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Votes for Women

Reflections on the Representation of the People Act 1918

COURAGE
CALLS TO
COURAGE
EVERYWHERE

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Manuscripts
Within a relatively broad framework, British Politics Review welcomes articles on British politics and society, preferably related to the thematic area set for each issue (announced in the previous issue and on our website). Please contact the editors at mail@britishpoliticsociety.no

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Editorial

"Votes for Women" was arguably *the* central theme in the British late nineteenth-century debate on the so-called "Woman Question"; the discussion on women's role in society. For those who campaigned and fought for a more equal status between the sexes, the right to vote – as the arguably foremost element of full citizenship – became the main goal. In the current issue of *British Politics Review* we celebrate the introduction of a female franchise in the UK in 1918 with a series of articles addressing different aspects of women's rights in Britain, then and now.

In the first article, Martin Pugh looks at the Representation of the People Act itself, and the immediate circumstances which led to the passing of the Act, revealing that – as the "late-Victorian suffrage campaign had largely won the argument over the principle of votes for women by 1900" – this extension of the franchise was similar to the previous reform acts of the nineteenth century. It came more as a result of party-political and pragmatic considerations, than a debate on principles. Diane Atkinson looks at the suffragette movement which spearheaded the campaign for a female franchise, emphasising that the suffragettes came from all walks of life and social classes in Britain, and thus demonstrating the broad appeal of the cause. In the third and last of our historical articles, Susan R. Grayzel addresses the question of the impact World War 1 had on the lives of British women, arguing that the popular perception of the war as a time "when women went to work or won the vote" needs to be qualified by the complexity of war time experiences, as well as by the fact that, in many respects, much remained the same as before.

Moving on to more recent times, Adrian Bingham looks at the female vote in the period after World War 2. Why was it that women – for a long time at least, and generally speaking – were more inclined than men to vote for the Conservatives rather than Labour? Finally, Laura Beers addresses the question of feminist responses to Margaret Thatcher. How were those who fought the cause of women, in a broad sense, really to relate to the phenomenon of a female prime minister who claimed to be no feminist herself?

Happy celebrations!

Atle L. Wold & Øivind Bratberg (editors)

Cover photo: The statue representing Millicent Fawcett was unveiled in Parliament Square on 24 April 2018. Fawcett (1847-1929), an intellectual as well as an activist, was an ardent campaigner for women's right to vote. The occasion marked the first female statue in Parliament Square, honouring the centennial anniversary of women's suffrage in Britain. Photo: 10 Downing Street official photostream.

The 1918 Representation of the People Act

by Martin Pugh

How great an impact did the First World War have on the parliamentary reforms of 1918? The answer depends partly on how far the cause of enfranchisement had advanced before 1914. It has not always been recognised that the late-Victorian suffrage campaign had largely won the argument over the principle of votes for women by 1900. From that stage onwards the House of Commons had a pro-suffrage majority. However, that success obviously failed to resolve the issue; the general principle was one thing, but a successful Bill had to deal satisfactorily with the details: how many women were to vote and on what terms? This was complicated partly because many men still lacked a vote and because the political parties were afraid that a limited measure might give an electoral advantage to their opponents. The women's suffragists, both militant and non-militant, had consistently made a tactical mistake in proposing a cautious reform granting the vote to single women who were heads of households. Unfortunately, many politicians were very opposed to enfranchising unmarried women for fear that this would encourage them to remain single and thus to accelerate the already-falling birth rate.

The immediate impact of the war was effectively to close down the campaign for women's votes as almost no one expected the government to deal with the issue. The Pankhursts largely abandoned the cause and reinvented themselves as pro-government propagandists campaigning to boost recruitment into the army. In recent times the war has been regarded as a "mass war" in which politicians were obliged to make concessions because the war effort depended on the contribution of civilians including women. It can be argued that as women performed industrial work usually done by men there was a radical re-evaluation of their competence as well as an appreciation of their patriotism. However, this seems rather simplistic. The wartime praise for women's work was ephemeral; indeed by 1918 newspapers were demanding that women abandon their jobs for the men returning from the armed forces. In fact there is no substantial evidence that the war changed fundamental ideas about the role of men and women. This is corroborated by looking at the politicians who granted the vote. One must remember that they had been elected in 1910. When their record is examined it is clear that only a small number actually switched in favour of votes for women. I have found a net movement for the cause of only 14 in over two hundred MPs who voted on Bills in both 1911 and 1917.

This seems rather negative. I am not, however, arguing that the war had no effect on the issue, but rather that its impact was not in terms of opinions but in terms of *contingencies*. The first result of the war was to create a coalition government of three parties in 1915. This proved

to be helpful because it brought together supporters of women's suffrage including Sir John Simon (Liberal), Lord Robert Cecil (Conservative) and Arthur Henderson (Labour), and it meant that the eventual Bill was an all-party compromise which was likely to pass.

