

Badenoch denies India trade deal claims

Matt Dathan Home Affairs Editor

Kemi Badenoch's former cabinet colleagues have undermined her claims to have blocked a free trade deal with India out of concern that it would cause a surge in migration.

The former business and trade secretary said last month that one of the reasons the deal was not agreed under the Tories was her opposition to India's demands for more visas. She told *The Daily Telegraph*: "Even as I was trying to do things to limit immigration, we had an India FTA [free trade agreement] where they kept trying to bring in migration and I said no. It's one of the reasons why we didn't sign it."

However, her former colleagues questioned this, insisting she was pushing for it to be signed so she could take the credit. One said:

"Kemi wanted to get a deal at all costs and didn't really think that the objections being put forward were serious. She said they were ideologically driven, that they were impractical and weren't conducive to good relations with the Indians. Kemi wanted a trophy to show post-Brexit benefits.

"All the bargaining power was with the Indians. There was a lot more pressure on us to do all the running and they were quite nonchalant. That was where the power lay."

A source close to Badenoch denied that she was prepared to sign a deal at any cost and said the Indian government had decided not to sign a deal with the Conservatives in the

hope of getting better terms under Labour.

The source said: "Kemi didn't want to do a deal that would have changed any UK immigration rules. It's categorically untrue. She would have never done that. India held out because they knew that under Labour they would get a better deal on students and social security. She did not put visas on the table, she did not sanction officials to offer access to the labour market at any point."

It is the latest row in the Conservative leadership election between Badenoch and Robert Jenrick. The new leader is due to be announced on November 2.

Jenrick is also understood to have raised objections to the deal for the same reasons.

India had sought easier access to the UK for workers in IT, healthcare and other services as part of the trade talks. Its negotiators also wanted visa holders to be exempt from national insurance, arguing that it was unfair to charge them given that temporary workers do not benefit from the tax.



Kemi Badenoch
"wanted credit"