

A MIX OF ISSUES:

Sunday, and the sun is shining as it always seems to be in contemporary Britain. Borough High Street, South London. Shoppers, shoppers everywhere. Neil Lawson, head of Labour Left pressure group Compass, is cycling across a not very busy junction. “We’re backing Jon Cruddas [for Deputy Leader of the Labour Party],” he says, after dismounting from his bicycle. I tell him that we’re interviewing Harriet Harman. “Harriet’s all right,” he says. “She’s nice, actually.” **A real human being?** “Oh yeah, she’s definitely a real human being.” And with that he re-mounts and cycles off, without a hand signal. **(Naughty man). >>**

Harriet Harman, a nice, normal human being in the age of the New Labour technocratic terrified-of-the-voters, don’t-talk-to-me-about-ideology politician. theyworkforyou.com (and how’s that for a title that says everything about the contemporary lack of trust and near loathing that many now invest in the political elite of this country) summarises how Harman has voted on key issues since 2001, thus: Moderately for introducing a smoking ban; very strongly for introducing ID cards; very strongly for introducing foundation hospitals; strongly for introducing student top-up fees; strongly for Labour’s anti-terrorism laws; very strongly for the Iraq War; very strongly against investigating the Iraq war; very strongly for the fox hunting ban and moderately for equal gay rights. **Hmm.**

In person a couple of days later Harman is tall, energetic and smiling (sexy and playful even). We sit in her friend’s office – stacks of files, a television showing some debate or other from the floor of the House of Commons, a discarded handbag.

Harman gets a little flustered by how to start her dictaphone, sits down and holds up edition 20 of the magazine. “The Kings of Leon?” **Yes.**

“I like Keane,” she says, grinning. “They’re great.”

Good.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WEREN’T IN POLITICS?

There was a job centre opening in my constituency recently and they have a computer programme which asks questions such as: ‘do you like working outdoors?’ ‘Do you like working with your hands?’ ‘Are you artistic?’ So I did this, and the computer said I should be a Probation Officer.

IS IT REWARDING ON A

PERSONAL LEVEL BEING A PROFESSIONAL POLITICIAN?

It is about being able to make a difference and make decisions. When you are in opposition you can be in politics, but all you can do is say things: ‘It’s terrible that the Tories are cutting the money going into the health service; that they think that unemployment amongst young people is not a problem,’ and so on.

You can see the problems people have, but you cannot help them. So if your party is in opposition you can actually do more outside of politics, but when you are in government you have a real opportunity to make changes.

WHY ARE YOU RUNNING FOR DEPUTY LEADER?

Because I want Labour to win a fourth term and we’ve got a lot of things that we need to do. I don’t want us to be going back to where we were with the Tories. I represent a hard-pressed inner-city area and it was a bad time for my constituents under the Tories with high unemployment and long hospital waiting lists. My constituency was just not on the map as far as they were concerned. I want to help Gordon Brown, who I think will be Prime Minister, to win that fourth term.

The other thing is that I have always wanted to see a strong representation of women, a strong focus on families, children and the elderly, and if I am Deputy those issues will be guaranteed a seat at the top table.

WHY NOT LEADER?

Because I think Gordon Brown will be the best leader. I have worked with him for 20 years, have been his deputy before, and I have full confidence in him.

IRAQ: YOU VOTED IN FAVOUR –

I thought that there were weapons of mass destruction and we also knew that Saddam Hussein had inflicted

mass murders on the people in his own country and that he had invaded other countries in the region. So my concern was not just over what he had inflicted on his people and the regional threat that he posed, but more widely, about the prospect of weapons of mass destruction being in Saddam Hussein’s hands.

DO YOU REGRET IT NOW?

I think that you can only do what you think is right on the basis of the information that you have at the time.

It was absolutely clear that Saddam Hussein was not cooperating with the UN weapons inspectors. He was playing a cat and mouse game with them. We knew in the past that he had weapons of mass destruction because he had used them, and therefore you have to make a judgement. I don’t think that if we had known that there weren’t weapons of mass destruction the issue would have been brought to the House of Commons for a vote, so you vote on what you know at the time.

