

Harriet Harman MP
Alice Bacon Memorial Lecture

**'From pioneers to parity?
100 years of suffrage'**

Leeds University
25th January 2018

Thank you very much, it's really great to be here and I want to congratulate Alan and Leeds University for hosting this and say how important it is for reasons that I will develop a bit more in my lecture. And I hope that other universities will follow suit because, as it's been said, it's 100 years since women got the right to vote and the right to stand for Parliament.

It's more than 70 years after Alice Bacon entered Parliament, 35 years after I got into Parliament and seven years after Rachel [Reeves] came into Parliament, but women in politics are still pioneers.

So I'm very grateful to you for inviting me to give this lecture tonight and it's an honour for me to be joining you to celebrate the achievements of Alice Bacon; to talk to you about my journey and talk about the battles that lie ahead; and it's a huge pleasure for me to be here with Rachel Reeves, who is one of the shining stars of the House of Commons. She has been elected by all her fellow MPs to be the Chair of the powerful Commons Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. She is a beacon among the young women now in Parliament and a source of great pride to us in the Labour Party, as I'm sure she is to you here in Leeds. And I think what radiates out from Rachel is 3 things.

Rachel's very committed. I knew her when she was toiling around hopelessly in Conservative seats, knocking on doors with local campaigners all around the country – she's Labour through and through. She's clever – even the most arrogant Tories defer to her. And she's tough. I'm afraid that it's the case that you still need to be ultra-committed and ultra-tough to be a young woman striving for Labour and striving for women in Parliament today. So it's a joy – and a relief – for me to see Rachel and dozens of young women in the Division Lobby in Parliament and see them surging forward with an agenda for change that is so important.

It was the Women's Movement that brought me into politics and I see Rachel and so many of her generation as daughters of the Women's Movement. And it is in that spirit that Rachel has written her book on Alice Bacon.

Now, I'm exactly halfway between Alice Bacon and Rachel, in that Alice was elected 70 years ago and I was elected 35 years ago, and Rachel is relatively new in. So I think that between Rachel's brilliant investigation into the work of Alice, and me and Rachel being here together today, we've got a perspective on women and politics that stretches back

100 years – and forward for what I hope will be another 30 years; because, Rachel, you will need to stay in Parliament a long time in order to make change, as it does really take a long time. But I think we've got it covered!

Alice Bacon was an amazing woman – a pioneer, a trailblazer – but I had never actually heard of her. Few people had heard of her. Few people would know about what she had done if Rachel hadn't written her book. And I think for the most part women are, as Sheila Rowbottom said, "Hidden from history."

You know, unless we write about ourselves and unless we write about what other women have done, history will tell us what men did, but it will not tell us what women did. And we certainly, I am afraid even until this day, can't rely on the men to include us women in their memoirs. And that's why I, having always railed against the idea of politicians writing their memoirs, denouncing them as vanity projects and a distraction from the struggle against the Tories, had to do a U-turn. Because as my colleagues from government – Alistair, Alastair, Tony, John, David – all wrote their very interesting memoirs, I would pause in the bookshop and look at the photographs, the way you always do, and there would be no women unless they were married to them or working for them.

I would then run my finger down the index and get to the H's and see no reference to myself; and this was the tipping point, because the period they were writing about was a one of massive change in women's lives – in family life, in women's sense of what it is to be a woman, in work life, in public policy – and it was invisible, just as Alice was until Rachel wrote her book. And so, I wanted to write about the big changes there had been in women's lives that the Women's Movement and Labour politics contributed to. I would urge all of you to recognise that you have to write it down, or suffer from invisibility.

To start at the outset and to remind you, that when I was growing up – and I was born in 1950 – the real aspiration for a girl was to get a husband. That was the most important thing. And once you had achieved that great aspiration, to be a good wife to that husband, many women – most women if they had worked before marriage – gave up work to get married.

There were obviously many women who worked throughout their lives, but their work was undervalued, almost invisible and regarded as pin money. Men were considered the important ones in the world of work and women were regarded as being in the world of the home.

Many women gave up work to get married. I met a woman in her eighties in Scotland who told me she had done her banking exams after leaving school and went to work in a bank. When she was 24 she gave it up to get married, because she wasn't allowed to work in the bank if she was married. But then her husband died when she was 50, so she went back to work in the bank but retired at 55, compulsorily. So, women talked about giving up work to get married – if they were teachers, if they were in the civil service – and that was regarded as a marvellous thing. Work was not as important as getting married.

