

Breaking Barriers

When There's a Woman in the Room "Groundbreakers" and their achievements



A film about prominent women in Westminster is to become part of a significant archive at Cambridge University

Foreword

“As a group of independent women broadcast journalists our latest collaboration with the Churchill Archives Centre has captured on film and in their own words the important political journeys of some of the most prominent women from across party in politics today. We have enabled these 13 “Groundbreaker” parliamentarians to record how over the past 50 years they broke barriers to not only gain their seats but to ensue issues of concern to women and families were embedded into significant legislative changes. These interviews follow our 20 years of independent broadcasting from Westminster about women in parliament and the archiving of these interviews nationally. As we keep saying: ‘When There’s a Woman in the Room’.”,
Jackie Ashley, Political journalist and production manager Groundbreakers.

“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.” **Allen Packwood, Director, The Churchill Archives Centre.**

“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 *40 per cent* women. So really my mission, our mission was to make Parliament more representative.”
Baroness Harriet Harman (Labour).

“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. One of the Treasury Knights as we called them said ‘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’. I must say, I was taken aback. I’ve never forgotten it.” **Baroness Gillian Shephard (Conservative).**

“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.”
Baroness Susan Kramer (Liberal Democrat).

Introduction

The Groundbreakers film released by three female independent producers provides a fascinating window into how the world of politics worked (or often didn't) for women in Parliament during the second half of the 20th century from the 1970s onwards.

These 13 interviews conducted in the prelude to the 2024 July General Election in collaboration with the Churchill Archives Centre University of Cambridge have been edited into themes (First Elected, Misogyny, Achievements, Social Media). These are subjects that the women themselves have talked about in their previous interviews with the Women's Parliamentary Radio team.

Watching these interviews is eye-opening—the hurdles and prejudices these women faced, which were intended to hinder their ability to function in even the most basic ways within the Westminster environment, are absolutely shocking. These pioneering women probably thought that winning an election gave them full access to the "Westminster Club," only to discover that a whole new set of battles lay ahead.

We hear from Helene Hayman, who went on to become the first female Lord Speaker of the House, about how a very senior female minister reported her to the police for taking her three-week-old baby into one of the Lady Members' Rooms, calling him a "stranger." Furthermore, she learned that the Chief Doorkeeper had been given instructions on how much force he was allowed to use if Helen tried to take her baby into the Chamber.

The testimonies are awash with injustices and reports of overt sexism. Gillian Shephard recounts how, upon becoming the first female Treasury Minister, she was firmly told how unimportant her role would be, as the "important work" and policy-making would be done by senior officials and the Chancellor. As an aside, she was also informed that there were no women's ministerial restrooms.

While there is ample reason to feel outrage on behalf of these women, there are also stories of the women supporting each other. These interviews are fascinating to watch, both for those of us who witnessed these events from the outside and for anyone who might underestimate the significance of women's inclusion in government and the House of Lords. The number of female politicians has steadily increased over the years, largely because of the idea that "if you can see it, you can be it." Today's female politicians might take for granted their right to be in Westminster and expect that the working environment will be appropriate for their needs. Thanks to these Groundbreakers, progress has been made.

Dr Lynn Morgan, MBE, Fellow Commoner Lucy Cavendish College

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Thank you to the 13 Parliamentarians who took part in the Groundbreakers project:

Baroness Hilary Armstrong, Baroness Margaret Beckett, Baroness Virginia Bottomley, Anne Campbell, Baroness Harriet Harman, Baroness Helene Hayman, Baroness Margaret Hodge, Baroness Anne Jenkin, Baroness Susan Kramer, Baroness Estelle Morris, Baroness Emma Nicholson, Baroness Gillian Shephard, and Dame Caroline Spelman.

NB: These interviews were conducted before the 2024 General Election when Baronesses Beckett, Harman, Hodge, were still MPs.

Our story

In March 2007 a group of female journalists launched one of the first podcast radio stations in the UK. Called Women's Parliamentary Radio our aim was to let women in Parliament speak for themselves about the policy issues they were campaigning on without ridicule or, as so often happens with the media, criticism and even condemnation.

The www.parliamentaryradio.com journey has taken us through a remarkably bumpy and historic period in British Political History with seven Prime Ministers reflecting a period of high political turn over. It began with Gordon Brown, then David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak and the current Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer.

