

Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MBE: *Chair of the Public Accounts Committee*

1944: Born in Egypt

1982: Appointed Leader of Islington Council (remaining in the role till 1992)

1992: Appointed Senior Public Sector Consultant at Price Waterhouse

1994: Elected MP for Barking

1998: Joined the Department for Education as a Junior Minister

2001: Promoted to Minister for Universities

2003: Became the first Minister for Children

2010: Elected Chair of the Public Accounts Committee

I've always felt something of an outsider. My Jewish family were forced to leave Egypt when I was five and being an immigrant has profoundly influenced my politics. I was sent to a boarding school in Oxford that was very class ridden: middle class kids didn't mix with the working class ones who'd got there through the Eleven-plus. I hated that and it made me question the whole class system by which England was run.

At sixteen, I used to stand on the Charing Cross Road handing out CND papers. The campaign for nuclear disarmament [CND] was just emerging as a powerful issue so my friends and I would spend Saturdays going on marches and that kind of thing. That was my first experience of political engagement.

Most of my Westminster peers were in ultra-left political groups during their university years – I wasn't. Sure, I went on the anti-Vietnam and anti-apartheid marches, but I also went to late night movies and poetry readings... It was that sort of era: sex, drugs and rock and roll. We talked a lot of politics and it was integral to my life but not central to it. I was much more into having a good time.

I met with discrimination in the workplace early on. I went to work for Unilever and found that women graduates were only allowed to collect the data while male graduates wrote the reports. When I complained to HR I was told, "If you're expecting anything else then you'd better leave." So I did.

I fell into politics because the woman who lived next door to me was being hassled by a nasty landlord. We moved to Islington at a time when the older community were being pushed out to make way for gentrification. People were getting kicked out of their homes; landlords were deliberately putting rats into old people's flats... My sense of outrage at that kick-started my involvement in local politics.

"Go on the council, it'll keep you sane when you're changing nappies." I can remember, so clearly, being at a local party meeting when I

was a young mother and one of the women told me that. I followed her advice, and it did! I would have been very bored otherwise.

Politics is an obsession, a drug. It's very hard to give up and I got hooked from there.

But there have been many times when the pressures of public scrutiny have made me question my resolve. When the children were little, one of the ways of coping was to compartmentalise my life very strictly: family in one box, friends in another, and work in another. But when they intruded on one another it could be unbearable.

When I was leader of Islington Council I had some terrible experiences with the press. I hired a nanny because I had four children and was attacked in horrible terms: how could you be a socialist and have a nanny? Then there was the time they went to see my dad, who was dying of cancer, and the time my nanny came home with one baby in her arms and holding the hand of another and a tabloid journalist pushed past her into our home as she put the key in the lock.

I even wrote a resignation letter once. I was a minister and was being raked over the coals by the press: "The packs are after you," I was told. I'd had enough but Tony Blair persuaded me to stay.

We were camped inside the house, my children and I, with the press outside. Then we ran out of milk so one of my children went out to buy some and came back saying, "There's only three of them, shall we offer them tea?" She went outside, offered them a cup, and another ten jumped out of a white van.

I survived by having a very strong hinterland. I played the piano. I still do, in fact, I played for an hour this morning. Family and friends, culture and travel are very important to me. I try to have it all. And I think having those other interests has a positive impact on my work. You'd be an unbearable person if you were simply to sleep, live and eat politics.

Had my husband been alive, I don't think I would have stood as Chair of the Public Account Committee [PAC]. He died when I was fighting Nick Griffin [leader of the British National Party, for her parliamentary seat in the 2010 General Election.] I had to go immediately back into battle. That political battle took over my life and when that was finished I had a slight panic: *how do I fill my life now, what do I do?*

It started as something to do because I was miserable on my own. It's very hard but my work helped me to manage that sadness. And I think he would be gobsmacked by it all. He was always very nervous for me. I've always had this tendency to say it like it is and he was always worried that it would get me into trouble – which it used to! During my time as a minister I was always slightly off message.

Now, I feel incredibly privileged and lucky to be where I am. I try to support the younger women coming into parliament. But what I love most is that I'm able to help open up a new front: the battle for equality for older women.

I made a choice when my children were small. So when my contemporaries were coming into parliament – Jack Straw, for example, or David Blunkett – I chose not to, because I didn't want to lead that sort of life while being a mother. It's meant I've come to it older, but still full of ambition for change.

I'm still conscious of occasionally being patronised, and that makes me furious. While I've been Chair of the PAC, there have been one or two witnesses who have been very patronising towards me yet relate to the men in a different way.

I think the way I chair the committee does stem from feminism. The fact that I'm a woman changes the nature of the engagement. It changes the way some witnesses approach me and it definitely changes the nature of the team.

I'm very collaborative. Take the PAC hearing on BBC severance payments – results weren't achieved by any one of us standing out in a macho way, it was brilliant teamwork. I try to ensure we work with a shared purpose. I think that comes from being a woman.

I've described my style as "grannyish." I suppose I am direct, and I'm quite tough. I know I irritate lots of the witnesses because if I feel they're waffling or being evasive I cut them dead. But I think that's more the product of me as a person than me as a woman. One thing, though, I do think might be down to gender difference: I don't shout. I don't think I bully, either, which I think men sometimes do.

Would I like to feel more secure? Yes, I would. Women do suffer from lack of self-confidence; men appear to have less of that. I still, to this day, worry: *was that speech okay?* But, I see that as a strength, actually. It means you are sensitive, not arrogant.

I'm sure that the world would be more financially responsible if more women were running it. Women have all the skills that the men have, but they bring a different style of working which I think can be incredibly powerful.

Over the years, I've come across a lot of women who feel that they need to ape the men in order to succeed professionally. They tend, then, to choose not to have children and, sometimes, become resentful. But when women have the confidence to understand that their own strengths and skills are just as important as the traditional male skills, then organisations can really be changed for the better.

I never set myself up to be a role model for women. But to the extent that I am in the public eye, doing things in my own way without aping the men, I'm slowly coming round to the idea that I may have become one! And that's okay. I think it's really important for women to see other models for success.

When I was up for selection as a candidate for the Labour party, I was the only candidate asked about my childcare arrangements, because I was a woman.

And now, my children are having children of their own. Three women in the younger generation of my family have recently experienced discrimination at work because they became mothers – one in the public sector, one in the private sector and one in the voluntary sector. It makes me think: *Oh my God – you haven't achieved enough to make their lives more equal and easier.* So I do want to move the world on.

It's a bit odd, isn't it, to be at this stage of life and thinking: I can still make a difference. But I'm incredibly grateful to be in that position.

SHORT EDITED VERSION

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