My mother was very unusual in that she went to university. Very few people went to university in those days – she was born in 1918 – but even fewer women went to university. She was one of three law students at Oxford at that time and the criminal law lecturer refused to teach the women in her class, so they had to bring somebody down from London to teach them. She qualified as a barrister, but when she got married to my father she had achieved her more important ambition, as it was seen. So, of course, she gave up work. And I look back and remember her wig and barrister's gown in our dressing up box – and that's just the way things were back then.

But the Women's Movement came along in the 1960s and 1970s, building on a lot of work undertaken by women in the Labour and Trade Union movements over the years – but the Women's Movement had a new energy, which was, we were going to change everything. We weren't going to define ourselves by who we married. Until that point the most important definition was the husband. In fact, my mother regularly received letters addressed to Mr. John Harman, which to me was very odd – but that's the way it was. But we were not going to serve the husband. Why should the husband need to be served by the wife? We expected the husband to be an equal partner in marriage. We weren't going to perform vows to obey. The marriage service routinely required women to promise to obey your husband. He was the head of the household – and that was not said lightly. His word stood.

I remember one time, when the Women's Movement was at its height, challenging this ideology after returning from university. By this time my mother had gone back to college to study as a solicitor, since we had all grown up. My dad had retired by this time – he had been a doctor – and he was reading the paper at the table while my mother was cooking him breakfast; kippers, so there was a terrible smell emanating! But also, because she was going to be at the College of Law, I remember her law book propped up on the back of the stove, because she had to cook his supper as well – and that was curry, so there was another awful smell emanating! So, I looked at him, sitting, reading the paper, waiting for his breakfast, while my mother was studying her law book, cooking his breakfast and supper, and I thought, "That is not going to be for me."

And that was the spirit of the Women's Movement. We loved and admired our mothers, but we weren't going to lead their lives. We were going to lead completely different lives. We weren't going to accept the notion that there were things you couldn't do because you were a woman, nor that men were there to make all the decisions and that women were there to abide by them. The Women's Movement was determined to change all that; to change the roles in the family; to change things in the workplace; to change the law; to change politics. And the fact that this was a massive mountain to climb did not daunt us at all – we just felt that things were wrong, and we needed to work together to put them right.

One of the things the Women's Movement was very innovative in was the idea of women as allies – the notion of sisterhood. People often make jokes about sisterhood now, and use it as a rather jokey, 'bantery' term. But sisterhood was a very important part of the Women's Movement, as women had previously been seen as rivals to one other – usually in contest for a good husband. But the Women's Movement said, for the first time, that women could support each other and could make more progress if they worked together.

I remember my sister applying for a legal traineeship before the Sex Discrimination Act – [when employers] could all advertise that they preferred a man, making it hard to find a firm that would take a woman – and so she applied to a firm she knew had employed a woman. She phoned them up and said, “I want to apply for this job,” and they said she couldn’t. She asked ‘why’ and they said, “Because you’re a woman.” And she said, “But you’ve already got a woman.” And the firm replied, “That’s precisely it. If we have another, you’ll only fight.”

And that was the kind of pre-Women’s Movement notion that women were rivals. But the Women’s Movement changed that and said women are going to work together.

The scale of change was massive. Most of the things we were arguing for then are mostly accepted now. But they weren’t at the time, and there was a massive pushback and backlash – it was considered subversive. To argue that women should be equal in the family home was an attack on the family man; it was an attack on his authority; it was downright subversive.

And to say, as Erin Pizzey did, who set up the first refuge – Chiswick Women’s Aid – that if a man is beating his wife the wife should leave him. Well, that was undermining the family and undermining society. And anyway a view was promulgated – and I remember my mother warning me against it because it was the prevalent view – that if a woman was beaten by her husband she probably brought it on herself, and that somehow he was exercising his ‘obligation’ to keep her in order, by hitting her if necessary.

So the idea that women shouldn’t be hit by their husband – that it wasn’t a private family matter; that it was wrong; that if the man continued to do it the woman should run away from him; and that she would be supported by other women in doing so – well, Erin Pizzey got a bit of a dressing down for that that idea and had to fight against the subsequent backlash.

Women who argued for equal pay or for equality in the workplace were often regarded as a subversive nuisance. Not only by the employer and manager, but also by the trade unions, of which they were often a member.

I remember the case of one woman, Brenda Clarke, who worked in a munitions factory in Birmingham. They were having redundancies at the firm and it was ‘last in, first out’, except for the part-timers, who were all made to go first.

This was just after the Sex Discrimination Act had come into force, outlawing discrimination, including indirect discrimination, but of course all the part-timers were women.

Brenda Clarke, who was a member of the union, said, “This is not fair.” And the management and the unions banded together and said it was the collective agreement and if you challenge it you are undermining the union; you are undermining collective solidarity.