When our first book "Women in Parliament: The New Suffragettes" was published by Methuen in Autumn 2005 Tony Blair was completing his third historic term as Labour Prime Minister. The 83 audio interviews from that book are now in the British Library. We subsequently published, over the next 15 years, three more books on women in parliament under the titles of "When There's a Woman in the Room", culminating in the celebrations of 100 years of women in parliament in January 2019. The podcast audio interviews for these subsequent books are now held at the London School of Economics and more recently at the Churchill Political Archives at the University of Cambridge.

Since 2007 the UK has experienced a wave of events starting with the financial crisis of 2008, which some say the economy has still not recovered from, and Labour's Gordon Brown losing the 2010 General Election leading to a subsequent coalition government with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. This was followed by the Scottish independence referendum, and the Brexit referendum, which resulted in David Cameron standing down when the vote went in favour of the so called Brexiteers. This in turn led to a rapid change in Conservative party leaders but the party remained in power for 13 years during which time they had to contend with a Covid pandemic and the so called "Partygate" scandal. At the same time there was a rise in, and distrust of, politics and politicians until Sir Keir Starmer won a landslide for Labour in the 2024 General Election and returned Labour to power after 14 years. Now the rise of the Reform Party and the Greens and the fracturing of British politics has given an equal voice in the opinion polls to new and smaller parties in what was once considered to be a two-party system. What a journey. Our interviews with women politicians across party have captured these events in podcast form and all were recorded in Westminster, often in Central Lobby, soon after the issues they speak about were voted on or debated.

In Spring 2024 a new collaboration between www.wpradio.com and the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge has been recording on film 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.

We have interviewed names such as the Labour Baronesses Margaret Beckett, Harriet Harman, and Margaret Hodge, who only stood down from the House of Commons at the July 2024 General Election and who are now in the House of Lords. We also captured the stories of their fellow Labour peers Baroness Helene Hayman, who like the others achieved a great deal in her political career but perhaps a lesser claim to fame was that she was the first woman 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, and also Baroness Anne Jenkin who formed Women2Win with Baroness Theresa May and Baroness Emma Nicholson.

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, but voicing concerns about social media.

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

Here we take quotes from these 13 film Groundbreaker interviews and allow them to describe their remarkable political journeys, covering some 50 years of politics and social change. We begin in the 1970s when Labour's Harold Wilson was Prime Minister but including more recent memories of meeting Margaret Thatcher and working with Theresa May, and in Tony Blair's and Gordon Brown's governments up to the coalition government of David Cameron and Nick Clegg. We have not included in this round of interviews women parliamentarians elected after the 1997 Labour landslide which transformed Westminster for women when 101 Labour women were elected resulting in 120 women in all, representing 18.2 per cent of all MPs. This has been covered in our previous podcast interviews and books.

Some of our Groundbreakers came from privileged backgrounds while others were from working class families. Some had fathers who were Westminster politicians while others experienced public life for the first time, but all remember how the attitudes to women at the time were often patronising and belittling. However, whatever background they came from -

and often selected for marginal seats - they broke through their own party's glass ceiling to make groundbreaking changes on issues of social concern.

We hear how some joined Parliament when women were still not part of their government's Cabinet and of their significant achievements as women parliamentarians in a more recent age, including the minimum wage, Sure Start, the 2010 Equality Act, NHS reforms, 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 was 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 Archives Centre explained:

"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, and 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 Groundbreakers 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, and Robin Hood media.

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

Starting Out

We set out here 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 weight 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.”

Baroness Margaret Beckett MP Labour – 1974 to 4th May 1979 then re-elected 1983, Derby South and stood down in 2024 and became a member of the House of Lords. 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.”

Baroness Harriet Harman - Labour, MP for Camberwell and Peckham 1982 to 2024. 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. Now in the House of Lords.

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 when she joined the House of Lords. Served as Cabinet Minister, 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 rang my mother-in-law, and my father-in-law, 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 aback 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 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.”

Baroness Margaret Hodge Labour MP for Barking 1994 to 2024 when she entered the House of Lords. 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.

(recorded before the 2024 General Election)

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.”

