

# I thanked God for election victory



**BEING a Christian involves helping to transform our society for good – and becoming an MP is a good way to do that.**

Sarah McCarthy-Fry's election as Labour MP for Portsmouth

North in April meant she could try to influence policy and implement social justice on a national stage. For her, the role feels like a genuine calling.

She went to St Nicholas' Church in Portsmouth as a child, served on the PCC of St Peter's, Southsea, and now goes to the Church of the Ascension, North

End. And it was there she thanked God on the Sunday after the general election.

"I am convinced that I'm only in this position because that's what God wanted me to do," she said. "That sense of vocation helped me during the election campaign, which was enormously stressful. And I do pray in the House of Commons – mostly that I'm not going to make a fool of myself!"

She wanted to be prime minister at the age of 11, as she grew up in a political family. She joined a trade union when she started work, though didn't join the Labour Party itself until 1986. She'd married at 18 and had her first child at 20, so was absorbed in family life rather than politics to start with.

She worked at the Natwest Bank, and Portsmouth City Council's housing department before taking time off to have children, then returned to work at engineering firm FPT Industries. She stood for Labour in the 1991 local elections before leading the 'Ban the Burner' campaign.

"I was living in Copnor, and Hampshire County Council wanted to build an incinerator there which would have been three times higher than the one we have now," she said. "It would have burnt rubbish from the whole of Hampshire, which would have been brought into Portsmouth by lorry, and it wouldn't have met modern environmental standards."

The success of the campaign propelled her onto the city council in 1994, where she chaired the environment committee before becoming deputy leader of a Labour administration a year later.

"It was superb training for being an MP," she said. "I'd come from engineering,

## Portsmouth North's new MP answers constituents' letters

which was an uncompromising environment, but the council was politically tough. You can't allow yourself to be intimidated in the council chamber, and you have to be able to justify why you are doing something.

"In 1996, Portsmouth was given unitary status, which meant we were also given control of education, social services, waste management and so on. I was very proud that the transition was seamless.

"It's arguable that I had more power as deputy leader of the council than as a backbench MP, but I was only dealing with Portsmouth-centric policies then, whereas now I can influence national policy."

When the Labour administration fell, she decided to get some accountancy qualifications – even though she had been effectively

Parliamentary business can keep her occupied until 11.30pm on Mondays and Tuesdays, meaning she stays in London during the week. She deals with constituency business on Fridays and Saturdays, and tries to keep Sundays for her family and church.

"I started going to the Church of the Ascension when I moved to North End," she said. "I've always found going to church an enormous source of comfort and can sit quietly and soak it in.

"I like a traditional high church service because that's what I grew up with. I don't agree with Father Ron's views on women's ordination as I fully support women priests, but it is my parish church and it does a lot of work in the community.

"I don't think you have to be a

## my faith

**Sarah McCarthy-Fry's sense of vocation helped her through an election campaign. Now she's an MP, will her desire for social justice help her make a difference to national policy issues?**

doing the job for FPT for years. While she was studying for her final exams, Sarah heard that her predecessor, Syd Rapson, wouldn't be standing as MP for Portsmouth North at the next election.

"I took a day to think about it and decided to go for it," she said. "The process to select me as Labour candidate was a bit fraught because I was doing finals at the same time.

"But last January, I got my exam results two days before I was selected as the Labour candidate. The election campaign itself was no foregone conclusion, but I was born in Portsmouth and knew the local issues well."

The 50-year-old mother of two won the seat with a majority of 1,139, entered Parliament and has since been appointed to the public accounts select committee.

Christian to be a socialist, but for me the two go hand in hand. Faith and social justice are intertwined. I am happy to call myself a socialist as I believe in co-operative, mutual models of ownership.

"I've also asked for an adjournment debate about corporate social responsibility – I think all large companies, local authorities and public bodies should report to consumers about their record on social responsibility, the environment and their ethical stance.

"I do struggle because I'm an ambitious person. When I go to church on Sunday I examine what I've done each week as I don't always get it right.

"But although I'm ambitious, I'll never forget that it's a privilege to serve my constituents, as they are the ones who put me here."

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