

Graduation 2010

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate John Bercow

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Professor King, my parliamentary colleagues, Bernard Jenkin and Bob Russell, ladies and gentlemen and above all today, graduates. Thank you for the warmth and generosity of that welcome. And perhaps I could start by asking to establish beyond doubt the simple question; can you hear me at the back?

Yes, gosh you really are a polite and agreeable lot! The Last time I asked that question, some 'wag' at the back of the room yelled back 'yes but I'll happily change places with someone who cant!' This is a marked improvement!

The second preliminary with which I wish to deal, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen is the sensitive matter which your natural courtesy will probably disincline you to raise with me face to face but to which Tony King referred in his generous remarks, of height. And very specifically it has been suggested in some of the crueller parts of the newspapers that I'm the shortest person, or at any rate the shortest man, ever to be speaker of the House of Commons. Now, ladies and gentlemen I must be candid with you. I am as intensely relaxed about being short as the noble lord Lord Mandelson famously said New Labour was about people becoming filthy rich. But the one matter about which I am not intensely relaxed is the matter of historical accuracy and as a matter of historical fact, it's quite wrong for some of these more downmarket scribes to suggest that I'm the shortest holder of the office. Sir John Bussy, speaker of the house from 1394 to 1398, Sir John Wenlock, speaker of the house from 1455 to 1456 and Sir Thomas Tresham, speaker of the house in 1459 are all believed to have been shorter than I am. Although I do have to admit that this was true only after all three of them had been beheaded!

Indeed no fewer than seven of my predecessors met their end on the executioners table, one was killed in battle and a further poor unfortunate soul was brutally murdered! So you will understand that this does enable me to view the present woes which afflict the House of Commons with an appropriate sense of historical proportion. But I want today, on what is for me a memorable and an emotional occasion, to thank this university profusely for the quite enormous honour that it has bestowed upon me. I absolutely adored my three years at Essex from 1982 to 1985, even if that adoration was not immediately obvious to Tony King and my other long suffering tutors and I have always enjoyed returning here. To think that from now on in I shall be able to do so clutching not one Essex degree but two Essex degrees is especially gratifying.

But there was nothing inevitable about my path and that of the University of Essex crossing. No member of my immediate family had gone to university before I did and I myself entertained serious doubts about the notion of studying for a degree. I had frankly not enjoyed my A levels at school and that lack of enjoyment manifested itself in distinctly modest grades. As at the time and for some years previously, I had been an enthusiastic, competitive, tennis player and had qualified as a tennis coach, I seriously contemplated making a living as a professional tennis coach. And then a couple of things changed and were sources of lasting inspiration. First there was a childhood friend of mine, now Professor of Political Science at Sussex University, called Shamit Saggarr with whom I had attended both primary school and secondary school and who had come to this university straight from A-levels in 1981. We kept in touch. He invited me here to see him for a day and impressed upon me the merits of the university and the potential desirability of me following in his footsteps perhaps the following year. And he really inspired me with his love of and

commitment to the institution. Secondly I went round the university that day and lapped up the atmosphere and I was just struck, again, physically on the premises, by the fact that the institution even then was a centre of excellence in my favourite discipline of Politics. And I went away back on the train to London thinking yes, I'm going to have a go and see if I can get in. And what happened then was that I decided to do an additional A-level which I did in 5 months from January to June 1982 in Politics and I applied to come to this place. Thereafter, and you need a bit of luck, I say to you our graduates, fortune did favour me. I was interviewed by a distinguished academic called Dr Ernesto Laclau. A man who was every bit as unambiguously a Marxist as my university application form had made clear I was at the time an unreconstructed admirer of the capitalist free market economist and philosopher Friedrich Von Hayek. So when I went in to see Dr Laclau and I saw this rather imposing picture of Marx on the wall, I contemplated not entirely with equanimity the prospects of the interview that lie ahead. But it seemed to go ok and he made me a generous offer of admission to the university. And thereafter, when I got here, I was blessed by the experience of learning from and engaging with a quite outstanding team of academics; Tony King himself, Ivor Crewe, Emil Kerner, David Sanders, Tony Barker, David Mackay, and Michael Freeman, what I might call the magnificent seven of political academia. And notwithstanding the fact to which Tony gently referred, that they must periodically and probably quite regularly have found my views at the time and the shrillness with which I expressed them either disconcerting or obnoxious, or both. They were tremendously patient and I gained so much from them. But that of course is in the nature, its part of the defining essence, the irreducible minimum requirement of a university. The notion of the exchange of ideas, that exchange of ideas I enjoyed, that exchange of ideas was profitable, I came away feeling enriched by that exchange of ideas. And I would like to think that in accepting this recognition today which I shall always remember, always treasure, always think very special. It might mark the start of an ongoing relationship with the university. For certainly in my time, as speaker of the House of Commons, I would like to strengthen the links between parliament and this institution and I hope that that can be done to advantage.

But colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I have over the last thirteen months as Bernard Jenkin and Bob Russell both outstanding parliamentarians can testify, constantly exhorted my parliamentary colleagues to be both brief and courteous. So with your enthusiastic agreement I will leave it there and thank you. I think you can tell I'm hugely proud, hugely appreciative, and hugely grateful. Thank you very much indeed.