

## John Bercow

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

Today it is my great honour to welcome the Right Honourable John Simon Bercow MP to a College Fellowship at Birkbeck, University of London.

Order! Orrrrrder! Bercow's "Ordaar" has entered the collective unconscious. In maternity wards throughout the country, midwives have inadvertently echoed his cry as babies have been born; school children have turned their quizzical faces towards teachers imitating his cadence; news programmes, quiz shows, YouTube videos, satirical performances, all have been mesmerized by the Speaker's attempts to control an unruly Chamber. And I am confident that many here in this room, hearing his "Order", have stepped swiftly to turn off their television or radio.

Whatever our political views, the Right Honourable John Bercow, Speaker of the House of Commons for over a decade, has left his mark on the country as well as on each and every one of us. He has spent a life in politics and public service. There have been screeds of interviews; years-worth of parliamentary transcripts to read; multiple self-authored publications. But what do we really know about him?

Bercow's paternal grandparents were Romanian Jews who came to Britain a century ago. They anglicized their name from Berkowitz to Bercow. His mother (Brenda Bailey) converted to Judaism when she married his father (Charles), who worked as a taxi driver. Bercow attended the Frith Manor Primary School in Woodside Park and then Finchley Manorhill comprehensive in North Finchley.

Politics were always in his blood. His late father taught him "to stand up for what I am... and not to seek to hide it". This he has done since the age of 9 when he stood in a school election. His manifesto? Opposition to "rubbish" school dinners.

He is proud to be Jewish, although secular. His bar mitzvah took place at Finchley Reform Synagogue. In 1985, he went to the University of Essex (the first member of his immediate family to have done so), where he was awarded a first-class degree in government. At that time, the Jewish Chronicle rather patronisingly described him as

Bright, punchy and self-assured... a nice Jewish boy from Finchley who studied politics at Essex University, found it “a hot-bed of left-wing radicalism”, and tried to do something about that.

They had a point. As a youth, he was captivated by very right-wing ideologies, which saw him become an active member of the Conservative Monday Club. A club he swiftly abandoned. In 1986-87, he was chairman of the Federation of Conservative Students (infamously wearing a Rambo tee-shirt) and, when that was broken up, was appointed vice-chairman of its successor, the Conservative Collegiate Forum.

After a short time at Hambros Bank, Bercow embarked upon a career in public affairs and lobbying. He describes what made him go into politics as:

1970ies, Winter of Discontent, streets unswept, sick people untreated, dead people unburied, strikes right across the public sector, Labour government.... Dad was conservative, I was a bit influenced by dad and I thought “This is no way to run the country” so that was the negative that got me interested in politics, it was 1978 when I was 15 just turning 16.

He was also inspired by Margaret Thatcher, having attended a school in Thatcher's own constituency of Finchley.

Bercow served as a councillor from 1986 to 1990 in the London Borough of Lambeth. By the mid-1990s, he could be found acting as Special Adviser, first to Jonathan Aitkin (then, Chief

Secretary to the Treasury) and then to the Secretary of State for National Heritage, Virginia Bottomley. But he yearned for a different Virginia – a Woolfian one; a “Seat of his Own”. Daring as even, in 1996 he chartered a helicopter in order to attend two Conservative Party selection meetings on the same day: Buckingham and Surrey Heath. It was, he later mused, “the best £1,000 I have ever spent”. He was selected by Buckingham and went on to win the seat in 1997, 2001, and 2005 with overwhelming majorities.

There followed a series of positions – if I were to name all of them, I would face a riot of Brexit proportions from those graduands waiting to graduate. So, in summary: he has been frontbench spokesman for Education and Employment then Home Affairs. He was Shadow Chief secretary to the Treasury; Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions; Shadow Secretary of State for International Development. On the way, he moved politically from being a Thatcherite to a social liberal, critical of the perception that the Conservatives were “out of touch, unsympathetic to disadvantaged people.... I thought that's got to change”.

In 2009, he successfully stood to become the 157th Speaker of the House of Commons, a position to which he was re-elected, unopposed, in 2015 and again in 2017. This makes him the first Speaker who is Jewish and the longest-serving Speaker of the House since the Second World War. He wanted the job for some very straightforward reasons: “strengthening backbench involvement” and “helping parliament get off its knees and recognise that it isn't just there as a rubber-stamping operation for the government”.

And now we arrive at that point of “Orrrdaaaar” that must be named: Brexit. We are all weary of this saga, so the less said, the better. If I may, with the consent of the Speaker, simply say that there were amendments and resentments; pre-emptions and the overturning of conventions. We all know the conclusion. Even the most politically engaged amongst us (and I class myself as one), in the days of Brexit and Trump can only sigh and plead: Can we please have a B&T-free day, while sipping a G&T?

