

# Kent on Saturday

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## Sporting ambition

**From council estate to power, Helen Grant's remarkable rise**

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# Sporting ambition amid the corridors of power

**W**HATEVER your political persuasion, you cannot help but be rather impressed by the meteoric rise of Helen Grant.

Raised by a single mother in a tough northern council estate, and bullied for the colour of her skin, she is the living embodiment of social mobility.

A former card-carrying member of the Labour Party, she now holds the distinction of being the Conservative Party's first black female MP and now a junior minister.

What's more, she embarks on a Westminster career having founded her own legal practice in Surrey, a core component of which was tackling the issue of domestic abuse.

She's also raised a family – with two grown-up sons in which she is clearly very proud.

All this and she's still just 52.

She grew up on a tough northern council estate and brought up by a string of strong female role models. Little wonder MP Helen Grant has never taken 'no' for an answer in life. Now a junior minister, **Marijke Cox** finds out just what makes her tick and just why she nearly kissed the Prime Minister...

In short, she is a powerful, successful career woman in a world where, put bluntly, white men still dominate.

Yet she remains something of an enigma in the county she represents; dogged by a sluggishness to live in her constituency and some headline-grabbing issues with regard to the thorny issue of expenses.

Just last month, she was left deflated when she was unable to answer five simple sports trivia questions during a media interview at Maid-

stone Hockey Club – one of which saw her think the town's football club only left the Football League last year. In fact it was 21 years ago.

Perhaps it was a little unfair to put her on the spot.

But, unlike so many other MPs, she prefers to speak to the media via the PR team she surrounds herself with.

The result is direct contact is rare.

Her quick rise through Westminster combined with her commitments in Maidstone, she explains to KoS, is the

real reason she is often unattainable.

Today, however, we have been granted face-to-face access at her offices deep within the labyrinth of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport – just a short hop across the road from the House of Commons.

Her office is large; her desk at its head, a large conference table stretches down one side. On the other, an area with sofas and comfortable chairs, in which we find ourselves perched.

Out of the window the familiar face of Big Ben peers around the corner.

She is immaculately presented, bright, friendly and articulate.

Pressing her on the more contentious subjects, however, and you get a glimpse of the steel which has no doubt helped propel her through the ranks. She becomes visibly fractious.

But then she admits that, while enjoying the job, the last 18 months or so have not been easy.

Receiving her first government appointment just two years after being elected in 2010, she was given the dual role of minister for justice as well as women and equalities.

In the second Cabinet reshuffle in October this year, she retained the equalities brief and was given the role of minister for sport and tourism.

For Mrs Grant, a self-confessed



**IN OFFICE:** Helen Grant replaced Ann Widdecombe (pictured). Above right, she watches David Cameron

sports nut and former under-16 judo champion for the north of England and southern Scotland, it was something of a coup.

But her quick rise as one of David Cameron's A-listers has led to scorn, with political rivals – not without an agenda, of course, with the General Election around the corner – claiming she is a career politician and neglecting her constituency of Maidstone and the Weald.

She remains unfazed, however, instead pointing out that she has fully embraced life in the county, uprooting her family from their former home near Reigate, including her 72-year-old mother, who sold her house to move to Kent.

"I don't think I've neglected my constituency due to the ministerial appointments because that's the reason why you work round the clock – to make sure you don't," she explains.

"There are a lot of issues within my portfolio that I think are good for my constituency, and many of my constituents seem proud of the fact their MP has been promoted."

**F**ollowing in the footsteps of the sometimes fierce Ann Widdecombe, who stepped down, Mrs Grant's 2010 success, saw her see off a tough and hotly-tipped challenge by the Liberal Democrats. She also became the Conservative's first ever black female MP.

"It doesn't grate that it's always mentioned," she says.

"I'm Helen, I'm me, I've always looked like this. I like the colour of my skin and I've never not liked it.

"I don't think it has hindered me or helped me; for me it's a non-issue.

