

David Lammy

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

Today it is my great honour to welcome David Lammy, Member of Parliament to the people of Tottenham since 2000, to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.

David Lammy is fond of quoting Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 observation that

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice”.

In fact, the famous sentence was first spoken in the 1850's by Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who fought all his life for the abolition of slavery. Parker was also a prominent Transcendentalist, which had a very different meaning in 1850s to what it does today. Then, Transcendentalists believed in the inherent goodness of people and nature. They argued that society and its institutions had corrupted the purity of the individual, and that people were at their best when self-reliant and independent. The famous sentence that King repeated that day in 1967 first appeared in a sermon Parker gave entitled “Of Justice and the Conscience”. Parker preached that

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; [but] I can divine it by conscience. From what I see, I am sure it bends towards justice.

The words of Parker's sermon foreshadowed the American Civil War, which was followed by the abolition of slavery in 1865.

Parker's words, which Martin Luther King echoed, are appropriate ones for Lammy to recite. Throughout his political career, Lammy has fought for justice and equality. His passion has been politics. And, by any definition, his political career has been incredible.

He initially stood as a Labour candidate for the Greater London Assembly, eventually being made responsible for Culture and Arts. In 2000, he was elected to his seat in Parliament aged just 27 after the death of the renowned Bernie Grant. At the time, he was the youngest MP. Between 2001 and 2010, he was involved in the Labour Government as Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Department of Health; a Minister in the Department for Constitutional Affairs; Minister for Culture; Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills; and Minister of State. In 2008, he was made a Privy Councillor.

For us today, witnessing so many wonderful scholars receiving their degrees, it is interesting to reflect on his ideas about education. Lammy insists that it is the responsibility of universities to diversify the elite. On the 26th of January this year, he delivered the keynote speech at a Reform conference on higher education policy. In it, he urged universities to "take social mobility seriously". Inevitably, he reminded listeners, "any discussion about social mobility, widening participation and fair access, has to be concerned about entrenched privilege". "Systemic" as opposed to "piecemeal" changes in the higher education sector are urgently needed, he insisted.

Why the urgency? His answer is typically hard-hitting: Some of the top universities in Britain, he claims, practice something resembling "social apartheid". I am proud to say, however, he was not referring to Birkbeck: 41 per cent of our students are BAME (Black, Asian and

Minority Ethnic). Through a freedom of information request, Lammy revealed huge disparities in admissions in Oxford and Cambridge along the grounds of race, class, and geography. One quarter of Cambridge colleges and nearly one in three Oxford Colleges made not a single offer to a Black applicant in 2015. 82 per cent of Oxford offers went to students in the top two socio-economic groups. He also revealed that Poor and northern students were also missing out. Oxbridge colleges need to be more proactive, he argues, actively writing to “young people in Sunderland, in Rochdale, in Salford, in Tottenham who get straight As and say... we want you to apply”.

Although he didn't mention it, representation of BAME groups is equally low if you look at the profiles of university staff. Here, Birkbeck looks less good. We can pat ourselves on the back for employing a considerably higher percentage of BAME staff than other universities nationally: nearly one-fifth of our academic staff come from ethnic minorities, compared to the sector norm of a disgraceful seven per cent. Nevertheless, this representation still falls significantly short of the overall London BAME level of forty per cent. Work to remedy this must continue.

Education is by no means Lammy's only (or even main) focus. I want to encourage you to listen on You-Tube to his speeches in Parliament in the past few days: type in “David Lammy and Windrush” and hear about the disgraceful treatment of Black Britons from the Commonwealth.

His prime role, as he sees it, is to represent his constituents and people like them. It is no surprise to hear that he has been elected in Tottenham six times, including gaining 82 per cent of the vote in the general election of 2017.

He is not shy about promoting affirmative action, pointing out that some people – typically white, male ones – are the beneficiaries of affirmative action every single day of their lives and are simply not aware of it.

He is a keen advocate for fathers. In his words, “Active Dads are good for children” but “We expect too little from Dads who don’t want to be there and are too hard on Dads who do; mothers lose out either way.... We need a family policy that is fit for the C21st”. He is the loving husband of artist Nicola Green and doting father to three children. In his words, “Everything starts with the family home. It is where a child’s character is formed and boundaries are first established”.

He is passionate about race and the justice system. He acknowledges the seriousness of the problem. After all, more than forty per cent of young prisoners are from black and ethnic minority backgrounds; this means that a young black man is nine times more likely to be in custody than his white counterpart. Yet, only seven per cent of judges are from Black and Ethnic minorities.

No one was surprised when he was named Hero of the Year at the European Diversity Awards in November last year, largely for his work in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster and social housing. Indeed, speaking about the horror of Grenfell Tower, he said what so many public figures were too afraid to say: it was corporate manslaughter” – not a “tragedy” but a crime. For Lammy, the personal is political; and the political, personal.

So, what about “the person”? Who is David Lammy? Lammy is proud that he is the son of Guyanese immigrants. He was born in 1972 into a working-class family and raised, with his four siblings, by his mother in Tottenham. His father was a taxidermist (Lammy coolly noted that it was “Not a run-of-the-mill profession for a West Indian immigrant”). Lammy later recalled that, as with many immigrants, his father’s original ambition had been thwarted by

a lack of money, bureaucracy, and straightforward discrimination. Having given up on becoming a vet, he settled for working with dead animals rather than live ones. His father left when he was 12 years of age, and he never saw him again. His mother was a formidable worker, sometimes doing three jobs: home help for the infirmed and disabled; care assistant in an old people's home; and Tupperware door-to-door saleswoman.

At the age of 14, Lammy won a choral scholarship to The King's School in Peterborough, one of the only state-run choral schools in the UK. Depending on his audience, he calls it his "Billy Elliot moment" or "X Factor moment". He was the only black pupil for many of the years he spent there, and he became Head Boy. Even as a young person, it was clear that Lammy had inherited his Mother's work ethic, at various times working as a security guard and at a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. To this day, he claims to feeling

oddly nostalgic when I pass the old site of KFC in Tottenham. It takes me back to the customers who place orders without looking at you, the name badge that you don't want to wear, and the starchy uniform trousers with their pockets sewn up so that money from the till can't walk out the door.

This was followed in 1990 by university, at our neighbouring SOAS, where he read law. During this time, he was involved with the Free Representation Unit, and did placements in Jamaica on death row Privy Council cases and in Thailand with Prisoners Abroad. He was admitted to the Bar of England and Wales in 1994, then he went to Harvard where he was the first Black Briton to be awarded an MA in law. After graduating in 1997, he worked as a lawyer in London and Los Angeles. Since 2000, he has been serving his constituents of Tottenham.

There, he makes a difference. He believes in the power of local community, broad political involvement, and solidarity, while still maintaining that there also needs to be state

investment in communities. He believes, along with Martin Luther King, that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice”.

In order to bend the arc towards justice, we need men like David Lammy, which is why we are thrilled to welcome him to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.