Dame Caroline Spelman 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 because of the Labour landslide. Pretty quickly it was obvious to me that, people 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 when she took up her seat in the House of Lords. Stood for European Parliament and London Mayor. Treasury spokes from 2015 to 2019. Was front bench Treasury Spokeswoman 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 Lynne 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.

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."

Social Media

In an age when women say they are put off going into politics because of the amount of abuse women politicians receive on social media we asked our 13 Groundbreaker parliamentarians what they thought about social media today. Here are their replies:

Baroness Helene Hayman, Labour

“I think it's much tougher. I think even though we were in a tiny minority, and as I say, you were patronized or people treated you as a silly woman or whatever. It was more so for me because I was both young and female, but we didn't have the abuse.

We didn't have the death threats. You know, it was nothing like that. ...I don't want to see people's lives really stunted and harmed by their participation in public life. This is not just MPs. You know, this is anyone who gets into any sort of public eye. And I think we have, as a society, gone really quite mad and very horrible.”

Baroness Margaret Hodge, Labour

“Well, I would enter politics again today because, as I always say to school pupils, if they ask me, unless you are born to wealth and power, there are few ways in which you can influence the world around you. Perhaps you can do a degree, or you may enter one of the caring professions, but as I said at the outset, you can only do what the world of politics will allow you to do.”

Baroness Harriet Harman, Labour

“There is still a great prevalence of misogyny. And, you know, social media is a major amplification for people who cannot bear the sound of women's voices in authority, and men fight back against that. We've still got a major problem of domestic homicide and male violence.”

Baroness Emma Nicholson, Conservative

“Don't bother with social media. It doesn't get you votes, all the surveys and all the data shows what gets you votes is going up and talking face to face with people. Leave it alone. I do use Twitter; I just block anybody who I think is abusive. The only way to change somebody's vote is to actually talk to them on the doorstep.”

Baroness Gillian Shephard, Conservative

“I’m really worried about the impact of social media, particularly on women. I don’t know how I would have managed to cope with that. My young colleagues in the House of Commons have different approaches. One reads everything and one reads nothing but, you know, it doesn’t have to come to this when we’re trying to make progress. And so much of it is anti-women. I mean, grotesque. That’s not progress, but that affects society as a whole. And not just women in politics. Social media is eroding the foundations of what you thought you had helped to build.”

Baroness Anne Jenkin, Conservative

“I think that there are additional risks that we didn’t have when we started out. And that, of course, is the publicity, being in social media, being in the public eye, misspeaking. You know, if you say something that is considered controversial, then you’ve got a pile on and so on. I mean, a lot of women say to me, I want to give back but social media is discouraging me.”

Baroness Virginia Bottomley, Conservative

“Well, these days, you talk about media pressure and criticism. It’s a completely different world now, particularly for women MPs who seem to get much more trolling and problems on social media.”

Baroness Hilary Armstrong, Labour

“I think it’s terrible for some women with social media. I think it is a real issue that nobody knows how to deal with. And it’s partly that you have men isolated on their computers saying really bad stuff, and they can get away with writing things because they think nobody will ever find it. It’s, you know, it’s bad for them. But it is very, very frightening for the women.”

Anne Campbell, Labour

“I don’t think I could have coped with social media very well. I had my own website, and we used email and so on, where people were able to express their views. But we didn’t tolerate the kind of abuse and rudeness which you get nowadays. We had a process by which, if I got a slightly rude letter, my office manager Dave would write back saying ‘I’m sorry, but I cannot show this to Mrs. Campbell’.

I think it’s got better for women, in Parliament today. I mean, the fact that there are now many more women than there were then and the Labour Party has succeeded in getting more women elected makes a big difference. The numbers make a huge difference. But I think the abuse that comes through social media is just intolerable and that needs to be fixed

because, you know, you're not going to get reasonable, decent people to stand, of any gender, while that is going on.

"We need better regulation, possibly, and the companies themselves need to take action to stop the abuse."

Baroness Estelle Morris, Labour

"Social media has made the job of an MP harder, particularly for women. It's absolutely impacted on their families too. I just hope that if I was in politics now, I'd have learned some of the skills of social media to cope with that."

Baroness Margaret Hodge, Labour

"I didn't look at them (antisemitic abuse) as I have an organization that monitors my social media, the vast majority of which were abusive. It was horrible walking into rooms and feeling the need to look over your shoulder and thinking, where are they on all this? Are they with on or against you and all that sort of stuff?"

