

A black and white portrait of Shami Chakrabarti. She is a woman with short, dark, curly hair, wearing a dark blazer over a light-colored top. She is resting her chin on her right hand, which has a ring on the ring finger. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a thoughtful expression.

...AND THE WOMAN WE
ADMIRE THE MOST IN THE UK ::

Shami CHAKRABARTI

THE OUTSPOKEN HUMAN RIGHTS
CAMPAIGNER TELLS **RADHIKA DANDENIYA**
WHY OUR PERSONAL FREEDOMS ARE AT
STAKE IF WE DON'T MAKE A STAND

With one after another draconian laws being passed in the name of fighting terrorism (the latest being to hold suspects with no evidence for up to 42 days), it's easy to think you're powerless against the whims of an increasingly harsh government. And the one woman that keeps popping up to remind you you're not alone in feeling suffocated by them, is one Shami Chakrabarti, the Director of the human rights

group Liberty.

A human rights barrister who pairs a no-nonsense approach with charm, her cropped hair and penetrating eyes combine a tough interior with femininity to striking effect, leaving politicians quaking in their suits after meeting her. Little wonder she was named Most Inspiring Political Figure in a recent Channel 4 poll, while the listeners of Radio 4 placed her on their wish list for a future Prime Minister.

She may be a petite 38-year-old who looks

unassuming enough, but whenever there's a political injustice being swept under the carpet, you can rely on Shami to be on the frontline, making sure the issue comes to a head in the faces of those responsible. If New Labour thought they could just slip in legislation that affect our human rights they've come to accept that Shami will be there to dispute them, armed with a megaphone and highlighting the plight of the common man.

In person, however, it's refreshing to see she isn't the type to bite your head off. With a smile that marries kindness with firmness, she assures: 'I'm actually a very happy person. But when I'm on TV, talking about these issues I get all serious and people think I must be angry all the time!'

It isn't as though this was something she decided to do on a whim one day. Shami's interest in human rights stirred at the age of 12 while watching the police hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper, when her father told her to question her decision to agree with the death penalty. She recalls: 'I asked why and he replied there is no justice system in the world that will be 100 per cent perfect and you have to imagine what it would be like to be the one person in a million who was wrongly convicted of this terrible crime. Imagine. Nobody believes your innocence; you're convicted and led to the scaffold.'

'That's what got me thinking about human rights; how we balance individual freedom and public safety.'

With the seeds of individual freedom sown in her mind, she soon had her sights set on tackling the unfair laws from the platform that came with being a lawyer herself. It wasn't easy. 'Because of the recession, despite my qualifications I found there were no jobs waiting for me. One day I was pulling pints for lawyers, the next I was a barrister; gravitating towards public law because I knew I'd be working directly with the government departments, keeping a watchful eye on them.'

Her first big challenge came when she took up a legal position in the Home Office, working with 'the most authoritarian politician, Michael Howard as Home Secretary – a man famous for being nasty to asylum seekers and immigrants!'

Shami has always believed in facing the enemy head on, but never at the expense of compromising her ideals. After seeing the 'dangerous duel' between the Conservatives and New Labour over their controversial Human Rights Act turn into 'an arms race', she couldn't bear the ethical dilemmas of working with two parties at loggerheads, and left to join Liberty.

For those who've adopted apathy as a way of life, Shami and her group exist to point out just how many things there are out there that you simply can't afford to take for granted. She points out: 'Britain is the oldest and greatest democracy



in the world with a noble practice of free speech and fair trials. Citizens have grown complacent with these privileges and don't realise that without them, they'd have virtually no human rights left.'

'These are dangerous times to get complacent; police are raiding houses of 'alleged' terror suspects, arresting students for researching 'questionable' material, and we're all being coaxed into paying for an identity card which will contain every iota of information about our lives at an estimated cost to the taxpayer £4.5bn. 'Stop and search' is back on the streets and, with the pre-charge detention pushed from seven, to 28 and now 42 days, we're edging closer to the dark dictatorships we all condemn.' *(Ed's note: Since this interview was conducted, the 42-day detention proposal has been heavily defeated in the House of Lords, with Shami and Liberty's role praised highly in all subsequent political commentary).*

Nor is she at all happy about the way the government uses fear tactics to pass through their policies. Shami states: 'Recent years have shown how forgetting Britain's moral compass has left our country less safe, but at the fag end of the misnamed, misjudged *war on terror*, abortion time limits are left to the conscience and detention time limits are not.'

