

Transcript for Dame Margaret Hodge's Talk at the Gender Institute

00:31:

Professor Laura Sjoberg (LS):

Welcome to the Gender Institute's second Launch Event. We are thrilled to have Right Honourable Dame Margaret Hodge here to talk. We are equally thrilled to have Professor of Politics and Gender and Associate of the Gender Institute, Professor Sarah Childs here to introduce Dame Margaret Hodge. There will be a talk and then a Q&A period, and as I said, please remain muted throughout the talk. And we look forward to this conversation. I'm gonna turn the floor over to Professor Childs, now.

01:03:

Professor Sarah Childs (SC):

Thank you very much and welcome, everybody. Margaret Hodge is chair of the council of Royal Holloway so in one sense, I'd like to welcome you as a member of our community, today. I also want to welcome – I should say, of course, the Right Honourable Dame Margaret Hodge. She's been in politics a long time, and I'm gonna try and see if I can get away with that, right? There's a two-volume collection, of biographies, of all the UK women MPs called *Honourable Ladies*. Margaret Hodge is in the first volume. And she's the only woman who is still sitting in the House of Commons. Which I think is very fascinating. She was elected to Islington Council in 1973, and in parliament since 1994 and she was elected through a by-election, which is often a very successful route in the early days, if you like, of getting more women into parliament. And she won her seat following the death of another Labour feminist, Jo Richardson, which I think is worth noting. Margaret has been the Labour MP for Barking ever since.

02:05:

So, to mark the launch of Royal Holloway's Gender Institute, Margaret is going to talk to us about her life as a woman in electoral politics. She's had a very, very successful career. Particularly in government during the New Labour years, but I think, arguably, her profile has risen very much as chair of the Public Accounts Committee. But I want to recommend one of her works to you, the book called *Called to Account*. It was published in 2016 which detailed corporate bad behaviour. I promise you; this is not a dry book this is the kind of book that you will want to sit down and read. For sure, it tells us about corporate bad behaviour, but it also tells us rather a lot about the failure of government and ministers to govern better, and in a financially prudent fashion. As I said, it's not a dry read, put it on your lists. We're not doing much else in lockdown, are we?

02:55:

Now, in Margaret Hodge, I think we have so many good role models. I think again, not least for the politically engaged older woman. Which I think is a huge contrast to one that we should be stressing because there are simply, in my view at least, too many 'young guns' out there who frequently think they have the right to rule and that they know what's best for the British people.

03:17:

Now, in predating the 1997 General Election, Margaret Hodge has experience of being in parliament when there were few women but also when there have been, at that time in that election, the number of women doubled overnight from 60 to 120. She has experience of being in opposition, in government, and in opposition again. And I think the UK has, quite clearly, become a more feminist place in the decades in which Margaret has been active in politics and it is thanks to women, like Margaret, that that's the case. Interestingly, her early years in local politics would become wrapped up with what was called the 'London Loony Left' but which now, actually, is increasingly the everyday norms of women's rights, gender and sexual equality, and sexuality equality. In the last parliament, she was a key player in the Commons' reference group on representation inclusion, working with our, Royal Holloway's very own John Bercow, the former Speaker. And even more recently, of course, Margaret Hodge has been at the forefront of holding her own party to account over anti-Semitism. So, I'd like to thank Margaret Hodge very much for accepting our invitation for supporting the Gender Institute, and wholeheartedly for continuing to fight for the redress of the inequalities that I think continue to mar British society to all of our detriment. Over to you, Margaret. Thank you very much.

04:39:

Right Honourable Dame Margaret Hodge (MH):

Thanks so, so much, Sarah for that very, very generous introduction. It's a real double pleasure to be talking to you both as chair of the council here at Royal Holloway. Delighted to see the emergence of the Gender Institute and also, I worked with Sarah when she supported us in parliament on gender issues, so I'm pleased to be here with you today. I'm going to just rattle through things in my life and hope that actually, my experiences reflect a little bit the journey of feminists.

05:16:

I've been a feminist throughout my adult life. I'm old enough to say that I participated in the women's consciousness raising groups that Sheila Rowbotham organised in the sort of, late sixties and early seventies. And then I fought for women's equality when I was in local government as a councillor, both as a backbencher and then leader of the council in the 1980s – lots of interesting stories about feminism in those days. And then, feminism has really influenced and informed all the actions that I've ever taken in every position that I've had, particularly in the Blair/Brown years and beyond.

06:01:

I'm just gonna talk about the impact it's had. I'm a glass half full individual. So, I like to think that there's been definite progress through my lifetime on feminism. But, but, but. I start with, in 1971, at that time I was an economist working in Unilever in the economics and statistics department – just before then I was there. And a friend of mine had her first baby, and I tell you this was 1971 – and I know that seems ages ago to you, it sort of feels like yesterday to me. She had to work up until the point that she was in labour at her desk. She went into labour, had the baby, and the first phone call she got from Unilever was to say if she wasn't back in two weeks, her job would go. So, that was terrible.

07:02:

In 1978, I was a member of Islington Council and I chaired the Housing Committee, and I was pregnant with my third child, I've got four children. And I went and saw the then leader of the council and told him that I wanted maternity leave. And nobody had ever done that before and I think he was kind of taken aback that I should ask for it, so I did. He had to give it to me. I had six months off but when I came back after having had my baby, what happened was that I was voted out of the office of those days, of running the Housing Committee. Fast forward to now, so we've got 52 weeks of maternity leave, we get 90% of pay in the first six weeks, then you get statutory maternity pay for another 33 weeks, we've got shared parental leave, we've got adoption leave, we've got the right to request flexible working, unpaid parental leave and we've got childcare. And this is the but. I now look at my children and see where they're going and I'm just going to tell you three stories from my immediate family.

