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Jessica Prestige

**Margaret Thatcher's politics: the cultural and ideological forces of domestic femininity**

**Abstract**

In December 1974 Margaret Thatcher hung up her hat and put on an apron. Despite being a wealthy, professional woman, it was as a lower-middle class 'housewife' that she won the Conservative party leadership in 1975 and the general election in 1979. This raises significant historical questions. What was it about a 'housewife' identity that was believed to suggest the necessary qualities of a political leader? It also emphasises the centrality of gender to Thatcher's leadership image.

This thesis will explore the cultural, ideological and political significance of Thatcher's femininity, with a particular focus on the rich and varied resonances of domestic femininity. Although a considerable body of literature analyses Thatcher's status as Britain's first female Prime Minister, the majority of work focuses on her failure to either promote 'women's issues' or to improve women's political representation. The conservatism of Thatcher's feminine image is frequently presented as a manifestation of the regressive social attitudes that shaped Thatcherite policy on 'women's issues'. Emphasis on Thatcher's opposition to the feminist movement has discouraged a more nuanced understanding of the changing role femininity played in the construction of her public personality. As this 'public personality' was a product of multiple influences, focus on Thatcher's public image facilitates a wide-ranging study that considers diverse cultural and political contexts.

Overemphasis on the prescriptivism of Thatcher's domestic image risks undermining the extent to which it reflected popular and political values, assumptions and prejudices. It also underestimates the extent to which Thatcher's feminine authority constituted a political problem. By examining gendered responses to Thatcher's leadership in political institutions, among her staff and colleagues, in popular culture, among women and within 'the women's movement' this thesis will consider the ways in which femininity functioned as part of a strategy for managing the presentation of unprecedented female power.

**Margaret Thatcher's politics: the cultural and ideological forces of  
domestic femininity**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
January 2017

Jessica Prestidge  
History Department, Durham University

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## **List of abbreviations**

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| CND   | Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament           |
| CPA   | Conservative Party Archive                 |
| MRA   | Moral Rearmament                           |
| MTFW  | Margaret Thatcher Foundation Website       |
| NEC   | National Executive Committee               |
| NVALA | National Viewers and Listeners Association |
| ODNB  | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography    |
| SDP   | Social Democratic Party                    |
| WI    | Women's Institute                          |
| WLM   | Women's Liberation Movement                |

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## **Acknowledgement**

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## Introduction

In 1979 Margaret Thatcher was advised to decline an invitation to debate with James Callaghan on television, not because her advisors thought that she would lose, but because they feared that in victory she would remind hostile male viewers of their wives. This is not the sort of problem with which previous party leaders had to contend. As a student at the University of Oxford her gender prevented her joining the Oxford Union, by this time an established training ground for politicians. She failed to secure nomination as the Conservative parliamentary candidate at Orpington, Beckenham, Hemel Hempstead and Maidstone in the 1950s, with many of her interviewers of the view that it was inappropriate for a woman with young children to pursue a demanding, political career.<sup>1</sup> Having won nomination for Finchley, a number of members remained unreconciled to the idea of a woman politician and stubbornly refused to endorse her candidacy. Upon announcing her candidacy for the Conservative party leadership she was accused of ‘quartering the party’ by introducing ‘women’s lib’.<sup>2</sup> As leader of the Conservative party her gender prevented her gaining full membership to the Carlton Club; her honorary membership was offered only after ‘considerable grumbling among the baffled clubmen’.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of Thatcher’s own pronouncements to the contrary, her gender constituted a political problem, and her leadership cannot be understood without a keen appreciation of the extent to which being a woman imposed political and cultural obstacles to the acquisition and enactment of power. However, her gender also provided Thatcher with discursive opportunities unavailable to her male predecessors or colleagues. This thesis will explore the ways in which Thatcher’s femininity – and her domestic femininity in particular – operated as a political force, arguing that the cultural and ideological resonances of domesticity are a crucial context for understanding Thatcher’s public image.

Against Lisa Filby’s recent claim that with the death of Thatcher in 2013, ‘Thatcherism had finally been laid to rest’, I would suggest that the Iron Lady is yet to be confined to ‘history’.<sup>4</sup> All historical writing, of course, is in some sense a reflection of the present, but this seems to be particularly true of the discourses surrounding Margaret Thatcher. After Theresa May’s election to the Conservative leadership earlier this year, the politics of Thatcher’s femininity have become particularly relevant. To announce May’s leadership in July, *The Sun* published a front page article featuring a large image of the new Prime Minister’s leopard print kitten heels. The headline provocatively read ‘Heel, boys’. Fetishisation of female power was similarly a hallmark of media responses to Thatcher, although *the*

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<sup>1</sup> See area agent for Maidstone report in C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher the Authorised Biography: Volume I* (London, 2013), pp.133-134.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Thatcher, 24 November 1974, Churchill College Cambridge, Thatcher Archive: THCR 1/1/6

<sup>3</sup> H. Young, *One of Us* (London, 1989), p.304.

<sup>4</sup> L. Filby, *God and Mrs Thatcher: the battle for Britain’s soul* (London, 2015), p.xx.

*Sun*'s headline in 2016 received more visible criticism than would have been likely in 1979. The enthusiasm with which May has been presented as a modern-day Thatcher itself suggests the media's emphasis on gender as the determining constituent of May's political identity [see appendix, figures 1 and 2]. The referendum on Europe also encouraged speculation as to what the 'Thatcherite' stance would be, with *Politico* journalist Ben Judah reflecting a widely held sentiment with the headline, 'Thatcher's ghost lurks over Brexit'.<sup>5</sup> A 'Thatcherite' candidate is set to represent the biggest opposition party in France's presidential election in April 2017. While, however, the issue of Margaret Thatcher's legacy remains political, historical writing on both Thatcher and Thatcherism has benefited from the passing of time, which has both increased the availability of archival sources and facilitated academic distance from the upheavals of the period.

A considerable body of literature seeks to explain, analyse and celebrate or condemn Britain's first female Prime Minister. This is informed by a range of disciplinary perspectives, and considers a broad number of issues, developments and phenomena, but the general emphasis has shifted during the past thirty years. The strength of feeling that Thatcher's person elicited has resulted in emphasis on Thatcher as a personality, and therefore on the personal convictions that informed her political agenda. A line is traced from her Grantham roots to the political hallmarks of her governments. This is certainly true of popular histories, and reflects a trajectory that Thatcher herself encouraged. As she told journalists on the steps of Downing Street in 1979, her father, the dominant figure of her early life, had 'brought me up to believe all the things I do believe'.<sup>6</sup> Parallel to this is a branch of academic scholarship which is uncomfortable with a personalised emphasis on 'Thatcher', and concerned rather with the economic doctrine of 'Thatcherism'. Both approaches are liable to mould the historical material to fit a predetermined pattern. Whereas historians once focused on the ideology of 'Thatcherism', which Stuart Hall famously described as a 'hegemonic project', recent work has tended to emphasise Thatcher's pragmatism, which involves a developed appreciation of the social and political contexts that informed her governments' politics. Richard Vinen for example, has argued in *Thatcher's Britain*, which was published in 2009, that 'Thatcherism was always about power, and it is the nature of power to adjust to circumstance'.<sup>7</sup> It is significant that Liza Filby's recently published book, *God and Mrs Thatcher*, is as much about the various institutional, cultural and political representations of 'God' as it is about Margaret Thatcher herself, emphasising the need to understand even the most ideologically driven elements of Thatcher's premiership within rich and nuanced contexts.

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<sup>5</sup> B. Judah, 'Thatcher's Ghost Lurks Over Brexit Campaign', *Politico*, 21 June 2016: <http://www.politico.eu>

<sup>6</sup> Interview on entering Downing Street, 4 May 1979, MTFW: 104078.

<sup>7</sup> R. Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain* (London, 2010), p. 4.

My thesis reflects this contextual emphasis by situating Thatcher's public image firmly within the social, cultural and political conditions within which her femininity was problematic. In doing so, I interrogate the wider social and political attitudes towards the vast number of issues and ideas upon which Thatcher's public image touched. Of these, the most pertinent to this thesis are femininity, domesticity and feminism. These are complex and highly evocative concepts with shifting meanings. Throughout this thesis 'femininity' will be used to denote socially and culturally prescribed ideals typically associated with women throughout the period since 1945. Within the context of an exploration of Thatcher's gendered public image, the most important of these is domesticity, which refers not only to the practical tasks of maintaining a home, but also – and especially - the character traits apparently manifest in effective 'homemaking'. These are embodied in the figure of the 'housewife', which itself reflects a complex history of changing attitudes towards both gender and class. Whereas for middle class feminist authors such as Betty Friedan a housewife identity was associated with social isolation, drudgery and lack of opportunity, working class women continued to regard 'housewife' as an aspirational identity into the post-war years. As Joanna Bourke has written of the period from 1890 to 1960, 'of all the dreams dreamt by working class women, marriage followed by full time domesticity was the most widely shared'.<sup>8</sup> Within working class cultures domestic competence elevated a woman's status and increased her power over her own life, and the lives of her family. Given that employment opportunities were incredibly limited, domesticity was regarded by many working-class women as a viable and rewarding strategy for demonstrating their familial indispensability. Thatcher's housewife image certainly drew on perceptions of 'the home' as the source of women's authority. It also mobilised moralistic understandings of women's social role, articulated most forcefully by the Victorian 'cult of domesticity'. This was a predominantly middle-class ideal that presented 'true' women as pious, pure, domestic and submissive. The domestic ideal evoked by Thatcher cannot, therefore, be understood as the product of a cohesive ideology. Rather, it reflected different strands of the ideal's socially and politically contingent meanings. That Thatcher was able to present herself as a 'housewife' emphasises the extent to which a housewife identity could be divorced from the practical realities of full-time domesticity. 'Housewife', rather, operated as shorthand for Thatcher's commitment to certain 'traditional' values. The word 'feminist' will be applied only to women who identified themselves as such, and this thesis will not seek to redefine the gender politics of historical actors in accordance with contemporary criteria, which itself remains contested. 'The feminist movement', unless otherwise stated, will refer to the Women's Liberation Movement [WLM], which was the dominant force in defining the meaning of 'feminism' throughout the period studied. Changing definitions of

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<sup>8</sup> J. Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960* (London, 1994), p. 62.

'feminism' and 'feminist' are used to trace shifting attitudes towards the nature of women's inequality, and the appropriate means of its redress.

This thesis will not pursue a biographical study of Thatcher. Richard Vinen, in his introduction to *Thatcher's Britain*, argued that John Campbell's *The Iron Lady* had 'taken us as close to understanding the woman as we are ever likely to get'.<sup>9</sup> Charles Moore's recently published volumes of his authorised biography have proven this judgement premature. Over two volumes, and 16, 000 pages, they meticulously reconstruct Margaret Thatcher's life from her Grantham schooldays to her third general election victory in 1987. A third and final volume is yet to be published. Of course no biography is 'definitive', but the scope of Moore's research and his unprecedented access to sources has provided Thatcher scholarship with a biographical account that will certainly endure, and with which this thesis will not contend. There are also considerable problems associated with biography as a form of historical explanation. As Philip Williamson has argued, 'all political leaders are enveloped and entangled within a mass of pressures and expectations...In reacting to such pressures they cannot escape being substantially diverted and shaped by them'. The structure of biography, which assumes a 'linear and self propelled trajectory', encourages the exaggeration of individual agency to the detriment of an appreciation of the immediate circumstances that determined particular decisions and behaviours.<sup>10</sup> The following chapters aim to contribute to understandings of Thatcher, but they do not provide a cradle-to-grave account of Thatcher's life. Neither do they meticulously reconstruct the events of Thatcher's premiership. My method, rather, has been to analyse Thatcher's feminine authority within selected contexts capable of informing historical understanding not only of Thatcher's leadership, but also of gender and power in late twentieth-century Britain. Indeed, it will be argued that the one cannot be understood without the other.

As key genres in the study of political figures, biography and autobiography nonetheless warrant consideration. Both have been widely used by this thesis, and require careful, historical application. A plurality of motives characterise biography, ranging from the communication of 'fact' through to the provision of entertainment, with most examples presenting a mixture of the two. Moore's biographies, complete with extensive archival references and extended bibliographies, are of the 'fact' heavy variety; his introduction nevertheless introduces the 'exciting story' that he has been charged to tell.<sup>11</sup> As Hermione Lee has argued, the biographical genre includes history, politics, sociology, gossip, fiction and psychoanalysis.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Ludmilla Jordanova has cited biography as an example of holistic history: strong biographical texts ably cut across arbitrary divisions between

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative leadership and national values* (Cambridge, 1999), p.12.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. xvi.

<sup>12</sup> H. Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose* (Princeton, 2005)

historical fields and approaches in the attempt to fully represent the diversity of a human life.<sup>13</sup> The Thatcher period has inspired a great number of political biographies. These fall into two broad categories: those written by academics and journalists, and those produced by politicians (broadly understood). There are 'good' and 'bad' examples of both, but even 'bad' examples, which do not adhere to the principles of sound historical scholarship, might proffer insight. For example, Patrick Cosgrave's offering, *Margaret Thatcher: a Tory and Her Party*, which was published in 1978, has been condemned as 'hagiography'. Cosgrave, an enthusiastic Conservative convert and one time editor of the *Spectator*, is certainly guilty of repeating the fictions Thatcher herself propagated. Nonetheless, approached as a primary source Cosgrave's biography provides an extended example of the public image that Thatcher and her advisors sought to cultivate at this particular stage of her political career. *Maggie: an intimate portrait of a woman in power*, which was written by *Time* magazine editor Christopher Ogden, usefully suggests the broad themes of transatlantic interest in Britain's PM, despite being neither revelatory in terms of content, nor rigorous in its scholarship. Political autobiographies can be used to suggest the narrative frames employed by historical actors to shape their political legacies. It is telling, therefore, that Thatcher's autobiography suppresses the gendered obstacles encountered in her early political career in favour of a narrative that emphasises recognition of professional merit and hard work. They also disclose, often in passing, snippets of revealing information considered too peripheral for extended academic commentary. In a thesis concerned with values, assumption and prejudices which are often taken for granted, these can be of great use. Biographies and autobiographies have been most valuable where archival evidence is as yet publicly unavailable. Mark Peel's authorised biography of Shirley Williams, for which he was permitted access to Williams' private papers, was therefore an important source in the preparation of chapter two. Further research, upon the public release of these papers, is likely to be revealing.

The 1970s and 1980s also produced a wealth of political diaries, most notably those of Barbara Castle, Alan Clark and Woodrow Wyatt, as well as the slightly earlier *Crossman Diaries*. The insights offered by such books, which contain a 'freshness and immediacy' lacking in autobiographies, could not have been produced by another genre.<sup>14</sup> We learn, for example, of Castle's somewhat jealous admiration for Thatcher's sexualised authority over her male peers, and of Wyatt's dated but well-meaning indulgence of Thatcher's vanity. Such disclosures are valuable indications of the dynamics that shaped Thatcher's political worlds. As Crossman wrote, 'a day to day account of a Government at work, as seen by one participant, is bound to be one sided and immensely partisan. If it isn't, it

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<sup>13</sup> L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2006), pp. 45-46.

<sup>14</sup> P. Weller, 'The Politics of the Diarist', *Politics*, 19 (2007), p. 133.

would fail to be true to life'.<sup>15</sup> Whilst this makes diaries a problematic source in the weighing of political influence, the very bias inherent in this genre provides compelling insight into the personalities around whom Thatcher's career was built.

A rich literature addresses the gendered phenomena of Thatcher's leadership. Beatrix Campbell's book, *Iron Ladies: Why Women Vote Tory*, is an important analysis of Thatcher's appeal to women; its influence is clearly discernible in the pages that follow. Published while Thatcher was still Prime Minister, however, it is infused with the author's socialist, feminist politics, and starts from the position of explaining what Campbell regards as women's perverse attachment to the Conservative party. Despite Campbell's acknowledgement of the enjoyment many women found in Thatcher's unprecedented female power, this inhibits the book's ability to consider the disruptive and/or empowering elements of Thatcher's leadership, which the author situates within a stable tradition of female Conservatism dating back to the Primrose League. As Martin Pugh has argued, 'the connections between Thatcher and feminism were complex, negative in some obvious ways, but positive in others'.<sup>16</sup> Campbell pays little attention to the multiplicity of 'feminisms' that informed women's responses to Thatcher, preventing the complexity of these connections being drawn out. Wendy Webster's *Not a Man to Match Her*, which is advertised as 'a woman's view of Britain's first woman Prime Minister', also considers the gendering of Thatcher's public image at length. Webster's focus, however, which consistently connects Thatcher's visual and rhetorical self-presentation with her professed views on a woman's 'proper' role, is liable to isolate Thatcher from the political networks within which she operated. Even the figures closest and most important to Thatcher are barely mentioned. This is probably an effect of the limited sources available when the book was written. Webster was far removed from high Conservative politics, and in 1990, when *Not a Man* was published, few 'insider' accounts were available to bridge this gap. With the period's archives generally closed under the thirty-year rule, this led to heavy reliance on media sources. My thesis aims to build on the work of Campbell and Webster by making use of both published and unpublished sources which have been made available since Thatcher's resignation from politics. Media sources are enriched by analysis alongside archival documents, biographies, autobiographies and published diaries, as well as by an evolving secondary literature. By emphasising the importance of social, cultural and political contexts I present an analysis which recognises the pressures and tensions inherent in Thatcher's unprecedented role. Rather than trying to explain the 'problem' of female Conservatism, which both Webster and Campbell regard as the product of women's political

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<sup>15</sup> Crossman, quoted in G. Egerton ed., *Political Memoir: essays on the politics of memory* (London, 1994), p.331.

<sup>16</sup> M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1999* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 335.

manipulation, I explore the ways in which gender operated as a political force. What did Thatcher use her femininity to 'do', and what do responses to this femininity suggest about the gendering of power in late twentieth-century Britain?

To answer these questions, my thesis will take advantage of new directions in the history of political figures which have focused attention on the linguistic, rhetorical, visual and material dimensions of political power. Books such as Richard Toye's *Roar of the Lion* have emphasised that the 'meaning' of political statements can only be grasped through careful attention to the responses they generated. Jonathan Charteris-Black has similarly argued for the importance of contextual factors in analysing political language:

Critical analysis of public communication maps out correspondences between particular language and other semiotic choices, and the underlying purposes and intentions that provide an explanation of these choices.

This involves relating a speaker's choices to 'the particular social context in which the speech was made, and the speech's impact'.<sup>17</sup> My thesis recognises the importance of situating particular utterances within contextual frameworks, but does not pursue a close reading of particular speeches in the manner of Charteris-Black. As Lawrence Black has argued, 'parties' relations with voters were rarely intimate enough to allow more than a contingent relationship between...electoral fortunes and political language to be deduced'. As such, party rhetoric is best understood as 'evidence of the production of political discourse', which is itself indicative of party culture, perceptions of the electorate and the mentalities of party leaders.<sup>18</sup> The analysis of discourse pursued by this thesis allows for, and benefits from, the consideration of a wide range of material. Despite his reference to 'other semiotic choices', Charteris-Black's book is primarily focused on the discursive construction of leadership through rhetoric. Thatcher's speeches, interviews and public statements more generally constitute important sources in the analysis that follows. So too, however, do the visual and material aids used to cultivate her leadership image. This will build on Ludmilla Jordanova's analysis of Thatcher's handbag, and Julie Gottlieb's work on Neville Chamberlain's umbrella, as well as David Cannadine's BBC Radio 4 series exploring 'Prime Ministers' Props'.<sup>19</sup> Jordanova, Gottlieb and Cannadine have demonstrated the rich analytical potential offered by material objects that came to symbolise the temperament and character of the politicians who owned them. Thatcher's handbag,

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<sup>17</sup> J. Charteris-Black, *Analysing Political Speeches* (Basingstoke, 2015), p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> L. Black, *Redefining British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> See L. Jordanova, *The Look of the Past* (Cambridge, 2012), J. Gottlieb, 'Neville Chamberlain's Umbrella: 'object' lessons in the history of appeasement', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016) and D. Cannadine, 'Prime Ministers' Props', BBC Radio 4: [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07pkg6b](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07pkg6b)



Jordanova has argued, from which the verb 'to handbag' derived, came to represent 'the troubling combination of femininity and power' presented by Thatcher's leadership.<sup>20</sup>

As a woman, Thatcher was held to different standards than her male colleagues, and visual appearance was a key area in which this inequality was apparent. Michael Foot may have been lampooned by critics for his ill-fitting suits, but his appearance received nowhere near the volume of media coverage that Thatcher's did. Indeed, her very nomination for the Finchley seat was announced by the *Standard* with the headline 'Tories choose Beauty'.<sup>21</sup> Recognising the political significance of Thatcher's wardrobe opens up opportunities for fresh analytical perspectives. Clothes, accessories and jewellery provided Thatcher with opportunities to exert agency; she was able to encourage particular attitudes through the way that she dressed. As Jordanova's analysis suggests, they also acted as receptacles for hostility and discomfort, and commentary surrounding Thatcher's appearance usefully focuses broader attitudes towards gender, power and 'Thatcherite' politics. Visual sources are particularly important given the visual and material nature of Thatcher's cultural legacy. Describing Thatcher as the 'backdrop of [her] childhood', a *Vogue* journalist in 2008 recalled 'that hair, those blue suits, the flamboyant bows at her neck'.<sup>22</sup> Melania Trump's choice of a pussy-bow blouse during the presidential election immediately prompted comparison with Thatcher in the British media, and in 2011 *Harper's Bazaar* paid tribute to 'the original power dresses' with an editorial featuring Georgia May Jagger wearing a series of 'Thatcherite' skirt suits.<sup>23</sup> Thatcher's clothes came to symbolise her political identity, and the chronology of her leadership can be traced through her changing wardrobe. Images are particularly prominent within the first chapter of this thesis, which functions as an introduction to 'Thatcher-as-housewife' as a political strategy. Party publicity posters, staged 'photo opportunities', political satire and portraiture collectively provide a rounded approach to the significant, visual element of Thatcher's public image.

When Thatcher campaigned for leadership of the Conservative party, she did so as a 'housewife'. Despite her demanding political career, and reliance on domestic 'help' in the raising of her then adult children, Thatcher staked her claim to leadership on domestic competency, as well as on the values and characteristics associated with a 'housewife' identity. Contextualisation is crucial to understanding the resonance of this image, both across the political spectrum and beyond party

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<sup>20</sup> L. Jordanova, *The Look of the Past*, p. xxi.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume I*, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> E. Sheffield, 'Margaret Thatcher', 1 July 2008, *Vogue* [www.vogue.co.uk/article/july-2008-vogue-margaret-thatcher](http://www.vogue.co.uk/article/july-2008-vogue-margaret-thatcher)

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, V. Moss 'Is there a hidden meaning behind Melania Trump's £585 Gucci pussy-bow blouse?', *Telegraph*, 10 October 2016. Photo shoot, originally posted 8 August 2011, can be viewed on Harpers Bazaar website: [www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/photography/g1614/georgia-may-jagger-margaret-thatcher/?slide=1](http://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/photography/g1614/georgia-may-jagger-margaret-thatcher/?slide=1)

politics. As Lawrence Black has argued, the majority of 'ordinary' people care significantly less about politics than political historians have tended to suppose.<sup>24</sup> In understanding Thatcher's public image it is therefore necessary to establish links between the political culture within which Thatcher worked, and popular culture(s) more broadly. The housewife image, in making the personal political, was developed to bridge this divide. Throughout this thesis the word 'politics' will not refer exclusively to the party politics of the House of Commons. Neither will the word 'politician' exclusively denote elected MPs. Broader contextual scope will allow for a richer analysis of Thatcher's public image, which negotiated a wide range of 'political' environments, both within parliament and beyond.

Contemporary attitudes surrounding femininity, feminism and domesticity shaped Thatcher's public image at the same time as being themselves changed by Thatcher's fifteen years of leadership. Within this framework, Thatcher's personal stance on 'women's issues' is influential but not determinative. To regard Thatcher's 'housewife' image as simply or primarily the visual and rhetorical manifestation of her desire to see women confined to the home underestimates the sophistication of the party machinery that helped her first to win, and then enabled her to retain, political power for eleven years. It also misunderstands the nature of twentieth century political communication, which, as Margaret Scammell and others have shown, regards both the political 'product' (ie the politician) and public opinion as malleable.<sup>25</sup> To understand how Thatcher's public image operated, therefore, it is necessary to explore the social and cultural resonance of the ideas and ideals it communicated.

The promotion of a broader contextual approach that moves away from Thatcher's personal stance in relation to 'women's issues' does not, however, deny that Britain's first female Prime Minister oversaw legislation detrimental to women. This is particularly true in the case of childcare. Despite being responsible for the Education White Paper that pledged the expansion of publicly funded nursery care in 1972, this care declined sharply under Thatcher's leadership.<sup>26</sup> The 1980 Education Act made local authority responsibility for nursery education discretionary, and while private childcare provision increased, this was only of benefit to those able to afford it. Whereas the previous Labour government had also reduced the number of state-funded childcare places, this has been presented as temporary and lamentable. Under Thatcher, all plans of the expansion of services were abandoned.<sup>27</sup> Where state sponsored schemes to provide childcare for the under-5s did exist,

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<sup>24</sup> Black, *Redefining*, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> M. Scammell, 'The Impact of Marketing and Public Relations on Modern British Politics: the Conservative party and government under Mrs Thatcher' (unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 1991)

<sup>26</sup> V. Randall, 'The Politics of Childcare Policy', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 69 (2016), p. 180.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178.

they targeted disadvantaged groups, such as families living in temporary housing.<sup>28</sup> Childcare was never considered a strategy for enabling all women to pursue paid employment. Indeed, even professional women likely to be able to afford private childcare were urged to put mothering first:

it's easy for a professional woman who's earning quite well to pay for extra help in the house... I would still say that the most important thing of all is to see that your children are properly looked after...If you've been a doctor do some voluntary work, do a little bit a half day a week, you can usually make provision for that, I know the problem, but I beg, I beg, I beg, never put the children second.<sup>29</sup>

During a radio interview in 1990, Thatcher warned of a generation of 'crèche children' neglected by their mothers' prioritisation of employment.<sup>30</sup> However, she was never quite as explicit as her then Secretary of State for Social Services, Patrick Jenkin, who in 1979 claimed that 'if the good Lord had intended us to have equal rights to go out to work he wouldn't have created man and woman'.<sup>31</sup> Although Jenkin's Conservative colleagues generally failed to either endorse or repudiate his views, leaked documents produced by the government's Family and Policy Group in 1983 suggest that he was not an isolated voice on matters of the 'the family'.<sup>32</sup> Despite the discursive emphasis on women's role as wives and mothers, the number of women in paid employment continued to rise throughout the 1980s. Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite have argued that Thatcher's recognition of this fact encouraged her use of gender-neutral terms when discussing 'hard working people': 'people don't go out to work for the Chancellor of the Exchequer. They go out to work for their family'.<sup>33</sup> The majority of women, however, were employed in part-time roles, which were often poorly regulated and badly paid. The 'consolidation' of wages councils in 1979, accompanied by reductions to the number of Council inspectors, exacerbated part-time workers' economic vulnerability.<sup>34</sup> As socialist feminist Elisabeth Wilson has argued, the deregulation of employee-employer relations implemented under Thatcher affected low-wage women workers more negatively than their male counterparts, as typically 'feminine' industries, such as retail, were less likely to be protected by trades unions.<sup>35</sup> The European Economic Community's directive on equal pay, issued in 1976, was implemented almost a decade later, long after the established deadline and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 181.

<sup>29</sup> Thatcher, TV Interview for Thames Television Afternoon Plus, 6 January 1981, MTFW: 104546.

<sup>30</sup> Randall, 'Childcare', p. 179.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 199.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.2 00.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in J. Lawrence and F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 'Thatcher and the Decline of Class Politics' in B.Jackson and R. Saunders ed., *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012) p. 142.

<sup>34</sup> J. Waltman, *Minimum Wage Policy in Britain and the United States* (New York, 2008), p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> E. Wilson, 'Thatcherism and Women: after seven years' in R. Miliband ed., *Socialist Register 1987* (London, 1987), p. 207.

only in response to external pressure.<sup>36</sup> Thatcher oversaw only one legislative change that explicitly benefited women, and had been reluctant to concede even this. The granting of independent taxation status to married women had been Nigel Lawson's initiative. Struggling to appreciate that categorisation as a husband's appendage could be considered offensive, Thatcher had regarded the move as an unnecessary cost that offered little in the way of electoral gain.<sup>37</sup>

Legislative changes are an important indication of Thatcher's gendered attitudes, but they are not the subject of this thesis. The effect of Thatcher's policies on women has been discussed at length in the existing literature, much of which was produced throughout the Thatcher period itself. More recently, Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs have argued forcefully for the disproportionate burden borne by women in periods of austerity.<sup>38</sup> My concern, rather, is with the gendered presentation of Thatcher's power, and particularly the role of domesticity in negotiating the 'problem' posed by Thatcher's femininity. Although the practical consequences of Thatcher's premiership will be referenced where relevant, the thrust of my argument is driven by the analysis of social, cultural and political values. By using cultural history to understand a political figure I suggest that the study of 'politics' cannot be reduced to formal political structures or legislative decisions: the public images of politicians are cultural as well as political products.

'Public image' should not be taken to imply simplicity or superficiality, although public images can of course be disingenuous. While Thatcher's self presentation is important, this study cannot be reduced to Thatcher's self presentation alone, as public images are collaborative – if not always cooperative - projects. In this respect 'contexts', such as the media environment, feminist politics, Labour politics and popular political cultures, are not merely backdrops against which Thatcher's public image needs to be understood, but rather agents in the image's construction. The media, for example, did not simply reflect back the image of Thatcher-as-housewife as prescribed by the Gordon Reece, but rather invested it with meanings that furthered their various agendas. A growing interest in the 'private' lives of public figures was therefore instrumental in the fostering of such opportunities as were exploited by Thatcher to foreground an ostensibly 'non-political' personality. Second-wave feminism, which chapter three will argue is a crucial context for understanding Thatcher's brand of female power, provided the model of female authority against which Thatcher defined herself. She was anti-feminist, but not beyond the discourses that 'feminism' generated. With 'the housewife' understood as symbolically anti-feminist, the contributions of 'feminism' to the construction of Thatcher's public image need to be recognised. Thatcher's image was neither the

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<sup>36</sup> Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, pp. 205-206.

<sup>37</sup> E. Nicholson, *Secret Society: inside – and outside – the Conservative party* (London 1996), p. 89.

<sup>38</sup> See R. Campbell and S. Childs 'What the Coalition Did for Women: A New Gender Consensus, Coalition Division and Gendered Austerity' in A. Seldon and M. Finn eds., *The Coalition Effect* (Cambridge, 2015)

simple manifestation of her personal convictions nor the superficial product of political propaganda. Neither was it merely reflective of existing social attitudes, for as Roger Chartier, Lynne Hunt and others have argued, political representations of social reality are themselves creative forces.<sup>39</sup> Thatcher's image, rather, represents a complex amalgamation of influences which are underappreciated if only traditional 'political' contexts are considered.

