

John Biggs

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

Today it is my great honour to welcome John Biggs – Mayor of Tower Hamlets and
long-standing Governor of our College – to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.

Let me start though with Tower Hamlets. Throughout the centuries, migrants have
come there from rural areas, attracted by its industry; Huguenot refugees in the
seventeenth century; followed by Irish weavers, Ashkenazic Jews and, in the 20th
century, people from Bangladesh. Throughout its history, diversity and vigour have
been at the heart of this part of London.

Indeed, just last month, it was the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Cable Street,
when anti-fascist protesters (including local Jewish, socialist, anarchist, Irish, and
communist groups) clashed with the police and Oswald Mosley's British Union of
Fascists. Let me encourage everyone here to go and see the mural in Cable Street
representing this great clash. It was originally painted by Dave Binnington, Paul
Butler, Ray Walker, and Desmond Rochfort but, after having been vandalised by
racists and looking weatherworn, has been recently restored by Butler. It is a bold
and powerful statement of resistance and justice.

Biggs is an equally bold and powerful champion of his area. In his words,

The East End has always been a place of massive opportunity.... people don't travel half way round the world to sit on their arses. They come here because of the buzz and the opportunity of London. If you look at life stories of people across our country, a lot of them trace their roots back to the East End and to the energy of their ancestors here.

He argues that people need to celebrate "being a city in which Muslims and Christians and Jews and Hindus and Sikhs live together and respect each other. If you look around the world at the moment, that is a real prize." It is this sense of respect that pervades everything he does – respect for faiths, communities, diversity.

So, who is John Biggs? He was born in North London in 1957 – indeed, his birthday is in 10 days' time. He grew up in Hampshire but has lived in Tower Hamlets for more than 30 years. He did an honours degree in Chemistry at the University of Bristol, a postgraduate diploma in Computer Science at Birkbeck, and postgraduate diplomas in Law and Legal Practice at the University of Westminster. He entered politics in local government in the 1980s.

He was first elected in Wapping in 1998, and was a Councillor in Tower Hamlets from 1988 to 2002. He was a member of the London Assembly, where from 2000 until 2016 he represented the City and East Constituency. He was opposition leader and then leader of Tower Hamlets London Borough Council between 1991 and 1995. In 1994, he led his party, Labour, to victory against a maverick “Liberal” administration – East End politics are always interesting. In a previous life, he worked as a financial analyst in the City of London. He has served as Vice Chair of the London Development Agency and Deputy Chairman of the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation. He is an Honorary Fellow of Queen Mary, University of London. Today, he is the directly elected Mayor of Tower Hamlets, having been elected following another interesting, and controversial, period in the Borough’s political life.

His key phrases include celebration of diversity, respect, collaboration, and empowerment. These, together with openness and accountability, govern his philosophy. This is no easy task in the political context of budget cuts, growing populations, shortage of public housing, rising house prices, air pollution, poverty, and anti-social behavior.

Biggs points to the enduring obscenity of the City, with its huge wealth, existing next door to desperate poverty. The area he serves has the highest percentage of children and older people in income-deprived households in England. In Tower Hamlets, almost 42 per cent of children are overweight or obese by the time they leave primary school – a problem that creates health problems, often for life. This is

why Biggs has recently backed a hard-hitting campaign from Cancer Research UK aimed at tackling childhood obesity. He is dedicated to making a difference.

When talking about Tower Hamlets, there is an unfortunately tendency to emphasis the negative. Optimism is important. In the past year, for example, youth unemployment in the area has fallen dramatically. Biggs is able to boast that “Whether through our A-Level success, excellent apprenticeships or other routes into work we know how talented and successful the young people in our borough can be”. That talent is “translating into jobs”.

As Mayor, Biggs is renowned for being open and approachable. Non-elitism is a core principle. On being elected to office, he scrapped his chauffeured car and highly paid advisors, and reduced the size of his office. These three reforms alone have saved the Council about £330,000 a year – although it is perhaps not unreasonable that he asks them to pick up the tab for his travel-card.

Biggs once quipped that he had “modesty beaten into me as a child” but perhaps that is the only way he could become Mayor of a constituency known for its turbulent political culture. He is not one given to hyperbole. He once noted that it was “very lazy politics” to simply demonize opponents, as in “Margaret Thatcher will steal your children and sell them into slavery”. Good politics is nuanced, respectful, and complex. Those who work with him attest to his calm, measured approach to problems, and obsession with proper process and transparency.

It will come as no surprise that he has a reputation for egalitarianism and basic fairness. He stresses the need for an “outward looking mayoralty that encourages the same attitude amongst the residents it serves”. In case this makes him sound rather dull, everyone I spoke to attested to his terrific sense of humour. He needs it. After all, it is all so well fighting for better lives, but that entails making tough decisions. As he once put it, “You can’t have the penny and the bun”.

But we are so honoured to know him here at Birkbeck because of his role as a Governor of our College. To this job, he brought his many talents. Widening access to education is one of his passions. He has ensured that everyone at Birkbeck remain alert and actively engaged in promoting our mission, despite the formidable financial and policy pressures of the last few years. He once told our Master that he would prefer to retire from the Governorship but would stay on if only to ensure that the College didn’t veer to the right. Comrade: we salute you!

Biggs once described himself as “a respectful, decent bloke who’s got a track record for delivering” and who will roll up his sleeves “and get on with the nitty gritty of getting the job done”. In my experience, politicians are not generally renowned for their self-insight – but in this case, Biggs has got it just right.

We are thrilled and honoured to welcome him as a Fellow of Birkbeck.