

28 | DOES HARRIET HARMAN SUFFER FROM MAD COW DISEASE?

The problem with political jokes is they get elected.
Henry Cate VII

My mother has long been a devoted reader of the *Daily Mail*, a newspaper which is a frequent critic of the feminist politician Harriet Harman, ‘Mad Hattie’. In early October 2011 I was having lunch with her (my mother, that is, not Harriet Harman) and, as is her habit, she passed me a number of articles she’d cut out of the paper. Pointing at the article at the top of the pile, she remarked, ‘She’s mad, you know. Quite mad.’ She could only be referring to one woman, I thought, and sure enough she was. The article was titled, ‘Hattie’s not for turning over Mrs Thatcher’:

‘Harriet Harman, the high priestess of political correctness, is leading the drive for Labour to change its rules to ensure that a woman is either leader or deputy leader in the future, irrespective of their ability or popularity. [Author’s note: it was, unfortunately, to be a ‘successful’ drive.] It will be the ultimate act of positive discrimination from the party that first championed all-women short lists for Labour seats.

But despite her pro-women policies, Harriet still can’t bring herself to say anything positive about Britain’s only female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (who, incidentally, became Tory leader in 1975 without any such help from the party’s rule book).

When I asked who her female role model in politics was, she said, ‘There isn’t one.’ What of Margaret Thatcher? ‘But she was a Tory,’ said Harman, her lower lip curling in distaste. ‘I am terribly tribal. Thatcher was saying: “I’m doing it despite the fact I’m a woman.” She spoke to women with her shopping basket and had the advantage of being an outsider and was seen by women as an outsider.’

All you need to know about Harman's attitude to Tory women MPs emerged shortly after she entered Parliament in a by-election in 1982 at the age of 32. Hattie caused a stir by breast-feeding in the Commons, before going into the division lobby to vote while still cuddling her baby. 'Mrs Thatcher spotted me with the baby and came over. I was in great conflict.'

'I wanted her to see my baby and the Prime Minister was obviously going to admire my baby. But I was torn. I did not want the eyes of a Tory Prime Minister to fall on my baby.'

So what did she do? 'I walked away as fast as I could.' And did Thatcher see the child? 'No.'

So much for the sisterhood sticking together.'

I've long been a subscriber to the daily broadsheet newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, the deliverer of daily doses of truth to British citizens of sensible right-of-centre opinions, mainly gentlemen. [Update: Shortly after this book was first published, the paper started becoming feminist-friendly. Their journalists, both male and female, attacked my party and myself before the 2015 general election.] Some of their finest columnists happen to be of the female persuasion, and one such is the estimable Liz Hunt. From the 5 August 2009 edition of the paper, her article about the feminist politician Harriet Harman, at her most influential at the time:

'Harriet Harman once cracked a joke. Yes, I know, it's hard to believe. Humour is not one of Miss Harman's chief attributes, nor is self-awareness – and this, remarkably, was a joke against herself. Asked, at the height of the leadership crisis last summer, about her own chances of becoming prime minister, Miss Harman said: 'It will not be possible, because there aren't enough airports in the country for all the men who would want to flee.'

One year on, she could confidently rewrite the line to include all the women who would join the stampede, too: desperate to escape a Britain shaped by her politically correct zealotry. The news that she has been slapped down by No 10 over a policy announcement is the culmination of a disastrous few days for

Labour's deputy leader, although an entertaining time for the rest of us. As an end-of-pier turn, she is starting to rival John Prescott in his gaffe-prone heyday.

Topics of national and international import – the swine flu pandemic, doctors' hours, bankers' bonuses, the war in Afghanistan, turbulence in Iran – are of no concern to the woman in charge while Gordon (Brown) chews his nails in a sodden Lake District and rues the political necessity of having to take a holiday at home. Instead, Miss Harman's fixation with 'equality' continues – although her ranting has taken on a disturbing shrillness of the 'all men are rapists' school of feminism.

She does 'not agree with all-male leaderships' because men 'cannot be left to run things on their own', she told an interviewer at the weekend. This eye-popping statement came alongside reports that, after winning the deputy leadership in 2007, she tried to change Labour's rules to ensure that a woman was always in a top job.

Undeterred by the ridicule this generated – not least from many prominent women – she turned her fire on the bankers, suggesting that if the girls, rather than a horde of testosterone-fuelled Gordon Gekkos, had been in charge, the global turndown might not have been as serious. I think she has a point about the macho culture of high finance, but she negated it almost immediately with a crass reference to 'Lehman Sisters rather than Lehman Brothers'. It prompted one minister to say that 'Harrier has literally gone bonkers'. [Author's note: it also prompted a comedian to quip that a similar point could have been made in favour of 'Gay Men Brothers'.]

Yet it is the timing of these ill-judged headlines that really shows how out of touch she is with the public mood. Under Labour, we have had more women MPs than ever before, and more women in government. Yet their success rate in high office has been abysmal, largely through their own ineptitude. The demeaning departure of Jacqui Smith (porn and sink plugs), Hazel Blears (flipping houses) and Caroline Flint ('female window dressing') is kept fresh in our minds by the vengeful recriminations that continue to surface on chat shows or in interviews. Even the old guard – Patricia Hewitt, Estelle Morris, Margaret Hodge, Clare Short – displayed a general lack of achievement that lingers in our consciousness. So what made Miss Harman think that either sex would sympathise with her renewed demand that a woman should be guaranteed one of

the top jobs in the party for reasons of equality rather than ability?

In fact, it rather throws the spotlight on Harriet herself – and makes you wonder what, other than a thick skin and a bludgeoning tenacity that wears others down, she brings to the Cabinet table.

To me, she belongs to a particular breed of Labour women who claim to have the best interests of other women at heart. In reality, their concern is rooted in a blinkered ideology that panders to a particular faction of their party, and is ultimately self-serving.

There is no question that Miss Harman has her eye on a forthcoming vacancy [Author's note: the vacancy in question was the leadership of the Labour party, in the event that Labour lost the subsequent general election]. But she may come to regret her outburst this week. It has alienated a majority of women who know, instinctively or through experience, that without merit there can never be a meritocracy.'

Harriet Harman's official title for a number of years was 'The Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP'. The 'QC' element stood for Queen's Counsel, denoting a senior legal figure appointed within the legal profession on the grounds of merit, but in the case of Ms Harman it was purely an honorary title, resulting from one of her many appointments.

In stark contrast, Margaret Thatcher – a trained barrister – would have been entitled to use the term 'QC' after her name on professional grounds, but never did.