

Interview by Jessica Bave (JB) with Maria Miller (MM)

JB: I don't know if you know but (after you resigned as Culture Secretary), we had 1,293 people vote in a poll that asked if you should resign as Basingstoke MP, and 88 per cent said you should. What do you think about that?

MM: Were they all Basingstoke residents? Were they all residents because I don't think they were, were they? Obviously, it has been a difficult situation but what I think I am very much focused on is the support that I have had from my family, friends and also constituents. I mean walking here today a gentleman just stopped me to wish me well, and I think that generally Basingstoke residents, I would like to thank them for all the support they have given me.

JB: We have had a lot of comments as well. From what we can gather, they are from residents.

MM: What I want to do is to focus on what is important for Basingstoke. It is a really important time and what we are doing now as a community will set the foundations for the future. I think Basingstoke residents who voted for me would want me to be focusing on that, and that is the important work I am doing now.

JB: I wanted to talk to you about how it felt to be Culture Secretary. How was it being involved in the cabinet. Was it an enjoyable experience?

MM: I think it is an incredible job to do. I was the 35th woman to ever become a member of the cabinet.

JB: What do you think your greatest achievements were during that time?

MM: I think it is not difficult to see that during my time in that role I achieved a great deal, not least the roll out of superfast broadband to the whole of the country, and I know from Basingstoke residents that now superfast broadband is seen as not just an added extra – it is seen as an essential in life. And to be able to have played a part in that is incredibly important and I will continue to make sure that Basingstoke gets the best roll-out that it is able to, given the incredible support that we are getting from Hampshire County Council.

But also, obviously, having been the person responsible for equal marriage becoming part of our culture and our life which is important, not only for gay people, but also, I believe, for women as well. The more we can do to make Britain an equal society for all people will obviously benefit women as well.

The other part of the role is not just Culture Secretary but it is also the Minister for Women and Equality too.

When I became a Member of Parliament in 2005, I was the 335th ever woman to be an MP and the first ever in Hampshire. And, I think that more women in Parliament is an important thing and a lot of the work that I am doing now is focused on how we can get more women into Parliament and make sure that those that are currently being put off, for whatever reason, see that it is important to attract more women into that particular role.

As I said before, I was the 35th ever female cabinet member which I think should be a point of huge concern to the country that so few women have ever been involved as part of the Government of this country and it is, again, something which I feel strongly about and I will continue to campaign on.

JB: Do you feel you handled yourself correctly during the expenses investigation?

MM: It was extraordinarily difficult and what I want to do now is to move on to what is important for Basingstoke. We are at a very critical part of the history of this community with yet more house- building being talked about in our Local Plan. I think that's what people would expect me to be focusing on.

JB: In terms of support, you had a lot of support from David Cameron. Did you find that of comfort at the time?

MM: I don't think you can call it comfort. I think it is important to thank people for all the support they gave me, the Prime Minister and many others indeed. I was really, extremely taken aback by the numbers of letters of support that I received from constituents, many of whom I have helped personally over the years.

JB: Do you feel you were let down by some MPs. There were some that didn't support you, even in your own party?

MM: I was most grateful to both (local MPs) Sir George Young and James Arbuthnot for their support.

JB: There were people who were saying things, even from your own party, did you brush that aside?

MM: I wasn't aware of that.

JB: David Cameron, when it all happened, said that he would like to see you back in the cabinet one day. Would you like to be back in the cabinet?

MM: For me, the reason I became a Member of Parliament, after having worked for 20 years in business, was because of the importance of having people with my experience working in the community to make it a better place to live, and I think that, for me, has always been my driving force to be a Member of Parliament, and I think it is probably anybody's driving force ultimately – to make the community a better place. The ability to do more than that is an enormous privilege. I know that the Prime Minister has expressed those views and certainly I would see it as that's for him.

JB: Is that something you would be willing to do again? Would you take on a cabinet position if you were offered it?

MM: My first priority is absolutely Basingstoke and it always has been and it always will be. Anything extra that I am asked to do is on top of that.

JB: With the expenses scandal, do you think legislation on gay marriage worked against you?

MM: I don't know.

JB: Do you feel you were the victim of a media witch hunt over the expenses scandal?

MM: (Shrugs shoulders to indicate she didn't know) and didn't answer the question.

JB: So you don't wish to comment on it?

MM: No. I think what people want to read in your newspaper is what I am doing for Basingstoke.

JB: Do you have anything to say about any of the things that have been written about you since the expenses investigation came to light?

MM: I think I have been very grateful to everybody who has been so supportive, and the letters of support that I have received, I have been very humbled by. I have been able, over nine years, to be able to help many people and clearly I have made a difference to a number of people's lives, and it's very kind of them to acknowledge that.

JB: What about the people who have not been so nice. I know we have had a lot of comments and anything we put up some people feel the need to say things.

MM: And you read them?

JB: Yes, we have to look at all of our comments.

MM: It is not for me to comment on political comments from other political organisations. That's for them to deal with.

JB: Do you feel you need to regain the trust of Basingstoke residents following the expenses investigation?

MM: I think every Member of Parliament is always working hard to do the best for the people who not only supported them when it came to the General Election, but those that didn't support them, and I will continue to do my very best, and I hope that will be good enough for local residents.

JB: When you were Culture Secretary, do you still feel you dedicated the right amount of time to Basingstoke? Do you feel that was still at the forefront?

MM: Every Member of Parliament's first job is to represent the people who live in their constituency and that's always the case. It is a tough job with very long hours and inevitably different people do it in different ways. I have always made sure that the work I have done locally has been a big priority.

