

Maiden speech

Miriam Cates

Penistone and Stocksbridge

Conservative

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Opposition half-day debate

Migration and Scotland

[Hansard link](#)

Maiden speech – Miriam Cates MP – Penistone and Stocksbridge

Thank you for allowing me to make my maiden speech, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My interest in this place began when I was 11 years old and somehow I acquired an ancient, long-wave radio that would only tune to Radio 4. In the 1990s, before YouTube and Candy Crush, I had to make do with the “Today” programme and “Westminster Hour”, but I was hooked—captivated by the history of our democracy, the workings of our politics and its power to bring change.

My first big political experience was the 1997 General Election. Growing up in Sheffield, in what was the capital of the socialist republic of South Yorkshire, this was no ordinary election. I was fascinated by the whole campaign and I sent off for, and displayed, posters from every single political party, including the Referendum Party. I even had a Liberal Democrat board on a post in our front garden, but we all make errors of judgment in our youth.

Despite this early interest, I did not become involved in party politics for another two decades, instead pursuing a teaching career, setting up a business with my husband and spending rather a lot of time being pregnant and changing nappies.

Five years ago, I became a parish councillor, and I started to see the opportunities for elected representatives to bring real change. To cut a short story even shorter, I found my home in the Conservative Party and I now stand before you as the Member of Parliament for Penistone and Stocksbridge. Apart from a three-year stint at university, I have lived in the Sheffield area for my whole life, so it is a profound privilege to represent a community that I call home.

Penistone and Stocksbridge is a truly remarkable constituency. We have stunning scenery, moorland and reservoirs. We have beautiful rural villages like Bolsterstone, Wortley and Cawthorne. We have the historic market town of Penistone, which received its market charter in 1290 and where Penistone Grammar School, founded in 1392, still provides an excellent education to local children. The school’s original motto was “Disce Aut Discede”, which means learn or leave. This sentiment clearly held sway in the 2016 referendum, where the constituency judged that the EU had failed to learn and so we should indeed leave.

The town of Stocksbridge, with its industrious history of steel manufacture, boasts the proud legacy of Mr Samuel Fox, inventor of the Paragon umbrella frame, and whose wire factories were responsible for the development of the town we know today. We have many other wonderful communities, like Dodworth, Pogmoor, Chapeltown, Ecclesfield, High Green, Grenoside and Burncross, and numerous rural villages, each with their own unique character.

Ten years ago, I moved to Oughtibridge, one of these villages, and, being until this point a city girl, I was utterly unaware of the strength and depth of community that I was about to encounter. Throwing myself into village life, I discovered voluntary groups, the school PTA, the local church and the parish council, bringing together people of all ages and from all walks of life. The wonderful thing about a village is that when everyone shares the same school, the same park and the same pub, it is natural to form friendships that are based on a common interest and a common geography, and not on social background or political worldview.

It was in my capacity as a parish councillor that I first met my predecessor, Angela Smith. I found her to be hard-working, sincere, thoughtful and helpful, and I want to thank Angela for the part that she played in securing an £8 million investment in the Fox Valley shopping centre, which has been

responsible for significant regeneration in Stocksbridge and the surrounding area. In more recent times, Angela became known for her inclination to switch allegiances, being, at different times during 2019, a member of no fewer than five political parties or groups. I am heartily glad that the people of Penistone and Stocksbridge shared this enthusiasm for switching parties and in December elected me as their first Conservative MP. On the topic of Scottish migration, perhaps the Scottish Government would want to offer a visa to any of my constituents who want to complete the set and experience representation by the SNP, although I feel sure they would only require a temporary visa.

We have heard much about how we Conservatives won seats such as Penistone and Stocksbridge for the first time. Like my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, I understand that many people lent me their votes, and I take seriously my responsibility to deliver on the commitments we made. One of the most important of these commitments is the pledge to radically improve public transport in the north of England. When I was first selected as a parliamentary candidate, I began by going around our communities asking people what changes they would like to see, and public transport was raised time and again.

We desperately need to level up our northern transport and infrastructure. Public transport is not just about getting people from A to B; it connects people with well-paid jobs, training and education, hospital appointments and shops, and it prevents loneliness and isolation.

Transport is the key to spreading opportunity and investment. That is why I am campaigning with the Don Valley Railway Group to see a Stocksbridge to Sheffield passenger train line reinstated and with Thurgoland Parish Council Public Transport Working Group to secure better rural bus services. I am delighted therefore by today's announcement on funding for buses and trains, which demonstrates that this one nation Conservative Government are committed to an ambitious programme of levelling up.

Levelling up is not just about financial investment, bricks and mortar, and miles of train track. The national soul-searching of the past four years has demonstrated that there are areas of our country, particularly northern towns such as Penistone and Stocksbridge, that have been left behind — not just in an economic sense, although that is certainly the case, but in terms of how our communities and our culture are understood and valued as part of our national life. As I said, I have lived in the area my whole life, and that is by no means unusual. Our towns and villages are wonderful places to live, not least because of the strength and depth of community life. Social mobility should not mean having to leave your home, your family and your community to find work, training or investment. We do have ambition, aspiration and talent, but we are also rooted in a deep sense of place. We need opportunities right in the heart of our communities, and this Government's initiatives, such as the Towns Fund and the Shared Prosperity Fund, will help us to deliver.

I want to finish where I started. A quarter of a century on from when my interest in this place began, I still believe that politics has the power to bring change and that we should celebrate our history as a democratic nation — not a perfect history by any means, and one with many dark moments, but one where the trend has been towards progress and fairness. To continue this progress we must begin to heal the very real divides that have been exposed, between north and south, towns and cities, leave and remain, old and young. We need to find a way to recognise and value our differences while celebrating what we have in common as citizens of this great nation. However different our life experiences, our place of birth, our social background, we have a shared identity

as human beings. Whether this identity derives from an acceptance of our intrinsic worth as people or a belief, like mine, that we are all children of the same heavenly father, we need to cherish what we have in common.

There are many different opinions in this country, and we have given each other many different labels, but the vast majority of us want to make this nation a better place for everyone who lives here. We may disagree, sometimes passionately, about how that should be done, but if we can respect each other's motives and leave the labels behind, be slow to judge and quick to forgive, the healing will begin. December marked a fresh start for our democracy, and a fresh start for Penistone and Stocksbridge. I am honoured to serve this wonderful constituency, and I will work hard to deliver for all of my constituents.