

Graduation 2012

Oration for Honorary Graduate Lucy Kellaway

Orator: Professor Joan Busfield

Chancellor, the Senate of the University of Essex has resolved that the Degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Lucy Kellaway

The University is honouring Lucy Kellaway today as an outstanding columnist on the British newspaper, *The Financial Times*.

The Financial Times is an excellent newspaper, in my view the best in Britain, one with principles and integrity that all those of you graduating this morning with degrees in Accounting and Finance from the Essex Business School should read regularly if you do not do so already. The newspaper, visually distinct for its light salmon pink colour, now has an international reach and is printed in 22 locations with a readership of over two million. What makes the FT, as it is commonly known, excellent is not only the quality of its news coverage, particularly its international coverage, but also the high quality of the critical analysis provided by its columnists. Lucy Kellaway, who has worked at the FT since 1985, is now the paper's Management columnist. She not only writes a regular Monday column, but also a Dear Lucy column on Wednesdays in which she, and others who write in to the paper, act as agony aunts in relation to queries about business life, such as how to handle questions about personal weaknesses in interviews, whether staff meetings should be banned, and whether you should resign over the high pay awarded to the Chief Executive of your company. She also does some of the interviews of business people and celebrities that appear in the paper, including some of the weekend Lunch with the FT interviews. Throughout, like her colleagues, she adopts a critical approach to the business and financial worlds. However, unlike them, she makes routine and brilliant use of satire. She would have been entirely at home in the eighteenth century world of Jonathan Swift and his satire, *A Modest Proposal*, on how to prevent the children of poor people being a burden on their parents by selling them as food to the rich.

Lucy Kellaway is perhaps best known for producing anonymously the satirical Martin Lukes column – about a fictitious, highly ambitious senior manager with little self-doubt or self-awareness, whose ups and downs were described via his business and private emails from 1999 until the end of 2007. That year Lukes became Chief Executive of his company but at the end of the year was imprisoned for insider trading. The success of this column led to a novel: *Martin Lukes: Who Moved my BlackBerry* in 2005 when her authorship of the column emerged. There is some uncertainty as to whether Lukes might return. Despite rumours of his death, there have been occasional references to him in the paper, for instance that he had become a born-again Christian, and was teaching a course for his fellow inmates – Pros for the Cons – in which he argued that all negatives can be made positive. Kellaway went on to publish a witty and well-reviewed comic novel, *In Office Hours*, in 2010 about office love affairs. She has received numerous awards and was named Columnist of the year at the British Press Awards in 2006

Lucy Kellaway was born in London of Australian parents who had met while students at Oxford and settled in this country. Her mother would appear to have been a significant influence since she became a part-time English teacher at Camden School for Girls, which Kellaway attended before going to Lady Margaret Hall where her mother had also been a student. Her mother was also a 'gifted gardening writer' and columnist who produced several books on gardening.

Lucy Kellaway has some particular bêtes noires – the greatest object of her ire is the meaningless words and phrases, often combined with pretentious, inflated vocabulary and fake metaphors, used by those in the business world – language that obfuscates and mystifies the reader. Here is Kellaway writing in her Monday column only last week about the British company, Burberry, whose early reputation was built on the selling of classic raincoats – something for which those experiencing this year’s British summer will recognise there is a market – and which is now a successful international brand. Picking up the language often typical of business leaders she begins by stating that she has decided to ‘leverage the concept’ of a Golden Flannel Award for business jargon, and ‘roll it out across a more comprehensive universe of consumer touch points’. Having rejected Bob Diamond of Barclays’ fame, or perhaps one should say notoriety, for his resignation announcement since, notwithstanding the flannel it contained, his message “It’s not fair” was too crystal clear, she turns to her chosen recipient of this additional award, Angela Ahrendts, the Burberry Chief Executive, who wrote in the company’s latest annual report:

In the wholesale channel, Burberry exited doors not aligned with brand status and invested in presentation through both enhanced assortments and dedicated, customised real estate in key doors.

Kellaway goes on:

This meets the most important criterion for jargon – it is utterly impenetrable. What are all these doors? Has Burberry acquired Travis Perkins building supplies? And what is an enhanced assortment?...The full statement is rich in mysterious three-word terms straight out of buzzword bingo: “seamless brand experience (did you know that brands, like stockings, can have seams?), digital trunk shows, and synchronised product presence”.

After considering how Burberry’s wildly inflated prices apparently need wildly inflated language to go with them, she ends “The Burberry boss has aligned balderdash and brand. She deserves my prize”.

Luck Kellaway’s campaign for clarity in the use of the English language is extremely important. Language shapes ideas and ways of thinking and can, all too readily, be used in ways that blind and deceive its audience. As George Orwell put it in 1946, language can “corrupt thought”. It can be readily used to undermine transparency and hide what is actually being done, as we have found to our cost in relation to the obfuscation in the language of high finance, when even insiders did not follow exactly the character, and more importantly the risks, of its financial products. We should all be grateful to Lucy Kellaway for attacking in such a skilful, humorous way the inflated, pretentious and distorting language through which the business world often presents itself. Many graduating in this ceremony will be entering this world. You should all do your best to follow her admirable lessons: think critically, write in a simple, clear manner, and do not tolerate impenetrable jargon.

Chancellor, I present to you Lucy Kellaway