

**Article Ground Breakers – the long read**

## **Prominent women in Westminster to become part of a significant archive at Cambridge University**

**A new collaboration between women journalists and the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge has been recording the personal journeys and histories of some of the most well-known and long-lived women parliamentarians from all parties in the House of Commons and House of Lords today.**

**They have interviewed names such as the Right Honourable Labour MPs Margaret Beckett, Harriet Harman, and Margaret Hodge, who will be standing down when the next General Election is called, as well as fellow Labour peers such as Baroness Helene Hayman, the first women to breast feed in the Commons and Baroness Hilary Armstrong the Chief Whip under Tony Blair's government.**

**Some of the first Conservative women to make it into the Cabinet have also contributed including Baroness Gillian Shephard, Baroness Virginia Bottomley and Dame Caroline Spelman, also Baroness Anne Jenkin who formed Women2Win with Theresa May.**

**More recently the Liberal Democrat Peer Baroness Susan Kramer has spoken of her entry into politics in mid-life and how much she has enjoyed it.**

**All speak of how social media has made the role of women in politics today more difficult, though they would still recommend it.**

**They describe their remarkable political journeys, covering some 50 years, beginning in the 1970s when Harold Wilson was Prime Minister, but including more recent memories of meeting Margaret Thatcher and working with Theresa May, in Tony Blair's and Gordon Brown's governments and in the coalition government of David Cameron and Nick Clegg.**

**Some came from privileged backgrounds others experienced public life for the first time and all remember how the attitudes to women at the time were often patronising and belittling but whatever background they came from - and often selected for marginal seats - they broke through their own party's glass ceiling to make groundbreaking changes.**

**Here we quote their recollections of the START of their political journeys some joining Parliament when women were still not part of their government's Cabinet to their achievements as women parliamentarians in a more recent age, including the minimum wage, Sure Start, the 2010 Equality Act, important international environmental advances, flexible working and gay marriage.**

**These 13 interviews will be held at the Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge which has the papers of Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, and individuals such as Florence Hillsborough, who the first conservative, female cabinet member and, on the labour side, Mary Agnes Hamilton and more recently Tessa Jowell and Patricia Hewitt.**

**Allen Packwood the Director of the Centre explained:**

“Our archives have tended to reflect the establishment, the elite of the time. Certainly, in our early years, the number of male collections vastly outnumbered the female. That's something going forward we're very keen to put right.

“I think it's vitally important that if this is an archive that reflects public policy and government, that it reflects the changes that have taken place over time. One of those key changes, of course, is the increase in the number of women. We have, recently taken in the papers, of Patricia Hewitt, of Tessa Jowell, on the other side of the aisle of Baroness Trumpington. We are at the moment, engaging with a number of female parliamentarians in the hope that we can get them to also add their papers here and to think about their archives, even if they're not coming here.

“What the “Ground breakers” series of interviews does for us, is to take us into the digital age. As we look to the future, more and more people are going to be accessing our resources online, and we want our material to be used in the classroom at all sorts of different levels. I think audio visual material is a really good, engaging way of doing that. People want to see these individuals talking about their experiences. They want to hear it from them, in their own voice.”

**The interviews were conducted and produced by Jackie Ashley, Deborah McGurran and Boni Sones OBE in association with the audio-visual unit at the Churchill Archives Centre.**

They have interviewed – (listed by date they came into Parliament): Baroness Hayman (Lab), Margaret Beckett (Lab) Harriet Harman (Lab), Emma Nicholson (Cons), Gillian Shephard (Cons), Anne Jenkin (Cons), and Virginia Bottomley (Cons), Hilary Armstrong (Lab), Anne Campbell (Lab), Estelle Morris (Lab), Margaret Hodge (Lab), Caroline Spelman (Lab), and Susan Kramer (Lib Dem).

Key quotes on what Parliament was like when they were FIRST elected in order of their election as an MP:

**Baroness Helene Hayman, Labour MP from 1974 to 1979 for Welwyn Hatfield – Baby of the House aged 25. Described as the “Julie Andrews” of politics. She became a life Peer in 1996. She was the first Lord Speaker of the House.**

### **From the Baby of the House to Lord Speaker of the House of Lords**

“When I was first selected, I was 22. Really, I was very doubtful as to whether I could do this, but my journey began with the local Labour Party in Wolverhampton. When I came down from Cambridge, where I was president of the union, they knew I was a Labour Party member. They invited me to come and speak. I talked to people afterwards, and there were a couple of great trade unionists there who encouraged me to stand. I said, well, you know, I'm not sure I could be a good MP. One said, there's only one way to be a good MP that's to get elected.

I was the baby of the house when I was eventually elected for Welwyn Hatfield. I had previously contested the Wolverhampton SW seat in the earlier February election in 1974. It's the first time I've ever lost with two general elections and getting married in-between. I decided I wanted to take my husband's name, which was not a very radical feminist thing to do then. My agent just about lived with it because it fitted on the posters so much better.

