

Baroness Brinton

President, Master, Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues

In 1869, John Stuart Mill – that great philosopher – wrote to a friend, saying

The most important thing women have to do is to stir up the zeal of women themselves. We have to stimulate their aspirations – to bid them not despair of anything, nor think anything beyond their reach, but try their faculties against all difficulties.... in no other way can we excite enthusiasm in women which is necessary to break down the old barriers.

The first line of that letter – urging people to “stir up the zeal of women” – was cited by Baroness Brinton when she stood up at 12.29 on the 3 March 2011 to give her maiden speech in the House of Lords. It was an eloquent, heart-felt, and practical call-to-arms to politicians everywhere. I can think of no better accolade for the Baroness than to say that she is a politician and role model who has remained true to Mill’s ambition to work to stimulate the aspirations of women and improve our world.

Baroness Brinton, born Sarah Virginia (Sal) Brinton, in Paddington on 1 April 1955, is a consummate politician. She was educated at Benenden School in the Kentish countryside, an establishment that, when it was opened in 1923 promised not only to be a place where every girl “would be given the chance to follow her own bent”, but that they would inculcate “personal integrity and service to others”. The founders would be very proud of Baroness Brinton. She later attended Churchill College in Cambridge and the Central School of Speech and Drama, here in London.

A decisive moment in her life occurred when she joined the Liberal Party in 1975 and, throughout its many incarnations, including the current coalition of the Liberal Democrats with the Conservative Party, she never looked back. Admittedly, she had some non-political moments – notably working as floor manager to BBC2 children’s programme, Play School with its famous opening lines: “A house, with a door, 1 2 3 4, ready to play, what’s the day, it’s Play School”. She met her husband, Tim, at Play School.

By 1993, she had left behind childish things to become a Cambridgeshire County Councillor in charge of the education portfolio. She contested the South Cambridgeshire seat in 1997 and 2001. This began her career in politics and education. Also in 1997, she became bursar of Selwyn College, Cambridge, a position she retained until 2003. For six years, she was a founder member (and for a period its Deputy Chair) of the Board of the East of England Development Agency and she is currently a non-executive director of the University for Industry (LearnDirect).

However, for the past decade, Baroness Brinton’s heart and spirit has been dedicated to Watford. She was the Liberal Democrat party’s parliamentary candidate for the Watford constituency in 2005 and 2010, narrowly losing out by less than 1,500 votes both times. Her campaigns – big and small – for the people of Watford are legendary: they include everything from campaigning to repair the potholes, to saving local post-offices and improving health services. Freezing temperatures and gusty winds have never kept her from knocking on doors, delivering leaflets, or simply asking locals about their anxieties and desires for their town. Watford is a place she loves, a place where she has raised a family, and a place (St Luke’s Church) where she worships.

Baroness Brinton has won many honours and awards for her achievements. In 1997, she became the East Anglian Entrepreneurial Businesswoman of the Year for her work as Bursar of Lucy Cavendish College in Cambridge. During her time there, its endowment and student numbers doubled, she oversaw a large building development, and ensured that computers

linked to the University system were installed in every bedroom. In 2003, Anglia Ruskin University made the Baroness an Honorary Doctor of Philosophy for her contribution to education, skills, and learning.

In 2011, Brinton took her seat in the House of Lords. The timing was right. She sought new challenges. But she also agreed because she is passionately committed to reform of the House, making it more accountable to the people. In her own words, "I'll be going [into the Lords] as a working peer, to help bring legislation through. I'm there to do a job. It's not just a title. I'm not particularly interested in those". No idle words: she has been one of the hardest working peers, with an exceptional record of speaking in the House.

The pomp and ceremony of the House proved strange. She admits that she is "very practical and pragmatic", which meant that the "whole concept of agreeing your title with the Garter King of Arms at the College of Arms and meeting Acting Black Rod" all seemed a bit "surreal".

Choosing her full title, however, was a pleasure. She became Baroness Brinton, of Kenardington in the County of Kent. The geographical location was important. Kenardington is a village on the edge of Romney Marsh, a place where she spent some happy childhood years, where her beloved father is buried, and where, in her words, there is "a wonderful Saxon church... so simple... [with] nothing to come between you, God, and his wonderful world".

This ethical sensibility pervades Baroness Brinton's thinking. She has dedicated herself to the service of others. She is committed to helping those who lack employment or apprenticeships. She understands the needs of mature students, having been one herself. She worked to ensure that part-time students were not discriminated against under the government's loans scheme. Widening participation in the universities is a major goal. So

too is diversification in politics. The words “re-energise our democracy” are frequently on her lips. It was no surprise to discover that Baroness Brinton is the great niece of the brilliant Mary Stocks (later Baroness Stocks), prominent suffragists and feminist, writer, and also fervent promoter of adult and lifelong education.

The Baroness’ colleagues speak of her in the warmest tones. As Baroness Scott told me, Brinton is a “‘come to’ person when you have a task that is complex and difficult” and she has “earned herself enormous respect for the way she has handled some very delicate issues”. She is renowned for her courage and willingness to stand up to the most malicious and violent bullies. She is the classic “head girl”, claimed another friend: always dependable, a fervent supporter of locals of all political persuasions. She is passionate about nurturing young and diverse talent.

Finally, there are many causes dear to the Baroness’s heart. Breast cancer – a great scourge in the lives of her friends; vascular dementia, a disease that took the life of her father – Conservative MP Tim Brinton – whose sufferings showed her the sacrifices that carers (both family and professionals, as in the Admiral nurses) make every day; the Christian Blind Mission, with its acknowledgement that “twice the number of women and girls are blind than men, usually because they don’t get fair access to treatment”; and climate change (for which, I am reliably informed, she once wore a startling-blue curly wig on a march). Perhaps I should also mention her love of the People’s Game, played by The Hornets or Elton John’s Rocket Men, at the Watford Football Club.

But the reason we honour Baroness Brinton is because she has always followed John Stuart Mill’s lead in seeking to “stir up the zeal of women”, as well as of all citizens and non-citizens, to “break down the old barriers”. She has always pursued what we proudly call the Birkbeck Mission. For these reasons, it is my great honour to present Baroness Brinton as Fellow of Birkbeck.