HIGH PROFILES

Harriet Harman

The Labour politician and veteran campaigner for women's rights interviewed by ***Roy McCloughry*** at Portcullis House

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The Fair Agenda

Harriet Harman

has spent 35 years fighting for justice for women in the House of Commons – mostly on its front benches. 'Like her or loathe her,' the *Daily Telegraph* observed recently, 'she's tough as old boots.'

Roy McCloughry took a shine to her in her office in Portcullis House.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **GEOFF CRAWFORD**

You were the third of four girls in quite a posh family. What values were instilled in you in your childhood that are still important to you?

If I'd have thought that my parents were trying to instil anything in me, I would have been like: OK, that is exactly what I'm going to do the *opposite* of! We weren't obedient young girls wanting to do what our parents told us, we were going to kick over the traces and do everything different.

But I can't help noticing, as I look back, that, despite my youthful rebelliousness, some of the things that clearly they were very concerned about have absolutely stuck – particularly being self-reliant and not depending on other people. For young women, that was a revolutionary message, really, because the aspiration at that time was to get yourself a husband so that you could rely on him.

Your mother had been a lawyer but gave it up when she got married, didn't she?

Yes, because in those days if your husband could support you it was inconceivable that you would go out to work, because your job would be to be the housewife and look after the children. It's quite poignant to recall that her barrister's wig and gown were in our dressing-up box! We didn't think anything of it, but actually that was her career thrown in the box for us to play with while she cooked my dad's dinner and got tea on the table.

In your new memoir *A Woman's Work*,[1] you talk about how hard it was for you to reconcile your career with your home life.

I felt that I had two causes – one was to kind of change the world, [as part of] the women's movement, the other was to be a mother – and the conflict between them made me feel torn in two different directions. I had no personal experience of being brought up by a working mother.

How come you weren't sharing the burden with your husband?[2]

I think that mine was the first generation of women who really went with the idea [that] we shouldn't have to make a choice between having a family and working outside the home. So, really it was about the changing role of women in society and there wasn't a commensurate change in men's role. Men were still regarded as being the people who needed to bring home the bacon.

When we were arguing that there should be more women in the House of Commons, the men took it personally

There was a crisis in masculinity for a time…

Was there? I didn't notice it! Not so that it made any difference!

Don't you think men felt undermined when women got more control over their own fertility and were able to make choices about spacing children and going into the labour force?

I think I'd call it a 'backlash' rather than a 'crisis of masculinity'. You know, when we were arguing that there should be more women in the House of Commons, the men [in the House] took it personally. It was all about women wanting to be able to share decision-making with men, but they perceived it as being a man-hating, 'Women's Lib' attack on the way they were doing their work.

At the end of the day, I think it's important to keep our minds focused on what we want for everybody, men and women: decent opportunities, the maximum choice – and fairness. And I think it's important for women not to be distracted by the issues that [arise] for men because they are advancing towards equality.

Sounds harsh?

No, no, it sounds good.

People say, 'We must fight for men to be able to take paternity leave, because if they ask [for it] at work they'll be discriminated against,' and it's like: Well, *we* had to fight for maternity leave. They didn't fight for us to have maternity leave – [not] that I noticed.

Are we supposed to fight for them now to get paternity leave? No, *they* should fight for it!

Your passion for the advancement of women has been the thread that runs through all the many things you have done in your life. Where does that come from?

It's really from my upbringing, which was to feel that I shouldn't be told: You can't do this, you can't do that!

And then, of course, the women's movement – I mean, it just so happened I was growing up at a time when the movement was forming and it was an incredible tide. And, actually, when I got into the House of Commons [in 1982] I was the only woman of my generation trying to be both a parliamentarian and a mother and if *I* didn't fight on those issues, like child care, domestic violence, maternity leave, who else would?

You know, Jo Richardson[3] had fought incredibly on women's rights but [in 1994] she died. A few other women came in in '87 and '92, but the big wave didn't come in until '97. So, it kind of fell to me to take things forward.

Our society has made a lot of progress towards gender equality, but would you say there are areas where things are still as bad for women as they have ever been?

There are still some fundamental problems that need to be addressed. If ever you're in any workplace where the men are a majority, there will be cultural challenges undoubtedly. A lot of women can be on equal terms with men until they have children – and then they find they're not. And then there are the new challenges that come with social media – the threat of trolling and bullying and all of that.

One [advance] is that there is an understanding of the importance of female solidarity. When I was growing up, women were seen as rivals of each other, usually in competition for the best man; but now the notion that women can support each other is really important.

