

Graduation 2006

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Nick Broomfield

Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen, and fellow graduates from the University of Essex. I am so pleased to hear that the new hall will have air conditioning!

Thank you so much for inviting me today. It's really a great honour to be here and I haven't been here since I graduated many, many years ago. As a word of encouragement, I was not a great academic success at the University; I had no idea what I was going to do when I left so I think the adventure of the future is the thing that is so exciting.

I must confess that when I transferred to Essex University from Cardiff University, my interests in coming here were not purely academic. I was involved with a gorgeous Norwegian who lived in London, and Cardiff was simply too far away. But I really had no idea what was in store for me when I came to Essex University, which in those days was in full-blown student unrest. I remember a few days after I came here one of the first things I witnessed was the burning of a car in the middle of the University square. The students were doing this as a demonstration against materialism, but the workers who were building the University decided this was a good car and they could use the car and so, with some of the more conservative professors, they decided to put the fire out. There was this ridiculously comedic scene where the right-wing professors and the workers had a hosepipe and when they met with the radical students in the middle there were blows thrown and I thought this place was full of the most incredible contradictions and it's going to be an interesting few years.

But many of the protests were justified and served a purpose. Enoch Powell, the Conservative MP with strong racist views came here to read poetry to the students, but was sent packing with his tail between his legs and a dent in the bonnet of his car by the students. He later had to resign from the Shadow Cabinet because of his racist rivers of blood speech. On another occasion, a scientist from Porton Down, the Biological Warfare Research Facility, received a mustard bomb to remind him of what he was doing. These protests were, and in fact gave me, some of my first subjects for a film. I myself took part in a sit down demonstration to protest against the presence of Ronald Bell, the right-wing MP who didn't believe in studying subjects such as Psychology and Sociology and who was looking into student unrest. All of a sudden Ronald Bell decided to wade through all of us while we were still sitting down. My first image of Ronald Bell was of his shoe coming down on my face. I tried to stop him by pulling his trousers down. I seem to remember I got them down to around his knees but they shot up again. Ronald Bell had exceedingly strong braces and he carried on through all the students! A couple of years later I met Ronald Bell again, when at the National Film School. I realised he was the local MP for Beaconsfield, and so I was actually able to make him the main protagonist in my student film called Proud to be British. I got to know Ronald Bell quite well but I confess I never brought up the subject of his braces.

What Essex had in those times was an openness to consider anything that was educational and progressive. I remember Professor Tony King was very supportive of me when I wanted to make a film as part of my paper in my final year. And it was because of this openness that I was able to make *Who cares?* while I was still a student at this University. It's about slum clearance in Liverpool. And I made this film with Peter Orchard, another student from Essex, who was best known for the accuracy for which he had thrown the mustard powder at the scientist from Porton Down. He was however also one of the most socially committed and caring people I had known. He later went on to do the most definitive study on meths drinkers and the homeless in the United Kingdom. Peter Orchard also had an extremely good relationship with many tenants groups around the country, including the Abercrombie tenants group in Liverpool with whom we made the film *Who cares?* And I always remained very very grateful, I think, to the University of Essex for taking

this very unusual step of allowing somebody who probably didn't know anything, because it took me a very long time to cut this film, but just to take that risk of allowing me to do something quite unorthodox and do a film as one of my year papers. And I've always been incredibly grateful for that opportunity. I still remember Professor Hall, who was my Professor of Government, coming to London to view a rough cut of the film which in those days. Because it was shot on film, we could only view it on a very ancient Italian viewing machine. It was a sort of gigantic machine that looked a bit like an absurd Italian coffee machine. It was called a prevost and everybody had to sit under a black blanket to see the image. I remember it was a very hot day, rather like this, and we were all huddled under this blanket and the machine made so much noise that you could really barely hear any sound from the film. I remember Professor Hall turning to me at the end, clearly not having really understood very much of the film at all, and saying very sportingly to me, "What kind of degree do you think you deserve?" I think it was in this openness of spirit that many of the students produced some amazingly original and very fine work in those years.

I think the questioning that went on in Essex at the time, which I think are often referred to as the time of great student unrest, were in the main extremely healthy and what you would expect in a flourishing and healthy democracy. I mention these things because I think in a healthy democracy, one looks to students to act as a sounding board and the voice of protest and conscience. What concerns me now, and why I bring this up, is because I believe the students of today face an enormous challenge on their rights to free speech and their rights to protest, as do all of us.

I wonder if the protests that we engaged in then would be in any way tolerated in the same way today; especially considering the restrictions of the anti-terrorism legislation which has so restricted the freedom of speech and our civil liberties in so many ways. I think probably many of you are not aware of the severity of some of this legislation. It worries me that in this world of extremes of the neo-conservatives on the one side and the fundamentalists on the other, that it is our civil liberties that will ultimately suffer and our ability to operate as a healthy and flourishing democracy.

I look to you the students of today to take up the challenge to show that these things will not be taken lying down; maybe it's time to get the mustard powder out again!

Thank you.