

Is this the real victim of the Tory power battle?



WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE: Ann Widdecombe has rebuffed attempts by spin doctors to change her appearance

Picture: JOHN DOWNING

EVERYBODY'S always rude about me, says Ann Widdecombe, former Prisons Minister, talking on the phone like a brisk schoolmistress. This time she's in the spotlight over a very public squabble with her former boss, the Tory leadership contender Michael Howard.

At the weekend, she told friends there was "dangerous stuff" and "something of the night" in the former Home Secretary's personality. Tomorrow, she will seek to denounce him in the Commons over the sacking of Prison Service director Derek Lewis two years ago.

Speaker Betty Boothroyd is likely to block her move. If she does, Widdecombe could vent her feelings during the Queen's Speech debate.

We met, shortly before this latest row broke out, in her office at the House of Commons. Widdecombe, short, well-upholstered and with a vast bust, walks in an almost hunched manner. She's wearing a floral skirt with cropped jacket, the clothes that county ladies wear to lunch at Peter Jones in London's Sloane Square.

There is something of the lecturer in the woman unenviably dubbed Doris Karloff by the tabloids. When a survey in 1991 showed that one in five families went hungry, she suggested that, as they were in the minority, they might be mismanaging things. But she says: "It's a myth that I said 'eat your greens'."

Two years later, she became a Roman Catholic in protest at the ordination of women priests in the Anglican Church. Her conversion was lit by photographers' flashbulbs. "Another myth that I invited half the world's media."

And last year, she sparked national uproar over her insistence that pregnant prisoners be handcuffed and chained to prevent them escaping. "It's a myth that I said they should be chained while in



Ann Widdecombe
FORMER PRISONS MINISTER

The Caroline Phillips

Interview

labour," she insists. She supports hanging and corporal punishment and is passionately against abortion. Depending on your view, her politics are either repugnant or bravely responsive to a public demanding, for example, a tougher line on criminals.

I am nervous. How does she feel about people being scared of her? "It worries me if vulnerable constituents are put off by the untruthful Press image of a black-clad, crucifix-swinging figure."

But apparently even the cold-blooded former Scottish Secretary Michael Forsyth, a leadership contender himself until unceremoniously unseated in the election, is frightened of her. She roars with laughter, as she often does. "I shall remember that next time I see him." She has also been called "the world's most inhumane woman". "I can only refer to that as ignorant." But surely she's known for being cold hearted? "Not by anyone who knows me."

A new light was cast on her when Mr Lewis wrote recently in his book, *Hidden Agendas*, that Widdecombe was so upset by his sacking that she burst into tears. "I have no complaint about the veracity of what he writes," says Widdecombe, who

bought five signed copies of his Howard-bashing memoirs. Lewis also blames Howard for being too harsh in his penal policy, eaten away by political ambition — and Widdecombe emerges as one of Lewis's staunchest allies.

As she speaks, she tugs her jacket down, as if self-conscious about her body. Her mouth sounds dry when she talks initially and her body language doesn't fit her tough reputation. Is it possible that she, too, is nervous?

SHE has been criticised consistently, perhaps unfairly, for her brutal image and unappealing looks. She has also been pilloried for her single, childless state. "How can a childless woman understand the emotions of other women?" ran the argument during the pregnant prisoners debate.

She has always claimed to care little that she has not married. "Mr Right never came along and I never made it a priority to look for him," she has said. But is she really indifferent? "I feel positively irritated if somebody is there when I go home."

But she regrets not having had children. "I've missed passing down the close bond that there is between mother and child."

As she grew up, she "took marriage and its stability for granted. My parents (James and Rita now aged 87 and 85) have been happily married for 61 years. There were no divorces among the parents of my peer group."

Why, then, has her own romantic history been so uneventful? Can we talk about how her sexuality developed? "Good gracious, no." What about her sex education? "My mother gave me a book called *The Facts Of Life* when I was 11. I was bored by it and didn't read it." And what about her adolescence and first boyfriend? "I'm pleased to say I didn't have a boyfriend. I had other things to do, like read Virgil." She says she never even fancied a boy.

And did she ever, during her time at convent school for example, have an adolescent crush on a girl? "Oh, no, no, no."

Widdecombe met her first boyfriend, Colin Maltby, at Oxford University. The relationship lasted three years. "I did not say that it was a sexual relationship," she says fiercely. "Nobody has ever said that I have had a sexual relationship, or I'd have sued." She smacks the air several times, as if punishing her insolent interviewer. "I've always believed that sex before marriage is wrong."

Widdecombe has a degree in Latin from Birmingham and was 25 years old when she left Oxford with a third in PPE. She became

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MP for Maidstone in 1987 and in 1990 became the first woman John Major promoted to a ministerial position. After being an under-secretary at Social Security and at Employment, she was made Prisons Minister in 1994.

The "sticky hands" of spin doctors who want to revamp her have always been rebuffed. Ability, she counters, is more important than appearance. "Interest in physical perfection is an irrelevance." She professes repeatedly that the political obsession with looks, style and image is nonsense. Widdecombe used to be skinny ("6st 12lb," she says proudly)

and now weighs "mind your own business". For Lent she stopped eating between meals and gave up alcohol, coffee and tea. Yet she claims her weight is a matter of indifference to her. "I take it for granted that I'm short, fat, dark, freckly and 49 years old."

BUT could it be that she has made a virtue of necessity? Her office reveals a different side. Extraordinarily, she keeps weighing scales there and a poster reads: "If you want to look thinner, hang around people fatter than you." There's a bottle of nail varnish on the desk. She makes self-protective jokes about her size (odd for someone who is happy with it), wears high heels (strange for someone who accepts being short), wears creased eye shadow and dyed hair revealing a motorway of grey roots.

Perhaps the clue to her character lies in a childhood that toughened her up. Her father was a senior defence official and she spent time in Singapore and attended six schools before she was 11. "According to my mother, I was perfectly horrible as a child," she laughs. "I was defiant, difficult and liked my own way."

Her mother disciplined her with smacking. "Most of the time she'd chase me with a brush, saying she was going to hit me — but never catching me! I take it utterly for granted that children should be smacked. I smacked my nephews and nieces."

She was raised a staunch Anglican but attended La Sainte Union Catholic school in Bath, an establishment of almost military discipline, where Protestants were considered second best. "That got me used to standing up for unpopular points of view."

The effect of her conversion on her has been considerable. She goes to confession four times a year. What does she confess? "Mind your business. I try to get on top of uncharitable views of people who are making my life difficult." But she believes life on this Earth isn't meant to be easy. "It's about endurance and endeavour and getting on with it."