

Graduation 2010

Oration for Honorary Graduand the Right Honourable John Bercow

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the Degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon the Right Honourable John Bercow MP.

I should say straightaway, Sir, that I taught the young John Bercow when he was a student of government at this University during the early 1980s. At that time, he was, to say the least of it, pretty right-wing. Some of his views at that time would have made Margaret Thatcher herself look a trifle wet, even a bit of a wimp. But since then his views have changed. He has been – this is his phrase – on “a journey of political enlightenment.” I would not dream in his presence of suggesting that he has moved a long way to the left. That would be too strong. But his views have – how shall I say? – “mellowed”. Indeed, as is well known, his election as Speaker of the House of Commons last year owed more to the support of Labour than Conservative MPs.

John Bercow’s time at this University is well remembered by those who taught him – partly, of course, because he held right-wing views at a time when most of the more vociferous undergraduates at Essex were on the left, some of them on the far left. A colleague remarked to me the other day, “I admired his guts in standing up to leftie prejudice.” But he is remembered just as much – I would say even more – for having been an outstanding student. Another colleague said to me recently that John was “in a class of his own in my 38 years of teaching in both the UK and the US.” He was industrious as well as able, and many of his essays could almost have been published as they stood. Moreover, he was regular in his attendance at class and, despite his idiosyncratic views (idiosyncratic in the context of early-1980s Essex), he was invariably cogent and courteous in debate.

I should add that, according to one or two of the colleagues I have spoken to, though I was not aware of it, there was every sign that the young Bercow was already honing his social skills, so that, when the time came, he would make a good impression on the elderly persons, especially the elderly female persons, who typically adopt Conservative parliamentary candidates. In other words, he already had his eye on the blue-rinse brigade. He was already, as someone put it, “in training to be a Tory MP.”

And, 14 years after leaving Essex, he duly became a Tory MP – for the safe seat of Buckingham. In fact, he appeared before two selection committees for safe Conservative seats on the same day. How did he do it? By the simple expedient of hiring a helicopter to transport him the hundred miles or so from one of the two seats to the other. He reckons it was “the best £1,000 I have ever spent.”

In between Essex and the House of Commons, John was employed variously as a merchant banker, a political lobbyist and a special adviser to two cabinet ministers: first to Jonathan Aitken and then to Virginia Bottomley, another graduate, I am pleased to say, of this University. He was elected to Lambeth Borough Council, soon becoming that Council’s Conservatives deputy group leader. It took him a little longer to get into Parliament. In 1987 and 1992, he contested two safe Labour seats. I will not embarrass him by telling you what percentage share of the vote he got in 1987 at Motherwell on the outskirts of Glasgow.

But it is his subsequent parliamentary career that is really interesting. He has always been, and I suspect enjoys being, a controversial figure. He began by being one of the most ferocious critics in the House of Commons of Tony Blair’s government, being variously described as a “hyena”, a “ferret” and a “vest-pocket Rottweiler”. Probably partly because he was so ferocious, as well as

being a brilliant debater, he rose rapidly in the ranks of Conservative MPs in the House, serving in a variety of junior shadow ministerial posts and eventually joining the Shadow Cabinet, first under Iain Duncan Smith and later under Michael Howard.

But he was never what in the 19th century would have been called “a strict party man”. In 2002, Iain Duncan Smith imposed a three-line whip requiring Conservative MPs to vote against a government proposal that would allow unmarried gay and heterosexual couples to adopt children. John voted the wrong way – that is, in favour of the government’s proposal – and promptly resigned from the front bench. He later said that he reckoned that the likelihood of Mr Duncan Smith leading the Tories to victory at the next general election were about as great as the likelihood of “meeting an Eskimo in the desert.” Iain Duncan Smith’s successor as Conservative leader, Michael Howard, immediately restored John to the front bench, but he continued to speak out of turn and was sacked within a year. Not long afterwards, Channel Four News and the Hansard Society named him “Opposition MP of the Year”. Some on his own side wondered who exactly he was opposing.

Latterly, John made no secret of his wish to become one day Speaker of the House of Commons, and just over a year ago, following the enforced resignation of Michael Martin, he was elected Speaker – on the third and final ballot – by 322 votes to 271. The ballot was secret, but there is general agreement that almost no Conservative MPs voted for him, perhaps as few as three. His “journey of political enlightenment” – and maybe his marriage to an outspoken member of the Labour Party – had not endeared him to his parliamentary colleagues.

As Speaker, his many admirers praise him as candid, fair-minded and unstuffy. His smaller – and, it must be said, dwindling – band of critics condemn him as bumptious, undignified and lacking in gravitas. I imagine, without having asked him, that John regards the allegation that he lacks gravitas as being a compliment.

But the important point about Speaker Bercow is not his parliamentary style but the substance of what he stands for. He is quite clear about what he stands for and about the causes he wants to promote as Speaker. He seeks to restore public respect for the House of Commons as an institution. He has facilitated the introduction of a new regime for regulating MPs’ expenses. He has done everything in his power to enhance the status of opposition and backbench MPs and, far more important, to increase their capacity to hold to account the Government of the day and to have the capacity to scrutinise adequately its legislative proposals. He has played his part in reducing the length of the long – it used to be excessively long – parliamentary summer recess. He will do his best to alter radically what he calls, politely, “the character, conduct, content and culture of Prime Minister’s Question” – otherwise known as the 21st-century equivalent of bear-baiting.

A moment ago, I used the phrase “everything within his power”. But, as John Bercow has always known, the Speaker of the House of Commons is far from being a dictator. His actual powers are strictly limited. His principal power, almost his only real power, is the power of persuasion. To achieve anything, he must persuade ministers and his fellow MPs that what is in the national interest is also in their interest. And, for a Speaker to be able to do that, it helps enormously to have the full backing of his fellow citizens, of people like most of the people in this room this morning. Speaking for myself – but I suspect also for you, Sir – I can only wish our honorary graduand today the very best of luck.

Chancellor, I present to you the Right Honourable John Bercow MP.