

## Graduation 2013

### Honorary Graduate – Response

#### Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Lord Dyson

I am somewhat lost for words, which is just as well I've got some text here. But before I go to my text I do want to say what an enormous pleasure it is for me, and I'm sure for my wife although I haven't been able to check with her, what an enormous pleasure it is to be participating with you in an occasion of shared joy. As I saw this seemingly endless succession of enthusiastic young people passing by me a few moments ago I couldn't help but notice the shared joy on all of your faces, and it's been absolutely wonderful to be here. I have to say there, that perhaps the abiding memory I shall have of that endless succession of young people was the shoes. I have never looked at shoes quite in that way before. And how, you young women walk on those things with such elegance, without a momentary totter I do not know. So I congratulate you for academic achievement and also for your mastery of the shoes.

I was extremely touched as you can imagine by the words that have just been spoken by Professor Sir Nigel Rodley, and I have to correct him, I'm sure he will forgive me for this, but I have to correct him, I did not read law at Oxford. In fact, I had to wait no fewer than 48 years to be awarded a law degree, and today is the day. It's been a very long wait indeed, and I'm deeply honoured to receive my law degree from this very distinguished University. The wait has been worth it because recognition by an outstanding academic institution like this means a great deal to me and make no mistake about it, your School of Law and your Centre for Human Rights have a very well deserved national reputation for all-round excellence. I know that the area of law of human rights, which of course is what the Centre for Human Rights is all about, now occupies a central stage in our legal system and in my view, rightly so. I much regret that human rights are so disparaged and ridiculed in some political and media circles. Nigel Rodley mentioned my lecture at Hertfordshire University on that subject. The protection of human rights should lie at the heart of any democratic system which respects the rule of law. No right minded person now – I think – doubts the importance of the rule of law. Without it there is the law of the jungle and chaos. And that's no law at all.

Why are human rights ridiculed as if they were some unworthy foreign import, inimical to our noble British traditions? To me, I have to confess, this is something of a mystery. The much traduced European convention on Human Rights enshrines ideas which as any lawyer ought to recognise reflects our common law principle in a measured and balanced way. The importance of human rights should not be allowed to be undermined or to become a political football mainly because the court in Strasburg may, and I emphasise *may*, may occasionally produce an aberrant decision. This is not the place, or the time, to defend or criticise any particular decisions of that court. I would merely say, that in my view the influence of the decisions of that court has for the most part been beneficial to the development of our law and perhaps more importantly to the law of some of the other member states who do not enjoy the long tradition of high quality justice and respect for the rule of law that we enjoy in this country, and that I'm sorry to say is all too often taken for granted. We should all be grateful for the high quality research that is been done in the field of human rights in this University. Some of it is rightly at a high level of abstraction. After all, that is what you academics do and are good at. But some of it is more down to earth and of particular value, dare I say, to judges who have to decide important individual cases that come up from time to time. I am especially delighted that my old friend Nigel Rodley, who continues to do invaluable and important work in the field of human rights both on the national and international stage, has honoured me with an undeservedly glowing oration this morning.

As he told you, we first met when we were children at school together. He didn't tell you when it was, I will tell you, it was long ago - it was 1948. I think that our teachers would have been utterly incredulous if they had been here today. What? Dyson? And Rodley? Surely not them, they might have said. Well I'm sorry that they are not here today; they are probably all dead now. Even if they were alive I can't imagine that somehow they would have found their way into this auditorium.

I'm also delighted that I've been honoured by another most distinguished old friend of mine and my wife's, Professor Antony King, who undertook, the I hope not unduly role, of escorting us last night and today and making sure that we didn't get lost and we actually made it to attend.

I have always been somewhat starry-eyed about academia. I'm not sure why. I think it has something to do with a love of learning that was instilled into me by my parents when I was a child. In fact I studied classics at Oxford, not law. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, but I enjoyed classics even though it was hardly a vocational subject. I seriously considered an academic career, attracted by the sheer intellectual excitement of it. I should say that I had intended to read law at Oxford, without quite knowing why, but the warden of my college said that if I wanted to be a lawyer, law is the last thing I should study, and so I didn't and I've never have. That was a rather curious and old-fashioned view I think even at that time.

I mention my parents who always encourage and supported me. They would have been proud to see me receiving this degree, just as I'm sure that those of you who are present, whether as family or friends are proud to witness the award of a degree to the person that you're supporting today, and my goodness the support has been very audible as well as visible. The students have striven hard for their success, but the role of the supporter should never be underestimated. I'm sure you'll agree that it's a great day for all of us. But to return briefly to my own career, after much vacillation, in the end I decided to go to the Bar. I have since rationalised my decision on the basis that it seemed that practising law would be both intellectually challenging and have practical relevance to our society. I'm not sure that I thought it out in this way at that time, but truth is that I knew that my father wanted me to be a barrister and it seemed a reasonable thing to do and added the attraction of pleasing him. There was nothing wrong with that and in the end it proved to have been a wise decision to make. I enjoyed my career as a barrister enormously. I have perhaps enjoyed my career as a judge even more. As a judge I've been able to satisfy my desire for intellectual excitement and challenge and to solve real problems faced by real people in a practical and I hope fair and just way. To be able to make even a modest impact on the lives of people has been a great privilege. I hope that this doesn't sound too sanctimonious, but it does reflect how I feel. And in the process I've been able to make a small contribution to the development of some aspects of our law. And now, I'm Master of the Rolls, an ancient office held by many distinguished jurists, I understand 96; if I remember the number we were told. Including Lord Denning, whose name is still recalled by many people today, who held the office for about 20 years. I feel greatly privileged to be holding this office.

Throughout my professional career I've had close links with academics, in fact, I've married one; you can't get any closer than that. But the relationship between judges and academic lawyers is complex and fascinating. Judges benefit from learn and writings of academics which shed light on difficult legal problems. Academics need judges, I suggest, they need judges to write judgments which they can then tear apart in learned articles and books, and then of course, commentary by one academic is criticised by another academic and so the world goes round and everyone is happy. So you can see that we have a symbiotic existence. In short, we need each other. So it is perhaps fitting that as someone who has written many judgments in the last 20 years I am awarded this degree perhaps partly in gratitude for providing ample grist for the academic mill, but I hope not entirely. More seriously, I would like to express my deep thanks to Essex University for honouring me with this degree today. Thank you very much.