

Amie Chapman

De Montfort Students' Union Deputy President for Education

Welcome from the student body

I wanted to start with a huge thank you from me and my colleagues at De Montfort Students' Union for allowing me a few minutes to speak today on this incredibly special occasion.

Today we welcome a woman into the De Montfort family that students will look up to and be inspired by. We could not think of a better figurehead for this university, but more than that, a leader and a challenger to the powers that be. This is what makes Baroness Lawrence as our Chancellor so exciting, students feel reassured that she will do more, instead of settling for being a name, a figure, a photo, a handshake; she will do her utmost to actively shape the De Montfort community for the better.

Last year I had the honour of listening to Baroness Doreen Lawrence when she gave an interview to De Montfort's Chief Operating Officer, Ben Browne, following her graduation ceremony. I vividly remember her saying that one of her inspirations was her grandmother, which immediately brought back memories for me, at three years old, sat on my grandma's carpet practising writing the alphabet in crayon on a dotted worksheet she made for me. My grandma knew that I was destined for academia when my life circumstances certainly said otherwise, as I grew up she got me dictionaries for Christmas when my siblings and cousins got toys, to sitting with me as I read book after book after book. Sometimes we need someone who sees more in us than we see in ourselves, who inspires us and pushes us to be that bit better. Baroness Lawrence can be that driving force right here at De Montfort University, for all of us.

I also remember her describing the excellent work of her Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust, the peer to peer mentoring, scholarships and support set up for young people wanting to get into architecture, law and journalism. It's so important for young people to hear from other young people that they can achieve their dreams. Scholarships are also a vital lifeline for students that do not have the means to fund themselves, as well as shrinking the debt these students then end up with. I know first hand that it is so much harder to visualise and act upon your ambitions when those around you do not share those similar experiences. Like many of our students studying here right now, I was the first in my direct family to come to university, and if you look at the Higher Education Funding Council's data for my secondary school area, and the separate sixth form I chose in the next town, only 18% of all the young people in the area ended up going to higher education. I needed that push from my teachers, from very distant relatives, from friends who saw a spark in me, to take that plunge and follow my dreams. So many students at

DMU have their own stories to tell too, all with that common theme of striving to better themselves and their situation.

Our new Chancellor also said that young people need to value themselves more. Too many young people say phrases like “I didn’t expect to live beyond the age of 25”. This may come as a shock to some of you, but that is the reality, and the lack of value that some young people today will place on themselves and their lives.

Many also feel that the government does not place enough value on the lives of young people, I remember Baroness Lawrence last year commenting on the House of Lords and her crucial work in education and social change in that space. She said “There’s not enough people like me in the House of Lords. It’s as if money, jobs – it’s nothing to some of these people. Not enough people who know real life.” This petrifies and de-motivates young people more than they dare say, politics becomes an impenetrable bubble that does not appeal or speak to them. This is why I treasure my work at De Montfort Students Union; we demystify politics every single day. We have a diverse range of students writing and presenting policy, standing for elected positions and running campaigns. It paves the way for students to make their own political journey, something that not many young people would otherwise have the privilege of doing.

Through this political journey, my work has sometimes been about finding the balance and confidence to correctly challenge those in authority, both in and out of the immediate university sphere. Baroness Lawrence last year said “I’m respectful to people, but at the same time challenging. I will always challenge you if I think you are wrong. I feel like I have got to step up to the mark.” This resonated with me massively, and is excellent advice for any young person faced with that very dilemma. It is incredibly scary at first but respect is the core of finding a good solution to the challenges you face. It involves figuring out everyone’s point of view too before plucking up the courage to respond to that challenge. This crucial life lesson is one I will take with me for the rest of my life and I firmly believe Baroness Lawrence can instil that same balance of respect and challenge in our students and graduates. We already see it happening; our students are the game changers that society needs and will do us all proud.

We, the student body, warmly welcome Baroness Doreen Lawrence to lead us, to be an advocate for us and work with us in ensuring we are the best we can possibly be. Together we can continue improving the society we live in and challenge any damaging conventions holding us back.

Thank you for joining the De Montfort family, we will not let you down.