

## Anne Widdecombe

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Colleagues and friends, graduates and graduands and their families - today the University will award an honorary doctorate to the Right Honourable Anne Widdecombe. For anyone who serves in the role of Public Orator, the ultimate nightmare is that the candidate for an honorary degree for whom he or she is giving the oration will be a world expert in a particularly obscure field, and thus eminently worthy of the award an honorary degree, but who seems to have done nothing all at else during the course of their lifetime, and as such it is impossible to extend the oration beyond around 15 or 30 seconds. It goes without saying that I was not inflicted with this particular nightmare as I prepared for this degree congregation today – indeed my task was exactly the opposite – how to compress a life for which Google found 756 thousand items in 0.18 seconds, into a period of time that would not cause a degree of agitation to my colleagues sitting behind me.

Now, for the graduates and graduands amongst us, I suspect that their main knowledge of Ann Widdecombe is though her dancing exploits and for her famously televised endorsement of the election campaign of Harold Saxon, also known as the Master, as being “....just what the country needs”. But the more senior amongst us will know that there has been much more to Anne Widdecombe’s life than that. She was born in Bath and educated at the Royal Naval School in Singapore and at La Sainte Union Convent in Bath, before enrolling at this University in the mid 1960’s to study Latin. At that time both the city and the University were very different places from at present. The City was at the height of its love affair with concrete, asphalt and the automobile. At the University considerable expansion and building work was going on, mainly in concrete, with the Muirhead tower under construction for the first time. The original Mason Hall had just been opened and our graduand was amongst its first students. Over the intervening years there has been much change, with the city re-inventing itself with a vibrant city centre and commercial life. The University has changed too – architecturally, with the Muirhead tower, newly refurbished such that its windows no longer fall out, shining in the sun on the rare occasions the sun is visible and Mason Hall has been demolished and rebuild. Sadly however Latin is no longer taught as a single honours subject. And for Ann Widdecombe the time since she was an undergraduate has been full of challenges and changes. She took a further degree at Oxford, reading PPE before it became a mandatory route for the younger generation of potential high flying politicians, and then worked as an academic administrator at the University of London. At the same time she was active in politics and serving as a district councillor for the Conservative Party in Runnymede, which is to my mind a wonderfully symbolic location in which to begin a political career. She stood as a parliamentary candidate in a couple of constituencies, including contesting the seat of Dr David Owen in Devonport, before entering the House of Commons as MP for Maidstone in 1987. She served as a Minister of State in the Department of Employment and in the Home Office, where in her role as Prisons minister visited every prison in England. When the Conservative Party went into opposition in 1998 she served as Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Shadow Home Secretary. In 2001 she stepped down from the Shadow Cabinet to give herself the freedom to speak out on a variety of issues about which she felt strongly, and in 2010 she decided not to stand for re-election to the House of Commons. Throughout this political career Ann Widdecombe has stood out from the crowd. In his memoirs Gyles Brandreth comments “Her strength as a politician is that, unusually, she only says what she believes”. And as one

might expect from such an approach, she became the news reporters delight and, one suspects, a source of some disquiet to her colleagues. She has a deep Christian faith and it has been said that “Widdecombe without God, politician, as much as person, is inconceivable”. Her faith and her strongly held beliefs led her to convert, in 1993, to Roman Catholicism from the Anglican Church, which unlike her, does seem to have a major problem in knowing what it believes.

But Ann Widdecombe was always more than a politician. Her decision to step down from the Shadow Cabinet was also intended to give her more time to spend on her other love – writing novels – and she published her first novel “The Clematis Tree” in 2000, a depiction of a family seeking to care for a seriously disabled child, and has since then written a number of other novels. She has had many media appearances covering a wide range of topics and styles including her own programme “The Widdecombe project” and other appearances as diverse as Call My Bluff, Countdown, Christianity - a history, and Grumpy Old Women. And much more could be said of her charitable work, her theatre and pantomime appearances and her campaigning on a wide variety of issues. And that is to mention only the first two pages of the Google search.

So, we are here today to celebrate a life lived to the full, a life lived with integrity and filled with not a little humour and a concern for the well being of others. Chancellor, I present to you and to the University The Right Honourable Ann Noreen Widdecombe for the Degree of Doctor of the University, *honoris causa*.