

Grant's. one Wish

From getting more women into sport to boosting Britain's profile as a holiday destination, **Helen Grant's** brief covers many bases. But as she follows Roy's boys to Brazil this week, one thing is uppermost in her mind...

"Don't say that word!" Sitting in her Whitehall office, Helen Grant's normal air of quiet calm is ruffled not by mention of the Labour party, or Sepp Blatter or even Richard Scudamore. No – the offensive term is "penalties".

As *The House* raises the dread prospect of a do-or-die shoot-out for our national team at the World Cup finals, Grant curses at the very thought. Like many England fans, she recoils at the memory of tournaments past, but knows just how all-consumed the country can become by a sheer passion for sport – particularly among youngsters.

"I remember Euro '96. The best aspect of that for me was the TVs blaring, a really hot summer," she says. "My lads were little and loved it. We had a house full of adults thinking they know it better than everybody else, but the kids and their delight is what I remember."

Back then, she was juggling the needs of a young family with the launch of her

own legal practice and Westminster was a world away. This week, she's in Brazil as Parliamentary Under Secretary for Sport, Tourism and Equalities, representing Her Majesty's Government.

Grant was at the England v Uruguay match this week, while her boss Sajid Javid is set to see the England v Costa Rica game next week. Speaking before she flew out, she said "we're going to be glued to the telly" for the other fixtures.

Unlike Angela Merkel, who attended Germany's first match, the Prime Minister has so far stayed away from the tournament. British politicians face the accusation of a lack of loyalty if they don't attend matches but the rival charge of using taxpayers' cash on a freebie if they do. Is it a case of being damned if you do and damned if you don't?

"I think it's just common sense. Football is a fantastic game, England are playing, we're very proud of them and I think it's absolutely right and proper that the sports minister goes to as many matches as sensible. And that's what I want to do," she says.

Words: Paul Waugh and Daniel Bond
Photos: Paul Heartfield



And if England get through their group, will she stay on in Brazil? "I think we have to just take each game as it comes. You always have to have contingency plans in government..." she smiles.

"I have to say I'm optimistic. We've got a tricky group. It's going to be hot as well, which is not easy for the lads. But I think Roy's done a very fine job actually. The team seem very together. If we get through the group, fantastic. After that, it's a knock-out tournament – anything can happen. And on our day I think we can beat the best of them."

"I think it's absolutely essential that FIFA and all other big international sporting bodies are open, fair and transparent in their dealings"

Of course FIFA has had problems of its own in the run-up to the big event, with huge controversy about the way the 2022 finals were awarded to Qatar. Grant says that she does not want to "pre-judge" the report of investigator Michael Garcia, but it's clear she's concerned. "They're very, very serious allegations indeed. Let's see what he comes up with. But what I do think is that no stone should be left unturned.

"I want to see what he finds, what's proven, which is very important, and I think we go from there. What I do think though is, I think it's absolutely



Grant on... a new offence of match-fixing

"We already have so many offences. We've got bribery, corruption, fraud, we've got Section 42 of the Gambling Act. The law is there...it needs to be used."

essential that FIFA and all other big international sporting bodies, I think it's very important that they are respected, I think it's very important that they are open, fair and transparent in their dealings, and I think it's very important that there is good governance."

And as for FIFA president Sepp Blatter's recent claim to African delegates that racism among the British media was to blame for the controversy, Grant is not amused. "I think that was the wrong thing to say completely, and I do not agree with it. I back Greg Dyke [the FA chairman who confronted Blatter over the charge] completely."

English football has had image problems of its own in recent months. The FA has come in for criticism over its handling of a number of racism rows, and last month Premier League boss Richard Scudamore faced accusations of sexism and calls to resign over a leaked exchange of emails in which he referred to "female irrationality".

At the time, Grant described Scudamore's remarks as "completely unacceptable and very disappointing", but stopped short of calling for formal disciplinary action to be taken. She says her views on the row have been "fully aired" and the Premier League boss's future is now settled. "But as far as I'm concerned," she adds, "I do expect a reinforced commitment from the Premier League in relation to women's football and equality issues more generally."

The storm around the comments has also refocused attention on the wider problem of the lack of female representation at the highest levels of British sport. "It carried on the debate and

it brought the issue of women and diversity to the surface again – which is not a bad thing," Grant says.

Improving the number of women in senior decision-making roles has been a perennial challenge for sports ministers, and progress has been slow. But in the wake of the Scudamore row, Grant warned the governing bodies of English football, rugby and cricket that she would make it a top priority of her time in office. And to prove she means business she set them a strict target: at least 25% of your board members must be female by 2017, or you face losing millions of pounds in grassroots funding from the Exchequer.

