

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft



Can Kemi checkmate her rivals for the Tory crown?

As she bids to succeed Rishi Sunak, biographer Lord Ashcroft reveals how the junior chess champion's early life in Lagos shaped her

NIGERIA has long been regarded as a risky place to visit, but it would probably be difficult for many Britons to grasp just how volatile it could be when Kemi Badenoch, née Adegoke, was raised there during the final quarter of the 20th century – a politically explosive era resulting in three decades of military juntas.

After its 1970s oil boom began to peter out, almost nobody was immune to the widespread disruption that followed. 'Tipping' the police in order to go about one's daily business was considered normal and 'jungle justice' – when, for example, someone caught stealing risked being doused in petrol and set on fire by a mob – was not uncommon.

In one sense, growing up under a series of military regimes was second nature to Badenoch and her two younger siblings. They knew nothing other than the instability which most Nigerians endured. At the same time, her middle-class Christian family was relatively lucky because they were largely insulated from the disorder.

Her father Femi was a GP with his own clinic, her mother Feyi was an academic at the University of Lagos's College of Medicine.

The 44-year-old, who married banker Hamish Badenoch in 2012 and has three children, has said that her family was close.

Unlike the parents of some of her friends, hers remained married, providing a solid platform on which she was able to build.

They were fairly relaxed by Nigerian standards, apparently becoming known jovially as the Cosbys, after the 1980s American television comedy *The Cosby Show*, whose main character was a doctor in New York.

In the early 1990s, she enrolled at the co-educational International School Lagos (ISL). Taiwo Togun was one of the first friends she made there. She says Badenoch was not a rebel but she could be outspoken.

"If there was something she didn't agree with, she would respectfully tell the teacher, but I wouldn't call her a rule-breaker," Togun recalls. "I think her parents probably instilled a certain amount of confidence in her." As well as being capable in the classroom, Badenoch was also a skilled chess player, winning a national girls' competition when she was seven years old. Some might argue that learning chess at a young age would come in useful years later when coping with the political scheming of Westminster, to say nothing of letting her get inside the minds of others.

YET Togun says that at the time they met, Badenoch's ability to checkmate her opponent's king did not simply reflect her enjoyment of the game; it also acted as a unifying force among their year group.

"I wouldn't call her a ringleader, but she had friends in all classes. We had some guys who were the brilliant boys in school and Kemi became their friend by playing chess. I think her dad taught her when she was a child and once the boys became her friend, they became every other person's friend.

"I think what endeared her to them is that she would beat some of them and they thought, 'Who is this girl?' Sometimes when people are very smart they tend to talk to smart people only, but she broke that idea, so we all became friends – girls and boys, brilliant, average, struggling."

Togun believes Badenoch's mindset from childhood to the present day has always been: "I'm probably the best thing in the room, you just don't realise it, and you will

realise it sooner or later." The way Togun describes this attitude is nuanced, however.

She doesn't necessarily mean Badenoch believes herself to be brilliant in all that she does; more that Badenoch feels her inner strength will eventually come to the fore, an outlook that has helped to bolster the sense of certainty that her parents always encouraged in her. Equally, her instinct to bring people together is another form of

networking, a trait that has so far served her well in politics.

It is somehow appropriate to find that, amid Nigeria's disorder, the schoolgirl Kemi had already become aware of a female leader who had taken a country that was in decline in the 1970s and, through what she called "the politics of conviction", transformed it. That person was, of course, Margaret Thatcher. In fact, Badenoch has claimed that

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when she was young, she held Thatcher in such high regard she would invoke her name during discussions with members of the opposite sex.

"They say a prophet is never loved in their own country," she told Nick Robinson of the BBC in 2020. "Growing up in Nigeria –

this is a country that is very patriarchal... there were competitions that the girls weren't allowed to take part in because we were girls.

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"And you'd just say two words: 'Margaret Thatcher'. And there was nothing they could

say in response to that. She was inspirational." By 1995, the middle class bubble in which Badenoch was brought up burst.

Nigeria's international reputation had plummeted. Its shattered economy and human rights abuses meant it moved rapidly up the scale of the most dysfunctional countries in the world.

After it was suspended from the Commonwealth following the executions of nine environmental activists, her parents began making plans to remove her from the turmoil so she could live abroad.

