

Glenys Kinnock

Being a political wife must be one of the hardest roles - especially for someone like Glenys Kinnock, passionate espouser of causes, moderate but unswerving feminist.

The first glare of publicity put the spotlight on her 'assets': the warmly-smiling and elegantly-attractive woman with 'heather blue eyes and trim figure', who is, according to one reporter, 'on the brink of Dynasty and Dallas glamour', and to another more obviously hostile one, 'the rose that hides Labour's thorn'. But even the row over who cooks the Kinnocks' breakfast or washes up conceals a deeper unease: the British seem to retain a suspicion that a husband who respects his wife's judgement is subservient to her.

Domestic equality signals a more threatening kind of independence whereby Neil Kinnock is the weak and verbose husband, stiffened in resolve and driven in ambition by his glamorous and dominating wife.

This is a peculiarly double-edged misrepresentation. Glenys Kinnock is simultaneously seen as powerfully harmful and domestically trivial - a wilfully misogynist transformation of a

order to have an opinion or to campaign for issues that concern you. I speak as an individual who is political and as a wife and a mother.'

Glenys Kinnock's appeal and great strength lies in this determined ordinariness and her emphasis upon those of her characteristics which she shares with millions of other women. She copes with her prominence by remaining her own person, speaking on the issues that she cares about with her own voice. 'I only take on the things which are of a special interest to me; the things which millions of women like me are concerned about... health, education, the problems of looking after elderly or disabled relatives.'

She grew up in Wales in a political household. Her father, a railroad signalman, was an active trade unionist; when she met her future husband she had already been a member of CND and the Labour Party for several years. And amid all of Labour's stumbling, shambling embarrassments over its more contentious policies, she has remained a committed peace campaigner, supporting the Greenham Common women when Neil Kinnock is sliding away from the word 'unilateralism'.

But she insists that she is not, as some people suggest, more radical than Neil: she too detests Militant Tendency (while being 'more interested in what the children at school are reading than in Militant'); she rejects what she calls 'ideological feminism' (while objecting to Neil's 'rugby vocabulary').

During her years as wife of the leader of the opposition, Glenys Kinnock has learned to deal with the glare of publicity, controlling her directness but remaining warm and at ease. She is not, however, a natural self-publicist, avoiding numerous interview requests and refusing to play the self-advertisement game purely for the sake of Labour's image.

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woman who has always been direct, frank and friendly with the public and the press.

Glenys Kinnock's reaction to Edwina Currie's attack on her ('Who is the real leader of the Labour Party?') is striking: first she regretted that it was a woman who had made the trivialising criticism; then she insisted upon her right to speak out, commenting that 'it is bothering that an MP or a minister could suggest that you have to be a member of parliament in



Glenys Kinnock: an unthreatening and accessible socialist

Active on behalf of One World - the pressure group for a radical approach to famine - she refuses to wield her status for its advancement. When Labour's charter for the Third World was launched, she stayed well out of the limelight. And recently in Truro she waited until the ranks of cameramen had faded away before taking up the pose that all tv editors would have loved: crawling on the floor while playing with a toddler.

Her socialism seems moral and gut-felt yet also unthreatening and accessible, revolving around issues of social justice rather than philosophies of social change. Similarly, her feminism is mild, humanitarian and non-combative: 'I define feminism as accepting that, because of their sex, women have a less fair deal'. She and Neil in many ways embody that most bland and palliative of traditions, the nuclear family, with their two chil-

dren, their sacrosanct Sundays and their secure loyalty.

Glenys Kinnock is seen by many as the Labour Party's 'greatest asset' but this implies that she is an object. She is, always and demonstrably, her own subject. Certainly, however, she helps her husband. Unlike Mary Wilson, who met Harold when he was an academic and longed for the peace she only found in writing poetry, she relishes politics. But her ambitions are neither personal nor manipulative, for she is firmly committed to creating a socialist society.

In spite of the odds she remains optimistic, although never Utopian. Like Neil, she dismisses what she sees as the vain visions of those who prefer purity to power. She believes, against the odds, that there is now a will to win, and it is winning that is essential: 'It is meaningless talking without power.'

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