I was the first woman to breast feed in the Commons, but my story is really about not having any maternity leave. In the long, hot summer of 1976 I was pregnant in that summer. That

was when Michael Heseltine waved the mace and all pairing was stopped, so there was no opportunity for that. I once went home because Barbara Castle created such a fuss that Margaret Thatcher paired with me and that's the only time, I ever really had a conversation with her. It was a very, very difficult time in politics.

When Ben my first child was born, nothing had been resolved, the government was on a complete knife edge, we were, winning votes by 1 or 2 or 3, mainly on House of Lords amendments on controversial legislation. There I was with a newborn baby. I wrote to Margaret Thatcher, actually, and said, listen, please can you help you know me. Terrible things were happening. People were dying because they were being brought in and brought down from Liverpool. And, you know, they were in ambulances in New Palace Yard, and they nodded them through for votes. It was it was a horrible time.

So, you know, I either had to leave a child I was breastfeeding at home and abandon him, or I had to abandon my policy, and that seemed stupid to me, so I picked up the baby, and I came to Parliament. But that was not because I was trying to make any great statement. It was about the fact that no one recognized that it would be a sensible thing to allow someone who'd had a baby to have a few weeks off before they came back to work."

**Margaret Beckett MP Labour - first elected 12<sup>th</sup> March 1976 to 4<sup>th</sup> May 1979 then re-elected 1983, Derby South. First female Foreign Secretary 2006. Deputy Leader of the Labour Party from July 1992 to July 1994. Her team introduced the minimum wage.**

#### **Breaking barriers to assume high offices of state and reforms.**

"When I first stood for Parliament, it was very difficult to get a seat for anybody. When I got elected for the first time the pattern was that women were all in marginals that was the norm. You only had to look around and you really knew whether we were all there or not so there was a strong sense of camaraderie amongst us. Most of those who came in with me in 74, like me, went out again in 79. Those who didn't go out in 79 went out shortly afterwards. There wasn't any kind of assumption that a woman MP would come back again. It was still harder.

Parliament was very male then but that was what I was used to. I'd been an engineer and apprentice and I'd worked running an electron microscope laboratory. I was used to being in a world totally dominated by men. Actually. Westminster, to me, was refreshingly, relaxing.

I was appointed foreign secretary of state in 2006 in Tony Blair's government, the first woman to hold that high office. When I became shadow chief secretary in 1989, I was the only other woman apart from Margaret Thatcher who had been shadow chief secretary. I suppose perhaps I was the second woman to hold one of the great offices of state. I have been fortunate. You find I do quote my husband Leo a bit. One of his observations was that, if you're hard working and you're good at what you do you will always be useful to a prime minister."

**Harriet Harman MP Labour, Camberwell and Peckham 1982. In 2010 Leader of the Opposition, Chair of the Labour Party. Leader of House of Commons. Mother of the House. Women and Equalities, Justice, Solicitor General, Sec State social security. She introduced the 2010 Equality Act.**

#### **Equality for all, challenging misogyny and making Parliament more representative.**

"I was one of many women in the women's movement who decided that we were going to break into male dominated areas, whether it was business, public services, the law, teaching, academia, whatever, journalism. They were all predominantly male dominated and obviously Parliament was male dominated as well so I decided I would stand.

I was one of a group of women who was determined that we would, you know, change that and ensure that women could have an equal place in all these, in the UN, in all these roles. When I was first elected in 1982, I was one of only 3% women. Now there are 35% women. So really my mission, our mission was to make Parliament more representative.

I think that over the four decades we have done that, but we're still in a minority. Outnumbered 2 to 1. So, we've got a way to go. But we are very much a critical mass. So, you know, if my intention was to make sure that in getting in, I could play my part to get other women in. Certainly, that mission is very much, you know, partially accomplished.

Well, there's something about being in a very small minority, only 3%, is that you are an outsider. You're an outlier. You don't fit in, you're out of place. Parliament is about working together as a team, collectively, and being in a minority makes it very difficult. Some people were outright hostile to the idea of women being in parliament, feeling that it was undermining women's traditional role in the family, which was to be at home, to bring up the children, to look after the husband.

There was something very subversive about the idea of a woman being a leader and in Parliament on equal terms with men who had always dominated in Parliament. So, it really did feel like being a bit of a pioneer. It very much felt like that for me, because when I arrived through the circumstances of a byelection, I happened to be pregnant when my predecessor died, and therefore I had to fight a byelection pregnant.

Arriving young and pregnant in a male dominated House of Commons, I immediately was, not one of the in crowd. I was very much a small out crowd, but in that crowd of one, really.

Sometimes people were outright hostile, shouting across the chamber that I was a stupid cow. There was kind of outright, misogynist behaviour but above all, there was hostility to my agenda because my quest was not just to be in Parliament, but to put on the agenda of Parliament issues of concern to women. For instance, domestic violence, as much as another Labour MP Jo Richardson had done, and childcare.