You've done a lot of work in the area of domestic violence, especially when you were Solicitor General in the early Noughties. Do you think we have made good progress towards justice for women in that area?

When I was young the conventional view was that if the man beat his wife, she brought it on herself – and the progressive view was: Well, perhaps she didn't – but who knows what goes on behind closed doors? The argument that actually domestic violence is every bit as bad as violence in the street – or worse, because you ought to be able to feel safe in your own home – that argument is now well advanced and well developed.

Having said that, there is still a lot more that needs to be done, because we still have about a hundred women killed in this country every year by a partner or former partner and one thing I saw as Solicitor General is that it's never a bolt out of the blue, there

have *always* been warning signs. So, I think that attitudes have changed a lot but the practicalities need to change more.

Many of the advances that have been made in terms of social justice, including gender equality, we thought were irreversible. Until a year or so ago, with the ascent of Donald Trump in particular, they seemed to be a permanent –

Oh, I never thought they would be permanent. I always felt they were fragile.

Do you fear we may lose our inheritance of social and gender justice?

I think that rights that have been hard fought for and won always need to be defended. It's absolutely complacent to think that the clock won't turn back. I think there is a real awareness amongst women that there is a threat there.

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I mean, at a very practical level, if your children's centre is cut back and child care becomes more expensive and less accessible, that has a very basic impact on how you balance home and work. But also now we have got the virus of misogyny coming from Donald Trump legitimising all the prejudices we've been trying to clamp down on since the 1970s. And those words from people in positions of power have an impact, because they kind of promote the culture that women are second-class citizens and are to be grabbed at.

Some people's passions are grounded in religious faith. Do you have a personal faith, or what else fills that place in your life?

Well, I… I've got a belief that oppression is unfair, injustice is wrong and that actually things are better for everybody if there is more fairness and social justice. That's my worldview, if you like. But I don't need to be spiritual about it – there's plenty to be getting on with in the here-and-now, and I certainly can't wait for some higher power to deliver it, I've got to get on with it myself.

Is that lack of religion part of the independence you grew up with?

I was brought up in quite a secular environment, really. I mean, by then the authority of the religious belief system was already waning and actually the church was seen as one of the vested interests and authorities that we needed to be challenging. Like, on abortion we used to have a chant: 'Not the church, not the state, women should decide their fate!' Basically, the church was one of the things that needed to stop oppressing women.

Politicians are sometimes criticised for having too little understanding of religious perspectives. Do you think that's a fair comment?

Well, obviously everybody should understand belief, but it doesn't mean they have to believe it. But I don't go along with the generalisation that politicians don't 'do' enough religion, or know enough about it.

I've met all kinds of opinions on that score in this building…

Prayer and things like that – I'm afraid you'll have to find somebody else to talk to about

that. You'll have to talk to Tony Blair!

I have![4]

You've experienced many reverses in your political life. What have you learnt from them?

That the longer you're in opposition and out of power, the harder it is. All you can do is talk about things, you can't do anything – and that is very frustrating, because you're in politics not just to talk about things but to do things. You know, we were voting night after night for [15] years and not winning a single vote! It was an exercise in frustration. But it did also give me the sense that you can rebuild things. No matter how bleak things are, the party can rebuild itself – and I hope it will [again]. I hope that it won't take so long this time.

For me personally, looking back on setbacks like falling out of the Shadow Cabinet [in 1993] or being sacked from the Cabinet [in '98], I learnt that actually what matters more sometimes than the post you're in is what your beliefs are, and just your ability to carry on doing things.

It's very important for your party to be in power and it's very important for you to have a cause. If you have a cause and your party is not in power, it's very difficult to do anything about it – but if you're in power and you *don't* have a cause, what's the point?

You talk in the book of occasions when you had to bite your lip…

Well, if your [time] in Parliament has been dedicated to trying to get out of opposition into government, it feels very unnatural when you do get into government to suddenly start undermining the Government. I mean, if, as I had, you've been working for years with one thing in mind, which is to get the Tories out and get Labour in, it's the furthest thought from your mind, really, that you would do any damage to that Labour government.

So, I always put my own personal circumstances into that context, if you like. It was not tactical compromising – 'I'd better not kick up a fuss, because otherwise everybody will be annoyed with me' (which I'm sure they would have been) – but more 'Would I be justified to kick up a fuss? The bigger thing is to have a strong government which is doing good in the country.'