"We need to ensure that we get more women on governing boards – so they can shape sport and shape the administration in sport," she says, insisting that the target is not about "tokenism" but simply "good governance". "I think it's a fair, reasonable and sensible statement to make to them and I expect it to be complied with. I've been doing this job eight months now and I've had the privilege of meeting some absolutely fantastic women who would be well placed on those boards. And the boards and the sports would be all the better for it."

Some women's groups expressed concern about the decision to move Equalities out of the Home Office and into DCMS back in 2012, fearing women's issues may be downgraded to an 'add-on' at a less powerful department. But the funding threat is perhaps a sign that Grant, too, is prepared to pursue a muscular and proactive agenda when it's needed. Sport needs to modernise, and if it's necessary, she says, she's "not afraid to use any powers" at her disposal.

Grant is, in fact, not afraid of much that life has thrown at her. The daughter of a single mother, raised on a northern council estate, her first love was the law, which she studied at Hull University. After help from her local MP, Willie Whitelaw, she managed to get funding for a place at

Grant on... more women on sport boards

"It's not about tokenism, it's good governance."

the College of Law, Guildford. She spent the next 23 years establishing herself as a solicitor specialising in family law, often dealing with cases of brutal domestic violence. After a brief membership of the Labour party, she was inspired by David Cameron's leadership victory to join the Conservatives and was among his very first 'A-listers'. Grant fought off some strong competition to succeed Ann Widdecombe

"I expect a reinforced commitment from the Premier League in relation to women's football and equality issues more generally"

in Maidstone and The Weald (including a young Conor Burns). After just two years in the Commons, she became the first ever black Tory woman minister, appointed as Minister for Justice and for Equalities in 2012. Last year, she was moved to DCMS, while retaining her equalities role.

Using her opponents' superior weight against them is also something Helen Grant has a lifetime's experience in. As an eight year old growing up in Carlisle, the future sports minister took up judo, and rose to become under-16 champion for the north of England and the south

of Scotland. Raised in a matriarchal household by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother – her Nigerian doctor father had moved to America shortly after she was born – a young Grant quickly realised the benefits of discipline and motivation.

But the sport also brought with it other benefits. For a long time the only mixed-race person in her estate, Grant experienced bullying, name-calling and worse during her childhood, and got into more than one scrap standing up to the offenders. But as she began to be recognised locally for her judo prowess, rather than the colour of her skin, the bullies quickly learnt to leave her alone. "It boosted my self-confidence and self-esteem so much that even though I did get some bullying and people calling me names, because I felt so good about myself I thought 'I don't really care what you think'," she remembers. "And interestingly, as I became a famous person in my school, and then in the town and in the city, the bullies seemed to recoil a bit..."

And as she grew older her sporting success – Grant also represented Cumbria at tennis, athletics, hockey and cross-country – triggered a road-to-Damascus conversion in her attitude to school work, too.

"It was fundamental for me, it gave me a belief in myself, and that was the beginning of my progress academically as well," she recalls. "I just used to be interested in sport, not particularly wanting to sit down and read. But the feeling I got of winning and my love of competition and doing well and pushing myself made me think 'well, if I can get that special feeling from sport then maybe I can do it in other things too'. So I did." ➤

Grant on... 'shouty dads' at kids' football

"It's not acceptable, is it? It's bad behaviour; it sets a bad example for the kids."

And that liberating and vitalising effect sport had on her is something Grant wants to make possible for every woman and girl. "I know what it did for me growing up," she says, getting into her passionate stride. "It's fantastic for self-confidence and self-esteem. There are health benefits as well. And sport is great when it comes to social cohesion, community cohesion. There's a whole load of additional elements that you get if you participate in sport. So for me, women in sport is one of my priorities."

New figures released this month show an extra 700,000 people have taken up sport since the Coalition came to office, with the number of participants up from 14.9m in 2010 to 15.6m today. "You can pick around but, tangibly, 700,000 extra people are doing sport. Fact. That's good news. And included in that are more women doing sport," Grant says. "But that is not to say we haven't still got more work to do."

Sport England will launch a "very big campaign" focused on getting more women into sport later in the year, she reveals, following on from several schemes across the country aimed at increasing participation and eroding the barriers faced by women, and women from ethnic minorities in particular.

"I think if we're really going to get these participation figures up it's a matter of asking women what they want and giving it to them. Not being snooty about it and saying 'this is what we think you want'. Asking: what do you want and what works for you?"

Grant has also just agreed to £2m funding for a new Equality and Human Rights Commission programme tasked with improving the inclusivity of sport, not just when it comes to women and ethnic minorities, but also accessibility for

disabled people.

