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Speech on *Women in a changing World* (1st Dame Margery Corbett-Ashby Memorial Lecture)

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Madame Chairman, my Lords Ladies and Gentlemen, as you know July is a particularly busy month for politicians and ministers but I agreed to come and give this lecture out of supreme respect for [Dame Margery Corbett-Ashby] Dame Margery and because I was very honoured to be invited to be the first person to give this memorial lecture.

The life and work of Dame Margery spanned almost a century, from her birth in 1882 to her death last year. And rarely, I think, has a century so exemplified Disraeli's maxim that in a progressive country change is constant. Dame Margery who was instrumental in bringing about so much change, was herself born into a world of change. And I want just to develop the theme. 1882 was a world of change. She was born into a world of change. She brought about so much change and what now are we going to do in the future, to transmit the very best of the truths that have been handed down to us, to future generations?

Let's have a look at the kind of changes that were taking place in 1882—when she was born.

It was a world of political change where not only women were deprived. It is obvious that the issue of women's right to vote arises only when people's right to vote has been established, or at least is on the agenda. And for most of human history it has been absent. In 1882 only 33% of men had the right to vote. Two years later The Reform Bill doubled that percentage, extending civil rights to an extra two million men.

It was a world of educational change. Elementary education had just been made compulsory by an act of 1880. Schools and [fo 1] colleges for women were springing up. Newnham College Cambridge where Dame Margery was to take a degree in classics, had been founded in 1871.

It was a world of scientific and religious change. In 1882 Charles Darwin, whose Theory of Evolution had challenged many accepted beliefs and disturbed many faiths and brought about a radical change in all human thought, was buried in Westminster Abbey, to the disgust of many Churchmen. Some years earlier, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce of Oxford, in his argument with the Darwinians, had shown the typically Victorian chivalrous attitude to women. He said that he could accept that his grandfather might have been descended from an ape, but not his grandmother.

It was a world of social change, much of it generated by the numerous voluntary organisations founded at that time. Their names read like a roll-call of compassion. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children founded in 1884, the St. John Ambulance Association in 1887, the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen's

Families Association in 1885, the Church Army in 1890—and many, many more. They were years of voluntary activity. They were years of enormous confidence in the future.

It was a world in which we were just beginning to see the first glimmer of change in the professional status of women—for example, in nursing and medicine. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson had qualified in 1865. You'll recall Madame Chairman that the suffragettes did not fight for the right of women to^[fo 2] work because so many women had of necessity to go out to work. Indeed Shaftesbury had commented adversely on that trend when he said:

'Domestic life and domestic discipline must soon be at an end society will consist of individuals no longer grouped into families.'

In 1881 some 27%; of the female population of the United Kingdom already worked outside the home. It's interesting that today the percentage is only 32—not so very different from or not so very many more than that time. We think that women going out to work is a new thing. We tend to forget that during those extremely difficult years of the last century, so many had to go out to work and often do work which was distasteful to them.

What Dame Margery and her generation did fight for was the right of women to be admitted to the professions—the law, the Civil Service and the Diplomatic Service.

It was, also that year, a world of legal change—and those of you who are lawyers will remember that it was the Married Women's Property Act that was passed in 1882. It affected a major advance in women's rights. Before that time no married woman had been allowed to hold property of her own. It automatically passed to her husband on marriage. From that time, women were then allowed to retain and own property independently of their husbands. This reasonable measure, which stopped the married woman from being a mere chattel of her husband, caused much distress in its passage through Parliament. And I did one or two very interesting bits of research.^[fo 3]

One Member felt that its enactment should be delayed until 1885:

'In order,' he said, 'to give men who were contemplating matrimony, time to change their minds when they found the law altered.'

Another feared that:

'No man would marry a woman with property, knowing that she could set him at defiance—the Bill was against Scripture.'

He had obviously never reflected on the words of the marriage service when, as the man said:

'... with all my worldly goods I thee endow.'

Until then, for women who had property, it had really been the other way round.

