

Baroness

JEAN CORSTON

**FEMINIST,
FIGHTER,
CHAMPION**

of

RADICAL CHANGE

for

WOMEN IN PRISON

- and a granny

talks to Yvonne Roberts

JEAN WITH HER
GRANDSONS, HENRY
AND CHARLES ON
THE DAY OF HER
INTRODUCTION TO THE
LORDS, JULY 2005



J EAN CORSTON SITS IN A TEA ROOM IN THE House of Lords, describing how, on a recent visit to a prison, a woman asked her if she was a duchess. Jean was appointed to the Lords after an accident forced her to retire as Labour MP for Bristol East in 2005. She had served as a Member of Parliament for 13 years. During that time, she was elected the first female Chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party, a very tough job to hold as “shop steward” of the Labour back-bench MPs. “I told the woman I was a baroness, not a duchess,” Jean, 74, smiles. “But I told her, I’m also a granny.” Jean has two grown-up children and six grandchildren, aged 13 to 23.

Along with Professor Pat Carlen and the late Chris Tchaikovsky, founders of Women in Prison, Jean - a patron of WIP - has improved women’s prisons significantly but all three would say there is still a very long way to go.

March 2017 sees the 10th anniversary of the publication of the groundbreaking Corston report, authored by Jean. In 2006, Jean was commissioned by the Home Office in the then Labour government to conduct a report into vulnerable women in the criminal justice system. A few years earlier, she had chaired a human rights inquiry into deaths in custody. The Corston report’s radical recommendations received support from all three main parties: Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat.

The report pointed out that women – 5% of the total prison population – are in a prison system designed by and for men. It also

argued that a high proportion of women in prison have family responsibilities, often as the sole parent. Many women also have mental health issues and should not be in jail at all. Jean and her team visited a number of prisons and found that childhood abuse, domestic violence and self-harm were very common experiences among imprisoned women.

Among the changes Jean triggered as a result of the report, published in March 2007, was an end to routine strip searching, programmes to address mental ill health, the addition of two “pathways to reducing re-offending” (ie recognising the impact abuse and prostitution have on women’s lives and the choices they make), improved support on the first night in jail and over £15 million invested in creating “one-stop” shops in women’s centres in the community and in developing schemes to divert women from custody. A group of funders came >>



JEAN WITH HER DAUGHTER IN THE 1960'S



JEAN AND PETER TOWNSEND AT A WEDDING IN 2008



JEAN IN A SIKH TEMPLE IN MY CONSTITUENCY BRISTOL EAST IN 1999



A REPORT BY BARONESS JEAN CORSTON OF A REVIEW OF WOMEN WITH PARTICULAR VULNERABILITIES IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

THE CORSTON REPORT

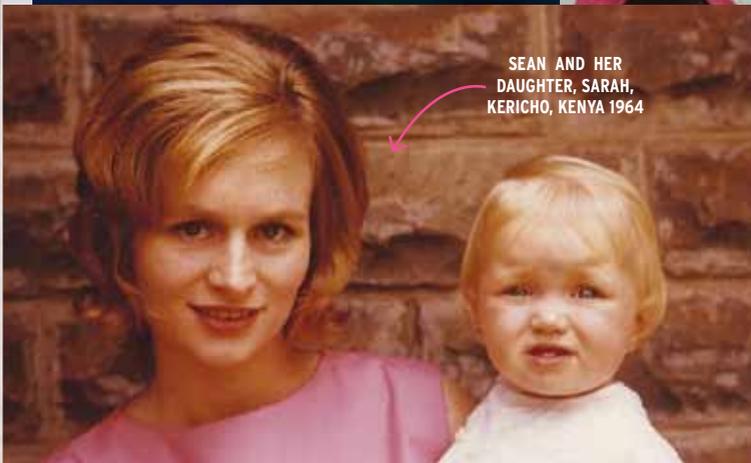
THE NEED FOR A DISTINCT, RADICALLY DIFFERENT, VISIBLY LED, STRATEGIC, PROPORTIONATE, HOLISTIC, WOMAN-CENTRED, INTEGRATED APPROACH



JEAN AND HER UNCLE ALF IN MAY 1944, HULL



JEAN AT SCHOOL AGED 11, 1953



JEAN AND HER DAUGHTER, SARAH, KERICHO, KENYA 1964

together as the Corston Coalition to invest in providing women with community-based alternatives to prison, a more effective way to end re-offending.