The thesis comprises five chapters organised by a combination of subjects and themes, collectively aimed at presenting a methodologically flexible analysis of Thatcher's femininity. The first chapter focuses on the period between Thatcher's election to the party leadership in 1975, and the 1979 general election campaign, although earlier and later periods are considered for the purpose of comparison. This chapter functions as an introduction to Thatcher's 'housewife' image, which was most acute in the period preceding what political insiders dubbed 'the shopping basket election'. By examining the cultural history of 'the housewife' within Conservative discourses I 'locate' Thatcher's domestic image within the gendered traditions of Conservatism, while consideration of the immediate political context suggests the particular reasons 'housewife' was considered a strategically advantageous political identity in the late 1970s. Given the recent emergence of women's liberation, and the increasing tendency for women to be in paid employment, domestic femininity was not an obviously persuasive strategy for presenting a professionally ambitious woman accustomed to domestic 'help'.

Chapter two considers Margaret Thatcher alongside Mary Whitehouse and Shirley Williams. Given Thatcher's status as Britain's first female Prime Minister, comparison with earlier Prime Minister has necessarily meant comparison with men. Given substantial, gendered differences between Thatcher's leadership and that of her male predecessors, such comparisons are necessarily limited. As a woman, Thatcher faced a different set of challenges to her male predecessors and successors. She was held to different standards, and also had a different set of rhetorical and symbolic instruments at her disposal. 'Household economics', for example, may have been an established facet of leadership discourses by 1975, but they had never been espoused by a 'housewife'. Each comparison probes different questions in relation to Thatcher's leadership, and her leadership image in particular. A comparative analysis of Margaret Thatcher and Mary Whitehouse, women described by Campbell as 'heroines of the right', provides an opportunity to consider the moral environment of Thatcherism, as well as stereotypes surrounding media

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<sup>39</sup> See L. Hunt ed., *The New Cultural History* (London, 1989), R. Chartier, 'Intellectual History or Sociocultural History?' in D. LaCapra and S. Kaplan ed., *Modern European Intellectual History* (New York, 1982). Also Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor introduction to J. Lawrence and M. Taylor eds., *Party State and Society* (Aldershot, 1997). More recently, Lawrence Black and Jonathan Charteris-Black have also emphasised the creative agency of political discourse, which is regarded as a social force in its own right. See Black, *Redefining British Politics*, p. 6 and Charteris-Black, *Analysing Political Speeches*, pp. 86-87.

representations of Conservative women. The moralistic nature of Thatcher's public image can encourage overemphasis of her moral authoritarianism. The literature that has recognised the disconnection between Thatcher's rhetorical commitment to traditional values and her willingness to legislate on such issues has tended to conclude that the moralistic rhetoric was therefore 'window dressing', warranting little investigation. It is my contention that recognising this inconsistency facilitates a better understanding of how the moralistic elements of Thatcher's public image functioned. The limited legislative impact of her rhetorical alignment with Whitehouse's brand of moral authoritarianism increases its as yet under-studied presentational significance.

Comparison with Shirley Williams facilitates the exploration of gender within political cultures of the left. Williams, who was widely tipped as a future Prime Minister before her Conservative contemporary's unlikely ascent, was in many ways Thatcher's 'opposite'. The London-born daughter of Fabian intellectuals, Williams' background bore little resemblance to Thatcher's small-town life 'above the shop'. In outlook, too, the women were poles apart, although both were motivated by religious commitments. Williams was, and remains, a devout Catholic. Presentational similarities between Williams and Thatcher suggest an enduring and pervasive social conservatism in relation to women across the political spectrum: as will be shown, Williams, like Thatcher, was cast in a 'housewife' role. Comparison with Williams will therefore facilitate a move away from analyses that present Thatcher's domestic image as the product of a specifically Thatcherite social ideal. Williams' political career, and her media image in particular, will be used to demonstrate the various pressures to which political women were subject. Understanding the media environment beyond its responses to Thatcher will facilitate a richer appreciation of the attitudes and expectations her public images was required to negotiate.

As has been argued above, the complexity of the 'feminist' context within which Thatcher must be understood has been underappreciated in the majority of the existing literature. Chapter three addresses this research gap, by offering a thoroughly contextualised account of Thatcher's relationship with 'the woman's movement', broadly understood. This chapter considers responses to Thatcher as presented in a number of feminist publications, such as *Red Rag* and *Spare Rib*, but also explores more diffuse 'feminist' sentiments expressed in a wider range of published sources, such as the *Guardian's Women's Page*, and as suggested by opinion poll data. In doing so, it reflects Caitriona Beaumont's assertion, presented in *Housewives and Citizens*, that 'the women's movement' cannot be reduced to the activities or attitudes of explicitly 'feminist' organisations, with which only a minority of women engaged.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the socialist nature of British feminism made

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<sup>40</sup> C. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: domesticity and the women's movement in Britain* (Manchester, 2013).

explicitly 'feminist' support for the policies of any Conservative Prime Minister unlikely, suggesting that to uncover more complex responses to Thatcher's power a broader context would be required. The Greenham Common peace camp, which generated controversy both within 'Women's Liberation' groups and society more generally, is considered at length. In a decade of waning enthusiasm for explicitly 'feminist' causes, the camp attracted extensive interest and generated strong feelings, whether of sympathy, revulsion or anger. Responses to Greenham Common usefully focus a wide range of contemporary attitudes towards feminine responsibility.

Despite Thatcher's opposition to a pro-woman agenda, her political power was widely enjoyed by women as a woman's victory over men. Thatcher's 'lack of sisterliness' did not prevent Brena Polan, writing for *the Guardian's* Women's Page, from imagining Thatcher's power as a 'private revenge' over the men who had 'doubtless...patronised and circumscribed her'.<sup>41</sup> Chapter four explores responses to and depictions of Thatcher's relationships with her male colleagues; the spectacle provided by domineering performances that reduced grown men to helpless schoolboys, as they were presented in countless cartoons. This chapter emphasises the need to consider both masculine and feminine elements of Thatcher's public image in relation to the gendered identities of those around her. That Thatcher was said to be 'the best man in the Cabinet' reflects not only on the Prime Minister, but also on the apparently inadequate masculinities of her colleagues. Thatcher's 'gender bender' image, as Webster has called it, relied on complexly gendered performances that challenged traditional conceptions of femininity; the iconic image of Thatcher riding a tank during an official visit to West Germany in 1986 was one such performance. Her visual femininity, however, was assiduously protected. As this chapter will show, her meticulously feminine appearance added drama to the spectacle of her female authority; she was not just a woman, but – as Keith Joseph argued – a 'womanly' woman, and she 'turned her very womanliness into a strength'.<sup>42</sup> Male attraction to Thatcher is a crucial element of her public image: her power was not just political, but sexual, also. Although sexualised elements came to the fore as her self-presentation gradually outgrew the 'housewife' of 1979, a 'kinky mix of regal and domestic' continued to define her public image.<sup>43</sup>

My final chapter considers Thatcher's occupancy of Number Ten Downing Street. Given the building's diverse functions, taking Downing Street as a unit of analysis brings together a number of themes prominent throughout the thesis. The most obvious of these is domesticity, which was enacted primarily through discussion of the mundane elements of 'life above the shop'. Popular

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<sup>41</sup> B. Polan, 'Handbag and Rule', 29 December 1988, reprinted in K.Cochrane ed., *Women of the Revolution*, pp.129-132.

<sup>42</sup> K. Joseph, 'Over the Barricade', BBC Radio Four, first broadcast 12 May 1985.

<sup>43</sup> Filby, *God and Mrs Thatcher*, p. x.

interest in Downing Street, which was primarily understood as a domestic residence, was intensified by the arrival of its first elected, female occupant. Whereas interest in the building's domestic functions had previously been funnelled through Prime Ministers' wives, Thatcher's election meant that this was no longer necessary, or indeed possible. The new Prime Minister's 'housewife' image served only to increase interest. Focus on Downing Street also encourages consideration of a frequently neglected network of relationships, analysis of which reveals characteristics not often associated with Thatcher. Whereas her relationships with her political colleagues have received considerable academic attention, comparatively little has been written about Thatcher's relationships with her Downing Street staff. Accounts that do exist have tended to concentrate quite narrowly on the role of Thatcher's senior advisors, such as Charles Powell. Downing Street, like the House of Commons, was dominated by men from a narrow social group. Both Thatcher's class and gender distinguished her from the upper-rungs of the building's Whitehall servants. In analysing Thatcher's negotiation of male political environments, it is therefore important that Downing Street be considered



## **1. Shopping basket election: Thatcher as housewife**

Using the 1979 general election campaign as a focus, this chapter will examine the reasons behind Margaret Thatcher's presentation as a 'housewife', before considering in more detail the events and strategies that structured the campaign's communication strategies. It will then analyse the generation of Thatcher's visual appearance, regarding this as a fruitful focus in the exploration of ideas, prejudices and ideals that surrounded femininity and female power in the late twentieth century. Despite her lower middle class roots, Thatcher's early public image was that of a traditional 'Tory woman'. Upon announcing her candidacy for the Conservative leadership in 1974 she became a 'housewife'; this chapter considers the political benefits that party strategists believed to be associated with this image. As her premiership progressed, traditional femininity gave way to a bolder, more confident image that came to define the Thatcher period. Analysing shifts in Thatcher's public image will suggest why different visual and rhetorical strategies were employed at different times, and for the benefit of different audiences. Her move away from the 'housewife' image is crucial in understanding the purposes which this image had been believed to serve.

### **!**

The 1979 general election campaign represents a highly stylised moment in the projection of Margaret Thatcher's gender. While the intensity of the housewife image would decline as Thatcher's premiership progressed, the presentation of domestic virtue continued to define her communication with women, making it a useful focus for initiating a gendered analysis of Thatcher's public image. With it widely believed in Conservative circles that issues surrounding prices would determine the result, Thatcher's campaign team dubbed 1979 'the shopping basket election'. This provided a useful 'peg' upon which to hang a strongly gendered campaign narrative, which exploited the 'natural' domesticity of Britain's first female party leader. Images of the prospective Prime Minister wielding her shopping basket – its contents depleted by purportedly Labour induced inflation - became the campaign's hallmark [see figure 3]. And if not photographed shopping, she was sweeping, cooking, dusting or washing up. The *Daily Mail* was particularly active in the promotion of Thatcher's new image, and it was in this paper that she had first announced her decision to stand for the leadership. Whilst, however, the campaign sought to win votes by presenting a newly accessible, refreshingly practical political approach – as will be considered below - the housewife image adopted by Thatcher was far from the natural guise of a wealthy, professional woman accustomed to domestic 'help'. Neither, however, was it a simplistically prescriptive attempt to return women to the kitchen sink. The brainchild of former television producer Gordon Reece, Thatcher-as-housewife represents a carefully constructed publicity strategy that operated on a number of levels, drawing on the

gendered history of Conservatism as well as contemporary social, political and cultural contexts. As such, analysis of this seemingly straight-forward image draws out complex contemporary issues surrounding class and gender, both within the Conservative party and beyond.

The housewife image, which dominated Thatcher's public image from 1974 to 1980, needs to be understood in context of Thatcher's pre-leadership reputation as a 'Tory lady in a hat'. As Wendy Webster has argued, this was a 'familiar species' of Conservative woman: married, comfortably-off, upper-middle class and leisured.<sup>1</sup> Read as a symbol of privilege, the hats of Conservative women have been recurrently understood as a metaphor for the narrow class interests that they, even more than their male counterparts, are perceived to serve, while simultaneously suggesting a superficiality tied to the whist-drive stereotype of female Conservatism. The extent to which Conservative women were defined by their headwear is born out across national and international newspaper coverage, with some reporters demonstrably more conscious of this cliché than others.<sup>2</sup> Media interest in women's hats perpetuated an understanding of the women who wore them as politically peripheral – their primary function being decorative. In July 1980, media coverage of delegates' headwear was understood by the party agent and secretary James Fluke as 'rather in the old Tory image', suggesting its association with a restrictive traditionalism from which the organisation sought distance.<sup>3</sup> Following the Conservative Women's Association's annual conference in 1977, it is tellingly the lack of hat-based coverage that drew (approving) comment from its organisers.<sup>4</sup> That Thatcher was so widely perceived as fitting this stereotype, despite her lower middle-class Grantham roots, suggests self-conscious assimilation into an accepted model of female Conservatism. As Beatrix Campbell argues in her introduction to *Iron Ladies*, 'we all think we know what [the Tory lady] is', and her identity is closely tied to her appearance.<sup>5</sup> By the mid 1970s a large black and white striped hat had come to define Thatcher's satirical image [see figure 4].

Thatcher's career trajectory – notwithstanding her accession to the leadership – reflects the political value of what Webster has described as 'the emblems of upper middle class womanhood', acquired in Thatcher's case through marriage.<sup>6</sup> In both 1951 and 1952 she stood as Conservative MP for Dartford, a heavily industrialised Labour stronghold. Unsurprisingly, she lost both times. Indeed, Thatcher subsequently reflected that it was the hopelessness of a Conservative victory in Dartford

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<sup>1</sup> W. Webster, *Not a Man to Match Her* (London, 1990) p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the *Daily Mail*, 21 May 1980, mocked the tradition of 'male journalists... snigger[ing] at the ladies' hats' in coverage of the Conservative Women's Association's annual conference, before going on to describe four 'remarkable concoctions above...crisp perms – including one panama shaped felt creation decked with outsized imitation violets'.

<sup>3</sup> J. Fluke to A. Hooper, 7 July 1980, CPA, Bodleian Library, Oxford, CCO170/5/555

<sup>4</sup> E. Sturgess Jones to Baroness Young, 20 June 77, CPA, CCO170/5/87-89

<sup>5</sup> B. Campbell, *Iron Ladies* (London, 1987), p.1

<sup>6</sup> Webster, *Not a Man*, p.43.

that encouraged the local party to adopt a female candidate: 'they had nothing to lose'.<sup>7</sup> It was upon marriage in 1951 to Denis Thatcher, however, a public-school educated millionaire businessman, that her political prospects improved.<sup>8</sup> His money, which funded Thatcher's legal studies, as well as domestic 'help' and private educations for the couple's children, made her political candidacy 'more acceptable and respectable'.<sup>9</sup> Marriage, which in the 1950s would have in most instances dramatically reduced a woman's career prospects, significantly enhanced Thatcher's.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Charles Moore has suggested that Margaret Roberts, who was to marry shortly after the 1951 general election, made a strategic decision to keep her engagement to Denis private, for fear it would suggest to voters that her career was to be short lived.<sup>11</sup>

Able to resign from her full-time role as an industrial chemist, she qualified as a barrister shortly after giving birth to twins; a career far more likely to further political aspirations. An 'English nanny' and 'supportive husband' enabled Thatcher to pursue professional ambitions beyond motherhood, and in 1958 she was selected to stand as MP for Finchley, a constituency which had consistently returned a Conservative MP since the 1930s. The benefits of having a 'comfortably off' husband 'quite in agreement with her views' are referenced by Miss Cook, a Central Office Agent, in support of Thatcher's nomination.<sup>12</sup> Entering the House of Commons in 1959, she represented Finchley until her elevation to the House of Lords in 1992. A television interview for the BBC programme *Panorama* in 1970 presents Thatcher in a way typical of her pre-leadership public image. The then Education Secretary is shown aggressively pruning roses in front of her seven-bedroomed, mock-Georgian townhouse, whilst Denis marched a massive mower over their expansive lawns. 'In these servantless days', a voiceover mocked, 'the maintenance of a large home is tough'. The same documentary showed Thatcher educating disadvantaged school children as to the merits of silver cutlery.<sup>13</sup> The impression given was of an upper-middle class 'housewife' entirely out of touch with the majority of British people. It was invaluable propaganda for the left.

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in J. Blundell, *Margaret Thatcher: a portrait of the Iron Lady* (New York, 2008) p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Thatcher had attended Mill Hill, a minor public school in North London, and inherited the family paint business. As will be discussed in chapter four, his social standing was by no means comparable to Conservative grandees, but it was nonetheless a rung above Thatcher's.

<sup>9</sup> Webster, *Not a Man to Match Her*, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> The marriage bar, which legally obliged women to resign from a number of mainly white-collar jobs upon marriage, was lifted during the Second World War, in response to severe labour shortages. While it never returned in a systematic way, there are examples of its practice into the 1970s. See G.Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* (Abingdon, 2005) p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Miss Cook, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THRC 1/1/1

<sup>13</sup> *Panorama* profile of Thatcher, BBC1, first broadcast 27 July 1970, accessed online 6 July 2016: [www.bbc.co.uk/archive/thatcher](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/thatcher)

As Thatcher's political reputation grew, her attitude towards women became increasingly prescriptive, but at the start of her political career it had some radical elements often overlooked in later commentaries. In a 1952 article emphatically titled 'Wake Up Women' she argued against the idea of paid female employment being detrimental to family life, the significance of which emerges more clearly when compared with the position advanced by a contemporary conference which many prominent feminists, including Mary Stocks and Eva Hubback, attended. While the conference's resultant publication, *The Feminine Point of View*, argued that a mother's full-time career should (only) be suspended for a period of six to ten years, Thatcher advocated 'a short leave of absence' at the mother's discretion.<sup>14</sup> She argued that 'refreshing contact with the outside world' would enhance the quality of a marriage by providing men with better-quality companionship. At odds with her later condemnation of 'strident' feminists as superfluous to a post-feminist society, the article, printed in the tabloid *Sunday Graphic*, reads as a rallying call. Women are urged to 'fight harder' to play a 'leading part in the creation of a glorious Elizabethan era'.<sup>15</sup> In 1960 she presented a similar view in the *Evening News*, under the title 'I say a wife can do two jobs'.<sup>16</sup> Wryly describing Thatcher as 'one of the less widely recognised feminists of the decade', Martin Pugh argues that her 1954 contribution to the Conservative party magazine *Onward* was 'one of the most reasoned defences of the working mother' produced.<sup>17</sup> The article is less well known than the *Sunday Graphic* or *Evening News* pieces, and worth quoting at length:

What is the effect on the family when the mother goes out to work each day? If she has a powerful and dominant personality her personal influence is there the whole time...From my own experience I feel there is much to be said for being away from the family for part of the day. When looking after them without a break, it is sometimes difficult not to get a little impatient...whereas having been out, every moment spent with them is a pleasure.<sup>18</sup>

That Thatcher's arguments for female employment were expressed within a framework which accepted a woman's domestic responsibility as a given should not be seen to undermine her divergence from mainstream contemporary thought. The 1940s and 1950s had seen a burgeoning of psychological studies arguing for the untold damages inflicted on an increasingly delinquent youth by maternal deprivation. Much of this found a popular audience. Pro-natalist thinking, while arguably progressive in its determination to empower the mother by recognising the value of her domestic work, created what Denise Riley has described as 'two irreconcilable parties: the

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<sup>14</sup> See Webster, *Not a Man*, p.37.

<sup>15</sup> 'Wake Up Women', *Sunday Graphic*, 17 February 1952, MTFW: 100936.

<sup>16</sup> *The Evening News*, 25 February 1960

<sup>17</sup> M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (Basingstoke,1992), p. 297.

<sup>18</sup> Thatcher quoted *ibid.*,

housewife mother and the woman worker'. Working mothers became an 'invisible category'.<sup>19</sup> As will be demonstrated in chapter three, it was not until the 1970s that Women's Liberation feminism championed the rights of employed mothers.<sup>20</sup> Thatcher's language is as striking as her message. Her celebration of a 'powerful and dominant personality' seems to advocate a style of female strength incompatible with her later celebration of respectable femininity from which it seemed that only she was permitted to diverge.

By 1970, however, Thatcher was arguing that employment was no longer for all mothers; only those able to employ the celebrated 'English nanny' (as opposed to the less prestigious, more affordable, au pair or child minder) were justified in their decision to pursue opportunities beyond the home.<sup>21</sup> As Thatcher told her interviewer in the *Panorama* profile cited above, 'I wouldn't have been quite sure if the au pair could speak English...so I always had a good English nanny'. By the 1980s even professional women were begged 'never [to] put the children second'. Professionally skilled and educated mothers, Thatcher suggested, might 'stay in touch with what's happening' in their profession by doing 'a half day a week' of voluntary work, but children were to remain 'the most important thing of all'.<sup>22</sup> Throughout her leadership women would be encouraged to find fulfilment in their roles as wives and mothers, with such advice figured as an 'empowering' rebuttal of socialism's denigration of family life. Given the traditional romanticisation of domesticity within working-class cultures, this was also presented as the championing of working-class values, and as further evidence of Thatcher's alignment with 'ordinary' people.<sup>23</sup> That directives on gender equality increasingly came from Europe added weight to this principled stance against an 'expert-knows-best' mentality, which drew on a long tradition of working-class suspicion of governmental intervention in family life. Speaking to Robin Oakley of *The Times* in November 1989, she argued that women for whom a professional career was not 'right' should not have one 'imposed' upon them: 'they're doing a fantastic job as they are'.<sup>24</sup> The contrast with her 1952 evocation of female civic duty is striking.

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<sup>19</sup> D. Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London, 1983), p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> The extent to which Women's Liberation did this is itself debatable. The movement – which was in fact a collection of diverse groups with different agendas – was widely criticised for alienating 'ordinary' women by undermining the social value and personal satisfactions of motherhood.

<sup>21</sup> See *Panorama* 27 July 1970.

<sup>22</sup> TV Interview for Thames TV Afternoon Plus, 6 January 1981, MTFW: 104546.

<sup>23</sup> Both Hannah Gavron and Ann Oakley have emphasised the cultural centrality of domestic femininity to working-class constructions of gender, with Gavron arguing that young working-class women's romanticised investment in their anticipated identities as wives and mothers left them ill-equipped to deal with the realities of these roles: H. Gavron, *The Captive Wife* (Aylesbury, 1975), p. 139. and A. Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (London, 1974), p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Interview *The Times*, 22 November 1989, MTFW: 107431.

In order to reconcile her elevation of domesticity with the professional career she had herself pursued, Thatcher emphasised the fact that she had not been a Member of Parliament until her children were of school age. As she explained at a press conference in 1979:

I do believe *passionately* that many women take the view, and quite rightly, that when their children are young their first duty is to look after the children and keep the family together. I wasn't a Member of Parliament until after my children were six. At least they went to school, you know I was there with them quite a lot during the early stages... you must not in *any way* make young women feel guilty because they don't go out to work.<sup>25</sup>

Thatcher may not have entered the House of Commons until 1959, but this emphasis on maternal dedication conceals her unsuccessful application to represent the Conservative party in the Orpington by-election of 1954, when her children were two. Thatcher had in fact already disclosed her unsuccessful bid for the Orpington nomination. In an interview with Tyne Tees Television in 1974, on the subject on women in politics, she was uncharacteristically frank about the failures of her early political career. Asked about prejudice against women, Thatcher remembered that selection committees

would say to me sometimes: 'Yes, we think you've made quite good speeches'—and they were very complimentary— 'but we don't think it's right that a woman with young children should stand'.<sup>26</sup>

Orpington in particular was singled out as a painful loss, and the resignation of the chosen candidate, Donald Sumner, was used to emphasise the party's misjudgement. She told the television audience: 'if you'd had Orpington Woman eight years ago, you'd have never had Orpington Man'.<sup>27</sup> Thatcher also applied unsuccessfully to represent Beckenham, Hemel Hempstead and Maidstone, before successfully contesting the Finchley nomination. An extract from a report issued by the Maidstone selection committee emphasises opposition to the idea of a woman 'with a husband and a small family' entering the House of Commons.<sup>28</sup> A letter she wrote to her sister shortly before the final selection of the Finchley candidate suggests that this was not an isolated incident. Expecting 'the usual prejudice against women [to] prevail', she anticipated coming 'the inevitable 'close second''.<sup>29</sup>

While Thatcher's marriage to Denis facilitated a style of upper-middle class femininity that assisted her gradual acceptance by the Conservative Party itself, it failed to endear her to a wider

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<sup>25</sup> General Election Press Conference, 26 April 1979, MTFW: 104045.

<sup>26</sup> TV Interview for Tyne Tees Television, 28 November 1974, MTFW; 102439.

<sup>27</sup> 'Orpington man' was a phrase used in the media to refer to an emerging group of suburban Liberal voters, following the Liberal Party's victory in the 1962 Orpington by-election, triggered by Sumner's appointment as a county court judge.

<sup>28</sup> Maidstone selection committee report, 18 March 1958, MTFW: 109943.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume I*, p. 134.

public. Derek Marks of the *Daily Express* condemned her as totally out of touch with everyone bar 'middle class, middle aged ladies', while the 'Stop Thatcher' campaign, launched in January 1975 by those in the Conservative Party who were loyal to Heath, traded on this same assumption of narrow class interest.<sup>30</sup> Thatcher's gender, however, shaped the terms in which ostensibly class issues were expressed. For example, journalists described her as sounding both like she was 'always wearing a hat' and 'opening a village fete', while Ian Gilmour is reported by his Amersham constituents to have warned that Thatcher's leadership threatened a 'retreat behind the privet hedge'.<sup>31</sup> Frequently derided as 'suburban', accusations of intellectual narrowness and self interest betray a gendered bias that drew on the longstanding cultural binary between a masculine cityscape and the feminine, or effeminate, suburb. Whereas the city stood for progress and modernity, the suburb has been characterised by pretension, petty competition and materialistic preoccupation.<sup>32</sup> As David Morely has written, the traditionally negative image of the suburb, which presents masculine rationality as corrupted by 'suburban, commercial, commodity culture', relies on 'an uninterrogated conceptualisation of gender'.<sup>33</sup> Women embody the suburban constraints from which men have frequently been presented as seeking escape.<sup>34</sup> Closely connected with the petit-bourgeoisie, the suburb is also characterised as inauthentic, while the associated figure of the suburban housewife is socially grasping. Late twentieth-century popular culture is rich with examples of such female characters. See, for example, Beverley of *Abigail's Party* or Hyacinth Bucket of *Keeping Up Appearances*.<sup>35</sup>

Thatcher's 'inauthenticity' was emphasised in an article by Jeffery Auer in 1979, which notes the frequency with which her speech was described in the popular press as 'plummy' 'toffee-nosed' and 'starchy', the emphasis being on affectation. An article in the *Times* noted Thatcher's habit of mispronunciation, and the quandary backbenchers found themselves in when deciding whether to 'follow her into this mispronunciation and risk ridicule...A month or two ago she spoke of CopenHARgen and even the most sycophantic of her backbenchers found themselves stumbling over

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<sup>30</sup> D. Marks in Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> Undated, unattributed newspaper article held at Thatcher archive, Churchill College, THCR 2/6/1/201 and Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 29 See also J. J. Auer, 'The Image of the Right Honourable Margaret Thatcher', *Central States Speech Journal*, 30, 4 (1979)

<sup>32</sup> As Lucy Delap has argued, denigration of suburbia for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'has been an attempt to feminise this space and exclude it from the narratives about modernity'. L. Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain* (Oxford, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> D. Morely, *Home Territories: media, mobility and identity* (New York, 2000), p. 130.

<sup>34</sup> 'Kitchen sink' drama in particular presented what Morely describes as a 'juvenile opposition' between the masculine desire to 'escape' and the feminine desire to 'contain'.

<sup>35</sup> *Abigail's Party*, written and directed by Mike Leigh, was first performed at Hampstead Theatre in April 1977. A television version of the play was first aired in November the same year. *Keeping up appearances*, written by Roy Clarke for the BBC, ran for five years, from 1990 to 1995. The central character, Hyacinth Bucket, famously pronounced her name 'bouquet'.

an exact repetition'.<sup>36</sup> While to the general public Thatcher's upper-middle class status was a given, establishment figures recognised subtle indications that – despite her best efforts – she was not one of them. It has been widely reported that Thatcher had elocution lessons, but these had not originally been for the purposes of political presentation. She had begun lessons as a schoolgirl to correct a slight lisp.<sup>37</sup> However, from 1972 onward the voice lessons definitely had a political purpose, with Kate Flemming, the National Theatre's voice coach, helping Thatcher to sound less 'shrill'.<sup>38</sup>

As Education Secretary, there was little indication of the anti-establishment image Thatcher would later present. Nevertheless, her class and gender meant that she was an outsider, despite her best efforts to fit in. As Charles Moore has said of 'the Knights of the Shires', this traditional spine of the Conservative party was a group of men 'for whom the habits of politics were those of a club'.<sup>39</sup> Not only did Thatcher's gender prohibit her from joining the clubs through which Conservative members socialised, formed friendships and forged alliances, but her social awkwardness and tendency to flout protocol challenged the conventions of the House of Commons, which was often referred to as 'the best club in the world'.<sup>40</sup> In a school-boyish display of irritation, Chris Patten and his colleagues would refer to their leader by her 'starchy Victorian' second name, 'Hilda'.<sup>41</sup> A sense of difference and a certain social gracelessness is made explicit by Julian Critchley's comedic dramatization of eating lunch with the then prime minister:

I have on occasion sat at a table which she has joined for lunch, a table shall we say of five rather cheerful members of Parliament drinking rather bad claret and gossiping. Suddenly you look up and the first thing you see is the sight of the Prime Minister's parliamentary undersecretary, in those days it was Ian Gow with the sunlight glinting in a sinister fashion

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<sup>36</sup> C. Brown, 'Queens English Twists the Tongue', *Times*, 23 March 1988.

<sup>37</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

<sup>39</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 283. The phrase 'knights of the shire' is anachronistic, referring to the landed Conservative elite that dominated the party in the nineteenth century. The social composition of the party changed significantly in the early twentieth-century. In 1918, only 15% of Conservative MPs were drawn from the landed classes, compared with 40% in 1900, and during the years of Baldwin's premiership industrial and commercial wealth increasingly came to rival landed wealth in the House of Commons. See B. Criddle, 'Members of Parliament' in A. Seldon and S. Ball eds., *Conservative Century: the Conservative party since 1900* (Oxford, 1994), p. 147. As Malcolm Pearce and Geoffrey Stewart have said of the early twentieth century, 'the Tories had become the party of suburbia, rather than the party of broad acres': M. Pearce and G. Stewart, *British Political History, 1867-2001* (Abingdon, 2002), p. 374. Nonetheless, Conservative grandees with ties to the aristocracy, such as Carrington and Gilmour, continued to exert considerable influence, as did member whose family wealth afforded an 'aristocratic' lifestyle, not least education at a major public school.

<sup>40</sup> A memorable example of Thatcher's apparent indifference to social etiquette is recalled by Grantham and Oxford contemporary Margaret Wickstead in Young and Sloman's *The Thatcher Phenomenon*: 'when [Thatcher] was a young member of parliament she came back to be the chief speaker at a dinner for the Old Girls, and corrected the headmistress, who was a classical scholar, on the pronunciation of her Latin'. This 'very silly thing to do' is said to have 'turned the whole dinner party away from her. Young and Sloman, *Thatcher*, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 301.



from his spectacles, and you knew that this was the harbinger of trouble. And then in she would come, she would sit down and everybody would stop talking and then she'd look at you and she'd say 'Julian, what are your views on the money supply?'<sup>42</sup>

Class and gender conspired to intensify internal hostility towards Thatcher's right of centre views and 'folksy' morality. Described by Jock Bruce-Gardyne, a junior Minister in 1984, as 'the first outsider to reach number 10 Downing Street since Bonar Law', the extent to which she was regarded from the outside as an archetype of the Tory establishment should not obscure broad differences between Thatcher and key figures within the Conservative elite.<sup>43</sup> Bruce-Gardyne's statement is inaccurate – Ramsay Macdonald had been much more of an outsider - but it is nonetheless a telling indication of Thatcher's relation to the party she led. As a grammar-school educated, provincial scientist it was more than her sex that placed Thatcher at the periphery of the party 'club'. The shopping basket election, in emphasising both Thatcher's gender and background, turned this difference into a strength: it was, as Saatchi's posters boldly declared, 'Time for a Change'.

