

# Audacity of the outsider



## My story

A blend of affection and irreverence for British institutions has taken **Gisela Stuart** a long way in her adopted home, and even if independence of mind may have cost her ministerial office, she still relishes the cut and thrust of political debate

I was born in deepest Bavaria, 60 miles to the east of Munich. At the local church I can trace my father's side of the family back to the 16th century, whereas my mother was a refugee from what was then Czechoslovakia. She arrived in the cold winter of 1946-47 with just a suitcase.

After doing an apprenticeship in bookselling and publishing, I moved to England when I was 18. My English was virtually non-existent, and I wanted to learn the language. I ended up working at the university bookshop in Manchester, before moving to work in Holland for a few months. I came back in 1976. I found being foreign here very liberating; the UK is an extraordinarily open society.

I did Business Studies at Manchester Polytechnic, and then became deputy director of the London Book Fair. After living in Braintree with my two young children I ended up in the Midlands. I translated books for a living and, to get the brain going again, I studied law as an external student at London University. It was a huge confidence boost when I won the Convocation prize for land law.

At this time I was the chairman of governors at my children's school. Attending courses for governors, I met an energetic lecturer who told me that he was standing for Cannock and Burntwood in the 1992 general election – his name was Tony Wright. I stayed up to watch him win the seat, and I started to get more involved in politics.

After finishing my law degree I started teaching PACE to policemen and also being a lay visitor at prisons. I then enrolled at Birmingham University to do a PhD by research on Discretionary Powers of Trustees. It sounds incredibly dull, but it became very topical when, in the early 1990s, questions were asked over who owned the huge surpluses in company pension funds. Lucas Industries in Birmingham took £200m out of its fund, with £120m going to the Treasury and £80m to the company. None of the pensioners received any benefits, so they took the case to court. That's how I met another Midlands MP – Jeff Rooker. His mother was one of the Lucas pensioners affected,

and he put me in touch with the group. My involvement in the case was very politicising; if the thing that you think needs changing is the law, then becoming a legislator is the obvious next step.

If I had gone into politics in the 1980s then I think I would have been a social democrat, but by the 1990s Labour was the logical party for me. It didn't occur to me to think otherwise.

As a German I never thought that I would get through a first-past-the-post election. I toyed with the idea of the European Parliament instead and, after the Maastricht Treaty was ratified in February 1994, I stood, under my maiden name, for the nomination in South Worcestershire. The Tories put out a press release saying: "I hope that the German candidate enjoys her short sojourn into this beautiful part of England."

I lost by half a per cent. At the time it seemed pretty devastating, but it showed that I was a credible candidate, and in 1997 I was selected to stand for Birmingham Edgbaston.

If I had been a bit more cautious, then I might have noticed that it was Neville Chamberlain's old seat. During the campaign one Tory councillor ran a campaign saying 'Keep Edgbaston British' – a local radio station gave him their 'Idiot of the Week' award.

My seat was the first big marginal result to be announced on TV. I remember sitting in the changing room for the TV show *Gladiators* at the National Indoor Arena and being told to start off my acceptance speech by saying "tonight we saved the NHS" because only my first three sentences would be broadcast.

The next morning I was walking up to Harborne High Street when a man came up to me with a huge bunch of roses. Ten years later I met him again at one of my surgeries, and he told me that the florist had refused to accept money once he heard who the flowers were for. The country had really fallen in love with Labour.

After my election, a lot of German radio and TV stations wanted me to comment on whatever was going on, but I refused to speak German for a year.

The really big thing about the 1997 women's intake was not the overall number but the huge diversity of backgrounds. Any woman with any political aspiration could look at that photo of the Labour women and Tony Blair and say: "Well, she's a bit like me." I'm still enormously proud of that photo, but the 'Blair's Babe' label was ridiculous. My 15-year-old son said to me: "Mum, I know what a babe looks like – and you ain't one of them."

I was still supposed to be writing my thesis, but as an MP I was able to quiz the people on the pre-legislative scrutiny committee looking at pension-splitting after divorce. I think I can now say that my PhD won't be written – because I have put it into law.





