Chairman of Council, it is my privilege to present to you Catherine Ashton, The Rt Hon The Baroness Ashton of Upholland.

The reasons for this honour are her contributions to public life both in the United Kingdom and in the wider world.

Catherine Ashton was born in Upholland, Lancashire. Her family was working class; for generations they had been involved in coalmining. She was educated at Upholland Grammar School in Billinge Higher End, Wigan Mining and Technical College, and Bedford College, London. In 1977 she left with a degree in Social Sciences.

Surveying Catherine Ashton’s early career no one would have thought that she was on track towards becoming one of the world’s most powerful women. From 1977 she worked for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, becoming one of the organisation’s Vice Chairs. From 1983 she worked for the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work. She was also Director for Business in the Community, working with business to address inequality, establishing the Employers’ Forum on Disability, Opportunity Now, and the Windsor Fellowship. During the 1990s she worked as a free-lance policy adviser, chaired the Hertfordshire Health Authority, and became Vice-President of the National Council for One Parent Families.

From 1999, when Catherine was made a Labour Life Peer as Baroness Ashton of Upholland, her rise became rapid. In 2001 she was appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department of Education and Skills, subsequently taking responsibility for Sure Start. In 2004 she was appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Department of Constitutional Affairs.
In 2006 she was sworn of the Privy Council. In 2007 Gordon Brown appointed her to his Cabinet as Leader of the House of Lords and Lord President of the Council. As Leader of the House, she was responsible for piloting the Lisbon Treaty through the House of Lords. By now her political skills were widely acknowledged and she received from different organisations the accolades of ‘Minister of the Year’, ‘Peer of the Year’ and ‘Politician of the Year’.

Chairman of Council, you will be aware that it is among the great traditions of our College, and in particular of its Bedford part, that our women alumni break through the glass ceilings of life. They are the first women to reach the top in their vocations. Catherine Ashton has maintained this great tradition. In October 2008 she became the first British women to be appointed to the European Commission, becoming Trade Commissioner in succession to Peter Mandelson. In November 2009 she became the first woman to be elected, by the twenty-seven European Union countries, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, a post whose remit had been expanded by the Treaty of Lisbon. In this post the first thing Catherine had to do was to establish her own bureaucracy, the European External Action Service, whose function was to work in cooperation with the diplomatic services of the member states.

In her role, which she combines with the Vice-Presidency of the European Commission, Catherine coordinates the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the Common Defence and Security Policy, and represents the European Union in international forums. Catherine Ashton’s tenure as High Representative has been notable for her involvement in issues ranging from the Quartet negotiations on the Middle East Peace Process and the negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme through to active support for the democratic forces in Libya and recently the lifting of European Union sanctions on the Republic of Myanmar.

It is a feature of public life that public figures are on the receiving end of much comment, not all of it very fair. What is striking about Catherine Ashton is how people have warmed to her understated style, her kindness, and her capacity to charm and persuade. These gifts have enabled her to carry forward what many regard to be an impossible job. She has helped to establish the post of High Representative in its expanded form. There are demands that she stands for a second term.
In recognition, therefore, of her outstanding contributions to public life in the UK and in the wider world, may I invite you, Chairman of Council, to induct as an Honorary Fellow of Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, The Rt Hon The Baroness Ashton of Upholland.

Professor Francis Robinson CBE DL
Professor of History of South Asia
16 May 2012