges she has amply repaid though her own work for others.

Curriculum innovation was one of the distinctive characteristics of the new ‘plate glass’ universities of the 1960s, especially a focus on the social sciences which were not well represented at Oxbridge and the large civics. At Essex three of the nine founding departments were in the social sciences – Economics, and the two departments whose students are receiving their degrees at this ceremony, Government and Sociology. It was an inspiring time for academics and students in these fields, and those attracted into them tended to be intellectually lively, critical and innovative, and often combined this with a strong desire to change the world – to have a strong sense of public engagement. Ruth has always provided an excellent example of the particular combination of critical academic scrutiny with a commitment to public service which the Department of Sociology at Essex has been keen to foster, and which was especially manifest in the work of Peter Townsend, the Department’s founding professor.

Ruth’s own family background, as with many of those attracted to Sociology in the 1950s and 1960s, was not straightforward. Her father, a medical doctor who for a long period worked for the Department of Health and Social Security in their industrial diseases section, was a refugee from Nazi Germany who came to Britain in the early 1930s. Her mother was an actress from Yorkshire and a committed internationalist. Ruth’s title, Baroness Lister of Burtersett, is taken from the village in the Yorkshire dales where her maternal grandparents lived.

After finishing her first degree at Essex Ruth went to the University of Sussex, another new university, to do an MA in Multi-Racial Studies. However, having decided that she did not want to do a PhD, she applied for a job at the Child Poverty Action Group, a campaigning group commonly known as CPAG. Essex’s Professor Peter Townsend turned out to be on the interviewing panel, although she was not then aware that he had been one of the co-founders of CPAG. The pressure group had been established in 1965 at a time when there was an increasing recognition that, despite the development of the welfare state along the lines set out by Beveridge, poverty and deprivation had not been eradicated in Britain. The group’s focus on child poverty was one way of challenging the assumption that poverty was the individual’s fault and the result of fecklessness.

Ruth worked at CPAG for sixteen years – years of committed activism – rising from Legal Research Officer, to Assistant Director, Deputy Director and then from 1979 onwards as Director. One of the CPAG's objectives was to raise public awareness of child poverty through the provision of accurate information, and what Ruth showed then and subsequently was a willingness to think clearly and analytically about poverty and its causes, to examine the complex benefit arrangements of the social security system, and to engage with politicians (getting sympathetic MPs to ask parliamentary questions was one tactic the group used).

In 1987 Ruth moved into academia taking up a Professorship in Social Policy at the University of Bradford, and then in 1994 went to Loughborough University where she is now an Emeritus Professor of Social Policy. The move to an academic milieu did not lead to any reduction in her interest in poverty and deprivation. Indeed she produced a series of books which sought a broader understanding of these areas by focusing on issues of citizenship and social exclusion: *The Exclusive Society: Citizenship and the Poor* in 1990, *Women's Economic Dependency and Social Security* in 1992, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives* in 1997, *Poverty* in 2004, and *Understanding Theories and Concepts in Social Policy* in 2010. She also produced many articles. Her academic work was recognised by her election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 2009 and a life-time achievement award from the Social Policy Association in 2010. She was awarded a CBE in 1999, and made a life peer early last year.

During her period as a full-time academic, Ruth's activism continued and she was a member of various commissions including the Commission for Social Justice, the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, and the Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty, as well as the National Equality Panel. Her commitment to the eradication of poverty and to the CPAG was recognised by her appointment as CPAG's Honorary President in 2010. Earlier this year she also played a very active role in the House of Lords scrutiny of the Welfare Reform bill.

Throughout her campaigning and academic life Ruth has fully shown what the *Financial Times* columnist Philip Stephens has recently described as an 'ethical compass' – an ethical approach to life that is attuned to the needs of others and spurns the pursuit of self-interest – something that appears to be so sadly lacking in many areas of life today, notably in the conduct of the banking sector over recent years. If there is one lesson that today's graduating students should take from reflecting on what Ruth Lister has accomplished, it is the importance and value of putting the public good before self-interest.

Chancellor, I present to you Baroness Ruth Lister.