A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK THAT IN THE LEAD UP TO THAT VOTE THE INTELLIGENCE WAS COOKED UP.

All I can say is that I exercised my vote and there is no certainty in those situations. You have to make a judgement, it can be a difficult judgement and you don’t have the certainty of the situation. Opinions were divided, there were a lot of people who felt very strongly that it was not the right thing to do, but you have to make a decision on the best information that you have at the time.

HOW DEEPLY SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT INTERVENE IN OR REGULATE FREE MARKETS, AS LABOUR GOVERNMENTS USED TO DO?

I think that we still do, and for a reason. It is right that you intervene

in the labour market, for example. Everyone who is employed should have a contract of employment; no-one should be paid less than a certain amount. There should be health and safety rules to protect people at work and there should be rights to have time off when you are having young children. You can either look at these things as regulations, as a burden on business and an intervention in the free market, or you can see them as necessary.

I don’t think you can take an in-principle position. What you have to do is look and say, ‘What is the market able to do? Is it doing it well?’ In which case leave it alone. Or, actually, should the market be assisted by intervention?

AND WHAT ABOUT THE RAILWAYS AND OTHER FORMER NATIONALISED INDUSTRIES WHERE PRIVATISATION HAS NOT WORKED?

I think that starting from where we were, what we have sought to do is to ensure that more public investment goes into public transport. We also wanted them to work in a certain way, including, for example, the provision of free travel for the elderly.

The question is, with limited resources, whether you need to own those services, or whether they can operate in the way you want them to.

WHAT ABOUT STAGECOACH WHICH MADE £700 MILLION LAST YEAR, AND IS STILL BEING GIVEN MONEY BY THE GOVERNMENT FOR RUNNING PART OF THE RAILWAY. THAT’S JUST WRONG ISN’T IT?

Public investment does go to people working privately in the public sector. It pays for GPs, but they are self-employed, for example. The important thing is that such services are working properly and taxpayers are getting good value for money. >



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> IS GORDON BROWN A SOCIALIST?

I think you should ask Gordon Brown that.

THAT'S A FAIR COMMENT, BUT I CAN'T AND YOU KNOW HIM. SO, IN YOUR OPINION?

He's got clear progressive principles. He believes in a strong economy and social justice. I think for a lot of people they would not necessarily know what you mean by socialist – it means lots of different things to different people. But I can certainly explain to you that I understand Gordon is committed to tackling inequality, poverty and unemployment. Therefore I know what he stands for, what he cares about and what he wants to do.

So I would be happy to describe that, rather than put a label on him. But if he wants to put a label on himself, he can.

I WATCHED ELECTION 92 RECENTLY AND PAUL BOATENG DESCRIBED THE LABOUR PARTY AS "A DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST PARTY." A CURIOUS MOMENT BECAUSE TODAY THAT IS SOMETHING OF A DIRTY WORD.

The question is, are we social democrat or democratic socialist? For most people those terms don't mean anything. How many people know the difference between democratic socialism and social democracy? The important thing is what people stand for, what they have worked for, what they want to do and what they are

committed to. And if caring about having a strong economy so that you can have high levels of employment so people have a good standard of living, and you can tackle inequality and have good public services means you are democratic socialists then, yes, we are.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO CRITICS WHO CLAIM THAT THIS LABOUR GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN TOO TIMID IN POWER AND COULD HAVE ACHIEVED A LOT MORE?

I think that you can always say that you could have done a lot more.

SHOULD YOU HAVE?

In all sorts of areas. But when we were in opposition, for example, the idea that we could have a minimum wage was ambitious. When I was Employment Spokesperson I worked on the low pay map of Britain and looked across each region at how many people were earning less than £1.60 an hour. It was an important step to say we are going to put a bottom line underneath what employers can pay people, so that no employer can pay less than is fair and reasonable.

