

# A woman's place... is in the Home Office

She's an X Factor fan, mother of two young boys, a former teacher who supports Aston Villa... and she's responsible for the safety of the British people. Debbi Marco meets Britain's first female Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, to find out about the woman behind the title



Jacqui Smith catches up with the team in her constituency – fresh from a holiday in Wales

At 9.05am, Jacqui Smith, Home Secretary, arrives at her constituency office in Redditch. 'Mark, you're wearing a tie!' she teases one of her two assistants.

'We always wear ties here, Jacqui,' replies Mark, with a broad pantomime wink.

It's obvious the show is for my benefit, but there is no mistaking the genuine rapport between Jacqui and her back-room staff.

However, there's little time for joking around. Jacqui, 44, has just returned from a two-week holiday at the family's static caravan in Wales. She likes to get away with her husband, Richard, and their two boys, James, who is 14, and nine-year-old Michael, three or four times a year – work permitting. But this summer was rather different from

Photographs: Sylvaine Poltau

previous ones – in June she was elevated from chief whip in the Blair Government to the key cabinet post of Home Secretary in Gordon Brown's. And that makes her one of the most important politicians in the UK, a relative unknown now charged with one of the most high-profile – and stressful – jobs in the country.

Today she looks refreshed and alert; her nonsense hair newly highlighted, she is wearing a smart cream jacket teamed with plain black trousers and a trendy necklace of silver circles and pale turquoise coloured discs. She also has on a new pair of velvet wedges – the price labels on the sole giving away their box-fresh status.

Although Jacqui doesn't give much serious thought to fashion, she learned the hard way that what she wears will always be noted – namely the outcry over her décolletage at the despatch box when she made her first speech as Home Secretary. The camera fixed to the ceiling of the House of Commons gave an ►

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All in a day's work (clockwise, from top): facing the press, discussing local issues with her husband and office manager, Richard, and being presented with the perfect gift for the boss



**'I think people would prefer I concentrate on keeping the UK safe from terrorism rather than what top I should wear'**

unfortunately clear view of the Home Secretary's cleavage as she addressed the House about the latest terror attacks on the UK – and the pictures filled the newspapers the following day.

'You've just got to laugh it off,' she says. 'I mean, I'm doing a statement about terrorism and, funnily enough, what was top of my mind when I got up that morning was, "What do I need to do to protect the British people against the terrorist threat" not, "Is this top a bit low cut?" Actually, I think people would prefer I concentrate on keeping the UK safe from terrorism rather than what top I should wear. Mind you, I haven't worn it since!'

Her style is more sensible chic than fluffy femme fatale, but her even tone and calm control are in distinct contrast to the overtly macho blustering of her predecessor, Glaswegian hard man John Reid.

She acknowledges that male colleagues don't suffer as much scrutiny over their appearance but, rather typically of her style, Jacqui's only real concern is that the incident doesn't put other women off stepping forward for prominent public roles.

In the office, she's quickly down to constituency business. She wants to stop the Conservative-run



Former Blair's Babe and brunette, Jacqui has been an MP for 10 years

county council moving a library out of a deprived area, while the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch needs extra maternity provision. It's an issue close to her heart – 'The Alex' is where she gave birth to her sons. Quickly she reads a couple of letters – 'It's affects not effects, Becky – effects is the noun,' she gently reminds another assistant. She used to be head of economics at Haybridge High School in Hagley. And just occasionally it shows.

Richard, her husband and office manager, arrives (it's their 20th wedding anniversary on 24 October). A civil engineer by trade, Richard gave up his job to look after James and then Michael, leaving Jacqui free to pursue her political career.

'He's very good at what he does,' says Jacqui protectively, 'but there are advantages and disadvantages to working with your partner. If I ring him up during the day I often start by saying, "This is a work conversation", and we'll talk about work. If I ring him in the evening I'll say, "Let's try and not talk about work", and we concentrate on the kids and what needs doing about the house.' Down-to-earth stuff indeed for this former Blair's Babe who's spent the past 10 years equally concerned with what needs doing in the House of Commons.

There's just time for a quick coffee – milk, no sugar – before the Home Secretary is whisked away in an official black Jaguar, with her aide and personal security officer, flanked by two West Mercia police escorts. It's the first visit of the day – a secret police location for covert operations on serious and organised crime. After a tour of the former Ministry of Defence site, Jacqui obliges by making a speech and unveiling a plaque. She's duly presented with

her own police helmet and some gifts for her sons. The police and local dignitaries seem thrilled that the Home Secretary, someone they've known well as their local MP (she won her Redditch seat in 1997 by a marginal majority of 2,716), has taken the time to see them.