At first the government had no intention of dealing with the vote. However, they were soon forced to tackle it because many male voters lost their place on the electoral register; this was because they moved house to work in munitions factories or join the armed forces and thus lost the twelve-month residence requirement for household voters. As a general election remained possible during the war the politicians felt obliged to try to re-establish a comprehensive list of voters. In effect it was the need for the *male* vote that brought the women's vote back onto the agenda.

However, the issue remained controversial, and so, in 1916 a special conference of 32 MPs and peers representing the Liberal, Conservative, Labour and Irish Nationalist Parties, was appointed under the Speaker of the House of Commons to consider the entire range of electoral reforms. The government did not expect this to succeed and was surprised when in early 1917 the conference presented a substantial list of measures including an expanded vote for men (increased by five million), a vote for women that amounted to 8.4 million, one-day polling, new constituency boundaries, and voting by post and by proxy for men serving abroad in the armed forces. Some 3.9 million servicemen were entitled to vote in 1918 of whom 2.7 million received ballot papers and 900,000 actually voted. As a result the reform of 1918 was not, in fact, a women's suffrage Bill, rather a general parliamentary reform Bill that included women in one of its clauses. Although this was not a very heroic conclusion to the campaign it represented a much more secure means of enacting the reform.

But why was it possible to reach an agreement over issues that had caused division for so long? The immediate explanation is that the Speaker started by getting his conference to settle minor issues on which agreement was easy and then to work towards the more difficult ones. He deliberately kept women's suffrage until the very end. MPs were reluctant to fall out over this one issue when they had settled so much. Also, as it was a comprehensive measure they could all agree that they had achieved some of the things they wanted and could therefore accept some things they did not. They found this easier because the conference did its work almost in private free from outside pressure; it did not even keep minutes and there were no delegations, meetings or protests. The leading non-militant suffragist, Millicent Fawcett, enjoyed private contact with two allies, W.H.



Dickinson and Sir John Simon, who were members, but they simply encouraged her to keep her followers quiet so as not to upset progress.

However, the fundamental explanation for the conference's success lay in the details. Almost all suffrage Bills before 1914 had included about one to one-and-a-half million women, but the 1917 Bill affected 8.4 million because it included married women over the age of thirty. This was what most politicians had always favoured and wartime greatly increased their desire to promote marriage and motherhood because of the huge losses Britain was suffering. Indeed, one conference member, Earl Grey proposed to grant an extra vote to all men and women who had produced four children! This was not accepted but it was a symptom of the mood prevailing in wartime. Conversely, despite all the propaganda about the role of young women working in munitions factories during the war, there was no attempt to give them the vote. The thirty-year age requirement effectively eliminated most of them. The conference had taken a series of informal votes; they agreed in principle to give some women the vote; they rejected a proposal to give all women the vote as this would have created a female majority; they then considered age limits of thirty and thirty-five years.

The politicians were looking ahead, fearful that war had disrupted the rate of marriage and that fewer babies would be born with dire consequences for Britain's role as a great industrial and imperial power. In any case, they felt comfortable with wives as voters whom they saw as a source of stability and continuity in a world that was undergoing radical change in the shape of revolutions,

the expansion of trade unionism, the collapse of monarchies and a decline in moral values. The shrewdness of this calculation was borne out by events following 1918. Four general elections in 1918, 1922, 1923 and 1924 demonstrated that although women were using their votes very few were getting elected to parliament. Some constructive legislation for women was enacted during the 1920s granting equal rights in divorce and guardianship but nothing more radical. Above all, by the mid-1920s the marriage rate had increased after the disruption caused by the war. As a result there was very little controversy in 1928 when the Baldwin government proposed to introduce equal franchise by abolishing the thirty-year age limit, thereby making women just over 52 per cent of the British electorate. Was this a slow process given that women had been campaigning for the vote since around 1866? Not if one sees it in historical context. Extensions of the vote for men had occurred in 1832 after years of pressure, in 1867, and in 1885, and even this left only around two-thirds of them on the register at any one time. This was a cautious record of democracy by instalments.



Martin Pugh is a former Professor of British history at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne; now freelance author, who wrote his Ph.D. on the Representation of the People Act of 1918. Among his many publications are: *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain since 1914* (Palgrave, 3rd ed., 2015), and *A Social and Political History of Britain since 1870* (Bloomsbury, 5th ed., 2017). He is currently working on a book on Britain and Islam, due in 2019.

