

## GRADUATION 2013

### **Presentation speech for John Bercow for the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws of the University *honoris causa***

Chancellor, John Bercow became Speaker of the House of Commons shortly after the expenses scandal had brought public confidence in Parliament to a low ebb. As a historian I know only too well that when electorates lose confidence in their parliamentary institutions the consequences can be horrendous. It is good to report therefore that with John Bercow as Speaker, the House is beginning to regain public trust. Above all, Bercow's contribution has achieved through his scrupulous fairness to members from all sides and through the extraordinary command that - thanks to his strong personality - he now has over the whole House.

The Vice-Chancellor has often said that when he came here in 2001 he was surprised to be told by so many people, both in the town and in the University, that we had an unusually good constituency MP. Regardless of political affiliation, John Bercow has captured the regard, friendship and loyalty of all members of society. He has done this through his unremittingly hard work, his genuine concern for everyone regardless of status and his extraordinarily conscientious approach to his duties. There can be no doubt that John Bercow believes that being a Member

of Parliament is not just a job; it requires a sense of vocation coupled with a high moral and ethical purpose.

When he became Speaker, John had to appeal to Labour and Lib Dem MPs as well as those in his own former party – Speakers must give up their party membership. During the early part of his time as Speaker, he faced something of a campaign by members of his old party who simply did not understand what the role of the Speaker entailed. It is much to John Bercow's credit that he has broken the historical and unsatisfactory Buggins turn system whereby each major party selected the Speaker in turn. Thus one of his greatest contributions to unwritten constitution is that he has championed the idea that the Speaker should be elected on the basis of cross party support. While this led initially to unpleasant personal attacks in the media, it is a tribute to his courage and stamina that he has withstood them so well. His reward is that they finally seem to be fading.

John Bercow has also been an enormous support to this University, regularly giving lectures – which have been of great help to our students of politics and international relations – and helping lobby on our behalf over important government policy developments.

But lest people think I am becoming a Radical – doing a Bercow as it were – let me conclude on a more traditional note. Once upon a time, the best way to understand what someone stood for was to look at their coat of arms. It wasn't easy because heraldry was a rather obscure, arcane, even elitist discipline – just like Parliament used to be. John has modernised them both and made them more accessible. His coat of arms includes a ladder to represent how far the taxi driver's son has

risen in life, four roundels to express his love of tennis, and pink triangles to signify his support for gay rights.

Chancellor, John Bercow has been an exemplary MP and a paradigm-shifting Speaker of the House of Commons and I call upon you to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.

**Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil**  
**16 March 2013**