

Labour's star

ANITA POLLACK recalls Barbara Castle's latter days as a battler for a socialist Europe, while LARRY ILES asks why she didn't become Britain's first female Prime Minister.

Writers, colleagues, and even opponents have paid fulsome tribute to her Barbara Castle's passionate advocacy of the socialist cause. Most have talked about her younger days, her posts in Harold Wilson's government and her many achievements from that era.

The Barbara I knew covered her decade in the European Parliament and her "retirement" to the House of Lords. I followed Janet Anderson MP, who followed Jack Straw MP, working as Barbara's political assistant for eight years. My first meeting with her came as a shock. How could such a giant of the movement be so tiny? Size, however, was not what characterised Barbara. It was sheer force of personality, strength of will and clarity of mind that made her tower over her contemporaries. Twelve and fourteen hour days were the norm (we are talking about someone in her seventies here) and crisis driven output the name of the game. She thrived on a three crisis morning, followed by a good lunch.

Opposed to the European Union as a capitalist club, Barbara sought to reform it from within the European Parliament. For many, reform was merely a turn of phrase. For her, it was a mission into which she threw herself with passion. Election to the European Parliament in 1979 as Leader of the British Labour Group followed the death of her husband Ted who had previously been a member of the non-elected British delegation to the EC prior to 1979.

Most delegation leaders (many of them ex Prime Ministers) preferred to sit on the Foreign Affairs Committee. "Hot air and

travel", sniffed the flame-haired torch-bearer of the left. Instead, she chose the Agriculture Committee - "it's where the money goes" - and set to with gritty determination opposing the entrenched farming lobby and developing a fact-based intellectual argument for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. She led the battle on every aspect of the ludicrous subsidy system and for vote after vote painstakingly drew up separate whips for her Labour brood. Drawing together academics, politicians and civil servants, Barbara slaved to produce a serious document opening the door to the beginnings of reform. Barbara's approach was always more confrontational than the European way of compromise resulting in skirmishes sometimes lost on tactics rather than substance.

Some of her continental Socialist colleagues found it difficult to understand the confrontational approach born of long years in the House of Commons and her antipathy to endemic wheeler-dealing. She railed against undemocratic methods but they loved her all the same for she was a linguist, hard working and a charmer too. Fluent enough in French polished up from her University days, Barbara took up German lessons "so as to be able to swear at Rudi Arndt" (a giant from Frankfurt at one time President of the Socialist Group and possessor of a somewhat bullying style). Holidays when she was not digging the garden and walking the dogs at her beloved Hell Corner Farm in the Chilterns were spent on language courses in assorted parts of Germany and France.

As well as style, Barbara had a great sense of fun. She knew precisely when to

fight a feminist battle for more women in top posts, and when to flirt outrageously with some younger man so as to enlist help with carrying a bag, or even with an older one to press a political strategy. In a place where status counts irony was used to cut down the many sycophants - often proving tough for the interpreters. But she treated with respect those prepared to stand their ground and argue a point.

Always moving on to the next battle, Barbara would be at her desk in Strasbourg, Brussels or England by 8 am, puffing ciggies (never in public) and furiously bashing away at articles, policy amendments, voting lists or the latest reform paper.

The inefficiencies of a multilingual assembly meeting in three countries drove Barbara up the wall on a daily basis. So, too, did the rigorous time slots (up to 4 minutes only) for speeches in the European Parliament. Her style, best seen in public meetings, was slowly to work up to a fury. Trying unsuccessfully to reform procedures more in line with the House of Commons, Barbara did succeed in having a Question Time slot introduced, now popular with MEPs of all countries.

For all her opposition to the faults of the European Community, Barbara was courageous enough to realise when it was time to accept Labour's negative option of withdrawal from the EC was no longer sensible. Her pragmatic article in the *New Statesman* in 1982 titled "Let Them Chuck Us Out" proved a turning point in Labour's debate. But she never relinquished her fight for social justice. When the Single Market was being created she argued that every directive on the internal market should be matched by one implementing the Social Charter.

To the journalists Barbara was always a favourite. They called daily to seek the latest story or pithy quote. Never needing press releases, Barbara's journalistic past gave her an instinctive feel for the fast quotable quote. Asked about the secret of her success, she once said "stamina, preparation and luck".

When she finally decided to retire from the European arena in 1989 it was not to quiet country walks, but to the House of Lords to continue her life-long battle for a better deal for the underdog.

In our new age of technocrats she leaves a big hole at the heart of the Labour movement.

Anita Pollack, MEP for London South West from 1989 - 99, was political assistant to Barbara Castle from 1980-89