

Kemi Badenoch

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

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming Member of Parliament Kemi Badenoch as a Fellow of Birkbeck.

Nigeria is famous for its poets: Niyi Osundare, John Pepper Clark, Gabriel Okara, and Christopher Okigbo. But one of my favourite Nigeria poems is by Aniemeka Nathaniel called “There was Once a Nation”. It contains the lines:

I dream of better land,
Where my children could fly.
Like an eagle in d sky

In the UK, though, during the June 2017 election campaign, Nigeria also became known for one of its politicians: Olukemi Badenoch who won a 25,000 vote majority for the Conservative Party in the Tory stronghold of Saffon Walden.

Although only in her thirties, Badenoch has lived quite a life. Born in Wimbledon to a Nigerian mother who was a Professor of Physiology and a Nigerian father who was a doctor, Badenoch ended up with a British passport (what she calls one of “Willy Wonka’s Golden Tickets”) when her mother came to Britain to give birth. She grew up, however, in Nigeria, with frequent trips abroad, including the U.S.

In 1996, however, when Badenoch was sixteen-years-old, Nigeria was in political chaos, run by the military and experiencing severe human rights abuses, including infringements on freedom of speech and assembly, violence, and a seriously devalued currency. She not only saw poverty, she experienced it. Her father recognized that his daughter needed to leave.

She tells how he scraped together enough money for a plane ticket and gave her the remaining £100 to help her live. Sixteen-year-old Badenoch thus ended up in London, living with a friend of her mother, studying part-time A Levels in Phoenix College, an FE college in Morden, south-west London, and working at MacDonalds.

But she was never going to be defined by the smelt of fries. She went to the University of Sussex, where she studied Computer Systems Engineering, graduating in 2003. This led to a job as a software engineer at Logica, then a system analyst at RBS. She was appointed as an associate director at the private bank and wealth manager Coutts, and became the director of the digital department at The Spectator. She is a Chartered Member of the British Computer Society.

Her link with Birkbeck occurred in 2009 when she studied for a Law degree. She is currently a board member in our Centre for the Study of British Politics and Public Life, which sets out to engage with key issues in British politics and public life. They do this through public debates, conferences, lectures, seminars and seminar series, and workshops, as well as by bringing political scientists, political theorists, historians, economists, and others who work in the humanities and social sciences into discussions and collaborations. She is a regular donor to the College.

Clearly, politics is what makes her heart beat faster. As she told me, she likes to “fix problems: You can’t find a better place to do this than in politics”.

She had joined the Conservative Party in 2005 and had stood for elections since 2010. In 2012, she stood for a seat in the London Assembly, although was not successful until 2015. While there, she was an active spokesperson on Economic and Transport issues in the Assembly. She also loudly criticized the capital’s “distant relationship with the rest of the country.”

Now, she is MP for Saffron Walden, having defeated the favourite, Stephen Parkinson, Cambridge-educated, white male, and adviser to Theresa May, on the first ballot. She won over the electorate – which, incidentally, has only 0.2 per cent categorised as “Black British” – by sheer personality, intelligence, and her experience as a member of the Greater London Assembly. She loves to tell the story of her arrival at Westminster when Labour MP Mark Tami greeted her, saw that she was Black, and assumed she was a newly elected Labour member. “What seat are you?”, he asked, only to have a look of horror when she replied “Saffron Walden”. She is currently Vice-Chair of the Conservative Party.

Her passion is also for education. She has served as a school governor at St Thomas the Apostle College and Jubilee Primary School in Southwark and Lambeth boroughs. She has a strong sense of what is “right”, arguing that “To leave our children carrying the burdens of our debt and excesses is morally wrong” and quoting Edmund Burke’s view that “society is a contract between the dead, the living and those yet to be born”.

She is a mentor to women in engineering, technology, and science and is passionate about social mobility and integration.

She is a British patriot, citing as heroes Winston Churchill, Airey Neave (the war hero-turned-politician who was murdered in a car-bomb attack by the Irish National Liberation Army in 1979), and Margaret Thatcher. She is also pro-Brexit (although her husband and some of her friends are not), believing that “the vote for Brexit is the greatest-ever vote of confidence in the project of the United Kingdom”. For her, London Remainers were both ignorant of the rest of the country and arrogant: they were, in her words, a “subset of people who think they’re smarter, more tolerant and even better-looking than everyone

else". Badenoch insists that the Left doesn't have a monopoly on caring issues. And she detests posturing politics.

If anyone can change perceptions about Conservatives, it is Badenoch. "Labour", she mildly observes, "doesn't have a monopoly on non-white people".

She also has a very realistic sense of democratic politics, quoting (in her maiden speech to Parliament) Woody Allen's quip about sex: "if it's not messy, you're not doing it right." Clearly, Kemi Badenoch has a fantastic sense of humour. She dances along to Michael Jackson and loves the film series "Back to the Future" and "Game of Thrones". She doesn't have an arrogant bone in her body.

She is married to Hamish Badenoch, whom she met at a local Conservative association in 2009, and they have one daughter and one son. Her energy is legendary, and so I asked her: "How do you do it?" Her answer was simple: "I have the most incredible husband".

She is part of the "British dream", in that a person can "go, in one generation, from immigrant to parliamentarian". She knows how to lead a debate, hold her own, and convince people. She is annoyed by "fake news", noting that "a lie can get around the world before the truth has got its boots on". There is no question that she is an effective politician. She is feisty, outspoken, and passionate about politics. Most of all, she is sincerely committed to education, education, education, including Birkbeck's unique mission.

I began my talk today by quoting from Nathaniel's poem, "There was Once a Nation". The lines:

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seem, to me, to represent what Badenoch stands for.

We are incredibly proud to welcome Kemi Badenoch as a College Fellow of Birkbeck, University of London.