

KEMI Badenoch is hotly tipped as a future Tory leader, which would cement her already impressive rise from her childhood in Nigeria to the top tier of British democracy, as Lord Ashcroft observed in yesterday's Daily Mail. In the second part of his impeccably sourced biography of the former Cabinet Minister, he explores how she took on the gender ID zealots and reveals what her critics really think of her...

KEMI BADENOCH hates 'grievance politics' – those fuelled by resentment and the wish to attach blame. Government, she once declared, needs to be 'an effective and streamlined machine for delivery, not a piggy bank for pressure groups'. She also joked: 'I must point out that I am a poor, black, female, gay (OK, I'm not, but I did think about it once), disabled if you count the myopia, Christian. You couldn't get more minority into one person like that if you tried.'

As a new MP in 2017, she publicly challenged the politics of identity, which encourage people to focus on their divisions rather than what they have in common, then articulated a frequently held sentiment that many important subjects are no longer allowed to be discussed openly.

The freedom to hold and express an opposing view was being undermined, she said, 'in an era where emotion and sentiment are prized above reason and rationality'.

Years later, as a government minister, she would complain: 'Dissent is treated as bigotry. It has become almost impossible to question fashionable theories. This underlying problem of ideological capture has to be addressed.'

She is also anti-woke and railed against confected outrage, such as the furore over repeats of the 1990s TV sitcom Friends. Newer, younger viewers were being squeamish about particular jokes and plot lines, such as Chandler Bing joking about his cross-dressing father. Some claimed this made the show transphobic or homophobic, which Kemi rejected. Though speaking out was risky, she defended Friends. 'Everybody loved it,' she declared. 'It was the biggest TV series of all time. It just doesn't compute for me that a few years later people are talking about it as if it's horrific. Something has gone wrong somewhere.'

She was resolute too on a much more serious subject – the Black Lives Matter campaign. In a six-hour parliamentary debate to

‘She doesn't want her own children told their history is slavery’

mark Black History Month, she declared that the Conservatives were opposed to critical race theory, the idea that Western societies are inherently biased towards white people. 'We do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt,' she told the Commons. 'Any school which teaches critical race theory without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views is breaking the law.'

She was a junior minister at the time and, according to insiders, she adopted this position without the sanction of Boris Johnson. He was instinctively reluctant to engage in matters relating to cultural or racial politics.

'She worries about typecasting and hates the argument that only black people can talk about these things,' says a friend. 'But the fact is she's good at this stuff and if you're going to attack wokery, a black mother [she has three children] is extremely well placed to do it. She doesn't want her own



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

POLITICAL BIOGRAPHER

children being given this patronising treatment and told that their history is slavery, which is not necessarily the Nigerian experience. It might be the Caribbean experience, but it's not the African experience. She says there are statues of slave traders in Nigeria who are still revered.'

On another issue – the trans controversy – she has been just as resolute. She became involved, she says, because 'I feel being a woman is a much stronger part of my identity than being black. Bringing a child into the world grounds you in the reality of being a woman. Puberty, menstruation, menopause. It is very biological.'

She has won respect across the political spectrum, including from Left-wing feminists, for the way she handled the issue, especially when, as Minister for Women and Equalities in Rishi Sunak's government, she was faced with a problem of politicians in Scotland voting to give 16-year-olds the ability to change their sex without receiving a medical diagnosis.

This ran counter to Westminster law, which insisted that adults wanting to legally change their sex had to apply for a gender recognition certificate, be diagnosed with gender dysphoria and live full-time under their acquired gender for at least two years.

Kemi was not alone in worrying that the relaxation of requirements in Scotland would result in giving biological males a licence to access female-only spaces such as changing rooms, or allow biologically male Scottish prisoners in English jails to request a transfer to a women's prison.

She wrote to Nicola Sturgeon, then Scottish First Minister, saying she was concerned the proposals would create a 'divergence' of approach on a 'complex and important issue'. Her voice was considered pivotal in the ensuing debate,



With Badenoch on the brink of entering the Tory leadership race, Westminster insiders give biographer LORD ASHCROFT a fascinating account of what drives her Kemi? She's not one for turning the other cheek, she's more of an eye-for-an-eye type of girl

Husband who sacrificed his own political dream so she could shine

IN HER first attempt to win a parliamentary seat, Kemi's campaign manager was Hamish Badenoch, a Cambridge University-educated banker with political ambitions of his own. He and Kemi, right, with one of their daughters, became friends after realising they had been born in the same hospital in Wimbledon a year apart. Because he had a car, he volunteered to pick her up for meetings. A relationship developed and they married in 2012.