It was just a horrible time. So, you know, I'm so relieved we won that battle (*antisemitism in the Labour Party*). But it was one that I would have given a lot never to have had to engage in."

Dame Caroline Spelman, Conservative

"But the Forestry Commission had a deficit. And as one solution to that deficit was that they wanted to look at selling some of the forest estates off. But the policy hadn't reached me at that stage, but by the time I came home it was in the media and a complete firestorm. It was one of the first examples really, of where social media takes off with a piece of fake news."

"On Brexit I was a remainer - but that led to death threats to kill me, to kill my children, to burn our house down. And I just thought after 22 years of loyal service to my constituents, I just thought that it was time to go. What's been rather nice since retiring as an MP is some people in my constituency have come up to me and apologized for what they wrote and what they said."

Baroness Susan Kramer, Liberal Democrat

"I'm very sensitive to the fact 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, if there had to be a benefit to losing was that I needn't continue with social media.

And what finally made the decision for me was that unintentionally friends of my children started posting photographs of my grandchildren on social media. I think that my feeling was

that put them at risk and exposed them in a way that I couldn't control. And so, I decided it was time to come off social media altogether. It clearly mitigates against young people coming into politics but I would advise women of any age to go into politics.

Groundbreaker achievements

Taken together the achievements of our women MPs are noteworthy and as you listen and watch them speak you are transported back to a time when in the early 1970s there were far fewer women in Parliament. In the February 1974 General Election, 23 women were elected, 3.6 per cent of the House of Commons. In October 1974 and another General Election, the number of female MPs remained low at 3.6 per cent. Our Groundbreaker MPs, Baroness Helene Hayman recalls that time, as does another Baroness Margaret Beckett. These were important stories to capture particularly as their political careers in the Lords are still active today as is the case with our other Groundbreakers.

Following the July 2024 UK General Election 263 women were elected to the House of Commons making up 40 per cent of all MPs. This is the highest number of female MPs in the UK up from 220 in 2019. Many of these were new with 129 being elected for the first time. 46 per cent of the women are Labour MPs, compared to 24 per cent of Conservative MPs. This was a drop from 27 per cent in 2019.

Take a closer look at what they told us about their achievements. A small part indeed of their highly significant political careers.

Baroness Helene Hayman, Labour - From the Baby of the House to Lord Speaker of the House of Lords

Baroness Margaret Beckett, Labour - Breaking barriers to assume high offices of state and reforms.

Baroness Harriet Harman, Labour - Mother of the House. Equality for all, challenging misogyny and making Parliament more representative.

Baroness Emma Nicholson, Conservative - Breaking conventions, campaigning for Europe, fighting for international immunisation against Polio, and trying to protect Iraqi marshlands.

Baroness Gillian Shephard, Conservative - The Gang Labourers Act and fighting against modern day slavery.

Baroness Anne Jenkin, Conservative - Getting more Conservative women into Parliament and setting up W2W.

Baroness Virginia Bottomley, Conservative - Being a woman in the Cabinet and steering through health service reforms in the face of opposition.

Baroness Hilary Armstrong, Labour - Fighting for social justice and the excluded in society and reforms to tuition fees

Anne Campbell, Labour - The first MP to have a website and set up Scientists for Labour. Using technology to help with social issues and benefit mothers

Baroness Estelle Morris, Labour - Winning a marginal seat and helping some of the students she taught get a start in life

Baroness Margaret Hodge, Labour - Fighting the BNP and introducing with others Sure Start and Flexible working.

Dame Caroline Spelman, Conservative - Using her role as Agricultural Minister to put on the international agenda sustainable development goals

Baroness Susan Kramer, Liberal Democrat - Improving transport in London, supporting electric vehicles and working with others on new gay marriage laws.

History of Women's Parliamentary Radio

Getting started in a new digital age

Women's Parliamentary Radio first started broadcasting in May 2007 and was an invention of the digital age. It followed on from the successful publication of our book *Women in Parliament: The new suffragettes* published by Methuen in autumn 2005. It was among the first as live podcast broadcaster following the relaxation of strict broadcasting laws earlier. This meant only licenced - what were called the terrestrial companies - were allowed to broadcast. At first the traditional channels were not allowed to expand their content through the Web. This was supposed to allow the small independents, of which we were one self-financed enterprise, to flourish.