"The important issue is who I am; that I'm good and true and look after my constituents – that really is all that should matter.

"I suppose on the positive side, where it might do some good, is it's broken down one of those glass ceilings – it's shattered now I'm through – yes, the first black female Tory MP.

"I think it's for the people's good, for the good of our country; the face of modern Britain.

"You should seek to represent the society that you aim to look after and if there is no diversity at all in Parliament, that can't be good. If it was just full of men, no women, no diversity, that's not good for Britain."

Perhaps it is a sad sign of how we perceive success, but there remains a waft of positive discrimination for Mrs Grant's climb through the Tory ranks.

Certainly, she is very in keeping with David Cameron's new-look Conservatives – taking a conscious step away from the perception of the Tories being an all-boys club of white, middle to upper-class men.

Growing up on the Raffles estate – a once notorious council housing development in Carlisle, Cumbria – Mrs Grant's own upbringing was, after all, in stark contrast to such a background.

Raised by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother after her parents separated (she admits to only developing a relationship with her father when she was older), it was this strong, matriarchal upbringing which would ignite a fire in her to challenge the political stereotypes.

"Some people have written about me in the past and given the impres-



sion it must have been awful growing up on a council estate, but it wasn't awful, it was fine," she said.

"I had a really happy, healthy childhood. I was born in London, but my mother moved me to Carlisle when I was a baby. There was an awful lot of community spirit about the place."

She was tough too. Growing up in the 1970s, the colour of her skin bought her unwanted attention from bullies. She simply stood up to them – learning judo as a method of self-defence.

She adds: "There wasn't a lot of money, but there was a lot of love and aspiration.

**“ I’m Helen, I’m me, I’ve always looked like this. I like the colour of my skin and I’ve never not liked it. I don’t think it has hindered me or helped me ”**

**Helen Grant**, on being the first black female Tory MP



"It was a very strong matriarchal family, everybody worked: my mum was a nurse and my grandmother a sister. When I came home from school the expectation was that I got on with homework and then I went out to play... that was the order.

"There was a very high expectation of work and study and I suppose working hard and aiming high was the philosophy in the household."

There's no denying Mrs Grant has used that philosophy to get where she is today.

After setting up a legal firm in Croydon in 1996 with her husband, Simon, she admitted she soon needed a new challenge.

"It must have been around 2004," she remembers.

"I'd been a solicitor for a number of years, I'd had my children, I'd built my own practice up and the firm was doing well, the boys were no longer babies. You get to the point where you think, I've achieved the goals I set and I'm not old yet.

"Do I coast, have an easy life and keep going, or do I take stock and set myself a new set of goals?"

"So it was just a matter of what next and that's where politics came in."

Despite it being a traditionally safe

seat, it was to be a close race with few able to call it between Mrs Grant and high-profile activist Peter Carroll, the popular Lib Dem behind the hugely successful Gurkha justice campaign.

But on polling day, there was little doubt who the people wanted with Mrs Grant securing 48 per cent of the vote and Mr Carroll 36 per cent.

**S**he admits while she hadn't been particularly party political before her parliamentary quest, she had always held strong views.

Her mother was a campaigner who set up the first women's refuge in Carlisle and although Mrs Grant insists her mother did not align herself to any particular party, this fight for justice must have rubbed off on her impressionable shoulders.

But the Conservatives were not her first port of call. Instead she "took a look" at the Labour Party.

Attempting to skirt the issue, she quickly points out it wasn't for her before swiftly moving the focus onto her passion for the Tories.

She was, however, a member of Tony Blair's party. A big step for simply 'taking a look' some might argue.

"Some like to build it up, but it was

“ There was a very high expectation of work and study and I suppose working hard and aiming high was the philosophy in the household ”

**Helen Grant,**  
on her childhood

just for a few months. It was a mistake," she said.

"Fundamentally, I'm a Conservative. It was when David Cameron was elected leader of the party I heard him deliver a speech in which he spoke about things I could relate to, about there being a whole generation of people out there who worked hard, who wanted to do well for themselves and their families, but also believed in social justice.