The couple's primary focus was

politics but they are said to have had an understanding that if one of them made it to the Commons before the other, the partner who was not an MP would continue with their professional career. When she was elected in 2017, he stepped back.

But each is very much their own person. They had different views about Brexit, for example. She was for it, while he was a Remainer – but it was never an issue likely to cloud their marriage. 'Hamish is half the brains of the operation,' says a

friend. 'He is Kemi's chief adviser and acts as a counter-balance to some of her views.'

Another friend explains: 'They met through politics, when they were both young activists, and he's always shared her view of how important her job is. He put her career ahead of his own. He is her political confidant as well as her husband.'

'She respects his judgment perhaps more than anyone's and realises that what she does is a joint production with him.'

They have three children and,



according to another friend, 'They make it work. He is an incredibly supportive political

spouse. He makes sure things are OK at home so she can do what she has to do.'

ing with people. Some politicians find her courage, clear-thinking and confidence off-putting, seeing it as arrogant or high-handed.

A Westminster observer who knows her well says: 'She's humorous but she can also become quite

‘There is a fearlessness about her that voters find attractive’

passionate and that passion can become anger.' According to a colleague, 'she can be abrasive and perhaps she doesn't engage with her colleagues enough.'

Another said: 'Some people feel she's aggressive and arrogant. I think she's quite confrontational, but in a good way because she doesn't mind taking people on.'

Nor is she the smoothest pebble on the beach when it comes to the press. One senior media player

says: 'She can find it really annoying to have what she regards as untruths written about her, even if they are quite trivial points.'

'She's not a great one for turning the other cheek. She's more of an eye-for-an-eye kind of girl.'

In my opinion, Kemi Badenoch is one of the most interesting politicians of her generation. She has an electric quality and an energy that most front-rank figures in Westminster do not possess. There is a sense of fearlessness about her that many voters find attractive.

And at a time when politics has become about the state's tentacles reaching ever further into our lives, particularly in relation to 'woke' issues concerning race and gender, her voice has become a powerful and effective weapon.

But it's 2024 soon for her, asks a distinguished Tory who left the Commons last month after more than 20 years. 'Kemi has risen so quickly because she's prepared to say what she thinks. She's impressive and could be a future leader.'

'But the party has developed a bad habit of choosing people who are inexperienced. Mrs Thatcher had been an MP for 16 years before she became party leader

and to me that seems to be the gold standard.'

Political careers are shorter than they used to be. As somebody who went from backbench MP to Cabinet member in just five years, she would know that better than most.

Why would she want to be leader? According to her adviser, Daniel El-Gamry, her conservatism is based on having seen a different life when growing up in Nigeria. 'She spent her first 16 years under various socialist regimes. She would hate for Britain to go anywhere near that sort of situation.'

Tory MP Alex Burghart adds: 'She doesn't take for granted what a lot of other people take for granted. She sees very clearly the things that are brilliant about the West and the UK particularly. That's refreshing in an environment when there are so many people talking everything down.'

Another friend says: 'Kemi's got this Nigerian approach to conflict resolution. She will leap in. To her, this is all about combat. It's not

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about making or winning arguments, it's about fighting. It's about making enemies if she needs to. For her, politics has always been a lot more visceral. That comes from her upbringing.'

Fellow Tory MP Julia Lopez says: 'She knows Labour will take the country in precisely the wrong direction and she would be great at interrogating those fundamental weaknesses. I think she'd dismantle Labour and their corrosive brand of identity politics.'

But in the opinion of one vintage political observer, 'she could either save the country or she could self-destruct. Either outcome is equally likely. Speaking passionately and from the heart can be someone's undoing in politics.'

'She's instinctive. Critics would say she can be impulsive. She has the potential to be a fantastic PM. Like Thatcher, like Churchill, she is driven by principle.'

People like that want to make a difference. But she could end up like George Galloway. Being driven by principle is no guarantee of success.'

Adapted from Blue Ambition by Michael Ashcroft, published by Biteback on July 29 at £20. To order a copy for £18 (offer valid to 10/08/24; UK P&P free on orders over £25) go to www.mailshop.co.uk/books or call 020 3176 2937.

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