08:11:

So, one of my daughters works for a London local authority. She fell pregnant with her second child, and they tried to make her redundant when she was on maternity leave. That's the public sector. My daughter-in-law worked for a big firm of lawyers in Leeds and they literally gave her an offer she couldn't refuse the day before she had her first baby. So that's the private sector. My niece works in the voluntary sector in London and she had to have IVF treatment. Her organisation got rid of her because she was taking so much time off to have the IVF treatment. So, all the advances that I think we made through my generation are still questionable and the lesson I learned from that – it's my first important message – it's that you can never afford to take your foot off the accelerator. You've just got to keep going on those very basic issues that will promote and support women's equality.

09:21:

I just want to put out one or two stories of when I was in local government. So, I became leader in 1982 in Islington in a London council. And we were seen as a radical – as Sarah said, in those days described by Margaret Thatcher and the conservative press as 'Loony Left'. But I do remember – I was leader, the chair of the Labour group was a woman, both of us had young children, but it took us three years to persuade all our colleagues that meetings should start at half past 7, not at 7 o'clock. So, you just had that extra half hour to put the babies to bed before you went out in the evening and it just allowed you to balance your life. Three years because all the men wanted to get the meetings earlier, so they'd finish earlier and get to the pub.

10:13:

The other thing which Sarah alluded to, we did do in those days, some radical reforms, too. We were absolutely lambasted for this. First of all, we did away with any eligibility rules for maternity rights. So, you didn't have to work for the authority for two years before you were eligible to take time off to have a baby. And everybody thought this was completely potty, but of course, you don't come to a place of work simply to have a baby. It made absolutely no difference to the number of women who sought maternity leave, but it gave those who were our workers much greater flexibility and loyalty, actually to the organisation.

10:57:

The second thing Sarah alluded to, we introduced workplace nurseries and actually, we modelled them on what HSBC was doing because they were one of the first innovators in workplace nurseries. But I can't tell you how we were lambasted for that – for wasting taxpayer's money. And what is interesting about that is what was seen as completely 'Loony Left' then has become accepted orthodoxy today.

11:26:

So, I became an MP in 1994. I was 50 by then and I think that has been really important learning for me throughout my adult life. Life is a marathon, not a sprint, particularly for women. So, I think there's a total obsession that you've got to achieve everything when you're very young, you can't let yourself fall behind, but actually our working lives are very, very long and while it's very difficult if you pull out of the labour market altogether, I think you can think of it as a marathon. Especially, all of you who are students now – you're gonna be working probably into your eighties, or seventies or eighties. So, a couple of years out to care for a parent or to care for a child is not the end of the world. Life is a marathon, and you should be aware of that. I think, actually, when I was thinking about this, Sarah, I looked at some successful women, just to make this case for older women. I get totally fed up when the agenda for older women is all about our pension rights and our care. Actually, what I want it to be about is our contribution to society. Look at Mary Berry, we'll all have seen on telly. She's 86! Look at Glenda Jackson, who has done a fantastic comeback out of politics back into acting. She's 84. Helen Mirren is 75. And then, two of my favourites, is a woman called 'Baddiewinkle' who is 92 and who became an internet sensation at the age of 85 – wears crazy clothes, she promotes the legalisation of medical marijuana, she fights ageism, and she's got three and a half million followers on Instagram, so join her. Daphne Selfe, who is a model, who is also 92, she's been a model since 1949 and again if you look her up, she looks absolutely stunning. When I arrived at the House of Commons in '94, I was the 165th woman ever to be elected as a Member of Parliament. That is a shocking statistic. Even in 1994, only one in ten MPs were women. A friend of mine who is sadly no longer with us, but who was a close colleague of mine in parliament, Tessa Jowell, who came in just a couple of years before me used to say that when she became an MP, so it was about the same number, there were more MPs whose first name was John than there were women MPs in parliament. So, that has been terrible. Today we're a third of the House. Labour, over half of our MPs are women, but in the Conservative party it's still under a quarter. Britain always kind of promotes itself, but we are not good on the global league table on women's representation, with Rwanda being top. Nearly two out of three, with Cuba and Bolivia being not far behind. We come down about a third in the global league table.

14:45:

I'm going to talk to you about how I became a candidate. Sarah, again, mentioned the wonderful Jo Richardson, who was a brilliant feminist particularly – all her life – but particularly the Kinnock years. She sadly died so I stood for election. I knew nobody in Barking when I went there, and these are quite funny stories. So, all I had was a list of members and I had to persuade the members of the Labour party that they should support me. So, my first port of call was the women's section. I go off to the women's section, thinking 'I can find some friendship here.' They ask me three questions. They asked me, if I was pro-hanging, if I was anti-abortion, and if I was anti-immigration. It was a complete

culture shock to me. I told them that I believe in the women's right – there's a big Catholic population in Barking so that's where the abortion question arose from – so I told them I was certainly against capital punishment, that I was very much pro-choice, and what I should have picked up actually, because this '94, was the growth of the fascist right. I had to fight the British National Party in 2010 which came out of the immigration question. But I am myself an immigrant. I wasn't born here. So, again, I took that. I got their vote. But when I actually went to the large meeting that finally selected me, I was the only woman on the shortlist, and I was the only candidate who was asked about my childcare arrangement. So, sexism was rife. Today, it's completely different. We have all women's shortlist now in the Labour party. So, in half of the winnable seats you have to have an all-women's shortlist. Strongly opposed measure, but an incredibly successful measure and I can't begin to describe the number of really talented, able women who are now with me in parliament and many of whom I'm privileged to mentor and support from the experience I've had down the years. And had we not had all-women's shortlists it simply wouldn't happen because it was for half our seats, so for those seats that didn't have an all-women's shortlist, you could choose a woman, or you could choose a man. All of them chose men. There's a very interesting issue that is now upon us, because we've just over 50% of Labour MPs are women, so, I think legally we are no longer allowed to have all-women's shortlists because we've overcome the disadvantage. I'm petrified of that; I think many of us are. We'll have to see what that does to the selection of women and women's representation in the Labour party in parliament at the next General Election. But positive action is absolutely essential. We can debate it perhaps, afterwards. We would not have the women representing us that we have today if we hadn't got positive action.