The housewife image represented a determined attempt to widen Thatcher's class appeal, as well as the appeal of the Conservative Party more generally. As Alan Howarth wrote to the party chairman, Lord Thorneycroft, in March 1976, priority needed to be given to 'redress[ing] the image of Conservatives as being out of touch and hard faced'.<sup>44</sup> An undated memorandum by Thorneycroft claimed that surveys concerned with party image, carried out since 1965, made 'on the whole for depressing reading', with the party widely considered 'unlikeable'.<sup>45</sup> Statistical evidence was used to support the idea of limited class appeal, with working-class Conservative support declining in percentage terms since 1964, and absolute terms since 1970.<sup>46</sup> Upon winning the leadership of the Conservative Party Thatcher was still best known among the general public for withdrawing free school milk for children as Secretary for Education. The epithet 'Thatcher the milk snatcher', which had been coined by a floor speaker at the Labour party conference in 1971 and was quickly adopted by the mainstream press, proved difficult to shake. The comparative ease with which Wilson had withdrawn free milk for the over 11s just three years previously suggests that it was Thatcher's perceived disregard for the alliance between women and children that generated such intense hostility. Labour Education spokesman Edward Short, for example, described it as 'the meanest and

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<sup>42</sup> J. Critchley quoted in H. Young, *One of Us* (London:1989) p. 245. It is indicative of the social make-up of Conservative circles that Critchley was himself self-conscious about his social origins, describing himself in the *Times* as a 'middle-class [boy] on the make'. The son of a north London neurologist, he attended Shrewsbury before studying PPE at Oxford; a clear social rung above Thatcher.

<sup>43</sup> A. King, 'Outsider as Political Leader: the Case of Margaret Thatcher', *British Journal of Political Science* (2002), p. 444.

<sup>44</sup> Alan Howarth to Thorneycroft, 30 March 1976, Conservative Party Archive: CCO20/7/26.

<sup>45</sup> Thorneycroft, 'The Image of The Conservative Party, undated, Conservative Party Archive: CCO20/7/26.

<sup>46</sup> Memorandum to the Leader Committee, undated, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR 2/6/1/188.

most unworthy thing' he had seen in twenty years.<sup>47</sup> The *Sun* asked, 'Is Mrs Thatcher human?', and in November the same year crowned her 'the most unpopular woman in Britain'.<sup>48</sup> A MORI poll conducted in 1978 for the *Daily Express* found that voters preferred Heath to Thatcher by a margin of 22 percentage points.<sup>49</sup>

In the lead up to the 1979 General Election the Conservative Party's strategy rested on attracting working-class votes. The C2 voter, a longstanding target of the Conservatives, gained particular prominence in internal campaign documents. The wives of traditional Labour voters – especially those in council houses – were also defined as a social group likely to be amenable to the Conservative message. This proved to be an effective campaign strategy; polls conducted on behalf of the Labour party between 7 and 30 April 1979 revealed that Labour had lost support among 'young housewives in the C2 group'.<sup>50</sup> As Gordon Reece wrote to Thatcher in November 1979, 'research has clearly shown we won the last election by a change in the voting behaviour of the working classes, and especially women in working-class homes'.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, the embarrassing 'unreliability' of the wives of Trade Union members had been recognised by Transport House as early as 1959.<sup>52</sup> A keen awareness of the volatility of the contemporary electorate encouraged a strategic focus on 'floating voters'. Less than two thirds of Conservative voters in 1970 had voted for the Party in 1966, and the Conservative net loss (in 1974) of 0.7 million was the result of a 4.5 million loss and a 3.8 million gain.<sup>53</sup> Volatility was thought to be at an all-time high and continuing to increase. That by the mid seventies little over half of the electorate voted with its supposed 'natural' class party increased the likelihood of campaign efforts having a substantial effect, legitimating a Conservative appeal to social groups that – at the peak of class-based voting in the 1950s – would have been considered a waste of resources.

In recasting the 'Tory lady in a hat' as a housewife, Reece sought to present Thatcher as 'ordinary' and therefore in touch with, and well placed to represent, 'ordinary' electors. This was not a new political strategy. Stanley Baldwin, for example, a wealthy businessman educated at Harrow and Trinity College Cambridge, had told Lord Salisbury that his 'social circumstances' had made him a

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<sup>47</sup> 'How Margaret Thatcher became known as 'Milk Snatcher'', the *Telegraph*, 8 August 2010.

<sup>48</sup> *Sun*, 9 July 1971, and 25 November 1971.

<sup>49</sup> J. Aitkin, *Margaret Thatcher: power and personality* (London, 2013), p. 219.

<sup>50</sup> D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1979* (London, 1980) p. 343.

<sup>51</sup> Transition to power: Gordon Reece minute to Thatcher, 27 November 1979, MTFW: 112176.

<sup>52</sup> A. Black and S. Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender', *Journal of British Studies*, 36, (1997), p. 434.

<sup>53</sup> Gallup Poll published in the *Sunday Telegraph*, circulated to members of the Campaign Planning Group, 26 March 1978, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR 2/6/1/188.

better judge of popular opinion 'than one born in purple'.<sup>54</sup> Presented as 'honest Stan', he claimed to possess an innate understanding of 'the common people' as a result of his normality. As David Cannadine has argued, Harold Wilson smoked a pipe – as opposed to the upper-class cigar – because of its 'classless' implications of trustworthy ordinariness.<sup>55</sup> More recently, Nigel Farage has forcefully presented himself as 'a normal bloke', and Labour leadership candidate Owen Smith emphasised his 'normal' upbringing and family life in order to seek popular support.<sup>56</sup> The audacity of Thatcher's transformation, however, was rather more striking: by 1977 she would claim to be so 'ordinary' that inflation had left her unable to afford a new winter coat.<sup>57</sup> A pointed awareness of the low esteem in which contemporary politicians were held, as well as recognition of Thatcher's particularly out of touch reputation carried over from her time at the Department of Education, made changes to her public image a political necessity. A Conservative survey conducted in the run up to the 1979 general election revealed a clear separation in the mind of the electorate between 'politics' and 'life', whilst MORI research conducted on behalf of the Labour Party disclosed a widespread sense of powerlessness and scepticism about politics in general. 'Changing the Tory stereotype', a strategy document circulated to members of the Conservative party's Strategy and Tactics committee in December 1979, urged acknowledgment of the fact that politicians were widely considered 'self serving, cowardly, dishonest, incompetent and expedient'.<sup>58</sup> In July 1980 the Conservative Research Department reminded the prime minister and her chairman to strategise on the basis that the electorate would 'expect politicians to inhabit a mental world remote from their own attitudes and problems, to promise more than they can deliver, to be less than competent and to be self serving'.<sup>59</sup>

Widespread cynicism should be regarded as an important factor in Thatcher's rebranding. The housewife image promoted common sense over political jargon and stoic realism over a quick fix. A pre-election leaflet, for example, contrasted what the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Dennis Healey, 'in cloud-cuckoo land', thought about particular issues, with 'The Real World' prognosis on the Conservatives.<sup>60</sup> A run of deliberately simple posters relaying 'The Facts' about crime, tax,

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<sup>54</sup> S. Baldwin quoted in P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin, Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 207.

<sup>55</sup> D. Cannadine, 'Harold Wilson's Pipe and Mac', BBC Radio 4, 7 September 2016.

<sup>56</sup> 'Owen Smith makes major pitch for Labour leadership by claiming: I'm normal', *Evening Standard*, 18 July 2016.

<sup>57</sup> A. Batt, 'Feeling Rich? No I'm saving for a pair of Curtains', *Daily Mail*, 8 February 1977.

<sup>58</sup> 'Changing the Tory Stereotype', 13 December 1979, CPA: CC20/7/22.

<sup>59</sup> Conservative Research Department Memorandum, 16 July 1980, CPA: CCO20/7/26.

<sup>60</sup> 1979 campaign leaflet available at Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR2/6/1/202.

unemployment and prices conveyed a similar sentiment [see figure five]<sup>61</sup> The Conservative party, and Thatcher, especially, was prepared to face up to unpleasant truths and administer the necessary 'medicine'. More than changing the electorate's attitude towards Thatcher and the Conservative party, however, the image was designed to moderate the electorate's expectations, and change the terms by which a politician's success and failure was to be judged. And as Thatcher herself admitted, a woman's failure was always going to be judged more harshly than a man's.<sup>62</sup> Both before and after gaining office, she emphasized that rebuilding the country's economy required a ten-year plan. By promising little in the way of immediate, material improvement Thatcher was able to avoid renegeing on promises, as the electorate had come to expect. Instilling 'gratitude' for the 'nasty medicine' of tough governmental decisions, particularly amongst 'voters at the margin', was considered vital to winning a second term.<sup>63</sup> That in June 1979 over half of polled voters considered the budget 'tough but necessary', with nearly 10% suggesting that it was not tough enough, suggests the short-term success of this message.<sup>64</sup> While these figures dropped not long into 1980, repeated re-election of Conservative governments perhaps suggests a longer term acceptance of the costs associated with Thatcherite 'success'.

Images that showed Thatcher engaged in routine domestic tasks were a key feature of media coverage of the Conservative party's general election campaign in 1979, just as they had been during the earlier leadership election. In April that year Thatcher was presented with a new broom during a visit to a factory in Bristol; obligingly adopting the 'aggressive' sweeping pose requested of her by a press photographer, she promised to 'sweep [the opposition] out of Whitehall'.<sup>65</sup> Domestic rhetoric further emphasised her housewifely credentials. By making sound political practice analogous with domestic responsibility, Thatcher's rhetoric aimed to reduce the perceived gap between 'politics' and 'life', while presenting complex political issues in a tangible, manageable way. Inflation became 'prices' and the budget became what every housewife knew. The 'appalling' state of 'national housekeeping' had to be addressed, and who better than a housewife to do this?<sup>66</sup> In giving material reality to otherwise abstract issues, Thatcher projected a sense of control. Importantly, however, this female control was funnelled through an established facet of Conservative discourse that 'celebrated' the political value of female knowledge without upsetting traditional gender norms. Just

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<sup>61</sup> Posters can be seen online:

<http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/view/all?os=400&sort=Shelfmark%2CDate>

<sup>62</sup> Asked whether she would remain leader if the Conservative party lost the general election, Thatcher replied 'There's only one chance for women. 'Tis the law of life'. TV interview for BBC *Campaign '79*, 27 April 1979, MTFW: 103864.

<sup>63</sup> 'Changing the Tory Stereotype', 13 December 1979, CPA: CCO20/7/22.

<sup>64</sup> 'Public Opinion After the First Year in Government', CPA: CCO20/7/26.

<sup>65</sup> Remarks visiting Bristol, 17 April 1979, MTFW: 104014.

<sup>66</sup> Thatcher, Speech to Shipley Conservatives, 28 June 1975, MTFW: 102726.

as the 'ordinary' politician was a well tested motif of political marketing, parallels between a household and the national economy were an established means of mobilising female support. As both David Jarvis and Beatrix Campbell have argued, a 'well developed typology of Conservative woman' emerged in the interwar period.<sup>67</sup> *Home and Empire*, an interwar Conservative magazine, ran a series of short stories featuring middle-aged char lady Mrs Maggs, and her naive but well meaning colleague, Betty the maid. While Mrs Maggs, as 'a bastion of common sense and homely wisdom', represented the quintessential Conservative woman, Betty stood for the naivety and sentimentality that was believed to leave women vulnerable to the demagoguery of socialism.<sup>68</sup> Mrs Maggs was not a housewife, but she nonetheless represented the virtues integral to political constructions of the housewife in the post-war period: practicality, resourcefulness and reliability. Importantly, Mrs Maggs and Betty discussed politics through a series of domestic metaphors, with complex national issues relayed in terms considered relevant and comprehensible for women. Industrial relations, for example, were said to be like autumn cleaning, as both became easier when people cooperated. Free trade meant allowing others to steal flowers from your garden.<sup>69</sup>

The success of the Conservative Party of the 1950s has been widely attributed to its effective courting of the 'housewife vote' through an appeal to the consumer interests of women, further entrenching the housewife stereotype in Conservative discourse. As Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has shown, 'the housewife' was central to the coalition of anti-socialist interests that the Conservative party mobilised against Labour's post-war austerity.<sup>70</sup> Having enjoyed a comfortable inter-war period, middle-class women in particular felt aggrieved by the continuation of food shortages and controls, which the opposition Conservative party presented as both an assault on individual liberty and a product of the Labour government's financial mismanagement. Middle-class housewives associations, such as the British Housewives League, emerged as visible and significant, if relatively marginal, expressions of domestic discontent, and the Conservative party itself encouraged the formation of housewives' committees that would allow women to 'voice their protests' in the face of material hardships imposed on them by the Labour government. To counter the Labour party slogan 'Ask your Dad', which encouraged voters to consider the unemployment of the interwar years, the Conservative party urged, 'Ask their Mums'.<sup>71</sup> The idea that the Labour party had forgotten about

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<sup>67</sup> D. Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: the Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994), p. 134.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party Recovery after 1945', *Historical Journal*, 37 (1994), p. 176.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

(middle-class) women, who had enjoyed plentiful food and consumer goods in the 1920s and 1930s, exploited Labour's image as a party dominated by masculine interests.

It was not, however, that the Labour Party rejected the housewife model of female politicisation, as the more recent alliance between socialism and feminism might be taken to imply. Indeed, by 1978 the opportunistic parading of shopping bags favoured by female politicians across the political spectrum was condemned as a media cliché by the feminist scholar Pat Barr.<sup>72</sup> Rather, their appeal to housewives was simply less effective. The immediate post-war Labour party needed to combine the rhetoric of 'fair shares' austerity with an appeal to consumer interests, leading to an ambivalent courting of the female vote.<sup>73</sup> The establishment of a largely conservative Women's Advisory Council within the British Standards Institute in 1951 further alienated left-wing interests from 'the consumer voice'. Although, as Matthew Hinton has argued, the Cooperative movement had the resources necessary to develop a consumer service, it 'lacked the imagination to move beyond the politics of necessity'.<sup>74</sup>

With its roots in the male-dominated sphere of organised labour, the Labour party was slow to mobilise female support. As has already been suggested, the party's female support base was considered vulnerable, with even the wives of trades unionists believed to be susceptible to the Conservative message. In only two elections between 1945 and 1970 did Labour enjoy leads amongst female voters, and only in 2005 did women begin to show a stronger support for the Labour Party than men.<sup>75</sup> While excessive emphasis on a masculinised labour culture risks obscuring a considerable body of Labour women's groups which were active throughout the twentieth century, gender equality was consistently felt to be at odds with the real issue of class. Labour's resistance to the promotion of 'women's issues' will be considered at greater length in chapter two. While a substantial body of historical literature seeks to explain the female move away from the Tory Party in the 1980s, the narrowing of a gender gap was the result of younger women's preference for Labour. Middle-aged women continued to demonstrate a strong preference for the Conservative party, and for Thatcher specifically. Labour Party strategists, as Laura Beers has shown, did not believe that the gender gap had ceased to exist. Joyce Gould, Labour's Chief Woman's Officer between 1975 and 1985, was particularly keen to understand the endurance of what she considered to be the deviant female commitment to Conservatism. *The Red Book 1983*, a collection

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<sup>72</sup> P. Barr, 'Newspapers', in J. King and M. Stott eds., *Is This Your Life? Images of Women in the Media* (London, 1977) p. 71.

<sup>73</sup> Black and Brooke, 'The Labour Party', p. 440.

<sup>74</sup> M. Hinton, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 170.

<sup>75</sup> Black and Brooke, 'The Labour Party', p. 420 and L. Beers 'Thatcher and the Women's Vote' in B. Jackson and R. Saunders eds., *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge: 2012), p. 113.

of polls and memoranda produced by MORI for the Labour party, contains a lengthy memorandum entitled 'Women', addressed to Gould, and apparently prepared at her request.<sup>76</sup>

While the Labour party's approach to women has been described as 'bemused, if not hostile', the Conservative party 'created a culture that embraced women', albeit on specific terms.<sup>77</sup> As Campbell has argued, this was a culture that 'celebrated their subordination' by helping women to understand their place in a world that Conservatism refused to grant them an equal share of.<sup>78</sup> The Primrose League, which is arguably the most important organisation in the genesis of female Conservatism, had enabled women to participate in the public sphere before the full rights of their citizenship had been realised. This participation was nonetheless limited, and resulted in a strictly defined gender ideology which narrowed the parameters within which subsequent Conservative women have had to define themselves. League women, for example, were keen to distinguish between their own 'truly feminine' work and the 'unattractive pressure exerted by Liberal and Socialist women'.<sup>79</sup> Whilst the Conservative party has been keen to present itself as the champion of female participation – producing, for example, a poster citing its 'feminist' credentials to mark 50 years of universal female suffrage - it has never identified with feminism, which has traditionally been presented as at odds with the Conservative, and specifically Thatcherite, emphasis on personal responsibility.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, 'Going Places', a 1980 Conservative pamphlet concerned with the prospects of its female members, proudly declared that female success within the party was 'the result of merit, and not any concession to their sex or in deference to any notion of a statutory woman'.<sup>81</sup> Conservative rejection of 'feminism' will be explored more fully in chapter three. For the purposes of this chapter it is sufficient to note the vulnerability of female politicians to 'accusations' of feminism. A series of letters held at Churchill College, Cambridge, sent in response to Thatcher's announcement of her candidacy for the Party leadership, demonstrate that the mere assumption of power was enough for some Conservatives to brand Thatcher a feminist. Accused of 'quartering the Party by introducing women's lib', the idea of a female leader is branded 'the death of the Tory party'.<sup>82</sup> The idea that she could 'sit down in the cabinet above such men as now leader Edward

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<sup>76</sup> Beers, 'Thatcher', p. 115.

<sup>77</sup> Black and Brooke, 'The Labour Party', p. 429 and Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> *Primrose League Gazette*, 24 December 1887 quoted in K. Cowman, *Women in British Politics C.1689-1979* (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 95.

<sup>80</sup> Poster celebrates affiliation with Mrs Pankhurst and cites the first female MP and PM as Conservatives, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR 2/6/1/202.

<sup>81</sup> R. Brown, *Going Places: Women in the Conservative Party*, May 1980, CPA: CCO170/4/7.

<sup>82</sup> L. W. Cradwick, letter to Thatcher, 24 November 1974 and Mrs D Lee, letter to Thatcher, 25 November 1974, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR 1/1/6

Heath', was, for one professed 'admirer', enough to make a 'laughing stock' of the party.<sup>83</sup> This level of antipathy should not be taken as the norm, and access restrictions on the wider body of letters prevents the contextualisation of what has been made available, but the existence of such vehement anti-feminism suggests the need for Thatcher to emphasise her traditional (i.e. non-feminist) femininity. Within this context, Thatcher's presentation as a 'housewife', an acutely gendered anti-feminist figure, served to emphasise her commitment to traditional gender roles.

Thatcher's 1979 election campaign presented her in moralistic terms that minimised a party-political emphasis. It was to be conducted 'with a national tone of voice', and Thatcher was advised to avoid personal criticism of Callaghan, who was considered too well liked for direct attacks to be beneficial.<sup>84</sup> Party strategists also argued that Thatcher's gender made it unwise for the Conservative leader to be seen to 'humiliate' Callaghan, and it was for this reason that she declined a television debate with the prime minister, despite her personal desire to accept. It was believed that while losing the debate would have demonstrated straight forward incompetence, her sex meant that a victory could have been equally damaging. As Thorneycroft argued, 'many men who would have resented it. They would have said, "That's my wife" and it wouldn't have been a good thing'.<sup>85</sup> Gordon Reece had been so scared that Thatcher would accept the television station's invitation, that he had hidden their first letter. Thatcher was furious, but accepted the advice she was given. In a letter to David Cox, of London Weekend Television, she refused the debate on the grounds that 'issues and policies should decide elections, not personalities', an argument in keeping with the thrust of the campaign strategy.<sup>86</sup> In a party-political broadcast held shortly before the 1979 election was announced, she claimed the national situation was 'too serious for...Party political points'.<sup>87</sup> Instead, she stood for the defence of 'our whole way of life'. Partly inspired by an aim to 'alter the image of politics as an opportunistic slanging match', the campaign strategy also traded on the longstanding habit of affording women a special role in the defence of moral standards. The tone of Thatcherite morality, however, pointedly avoided sentimentality, with Thatcher firmly inhabiting the role of Mrs Maggs in her ability to expose the false morality of socialism. While it is widely accepted that politicians should feel strongly about their causes, 'the appearance of the emotional in political performance', argues Kay Richardson, 'carries risks for the ways in which it will be mediated and

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<sup>83</sup> Unattributed letter to Thatcher, 24 November 1974, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR 1/1/6

<sup>84</sup> Hoskyns letter to Thatcher, 'Some thoughts on a strategy for an election held this spring', 31 January 1979, CPA: CCO20/7/22.

<sup>85</sup> David Butler interview with Lord Thorneycroft, quoted in Moore, *Volume 1*, p.402.

<sup>86</sup> Letter to David Cox, London Weekend Television, 3 April 1979, Churchill College Thatcher archive, THCR 2/7/1/32.

<sup>87</sup> Thatcher, Party Political Broadcast, 17 January 1979, transcript available at Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR 2/6/1/1/171



perceived'.<sup>88</sup> Given the double-bind in which political women have historically been trapped, which equates strength with stridency and compassion with weakness, the navigation of emotional performance was a key publicity concern for Thatcher's campaign team. A thematic focus on 'emotive' issues had to be balanced by the rationality needed to dispel Labour accusations of extremism. The housewife image provided Thatcher with an accepted model of female authority that, while tied to a deeply moralistic domestic ideal, suggested competence and practicality as opposed to emotional indulgence.

Thatcher's domestic discourse celebrated 'mums' as 'tough', and their capacity to cope out of necessity was lauded. 'On the job' for twenty-four hours a day, their stamina was held up as a rare example of desexualised female physicality. In emphasizing her own identity as a mother, Thatcher staked her claim to these same qualities. Given the historical physicality of the political arena, and an entrenched 'deference' to the comparable weakness of 'the fairer sex', the housewife image provided Thatcher with a useful means of feminising physical strength. Speaking to *Leicester Mercury* reporter Marilyn Kay in April 1979, Thatcher said she was:

not at all tired. People think all this is tiring for a woman, and especially a woman who has had a family. It is not. Any woman who has had to get up in the night to her children and still cope can stand this. By comparison, all this is a doddle.<sup>89</sup>

Of course Thatcher had coped with the difficult balance of motherhood and employment in the way that she implied, but in addressing the issue of her physical capacity she picked up on an area of keen public interest. Indeed, stamina became a defining feature of Thatcher's leadership image, and she was keen to conceal signs of physical weakness throughout her premiership. Ferdinand Mount's memoirs recall the late night charade at Chequers which was necessary to persuade the prime minister to go to bed:

As it is a publicly declared dogma that the Iron Lady requires less sleep than other mortals and is never, ever, exhausted, it is Robin Butler's role as her principal private secretary to rise to his feet, give a yawn and stretch his arms in an extravagant manner like a man using a chest expander and say, 'Prime Minister, I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. I'm feeling extraordinarily tired' – at which the rest of us emit various yawns and sighs and say that, for some unaccountable reason, we feel a bit knocked out, too.

'You run along upstairs, then, and I can get on with these papers.' She makes a show of getting down to serious work as we troop off upstairs, but as I turn off the minstrels' gallery towards my room, I catch sight of the little figure down below gathering up her things and going off to bed, her reputation for being indefatigable undented.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> K. Richardson, *Beyond the News: Political Culture and Media Genre* (New York:2013),p. 146.

<sup>89</sup> Thatcher Interview, *Leicester Mercury*, 19 April 1979, MTFW: 104023.

<sup>90</sup> F. Mount, 'The Real Lady Thatcher', *Times*, 6 April 2008, reprinted by MTFW: 111195.

John Coles, Thatcher's private secretary for foreign affairs from 1981 to 1984, has similarly suggested that the popular image of Thatcher's boundless energy did not reflect the physical strain felt by a woman 'who was not young'.<sup>91</sup> The importance of physical health to a female politician's perceived competence was emphasised by media speculation (exploited by Trump) during the 2016 presidential election that Hilary Clinton lacked the stamina required of presidency. Her age was regularly cited as evidence of her unsuitability for the role, despite Trump, at seventy, being the elder candidate. When Clinton developed pneumonia shortly before election day, her campaign team (unsuccessfully) attempted to conceal the illness, emphasising the extent to which physical weakness was considered to be politically damaging.

The mainstream media portrayed Thatcher's appearance in traditionally feminine terms, and enjoyed dramatising the apparent contradiction between her 'feminine' appearance and combative personality. *The Post*, for example, described her as 'deceptively fragile' with a 'peaches and cream complexion and golden hair'.<sup>92</sup> As Jill Knight put it to Thatcher in a television interview for Granada's *World in Action* in January 1975, the press had built her into a 'sort of Dresden china image with pearls and a perfect complexion'.<sup>93</sup> This of course was something Thatcher emphasised herself. Speaking before the Finchley Conservatives in 1976, she mocked the incongruity between her appearance and reputation: 'as I stand before you tonight in my Red Star chiffon evening gown, my face softly made up and my fair hair gently waved, the Iron Lady of the Western world.'<sup>94</sup> As a swathe of feminist scholarship has argued, the mass media, typically drawn to easily digestible, readily recognisable stereotypes, are particularly powerful in both defining and enforcing the status quo in relation to gender. With *The Observer* claiming Thatcher's 'nerve' was expected to 'crack' during the campaign period, newspaper coverage also mobilised entrenched notions of female susceptibility to mental weakness.<sup>95</sup> Such images of vulnerability are difficult to reconcile with 'the hurly burly' world of politics as it existed in the popular imagination. Ideologically hostile to gendered concessions, she had to meet the men – and a masculine political culture – on their terms. As will be argued later, however, Thatcher's visual femininity was an important means of neutralising conservative opposition to her 'unnatural' power; it was important for Thatcher to demonstrate physical capacity without sacrificing this femininity. As Josephine King has argued, if women on television diverged from a narrow catalogue of accepted roles, this difference was used

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<sup>91</sup> J. Coles, 'Appreciation of Margaret Thatcher', 14 June 1984, MTFW: 135761.

<sup>92</sup> *The Post*, 12 February 1979, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR1/1/8.

<sup>93</sup> TV Interview for Granada TV *World in Action*, 31 January 1974, MTFW: 102450.

<sup>94</sup> Thatcher, Speech to Finchley Conservatives, 31 January 1976, MTFW: 102947.

<sup>95</sup> See *The Observer*, 'Maggie's Nerve is the Target', 22 January 1979

to mark them out as a special case.<sup>96</sup> *The Bionic Woman*, a television series broadcast by ITV from 1976 to 1978, is cited as the 'logical conclusion' to this representative trend.<sup>97</sup> Whilst Thatcher would come to distinguish herself confidently from other women as her time at Number 10 lengthened—with her 'bionic' qualities attracting increased satirical attention - it is important not to allow later developments to inflect what in 1979 was an essentially cautious, small-c conservative campaign. Between her accession to party leadership and the early 1980s, she was frequently depicted in the guise of traditionally feminine authority figures: a nurse, a nanny or a school ma'am. While this might be read as evidence of the media's need to contain unprecedented female power, it was a containment invited by a media strategy that promoted the normality of Thatcher's position in reductively gendered terms.

It must be recognised, however, that the housewife image operated beyond its negative function of neutralising sexist hostility. The instabilities of the 1970s resulted in what Angus Maude described as

a deep nostalgia, in part for what is thought of as a comfortable past, but chiefly for a settled, civilised life. Continuity is vital, and that is in tune with a Conservative approach.<sup>98</sup>

As such, Thatcher's invocation of a 'bygone' domestic ideal sought to engage with the same cultural sentiments manifest in the dramatic burgeoning of what can collectively be called 'the heritage industry'.<sup>99</sup> Thatcher's presentation of a traditional femininity, therefore, needs to be regarded as part of a wider rejection of a particular vision of modernity, which was associated with a dystopian vision of broken homes, rising crime rates, teenage pregnancy and youth delinquency. The 'middle ground' was defined by 'traditional' values securely located in the past. As John Hoskyns, the head of Thatcher's Policy Unit, put it, the party must 'by its leadership, reaffirm values which many people have assumed to survive only at the level of small groups, at work...or within the family'.<sup>100</sup> With the Conservatives widely regarded as the natural party of tradition, they were well placed to stake a campaign on the defence of a value system supposedly threatened by Labour's acceptance of 'permissive society'. Conservative women's groups, historically concerned with issues relating to law and order, are likely to have been particularly responsive to an electoral emphasis on 'family values'

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<sup>96</sup> King, 'Television', in J.King and M.Stott ed., *Is This Your Life?*, p.124

<sup>97</sup> *The Bionic Woman* starred Lindsay Wagner as Jaime Sommers, a woman critically injured in a sky diving accident. Bionic surgical implants to save her life leave Sommers with superhuman hearing, strength and speed, which enable her to carry out daring spy missions.

<sup>98</sup> Angus Maude, 'Themes', undated, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR3/1/78 Maude was a key figure in Thatcher's election to the party leadership, and upon winning the second ballot Thatcher appointed him Chairman of the Conservative Research Department. After the general election he was made Paymaster General, but stepped down in 1981, after the government failed to meet key targets.

<sup>99</sup> See R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 2012).

<sup>100</sup> J. Hoskyns, 'Changing the Tory Stereotype', CPA: CCO20/7/22

and social control. The Conservative party's perceived competence in this area, however, even amongst non Conservative voters, made it a strategically sound emphasis more broadly.

It was not only a mid-century, domestic past that Thatcher's political discourse recalled. For Martin O'Shaughnessy, the most significant historical moment in the construction of Thatcher's national narrative was the Battle of Britain, with the courageous and far-sighted leader role which was enthusiastically adopted by Thatcher throughout her premiership.<sup>101</sup> Others have emphasised the 1930s of her childhood as a formative period to which Thatcherite discourse frequently returned. Most famously, of course, the Victorian period acquired a central place within Thatcherite constructions of the national past; this will be discussed at greater length in chapter two. Irrespective of the precise historical period Thatcherite ideology evoked, however, the certainty of a simplified and sanitised 'past' was used to structure and stabilise what had become an uncertain future. A life lived through the past offered a return to unambiguous values – a clear distinction between right and wrong. Whilst Thatcher may have adopted the role of a Churchillian leader at key moments throughout her career – when 'battling' the miners or taking the country to war, for example – the housewife image can be understood as an idealised, nostalgic version of 'ordinary' – an anchor to the extraordinariness implied by the recurrent 'politics as war' metaphor that Jonathan Charteris-Black has discussed as the hallmark of her political style.<sup>102</sup> *The Sun's* depiction of Thatcher as 'Churchill in Carmen rollers' is a neat example of comic overlap between these two starkly opposed styles of characterisation.

