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'I want to go out on a high': Meet Parliament's last Countess

The Countess of Mar, Britain's only female hereditary peer, is stepping down from the House of Lords after 45 years

[By Camilla Tominey](#), Associate Editor 1 May 2020 • 6:22pm



The Countess of Mar at home in Worcestershire | CREDIT: Adrian Sherratt / Alamy Stock Phot

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As the only female hereditary peer in the House of Lords, at first glance the grandly-titled Countess of Mar would strike many as the type to rail against reforms to the “unelected” upper chamber.

Yet, as the woman who holds the oldest peerage title in Britain prepares for her retirement to become official on Tuesday, after 45 years, she is fast becoming one of the most vocal advocates for ending the cronyism that has seen the red benches swell beyond all recognition since she entered Parliament in 1975.

“I don’t want to be there past my best before date,” the 79-year-old grandmother declares from self-isolation in rural Worcestershire.

“I’m not going to be one of those people who staggers around with a zimmer frame and needs people to tell them where they’re going. I’ve seen too much of that. I want to go out on a high.”

Having once famously declared that [the Lords](#) should “not become a rest home for retired Members of Parliament”, the Countess – or Margaret, as she prefers to be known – is adamant she must not be replaced.

One of her last acts as a sitting member of the House – in which she was deputy speaker three times between 1999 and 2020 – has been to throw her weight behind Lord Grocott’s Bill, which calls for an end to outgoing hereditary peers being succeeded by others with inherited titles.

“I think just let those of us who are there now fade away gently, one way or another,” she says. “When Theresa May was in, it was agreed that it should be one in, two out. But Boris has completely gone against that.”

Having survived the 1999 cull of [hereditary peers](#), which permitted just 92 to remain, the Countess would like to see an even bigger shake up, admitting that some merely clock in for their £323 daily “allowance”, while making little contribution.



The Countess of Mar with her step mother in 1975 | CREDIT: PA Archive/PA

“I’ve never gone in just for the money. I don’t think it’s right to be quite honest,” she says. “With privilege comes duty and I hope that I’ve done my duty while I’ve been there. That is something that my father instilled in me.”

So much has changed since the crossbencher - and former goats cheesemaker - first set foot on the Westminster estate following the death of her father, James Clifton Lane, the 30th Earl of Mar, at the age of 60.

Ordinarily, the Countess’s younger brother, David, would have become the 31st Earl, but he had tragically died from kidney failure aged just 23 in 1967. So the oldest peerage title in the UK, dating back to 1115, passed to Margaret, as the eldest of the Earl’s two daughters (“I was thrown in at the deep end!” as she puts it).

By then mother to 12-year-old daughter, Susie, and on the brink of divorce from her first husband, Edwin Noel Artiss, the Countess encountered a bygone era when “noble Lords” were told not to talk to the doorkeepers and there were no women’s loos on the principal floor.

Sexism was rife. Told by British Telecom - for whom she worked, eventually rising to become a sales superintendent - that she would have to take unpaid leave to claim her seat, she was flummoxed when, during a meeting with the head of the firm, he turned to another man and asked: "Has she got any right to be here?"

Chuckling at the memory, the Countess exclaims: "I thought, oh dear, you haven't done your homework!"

Describing "another sort of feminist thing" she recalls persuading the chief whip to allow her daughter to sit on the steps of the Throne - a privilege reserved for the elder sons of male peers.

"He made all sorts of funny excuses about her knees upsetting noble lords and then suggested that I might have another child - a son. I had just had a hysterectomy, so I said 'I could give you a certificate, to prove that I can't.' His face turned the colour of the House of Lords carpet!"



Countess of Mar during her time as a hereditary peer in the House of Lords | CREDIT: Photoshot / TopFoto/UPP,CGB 059540

Run-ins with Black Rod soon followed, with the Countess arguing that female peers shouldn't have to queue up for 'guest' tickets for their husbands, while the wives of male peers were allowed to walk straight in.

He eventually relented, and was later persuaded by the Countess to let Susie, now 56, attend the State Opening of Parliament - even though the form only allowed for the admission of "elder sons and heirs".

Following a second divorce in 1981, after five years of marriage to John Salton, the Countess wed her third husband, John Jenkin, now 79, in 1982. They agreed she should give up her day job with British Telecom and focus on the Lords full-time. Yet it was only after she suffered a catastrophic accident in 1989 that she fully realised the power of her peerage.

The couple were 'dipping' sheep on their farm in the Malvern Hills when some of the organophosphate liquid splashed inside her Wellington boot. "Three weeks later it was as though I'd been poleaxed," she recalls.

The poisoning sparked 18 months of [chronic fatigue syndrome](#) (ME), which affected the Countess's memory and speech. The experience prompted her to embark on a

lifelong campaign for better awareness of the condition, dismissed by many at the time as “yuppy flu”.

“Psychiatrists would say - it’s all in your head. They’d been working on the principle that everybody was a shirker or could be cured by a bit of cognitive behaviour therapy and exercise,” she recalls.

It took nearly 30 years of campaigning but in 2018, NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) agreed to rewrite the outdated guidelines around ME.

But carrying around such an archaic title can have its downsides.

When, during a debate about food waste several years ago, she quoted Oscar Wilde’s remark about “people knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing”, the backlash was unrelenting.

“They said I’d got no idea about shopping or cooking or anything like that, but of course I do all my own shopping and cooking,” she exclaims.

“The abuse that I got from that online and in the post, you know plain brown envelopes with disgusting pictures in them and things. It wasn’t nice, but you get over it.”

Insisting she has never used her title “to get a good table in a restaurant or make a fuss about anything,” she adds: “The other privilege is that you can help people when Mr Smith might not be able to.”

Six weeks into the [coronavirus lockdown](#) and the Countess is worried about the long term effects of Covid-19 on sufferers like the Prime Minister. “There is such a thing as post viral fatigue syndrome,” she insists. “A lot of people have been pushed back to work too early, for example the medical staff. They will have a collapse eventually. The ME groups are keeping an eye open for that.”

Not being in the House has been “less of a wrench” than she expected, admits the Countess, whose underlying health problems mean she is one of the 1.5 million forced into self-isolation for the foreseeable future. She has taken up watercolours, started growing her own vegetables, and knitted countless jumpers.

“My husband plays the piano so I have lovely music to listen to,” she adds, along with tuning into Radio 4. The couple also regularly FaceTime her granddaughters Izzie, 28, and Frannie, 26.

Yet her life, it seems, is as dispensable as her seat in the Lords. “I’ve already signed a piece of paper saying I don’t want to be resuscitated,” she reveals. “John and I have both decided if we get it, we don’t want to see the doctor. If we get over it, we will, and if we don’t, we don’t. They don’t want us clogging up the hospitals.”

And with that, she bids me farewell to tend to the seeds in her polytunnel - the next chapter in the extraordinary life of Parliament’s last Countess.