Presentation of Saul Lehrfreund for Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws of the University of Reading

Mr Vice-Chancellor,

Few academics have the great pleasure of presenting one of their own former students for an honorary degree of this University to be conferred upon them. I have been given that rare privilege.

Saul Lehrfreund graduated with an LLB degree from the School of Law at this University in 1990 and immediately thereafter obtained an LLM from University College, London in International Human Rights Law. I am sure that Saul would agree with me when I say that subjects such as Property Law, or indeed Equity & Trusts, did not fire his imagination quite as some of his tutors might have hoped. It was in his final year, when studying subjects such as International Human Rights Law, that his eyes lit up and his intellectual curiosity became seriously engaged. This was a sign of things to come, as Saul has spent the whole of his subsequent career acting as a champion of human rights.

After completion of his academic studies, Saul joined the Soho-based firm of Solicitors-Simons, Muirhead and Burton, where he co-founded, with his colleague Parvais Jabbar, the ‘Death Penalty Project’, of which he is now Executive Director. In this capacity, he is able to use the knowledge he had acquired at Reading to build on his international human rights experience for the benefit of those prisoners languishing on ‘death row’.

Saul has acquired an international reputation in the field of human rights law on a practical level: he has represented prisoners under sentence of death in the English speaking Caribbean before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Human Rights Committee of the International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights; he has also provided logistical support to a number of lawyers in Commonwealth Africa, such as Nigeria, Zambia, Kenya, Uganda and Malawi, where local lawyers with the assistance of the ‘Death Penalty Project’, succeeded before the Supreme Court of Malawi in obtaining an order declaring the mandatory death penalty unconstitutional. Saul’s international reputation lead to him being appointed as a founder member of the UK Foreign Secretary’s ‘Death Penalty Panel’ and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s ‘Pro Bono Panel’.

The ‘Death Penalty Project’ has played the leading role in redressing a number of miscarriages of justice in relation to death-row detainees, and in establishing violations of human rights norms before regional and international human rights tribunals. Accolades have been lauded on Saul for the work he has done. In 1995, the ‘Death Penalty Project’ won the “best pro bono activity” award at the inaugural ‘UK Lawyer Awards’; in the same year, Saul won an individual award for outstanding contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights from the ‘International Bar Association’; in 1999, Saul and his co-Director were jointly awarded ‘The Times/Justice’ ‘Young Lawyer of the Year Prize’. In 2000, Saul was awarded the MBE by Her Majesty the Queen “for services to international human rights”.

Saul has a deep commitment to ensuring that all those accused of serious crimes are afforded fair and well-considered trials. This has led him to become involved in some of the world’s most dangerous and high-profile cases. His efforts have contributed to the development of the law in countries such as the Republic of South Africa and the Federation of Malaya. Saul’s work has been widely recognised, with him being awarded the Order of the British Empire (CBE) by Her Majesty the Queen “for services to international human rights” in 2016. In 2018, Saul was awarded the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by Her Majesty the Queen “for services to international human rights”.

Saul Lehrfreund’s dedication to human rights and his commitment to justice is an inspiration to all those who have the privilege of working alongside him. I am proud to present him for the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws of this University.

Thank you.
Saul has always maintained very close links with the University of Reading, and in particular the School of Law. I have had the enormous pleasure of keeping in close touch with Saul and watching his reputation grow ever since his graduation. Every year, Saul returns to Reading to deliver a seminar on the ‘Death Penalty’ to my International Human Rights Law class. In 2007 Saul delivered the ‘Annual Reading Law School’ lecture. Saul has accepted International Human Rights Law students from Reading on ad hoc placements with the ‘Death Penalty Project’ on a number of occasions. In addition, Saul has provided the opportunity for two students per year from the Law School’s ‘Pro Bono’ module to experience work with him on the ‘Death Penalty Project’, as well as serving on the School of Law’s ‘Pro Bono’ Steering Committee. Saul has published numerous articles and reports on the ‘Death Penalty’ in the serious academic literature.

In sum, Saul is a testament to the benefits of a Reading education and our ability to send out fundamentally decent people into the world at large. We can be extremely proud of Saul. We gave Saul the wings to fly. It is no exaggeration to say that Saul has saved more condemned men from the gallows than any other lawyer in this or any other jurisdiction.

Mr Vice-Chancellor, I present Mr Saul Lehrfreund for the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws of this University.