## II

The housewife image, then, suggests Thatcher's complex standing in relation to both the Conservative party and the general public, as well as indicating the problems associated with the Conservative party's public image and the image of 'politics' more generally. The 'public', of course, exists in a multiplicity of forms. The delineation of sub-groups within a vast whole is the complex and inevitably imperfect undertaking of politicians and their advisors, conducted through various processes of consultation and opinion-polling. These sub-groups, such as 'working-class women', are far from homogenous, and inevitably comprise a wide range of incomes, attitudes and political dispositions. Some theorists argue that such processes entail 'audience constructions' that 'say more about the logistical and strategic needs of the institutions creating them' than they do about the social groups investigated. Nonetheless, as the unit by which politicians understand their electors,

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<sup>101</sup> M. O'Shaughnessy, 'The Lady Turns Back: the Thatcherite Discourse on Thatcherism', *Atlantis* (1996), p. 298.

<sup>102</sup> J. Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric: the persuasive power of metaphor* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 171.

these audiences – constructed or otherwise - remain integral to any analysis of political image.<sup>103</sup> As Margaret Scammell has argued, the defining feature of political marketing, which she claims was fully realised under Thatcher, is a reciprocal relationship between elector and elected: one cannot be understood without the other.<sup>104</sup> Persuasion, or ‘propaganda’, is inherent and integral to the functioning of political parties, but from the 1960s onwards politicians, following the lead of commercial companies, developed increasingly ‘consumer’ focused communication models that regarded the ‘product’ (that is, the politician and his or her policies), as opposed to public opinion, as malleable.<sup>105</sup> And Thatcher proved to be a malleable subject. As she told David Frost after having left office, ‘Gordon was terrific. He said my hair and my clothes had to be changed and we would have to do something about my voice. It was quite an education’.<sup>106</sup>

Having so far focused on the dominant messages and political context of Thatcher’s 1979 general election campaign, I will now explore the mechanics of its operation. Although thematically traditional, the professionalism of its approach was innovative (if not as radical as has sometimes been suggested). Thatcher may have claimed to have innately understood and reflected the national mood, but the role of adept publicity advisers, sympathetic newspaper editors and an increasing body of opinion pollsters should not be underestimated.

The political marketing of Thatcher has been widely addressed by texts in media studies, but there is a tendency for the existing literature to be short sighted in asserting the innovations of the Thatcher period. Thatcher’s employment of the advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi has received considerable attention, but this was far from being the first time the Conservative party had secured the services of a professional agency. Holford-Bottomley Advertising Services and S. H. Benson had been employed in 1929, and the agency Colman Prentis Varley was appointed after the party’s general election defeat in 1945.<sup>107</sup> The practice continued throughout the period preceding Thatcher’s leadership. Politicians have always been in the public eye; their images subject to varying degrees of management and manipulation. It is arguable that their public impact has in fact been reduced by the proliferation of media outlets. With access to politicians so readily available, the excitement generated by Baldwin’s radio broadcasts, for example, has been largely lost. As has been suggested, however, the context within which politicians were received had shifted. Not only were late twentieth-century politicians widely mistrusted, but the public personalities demanded of them,

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<sup>103</sup> J. Sullivan, *Media Audiences: Effects, Users, Institutions and Power* (London, 2013), p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> M. Scammell, ‘The Impact of Marketing and Public Relations on Modern British Politics: the Conservative Party and Government under Mrs Thatcher’, PhD thesis (London School of Economics, 1991), p.15.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>106</sup> *Thatcher: The Path to Power—and Beyond*, BBC1, 12 June 1995 quoted in M. Cockerell, ‘Gordon Reece’, ODNB.

<sup>107</sup> C. Mullen, ‘Selling Politics’ in C. Wharton ed., *Advertising as Culture* (Bristol, 2013) p. 172.

and the standards by which they were judged, had changed. Politicians' 'private' personalities were increasingly considered a legitimate topic of political debate and popular gossip by the mainstream media. No longer, for example, would a politician's sexual affair be respectfully ignored.<sup>108</sup> Although personally restrictive, this broadened the campaigning strategies available to politicians willing to disclose their ostensibly 'private' personalities. Understanding the media environment is an important prerequisite to understanding how Thatcher's image operated in a heavily mediated political culture.

Margaret Thatcher's shopping-basket election campaign sought to develop techniques employed under Heath's leadership. Whilst 1970 has been described by Richard Cockett as a 'turning point' in the Party's relationship with the advertising and communications industry, advances widely regarded as instrumental in Heath's election were disregarded once he had gained office, resulting in the two hastily prepared and ultimately unsuccessfully campaigns of 1974.<sup>109</sup> Although Saatchi and Saatchi was not the first advertising agency employed by the Conservative party, it was the first agency to be paid a retainer fee, ensuring a cohesive, considered approach to Party image outside of campaign periods. This enabled a quick response to media opportunities as they arose, allowing Thatcher to take full advantage of the 'Falkland's factor' in 1982. Gordon Reece's appointment as Director of Publicity in 1978 was heavily influenced by Thatcher's preference. Reece, who enjoyed what David Miln has described as a metaphorical 'love affair' with the agency's Chairman Tim Bell, was responsible for the hiring of Saatchi. In an interview with Andrew Riley, Miln, Business Director at Saatchi throughout the 1979 campaign, recalled that although Thatcher did not take kindly to criticism, she accepted it from Reece and Bell.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, in a meeting with Bell she instructed him to tell her 'the truth at all times, however painful you think it might be for me'.<sup>111</sup>

The Conservative party's defeat in 1945 stimulated interest in opinion research, which it pioneered before the Labour party.<sup>112</sup> While, however, polling had long become a staple of commercial practice, it was not until the 1960s that it made much headway in British politics, and

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<sup>108</sup> J. Strayner argues for the 1970s as a decisive decade in the reconfiguration of a media environment less accommodating of politicians' desire for privacy, by the end of which the sex lives of politicians were no longer 'in the main, off limits'. In the 1920s and 1930s Lloyd George was able to continue a thirty-year affair with little threat to his political career, and as late as the 1950s and the early 1960s a 'long liaison' between Macmillan's wife and the Conservative politician, Bob Boothby, could remain private. J. Strayner, *Prime Ministers and the Media*, p. 45.

<sup>109</sup> R. Cockett, 'The Party, Publicity and the Media' in A. Seldon and S. Ball ed., *Conservative Century* (Oxford, 1994) p. 572.

<sup>110</sup> M. Kandiah and A. Riley interview, 'The Conservative Party's 1979 General Election Campaign', 11 February 2005, p. 21. Both Gordon Reece and Tim Bell were 'self made men' with backgrounds likely to endear them to Thatcher.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Aitkin, *Margaret Thatcher*, p. 214.

<sup>112</sup> A. Taylor, 'The Conservative Party, Electoral Strategy and Opinion Polling, 1945-1964', *British Elections and Parties Review*, 7 (1997), p. 207.

even then it continued to be regarded disdainfully by a large number of 'serious' politicians. George Hutchinson, chief publicity officer for the Conservatives throughout the 1964 election, gave expression to common sentiments: 'The duty of the political leader is to advocate what he believes to be right not what the market researchers prescribe for immediate popularity.'<sup>113</sup> Although it should be noted that Hutchinson's comments were almost certainly a partisan attack on Labour's campaign, the reciprocity of a 'consumer' focused marketing model can appear to sit uneasily with the leadership qualities expected of politicians. Polls, however, should be understood as contributing to the tone of a campaign, more than determining the course of policy. Indeed, Reagan and Thatcher, both highly 'marketed' politicians, were deeply ideological in their approach to government. Increasingly segmented categories of voter, designed and reached through opinion polls, enabled Thatcher's Conservative Party to design a campaign specifically targeting selected, key groups. Further to informing the campaign's emphasis in terms of content, a determination to win the votes of working and lower-middle class women shaped the structure of the campaign more broadly, establishing a pattern of political communication that subsequent political leaders would follow.

In 1979 the Conservative party's general election campaign exploited the publicity opportunities offered by 'soft' news outlets which were considered particularly valuable in researching lower-middle and working-class women. These included daytime radio chat shows, the early evening news slot, women's 'weeklies' and the women's pages of middle-market newspapers. 'Light' radio chat shows were quickly championed by Reece, in the face of initial Party reluctance, as a useful means of reaching a target social group. As Josephine King and Mary Stott have argued, between the hours of 9 and 5 every weekday sound broadcasting was primarily aimed at women. Not only were women more likely to be at home during the day, but their over-representation in menial roles made it more likely that they would be listening to the radio at work. Reece argued that the typical 'floating voter' was not much interested in politics. 'Ordinary people', he argued, 'voted on impressions'.<sup>114</sup> An episode of the Jimmy Young Show, which was known in the press as 'the housewives' choice', aired a week after Thatcher's successful leadership campaign, demonstrates some of the hallmarks of his strategy for broadening her support. The relationship between Young and Thatcher was informal and betrayed obvious signs of familiarity, including shared laughter. Early on in the interview she expressed light-hearted disbelief at her newfound political prominence, noting a disconnection between 'the Leader of the Opposition' and a person she considered 'only me, still'.<sup>115</sup> The 'personal'

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<sup>113</sup> G. Hutchinson, *The Times*, 23 April 1965

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume I*, p. 307.

<sup>115</sup> Clip available through BBC online archive: [www.bbc.co.uk/archive/thatcher/6316.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/thatcher/6316.shtml)

tone of the interview is enhanced by her explicit recognition that the interview is “not a Party Political Broadcast”, thereafter presenting discussion of political values as personal insight. An alignment with ‘ordinary’ women is suggested when, asked by Young how she manages her gruelling work schedule alongside domestic responsibilities (which is framed as a question repeatedly asked by female voters), she claimed to ‘do it the way they do it. We just get on with the job in hand’. This ‘ordinariness’ was compounded by her rebuttal of the personal wardrobe suggestions which were filling countless newspapers as impractical and ‘too expensive’. In terms of the interview format, whilst the audience is invited to ask questions through the show’s host, the questions posed appear carefully selected to enable a positive response – Thatcher was given ample opportunity to discuss tax cuts for the disgruntled self employed, for example, linking this to a personal commitment to meritocracy and her desire for ‘hardworking people’ to ‘get on’. The appearance was deemed a success, and Thatcher went on to appear on the show another thirteen times. An advert placed in the women’s magazine *Cosmopolitan*, which took the form of a ‘quiz’ populated by leading questions ostensibly designed to help readers clarify their (Conservative) political preferences, is another example of the campaign’s strategic engagement with popular culture.<sup>116</sup>

Communication through traditionally non-political channels enabled Thatcher to talk about superficially non-political issues. As existing scholarship has argued, the burgeoning of the mass media vastly increased a politician’s opportunities to display his or her ‘private’ side to a political advantage. As Reece wrote to Thatcher in 1977, there was ‘an increasing trend in the media to show politicians as individuals and characters’.<sup>117</sup> This process of personalisation has been described by Langer as the expansion of qualities deemed relevant to leadership. She argues that it should not be expected to exhibit a linear trajectory. Rather, as the immediate context and political figures change, so too does the degree of disclosure.<sup>118</sup> With Thatcher’s gender generating interest in – that is, an audience for – insights that would not have been required of a man, recourse to a wide range of media outlets was perhaps of particular value. Her ‘private’ personality, given form through the figure of the housewife, was in high demand. The price of such publicity opportunities, of course, was the steady erosion of politicians’ privacy, and a culture that increasingly linked their personal lives with the capacity, and/or right, to govern. By ‘disclosing’ personal details Thatcher was able to obtain better control of the public image of a private life that would inevitably find its way into the papers. With posed domestic images a longstanding staple of the tabloid press, the housewife image lent itself well to this type of media demand. Given that a less invested audience is more likely to be

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<sup>116</sup> L. Beers, ‘Thatcher and the women’s vote’ in B. Jackson and R. Saunders ed., *Making Thatcher’s Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 118.

<sup>117</sup> Reece letter to Thatcher, 20 April 1976, Thatcher Archive, 2/6/1/201

<sup>118</sup> A. I. Langer, *The Personalisation of Politics in the UK* (Manchester, 2011), p. 72.



persuaded by the environmental characteristics of any given message, including the credibility (or likability) of the source, 'soft' communication formats offer a 'cognitive short cut' in lieu of what Petty and Cacioppo described as 'central processing', which requires a message be perceived as relevant in order to be persuasive.<sup>119</sup> With the key aim of the 1979 election being to mobilise an identified conservative *mood*, emotive issues of the kind particularly suited these 'soft' communication formats became key election messages. This, tied to the novelty of Thatcher's gender, enabled the effective use of a wide range of female-focused campaign platforms, a practice which continued throughout her premiership.

When asked by Young in the 1975 interview whether 'all the publicity' surrounding her leadership challenge was 'really necessary' ('the William Whitelaw kiss, and he was doing the washing up and you were doing the washing up') Thatcher claimed that the real difficulty lay in avoiding the press. Although Young rather generously accepted this (itself a demonstration of the nature of their on-air relationship), by the end of 1979, and pointedly by 1983, the marketing of the prime minister was a topic of media interest in its own right. An article titled 'The Selling of Maggie' was run by *The Observer*, for example, in April 1979, and in 1983 the BBC's *Panorama* ran 'The Marketing of Margaret'.<sup>120</sup> While the photo opportunity had been a mainstay of political campaigning since the 1920s, it entered a new era with the Conservative campaign of 1979, by the end of which longer shots were used to include images of jostling photographers, drawing attention to the performative nature of these 'media events'. When considering the public prominence Thatcher's Press Secretary Bernard Ingham would achieve, it is necessary to situate this within a context of increased media awareness. Butler and Kavanagh have described the general election of 1979 as 'the most presidential [campaign] ever', with 'the personalities of the two main party leaders ... seen by broadcasters to be as important as their policies'.<sup>121</sup> As Langer has argued, however, personalisation and presidentialisation should be recognised as distinct processes. Presidentialisation refers to the concentration of power in an individual leader, whereas personalisation describes an increasing emphasis within political discourse on the 'personal' characteristics of politicians. Whereas presidentialisation relates to institutional arrangements, personalisation is a product of communication strategies.<sup>122</sup> The 'presidential' quality discussed by Butler and Kavanagh, then,

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<sup>119</sup> The 'Elaboration Likelihood Model' of persuasion was developed by Richard John Petty and Cacioppo in 1986. Quoted in Sullivan, *Media Audiences*, p. 41.

<sup>120</sup> A. Raphael, 'The Selling of Maggie', *The Observer*, 22 April 1979.

<sup>121</sup> Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1979*, p. 229.

<sup>122</sup> Langer, *Personalisation*, p. 6.

described in terms of media interest, should be considered an effect of personalisation more than any fundamental 'change in the relation to autonomy of different actors'.<sup>123</sup>

Recognising the highly mediated nature of contemporary politics, and the instability of information in the public domain, Thatcher's Conservative party was hospitable to the needs of the press. Callaghan's Labour Party was not. As Michael Sullivan, a BBC reporter who accompanied Callaghan throughout his campaign, wrote in *The Listener*:

Jim's style was to treat the tour as a private affair between himself and the electorate, making no concession to the television age razamatazz adopted by the publicity men at Conservative Central Office.<sup>124</sup>

Journalists covering Thatcher's campaign were able to purchase a seat on the campaign tour bus for £600, but the reporters covering Callaghan's campaign 'had trouble keeping the prime-ministerial rover in sight'.<sup>125</sup> In this respect it was a reversal of the situation in 1974, when it was Heath's discomfort with the press that put his party at a disadvantage. Once leader, Thatcher would recommend knighthoods for three editors of sympathetic newspapers within her first term. She developed a particularly close relationship with the newspaper owner Rupert Murdoch, who was a regularly invited to the prime minister's Christmas gatherings at Chequers.<sup>126</sup> Unfortunately for the historian, archival documents relating to Thatcher's relationship with Murdoch are not yet available, and it is not a topic her autobiographies discuss.

The Conservative party was well aware of the need not only to make Thatcher likeable, but also to raise her public profile and increase public awareness of Conservative policies more broadly. In 1976 a Conservative poll revealed that only one third of those asked cited Thatcher's accession to the leadership when asked about recent party activity.<sup>127</sup> In 1977 the Conservative Research Department published a report which expressed concern about the dwindling number of Conservatives featured on television and radio programmes, with no Conservative MPs or peers having been featured on the BBC's 5. 40 news in January that year.<sup>128</sup> Simplifying the Conservative message was regarded as crucial to reaching a wider audience. In this context, the housewife image can be seen not only as a means of generating interest in Thatcher's association with traditional morality, the role of women, law and order and so on, but as part of a strategy for enabling the simplification of key messages. Believing that the Conservative Party was characterised as preoccupied with 'the most complicated and to the public largely incomprehensible subjects', Lord

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>124</sup> M. Sullivan, quoted in *ibid*, p. 206.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>126</sup> Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p.335.

<sup>127</sup> Memorandum Alan Howarth to Lord Thorneycroft, 30 March 1976, Conservative Party Archive: CCO20/7/26

<sup>128</sup> Report by Thorneycroft, 1977, CPA: CCO 20/7/24.

Thorneycroft urged his colleagues to simplify communication: 'to be reported we need to say things that are understood'.<sup>129</sup> Incomprehension, it was believed, had led to an inability – particularly among those in the 18-24 year old age bracket – to distinguish between Labour and Conservative policies.<sup>130</sup> Mass media, as 'the enemy of complex messages', was considered more likely to spread the Conservative message if it could be presented in simple terms. The housewife image, therefore, which enabled complex, national issues to be relayed in tangible, domestic terms, must be understood as driven by the processes of mediated communication as well as the ideological 'content' it conveyed.

An appreciation of the media's importance, however, and a willingness to comply with its demands, should not be taken to suggest that Thatcher was a comfortable or confident public performer. Early in her leadership career she often annotated speeches with encouraging notes to herself. At the top of the first Conservative party speech she delivered as leader, she had reminded herself to 'Relax. Low speaking voice. Not too slow'.<sup>131</sup> Described by Michael Dobbs, then political advisor and later her Chief of Staff, as 'a very bad election campaigner', the self assuredness that Thatcher would become known for had, in 1979, yet to develop.<sup>132</sup> As Keith Britto noted, she was 'indecisive' and relied on Gordon Reece and Tim Bell for reassurance.<sup>133</sup> Aware that she could appear stiff on television, she asked that Bell sit just behind the camera whenever she did broadcast, so that she could speak directly to a real and friendly person.<sup>134</sup> Despite the Party's heavy reliance on opinion polling, Britto recalls her discomfort when faced with polls relating to her image. Only 'one or two' were ever conducted and 'the results were to be buried...she did not want to look at polls about her as a person'.<sup>135</sup>

### III

Any discussion of Margaret Thatcher's 'packaging' demands special attention be paid to her physical appearance, which, as a woman, was imbued with particular social and political significance. As *The Sun* rather crudely put it in 1979:

Nobody complains about the cut of Mr Callaghan 's trousers.  
Nobody tears him to pieces if he sounds like a pompous policeman.

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<sup>129</sup> Thorneycroft, 'The Image of the Conservative Party', CPA: CCO20/7/26.

<sup>130</sup> Alan Howarth wrote to Thorneycroft in March 1976 of the need to 'make more people understand in broad and simple terms that lodge in the mind the Conservative approach to government...As it is, one elector in three, and more than half of the 18-24 age group, sees no difference between Labour and Conservative policies'. CPA: CCO20/7/26

<sup>131</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 325.

<sup>132</sup> Kandiah and Riley interview, '1979 General Election Campaign', p. 24.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>134</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 387.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Yet who would want a dowdy female fatty for Prime Minister?

After all, if a person can't control her weight, doesn't it occur to everybody that she may not be able to control other, more important things?<sup>136</sup>

Selection committee reports suggesting the suitability of the then Margaret Roberts to stand as a Conservative candidate similarly emphasises the perceived electoral benefit of her attractiveness. She is described, for example, as having 'the most attractive personality and appearance', as being 'very attractive looking' and as a 'grand young candidate. Speaks well. Good looking'.<sup>137</sup> Comment on her appearance is confined neither to men nor women. Male attraction to Thatcher, particularly within the Conservative Party, became a cliché. It is well known that Alan Clark – a junior minister under Thatcher – was particularly fond of her ankles. François Mitterand famously described her as having the eyes of Caligula and the lips of Marilyn Monroe. This offered ample opportunities for satire, which are considered in chapter four. When asked by Jenni Murray in 1993 whether she had 'played on' male attraction, Thatcher was unsurprisingly decisive in her denial, claiming not even to have been aware of it.<sup>138</sup> This is unlikely. As Keith Joseph recognised, she 'turned her very womanliness, and she [was] very womanly ... into an asset'.<sup>139</sup>

Long before her high-profile political career, Thatcher had paid keen attention to the way she looked. Indeed, this is a significant emphasis of the early chapters of Charles Moore's authorised biography, which draws on the recently discovered letters Margaret Roberts sent to her sister, Muriel, as a young woman. Clothes, and the difficulties of affording them, constitute the letters' main subject matter.<sup>140</sup> Thatcher is said never to have been concerned with trends, but 'she constantly sought elegance', and regarded Conservative party events as key opportunities to show off her favourite garments.<sup>141</sup> An interest in clothes also provided an assumed common ground between herself and the female electorate [see figure 6]. In this respect clothes were less of a visual aid than a subject of conversation. The winter coat Thatcher claimed to be unable to afford, together with her public rejection of designer clothes as 'too expensive', demonstrates the capacity of clothes to facilitate performances of a particularly feminine normality. Even once the housewife image had given way to the power-dresser of the post-Falkland's period, Thatcher continued to promote an economical approach to fashion. In a television interview for TV-AM about British Fashion Week, and particularly the dinner held by Number Ten 'for all the leading fashion stars', she argues for a staple

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<sup>136</sup> K. Hadley, 'My Face, My Figure, My Diet', *The Sun*, 16 March 1979

<sup>137</sup> Selection Committee reports held at Churchill College Thatcher archive: THCR 1/1/1

<sup>138</sup> Margaret Thatcher interview for BBC's *Woman's Hour*, 18 October 1993, recording available online via BBC archive

<sup>139</sup> K. Joseph quoted in H. Young and A. Sloman, *The Thatcher Phenomenon* (London, 1986), p. 36

<sup>140</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 41.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

wardrobe of 'tailoreds' complemented by a greater number of inexpensive items that can be '[worn] under coats and change[d] more frequently' as an effective form of fashion-conscious economising.<sup>142</sup>

As resourceful as she may have been, however, Thatcher's image became increasingly glamorous as the 1980s progressed. Her post-Falkland's image was far removed from the housewife image that defined her early leadership career, as a comparison of Conservative party posters from 1975 and 1987 emphasises [see figure 7]. Although it is a slippery concept, style must be recognised as an important aspect of Thatcher's power, and whilst style cannot be reduced to the visual, the visual constitutes an integral part of style. This is particularly true in the context of an intensely image-driven media environment. Given the extent to which female appearance was interpreted as a reflection of other traits and capacities, apparently 'trivial' considerations relating to Thatcher's appearance carried political weight. As Nigel Lawson has argued, 'she was convinced that her authority...would be diminished if she were not impeccably turned out at all times. She was probably right'.<sup>143</sup> Bolstered by the Falklands victory and a comfortable second term re-election, the need to justify her authority with reference to a conservative image of domestic competence had largely disappeared by the summer of 1983. The rhetorical evocation of her housewife credentials continued throughout her premiership, and was deemed particularly valuable when addressing women, but she never returned to the wardrobe of the 1979 campaign, which had been neat but functional. Her hairstyles became larger and her suits became brighter and more structured. While in 1979 Conservative party strategists had rejected a campaign photograph of Thatcher over concern that her rings were too prominent, jewellery would later become an integral part of her image.<sup>144</sup> Its growing prominence can be traced through campaign posters. Wendy Webster has described this style as that of the New Woman, emphasising the extent to which even conservative items such as skirt suits and pearls could be used to evoke a sense of power and change. Thatcher's change in dress also reflected a change in the 'national mood', and suggests shifting attitudes towards professional women. These will be considered in chapter four. Sartorial boldness should not be taken to imply professional security or equality, however. Women's wardrobes continued to mediate highly contested professional identities.

In order to understand Thatcher's 'New Woman' appeal it is important to consider the particular social groups within which she found support. As Laura Beers has demonstrated through her analysis of opinion poll data, women were more likely to vote Conservative out of support for Thatcher

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<sup>142</sup> Thatcher, TV interview for TV-AM (British Fashion Week), 15 March 1984, MTFW: 105504

<sup>143</sup> N. Lawson, *The View From Number Eleven: memoirs of a Tory radical* (London, 1992), p. 127.

<sup>144</sup> Unattributed letter, 20 April 1978, Churchill College Thatcher archive: THCR 2/6/1/202

herself, and on average were less likely to perceive Thatcher as anti-feminist. Interestingly, it was the oldest and most socially conservative group of women surveyed (45 years +) who were most likely to express resentment over the inequality of professional opportunity between men and women.<sup>145</sup> This resentment, however, co-existed with conservative views about gender roles more broadly.<sup>146</sup> For example, of 1001 women surveyed in 1985, 89% believed a woman's first priority should be her marriage and children.<sup>147</sup> An authoritative but traditionally feminine appearance, then, combined with the rhetorical elevation of domesticity, is likely to have struck a chord with women increasingly engaged in paid employment and frustrated by the professional limitations imposed on them, but otherwise committed to a conservative gender order. As Wendy Webster has discussed, women recurrently described the 'thrill' of Thatcher's successes.<sup>148</sup> In this respect, Thatcher's image was 'new' enough to generate excitement and a sense of empowerment, but 'womanly' enough to assuage anxiety over the novelty of her power and its potential threat to the status quo.

Towards the end of the 1980s Thatcher was recurrently being depicted as a second, sometimes rival, queen. As Daniel Conway has argued, Thatcher 'appeared to adopt similar dressed performances to the Queen'. This involved carefully planning outfits for diplomatic occasions, incorporating national symbols into her dress, emphasising her responsibility to look 'British' and selecting increasingly elaborate evening wear for state dinners. She employed the same couturier as the queen to design evening wear for diplomatic visits to France and the Middle East, and the royal milliner, Philip Somerville, designed the fur hat that Thatcher famously wore during her state visit to the Soviet Union in 1987.<sup>149</sup> Visual similarities were compounded by her widely reported use of the first person plural, or 'royal we', the most famous example of which was her 1989 announcement: 'we have become a grandmother'.<sup>150</sup> As John Campbell has argued, Thatcher's pronoun choices had been inconsistent since the early days of her premiership; she was prone to swap between 'I' and 'we' multiple times within a single interview, assuming and disavowing sole agency with little discernible rationale.<sup>151</sup> The extent to which this verbal practice became understood as a symptom of regal pretension, however, is itself an important indication of Thatcher's changing public image. The relationship between Thatcher and the queen was a matter of keen public interest.<sup>152</sup> This was

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<sup>145</sup> Beers, 'Thatcher and the Women's vote', p. 123.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>148</sup> Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 2.

<sup>149</sup> D. Conway, 'Margaret Thatcher, dress and the politics of fashion', in A. Behnke *The Global Politics of Fashion* (London, 2016), accessible online at the British Library.

<sup>150</sup> Thatcher, 'Remarks on Becoming a Grandmother', 3 March 1989, MTFW, ref: 107590

<sup>151</sup> J. Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: the Iron Lady* (London, 2004), p. 468

<sup>152</sup> Thatcher was not only presented as Elizabeth II by cartoonists, but as a diverse range of 'regal' figures, including Boadicea, Queen Victoria and Marie Antoinette.

particularly true following the publication of an article in *The Times* which reported royal disapproval of the government's stance towards South Africa, although there had been rumours of conflict between the Queen and her prime minister before this. Popular appetite for scandal encouraged the dramatisation of an apparent conflict between these two powerful, public figures, who for the first time were both women.

Their relationship was powerfully symbolic. Although Thatcher herself was deeply respectful of monarchy as an institution, and the depth of her curtsey became a source of ridicule among establishment figures, the position and role of monarchy within the discourses of Thatcherism was ambiguous. As David Cannadine has argued, 'many Thatcherites regarded the monarchy as 'just another vested interest, an unaccepted amalgam of snobbery and frivolity'.<sup>153</sup> Within this framework the Queen represented the old world order; Thatcher the new. John Campbell has argued that during Thatcher's leadership the Queen's glamour, which is a traditional part of the monarchy's appeal, had started to fade, fuelling popular interest in the increasingly regal glamour Thatcher was able to provide. As Robert Harris of the *Observer* noted in 1988, Thatcher had become 'more like the Queen of England than the real thing'.<sup>154</sup> Interestingly, however, a much earlier newspaper article had also compared Thatcher to the Queen, albeit less explicitly, suggesting that the comparison referred to more than Thatcher's power, glamour or entitlement. In April 1961, Godfrey Winn, writing for the *Daily Express*, introduced Thatcher as follows:

The woman opposite me on the sofa could not have been born and brought up in any other country except ours. With the Queen she shares not only a birthday year [in fact she was born in the year before the Queen], but possess the same, flawless cold-water, utterly English complexion.<sup>155</sup>

To compare a fledgling politician from Grantham with the nation's sovereign on the basis of complexion would appear to be a stretch. On one level, then, Winn's article re-emphasises the dearth of female exemplars through which public women could be understood. More substantially, however, it demonstrates the symbolic 'Englishness' derived of regal comparison. Throughout the 1980s, cultural understandings of Thatcher-as-queen invested the prime minister with national representativeness, and depictions of Thatcher as Britannia went further still, presenting her as the nation embodied. Given Thatcher's divisiveness, this was always a violently contested narrative, but it nonetheless complicates understandings that present Thatcher's 'queenly' image as the simple product of regal pretension.

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<sup>153</sup> Quoted in B. Pimlott, *The Queen: Elizabeth II and the monarchy* (London, 2001), p. 501.

<sup>154</sup> Quoted in Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 106.

<sup>155</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume I*, p. 158.