The clock is ticking, and after 40 minutes she's back in her car being escorted to Birmingham. The constant presence of her security staff is something that Jacqui and her family have had to get used to. 'They're very discreet and professional,' she says of the men who now guard her 24 hours a day – they even joined the family on holiday in Wales (although, mercifully, in their own caravan).

Next stop is a new passport office in Birmingham. After a private briefing, the Home Secretary steps out to face a wall of local and national press. She watches as staff demonstrate a mock interview, then talks to the waiting journalists. Interviews done in this office, she explains, will help prevent identity theft, organised crime and terrorism.

Jacqui has already been challenged by these issues in a very public way. She survived the baptism of fire (literally) wrought by the terrorist attacks in London and at Glasgow airport just 12 hours after becoming Home Secretary. And 48 hours after our interview, she was seen fighting back tears after watching the heartbroken parents of 11-year-old shooting victim Rhys Jones on television. Every ➤



**Good sport (clockwise, from top): Jacqui meets boxer Haider Ali (far left), youth workers and kids at a Positive Futures project in Walsall**



I'll go and see where it is, but I haven't done that yet. As for at home, we've set up a mini-gym in our garage. Actually, it's a TV on the wall with an exercise bike in front of it. I sometimes put on an episode of West Wing and cycle for the duration,' she says.

In less than half an hour, Jacqui finds herself in a very different sort of gym in Walsall, north of Birmingham. It is part of the Government-initiated Positive Futures project. Here, youth workers guide disaffected teenagers at risk of getting involved in drugs and gang culture. One of the volunteers is Commonwealth gold medallist Haider Ali, whose presence at the centre has done much to boost the morale of the kids. Jacqui loves the focus on sport; she was a member of the Oxford University rowing team and is a keen Aston Villa supporter. She stops to talk with the youngsters who have benefited from the project, joking that in her former job as chief whip, 'I had to keep the MPs in line – maybe I should have sent them to the gym.'

She encourages them to tell her what they think would solve the antisocial behaviour problem. The message is clear: more centres like this where they feel safe from gangs and can learn from role models how to boost self-esteem and improve their lives.

Jacqui is adjusting to her new cabinet role, but being a government minister is not new to her. She has previously held posts in the Department of Education and Employment, Trade and Industry and became chief whip in 2006. As all working parents find, life is a choreographed juggling act.

'Like every working mum, there are times I have missed something at school because of work. Thank goodness Richard is there and thank goodness for video cameras. I missed my little boy's leaving assembly from his

**'I'm told there's a gym on the bottom floor of the Home Office but I haven't found it yet'**

day seems to bring headlines about gang warfare and the growing threat of gun crime. Yet police statistics show that violent offences have fallen by a third since 1997. So how does Jacqui balance this with the perception that our streets are no longer safe?

'We need to listen to people – that's the only way they will feel confident. The fundamental objective of my job is to make sure people are protected in their communities, to make sure our borders are protected. That way, people can get on with their lives and bring up their families,' she says, and goes on to outline her plans for localised crime reports and prioritising funds to fight street crime.

After a television interview, Jacqui sits down with the newly trained passport office staff. She praises their input and gently teases the two involved in the role play about their acting skills. Then she asks how they are finding things, from their side of the desk.

Sandwiches and cakes are laid out but, although it's gone 1pm, they go untouched as the Home Secretary is ushered out by her time-conscious team. It must be hard to find time to look after herself with such a demanding schedule.

'I try to eat sensibly and not drink too much. I'm told there's a gym on the bottom floor of the Home Office building in Whitehall – I've promised myself

first school, but at least I could watch him on video.'

While her weekdays are filled with important issues of national security, the Home Secretary admits to a guilty secret – 'I'm a big X Factor fan'. And she is acutely aware of the importance of keeping grounded by staying in touch with family and friends. 'One of my favourite things is to get together with my sisters and their kids and my Mum and Dad,' she says. Then there's the annual family tradition of holding a Scalextric competition for Richard's birthday, involving around 30 family and friends. But she admits that, even on her evenings off, she and her friends sit around discussing politics – a lot of them work in politics or she's known them from her teaching days.

Our day with the Home Secretary is drawing to a close, but she sets off in her official car to attend yet another meeting in her constituency. It's a relentless schedule with precious little downtime and it would floor most of us, but she's clearly up for the biggest challenge of her career. 'I'm very lucky because in my day job I get the chance to do something about setting the world to rights,' she says. 'I love this job and I'm massively proud I've got it. I want to do it for a serious period of time and be able to make a difference.'