"In terms of inclusivity it's saying we recognise that some BME groups are not engaging in sports as much as we'd like," Grant says. "And we also recognise that sports stadia are not as accessible as they should be. What the Equality and Human Rights Commission will be doing is actually looking at, I suppose, the law, gathering evidence, looking at the guidance that already exists, improving the guidance and then very practically – which is something I always like – actually talking and working with sports governing bodies to say 'right, this is your sporting venue, how accessible is it and what can we do to improve that?'"

"I think if we're really going to get participation up it's a matter of asking women what they want and giving it to them"

And if the sporting venues don't do enough to improve accessibility, could she tighten guidelines and force them to? "We could do all sorts of things," she replies.

In terms of a deadline, Grant says the Commission is going to need "a fair amount of time" before it is ready to report back. Is it likely to be before the election? "It would be nice, wouldn't it?" Grant says. "It's



Top left: Grant with Olympic gold medalist Daley Thompson
Bottom left and above: Grant proving she still has the knack for gymnastics and hockey
Top right: At the Marden Health Fair this April
Right: Cheering on a local rugby side

important. I want to achieve things."

Another diversity issue which has caused particular concern in recent years is the lack of black managers in English football. After the sacking of Norwich City's Chris Hughton earlier this year, there are now no non-white managers at any of the 92 Football League clubs – despite the fact that more than 25% of players are from BME backgrounds.

Grant says it's vital that sports are representative of society, not just on the pitch but "at every single level", and backs the inquiry into diversity in management by the FA's Inclusion Advisory Board, chaired by former Lambeth Council chief Heather Rabbatts.

She describes the NFL's 'Rooney Rule' – a law in American football requiring teams to interview at least one ethnic minority candidate for senior coaching roles – as "interesting", but stops short of calling for its introduction here, suggesting instead the FA should be looking at extending its COACH bursary scheme at the FA's National Football Centre at St George's Park, which helps BME trainees progress up the qualification ladder.

"I'm not going to go that far," she says of introducing the Rooney Rule on this side of the Atlantic. "Many would say it's worked very well for NFL in America. It depends on having a good stock of people that you can put forward for interview.

Grant on... Asians and Yorkshire Cricket Club

"I think there will be lots of different reasons [why so few Asians play professional cricket], including confidence, and feeling included when they participate in sport."

But I think we've got to look at everything. We've got a fair way to go and I think we should be looking at everything – including the number of bursaries, and the work that's taking place at St George's in relation to the stock of managers that we have across the piece."

As someone whose own childhood was transformed through sport, Grant is determined to increase participation and deliver on the promises of a long-lasting

legacy from the 2012 Olympics.

But given Britons' love of sport, she also wants to make sure it fits neatly into her other brief: as tourism minister. Has the recent passports controversy offered a good opportunity to show people that they can have a hassle-free holiday in the UK?

"It's about choice, at the end of the day," she says. "I would have to say I grew up in Cumbria just on the edge of the Lake District, and my constituency is in the

heart of the garden of England. I'm pretty biased – I think those two areas are two jewels among a very rich crown. I think there's a lot to be said for the 'staycation'. People need to do what they like. I think we are going to have a great summer, we are certainly going to have a great summer of sport too, there's lots of opportunities to build your holiday around a spoilt-for-choice list of events – the Tour de France Grand Depart, we've got the golf, we've got the Commonwealth Games, we've got football that we can watch on the TV. And yeah, it's a wonderful place to have your holiday."

So it's not the end of the world if people don't get their passports this year? "I'm sure you will get your passport. I'm in no doubt, I'm very confident," she smiles, her lawyer's brain spotting the leading question. "But if they don't want to go away, we have some fantastic places to visit and holiday not that far from here."

As we leave, only one question remains. What did she make of claims on Radio 5 Live recently that she'd refused to appear on the station because she didn't 'feel confident enough to do live interviews yet'?

Grant becomes animated, pointing out that she "hounds" her press officer to ask which media he has lined up for her every week. "I'm really annoyed about it. It's not me. In fact it's the opposite of me. I like them [media appearances]...I want more of it, not less of it. Maybe you can say how you find me...if you thought I was a shrinking jibbering idiot?"

"I enjoy talking about things that I'm passionate about. I've nothing to hide. I want to do this. If they want to ring, if they want to get on the phone, I am very happy to do it."

If England progress in the World Cup this year, they'll surprise a few sceptics. And Helen Grant has herself made a career out of defying the odds. As she watches the national team in Brazil, she'll be cheering them on like a Carlisle schoolkid – penalties or not. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