JB: Did you feel that you needed to have a home in London, especially when you were Culture Secretary? Did you feel it was correct that you had two homes?

MM: As with the vast majority of Members of Parliament, I had appropriate accommodation to be able to make sure I could do my job.

JB: In the lead up to the General Election are you worried about getting comments when you are door-knocking and going to events?

MM: I think people who are Members of Parliament are very used to dealing with a great variety of comments. What I am focusing on is making sure that Basingstoke is a great place to live.

I have been campaigning for nine years to make sure that we don't return to the bad old days of people in charge who give Basingstoke house-building targets that are unsustainable.

I think the people who took decisions to have the highest possible level of house-building in this borough were wrong. They allowed house-building to go ahead without the right level of investment in infrastructure and I am pleased to say that although it has taken a change in the Government, we now have more investment coming into the area – some £20million was announced just last month. It is a step in the right direction.

But, my job between now and the election and beyond, is to make that the case for continued investment and only levels of house-building that are sustainable, and that infrastructure is put in place before the houses are occupied, are all at the heart of not only our Local Plan but also the plan for the next Conservative Government.

JB: You have been selected to fight the Basingstoke seat. Are you determined to win?

MM: I am very grateful to my local association for selecting me to be the candidate, and I will always work as hard as I can to get the best result, not only for me but also for the borough councillors who will be up for election at the same time. We work as a team. We always have done and always will.

JB: Why should people vote for Maria Miller in 2015?

MM: Well, I think I have got a proven track record of being a strong voice for Basingstoke. I am not a typical Member of Parliament – I never have been and I never will be. Primarily because I am a woman, and I am a woman with caring responsibilities, not only for my children but also for my elderly parents, but I think that makes me better placed to provide the sort of insight that we need to make good policy for Government. I will be continuing to work hard to make sure that Basingstoke is a great place to live. I have got a proven track record of not only helping people who themselves find themselves in very difficult circumstances but also in supporting our local council to have the right sort of future for our town.

JB: You say you don't think you're a typical Member of Parliament. What would you call a typical Member of Parliament?

MM: You can look at that for yourself can't you?

JB: Do you feel your upbringing was different to a lot of MPs?

MM: Yes, having been born in a council house, went to a comprehensive school and didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge means that I am not a very typical Member of Parliament. But, also, I think overwhelmingly the fact that I am a woman with school age children means that I am very much in the minority but I don't think that is a weakness, I think it's a strength.

Having worked in business for 20 years before I became a Member of Parliament means that I can bring that experience to there. Basingstoke is a town that thrives on success as a business centre and certainly, I think, one of the reasons why being Basingstoke MP has worked so well is because of my insight into business and having been someone who ran a business myself in the past.

JB: Do you feel like you are in a good place, and handled everything well?

MM: I think the important thing for any Member of Parliament is to be continually striving to work hard. I learned a great deal from the last few months and it has certainly made me a stronger person, because I know, more clearly now, why this job for me is an important job to do.

JB: Do you still enjoy it?

MM: I think being an MP is the most incredible privilege.

JB: Back when the expenses scandal was happening I know you did a piece for your column in the Basingstoke Extra saying "I have let you down" and held your hands up. Do you think you are regaining their trust?

MM: As I said, I think it was an extraordinarily difficult time and all I can say is thank you to the people who have shown me such a great level of support.

JB: Do you still think expenses is a problem in Parliament?

MM: I have no idea.

JB: Your cooperation (with the investigation) was put into question. Do you feel that you cooperated as you should have during the investigation?

MM: What I want to do is to make sure that I am moving forward in a very positive way and I think that's what people in Basingstoke would expect me to do.

JB: Do you understand where concerns have come from constituents?

MM: What I think this interview is about is making sure people in Basingstoke know what I am doing for the future, and I think we can spend a great deal of time looking backwards. What people want me to do in my job is to be looking forwards and working hard in their interests, and that is exactly what I am doing.

JB: As you can understand we have got to ask these questions and we have had a lot of comments since April saying why aren't we talking to you and why are we not asking you these questions.

MM: As you know, I talk to you every week because I do my weekly column. I also send a great number of press releases, many of which you choose not to use, but that's up to The Gazette obviously. But, I spoke to Richard Garfield at length recently so it is really for The Gazette to answer that question.

JB: What are your other main plans for Basingstoke?

MM: I think that the most important and pressing issue that Basingstoke faces is future levels of house-building in our town. We are an outlier when it comes to past levels of house-building. Our levels were far higher, significantly higher, than any other council in the area and I think the question has to be asked as to whether it is appropriate, to therefore be using historic house-building trends as a way to predict future house-building needs. This is something that certainly the Minister responsible for house-building has said that anomalies in historical levels of

house-building can be taken into account when planning the future and I want to ensure that any future house-building in Basingstoke is at a level which is what local residents need but is sustainable as well. A great deal of work that I have been doing over the last nine years is raising this issue and my first ever campaign in 2005 was wholly based on this at a time, when unfortunately, the then council decided to put in place the highest level of house-building well in excess of those which were asked for by the South East Regional Development Agency.

I think importantly as part of the borough council's Local Plan, they have a very clear commitment to making sure that a significant proportion of the new houses built are affordable and I think that's important and that, coupled with the work being done by the Government on Help to Buy which has reduced the deposit level that buyers have to put down on their new homes, and all of this is helping to make housing in Basingstoke more affordable. In fact, I met a lady who has just moved into a house next to the hospital on Friday who was telling me that without the help of the Help to Buy, she would not have been able to buy the house that she is now living in. So, it is those sorts of schemes which are important as well as the commitment of the council to put 40 per cent affordable housing in the Local Plan.