

ROLLING *with the* PUNCHES

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan tells us why her constituency has a special place in her heart, and explains why she'll stop at nothing to achieve her goals

Words MADELEINE HOWELL

High five me girl!' Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, MP for Tooting and Shadow Minister for Sport, grins and joins palms with our senior designer Lacey McBane as we discuss their mutual hobby – boxing. With a mad schedule since being elected as Sadiq Khan's successor in June, and two young daughters to contend with, her evening sessions at Balham Boxing Club (where she is the team doctor) keep her fit. 'You're really close,' she tells me, a Balhamite. 'It's on Cavendish Road – come with me!'

Her inclusivity and enthusiasm exemplifies her relentless get-up-and-go, and gives me an initial clue as to the kind of politician she is. In or out of the ring, you'd be glad to have her in your corner. As we get cracking on her make-up at Charlotte Cave Store and Services in Balham, ready for our exclusive photo shoot at The Imperial Durbar in Tooting, she tells me how she used to chat to everyone on the 355 bus – and that now, her job involves exactly that. 'It's funny how it's come full circle,' she reflects.

In her triumphant maiden speech in the Commons, Allin-Khan joked that her dad may not have been a bus driver, but her mother did work in the petrol station between Tooting Bec and Balham, so Sadiq Khan's father may just have filled



Allin-Khan succeeded fellow local Sadiq Khan as the MP for Tooting

up his tank there. As a local girl through and through, she feels she is truly ingrained in the community. 'It wasn't a glamorous place to live back then,' she says, 'but it always had soul. It's changed a lot – but for me, that soul is definitely still there today.'

It's been quite a journey along the way since those days on the 355. Having dreamt of becoming a doctor as a child, Allin-Khan ignored the naysayers – who she felt discouraged her from pursuing her goals by virtue of her far from privileged background – and completed a degree in medical biochemistry. Finally, she enrolled at Cambridge to study medicine at the age of 24, with the help of new government funding. 'I was made

The Imperial Durbar on Trinity Road proved the perfect setting for our exclusive shoot



It wasn't a glamorous place to live back then - but it's always had soul



Allin-Khan feels that she is truly ingrained in the community



The Imperial Durbar serves up curry from the Cardomom Club, and great cocktails

to feel at school that that wasn't the path for kids like me,' she admits. 'But education is everything. It's all about having aspiration. When I meet young children and they clearly have a dream, I want to make sure that the dream is nurtured.'

She credits her own successes with her 'steely' determination, but also with an improvement in financial accessibility, and the fact that her community in Tooting clubbed together to lend her funds to prove she could afford her Cambridge fees on her application. So, is that what drew her to the Labour party? 'Yes,' she affirms. 'It was also instilled in me from an early age to find people who are worse off, and to help them. I always used to ask my mum growing up, "why is life really hard?". And she said, "though it's hard, there are people who have it harder". The reason I was so passionate about medicine was that I felt

that through it, you could reach people at the grass-roots level.' The fact that she has worked as a doctor at St George's Hospital in Tooting herself is something that Allin-Khan believes feeds into her work as an MP. 'Let's be very clear,' she asserts, seriously. 'I'm not a career politician. That's not how my life has been. I'm a public service worker. I've served people on the frontline, both internationally and locally. It informs so much of what I do, because I see people at rock bottom.'

It's perhaps one of the reasons why she has a balanced outlook when it comes to the big cross-party issues. She campaigned shoulder to shoulder with the Conservatives and fellow Wandsworth MPs Jane Ellison and Justine Greening to back Remain, and she outlines three strands when it comes to housing. 'There's the affordable housing element to tackle,' she says, 'but also people who've worked hard, who've saved for a deposit and live in a big beautiful home – they're worried about where their children are going to live when they come back from university, unable to get on the property ladder. Then, we've got the private rented sector. We need to make sure that renters are protected.'

Let's be very clear – I'm not a career politician. That's not how my life has been

Along with Siobhain McDonagh, MP for Mitcham and Morden, she also recently signed an open letter to Theresa May calling to close the gender pay gap.

'It's not just because I'm a woman,' she says. 'I feel we have a social responsibility to make sure there is equality for every group – women, ethnic minorities, people who are less able-bodied, people who are partially sighted – but women are not set to be reaching pay parity for a great number of years, which is shocking and unacceptable.'

It seems that this lady never stops. Whether it's carving out precious time to take her daughters to Bertie and Boo on Balham High Road or to Eddie Katz in Earlsfield, helping disaffected youth to channel their energy into sport, encouraging local businesses to take on apprentices, or campaigning for a new playground in Graveney, her to-do list is never-ending. Sadiq Khan's shoes are big to fill, she has said, but she has the benefit of much higher heels. And all that I can really say to that is: 'High five me girl!'

Visit droseena.co.uk to find out more



GET THE LOOK

Gemini Hair and Beauty
2 Bedford Hill, London SW12 9RG
020 8673 7445; geminihairbeauty.co.uk

Charlotte Cave Store & Services
105 Balham High Rd, Balham,
London SW12 9AP; 020 8673
4343; charlottecave.com