In my first Prime Minister's Questions to Margaret Thatcher, I raised the question of childcare as we we're coming up to the school holidays, and a lot of women were working, and school holidays are very difficult.

I was saying, what's the government going to do about school holiday provision? There was literally sort of jeering not only from the other side at the Tory side, but from our side as well, on the basis that I really didn't know what being in Parliament was about. This was not an issue for Parliament. This was not an issue for government, you know. And therefore, why was I raising it? You know, I'd got the wrong end of the stick about being there.

There was, an editorial in the Daily Mirror denouncing me for not knowing what questions I should be asking. There was hostility to my agenda, which was the reason I was there. This was really backed up, as I say, not just by fellow MPs, but by the media and the political lobby, who more or less had the exclusive reporting in Parliament at the time because Parliament wasn't broadcast. They were all men as well. They thought talking about, issues of childcare or maternity was just silly and irrelevant, and that it should be about the money supply and mining and not about those sorts of things.

People often asked me whether or not, I was, you know, friendly with Margaret Thatcher because we were one of a very few women in the House of Commons at the time so did, we bond?

The answer was absolutely not because she was very much a paradox. She wasn't a feminist. She wasn't sisterly to other women. She wasn't there to bring other women in. She was there to beat the men at their own terms. Also, we felt she was doing so many absolutely terrible things like, you know, very socially regressive things like clause 28, banning the discussion of homosexuality in schools, for example.

She was really a figure of loathing for the Labour Party. And I remember once when I was walking down a corridor and it must have been a late-night vote, and I, for some reason had a baby with me, one of my babies. I could see her at the end of the corridor, bearing down on me, flanked by a couple of, you know, her aides and I thought, oh gosh, she's going to see my baby. It's funny because normally when you have a baby, you really want to show your baby because you're so proud of your baby. Whatever you do, admire it. But I didn't want her gaze. I didn't want the Thatcher gaze on my wonderful baby. I almost felt it would, like, harm the baby. I mean, it just shows. I was clearly very postpartum at that point. So, I literally dived into a, a room at the side in order that she could not actually look into my little baby's face."

**Baroness Emma Nicholson, Conservative MP for Torridge and West Devon 1987, switched to LDs in 1995. Life Peer since 1997. LD European Parliament SE England, 1999 to 2009. In 2016 rejoined the Conservatives.**

**Breaking conventions, campaigning for Europe, fighting for international immunisation against Polio, and trying to protect Iraqi marshlands.**

"I belong to the Conservative Party. I had an out rush and joined the Liberal Democrats for a while. Came back to the Conservative Party. I'm in the House of Lords. I've been fortunate in that I've sat in five different parliamentary settings, including Brussels, Strasbourg and Commons and London and so on and so forth.

I have a lot of experience in Parliament, and I come from a very, very long line of Parliamentarian on all sides of the family but I am the first lady Parliamentarian. I stood for Parliament because having spent my childhood supporting all the men in the family and I mean very big family, so all sorts of uncles, cousins, brothers in law, fathers and everything I realized I didn't agree with them. If I was outdoor-knocking, I had to agree with them. So, I concluded when I was about 14 or 15, that I would wait until my father retired and not do anything before that.

Eventually, when my father did retire, he had a very, very long time of service in the House of Commons I decided to begin my parliamentary career. I informed my father and brother-in-law and cousins and all. They were absolutely horrified and told me not to dare to try for it, it wasn't right. Women shouldn't be in Parliament, still less a female member of the family.

So that was quite extraordinary. I wasn't expecting that, which was foolish of me."

**Baroness Gillian Shephard Conservative. MP for SW Norfolk from 1987 to 2005. Served as Cabinet Minister, Environment, Education and Employment. Agriculture Fisheries and Food. Now Chair of the Conservative Association of Peers. One of two women promoted to John Major's government in 1992.**

### **The Gang Labourers Act and fighting against modern day slavery.**

“There's been so many changes since I got into Parliament in 1987. But it was when I was at the Treasury in 1990, I felt for the first time, anti-women prejudice.

I had been a parliamentary secretary of state at social security in 1989. When Mrs. Thatcher gave me that job she said, “now dear”, she always said that when she couldn't remember your name, “it is the most junior job in government, but I want you to know that it was a job I started with and will always remember”.

There was no prejudice there it was a job considered suitable for women. But when I got the job in the Treasury, which was when John Major became prime Minister, and at the same time I was made deputy to Chris Patten, the deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, people began to feel they were being competed against.

This was the first time I noticed comments from male MPs. However, this was as nothing compared with the welcome I got in the Treasury. A senior Treasury official, a man of enormous overweening importance, of course, but he was only one of 4 or 5 Treasury Knights, as we called them, came into my office and said, “yes, Mrs. Shephard, you are the first woman Treasury minister we've had but I want to explain to you how unimportant in the Treasury junior ministers are. Really, you're about signing things and all of the policy, to be honest, is done with us the senior officials and the Chancellor. I hope you enjoy your time here. By the way, there is no women ministers lavatory”. So, I said, “I don't think that will worry me at all. I shall be very happy to use the Women's Treasury staff lavatory should I need it”.