Actually, I think I *should* have kicked up a fuss about not being made deputy prime minister [in 2007], because it was important for the party and the Government to have a woman recognised in a senior position. I should have kicked up a fuss about that.

It's evident that you've been willing to step back (albeit reluctantly in that instance) for the sake of the party. It's quite unusual to find someone who has a passionate

commitment to a cause and yet is still a team player.

Well, the show did go off the road from time to time, but…

It's really not about the *team*, as in 'me and my chums', it's about the cause. I think that I respected what the others in the team were doing for that cause. For example, when Gordon Brown and Tony Blair [became MPs], just a few months after me, the party was absolutely out for the count and I really admired the way they worked together to build a team for us to get back into government.

So, it was partly respect and admiration and partly just recognising that you can't do things if you're an outsider, you need the co-operation of your colleagues. I got precious little of it, but… Well, that's not true, I did get a lot. Gordon doubled maternity pay and leave and put all that money into child care, and Tony was the leader who saw a hundred women come into Parliament. I think it was amongst my [other] colleagues rather than the party leadership that there was more [resistance].

If people don't like what you're arguing for, what they do is have a go at you and ostracise you. It *feels* personal, but I actually think it's not

You told the *Observer* recently that 'for nearly 20 years' nobody in the House of Commons liked you and 'it was lonely and painful'. Why do you think your colleagues took against you?

Well, I think what happens is that if people don't like what you're arguing for – if you're arguing for change and they want the status quo, and you're arguing to share power when they want to have it all themselves – what they do is, they have a go at you and they ostracise you. It's easy to take it personally, because it *feels* personal; but I actually think it's not.

You feel like you can't go into the bar because everybody's being nasty about you – and they were – and you have to look over your shoulder when you're going through the division lobby because everybody's stabbing you in the back – and they were; but I can see actually that I wasn't being the sort of person that everybody would want to not like, I was just being the person who was arguing for change they didn't want.

They were playing the man, not the ball (I don't know what the gender-neutral equivalent is). The same thing happens with the public as well. I was on a radio phone-in the other day and somebody rang in and said: 'You're a hypocrite! You went to a private school!' And what I should have said (but didn't) was: 'You don't have to like me, or even vote for me. What is it about what I'm arguing for that you don't agree with? What is it that you don't like about women having equal rights? Let's talk about that! Let's be having you!'

It was much easier [for my fellow MPs] to say nasty things about me – that I was snooty, unclubbable, ditzy, thick, had too many children, whatever – than actually to deal with my argument. It's very easy, if you're the majority, to, like, 'outgroup' a minority. You know, I did have to rush home between votes to put the kids to bed. [They said,] 'She's not very friendly!' – well, I couldn't stay in the bar drinking all night. [Sometimes], I think, women are seen as not 'one of the lads' – well, they aren't, really. And that's why numbers [are] important: once you get a critical mass of women, the culture changes.

You temporarily held the reins of your party in 2010 and 2015. Do you regret that you never became leader?

Well, I tend to think regret is pretty pointless. The more time you spend hand-wringing about what you might or might not have done, the less time you're getting on and doing stuff. So, that is my general stance on all of this.

But I do look back at 2010 and wonder why I didn't ever sit down and think: Should I go for it – and if so, what would I do as leader of the party? It didn't even enter my mind. And, bearing in mind I was the deputy [leader], bearing in mind I then was the acting leader, bearing in mind I was absolutely *owning* it, that really is quite odd.

But I think it takes quite a lot to get [past] the outsider mentality. You know, there's a lot of men in the House of Commons who, the minute they set foot on that green carpet, everybody's going: Leadership potential! Well, they weren't saying that about me, they were saying: Why is she here? So, that kind of sets your frame. I'd got as far as I had despite all of that, but then that next step up…

You know, obviously if there is an opportunity you *should* think about it. Who knows, if I'd have thought about it I might have decided not to go for it anyway; but I didn't even think about it. I just didn't.

Do you think that your tendency to agonise over things might have disabled you as a leader?

Oh, I think everybody agonises. As far as I know, from knowing them at close hand, Neil [Kinnock], Tony, Gordon, Ed [Miliband], they've all been self-critical and thoughtful. They just criticised themselves for different things than what I criticised myself for – and what women criticise themselves for. So, I don't think I've got the monopoly on self-doubt.

