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LAWYER STILL FIGHTING TO BRING DOWN THE CORRUPT

By Dina Medland

Helen Garlick's legal career is testimony to how long and hard the battle against global corruption has always been – and remains today.

Joining the UK's Serious Fraud Office at its inception in 1988, she was leading its Mutual Assistance Unit when a prosecutor from Milan made contact. It was to be a joint attempt that would last several decades, to bring Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian prime minister, to trial for fraud.

In November last year, news reached her that Mr Berlusconi had finally been ejected from his seat in the Italian senate following his conviction for tax fraud. "The Berlusconi case was one of the most memorable," says the lawyer. "It has taken a very long time. But it is not atypical of corruption cases where people are influential and powerful."

While leading the SFO's Mutual Assistance Unit she worked on many such cases including those involving General Sani Abacha, the late Nigerian dictator, and Frederick Chiluba, Zambia's late former president.

Parts of her work sound like the stuff of theatre, which would appeal to a woman who says she might have chosen that world as an alternative career. Ms Garlick – and her twin sister – were born in Cardiff into an "extremely well-educated and self-educated Welsh family".

She says: "I was a clever girl. In those days, in the 1950s and 60s when I was growing up, there was no question that you wouldn't go for higher education. And there was nothing more prestigious than being a barrister."

She read law at the University of Warwick and read for the bar at the Inns of Court in London, the professional associations for barristers in England and Wales. But instead of joining a set of chambers and "taking tenancy", she found a job in legal services and worked for what was then the Director of Public Prosecutions.

"It was in the days before the Crown Prosecution Service and we operated like a small set of chambers – every important criminal case came through this office, from murders to terrorist offences, and they all had to be prosecuted," says Ms Garlick.

At the age of 22 she was in court every day to argue some of the most difficult and important cases in the country. It could have been a trial in itself for a young woman starting out in the profession, but she says: "I can honestly say I have never encountered sexism."

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She became the first woman given the task of prosecuting “obscene publications” and had to spend hours watching films or surrounded by obscene magazines. “I was followed into court by police officers with trolleys full of them,” she says. “The publishers would instruct senior QCs to defend the cases. I was very young and I cut my teeth on those and murder cases.”

The armed robbery and “super-grass” cases she prosecuted involving characters such as Charlie Wilson, a member of the 1963 “great train robbery” gang and retired celebrity criminal Ronnie Knight, once married to actress Barbara Windsor, “seem a thing of the past now, as organised crime has decided fraud pays better”, says Ms Garlick with characteristic bluntness.

Early in her career, she also developed her expertise in national extradition laws and was responsible in 1985 for extraditing football fans back to Belgium after the Heysel Stadium disaster at the Liverpool versus Juventus European Cup final in Brussels. Several British fans were eventually jailed for their part in events that led to 39 deaths.

A year later in 1986, the Crown Prosecution Service replaced the DPP’s office and Ms Garlick moved on to work briefly in Portsmouth as a senior crown prosecutor. She then joined the SFO when it was formed in 1988. “I think I was offered the job because of my international experience,” she says.

She was an investigating lawyer on some of the SFO’s earliest landmark cases, including the messy aftermath of the Barlow Clowes investment management firm collapse in 1988 and the illegality uncovered at the Bank of Credit and Commerce International shortly after.

Another first for her career lay in becoming the first head of the SFO’s Overseas Corruption Unit, with her first investigation being into complex allegations concerning BAE Systems’ arms contracts with Saudi Arabia. The case was finally dropped in 2008 amid controversy.

Ms Garlick says her investigation was making progress but that political considerations took priority as the case threatened to harm the UK’s relationship with Saudi Arabia regarding counter-terrorism measures. She says the prosecution was “trumped by a competing and superior national interest – national security”.

She left the SFO in mid-2008 and has been working extensively with national governments in various capacities since.

“I was very sad to leave the SFO. We join a public service through choice, not ambition centred on money. But I could not stay,” she says.

Today, she is much in demand as an experienced prosecutor. Ms Garlick is currently special prosecutor to the government of the Turks and Caicos Islands, leading a large

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team of investigators and lawyers investigating allegations of government corruption arising from a commission of inquiry led by Sir Robin Auld in 2008.

She is a partner at Fulcrum Chambers, which she helped to found, and lists her current specialisms as “serious and complex fraud, bribery and corruption, financial market offences, asset forfeiture, tracing and confiscation”.

Ms Garlick is also keen to pass on her knowledge. At a global “Women in Parliament” summit at the European Parliament in November, she took part in a panel, sponsored by consultancy EY, discussing corruption and was especially keen to meet women parliamentarians struggling against corruption.

She says: “I am really interested in teaching prosecutors in developing countries, in giving them the confidence and skills to do their job through role playing and interaction.”

With her rich and varied experience, it is an offer that should be hard to refuse.

Secret CV

Your first big break?

I would say it was getting that first job with the Director of Public Prosecutions – it was a competitive process.

What else might you have done?

I was always a bookworm – and I still am.

My first love was always English literature. I would have loved to have done something in theatrical direction.

Your best career advice to others?

Don't respond to a difficult or aggressive letter in haste or anger: think about it – especially these days. Also, my heart breaks for hundreds of gifted young people today who can't show what they can do because they can't get that legal training contract or a pupillage.