The remarkable suffragette campaign for the vote

by Diane Atkinson

One hundred years ago women won the right to vote after waging a war of direct action on the street of Britain. The suffragette campaign for the vote was a drama that ran for more than a decade. It had constant stars, scores of supporting actors, hundreds of walk-on parts and a vast chorus who created dazzling spectacles. These performances were written, directed and played out by a fluid group of politically motivated women, sometimes helped by men, who sacrificed everything from friendship and employment to liberty, health and, in one famous case, life for the struggle.

It was an insistent and defiant panorama of first nights, long runs, tragedies, comedies and *coups des theatre*. Unlike the more seemly suffragists who kept their protests within the rules of law, the members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) went to revolutionary lengths to make their case. They practiced street theatre – demonstrating en masse, chalking pavements and burning down empty buildings. They blew up pillar boxes and attacked works of art. Their processions and interruptions of meetings all too often ended in the prison cells, where, denied political status and treated as common criminals, the women went on hunger strike and were then force-fed.

One of the most famous suffragettes was the governess Emily Wilding Davison, a career militant who served eight prison sentences and was fed by stomach and nasal tube dozens of times. She guaranteed herself a place in the suffragette hall of fame with her deathly dash into the path of the King's horse, Anmer, at the 1913 Derby. She suffered a fractured skull and died four days later. Her sacrifice was not in vain. A hundred years ago, the suffragettes' daring and painful struggle helped (some) women get the vote.

The demand for enfranchisement did not start with the suffragettes. In fact, the foundations of the campaign began some eighty years earlier. In 1832, Mary Smith, a Yorkshire lady of "rank and fortune," expressed her dismay that, from a population of 24 million, 300,000 "male persons" were added to the existing, principally land-owning electorate of half a million under the Great Reform Act. The insertion of the word "male" was the first statutory bar to women having the vote.

Smith asked Henry "Orator" Hunt, the radical MP for Preston, to present a petition to parliament. Smith's position was that she paid taxes, and that all women were liable to all laws, and that they ought to have

a voice in the making of them. During the ensuing debate, one MP pointed out the "egregious anomaly" that women did not have the vote and yet a woman was likely to inherit the throne in the near future. Victoria became Queen in 1837, but Smith's petitions fell on deaf ears.

During the debate on the Second Reform Act of 1867, John Stuart Mill, often called the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the 19th century, argued that taxation and representation should go hand in hand, and proposed an amendment to the bill that would strike out the words restricting the vote to men. He did not succeed either, although he was encouraged that 73 members of the House of Commons had voted for his amendment.

As more men got the vote, the pressure to enfranchise women increased. With the 1884 Reform Act, which once again enfranchised more men but excluded women, suffragist agitation intensified. Mrs Humphry Ward, a best-selling novelist and indignant "anti", organised a petition in 1889 signed by the "great and the good" women of Victorian society, that was an "appeal to common sense and the educated thought of the men and women of England". She did not want the vote. She did not want other women to have it either.

At this point, the Pankhurst family came out. Richard Pankhurst, a radical barrister, married Emmeline Goulden in Manchester, in 1879. Both had long experience of campaigning for women's suffrage, but when Richard died suddenly in 1898, Emmeline became more radical. With her changed circumstances, she rented a modest house for her three daughters and son and took a job as a registrar of births and deaths in Chorlton, Manchester. There she gained a deep understanding of the harsh reality of working women's lives as they came to register their loved ones.

In October 1903, she and her daughters, Christabel, 23, and Sylvia, 21, founded the deliberately provocative WSPU. Their motto was: "Deeds, not words" and it warned the country that the time for asking for the vote in a ladylike manner was over. Christabel Pankhurst expressed her personal feelings of urgency: "Mine was the third generation of women to claim the vote and the vote must now be obtained. To go on helplessly pleading was undignified. Strong and urgent demand was needed. Success must be hastened or women's political state would be worse than their first." The noisy upstarts barged in from the wings to share the women's suffrage stage. In

response to their shocking tactics, Charles Hands, a *Daily Mail* reporter, coined the term “suffragettes” to demean the women of the WSPU. In fact, the feeble joke backfired. Emmeline and her colleagues happily embraced the term.

There has been some confusion about relations between the suffragists and the suffragettes. It is not true that they were hostile to each other and their methods. Millicent Fawcett, leader of the non-violet National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and Emmeline Pankhurst were friends. Members of their organisations went to each other's meetings, walked in each other's processions, wore each other's badges and spent money at each other's fundraising events. Suffragette militancy escalated in 1912 and this did cause a rift between the two organisations, which many wrongly assumed was there from the beginning.