I was the legal officer at Liberty at the time and we took on her case, saying we had to recognise that those collective agreements – even those that had the support of unions –

were illegal if they said that women should go out the door first, and that women's work was equally important to them.

So, as Rachel has said, Alice was one of 24 women MPs in 1945. By the late 70's and early 80's when I was deeply involved in the Women's Movement and Labour politics there were only 19 women MPs out of 650. So the 'quota', if you like, was three per cent, and that was it.

But we were determined to change the face of Parliament. We thought – women all up and down the country – we've got to get into Parliament. We don't want to be asking men to do things for women. We want to be in there; to be part of the decision-making. And in my constituency, Camberwell and Peckham, when the [sitting] MP said he was going to retire, they made a decision: that in London, in the heat of the Women's Movement, they only wanted a woman MP. They didn't pass a resolution about that, but that was very much part of the spirit of it – like Rachel's constituency, Leeds West, which made a resolution [to select] a woman to increase women's representation in Parliament, and here in Leeds [Central].

So, I got selected along with a load of other women in constituencies we were going to fight in 1983. And that was going to be the moment when there was going to be a big breakthrough.

Sadly, the MP I was due to replace, Harry Lamborn, died and there was therefore a by-election. But at that time I was pregnant, hoping that by the time I'd had the baby and sorted myself out – although that never actually happens until they're about 30 – we could have a general election. But suddenly [Harry Lamborn] died; and I was 5 months pregnant. And it really was the elephant in the room. Nobody wanted to say, "For heaven's sake you're pregnant! You can't fight a by-election pregnant!"

It was mad, really, because the Women's Movement [taught you] that if anybody said you couldn't do something, you had to do it. I only had to know that somebody was thinking I couldn't stand for by-election pregnant to know I was going to do it. And of course, my husband, not knowing anything about babies or pregnancy, said, "Of course you can do it, it's going to absolutely fine." And so I got into Parliament, hoping there would be a great load of women arriving in 1983 – to be the class of '83 that was going to change everything. But when I first arrived in the House of Commons it was very daunting. I was one of only 10 women Labour MPs and there was an overwhelming Tory majority. London was almost entirely Tory and I was a Labour MP in London. There were hardly any women – as I say, only 10 Labour women – and a much older Commons; and I was only 32... and pregnant.

I remember, as those huge doors to the House of Commons swung open – because when you're elected in a by-election you have to walk down the carpet with everybody staring at you, bow three times, try not to trip over, walk on another three steps, again with everybody staring at you, and they were obviously all men in suits, because that's the way it was – I felt a prickling [sensation] on my skin and begun thinking, "You're wearing the wrong thing," because I was wearing a red-velvet maternity dress. There was no such thing as being appropriate in the House of Commons as a young pregnant woman in those days. Really an awful lot has changed!

I had hoped all these women would arrive in 1983, but Labour did so badly we actually lost women MPs.

The thing is, the fortunes of women's representation are the fortunes of women in the Labour Party and women in the Labour movement. All the ground that has been gained has been pushed forward by Labour women and the Tories have followed. [The Tories] looked like the Politburo of the 1950s – loads and loads of men. Women in the Tory Party have therefore said, "Look, there's so many women in the Labour Party, we look ridiculous and old-fashioned and discriminatory – we've got to have more women!" So as we began the painful process of getting more women into Parliament as Labour MPs, we made the case for more women MPs. And everybody was like, "Yeah, it's the Labour Party, the party of women and equality – we totally agree with you." And yet nothing changed. So then we argued for a change in the rules. We said, we've got to stop having these all-male shortlists for Labour safe seats where the only candidates interviewed are men; we've got to have a woman on every shortlist. This caused absolute outrage, fury and defensiveness from the men, who felt it was somehow a criticism of them, when it wasn't – it was just wanting to advance women.

But we managed to get it through – a woman on every shortlist – and nothing changed, so we thought, well, we'll have to be even bolder and we argued that 50 per cent of the shortlist must be women. More huge rows, more backlash and, as you can imagine, the 50 per cent of the shortlist who were men got selected, so nothing changed.

So in order to actually make a difference, and move up from this three per cent there had always been, we [decided we needed] all-women shortlists that said, "You can choose whoever you like in this constituency, but it can't be a man."

And that is a very difficult thing, because it feels uncomfortable and it is uncomfortable. But what was also uncomfortable was that Parliament was completely unrepresentative. It was a Parliament that was 97 per cent men and three per cent women, in a country where women were believing themselves to be equal. [All-women shortlists] were a necessary means to get to the ends we needed.

