

**FIRST PERSON**

**Her mother might not always know best, says Juliette Foster, but her mum loves best**



# Women don't need handbags to get ahead

**W**e're fortunate to live in a world where women can be leaders in some of the most influential spheres of our lives. We take it for granted that when they are not organising households, women are running companies, academic institutions and even nations! There may not be enough of us monopolising the top jobs, but we have come a remarkably long way in a relatively short period of time.

I vividly remember as a schoolgirl being assured that a woman would never enter Downing Street except as "a cleaner, cook or Prime Minister's wife!" The meteoric rise of a certain "Iron Lady" debunked that myth.

However, I didn't need a politician to inspire my career as my muse was a little bit closer to home. In fact, she ran the house with the quiet efficiency of a chief executive. My mother was born in Barbados, but left the country as a young bride to join my father, who had travelled ahead of her to England a few years earlier.

Life wasn't always easy, but my parents battled against the economic hardships and the racism that sometimes dogged their tracks. I found myself on the receiving end when I started school. There is no point in repeating what was uttered – all that needs to be said is that it was humiliating.

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My parents were always there to comfort me, but it was my mother's explanation for this behaviour that was tellingly perceptive. She felt that people were abusive because they realised I had certain qualities, which they lacked, and that provoked both their jealousy and fear. They could only express those emotions through hurtful words designed to wound and undermine.

She taught me to draw strength from that animosity and, above all, to rise above it. I have never forgotten her wisdom and it has steered me well throughout my working life.

During some of my bleakest moments, her simple philosophies and clarity of vision would cast a welcome beam that guided me out of my despair. I don't always see eye to eye with my mother and, occasionally, we do lock horns, but that's to be expected when two assertive women from different generations argue about the rights and wrongs of the world.

What never changes is her unfailing support for me, which is free, unconditional, and always on tap when I need it. With support like that, I don't need a handbag to muscle my way to the top.

■ *Juliette Foster trained with the BBC before joining TV-AM. She did freelance work for the BBC Radio and TV, Carlton TV and Channel 4 before joining Bloomberg. Since 2001, she has worked for Sky News. She will lead a discussion at LeicestHERday 2006 on Friday at the Walkers Stadium.*

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**Monday: John Florance on local government funding**

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