From politics at Birkbeck to policy-making in Brussels

Claude Moraes is a trailblazer in European politics. The Labour MEP was one of the first Asian MEPs to join the European Parliament in 1999, and in July 2014 he was re-elected for his fourth term. Still only 49, the London MEP is already one of the veterans of the European Parliament.

After studying law in his hometown of Dundee, Moraes decided, aged 21, to study an MSc in Politics and Administration at Birkbeck. He was attracted by the evening classes, as he could combine studying with working as an adviser to Labour MPs John Reid and Paul Boateng (now both Lords). He persuaded the late Ben Pimlott, then Professor of Politics and Contemporary History at Birkbeck, that, despite his youth, he was a suitable candidate for postgraduate study.

Moraes said: “I told Ben Pimlott what I had read and I managed to persuade him to admit me. Ben was a real politician’s writer, as he combined journalism and serious writing with geeky politics.”

However, juggling work and study was not straightforward. Moraes recalled, with affection, when he was hauled into the office of the late Paul Hirst, Professor of Social Theory. Hirst explained that there was a departmental sweepstake regarding the reasons for Moraes’ absences, and he was putting his money on work-related visits to Scotland. Hirst wanted to know whether he had won the bet. Moraes confirmed that he was right – and made sure that he did not miss classes thereafter.

More than 25 years after completing his part-time studies at Birkbeck, Moraes still recognises the impact of his course on his career. He said: “My experiences at Birkbeck, including the influence of leading left-wing thinkers, have really shaped my career as a Labour politician. The course gave me a broader perspective, and I became more mature as I was studying with people older at the time.”

Moraes is now the chairman of the European Parliament’s influential and wide-ranging Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee, which tackles matters including immigration and asylum, cross-border crime, data regulation and anti-discrimination law.

He added: “The EU is about economic growth, but also about values – from democracy to the stewardship of the environment. Our challenges relate to how the EU handles austerity and how it addresses youth unemployment. Undoubtedly, the EU will stay together and grow, but the UK’s position is uncertain. That day of reckoning is coming. I will be campaigning for the UK to stay in a reformed EU.”

Studying at Birkbeck in the late 1980s helped Claude Moraes to form his political ideas and to launch his successful political career.