

Graduation 2010

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Lord Triesman of Tottenham

It was an enormous pleasure to have been a graduate of the University of Essex on two previous occasions, a pleasure I share with all graduates here today. May I congratulate you all, recipients and your lecturers.

Let me say, it is a very special honour to receive an honorary degree from your own university. It is true that some honours in public life come because you have held a public post for long enough without capsizing the boat – many regard them as almost part of their pay and rations.

An award from a university is wholly different. The historic and coveted independence of our universities means that they make their choices free of anybody else's decisions. It is solely their right, prerogative and gift. To be thought to hold the same values, to be guided by the same inspirations as the University of Essex is a great feeling. It is hard to find the right words to express my appreciation.

I applied to come here because I was so impressed by the Reith Lectures of the first Vice Chancellor, Sir Albert Sloman. He wanted to create an academic community engaging the talents of everyone on this campus irrespective of their status where their combined abilities would be greater than the sum of the parts. It would be a unique experience to be here. And so it was.

He also thought we would be like a self-sufficient town without any need to leave the boundaries for anything we needed perhaps underestimating the attractions of the rest of the world.

In short he wanted something both splendid and impossible. I like that. I think it always worth going for the impossible. He assembled stellar academics – Peter Townsend, the greatest sociologist of his generation, Richard Lipsey, the dominant economist, Alasdair Macintyre, the outstanding moral philosopher, and others with whom I studied. It was the same in all faculties.

Dick Lipsey's lectures were often punctuated by drilling in the concrete walls as the university was built around us. Enraged he would turn from the blackboard (ah, 'blackboard', that tells how old I am) and silently crush the chalk in his fist delicately sprinkling the powder across the lectern. So impressed was I that I took up economics and weightlifting.

The world remembers the radicalism of the early years. We did have a feisty spirit. Yet Essex was so much more - in modern languages, mathematics, poetry, computing, film and theatre, social sciences, physical sciences and sport. A real university, a polymath - as a university should be. And most of us sampled it all.

Indeed, I used to slip off to play the then unfashionable game, football. I had to tell radical political friends I was off to another meeting. Football was not to their taste. When I was found out by a stern revolutionary he told me that heading the ball was incompatible with serious socialist thought.

The successes were down to Albert Sloman who had crafted an inspired university with empathy for the adventurous spirit and hard work. And it has continued to be guided by leaders of the highest calibre in Sir Martin Harris, Professor Ron Johnston, Sir Ivor Crewe and, now, Professor Colin Riordan. It was what I learned here which fundamentally helped me in everything I subsequently did. It was the same ethos that set values then which now fosters the world-renowned Human Rights Centre. It was the same imagination then which subsequently brought the

Turner prize artist Steve McQueen here to work with British military personnel in 2009. It is what drives Essex toward the peaks of research and teaching excellence.

It attracts students from around the world. I relish the fact there are students here from 55 countries for which I had responsibility at the FCO.

They – indeed all of you – have earned a degree from a remarkable place and it will stand you in great stead whatever you do in future. I hope you will get as much future enjoyment as I have from everything you absorbed from this campus and from what I know will be the enduring friendships made here.

Ladies and gentlemen, as your Chancellor (my friend and political opponent, Lord Phillips of Sudbury) will confirm, The House of Lords Library is partly distributed throughout the corridors and members' offices. The librarian has just placed in my room the multi-volume Inventory of the Historic Monuments of Essex. This may be pure coincidence but on inspection I was glad to see I am not yet listed among them. So, there are some years to ahead to enjoy today's great honour and to work for the continued success of this remarkable place. And that is exactly what I will do. Thank you.