

Danielle Rowley MP: Maiden speech

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee) on her fantastic maiden speech. I share her passion for representing our constituents. I also congratulate my fellow Scot, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), on his speech, and I echo his sentiments on the legacy of Charles Kennedy.

We have heard passionate contributions from hon. Members today. During the Brexit process, we must get the best deal for our economy, protect jobs and defend the rights of EU nationals. I will be fighting for that on behalf of my constituents in Midlothian, and I thank them for sending me here to do that.

I must pay tribute to my predecessor, Owen Thompson, who I know worked hard to represent Midlothian, and I am sure his contribution to the community will be remembered well. I thank him for his congratulations, and for the warm and friendly way in which we conducted our campaign. In his maiden speech, Owen, who was wearing his Midlothian tartan tie, spoke about the green representing the landscape, the blue representing the reservoirs and the black representing the coal in Midlothian.

Owen remarked that he was the first non-miner in a long time—since the second world war, in fact—to be elected to represent Midlothian, and I want to make two points about that. I have another first: I am the first woman to be elected to serve Midlothian, and of that I am very proud indeed. Secondly, although you can see that I myself am not a miner, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud to come from good mining stock—both my grandfathers, Willie Rowley and Ron Curran, worked down the mine—so I am keeping that strong Midlothian tradition alive, and I was honoured to receive the endorsement of and support from my local retired miners group.

Speaking of former miners to represent Midlothian, I would also like to pay tribute to two former Members for Midlothian whom I have the honour of knowing and have learned from, Sir David Hamilton and Eric Clarke. Eric said in his maiden speech:

“I am proud to be a socialist and a trade unionist”.

I am very glad to be carrying on that mantle, and I am very grateful to David for helping me with my campaign. I must say that I have run out of paper with the list of people from all parts of the House who have asked me to pass on their warm wishes to Eric and David.

It is traditional to talk about the history of one's constituency in a maiden speech, but I feel that those who have come before me have done a fantastic job of highlighting our rich history of Gladstone, of our proud industry—or once proud industry—of Dolly the sheep, of Dalkeith Palace and of Rosslyn chapel, so I would like to talk about the people of Midlothian and what I

hope to do for our future.

On 9 June, the day after I was elected to serve here, I spoke at a local food bank, the Food Facts Friends Project in Penicuik. I talked to Mark, who told me his personal story. He told me that when he found himself having to rely on a food bank, it did not just give him the food he needed, but gave him friendship and support and helped him to develop a network. He then helped set up and run the Penicuik food bank himself.

Mark's story reminded me of an ethos that is central to charity and to the idea behind food banks, and that should be central to the work we carry out here when we talk about helping people in need: a hand up, not a handout. It is essential that we give people the tools that they need to live their lives to the full. When I have worked with people in various jobs who are receiving benefits or support from charity, that is what they want. They want support to do things for themselves, not a handout, as some Members of this House and the media might have us believe.

I am sad to say that Mark had to report last week that demand for the food bank had gone up again, with more than 20 families a week using the service. He said that people who come to the foodbank because they cannot afford to feed their families may have been sanctioned or suffered from the benefit cap and welfare reform. Others simply cannot feed their family on the income of low wages and inadequate help from the Government. That is an absolute disgrace and something I will spend my time here fighting. I will fight for good jobs, for good wages, for support for our young, our elderly and people with disabilities, and for a hand up for those who fall on hard times, because it can happen to any of us.

Midlothian is a strong and proud community. Yes, we come together in solidarity in times of hardship—we did it during the miners' strike, we do it when there are job losses and we have done it again now—but we also have many fantastic ways of coming together to celebrate and enjoy our community. There is the youth project that Councillor Margot Russell runs; our community radio, Black Diamond FM; and the Cousland community coffee morning, where I share a roll and a cup of tea at the weekend with members of the community. Since being elected, I have attended many children's gala days. On polling day, I gratefully received some nice soup and a roll from the Grassy Riggs café for older people and their carers. That is to name just a few. I want projects like that which bring the community together to flourish.

I started my speech by paying tribute to Labour Members Eric Clarke and David Hamilton, and I will end on their wise words too. Eric ended his maiden speech by talking about

“the double standards of having a few who are rich and the vast majority who are poor.”

David ended his speech by talking about Labour standing up for vulnerable people, saying that

“those people will benefit, along with all of us, and not just a few.”

Although the phrase may have been stolen today by Government Members, I am going to reclaim it. I end by echoing those sentiments in saying that I am proud to have been elected here to represent the people of Midlothian on a platform of hope and with the message that I am joining my friends on these Benches to fight for the many, not the few.

This speech was delivered on July 06 2017. It should be checked against delivery.