Over the 20 years of broadcasting, our finances were transparent and we had audited accounts. Holding a lobby pass meant we needed to abide by the rules and declare relevant interests.

Our supporters

The support we had from women across party at the highest level such as Baroness Harman, the late Baroness Tessa Jowell and Baroness Theresa May and Dame Caroline Spelman was very encouraging. The Lobby itself was more suspicious of us, but a few did help embed us as a feature of the new age of political reporting particularly its then Chair Brian Shallcross. As part of the Burma Road (a narrow corridor in the Lobby where journalists offices are situated either side), we reported regularly.

Of note and specifically the sound engineer Peter Cook of the Cambridge University Audio Visual Unit worked for us freelance helping us to gain the audio technical recording and editing skills that previously only our former BBC sound engineering colleagues had been able to perform. It was an exciting age for the Indy's. While the technical people were gaining interviewing skills fewer journalists then were gaining the technical skills. We were the outlier. With Peter Cook we innovated, and our web manager Richard Bradbury did too. It was so different from the age of the big broadcasters.

We were a curiosity. This was an age of cynicism about the difference women in parliament had made even amongst leading feminist academics, but Professor Joni Lovenduski of Birkbeck initially worked with us on our first book. It is difficult for cross party projects to get funding even when our Advisory Board included high profile women politicians from across party.

Surprising was the degree of support we got from the national political archives who emailed and met us and followed our work. That included the British Library the LSE Women's Library and the History of Parliament Trust and later the Churchill Archives. At one time the Bodleian Library suggested that they acquired our Archives. Our podcast interviews are held at the BL the LSE and the Churchill Archives Centre. All appropriate credits are given on our Wikipedia page. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_Parliamentary_Radio

The Interviews

With a small team we set up our interviews with women politicians and conducted over 700 interviews over the 20 years. We recorded them and edited them and distributed them through modern platforms such as Soundcloud and twitter. When our small group of broadcast journalists conducted interviews, we then edited and processed them. We acquired the hard brain technical skills combined with the intellectual skills of interviewing.

In interviewing these women, we focused on public policy issues of the time rather than just the big political but often transitory personal disputes. While we did interview ministers and turn up at relevant events our focus on campaigns often meant we were interviewing those whose speeches may not have been as high profile, but who were trying to introduce change and speaking truth to power at constituency level. We covered political concerns at the grass roots.

Our frequent meetings with the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) women's committee administered by Caroline Adams and also Theresa May and Caroline Spelman were helpful and subsequently the Tory women launched Women2Win. Theresa May achieved much and was a change maker as far as the Party allowed her to change structures working with Baroness Jenkin. Of note is the fact that when Theresa May and Caroline Spelman said in our first 2005 book that they were "feminists" this was a controversial statement for them then to make. It made the headlines in the nationals.

The fact we were in Westminster each week often at PMQs in the press gallery allowed us to be seen and trusted. It was relatively easy to secure an interview. This is how, despite the funding issues, we managed to keep www.wpradio.com going for so long with minimal costs, taking with us our recording equipment and laptop to edit. We could turn interviews round and edit and output them in 2 hours. We were a curiosity but truly innovative. In the first couple of years, we did much of this with Pete Cook in his studio, evolving later into what was a one-person enterprise. Of note is the handful of young journalists who came alongside us at the start of their careers.

The new digital age

It's been such an exciting age and this history of broadcasting, where we have come from to, is still not remarked upon enough. The digital formats too have changed, and it has got easier to transfer one thing over to another. Just like the beginnings of the printing press Women's Parliamentary Radio podcasts have been at the forefront of this new era. Our contribution is noted on the Wikipedia history of podcasting.

All our podcasts' interviews, held at the various national archives have been written up in our subsequent three self-published books with our own ISBN numbers on. They are now in all the major libraries of the UK, so we have structured our historical records well. Again, the fact we could self-publish was exciting. At that time every mode of communication was opening up into this new digital age.

The Day the Carlton Club accepted women – our historic party photographs celebrating 90 years of women and the vote

A year after we began broadcasting in 2008 Women's Parliamentary Radio in association with the Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Independent Labour parties launched a national photographic exhibition to celebrate 90 years of women and the vote. These photographs are now held by the Churchill Archives Centre.