The WSPU actively recruited working-class women from the start, arguing that their lives were the worst. It was no coincidence that one of their most prominent activists was Annie Kenney, a mill girl from Oldham, who joined a few months after her mother's death in January 1905. Others followed: Minnie Baldock was a factory worker from Poplar; Charlotte Drake, also from the East End; Hannah Mitchell was a dressmaker from Derbyshire; Alice Hawkins, a shoemaker from Leicester; and Jennie Baines had worked at a gun factory in Birmingham as a child.

Although membership lists were not kept in case of police raids, there is plenty of evidence to suggest there were thousands of suffragettes from all social classes, from all parts of the country, and from all life experiences. Teachers, nurses, doctors, factory workers, sweated homeworkers, actresses, singers, poets, sculptors, shop assistants, servants, school-girls, vegetarians, politicians' wives and daughters, mill workers and seamstresses all took part.

In response to the suffragettes' increased presence, two new organisations were established by early 1909 - the Men's League for Opposing Woman Suffrage and the Woman's National Anti-Suffrage League. Men's opposition to the vote was predictable, but the vehemence of women who detested the idea is curious. Mrs Ward remained adamant that women's suffrage would cause a momentous social and political revolution that “would bring disaster upon England”. Violet Markham, the daughter of a wealthy coalmine owner, believed that giving women the vote would fill the electorate with ignorant and experienced voters. (After observing the inequality of women's lives during the First World War, however, Markham changed her mind, and became a successful feminist campaigner.)

The Pankhursts' bold vision and mission attracted the support of a diverse group of women, and some men too. Emmeline and Frederick Pethick-Lawrence were wealthy, generous and shared a keen social conscience. This handsome couple were vital to the establishment of the WSPU as the best organised and financed political campaign of the twentieth century. The high-born Lady Constance Lytton risked her weak heart and protested outside parliament, broke windows in Newcastle and went disguised as the working woman “Jane Warton,” to Liverpool and got herself arrested to experience what working-class suffragettes endured. Constance went on hunger strike and was force-fed eight times before the authorities and realised who she was and released her.

In the end, victory came while the First World War was still raging. Women were playing a critical role on the home front. They stepped into men's shoes, with a few exceptions, filling munitions factories and keeping essential industries going. The catalyst for change came with the discovery that thousands of men who had gone off to war had lost their vote: the law said that those absent from their home for more than a year, whatever the reason, would be disenfranchised. The government, embarrassed, sought an urgent amendment and was immediately faced with the prospect of a revived and morally indignant suffragette campaign. How could women who had done so much for the war effort continue to be denied the vote? In short, they could not.

And so, 85 years after Mary Smith first raised her objections, women aged 30 and over with certain property qualifications were granted the vote. It would take another decade for the vote to be widened to over 21s.



Diane Atkinson is a historian and biographer, and former lecturer and curator at the Museum of London. She specialises in women's history and wrote her Ph.D. on the politics of women's sweated labour at the University of London. She is a frequent guest on radio programmes, is a keen podcaster, has contributed to several television documentaries and was a consultant

on the film *Suffragette* directed by Sarah Gavron, starring Carey Mulligan and Meryl Streep. The most recent among her many publications is: *Rise Up, Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

British women and the First World War: some reflections on class, gender and political legacies

Susan R. Grayzel

What have we learned about British women and the war as the centenary of the First World War comes to a close? For one thing, we know more about the limits to what women achieved in contrast to the kinds of dramatic transformations that the earliest accounts of this war had promised. A host of wartime publications extolled the contributions of women so much so that one could forgive students who claim that this was when women went to work or won the vote. The popular version of the women's war story has long been focused on the mobilization of women's labour, their movement into new types of industrial occupations, and their taking on public roles previously denied to them. This is part of the story retold in popular centenary publications such as journalist Kate Adie's *Fighting on the Home Front*—it is about the shock of realising “a woman can do that.” Yet such accounts often neglect the complexity and diversity of women's experiences across the British Isles, let alone considering the full imperial scope of this war.

Concentrating on the United Kingdom itself, a far less triumphal narrative about women and the war would begin by acknowledging how much class and gender norms matter if we seek a more complete understanding. Such a history needs to begin with the grim conditions facing working-class women across the nation at the start of the war, including the high infant mortality rate and difficulty of everyday life documented in contemporary publications like *Maternity* and *Round about a Pound a Week*. It led to the burgeoning recognition, dating back to the South African or Boer War and reemphasized during the recruitment for the Great War, that working-class poverty produced men unfit for military service and that mobilising masses of men might require ensuring their families did not suffer further at the resulting loss of a male breadwinner.

One key, often neglected text that might help illuminate these experiences can be found in feminist, socialist, and anti-militarist Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England during the First World War*, which focuses on the war's working-class women as wives and mothers rather than waged labourers. First published in 1932, the memoir covers Pankhurst's experiences from the outbreak of war in 1914 through 1916. Centred on working-class families in the East End of London, and like her account of being a suffragette published in 1911, it blends the personal and the social. Current readers may be shocked by how unflinching it is in its attacks on war itself as the real enemy of non-combatants, especially women at home.

