“WE’LL CARRY ON FIGHTING”

The Labour MP Margaret Hodge (above, left) and former Labour MP Louise Ellman have been two of the fiercest critics of their party in recent years. On the eve of Labour’s leadership election, **Rebecca Taylor** speaks to both women about the future challenges for tackling antisemitism, Brexit, immigration – and bumping into Jeremy Corbyn in the lift. Photography **Rob Greig**

Margaret Hodge is about to have a new neighbour. Just a few steps down the corridor from her office – high up in Portcullis House with sweeping views of Westminster Abbey – a nameplate on the door reads: Right Hon Jeremy Corbyn MP.

This is the office-in-waiting for the (soon to be former) Labour Party leader. Following the announcement of the Party’s new leader in April, Corbyn will relocate here from his office across the road in the House of Commons. By the time you read this he’ll have installed the coffee maker and be enjoying the new view.

Hodge has been a ferocious critic of Corbyn – one of her last communications with the Labour leader was to blast him as an “antisemitic racist” in a furious confrontation between the pair in the House of Commons last July. Who wouldn’t want to be a fly on the wall when those two bump into each other in the Portcullis House lift?

“That’s going to be challenging. We haven’t spoken for months. He’s passive aggressive at the best of times,” says Hodge with a chuckle. We’re joined in her office today by Louise Ellman, the former Labour MP for Liverpool Riverside, who resigned from her post in October 2019 over concerns of antisemitism in the Party and after facing an increasingly hostile climate in her local constituency.

With a new leader about to take charge of the Labour Party, I’m meeting with these two veteran campaigners to talk about the possibility of change: are they hopeful for Labour – and the country – after such a difficult year?

REBECCA TAYLOR: The last time I met you, Louise, was in 2017 in an interview for JR. You were terribly concerned about antisemitism in the Labour Party but insisted you would continue to fight it from within. What changed?
LOUISE ELLMAN: I started to feel it was possible that Corbyn could become prime minister. I didn’t think there would be a majority Labour government but there could be a minority and the Lib Dems would help put Corbyn in No.10. I felt very uncomfortable with being part of that.

I went to the Party conference and spoke at a fringe meeting. I said I didn’t think Corbyn was fit to be prime minister. Then, I went to the next constituency meeting in Liverpool. The faces in the room were even more thunderous than usual. I was challenged about my remarks. One member said he’d rather talk about inequality and poverty than antisemitism. Everyone cheered. I looked round the room, at the faces filled with loathing, and I thought: this is the Labour Party at rock bottom; I can’t stand this any more.

Within a day, a resolution had been put forward calling for a vote of ‘no confidence’ in me. The date for the vote was on Yom Kippur. I don’t know if they knew it was Yom Kippur. I don’t think they would have cared even if they did. A week went by and the date remained unchanged until someone from Corbyn’s office called them begging them to withdraw the vote. By then I’d decided I should leave.

RT: This was from your constituency party. Did any of your Liverpool voters share their point of view?
LE: No. One thing that is upsetting is that when people hear about antisemitism being an issue they think we are talking about Liverpool people. I’m talking about the people who joined Labour after Corbyn became the leader. Most people didn’t think like that at all. People stopped me in the street to express support over the antisemitism issue, people at my surgeries thought it was terrible.

RT: How did being forced out affect you?
LE: Emotionally I’d gone so far. I couldn’t deal with it any more. I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to keep fighting. But I didn’t want to be in the party any more.

It was a terrible trauma for me and still is. The Labour Party has been my life. I joined when I was 18 and I’ve been in it for 55 years and been in an elected position since 1970, when I was on Lancashire County Council. It doesn’t mean I’m not a Labour person because I am. I could never join another party. Now I’ve left, I can see how quickly something bad can take hold. How few people are prepared to speak up for what’s right and that there are a significant number of people who know precisely what is going on but go along with it so they don’t jeopardise their positions.

RT: That’s something you brought up, Margaret, at the leadership hustings at St John’s Wood synagogue in February.
MARGARET HODGE: Emily Thornberry, Clive Lewis and Keir Starmer were so passionate in their pronouncements that antisemitism had to be eliminated! I sat there thinking: where on earth were you? If the shadow cabinet had been more public in their criticism of antisemitism we might have stalled its progress.

RT: Margaret, is your constituency party supportive of you?
MH: I first took on Corbyn in that very public way at the end of last July. I went back to my constituency party and I realised I hadn’t really spoken to them about it. I have a big Muslim membership and I wondered how this was going to go down. But I described what had happened in a very open way. There were 300 people in the room and I got a standing ovation, which was really warming and Muslim after Muslim got up and said, “What you’ve described is like the Islamophobia we’ve experienced.” There was a real coming together, ironically of the people Corbyn thinks he’s representing.

RT: Louise, would you rejoin the party?
LE: Yes, if antisemitism is dealt with. Under the new leader, antisemitism needs to be expelled fast and that would send a message to the others on the fringes. They have to take action not just talk. The findings from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report will be announced and that will be a key moment. Its recommendations need to be followed. The complaints process also needs to be changed. But it’s about people at the top of the party and what they believe. We need a leader who doesn’t hold those same ideologies – someone who thinks they are anti-racist, but being anti-Jewish is OK.