Remarkably it wasn't until 2008 that one London Club voted to let women join, so we called this series of photographs: "The day the Carlton Club accepted women".

Women's Parliamentary Radio invited the original "Blair's Babes" Reuters photographer Kieran Doherty back to Westminster to take the historic group photographs working in association with the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat Parties and the Independent Labour Party.

We organised viewing of these 4 photographic images of 104 of the 125 women MPs in Westminster at the National Portrait Gallery in the autumn of 2008.

Barbara Follett MP, the then Deputy Minister for Women, launched the viewing at the National Portrait Gallery. She said: "Britain is a more equal society today than it was on that May morning eleven years ago when 101 Labour women MPs gathered around their newly elected Prime Minister for a photograph to celebrate the fact that, overnight, we had almost trebled the number of Labour women MPs and doubled female representation in the House of Commons. That increase has been particularly beneficial to women, and, over the past decade, the gender pay gap has been reduced; maternity leave has been extended; the number of childcare places has been doubled and parents of children under the age of six have won the right to request flexible working.

"But, as 104 of Britain's current 125 women MPs gathered under Big Ben for another photograph on another May morning just a month ago, I reflected on how far we still have to go. Only 20% of the members of the House of Commons are female and we rank a rather shameful 51st on the international women's representation league table. Even more worrying is the fact that we have only 2 Black women MPs and not a single Asian one".

Theresa May MP, The Shadow Leader of the House of Commons and Shadow Minister for Women, said: "This is a wonderful achievement which marks the 90th anniversary of women first getting the vote, but which I hope will have lasting benefit in showing women that politics is for them. We need to show positive images of women in Parliament to encourage

others to aspire to stand and be elected. This is the first time that such a positive image of women across all parties in Parliament has been put on public view. Well, done to all for achieving this milestone.”

Until now the most often used photographic image of women MPs has been the so called “Blair Babes” picture taken on 7th May 1997 shortly after 101 Labour women were elected to Westminster as a result of positive action by the Labour Party. That picture was taken by Reuter’s Kieran Doherty, who had climbed up the steps to get the women looking up at him and waving. Many disliked it as Baroness Hodge recalls in our Groundbreaker interviews.

As Caroline Spelman MP, Chairman of the Conservative Party, arrived for the photo call she announced that “The Carlton Club” had just voted to accept women. The display is entitled “The Day the Carlton Club accepted women - 90 years after women first got the vote.”

A copy of these four photographs sits in an office corridor in the House of Commons today.

Social history in the making

The journalist as social historian providing the first version of history is known but what Women’s Parliamentary Radio has achieved has added significantly to the ability of historians to listen person to person to the many different voices of women in parliament and what they believe are their achievements and disappointments.

We want to thank the Churchill Archives Centre personally for the seriousness it has given to our work and for investing time in cataloguing it and hugely increasing the visibility of all our archives. The Director Allen Packwood, Andrew Riley, Amanda Jones, Chris Knowles, and formerly Dr Cherish Wooton-Colbrook.

Thanks also go to the team at Lucy Cavendish College who supported and outpuffed our film on YouTube. Jo Ryan, Alison Vinnicombe, Flavia Bartoletti, and Dr Lynn Morgan MBE a Fellow Commoner at Lucy Cavendish College.

For the women MPs the broadcast journalists and those techy guys who helped us innovate we thank them.

Social change and putting women's issues on the map

We did follow in the footsteps of significant women who had paved the way for these changes and advances in women's rights.

The bigger picture in recent times would single out, Germaine Greer, and her book *The Female Eunuch* published in the 70s. The Greenham Women and the attempt to ban nuclear weapons in the 80s. Then came female writers like Victoria Glendenning, Brenda Maddox, Michele Roberts writing women into modern history. And of course, the Labour politician and Minister Barbara Castle the then Sec of State for Employment. She met the striking Ford Dagenham women in 1968 who were demanding equal pay and supported them. The very act of meeting with them was controversial. It was a trigger cause of the passing of the Equal Pay Act 1970. Castle also got death threats when as previously Minister for Transport she introduced the drink driving laws, which led to women driving their husbands and partners to the pubs for the first time, and then the 70 mile an hour speed limit too. Anne Perkins authorised biography *The Red Queen* maps it all.