"I remember saying to my husband 'he's talking about us'.

"I believe in low taxes, being tough on crime, strong families, personal freedom, business doing well – that's how I think.

"Those are Conservative principles and values and essentially what I made a mistake on was, at the time, the Labour Party was holding itself out to be the party of social justice.

"I looked into it in a bit more detail – and you can't always do that unless you get inside.

"I quickly became disillusioned, felt they talked the talk, but didn't walk the walk. It just didn't feel right."

And so she turned her back on politics until that speech by Mr Cameron, when he became leader, which made her "ears prick up".

But clinching victory in 2010 was only the beginning of some very tough tests.

In November 2012, after the celebration of receiving a ministerial appointment, she was lambasted for claiming the maximum expenses for a second home in London, despite having a £1.8 million house in Kingswood, near Reigate, just 19 miles from Parliament.

Under House of Commons rules, Maidstone is outside the commuter belt meaning she can claim expenses for rent on a London flat.

Reigate, on the other hand, was not. With a populace – and media – ultra sensitive about MPs' expenses, she was dragged into the row.

Even now, talking about what was perceived as an expenses scandal, she visibly bristles and her demeanour changes quite dramatically.

But with taxpayers having to tighten their belts in these austere times – and unlikely to be able to afford a £1.8m home – few are likely to sympathise and will question why she couldn't simply travel the 19 miles from Reigate.

Legally, she stresses, and according to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (Ipsa), she had done no wrong.

"I acted in accordance with the letter of the law and the spirit of the law," she explained. "I've been a lawyer for 23 years, I don't want to do anything wrong, and I wouldn't.

"The situation was that when I



## Games has delivered legacy but women in sport are still lacking

AS important as the winning of medals at the London 2012 Games, was the legacy it would leave behind.

It was a word that became synonymous with the spectacle; hopes were it would spark a passion for sport and with it a surge in the number of people taking up physical activity and competitive games.

But a little over one year on and questions have been raised as to whether that dream of a legacy is being realised.

A parliamentary report by the House of Lords select committee on Olympic and Paralympic legacy, published last month, said while the Games were an "outstanding success" the legacy benefits were "in danger of faltering".

The report found little evidence of increased participation in sport and stated there was a "lack of clear ownership of legacy as a whole".

But sports minister Helen Grant said she believed the legacy was in fact living up to what is expected.

"Generally, in terms of legacy, participation, of course, is one of the big elements and if you look at the data and stats more people, women and men, are participating in sport far more than they did before we bid for the 2012 Olympic Games – I think the uptake has been noticeable," she said.

"I think there are issues in terms of women in sport. Fewer women participate.

"One of my priorities is to reduce that differential by 2022, which will be 10 years since the London Games, to get more women doing sport and there are a number of things that are happening in relation to that.

"Sport England is investing a lot of money into it, we've also got the school sports premium and school games programme which aim to encourage girls and boys to participate in sport at school and hopefully if they do that at school, they will keep doing sport in life."

Sport England is investing millions of pounds into a new pilot based in Bury aimed at increasing the number of women taking part in sport and physical activity.

Over the next 12 months, a range of activities taking into account some of the issues women face, including social motivations, peer pressure and body image, will be made available at parks and leisure centres.

"They are looking at 'what are the elements that stop women from doing sport?' and looking at how to deal with those barriers and hurdles," said Mrs Grant.

"They are literally listening to what women want and giving it to them, whether it's a zumba class or a game of rounders after they've taken their children to school.

"There's also satellite community sports clubs that have been set up, there's 100 that are girls only, and again the aim is to bridge the link between kids doing sport at school and then the drop-off that happens when they leave school and go into the community. So it's bridging that gap.

"So there's a lot that's happening in terms of participation and it's going in the right direction and we want to keep that momentum going."

She vowed that, with her sporting background, she has the experience and credibility to be a good champion for sport.

became MP we still had a house in Kingswood. The market had been absolutely dreadful and I hadn't been able to sell it.