It might be difficult to change things. It’s not just about who is the leader but who is in control of the party – its officials, advisors and the composition of the National Executive Committee. The hard left might fight on. It might not be simple to remove these people.
MH: You can’t overestimate the task. We need to ask: what will zero tolerance of antisemitism look like under a new leader? It’s always been on the fringes but now it’s in the mainstream – although most Labour Party members are appalled by how it has infected the party. If you look at the post-war Jewish MPs, most of them were in the Labour Party. Now, I’m the last Jewish woman Labour MP. I call myself the last woman standing.

RT: Margaret, have you considered standing down?
MH: All the time. It’s as hard to stay as it is to leave. But if you are on the outside it’s difficult to influence events on the inside.

RT: What issues should the new leader focus on?
MH: During the leadership campaigns there were many difficult issues that were hardly touched on: the world of work, artificial intelligence and terrorism. Immigration was barely talked about.

I fought the extreme right in Barking and Dagenham [in the 2010 general election Hodge battled to keep her seat from the BNP]. Politicians have a voice but they have never used that voice to talk about immigration in a positive way. I talk about integration rather than how we control numbers. Part of globalisation is the movement of people across borders. It’s a reality and if you fight it, all you are doing is giving promises you’ll never fulfil and you fuel greater suspicion of the political class for failing to deliver.
LE: One concern I have is that the UK (and the Labour Party) might look inwards and create an insular society, where people turn on each other. The new leader has to show people the benefits of having people from many places working together.
MH: My constituency voted 2:1 to leave – partly to ‘take back control’ and partly so they could turn Barking and Dagenham into a ‘whites only’ place. When I arrived in the area in 1994 it was a white, tight-knit community. I’d never met so many great-grandmothers who lived within ten minutes of their great-grandchildren. I’ve always been a ‘remainer’ but everything I do is about how to reconnect with the local community. People’s politics start from the local, such as housing. If you respond to that – or to the siting of a bus stop, or a rat run – you start to build trust. Then you can start to disagree on things like Europe. →

JR's editor Rebecca Taylor (left) with former Labour MP Louise Ellman (centre) and MP Margaret Hodge at Hodge's office in Portcullis House, March 2020

RT: What do you say to your local community when they say: immigrants are taking our housing?

MH: The reason my constituency was such a close-knit white community was that 98 per cent of its housing was council owned. If you were the children of council tenants you got put in a high-rise flat and then in a terraced house. But the 'right to buy' scheme came along under Margaret Thatcher. The privatisation of housing enabled new communities to come to Barking and Dagenham for housing – the second generation of Windrush immigrants, for example, came and bought houses. It was a cheaper part of London. Also former council tenants bought their houses, moved out of the area and let their properties back to the council, who needed homes for asylum seekers and refugees. That's what started to change. The Labour, Conservative and coalition governments never built enough homes.

LE: It's an oversimplification to say the north-south divide defines attitudes towards Brexit and immigration. In Liverpool, in my constituency, 73 per cent voted Remain. Europe saved Liverpool. Thirty years ago the city was on its knees, and a combination of European funding and programmes changed that, alongside Labour's regional policies. Liverpool became the European City of Culture in 2008 and there was hope.

I don't hear much racism. Liverpool is a maritime city with a lot of refugees and asylum seekers. We've recently had marches through the city to protest against asylum seekers facing deportation.

We need economic strategies that aren't focused just on cities, that focus on regions. The UK isn't just made up of cities.

RT: So you'd welcome Boris Johnson's attempt to 'level up' the north?

LE: I agree with what the government says it wants to do: to develop a better north-south network that links up with local networks; to give Transport for the North more power, to link HS2 with upgraded local rails, to take the bus service back from the private sector. But it's no good saying it; you've got to make it happen. And you need to stop cutting council funding. If you cut local services, you reduce the standards of service and community cohesion. Young people get into trouble when prevention services are removed.

"We need economic strategies that aren't focused just on cities. The UK isn't just made up of cities"

RT: In the north, Johnson has spoken to the constituency that Labour used to represent. How can Labour reposition itself?

MH: Corbyn's policies didn't speak to the 'red wall' communities. Our traditional support is disintegrating. If you look at the seats we did win in the 2019 election, 10 per cent of them have a majority of less than 2,000; a quarter have a majority of less than 5,000. If we don't halt the decline we'll be in worse trouble in 2024/25. It's to do with the emergence of populism. It's not about the economy.

The challenge is to marry two sorts of values: those who voted for Corbyn and tended to be pro-EU and care about liberal issues such as feminism and those who want to be tough on crime, are anti-EU and are nationalistic.

LE: One thing that needs to change is that those who don't have fashionable attitudes about social issues shouldn't be demonised and told they are evil and racist. People have different views and they need to be argued out.

RT: You've both fought for equality for women throughout your careers. But politically this seems to be an era of white, male bullies…

MH: We've been feminists all our lives. The lesson is you can never take your foot off the accelerator. This is a bad time for feminists in the Labour Party. It feels like there is a misogynist, bullying culture at the moment. Why shouldn't there be a woman leader? It drives you bonkers.

LE: I first met Margaret in the 1980s, when I was the leader of Lancashire County Council and Margaret was the leader of Islington Council. It was unusual to have a woman as council leader. We've been fighting all these years – we'll carry on. ■