He left the room. I must say, I was taken aback. I've never forgotten it. Of course one wouldn't. But you know. How amazingly small minded I thought. How can you, a towering figure possibly stoop to say something like that? How extraordinary. So, I did find, in the Treasury for the first time that sort of approach.”

**Baroness Anne Jenkin Conservative Peer since January 2011. Set up Women2Win with former PM Theresa May in 2005. First stood for Parliament in 1987 for Glasgow Provan. Currently co-chair of W2W.**

### **Getting more Conservative women into Parliament and setting up W2W.**

“I came into Parliament as a secretary and before that I had worked in Conservative Central Office as a secretary. In those days, there were masses of women working in Parliament clicking, clacking away at typewriters.

Having been around Westminster for a long time, I could see that there weren't enough women MPs and in the Conservatives in particular. All the political parties were bad at it until Tony Blair came in and introduced all women shortlists in 1997, and then they leapt ahead. In 1997, when Theresa May and Eleanor Lang, for example, were both elected, we had, I think, 17 conservative women MPs.

That was a year of a massive landslide for labour, but they at the same time had 101 women. So, if you can visualize the 17 on our side and the 101 on the labour side, it illustrates the problem quite clearly. I think I got steamed up about it a little bit later on, and by the 2005 general election, we'd made no progress, basically, between that period we were at 9% of the parliamentary party, women made up just 9%. Or as I prefer to say it, men made up 91%.

Before the 2005 election, there had been an incident and I don't remember the details, but two women were deselected in the run up to the election, and I believe it was something to do with wearing a skirt that was either too short or not short enough. Somebody asked me, I don't remember quite how the journey started, but somebody asked me about why I thought this was happening, and I gave a quote to the press, and then I was in the cuttings. So, I started to think about how the process could be fairer for women. In this article, I suggested I talk to a few candidates in advance, and I suggested that we should be using what subsequently became the A-list or the gold list, or the priority list, where the actual candidates list was whittled down to a much smaller number.

I think in the end it was 100. So, 50 men and 50 women. The electorate or conservative members were expected to pick from those top candidates rather than the 600 or however many it was that were on the candidates list. So, after the election, when we made no progress, I was asked to go on woman's hour, because I was in the cuttings and I remember sitting in the green room in advance of the interview with Jenny Murray, which was quite intimidating in itself.

I remember her very beautiful nails but felt quite nervous. The researcher came into the green room, and I think there was a comedian on after me. And she said to this other person, "you're on after a piece about women in the Conservative Party, so that won't take long". And they sniggered and I felt extremely uncomfortable.

When I got into the actual studio, I mentioned this, because I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed for our party. I was embarrassed for women. I was embarrassed, it was a shameful experience. So that really got me going, I think. And it really evolved from that. So, we launched Women to Win in November 2005, just two weeks ahead of David Cameron becoming leader of the Conservative Party.

I think at that stage we didn't know. As I say, we thought we were a ginger group. We thought we were there to rattle the cage, to make the Conservative Party listen."

**Baroness Virginia Bottomley, first elected as a Conservative MP in 1984 to 2005 SW Surrey. Became a member of the House of Lords in 2005. Sec of State Dept of Health in 1989. One of only two women promoted into John Major's government.**

**Being a woman in the Cabinet and steering through health service reforms in the face of opposition.**

"I was my school labour candidate. My uncle was Douglas Jay, and I was tremendously close to him, and particularly to his wife Peggy Jay. So, I believed in politics.

My husband Peter's cousin was a Robin Turton, who was father of the House from 1965 to 1974, he went to the Lords, and so we both grew up in public service families where we believed in public service. Quite honestly, I could have gone Labour, or I could have gone Conservative. We'd never have gone liberal because you either join the Labor Party and make them economically responsible, or you join the Tory party and make them socially responsible. So, it's much the same.

I really encouraged Peter after Cambridge to go into politics. I was the fragrant wife, very supportive, quite pushy, speaking at conferences, I used to make lots of speeches for him, and all I wanted him to do was be a very successful cabinet minister. And every time we went to see Mrs. Thatcher, she'd say, "Oh Peter asked me such a difficult question today". I'd say to him afterwards you're not supposed to ask a difficult question, find ways to ask her easy questions so she makes you a minister.