In recent times Harriet Harman, Tessa Jowell and Joan Ruddock and the Labour women have continued those struggles. Conservative women too have led the way in Parliament with Dame Marion Roe campaigning on Female Genital Mutilation leading to the first act of Parliament in 1985. But there weren't any prosecutions. And now Theresa May, the second female PM of the UK, giving up her seat but as a Baroness she now has more time to campaign on Modern Day Slavery. She also set up with Baroness Anne Jenkins Women2Win. And of course, the first woman to take up her seat in Parliament in 1919, Conservative MP Nancy Astor, campaigning on temperance, and welfare.

Being in Parliament and Ministerial roles gave them what we would term today a platform. Their visibility and the very fact they got out front empowered others to follow suit. Much abuse was directed at them.

The small acts and voices of change are notable. When Dari Taylor became the first of two women to serve on the Defence Select Committee after the Labour victory of 1997, she asked about serviceman's families, not just the weapons of war. A mere question, not spoken before can be a radical act and an act of leadership and those questions can result in substantive change.

As Sheryl Sandberg advised we “leaned in”. The battle for more women in the Boardrooms is still ongoing. Years before as journalists some of us leaned in too, challenging our news editors who were invariably male. Visibility counts.

Our “When There’s a Woman in the Room”, books give the women in parliament across party an opportunity to speak about the positive work they had done, rather than being labelled as Blair’s babes, or “not quite up to it”. Our first book solicited an apology from the then media Editor of the Guardian, Roy Greenslade, for the terms he had used to describe them and their dress, including Patricia Hewitt’s dungarees. He said it was not the same as joking about Ken Clark’s hush puppies.

The visibility of those women, who conspired to wear bright jackets at PMQs on a Wednesday, just so they could be seen, was in itself a small but significant step forward for the movement now global. Or as Margaret Sitta, MP from Tanzania told us: When There’s a Woman in the Room women’s issues get discussed.”

The journalist Helen Lewis has chartered some of these struggles in her book “Difficult Women” A History of Feminism in 11 Fights. It covers issues such as Divorce, The Vote, Sex, and of course, the right to be Difficult. Christabel Pankhurst, Marie Stopes, Lily Parr, Jayaben Desai, Erin Pizzey, Rosa Parks and many more not so well known. These “wins” resulted from the actions of grass roots movements and are still being fought today. Look at the last American Presidential election and the Trump v Biden and fertility rights.

As the women in Westminster know leading any campaign for change leads to what we term “the pile on”. Back in the 70s and 80s campaigners, like the formidable anti-pornography campaigner Mary Whitehouse, wrote to their local newspaper to complain. We then duly checked the name and the address on the letter against the electoral register. We were careful. And if they were insults and abuse, we didn’t publish it or we edited it out. Today women are impacted more by social media than their male colleagues, and the Labour politician Diana Abbott receives more abuse than others. As our Groundbreakers recount it is putting women off going into politics and standing as candidates in a General Election.

On IWD in 2024, the Conservative politician, Maria Miller with others across party on the Women in Parliament APPG launched the “Clean campaigning” pledge. The headline in the Times was “Toxically misogynistic campaign” would undermine trust of voters. While twitter can be seen as a negative Groundbreaker Baroness Harman tells us it can also be used as a tool to have your say, and get the messages you want out there, without having to rely on either one of the right or left leading papers to write it up. The media is partisan.

All the terms of abuse levelled at women, being opinionated, being strident, and yes being “difficult” are indeed the qualities that were needed to put women’s issues on the map nationally and internationally over the past 50 years of our Groundbreakers in Parliament and before. Ask the Kenyan women MPs who in 2003 walked out of the chamber in protest of a ban on taking handbags into the Chamber.

The 2021 Sarah Everad murder and subsequent grass roots protests by women, during the Covid restrictions, illustrate how powerful women’s voices are on social media and how empowering that can be. The Labour MP Jess Phillips, now a Minister in the Labour government, on IWD reads out the names of women and children murdered each year most by their partners. And that figure hasn’t changed since that Labour victory of 1997 and the 101 Labour women being elected to parliament. As Dame Vera Baird KC the former Labour minister and former Victims Commissioner and DV campaigner said, “the fundamentals haven’t shifted”.