17:59:

So, when I arrived in '94, what were my first impressions? Well, there was one ironing board in the whole of the Palace of Westminster and that was located in the women's lavatories. There were hardly any women's toilets because there were so few women. You could go through the lobbies and you couldn't go to the loo. The pink ribbons that existed were in the cloakroom, and they were pink ribbons that used to signify the fact that everybody used to hang their swords in the cloakroom. And if you look at what the sketch writers used to write about women from the '94 through to the early Blair years – whenever they wrote about women, they wrote about what they looked like and how they sounded and when they wrote about men, they wrote about what they said. It was just extraordinary. So, they talked about cleavages, they talked about hair, they talked about screeching voices, those sorts of things. They never focused on what we said, it was what we looked like. We weren't confident and I look back at some of the things we did in those days in horror. Some of you may have seen the picture of the over a hundred women that came into parliament in '97 with Tony Blair, the 'Blair Babes' photograph of all of us together. I think that was horrifying, awful. It was a sort of, with him at the centre, the man at the centre, and all of the supplicant women around him. And the other, quite funny story was, there was a great focus on what we looked like. There was a woman at that time called Barbara Follett who helped us with our colour-coding, hairstyles and make-up. I resisted going to her for ages. We all wore the same, sort of, puffed up little jackets, we all looked as if we were in uniform, but I tell you, my funny experience of her. I resisted going to see her, they wanted me to go and see her when I was leader of Islington. It was a whole day, and in those days, I didn't have to wear any make-up unlike today. But I just wasn't interested in all that sort of

stuff. But eventually my press office said, 'you just have to do it, Margaret.' So, I go along, it was a whole ruddy day, worrying about it. But you come out of it and I thought, 'well I better do what it tells me.' So, it colour-coded me, told me what colour my hair was, it was all run by Barbara Follett who told me in make-up. I went and spent £90 on make-up, which was a lot of money in those days, because I never wore any. I went to the hairdresser and said, 'tint me this colour', and she said, 'I'm not sure about that, Margaret.' I said 'no, no, I've been colour-coded.' So, she said 'I'll put a bit of that stuff that comes out of your hair in it, just to see whether it works.' So, she did that and I went off and bought jackets that were supposed to be my colour. Didn't tell anybody else quite what I'd done. The next few times I was on television, my friend said to me, 'what's the matter with you, Margaret? You look so old.' So, I binned the whole of the Follett gear and went back to not wearing make-up. So, I think there were things we did which were, sort of, showed our lack of confidence and somehow, we had to display ourselves in a particular way to get that confidence. I've always had to struggle with the balance in your life. So, as an MP it is very difficult, struggling with your responsibilities in the family and at home and being a really good representative in parliament. And I'm going to tell you three early stories about that.

21:53:

A friend of mine who came in in about '94 to '97, had tiny children. One of her children had her third birthday, so she just wanted the time off to go to that birthday party and was told firmly by the whips that she couldn't do that. The second story is, when I first arrived in parliament, you know, the journalists take you out for lunch, you're pretty naïve, you don't quite understand how to do it. So, a *Sunday Times* journalist took me out for lunch. Which I still believe in, I think you could have jobshare MPs. I think it's a really good job that could be jobshared. We usually vote on party lines, we very rarely vote on things like fox hunting, or maybe abortion issues and those sorts of issues that become free issues. Most of them are on the whip and the rest you could certainly share, and I think that would bring a very interesting cohort of women into parliament. So, I talked to her about this. She then ran an article with a photo of me in the *Sunday Times* on the following Sunday. I came into parliament on the Monday, was hauled into the Whip's office by the whips. They had my photograph up on the wall and they were throwing darts at it. And the message was, if I didn't like the conditions under which I had become an MP, there were plenty of others who wanted the job, and I was not to complain.

23:23:

The third one is quite a funny one. Tony Blair then got elected as leader of the Labour party. And one of the great things for your constituents is to sit behind your leader at Prime Minister's Questions because then you're seen by your constituents and they all think you're working jolly hard. It sort of gives the image rather than the reality. So, I went into Prime Minister's Questions half an hour early to make sure I got a seat behind Tony Blair, sat down, PMQs started and in those days, we didn't have mobiles, we had pagers, and suddenly my pager goes off and it's my 15/16-year-old at home who's revising for her GCSEs and she said 'ring home. Crisis. Urgent.' I thought 'oh my God, there's a gas explosion. She's set fire to the house. She's going to tell me she's pregnant.' So, I leave the seat, go out, pick up the phone, say, 'for heaven's sake Anna, what's wrong?' and she said, 'oh nothing, mum, I just wanted to see whether or not you had your pager on silent.'

