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JESS PHILLIPS
EVERYWOMAN

**ONE WOMAN'S TRUTH ABOUT
SPEAKING THE TRUTH**



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To the women and girls who helped build me
but never got to see the finished result
Mom, Baby Iris and Jo Cox

Everyman (noun): an ordinary or typical human being
‘Despite his superstar status, in his movies the actor is able to play the role of an *everyman* quite convincingly.’

Everywoman (noun): an ordinary or typical woman
‘Despite her role as a working mother of two, in her job she is able to play the role of *everywoman* quite convincingly.’

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THE TRUTH ABOUT SPEAKING UP

‘You will never be popular.’ Not necessarily what you want to hear when you’ve just started a new job. I’d been in Parliament for just four months when the Rt Hon. Harriet Harman placed her hand on my shoulder and spoke these fateful words to me. I’m not a spiritual person – I don’t have faith; I’m your classic smug cynic – but I kid you not, at that moment I felt some sort of baton passing. I’m not messing – I feel a proper div saying this – but I felt something in my heart. I’d stopped smoking around the same time, so perhaps it was coincidentally the moment that my heart started to function properly after twenty-two years of abuse.

Being told that you’ll never be popular might seem harsh. Especially when it was said to me by the woman who, aside from my mother, had probably had the greatest effect on my life. This is a woman who fought for women like me to get where I am. She was elected around the same time I was born. Every moment she has spent in

our democratic palace has been to make sure that girls like me from outside the Establishment can have a couple of kids, make some monumental mistakes and still stumble upon success and, in my case, one of the most powerful jobs in the land. Don't get me wrong, I deserve a massive wedge of the credit for my own success, but the ladder I climbed wasn't just thrown down to me by Harriet and other women in Parliament; it was whittled by them until their hands bled. Telling me I'd never be popular was her way of saying that it was now my job to build the ladders; that my hands were going to be full of splinters but it would be worth it.

So there I was in the mother of all Parliaments, with the mother of Parliament inspiring me with her knock-'em-dead feminism. She was right, of course. In my sixteen weeks in Westminster I had become, in some quarters, fairly unpopular both in and out of the parliamentary bubble. Quite an achievement when Parliament was shut for recess for nine of those sixteen weeks. In that short time, I'd marked myself out as an angry feminist. A big pink target was scrawled on my back and – whaddya know! – the delegitimation of my voice had begun. I don't mean to brag, but I count myself in the cool crowd. I was your classic popular kid at school. This new unpopularity was going to be hard to handle.

I might as well get the negatives out of the way now, so we can get back on track. I am writing this as a call to arms to activism after all. They do say forewarned is forearmed, so even though I am tired of saying what I'm

about to say, any woman who dares to speak out has to prepare herself for the slow and subtle push for her voice to conform to the norm. These are the top five things people do to infantilise strong (usually female) voices.

Shushing

I accept that this might be going on in the real world – in offices up and down the UK, people might actually be shushing their colleagues – but I can't say it happened where I worked at Women's Aid, so I'm a bit new to it. In Parliament there is a fair amount of shouting, ribbing and sledging. It is often presented as being a very male behaviour, but many of the women on the green benches do it too. Nicky Morgan is a proper mutterer. Anna Soubry jolly well lets you know what she jolly well thinks. I myself am perhaps one of the loudest, but my voice is rarely alone. If I am getting aggravated or am heckling in a debate, I have noticed men from the opposition benches, men who shout and holler all they like, shushing me like I was a five-year-old on a car journey and they were about to miss some vital bit of storyline on *The Archers*. I am *not* a child; do not shush me.

These men have cottoned on to the fact that saying 'calm down, dear' won't play well. So instead they have replaced it with the weaponry of a primary school teacher. On one sublime occasion, a minister on the front bench – a privileged bloke who has never lived on the benefit we

were debating – wanted silence for his oh-so-uninformed view on what gets mothers back to work. He looked at me like I was a pramface commoner, fag in hand, screaming kids round my ankles, and shushed me. ‘You’re not my dad,’ I responded. ‘Don’t you dare shush me while the men shouting around me get no such treatment!’ There it is: paternalistic shushing, as if the women in the Commons are nothing more than infant children, there to present an acceptable image. I say to you, good sir, you can take your shushing shushes and stick them up your shushing arse!

If anyone ever shushes you, my advice is to call it out. Ask the man in question, ‘Did you just shush me like a child?’ They will then be forced to verbalise their dislike of your opposition to their views and will fall apart almost instantly.