Her first chapters recount the now mostly forgotten economic upheaval of the first phase of the war, and the harrowing situation of working mothers of London's East End, findings echoed by other scholars who have focused on rural women and women engaged in waged labour in textiles and clothing production, whose jobs fell away in the first months of the war. Fears about the economic consequences of the war for women and children as impinging on enlistment

by working-class men had contributed to the broader implementation of separation allowances, monies paid to military dependents. These were funds put into place precisely to encourage enlistment by promising such aid would remove material hardship for families left behind. Yet 1914 found the policy not yet worked out for the expanded ranks being recruited into Kitchener's army.

Such decisions became caught up in other social debates in Britain; for instance, the issue of whether or not to support “illegitimate” dependents remained unresolved when war broke out. In August 1914, the policy around separation allowances reached back to criteria established by the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association during the South African War, that



Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960). Alongside her mother Emmeline, perhaps the most internationally renowned individual in the British suffragette movement. To the Pankhursts, the women's vote was an essential cause for the Left.

payments would only go to those dependents where a "regular" connection not merely a casual one existed. There was thus a compromise on the part of those wanting to recognise the problems of not supporting dependents of common law marriage, but not to encourage "immorality." Politicians were likewise figuring out whether or not the parents of soldiers and sailors were entitled to aid and under what circumstances.

In *The Home Front*, Pankhurst vividly portrays the impact of these policies and the grievances of such new military families, often in the words of those most affected. One woman had sent her marriage certificate to the War Office as proof that she deserved her separation allowance. Officials had then sent it on to her husband, but, having not yet received his first official military pay, he could not afford to send it back to her to prove that she merited the money. As she complained in a letter to Pankhurst:

I think it is a shame that the Government should be allowed to do such things just because you are poor... When they take your man, you might as well say they have took all you possess; and they don't care so long as they have him, what become of them left behind... We have a right to have what our husbands slave for, and get treated like dogs to earn.

This succinctly illustrates the anger of women trying to cope and points to the potential social disruption that could ensue. This was what the policy had been created to alleviate – the sense of grievance about the government taking "your man" and mistreating him and his family as much as the economic hardship. Pankhurst uses this and other cases to claim that such families were thrown into destitution, a situation made worse by a rhetoric of national unity and sacrifice.

This still not well-known story of economic deprivation for British working-class women merits further exploration, for it helps contextualise the trajectory of their wartime experience. Recent work on Scotland and Ireland has confirmed that those families depending on separation allowances suffered during the first two years of the war because of the inability of the system to keep up with dramatically increased demand. More work remains to investigate the consequences of the fact that such funds did not keep up with wartime inflation either. By focusing on the public visions of women's waged war work or the spectacle of the women's "Right to Serve" march of 1915, historians may overlook the significant grievances that led to women's wartime protests over the rising costs of living and potentially reshaped their post-war political lives.

Such an erasure of working-class women as consumers as well as wives and mothers continues to shape the popular memory of the war. At the entrance to the new First World War galleries at the Imperial War Museum

(London), a series of slides show the situation on the eve of war; the one on women has a sentence about the number of women workers and uses this to make a point about their increased wartime participation in the waged workforce. Yet, this number only refers to those women pre-1914 engaged in remunerative employment outside the home. So, the majority of British adult women, who performed vital unwaged work inside their homes including running households and raising children, vanishes. A more accurate public accounting would reference this. While including the statistics on waged labour, it would point out that with extraordinarily few exceptions, all adult women were actively working inside the home.

Moreover, even if we can trace women in paid labour, we still do not know the numbers who contributed to the explosion of volunteer and philanthropic work during the war years. They did so mainly in charities aimed at the war effort but, in some cases, continued to address the problems of poverty that the war exacerbated or failed to improve, and at very local levels. Economic and emotional support at the level of the neighbourhood clearly existed, and it proved essential to sustaining the nation. When women's economic privations became politicised and publicised as critiques of the war, turmoil could ensue – this happened within the United Kingdom as well as in more famous examples like Germany or Russia.

The vote that some British women received a hundred years ago owed its existence to fifty years of activism as much as to their war experiences. What happened to the feminist movement as well as to the women who ensured national survival one home at a time is a story worth revisiting. For we might find much to think about in the resulting history, which was in part about the slow creation of an intermingled warfare and welfare state – something that resulted from the place where feminist demands for aid to women, children, and families met governments willing to make these concessions in order to have a fit population with which to face and wage future wars.