So Dame Margery was born into a world of change, the educational change, the social change, the political change, the legal change, the scientific change. And really change is an essential characteristic of the human condition. But history is shaped by the way in which men and women respond to that change. They may resist it absolutely, so that all its opportunities are wasted, like the religious sect who will not use buttons because they

regard them as a product of a decadent modern civilization. Or they may accept change so wholeheartedly that novelty becomes a virtue in itself and all the lessons of history and experience are just dismissed. This attitude has caused much political upheaval, as whole regimes and civilizations have sometimes been swept away in the name of change which is assumed to be beneficent just because it is change.

Then there is another response, that is one which welcomes and uses change, but refuses to be ruled by it, testing each new development against the eternal verities.[fo 4]

I believe that this last was the attitude of Dame Margery in her great contributions to the century of change through which she lived, in her services to women and society, in Britain and throughout the world. She was co-founder of the Townswomen's Guilds, of the Commonwealth Countries League and The National Women Citizens Association. She was President of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance from 1923 to 1946 and an office-bearer in it for seventy years. She gave her first presidential speech at the Sorbonne in 1926, soon after I was born. She presided at Berlin in 1929, Istanbul in 1935, Copenhagen in 1939 and Interlaken in 1946. What a fantastic record she had.

Her first concern was that women should have the same political rights as men. With that end in view she became Secretary of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies as far back as 1907 working tirelessly until full adult female suffrage was achieved in 1928. Some of you will recall that women first got the vote in 1918, but only women who were aged over thirty. I think it's the only time in legislation when the year 30 has been of legal significance in a woman's life. And then in 1928 on the same terms as men.

The task was not made easier—the task of women's suffrage when Dame Margery took it up—wasn't made easier by the fact that the leader of her chosen party, Mr. Asquith, was resolutely opposed to votes for women. He followed the tradition of Mr. Gladstone, who in 1884 and then Prime Minister, had spoken against women's suffrage. He—and I quote—'feared that voting would trespass upon their delicacy, their purity, their refinement, the elevation of their whole nature'.[fo 5]

Dame Margery is proof that it did none of those things. It is of course true—and I should make a clean breast of it—that Winston Churchill had often felt the same way about women in political life. And when I went to see Lady Churchill, shortly after I became Leader of the Party—because I wanted to see her, she was a wonderful woman in her own right—and she reminded me of this; and she said, '... but you know I always used to argue with Winston over it.' And I guess she did.

I am very conscious of the fact that it is due to the efforts of Margery Corbett-Ashby and others like her, that women today are able to play such a major part in political life. All women received the vote in 1928 and 1929 saw the appointment of the first woman Cabinet Minister, Margaret Bondfield. But this wasn't enough for Dame Margery. In her speech of that year to the British Commonwealth League, she deplored the fact that women did not have the right to sit in the House of Lords. Almost 30 years later, in 1958, the Life Peerages Act, gave women that right. This was extended in 1963 when the same Government admitted hereditary peeresses to the House of Lords.

Last year we achieved another 'first' when I asked Baroness Young, who has done so much for public life, to become the first woman leader of the Upper House. I like to think that Dame Margery would have approved.

In the House of Commons, more than half a century after all women got the vote, there are only twenty one women Members of Parliament out of a house of 635 Members. And I think this would have been a great disappointment to the early suffragettes whose[fo 6] main fight was for the rights of women to full participation in politics, local Government and the community. They did this partly because it is just and equitable that

women should have such rights; but also because they wanted public life to be shaped and influenced by the special talents and experiences of women.

To quote Dame Margery again, in her 1926 Presidential Address to the Congress of the International Alliance at Paris:

‘No woman is so busy in her home or profession that she can't by a better adjustment of her time, spare some energy to work for neighbours, her town and her country. We seek to deepen a woman's sense of responsibility and to widen her sphere of activity from the home to the city, from the city to the nation.’

My generation put it in virtually the same way, when we say that the home should be the centre but not the boundary of a woman's life.