‘You would say that’

This is an absolute killer. If you care about something or have been identified as a person with a certain position (i.e. feminism), immediately your insights are no longer legitimate. No one says to their GP, ‘You say I’ve got tennis elbow, do you? Well, you would bloody say that.’ My advice is to simply reply, ‘Yes, I would say that because I am both learned and experienced in this field, so what I say is based on evidence. What about you?’

The fear of a pigeonhole

If only I had a pound for every time someone had said to me, ‘Be careful you don’t get pigeonholed with the whole feminism thing.’ As if the fact that I fight for women not to be murdered and raped means that I don’t also have opinions on road safety, the economy and foreign policy. My pretty little head can only deal with one thing at a time, you see. No one ever said to Andy Burnham, ‘Watch out, dude, your ten-year campaign for Hillsborough victims means everyone is going to think you only care about football crowds.’ No, in that time he managed to be a treasury minister and Secretary of State for Health, and also hold a variety of shadow ninja positions. No one ever said to George Osborne, ‘Mate, always chatting about the economy will make people feel like you are a one-trick pony.’

Women with a cause suffer from these accusations simply because they are women. If their cause is women too, they must be reminded of how narrow this is all the time, for fear that something might actually change. I say ignore these comments and care about what you care about. Faking it, like so many things in life, is a pointless exercise that will ultimately leave you dissatisfied.

‘You are an attention-seeker always chasing publicity’

Oh what a classic way to shut me up! To make me feel guilty for getting publicity for the things I care about. When I stood up in the Commons on International Women’s Day and read out the names of 120 women murdered by men in a single year, every newspaper wrote about it. I made it into the *New York Times*. For a moment I imagined Carrie Bradshaw and her friends discussing it in their fancy clothes in some trendy Greenwich Village brunch hangout. Should I be feeling guilty that people were talking about something that needs talking about? Jeremy Corbyn is in the papers every day, but I doubt he gets called a publicity-seeker. When he was a backbencher, as I am, and was famously marched off by the police in front of the hacks’ cameras at an anti-apartheid rally, I doubt anyone said, ‘God, he likes himself, he’s only doing it to get a spot on *Russia Today*.’ On the contrary, he is a man of principle, whereas I – a woman – am considered to be like someone on *The Only Way Is Essex*.

The whole point of being a campaigner is to get publicity to change things. It’s the sodding job. I have long campaigned for sustainable funding for refuges in the UK because they are forced to survive year to year on uncertain budgets. It took a campaign by the *Sun* in partnership with Women’s Aid to make the government pay attention. Publicity matters. When people call me an attention-seeker, they do it to silence me, and I’m

ashamed to say it works. I will withdraw from interviews and avoid noteworthy campaigns for a few months after I've been splashed across the public consciousness. I'll bet you anything you like no man with a cause ever did the same.

But I say to you now: don't do it. Don't listen. Line up every possible platform you have: TV, newspaper, magazine, podcast, radio. Tell the world what you care about, because it makes them care too, and we need people like you to speak up.

They threaten you

The previous four things are often subconscious acts carried out as a result of our continued existence within a patriarchal society. They are not exclusively done by men. We are all guilty of unconscious bias and its associated behaviour. But this final act is committed by true baddies. If they cannot silence you by undermining you, if they fail to make you feel so anxious about your actions that you can't sleep, then the threats roll in. Every day I receive threats. They range from death and rape to warnings of unemployment. Plots to deselect me and others like me from our seats in the House of Commons are the most common.

But this isn't specific to me, or to other MPs. This happens across the land. In every town someone is being called in to their boss's office and being threatened; more

subtly than Internet bullying, but threatened all the same. We all have to rub along together, so we should bend and mould to our environment. I get that. Threats are different; threats come about because of a perceived imbalance in the established power structure. They are designed to squash. My best advice is to call it out if you can. I can't imagine anyone in Westminster would threaten me, because I would sing like a bird and everyone would want to listen (one of the reasons why they don't want you to have publicity).

If any one of these five devices is ever used to shut you up, you are winning. It turns out that not being popular actually means not being popular with the kind of people you wouldn't want to go on a date with or find yourself in the caravan next door to on holiday. Next time someone says, 'I know this really matters to you, I'm just worried it might mean people don't take you seriously,' what you should hear is 'Goddammit, people are taking you seriously!' Never in any rom-com or coming-of-age-drama did the popular kid emerge smelling of roses. Nobody cheers when the person who always does well does a bit better. If people come after you for being a success then shout it out, shame them to their faces and amongst their peers; it's what they're trying to do to you. Let's all relish our unpopularity. Let's take back the tag and wear it as a shield. Let's say sod the idea of toeing the line. Let's be unpopular together, because I sure as hell don't want to be unpopular on my own! That would be no fun at all.