

“University was for me the key to the kingdom”

Shami Chakrabarti on liberty, education and changing people's lives.

Shami Chakrabarti CBE is recalling her London childhood, and how her fiery teenage values were brought into sharp question by her father in a debate that changed the way she viewed civil liberties.

“My parents were migrants,” explains the Brookes Chancellor and Director of campaigning organisation Liberty. “They came from India to live in London in the late 1950s, and they were obviously very interested in current affairs. They had, I suspect like a lot of their generation, quite an idealised view of the British justice system, and especially London as this centre of the Commonwealth and a wonderful melting pot.”

The moment of clarity for Shami came in the wake of the Yorkshire Ripper hunt, when she angrily declared that the murderer should be strung up for his crimes.

“I was reminded, or perhaps taught for the first time by my father, about the danger of the death penalty,” she says.

“I was asked to feel like someone facing the death penalty, knowing I was innocent, but convicted and no longer believed, even by loved ones. If one person in a million feels that, that's one person too many, and that idea of having to empathise has been the most powerful influence on me.”



With regular appearances on Radio 4's politics shows, BBC 1's Question Time, in newspaper columns and even on Desert Island Discs, Shami is a familiar voice on the political landscape.

But she's a little gentler in real life than the firebrand she's often painted as. Undoubtedly passionate, committed and firmly articulate, she's also measured in her opinions, which are often tempered by a wry sense of humour.

Describing the moment she was asked to consider taking on the role of Chancellor at Brookes, she self-deprecatingly admits she thought it was a joke.

"I got a phone call from Jon Snow," she deadpans. "He said 'I've been asked to sound you out about whether you'd consider being Chancellor at Oxford Brookes.' I thought he was playing a joke on me. He did this very serious talk to me about how the first Chancellor had been Helena Kennedy followed by him, and that the university wanted to

keep going in its tradition of values."

Now approaching her last year in the role, Shami says that when she finally realised the Channel 4 news anchor was being serious, she couldn't have been prouder to accept. "I was so honoured," she recalls, smiling. "Although I was less worried about filling his shoes than whether his gown would be too long for me."

"For me it was really the key to the kingdom that made everything subsequent possible. Going to the London School of Economics, we didn't just learn law as a means to an end or a way of making money, it was law in context and law as a means of changing society for the better. It was the right place for me at the time; I came out realising that the kind of law

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Shami has no doubts about the role her own university education played in evolving her early values into something tangible.

"University is the biggest life chance, the biggest game changer for a lot of people," she says firmly.

I was interested in was nothing to do with making megabucks in the city, but the kind that can be used to make life better for everyone."

Shami will step down as Chancellor in 2016, and she says that the role has been a perfect fit with her

campaigning position at Liberty.

"My connection with Brookes has been a wonderful experience that I found to be very complementary with my work at Liberty," she explains.

"I think that Janet Beer has been a visionary Vice-Chancellor with a very strong sense of justice herself, and of where Brookes should be in society – not as an ivory tower, but as accessible to as broad a student base as possible, absolutely first rate in terms of teaching and research, but also relevant to the society around it."

As Brookes approaches its 150th anniversary in 2015, Shami attributes many of Brookes' strong values to its beginnings as an art school.

"To begin as an art school and then morph into the great and wide-ranging university it is today, there's something in that creative culture that is capable of influencing, distilling and promoting values perhaps more than anything else," she considers.

Shami was talking to Hannah Marsh.



Shami on... liberty

"When I say the word liberty, for me I'm talking specifically about post-war human rights. It's not about unfettered freedom – freedom for the wolf would be tyranny for the lamb – but the underlying human rights values: dignity, equality, security, protection from torture and unfair trials, the bundle of rights and freedoms that harness everything you need to flourish as a human being.

"Perhaps most of all its equal treatment, that's what makes us protect other people's rights and not just our own. You could call it empathy, and without it there is no liberty."



Shami on... gender inequality

"I would say, not just as a woman, but as the Director of Liberty, that gender injustice is the biggest injustice on the planet. It is an apartheid, and the 21st century has got to offer change.

"I've had brickbats directed at me that wouldn't have been directed at a man; innuendos that I was having an affair with a senior Conservative politician when he supported a campaign, being told I'm being 'emotional' on Question Time, and a senior colleague saying I was good for the statistics in my department.

"People should stop being afraid of the F-word. I think the anger and the drive to do something has increased recently, and not before time."

Shami on... being a flagbearer at the London 2012 Olympics

"Because we deal with a lot of serious, and often upsetting, issues at Liberty, there's a strong culture of office humour to offset some of it.

When I got the phone call about the Olympics, I thought it was one of my colleagues. He was saying 'I've been asked to call you by Danny Boyle,' and I was going 'yes, yes', thinking I would spin it out for as

long as possible before he cracked, imagining he was a couple of doors down.

When it finally crossed my mind that maybe this was for real, I had that stomach dropping feeling.

"The night itself was surreal. You could tell me now it was a bit of a dream and I'd believe you – it was a nice enough dream though."

