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Ladies of the House

Nineteen-fifty-eight was the year suffragette Christabel Pankhurst died; the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Barbie dolls were born; Britain got its first motorway; instant noodles went on sale for the first time; and the musical *My Fair Lady* opened in London's Drury Lane. Alan Sillitoe published his novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and economist J.K. Galbraith his less fictitious *The Affluent Society*. Growing ethnic diversity on Britain's streets began to challenge traditional notions of Britishness, and the ban on portraying homosexuality on the stage was lifted. On the world's stage, Egypt and Syria became the United Arab Republic; Sputnik 2 disintegrated in space; there was a military coup in Algeria and a revolution in Iraq; and Britain and Iceland started to argue about who had rights to empty the North Atlantic of fish. In July 1958, one of the oldest political institutions in the world received a dramatic shock to its constitution when the Life Peerages Act admitted both non-hereditary peers and women to Britain's Upper House for the first time. The House of Lords became a House of Lords and Ladies, although it was never officially renamed, because that would have meant another long-drawn out battle to drag Britain into the modern age.

The Life Peerages Act was not the first notable public event in Barbara Wootton's life, but it is one of those with which her name is most associated. She was the first woman to be created a Baroness under the terms of the Act. Women over thirty got the vote in 1918, but eligibility for the Upper House did not automatically follow enfranchisement in Britain, as it did in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, the Irish Free State, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden and the USA; for this reason, Britain was unable to sign up to the United Nations Convention of Human Rights in 1953. Women in Britain could inherit titles, although they did so much less frequently than men, but they were not allowed to use these to gain entry to the House of Lords. Two-chamber political systems are common in democracies, with the second chamber having some function of watching over the constitution and

revising legislation. The problem with Britain's two chambers is that they go back a long way – more than 500 years – and an institution full of dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts and barons, who have inherited their titles through no merit of their own, is fundamentally difficult to fit into a modern parliamentary democracy. This is one reason why it took women, whose public political roles are exemplars *par excellence* of the modern age, such a long time to get in. Gender got mixed up with the issue of constitutional reform; most people who wanted to do something about the House of Lords did not want to do anything about women.¹

Prime Minister William Gladstone once famously remarked that admitting women to the House of Lords would be disastrous, since most of the peers would die of shock and the women thus admitted would die of boredom.² 'The main point is that many of us do not want women in this House. We do not want to sit beside them on these Benches, nor do we want to meet them in the Library. This is a House of men,' said the Earl of Glasgow in 1957.³ There were centuries of excuses. Women would be too bossy, too distracting, too frivolous; they would have bees of various kinds in their bonnets which would buzz far too loudly. Following the 1919 Sex Discrimination (Removal) Act, which stated that women should not be disqualified either by sex or by marriage from the exercise of any public function, Margaret Mackworth, Viscountess Rhondda, who had inherited a title from her father, argued that these public functions must surely include the ability to contribute to the work of the House of Lords. A decision in her favour was overturned by the Lord Chancellor, Viscount Birkenhead, an unrepentant anti-feminist, who argued unpleasantly that 'physiologically' women such as her were merely acting 'as a conduit pipe through which the blood of distinguished men may pass from one generation to another'.⁴ When the House of Lords itself finally passed a motion in 1949 to admit women, the possibility of equality fell foul of the Labour Government's antipathy to it as an unreformed establishment institution. Socialist politician Jennie Lee spoke for many when she said that she was 'no more in favour of ladies being Members of the House of Lords than men, because I do not believe in the House of Lords'.⁵ Jennie Lee would later eat her words when she herself accepted a life peerage in 1970, and Barbara Wootton would encourage her to do so: 'There seems not the slightest prospect that the House will be abolished, as it ought to be,' counselled Barbara, 'but while it survives, I really don't think it ought to be an exclusive Tory platform'.⁶

Barbara Wootton was another word-eater. 'It is not...enough to abolish the House of Lords,' she had announced in her trenchant *End Social Inequality*, published in 1941. 'If we are serious about democracy, it is necessary also to abolish the Lords.'⁷ What all political parties had to recognize was that, by the 1950s, poor attendance

and an ageing population had made the House of Lords an ineffective tool for any type of government.⁸ Many peers never turned up, and some of those who did fell asleep as soon as they got there.⁹ A solution to this problem was the introduction of selected younger members who would be more likely to stay awake.