"But I was selected to represent the Maidstone seat so my family started to move to Kent, with the result that my mother sold her house in Kingswood which was next to me.

"We moved my son to Kent, he was at Maidstone Grammar School – the only thing I had stopping me leaving was a house and you can't just up and leave it. I also couldn't let the house out because of the mortgage terms.

"Therefore, I was commuting either from Kent, where I was staying with my Mum, or from Kingswood where I stayed in the existing house, but it varied depending on what was going on.

"I'm allowed, because I'm a Kent MP with my mother and my son in the constituency, to have a home in London.

"I told Ipsa of the situation. They were well aware of the fact I still owned a house in Kingswood which could have been sold at any point and they said you're absolutely allowed to take a place in London, so therefore I was living mainly in the place in London, having to check the house in Kingswood – obviously because I couldn't desert it – and then the rest is history; you heard what they said in the media.

"I can't even remember the logic of their argument, but all I know is that I checked it was allowed.

"I have not been reprimanded by anybody – I have a letter from Ipsa saying I have acted correctly.

"I no longer have the property in London because of all the fuss. I now have rented a property in the constituency. I have a place in Marden, and that's the end of the story."

Mrs Grant is evidently still a little bruised from her experience.

"It bothers me that it keeps coming up because of the injustice of it," she said.

"I don't like injustice and how it was presented in the press, that hurt, because I checked everything.

"Most MPs who aren't London MPs



live in London Monday to Thursday.

"Not every MP is able to go home every night; most don't, most are here. That is the norm.

"At the weekend, unless I have to do something up here in London, or I'm away, we have this lovely cottage in Marden and I stay there.

"When I'm not there I stay at my mum's in Sutton Valence, so I have got a home, but as a minister I do have to often be up here as well and elsewhere, that's the reality of it."

**I**t's a touchy subject, but when we move onto her new role as sports and tourism minister, her warm demeanour returns.

She admits, laughing, that she almost kissed the Prime Minister when he announced her as sports minister, taking over from Faversham and Mid-Kent MP, Hugh Robertson, who was promoted to minister of state in the foreign and commonwealth office.

"I just couldn't believe it and I really do feel that I've got the best job in government," she says.

"At school I was a sporting nut I

suppose, it was my thing, I knew from a very early age – probably five or six – that I was good at it.

"I was a very fast runner and I used to win all my school sports races. That was very good for me as it gave me my self-confidence and self-esteem.

"Early on, to be perfectly honest, I wasn't particularly academic.

"I loved sport, I preferred to go out and run around on a hockey pitch or running track rather than sitting down and reading, but I think it was one of the things that sport did for me.

"I enjoyed the discipline of learning and practice. That confidence which came from sport effectively spilled over into my academic subjects."

The idea of law came to her in her teens.

"I don't like injustice at all and it just seemed something I felt I might be able to contribute to.

"So I decided then that I might want to be a lawyer, pursued that course, did well at my A-levels and went onto university."

After the University of Hull she went on to Guildford law school.

Completing her training back in Carlisle, she joined a law firm in Covent Garden specialising in medical negligence.

"I enjoyed it, I learned how to litigate well, but found it very narrow because you're really just representing doctors and dentists.

"When law really came alive for me was when I joined a small general practice in Wimbledon and I was doing everything – conveyancing

**“I enjoyed the discipline of learning and practice. That confidence which came from sport spilled over into my academic subjects”**

**Helen Grant**, on the influence of sport on her early life

work, matrimonial work, divorces, family – and that's when I first became very interested in domestic violence, which is something very close to my heart."

Growing up with a strong-minded mother, who reached out to help others, was something which formed the basis of this passion.

"My mother set up the first women's refuge in Carlisle with some other women and I remember being about 10 and going to the refuge with her.

