

## GRADUATION 2009

### **Presentation speech for The Rt Hon Frank Field MP for the honorary degree of Doctor of Science of the University *honoris causa***

Chancellor, so far as I am aware, in the past, Buckingham has not enjoyed close links with Birkenhead, the constituency Frank Field has represented with such dedication since 1979. It is true, however, that F E Smith, first Lord Birkenhead, lived at nearby Charlton, and is buried in the little graveyard there. I fear that the mention of Smith may seem inappropriate – after all Smith was a Conservative and Field is a Labour member of Parliament, and in some ways undoubtedly of the Left. But no one could accuse Field of being ‘a mere party man’. What gives him such a remarkable standing in public life today is that he is perceived as essentially independent minded. Above all, he is known as the man who was asked to ‘think the unthinkable’ – and did.

Chancellor: There are still many in Field’s party – and indeed in other parties – who believe that an extension of state-provided welfare offers the best solution to the problems of society. On the basis of his own direct experience of Birkenhead, Field challenges these beliefs and shows that too often state intervention does more harm than good. Of course, others in politics have said similar things – not least our own Chancellor Emeritus. But does that mean by honouring Frank Field today, we are saying that he is really a ‘Thatcherite’? Emphatically not: ‘Similar’ does not mean ‘identical’.

So what are the differences? Margaret Thatcher achieved a great deal but she also left many things undone. Above all she never really addressed the problem of social – as distinct from narrowly economic decline - and how to reverse it. Her governments showed little appreciation of the importance of the family and of religion in maintaining a healthy society. These are the issues that Frank Field has grappled with. Perhaps others may suppose that his views really belong to the Right rather than to the Left. Not so, Chancellor. The prevailing equation of the Right with Small Government and the Left with Big Government is a comparatively new phenomenon. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if anything, it was the other way round. Then the Tories were the party of paternalism – with self consciously dependency implications – while the Liberals, Radicals and yes, even some early Socialists, stood for self help, self respect, and self advancement. They believed that the state held people back from the achievement of their true potential and was thus an obstacle to genuine social progress. That is the tradition that Field has sought to revive in his own party.

Chancellor, I believe that one of the greatest problems facing Britain today is a crisis in respect for Parliament – and that in large measure this has been caused by its lack of independence and of new thinking. Frank Field is a wonderful example of the independence that is so desperately needed. We think that respect for universities also requires independence. That is why our proudest

boast is that we are the Independent University. Perhaps those who believe in academic independence and those who believe in political independence are natural allies. Chancellor I call upon you to confer upon the Right Honourable Frank Field the Degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*.

**Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil**  
**28 February 2009**