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My first job was as PPS to Paul Boateng at the Home Office, and then I joined the government as a health minister in 1999. We had a serious influx of money, and I was at the department when the subsequent decade of health spending was shaped. It was a very exciting time.

I couldn't hear what Sharron Storer was saying [when Tony Blair was angrily confronted by a patient's wife at a Birmingham hospital] during a walkabout in my constituency. All I could do was smile. Tony never said anything afterwards, and I am absolutely certain that I didn't lose my job over it.

Even when he's sacking you, Tony has the unique ability of making you want to offer him a tissue. The truth is that after a reshuffle there sometimes just isn't a chair left when the music stops playing. My private office thought I was joking when I told them I was out of the government.

In 2002 I joined the European Convention on the Future of Europe. It started off as a minor thing, and then became a full-time job. We were drafting the EU constitution, and I ended up working across the UK government at cabinet level – with the Speaker's counsel acting as my legal advisor – and helping to set up the first joint Lords and Commons committee.

I just didn't think that the product that we came up with was right. I was on the train back to Birmingham with Tony Wright, who at that



time was chairman of the Fabian Society. I was ranting about the constitution and, probably to shut me up, he said why don't you write a Fabian pamphlet. It became their best-ever selling pamphlet.

The party could just about deal with that, but not my campaign for a referendum on the constitution. It wasn't something I did lightly, but if you believe in something and don't act on it, then why be an MP? I was denounced by the entire PLP, and Geoff Hoon, then chief whip, later screamed at me for ten minutes about loyalty! That seems quite funny now.

I also went against the party line on the 10p tax, which I thought was just wrong, and there are other times when I haven't voted, but my relations with the whips are fine.

I hadn't noticed that picture [of Gordon Brown with a moustache and horns in the constituency office], and if the *Guardian*

journalists had looked hard enough then they probably would have found a similar picture of me. My office manager was so irritated by the story that she threw it away. So I couldn't auction it off.

I've taken a long journey since I first came to England and naively turned up to watch a cricket match in the pouring rain, and it was only after I went to South Africa and sat through a five-day match that I got a feel for it. The first time I saw a cricket match at Edgbaston was with the late Denis Howell, and he talked me through it.

Why do I want to be re-elected? I've still got more to give. After 13 years' experience as an MP you realise how you could do things better. I learned a lot through the lobbying I did with the Tories and Lib Dems over Birmingham New Street Station and High Speed Rail. I've also got some unfinished business with secondary education for boys, which we haven't got right in my own patch – and then the still-unresolved area of pensions.

I'm editor of this magazine and the weekly editorial meetings – with Charles Kennedy, Jenny Willott, Austin Mitchell, Paul Goodman and Graham Brady – allow you to remove your party hat and look at politics through an outsider's eyes. We're brutally honest about things, and I think it's made me a much better politician.

I have a huge vegetable patch and I like to garden. My children say I grow things just to compost them, but although I never have time to eat the vegetables, I do grow them. It's the Bavarian peasant in me.

I compare the mood of the electorate to being married for 13 years. They might look at us and decide to stick with us, or perhaps they will run away with the young lad round the corner. But the Labour Party is at its best in adversity, the mood is buoyant on the ground, and it's all to play for. ●

*Interview by Sam Macrory • Photography by Paul Heartfield*

## CV: Gisela Stuart

**Date of birth** 26 November 1955

**Education** Staatliche Realschule, Vilsbiburg, Bavaria; Manchester Polytechnic (Business Studies 1979); London University (LLB 1992)

**Career** Deputy director London Book Fair 1983; translator; lawyer and lecturer, Worcester College of Technology and Birmingham University 1992-97

**Parliamentary career** Member for Birmingham Edgbaston since 1 May 1997 general election; Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health 1999-2001; Parliamentary representative, Convention on Future of Europe 2002-04; Commons select committees: Member: social security 1997-98, foreign affairs 2001-, joint committee on conventions 2006

**Recreations** Gardening

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