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the Blitz (2012), and *Gender and the Great War* (2017), co-edited with Tammy M. Proctor.

Popular Conservatism, gender, and the politics of everyday life

by Adrian Bingham

The enfranchisement of most women over 30 in 1918 added an unpredictable new element to British politics. Many Conservative Party members and supporters worried about the electoral impact of the new voters, and their fears were heightened in 1928 when women obtained the vote on the same terms as men, at the age of 21. "Socialists are convinced such a measure will place them in office for many years and will mean for them the capture of a host of Conservative seats at the next general election," argued the *Daily Mail*, Britain's best-selling daily newspaper. The Labour victory in the general election of 1929 seemed to vindicate such warnings. In the absence of any scientific way of measuring public opinion, it was easy to make generalisations about voting patterns, and very hard to verify them.

The collection of relatively rigorous and representative opinion poll data after the Second World War enabled a more precise interpretation of electoral patterns, and soon revealed that the Conservatives' anxieties about female voters were misplaced. Evidence from Gallup polls and the British Election Surveys indicate that between 1945 and the 1970s a significantly higher percentage of women than men voted for the Conservatives, with the gender gap (calculated as the percentage Conservative-Labour lead for women minus the Conservative-Labour lead for men) opening up to as much as 17 per cent at times in 1951 and 1955; it averaged 14 per cent between 1945 and 1955, and 8 per cent between 1959 and 1974. Even when more women voted Labour than Conservative, as in the elections of 1945 and 1966, they remained notably less likely to do so than men. These gender gaps were of real importance, giving, for example, the Conservative Party in the 1951 General Election an advantage, distributed evenly across marginal and safe constituencies, of around 1.2 million women's votes when the overall difference between the parties was less than a quarter of a million votes. Without female voters in the electorate, the political scientist Pippa Norris has observed, it is likely that the Labour Party would have won every general election from 1945 to 1979.

How is this gender gap to be explained? Political scientists and sociologists have highlighted the impact of a variety of demographic, social and cultural factors, including women's lower levels of paid employment – and therefore distance from Labour-inclined workplaces and unions – and their greater religiosity, which is associated with Conservatism. Historians such as Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska and G. E. Maguire, meanwhile, have focused on

the strengths of the Conservative machine and the appeal of the party's policies, noting, for example, the integration of large numbers of women into the party organisation, the success of its central communications, particularly on the issue of consumption and living standards, and the attraction of the party's "feminist agenda", which promised action on matters such as equal pay to improve the position of women. While these explanations all help us to understand the gender gap, we need to do more to explore how political messages resonated with the realities and experiences of women's everyday lives. I argue that one of the main reasons for the Conservative appeal to women was the party's plausible and sincere rhetorical invocation of the hard-working, ambitious and consumerist, but still traditionally-minded, housewife or part-time worker. This approach helped the party to speak to the aspirations and anxieties of lower middle-class and upper working-class women.

Political science research in the post-war decades consistently found that women were less engaged in politics than men. These findings were often viewed uncritically and reflected many scholars' assumptions that women were more deferential and more likely to adhere to traditional values and institutions – thus favouring the Conservative Party. With historical hindsight, we can see that many women were alienated from, and intimidated by, a political world that had so long been dominated and defined by men, in which female candidates, MPs and leaders remained thin on the ground, and where so-called "women's issues" were often stereotyped, mocked or marginalised. Given these feelings of distance from politics, to be effective party communications had to connect, with some degree of persuasiveness, to the common experiences of everyday life. It is plausible to argue that in the 1950s and 1960s the Conservatives did this more effectively than Labour, particularly in the party's embrace of the emerging affluent society.

Margaret Thatcher, who was first elected as MP for Finchley in 1959, was perhaps the most successful front-rank Conservative in negotiating these gendered cultures and languages of politics, and finding compelling ways of connecting political issues to the experiences of everyday life. She unashamedly celebrated the aspirations of housewives for material improvement and greater domestic security. She shrewdly navigated public anxieties about "permissiveness", pragmatically accepting certain social reforms while also maintaining a religiously based defence of conventional moral values. That-

cher argued that women's hard-won domestic knowledge was as useful as the book-learning of experts: "Don't be scared of the high language of economists and Cabinet ministers, but think of politics at our own household level" she told voters in the 1940s.