NEVITABLY, 10 YEARS ON, THE first question is, has progress continued? In 1980, with a smaller general population, around 1,500 women were in prison. Between 2000 and 2010, the female prison population leapt by 27%, even as the consensus grew that custodial sentences of six months or less were not appropriate for many females.

Numbers have now declined from a peak of over 4,600 (2005) to around 3,800. The aim of WIP, and Jean Corston, is to have only a very small number of women incarcerated, with the rest given community sentences. Yet, now, changes to the system mean that women's centres and the use of community sentencing are under a very real threat. The government has announced that five small women's prisons are to be built, a backward step. Jean fights on. "The House of Lords gives me a platform," she says. "Here, I am a mouthpiece for people who have no voice. If I stop being effective, I'll stop coming."

So, who is this remarkable woman, a lifelong feminist, who, in her report, and in a lifetime of campaigning, has laid down so many milestones for women? Jean smiles. "I always say to a woman who may be in a dark

place and lacking in confidence, 'if I can do it, so can you'. And it's true. Women are strong. I think I'm very ordinary."

Jean was born in Hull in 1942, during World War II, as the bombs rained down on the city. Her family later moved to Yeovil in Somerset. Jean's father was a skilled glove cutter (ensuring leather was properly stretched and "fitted like a glove") and a trade union activist, who was blacklisted by employers and was therefore often out of work. "My mother

left us when I was 14," Jean says. "We had so little money that often my sister, father and I would share a tin of soup."

Jean passed the Eleven Plus and went to grammar school. "I came from a council estate so they didn't treat me well. When people say how wonderful grammar schools are, I want to explode."

Jean had to leave school at 16 and worked for the Inland Revenue because the family needed her wage. By 19, she was married and she and her husband, who worked for British Forces Broadcasting, had moved to Kenya. "The baby was stillborn. They took her away and put her in the sluice. It was treated as if I'd lost an umbrella. I was devastated."

Jean rapidly had two more children and returned to England. "I used to feed four of us on £6 a week." She was at home with the children for 11 years, and then took an A level at an evening class before studying Humanities

"I always say to others, 'if I can do it, so can you'. I think I'm very ordinary."

and Social Sciences for two years with the Open University. Then, she began to work for the Labour Party and, aged 38, she became Southwest Regional Organiser, based in Bristol, considered "a man's job" by many men.

In 1985, during the time of the miners' strike and the bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton, which Margaret Thatcher was visiting for the Conservative Party Conference, Jean was responsible for the Labour Party Conference. One of her male critics said: "You can't have a woman running the Conference; she'll cry."

BREAKING TRADITIONAL patterns of behaviour is in Jean's blood. Barristers are usually in their 20s when they embark on a career; Jean was in her mid-40s when she left Labour Party employment to read for a law degree and then train to become a barrister. At the same time as she was training for the bar at the Inns of Court School of Law in London, at weekends, she was also "pounding the streets" in Bristol, canvassing as the Labour candidate for Bristol East.

A barrister for two years, a job she says she loved, she often represented women in cases of domestic violence. "I'd lived a life. When I met a woman with three children, no qualifications, no money who went back to a man who beat her up, the police would say, 'silly cow', but I understood her."

In her personal life, divorced and in her 30s, she met Peter Townsend. He was

an academic and activist who helped to establish the Disability Alliance and the charity the Child Poverty Action Group. He was hugely influential in battling the scourge of poverty in Britain, one of the richest countries in the world. They met in 1980, married in 1985 and he died eight years ago. "We were very lucky. We had 29 very happy years," Jean says. "But the day he died was the worst day of my life." The tears nearly fall.

Spend 10 minutes in Jean's company and you are at ease. She is warm, caring and passionate. She became a candidate for Bristol East reluctantly and hated her first term in parliament in 1992. "The party was looking for a candidate. I said, 'we don't know anyone who is presentable enough on television so nobody has to hide behind the sofa, and who would do it'. A colleague said, 'yes we do. It's you!'"

Jean now chairs the All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System. She says she has no intention of giving up the campaign for real and lasting change nor the aim of ensuring the proper funding of a network of independent women's centres. "You only have to look at the rates of re-offending to see that the current system doesn't work," she says.

I ask this extraordinary woman, who regards herself as "very ordinary", which of her many achievements she feels the most proud, and she smiles broadly. "Being a granny," she says.



MORE JEAN!
Jean's favourite book: *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing
Jean's hobbies: reading, gardening, and tapestry (and she bakes a chocolate cake every Saturday for her grandchildren)
Favourite quote: "A woman is like a teabag; you never know how strong it is until it's in hot water." Eleanor Roosevelt