In 1997 we therefore went from 60 women MPs to over 120, and 101 were Labour. It sent an amazing message to women throughout the country: that there were women in Parliament representing both men and women, and there was also a more balanced team. But it did create a backlash.

You'll remember the photograph of all us women MPs, with Tony Blair standing in the middle. Now, I did actually recommend to Number 10 that Tony shouldn't come to this photograph, because it was a photograph of women standing together, but the finer ideology of feminism was not quite steeped into Downing Street at that point, and Tony came – and you can hardly say to the Prime Minister who's won an absolute landslide, "Sorry, get out of our photograph!" So, there he stood, in the photograph – and the press absolutely loved it because they were (sic) able to do 'Blair's babes'.

The thing about 'Blair's babes' is, it was not light-hearted. It was belittling. It was belittling women who had struggled and who were determined to make a difference. It was demeaning them. And it was chanted by the newspapers like a joke.

How could Mo Mowlam ever be regarded as a 'Blair's babe', she was a Mowlamnite rather than anything else. It was ludicrous to see her as a 'Blair's babe'; ludicrous to think of Clare Short as a 'Blair's babe'; or Yvette Cooper, Ann Cryer or Caroline Flint.

I challenge anybody now when they look at the list of women MPs who have come in since all-women shortlists – you can't tell which are from all-women shortlists and which are from open shortlists.

Everybody said, those women who [enter Parliament] on all-women shortlists will be useless MPs – they won't be as good – but you cannot tell by looking at them who came in on an all-women shortlist and who didn't. They are all pioneering.

What we wanted – and, by and large, what we achieved a lot of when we were in government – was a real change in the political agenda and a change in public policy.

When I was first elected, if you beat your baby or neglected your toddler, you could get a nursery place. But it was only for parents who were a danger to their children. If you were just somebody who wanted to go out to work, either to contribute to the family income, or as a lone parent, you couldn't get a nursery place. We wanted childcare for everybody. And we argued it was also better for those vulnerable children to be together with all children, rather than just in nurseries for children from families with problems.

We wanted childcare for everyone and that argument has by and large been accepted. The reality, we know, remains far from that – but the argument has been accepted.

On domestic violence, we wanted it to be accepted and the law to recognise that there is no justification, ever, for there to be violence against a woman in the home, and that regardless of what has happened in the relationship, [domestic violence] is not justified. We therefore argued for a change in the 'provocation law'.

People will remember that there used to be a law, a defence, which said if you murdered somebody you get charged with murder, but if you murdered your wife you don't get charged with murder, you get charged with manslaughter, because you're able to say that it was not your fault that you killed her, it was her fault because she provoked you. And it used to be called the 'nagging and shagging' offence by people at the Bar, because she either must have provoked you by having an affair – and everybody would go 'oh God that's awful, how you must have suffered' – or she provoked you by not being a proper wife to you and not doing her household duties. And often there would be a non-custodial sentence. It took us until 2009 to get the provocation defence abolished, but we got there.

We had all the arguments about the importance of the Equal Pay Act implemented more accepted. We doubled maternity leave, pay and introduced paternity leave. And next week we've got a vote in the House of Commons where, for the first time, there will be a system for maternity and paternity leave for MPs. Since 2010 there have been 17 babies born to women MPs and yet there is no system of maternity leave, so we're following in New Zealand's footsteps a bit there.

With the all-women shortlists in 1997 in Yorkshire and Humberside – sorry to include Humberside, but it is done on regional configuration – there were only two Labour women MPs out of 34. Then it built up to 10 out of 47. And now it's 20 out of 37.

If you think about it – going from only two to 20 out of 37 – [all-women shortlists] are leading to much more equal representation. I used to say to my Yorkshire colleagues, "Why are there only two women from Yorkshire and Humberside in the House of Commons?" And they would say, "You're just a metropolitan elite person. You don't realise that women in Yorkshire and Humberside don't want to be MPs." And one even said, "There aren't any women in Yorkshire and Humberside." And I thought, "You know, I've heard many arguments in my time, but that!"

In conclusion, and to bring us right up to date, we've had a series of 'moments' that have happened. Harvey Weinstein, Carrie Gracie and the Presidents' Club Dinner.

Each has been a moment, not where something new has been discovered, because we all knew that all of this was going on all the time, but where there was longstanding resentment that has burst out into the open; where there has been justified anger.

But what we need to do is to make sure that all of these moments are not just moments, but opportunities for lasting change. What happened with Harvey Weinstein is echoed in all walks of life. Most men in a male hierarchy wouldn't dream of abusing women in junior positions, but some do and there's been impunity for that. What we need now is a proper anonymous system for reporting, as well as independent evaluation, and no shaming or blaming of those who complain.