There I am, minding my own business, but working with the Child Guidance Committee, and chairman of the juvenile court at the time of the Brixton riots, really difficult social policy activities. I'm sort of a social reformer at heart. Then suddenly I got a call from number ten saying, Mrs Thatcher says get more women to stand, get Virginia Bottomley. I thought I couldn't do it. I can't, I mean, I would be too shy, too nervous. I hate people criticizing me. I can't bear them challenging my integrity. But then I thought, it's not what you do you regret. It's what you don't do. So, I thought, I need to consult. So, I rang my Aunt Peggy Jay because she should have been an MP, but her husband was a cabinet minister and so she couldn't be an MP. Then. And Peggy said, absolutely Do it, I'll back you all the way. I'll look after your children. So, there we were.

Then I ran my mother-in-law, and my father-in-law was an ambassador. She said I'll back you all away. She was the most wonderful champion and support. I didn't do better than Peter. We've just done differently.

The media painted me as an English rose figure, but I can be an absolute battle axe. So, this English rose picture, I mean, whatever I look like I'm a tough old boot. And my daughter used to say, mum, they don't know whether you're a battle axe or a bimbo. I think you're both.

But I was really protected by Peter and his conservative colleagues. Of course, I remember Keith Joseph, a wonderful man, who made me a Tory, used to come up to me and say things like "that's a nice dress you're wearing, Virginia". He meant it politely and I would say, well, that's a nice tie you're wearing. You had to learn not to be mean, but to use humour.

I say this to people, as women, as a head-hunter, you get awful, patronizing comments but the thing is, you know, don't get mad, get ahead.

Another ridiculous story when I was first the MP in Southwest Surrey, I was asked to give away the prizes at a school prize day. A posh girls school. It was a school that had a male chairman of the governors. The tradition was the head girl's father thanks the visiting speaker. And it had a headmaster. So, they introduce me and say "Oh, we're so pleased Mrs. Peter Bottomley is here to give away our prizes. Mrs. Bottomley is married to Peter Bottomley, the transport minister. I eventually managed to say, and how fortunate we were in this country, that Mrs. Denis Thatcher was our Prime Minister, to which, you know, the house collapses. But I always say to women don't get nasty, get witty. That was a good response."

**Baroness Hilary Armstrong, Labour MP for NW Durham from 1987 to 2010. Served as Chief Whip under Tony Blair. Minister for Cabinet Office and previously Social Exclusion Minister when she worked on Sure Start. Life Peerage in 2010. PPS to John Smith during his time as Labour Leader.**

### **Fighting for social justice and the excluded in society and reforms to tuition fees**

"I was elected in 1987 and I come from the Northeast of England. I was never going to go away from the Northeast, as it were. And there were three of us elected from the NE, about 26 MPs, three of whom were women. And we've not had any women since Ellen Wilkinson who was first elected for Labour in 1924 to 1929 and again for Jarrow in 1935. Ellen died in 1945 and served in the Attlee government. So, there we were in 1987, a good 20 years later, and we were the only three. But before we were elected, we knew each other well and talked to each other, and we all had issues about being the only woman.



I was secretary of the local Labour party in Sunderland where the chair of the constituency was an old councillor who just used to say, "but women don't want to be members of Parliament that's why we don't have any, they're too busy doing other things".

It was that sort of thing that spurred us all on to make sure that we would become, if possible, members of parliament. Clearly, the Abortion Act had been passed in 1967, so that was well entrenched, as it were, by the time I became a member of Parliament in 1987. However, there were attempts to roll back and there was cross-party, organization among women and in those parliaments to make sure that we didn't roll back.

Half of my constituency was very Roman Catholic, the other half quite Methodist, and lots of others in between, as it were. In my selection conference with the Labour Party, I was asked, "how do you justify the foetus in the womb being treated worse than a convicted murderer?". I was the last to be interviewed in the selection all the previous five would be men and they'd not been asked any questions like that. But the regional organizer immediately jumps in, and she said, "you don't need to answer that because none of the others have been asked it?". I knew if I didn't, I was toast. So, I did answer it. That symbolized if you like, a very deep ingrained, anxiety about abortion. And I clearly supported the right of women to choose. So, I would always have that as an issue going through my Commons career.

I also always had a real interest in international development because I had gone to Kenya. That really changed my life.

My dad was very important. My mum was very important in my upbringing. But going to Kenya had shown me what mattered to me. I learned a lot about myself. and so, I always have had a big interest in international development. So, I used to drive the Labour Party mad because every election I would have a public meeting on international development.

That was sort of part of also me reaching out to Catholics who couldn't support me on abortion, that there were things that they could identify with, that I was interested in and that I was campaigning on and so on."

**Anne Campbell Labour MP for Cambridge 1992 to 2005. In 2003 resigned as PPS to Patrician Hewitt to vote against the Iraq war. Voted with government on third reading of the tuition fees bill. The first MP to have a website and set up Scientists for Labour.**

#### **Using technology to help with social issues and benefit mothers**

"When I first came into Parliament it was a pretty hostile environment, actually. It felt more like a public school than almost anything else. I mean, there was tobacco smoke everywhere, but that was one of the things I remember because I suffered, slightly from asthma. Tobacco smoke I found extremely irritating. But almost everywhere you went there was a smell of the smoke.