But none of this affects me, you might say. Human rights is a matter for everyone who wants to live in a free society, Shami explains:

'Human rights means three things: dignity, equality and fairness. I believe as strongly in these rights as any member of al-Qaeda believes in goodness knows what. It just so happens that the framework contains a lot of respect for other people. That's the great irony for democrats: you have to stick up for the rights and freedoms of people who would do you down about volunteering information.'

She understands why you may not care, but urges: 'I don't blame people being turned off by politicians, but not voting hardly solves the problem. I urge Asians to vote or join Liberty, anything at all that gets you engaged with the laws that keep you free!'

The good news, though, is many more of us do take note thanks to Shami. Speaking of Asians who come up to her with praise for her work, she says: 'I think public life is generally so white that people like to see a bit of colour. I guess it lets people who've spent so much on colour televisions, to make use of them!'

People who meet Shami are often surprised to find she has a sense of humour. 'With a job like this you need something equally strong to pull you in the other direction and my little boy is that. If I didn't have him, I'd be ranting all the time!'

At least politicians have one thing to be grateful for...

• www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk

FACTFILE ::

1969: Born in London after her parents came over from Calcutta.

1990: Graduates in law from the London School of Economics and does her pupillage at a public law chambers.

1996: Moves to the Home Office as a lawyer working with Michael Howard. Present during the framing of New Labour's first-term Human Rights Act.

2001: Joins Liberty on 10 September – the day before 9/11. Spends next two years campaigning against the severe anti-terrorism measures which followed the fall of the Twin Towers, and remains a leading critic of counter terrorism legislation.

2003: Becomes director of Liberty.



LIBERTY STAKES ::
Shami protesting against ID cards outside parliament

2005: Radio 4's Today programme put Shami Chakrabarti high on their wish-list.

2006: Shortlisted for the 'most inspiring political figure' award in the *Channel 4 Political Awards*. Also wins the award for sexiest 'anarchist in a barrister's wig' by politically incorrect lads' mag *Loaded!*

2007: Awarded a CBE in the 2007 Birthday Honours,

'This is an official Royal invitation to do more, and on behalf of people punished without trial and barred from protest, I will accept.'

2008: Successfully fights the controversial 42-hour detention policy.

2009: Vows to continue raising more awareness on torture, terrorism, human rights, privacy, protests, equality, asylum and young people's rights.

LIBERTINE

Shami's view on our world

Has Britain become more racist?

Inevitably 9/11 and the policies adopted after it worsened race relations. But there's still a lot of resilience and multicultural goodwill under the surface. The majority of Britons still say multiculturalism has made Britain a better place to live in.

Do we struggle with our dual identities?

I'm not just a British Asian, I'm a mum, a daughter, a lawyer and so on. I don't get bogged down with labels. I am who I am: an individual human being!

Should Britain lay off Muslims?

Britain's two million Muslims, far from being this country's problem, are an essential part of defence against future attacks. All these new anti-terror measures have rattled many moderates who had previously rallied in defence of Britain.

Will the forced marriage units succeed?

Forced marriage is a human rights violation. We have a duty to provide specific help and protection to the victim and I'm completely behind forced marriage units and the new legislation that puts control in the hands of the victim; they're the ones who can put a civil order to protect them rather than the authorities.

Can we stop honour killings?

To be fair to the government and police, the Asian community could do more to make sure women have the opportunities to speak out and challenge their families.

Is positive discrimination a bad thing?

We shouldn't discriminate full stop. But when you have people under-represented in certain areas, it's not positive discrimination to encourage applicants who wouldn't normally go for the job. In my view, that's sensible management.

You don't hate the police do you?

They're being asked to mend society, be our babysitters and protectors against terrorism. But if you keep handing over broader and broader powers to them, it's natural that some will abuse them in a discriminatory or irrational way. Get them back on the street and everyone will be safe from harm!