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Nothing Like a Dame

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NOTHING LIKE A DAME

A Washington judge has decided that Mrs Ann Hopkins was unfairly done out of a partnership with Price Waterhouse. Any businessman on the American east coast who thinks he can dismiss a lady as being too "macho" and get away with it is displaying a curious lack of boardroom judgement.

Not that this was what initially upset Mrs Hopkins. A highly efficient PW employee, she was considered for a partnership eight years ago. She was therefore disappointed shortly afterwards to be told that her nomination had been put "on hold". She promptly sued over sex discrimination.

Only after the litigation started did the reasons for her rejection become plain. Other partners in that palace of accountancy (only 27 out of 900 of them are women) had suggested that she should "go to a charm school". She was, they alleged, over-compensating for being female. "Why can't a woman" complained 'enry 'iggins "be more like a man." One reason may be that most men will not let them.

Some firms are disinclined to take on women because they frequently depart to have children. This means hiring temporary replacements at greater cost or involves a continual turnover of staff. Despite these natural obstacles, however, there are a growing variety of jobs in commerce and in some of the professions where women are beginning to make headway. Even Price Waterhouse in this country now claims that 40 per cent of its annual intake are women, compared with only 5 per cent 18 years ago.

The room they occupy at the top remains limited, for all that. The British Medical Association reported last year, for instance,

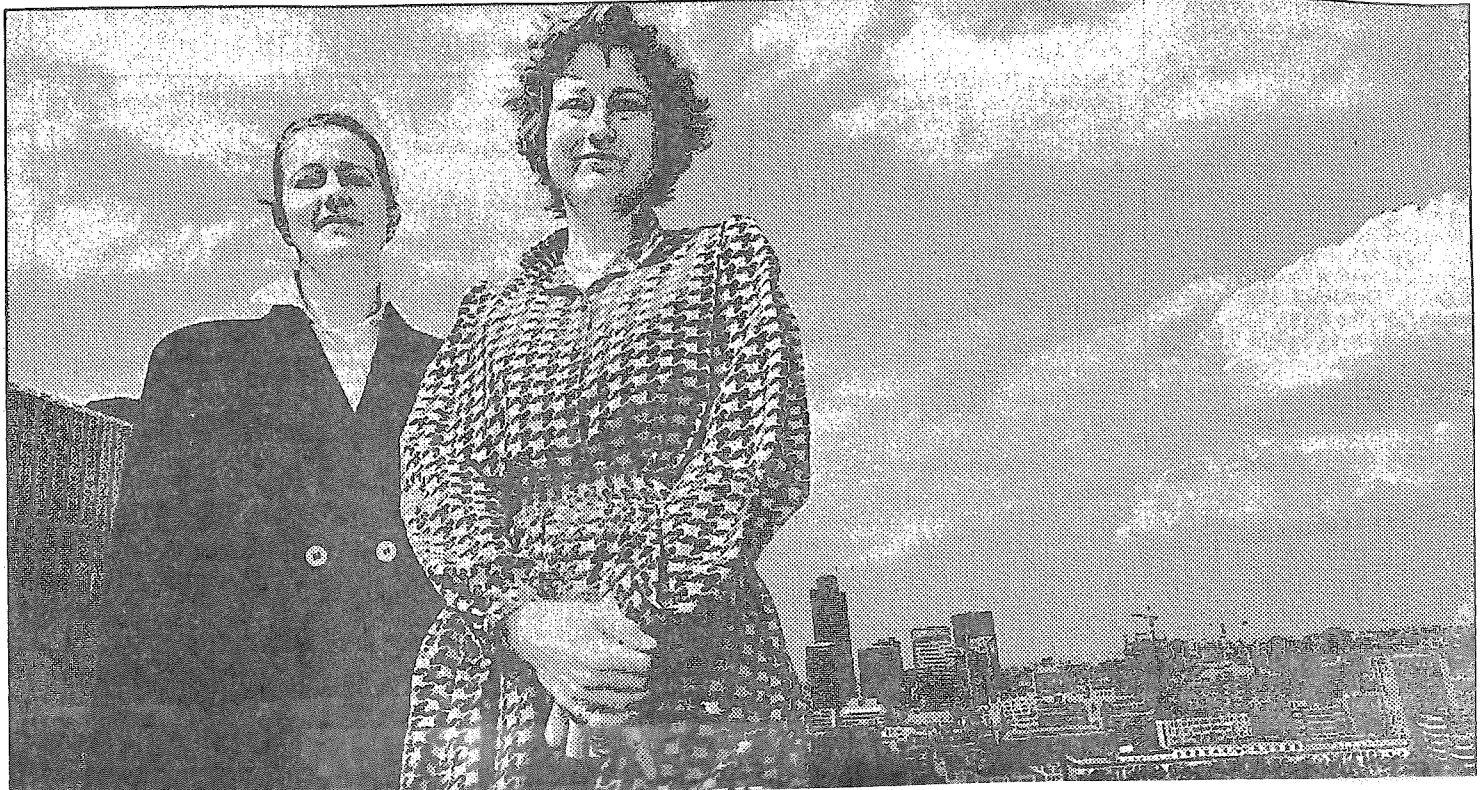
that whereas nearly half of all medical graduates were now women, fewer than 1 per cent of general surgeons were female. Not a single female general surgeon had been appointed a consultant in the previous five years.

The Hansard Society Commission report in January identified Parliament, academic life and the law as being the least penetrable male institutions. Despite the triumph of the suffragettes 70 years ago, only 139 women have since become MPs. This puts Britain near the foot of that particular league table among Western parliamentary democracies.