Now everyone takes it for granted, but that was hard fought territory, as was the policy to double investment in the NHS and cut hospital waiting lists. Today people agree with us that it was right that we should do that. So we have done good things but we need to do more.

THAT PHRASE –

A lot done, a lot more to do? Well, yes, I'm sorry if it's a soundbite, but

I believe it. We have a new law on domestic violence, but is it the case that men don't beat their wives and girlfriends, and there is no domestic homicide? Well no, so we do have more to do.

DOES SOCIAL MOBILITY MATTER?

Yes. I don't think that if you are in the Labour Party it is because you think people should be born into their station and stay there. Everybody should have an opportunity.

We don't like inequality or injustice, and the idea that you are born into a poor family and that is where you stay for the rest of your life and that your expectations are subsequently narrow and lower. That is not only wrong for the individual, it is wrong for society as a whole because society does best if it has all the talents engaged.

WHY HAS SOCIAL MOBILITY GONE DOWN UNDER LABOUR?

I think that there are a whole range of issues on which we have got to make more progress.

IS THAT TROUBLING FOR PEOPLE IN YOUR POSITION?

Social mobility is a big issue and it is a concern, as is inequality. We have done a lot to tackle absolute levels of poverty amongst children and amongst the elderly, but we also have a growing gap between rich and poor and that is worrying because societies work better if there is more sense of unity and cohesion.

STABBINGS AND SHOOTING HAVE BEEN IN THE HEADLINES

RECENTLY. ARE WE TALKING ABOUT RACE, CLASS OR POVERTY HERE?

We are talking about a whole mix of issues. What we need to do is recognise that we have to be wise before the event where these tragic events are concerned.

We have a situation now, for example, where if a young child has a problem, then the parents know where to turn. But if you have primary school or older children and they have worrying problems, then it can be more difficult to get help at that point when intervention and support is needed.

We can spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on a QC to defend somebody in the Old Bailey, but how much help and support is available to the teachers spotting the early-stage problems, or to the parents not knowing where to turn? We have got to not just sit back and analyse this as an intellectual problem; the point is to act.

THE DEGREE AND THE DEPTH OF THE RECENT VIOLENCE IS SHOCKING TO A LOT OF PEOPLE.

I think there have always been gangs, but the difference today is that the age at which kids get involved with them is dropping and the use of weapons such as guns and knives is increasing.

The other phenomenon that is worrying is the exploitation of girls in these gangs. It starts with a gang member giving presents to a young girl and then she seems to be his

girlfriend, though she is actually being groomed and exploited and then passed around. That's a new phenomenon that we need to act on and recognise for what it is, which is sexual offending.

WHY ARE SO MANY OF THE PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS BLACK?

I think that across the country as a whole that is not necessarily the case. When I was Solicitor General I dealt with a series of homicide cases – murder and manslaughter – and the overwhelming majority of the perpetrators were not black.

I don't know what the latest actual figures are but certainly in my constituency, which has a very diverse community with a high minority ethnic population, the overwhelming majority are good, hard-working people who have come here to make a better life for themselves and for their families.

PRISON WORKS - YES OR NO?

For an awful lot of people the best option is not prison. It is important that people who are dangerous are locked up and that society sees that people are punished for their crimes so there is a deterrent. But for a lot of young criminals the best thing would be non-custodial sentences such as work in the community, so the community can say what work it wants done and can see that it has been done.

There is also an issue in that too many women get sent to prison. We need to deal with these things differently.

DO TOO MANY POOR PEOPLE GET SENT TO PRISON?

One of the things that I felt very

strongly about as Solicitor General was that you shouldn't have a situation where if somebody defrauds the benefits system they get sent to prison, but if the person is a white collar criminal, who defrauds their company, then that is considered to be not so serious. It is important that the criminal justice system is fair and that it does not deal more harshly with poor people. In terms of fraud I think that has been the case.

SHOULD WE BE LOOKING AT ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR SOCIETY?