Schemes for reforming the House of Lords had been intermittent since the 1830s, and private members' Bills seeking to create life peerages were introduced in 1869, 1888, 1907, 1929, 1935 and 1953. The 1911 Parliament Act had expressed an intention to 'substitute for the House of Lords as it at present exists a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of hereditary basis', though nothing was subsequently done to bring this about. The final push came with Harold Macmillan's Conservative Government in 1957. Predictably, however, this did not bring the sexist nature of the debate to an end; when the Bill that became the Life Peerages Act was being discussed, Earl Ferrers likened women in politics to the action of acid on metal, corroding the purity of masculine authority,¹⁰ and the Earl of Home observed that 'taking women into a Parliamentary embrace would seem to be only a modest extension of the normal functions and privileges of a Peer'.¹¹

Barbara Wootton was sixty-one when the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, wrote to her to say that he wished to submit her name to the Queen 'with a recommendation that Her Majesty may be graciously pleased to approve that the dignity of a Barony of the United Kingdom for life be conferred upon you'.¹² All the new members of the House were to be known as 'baronesses' or 'barons'. Barbara Wootton's elevation to a feudal title came at the instigation of Frank Pakenham, Lord Longford, who prompted Labour politician Hugh Gaitskell, then Leader of the Opposition, to suggest her name.¹³ Gaitskell and Longford had been close friends as undergraduates at Oxford.¹⁴ Longford's complicated political career had begun in the Conservative Party; converted to socialism by his wife, he converted her to Catholicism and was famous for the moral stand he took on such issues as gay rights and prison reform; he and Barbara Wootton would have much to do with one another in subsequent debates in the House. Longford had been 'right-hand man' to William Beveridge in the latter's landmark welfare state Report, an enterprise in which Baroness-Wootton-to-be had also shared.

Gaitskell put Barbara Wootton on the list of the first life peers not because she was a woman, but because she was the cleverest left-wing person he and his advisors knew.¹⁵ Hers was one of fourteen names – ten men and four women – on the first list of life peers. Six of the men were, or had been, MPs; one was a trade unionist, one a colonial Governor, one an academic, and one a prominent member of the Church of Scotland. In *The Times* announcement, the photographs of the

four women were placed above those of the men: Dame Katherine Elliot, Lady Ravensdale, Dowager Lady Reading, and plain 'Mrs Wootton'. All the new recruits had brief biographies appended to their names. Both Katharine Elliot and Stella Reading were described as 'the widow of ...'; Irene Ravensdale, the unmarried one, was attached instead to her father, 'the elder daughter of the late Lord Curzon'. Barbara's began 'Mrs. Barbara Frances Wootton (Mrs. Wright), who was educated at ...'¹⁶ Her surnames were a cause of confusion throughout her life. In 1958, she was still married to her second husband, George Wright, but 'Wootton', the name of her first husband, was the one she always used. The confusion is neatly marked in her Writ of Summons to Parliament, which is addressed 'To Our right trusty and well beloved Barbara Frances Wright of Abinger Common in Our County of Surrey' and ends with the name 'Barbara Frances Baroness Wootton of Abinger'.¹⁷

For most of her life, Barbara Wootton had worked as an academic. She was tired of the small-mindedness and seclusion from real life issues of university life, and with considerable experience behind her of public service, and a fierce conviction that the point of being alive is to try to improve public welfare, she was looking for something else to do. Her background was rather different from that of her three titled female co-entrants, and she was the only one of the four to be chosen after consultation with the Leader of the Opposition. But there were also some striking similarities between the four new Ladies of the House: all four had been born within nine years of one another; all had been brought up by nannies (as was customary among the British upper classes at the time); all had a reputation for being fearlessly outspoken; all were childless; one had never married, and three were widows. One of several ways in which Barbara embarrassed House of Lords' officials was by having her second husband, George Wright, still alive. George was very proud of her achievement; accordingly, he claimed the title of 'peeress', and requested the traditional right exercised by the spouses of peers to sit in a special part of the House. This raised the demon of 'facilities'. If George joined the other wives, he would have to use their lavatory, and as that could not be allowed, he was given a special place in the front row of the Distinguished Strangers' Gallery instead.¹⁸