24:37:

So, there was sort of, a whole lot of things like that but women have made a difference in parliament. We have made a massive difference. And certainly, in government, we work together collaboratively, the women who were ministers, to achieve huge things that simply would not have happened had we not been there as part of the cohort of ministers. It's difficult to pick out but I'll just pick out some. When we introduced the tax credit system, Gordon Brown wanted to put it into what we called 'the wallet'. So, it would go into the men's wage slip. We insisted that there should be the right to put it into 'the purse' rather than 'the wallet'. We won that battle. The whole of the childcare program simply wouldn't have started. I was very privileged to be Children's Minister to appear in this, and you know, saw the childcare and Sure Start program through. But, without us it would never, ever, ever have happened. Sure Start might have done, childcare never would've done. And we always struggled to make it better. All the stuff through from domestic violence through to female genital mutilation, all that was promoted by the women MPs. All of improvements in maternity leave and maternity pay. And then, one of the ones that I always talk about is flexible working. We all know that actually, having the ability to choose when you work makes a fantastic difference to coping with balancing your life. There were a group of us who wanted to introduce the right to request flexible working and both Tony Blair, who was then Prime Minister, and Gordon Brown, who was then Chancellor, both were totally opposed to it. So, it was a completely concerted effort by women ministers working together with the women who were in number 10 and therefore influencing him from that. Working with women trade unionists by just, all of us, badgering and constantly going on, we finally got them to agree to put it on the statute book. And I think it's been one of the most important and lasting reforms that we ever did. Every job, I was very privileged, I was a minister throughout the Blair/Brown years except for the first and every job I did, I always think I left a feminist legacy behind. Some have survived, others haven't. Actually, funnily enough in what is "BAZE" today I introduced a 'Women in Business Taskforce' and that is still there today, so I'm proud of that. I've said before, I did all the work around childcare and Sure Start and as Children's Minister I used to go proudly around the country speaking at conferences and saying, you know, 'we've opened a new frontier of the welfare state' and I really thought we'd created something that could not be destroyed. I didn't realise how easy it would be for the Conservatives - and the coalition and the Conservative government - to undermine particularly the Sure Start program and childcare, I mean childcare now, there's not enough of it, it's too expensive and the quality is abysmal. So, all those, sort of key aspects that we thought were so important were there. Flexible working has survived, and then, I'm gonna finally tell you a story of something that didn't survive.

28:10:

I became Culture Minister at - I can't remember - about 2006/2007. I arrived, and one of my responsibilities was for appointments of people to the boards of things like the Tate Gallery, the National Theatre, you know, the big orchestras. The big cultural appointments, big national appointments. Only about 24/25 percent of those appointments were women. So, I was determined to turn that round. And it wasn't difficult. There were tonnes of women with the right experience and talent and expertise and commitment to do the job, so all we did was build a list of possible women. I had terrible fights with the male chairs of these bodies. But within a year we went from 25 percent to 50 percent. So, I was really proud of that. I then had to take a year out of office because my husband was terminally ill,

so I took a year out to care for him. I came back, and to be fair it was Gordon Brown who kept the job open for me, so after my husband died, I went back again into DCMS and you couldn't believe it, but in a year, it had gone back from 50 percent back to 26 percent. So, that again shows the difficulty in sustaining these things.

29:35:

Throughout all this work, networking is hugely important. I think I've always been a member of endless women's networks and I think just that, supporting each other, talking to each other, helping each other, holding each other's hands as you go through difficult times. There's nothing that beats that in trying to break through glass ceilings, promote women into jobs, all those things really, really matter, just sharing the frustrations and difficulties of managing your lives as women. All that has been really, really important to me.

30:08:

The other thing is mentoring. I think for me, growing the next generation of women, and for them to grow the generation after that is really absolutely vital in that continuing fight for women's equality and keeping your foot always on that accelerator. That has meant that I've always worked with women from across the political spectrum. It was much, much easier if I'm absolutely honest before this parliament. I just think, for example, there are just endless women. Caroline Spelman, we worked a lot with. Justine Greening, I worked with. And I remember when she first spoke at the dispatch box as a junior treasury minister, she did that answering questions in the question's session for treasury without a note. She did it completely, you know, spontaneously. Which is incredibly brave and she was really effective. I went up to her after - and that's the sort of comradery - and said, 'that was brilliant, Justine.' So, that sort of, image you've got of this 'ya-boo' environment, it's true about the chamber, it's got much, much worse in recent years, but actually behind the scenes there is a lot of collaboration with women. Now, Caroline Nokes is, I think, needs special mention for the work she's doing, trying to keep the women's agenda going. So, you look at things like sexual harassment, look at baby leave which we've introduced, look at now maternity leave for women ministers, look at abortion rights in Northern Ireland, something that Stella Creasy promoted that we got through by cross-party cooperation. And look at now, we're just now, all working together on a bill that is about to come to parliament on online harms which is going to start holding the social media platforms to greater accountability for allowing harm and abuse which is so often - I mean I've experienced it massively myself, but it is very often misogynistic hate stuff online. We're cooperating. But today is different.

32:22:

I am absolutely devastated by Liz Truss, and her failure, really, to understand feminism. She gave a keynotes speech just before Christmas on equality. She only mentioned feminism once. She rejected the idea that being a woman could ever be a barrier to success. She rejected quotas and targets without any real explanation. She has stopped the unconscious bias training, probably that Sarah was partly responsible for bringing in as a way of trying to mitigate discrimination against women. She believes that people should be defined by their individual character, not by their 'protected characteristics'. And she said in that speech, 'I'm calling time on 'pink-bus' feminism. Women get opportunity by increased competition and boosted transparency.' And most awfully, her appointment to protect women's issues

on the Equality and Human Rights Commission is one, Jessica Butcher who is a digital entrepreneur. And I don't say this to be partisan I just say it to be critical. But she thinks modern feminism disempowers women, and she thinks that the 'MeToo' Movement ruined men's reputations without due process. So, I fundamentally disagree with a take that is now being promoted by the Johnson government.

34:10:

I think we still have the same challenges that brought me into feminism a long, long time ago. Whether it's about balancing our lives, high quality, easily accessible, affordable childcare. Whether it's smashing the endless glass ceilings. All those challenges are there. There are new challenges, some of which are difficult for feminists. The debate about transsexuality, I think shouldn't divide us, we should listen to each other's viewpoints and just discuss the issue and come to some sort of way of living with each other on it. I think the issue about intersectionality is really interesting and difficult. Can I talk about the discrimination that a black woman faces? Well, I hope that I can listen properly. That I can try and understand the issues that confront women who are also black. But I hope, also, that they can accept that I can campaign and advocate on their behalf if I've done that listening and understanding. What we have to remember, is we have far, far much more in common as women and we should build on that and not allow these issues to divide us.

