

Graduation 2006 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Sir John Tusa

Orator: Professor Anthony King

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon SIR JOHN TUSA

I want you, sir, and everyone else present, to imagine two scenes. The first takes place in 2001, shortly before the General Election of that year. The setting is a room in Number 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is in the chair. Mr Blair has invited all the movers and shakers in the world of the arts in Great Britain to attend a mini conference at Number 10 on the new Government's arts policies.

You can imagine what happens next. In the presence of the Prime Minister, speaker after speaker says how absolutely wonderful the new Government's arts policies are: imaginative, generous, far-reaching, forward-looking and so on.... and on, and on. I believe, sir, there is at least one vulgar expression to describe the activity that most of those present were engaged in, but I would not want to use it on a solemn occasion like this.

But then a voice is heard to say that, no, actually, the Government's policies towards the arts aren't all that wonderful: in fact, they're unimaginative, pretty mean-spirited and consist mostly of verbal flannel, a veneer of high-flown language and "spin" concealing the fact that the Government isn't actually doing much – and that what it is doing is ill thought through. The voice, needless to say, was, and is, the voice of John Tusa – in his role as managing director of the Barbican Arts Centre in the City of London.

Now, spool back a little in time and imagine a second scene. The time now is 1991, and John Tusa is sitting in his office in Bush House in central London. He is managing director of the BBC's World Service. The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has just been released after being kidnapped and carted off to the Crimea. Mr Gorbachev is asked how, in an interview, when he was in captivity, he knew what was going on, and he replies "By listening to the BBC's Russian Service", and John Tusa, responsible for that service, lets out a whoop of delight, not because the BBC has another distinguished listener – he knows the BBC has thousands of distinguished listeners already – but because he realises that, with Mr Gorbachev restored to power, the Soviet Union has irrevocably changed and that, after more than forty years, the Cold War, is at last, over.

From those two episodes, I think you can, sir, draw a number of inferences. One is that Sir John Tusa is a toughie. He says what he thinks, no matter who he is talking to. He not only speaks the truth as he knows it: he is able and willing, unlike some people, to speak truth to power. Another inference you can draw is that Sir John is absolutely devoted to the creative and performing arts – and to the present and future health of the arts – in this country. Yet another reference you can draw is that Sir John is the opposite of a Little Englander. Britain is the centre of his world, but he does not imagine it is the centre of the world. His is a cast of mind that always looks outwards, never inwards. He actually likes foreigners.

As we are assembled here in the county of Essex, at the University of Essex, I think I need to report that John Tusa is – in a manner of speaking – "Essex man". He was born in Essex. His father, a Czech, was manager of the enormous Bata shoe factory not far from Southend. He went

to school with Professor Hugh Brogan of this University. Not then a Professor, I should say, at the age of about 10 or whatever he was! At Cambridge, he was a renowned university actor. He nevertheless found time to get a First in history. He did his national service in the Royal Artillery, commanding a light anti-aircraft troop in Germany.

So far, so conventional. But, from then on, Sir John's career bifurcated. He followed two careers, sometimes one after the other, sometimes both simultaneously. One career was in news and current affairs. He presented current-affairs programmes on BBC radio and television, most famously as one of the original presenters, with Peter Snow, of *Newsnight*. Whereas Jeremy Paxman nowadays interviews with a broadsword, John Tusa's preferred weapon was the rapier or sometimes the needle. The Royal Television Society made him Television Journalist of the Year in 1983. Then, later, he enjoyed for six years a kind of a career within a career, as head of the World Service.

But his passion for the arts – notably, but not only, for painting and music – led him to become involved in the arts world – for example, at the National Portrait Gallery and English National Opera – from quite an early stage. Then, a decade or so ago, he took over as director of the Barbican Centre. He is still there. Under his direction, the Centre, a huge building-complex, which some of you will know, is undergoing a visually stunning transformation. It used to be dispiriting and drab. Already it is tremendous fun to be in – a splendid example of what modern design can be and should be.

Actually, Sir John has followed three careers, for he is also a writer, mainly on broadcasting and the arts but also – with his wife, Ann – on modern European history: one book on the Nuremberg war-crimes trial and another on the 1948 Berlin airlift. He insists that Ann, who is here with us today, was the principal author of both.

But, as we all know, bare biographical details – of the kind you can look up in *Who's Who* – convey almost nothing about what someone is really like. To find that out, you have to know them or talk to and correspond with their friends and the people they have worked with.

If you do that, you find out a lot, certainly in Sir John's case. He is not only tough, highly intelligent and a man of total integrity: he is someone – everyone says so – with an extraordinary gift for friendship. He is probably as busy as anyone in this country, and his friends therefore marvel at his capacity, as well as his wish, to keep up with them all. And many of his friends go back a long way, to his Cambridge days and, in the case of Professor Brogan, even beyond that.

Unlike some people we all know, Sir John is not one of those micro-managers, a congenital interferer, someone who actually enjoys one-on-one's, meetings and keeping tabs on people. In all his managerial roles, he has chosen good people and then left them to get on with it. As one of his colleagues wrote, "It's his style: trust and delegate." But he has high standards, and people who fail to meet those standards find themselves in trouble pretty quickly.

He is, then, a first-class manager, but he is far more than that: everyone who has worked with him describes him as "an inspiring leader". People remain intensely loyal to him years after they have ceased to work with him. One of his colleagues at the World Service describes how Sir John used to sit down at his battered old portable typewriter and write thank you notes when they had done something good to even the most junior members of his staff. They were known as "hero-grams", and long afterwards people still keep them and treasure them. Somebody up there noticed.

Sir John is, indeed, not only a brilliant and highly successful man but a man who notices.

Chancellor, I present to you SIR JOHN TUSA