Lavatories, titles and clothes were all formidable problems – details which rapidly became of absorbing interest to the press. A special Sub-Committee of the House of Lords' Offices Committee was set up to consider the 'facilities' issue. *The Times* thought the creation of a 'Life Peeresses' room at Westminster worthy of its political correspondent's attention; the room was decorated and furnished in what the Ministry of Works described as 'a more feminine style', with 'light neutral shades' on the walls and printed linen curtains. There was a red carpet and 'attractive seats' with 'bright loose covers'; small tables and a mirror were provided.¹⁹ The toilet,

'a sort of mahogany throne with blue roses on the bowl', had to be seen to be believed.²⁰ On the door hung a sign announcing 'Life Peeresses', but, as Barbara's George had proved, a peeress is the wife of a peer. Barbara was much exercised about this, writing to Viscount Hailsham as Leader of the House of Lords and to the Lord Great Chamberlain on behalf of herself and her three female colleagues in an effort to get the sign changed to 'Women Life Peers'. 'The point may seem a small one,' she conceded, 'but the reasons for the request are both practical and a matter of principle. The principle involved arises from the fact that our peerages have been personally conferred on us and are not derived from our husbands.'²¹ The sign was eventually changed to 'Women Peers', but the new label was enclosed in inverted commas, as though the sign-writer could not quite believe it.

And then there was the little matter of the clothes. Should the new Ladies of the House, like the old Lords, wear robes on ceremonial occasions? 'I don't know what the situation would be if a new peer or peeress refused to wear them,' admitted Sir George Bellew, Garter King of Arms, somewhat desperately, 'It has never happened.'²² Robes were expensive; perhaps the ladies could hire them – it would cost only £8 a day.²³ Barbara Wootton, who hoped to avoid the whole robes issue, agreed that this would be an excellent idea. The traditional robes of a baron, dating from the fifteenth century, are made of scarlet wool, trimmed with bars of ermine and gold oak leaf lace, though these days the ermine is miniver – rabbit fur – painted with black dots, which is cheaper. Baronesses, as well as barons, could wear such robes, but there was a further problem to be resolved: the hat. During the introductory ceremony new peers had to undergo, it was customary for the hat to be raised three times, but this would savage the ladies' hair-dos. A special tricorne hat, resembling that worn by women naval officers, was thus designed by robemakers Ede & Ravenscroft. This consisted of lightweight black velour with a gold lace rosette on the side – a tiny, sensational rosette, 'the feminine touch'²⁴ – and its wearers were allowed to keep the hat on throughout the ceremony. The hat business entertained the journalists: 'Women First to Join Lords: Keep Hats On' and 'The Ladies Join the Lords as Though Born to It: Revolution Kept under Hat'.²⁵ The possibility that women might also want to wear ordinary hats during the ordinary business of the House also had to be allowed for, and since the constitution barred peers from wearing hats while speaking, this was yet another custom that had to be changed.

Of the four women who would wear this negotiated regalia, Barbara was the first to be 'gazetted' with the title Baroness Wootton of Abinger in 'letters patent' dated 8 August 1958. She was in the first batch of life peers to be introduced, the second woman, after Lady Reading. Stella Reading and Barbara had already

crossed paths in their capacity as Governors of the BBC. The main feature of this first meeting recalled by Barbara had also involved the inconvenience of having to provide conveniences for token women. When she first went to Broadcasting House in 1950 to meet Sir William Haley, the then Director-General, Barbara had been handed a Yale key marked 'women's toilet'. This facility she shared with Stella Reading as the only other woman member. The nailbrush in the toilet was chained to the basin, and the two women wondered which of them was the target of this precaution.²⁶ Such privations would, for Stella Reading, have stood out as unusual in an otherwise well-resourced life. She shared with another of the new ladies, Irene Ravensdale, an imperial Indian connection: her father had been a member of the British Foreign Service, and director of the tobacco monopoly of the Ottoman empire, and the unmarried Stella had served as secretary to the wife of the Viceroy to India, Rufus Isaacs, Marquess of Reading. When the Viceroy's wife died, Stella had married him after a decent interval, thus acquiring the title 'Marchioness of Reading', although this did not stop her from a considerable record of achievement – most notably, the founding of the Women's Voluntary Service.

