

## SHAMI CHAKRABARTI

Mr. Chancellor,

In her 2012 Fickling Public Lecture at Newcastle University, Shami Chakrabarti, whom we are honouring today, recalled her childhood passion for books: ‘From early childhood memories of my mother reading to me, to recent years when my own child began to share my love of reading, few influences have moved me as much or seemed as capable of inspiring the empathy and the values that constitute a belief in human rights.’ Her model of a human rights hero is Atticus Finch, the small-town lawyer in Harper Lee’s famous novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published fifty years ago, this powerful account of a Southern lawyer’s defence of a black man falsely accused of rape, and his stand against the prejudices of his day, might not, on the face of it, be the ideal subject matter for a work of children’s literature. But Shami Chakrabarti asks us to consider ‘Where [else] do human rights come from; are they passing figments of the imagination or something more real and enduring; what makes us value human rights across the globe, from one generation to the next?’ It is for this reason that she believes children’s stories can be as much a force for human rights and freedoms as political speeches, sermons and legal doctrines – maybe even more so.

Perhaps then her story ought to begin with a Once Upon a Time. Born to Hindu-Bengali parents in the London borough of Harrow, her mother - as we have already seen – gave her the gift of reading, while her father inspired her to take an interest in civil liberties, and challenged her to

think harder about whether the rule of law should apply to everyone – even those accused of terrorism. From these small beginnings, the nurturing of one child’s education and sense of justice – we fast forward to Shami Chakrabarti as we know her today, a public figure recognised nationally and internationally as a forceful and passionate advocate for human rights. She is rarely out of the media spotlight and has been voted 'one of our most inspiring political figures' as well as (according to the *Sun* newspaper), ‘the most dangerous woman in Britain’. Her politics comes back to this most simple of challenges, ‘Do we believe in the rule of law?’ On a recent current affairs programme, during a confrontation with a Conservative MP who opined that prisoners shouldn’t have the vote, and that Britain should disregard EU legislation on the matter, Shami’s resounding riposte was: ‘I don’t think Her Majesty’s Government should pick and choose which laws to obey’. A selective approach to the application of the law, she believes, gives succour to tyranny and a role model for dictatorship. Her advocacy of equal rights for everyone, even prisoners and those accused of terrorism, is much misrepresented, and she is often subject to outright hatred from the ‘hang ‘em and flog ‘em’ brigade. But she stands firm in her conviction that human rights are something inalienable – and unearned – independent of race, nationality, gender, or any other consideration. We possess them simply by being human, and being alive.

Shami’s legal training began with a degree from the London School of Economics; she was later called to the Bar by the Middle Temple in 1994. In 1996, she started working as a barrister for the Home Office, where she gained experience under both Conservative and New Labour administrations. Then, somewhat fatefully, on September 10, 2001, she joined Liberty as in-house legal counsel. Liberty, or rather the National Council for Civil Liberties, was founded in 1934, a cross party,

non-party membership organisation at the heart of the movement for fundamental rights and freedoms in the UK that promotes the values of individual human dignity, equal treatment and fairness as the foundations of a democratic society. It was, she says, impossible to predict just how much the events of 9/11 would shape the civil rights debate in the years that followed her joining Liberty. For her, it was not just a matter of philosophical or political principle - her son was born soon after the attacks and his birth, she says, influenced her own feelings: 'I understood more what it is to be afraid, what it is to really worry about whether your family are going to be blown up on the underground.' Shami became Director of Liberty in 2003, and has been deeply involved in campaigning for human rights through parliament, the courts and in wider society. She has written and broadcast widely on the importance of the post-World War Two human rights framework as an essential component of democracy. In addition to being a Master of the Bench of Middle Temple, Shami is Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University and a governor of the British Film Institute, and was recently asked to advise Lord Justice Leveson as part of the public enquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the UK press. Her eclectic mix of *Desert Island Discs* (when she was a guest of the iconic Radio 4 programme) ranged from punk anthems to the lyrical yearning of Nina Simone's ballad *I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to be Free*.

It is pleasing to reflect, Mr. Chancellor, that Shami Chakrabarti is now standing now on the exact same spot, almost to the day, as Dr. Martin Luther King when he was awarded an honorary doctorate by this University 45 years ago (the only UK University to do so during his lifetime). On that day, Dr. King told the Chancellor 'I can assure you, you give me renewed confidence and vigour to carry on in the struggle to

make peace and justice a reality.’ Though his civil rights campaigning was cut tragically short just months later, it is a modest hope that our honorary graduand today will feel similarly reinvigorated to pursue the arduous work that lies ahead of her in the finest tradition of civil rights campaigning.

Mr Chancellor, for her work on social justice, and in keeping with Newcastle University’s dedication to social renewal, I present Shami Chakrabati for the award of a Doctorate in Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Helen Berry

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