

A POLITICAL LIFE: Remarks at the funeral of Jean Searle OBE, St Michael's Church, Headingley 11.45 a.m. June 29 2010 by Edward McMillan-Scott MEP (Yorkshire & The Humber)

I was very touched when Mike asked me to say a few words about Jean's political life. Jean and I were a political team for some 25 years: we encouraged each other, discussed the politics of the day, took initiatives and of course, gossiped about those around us.

She was my political adviser and constituency organiser after Eric Ward died. I shall miss her very much – and so will the Conservative Party, for which she had been working as a fund-raiser in the North East since 2006. Her energetic work saw the Party's financial target there surpassed by a quarter last year.

She was President of Relate in Leeds, which she had supported for 40 years. Her last act was to secure an additional £10,000 funding from the City Council recently, despite cutbacks, which she handed to her successor.

Over many years Jean and I were always loyal to each other. Frankly, she was my political mentor. Despite my expulsion from the Conservative Party last year – after a dispute over David Cameron's choice of allies in Europe – Jean was steadfast.

We hardly had a chance to discuss the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition before her operation. But it was characteristic of Jean to see the funny side, after my move to the LibDems in March and the formation of the coalition government: "Now you've come full circle", she said.

Jean's political life really started with her election to Leeds City Council, for the ward in which this church stands: she specialised in housing.

She was steeped in the concepts of public service: her mother was a GP and her father an architect who rebuilt Plymouth after the war.

Jean was a diligent and popular councillor. Her predecessor as Yorkshire Area Chairman of the Conservative Party, and a great friend, Pam Smith - who is here today and to whom I am indebted for some insights – recalls Jean’s first speech at the party conference in 1989.

She ended her speech with the words “Housing benefit needs reform.” How pleased Jean would have been to have heard George Osborne use those very words in his Budget speech last week.

Mike says that Jean regarded her two years as Area Chairman as the pinnacle of her long career in politics. Certainly she was an effective chairman.

Beyond her beauty and her charm and her sense of fun, Jean was an authority figure. She was firm of purpose and decisive and she had extraordinary organisational skills.

I served on the Candidates Committee under her. At that time there were no A Lists – of which she despaired – but there was a rigorous process of selection. Jean had an unbending principle: Conservative candidates had to have calibre. Once she was asked to define it and replied ‘you know it when you see it’.

She wanted women to win, on their own account of course. While I was leader of the Tory MEPs, she and I served together on the Party’s board after William Hague’s reforms.

The difference is that I was appointed, but she was elected by the party at large. Her election manifesto to become a Board member – and later chairman of the National Convention - stressed her organisational experience. She had, after all, qualified in institutional management.

A former Area women's chairman, she was a life president of the Party's Women's Organisation.

Jean rose to the highest positions available to a voluntary member of the Party, here in Yorkshire and nationally, by election.

Perhaps it is a generational thing. The loss of Jean in the same year which has also seen the sad death of Joe Barnard – another former Area Chairman – recalls a party with different, older values.

Jean was only 67. As another friend and colleague on the Board – John Taylor - said to Pam the other day after Jean's death "It is the more tragic when someone dies who has so much more to give."

During her recent illness she suffered increasing pain and was frustrated by the delay in getting an operation. I asked her why she didn't pull some strings. After all, she was a former member of the Leeds health board. "Of course not" she replied.

She was ahead of her time while on the health board: Leeds patients may not know of her reorganisation of their catering. She was quite obsessive about knowing more than the management team. She even became a specialist in the pros and cons of chilled food!

The position which gave her maximum visibility was her chairing of the Party Conference in 2001. This occurred just days after 9/11 and was a supreme test of Jean's leadership skills. I attended the morning management meetings and can attest to her calmness.

To the conference and to the outside world, she exuded dignity and purpose.

Only recently I learned that, after Tony Blair introduced the debased system of proportional representation for Euro-elections, Jean had considered standing as a Euro-MP herself. Typically, she ruled it out because she was then Area Chairman.

She was active in helping the ex-Soviet bloc in its transition to democracy, for example visiting Bulgaria three times to build its political institutions.

How sad I am that her dedication and great skills and personality were not put to the service of her country, her county and her party on the European stage.

If Margaret Thatcher was the Iron Lady, Jean Searle was Yorkshire's lady of steel.

For her family, we grieve with you. There are people in this church who are friends and there are those who are political colleagues: it was part of Jean's genius that so many are one and the same.

This especially goes for Mike, always by her side, always steadfast. He told me that recently, reflecting one evening, that Jean had said 'We have made a great team'. They did.

I cannot express my own feelings adequately. In the big things Jean was indomitable, a pillar. In the small things her unstinting helpfulness and spirit of charity were unsung and perhaps only known to a few.

I am grateful that I was one of them.