Proceedings on 21 October when the first new peers were introduced went smoothly. The House was packed and awake. In a ceremony almost unchanged since the seventeenth century, the peers followed a procession led by Black Rod and the other officials in their sparkling ceremonial wear, bowed to the throne, then knelt at the Woolsack while their Writs of Summons to Parliament were read out. True to her word, Barbara Wootton wore borrowed robes – those of Lord Catto, one time Governor of the Bank of England, at the suggestion of the mechanic who serviced her car in rural Surrey, who had observed that Lord Catto, a neighbour, not being well, would probably not need his robes on this occasion.²⁷ Lady Reading hesitated slightly when taking the oath of allegiance. As she added her signature to the great Book of Peers, 'a solemn hush' filled the House, followed by a 'long, warm murmur of applause'.²⁸ Then came the first of the commotions Barbara Wootton would cause their Lordships: looking 'greatly interested in what was happening to her, though less than overwhelmed with awe',²⁹ she waved the bible aside and tried to give it to the clerk, who refused to take it.³⁰ Then she declared in firm tones her conscientious objection to anything other than a simple affirmation of allegiance to the Queen.³¹ Each new peer had to have two sponsors from among existing peers. Barbara's were Lord Longford and Lord Burden – Tom Burden, a socialist friend from Barbara's days in the Workers' Educational Association. An archive photograph shows the three of them, in descending order of height, Barbara with strangely angled feet looking rather on her guard between the two avuncular men. As the senior sponsor, Lord Longford remembered waiting

uneasily while a search took place at the Clerk's table for the alternative wording required for the making of an affirmation. Two old Tories on the bench opposite wondered out loud (one of them was somewhat deaf) what accounted for the hold up: 'She doesn't believe in God.' 'Why the Devil not?'³² But, after that, Barbara did her three bows, the kneeling and all the rest of it, 'like a good girl'.³³

Once in the House, the four women life peers became part of an expanding brigade of Ladies whose levels of energy more than matched those of buzzing bees, and certainly exceeded the political activity of the sleepy or absentee Lords. According to the calculations undertaken by academics Gavin Drewry and Jenny Brock in their study of women in the House of Lords in 1980, sixty-five per cent of women life peers compared with forty per cent of male life peers had attended half or more of the House's sessions in the previous year.³⁴ At a Fawcett Society party in honour of the four new Ladies of the House, Stella Reading called the House of Lords a 'delicious place to be in. People move so slowly. Nobody runs down passages; nobody uses used envelopes; nobody does anything for himself if he can ask a gentleman with a gold chain to do it for him.' Irene Ravensdale wondered what her father, a swaggering adulterous aristocrat,³⁵ would have said, given that he had been so violently opposed to the suffrage movement.³⁶ She continued the insect analogy others had used by comparing the Lords with 'a drowsy lot of flies in a very hot room' among which women like herself might be regarded as 'an excited bluebottle coming to disturb their sleep'.³⁷ Katharine Elliot, the daughter of a baronet and the half-sister of Prime Minister Asquith's wife,³⁸ spoke more conservatively about the extreme kindness of their Lordships. Barbara, typically, had her eye on the future: 'There are strongholds that have not yet been breached,' she declared firmly. 'We look forward to a far greater distinction than entry into the House of Lords, and that is entry for women into the Athenaeum Club.'³⁹ This was not an achievement she would see in her lifetime: the Athenaeum did not agree to embrace women until 2002.

As Melanie Phillips mentioned in her book about women at Westminster, one of Barbara's elderly Conservative colleagues in the House of Lords once remarked, 'Barbara Wootton is quite brilliant, you know, even though she's frightfully left-wing, but she's a bit odd. She married a taxi driver, you know. Wasn't that an extraordinary thing to do?'⁴⁰ It was possibly one of the least extraordinary things Barbara ever did, and it certainly seems somewhat less extraordinary than her decision to enter the House of Lords. Ambivalence about its pomp and circumstance has been a common aspect of the general regard in which the House has been held, and ambivalence was a thread running through the new Baroness Wootton's life. But she was also attuned to evidence, and the evidence

she encountered once in the House was that here was an establishment where, perversely, women could be, and were, treated as equals – more so than in The Other Place (parliamentary terminology for the House of Commons). Interviewed by *The Observer* in 1977, Barbara observed that she had never been anywhere else where the men had treated her more as an equal, except, she added, ‘for that Longford, who always makes some fatuous remark about one’s dress or hairstyle’.⁴¹

