

Beatrix Campbell talks to Emma Nicholson

## Hearts Of Gold

**Emma Nicholson is Conservative MP for Devon West and Torridge. She supported Michael Heseltine in the leadership challenge**

**Why did you take the risk?**

I took the steps I took in terms of pressing for change of leadership in the Conservative Party, and thereby of prime minister, because of a build-up of personal concern on the community charge, on our relationship to Europe and of the difficulties of the individual backbenchers, influencing policies directly affecting our constituents.

**Why did the revolt on specific issues have to become a revolt against a leader. Why couldn't the dissent be resolved democratically within the party?**

It would have been the better decision in terms of a less acute transition. I think any government has very clear channels through which opinions are transferred and those channels have become too departmentalised. Everybody was appointed to stick to their own brief and not comment on anybody else's. One of the most interesting things that John Major has done, which I don't think has yet been widely noticed, is that he has authorised ministers to talk across their briefs. I believe that maybe this is the single most important thing he has done.

**Were you afraid for your political future when you expressed your dissent in a culture that was very very loyal?**

When I believed that my privately expressed concerns were not getting the response that my constituents needed, I talked privately with ministers and it became apparent to me that the problem was too large. Eventually I said something that got picked up publicly.

**You'd been very loyal before... did you feel there would be consequences?**

I knew that my actions would inevitably make some of my colleagues feel that I was being unsupportive of the government...

**Why did you then move towards Heseltine?**

Fairness is the kernel of my belief in public service.

**That's not a Thatcherite term - fairness - is it? Service, fairness - these are words from an older language, aren't they?**

I think they're something from a newer language. I think recognition that everyone must have equal opportunities is the newest concept of all. It's old to live steeped in tribal law and push

outside the pale anybody who isn't the same as you.

**Thatcher wasn't very tolerant of difference, was she?**

She was criticised for tolerating difference. Difference in lifestyles in her cabinet. She was very forgiving...

**... of men, but not tolerant at large. If we're thinking of sexual politics, she was illiberal and tended to support regressive and repressive bits of legislation.**

But you could say she didn't allow private morality to dictate who should or should not perform a public task.

**And yet, private morality was supposed to be at the centre of the Thatcherite project.**

In terms of service to the community, yes. In terms of reaching outward, if you remember her methodist upbringing, in terms of wealth itself not being a bad thing, but how you used wealth. That's a very fair concept.

**You're kidding us! What is very interesting is that Thatcherism, which is nothing if not radical, had an argument with society, felt it had a mandate even if it didn't have a majority, for change.**

Yes, I felt that there was insufficient change, that perhaps was another motivation for me.

**What did you want?**

Privatising the Bank of England, for example. I would like to remove government intervention as far as one can on the setting of interest rates.

**Why did you support Heseltine then, who is a state interventionist, a corporatist?**

Because we can't leave our industry at a disadvantage internationally, because we need those contracts, we need to compete. We want to reduce intervention internationally - hence our desire to get more people into Gatt, hence our desire to bow to the pressures from the USA and have 30% cuts in farm prices. We need to be in the real world, while at the same time working as hard as possible to enlarge free trade.

But why did I support Heseltine? On a practical basis, he was the only person who stood against the prime minister. I felt as if we were running into a siding in the last 18 months. And I believe that a unique opportunity had arisen in that we could have a change without recourse to a general election.

**What will the new order be? Will it be Thatcherite, post-Thatcherite, what would post-Thatcherism be anyway?**

My key needs for change are already

being addressed - one is the community charge. Michael Heseltine has clearly given himself 24 months to do it, and is reaching out to the other side to seek ideas. One of the weaknesses of modern government in the United Kingdom is that it has to be like a football match, one side against another. Opportunities for joint participation are rare indeed, and never on policy issues.

Secondly the approach to Europe has already moved right back to where it ought to be. The Ridley interview was the trigger, together with Mrs Thatcher's statement at the end of July, that that was the last word on the community charge.

**Was it Howe who in the end detonated everything?**

Ridley was the rock, and Howe was the boulder. His speech was unique. He'd never made a speech like it in his life.

**Who did you feel close to in that time?**

Geoffrey Howe, without a doubt. But I reached my decision in isolation. I was not part of Mr Heseltine's team. Once I had reached my decision, I alerted number ten Downing Street, five days before the first ballot, and I also told Michael Heseltine. I then went home to consult in the constituency, looking for a way out, looking for the one argument that would pin me to Mrs Thatcher's train. I couldn't find it.

**Did you talk to any of the other women? Have they been coherent as a group, the Conservative women?**

We have started having regular dinners, and that's a new initiative. They're organised by Dame Jill Knight, one of the women who should have been made a parliamentary private secretary or a junior minister. It's women like her I weep for. That I think is the tragedy of those years. Perhaps women were so rare that nobody gave them the first hand up the ladder.

**And Mrs Thatcher didn't really lend a hand, did she? Why not?**

I cannot tell. You see it's been exceptionally difficult for women to get into power on the Conservative ticket. Labour somehow seem to have overcome to a greater measure than the Conservatives that problem. The result is that we have a higher quality of Conservative woman MP than the equivalent man.

**What did you feel about the way that Mrs Thatcher finally resigned: there was this constant reference to the march of the men in the grey suits. It seemed for the first time that the corporate power of men was**



**being represented as exactly that.**

I had no anticipation that Mrs Thatcher would resign at all, that the votes were melting around her. Perhaps had we all at different levels spoken earlier, things would have been sorted out without this.

**Doesn't that suggest a kind of corruption of thought?**

It's a failure of British culture. I have been feeling that we need a new mandate for the next election.

**How are we to understand the dominant ideology in current conservative thinking?**

Capitalism with a heart.

**A heart of what? Stone?**

Hearts aren't of stone in real life. Hearts are warm living things. A free market with a social philosophy.

**Does that make you feel retrospectively critical, and indeed self-critical, about the priorities of Thatcherism?**

I am critical only that privatisation was so slow. Take the finance minister of Czechoslovakia, he said the other day, I have 42,000 industries to privatise. Over ten years Mrs Thatcher has privatised ten. We were too slow, had we been faster, I believe that impetus would have given us wider breadth of imagination - to see the needs of the poor, for example.

**Of whom there are now many more.**

It depends how you define it. The poverty level is now shifting...

**Sure, but it always was...**

No it wasn't, not really before the advent of the Child Poverty Action Group. My concern is the knowledge that original government figures were incorrect, which was a devastating blow to me at the end of July. The system created incorrect figures which enabled us to say that there were fewer pensioners and the standard of living of the bottom fifth increased at a faster rate than the remainder of the population. It was not true.

**One last question. Why did Mr Major make such an extraordinary mistake in appointing no women?**

I am unhappy. Linda Chalker deserved that post.

**It was astonishing that Major could not register that it now mattered to people that there be women in government.**

Well, the Conservative Party like any other political party is an imperfect instrument. We have to refine it. Mr Major is not God.



Photography: Abel Lajus