Thatcher frequently suggested that women, through work, motherhood and marriage, had a better understanding of the realities of taxation and inflation than the politicians running the economy. During the 1960s, she attacked Labour by adopting the perspective of the housewife: "So once more the married woman who goes to the butcher, grocer and dry cleaner and then, when she is finished and wishes for a little pleasure, to the hairdressers, will find that prices are going up" she lamented in 1966. To a questioner who complained about the 1966 World Cup taking up too much attention, she answered that those thus distracted were mainly men and so "the women can get on and do the job" in their absence. And despite the wealthy lifestyle she obtained on marrying Denis Thatcher, she repeatedly emphasized that politics had not distanced her from the mundane activities of domestic life, telling the feminist Jill Tweedie in the late 1960s, for example, that: "I've got a housekeeper but I still do the cooking myself ... rush in, peel the vegetables, put the roast in ... all before I take off my hat." She offered a model of how the party could create a persuasive and modern popular Conservatism for women.

By the early 1980s, the voting gender gap had narrowed significantly, and there is some evidence that younger women were starting to move disproportionately to the left. There are a number of reasons for this, but of central importance was the diminishing persuasiveness of the rhetoric of the "ordinary housewife" that had been deployed so successfully by Thatcher and the Conservatives for several decades. A combination of the social and economic changes which significantly increased the numbers of women



in the workforce, and saw many professions being transformed by female entrants, with the influence of the resurgent feminist movement of the 1970s, rendered the roles of housewife and mother far less appealing to younger women, and left the language of domesticity looking decidedly old-fashioned to younger generations.

The weakening of conventional assumptions about femininity left Conservatives struggling to find a unifying language with which to attract women who had grown up in this period of change. Thatcher's achievement of being the first female prime minister, moreover, was compromised by her obvious distaste for feminism and by her reluctance to promote

other women to leading positions in the party; she was frequently portrayed as an entirely exceptional, and indeed often masculine, figure.

Feminists in the late 1970s and early 1980s started to find a more conducive environment in an evolving Labour Party, and used this platform to appeal directly to young female voters. The Conservative party never truly understood the dynamics of the gendered post-war political culture that they benefitted from; just as the party congratulated itself that it had enabled a woman to rise to the top, that culture started rapidly slipping away.



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Feminist responses to Thatcher and Thatcherism

by Laura Beers

A crucial transformation in feminist attitudes towards party politics began under Thatcher and continues to the present day. If, in the 1970s, the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) viewed both Labour and the Tories as part of the mainstream political establishment, dominated by men and largely indifferent to women's concerns. Thatcher's free market ethos and her emphasis on traditional family values – which she articulated from the late 1970s onwards – compounded by the cuts to social welfare programs and the marginalisation of the Equal Opportunities Commission during her first government, convinced many feminists that the two “establishment” parties were not, in fact, interchangeable.

The entrance of militant feminists into the Labour party in the 1980s should be understood principally as a response to the perceived radicalisation of right-wing women, and particularly to the perceived threat of Thatcherism to feminism. Scholars have argued that Thatcherism in practice was not unambiguously hostile to the goals of the WLM, and that the influx of feminists into the Labour movement is better understood as a response to the positive reforms within the Labour organisation and leadership than as a negative response to Thatcherism. In contrast, I would argue that Thatcherism was perceived by feminists to be incompatible with feminism, even if the practical record of Thatcher's administrations was more nuanced.

The irony of women's liberation feminists being pushed into the arms of the Labour party as a consequence of the ascendancy of the first female leader of the Conservative party was not lost. The feminist political scientists Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall have argued that Thatcher's “occupation of the supreme political office, and ... the confidence and authority with which she carried out its duties ... made it seem more possible for women to be powerful, to succeed in a man's world.” At the same time, women, as child bearers, mothers, and frequently part-time, often low-skilled workers, suffered disproportionately through her governments' neo-liberal reforms, including deregulation, privatisation and reduced public spending and cuts to the welfare state. Such policies had a differential impact on vulnerable communities including single mothers, “carers”, the elderly, and the poor. In a May 1979 leader, the Spare Rib editorial team dismissed the question of whether a victory for Thatcher would be regarded “as a victory for women's liberation, proof of what-the-modern woman-can-achieve.” This question was, they argued, misleading: “For us as feminists, the issue is not the success or failure of one individual woman, but whether the actual policies of Thatcher, and of the party which she leads, can promote the interests of wo-

men in general.” As it became apparent that Thatcher's governments would not promote what WLM feminists deemed to be the interests of women in general, many determined that the paradox of Thatcher's gender identity was easier ignored.

Thatcher too largely eschewed engagement with feminist discourse. She famously proclaimed in a 1978 interview, “No, I am not a feminist,” and left it at that. She justified her government's policies through a rhetoric of choice and competition, on the one hand, and through an emphasis on reducing the deficit, on the other. She prioritised the commitment to “fiscal responsibility” over full employment and the safeguarding of the social minimum in language intended to appeal to the female electorate. She asserted, speciously, that, “international economics work just the same as home economics,” and argued that, just as a family could not spend more than it took it, neither could a nation.” Such language was intended to appeal principally to women, who retained primary control over household spending, even in families where both parents worked full time. And, there was evidence that such language was effective. Although support for the Conservative party amongst women fell during the 1980s, more women than men continued to support the Tories, with women more inclined than men to disapprove of deficit spending. (As Adrian Bingham argues in this issue, women's comparative preference for Thatcher was not anomalous. While the 1980s saw the beginnings of gender dealignment in voting patterns, women had traditionally shown a greater inclination to vote Conservative.)

