

GRADUATION 2009

Presentation speech for Sir Sydney Kentridge KCMG QC for the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws of the University *honoris causa*

Chancellor, on a beam in our Hunter Street Library, there is an early piece of Graffiti: it says 'Burdett and Liberty for Ever'. Although these words were written long before this University was even thought of, many of us still draw inspiration from them. A commitment to Liberty is central to what this University stands for – and it has also been the crucial theme in the life of our Honorand.

Chancellor: A good many of Sir Sydney's cases have centred on issues of freedom and liberty, first in South Africa and later in this country. In South Africa he frequently appeared for leaders of the anti-apartheid movement and his clients included Chief Albert Luthulo, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He is perhaps best known for representing the family of Stephen Biko. Lord Alexander of Weedon wrote of his performance at the Inquest, 'Through remorseless and deadly cross-questioning, sometimes with brilliant irony, Kentridge established that the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement had been killed by police brutality. The verdict of accidental death was seen as risible'

In this country Sir Sydney has continued to defend freedom. He was so effective when representing the Countryside Alliance in its attempts to stop the proposed ban on fox hunting that he was accused of 'overstating his case'. Nothing daunted, when the case got to the House of Lords, he began 'Perhaps I could overstate my case again'. But perhaps most telling has been his analysis of the dangers inherent in the present government's proposal to introduce 90-day detention for those suspected of involvement in terrorist activities – warning that these proposals echo the terrible escalation in repression in the days of Apartheid in South Africa.

But, Chancellor, what does this all mean for Buckingham? I think it means a great deal. There are two things that strike most people about this University. It has a large and flourishing law school and it has students from all over the world who – on the whole – get on extremely well together. I believe that the two things are connected. We understand that the Law and lawyers have a vital part to play in creating a free and just society – brilliantly exemplified by Sir Sydney's work in South Africa. But what is true of South Africa is true of all societies, large or small, states or communities. Sir Sydney's example is an inspiration throughout the world but it is also an inspiration to us.

Chancellor: I call upon you to confer upon Sir Sydney Kentridge QC the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil
28 February 2009