

'No regrets' after 27 years but MP Coffey feels retirement 'loss'

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ANN Coffey has admitted she has gone through a cacophony of different emotions after retiring as Stockport's MP this week.

Mrs Coffey has spoken of her pride at what has been achieved since she was first elected to Parliament in 1992 with a majority of less than 1,500 votes.

She added that she had no remorse over leaving the Labour Party in February to join the Independent Group for Change, adding the main two parties have moved away from the political centre while being "broken" by the issue of Europe.

"I have no regrets," she told the Express.

"I was surprised how little criticism I received [after

defecting]. A lot of colleagues and former colleagues had a deal of sympathy for my views, but opted to stay in the party to see if they could effect change to pull that party back to the centre ground."

She recalled one of the "vivid" memories of her political career was first going into Downing Street in 1997 as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"We had been in Opposition for so long, we were in 10 Downing Street and thinking we couldn't quite believe it," she said.

"It was an absolutely incredible feeling, really. I look back with pride on what was achieved under the Labour government under Tony Blair.

"There were excellent policies on the minimum wage, pension rights, rights for people at work, money

went into education and health. They were fantastic years, really.

"I think Europe has split and broken both main parties. Then you get people saying they feel politically homeless and don't know who to vote for. They don't recognise anything in either party that represents their views."

Ann, 73, admitted standing down had brought a feeling of "loss".

"When you've been an MP for a long time, which I have been for 27 years, it's very hard to give up that particular role," she said.

"For me it was particularly hard because a lot of my personal and social life is in Stockport.

"I moved to Stockport in 1977 and my daughter was brought up in Stockport. It's a feeling of loss of something that you have identified with for a long time.

"It's underlying excitement because you know that something is going to change, but also trepidation as to how that might change. That's something that's shared by everybody throughout their lives.

"Change happens and life is about change."

Ann said the announcement of a snap general election had merely brought forward a retirement decision she had already given plenty of thought.

The fourth longest serving female MP in the House, she said her age was the primary factor, and felt her family were 'quite relieved'.

She said: "In 2015 I anticipated that it would be a five-year period and I probably wouldn't have stood for election in 2020. Obviously we then had a very snap election in 2017.

"I've been thinking about it for a long time, but thinking about it is different to when you actually get to implement the decision.

"I've already worked long after retirement age and there comes a time where I think I'd maybe like to have some more time to myself and have a balanced life.

"I have quite a lot of interests which I've never really had the time to build on - reading, painting, photography, walking, travelling, going to films and meeting friends, going to galleries."

Ann said she has received

some "very kind messages" following the announcement, adding: "As an MP you have an ability to open doors that have been closed in people's faces - sometimes people with very dire personal circumstances.

"They welcome the help that they've got. That's been shown in the absolutely fantastic responses that I've had from people.

"One of the things that my constituents do is keep my feet on the ground.

"The people of Stockport are good people, sensible people. I will miss that contact you have as an MP.

"The MP's office is only as good as the people who work in that office. I've been very fortunate to have some very committed members of staff over the years. That's a bit sad because when the MP loses their job they lose their jobs as well."

With public regard for our politicians widely believed to be at an all-time low, new speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle this week vowed to clean up Parliament's 'tarnished' reputation. And some female MPs have cited abuse and threats as the reason for them not standing for re-election on December 12.

Ann believes the public have "never liked" the 'yaboo' style of exchanges in the Commons.

She said: "The parties are very tribal. This is not a



● Ann Coffey has announced her retirement after 27 years as Stockport's MP

recent thing. It has given rise to a very robust interchange, and is at times abusive. That's something the public have never liked. They don't like to see their MPs at each other's throats.

"It seems very odd that we teach children in school to be respectful and yet these children can watch their elected representatives behaving in a way that they're not allowed to.

"I think that's been made a lot worse by social media.

"Social media encourages 'clever' remarks and those clever remarks sometimes can turn into unpleasant, abusive remarks. That creates an atmosphere where it's not easy to discuss difficult issues like the environment, our relationship with Europe and the rest of the world."

A former social worker, Ann chaired the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults for a decade, penning two influen-

tial Real Voices reports into child sexual exploitation, following the Rochdale trial. She also led the campaign to outlaw the term 'child prostitute' from all legislation and replace it with the term 'a sexually exploited child'. This came in with the Serious Crime Act 2015.

She said: "We have campaigned to have children who go missing better protected and have raised awareness of the issues underlying children going missing. Protecting children has been a large focus of my work. I would like to continue to be involved in working to better protect children."

Ann says next month's election is extremely difficult to call, but would like to see a Hung Parliament to ensure (Remain-leaning) moderates can rein in the largest party.

"It's not a normal general election, it is a Brexit election," she said.

Political leaders pay tribute

STOCKPORT'S political leaders from across the board have paid tribute to Ann Coffey's public service after the announcement of her retirement.

Coun Elise Wilson, Labour group leader, said: "Ann has dedicated a huge amount of her life to representing Stockport. For the past 27 years she has been both well liked by residents in her constituency and well respected in Parliament for her work on child welfare. I wish her well with her future endeavours and I look forward to working with the new MP for Stockport."

Liberal Democrat leader and former Cheadle MP Coun Mark Hunter said: "I think she was a first class constituency MP. I have to



● Ann Coffey reading the Stockport Express onto tapes for the blind

say I think it's a crying shame she felt she had to leave the Labour party after so many years' faithful service to them. I was always comfortable to work alongside her even though we were from different political parties.

"She always had the best interests of Stockport at heart."

Coun Mike Hurleston, Conservative group leader, said she had been "a great public servant" in both her service as an MP and local councillor.

He said: "I wish her all the best for the future and thank her for all her service. She's worked with people across all parties to try and get the best for the people of Stockport."

Tributes have poured in on social media. Hazel Grove MP William Wragg tweeted: "I have always enjoyed working constructively with Ann, particularly on health matters. She has been a dedicated public servant."

Anna Soubry, leader of the Independent Group for Change, tweeted: "She's been an excellent constituency MP and campaigner for some of the most vulnerable people in our society."

"Huge respect for Ann and I am sad she's leaving Parliament. She goes with a proud record."

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