If you're an MP, people do not elect you to wring your hands about your own personal

traumas, they elect you to get on with the job. When my constituents came to see me because *they* were scarcely coping, the last thing they would want is me to say: 'I know how you feel, I'm just about to, you know, blow out myself!' And that is multiplied, *multiplied*, when you become a leader, because not only are all your constituents looking to you but all your MPs.

But when you get to write a book, at that point you can say: Actually, I was scarcely coping.

What do you see in your character that would make you a good leader?

So, I think there is no such thing as 'the quality of leadership'. The point is whether or not, when you become a leader, you actually recognise what you need to do. You've got to take responsibility, and you've got to reach out to all the people who aren't on your side. And that's really hard work, and really difficult.

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Is it hard for a woman to be a strong leader?

Well, I would say 'effective' – the effective woman leader is open-minded and able to understand all the different sides of the arguments and, you know, able to bring everybody together.

I am quite worried about the way the qualities of a 'great' leader seem overwhelmingly to be qualities that are regarded as male. I think 'strong' is a bit of a gendered word…

OK.

You have to be so careful in the institute of political correctness!

What's next for you?

Well, I've developed this theory on the three ages of woman and the three ages of man.

Basically, in the first age the man has his whole future ahead of him: he's young and thrusting, you know, he has everything to play for. He's in his prime. The woman is, like, young and flaky, distractingly pretty, to be ogled at but not to be taken seriously.

Once she's got a family, it's like: She's got too much on her plate. The man is now a family man, reassuringly virile. So, he's in his prime and she's, you know, an absolute write-off.

Then, once her children have left home, she's suddenly past it. He is older, too, but he's mature, experienced, authoritative, wise – and he's in his prime again! You know, we can respect older men, but we've got to be protected from the sight of older women. So, the man has had three goes at being in his prime while the woman goes from 'too young and pretty' to 'too much on her plate' to 'past it'.

So, basically I've decided I'm having my prime now, since I haven't been able to have it previously. What I'll do with it, I don't know.

 This interview was posted on highprofiles.info on 28 March 2017.

1 Published by Allen Lane on 2 February 2017
2 She has been married since 1982 to the trade unionist (and. since 2010, Labour MP) Jack Dromey.
3 The Labour MP for Barking from 1974 to '94 – see ind.pn/2nE2rZm.
4 See bit.ly/BlaironGod.

Biography

Harriet Harman was born in London in 1950. She was educated at St Paul's Girls' School and then studied politics at York University, graduating in 1972.

Having qualified as a solicitor, she worked from 1974 for Brent Law Centre in London. In 1978, she was employed by the National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty) as a legal officer. After she was convicted of contempt of court for showing documents to a journalist, she appealed to the European Court of Human Rights and successfully argued that the prosecution had breached her right to freedom of expression. Harman v United Kingdom is still cited in textbooks.

In 1982, she stood for Parliament as the Labour candidate for Peckham in an unexpected by-election and won while seven months pregnant.

She joined the opposition front benches in 1984 as shadow minister for social services and then, from '87, spoke for her party on health. In 1992, she was voted onto the Shadow Cabinet and for a year shadowed the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. She was re-elected in 1994, '95 and '96 and in turn given the briefs for employment, health and social security.

She sat on the party's National Executive Committee from 1993 to '97.

In the general election of 1997, she was returned to the Commons by the new constituency of Camberwell and Peckham. She was made a Privy Counsellor and appointed Secretary of State for Social Security and the first ever minister for women, but was sacked by Tony Blair the following year. She rejoined the Government in 2001 as Solicitor General (and, by convention, became a QC). In 2005, she was made minister of state for constitutional affairs.

In 2007, she ran for the deputy leadership of her party and won by a whisker. Gordon Brown, who was elected leader, appointed her Leader of the House of Commons, Lord Privy Seal, minister for women and equalities and party chair – but not Deputy Prime Minister.

She held all of these positions until Labour lost the 2010 general election. She then became acting leader of the party and the Opposition until Ed Miliband was elected. She subsequently shadowed both the Deputy PM and the Secretary of State for International Development (2010–11) and then Culture, Media and Sport.

After the 2015 general election (in which she won more than 32,000 votes), she again briefly became leader of both the party and the Opposition before returning to the back benches. She is currently chair of the joint select committee on human rights.

She holds the record as the UK's longest-continuously-serving female MP.

Her memoir *A Woman's Work* was published by Allen Lane on 2 February 2017.

She has been married since 1982 to the former trade-union leader Jack Dromey, who joined her in the House of Commons in 2010. They have two sons and a daughter.

Up-to-date as at 1 March 2017