A quarter of a century on from Thatcher's resignation, David Cameron and his chancellor of the exchequer George Osborne not only embraced the Thatcherite logic of deficit reduction, but went a step further in committing to achieve a budget surplus by the end of the 2015 parliament. (After taking over the premiership, May quickly abandoned this pledge.) The Ipsos-MORI 2015 public opinion almanac (which did not disaggregate its findings by gender) reported that, “the government has succeeded in setting a narrative for the majority of the public that we need continuing cuts to balance the budget. If that means services can do less, we have to live with that.” Notably, however, an earlier poll conducted in advance of the 2011 budget showed a greater conviction amongst women than amongst men that the government was “cutting spending too much” (46% of women vs. 40% of men). While these figures show only minority dissatisfaction with fiscal austerity, they perhaps reflect a growing acceptance of the feminist line, espoused consistently since the late 1970s, that Conservative policies directed at cutting the welfare state are

in practice anti-women.

This critique of Conservative social and economic politics was more clearly articulated by so-called "socialist feminists" who, unlike radical feminists, identified themselves as belonging to the far-left wing of the political spectrum. (Radical feminists, in contrast, tended to reject the entire left-right spectrum of male-dominated party politics as patriarchal and inimical to the goals of the women's liberation movement.) Yet, despite their disillusionment with Thatcherite economics, it took time for militant socialist feminists to reach the conclusion that the best way to combat Thatcherism was through the Labour movement. Even at the 1983 election, socialist feminists remained divided over whether or not to support Labour, and many members of the movement never reconciled themselves to participation in mainstream party politics. However, the growing entrance of women's lib-ers into local Labour women's sections from the early-1980s, and their increased prominence on and ultimate dominance of the National Labour Women's Committee and the London-centered Women's Action Committee are a direct result of the impact of Thatcherism on the WLM.

Both women's liberation activists and some historians of the movement have argued that there was comparatively little difference between Labour and Conservative attitudes towards feminist demands in the 1960s and 1970s. Looking at this purported similarity from a more positive perspective, the historian Elizabeth Homans has argued that both parties in this period were relatively open to reforms that benefited women's material and social position, as long as these did not threaten the post-World War II Beveridge consensus based around assumptions of the gendered household and the family wage. While Homans emphasizes points of engagement between feminists and the principal political parties, Sarah Perrigo, a political scientist who was active in the WLM in the 1970s and became a member of the Labour party shortly before the 1979 election, has argued that, "Until the late 1970s there was neither significant pressure nor any real incentive for the Labour Party to take gender issues seriously. There was no competition from other political parties on women's is-



Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013); the first woman to serve as British prime minister and Britain's longest serving PM of the 20th century.

sues. Further, despite the widespread mobilisation of women in the feminist movement, there was little attempt by women influenced by feminism to exert pressure directly on the political system." (Perrigo, 1996, 117)

It is thus unsurprising that many WLM feminists retained an ambiguous attitude towards the Labour party in the 1980s, even as large numbers of formerly militant feminists were flocking to its ranks. In the early 1990s, Sylvia Bashevkin interviewed 43 women's movement activists. By the time that the interviews were conducted, most of the activists she interviewed professed to be "Labour Party voters or members." However, "doubts about the intentions of Labour in power were shared by virtually all activists, whether pragmatists or radicals. Many recalled the beginnings of public service cut-backs under the last Callaghan government, arguing that Labour had largely set the stage for Thatcher's subsequent

efforts." Their suspicion of Labour reflected the WLM's long-held aversion to party politics: "Parallel with their distrust of Labour, pragmatists and protesters also shared a cynical interpretation of the larger party system." (Bashevkin, 1996, 552-554)

Politics is inherently a story of relationships. Part of the story of what it meant to be a right-wing woman in the 1980s was how that identity, with its emphasis on economic liberalism, family values and self-help, impacted on those women who did not share her values. We cannot understand why so many militant feminists found their way into the Labour party in the early 1980s without appreciating the extent to which they perceived Thatcherism as an existential threat to feminism. And we cannot understand how and why Theresa May and her generation of female Conservative leaders have sought to reclaim feminism for the right without appreciating the extent to which feminist politics became associated (albeit uneasily) with the Labour party from the 1980s.



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