"I'd sit at a big old brown table pretending to be getting on with my homework and I'd see her surrounded by women and children who had been beaten up. They often had black eyes, no self-esteem, no confidence, nowhere to go, and I would see what she and others were able to do and that obviously had an effect.

"So when I got stuck into family law, domestic violence and looking after women and children was something I really enjoyed doing, and it remains a deep interest, a passion for me even now.

"I think the skills you pick up as a lawyer are very transferable.

"As an MP you have to be able to prioritise, communicate, campaign, and you have to do the same as a lawyer so I've found that very useful indeed and continue to."

But what of her constituents? Do they have faith in her to fight their battles? Or as a minister are her hands now tied by the party whip?

"I will continue to work very hard and do the best for my constituents," she said.

"It's up to the electorate what they would like to do. Hopefully, they will vote for me in 2015, but I intend to just work hard and continue to help people campaign well and we'll see what happens."

At the centre of her busy life, however, is her family.

She admits she wouldn't have been able to achieve what she has without the backing of a very supportive family – including her son Ben, a Royal Marine Commander, and other son Joel, a student at the University of Kent in Canterbury.

"I couldn't have done it without them. I have a fantastic mother still and a fantastic husband and sons."

## UKIP THREAT NO LAUGHING MATTER

IN recent decades the fight for power has remained primarily between the three main political parties: Labour, the Conservatives and the Lib Dems.

The Tories, however, have retained their hold over the county. It currently represents all parliamentary seats in Kent and the majority of the district and borough councils.

But a new contender is emerging in the form of right-wing party Ukip.

Led by Nigel Farage, from Westerham, the party has done more than ruffle a few feathers in the Tory camp.

Taking 17 seats in the Kent County Council elections in May, the party became opposition on the Conservative-led council, with a few of its members former Tory activists.

And with disillusioned Conservative voters switching to Ukip, there's no denying they are a threat in the 2015 General Election.

Helen Grant admits her party can't be

complacent to Ukip's rise in popularity.

"I don't think they can be ignored and I think we've got to work hard indeed to bring back some Conservative supporters that have gone to Ukip," she said.

"We mustn't be complacent about the matter, but a vote for Ukip in many ways is a vote for Labour and at the end of the



day do the people of Kent want Ed Miliband and Ed Balls in or do they want George Osborne and David Cameron?

"Because that's how it is. It's a bit different, granted, at council level, but that's what will happen at the end of the day and I like to think that we want David Cameron and

George Osborne to continue to lead and drive our country and continue with the good work in terms of deficit reduction and getting our country back on its feet again that we've started.

"But no, there's certainly no complacency and there is work to be done."

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH HISLOP

FROM being grilled by Have I Got News For You panellist and Private Eye editor Ian Hislop (who lives in nearby Sissinghurst), to coming under the fierce glare of the electorate, Helen Grant said fighting to become a candidate to stand in the 2010 election was a hard enough task in itself.

And despite her brief dalliance with Labour, she knew the Conservative Party was the one she wanted to represent.

"I joined the Conservative Party, I liked it – I thought 'I'm home', the principles and values fit – so I decided to become a candidate and stand which I never did for Labour," she said.

"There's a big difference there; the big decision is committing your life and saying I am going to be a Member of Parliament for that party.

"And so I did, I wanted to do it.

"I applied for seats in Sutton and Cheam, and Hammersmith was another. Third time lucky, I applied for Maidstone and I won."

But it was no easy task, she said.

"You get to know the seat, you learn about the issues and then you go through a rigorous selection process where they want to see how you relate to people.

"You have to make a speech, answer a lot of questions, do a session on the doorstep, canvassing, so they can see how you relate to the community.

"I had to meet with community groups and the big event – the final – I had to do an interview with Ian Hislop.

"He grilled me in front of all the members and then I had to give another speech, and another speech, then more questions. It was a long process over about three weeks."

But was it worth it?

"Definitely," she says, "I was delighted – over the moon."

After being selected, she went on to take 48 per cent of the vote in the 2010 General Election and a place in Westminster, tipped as a political star of the future.