Her father's clinic was failing as the oil company contracts that had kept it buoyant for more than a decade were terminated. Money was tight and the future looked grim.

Feyi Fawehinmi, a distant cousin of Badenoch, says of this period: "The eco-

omic crisis made life very tough for everyone. People thought the country had no future. You had to fight for everything and rely on friends. Inflation ravaged savings.

"The damage done in the 1990s destroyed a lot of the Nigerian middle class. Kemi's family was a victim of that. At that time the greatest love that parents could show their child was to get them out of the country. If you had the means to do it, you would."

One consequence of Badenoch's mother having given birth to her in Wimbledon, London, was that Kemi, by then 16, had an automatic right to a British passport.

"I remember the day that [it] arrived," Badenoch once recalled. "I always tell people it was like in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory when you open the chocolate bar and there's the golden ticket... It

was amazing." Badenoch's father scraped together the money to buy her a plane ticket and she arrived alone in London in the summer of 1996 with £100 in her pocket.

She lodged in Wimbledon with Dr Abiola Tilley Gyado, her parents' long standing friend, and enrolled at the state-funded Phoenix College, studying for A-Levels in biology, chemistry and maths.

She also found a part-time job at McDonald's in Wimbledon town centre.

Never having eaten a hamburger before, she couldn't believe her luck in being able to enjoy them free of charge as a perk.

"She worked there at weekends and in the holidays," Dr Gyado says. "It wasn't what she had to do. I didn't ask her for money for rent or food. It was her choice to work hard." After gaining a place at Sussex University



ON THE RISE: Kemi serving on London Assembly in 2016

'They'd laugh and say, "Girls can't do this." And you'd have two words: "Margaret Thatcher"'

TRUE BLUE: Kemi Badenoch might be the first Tory leader to have worked in McDonald's

to study computer systems engineering, she took a gap year to experience working in a professional environment, successfully applying for the UK-wide 'Year in Industry' apprenticeship scheme at Hunt Thompson Associates, an architecture practice in north London.

On arrival at Sussex University in the autumn of 1999, knuckling down to her books or relaxing in her bedroom on campus was not always possible because of one problem: another student who lived in the same block took recreational drugs and was highly disruptive.

According to Nkem Ifejika, who was Badenoch's boyfriend during her final two years at Sussex, the student in question was prone to aggressive outbursts.

Yet she made it clear she was not prepared to accept the situation. She was among a cohort of residents who took a stand, eventually alerting the police.

Ultimately, their involvement contributed to the drug-addled student's expulsion – but not before their father visited the campus looking for Badenoch to remonstrate with her. Fortunately, she dodged him and no confrontation ever took place.

"She told me the student was violent and racist," says Ifejika. "I think she got them kicked out of the university. It was difficult for her. It set her back."

"It affected her work and her grades suffered. I think this situation certainly contributed to her not enjoying her time at Sussex."

WHILE Kemi didn't engage in student politics, Ifejika remembers her regarding left-wing students with disdain. "Sussex had a reputation for being politically active and very left-wing," he says. "I remember there was an attempt for some political reason to ban Coca-Cola on campus during our time there. The Marxist-Leninist Society was very popular."

"Kemi had strong opinions about how left-wing the students were. She felt that some of them were middle-class and spoilt and didn't understand the real world."

Having been elected MP for Saffron Walden, now North West Essex, in 2017 – her second attempt to enter Parliament – Badenoch has latterly concluded her student days have informed her politics.

"Sussex was a very left-wing university and if anything probably being there made me more Conservative," she told a Spectator podcast in 2022. "It was almost a reaction to the very spoiled, entitled, privileged metropolitan elite-in-training at university. I saw it first there."

The resilience and responsibility which Badenoch showed throughout her eventful youth has clearly left its mark on her in a positive way, ultimately helping to propel her to Westminster. But will those qualities, plus her experience as a Cabinet minister, now be enough to secure her the job of Leader of the Opposition?

If they are, she will almost certainly be the first Conservative leader in history to have worked in McDonald's.

● Edited extract from *Blue Ambition: The unauthorised biography of Kemi Badenoch* (Biteback Publishing, £20). Visit expressbookshop.com or call Express Bookshop on 020 3176 3832. Free UK P&P on orders over £25. Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X or Facebook @LordAshcroft