35:31:

The things that made me a feminist in my youth still matter to me today. The struggle for equality remains ever-present, ever-relevant, and ever-important, and for me the binding words of Martin Luther King are what drive me on my feminism and other issues. When he said, 'our lives begin to end on the day we become silent about things that matter, and I never will.' Thanks, Sarah.

36:08:

SC:

Thank you, Margaret. I knew you'd give us a rich account. I hadn't realised I'd be quite so moved. I feel like I'm slightly dog-tied in some of these efforts and campaigns, but actually that was really wonderful. My new mantra is going to be 'always leave a feminist legacy wherever you go'. I think that would be something that would be rather marvellous if many of us who wish to change the world actually thought in those kinds of terms.

36:33:

I think your comments about the politics of feminism remind us that women's bodies do not equate with feminist minds, and we need to be aware of that. I thought that was a really important point to make. I thought your comments around personal resilience and how you collectively act to become more resilient was really, really fascinating. If you're a glass half empty person, then that requires such a lot of strength and I thought it was interesting the way that you talked about how that was also a collective strength, it wasn't just about you as an individual. It was about your networks and also how there's lessons learnt from your own networking, moved to mentoring.

I'm going to ask a couple of questions and then obviously open the chatroom as they say these days.

37:23:

I thought your comments about the sort of, performance of politics was really interesting. The way in which not only the way that the media will judge how you look, but that your colleagues and your party strategists and that others expect a certain kind of presence and way of doing politics. I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about that in the everyday. To what extent do you feel that you have to perform politics as it's been historically done, you know, the grand speeches, commanding the room, that very sort of, adversarial politics that characterised – you're right, it's only the chamber and not in other places – but to what extent is that a barrier to women achieving more in greater numbers in leadership perhaps in British politics? Because we see 'leaders' as very much in male bodies, in male elite bodies.

38:14:

MH:

I mean, you've got me on something, Sarah. Which is, I'm a glass half full person. But you've got me on something that's quite depressing. So, I think people still worry about what you look like. I mean, if you're a woman, it's still a very defining feature. Even now, when I'm on telly, the first comment – even my empathetic Labour colleagues will be, 'you look great, God, your make up was good that day, Margaret.' Even on that level. So, it is always there. The reason I'm depressed is that – I'm going to contrast the chamber to what I did as chair of the Public Accounts Committee because I failed to talk about that little period and that was quite interesting. In the chamber, when I first arrived in parliament, you would go into the chamber at these national moments, so for example, to hear Tony Blair talk about Northern Ireland, or David Blunkett talk about 9/11, or Robin Cook talk about Iraq, or Gordon Brown talk about the big crash. These were really profound, big moments and people gave really powerful, intellectually bound together speeches. I've now, since 2010, it's got gradually worse and worse and worse and I now can't stand it because it's such Bullingdon Club Boy banter and it's always getting at a person and not dealing with the issue. I think that we have lost the dignity and the importance of those moments in the chamber when you can make a difference. Even Geoffrey Howe, think about his speech in Margaret Thatcher's day. There's endless examples. That just doesn't happen anymore. I regret that. I don't know how we get that back. I don't think you can with Boris Johnson, you certainly couldn't with Jeremy Corbyn. I think Theresa May actually did try and deal in a dignified way but because she was opposite Jeremy Corbyn it just never, ever worked and she never could give a really intellectually sort of, massively robust defence of even Brexit or any of these big moments. Contrast that with a PAC, where I became the first – I should have talked about that a little, will you give me a minute to do that, Sarah. Is that alright?

40:54:

In 2010, when Labour lost the election, I didn't want to go back and be on the Opposition frontbench, so somebody said, 'stand for the Public Accounts Committee'. There had never been a woman chair before. You know, finance is a boy's job. Still true today to some extent. It was the first time we'd had elections, previously the job had been appointed by

the whips and the party leaders. So that election was really important. And I hadn't been a House of Commons groupie because I had been a minister throughout the Blair/Brown years. I spent my time in departments and in cabinet meetings and not very much in parliament, so I didn't know a lot of MPs. I was up against six men. So, I had to win this election and I had two weeks in which to do it. And all I did was go around and talk to people and every woman MP, I didn't know them very well – a third of the parliament was new so none of us knew them, the others I just didn't know. What I said was, 'I'm a woman, vote for me, they've never had a woman before.' And I think that did help actually in that climate. I'd also just beaten the BNP, so I had some cross-party credibility for seeing off the BNP. So, I think those two factors together made me win. But the interesting thing is, select committees reflect parliament, so we had a majority of Conservatives on our committee. Our committee was there to oversee and hold to account the government for economy efficiency and effectiveness. We produced, some of you may remember, we were always in the news. We produced very often, very critical reports. Both in the Labour government of which I'd been a member and then later on – because you look back at the previous record – and then of the Conservative government. The interesting thing is, we produced in my five years in that job, 247 reports. 246 were unanimous. So, although we had a strong Conservative majority, and they were highly critical of the Conservative coalition government, we managed to get unanimity, only one was contentious and that was on the sale of Royal Mail, which came up just before the 2015 election, so it was just a bit too political to consider then. And I'd like to think that one of the reasons that we were able to build that consensus was because the style was so different in the committee room and I like to think it's because I'm a woman and therefore set a much more collaborative style, was able to say sorry now and again when I predictably annoyed the Tories on my committee, didn't think it was the wrong thing to say sorry and was able to build a much more consensual, collaborative team that we managed to be an effective committee, do our job properly, be really critical but do that through unanimity.

