

Baroness Valentine

President, Master, Chairman, Distinguished Governor, Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues

St Hugh's College, Oxford, has nurtured some extraordinary female talent. The suffragette Emily Davison, who graduated from the college but was tragically killed in 1913 when she stood in front of King George V's horse at the Epsom Derby, argued that "women, qua women, should have the same opportunities and facilities to develop that men have, qua men". She strove to create the political and social environment that would encourage the emergence of an alert, energetic, progressive citizenry. Her personal motto was "Deeds, not Words".

Today, we celebrate another one of that College's talents. Josephine (Jo) Clare Valentine, Baroness Valentine, saw her intellectual abilities fostered at St Hugh's. Like Davison, she believes in "Deeds, not Words" and is passionately committed to creating the opportunities for an engaged citizenry.

Baroness Valentine grew in Putney and attended St. Paul's Girls' School, one of Britain's leading independent institutions. Early on, she developed a passion for mathematics, and, when she went to the University of Oxford, she sought the challenge of combining mathematics with philosophy. As the Sunday Times reported at the time, Valentine was one of the bright, young things in Oxford.

This was not merely potential. Like other great female role models, she quickly showed her mettle and her ability not only to speak unflinchingly to power but – more importantly – to be listened to. In 1981, Baroness Valentine was the first woman to be appointed a

manager at Barings Bank. It was, she later admitted, “a very gentlemanly atmosphere”, and she “did feel quite stultified... by it. There was a lot of cricket and shooting”.

After seven years at Barings, she resolved to make a different contribution to the world. She took leave from her luxurious office in the city to run “The Blackburn Partnership”, a public-private partnership seeking to regenerate Blackburn, at the time a badly run down textile town. Thanks to her energy and an enthusiastic team, Baroness Valentine played an important role in improving the city’s economic prospects. As one person put it, her “easy manner... belies a firm touch”. Her “skillful handling helps to bring together people from different walks of life”.

In 1990, she joined The BOC Group to head its corporate finance and planning section, leaving in 1995 to establish the Central London Partnership where, among many other things, she championed the Millennium Bridge. In 1997, she joined London First as Managing Director, becoming Chief Executive in 2003. London First – which also boasts David Latchman, Master of Birkbeck, on its Board of Directors – was created in 1992, a time when London was described as “miserable” and seemed to be heading into a recession. In the Baroness’ words, “There was a need to champion London; say [that] London is a great place”. Its homepage proclaims: “Open to Talent; Open for Business”. Or, as Davison and, I imagine, Baroness Valentine would say: “Deeds, not Words”.

And yet she still had energy for other major projects: a National Lottery Commissioner and a non-Executive Director of Peabody housing Trust. Then, in 2005, she took her seat as a crossbench peer in the House of Lords. It offered her a way of getting things done. Deeds, not Words. Earlier this year, she was listed in Brummell Magazine (the “Little Black Book for the City”) as one of the thirty “most inspirational women on Boards”.

Baroness Valentine is a woman of talent, energy, and big ideas. She champions business; she is an advocate for London. She argues that “economic development follows access”, and she is tireless in developing do-able plans to revitalize London’s transport infrastructure, housing, sustainable waste and water facilities, and telecommunications. Her mantra is “capacity, reliability, quality, and resilience”. Deeds, not Words.

Baroness Valentine is also a vigorous campaigner for higher education. It is vital to London’s – indeed, the U.K.’s – economic success. To have Baroness Valentine raising the case for Higher Education in the House of Lords as well as to business leaders is a great thing indeed. Her educational vision is close to Birkbeck’s mission. We have in Baroness Valentine a great friend and passionate advocate.

However, if I only spoke about her “big ideas” for infrastructural, economic, and educative change I would be missing an important aspect of Baroness Valentine’s philosophy of life. She combines a love for analytical work and deal-making with what she calls “doing community, creative, puffy-stuff”. Her social conscience is kind but never sentimental. Crucially, her politics is informed by a deep sympathy for humanity, and especially the most vulnerable members in our society.

Sometimes this requires small steps – delivering free breakfasts to a school on a troubled housing estate in Blackburn, for example. Other times, it requires that Big Vision for which she is renown. Given the fact that she is a fervent traveler and explorer, it is not surprising that global problems are on her radar: she is incensed by the marine pollution killing the fish in our seas or the fact that in Africa alone three million young girls undergo genital cutting annually. It is no wonder that nearly everyone I spoke to about the Baroness began with the statement: “she works incredibly hard”.

She also plays hard – and I am not simply referring to the fact that she was a long-jump champion and an athletics half-blue at Oxford. Nor that she recently completed the walk along the North Downs Way.

She is also, as a friend told me (and others confirmed), “quite a character”. When at St. Hugh’s, she once drove her father’s car down a one-way street and then down a steep flight of stairs, in emulation, I suppose, of the great scene in The Italian Job. When one of her two daughters turned seven, she hired a stretch limousine to take her and friends to see the Egyptian treasures at the Petrie Museum, just round the corner from Birkbeck. She has what someone rather affectionately called a “bizarre dress sense” (a reference I suppose to her fondness for pantaloon trousers and furry boots) and she harbours an equally bizarre passion for show tunes and the X-Factor. In some remote place in South America, she entertained everyone with a spirited rendition of Grease Lightning, during which she banged the table, releasing a large swarm of wasps. Deeds, not words, indeed.

As might be expected, then, (and my sources here are impeccable) Baroness Valentine is completely undomesticated – so we all clearly owe a great deal to her husband, the venture capitalist and author Simon Acland.

But the crucial thing about Baroness Valentine is the fact that she gets things done – Deeds, not words. Her attitude can be summed up in her response to the 11 September terrorist attacks in the USA which plunged London businesses into depression: “It is important”, she argued, “that London picks itself up, dusts itself down, and gets on with it”. In a recent blog, the Baroness praised Emily Davison for her “stamina, resilience, vision, and... stubbornness”. The same tribute can be given to the Baroness herself and it is for this reason my honour and pleasure to present her as Fellow of Birkbeck.