

Graduation 2010

Oration for Honorary Graduated Lord David Triesman.

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Lord David Triesman.

Those of you who have just graduated know from personal experience how much hard work and effort it takes to earn a University of Essex degree. You may, therefore, understandably, be feeling a little surprised that the University is prepared to hand out a degree to Lord Triesman without him having to submit a single essay or sweat through a single exam. But let me reassure you all that Lord Triesman is no stranger to the examination halls of this University. He was among the first students to study here, graduating with a BA in Government in 1968. There is even some suggestion that he has an Essex MA but the University's records are unaccountably vague; certainly he has an MA in Philosophy from Kings College Cambridge. However, his time at Wivenhoe Park is remembered, by many, less for his academic achievements than for his extra-curricular activities. For Lord Triesman, or Dave as he was then more simply known, was a student radical, a threatened species rarely encountered on today's campuses but widely distributed and thriving across the UK and Europe in the '60s and '70s. You may only be familiar with the notion of student radicalism from history GCSE, but Dave and I, and probably many of the parents here today, were actually there. Most student radicals, if I may be permitted a sweeping generalisation, were studying social sciences and I've always taken the view that their radical activities, (disrupting lectures by eminent chemists because they work for chemical weapons establishments, sitting in, or boycotting this that or the other) were the equivalent of doing practical classes in Biology. In today's education-speak they were also an excellent way to develop students' employability skills. Though they may have been a wonderful preparation for his subsequent career as an academic, Union Official and Politician, Lord Triesman's radical activities (all of the above) were something of a double edged sword for the University. On the one hand the extensive press coverage was instrumental in establishing the reputation of the University as a wonderful place to do social sciences. On the other hand the same reputation did little to help recruitment into Chemistry. So if some at the University were pleased when Lord Triesman's graduated largely because it meant he would be leaving Colchester, why are we now not only welcoming him back to Wivenhoe Park but also honouring him with a Doctorate?

Degrees are awarded on the basis of rules of assessment. Honorary degrees are a little less prescribed, but the guidelines mention, amongst other things, distinction in sport, the arts or public service and some connection with the University or the County of Essex. Let's begin with 'distinction'. I hope you're concentrating for this bit. There may be a brief test at the end. After a few years in academia, first as a researcher into addiction at the Institute of Psychiatry, then lecturing in Economics at South Bank Polytechnic Lord Triesman embarked on a career in the 'Lecturers' Unions', becoming General Secretary of the Association of University Teachers between 1993 and 2001. He has been a member of the labour party since the age of 17, except for a brief flirtation with the communist party in the 70s (part of the normal career trajectory for left wing politicians of a certain age), and became General Secretary of the Labour party in 2001. He was created a life peer in 2004. Since then he has been a government whip and Parliamentary Undersecretary of state; first in the Foreign Office and then in the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills where he is on record as saying 'Students are the best placed to tell government what is going right in the system and what needs to be done better. We need students to tell us how higher education is working for them'. Thank you David, I think we got the message back in 1968.

But enough of politics. This is a congregation for Biologists, Sports Scientists and mathematicians. I'm struggling a bit to make a link with prime numbers, coral reefs or biomedical sciences, but Sport is a different matter. As Bill Shankley is supposed to have said, 'Football isn't a matter of life or death, it's much more important than that'. It's importance to Lord Triesman might be gauged by his title; 'The Lord Triesman, Baron of Tottenham in the London Borough of Haringey'. An honorific to kill for that some might argue even beats BA (hons) Essex. It comes as no surprise that he has been a lifelong fan of Tottenham Hotspur. He even played for their youth team between 1961 and '63 during the golden era in which Spurs became the first team in the 20th century to win the double (League and FA cups in 1961) and the first English team to win the European Cup Winners Cup (1963). I'm not sure if he had time to play football at Essex as he was busy being radical and Sport wasn't a top priority for the University in its early years. However, he has never lost contact with the beautiful game, coaching Camden under 15s and 16s and becoming a registered senior referee with the London and Middlesex FA during the '70s. In 2008 he became Patron of the Tottenham Hotspur Foundation, a wonderful 'community football' charity that provides sporting opportunities for young people in North London and Africa. Lord Triesman became the first independent Chairman of the FA in early 2008 and led the bid to bring the 2018 World Cup to England. It would be disingenuous not to mention that he resigned this post in May after the Daily Mail, in a sting that has since been widely condemned and perhaps even largely forgotten, published part of a private conversation involving, as Anna Kessel of the Guardian put it 'some guff about football's dodgy international dealings'.

We'll wait to see whether these shenanigans influence the outcome of FIFA's deliberations.

So, there we have it, ladies and gentlemen. Lord Triesman, a serial over-achiever in academia, Union and Governmental politics, an ambassador for Sport and an alumnus of this University. A human being with a copy book that is not quite unblotted, but who has far, far more in the credit than in the debit column. Just one...just two final pieces of this portrait. After the storms of 1987, that decimated the ancient oaks of Wivenhoe Park, it was David Triesman that the then VC Professor Sir Martin Harris turned to to set up a tree replanting fund, and in November of last year, in recognition of his contribution to the original establishment of a theatre on campus, Lord Triesman, once Chair of the Theatre Arts Society, re-opened the Lakeside Theatre on campus and in his address referred to this university as 'a place that I feel at home in and love dearly'. I think it is entirely right that the University recognises the achievements and support of this remarkable man.

Chancellor, I present to you Lord Triesman of Tottenham.