

The Rt Hon Baroness Castle of Blackburn PC
(née Betts, Philosophy, Politics and Economics, 1929)

1910-2002



Barbara Castle was a Labour Party politician, and the longest serving woman MP in the history of the House of Commons until 2007. She is the only woman to have held the office of First Secretary of State (1968-70). She was a life-long advocate for the transforming power of socialism.

Barbara Castle was born in Derbyshire in 1910 and, due to the nature of her father's employment as a tax inspector, moved around with her family frequently as a child. She spent her secondary school years in Bradford, a city which had produced some of the earliest Labour MPs and where the Independent Labour Party had been founded in 1893. As a child, she was deeply interested in politics, and even stood as Labour candidate at a mock general election held in her final year at school.

In 1929, she followed in her sister Marjorie's footsteps by coming up to St Hugh's to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics. She was intent on going into politics and played an active part in the Oxford Labour Club, serving as Treasurer in her second year. As she put it in her introduction to the Association of Senior Members' colloquium 'The History of St Hugh's in the Twentieth Century' in 1999, 'my wild ambition in life was to be a Member of Parliament, I couldn't imagine anything more wonderful...'

After leaving St Hugh's, Barbara Castle embarked upon her career as a journalist, including as a columnist covering trade union matters for *Tribune*, the newspaper she helped to launch alongside Michael Foot and William Mellor, which had a mission to recreate Labour as a truly socialist party. She became a St Pancras borough councillor in 1937 and was drafted into the Ministry of Food as an administrative officer early in the Second World War. It was in her capacity as borough councillor that she was called upon to speak in the debate on the Beveridge report at the Labour Party conference in 1943. Her performance made quite an impression and appeared on the front page of the *Mirror* the next day courtesy of night editor Ted Castle, who she went on to marry in 1944.

In the 1945 general election, she was elected as the MP for Blackburn, the seat she represented until she retired in 1979. She became the youngest woman in the Commons, serving as parliamentary private secretary to Sir Stafford Cripps at the Board of Trade and then to Harold Wilson, who became one of her closest political allies. When Harold Wilson became Prime Minister in 1964, she became part of his first cabinet in the new role of Minister for Overseas Aid. She was promoted in 1966 to the Department of Transport, where her reforms included making permanent the national speed limit of 70mph, as well as legislating for breathalyser tests to combat drink-driving, and compulsory seat belts. At a time of immense tension between the government and the unions, she then became

Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity in 1968 (a newly created department) and First Secretary of State, serving until Labour was defeated in the 1970 general election. During this period, she launched her failed and immensely controversial bid to reform the trade unions, and she oversaw the passage of the Equal Pay Act. When Labour returned to power in 1974, she became Secretary of State for Health and Social Security. Her contributions during this period included launching a far-reaching review of social security provision, radically reforming pensions and bringing in child benefit as a payment to mothers.

When her parliamentary career ended in 1979, she went on to become an MEP for 10 years, representing Greater Manchester, and she was leader of the European Parliamentary Labour Party from 1979 to 1985.

Barbara Castle became a life peer in 1990. She remained a passionate campaigner for pension rights and against animal cruelty until her death in 2002. Her memoirs, *Fighting All the Way*, were published in 1993.

She was elected an Honorary Fellow of St Hugh's in 1966, and her portrait by Nick Sinclair hangs in the College's Main Building.

Barbara Castle will be the focus of a symposium being organised by the St Hugh's Alumni Association on 18 September 2021. This event will close the College's celebrations for 100 years of Oxford degrees for women.

Sources

Howard, Anthony, 'Castle [*née* Betts], Barbara Anne, Baroness Castle of Blackburn', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2012)

Perkins, Ann, 'Barbara Castle: Obituary', *The Guardian* 3 May 2002

Soutter, Ann, and Mary Clapinson, eds, *St Hugh's College Register 1886-1959* (Oxford: St Hugh's College, 2011)

Extract from transcript of introductory speech at ASM Colloquium 'The History of St Hugh's in the Twentieth Century' reprinted in *St Hugh's College Chronicle 2001-2002*, no.75, pp.21-23