Given that Thatcher had once sought to emphasise her ordinariness as the basis of her capacity to govern, stylistic assimilation with a hereditary figurehead dramatically refigures the conceptual relation between herself and the electorate. Not only does the hereditary nature of monarchy mean that queens are innately 'different', but the Queen was an image from which 'the public' sought distance. It was not considered desirable for the monarch to be 'like us'. As Michael Billig argues in his *Talking of the Royal Family*, the image of royalty as distinct and morally superior to 'normal people' is something his interviewees were keen to preserve.<sup>156</sup> While, for example, many respondents supported divorce in general, the idea of royal divorce offended their conception of what the royal family was supposed to represent.<sup>157</sup> Conversely, however, interest in the royal family, as opposed to an isolated monarch, enabled identification through common familial structures. The Queen's identity as a wife and mother, for example, provide a means of identification denied by focus on the queen in isolation. As Judith Williamson has suggested, 'the key to the great significance of and popularity of royalty is that they are at once like us and not like us'.<sup>158</sup> Thatcher, similarly, was both 'Maggie' and 'The Iron Lady'; she was of the electorate and above it. The negotiation of, and interplay between, these two images was integral to her place within the popular imagination. Her 'out-of-touchness', which was consistently emphasised by opinion polls, might be understood as evidence of an innate superiority if refigured as a 'regal' quality. In the figure of a queen, or, perhaps, a queen-like Prime Minister, such distance is accepted, and even encouraged. With her political status and historical significance confirmed after victory in the Falklands, specialness, more than normality, came to define Thatcher's publicly projected personality. As the 1980s progressed, 'the housewife' element of this personality increasingly featured as an interruption. The acceptable face of female authority had changed.

### Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the complexity of Thatcher's image as a housewife. This operated on a range of levels, and was developed to do far more than simply promote the New Right's conservative social agenda. This is not to deny that Thatcher employed a housewife image in order to promote a social structure that confined women to the home. As has been shown, the elevation of domesticity played upon and encouraged popular attachment to traditional gender roles which presented women as naturally and primarily domestic, to the detriment of their other interests and ambitions. Rather, it has been argued that her *successful* projection of a housewife image depended

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<sup>156</sup> M. Billig, *Talking of the Royal Family* (London, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>158</sup> J. Williamson quoted in *ibid.*, p. 86.



on the positive values that this image evoked. The housewife image was primarily a publicity strategy. Thatcher was able to draw on the established model of domestic femininity not only to appeal to women, but to neutralise the threat that, as a woman, her own power could seem to entail. By presenting the nation with an example of Conservative femininity which was familiar to many, she was able to position herself within an accepted tradition of female status, within which emphasis on sound economic management and moral fortitude was particularly resonant. Importantly, this tradition had broad class appeal; indeed, it was particularly resonant among the working classes. In the context of the political establishment, Thatcher's domestic femininity emphasised the extent to which her leadership represented a change. Her common sense, practicality and capacity for hard work, attributes she claimed were honed in the domestic sphere, offered voters something different. In line with the general election campaign's overarching theme, however, this was a change back to tradition.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> A. Maude, strategy document 'Themes' argues for a 'change back to known standards' and 'back to common sense', undated, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR3/1/78

## **2. Establishing a context**

As Ludmilla Jordanova has argued, comparison is an integral but frequently implicit part of all historical analysis. Processes of contextualisation entail prior assessments of what one's subject 'is like or not like and in what respect'.<sup>1</sup> This depends on the prioritising of certain characteristics over others. As Britain's first and only female prime minister, Thatcher is frequently contextually 'located' alongside male prime ministers, which tends to confirm widely held assumptions that her premiership – and her personal authority particularly – was exceptional. It also encourages recourse to gender as a default and largely unrefined explanation for the apparently unprecedented elements of Thatcher's public image. The premise of this chapter is that the prioritising of political office as the determining feature of comparison risks blunting analysis of this image, given the extent to which it was in many ways *incomparable* to the public images of male prime ministers. As a woman, Thatcher faced a different set of challenges to those of her male predecessors and successors. She was held to different standards, and also had a different set of 'tools' at her disposal. The visual and discursive resources she drew upon alternately emphasised and suppressed her gender. The responses she generated were often equally gendered. Given the centrality of gender to her public identity, it seems logical that Thatcher's gender should be foregrounded in the structure of any comparative analysis. It is only by doing this that gender might be disentangled from other factors in explaining either the construction of Thatcher's image, or the responses she generated. In comparing Thatcher with Shirley Williams and Mary Whitehouse my thesis aims to develop a more fruitful context for understanding the nuances of Thatcher's public image.

As Jordanova and others have argued, comparisons are most effective when the differences between compared subjects are minimised. Pragmatic recognition of the limited number of high-profile political women throughout the period of Thatcher's leadership, however, excuses a wider comparison than might otherwise be desired. Both Mary Whitehouse and Shirley Williams occupy sufficient common ground with Thatcher to be considered *comparable*. Beyond this, comparison with each woman is designed to sharpen understandings of Thatcher in quite different ways, by isolating – as far as possible – different variables. Whitehouse, though not a party-political politician, can be considered a political actor if a broader definition of 'politics' is adopted. She was widely taken to represent similar ideals and prejudices to Thatcher, and will provide a useful focus for investigating discursive connections between gender, morality and domesticity. She polarised opinion in a similar way to Thatcher, traded on similar anti-intellectual sentiments and drew core support from similar social and cultural locations. A comparative focus on Whitehouse and her

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<sup>1</sup> L. Jordanova, *The Look of the Past* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 211.

National Viewers and Listeners Association [NVALA] also facilitates an analysis of the moral environment of Thatcherism. Despite being closely linked to the moralistic character of Thatcher, the moral environment of Thatcherism cannot be reduced to the pronouncements of Thatcher alone. Key Thatcherites, such as Keith Joseph and Norman Tebbit, were vocal in their promotion of a specific, if underdeveloped, moral outlook, whilst arguments surrounding the moral status of wealth (and wealth creation) ensured the ongoing relevance of moral issues to an economically-focused *Thatcherite* regime. Analysing responses to Whitehouse and the NVALA will help to establish a popular context for the 'traditional values' that Thatcherism and Thatcher specifically were considered to represent.

Shirley Williams is perhaps a more obvious comparative choice. After Barbara Castle lost her cabinet position in 1976, Williams was for more than a decade the most prominent female party politician in Britain, after Thatcher herself. She graduated from Somerville, Oxford, four years after Thatcher, and like Thatcher, she spent a period in the traditionally 'feminine' Ministry of Education. Both Williams' and Thatcher's politics were influenced by religion, although Williams' Roman Catholicism was never publicised in the way that Thatcher's personal faith was. Beyond this they were different, and in ways that ranged beyond their party politics. Their differences were magnified by the media, which encouraged an understanding of Thatcher and Williams as representative opposites – symbols of binary value systems. Although the character of these value systems depended on the vantage point from which they were assessed, Thatcher - whether commendably resolute or unforgivably callous – was typically presented as 'hard'. Williams, conversely, was 'soft'. Entrenched perceptions of Thatcher as being anti-woman have often prevented interrogation of the broader conditions that shaped Thatcher's distinctly feminine, and anti-feminist, public image. If such broader conditions are acknowledged, they rarely range beyond the socially conservative culture of the Conservative party itself. A comparative analysis of Margaret Thatcher and Shirley Williams will enable a contextualisation of women's status, and the status of 'women's issues', beyond the Conservative party. This will help to establish the parameters of political viability with regard to the politics of gender, allowing for a more pragmatic assessment of Thatcher's presentation *as a woman*. Not only were Williams' political convictions sharply opposed to Thatcher's, but so too was her political and personal style. As such, comparison with Thatcher also provides a useful focus for analysing the media's presentation of diverse, personal characteristics, which in turn suggests popular understandings of 'politics' and political competency.

But the most obvious justification for the selection of Whitehouse and Williams, perhaps, is that they were women with whom Thatcher was frequently compared by the contemporary media: Whitehouse as the embodiment of Thatcher's 'Victorian values', Williams as Thatcher's Labour

alternative. This might seem superficial, but it does suggest something important about the place that Thatcher occupied in the popular imagination. As Felski and Friedman have argued, comparison is 'not just a cornerstone of analytical thought', but 'pervades everyday life'.<sup>2</sup> That contemporaries regarded both Whitehouse and Thatcher, and Williams and Thatcher, as implicitly comparable suggests the different cultural frameworks within which Thatcher was popularly understood.

The public images of politicians are of course complex, and represent a combination of multiple and sometimes contradictory influences. It is widely recognised that the images projected by politicians and their supporting teams are affected by the political agendas of media outlets that receive and transmit these images. In addition, however, interest groups are also liable to exploit the public images of politicians – and public figures more generally – as a means of indicating a high-profile endorsement of the values or ideas that benefit their causes. This is an argument Philip Williamson has made in relation to the public image of the monarchy in twentieth-century Britain, which he regards as both bolstered and shaped by organisations 'projecting on to it what they themselves admired'.<sup>3</sup> Such projections cannot always be regulated by the public figure in question, and are not always welcome. It should also be recognised that public images are often constructed in relation to those of other public figures deemed 'comparable'. As Shirley Williams and Margaret Thatcher were widely understood by the media as similar enough to be legitimately compared, it should be recognised that the relationship between their public images was dynamic. However indirectly, responses to Thatcher shaped public depictions of Williams, and vice versa. The same can be said of Whitehouse, whose National Viewers' and Listeners' Association was keen to promote an image of Thatcher that bore out the Association's values. An examination of Shirley Williams and Mary Whitehouse, therefore, suggests the dynamic social and cultural frameworks within which Thatcher's public image developed

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<sup>2</sup>R. Felski and S. Friedman ed., *Comparison: theories, approaches and uses* (Baltimore, 2013), p. 2

<sup>3</sup>P. Williamson, 'The Monarchy and British Values, 1900-1953', in A. Olechnowicz ed., *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 230.

## i. Mary Whitehouse

The rationale for a comparative analysis of Margaret Thatcher and Mary Whitehouse may not be immediately obvious. Mary Whitehouse was not a party politician and, while her Conservative sympathies were well known, she was not a party political figure.<sup>1</sup> As a moral campaigner, her relationship to 'the public' was very different from that of elected representatives. While she claimed to represent 'the popular voice' – a 'silent majority' whose culture of civil obedience increasingly denied them political and cultural representation – no evidence was provided in support of this. The very existence of moral pressure groups is testament to the absence of the popular consensus that Whitehouse asserted; had this existed, her campaign would have been unnecessary. She had no direct power, and any power that she was able to exert rested heavily on the institutions she sought to attack. The *Sunday Times* journalist who described her as 'almost a local radio station, a one woman talk show', was expressing the irony many commentators found in her reliance on, and highly effective use of the media outlets she so disparaged.<sup>2</sup>

Her political and cultural significance, however, should not be underestimated. The absence of complete popular consensus is common to the vast majority of political activities, with elected politicians representing - at best - the views of a majority. Mary Whitehouse's NVALA was undoubtedly a mass movement, having quickly assembled a 300 000 strong foundation membership after its formal inauguration in 1965. Whitehouse, as well as being the association's founder, was its elected president. Following a particularly 'political' model, in the lead up to the 1987 general election she toured marginal constituencies, campaigning for the return of candidates deemed 'friends of the family'. The influence of party-political practices aside, however, it should be recognised that the definition of 'politics' has been considerably expanded by advocates of the New Political History, which emphasises the cultural history of 'the political' above a narrowly defined party establishment. As Lawrence Black has argued, 'just as the Church was not the sum of religious history, nor was the party or government the sum of politics'.<sup>3</sup> Although the politicisation of everyday life has been a process most closely identified with the New Left, Conservatives of the later twentieth century similarly invested the cultural and the personal with political significance. Thatcher's housewife image explicitly invited politics into the home. The wifely preparation of breakfast, for example, became a political act. This blurring of public and private suggests the deceptiveness of a neatly defined political sphere, and legitimises the consideration of a figure such

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<sup>1</sup> The fact she never stood for election appears to surprise M. Tracey and D. Morrison, the authors of *Whitehouse* (London, 1979)

<sup>2</sup> A. Brien, 'Alan Brien's Diary', *Sunday Times*, 3 November 1974

<sup>3</sup> L. Black, *Redefining British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 1.

as Mary Whitehouse in a thesis about Margaret Thatcher. Expanding ‘the conception of politics into that of political culture’ enables an analysis of Mary Whitehouse that recognises the popular significance of non-party politicians in reflecting and constructing the broader, cultural environment in which party politics took place.<sup>4</sup>

As a woman who received widespread media attention for her vocal attacks on the instruments of ‘permissiveness’, Mary Whitehouse is an important figure in understanding the social context in which Margaret Thatcher’s domestic image circulated, with domestic ideals consistently functioning in Thatcherite rhetoric as an antidote to the decadence and irresponsibility exacerbated by ‘permissive’ legislation of the 1960s. Thatcher-as-housewife spoke not only of practical competence, but also of moral goodness. In addition to providing a social context, Whitehouse’s public reputation provides a means of exploring common themes in the media’s representation of conservative women. Under Thatcher, no female Conservative politicians received comparable media attention. Given entrenched notions of women’s ‘natural’ social conservatism, Mary Whitehouse’s deeply moralistic public image is likely to focus comparison in a way that draws out the gendered elements of representation, suggesting the extent to which Thatcher’s public image might be understood as a product of persistent ‘Tory woman’ stereotypes. This will help to develop an understanding of how and why Thatcher mobilised these stereotypes, as well as when she sought distance from them.

After summarising the key details of Mary Whitehouse’s biography and campaigning activities, the nature of her relationship with Thatcher will be considered, drawing out the tension between rhetoric and policy that Whitehouse and the NVALA compounded. Understanding the extent to which Thatcher’s advocacy of ‘Victorian values’ was, as many historians have argued, ‘merely’ a marketing ploy in the selling of Thatcherite economics is a necessary prerequisite to understanding how Thatcher’s domestic image functioned – what it was being used to ‘do’. I will then analyse the image that Whitehouse sought to develop as distinct from the image attributed to her by the popular media, comparing this with the visual and rhetorical characteristics of Thatcher’s public image considered in previous chapters.

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In 1964 Mary Whitehouse and Norah Buckland launched the Clean Up TV Campaign from Whitehouse’s living room. Whitehouse was an art mistress at Madeley School in Shropshire, and Buckland the wife of a vicar and active member of the Church of England’s Mothers Union. Whitehouse’s third autobiography, *Quite Contrary*, describes herself and Buckland as ‘totally

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

inexperienced in public affairs'.<sup>5</sup> Concerned by the effect that television appeared to be having on the sexual outlooks of children she taught, and appalled that the 'new morality' refused to take an authoritative stand on fundamental Christian issues, Whitehouse launched what would become a thirty-year assault on 'the propaganda of disbelief, doubt and dirt ... promiscuity, infidelity and drinking' that she regarded as characteristic of a large proportion of media output.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the campaign initially targeted the BBC specifically, the National Viewers and Listeners Association – as Clean Up TV would become – became fastidious in challenging perceived obscenity across a wide array of media forms. Poetry, journalism, film and television broadcasts were all subject to NVALA campaigns and/or Whitehouse prosecution. The NVALA, presenting itself as the voice of a 'silent majority', campaigned to censor the production and transmission/circulation of particular examples of 'obscene' material, as well as for legislative changes to curb the spread of obscenity more broadly.<sup>7</sup> Mary Whitehouse also undertook high profile legal action personally, such as in 1977 when she brought a private prosecution against *Gay News* for publishing James Kirkup's poem 'The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name'. The extent of NVALA's legislative impact is difficult to judge, a fact reflected in the vague assessments offered by existing historical studies. Lawrence Black, for example, refers only to the policy changes NVALA 'claimed' to influence, whilst Micheal Tracey and David Morrison describe the results of NVALA campaigning as 'limited'.<sup>8</sup> For Martin Durham, obscenity campaigners were 'far more ... successful in achieving legislative changes' than pro-life groups, though this comparative success remains largely unquantified.<sup>9</sup> Even in relation to specific changes it can be difficult to untangle dual (or, more often, multiple) influences: whilst Mary Whitehouse claimed that the passage of the 1982 Local Government (Miscellaneous Provision) Act, which granted residents enhanced powers to close local sex shops, was a victory for the NVALA and other family-oriented 'ordinary' people, Philip Jenkins regards it as a result of explicitly feminist initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

Whitehouse's political influence may be difficult to trace, but her cultural significance is clear. She published three autobiographies as well as three further books, was the subject of at least one widely reviewed biography and one 'sociological enquiry'; she packed university debating chambers and found a willing platform for her organisation's views in the conservative leaning national press.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Whitehouse, *Quite Contrary* (London, 1993), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> M. Whitehouse, Clean Up TV campaign manifesto, NVALA archive, University of Essex, box 1.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase 'silent majority' was popularised by Richard Nixon in November 1969, although there are numerous examples of its having been used before this.

<sup>8</sup> Black, *Redefining*, p. 107 and Tracey and Morrison, *Whitehouse*, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> M. Durham, *Sex and Politics: the family and morality in the Thatcher years* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> M. Whitehouse, *Mightier Than The Sword* (Eastbourne, 1985), p.73; P.Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies: moral panics in contemporary Great Britain* (New York, 1992), p.13.

The book *Whitehouse*, described by its authors Tracey and Morrison as exploration of the ‘gestation of moral protest’, was conceived as an academic project with a limited press run. In response to widespread interest, however, it was launched by a high-profile press conference and promoted nationwide.<sup>11</sup> This is not, however, to suggest that coverage was universally – or even generally – positive. She was a divisive figure described by *Telegraph* journalist Elizabeth Urdel as ‘second only to Mrs Thatcher in the liberal hate stakes’.<sup>12</sup> The banners of protesters in Trafalgar Square, following her successful prosecution of *Gay News*, read ‘Mary Whitehouse! Kill! Kill! Kill!’.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, given her pro-censorship message, Whitehouse inspired an intensely hostile, as well as pointedly satirical, reaction amongst large sections of the media. In 1975 David Sullivan launched a pornographic magazine in her name, and *The Mary Whitehouse Experience*, a sketch show produced by the BBC in partnership with Spitting Image productions, is an example of the irreverent and sexually explicit comedy the NVALA campaigned against. Indeed, and as will be argued below, Whitehouse’s willingness to endure ridicule was a key feature of the public image she sought to project. As this suggests, she emerged as more than the NVALA’s founder and elected president; in the popular consciousness she *was* the NVALA. This left her open to accusations of non-representativeness, and an article published by the *Sun* in March 1975 under the title ‘How many of us does Mary Whitehouse really speak for?’ followed a common line of attack by emphasising instances of disagreement between Whitehouse and NVALA membership. Nonetheless, the extent to which Mary Whitehouse was seen to embody an entire branch of moral protest created a media-friendly campaign focal point, and a rich focus for historical analysis.<sup>14</sup> As Philip Jenkins has argued, ‘there has never been any doubt that the [NVALA] was a pallid reflection of her personal beliefs’.<sup>15</sup>

Jenkins attributes the extent of Whitehouse’s cultural impact to ‘close friends and allies in parliament’, ignoring the fact that MPs who publicly aligned themselves with her were generally outsiders. He also claims that the NVALA had access to ‘enormous’ publicity resources, without suggesting what these resources comprised.<sup>16</sup> Neither Whitehouse nor the NVALA had a large amount of money at their disposal – on more than one occasion the *Viewer and Listener*, the organisation’s bi-monthly pamphlet, was compressed for explicitly financial reasons, and Whitehouse was consistently clear about her willingness to lose everything to the campaign. Had an anonymous donor not supplied the £30 000 required to cover the costs of a lost court case in 1981, she would have had to sell her house. While Whitehouse herself intimated that she had close

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<sup>11</sup> *Middlesbrough Evening Gazette*, 4 October 1979, clipping held at NVALA archive, box 76.

<sup>12</sup> E. Udall, ‘Mary Whitehouse: sometimes I denied she was my mother’, *Telegraph* online, 28 May 2008.

<sup>13</sup> See Tracey and Morrison, *Whitehouse*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> A. Palmer, *Sun*, 25 March 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.



relationships with a number of politicians in *Mightier Than The Sword*, claiming that knowing politicians ‘as individuals’ made it harder to criticise their policies, for fear that ‘doors which were once welcomingly open will close’, evidence of parliamentary support is limited.<sup>17</sup> James Dance, Conservative MP for Bromsgrove, was instrumental in inaugurating NVALA and acted as its chairman until his death in 1971, but there is no evidence to suggest that he had the networks, authority or popular reputation necessary to exert parliamentary influence in favour of NVALA aims. Lord Longford, a similarly active supporter of NVALA, attempted to wield his influence to Whitehouse’s advantage. Despite having held ministerial offices in the 1950s and 1960s, however, the Labour politician had long been considered an eccentric with a proclivity for supporting unpopular causes – including the parole of Moors Murderer Myra Hindley, in the late 1970s. He produced an extensive report, which was published in 1972, that recommended a broader definition of ‘obscenity’, as well as the abolition of ‘the public good clause’ that permitted obscenity within artistically enriching work.<sup>18</sup> This report, however, was Longford’s own initiative – as opposed to that of a parliamentary commission – and its recommendations, whilst debated, were never taken up. Known throughout the media as ‘Lord Porn’, Longford’s moralist sympathies, as well as his direct support of Whitehouse, were broadly detrimental to his public image, emphasising the extent to which, in the early 1970s at least, these sympathies were culturally and politically marginal. This hardly testifies to extensive NVALA influence.

Whitehouse’s one-time membership of the Oxford Group, which became Moral Rearmament [MRA], was widely reported by the media, making overt support all the less appealing for public figures on either side of the political spectrum. MRA was a Christian pressure group, founded in London in 1938, that campaigned vigorously in the 1940s and the 1950s throughout Britain and Europe. Members sought to promote evangelical values, fight immorality and oppose communism; stage plays and training courses supplemented more traditional campaigning methods, such as letter writing and pamphleteering. The group’s insistence on loyalty, emotional self expression and secretiveness encouraged both popular and political suspicion, and there was concern in the Church of England that MRA would ‘harden into a sect’.<sup>19</sup> Although the most recent files held by the Conservative Party archive relating to Moral Rearmament date from the 1960s, it is unlikely that the advice offered by party vice-chairman Marjorie Maxse in 1950 had changed: ‘it is better for us as a party not to become entangled with [MRA] any way’.<sup>20</sup> MRA had become popularly associated with appeasement of the Nazis in the 1930s and was believed to encourage what were considered to be

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<sup>17</sup> Whitehouse, *Mightier*, p. 120.

<sup>18</sup> Brooker, *The Art of Offence*, p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> C. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 198-201.

<sup>20</sup> M. Maxse to D. M. Reid, 23 November 1950, Conservative Party Archive, CCO 3/2/117

socially and psychologically destabilising practices and beliefs. In describing the NVALA as a 'guise' for MRA campaigning, Callum Brown echoes widespread contemporary opinion, and although there is no evidence to suggest the precise number of MRA supporters amongst NVALA ranks, the image alone will have been enough to dissuade Conservatives from explicit association.<sup>21</sup>

While Keith Joseph, a pertinent figure in aligning the new right with 'remoralisation', famously urged his audience at Edgbaston in October 1974 to 'take inspiration from that admirable woman, Mary Whitehouse', the same speech argued for the free provision of birth control as acceptable in the face of the threat that single, working class mothers posed to 'the national stock'.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, and despite her widespread association with a middle-class value system, Mary Whitehouse's rhetoric was consistently classless. No particular class was emphasised as either susceptible to, or responsible for, the decline in moral standards that she sought to redress. Religion was a more important determinant of NVALA membership than class, with the vast majority of members being practising Christians.<sup>23</sup> The 'pragmatism' of Joseph's position was incompatible with Whitehouse's religious zeal, which saw premarital sex as unchristian. As such, Joseph's praise was not entirely welcome, and Whitehouse issued a statement emphasising her 'embarrassment' at having been aligned with Joseph's endorsement of contraception. An exchange of letters held at the National Viewers and Listener's Association Archive testifies to the complexity of the pair's relationship. Although Whitehouse was eager to benefit from association with Joseph's high-profile attempts at 'remoralisation', she was not prepared to compromise the fundamental Christian views upon which the NVALA had been founded.<sup>24</sup> Margaret Thatcher's relationship with Mary Whitehouse was more ambiguous still. The cultural climate had shifted markedly by the late 1970s, with the almost blanket hostility towards figures such as 'Lord Porn' becoming patchier, if still dominant, but the mutual support and ideological closeness between moral campaigners and the New Right which was suggested by feminist authors such as Kate Marshall underestimates the complexity of Thatcher's

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<sup>21</sup> Brown speaks of 'Moral Rearmament campaigning in the guise of Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association': C. Brown, 'Gendering secularisation: locating women in the transformation of British Christianity', in I. Katznelson and G. Stedman-Jones ed., *Religion and the Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph, Speech at Edgbaston, 19 October 1974, MTFW: 101830

<sup>23</sup> Tracey and Morrison, 'Opposition to the Age', a Study of NVALA membership (manuscript), pp. 28, 30, NVALA archive, University of Essex, box 76.

<sup>24</sup> Following her public statement, Whitehouse wrote to Joseph explaining that she had been 'receiving phone calls and letters criticising me for apparently supporting wholeheartedly all that was in your Birmingham speech, including the controversial remarks about birth control'. Although compelled to 'put the record straight' she was 'only too conscious' that Joseph may have regarded this as 'almost treasonable'. The letter suggests the media tendency to flatten significant distinctions between moralising elements of the Right. It also emphasises the difficulties inherent in forging relationships within a 'moral lobby' that contained such distinctions. See Whitehouse to Joseph, 23 October 1974, NVALA archive, box 59.

position.<sup>25</sup> In claiming that Whitehouse's 'closeness to Thatcher' enabled her to exert 'a good deal of influence', Julian Petley mistakes a (limited) degree of ideological overlap, and the recognition of an overlapping support base, for power.<sup>26</sup>

Given that Whitehouse's public profile cannot be attributed to parliamentary allies or private resources, particular attention should be paid to the media environment of the late 1970s and 1980s, which is likely to have enhanced interest in her moral 'crusade'. 'Moral panics', a phrase coined by Stanley Cohen in 1972 to denote media 'overreaction' to youth violence of the 1960s, increasingly dominated newspaper headlines, and the vulnerability of women and children was consistently emphasised. A series of high-profile, often sexually driven murder cases seemed to demonstrate the unpredictability of threat and contracting areas of safety. In response to the roadside murder of the heavily pregnant Marie Wilks in 1988, the *Daily Mail* ran an article under the title 'Is nowhere safe for a woman?', while *The Times* claimed that 'The fear of crime on the roads is creeping into our daily lives just as the possibility of being raped or mugged now restricts a woman's choice about whether to go out in the evening'.<sup>27</sup> This unpredictability was compounded by new emphasis on the proximity of threat to 'ordinary' people, with evidence now used to suggest that molesters and killers were more likely to be found within the family circle than amongst strangers.<sup>28</sup> The abuser in the home became a powerful and recurring image, making NVALA's emphasis on moral protection of the domestic sphere all the more pertinent. The *Daily Mail*, which was particularly vocal in its condemnation of perceived moral decline, provides a useful indication of the discursive environment within which the moralistic images of both Whitehouse and Thatcher found popular support. Having painted a dystopian picture of children spending their pocket money on 'sex and sadism', the paper launched its 'Ban the sadist videos' campaign, following the failed second reading of the Labour MP Gareth Wardell's Bill to prevent the rental of adult videos to young people in February 1983.<sup>29</sup> *The Sun*, similarly, warned of 'Six year old addicts of video nasties'.<sup>30</sup> The prominence that 'video nasties' received in the Conservative's 1983 election manifesto is widely explained as an attempt to appease such tabloid initiatives. In response to panic surrounding the AIDS epidemic that unfolded in 1986, the *Mail* launched an increasingly homophobic attack on permissiveness, again framed around the 'protection' of children, this time presented as exposed to

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<sup>25</sup> See K. Marshall, *Moral Panics and Victorian Values* (London, 1985)

<sup>26</sup> J. Petley, *Film and Video Censorship in Modern Britain* (Edinburgh, 2011), p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> Unattributed, *Daily Mail*, 22 June 1988, and H. Kirby, 'Lessons That Could Be A Lifesaver', *Times*, 27 June 1988.

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> The image of children spending their pocket money on 'video nasties' is a recurring theme in *Daily Mail* coverage; see for example B. James, 'We Must Protect Our Children Now', 25 February 1983, or G. Greig, 'Video Victory!', 12 November 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, p. 41.

pro-gay 'propaganda' disguised as sex education. As Jenkins argues, popular identification of social problems is a cumulative process, and as the 1980s progressed a rich fund of 'socially available knowledge' appeared to present a society bedevilled by an insidious and unavoidable evil.<sup>31</sup> This, combined with an increasingly sensationalistic press in wake of the 'Murdoch revolution' and inauguration of *The Sun*, helped to create a public that was acutely aware of 'new' and harrowing dangers. The change of 'mood' during the late 1970s that Morrison and Tracey identify as softening hostility towards Mary Whitehouse should, therefore, be read in relation to a broadly increased sense of vulnerability, evident in, and amplified by, the wider media environment.<sup>32</sup> While, as Julian Petley has argued, 'even newspapers as strident as Britain's cannot, all on their own, ignite the fires of moral panic and indignation', the popular press – and media more broadly – must be recognised as providing a 'megaphone' for existing concerns.<sup>33</sup> A conservative leaning press attuned to the marketability of moral panic provided a willing platform for moral campaigners, such as Mary Whitehouse. This was a platform she was eager to exploit.

'Clean Up TV' had naive beginnings. *Quite Contrary* recalls the would-be campaigners 'looking down at the 2000 copies of the...petition [they] had printed...without any idea how to get it launched'. But Whitehouse quickly demonstrated an aptitude for publicity.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Beatrix Campbell is sceptical about the authenticity of Whitehouse's naivety, claiming that she had gained political experience through her association with Moral Rearmament, and then as an anti-communist campaigner, before turning her attention to permissiveness in the 1960s.<sup>35</sup> Black describes her as having been 'Britain's most recognisable Christian'.<sup>36</sup> In bringing a blasphemy suit against *Gay News* – invoking a law that had been described as early as 1949 as 'a dead letter' - Whitehouse was deliberately courting publicity. Tracey and Morrison, sociological researchers who spent three years studying Whitehouse and the NVALA through field work, suggest that she had been waiting for some time for the opportunity to try a winnable blasphemy case.<sup>37</sup> The specific content of Kirkup's poem, beyond its deep offensiveness to Whitehouse, was in this respect incidental. In response to her withdrawal from the case against the controversial stage play *Romans in Britain*, which had been brought under the charge of gross indecency, John Sutherland surmised that for the 'canny' Whitehouse undermining the legal invulnerability of theatre had been sufficient. By pursuing the Sexual Offences Act – effectively claiming that the simulation of gross indecency

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Tracey and Morrison, *Whitehouse*, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Petley, *Film and Video Censorship*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Whitehouse, *Quite Contrary*, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> B. Campbell, *Iron Ladies: why do women vote Tory?* (London, 1987), p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> Black, *Redefining*, p. 124.