There were only 30 women MPs, I think when I got elected in 92. One of the things that is worth saying is that I hadn't in my professional life, worked very much with other women before because I'm a mathematician and a scientist. I had been mainly working with men. What really took me a back was the warmth and friendship I had from some of the senior labour women, people like Harriet Harman and Dari Taylor and Margaret Beckett, who were just absolutely wonderful and really nice and helpful and, you know, supported me in those early days.

I think one of the things that I did try to change was the importance of science to the economy. The person who listened to me after we got into government was Gordon Brown, who took it up, in a wonderful way but at that time, the real concern of most labour MPs was

the decline of the shipping yards, the motor manufacturing industry, you know, the old manufacturing industries which had sustained the northern towns, and the mining. It was slightly irritating to have this newcomer from Cambridge standing up and saying, "we've got all this wonderful high-tech stuff which is going to save the world eventually". It was a bit of a struggle sometimes, I have to say.

I was the first MP to have a website, yes. That was my, great friend Bill Thompson. And being an enthusiast about the high tech that was being developed in Cambridge and the Cambridge phenomenon as it was then called, did make me a bit different. But I remember Dennis Skinner saying to me, "if we didn't have people like you in Parliament, we wouldn't be in power you can't rely on the old manufacturing, anymore". That gave me quite a boost."

**Baroness Estelle Morris Labour MP for Birmingham Yardley from 1992 to 2005. Sec State for Education from 2001 to 2002. Resigned saying she was not up to the job. First former Comprehensive School teacher to hold that position. May 2005 created a Life Peer.**

### **Winning a marginal seat and helping some of the students she taught get a start in life**

"Birmingham Yardley was a Conservative held seat. It was a strange seat because the conservatives were thought to be losing it, but it was the Liberal Democrats that people anticipated would win it. It was a three-way marginal.

It was really hard work to win it. Put it this way, when the Labour Party had the selection conference for the candidate in Yardley, there weren't hundreds queuing up to take it on. So, it was it was a tough thing from the start, but I very much enjoyed it. We only won by 162 votes. That was hard work. And every election was hard work because it was a Liberal Democrat challenge rather than a Conservative challenge. In the subsequent elections, when we got to the House of Commons, I think I had an advantage because my dad had been an MP, so it wasn't the first time in the building.

I loved politics. I loved my dad being an MP. I loved going round with him and attending meetings. It wasn't a strange place for me. I didn't get there and have the feeling that gosh, I don't fit in, or I don't like this place when I'm here. I didn't have those barriers to overcome.

One thing I did notice was that when the new labour MPs got together in 92, we were a reasonable sized group. Actually, it wasn't as big as 97 in terms of labour women, but it's a reasonable sized group. I went round meeting everybody and it was amazing how many of those had won seats from the Tories. So, it wasn't just me that had come in having won a marginal seat.

When you look further in the parliamentary Labour Party to see who had come in on the basis of having won a safe seat, they were men, not women. That really struck me at the time. At the time I thought, oh gosh, it wasn't just me in Yardley, but it was throughout the country where I did feel at that era, because this was before women shortlists, that women there very, very often had marginal seats and no children.

I know that changed now. I think we were the last intake, perhaps to whom that was the case."

**Dame Margaret Hodge Labour MP for Barking since 1994. Standing down at next General Election. Was leader of Islington Council from 1982 to 1992. Chair Public Admin Committee from 2010 to 2015. Spoke out against antisemitism in the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn.**

### **Fighting the BNP and introducing with others Sure Start and Flexible working.**

“The 1997 intake of Labour women did change Parliament. I think all the positive action, the all women shortlist was absolutely central in bringing more women into Parliament. And before anybody says that brought in women of a lesser calibre and capability that is such rubbish.

We have the most fantastic, talented women who came in, in that way. The interesting thing is, in every constituency where there wasn't an all women shortlist, invariably they selected a man. It was a really effective tool and it helped us grow. The sad thing is that this time round we have to see what happens in the 2024 election, and labour can no longer use all women's shortlists because it was challenged legally. The judgment was that until such time as we get 50%, it's a legitimate tool. Once you get beyond 50%, it would become an unlawful tool. So, we're at 50.02% or something like that so we weren't able to use it. I am very nervous that the proportion of women labour MPs, next time will not be as good.

But I absolutely hated that photograph of Tony Blair with the with Blair's Babes. I thought that was a deeply, offensive, image of us, who we were, you know, standing behind Tony. I love Tony Blair, but standing behind him in that way, I thought was not welcome.

We were celebrating the fact that there were over 100 women MPs. Did we make a difference? 100% difference. I tell you we worked together, but then we made a difference in so many ways. We worked together were much more collaborative and much less competitive and much more supportive of each other. That's in the nature of women's DNA, really.

