

Graduation 2009
Oration for Honorary Graduated Sir Ivor Crewe
Orator: Professor Anthony King

Chancellor, the senate has resolved that the degree of doctor of the University be conferred upon Sir Ivor Crewe.

As many of you will know the post-war president of the United States, Harry .S. Truman, famously had on his desk a little sign on which were printed the words, "The buck stops here"; in other words, he bore the ultimate responsibility. In the end everything that happened on his watch was down to him and not to anybody else. That in fact is the position of the Vice-Chancellor of a British University, a title Vice-Chancellor doesn't tell you very much, indeed it rather implies that the person who holds that position is number two in the organisation. Well he isn't, he's number one. The chancellor of a British University, however eminent he may be, as ours undoubtedly is, is a sort of constitutional monarch. The Vice-Chancellor, despite his title, is so-to-speak the Prime Minister, the boss, ultimately the buck stops with him.

Sir Ivor Crewe was the Vice-Chancellor of this University for 12 years and there's universal agreement on these premises that he was a wonderful Vice-Chancellor. You might find one as good, but it would be truly astonishing if you found one who was any better. On his watch the University expanded, it became a truly regional University, it reinforced its position as one of this country's most powerful centres of learning and research, not least it remained a happy place, a place that people wanted to come to and stay at. It wasn't all down to him of course, lots of others contributed, but the buck did stop with him and therefore, in my view, most of the credit should stop with him to.

Sir Ivor was and is an outstanding academic, one of the very best people in his field and he knew what it's very easy to forget; that no University can be better than the quality of its academic staff. Recruiting the very best people and keeping them, that's what it's all about and Sir Ivor kept a very close eye on academic appointments and promotions. He was and is enormously energetic, when he was president of University's UK, the national organisation of UK University's, for two quite extraordinary demanding and busy years, he never at any point lost contact with what was going on at Essex and with what needed to be done here; he remained at all stages our Vice-Chancellor. I mention that on his watch, Essex became a regional and not just a Colchester based institution. Sir Ivor was never in the slightest degree parochial, under his leadership Essex remained in terms as you can see here today, in terms of both students and staff, a richly international University. And Sir Ivor never ceased to be conscious of and engaged with the UK wide higher education scene. Nationally as well as locally, he was always in the very best sense an operator, tactically astute he certainly was, but he also developed and sustained a remarkable, strategic vision for this University as a whole. One of his colleagues wrote to me, "it was always apparent that Ivor cared deeply about the University", "Love it" - he added, "Is not too strong a concept". Not surprisingly there's also universal agreement that plain Ivor as he then was, before his knighthood, was a wonderful man to work with and a wonderful man to work for; he never lost his cool, he never blamed anyone else for his own mistakes, he never shot the messenger; the person who brought him bad news. A loving family man himself, he was always sensitive to the domestic crises and problems of others. I had a letter the other day from someone who was his personal assistant for many years, and is sad that she can't be here this morning. She says this; "I have to say that I'm not alone in thinking that Ivor was really the perfect boss, we all found him even-tempered, good-humoured, long-suffering and understanding. He was empathetic, always kind, always encouraging and never ever condescending."

The building you're sitting in today is called, you may well have noticed as you came in, the Ivor Crewe Lecture Hall. That's not because the building was designed and built on his watch, though it was, that's because his colleagues decided to name it after him in acknowledgement of everything he had done for this place and everything was a lot. Mind you, Sir Ivor isn't perfect, no one is; Sir Ivor can be amazingly and amusingly destructive of physical objects. He loves gadgets and I'm told speedily acquired, one of the first ever electronic personal digital assistants, but then he put it in his back pocket and sat on it and that was the end of that. He also typically has so much going on in his mind at any one moment that he can seem and be wonderfully absent-minded. To my personal knowledge in the course of his travels, he has already lost two passports this year and it's just July. He also, and this is an endearing characteristic, hates, he really hates to be praised. His wife Jill will know that I sometimes praise Ivor to his face in the company of others, knowing how uncomfortable it will make him. Given the chance, he's very quick to change the subject but I'm glad to say that he's in no position to change the subject on this occasion. You all out there can see him, I can't, but I consequently predict that he's looked exceedingly uncomfortable in the course of most of this speech. So far as I'm concerned that's his problem; I'm totally unapologetic.

Sir Ivor and I are about, as you've heard earlier, to embark on a research project together, a project that is substantial and will be based here at Essex. When the news was announced one of his former colleagues here said to me, "that's wonderful, that's means we'll see more of Ivor." And that tells you everything you need to know.

Chancellor I present to you, Sir Ivor Crewe.