Look at the Carrie Gracie situation. Many of you will have seen, like me, her reporting: speaking fluent Mandarin as the BBC Chinese Editor in remote villages, not welcomed by the authorities, always a whisker away from being expelled from China or arrested – a brilliant BBC News Foreign Editor. [The BBC] also had Jon Sopel in Washington, not as likely to be arrested, only needing to speak English, and Jeremy Bowen doing brilliant work in the Middle East – and they were paid 50 per cent more than [Carrie Gracie].

When that came into the open, and when at the end of April all these pay transparency audits are to be published, all these inequalities in pay will be laid bare. But the point is not just to be angry about it. The point is to set targets and insist on action to narrow those pay gaps. We've seen the Presidents' Club dinner. Now this is in breach of the Equality Act – the Equality Act outlaws selling tickets to men-only events. Of course, it wasn't really a men-only event was it? Although men were there buying the tickets, there were women there too, but the women were required to be scantily clad, with matching underwear and high heels, and were there to be groped. And now even Number 10 has said they are appalled by this.

The important thing is not only to be appalled and to move on, but to recognise that this goes on all the time, up and down the country, and as well as needing to be stopped, it is against the law. I think we've changed the mood of many arguments, over many decades, but we need to change the reality as well.

One way we can change reality is by making further progress for women and that means, at some point in the future – we are not going to be having a leadership election in the

Labour Party any time soon, we are much more likely to see a leadership election in the Tory Party and that will probably see a woman being replaced by a man, but we will at some point have a leadership election in the Labour Party – we must decide, for a party that has had its centenary and is the party of women and equality, to make it so we elect our first woman leader. We absolutely have got to decide that.

We have got many fantastic men in the Labour Party and I want us to all be supporting and encouraging them, and saying, “You can go incredibly far in the Labour Party. One day you could be Deputy Leader.”

Because as Sayeeda Warsi said – who is of this region, but in the wrong party because she should be in the Labour Party – “It takes a great man to be a leader, but an even greater man to support a woman leader.”

So, let’s make all our men in the Labour Party that sort of remarkable man who supports a woman leader. And, of course, we have plenty of brilliant women to contest the leadership.

We’ve got to recognize, there’s always a backlash. Expect a backlash, expect to have rows, and if you’re ragingly popular and nobody’s having a go at you, you’re probably not doing anything. It’s better be having a row.

Social media is a problem because people are trying to silence women. There are women MPs who have had to quit of Twitter because of death threats – that is silencing women and pushing them back. We have to be sure we tackle this and Yvette Cooper is leading the Home Affairs Select Committee on this.

There are physical as well as verbal attacks. We all remember our beloved colleague Jo Cox and her terrible murder outside her surgery.

We have also got to remember solidarity – you can’t achieve change alone. As women, we have all got to support each other.

And there should be no hierarchy of inequalities. There are many inequalities – disability, age, ethnicity, region, social class, gender. All inequality is unfair. Some people will battle for one inequality and others will battle against another, but there is no hierarchy of inequalities. Anybody who is battling against misogyny, or homophobia, or racism, or disability hatred is broadly on the side of the angels.

If somebody is campaigning on disability, or another inequality, but not on gender, I’m not going to call them out. I am going to thank them and praise them for what they are doing and say good on them – there’s enough to be done on discrimination on disability, race and homophobia.

On Woman’s Hour I heard woman denouncing a “corporate feminist” and I was listening to it feeling puzzled, and then I realised why. The problem is not corporate feminism, the problem is corporate misogyny. We should [understand] that all of us doing whatever we are doing in the fight against inequality are doing good, and we need to respect what all of us are doing.

I would just finish off by saying something about the new Tory women, because it is rather paradoxical. Although they are in a party that is cutting public services – including funding for refuges, and that regards workers' rights as a millstone around businesses' necks rather than fairness for employees – there are some new Tory women MPs who are (sic) quite feminist and support childcare and tackling domestic violence.

For someone who entered Parliament under with Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, when the Tories were my absolute total sworn enemies, it is quite baffling to me that there are some Tory women now that can be worked with, because on some issues they do think like us. I still believe they're in the wrong party, but I see them in transition. They don't see themselves like that, but we in the Labour Party believe in redemption, don't we?

The point is, that as women in the Labour Party and Labour women in Parliament, we are there for other women, but we are also there for a better democracy, for a more representative democracy, and we've still got a long way to go. But we are confident, as one man said, "The arc of history bends towards progress" – so we will get there.