Now what are these special talents and experiences which women have to bring to public life? Are they any different in kind from those of men? Yes—I think they are, because we women bear the children and create and run the home. It is noticeable Madame Chairman, that many of the suffragettes were very womanly. Like Dame Margery, they had the inestimable privilege of being wives and mothers and they pursued their public work against the background of full and happy domestic lives. They neglected no detail of those lives—so that they were warm as well as immensely capable women. And it was these enriched lives, with their breadth of experience that they devoted to public service.[fo 7]

The many practical skills and management qualities needed to make a home—and I often stress to audiences that you have to be a manager to run a home. Those many management qualities give women an ability to deal with a variety of problems and to do so quickly. And it's that versatility and decisiveness which is so valuable in public life. And I may say that I think I am able to make decisions at a tremendous speed in public life because I have been used to doing that in the home. It also means that one is able quite naturally, to deal with an enormous volume of work and to switch your mind to whatever problem is at hand. Indeed I sometimes think it wouldn't be a bad maxim in life if you said, "what we have to do, and do well, is the very next job that comes to hand."

Now, after the victory for women's suffrage had been won here Dame Margery went on to work for it in other countries, through the International Alliance. Their 1935 Congress was held in Turkey where, despite promises and statements of relevant legislative intent in 1930, 1931 and 1934, Turkish women had still not received the vote. So, on her arrival in Istanbul, Dame Margery told the Mayor that it was a pity:

‘... that women will come from all over the world to Turkey and find Turkish women without the vote.’

That remark found its way to the President of Turkey—President Ataturk—and very soon Turkish women had been granted the vote on the same terms as men and seventeen women Members of Parliament were elected. What quiet power Dame Margery had.

It was also after 1928 that she turned to the second great[fo 8] strand of her work, your Guilds, the Townswomen's Guilds, born in 1929 out of the earlier suffrage societies. The significant achievements of the Townswomen's Guilds in the last half-century owe much to her example and her vigour. And it is useful to remind ourselves of the objectives which guide your work:

‘To advance the education of women, irrespective of race, creed or party, so as to enable them to make the best contribution towards the common good: To educate women in the principles of good citizenship and to provide facilities for women to improve their own social conditions and those of their fellows.’

I understand you've modified that latter part a little now. It reads in a much more modern way; but you know so many things they're not always quite so clear as the older ones. So I thought I would take the older one. You know, it still expresses really what we stand for and what we set out to do.

Now of course Dame Margery worked hard for legislative change. She and others knew that only legislation could give women the vote and certain fundamental rights. But she knew too that legislation is not enough. As she said when I was privileged to share a platform with her in Westminster Hall in 1978, at the celebration of fifty years of women's suffrage.

'It's comparatively easy to change the law. What is difficult is to change the attitudes of the community.'

She set out to change those attitudes through the Townswomen's Guilds, and her work in them illustrated the belief that legislation can provide only a foundation for action. And the rest^[fo 9] is up to us. To give a person a vote is a remarkable achievement, but to help people to understand how democracy works and its dependence on the exercise of personal responsibility, is much harder. And is that not part of the role of the Townswomen's Guilds?

The benefits which law is intended to promote can only be actually achieved by the effort of individuals. A Government may provide incentives for industrial development, but it is the brains and hands of men and women which must translate that into action and industrial health—and success.

A Government may provide a framework of social services, a safety net through which none may fall. But the many deeds of mercy, the myriad acts of human kindness which give life its dignity and meaning, these are the work of individuals. And no State can ever play the part of a good neighbour. The loving care which should generate and inform such activities, is a feature, not of legislation but of the human spirit. It cannot be manufactured or decreed by politicians.

'What's the Government going to do about it?', is a common phrase. I hear it often! I shall hear it when I get back to Number 10 tonight! But surely the better approach was that expressed by President Kennedy in his Inaugural Address:-

'Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.'

Recently, Madame Chairman, this summer, we have seen that philosophy abundantly fulfilled by our people when called up to defend freedom and justice, many thousands of miles away.^[fo 10]

The achievements for which we honour Dame Margery today, although great in themselves, have been a comparatively small of the enormous changes which have transformed our lives over the years.

Changes in transport, in communications, automation, fuel and energy, science and medicine, in the environment and the of our cities. Above all, changes in the standard of prosperity so that the luxuries of the few, have become the necessities of the many. It is not therefore possible to isolate the effect of the changing status of women in our society. Nevertheless if we are to shape our future, we must take a dispassionate look at what has happened to the structure of society across century.

