'The enemy now is secularism'

Her approaching retirement has done little to dim **Ann Widdecombe's** appetite for new challenges or to soften her religious views. Kay Parris met the veteran Tory MP, TV personality, bestselling novelist and high profile Catholic convert a few days before her bid to be Speaker of the House of Commons ended in defeat

The vote that was to deny Ann Widdecombe her last-minute pre-retirement ambition of winning the speaker's chair was just under a week away when we arrived at her Westminster offices. Huddled over desks with her staff she was planning a frantic day of signature-gathering to support a campaign that appeared to be gaining momentum.

This would have been the final political career move of Britain's best known, most colourful and most outspoken Christian MP, who famously converted to Catholicism in 1993 following the decision of the Church of England to ordain women priests – something she saw as being "theologically impossible" and for her, the last straw in a catalogue of liberal compromises. She will stand down at the general election, which is now expected to come at the last possible moment of Labour's current term, in June 2010.

Her uncompromising views and sometimes strident tone mean she is not everyone's cup of tea, but she managed to garner support from both sides of the House of Commons. Her parallel careers as TV personality and best-selling novelist have made her a household name. But more importantly, as she was keen to reminds us, "The Telegraph proclaimed me a saint" in the midst of the parliamentary expenses scandal.

Some potential supporters ruled her out because she was only willing to perform the Speaker's role as an interim measure until the next election, but others found this a positively attractive prospect – a high profile, trusted figure coming in to clean up the mess and hand over a morally restored Commons in time for polling day and a fresh, new government.

Why did someone so close to retirement even want to take on such a major challenge? Because supporters asked her to, appears to be the answer.

Motivation comes naturally to a woman whose driving desire to be part of the action at the heart of political life first developed, alongside her devotion to the Conservative Party, before she left school. That desire has remained with her during 22 years in Parliament, lasting, it seems, right up to her final months as an MP.

There is only one thing outside of her family that has been more important to Ann Widdecombe than politics. It inspired her to make a programme on the Reformation, screened as part of Channel 4's Christianity – a History series earlier this year, and even in the midst of a campaign whirlwind of a week she found time to talk to Reform about it – her faith.

You've always been someone who speaks out on moral issues. Do you see that as coming from your religious upbringing?

Some of it is, some of it isn't. People assume because I'm a Catholic that's why I'm pro-Life, but in fact it's the other way around. I was always pro-Life – as an Anglican, as an agnostic and now as a Catholic and actually it was the fact that I was brought very closely into contact with the Catholic Church as a result of my work on pro-Life that I became a Catholic.

Similarly the positions I've held on marriage and homosexuality, on freedom of speech, on all the big moral issues, those I've held throughout my life.

You grew up as an Anglican in a strict Catholic convent. Was it the tension between those influences that ultimately led you to reflect deeply on the differences between the two Churches and on the Reformation?

I was reflecting on the Reformation even while I was growing up! I was a Protestant in a Catholic school at a time when we did traditional history. So quite obviously I was intensely interested in the Reformation and what it involved, and I have maintained that interest, and in fact my favourite television programme ever was the one I did on the Reformation, which I thoroughly enjoyed. So I think it has always been a major concern, but I've come to see it in a different light.

Initially I thought the Reformation was undilutedly right. I now think it got quite a lot wrong – it got quite a lot right as well – but it got quite a lot wrong and was done in the most appalling way.

Ideally you would have liked, not a Reformation that split the church, but just a degree of reform.

Yes, reform from within. I think if we'd had Luther 50 years later, it would have been a very different kettle of fish.

As it was, the political situation played very well with Luther. If you think for example of the slaughter of the Anabaptists, which Luther was actively encouraging. You know, this was not some gentle monk, busy translating his Bible secluded from the world. This was somebody who had political views. And of course Henry VIII was able to seize on the Reformation in this country as his excuse to get his way as far as the marriage went.