We cared about issues that matter for women. So, you know, you'd never have the childcare strategy, you've never had a sure start. You'd never have had, improvements in maternity leave, maternity pay. There's one improvement I would look back on that I think really transformed women's lives in the community. That was the right to request flexible working. So, the bunch of us who thought it was really important, we were ministers and again, we work collaboratively. There were some women in number Ten as well, two women who were working with Tony at that time, who we were all absolute determined to get this right to request a flexible working. Tony then Gordon Brown was very resistant to it because they thought that the business community would, hate it.

But with this sustained pressure from Parliament, from government, from the officials supporting it, and the political officials supporting Tony in number Ten eventually we won. We brought it in. I honestly think that in terms of women balancing their lives between work and their care and responsibilities, it's been the most important change that we effected, which has really helped women both stay in the workplace and carry out their caring responsibilities.

I think it's been more successful than I ever thought. And now, of course, it's spread. You know, men do it, everybody does it. It doesn't have a negative impact on businesses, because if you know, you commit yourself more, you work harder.”

**Caroline Spelman Dame Conservative. MP Meriden 1997 to 2019. Sec of State Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2010 to 2012 in David Cameron's government. Second Church Estates Commissioner 2015 to 2019. Speaking up for the European Union in the Brexit campaign.**

**Using her role as Agricultural Minister to put on the international agenda sustainable development goals**

"Nobody in my family, had ever been a parliamentarian. The way of working is very different from anything else that I'd experienced. I mean, it's not 9 to 5. I'd had full time jobs I'd had part time jobs, but I think it's a very different style of working.

Quite often I had to explain to my constituents that about half the time is spent in the constituency, and the other 50% of the time is spent at Westminster. So, Monday to Thursday at Westminster, Thursday to Monday back in the constituency. And, you know, very, very long hours culture in Westminster and it took some adjusting to the very late nights, particularly as I had small children. I used to keep a sleeping bag in the office.

Late nights plus early starts with small children, can make you quite tired, but adjusting to the pattern of working took a little while.

When I came into Parliament in 1997 the Conservatives had been defeated. One of my male colleagues said it was how he imagined the aftermath of the First World War. You know, when so many people had been lost in battle that, you know, it was a regrouping of the remnant of the army at Westminster.

That's how he described it. Obviously, I hadn't known what it was like in the previous parliamentary cycles when there were more Conservative MPs, but Labour did have a bigger majority than even we had Conservative MPs. Pretty quickly it was obvious to me that, people like me, women and men for that matter, with young families, they were predominantly on the labour benches, and I gravitated a bit towards them. Just talking through the practicalities of, you know, how you adjust to the working style of Parliament.

I recall we were sitting in the Chamber on one of the very first occasions, and suddenly people were standing up. So, you know, we stood up and then one of us realized that people were standing up in order to be called to speak, and we weren't ready to speak. So, he said, sit down. So, we all sat down. So, there were some very basic things we had to learn in those early weeks.

There was quite a bit of misogyny, that was pretty evident very early on. Indeed, you tend to sort of reach out to other women your own age sometimes. I didn't get a very friendly reception. because sometimes when new MPs arrive at Westminster, they assume that the battle they've just come from, of fighting people in other parties, you know, is what you carry on.

I think it takes a while to realize you can have friends in other parties, and I did make friends in other parties and, men and women. Typically, we were the ones who'd be in the library, you know, trying to keep ourselves awake till late at night, trying to get through all the paperwork so that we wouldn't be taking that back home so that we would have more time to spend with our family at the weekends. You know, we became firm friends and we're still friends today.

Misogyny well, that was one aspect of it. I don't think it was so much, just men, you know, who were resistant to the idea of changing the hours. I think parliamentarians that have got

used to the long hours culture and the overnight sittings quite liked it. I think that was where some of the resistance came from changing to an earlier finish.

The misogyny took, you know, some quite harsh forms. I remember the very day that I was signing up, you have to sign your name and then you swear in. And somebody who should be behind nameless was standing behind me and said, "you know, what do you even think you're doing here? You should be at home looking after your children". I was pretty taken aback by that because I had never really encountered that in the workplace that I had been in before I came into Parliament.

With social media abuse I think it's not just politics. I think there is misogyny directed towards women. If I speak to other women at the top of their professions who are in the public eye, they will say they too attract, incredible abuse, via social media. I think we need to get a grip of this because these are things that you can't write to people because they would be libellous.

These aren't things that you could say to someone face to face, because it would be criminal. But just because you can think, you can have your anonymity, you know, to tap out a message to somebody and to escape the normal defences which are in place against that kind of abuse in society. I think that shows me that there's a gap in the way we handle social media. Particularly for women.

Another thing I would definitely recommend to anybody going into politics or any high-profile public career, is get yourself a mentor. I was so lucky in the mentor I asked to help me. That was Gillian Shephard. She was absolutely wonderful and always at the end of the phone, when there was a problem. I would just ring her up and she would listen very carefully, and she would immediately get to the heart of what the problem was and give me very sound advice.