Throughout history, great emphasis has been laid upon the importance of the family. But in family matters today, there are some very disquieting features. For example, in 1882 there were 43,000 illegitimate births in England and Wales. Some eighty years later, in 1960, there were approximately the same number and proportion. In 1980 the numbers had risen from 43,000 to 77,000. Worse still, the number of girls who

conceived children under the age of sixteen, had risen from 6,600 in 1970 to 8,100 in 1979. Further, the number of juvenile offenders has doubled in less than twenty years, rising from 100,000 in 1965 to nearly 200,000 in 1979. Moreover, today, one in ten marriages is expected to break down after five years and one in three after thirty years.

It is, of course, difficult to make valid comparisons with a century ago. But the figures do tell us what has happened[fo 11] in the last twenty years and we can't fail to be worried by them. Indeed, I wonder whether the family has been sufficiently highly regarded in recent years? Much emphasis has been placed on individual rights, less on our duties to each other.

Children have been encouraged to grow up faster and to see themselves as independent of parents. Parents have been told by self-appointed experts, that their duties to each other and to their children should be balanced by more emphasis on self fulfilment. In other words, we have seen the birth of the permissive society. Has that benefitted women? Far from it.

Women know that society is founded on dignity, reticence and discipline. We know instinctively that the disintegration of society begins with the death of idealism and convention.

We know that our society as a whole and especially for the children, much depends upon the family unit remaining secure and respected. It is significant that so many women who have reached the top have families of their own, like Dame Margery and as I can personally testify, they are our greatest joy and our strength.

It is of course true that women of our generation are often still comparatively young by the time our children are grown up and therefore we have an opportunity further to develop our own talents, an opportunity which in Dame Margery's day, was rarely available. For many, that experience can enhance their lives and enlarge their interests. But I remain totally convinced that when children are young, however busy we may be with practical duties inside or outside the home, the most important thing of all is to devote enough time and care to[fo 12] the children's needs and problems. There are some things for which only a parent will do. I'll never forget the comment of a headmaster of a school I visited when I was Secretary of State for Education. He said to me that as many problem children came from rich as poor homes. Some were from homes where the children had everything they could wish for, except, perhaps enough of their parents' attention. Madame President, material goods can never be a substitute for loving care. Too much money can create problems as well as solve them.

The battle for women's rights has been largely won. The days when they were demanded and discussed in strident tones should be gone for ever. And I hope they are. I hated those strident tones that you still hear from some Women's Libbers'.

The Battle is largely won, but we must now see women's rights in perspective and turn our attention to how we could use human rights to build the kind of world we wish our children to in.

It's no use looking through rose-tinted spectacles or pretending that human imperfections and evil will disappear if we get the economy right. They won't. They are as old as humanity itself and we have to fight them constantly. Fight them by making and enforcing laws to protect the weak; by upholding conventions and customs which serve the larger purpose and which limit the selfish purpose.

In international affairs the only protection for civilized values against the tyrant is a sure defence. Dame Margery's generation learned that so vividly and at so great a price. It is a tragedy that since the last world war there have been[fo 13] I'm going to tell you how many conflicts since the last World War. You will be amazed when I say the number, as I was amazed when I did the research. Since the last World War, there have been

over one hundred and forty conflicts in various parts of the world and they continue even as we meet here today.

The danger for democracy is that too many people will say, what can one person do among 55 million? Dame Margery never took that view. Nor does your society of Guilds. Politicians will know that Burke put it so well, so long ago:-

‘All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men (and women) to do nothing.’

But our generation has reason to be thankful that those noble and brave acts which brought fame and renown to Britain's name are matched by deeds of courage and valour in our time. And we saw that over the Falklands story.

Madame Chairman, it's a rare honour to be Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. It is a supreme privilege to occupy that high office when great human causes have to be defended. It has been an inspiration to witness the young generation of today set the most glorious standards for the young of tomorrow.

I'm very much aware of how much I owe to Dame Margery. I honour and thank her for her sense of purpose, for her selfless service and for that tireless spirit which sustained her until her works were well and truly accomplished.

That was where I had finished writing this Lecture and as I looked up, on my desk, at Chequers, I opened the top of the ink[fo 14] stand. There is there, a saying in Latin, which fortunately is translated into English, which I thought was so appropriate, both for Dame Margery and, for those principles by which I try to guide my stewardship and I finish with it:

‘To stand on the ancient ways

To see which is the right and good way,

And in that way to walk.’