Women are now powerful enough to call out and publish social media abuse. The numbers matter. Parliament now has 263 women the highest number ever to sit – 40 per cent.

But it does take time. In 2024 the National Portrait Gallery tweeted us saying: “We go there in the end,” after it eventually took on a suggestion we made for more women “achievers” portraits. It took 20 years.

Social media figures like Andrew Tate the real man influencer, are boasting of their many millions of followers. But for every Tate there are also men and women with many more followers such as Barak Obama, Rhianna, Katy Perry or Taylor Swift. It’s not all bad news but it is tough and toxic!

One thing remains true throughout this. In March 2014 Margaret Sitta MP from Tanzania told www.parliamentaryradio.com that “Where there is women there is talk about women’s issues, which sometimes seems to be forgotten.”

Through the publication of our 3 books “When There’s a Woman in the Room”, our 3 national audio archives and now our Groundbreakers series of 13 film interviews we hope that these significant advances and achievements will be archived and acknowledged by future generations and historians.

As ever thanks go to all who have joined us on this long journey particularly the team at the Churchill Archives Centre.

Boni Sones OBE

Executive Producer Groundbreakers Film

Links to our Archive Work

We grew out of the publication of our book: “Women in Parliament - the new Suffragettes”, published in September 2005 by Methuen and nominated for the Orwell Prize in journalism.

We have created three national audio archives here are the links to these:

The BL Archive:

<http://cadensa.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgiirsi/x/0/0/5?searchdata1=CKEY7012165&library=ALL&ga=2.232002073.70138076.1549305536-1026027972.1549305536>)

History of Parliament 2017: <http://historyofparliamentonline.org/news/womens-parliamentary-radio-archive-deposited-history-parliament>

LSE 2014: Our LSE audio archive can be accessed

here <https://archives.lse.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=SONES>

We also have a nice new blog May 2017 on the BL site from our Archive British Library 2010: <http://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2017/05/blairs-babes.html>.

The Churchill Archives Centre

[Collection: Women’s Parliamentary Radio publications and podcasts, conducted by Boni Sones with contributions by Jackie Ashley, Deborah McGurran and Linda Fairbrother | ArchiveSearch](#)

[Interviews with Boni Sones OBE in the Centenary Year of Women’s Suffrage - Churchill Archives Centre](#)

And our Groundbreakers series of interviews can be found here:

[Groundbreakers: In Their Own Words — Churchill Archives Centre](#)

[Collection: Groundbreakers Interview Series | ArchiveSearch](#)

All our three books (and a further 4th edition revised) can be found in the National Libraries of Britain: The British Library, the Bodleian Library Oxford University, The Cambridge University Library, National Library of Scotland, National Library of Wales and Trinity College Dublin.

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Find Out More



- **Visit the Archives Centre and read memoirs** by female MPs including *A Woman Like Me* by Diane Abbott, *A Purposeful Life: What I've Learned About Breaking Barriers and Inspiring Change* by Dawn Butler, *A Woman's Work* by Harriet Harman, *House Music: The Oona King Diaries* by Oona King, *Going Nowhere: A Memoir* by Joan Ruddock, *The Downing Street Years* and *The Path to Power* by Margaret Thatcher
- **Watch the full-length Groundbreakers documentary** on [YouTube](#).
- **Listen to longer audio versions** of these interviews hosted on Boni Sones' [website](#). The video interviews will be catalogued and added to the Churchill Archives Centre Access Portal in the near future. You can also read highlights from these interviews in Boni Sones' [article](#). Boni Sones is a Fellow Commoner at [Lucy Cavendish College](#) and Research Associate at [The Centre for Business Research](#)).
- **Listen to earlier interviews** given many of the women featured in this exhibition, alongside other leading female MPs, for Women's Parliamentary Radio, which are available on our [Access Portal](#).
- **Browse the Archives Centres online exhibition** '[Uphill All the Way Exhibition: A Century of Women in Parliament](#)', revealing some of the stories of pioneering women MPs in our archives.

We end on a quote from Baroness Margaret Hodge:

“I think I have had the most interesting, privileged, productive, exciting, you know, uplifting, difficult, challenging, life, professional life that you could imagine for. “

Breaking Barriers

When There's a Woman in the Room "Groundbreakers" and their achievements

