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## RUNNING A CHARITY IS NO SOFT OPTION

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By Dina Medland

Jackie Ballard might have shaken off her party political affiliations but she remains a political animal. Today, she says: “There is more politics in animal welfare than there is in politics.”

She has a wealth of experience of both, having been director-general of the RSPCA, the charity, and a member of parliament.

Now chief executive of Action On Hearing Loss, the recently rebranded charity formerly known as the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, she has strong views on the current political turmoil surrounding the government’s plans to limit tax relief on charitable giving.

“This has been a complete ‘own goal’ for the government. I completely understand the desire to stop people avoiding paying their taxes, but there are so many other ways,” Ms Ballard argues.

“They have upset the sector they are trying to woo to implement the ‘Big Society’, and it is at a time when most charities are struggling with legacy income because house prices are not going up.

“I don’t think the plans will survive in their present form,” she adds. “But if the government does backtrack, the media should not hound them – allow them to say ‘we got it wrong’ and ‘we listened’, otherwise you will drive them into a bunker.”

The furore has also shone a spotlight on the charity sector itself. For example, why are there so many charities?

She agrees there might be too many: “My heart sinks when I read about new ones being set up for a loved one who has died. But on the other hand the person who does that won’t be motivated to raise money for something else.”

Ms Ballard argues that those in the voluntary sector, especially the larger charities, are

“generally looking to avoid duplication, with mergers and sharing of back office functions, as well as collaborating on campaigns and on service delivery”.

The complexities of running a large charity emerge as we speak, making it far from the soft career option some might claim: “It is a complex job – many charities campaign, fund research and provide a portfolio of different services. The chief executive also has to manage a brand, compete in the market for funding and volunteers as well as skilled staff in a sector where reputation and trust are crucial.

“We have a mix of paid staff and volunteers and many of us run membership charities, which means another group of interested stakeholders. We do not have one bottom line – profit – we have many bottom lines, the most important of which is our social impact and reach. A doddle? I don’t think so,” she says.

But does it justify six-figure salaries? The charity’s completely transparent annual report says her salary was £133,600 in the year to March 31 2010 – a salary set by the trustees. “The standard way of looking at a salary is the role, the responsibility, budget responsibility and management responsibility. I run an organisation of 900 staff and 1,200 volunteers – which we have grown a lot in the last four years as part of our strategy,” she says.

She mentions that the charity has residential care homes which house vulnerable people: “If something happened to one of them I would be responsible, so it comes down to trusting me to put all the right things in place – it’s a legal as well as a moral responsibility which keeps you up at night.”

Ms Ballard also serves on the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, which is to focus in the next six to nine months on what should constitute the “right salary” for an MP.

Her route into the charity sector was “somewhat random”, she says, with characteristic bluntness. “I can’t pretend all my motivations in life were clearly thought out.” But she is delighted to have her career described as “non-linear” and her CV makes very interesting reading.

Aged 11, she won a paid scholarship to the Monmouth School for girls, in Abergavenny, South Wales, where her political side emerged: “I was so incensed that this education was only available to people whose parents had money. Mine lived in a caravan. Apart from the education, public school gives you self-confidence.”

She was expected to become a teacher but was always likely to defy expectations: “I had a very strong non-conformist streak from the start. By the time I went to university I had this romantic idea of ‘doing something’, so I thought I would become a prison psychologist.”

Rather than her school’s preferred choice of Oxford or Cambridge universities, she chose

the London School of Economics “because in those days it was the rebellious place to go”. Her BSc in social psychology was “out of an interest in people and motivation” and “I enjoyed demonstrating against just about everything – I was a bit of a serial demonstrator.”

A temporary job in social services followed, and training as a social worker with the London borough of Waltham Forest. Living in a bedsit, she worked in a psychiatric hospital, enjoying it but “finding it hard not to get overly involved with clients”. She never completed the qualification: she married and moved to a rural life in Dorset.

There, she found work as a market research interviewer with NOP and Mori, the polling organisations. She also retrained as a private secretary and ended up teaching in Somerset, where her daughter was born.

Moving counties brought her into contact with former Liberal Democrat party leader, Paddy Ashdown, who won the Yeovil parliamentary seat for the Liberal party at the 1983 general election. “I had voted Labour until then but I was impressed with him as a candidate,” Ms Ballard says.

“I started writing to him about everything that irritated me – from class sizes to VAT to healthcare for my aunt. He used to write back, or sometimes phone up in response, and one day he turned up at my doorstep and said ‘you’re a Liberal, join the party and get involved’.”

She did, and became a town councillor, then district councillor and county councillor. From 1997 to 2001 she was the Liberal Democrat MP for Taunton and the party’s spokesperson on women’s issues and local government, before becoming deputy home affairs spokesperson with special responsibility for the voluntary sector.

“I was never very comfortable with party politics. I was a liberal more than I was anything else at the time, but I don’t like tribalism. I decided before the 2001 election that if we lost, that would be it – so I stopped.” She eventually cancelled her membership and remains unaffiliated to any political party.

She used her redundancy money, which she describes as “a huge amount – six months pay tax-free” – to enrol for a PhD at Iran’s Tehran University. Her reasons were personal, allied to her love of the culture. But it did not end well – she was thrown out. It did, however, lead to her being approached about leading the RSPCA, which was facing financial difficulties.

“I had always admired the RSPCA and worked with them long before I was in parliament,” she says. It was a baptism of fire: sections of the media referred to her as “an ex-Lib Dem” and she faced a public assault by trustees who were opposed to her appointment as director-general and who considered her unsuitable and inexperienced. One tabloid called her “a feminist and failed MP who hates hunting and can’t read a balance sheet”.

Ms Ballard recalls: “I enjoyed both the leadership and the management. A degree in psychology proved to be a very useful tool: understanding what motivates people is key.” She pushed through tough reforms, wiped out the £7m deficit and raised income from £80m in 2002 to £111m in 2006. “I was lucky to be there when the ban on hunting finally went through and the Animal Welfare Act – with all-party support.”

After five years at the RSPCA, where she describes her salary as “more than I had ever earned by a long way”, she took a cut in her overall pay package to move to RNID. The chairman at the time commented to her afterwards that she did not try to negotiate a higher salary at interview. “It didn’t even occur to me,” she says.

She has been leading Action On Hearing Loss for five years from its functional, bright and purpose-filled offices off London’s Old Street and has clear views on leadership, too: “Most of us are of real value in the first few years – then you start to see things with an insider’s eye and get embedded.

“I do think leadership has a limited life span.”

### **Secret CV**

#### **Who were your mentors?**

In politics, (Sir) Paddy Ashdown, who was inspirational at getting me involved, even if we fell out in later years over strategies. And (Dame) Mary Marsh who was chief executive of the NSPCC and saved me from making a lot of mistakes at the RSPCA. Also, Nelson Mandela is, to me, the best example of goodness and grace.

#### **Your first big break?**

Winning a fully paid scholarship to a public school education at 11.

#### **Best career advice to others?**

Always follow your instincts and don’t worry too much about the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I’m a fan of Will.I.Am and as he said on The Voice on television: “follow your gut”.

#### **What else might you have done?**

When I was at LSE I used to go to law lectures and almost switched to a law degree. I never had the nerve to do it. But I might have been a barrister, dealing with human rights.