“If there had been an Institute for Government I would have been better prepared”

In her book [2] and in conversation [3], former Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and Leader of the Opposition Harriet Harman candidly discusses the lack of preparation she had when appointed Secretary of State at the Department for Social Security. Going from a team of four to a department of 80,000 was a huge shock and she received little to no training on how manage the change. Harman is critical of the one training course she did receive in 1997, arguing it presented “a fossilised model of government”.

She contrasts this with her experience of IfG training in 2015 [4], saying it illustrated how government and the civil service had transformed since her first ministerial role. The training was useful as it started from a position of working out what her government wanted to achieve and the difficulties they would face, rather than simply prescribing what a good minister is. She acknowledges that the ability to discuss problems whilst in government “in a dispassionate way” would have been very useful as a new minister.

“I’m very much against role models or mentoring new MPs”

Despite training incoming MPs while Deputy Leader, Harman believes it is more important they draw on life experiences, political commitment and “what you see and hear from your constituents” than it is to learn the sometimes-arcane rules and traditions of government. Not the least because her role as a leading campaigner on equality and women’s issues often involved challenging those very same rules.

She adds that each generation needs to work out what’s important rather than slavishly copying role models.

“I’d picked up the flag to say women can and should be in Parliament and in the Shadow Cabinet, I couldn’t turn around and quit”

Expanding on her personal motivations for campaigning for women’s issues, Harman talks about the weight of expectation she felt as a “political representative of the women’s movement.” As a pregnant mother first entering Parliament in 1982, and later as a woman in the Cabinet, Harman felt that she could not give ammunition to critics who maintained that a woman could not do these roles. She describes the reinforcement she received from women around the country as being key to helping her drive through some of the changes that have impacted women’s lives.

The three biggest achievements: childcare, domestic violence, representation
Harman cites her work on childcare as one of the most important achievements for women, discussing how at the time of entering Parliament childcare was only available in emergency situations, such as abuse. Though she acknowledges there are still barriers to access, she spearheaded the drive towards universalising childcare available for all working women by introducing the National Childcare Strategy. She also outlines how she succeeded in transferring domestic violence from a matter in the private sphere to the public sphere by changing the law on domestic violence.

Harman’s work in pushing forward the representation of women in Parliament by advocating for all female shortlists and more female shadow cabinet has increased the number of female MPs on both sides of the political spectrum. In 1982 the House of Commons was 3% female; after the 2015 election, the figure was 29%. Harman expressed the widespread resistance she faced within her own party on these points.

But even as women lead more in politics today, this can’t be taken for granted.

Harman is quick to stress that women cannot rest on their laurels. Those who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, during the Women’s Movement, must be vigilant of the passive resistance they still face.

She also argues that government needs to be held to account through key metrics that track the progress of women’s rights, for example, women’s average pay in the UK over time.

Finally, women must actively fight against being written out of history. Harman cites her autobiography as an example of this, arguing that she has come across numerous cases of her work in government being retrospectively and incorrectly assigned to men.

Further information

Watch or listen to our in conversation event with Harriet Harman [3].

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Links
[2] https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/296722/a-woman-s-work/agrknuYW-FNrLQ