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Alternative Careers No.1: Politician – a hobby or a way of life?

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Is being a politician really a job? There is no set workload, no fixed hours, a loose and volatile management structure. Surely it is more an overblown hobby or curious way of life?

“It becomes a way of life,” says the Rt Hon Tessa Jowell, MP and the Labour party’s shadow minister for Cabinet Office, as well as shadow minister for the Olympics.

“If you’re lucky enough to do a job that is a vocation and also be able to express what you believe in and feel passionately about, then you are blessed. It’s much, much tougher when you’re in opposition, though.”

She quotes “a very dear friend who was in the Cabinet with me and standing down. When I asked what she would miss the most she said: ‘the freedom, and having the time to do what you like’.”

Concepts such as “freedom” and “having the time to do what you like” are mostly alien in the normal world of work. This prompts her to list the constraints: “As a backbench politician,” she says, “it’s a paradox. There are many constraints on your time – including the whipping [the whips are party managers] and having to be in parliament to vote.

“But you also have the freedom to develop your own workload. You have to be a good self-starter and not daunted by constructing a week with reference to nobody except what you think is important, what your constituents want and expect, and your own political ideas.

“And if you’re in government, every second of every day is programmed and your ministerial diary is a list of engagements from morning to night.”

She agrees that being in politics can be like having two different jobs – depending on whether or not your party is in power. But Ms Jowell is also clear: “You don’t do it for the money. You do it for all the incalculable satisfactions that being the representative of 80,000 people brings. Every single day that I walk through parliament is a thrill, and I’ve been doing it for 19 years.

“I believe passionately in the power of politics to do good. Politics has suffered so much denigration over the years – I wish people knew more about the sincerity and the passion that goes into it across all parties. Doing the best you can is a characteristic of politics that gets forgotten all too often,” she adds.

Inspired all her life by her mother, she says: “My mother taught me from a very young age never to take ‘no’ for an answer. She is a highly intelligent woman and although now physically frail, is still vibrant and engaged. Having her example created a mindset from an early age.”

She is also acutely aware of the contributions women can make to political life. Ms Jowell says: “It was a great change in British politics when we had 101 women in 1997. It forced all the parties to change. Don’t tell me we would have had Sure Start [children’s centres] – which was my baby – or maternity pay, paternity leave, domestic violence legislation otherwise. These are things women think about and the voice and power of women makes government work better.”

She does have one helpful tip on politics as a career: “Being in politics can be heady stuff. It’s best not to inhale, and to remember that when there is glory, it is for the position, and not for you.”

Having tasted government, she is now in opposition in the House of Commons but still believes her “guiding good fairy” has been luck. She says of her arrival as a politician: “I am not someone who decided at 13 that I was going to be prime minister – not even someone who, in their 20s, decided to be a Labour politician.

“I’ve always had very strong values and a belief that it is just simply wrong that children are born unequal, and in so many cases have their life chances handed out with their birth certificate. At some point I came to realise that all the big obstacles to people realising their potential lay in the big decisions of government,” she says.

Before switching to politics, she channelled these energies into social work, dealing with children in London who were damaged by their early experiences in life – first as a child care officer in Lambeth, then as a psychiatric social worker at the Maudsley Hospital in Camberwell, and finally as assistant director at the mental health charity, Mind.

With a mother who was a radiographer and a father who was a doctor, at several points in her life she considered a career in medicine: “As a young teenager I probably wanted to be a doctor but there were many obstacles then for women. At the Maudsley I thought seriously about retraining, probably as a psychiatrist,” she says.

Instead, she became involved in politics. Her first encounter with elections came as a shock when she secured a seat on Camden council in 1971: “I was only meant to be a ‘paper candidate’ on the ballot paper. I’d just got married and didn’t want to become a councillor. I was told I had a zero chance of being elected. So I took six weeks off work and did a lot of work.”

In the late 1970s she made two unsuccessful attempts to win the Ilford North parliamentary seat for the Labour party, standing first in a by-election in 1978, which she describes as “among the three most miserable weeks of my life”.

After having children and establishing a career in social work, the opportunity to advance in politics presented itself again in Dulwich, which was looking for a parliamentary candidate in 1992.

This time successful, she became an opposition MP: “I won, but Labour lost [the general election] so the prevailing sentiment was bitter disappointment – and yet jubilation for those of us who had won our seats for the first time.

“Having had an established career gave me a confidence you need to do a job that has very little coherent structure. I’m always grateful that I didn’t become an MP in my 20s but in my 40s.” She has held the seat – now reconfigured as Dulwich and West Norwood – ever since.

When the Labour party returned to power in 1997, she was appointed minister of state for public health and spokesperson for Women in the House of Commons, taking with her a passionate belief about the need for public services, which she calls “the lifeline to what makes life worth living or not”.

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