Despite a growing number of women lawyers, Britain has only a handful of senior women judges, no female law lords and only one woman in the Court of Appeal. This means that Britain lags a long way behind other countries, most notably Holland — where a third of the (admittedly part-time) judges are now female. In general women seem to be most successful in small businesses or those inspired by the principles of the free market — advertising, for instance, or journalism and broadcasting. Several national newspapers are now edited by women.

The higher slopes of industry and commerce as well as of most professions remain difficult for a woman to scale. Moreover when she tries to acquire the supposedly male characteristics of controlled aggression, the ability to make swift decisions and the unrelenting pursuit of the objective, she is sometimes criticized for being shrill or, still worse, butch. For those who complain that women cannot win, the "illegally sexually stereotyped" Mrs Hopkins must seem a shining example of one who has.

Tough it out at the top



At 7.30am Ann Hopkins agrees, with one caveat, to be interviewed half-an-hour later: "I'm not going to be looking too feminine." This is clearly a stab of irony from a woman who was denied a partnership seven years ago at one of the world's top accounting firms because colleagues found her too macho.

Anyway, she quickly adds, eight o'clock is no problem, because she has been up since 5.30, already taken three other telephone calls and is about to bundle her children into the family van and drop them at school. "If you get to the house before I get back," she says, breezily, "just go right on in and up to the second floor. There's coffee on the stove in the kitchen."

This seems very informal, friendly even, from a woman painted in court documents, as she puts it, as "the closest thing to the hounds guarding the gates of Hades".

This week, Miss Hopkins "the claimant" made legal history in Washington when a judge ordered the accountancy firm Price Waterhouse to award her a partnership and about \$400,000 (£240,000) in back pay for failure

to promote her seven years ago. At the time, Miss Hopkins, now aged 46, was an outstanding candidate for partner. She was bringing in an estimated \$30 million (£19.75 million) to \$50 million in sales for the company, a staggering sum even by today's standards when top consultants earn barely one thirtieth of her total for their employers.

But Miss Hopkins was also the only female nominee among 88 candidates for partner. "If I didn't stand out like a sore thumb then nobody did," she says over a mug

Ann Hopkins missed promotion because she was thought too macho. This week she won a famous victory, Susan Ellicott reports

of coffee and a chain of cigarettes in her sitting room.

Price Waterhouse passed her over and told her that her nomination was on hold. No explanation. Miss Hopkins asked why and was told she had irritated her colleagues. No elaboration. She sued. Her case went all the way to America's high court and back to a district judge. En route, to her amazement, Miss Hopkins discovered she had been the victim of illegal sexual stereotyping.

It turned out that the accounting firm decided against making her a partner because some existing partners disliked her personal manner. In written assessments, they even said she would benefit from a course at "charm school", was "universally disliked", even "dangerous".

"Now, c'mon guys," Miss Hopkins says, sitting barefoot in black Levi 501s and a long-sleeved pink T-shirt on one of her soft, cream sofas. "I'm a management consultant. Things don't get dangerous unless a computer falls on somebody."

She says: "The problems of stereotyping are very great. Not all men think that women should be barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen but some think that women shouldn't swear."

Miss Hopkins does swear and give the impression that she does not suffer fools gladly. But once you have met the straight-talking, humorous mother of three, the

idea that some men find her macho becomes comic.

Yet she is undeniably a force with which to be reckoned. Nowadays, she leaves her house in a leafy road near Washington's zoo for her senior management post at the World Bank, where she has worked for the last two years after a spell as a freelance management consultant. In conversation, she is quick-witted, with flashes of understated humour, but always fair and concerned about accuracy.

"I have a presence," she says when asked if partners at Price Waterhouse even knew who she was when they produced their assessments of her. "I tend to be noticed."

She does not appear bitter about her treatment by the firm and does not see herself as a landmark figure for other working women. "I have never given a thought to the women's movement," she says. "I just kind of missed it. I went to college in the south in the Sixties and went to work for IBM in the space business straight afterwards and have stayed in computers ever since. I am not a pioneer. I would rather just be the fifteenth person on the leading edge, because that's where I started out."

In London, Price Waterhouse has 11 female partners. Jean Stevenson says she has never experienced prejudice during her time with the company. Mrs

Stevenson, age 36, became a partner one year ago when she was five months pregnant after having joined Price Waterhouse 13 years ago in Liverpool.

Emma Lubbock, another partner, feels that being a woman is an advantage in the company. "You stand out. Of the three women who joined when I did, two have become partners. And I could introduce you to three people who haven't become partners who are men." Miss Lubbock, aged 38, is also married, has two children and has been with the company for 16 years.

Partnership in Price Waterhouse in London brings with it enormous prestige, but both women stress the risk factor involved.

"You have to be very sure of who you are having as a partner, because they *are* the company," says Miss Lubbock, responsible for bank and financial services tax practice in the United Kingdom.

"As partners you must be good at people management, personal effectiveness, and communication. The selection process is very thorough. Your performance is measured. We have six-monthly assessments and either you meet the criteria or you don't. It's as simple as that."

Miss Hopkins says it is too early to say whether she will return to the company now that a judge has ruled it must make her one of its 900 partners. Today, 27 of these are women.

The judge said he would order Price Waterhouse not to retaliate against Miss Hopkins for suing the firm if she were to rejoin. Miss Hopkins is unlikely to require such protection: "I'm not the least bit afraid of getting in to a snake pit."