I think it is always worth looking around and seeing how other people are doing things, but I also think that we should not expect to take off the shelf any model going.

The point is to listen to what people think and say. Mostly this is not about theory; it is about practicality and about people's understanding of their own experience and their knowledge of what would make things better for them.

IN THAT CASE WHY AREN'T WE LIKE SWEDEN?

Because Sweden has had a progressive government for years while we were under the yoke of Thatcherism.

SHOULD WE BE MOVING TOWARDS A SWEDISH MODEL?

In a lot of ways we have, with regard to more generous maternity pay and leave, more nursery facilities, support for women both working outside and within the home. We are arguing for all of these things, though we cannot but help notice that they managed to get them first.

ALONG WITH ABBA –

Along with Abba, which, as we all know, is the tops. <

HARRIET HARMAN:

ANSWER THE QUESTION:

WHAT WAS THE LAST ALBUM YOU BOUGHT?

I don't buy albums. In terms of music I watch MTV from time to time and I listen to various radio stations. I'm going to refuse to tell you which ones they are.

IS IT RADIO 2?

No, it's not, but I'm afraid it's kind of – Oh God, it's Magic and Classic FM.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE ALBUM?

At the moment I'm listening again to 10,000 Maniacs.

WHAT'S THE SWEAR WORD YOU USE THE MOST?

I do quite a lot of swearing.

MINE'S 'BOLLOCKS'.

Oh, that's alright, that's not really swearing, is it? I do a bit too much swearing. [assumes a stern voice] but I'm not in favour of it when I do it. It's very satisfying, but I'm against it.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME THAT THE ROOM SPUN WHEN YOU WERE DRUNK?

I'm on the wagon at the moment. I find you can do more if you drink less. But then it means that life is more boring. <

YOU COULD HAPPILY SLEEP IN UNTIL WHICH TIME OF THE DAY?

I'm a bit of an early morning person as well as a Magic listener, so I don't sleep particularly early in the morning.

TONY BLAIR WILL BE REMEMBERED FOR WHAT?

I hope he will be remembered for making Britain a more prosperous and a fairer place.

ARE YOU SURE IT WON'T BE FOR IRAQ?

I think that mostly people are trying to get on with their lives and have a better life for themselves and their children, so I don't think that's the first thing that people think about. I hope that people will think about the good things that they agree with that Tony Blair's done, as well as having their own views as to what they think he shouldn't have done, or that he should have done more of.

DID YOU THINK LABOUR WAS GOING TO WIN IN 1992?

The opinion polls said that we had a good chance of at least having a hung parliament, so I was bitterly disappointed. It was just that people would still not vote for us, so we really had to carry on changing. <

HARRIET HARMAN – A POLITICAL LIFE:

Harriet Harman QC and MP is a high-ranking Labour politician and has been MP for Camberwell and Peckham since 1997 (previously MP for Peckham from 1982). Between 1978 and 1982 Harman was Legal Officer for the National Council for Civil Liberties. She became Labour's front-bench spokesperson for Social Services in 1984, and then for Health in 1987. After the 1992 General Election she was promoted to the Shadow Cabinet as Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury and then Shadow Secretary of State for Health. After Labour's win in 1997, Harman became Secretary of State for Social Security with a brief to reform the welfare state. She ran into trouble with this, came into conflict with her deputy, Frank Field MP, and was removed from the post in a reshuffle the following year. She returned to the government in 2001 when appointed Solicitor General (becoming the first female Solicitor General). After the 2005 General Election Harman became a Minister of State in the Department for Constitutional Affairs, with responsibilities for constitutional reform, legal aid and court processes. On 16 March 2006 Harman relinquished her Ministerial responsibilities for electoral administration and reform of the House of Lords. She stated that this was to avoid any potential conflict of interest after her husband, the Treasurer of the Labour Party, Jack Dromey, announced that he would be investigating loans made to the Labour Party which had not been disclosed to party officers. <