<sup>37</sup> Tracey and Morrison, *Whitehouse*, p. 6.

constituted gross indecency itself – Whitehouse punctured the protection offered by the Theatres Act of 1968, which had appeared to guarantee freedom on the stage.<sup>38</sup> Of course Sutherland’s interpretation is debatable – Whitehouse could equally have withdrawn to avoid an expected loss – but it nevertheless suggests contemporary perceptions of Whitehouse’s public ability. Arranging parliamentary viewings of the ‘video nasties’ that the NVALA was campaigning against cleverly tapped in to assumptions of politicians’ detachment from the ‘reality’ shaped by their legislation. The event gained widespread media coverage. As these examples suggest, Whitehouse was more concerned about breadth of effect than the punishment of particular individuals, and she developed a reputation as an articulate speaker and savvy campaigner across the press. According to the *Daily Mail*, by 1970 she even looked the part, ‘the sophistication of the television personalities and other public people she now meets’ having ‘rubbed off’.<sup>39</sup>

Despite attracting passionate condemnation, Whitehouse was then too prominent a public figure to be politically ignored. Described by Beatrix Campbell as a ‘populist heroine of the right’, her prominence presented particular difficulties for Thatcher, who occupied a very similar cultural location.<sup>40</sup> In order to understand these difficulties, it is first necessary to establish the extent to which Thatcherism might be understood as a moral ‘project’. Recognising a tension between Thatcher’s actual commitment to ‘Victorian values’ and her exploitation of the rhetorical opportunities offered by the concept will help to draw out the challenge that Mary Whitehouse posed to Thatcher’s public image.

## II

‘Victorian Values’ - originally intended as a critical phrase - was coined by the Labour MP turned journalist Brian Walden in a television interview with Thatcher, aired in January 1983. Despite this, it became one of the defining moral concepts of Thatcher’s premiership.<sup>41</sup> In response to Thatcher’s complaint of increased state dependency, Walden contended that the values she advocated did not ‘have a future resonance’. Rather, they resonated with ‘Victorian times, when there was great poverty, great wealth, etc ... you’ve really outlined an approval of what I would call Victorian values’. Thatcher went on to praise the philanthropy of Victorian people, who she claimed ‘gave great voluntary things to the State’ as they prospered. This particular celebration of Victorian values as a testament to philanthropic spirit, however, soon gave way to her expression of a broader admiration for ‘honesty and thrift and reliability and hard work and a sense of responsibility for your fellow

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<sup>38</sup> J. Sutherland quoted in Brooker, *Offence*, p. 189.

<sup>39</sup> R. Churchill, ‘What Happened to the TV Crusader’, *Daily Mail*, 20 May 1970, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> See TV interview for London Weekend Television, 16 January 1983, MTFW: 105087.

men'.<sup>42</sup> By May, Thatcher would write to the Labour MP John Evans explaining that the term referred to 'respect for the individual, thrift, initiative, a sense of personal responsibility, respect for others and their property' as well as, importantly, 'all the other values that characterised the best of the Victorian era'.<sup>43</sup> The main target of a revival of Victorian values, then, was clearly the individual's relation to the state. Indeed, when accused by a member of the public of promoting, amongst other things, a 'frigid morality', Thatcher merely responded that the viewer had it 'mixed up', before going on to explain the economic vitality and self reliance she saw as characteristic of the period.<sup>44</sup> The flexibility of the term, however, suggested by Thatcher's letter to Evans, is significant. While there is little evidence of Thatcher using Victorian values explicitly to condemn 'permissiveness', the connection between Victorian values and moral authoritarianism was widely assumed. Indeed, in a radio interview for IRN, Peter Murphy suggested that the pragmatism of Thatcher's response to AIDS ran contrary to her professed commitment to 'Victorian values and family values'.<sup>45</sup>

The economic focus of Thatcherite morality – which included, but was by no means limited to an elevation of nineteenth century individualism – has been used to argue for the instrumentality of Thatcher's moralising rhetoric. Presenting Thatcher's moralistic rhetoric as 'window dressing' in the sale of unpalatable economic policies, however, rather ignores its significance in terms of the reception of Thatcherism. Indeed, Thatcher's forceful emphasis on good and evil, right and wrong, was crucial for the presentation of ideological consistency implied by the word 'Thatcherism' itself. The 'moral panics' that brought Mary Whitehouse to the fore encouraged support for Thatcher's Victorian values and enhanced the 'marketability' of an image that, even before 1983, suggested the moral clarity offered by a return to the value systems of 'simpler' times. I will argue that the moralising character of Thatcherism warrants sustained historical attention because alongside focusing a range of heavily gendered issues surrounding power, broadly defined 'moral issues' are integral to understanding the cultural climate in which Thatcher's domestic image took root. A limited legislative record on 'moral' or 'family' issues should not be used to undermine the moralistic tone of Thatcherism, which consistently articulated a vision of politics bound up in a fundamentally moral battle. Within this framework, issues beyond the traditional remit of the moral lobby acquired a poignantly moral character. As Thatcher told Ronald Butt of the *Sunday Times* in May 1981, 'economics is the method; the object is to change the heart and soul'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Thatcher, Speech to Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, 28 January 1983, MTFW: 105244

<sup>43</sup> Thatcher to John Evans, 5 May 1983, MTFW: 132330

<sup>44</sup> TV interview for BBC One Nationwide, 24 May 1983, MTFW: 105147

<sup>45</sup> P. Murphy, Radio interview for IRN, 23 January 1987, MTFW: 106731

<sup>46</sup> Thatcher, Interview for *Sunday Times*, 3 May 1981, MTFW:104475

Richard Vinen argues that a clear gap existed between Thatcherism's professed commitment to 'remoralisation' and a lack of practical support offered to moral campaigners, arguing that the leadership's association with 'moral' issues was strongest during Thatcher's time as leader of the opposition. A lack of power, he suggests, enabled a freer, and more ideologically driven articulation of support for typically populist causes. Against Stuart Hall's conception of a 'hegemonic project', Vinen's *Thatcher's Britain* emphasizes Thatcherism's scope for pragmatism. For example, dealing with Victoria Gillick's campaign to prohibit the provision of contraceptive advice to girls under the age of sixteen, the Conservative government was able to 'give the impression that it supported the general moral thrust of the campaign', while working to repeal legal judgements that went in Gillick's favour.<sup>47</sup> Martin Durham is equally keen to assert the limitations of taking Thatcherism at its word in relation to moral concerns, arguing that while moralist sections of the new right gained strength as Thatcher's premiership progressed, the 'moral lobby' remained 'fundamentally dissatisfied' with the government's direction. Indices of divorce, abortion and illegitimacy continued to rise throughout the 1980s, and statutory intervention to redress these trends was generally withheld. As Ann Marie Smith has argued, however, a failure to repeal 'permissive' legislation should not be presented as evidence of moral disinterest or social liberalism.<sup>48</sup> Thatcher's commitment to a traditionalist Christian faith is an important indication of the extent to which moral issues mattered. While morality and religiosity should not be read as synonymous, the moral environment of Thatcherism cannot be understood without reference to Margaret Thatcher's personal religious beliefs.

By her own account, Thatcher's religious faith was a lifetime political influence. Importantly, and unlike any prime minister since Macmillan, it was an influence she was happy, even keen, to disclose *while in office*. She addressed the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland as a 'Christian, as well as a politician', and consistently referred to the importance of religion, both as a personal and a political aid.<sup>49</sup> That Thatcher extensively called upon religion to promote virtues tied to a distinctly Thatcherite free-market individualism does not mean that religion should be discounted as a 'marketing ploy' for economic policy; it had far deeper roots. The influence of Thatcher's devoutly Methodist father is well covered by existing commentaries, and Liza Filby's *God and Mrs Thatcher* provides a particularly helpful analysis of Thatcher's distinctive Christian faith.<sup>50</sup> The Roberts children attended Church three times on a Sunday; their home life was 'austere, teetotal' and 'governed by

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<sup>47</sup> Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain*, p. 279.

<sup>48</sup> A. M. Smith, *New Right Discourses on Race and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 5-6.

<sup>49</sup> Thatcher, Speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 21 May 1988, MTFW: 107246.

<sup>50</sup> L. Filby, *God and Mrs Thatcher: the battle for Britain's soul* (London, 2015)

strict rules'.<sup>51</sup> At Oxford University she joined the John Wesley Society, which regularly sent its members out to preach in surrounding villages. Thatcher readily joined in: as John Campbell has emphasised, she was 'a preacher before she was a politician'.<sup>52</sup> It is reasonable to assume that Alfred Roberts' brand of Methodism, which was underpinned by 'an uncompromisingly individualistic moral code', had a profound effect on both the personal faith and political outlook of his eldest daughter.<sup>53</sup> Although she converted to Anglicanism at some time in the 1950s, her style of faith remained deeply influenced by the Methodism of her childhood, which she described as 'practical' and 'evangelical'.<sup>54</sup> The strictness of her Methodist upbringing would later be used to authenticate her commitment to 'Victorian values'.

It is significant that 'Victorian values' first arose in the context of the individual's economic relation to the state. This was, for Thatcher, a fundamentally moral issue. The speed and enthusiasm with which 'Victorian values' was taken up as a catch-all statement of Thatcherite morality, however, is indicative of the extent to which the phrase resonated with popular conceptions of what Thatcherism offered, whether this was regarded positively or not. In part, this demonstrates a stereotyped image of feminized Conservatism. With its roots in the 'law and order' Conservatism of the party's women's groups, the authoritarian populism that characterised both Whitehouse and Thatcher reflected the Conservative party's gendered past. That the fears of the 1980s were primarily framed as women's fears – either for themselves or their children – helped to mobilise entrenched notions of female conservatism, tied to what Beatrix Campbell has described as the 'hang 'em and flog 'em brigade' of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>55</sup> 'Victorian values', which spoke of discipline and moral fortitude, chimed with the traditional, social concerns of the party's women's groups. More than this, however, Thatcher's Victorian values created 'a metaphorical space for the expression of moral anxiety' that resonated beyond law and order lobbyists.<sup>56</sup> The rhetoric of 'Victorian values' is a compelling example of Thatcher's ability to translate policy issues into questions of morality.

'Victorian' was being commonly used in a pejorative way at the time of Thatcher's celebration of the period. In 'A Public Disservice', an undated campaign booklet produced by the NVALA, Whitehouse addressed and refuted the popular image of her organisation as being 'anxious to reimpose a caricature of Victorian values', and as recently as 1981 Harold Macmillan had denounced

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<sup>51</sup> J. Campbell, *The Iron Lady* (London, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>53</sup> See A. Weiss analysis of Alfred Roberts' sermon notes, 'The Religious Mind of Mrs Thatcher', 2011, available through MTFW: 112748 and Campbell, *Iron Lady*, p.4.

<sup>54</sup> Thatcher, interview for *Catholic Herald*, 5 December 1978, MTFW: 103793.

<sup>55</sup> Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> Samuel, *Island Stories*, p. 335.



the Victorian period as ‘simply an interruption in Britain’s history’.<sup>57</sup> Thatcher herself had in 1979 dismissed socialism as a ‘Victorian ideology’, and as Raphael Samuel argued in 1992, ‘in Mrs Thatcher’s lexicon ‘Victorian’ seems to have been an interchangeable term for the traditional and the old fashioned’.<sup>58</sup> In aligning herself with a contestable value system, then, Thatcher demonstrated her willingness, even desire, to be regarded as a champion of the unfashionable. As Samuel argued, ‘what mattered was less the words themselves than the character she projected of one who was not afraid of sounding reactionary’.<sup>59</sup> The simplistic, reductionist quality of the phrase ‘Victorian values’ itself was bound to rile academic arbiters of the Victorian past, and Eric Sigsworth’s edited volume of essays *In Search of Victorian Values*, published in 1988, is largely an academic rebuttal of Thatcher’s unduly celebratory vision of the Victorians. ‘Given the way in which [Victorian values] is being bandied about’, Sigsworth argued that the phrase needed to be ‘examined critically’.<sup>60</sup> Demonstrating, for example, the invalidity of Thatcher’s ‘Victorian’ admiration of ‘cleanliness’ as being ‘next to Godliness’, however, seems to miss the rather obvious point that the cultural resonance of political rhetoric is rarely attributable to historical accuracy.<sup>61</sup> The Raphael Samuel article from which I have quoted was also published as part of an edited volume exploring ‘Victorian Values’ and ‘the great contemporary interest’ they generated, although only Samuel’s article engaged explicitly with their political resonances under Thatcher.<sup>62</sup> This was the product of a collaborative symposium organised by the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1990, demonstrating considerable academic attention. Gordon Marsden’s *Victorian Values: personalities and perspectives in nineteenth-century society*, which was published in 1990, brought together articles which had been published in the history magazine *History Today*, reflecting popular, historical interest in contemporary reconfigurations of the Victorian past.

‘Elitist’ criticism of Thatcher’s ‘Victorian values’ was picked up by the Centre for Policy Studies, which produced a report entitled ‘Victorian values and twentieth-century condescension’ in 1987. Authored by Gertrude Himmelfarb, a history professor at the State University of New York, the

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<sup>57</sup> H. Macmillan quoted in A. Briggs ‘Victorian values’ in E. M. Sigsworth ed., *In Search of Victorian Values* (Manchester, 1988), p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> R. Samuel, ‘Mrs Thatcher’s Return to Victorian Values’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 78 (1992), p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Samuel, ‘Mrs Thatcher’s Return’, p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> Sigsworth, *In Search*, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3 The late twentieth-century fascination with the Victorian period is widely recognised by social and cultural historians, who emphasise the proliferation of television adaptations of Victorian literature, the vogue for Victorian collectables and the upmarket refurbishment of Victorian terrace houses for affluent buyers. As Cora Kaplan has argued, whereas in the 1960s ‘Victoriana’ referred narrowly to the collectable remnants of material, Victorian culture, by the late 1970s ‘its reference had widened to embrace a complimentary miscellany of evocations and recycling of the nineteenth century’: C. Kaplan, *Victoriana: histories, fictions, criticism* (Edinburgh, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> T. C. Smout ed., ‘Victorian Values’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 78 (1992).

report aimed to counter left-wing hostility with an authoritative, academic voice. Himmelfarb, who had a large record of right-wing commitments, argued for the democratising potential of Victorian values, which 'did not assume any special breeding, or status, or talent, or valour, or grace – or even money. They were common virtues within the reach of common people'.<sup>63</sup> She denounced claims that 'Victorian values' had been imposed on the working class by their social superiors as 'patronising', echoing a consistent theme of the New Right's political discourse. She also emphasised contemporary discomfort with the word 'respectable', describing it as a word 'which we can scarcely utter without audible quotation marks'.<sup>64</sup> Despite including herself within this 'we', such discomfort is clearly presented as foolish. In championing traditionally 'respectable' values, then, Thatcher is implicitly commended for her willingness to flout convention and, as Samuel put it, to 'sound reactionary'.

Thatcher herself acknowledged that the 'Victorian' values she championed might equally be referred to as 'perennial'.<sup>65</sup> In this respect, her decision to focus them through the Victorian period, however accidentally this may have been initially, speaks to the importance of historical discourse within the Thatcherite narrative. In 1979 she had complained of the poor treatment that the Victorians had received by socialist history, suggesting that their New Right reincarnation might be read as part of the wider Thatcherite project to promote an alternative British history that encouraged a sense of British identity amenable to the New Right's contemporary political aims.<sup>66</sup> Thatcherite history was used to affirm eternal British qualities superficially obscured by post-war decline. As Patrick Wright argued in 1985, with the future having repeatedly disappointed expectations, the past was increasingly called upon to offer a peculiarly limited form of hope:

If temporary endurance stands as some sort of measure of achievement, value and quality, this sense is certainly intensified now that history is widely experienced as a process of degeneration and decline: like people, countries grow old and decrepit. In this perspective the future holds nothing in store except further decline and one can only hope that ingenious stalling will be contrived by necessarily Conservative governments.<sup>67</sup>

The nostalgic bent of Thatcherism has been widely acknowledged by existing literature, but it should be recognised that the period seemed to encourage engagement with historical conceptions of national identity in less politically-driven ways, also. Martin Wiener's *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, for example, which was first published in 1981, attributed Britain's economic

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<sup>63</sup> G. Himmelfarb, *Victorian Values and Twentieth-Century Condescension* (London, 1987), p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>65</sup> Thatcher, Radio programme for IRN programme *The Decision Makers*, 15 April 1983, MTFW:105291

<sup>66</sup> Thatcher spoke of 'Britain' and 'British' national identity, but her historical narratives were invariably Anglo-centric.

<sup>67</sup> P. Wright, *On Living in an Old Country* (London, 1985), p. 70.

problems to the misplaced deference to the values of the nineteenth-century rural elite.<sup>68</sup> It received widespread academic, as well as popular attention – although this has been far from universally positive.<sup>69</sup> It generated two Granada World in Action television programmes and was reportedly read by those among the Conservative elite. The revival of ‘period’ styles, the rage for ‘period’ interiors and the elevation of Victorian mansions suggested a more diffuse investment in the national past.<sup>70</sup> Reaction to Labour’s refusal to ‘save’ Mentmore Towers, a high Victorian country house faced with private sale, is a pertinent example of the growing value that became attached to ‘heritage’.<sup>71</sup> The backward-looking emphasis of Thatcherite rhetoric, then, and Thatcher’s invocation of Victorian values especially, should be seen within this context. It made use of, and augmented, but certainly did not create popular desire for the explanatory certainties of a particular version of British history that seemed to offer an alternative to the frustrated hopes of modernization.

Without suggesting that ‘Thatcherite morality’ should be taken to imply a coherent body of moral positions, the moralistic rhetoric of Thatcherism was integral to Thatcher’s cultural positioning. As Antonio Weiss has shown, her religious commitments were consistently and deliberately publicised. Reciting psalms in a television interview, for example, clearly suggests a conscious decision that religion should inform her public profile.<sup>72</sup> Of course moral pressure groups have never been exclusively Christian – the Responsible Society, for example, a contemporary of the NVALA, took a wholly secular approach to ‘moral pollution’ - and the activities of moral pressure groups do not represent the ideals of all Christians. Nevertheless, a substantial Christian presence within what might be loosely described as the ‘moral lobby’ will have been encouraged by the visibility of Thatcher’s faith.<sup>73</sup> The party’s recurrent claims to being ‘the party of the family’, combined with a greater (if still contestable) distance from progressive legislation of the 1960s encouraged expectations of government support for moral causes after Thatcher’s election in 1979. Given that the ‘natural’ conservatism of women, particularly in relation to social issues, was widely assumed, Thatcher’s gender, together with the emphasis placed on her personal experiences of family life throughout the election period, is also likely to have been optimistically received by those looking to

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<sup>68</sup> M. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (London, 1992)

<sup>69</sup> See for example, Sheldon Rothblatt, ‘Ideas of Decline’, *London Review of Books*, 6 August 1981; P. Mandler, ‘Against Englishness: English culture and the limits to rural nostalgia 1850-1940’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 7, (1997)

<sup>70</sup> Samuel, *Island Stories*, p. 224.

<sup>71</sup> Wright, *On Living*, p. 29.

<sup>72</sup> Thatcher interview for TV-AM, 20 December 1988, MTFW: 107022. See also Weiss, ‘The Religious Mind’, p. 33.

<sup>73</sup> D. Cliff, ‘Religion, Morality and the Middle Class’ in R. King and N. Nugent ed., *Respectable Rebels: middle class campaigns in Britain in the 1970s* (Kent, 1979), p. 129.

combat 'threats' to the family such as divorce, abortion, illegitimacy, youth delinquency, feminism and homosexuality. It is in this vein that in February 1979 *Private Eye* anticipated

Thatchatollah's millions of supporters sweep[ing] her into power in a holy war. The Thatchatollah promises a return to 'the traditional British virtues' – hard work, fair play, regular church going and an end to late night 'adult' films on TV.<sup>74</sup>

Whitehouse herself expressed confidence that Thatcher would reject the findings of the Williams Report, which had argued against a causal link between pornography and violence, 'not only because she is prime minister but because she is a woman, and especially because she is a mother'.<sup>75</sup>

The association between women and piety reflects a Victorian inheritance which conceived of men and women in as having different attributes.<sup>76</sup> Whereas women were pure, chaste, soft and homely, men tended to be innately brutish; only by submitting to womanly virtue could their worldly appetites be subdued. Thatcher herself expressed a similarly 'Victorian' view of gender when she told her audience at the first Dame Margery Corbett-Ashby memorial lecture that 'Women know that society is founded on dignity, reticence and discipline'.<sup>77</sup>

Upon Thatcher's election in 1979, Mary Whitehouse was optimistic that she had found an ally. Whitehouse had grown frustrated with Callaghan, having 'received nothing but discouragement from the Labour government so long as it remained in power', while the 'cool corporatism' of Edward Heath had made him an equally reluctant defender of a distinctly populist morality.<sup>78</sup> In the lead up to the 1979 general election Whitehouse urged NVALA members to petition their parliamentary candidates on moral issues, and circulated a questionnaire designed to assess their 'reliability' as advocates of 'the family'. Conservative candidates both returned the greatest number of surveys, and provided the most satisfactory replies.<sup>79</sup> Leaked deliberations of the Family Policy Group, apparently demonstrating high-level Conservative party support for obscenity legislation, generated widespread media attention in Thatcher's first term, and Thatcher's support of a ban on 'video nasties' would become a key feature of her 1983 campaign. In her capacity as leader of the

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<sup>74</sup> 'Thatchatollah appoints government', *Private Eye*, 6 February 1979, p. 14. The authoritarianism moralism emphasised by *Private Eye* remained an important feature of Thatcher's public image throughout her premiership. In 1989, when Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the assassination of Salman Rushdie, journalists were quick to draw satirical comparisons between Khomeini and 'Ayatollah Thatcher', described by Andrew Rawnsley of the *Guardian* as 'the country's aging, absolute ruler'. Quoted in D. Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: the novel, the Ayatollah and the west* (London, 2009) p. 235.

<sup>75</sup> Whitehouse quoted in Durham, *Sex and Politics*, p. 79. The Williams Committee Report was the product of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship, chaired by Professor Bernard Williams. The Committee was appointed by the Home Office in 1977 and reported in 1979.

<sup>76</sup> C. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-century Britain* (Edinburgh, 2006), p. 69.

<sup>77</sup> Thatcher, *Women in a Changing World*, 26 July 1982, MTFW: 105007.

<sup>78</sup> Whitehouse, *Quite Contrary*, p. 23 and Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 99.

<sup>79</sup> 62% of the 280 responses were returned by Conservative candidates, 32% by Labour candidates, 2% by Liberal candidates and 4% 'other'. Of the 105 Conservative replies, 18 refused to define their moral position. Of the 90 Labour replies, 34 refused.

opposition Thatcher had supported Whitehouse in her ABUSE petition, aimed at protecting children from pornography, and in reply to Whitehouse's letter of congratulation upon her 1979 election, Thatcher wrote that she hoped they would 'continue to communicate with one another over those issues about which we both feel so strongly'.<sup>80</sup>

However, Thatcher's Conservative government failed to fulfil NVALA's expectations. As early as summer 1979 Whitehouse complained in the *Viewer and Listener* of the vagueness surrounding the prime minister's pledge to 'insist' and 'ensure' that the BBC upheld its responsibilities.<sup>81</sup> In 1985 she wrote to Thatcher expressing her 'dismay' at the government's failure to legislate for the control of pornography, although she drew a distinction between 'a failure on the part of the Home Office' and Thatcher's 'great ... personal concern over these issues'.<sup>82</sup> Whilst Thatcher was never exactly a champion of the BBC, she was drawn more towards privatisation than a return to Reithian-style public service broadcasting, as was the ostensible ambition of Whitehouse. Thatcher's consistent emphasis on the moral superiority of personal freedom was incompatible with the statutory control for which Whitehouse campaigned. Indeed, her government licensed cable television in the name of consumer choice.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, despite significant ideological differences large sections of the media – both right and left – continued to imply an affinity between these 'populist heroines of the right'.<sup>84</sup>

### III

Whilst the legislation Whitehouse lobbied for may have been incompatible with the Thatcherite emphasis on the individual, Whitehouse herself was held up as a testament to the power of individual endeavour. Thatcher presented an award for the BBC television programme *Yes, Minister* at the NVALA's television awards ceremony in January 1984 – her presence itself indicating sympathy for NVALA aims. In her speech, she celebrated the organisation's founder: 'Let no-one ever again say "what can one person do?" Look at Mrs Whitehouse and see the answer'.<sup>85</sup> The story of a housewife who, through 'plucky' determination and a commitment to the cause became a 'woman of national standing, a leader', as the *Telegraph* put it in 1971, has obvious resonance with a Thatcherite narrative that emphasised the humble origins of a grocer's daughter.<sup>86</sup> As David Flinton, of the *Western Mail*, said of Whitehouse in April 1976, 'Hers was the classic and extraordinarily

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<sup>80</sup> Thatcher, to Whitehouse, 24 May 1979, NVALA archive, box 59, 'Correspondence with 10 Downing Street 1965-1985'

<sup>81</sup> Whitehouse, 'A New Broom', the *Viewer and Listener*, summer 1979, NVALA archive, box 15

<sup>82</sup> Whitehouse, to Thatcher, 21 October 1985, NVALA archive, box 59

<sup>83</sup> Samuel, 'Mrs Thatcher's Return', p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> B. Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Thatcher, Speech for BBC1 *Yes, Prime Minister*, 20 January 1984, MTFW: 105519.

<sup>86</sup> W. Deedes, 'Who Does She Think She is?' book review, *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 October 1971

ordinary upbringing of a lower middle class girl living in middle England'.<sup>87</sup> An emphasis on Whitehouse's 'ordinariness' was seen to legitimise her claim to speak for a 'silent majority' of 'ordinary' people as concerned to uphold moral decency as she was. The title of her 1971 autobiography *Who Does She Think She Is?* evokes a sense of underdog tenacity by appropriating the voice of elite offence at her encroachment into matters beyond her status. The book's promotional statements promise to explain Whitehouse's ascent 'from housewife to household name'.

Whitehouse's identity as a housewife was far more genuine than Thatcher's, and her decision to return to teaching – a profession she had given up upon the birth of her first son – is explained in her autobiography as an unfortunate necessity. Having been left weak from a prolonged illness, Whitehouse claimed that paid employment – a less demanding occupation than full-time housewifery – was a necessary means of financing domestic help.<sup>88</sup> In 1953 she spoke on 'Woman's Hour' under a segment entitled 'Thoughts of a housewife on the coronation', explaining her belief that her 'dedication' to the Queen could be conveyed by 'the caring details [she] put into the tiny details of [her] everyday life, even the washing up'.<sup>89</sup> The contrast with Thatcher's coronation-inspired statement of female duty to the public sphere is stark. If teaching was 'just' a job, however, her campaign work was a vocation. The image of a housewife compelled to public action was used either as part of a David-and-Goliath narrative to amplify her reputation for courage, or read as symbolic testament to the provincial, backward-looking views widely associated with the NVALA. Hostile characterisation of Whitehouse as a 'typically' reactionary housewife served only to augment support amongst an audience keen to reassert the value of the unfashionable and inexpert. If Thatcher's housewife image, as considered in chapter one, sought to mobilise hostility towards an elitist disdain for 'suburban values', Whitehouse's image as a 'housewife having a go' appealed to similar sentiments.

Positively spun, Whitehouse's housewife image – the archetypal 'ordinary' image of traditional femininity – dramatised a battle between powerful institutions and an individual woman, a narrative supported by the extent to which the NVALA was widely considered reducible to the figure of Mary Whitehouse herself. Both Whitehouse and Thatcher presented themselves as champions of common sense, set against an elitist group of ideologically-driven, leftward-leaning 'experts' working to undermine parental authority and destabilise the family unit. As Philip Jenkins argues, 'where the Left has embedded itself in institutions', such as universities, broadcasting companies and the social services, 'it survives and may even flourish'.<sup>90</sup> Within this context NVALA's 'naive' campaigning

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<sup>87</sup> D. Flinton, 'Introducing the very human Mrs Whitehouse', *Western Mail*, 29 April 1976

<sup>88</sup> Whitehouse, *Quite Contrary*, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> Whitehouse, 'Thoughts of a housewife on the coronation' transcript, NVALA archive, box 72.

<sup>90</sup> Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, p. 37.

strategies – which relied heavily on public meetings, letter writing and leaflet distribution - could be understood as a defiant statement of ‘everyday, DIY activism’ which served to distance Whitehouse from the professionalism of the organisations she opposed.<sup>91</sup> The absence of professionalism was used to suggest transparency and popular legitimacy. Despite a routinely professed hostility towards expert opinion, however, Whitehouse was not above using the testimony of those few experts that supported her position. Dr John Court, an Australian pro-censorship psychologist at Flinders University, Adelaide, and supporter of Australia’s National Festival of Light, is described by Ben Thompson as Whitehouse’s ‘inhouse expert’.<sup>92</sup>

Integral to Whitehouse’s campaign was a frequently repeated belief that ‘permissive’ reforms had been pushed through by a subversive minority. Importantly, this minority was described as concentrated in London, giving voice to and capitalising on a sense of London’s cultural estrangement from the rest of the country. The ‘London factor’, which associated the capital – a Labour stronghold- with the sexually unorthodox lifestyles of a ‘loony’ fringe, was blamed for the defeats of several provincial Labour candidates in the early 1980s.<sup>93</sup> As recalled in *Quite Contrary*, Whitehouse arranged a supper for Harman Grisewood, Sir Hugh Greene’s deputy, and some of her ‘young friends’, in order to demonstrate that ‘the standards of ‘swinging London’ were not theirs’.<sup>94</sup> NVALA membership was densely provincial and heavily female.<sup>95</sup> Members were likely to be either housewives or retired. As the Reverend Michael Saward wrote to Whitehouse of the organisation’s national convention in 1970, it ‘would carry more weight if it could be seen to be composed of a wider spread in terms of age and outlook and less numerically dominated by women of fifty and over’.<sup>96</sup> As Paul Whitely has argued in relation to the grassroots Conservative Party, a narrow membership profile undermines an organisation’s a perceived capacity to pursue common interests. Whitehouse herself was 53 when she launched CUTV – an age, according to Tracey and Morrison, ‘when most people are sinking into... comfortable anonymity’.<sup>97</sup> Her age, and her later identity as a grandmother, was a consistent point of reference for even sympathetic journalists and commentators, who emphasised her stamina and vitality against an implied caricature of aged frailty. Less sympathetically, age was central to depictions of Whitehouse as an out of touch ‘fuddy-

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<sup>91</sup> Black, *Redefining*, p. 122.

<sup>92</sup> B. Thompson, *Ban This Filth* (London, 2012), p. 287.

<sup>93</sup> Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, p. 37.

<sup>94</sup> Whitehouse, *Quite Contrary*, p. 18.

<sup>95</sup> Morrison and Tracey estimate a 3:1 ratio in favour of female membership in 1979.

<sup>96</sup> Saward to Whitehouse, 25 June 1970, NVALA archive, box 10.

<sup>97</sup> Tracey and Morrison, *Whitehouse*, p. 48. Thatcher was 53 when elected prime minister. According to Pauline Peters of the *Sunday Times Magazine*, this was a ‘vulnerable age when most women expect[ed] to be contending with the menopause’: ‘The Tidy Mind of Margaret Thatcher’, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 20 August 1978.

duddy', and cartoons – even of the 1960s - presented her as an old woman. A particularly dated pair of horn-rimmed glasses became her trademark. Age, combined with a parochial commitment to an increasingly marginal set of religious ideals, certainly made Whitehouse a figure of fun. This, however, enabled her to present what satirical voices regarded as 'unfashionable' irrelevance as pointedly 'anti-fashion' defiance – a display of courageous single mindedness in the face of a rising tide of institutionally-endorsed permissiveness. As Lawrence Black has argued, she 'revelled in her oppositional status'.<sup>98</sup> Posed against a 'patronising' metropolitan elite, rhetorical similarities with Thatcher's celebration of suburban values, a central theme of her 1979 election campaign, are obvious.