Breaching the masculine citadel of the House of Lords was an element in women’s long battle to be treated as citizens. When Stella Reading and Barbara Wootton swayed through the House that day in October 1958 in their scarlet and gold regalia flanked, preceded and followed by men, their presence symbolized a very particular version of modernity. The 1950s were an ultra-conservative decade for women: the militancy of the suffragettes had been swallowed up in women’s massive mobilization as substitute male labourers during the First World War, and the token concession of the over-thirties vote in 1918; the traditional family, with women at its centre, underpinned all programmes of post-war reconstruction, giving most women no option but to accede gracefully and become iconic housewives, wives and mothers. Simone de Beauvoir had published her now classic *The Second Sex* in France in 1949, less than four years after French women obtained the vote, but her arguments about masculine society creating restrictive roles for women took years to permeate other languages and cultures. In the 1950s, the Anglo-American world was dominated by pseudo-psychoanalytic views of the widespread neurosis inflicted by women’s refusal to be happy housewives at home.⁴² Day nurseries were closed, and experts pronounced on the importance of mothers to children’s socialization.⁴³ The sinister idea that proper mothering would prevent all social problems was one that Barbara Wootton tackled in her own *Social Science and Social Pathology*, finished around the same time as she entered the House of Lords. Like the notion of ‘the teenager’, that of ‘the working mother’ arrived in the 1950s to signify the displacement and panic of changing family arrangements. Women, of course, had always worked, but their equal participation with men in the world of paid work outside the home has always been another matter. Post-war, the ideology was that women had simply acquired a new role – they had two, whereas men had one.⁴⁴

The widespread conservative turn away from a feminist agenda which occurred in many countries after the Second World War affected popular culture, fashion, political propaganda and social science alike. The American harbinger of discontent, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which revealed the unhappy truth behind the happy housewife ideal, would not be published until 1963, and the new wave of feminism did not begin its tidal sweep of patriarchal sands until the late 1960s.

All the countries in which the new women's movement arose could point to similar patterns of discrimination: the legal exclusion of women from public functions persisted; their incursion into formal male politics had been paltry; reproductive freedom remained a mirage; and women in the labour force worked mainly in unskilled jobs for half or two-thirds of the equivalent male wage.⁴⁵ Much of this discrimination persists today. Even some of the more apparently trivial themes in women's induction to the House of Lords have been raised to the status of serious subjects for study. The problems the women peers had with their lavatory provision continued well into the 1970s, and there is now a respectable body of research and political campaigning on the topic of 'urination discrimination'. This is most notably a place in which women experience the restrictions of both biology and culture, being allocated about half the public toilets provided for men, despite spending twice as much time in them, for physiological reasons.⁴⁶

None of the four new baronesses had experienced the ordinary problems of women's two roles. It is doubtful whether three of them would have earned their new passports to ennoblement without the connections they had to men; again, there is nothing very extraordinary about this. Writing of the four names, *The Daily Telegraph* noted, 'The list makes history – without unduly disturbing it'.⁴⁷ Barbara Wootton was the exceptional new Lady of the House. She was the only one to have got there under her own steam, commented *The Observer*, calling her (incorrectly) "'Professor" Wootton'. She was likely to be the most vigorous of the new creations: 'A tall, handsome woman of sixty with a formidable deep voice and a subtle mock-serious wit, she sometimes gives the impression of a stern masculine character', but fortunately she also exudes a 'natural feminine warmth'.⁴⁸ 'To the ordinary thinking woman like myself,' wrote one admirer, Mrs Margaret Rees, to Barbara on reading of her life peerage, 'it will be a great satisfaction to know that matters which concern women, child welfare & subjects which the male members can never understand properly, will be left in your capable hands My politics are not yours,' she went on honestly, 'but there are so many things needing attention today, which need commonsense, plain speaking & understanding. May God Bless & guide you during your life & so help to uplift women on to the same equality as man, in all walks of life.'⁴⁹

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