

Leading Ladies

By Nancy Honey

Interviews by Hattie Garlick

Baroness Usha Prashar: *Crossbench member of the House of Lords*

1948	Born in Kenya
1976	Appointed Director of the Runnymede Trust
1984	Made Research Fellow at the Policy Studies Institute
1986	Made Director of the National Council for Voluntary
1991	Served on the Royal Commission on Criminal Justice, Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct, the Arts Council and Channel 4
1997	Made Executive Chair of the Parole Board for England and Wales
2000	Made the first Civil Service Commissioner
2005	Appointed inaugural Chairman of the Judicial Appointments Commission
2009	Served on the Iraq Inquiry
2012	Appointed Deputy Chair on the British Council

“Do your job well but don't get so emotionally involved that you burn out”, that's what I told myself when I left the Runnymede Trust. I became director at quite a young age and for seven years I was completely emotionally absorbed in it. By the time I left I was really quite exhausted. That was a good lesson to learn, I think.

I have always have been driven by the desire to make a difference and to do something worthwhile.

I made a decision not to have children because I do not think that it is possible to combine both without significant help. If you have children, you have to devote time to their upbringing.

I made the choice to devote time to my work and make a difference in a different way.

I do not like the phrase, ‘having it all’. Equality, for me, is the ability to make real choices, not trying to prove that as women we can ‘have it all’.

I am a reflective person, a thinker and a doer. Reflection allows one to learn from one's mistakes and improve.

Am I a feminist? It depends on what you mean by feminism. I believe in equality of opportunity but I do not wear it on my sleeve! Those who wear it on their sleeve irritate me. I am deeply committed to equality and have worked to achieve that throughout my career.

Sometimes, we can create barriers for ourselves by being overly conscious of our difference. I've been the only woman on a great number of boards and committees. But I don't enter a room thinking, “I'm a woman, I'm the only one of my kind here.” Rather than wasting too much thought on being the only woman or ethnic-minority in a professional situation, I'd rather think, “These are my skills, what can I bring to this?”

That's not to say that you're not, sometimes, aware of how other people perceive you. But has being a woman disadvantaged me? Not to date.

I look at the word diversity in a very broad sense – in terms of backgrounds and experiences, whether that means a working class perspective or an Etonian one, female or male. Bringing different experiences to bear on problems enriches decisions. Otherwise organisations begin to stagnate. I do not think we have yet learnt how best to benefit from this diversity in organisations.

In the 1960s and 70s, appointments across many professions, with the exception of the Civil Service and local government, were being made without open competition. The process for public appointments really began to change in the 1990s.

The judiciary was predominantly male and white when the Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC) was set up in 2006 and I was appointed its chairman. The JAC was established to make the process for appointing judges more open and transparent and to widen the pool from which the applicants were drawn. The process is now more open and that has helped to attract more diverse applicants.

The judiciary is changing but not fast enough. A judiciary that is more diverse and is reflective of the society as a whole will have greater legitimacy.

It is still true that more men than women apply. [79% of professional, full-time judges in Scotland, and 77% in England and Wales, are men] This is inevitable because there are more men than women in the legal profession. For some women, a requirement to go on circuit if one is a High Court Judge is a disincentive. It does not complement family life.

Commercial legal work is dominated by men so the pool from where the women commercial judges can be drawn is limited.

I've seen a gradual improvement in the judiciary where women are concerned, if not for minorities. Things need to improve further and for that to happen, the judiciary itself has to change. That includes changing the culture to make it more welcoming to women and altering working practices.

More women are entering the legal profession but leave when they have children. Re-entry can be difficult. So retention is a problem. We need change in working practices. Thankfully moves are afoot to allow flexible working and this should make a difference. This is something I, among others, have argued in favour of for some time.

Reality, myth and prejudice all play a part. It's a complicated problem, there's no one magic wand you can wave to fix it.