44:04:

SC:

Thank you. And I think what's also interesting in that example is how a formal rule change, which wasn't intended to have gendered effects really rebalanced the institution and opened up opportunities that women were able to exploit. And I think that's an ongoing question: the extent to which select committees enable women to participate in leadership positions and to then engage in different ways of undertaking politics. The reason I keep looking down is I've got a student who's going to be typing me a question very soon, but I shall wait for that. In the meantime, while I wait for that, can I just ask you about the hybrid parliament and your feelings. We've seen members who have either hidden disabilities or caring responsibilities wanting to participate. We saw those scenes with Tracey Crouch MP, a woman with breast cancer asking why she couldn't participate in a debate on breast cancer because of the rules and I just wondered if you might say a little bit about how this hybrid parliament, the ability to sometimes participate remotely may be part of trying to make the institution more diverse. I know you have views on that and I'm just gonna pick up my phone from my student while you answer that.

45:18:

MH:

Right, I've been shielding obviously because of my age although I've had the job now so hopefully, I can go back soon. I cannot believe Jacob Rees-Mogg would not really open up all the procedures in parliament to allow people to participate remotely. And it did take Tracey Crouch, and I should have mentioned that really in my talk because it was a really clear key moment. It did take her just making a heck of a fuss when she wasn't allowed to participate in that debate on breast cancer to force Boris Johnson to overrule Jacob Rees-Mogg and allow us to participate virtually. I think we're all getting better at virtual participation, you know, we're all – think about yourselves, and think about actually how, I think Royal Holloway has been utterly brilliant and much better than most universities at translating it, going online and teaching online in an interactive way. So, we're getting better at it.

46:24:

So, at the beginning, I used to think when I asked a question, at the beginning you were only allowed to ask questions really, that was your only way in which you could participate. Now, it's a bit stilted. It still is, you can't interrupt speeches. There's a little bit of that – you know, when a minister is saying something you know is a load rubbish and you're desperate to get up and say, 'hang on a minute, that's just not true', or 'that's wrong', you can't do that remotely. But I have now moved amendments on tackling financial crime and money laundering from home. Again, not as effective as I'd have live to have been as I couldn't actually lobby Tories to get them to support our amendment and the only way we could get it through is by lobbying Tories. You've got to do that face to face. But we can do that, we can now participate in debates and we're learning. We're getting better and better at it. And certainly, the one thing I would say, Sarah, the voting is transformative. I don't like having proxy votes, actually. I want to be able to vote myself. At the moment you do it through proxy votes. But I can't tell you, having just, you know, being able to do it on your mobile from wherever you are, just transforms your life. Instead of just sitting around – prating around, to be honest – in the lobbies forever and ever. Voting, it's a terrible waste of your time. But being able to express your political votings remotely, I just wish we could get that back. It's a reform I've wanted for a long, long time. Again, Jacob Rees-Mogg, who is just such a force for 'conservatism with a small c' is resisting like mad. So, some things don't work as brilliantly as you'd like, but on the whole, the way that it's enabled participation and the way that it will again enable women, particularly, to take part I think has been really important. I hope we can maintain it beyond coronavirus.

46:26:

SC:

Thank you very much. I will of course open the chat up to questions, but in the meantime some people are gonna send me some questions there. I'm just gonna read a question from one of my students who I'm afraid had to leave for another class. She wants to ask about the impact of the sexist media on women's participation in politics and whether the fact that it's sort of so omnipresent and everywhere that actually nobody really does anything about it. Talking really about the 'bystander effect' if you like. But the idea that it's just, there's nothing you can do about it and how do we transform our media to actually represent women in politics much more fairly?

49:09:

MH:

I mean, I think it's the abuse on social media which is the worst. So, that was never around when I started in politics. And if I just say to you, since I've been campaigning against the anti-Semitism in the Labour party, I have just been subjected to absolutely horrific, horrific, horrific, horrific abuse on social media. In the two months of October and November last year, I don't look at it myself, and there's an organisation called 'Community Security Trust' which looks at all my social media and collects it. They came to see me, in those two months I had 90,000 mentions on social media, really Facebook and Twitter are the most important ones. Although some of it was support that was just at the time when the Equality and Human Rights Commission report came out, so it was at the time when all the contentious stuff about Jeremy Corbyn's position was in the media. It was horrible. Endless death threats. You almost get to the point where you ignore the death threats although they refer them to the police. I think there is something we can do about that. We've got this proposed legislation from the government, the 'Online Harms' bill, which I think was probably at first – the other thing to say Sarah, there's been research done. There's a very right-wing website called 'A Storm Front' or something like that which is American based. And somebody – I can't remember who – did some research there. And what is so interesting is that it's anti-feminism of course, and it's anti-Semitic, of course. And it's interesting that the two are linked so lots of the anti-feminist postings link it to anti-Semitism so it looks like Jews are responsible for feminism, which in a way is quite a nice thing to be told. But it just shows that intersectionality, again, of abuse. But what it did show, and this was quite interesting was that at the time they did it, I think it was about 2018 so it's a couple of years out of date, prominent politicians at that time who were Jewish were Ed Miliband and John Bercow, and prominent Jewish women politicians were Luciana Berger and myself. Luciana and I got 15% more mentions on that website than John Bercow and Ed Miliband, both of whom were better known. So, there's a real misogynist strand through the way in which social media is used.

52:04:

So, we've got this Online Harms bill. It's going to put a duty of care on the platforms. I don't think it goes strong enough and I think the two reforms I'm looking for and they're contentious. What I want is contentious and other people may have views here today. I think gone are the days where we can allow total anonymity online. I say that knowing and wanting to protect those for whom anonymity is really important. So, if you're a whistleblower or a victim of domestic violence or a victim of child abuse. All those people want anonymity. But I think in the same way that PayPal knows the identity of all their users, the platforms should also know the identity of theirs. Not to reveal them, but if anybody then actually uses the platform to put on harm or messages of hate or whatever, that they can then be identified and referred to the relevant statutory body and I think that of itself would immediately cut massively, will have a deterrent effect, and cut massively the online abuse.

