

Lord Lexden remembers Conservative peer and women's campaigner **Baroness Miller**, who died last month aged 81

Doreen Miller rose swiftly to prominence in the Conservative party in London during the Thatcher era after a successful career in the cosmetics business. Finchley, which Margaret Thatcher represented, was one of the many constituencies in which she established a formidable reputation as a dedicated and tenacious activist. By the 1990s she was the best-known and most popular Conservative woman in London, becoming successively chairman and president of the party's organisation in the capital.

A seat in the Commons was her goal, but time and again she narrowly failed to secure selection as a candidate at a time when Conservative associations were notoriously reluctant to adopt women. The one election she fought was in 1984 for the European Parliament, but her London South Inner constituency offered no prospect of success.

She responded to these setbacks not by becoming disgruntled, but by organising highly effective campaigns to help women overcome the barriers they faced. From 1985-88 she was national chairman and executive director of the all-party 300 Group, which worked for the election of more women to Parliament, and then moved on to a wider role chairing the Women into Public Life campaign from 1986 to 1992. Her involvement with women's issues was strengthened still further by her work as the human rights adviser to Soroptimist International from 1987 to 1990. She was

made an MBE in 1989.

This wide-ranging activity brought her to the attention of John Major, who as Prime Minister after 1990 was acutely conscious of the need to enlarge opportunities for women in all areas of national life. For a time, she talked or wrote to him almost daily about the issues of the day, seeking above all to help him overcome the Tory party's deep divisions over Europe. She would summon recalcitrant London MPs for a wiggling.

In 1993 Major appointed her to the Lords, and a year later she joined the government as a whip, taking to five the number of women on the Conservative front bench in the upper house – more than ever before. She had extensive duties, covering health, education, employment, environment, trade and industry between 1995 and the government's fall in 1997. In opposition she was no less busy, serving as official spokesperson for environment, transport and the regions (1997-2000), trade and industry (1997-2006), employment (2000-03) and education and skills (2001-03). She had a relaxed, engaging style at

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the despatch box and was always on top of her numerous subjects, thanks to the detailed briefings prepared for her by her husband, Henry, a successful solicitor, who became

her devoted unpaid research assistant. “Everyone needs a Henry”, she would say, echoing Margaret Thatcher's famous remark.

She always took a keen interest in law and order issues, and not just because he served for over 20 years as a JP. In her maiden speech in November 1993 she startled her new noble colleagues by saying: “I suspect that hardly any of your Lordships have been held up with a double-barrelled shotgun at



your head for half an hour, which seemed like a lifetime.” The ordeal occurred when she arrived at her hairdresser's for an early appointment. “Unfortunately, an armed gang were waiting to ambush a bullion van that was making a delivery next door.” Her husband took his time in coming to collect her after her release. He took her excited references to being “held up” to mean that she had been delayed.

She displayed considerable entrepreneurial skill as chairman and managing director of the international mail order company, Universal Beauty Club, which she established in 1971. She sold the business very profitably in 1988, enabling her to devote her time fully to political and public affairs. She chaired the Barnet Family Health Services Authority (1990-94) and the National Association of Hospital and Community Friends (1997-2003). She found relaxation chiefly in football, often watching Arsenal in the company of the Labour peer, Lord Clarke of Hampstead. 🐾

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and the party's official historian