I remember when Iain Duncan Smith asked me to go out to Afghanistan at the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan, after the attack on the Twin Towers. I could not believe that I was expected to do that with no security, no support whatsoever. As a mother of young children, I could not believe it. And I picked up the phone to Gillian and I said, this is what I've been asked to do, Gillian, is this reasonable?

She said to me, "no, of course it's not reasonable, but you're going to have to do it otherwise they'll say, you're a wimp. So, let's work out together how you can do that as safely as possible". And she helped me find a way to get out to Afghanistan with a purpose where I could at least feel that the risk I was taking was worthwhile. I mean, that's a true mentor, isn't it?

**Baroness Susan Kramer. Former Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park from 2005 to 2010. Stood for European Parliament and London Mayor. Treasury spokes from 2015 to 2019. Was front bench Treasury Spokes in Nick Clegg's coalition government.**

**Improving transport in London, supporting electric vehicles and working with others on new gay marriage laws.**

"I got involved in politics in this country after returning from living in the States. I contacted all local political parties and only one came back to me. The Liberal Democrats knocked on my door, and I had had a sense that that's where I was going to be in politics. I'm very, you know, focused on community activism. I've always had a very strong environmental streak, which I'd exercised while I was in the United States.

I'm very internationalist in my outlook. I believe strongly in social justice and civil rights, and it seemed to me the party where I would likely belong. But the person on my doorstep said, you're new to the area We're having a ward meeting on Friday why don't you come down and meet some people? I went and by the end of Friday afternoon, I was the social secretary of the Barnes Ward, Liberal Democrats, and it went from there.

I met other people. I ended up going to a party conference, which I found unbelievably invigorating and exciting, and women liberal Democrats, who were then a very active group, persuaded me to fill out the forms to become a prospective parliamentary candidate. And as I filled them out, I was sitting next to somebody I met for the first time called Lynne Featherstone, now Baroness Featherstone, also filling out her forms. It was Lynn who campaigned for the gay marriage bill in the coalition government I was part of.

The two of us came into Parliament together in 2005. When I first filled out the forms to be approved as a parliamentary candidate, it never occurred to me that coming to politics, I'm already well into my 40s, and having been away for 20 years and hadn't obviously been active, except very recently, it never occurred to me that I was really going to stand for any office where I had any chance of being elected. But I thought it would be fun to stand for even a losing seat and to go through that experience.

I wanted the Liberal Democrats to do better, so my first outing was for the seat of Dulwich in West Norwood in 1997, and it was absolutely last minute, 12 weeks before the election, they didn't have a candidate, so I sort of quickly, said, yes, I'll come. But it was a fabulous experience because I was a next-door campaigner to Simon Hughes. Really, I watched one of the best out there campaigning, and I absolutely cut my teeth on that campaign. Loved it. Loved the, you know, the local constituency and the local membership who were out there pounding the doorsteps because they had council ambitions that they wanted to consolidate during the general election. it was a great introduction. So that was step one for me.

In terms of social media today I'm very sensitive to the fact that that, a number of women that I know find it quite hard to take the level of poison that comes at them, on social media. But I decided when I lost my seat in 2010, if there had to be a benefit to losing it was that I needn't continue with social media. What finally made the decision for me was unintentionally friends of my children started posting photographs of my grandchildren on social media. My feeling was that put them at risk and expose them in a way that I couldn't control, so I decided it was time to come off social media altogether. I would advise women of any age to go into politics.

I'm not saying all women are good and all men are bad, I'm saying we need that mix, we need that variety, and I think we need the variety by age. I would say to many women, politics is a very consuming career.

You are a public figure. When I was an MP, when I sat down on the bus, invariably someone would sit next to me with a set of queries. My husband, when he was alive, said that when we went out to dinner, people would bring their chairs and sit down at our table with us to question us. If we went to the theatre, people would wait until the intermission to then come and ask a series of questions. When my husband died, people brought casework to the funeral because they thought, I won't be holding a surgery that week and that their issue was so important it needed to be drawn immediately to my attention. I can tell you it shocked the vicar.

What is so frustrating about it is that you have other people who hold back from approaching you because they feel you must be busy, and so they shouldn't possibly disturb you with their problem. But you want to say yours is exactly the problem I want to deal with, you know, because you've got a real problem. So, it's a very frustrating.

I would say, I think it's tough being in politics if you've got a young family and young children, I wouldn't say to anybody, don't do it, but just say be prepared for the fact that you will need a lot of support and a lot of resources.

I think for anyone with a young family and typically, the people who carry most strain with a young family is still going to be the women, and so they need far more support.

Frankly, as you get older, you get thicker skinned. You get a whole lot tougher. I think politics is a really exciting place to go for older people. I think being with the Lib Dems encouraged me to go to the barricades that, as far as I'm concerned, is where I am staying on the barricades.

END.