53:25:

Then the other thing is, I'm just fed up of these incredibly powerful platform providers. We saw that with Facebook and Australia recently. I think the only way you're gonna change their behaviour and make them responsible on allowing harm and hate to be so omnipresent on their platforms is by making them individually responsible as directors of their platforms. I have the same view of money laundering, that the only way you'll stop the banks allowing them to be used as vehicles for money laundering is if the directors of the banks become culpable. So, I would put responsibility, be it criminal or civil, on the owners of those platforms and I think that again would completely transform the attitude. So, if we can get the Online Harms going, it won't deal with everything, but I think you know, I think of myself today in my 20s would I go into politics with all this absolutely vile abuse, and I think I would because I want to change the world, but equally I think the abuse would make me think twice.

SC:

Thank you very much. Can I ask if you have time for some questions or whether you're needing to go?

MH:

Yeah, I don't mind, I'm OK.

SC:

Can I ask people to raise their hands or put something in the chat? We don't have Margaret for much longer. OK. I have Rosie Meek, please.

55:08:

Rosie Meek (RM):

Hi Margaret, thanks for a wonderful presentation. Just as a side note, I'm sitting here with my mother because we're in lockdown together. She's about your age and raised me as a single mother and was brought to tears by what you said, so thank you. But my question is: we haven't met but I was previously head of the Law School, the founding head of the Law School and I think we have a wonderful history at Royal Holloway, obviously. But I understand that about 20 years ago you were the university's minister, and I'd be really interested to hear your own reflections on what you think are the key issues in terms of gender equality in higher education at the moment? I mention that also because as recently as 2013, when I arrived at Royal Holloway and became the head of what was then Criminology and Sociology, I think there were about 22 academic departments. Only two of us were women. Now, things have massively improved since that point but that was only eight years ago so I'd be really interested to hear your reflections on what us feminist leaders in higher education should be doing.

56:14:

MH:

Much more! I've been shocked really, if I'm honest with you. I only had a year as Higher Education minister and I think, you know, it was a contentious year because we were developing the policy of what were known as 'top-up fees'. I actually supported that at the time because it was always going to be a contribution to education and I thought, it was part of my feminist agenda, it was much more important to put money into under 5s education because that really provided, you know, equalised life chances. And it's still true of HE today, we're still too middle class as a sector. I mean, if you're working class, I can't remember the figures, you know, you will go to university more or less, universally. Whereas if you're from a, you know come from the area that I represent it's still AT participation is very, very low and AT participation does buy you fantastic advances in your life. So, I was shocked when I came to Royal Holloway can I tell you honestly? At the, you know, I thought, 'for God's sake, this is a women's college, a women's university, come together from Bedford and Royal Holloway. It was founded as an institution to promote women's education and women's participation in higher education. And our record is poor. Our record is poor. So, I hope you will begin to see, it's quite, you know, chair of council is an odd role to have. But we do oversee strategy and it's turning a tank engine round if I'm honest with you. That's my other feeling about it. Universities are very much sort of, 'conservative with a small c' again, you know, they're very difficult institutions to transform. So, I feel it's like a tank engine that I'm confronting all the time. Even on the non-executive strategic level. But we have just appointed, Katie Normanton's gone, and we insisted that we appointed a woman there. We're creating a much more diverse council. We went out and – that's the other bit of it, that we had more women actually on council, but we didn't have people of colour on there, so I refused to appoint anyone who wasn't of colour and we found a fantastic chair of finance and chair of audit. And I think, hopefully as we, you know we're developing this new strategy with Royal Holloway, and hopefully that will free up opportunities for promotion so that you don't get this absolute clear gender imbalance in who gets promoted at the moment through the university. It's outrageous that we, as a women's college with that tradition should be performing so poorly. And on gender pay gap, we keep going back to that the gender pay gap is still lousy and unacceptable. And we need to confront that issue as well. So, I think promotion is the big issue. It's not who comes in as students. It's actually not who comes in as postgraduates. It's not that level. It's the glass ceiling effect and it's the gender pay gap. Unless you tell me otherwise, I'd be interested to hear but those strike me as being the two key issues that we need to think about. Not just think about, act on.

59:46

SC:

Do I have another hand? Laura, over to you.

59:54:

LS:

I was wondering what scholars of gender can do to provide evidence or foundation or something like that to help people who are feminist in parliament be able to make their case?

1:00:13:

MH:

The really important thing is with the current – not saying this party politically – but with the current thrust of where the Conservative government is with Liz Truss, I think it's absolutely critical that you keep presenting the evidence to show she's wrong. Absolutely critical. I sit as a visiting professor on a think tank in Kings College London and one of the constant things I talk about: universities tend to take this rather, you know, the research has got to be absolutely right, it's often blue sky thinking. It doesn't relate frequently enough in a timely manner to the public policy challenges that we're confronting today. So, just for goodness sake, give us the constant evidence to demonstrate that those are biding issues of disadvantage that women still face and the challenges of discrimination we face are still relevant. Prove her wrong. I think that's the first thing I'd say.

1:01:27:

Then the second thing that worries me, there's sort of three things. I did a session the other day with an organisation called 'Labour Women's Network' which is one of these networking organisations and one of their tasks is to support women and train them through so that they get the confidence to stand as candidates either on local authorities or hopefully, through into parliament. I hadn't been at a session with them for a few years and I thought there was a terrible feeling of victimhood in their approach and that's never been my feminism. Maybe again it's the half full/half empty syndrome but I was a bit taken aback that they felt, 'we've got to out-perform the men to be able to get there.' There's a real victimhood culture and I think that anything that can support and stop that from pervading feminism as it struggles against a government that refuses to recognise it wouldn't be very helpful.