Luther 50 years later, with a different order of monarchs around the world, with a different Pope, I think he might have had a completely different impact. We might have had the abolition of indulgences, the translation of the Bible into the vernacular – we might have had those things any way and they might have evolved, rather it being a process of revolution. My great sorrow about the Reformation is that it happened when it happened.

How do you see relations between the two Churches now?

They are nothing like as tense as they used to be. I grew up in a Catholic school before Vatican II and the tensions between the churches were very, very significant. Well that's gone, and partly it's gone because of the ecumenical movement, partly it's because of Vatican II, but mainly it's because the enemy now is secularism.

When we were all Christians and busy arguing over the finer points of doctrine, that was one thing. But now that we're faced with this huge secular threat and the marginalisation of Christianity we are looking outwards instead of bickering inwards and I think that's a jolly good thing.

Do you hope for a day when the Churches will unite again?

No and for the reasons I gave just now I don't think we should bother about trying to resolve every last aspect of doctrine between us. I think it's much more important we cooperate, love each other and look outwards.

Nonetheless you decided to leave the Anglican Church and choose Catholicism.

Oh yes, the fact is, so long as there are divisions, you've got to make a conscientious decision to go with what you think is more likely to be right.

Were there issues you might have once have repudiated that you now admire in the Catholic Church?

Yes, actually when I was making the transition, everyone thought papal infallibility would be the stumbling block, but actually it wasn't. Because the Bible says very clearly: "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matthew 16: 19)."

I didn't have a problem with that. I had a big problem with purgatory, I had a big problem with some of the Mary stuff, but on the whole I think papal infallibility I came to see the sense of quite easily.

I had grown up in an evangelical household, where they took such a very tough line on confession - that it was all wrong. And yet the Bible clearly says "Whoever's sins you forgive, they are forgiven (John 20: 23)" and I thought, hang on.

And actually it isn't true, as the Protestants claim, ▶

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▶that they have some unique biblical basis for their beliefs. The Catholics have a very biblical basis.

You had a long period of agnosticism before you came to the Catholic Church didn't you?

It was after a period of agnosticism that I came back as an Anglican, and after that I became a Catholic. It is important, because I think that was my big mistake. Because while I was an agnostic and seeing the churches from afar, I came to admire Rome and I came to despair of the Church of England. So when I returned from agnosticsm, that was the moment when really I should have looked more closely at Rome.

I have very deep Anglican roots – I come from generations of vicars; my little nephew has just been ordained a vicar; my brother is a vicar, my uncle was – in every generation there was a vicar. They were immensely deep Anglican roots, so it wasn't only doctrine I had to deal with, it was emotion as well; but it was wrong.

Mightn't someone returning from agnosticism expect to be attracted to liberal ideas, like those you found emerging in parts of the Anglican church, rather than the absolutes of Catholism?

Well no. People ask me why I became agnostic and I tell them it was a gradual erosion of belief; I mean there was no big flash of light. And similarly the return wasn't remotely Damascan, it was the gradual erosion of unbelief. That's how the two things worked - the passage out and the passage back were both very slow.

So though you say I was an agnostic for a long time, actually I would question that. Because going out, I was a mixture of Christian and agnostic, coming back I was also a mixture for quite a while. Pure agnosticism I certainly did embrace for a while, though it was not for quite as long as people think.

But when I say pure agnosticism I mean it. Because, a lot of people say agnosticism means you don't know. It isn't that at all. It is a very clear and rational view that man can have no knowledge beyond material phenomena.

But it's true isn't it, that we can't have knowledge beyond material phenomena?

That's what a lot of my friends used to say when we were arguing, they'd say to me, it's a truism, it's perfectly obvious, but actually that's wrong. Because I think you can have knowledge, you can have experiences that convince you that there is more than what is visible.

Is that really knowledge?

I think you can call it knowledge.

But do you still sometimes have spells of doubt?

No.

Do you still feel strongly against the idea of women priests?