Whatever our personal political views, it is true that, throughout his political career, Bercow has shown himself to be a man of principles. He is incensed with human rights in Burma, Darfur, Western Sudan. He has actively raised awareness of the rights of tribal peoples. He is

passionate about education, and serves as Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire. He has sought to interest young people in politics, chairing the first sitting of the United Kingdom Youth Parliament in October 2009, making them the only group except Members of Parliament to sit in the chamber. He has chaired every subsequent sitting and attended every annual conference.

He has been a consistent voice against racism, sexism, and homophobia. In 2002, Bercow resigned from the shadow cabinet in protest at Iain Duncan Smith's policy of opposing the rights of gay and unmarried couples to adopt children. He pleaded with the Tories to avoid becoming a "moral policeman", stating that it was "clearly wrong that gays and lesbians and people in unmarried relationships do not have equal rights in some very important and deeply personal matters", including financial affairs and hospital visiting rights. In 2003, he was among 23 Conservatives who joined Labour and Liberal Democrats in opposing an attempt by the Opposition to restore Section 28 of the Local Government Act, banning the promotion of homosexuality in schools. Bercow said that section 28 had "caused much pain to many people for too long". In 2010, he won the Stonewall award for Politician of the Year. He is optimistic. He once said:

I've got two categories of opponent – snobs and bigots. I think bigotry can be cured because I once held those views myself. As I'm aware, there's no known cure for snobbery. I feel rather sorry that those people, usually of no very great distinction, who think that because of the school they went to, the house they live in, or the person they married, or the money they've got, that they're better than you.

Unquestionably, too he is one of Westminster's "Awkward Squad". He always believed that Parliament "could do a better job of scrutinising government". As he once said, he hoped that debates in Parliament would help it to "rediscovered our collective balls" (and I hasten to inform the Master that this is The Right Honourable MP's language, not mine). He has put up with misogyny, chauvinism, and heightism (although he once wittily commented that he was

“as intensely relaxed about being short as... said New Labour was about people becoming filthy rich”). Through it all, he has remained (at least in public) remarkably cool. As he told one journalist,

Somebody once said politicians complaining about the media is like sailors complaining about the sea – it's about as fruitful. I did refer to one [news]paper as being sexist, racist, bigoted – somehow I missed out the adjective homophobic. I was asked if have any regrets about saying that. I do because, and this is an abiding failing of mine... I was guilty of understatement.

In 2005, Bercow was awarded The House magazine award for Backbencher of the Year and, in the same year, was named by Channel 4 and The Hansard Society as Opposition Politician of the Year. At the latter event, former Tory leader William Hague said that Bercow was “definitely in opposition, but one is not always sure in opposition to whom”.

Bercow is also renowned for reaching out to marginalised youth, including children with speech, language, and communication needs. After all, around seven per cent of 5-year-olds entering schools in England have such needs and early intervention is essential. He is a patron of charities including The National Autistic Society, the Puzzle Centre, and Afasic. Through his interest in this area he became involved with Birkbeck's ToddlerLab, and hosted a dinner themed around the work of the Lab in Speaker's House, his House of Commons residence. This resulted in Birkbeck securing a major donation towards the Lab. He has since very generously hosted two further events for the College, and these have been extremely valuable in enabling the College to reach new potential supporters of its work.

In addition, he has been a long-standing supporter of the College's Department of Politics. He has regularly met Birkbeck Politics students who have visited Parliament through the College's Parliamentary Students programme. Just last year, he gave a very well received public lecture hosted by Birkbeck's Centre for British Politics and Public Life, where he

discussed his efforts to push through parliamentary reform. He has also attempted to make Parliament a more inclusive place to work. This has included many initiatives, including supporting the work of Professor Sarah Childs at the Centre, endorsing her report on The Good Parliament, which set out proposals to tackle gender discrimination in Parliament.

Does this make him sound too earnest? Not at all. He is married to Sally Illman and they have three children. He is an Arsenal fan; although how that can be reconciled with the fact that he loves the novels of Sarah Waters, I cannot fathom. He is (according to his own assessment) the world's worst dancer, but he is probably one of Parliament's best tennis players. Indeed, he started playing himself aged 8, and, as a young man, he had been ranked Britain's No. 1 junior tennis player. In the 1980s, he qualified as a tennis coach. To relax, he plays and watches tennis, wearing his Roger Federer shirt and cap, and sipping a glass of lager.

The Right Honorable John Simon Bercow believes in justice, fair play, guts, and the rule of Parliament, all washed down with a good swig of humour. We are incredibly honoured that he is now a Fellow of Birkbeck.