



The right honourable

We all love to hate politicians and MP Clare Short doesn't blame us. She talks to Dawn Mellowship about Bush and Blair, press intrusion and why more women should be involved in politics.

Clare Short was born in Birmingham and of Irish Catholic descent. The field of politics seems to have been a congenital calling. Her desire has always been to foster a more equitable and egalitarian society.

'The school where my father taught was in quite a poor area. He was cross about what had happened to Ireland historically. We had this sense that the exploitation of India and Africa wasn't right and that Britain could be a fairer country. There was a natural interest in politics in the family.'

This interest led Clare to take up a place at university studying political science, followed by a spell working as a civil servant. After various roles, in 1983 she fulfilled her dream of being elected to Parliament in her hometown constituency of Ladywood. Clare has served the Labour Party under Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock, John Smith and now Prime Minister Tony Blair. She resigned from Blair's Cabinet over the policy on Iraq.

Giving evidence to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in June 2003 following her resignation, Clare was asked about whether she felt the Prime Minister had purposely deceived her in the period

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immediately prior to the Iraq war. Her response was that she believed that Blair viewed it as an 'honourable deception'; that he must have concluded it was honourable to back the US in military action, thus honourable to persuade the Cabinet and Parliament however he saw fit.

Broken dreams?

I wondered if the reality of political office had lived up to Clare's dream, especially in the light of recent events in Iraq, Israel and Lebanon.

'I love being a constituency MP, it's very moving and rewarding. You get to deal with people's problems

Image - abi johnson

where the system hasn't given them what they are entitled to. You learn a heck of a lot, as well as having that sense of service. Plus in all the years of opposition I was on committees and expressing my views, as well as being on the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party. It was hard work but worthwhile.

'When we won in 1997, I took over the Department for International Development. It became a leading player and a very effective organisation in the world. It was fantastically satisfying.

'I left the government over Iraq and the dishonesty of it all. Since then it has been a profoundly disappointing time for me in my political life. I still think it matters to speak the truth about issues such as Lebanon and that Britain should have called for a ceasefire.

'I personally think the way in which Tony Blair engaged in deceit to get Britain to war with Iraq is a very serious matter. It seems very shocking that the House of Commons hasn't done anything to hold the Prime Minister to account. I am with the country suddenly

It's like a kid in the playground who says I am important because the biggest bully in the playground is my best friend.

'I think Blair has really annoyed the country. Most people don't want to fall out with America but don't want to be a poodle either.'

Style over substance

In her book *An Honourable Deception? New Labour, Iraq and the Misuse of Power*, Clare discusses what she perceives as Blair's apparent preference for style over political substance. Blair steps off a plane to a flash of cameras after having his hair styled and make-up done. Presentation is paramount, she says.

'Modern politics is about that. More and more people who succeed in the media become political leaders. It's really worrying. Modern politics is so much about razzmatazz and looking good on the TV. Surely in politics we want people with substance who will communicate honestly with the country. Bush is like this Texan cowboy, not that bright but America was taken in. So I suppose that

love to but could not stand the idea of the press intruding on their personal lives. It discourages good people from going into public life and that is highly unfortunate.

'I hope people will come back to politics when it renews itself – people who like to get things done and who like listening to people.'

In 1997, a record 101 women MPs were elected to government, but Clare states in her book that because of the centralisation of decision making around number 10 Downing Street, this isn't as profound as it seems. Clare believes that women have an aptitude for common sense and getting things done that politics currently lacks, but fears that our increasingly competitive society may create a number of problems.

'I think women can often speak more sincerely and straightforwardly, in a way that moves people more. The danger is if we get post-feminist ambitious women who think they can have it all, and that softer, caring side might be lost.

'I think feminism dreamed of a world where everything could have its place and it was a more caring world where men were allowed to have all those qualities as well. We are in danger of having a successful band of women who have to be as tough and hard as the men they are competing against, and that is not quite how we meant it to be.

'We are in an unpleasant, very competitive, consumerist, greedy phase. Society is becoming more unequal. There are lots of women in high-powered jobs earning lots of money, then there is a group of women who work in the more traditional jobs and have to give up work or go part-time when their children are born, who struggle away balancing everything, who are paid quite poorly and have little training or promotion prospects.

'More equal countries, such as those in Scandinavia, have less crime and a better quality of life. We should try to be more like that – quality of life is everything. Look at us – we have more money and are rushing around with no time for the people we love, shopping all the time, buying the same old tat really.

'We need to draw back a bit, consume a bit less and enjoy each other a bit more. We have a long way to go in getting back to simple food and eating together but there is a yearning for that I think.'

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thinking: "These politicians are self-serving; they are all the same. You can't believe what they say."

'People still inspire me. I still like the constituency work. I still think there is a decency and common sense in the broad mass of people that moves me and motivates me, even when their leaders are misleading them in my view.'

America's poodle?

Many people nationwide and also in America cannot help but feel they have been duped over Iraq. Clare is highly dubious of the relationship between Tony Blair and US President George Bush.

'Since the end of the Second World War, I think the special relationship with America has been the most important feature of British foreign policy. Blair has taken it to a more extreme degree than any previous Prime Minister. It's like Britain doesn't know how to think for itself anymore now it's best friends with the biggest power, which is a bit pathetic.

is why Blair fits the part. For a while the country loved it, the young family man who always dresses right.'

The glare of the press affects many MPs. When Clare tried to introduce a bill to prevent the degradation of women in the media, *The Sun* parked a bus of scantily clad women outside her house, desperate to nationally humiliate her.

'When it first happens to you it is a terrible shock, upsetting and intrusive. I think the press here are a bit mad.'

More women in politics

When Clare was Shadow Minister for Women, her role involved trying to make sure that the Labour Party had more women representing it – right through from councillors to Parliament.

She says: 'I would go round women's organisations and institutes trying to encourage women to go into politics, especially those whose children have grown up, because there is so much wisdom there. Many said they would