In the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Mary Whitehouse, Mary Warnock argues that her unrelenting confidence in her own 'common sense' world view 'seriously obstructed her success'.<sup>99</sup> While, as a caricature of overzealous, provincial moralism, Whitehouse was, as her biographer Max Caulfield put it, the consistent 'object of sneers and widespread calumny', this oppositional, outsider status worked to mobilise particular sections of society disenchanted by a patronising and increasingly alien establishment stance on issues that were central to their social identities.<sup>100</sup> As Kenneth Thompson has argued, the loosening hold of 'Victorian morality' had 'a particularly strong impact on the precariously balanced lower middle class from which Mrs Whitehouse and many of her supporters came'.<sup>101</sup> Letters held at the NVALA archive consistently express the frustration of members at being patronised by both politicians and the BBC. Hugh Greene, described by Brian Walden as the establishment embodied, is said by his biographer Jeremy Lewis to have been 'amused by Mrs Whitehouse', whom he regarded as 'an absurd and reactionary embodiment of the lower middle classes at their primmest and most narrow minded'.<sup>102</sup> Alienation from the BBC is likely to have been particularly painful, given its one-time status as a bastion of middle class respectability. In the context of such anti-institutionalism, it is important to recognise that the ridicule and derision that Whitehouse endured buoyed her image as a champion of the under-represented, anti-intellectual *everyman*. Had Thatcher turned her back on Whitehouse, she would have been widely perceived as rejecting the very position upon which she had campaigned.

The Church of England dissociated itself from her activities, adding to the image of Whitehouse as a lone and heroic voice, speaking out against a 'spineless' church increasingly reluctant to espouse the traditional moral certainties that Whitehouse and her followers believed fundamental to the

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<sup>98</sup> Black, *Redefining British Politics*, p. 122.

<sup>99</sup> M. Warnock, 'Whitehouse', ODNB

<sup>100</sup> M. Caulfield, *Mary Whitehouse* (London, 1975), p. 134.

<sup>101</sup> K. Thompson, *Moral Panics* (London, 1998) p. 125.

<sup>102</sup> J. Lewis, *Shades of Greene: one generation of an English family* (London, 2011) p. 444.



Christian faith. In *Quite Contrary*, for example, Whitehouse recalls her disbelief at a television panel of church figures refusing to underline the basic moral unacceptability of premarital sex. A similar sense of abandonment is expressed in relation to the church's silence over her legal battle with *Gay News*. Publications such as *Honest to God* and *The Myth of God Incarnate* had undermined old theological certainties.<sup>103</sup> To many it seemed that the church was no longer interested in theology at all, instead preferring to devote its energies to issues of social justice. In response to the Bishop of Liverpool's 1984 Dibleby lecture, which addressed the social chasm between 'middle' or 'comfortable' Britain, and 'Other Britain', the *Daily Mail* complained that Sheppard had squandered an invaluable opportunity to spread the Christian message by 'talk[ing] about housing'.<sup>104</sup> In her speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1988, Thatcher urged that 'Christianity is about spiritual redemption, not social reform', and a decade earlier she had emphasised, in a speech at St Lawrence Jewry, that the 'Bible as well as the tradition of the Church tell us very little directly about political systems or social programmes'.<sup>105</sup> It should not, however, be supposed that the Church of England leadership comprised a homogenous group. The Very Rev. Edward Norman, Dean of Peterhouse College, was a vocal critic of the Church's 'politicisation'. His Reith Lectures, delivered in 1978, lamented the anti-Conservative bias of Church leaders, and his history of the Church since 1770 told the story of Anglicanism's gradual capitulation to increasingly dominant secular, left-wing ideals.<sup>106</sup> Having been impressed by a talk he gave at a meeting of the Conservative Philosophy Group, Thatcher consulted Norman in search of a Christian justification for capitalism.

Nonetheless, a 'wayward' and increasingly politicised church was a key image in Thatcherite Britain. *Faith in the City*, published in 1985, clearly positioning the Church against neo-Conservative moral orthodoxy, and the image of 'Maggie' at war with 'Butskellite Bishops' over the post-war consensus became a popular journalistic motif.<sup>107</sup> With 'secular Anglicanism', characterised by tolerance, consensus and distaste for extremities, integral to post-war political culture, the Church of England became increasingly aligned within Thatcherite discourse with other 'wet' institutions such

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<sup>103</sup> *Honest to God*, written by the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich John Robinson, was published in 1963 and became an unlikely best-seller, largely as a result of controversy it generated. Robinson argued that traditional Christian orthodoxy had become remote from the modern world, and promoted the 'radical recasting' of the 'of the most fundamental categories of [Christian] theology'. *The Myth of God Incarnate* was a collection of essays edited by the philosopher and theologian John Hick, published in 1977. The volume questioned whether 'the incarnation of God in the particular figure of Jesus' was essential to Christianity.

<sup>104</sup> 'Casting Doubt on the Christian Message of Hope', *Mail on Sunday*, 22 April 1984.

<sup>105</sup> Thatcher, Speech to General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 21 May 1988, MTFW: 107246 and Thatcher, Speech at St Lawrence Jewry, 30 March 1978, MTFW: 103522.

<sup>106</sup> E. Norman, 'The Political Christ', BBC Radio Four, 1 November 1978: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00h4q7g> and E. Norman, *Church and Society in England, 1770-1970* (Oxford, 1976).

<sup>107</sup> L. Filby, 'God and Mrs Thatcher' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2011), p. 14.

as universities and the BBC.<sup>108</sup> In the context of a flailing Labour party, and owing to enthusiastic media interest, the Church of England assumed the position of ‘unofficial opposition’. The views of the Church’s leaders, however, did not penetrate the grass roots. As an anonymous Anglican priest told the *Yorkshire Post* in 1983, ‘[The] average Anglican preaching today is rather like Guardian readers talking to Telegraph readers’.<sup>109</sup> While Church leadership turned away from the Conservative party throughout the 1980s, the Church of England membership – as Liza Filby has shown – remained loyally Conservative.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, numerous surveys commissioned throughout the 1980s indicated widespread disapproval amongst the laity about the political interventions of senior clergymen; approval was more likely to be found amongst non-Christians.<sup>111</sup> Both Whitehouse and Thatcher’s relationships with the Church of England, then, augmented their reputations as traditionalists aligned with, and prepared to defend, a grassroots Christianity. The Church of England’s ‘betrayal’ of its core, middle-class, Conservative-voting constituency helped to create a receptive audience for Thatcher’s moral elevation of enterprise culture, whilst the refusal of religious leaders to affirm traditional Christian orthodoxies encouraged support for Whitehouse’s traditionalist campaigns.

While the housewife image was intended, amongst other things, as a way of humanising Thatcher – making ‘the iron lady’ empathetic through an emphasis on universal, care-based relationships - Whitehouse’s domesticity was more commonly used to align her with the reactionary ‘law and order’ Conservatism of the 1950s and 1960s. Her domestic identity was both explicit and explicitly partisan.<sup>112</sup> This meant that ‘humanising’ commentary tended to emphasise non-domestic themes. ‘Introducing the very human Mrs Whitehouse’ for example, a comment piece featured in the ‘She-mail’ section of the *Western Mail*, removes Whitehouse from her pedestal by referring to her ‘involvement’ with a married man in her early twenties. Importantly, this is a positively conveyed

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<sup>108</sup> Arthur Marwick has defined ‘secular Anglicanism’ as the prevailing ethos of the post-war decades. Derived from ‘established Anglicanism’, Marwick argues that secular Anglicanism’s emphasis on the value of consensus, citizenship and community provided ‘stability and unity’ despite the increasingly secular nature of twentieth-century Britain. See A. Marwick, *British Society since 1945* (London, 2003), pp. ix-xi.

<sup>109</sup> Filby, ‘God and Mrs Thatcher’, p. 100.

<sup>110</sup> The Kensington and Chelsea Conservative Association wrote to the suffragan Bishop of Stepney, who vocally opposed Conservative policy, warning that he should refrain from making political statements that alienated the Church of England’s loyal adherents. As Filby argues, the Association’s point is born out with reference to the statistical information: in 1987 63% of Anglican worshippers classified themselves as supporting the Conservative Party, compared with 43% of the general population. See Filby, ‘God and Mrs Thatcher’, p. 113.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>112</sup> Thatcher’s ‘housewife’ identity was secondary to her political identity, whereas Whitehouse’s campaigning activities were presented as the outgrowth of her domesticity. Despite the fact that these activities constituted a full-time career, she remained popularly understood as a ‘housewife’.

experience, shown to have taught her that 'life is not a bowl of cherries'.<sup>113</sup> Sympathetic attempts to distil Whitehouse's 'housewife' identity emphasise the image's mixed connotations, and suggest the range of both positive and negative values that Thatcher's 'housewife' image had to negotiate. Aware of her authoritarian reputation, Whitehouse urged the publishers of *Whitehouse* to change the jacket's photograph: 'One look at the face on the cover with its hard, twisted mouth and [Christian] values are automatically, if subconsciously, associated with harshness'. She was quoted in the *Evening Gazette* as saying that it made her 'look like a Fascist'.<sup>114</sup> Her publishers refused, describing the jacket as 'a selling jacket'.<sup>115</sup> The commercialisation of her controversial status, then, suggests a 'market' beyond NVALA supporters, as interested parties vied for the right to determine what she represented. Whether seen as a figure of fun, a dangerous threat or a champion of decency, reactions to Mary Whitehouse registered ways of thinking that should be recognised as important features of the cultural climate that brought Thatcher to power.

### **Conclusion**

As I have stressed, however, Mary Whitehouse was not a comfortable figure for the new right to absorb. The apparently sympathetic relationship between Whitehouse and Thatcher encouraged the amplification of some of Thatcher's more divisive qualities. Whitehouse was largely understood through caricature, and detractors considered her a backward-looking reactionary determined to impose an out-dated and discriminatory moral framework on modernising institutions. Her frequently ridiculed 'housewife' image also indicates the political dangers associated with Thatcher's emphasis on domesticity. However, as Thatcher's elevation of 'Victorian values' demonstrates, a willingness to 'to be seen to be reactionary' could be considered a strength, and both Whitehouse and Thatcher emphasised their readiness to speak 'unfashionable' truths. Both the public profile that Whitehouse was able to develop and popular interest in Thatcher's 'Victorian values' demonstrate contemporary concern for moral issues. The ideological differences between Whitehouse and Thatcher had little impact on the public image of their relationship, which emphasised shared 'suburban' qualities, whether positively or negatively conceived. Thatcher's handling of Whitehouse emphasises the discrepancy between her moralising rhetoric and her willingness to legislate on moral issues. However, far from suggesting the superficial irrelevance of Thatcher's moralistic stance, this emphasises the importance of tone and style to the character of Thatcher's leadership. As Raphael Samuel argued, 'as a political leader, [she] was happiest in the role

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<sup>113</sup> 'Introducing the Very Human Mrs Whitehouse', *Western Mail*, 29 April 1976

<sup>114</sup> *Evening Gazette*, Middlesbrough, 4 October 1979

<sup>115</sup> Macmillan to Whitehouse, 12 September 1979, NVALA archive, box 76.

of an evangelist confronting the country with uncomfortable truths'.<sup>116</sup> Thatcher's traditionalism may have been a matter of 'style', more than 'substance', but it is the contention of this thesis that the political significance and historical value of style should not be underestimated.

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<sup>116</sup> R. Samuel, *Island Stories, Theatres of Memory Volume II* (London, 1998), p. 339.

## ii. Shirley Williams

In 1980, 'comparison and contrast' between Margaret Thatcher and Shirley Williams was described by journalist William Wolf as 'inevitable'.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the frequency with which journalists considered these two high-profile political women comparatively, this was always in passing; the only sustained comparative analysis has been undertaken by Melanie Phillips, also a journalist, in her book *The Divided House*. Published shortly before Williams left the Labour party to join the 'gang of four' in founding the Social Democratic Party, it is a comparison that warrants reconsideration.

Understanding Thatcher's public image – and particularly the extent to which this image was either 'exceptional' or 'typical' – requires an understanding of the conventions by which female politicians of this period were popularly understood. Common themes in the representation of Williams and Thatcher, therefore, will work to redress sweeping assumptions of Thatcher's 'exceptionality', as described in the introduction to this chapter. Comparison with Williams also demonstrates the extent to which public images need to be assessed in the context of the gendered assumptions of political parties. The party-political placement of women, in terms of the gendered power balance, party structure and the status of 'women's issues', as well as the more nebulous issue of representational 'space' afforded to women within the broader party image, combine to powerfully shape the public images of women that operate within these party-political structures. Through comparison of Thatcher and Williams, therefore, I will consider the Labour, Social Democratic and Conservative parties as gendered environments, allowing for a richer understanding of the tensions and anxieties that surrounded gender across the political spectrum.

I will first examine attitudes towards women and 'women's issues', including the status of 'feminism', within both the Labour Party and the Social Democratic Party, before considering Williams' background, career and public image. Examining the possible reasons behind Williams' failure to reach the political heights that were expected of her will suggest factors that contributed to Thatcher's success.

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Despite having left the Labour Party in 1981 in opposition to what she believed to be its undemocratic extremism, Williams' long standing Labour affiliation makes it useful to begin by considering the ideological history of gender within this party. As Martin Francis contends, the relationship between gender and the Labour party is 'complex and ambiguous'.<sup>2</sup> Though Mary

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<sup>1</sup> W. Wolff, 'Will Shirley Williams Take the Right Road', *Now*, 25 July 1980.

<sup>2</sup> M. Francis, 'Labour and Gender' in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo ed., *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), p.191.

Honeyball, a Labour MEP and one-time chair of the Greater London Labour Party's Women's Committee, has described Labour as 'the natural political home for those wanting to improve the position of women across the board', this suggestion of an historic alliance between women and the Labour party fails to acknowledge Labour's alignment with a culture of heroic masculinity and male-dominated trade unions often hostile to women. As Stephen Brooke has argued, in the mid-century context of anxiety over the effects of affluence on working class identity, the only acceptable form of femininity came to be represented by the shapeless, working-class 'mam'.<sup>3</sup> Only once desexualised, and stripped of a more complex femininity, could women be 'used as a cipher for the integrity of the working-class home'.<sup>4</sup> The late twentieth-century proliferation of an anti-feminist 'Right-wing Woman' stereotype has resulted in default assumptions concerning Labour's amenability to 'women's issues'.<sup>5</sup> Whilst the rigid typology of womanhood that emerged in a Conservative context may not have had a Labour, or socialist, parallel, the parameters of acceptable womanhood remained historically narrow within the Labour party. Although Labour has always been 'more than a party of the organised, male working class', a reluctance to cede ground to 'feminist' or pro-woman agendas is a marked feature of the Party's first hundred years.<sup>6</sup> Whilst equal pay for equal work first became an election pledge in 1918, it was not until 1969 that the Labour government was willing to legislate on the matter. In 1967 the response of the party's National Executive Committee [NEC] to mounting frustration towards the leadership's inattention to the matter was to suppress it, by forbidding discussions of equal pay at party conferences for three years. As with their Conservative equivalents, the Labour women's sections were afforded only an advisory role. The Women's Advisory Committee was not granted powers to initiate policy, and women's sections did not directly elect their NEC representatives, despite this privilege being afforded the Young Socialists. Women's conferences were considered so insignificant that it was not until the 1980s that they came to be properly minuted.<sup>7</sup> A report prepared by the Labour Women's Advisory Committee and presented to the Labour Party Commission of Enquiry in 1980 outlines members' dissatisfaction with the culture surrounding their contribution.<sup>8</sup> The authors argue that 'there is a general feeling by the women that their work and activities are taken for granted and not treated seriously', a feeling

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<sup>3</sup> M. Honeyball, *Parliamentary Pioneers: Labour Women MPs 1918-1945* (Chatham: 2015), p.147.

<sup>4</sup> S. Brooke, 'Gender and Working Class Identity in Britain during the 1950s', *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2001), p. 788.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Bridget Christie's skit on Tory feminism in her stand up show *War Donkey*, which debuted at the Edinburgh festival in 2012. Christie mocks the recent trend among Conservative women to be photographed wearing a T-shirt stating 'This is what a feminist looks like'.

<sup>6</sup> Francis, 'Labour and Gender', p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.196.

<sup>8</sup> A Labour Party Commission of Enquiry was set up to investigate constitutional reforms proposed by Tony Benn to reduce the independence of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and give more power to Labour party activists.

augmented by their 'advisory' title and lack of direct influence on the NEC. Although the authors recognise that the 'weak position of women' within the Labour party was not the result of 'direct discrimination', they argued that it reflected broader traditions of the party and of society at large.<sup>9</sup> Further to this, Labour's failure to consider the perspectives of women both within the party and beyond it is used to explain the Conservative party's success amongst women voters.

While party structure, which Honeyball describes as perpetuating conceptions of women as an 'optional extra', is frequently cited in explanations of the marginalisation of 'women's issues' in the Labour party, reference to structure alone can obscure broader ambivalence about the status and value of 'feminism', the relationship between 'feminism' and 'socialism', and the type of contribution expected of women.<sup>10</sup> From the 1920s to the 1960s, few female Labour MPs regarded themselves as feminists, with Edith Summerskill – whom Williams regarded as a role model – as a notable exception. This was partly a result of the belief that the middle-class exponents of feminism had little to offer working-class women. Jennie Lee, daughter of a miner and Labour MP for Cannock from 1945 to 1970, was invoking a popular caricature when in 1945 she observed that feminist groups always seemed to end up discussing the 'problems of finding, or keeping, domestic servants'.<sup>11</sup> Whilst many Labour MPs sought to advance 'women's' causes, and were particularly successful in shaping the welfare state, these were infrequently discussed as specifically 'feminist' initiatives. Rather, they were regarded as part of the wider socialist project of emancipation. Equal pay, for example, was defended as a means of preventing women from being forced into the labour market as 'backlegs'. In a profile of Labour women elected to parliament in 1970, Lena Jeger, MP for Holborn and St Pancras, claimed that issues surrounding equal pay, widows pensions and consumer protection were 'about social justice rather than feminism'.<sup>12</sup> As this suggests, 'sexual difference in the discourses... of the Labour party was rarely disentangled from a larger matrix of identities', most significantly derived from social class.<sup>13</sup> It should also be recognised that whilst she retained the view for longer than many of her Labour contemporaries, Thatcher was not alone in claiming to believe that feminism had ceased to be of relevance in post-war British society. In 1952 the author Margherita Laski described 'rights for women, so far as my generation is concerned' as 'a dead issue'.<sup>14</sup> Barbara Castle, on returning from a rally commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage, confided in her diary her frustration with 'the elderly or earnest' women who attended,

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<sup>9</sup> 'Report of the National Conference of Labour Women', 1980, Labour Party Archive, People's History Museum.

<sup>10</sup> Honeyball, *Parliamentary Pioneers*, p.xxi.

<sup>11</sup> J.Lee quoted in Francis, 'Labour and Gender', p.203.

<sup>12</sup> *Labour Weekly*, July 1970, p.108.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p.205.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in M.Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (London, 1992), p.285.

and claimed to believe that it was 'time we stopped thinking in these women v men terms'.<sup>15</sup> In a phrase that could be mistaken as Thatcher's, Castle is quoted by Elizabeth Vallance as claiming to think of herself 'as an MP, not as a female MP'.<sup>16</sup> A desire to avoid being pigeon holed as a 'woman politician' arguably encouraged Castle's interest in economic and industrial matters. Even as a local councillor she had rejected the traditional woman's seat on the Maternity Committee, in favour of a position within Highways and Public Works.<sup>17</sup> A similar motivation perhaps inspired Thatcher's specialisation in tax law, as well as an early emphasis on her scientific background. As she told the *Sunday Times* in 1974, in a profile of women returned to the House, 'there are too few people interested in the science side [of education and science]. Fuel and power is a very fascinating area'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in an article focusing specifically on women, Thatcher gave the typically 'feminine' ministry of Education a decidedly 'masculine' twist. Having won the 1979 general election, Thatcher was keen to be recognised as Britain's first prime minister to have been awarded a science degree, whilst refusing attention premised on her gender.<sup>19</sup>

Shirley Williams also deliberately eschewed a feminist label, explaining this, like Laski and Castle, in generational terms. In April 1960, she explicitly denied being a feminist on the grounds that it was 'a matter of generation', and in March 1966 she told the *Daily Telegraph* that there was very little prejudice against women 'compared with yesteryear'.<sup>20</sup> Williams would come to revise these early affirmations of equality in her autobiography, published in 2009, in which she recalls even the geography of the House of Commons as testifying to her 'secondary status', and Castle later admitted her regret at having neglected Labour's women's sections. On one level this emphasises the extent to which feminist identification was considered electorally unwise even for left-wing women at this time. The apparent 'coming together' of socialism and feminism that happened in the 1970s context of a (primarily) socialist-feminist Women's Liberation Movement should not obscure a long history of tension surrounding the status of women and 'women's issues'. Moreover, this also indicates the instability of feminism as a term of identification. Castle and Williams' refusal to label themselves as 'feminists' suggests the inability of the term 'feminist', as then understood, to reflect either their political agendas in relation to women, or their conceptions of their own identities as women operating in the public sphere. This does not, however, imply a lack of concern for the plight of women. Consulting the records of Castle and Williams reveals their enduring concern for

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<sup>15</sup> Castle, quoted in Perkins, *The Red Queen*, p. 334.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Vallance, E. Vallance, 'Women MEPs and Gender Equality Policy' in M. Buckley and M. Anderson eds., *Women Equality and Europe* (London, 1988), p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> Phillips, *The Divided House: women at Westminster* (London, 1980), p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Women of Our Choice', *Sunday Times*, 19 May 1974.

<sup>19</sup> C. Moore, *Volume I*, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Williams quoted in Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, p. 285, and Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 223.



‘women’s issues’. The Equal Pay Act that Castle pushed through parliament in 1970, for example, has been widely celebrated as a ‘feminist’ effort. However, judging the ‘feminist’ credentials of past politicians by contemporary standards tends to imply a stability of meaning that the history of feminism disproves. Multiple ‘feminisms’ exist simultaneously, as well as there being general shifts of meaning over time, as the frequently used ‘wave’ metaphor suggests. Indeed, the ‘feminist’ label was eschewed by significant sections of the Women’s Liberation Movement, who regarded the term – like Castle, Williams, Thatcher and Laski had done – as tied to the activities of a past generation. ‘Women’s Liberation’ was coined to denote something ‘new’ – a break from what had been before. As Martin Pugh has argued, feminist organisations of the 1930s continued to be led by women who had ‘served their apprenticeships in public life’ in the Edwardian and Victorian periods, increasing perceptions of their ideals as being generationally out of place.<sup>21</sup> A number of recent publications have demonstrated the continuing efforts of feminist activists between the so-called first and second ‘waves’ of feminist activity, but the comparatively low profile of ‘feminism’ between 1928 and 1968 is undisputed. By the 1950s older feminists such as Edith Summerskill and Margery Corbett-Ashby had become isolated figures, and, as Shiela Rowbotham’s *A Century of Women* has claimed, the majority of women ‘wanted to be accepted for individual competence rather than as representatives of their sex. Special treatment was regarded as patronising and demeaning’.<sup>22</sup> The desire for equality with men based on merit alone, manifest in Castle’s desire to be regarded as ‘an MP, not as a woman’, was not in itself an ‘un’ or ‘anti’ feminist position, but rather reflects the attitudes of a post-suffrage, pre-Women’s Liberation generation. For Anthony Howard, it was by ‘taking on men on equal terms’ that Castle paved the way for a female Prime Minister; her ‘real memorial’, as he put it, would seem to be a feminist one.<sup>23</sup> Within this context it is perhaps unsurprising that political women such as Castle, Thatcher and Williams, born in 1910, 1925 and 1930 respectively, were reluctant to present themselves as feminists.

If the Conservative Party operated as an ‘old boys club’, with the Carlton Club offering Thatcher only honorary membership, so too did Labour. Williams was never invited to join the Reform Club, which remained segregated until 1981, nor the more selective Party clubs for ‘coming young men’, such as The Group.<sup>24</sup> XYZ, a private club that brought together party intellectuals over dinner, might be expected to have invited Williams, who was by birth, marriage and personal accomplishment a

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<sup>21</sup> M. Pugh, ‘Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism’ in H. Smith ed., *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, 1990), p. 144.

<sup>22</sup> S. Rowbotham, *A Century of Women* (London, 1997), p. 284

<sup>23</sup> A. Howard, ‘Barbara Castle’, ODNB

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p.150.

recognised member of the intellectual elite.<sup>25</sup> It did not. The Fawcett Lecture that she gave at Bedford College in London in 1979 argued that gender equality within parliament would only be possible if it became 'less of a club and more of a workplace'.<sup>26</sup> Though the Labour Party would become increasingly aligned with feminist politics as the 1980s progressed, a shift that women's sections within the SDP condemned as superficial and driven by publicity concerns, change was slow and uneven. Harriet Harman, for example, elected in 1982, was accused of not being 'clubbable'.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, on challenging the hours of the House, which started at two in the afternoon and frequently ran past midnight, Harman was told by male MPs that this would leave them 'prey to the vice of Soho':

When I remonstrated with them, I was accused of being unsisterly and not caring about other women – because even if MPs were not sinning, their wives would suffer because they would believe that they were.<sup>28</sup>

That this was considered a legitimate argument, while the need to care for one's children was not, forcefully illustrates the gender dynamics of Westminster. Williams' autobiography recalls how she would drive home for her daughter's bedtime, before returning to the House for the 10pm vote, and a couple more hours of work.<sup>29</sup> Maintaining this schedule was made possible only by the assistance of friends, family and paid-for domestic help.

In the Labour party, as in the Conservative party, women were placed in less winnable parliamentary seats. A cursory review of the profiles of female candidates featured in *Labour Weekly* throughout the 1970s, and *Labour Woman* before this, reveals how frequently women were forced to be 'realistic about their chances', given huge Conservative majorities in the constituencies for which they were chosen. While Williams' social connections may have helped her to enter politics, she, like Thatcher, had to wait ten years before entering parliament. At 23 years old she was invited to stand as Labour candidate for Harwich in a by-election necessitated by the elevation of Joseph Stanley Holmes, the sitting National Liberal MP, to the peerage. Holmes, who had held the seat since 1935, was predictably replaced by Conservative and Liberal candidate Julian Ridsdale. It was not until 1964 that she entered the Commons as MP for Hitchin, and even this came as a surprise to many. As Williams recalls, 'The field of contenders for the candidature was rather weak, because

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<sup>25</sup> Williams taught at University College Ghana in 1958, where Bernard was then employed, as well as at the People's Educational Association in Accra. In 1979 she spent a short period as a Fellow of the Institute of Politics, at Harvard University, where she returned in 1988 as a professor in the Kennedy School of Government. Further to this, she was employed between 1960 and 1964 as the General Secretary of the Fabian Society.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, *The Fawcett Lecture 1979-80* (London, 1980), p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Honeyball, *Parliamentary Pioneers*, p. 150.

<sup>28</sup> H. Harman, 'Hours of the House', *Labour Weekly*, 14 January 1983, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Climbing*, p. 146.

Hitchin, with its 4000 strong Tory majority, was not regarded as a likely win for Labour.<sup>30</sup> Potential offered by the rapid growth within the constituency of the new town of Stevenage, however, which was 'tailor made for Harold Wilson's message about the white heat of technology', had been overlooked, and constituency agent Jack Ward encouraged Williams to present her gender as evidence of the party's progressiveness. As a young woman, she was felt to be particularly capable of identifying with the need for a 'new Britain'.<sup>31</sup> This was not a representative experience, however, and as late as 1988 the modest proposal that there should be a woman on every parliamentary shortlist was carried at the party conference against the express wishes of the NEC.<sup>32</sup> The step to introduce quotas in 1989, for constituency and trade union sections of the NEC, as well as in the shadow cabinet, was controversial, and strongly resisted by a number of local parties. While, then, Labour may always have been 'more than a party of the organised, male working class', its 1918 claim to being 'the women's party' was premature.<sup>33</sup> Williams' claim in 1972 that women faced disadvantage within the Conservative party only, should be regarded more as an attempt to mobilise conceptions of Conservative traditionalism for electoral advantage, than as a statement of fact.<sup>34</sup>

If the place of women within the Labour party was complex, so too was the relationship between the Labour party and the female electorate. As has been considered in chapter one, the Conservative party's advantage amongst women was recognised by the Labour party, and constituted a key concern of communications strategists from the 1950s onwards. Only in two elections from 1945 to 1970 did Labour have majorities among female voters, and they were never as substantial as those of the Conservative party in 1951, 1955, 1959 and 1964.<sup>35</sup> This gendered disadvantage is reiterated throughout the pages of *Labour Weekly*, and explained by reference to women's lack of paid employment. Their lack of exposure to the hard realities of working life was thought to have preserved their conservatism. Given that 47% of married women worked outside of the home by 1981, often in poorly regulated and badly paid part-time roles, this seems an inadequate conclusion.<sup>36</sup> The magazine put the onus for change on women activists, who were instructed to recruit for their local women's sections more vigorously. Before the 1979 general election, the Labour party recognised that even traditional Labour voters were liable to vote Conservative. Polls conducted by MORI on 1 and 2 of April in that year suggested that of women

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.143.

<sup>32</sup> Francis, 'Labour and Gender', p. 198.

<sup>33</sup> 1918 Labour party general election manifesto, quoted in Honeyball, *Parliamentary Pioneers*, p. xv

<sup>34</sup> 'Women in Politics', Radio 4, 14 January 1972, clip available: [www.bbc.co.uk/archive/thatcher/6310.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/thatcher/6310.shtml)

<sup>35</sup> A.Black and S.Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender, 1951-1966', *Journal of British Studies*, 36, 4, (1997), p. 420.

<sup>36</sup> Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, p. 288.

from the skilled and unskilled manual working class, 23% were undecided compared with 14% of women from the professional, managerial and white collar middle class.<sup>37</sup>

The Conservative party is well known for its effectiveness in mobilising the housewife vote, but it is rarely recognised that the Labour party sought to appeal to women in a remarkably similar way. From 1960 to 1966 not a single Labour pamphlet made reference to either a single or married working woman, despite a marked numerical increase in the latter.<sup>38</sup> Numerous covers of *Labour Woman* used comparative images of basic food stuffs to demonstrate the effect of Conservative-induced inflation on the housewife's budget. In March 1956, for example, a bag of flour is compared with half a bag of flour, a full milk bottle with a bottle two-thirds full. A caption claims that 'Housewives, more than anybody else, know exactly what the rising cost of living means in terms of everyday necessities'.<sup>39</sup> In both 1964 and 1974, party political broadcasts showed Shirley Williams comparing the cost of groceries bought before and after Conservative periods in office. Such tangible illustrations of the pound's weakness were of course integral to Thatcher's 'shopping basket' election, and call to mind specifically her parading of red and blue shopping bags; the blue one full to bursting, the red half empty. As secretary of state for prices and consumer protection, a position that Peter Hennessy argues Wilson created in order to give Williams a seat in the cabinet, she was cast as the 'housewife's champion'. Whilst a *Financial Times* journalist considered this a 'booby-trapped' appointment that reflected the tendency of male politicians to think of women 'in terms of the shopping basket', Tony Benn complained that she was 'built up as the great heroine: "Shirley keeps our food prices down, Shirley protects our shopping baskets"' and so when she is in fact doing nothing but doling out money to industry'.<sup>40</sup> That so 'modern' a woman as Shirley Williams could be convincingly cast in a 'housewife' role emphasises the strength and endurance of the association between women and domesticity.