I don't have to feel strongly because it no longer bothers me. I am not an Anglican so I don't have to reconcile anything. I left the Church of England precisely because I didn't want to stay with a situation where I couldn't be reconciled. I left and having left it's now somebody else's problem; it's the C of E's problem, not mine. I give exactly the same arguments about women bishops. I am quite happy to engage in theological debate but it's not an issue for me any more because it doesn't have to be. Rome isn't going down that road.

It isn't at the moment, but how would you feel if at some stage it did?

Well it won't, that's silly. That's like you saying, how would you feel if the Pope said Jesus Christ didn't exist?

You think it's as fundamental as that?

No, certainly not, but what I'm saying is that Rome has certain doctrines which for 2000 years have not changed because they are core. As opposed to rules which are not core. For example celibacy of the clergy is a rule, it's not a doctrine. A rule is whether you say mass in Latin or the Vernacular, it's not a doctrine. But the representation of Christ by the priest at the point of the consecration is a doctrine, it's a central doctrine, so it ain't gonna change.

Your career is the story of a strong woman rising to the top and presumably thinking she had the right to do that. Doesn't that contrast rather starkly with your view of the rights of women in the church?

No, I've never understood this argument. The argument you are making now is exactly the same as the argument which the then Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey used when I left the Church. He wrote me a letter saying how can you, a woman MP, deny the aspirations of a woman priest? To which my reply is, but I don't represent Christ at the point of the consecration.

This is not just a career option, you're talking theology, you're talking about the serious administration of the Church's sacraments and what it involves. I do not believe for one moment that you can see the church as a series of career steps. Possibly there are Anglicans who see it that way. But if that's all it is, it's not worth having.

Christ said so often to the apostles that they weren't to vie with each other, they weren't to be ambitious, they were to be obedient. And this is what the Catholic Church is based on, obedience.

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Without questioning why that should be?

No, it doesn't mean you just wrap your brain up and dump it in the nearest river. You can question, but what it means is that in the end it's cohesive, and it's based on obedience and that's got to be right. No bishop in the Catholic Church could have done what the then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, did and actually doubt articles of creed and stay in post. He might have his doubts but not stay in post.

You're retiring from Parliament next year.

Hurray!

Is that how you feel? You haven't had any wobbles?

No wobbles, no. A lot of people have asked me, if I could have foreseen this business with the speakership, would I have taken a different decision? But I do not regret it. I will miss the place, but that's a different thing, I won't regret leaving.

When I left the C of E I missed it. I missed the smell of pew and polish, which is completely different from the smell of the Catholic Church. I missed the church bells ringing, because Catholics don't peal bells, theoretically we're not allowed to peal actually, by law. We "dong, dong, dong", but only the Church of England peals. So there were lots of things I missed, but I didn't regret leaving. And I think it will be the same here. There will be lots of things I'll miss, but I shan't actually regret leaving.

Which period of your parliamentary career have you enjoyed most?

I have enjoyed each one more than the one before it. I loved it when I came into Parliament obviously, who doesn't? Then I loved it when I became a minister. Then I loved it when I was in the shadow cabinet. I really loved being shadow home secretary because I was able to design policy. Then when I left that, largely because I had an elderly mother to look after, I enjoyed doing the other things I've done, the television work and the writing and so on.

Have you enjoyed them as much as the parliamentary side?

No. I'm first and foremost a politician and I would not have spent my life any other way. If you ask could I have imagined being a politician but not a writer, I would say well it wouldn't have been quite so good, but OK. Reverse it and ask if I could have imagined life as a writer without the politics and I would say no, I wouldn't have wanted that.

Any regrets?

There are always regrets but I don't dwell on them. People get so tied up with if onlys. If I'd done this, if I'd done that. But what's the point of that? You didn't.

What will your retirement be like?

It's going to be a retirement from politics and also a retirement in the sense that I will have more leisure time. I've bought a house on Dartmoor and every time I'm down there I can see exactly what my life will be like when I leave politics. I shall do much more writing, I shall walk dogs on the moors and appreciate God's creation and see what happens. ■