

Graduation 2011 Oration for Honorary Graduand Chris Mullin

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Chris Mullin.

From time to time a political diarist appears on the scene who transcends convention. Sadly, the chief aim of most political memoirs and diaries appears to be to justify all decisions taken by the writer, however hare-brained or subsequently demonstrably wrong. Such diarists do politics a disservice by making it appear that normal human failings and modes of discourse are absent from the workings of government and, for that matter, of opposition.

Ladies and gentlemen, Chris Mullin is not like that. The first volume of his diaries, *A View from the Foothills*, which appeared in 2009, rapidly established itself as being in the very best tradition of political diarists. The most often-quoted review calls them 'The most wickedly indiscreet and elegant memoirs since those of Alan Clark'. I'm not sure that's right though: elegant, yes; wickedly indiscreet in the style of Alan Clark, certainly not. In fact what really characterizes these diaries is a brutally frank self-assessment and a very human sense of proportion. On being made a minister Chris Mullin makes no bones about the mind-numbing tedium and utter futility of much of the work he engages in, or indeed of the extraordinary lack of influence or purpose that appears to be the lot of junior ministers generally. The entry for 1 January 2000 illustrates this: I quote 'As for me, I am entering a period of unprecedented obscurity. Hopefully my eclipse will be temporary. Not that I wish to be famous, only useful. At the moment I am no use whatever'.

Well. Has Chris Mullin been useful? Of course he has, and in very many ways that make him eminently worthy of the honour we are bestowing today.

Before entering parliament, Chris Mullin was an investigative journalist freelancing for a programme which many members of the audience will remember well: *World in Action*. Chris Mullin it was who first exposed the enormous miscarriage of justice that followed the Birmingham Pub Bombings in 1974. At that time these were the greatest single terrorist atrocity carried out on mainland Britain, claiming 21 lives. 6 men were arrested, convicted and imprisoned for these appalling murders. It later transpired, they were entirely innocent. Chris Mullin's campaign to have these wrongful convictions overturned lasted from the mid 1970s until 1991 when the convictions were finally set aside. This work was carried out in a way utterly characteristic of the man: determined, focussed, transparent, honest, with a clear sense that rights and justice really matter in a democracy whatever the public pressure for a resolution and a conviction.

Chris Mullin thus entered Parliament as MP for Sunderland South in 1987 with a serious reputation for upholding the rights of those subjected to injustice. Sunderland became his adoptive home, taking him far from his fine roots in Great Baddow near Chelmsford, right here in Essex.

Our honorary graduand quickly became known for two things: in General Elections his constituency was always the first to declare, often within an hour or so of the polls closing. The beaming face of Chris Mullin thus became a familiar feature of election night, and the size of his majority the first indication of the ultimate result. Almost as swiftly he became known not only as an assiduous and effective constituency MP, but also as a backbencher who would not let the government rest. We all well remember his sharp, effective questioning of the government of the day in the late 80s and early 90s, when he could always be relied upon to uncover the

inconsistencies and evasions of cabinet ministers. In his first formal role as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee he augmented his reputation for incisive intervention in holding the Government to account, and later on as a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee, once a relatively quiet backwater, he found himself amid the storm of the expenses scandal, from which, as one of the lowest claimers in the House, he remained personally and honourably immune.

In 1999 he became a junior minister with responsibility for aviation, moving two years later to the Department for International Development, where his twin interests in international affairs and social justice coincided well. His final ministerial appointment was at the Foreign Office as Minister for Africa, where he was succeeded by Lord Triesman, an Essex graduate to whom we awarded an honorary degree last year.

But a distinguished political career is not all there is to Chris Mullin. His 1982 novel *A Very British Coup* is a funny, insightful work that has become a classic of its kind, and is one of three novels that he has published. In fact the title has entered the language; only the other day the Murdoch affair was described as a 'very British revolution'. This brings me to another feature of Chris Mullin's diaries, which is that they are frequently prescient and topical. This may be coincidental, but I cannot resist quoting the entry for 23 January 2003: 'Today's *Mail* is telling its readers that students could be leaving university with debts of up to £50000. On Monday they were saying £21000. And if we were to suggest paying for students out of general taxation the *Mail* would be the first to scream blue murder. What are we going to do about these loathsome tabloids? Must we lie back and take it or can we find some way of striking back?'

Ladies and gentlemen, one thing nobody can say about Chris Mullin is that he lay back and took it. The University of Essex, with its excellent record on human rights teaching, research and practice, can be proud to honour a man who has for many years stood up for the rights and opportunities of those less able to defend themselves.

Campaigning journalist, wise parliamentarian, government minister, novelist, diarist – above all man of Essex:

Chancellor, I present to you Chris Mullin.