1:02:34:

Then the third thing is, I do worry a lot about how issues around transgender issues could tear us apart. And issues about intersectionality could tear us apart. I think we've just got to have a conversation. These are difficult issues, and we may have difficult views. It puts me back actually, if I can say, back to my Sheila Rowbotham consciousness-raising days because the issue in those days was, there was a big issue about sexuality. So, there was a fight going on within the early feminist movement between those who – on the ground in those groups I was in – those who were, sort of, 'men haters'. It's probably a very simplistic way of putting it. And those who really, just wanted to tackle the disadvantage and you know, tackling the disadvantages that we face in society at large or in the economy or wherever it was. And we that OK, it was a contentious issue and there were tough conversations within the feminist groups and I just think that these tough issues today of intersectionality and transgender which are highly contentious but I hate to see the vilification that it's led to of, you know, really good feminists. So, I think, any support you can give us to try and have conversations about these difficult issues and understand that we stick together and don't allow them to divide us or to hit feminism in a negative way. I think that's really important Laura, I'm sure you've got other things you think I should be thinking of so maybe I should ask you the question but those are the ones off the top of my head that strike me.

1:04:24:

SC:

Thank you, Margaret. I think this might have to be your final question, but I've got a question from an undergraduate who says, 'what advice would you give to a 20-year-old who wants to become an MP or what advice would you give to your 20-year-old self if you were giving it from your perspective today? Thank you.

1:04:41:

MH:

I think if you want to change the world, which I very much did, child of the Sixties, I just thought we could create heaven on earth. If you want to change the world, one of the very, very important routes of doing that is through politics. And whilst you have a lot of downs, when you get a high and you really achieve something, there's nothing more rewarding than that. And then you go out in your community and you just see a real difference that you've made in some way and it's incredibly rewarding. So, keep that 'I wanna change the world'. And I suppose the other thing that I do tell a lot of people who come and seek, who come to me as a mentor. Don't feel you've got to come in at 20. Don't think you've got to come in at 30. You've got your whole life ahead of you and I think there is something to be said about doing things that help keep you in the political frame, allow you to be a political activist, perhaps change things at some level in politics, whether it's through an NGO, whether it's through university, whether it's through local authorities, whether it's through the trade union movement, but there are all sorts of ways. But don't feel you've got to come into parliament at a very young age, because actually, ironically the way that parliament works is that, really, people see you as young from the day you come in, so it's not your chronological age that counts, it's the age when you join. And we've had a lot of really, really great people who have joined us in their more mature years and that's brilliant! You bring all the experience, the expertise of life and the experiences you've gone through to bare. So, we want to mix the voices. So, do do it if you want to change the world, but don't feel you've got to do it yesterday.

1:06:37:

SC:

Thank you. I've had one other question from a student. I would've ruled out staff but I'm going to indulge myself and exploit you. I've got a student who would like to ask – so if you can do that, Sampada. And this really will be our last question. Apologies to anybody else, thank you.

1:06:58:

Sampada:

Thank you so much, Professor. I enjoyed the conversation, and it was very empowering. I have a question: as a feminist, there are many situations where we do not wish to take sides and as women it becomes really difficult for us to stay neutral because constantly there's a pressure for us to take a side. Were there any situations where you wanted to be neutral

but had to take a side given the situation and if I ever wanted to run for office and then I decided I wanted to take a side; how would I have to deal with such a situation?

2:07:37:

MH:

I think the issue about transgender is one. If you think of the current – it's one where you know, you're very often said, 'what, where's your view, where do you stand on this, what do you stand on that?' And I think that the most important thing is just, because it's such a difficult issue, is to try and say, 'let's have a conversation, let's keep a conversation and see if we can build a consensus', which recognises feminism or however we want to define it and describe it. So, I think that's really important, but equally I think, also, I've just been through four very, very – four/five – very, very difficult years of battling racism in my own party from anti-Semitism, that's the other side of the coin really. And one of the things that I would always remember is those who had the courage within my party to stand up and support me in what was often a very, very lonely battle. But too many of the others who chose to stand aside, and the ones who did stand up and support me, not Jewish many of them, were mainly women. It was mainly women who really had the – and it was the women Jewish MPs who led the battle against anti-Semitism Labour. And one of my really sad reflections is out of the four of us, Luciana Berger, Ruth Smeeth, Louise Ellman, and myself, and we led it. The male Jews just didn't want to take part. We were supported by lots of wonderful women MPs, but out of those four, I'm the last one left. And that is a real indictment of my own political party. So, there are times when you have got to stand up and be counted, and women are better at doing that. But there's also times when you just want to engage in a conversation when the issue is just, you can see it, there are two sides to it.

1:09:40:

SC:

Thank you, and in closing I want to thank Margaret Hodge of course, for speaking for, as I've already said, moving many of us, and also inspiring us. I think many of the topics you've been discussing today are hard. They are hugely political and come with costs. I think your emphasis on the politics of feminism and how there is an argument to be won, the world does need to be transformed is really so, so important. I think your role, well the emphasis on women's friendship as a resource in politics, I think is really important too. I'm still gonna hold onto that 'leaving a feminist legacy'. A glass half full, I will remember that now. And as I said right at the beginning, the fact that you're one of the few from those early years I think is absolutely critical and you made the point about old women throughout and then one of our speakers mentioned her mother too and I think it is really, really important that politics is about everyone and our work towards inclusion is very diverse in its inclusion. So, I'd like to thank you very much for giving us your time today and telling us those stories because I think in political stories you often really get to the crux of what actually has to be redressed in order to bring about a more just and equal society. So thank you very much, Margaret.