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Vice-Chancellor of De Montfort University

Introduction to Investiture

Good afternoon. It is a genuine honour to be able to welcome you to the Investiture of Doreen Lawrence, Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon OBE, the new Chancellor of De Montfort University.

The chancellorship of a university is a role with august and ancient resonance, reflected still in the physical trappings and ornamentation you will see today. For us, these add appropriate ceremony to what is, after all, a rare event. They allow us to remind ourselves of, and show the world, the significance invested in this role, and that this is no ordinary day.

Baroness Lawrence is, of course, no ordinary individual. While there is historical meaning tied to the symbols you see in the ceremony, we should remember she herself is a figure who has changed the flow of British history, and continues to build a legacy that will shape future society forever, and for the better.

It is a very great privilege to call Baroness Lawrence our Chancellor, and have her as our champion. She is a remarkable woman and has been a powerful presence on the public stage for more than two decades. She is a campaigner, a fighter for justice, the embodiment of purpose, of focus, and of resilience.

In 2003, she was awarded the OBE for services to community relations. In 2013, her dauntless pursuit of equality saw her made a life peer. In the Lords, her natural authority is acknowledged across the political spectrum. Yet knowing all this, we have to understand, too, that Baroness Lawrence is a heroine rebuilt from the cruel devastation of a former life. She herself has said she would give up every one of what the world regards as her greatest achievements to have an ordinary life, with all of her family around her. She was ushered to prominence by a tragedy she cannot undo, but by which she refuses to be defined.

Doreen Lawrence is the mother of Stephen Lawrence, a teenager murdered in a racist attack in South East London in 1993.

In her memoir, she wrote movingly of ‘two lives end[ing] on that chilly April night... one was the life of my eldest son... The second was the life I thought was mine’. Laid low by grief but determined to stand for hope, she rebuilt.

After tireless campaigning by Baroness Lawrence and her family, a wide-ranging judicial inquiry was established to investigate the circumstances of Stephen’s death. It concluded that the Metropolitan Police was ‘institutionally racist’ and said this lay behind the failure to solve Stephen’s case. In the aftermath, Baroness Lawrence continued to demand justice for her son and for other victims of racist crime.

Stephen, a student like many here today, was 18 when he was attacked by a group of youths as he waited at a bus stop. It took more than 18 years before two of his killers were tried and sentenced after a struggle led by Baroness Lawrence. Her ongoing efforts led to an investigation into claims of corruption.

So, a life defined not by tragedy, but by mission. This powerful force that would shape her was never imagined by the young girl who grew up in Jamaica in the 1950s, nor the mother and bank worker who raised her family to be respectful and hardworking, here in the UK, in the decades that followed. Her maiden speech in the House retraced the steps of that life journey.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon – her title, unconventionally, acknowledging the Jamaican parish her family hailed from – told her audience that her parents, like many of their generation, ‘came here from the Caribbean in search of a better life for their family’. “Never,” she said starkly, “would they have imagined the nightmare that was to engulf my family: my son Stephen’s life, taken so brutally and so senselessly by racists; and the battle for justice which followed.” Her path sundered by violence and tragedy, she explained why she had summoned the strength to forge ahead in a new direction, one that had brought her to the House that day.

Baroness Lawrence said she had never sought, nor expected, nor could now take for granted, her public platform. There was ‘something important’ that needed to be conveyed. Power, she had learned the hard way, was often resistant to the natural claims of justice, and of fairness.

What this meant, and means still, is that all those who believe – as she does, as we do – that each person in our society deserves access to the same opportunities to learn, work and succeed, cannot merely *demand* change. They have to *work* ‘every single day’ for their belief. They have to stand. They have to fight.

Baroness Lawrence uses her influence to effect positive change. She champions issues affecting education and social reform and as Chancellor will inspire our students to make a real difference in society. The Baroness believes, as do I, as do we all, that universities have the power to improve communities, and a duty to do so. That has been the strongest, most instinctive, point of connection in our relationship. The communities we help, by harnessing our talents and energy, may be those on our doorstep, whose lives we touch every day by our sheer presence, or those thousands of miles away. This is a tenet of both our #DMUlocal and DMU Square Mile missions. I’d like to share something of that commitment to our community with you today.

The global outlook that is DMU’s second nature can express itself in ‘local’ community projects anywhere in the world where we can make a difference. Recent ventures have embedded students and staff in India, and in the USA.

Our global instinct is defined most strongly in #DMUglobal, the international experience programme that enriches study, and expands cultural horizons through internships, field trips, volunteering and international exchanges. A key focus is where education can bring about change and where our students can make a positive contribution.

Some 11,000 of our students will be part of #DMUglobal by 2020 and I'm delighted that our new Chancellor has expressed a wish to lead experiences in Ghana, South Africa and, of course, Jamaica.

I am also pleased to announce that we will shortly be creating DMU Square Mile India, bringing together the best of #DMUglobal and our community projects in Leicester. This will encapsulate on of Gandhi's key principles:

"You must be the change you want to see in the world".

New projects will:

- support a foster home for 120 vulnerable Dalit children (or 'untouchables'), from the lowest Hindu caste, in Ahmedabad
- see the creation of a new 'Square Mile' in the slum of Ramapir No Tekro
- offer more than 200 DMU students the opportunity to put their degree skills into practice within Indian communities
- connect remote rural villages with sustainable energy resources
- provide health outreach to hundreds with eyesight and hearing problems in Gujarat
- create global internships for 80 Indian students at DMU
- and deliver the 2016 Gandhi Global Peace Conference in Leicester

Baroness Lawrence shares our belief in the true value of providing education to the disadvantaged and the excluded. As an institution dedicated to working for the public good, we can help to improve the present circumstances and future prospects of many of the lives we touch.

What Baroness Lawrence embodies, we at DMU aim to embody:

- a devotion to public good;
- action that advocates and celebrates cultural diversity;
- and a refusal to accept attitudes that hold back progress and opportunity.

This year our institution also publishes DMUfreedom, a proud public statement of our commitment to equality and diversity, and our ongoing mission to connect with, and to include, talents from all sectors of society.

It is the same spirit that, just this week, saw DMU rise a further 17 places in Stonewall's Top-100 Employers for workplace culture for lesbian, gay, bi and trans

staff – in a survey which included more than 400 of some of the UK's businesses. At 58th, this is our highest ever position.

The DMU spirit has always been strengthened in this way, and has so strengthened others. The work we can do with Baroness Lawrence's support, and what we will achieve, will be increased greatly in scope and range under her chancellorship.

I began by addressing the ceremonial meanings around investiture of the Chancellor; and the accoutrements involved – the gown, the mace, the scroll. What they represent, symbolically, is authority. But authority is something Baroness Lawrence brings with her, naturally. And while she will always prefer to let her actions speak for her, I know that her personality, her integrity, her aura, will also help open doors, reach the right ears, and help us to make a difference.

My role, that of vice-chancellor, is one that has evolved throughout the history of universities. At one time, the Chancellor would normally be resident; vice-chancellors were appointed as the Chancellor's deputy, to act only in their absence and bestow degrees. Today, as chief executive, I am responsible for students' academic experience and the professional services we have in place here at DMU. The Chancellor is understood to be in some quarters, I think a bit misleadingly, 'a figurehead'. However, that can sometimes carry the slight sense of an inert, symbolic presence. What the Chancellor is, and what Baroness Lawrence is, is a true leader too – someone to take our university forward.

Baroness Lawrence will be a magnificent advocate for De Montfort University, and I know that she is keen to engage with staff and students as soon as possible – time then to commence the ceremony so that the real work may begin...

Thank you.