

Baroness Garden

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today it is my great honour to welcome Baroness Gardento a Fellowship at Birkbeck.

Recently, Baroness Garden gave a speech in which she referred to the famous “King and Country Debate”, which took place on 19 February 1933 in the Oxford Union. The star of this debate was Cyril Edwin Mitchinson Joad (1891-1953), a philosopher based at Birkbeck for nearly all his career. At his height, he was a household name and the UK’s most well-known public intellectual. During the “King and Country” debate, Joad famously argued for the motion that “this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country”. His oration was witty, passionate, and uncompromising. Joad admitted that he had engaged in a similar debate prior to the First World War. A few months later, he recalled, his best friend “had hung on barbed wire for 24 hours with his entrails hanging out screaming in agony”. Joad insisted that the motion should read, “that this House will never commit murder whenever the Government decided it should do so”. The motion was carried by 275 votes to 153. Of course, human cruelty in the form of Nazism made him repent of his pacifist principles. The Blitz confirmed his change of mind. Birkbeck was the only college in London not to evacuate to the countryside. Joad was at the forefront of Birkbeck’s mission during the war: indeed, his lunch-time lectures were so popular that they continued even after bombs fell directly on Birkbeck.

Joad’s speech caused uproar, but was a passionate defence of free speech – particularly in the universities. As Baroness Garden has eloquently argued, the “King and Country Debate” is an example of the need for universities to feel “unfettered in debating issues which could well have caused offence..... If students only ever hear and discuss ideas with which they agree, their education will not have served them well”, she argues. Baroness Garden and

Joan should share some important principles: free speech, the requirement that politicians not to recklessly lead their citizens into war, and a passion for education, education, education.

As the College Orator, one of my favourite jobs is reading about the achievements of new fellows. Because Baroness Garden has been a member of the House of Lords since 2007, the obvious place to start was her speeches in the Lords. I never expected to enjoy myself so much. She is stern then witty; clearly delights in an original turn of phrase; and is a staunch supporter of education at every level and for everyone.

Earlier this month, for example, she could be heard extolling the UK's universities, arguing that the country's "research success" was due to three things: world-class facilities, homegrown talent, and high levels of international co-operation. Here at Birkbeck, we also value the extraordinary talents of our staff, both homegrown and international, and are proud of our international collaborations. Earlier this year, Baroness Garden also shared her anxieties about part-time and adult education, calling Birkbeck "one of the great pioneers of part-time, adult degree-level education", which has been "transformative for so many people who may have missed going to university from school or who simply wished to continue learning". This was obviously "good for social mobility and good for the economy".

In case this sounds all too earnest, her speeches also reveal a healthy sense of fun. Recently, for example, she could be heard congratulating a fellow Lord on "the clarity of his response" to a question. She continued:

The Plain English Campaign advises... "Keep your sentences short", "Prefer active verbs" and "Avoid nominalisations". I am sure we would all aspire to that. What training is given to civil servants and Ministers to ensure that they avoid gobbledegook in government documents?

Such comments tell us something of the woman we celebrate this morning. She has been an important figure in politics for many years.

Most people know Baroness Garden in her numerous roles as a Liberal Democrat politician

and member of the House of Lords. But her rise to power was an unconventional one. As Susan Elizabeth Button, she grew up in London where her father was a civil servant. Her father's father was a Methodist minister and her mother's father was a butcher, but both of her parents went to Cambridge where both got a first in Modern Languages. There was one important difference, though: because she was a woman, her mother was never allowed to call herself a graduate of the university (women at Cambridge weren't allowed that right until 1948) . The sense of injustice was strong in Susan Button from this early age.

At the age of eight, her father was sent to Paris for three years, so she was thrown into a French School – an experience that was going to be important for her in later years. At nine, however, she and her much loved sister were sent back to Britain to go to boarding school: Westonbirt School in Gloucestershire. She missed her parents, but the school had a strong language teaching.

It was always assumed that she would go to university – and, indeed, she had assumed she would follow her parents and go to Cambridge. When she did not get called to interview at Cambridge but was interviewed at St. Hilda's College in Oxford, she candidly told her interviewee, when asked why she wanted to come to St. Hildas, that "I do not!" 0% for tact; 100% for honesty – but the powers at St. Hilda's graciously let her stay. Indeed, Baroness Garden later served as Chair of the college's Association of Senior Members.

At university, she read French and Spanish; she threw herself into the university's social life. That was also where she met her life partner – Tim Garden – later Air Marshal Lord Garden – who was reading physics and, due to his passion for flying, was already commissioned in the Royal Air Force. They fell in love.

Marriage was a different matter. The 21-year-old Tim Garden had to get permission to marry from the RAF, something they only discovered a couple of weeks before the wedding. They received a 4 page response to his request, informing him that he was about to make a terrible mistake; she would be a millstone around his neck. It concluded with a curt "good luck", anyhow. Those early years were challenging. Tim Garden was paid as a single man and

could not have his own quarters. But love always wins out. They had a long and happy marriage, lasting 43 years.

It was also a nomadic marriage. They moved 20 times during his RAF career. Consequently, she took what jobs she could: a copy-typist; a teacher; a volunteer with the Citizens' Advice Bureau; a welfare counsellor; a military caseworker. But then he left the airforce and, freed of the need to be politically neutral, was inspired by his opposition to the war in Iraq to join the Liberal Democrats. Equally free to express herself politically, so did Sue Garden.

She joined the Liberal Democrats in 2001 and immediately revealed herself to be a naturally-talented politician. She contested Finchley and Golders Green at the 2005 General Election and, in 2007, was appointed a Life Peer as Baroness Garden of Frognal. It is impossible for me to list all of her posts – after all, there are people still waiting to graduate – but, in summary: In 2010, she was the Lords Spokesperson for the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport; 2012, Lords Spokesperson for the Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills; 2014, Lords Spokesperson for Women and Equalities. She served twice as Baroness in Waiting, that is, the Lords' Whip. In 2015, she was Deputy Chairman of Committees in the Lords and, from last year, Deputy Speaker in the Lords. It was a meteoric rise.

As if this wasn't enough, Baroness Garden raised two daughters. She worked for City and Guilds for 20 years, developing and promoting vocational qualifications. She has been active in a range of Oxford Societies; vice-president of the Institute of Export; on the City of London Poppy Appeal. She is a member of the World Traders' Livery Company, and was Master of the Company in 2008-9. She is Vice President of the War Widows Association. She is on the Council of the Air League, which gives scholarships to young people wanting to fly. Given her own happy marriage, it should come as no surprise that she was President of Relate Central Middlesex.

It is exhausting just thinking about how much she gives back to the community and the nation. Like Joad, she is witty, passionate, and uncompromising in promoting the values that we here at Birkbeck hold most high.

It is a great pleasure to formally welcome Baroness Garden to a Fellowship here at Birkbeck.