As Amy Black and Stephen Brooke have argued, however, a number of factors inhibited Labour's ability to appeal to 'housewives', read as a byword for women, as effectively as the Conservative party had proved itself able to do. The mid century emergence of a 'gender gap' is an important moment in the development of party attitudes towards women, and its legacy looms large in Labour strategy documents. Labour's post-war rhetoric of 'fair shares' spoke of austerity, and Labour policies sat uncomfortably with the culture of affluence that developed in the 1950s. Black and Brooke argued that at the root of Labour's inability to appeal to women was a 'highly ambivalent' attitude towards affluence and consumerism more broadly, given that party policy was weighted in

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<sup>37</sup> 'Among women there is everything to fight for', *Labour Weekly*, 13 April 1979, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Black and Brooke, 'The Labour Party', p. 441.

<sup>39</sup> *Labour Woman*, February 1956.

<sup>40</sup> *Financial Times*, 6 March 1974 and Tony Benn, *Against the Tide: diaries 1973-1976* (London, 1990), 212.

favour of producers. It was also heavily influenced by a deeply moralistic tradition that sat uncomfortably with the sexual freedoms won by women in the post-war years. These were not problems that evaporated as the party's affiliation with 'women's lib' began to develop in the late 1960s. As Beatrix Campbell has argued, faced with a growing number of single mothers in the 1970s, who 'fitted uncomfortably into the party's traditional and patriarchal conceptions of domesticity', the Labour party found itself 'bewildered'.<sup>41</sup> That the Social Democratic Party chose to position itself as the party for gender equality persuasively suggests dissatisfaction with the extent to which Labour had championed this cause.

## II

Unburdened by the century of tension between feminism and socialism that had afflicted the Labour party, the SDP was able to be more decisive in its championing of a 'feminist' agenda. Emphasising the failure of both of the main parties to tackle gender inequality became a key campaign tactic, and 'a better deal for women' was explicitly cited as one of the initial twelve tasks of the party leadership. The SDP archives, held at the University of Essex, testify to the perceived electoral opportunity offered by 'women's issues'. A party communications notice advised that 'the SDP [could] 'afford' to be different', this being 'one of the expectations people [had] of it'.<sup>42</sup> Being 'serious about women's issues' was 'part of the SDP's claim to be different'.<sup>43</sup> The European Community's record on gender equality, which Thatcher presented as statist intrusion, brought together two of the party's key commitments.<sup>44</sup> Preparatory notes for a 'keynotes speech on women' emphasise the Conservative government's refusal to rectify inadequacies in the 1970 Equal Pay Act identified by the European Court, while simultaneously presenting Labour's championing of 'women's issues' as insupportable rhetoric, given the power of a trades union block vote concerned only with the needs of a predominantly male membership in full time employment.<sup>45</sup> Outward looking and modern, the SDP aimed to offer an alternative to the retrograde insularity and claustrophobic traditionalism of both Labour and the Conservatives.

This is not, however, to suggest that they achieved – or claimed to achieve - a truly egalitarian party. Initial analysis of SDP membership emphasised both its whiteness and its maleness, as well as an overwhelming middle-classness, and the equal representation clause, which would have seen an

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<sup>41</sup> The demonization of single mothers emerged as an important element of New Labour's public image. See M. Bevir, *New Labour: a critique* (London, 2005) p. 68.

<sup>42</sup> 'A strategy for communications', undated, SDP archive, University of Essex, 'Communications committee papers and minutes March 1981-December 1986'.

<sup>43</sup> Wendy Buckley, 'notes on a keynotes speech on women', undated, 'Women for Social Democracy', p.2, box 34A.

<sup>44</sup> The SDP had been formed largely in opposition to left-wing elements within the Labour party which sought to withdraw Britain from Europe.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

equal number of men and women compete for seats, was rejected by postal ballot in 1981, demonstrating that hostility towards 'positive discrimination' was endemic across the three major political parties.<sup>46</sup> Reflecting on 18 months of existence, Wendy Buckley, assistant policy coordinator, claimed that 'in the SDP Green Papers published so far there is little sign of an awareness of women's issues', a consequence she attributed to the 'overwhelmingly male' composition of SDP policy groups which comprised of an 'expert' class that few women had been able to penetrate.<sup>47</sup> Simultaneously, however, the party recognised that 'men's reaction to 'feminism' and 'egalitarianism' remains[ed] suspicious'.<sup>48</sup> It was therefore advised in a Green Paper on Women that care should be taken not to 'frighten men voters off by promising to push more women into the labour market or give women "privileges"'. The party's seemingly genuine and broad-based support for gender equality was therefore tempered by fear of male hostility towards 'feminist' programmes, suggesting the narrow parameters within which the politics of gender took place. As already noted, the Labour party too was slow to adopt any sort of minimum criteria for female representation. In this light, Thatcher's determination to distance herself from a pro-woman agenda appears to reflect popular scepticism towards affirmative action across the party-political spectrum. This is not to deny that such scepticism was more pronounced within the Conservative party - as shown in chapter one, the mere fact of Thatcher's sex was enough for some Conservative Party members to accusingly brand her a feminist. But it does emphasise the need to analyse Thatcher's stance in a broader political context. That the SDP, a left-of-centre party vocal in its commitment to advancing gender equality, felt compelled to restrain its public statements on women in view of male suspicion, suggests the political impracticality of a female Conservative Prime Minister endorsing anything close to 'feminist' causes.

Despite claiming that Williams was integral to the SDP's emphasis on gender equality, her biographer Mark Peel denies that she was ever a feminist, apparently taking her at her word, which was given at a time when it would have been politically risky to say otherwise. Questionably, he cites her isolation from female Labour MPs as 'proof'.<sup>49</sup> As Catherine Blackford has argued, however, developments in feminist theory have allowed the possibility of including within the history of feminism those who did not present themselves as feminists.<sup>50</sup> Some have gone so far as to suggest the definition may stretch to include Thatcher. As untenable as this may seem, it indicates the flexibility and changeability of 'feminism' as a concept, and emphasises the need to clearly define

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<sup>46</sup> 'Socially distinguished people', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 November 1981, and Buckley, 'notes', p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Buckley, 'notes', p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> 'Draft green paper on women', 9 March 1983, SDP archive, box 34A.

<sup>49</sup> Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 179.

<sup>50</sup> C. Blackford, 'Wives as citizens and watchdogs of equality: postwar British feminists' in Jim Fyrth ed., *Labour's Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-51* (London, 1995), p.59.

the terms of its use. As previously argued, the refusal to emphasise gender as an integral part of professional identity could be regarded as a powerfully ‘feminist’ position. Williams’ relationship to feminism was not straightforward, but Peel’s conclusion appears unfounded.<sup>51</sup> Rather, Williams was not an advocate of Women’s Liberation feminism, which increasingly presented domesticity and the home as the seat of women’s subordination. The equality the SDP would claim to offer women explicitly recognised their dual roles both within and beyond the home, and appeals to ‘working family women’, a phrase Williams first used in a commons debate in December 1982, became a common theme within party literature.<sup>52</sup> The SDP opposed the Labour party’s ‘long term goal [of] childcare provided by the state’, believing that such a ‘panacea’ was ‘misguided’, and that a more flexible solution was called for.<sup>53</sup> They argued that neither Labour nor the Conservatives appreciated that most women did not want to make ‘a choice between working for pay and working for [their] families and communities’. Such an approach challenged Labour’s disregard for the domestic sphere as well as Thatcher’s elevation of it.<sup>54</sup>

### III

Alongside Margaret Thatcher, Shirley Williams was one of the most recognisable female politicians of the 1970s and 1980s. Her career, however, followed a markedly different trajectory. Williams never re-entered the House of Commons after losing her Crosby seat in the 1983 general election – a seat she refused to abandon despite recognising that boundary changes made her re-election ‘hopeless’.<sup>55</sup> Suppression of personal ambition may suggest why, despite being frequently cited as prime-ministerial material, Williams never quite rose to the political heights expected of her. Whereas Thatcher, out of relative obscurity seized the opportunity to assume party leadership,

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<sup>51</sup> Contemporary journalistic debate as to Williams’ feminist status testifies to this problem of, and investment in, definition. For Anne Perkins, of *The Guardian*, Williams is ‘the most serious feminist of her generation’; Sarah Vine, writing for the *Daily Mail*, condemns her as ‘just a doormat’. Germaine Greer’s ‘Women in parliament’, included in Andrew Duff’s collection of essays in honour of Shirley Williams, seems tacitly to suggest Greer’s belief in Williams’ feminism. Perkins, ‘Feminism in Politics Needs to be Serious’, *Guardian* online, 28 April 2010, Vine, ‘Feminist? No, Shirley Williams is just a Doormat’, *Daily Mail* online, 14 January 2015, Duff ed., *Making a Difference: essays in honour of Shirley Williams* (London, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> On 8 December 1982 Williams emphasised the government’s failure to ‘display any sympathy for the Prime Minister’s peers and contemporaries who also happen to be working, family women’, arguing that the exclusion of married women who are not registered for benefit from the government’s job splitting and job sharing schemes denied them an ‘almost perfect solution’ to the problem posed by women’s domestic responsibilities.

<sup>53</sup> Buckley, ‘notes’, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> A draft green paper for women presents Labour’s view of women as being as outdated as the Conservative’s: ‘Labour policy seem still to be following Trade Union’s stereotype egalitarianism; Labour feminism still derives mainly from Marx and Engels’ view that work in the home is a kind of slavery’. Whilst mid-century Labour policy towards women had been shaped by pro-natalism, vocal elements within the left came to reject domesticity from the 1970s onwards. In 1984, for example, Paula Watson and Vidya Anarid argued for comprehensive childcare on the implicit grounds that a woman’s desire to stay at home could only be the result of socially constructed guilt.

<sup>55</sup> S. Williams to Peter Metcalf, 13 September 1982, quoted in Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 333.

Williams twice failed to act decisively when leadership was within her reach. As Peel suggests, this should not be understood as the result of indecision alone, but rather reflects a wider ambivalence about the obligations imposed by leadership. In her autobiography, Williams suggests that it was a lack of ruthlessness and self confidence, as well as the absence of a stable and supportive spouse, that inhibited her political achievement. Whereas ‘battling’ Barbara Castle might be aligned with Thatcher stylistically, and both women have been described by Sara Childs as examples of the ‘terrifying termagant’ female stereotype, Shirley Williams was an altogether different breed.<sup>56</sup> As a frustrated colleague once complained, ‘that woman looks for a compromise before she has even come up against a difficulty’.<sup>57</sup> As such, a comparison of Margaret Thatcher and Shirley Williams will consider not only the effect of ideological difference on public image, but also the effect of differences in personal and political style.

Both Thatcher and Williams spent periods as secretary of state for education, while Williams held the equally ‘feminine’ ministry of prices and consumer protection. Both women were also cast – though to differing degrees – in a ‘housewife’ role.<sup>58</sup> Although Thatcher reportedly rated Williams highly enough to tell her they were the only women that mattered, and Peel suggests a degree of camaraderie inspired by a determination not to let the male majority ‘get the better of [them]’, solidarity should not be overstated. Thatcher was keen to exploit Williams’ miss-step in supporting the Grunwick strike, and was publicly critical of the weakness she felt the defectors’ abandoning of the Labour party revealed: ‘they should have stayed within and fought their way through’.<sup>59</sup> Although there is little indication of what Thatcher thought of Williams on a more personal level, Williams has on occasion discussed Thatcher. In a documentary aired in 1970 she perceptively anticipated future developments, noting that Thatcher’s ‘combination of high intelligence with the fact she that she stands really rather on the right’ had resulted in her becoming ‘something of a hero figure in the Conservative party’.<sup>60</sup> Upon Thatcher’s death, Williams’ speech in the House of Lords remembered the first female prime minister’s determination, dedication and self-discipline, emphasised the ‘deeply masculine’ nature of political society in the 1960s and 1970s, and commended the ‘astonishing courage’ necessary for a woman to stand for party leadership.<sup>61</sup> It is difficult not to read into this an explanation for Williams’ failure to do so.

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<sup>56</sup> S. Childs, *Women and British Party Politics* (London, 2010), p. 141.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Wolff, ‘Will Shirley Williams’.

<sup>58</sup> Williams was repeatedly presented as a housewife by the Labour party in general election campaigns in an arguably tokenistic attempt to demonstrate an understanding of ‘the woman’s perspective’. Thatcher’s presentation as a housewife was tied rather to her personal electability.

<sup>59</sup> S. Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves* (London, 2009), p. 148 and Thatcher, TV interview for BB, 3 June 1983, MTFW: 105159

<sup>60</sup> Panorama profile of Thatcher, BBC1, first broadcast 27 July 1970.

<sup>61</sup> House of Lords, ‘Death of a Member’, 9 April 2013 c1148.



Williams' formative years were quite different from Thatcher's, and her rejection of feminism (as a form of public identification, at least) is particularly striking given her parentage. Her mother was the feminist and pacifist author Vera Brittain. A member of the Six Point Group, Brittain was an equality or 'old' feminist who opposed Eleanor Rathbone's emphasis on 'a woman's point of view'. She married only upon agreement that her own career would be given equal status to her husband's. As Williams recalls in her autobiography, Brittain was the family's main breadwinner, and Shirley and her older brother were brought up to respect her work. Although Williams remembers Vera as a 'distant' parent – anxious, formal and committed to her political causes – she 'learn[ed] to love her'. This, however, was 'as an adult, a beloved friend, rather than as a child loves its mother'.<sup>62</sup> Her father, George Catlin, was a successful political scientist, and spent prolonged periods of time in the United States throughout Shirley's childhood. He held a lectureship at Cornell until 1935, and continued to travel beyond this. Deeply influenced by his mother, Edith Kate, Catlin too was a feminist. Edith had supported the National Union of Women's Suffrage, and later abandoned a restrictive marriage to pursue charity work in the east end of London. Of her father's feminism, Williams has argued that it was 'not an intellectual construct. Quite simply, he saw no reason to think that women were lesser beings than men'.<sup>63</sup> Williams' childhood home was shared with her parents' friend, the feminist, socialist and pacifist writer Winifred Holtby, until her death in 1935. This was considered an 'odd arrangement' by some of the family's acquaintances, and generated speculation that the relationship between Brittain and Holtby was a lesbian one.<sup>64</sup> Williams remembers 'Aunty Winifred' affectionately, her joyousness providing a counterbalance to Brittain's solemnity.

Having such parents, and moving in their social circles, presented Williams with connections and opportunities unimaginable to someone from Thatcher's background. Williams' autobiography, for example, recalls Jawaharlal Nehru visiting her parents for dinner, and meeting Herbert Morrison in an air raid shelter when bombing interrupted a party they had attended on Park Lane.<sup>65</sup> Morrison, who had helped Ellen Wilkinson, Edith Summerskill and Barbara Castle break into political life, is remembered by Williams as a 'mentor' during the wartime and early post-war years. Her 'easy going charm', cultivated among the intellectual elite, enabled her to thrive socially at Oxford, where she attended Somerville College four years after Thatcher. Her university experience, however, was very different from that of the grocer's daughter, whom Janet Vaughan, principal of Somerville college,

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<sup>62</sup> Williams, *Climbing* p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7 and p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15 and p. 59.

described as having ‘had nothing to contribute’ at social events, thereby justifying her exclusion.<sup>66</sup> As Moore’s biography describes, Thatcher’s Somerville contemporaries remember her as distant; committed to her studies and socially diffident.<sup>67</sup> Conversely, Shirley attended enough social events to rouse the concern of her mother, who saw her daughter’s popularity as a inhibiting her academic performance.<sup>68</sup> Vaughan was particularly fond of Shirley, whose political views were more in line with Somerville’s liberal tradition, and would later join the SDP out of loyalty to her former student. Williams’ autobiography describes Vaughan as a ‘great friend’.<sup>69</sup> Deeply influenced by her medical training in the slums of Camden, Vaughan was a committed socialist, and there is some evidence to suggest that her work on malnutrition played a role in formulating ideas enshrined in the Beveridge Report.<sup>70</sup> Charles Moore has described her as ‘one of those progressives who view being Conservative as a sort of mental defect’, and while his own political views shape the tone of this denunciation, Thatcher’s Conservatism did make close relations with Vaughan unlikely.<sup>71</sup> In 1984, in a radio interview for BBC 4, Williams claimed that Vaughan’s influence prevented her ‘fall[ing] into the sort of patterns that one is meant to fall into as any sort of professional woman’.<sup>72</sup> Tellingly, perhaps, these ‘patterns’ were not interrogated by the interviewer, but the preceding description of Vaughan as having ‘a tremendous sense of humour’ suggests that a seriousness was associated with professional women that Williams found unappealing. The ease with which ‘professional women’ could be characterised indicates the stigma attached to women with professional careers. Vaughan had been a contemporary of Vera Brittain as an undergraduate at Somerville, and Williams’ autobiography suggests that it was only through her mother’s intervention that she was invited to interview at Somerville herself. Preferring to attend the London School of Economics, and having attended the interview at Somerville begrudgingly, it was Vaughan who persuaded her to take it seriously, and ultimately accept her place. The contrast with Thatcher’s determined path to Oxford is stark.

As a child Shirley had resented her parents’ professional commitments. She criticised them for failing to provide a settled ‘home life’, which meant ‘all the members of the family sitting round the fire knitting, talking and listening to the wireless’.<sup>73</sup> A letter Vera wrote to her husband in October 1946 reveals Shirley’s dissatisfaction with ‘being ‘left to nurses’’, as well as her belief in ‘the

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume 1*, p. 45.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>68</sup> Concerned that her daughter’s social schedule would compromise her degree, Brittain wrote to one of Shirley’s tutors, requesting she intervene on her behalf. See Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 77.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, *Climbing*, p. 72.

<sup>70</sup> M. Owen, ‘Dame Janet Maria Vaughan, D.B.E.’, *Biographical Memoirs* (1995), p. 490.

<sup>71</sup> Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, p. 45.

<sup>72</sup> Williams, BBC Radio 4, 5 November 1984, British Library sound archive: NP8632BW

<sup>73</sup> Brittain to Catlin 12 March 1947, quoted in Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 54.

importance of mothers bringing up their children themselves'.<sup>74</sup> Despite a substantial decline in the number of women working in domestic service across the first two decades of the twentieth century, which was a change particularly felt among middle class families, Williams' autobiography presents the employment of servants as having been a hallmark of middle-class identity throughout her childhood, suggesting the degree of privilege around which she was brought up. As a child this privilege was something she struggled with; as an adult it was used to undermine her politics, both independently and, from 1981, as a proponent of the SDP's 'champagne socialism'. In the debate over comprehensive schools Margaret Thatcher used Williams' background to present the Labour position as out of touch with the 'ordinary' people. In a Conservative party conference speech titled 'Confrontation with reality', Thatcher argued that 'people from my sort of background needed grammar schools to compete with children from privileged homes like Shirley Williams'.<sup>75</sup>

Williams' personal feelings towards domesticity are little known. They were never presented as part of her public personality, as was the case with Thatcher. As a child, she had longed for a more affectionate mother, once alleging that her parents were more interested in politics than they were in her. She claims in her autobiography to have been 'in some ways closer' to Amy and Charles Burnett, the family's cook-housekeeper and her husband, than she was to her own parents, and upon Amy's death Williams inscribed the wreath to her 'other mother'.<sup>76</sup> Despite her mother's stature, Williams aligned herself with Thatcher (and Castle) in being shaped by the influence of a father who saw no reason that gender should limit his daughter's ambition.<sup>77</sup> Upon marrying the philosopher Bernard Williams the domestic situation of their family was again unconventional by the standards of most politicians.<sup>78</sup> For fifteen years she shared a large house in Kensington with her husband, a couple they had met at Oxford University, and their children, an arrangement probably influenced by her parents' house-sharing with Winifred when she was young. Whilst it was primarily an economic decision, and Williams considered it surprising that so few people opted for a similar arrangement, it also allowed the couples to share the responsibilities of childcare.

Williams claims that three things made her life as an MP 'just about possible': a helpful husband, sharing a home with two 'devoted friends', and Mrs Curry, her daily housekeeper-cum-nanny.<sup>79</sup> Her first husband's willingness to share domestic responsibility, and take what Williams has described as an 'equal part' in the raising of their child, was considered progressive.<sup>80</sup> In 1964 Vera approvingly

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<sup>74</sup> Brittain to Catlin 4 October 1946, *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>75</sup> Thatcher, Speech to Conservative party conference, 14 October 1977, MTFW: 103443

<sup>76</sup> Williams, *Climbing*, p. 21 and Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Brittain to William 19 December 1954, quoted in Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 101.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, *Climbing*, p. 153.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

described Bernard of 'look[ing] after Becky like a mother'. Peel goes further, suggesting that his academic output suffered as a consequence of Shirley's hectic schedule.<sup>81</sup> His 'inferior' status, according to Peel, led to his being dubbed 'Mrs Williams' by the popular press, and Williams has cited press cruelty in referring to Bernard as her consort as a reason behind their divorce. Given that Bernard pursued divorce in order to marry someone else, this may be retrospective rationalisation. Nonetheless, the indication of unflattering press coverage contradicts the argument that Williams presented in *Women in Politics*, which suggested that in Britain female monarchs had normalised the idea of powerful women and male consorts.<sup>82</sup> This follows the pattern by which Denis was widely referred to as 'Mrs Thatcher', with both Shirley and Margaret – by virtue of their public success – assuming the masculine role. Following Williams' divorce, it was often quipped in the press that she 'needed a wife', by which journalists meant a supportive assistant [see figure 9].

Such media treatment, however, ignored Bernard's considerable professional successes. He won prestigious academic appointments both in the UK and abroad, as well as taking an active role in public life. He served on several commissions, including one on film censorship and pornography that has been discussed in the earlier section of this chapter. Although Bernard's decision to take up a lectureship at UCL in 1959 was encouraged by his desire to accommodate his wife's prospective parliamentary career, he was equally growing tired of the philosophy produced by Oxford and received encouragement from A. J. Ayer, a philosopher whom Bernard had known previously and much admired. At the age of forty, in 1967, he was offered the prestigious Knightsbridge professorship of philosophy at Cambridge University, a position he took despite this forcing him to spend half the week apart from his wife and daughter. The extent to which his career was limited by his wife's parliamentary responsibilities would therefore seem to be limited. The couple bought a house on the edge of Shirley's Hertfordshire constituency, which was commutable distance from Cambridge. Shirley visited Bernard here at weekends and over holiday periods, but continued to spend the majority of her time in London. Her autobiography suggests regret at failing to take her feelings of 'foreboding' surrounding this move seriously: 'Like many other reasonably happy spouses, I took my husband for granted'.<sup>83</sup> Whilst at Cambridge, Bernard fell in love with Patricia Skinner, then wife of historian Quentin Skinner and senior commissioning editor at the University of Cambridge Press. His marriage to Shirley was formally dissolved in 1974, though he had been living with Patricia in Cambridge since 1971; they married in August 1974. As a Roman Catholic Shirley

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 168.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, *Women and Politics* (London, 1980), pp. 5-6.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, *Climbing*, p. 156.

understood marriage as ‘a sacrament’ and an ‘honourable estate’.<sup>84</sup> She was badly hurt by the divorce and had offered to leave politics in order to preserve her marriage, believing that she had neglected her relationship as a result of her career. This was an interpretation echoed by the contemporary press.<sup>85</sup> In the mid 1970s a potential second marriage to Anthony King, a professor at Essex University, went unrealised, as a result of the Catholic Church’s lengthy investigation into the legitimacy of William’s first separation. This was a process she was unwilling to forgo, and upon its conclusion King had moved to the United States and met someone else. In 1987 Williams married Richard Neustadt, a political scientist based at Harvard University. All the significant men in her life are described as having been supportive and involved father figures, whether in relation to their biological children or not.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, the comparative stability that Denis Thatcher offered to Margaret Thatcher must be recognised as a considerable political advantage, not least because – as the ‘party of the family’ - it was likely to regard the publicity implications of divorce all the more seriously. Patricia Greenough, who was involved with the Dartford Conservative association in the early 1950s, suggested to Charles Moore that the association considered it wise for Thatcher’s engagement to a divorcee to be kept private, until after the 1951 general election.<sup>87</sup>

#### **IV**

Williams’ personal life was never part of her political life in the way that it was for Thatcher. Both Williams and Thatcher were mothers to young children when they entered parliament, but Thatcher did not receive widespread media attention until her children were older, giving her the flexibility to re-imagine her role in their early childhoods when it was considered expedient to present herself as a bastion of domestic wisdom. On her election to the party leadership, Carol and Mark were twenty-two. Williams, conversely, was touted as prime-ministerial material from an early stage in her parliamentary career, and received the associated media attention. She had a two-year-old daughter upon her selection as Labour candidate for Hitchin. Her domestic arrangements, however, remained largely private, which is particularly noteworthy given her presentation as the ‘housewives’ champion’. Although she would quickly become Labour’s ‘media darling’, Melanie

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>85</sup> See for example, ‘Prices Supremo Agrees to Divorce’, *Daily Mail*, 4 May 1974: ‘Mrs Williams and her husband gradually drifted apart as she concentrated more and more on politics’. In 1965 Brittain expressed concerns about Shirley’s dedication to her political work. In a letter to Catlin she claimed to ‘feel instinctively that I ought to warn her not to immerse herself too completely but no one can say such things at the right moment’. Quoted in Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 168.

<sup>86</sup> Bernard’s approach to fatherhood has already been discussed. Neustadt is described as ‘the most loving of fathers to all the disparate children he acquired’, which is a reference to his role in the raising of Williams’ brother’s children after his death. King is described as ‘a caring father figure, though he had no children of his own’. Williams, *Climbing*, p.329 and p.323.

<sup>87</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p.109.

Phillips has argued that ‘interviews with her are rarely able to dwell on the personal details of her own life, but are soon removed to the more abstract intellectual plain of her beliefs, principles and ideas’.<sup>88</sup> By refusing to politicise her domestic life, Williams avoided some of the scrutiny to which Thatcher was subjected. Indeed, Thatcher complained to the *Sunday Express* in 1972 about the comparative lack of opprobrium that Williams’ hiring of a nanny had received in the press.<sup>89</sup> This is not to say that her personal life escaped media commentary entirely, and Phillips has argued that the ease with which she was perceived by the media to manage her dual responsibilities as politician and mother alienated her from other Labour women.<sup>90</sup> In 1974 her divorce was reported, and, as mentioned previously, her public commitments were blamed. Her daughter’s private schooling was also deemed ‘news’, given Williams’ vocal opposition to grammar schools. But Williams did not play up to the role ascribed to her by the press.

Even her autobiography failed to reveal as much as her publishers had hoped, though it does at times suggest an uneasy relationship with the type of feminism that as a socialist woman she might have been expected to endorse. For example, her second husband’s first wife’s devotion is recalled affectionately: ‘she had been a traditional wife, catering for her husband’s every need. In the lovely phrase from the Old Testament, her price was far above rubies’.<sup>91</sup> She blames herself for the breakdown of her relationship with Bernard, confessing to having taken him for granted. In 1962 she decided not to contest Doncaster, a Conservative marginal, when she found out she was pregnant, despite her nomination being endorsed unanimously by the General Management Committee. She also considered resigning from the Fabian Society, something that her father despairingly put down to her desire ‘to be ‘a good wife’’.<sup>92</sup> Her Roman Catholic opposition to abortion, which was described by Vicky Randall in 1987 ‘as almost the definitive issue of contemporary feminism’, was difficult to align with the image of modernity she projected, and distanced her from female contemporaries.<sup>93</sup> The trauma of suffering four miscarriages perhaps augmented her opposition to voluntary termination, although abortion was not an issue about which she was vocal. It was, however, an issue opponents were keen to exploit, and one that – as a fledgling party – the SDP was keen to

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<sup>88</sup> Phillips, *Divided House*, p. 25.

<sup>89</sup> *Sunday Express*, 16 January 1972.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 March 1966: ‘Shirley Williams has found that she can combine politics with caring for a four-year-old (with the help of a nanny)!’ and *Shropshire Star*, 29 January 1966: ‘Shirley Williams makes light of the difficulties in being wife, mother and politician’.

<sup>91</sup> Williams, *Climbing*, p. 257.

<sup>92</sup> G. Catlin quoted in Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 123. Placing the phrase in inverted commas, Catlin signalled his distaste for the very notion of a ‘good wife’.

<sup>93</sup> V. Randall, *Woman and Politics: an international perspective* (Chicago, 1987) p. 263.

avoid.<sup>94</sup> Whilst Thatcher's religion was an integral part of her political discourse, Williams was more reticent, perhaps suggesting a recognition of the subject's volatility and perceived incompatibility with 'progressive' politics. In 1957 she had sought, and narrowly missed out on, nomination as the Labour candidate for Epping, a Conservative marginal. The local association, in a breach of rules protecting a candidates' right to religious privacy, had questioned her about her views on contraception, which at the time she believed it was her Catholic obligation to oppose.

Williams' book, *God and Caesar*, subtitled 'personal reflections on politics and religion', was not published until 2003. Concerned primarily with the modern, political application of a vague if evocatively described religious sentiment, its tone is far from introspective. *God and Caesar* explains her religious faith as a product of the 'almost pantheistic love' she feels for 'His creation', combined with a belief that she 'should embrace Christianity in its strongest form. It was the huge claims and huge demands made that drew me to the Church of Rome'.<sup>95</sup> The particulars of her religious views are said to be 'not particularly well formed'.<sup>96</sup>

Thatcher presented her strength and determination as a product of Christian faith in the moral superiority of her government's policies. As shown in the preceding section of this chapter, the phrase 'Victorian values' helpfully captured Thatcher's Christian emphasis on self-discipline, self-help and 'family values' as an antidote to the encroaching permissiveness of post-war society. The phrase also called to mind stock figures of 'Victoriana' – the nanny, the matron and the governess – with which Thatcher was already associated. For Marina Warner, Thatcher could be compared with, and understood through these images because they, like her, are enforcers of discipline:

Margaret Thatcher has tapped an enormous source of female power: the right of prohibition. She exercises over unruly elements, near and far, the kind of censure children receive from a strict mother. It is a very familiar form of female authority.<sup>97</sup>

Despite Williams' staunch Roman Catholicism, she projected an altogether softer image and was frequently presented as more of an 'unruly element' than as the arbiter of order. Indeed, a *Times* article published in May 1987 describes her as being treated by political staff at the SDP's Cowley Street headquarters 'as a force to be directed rather than as president of the party'.<sup>98</sup> Her unpunctuality was notorious, and has been variously explained as the result of disorganisation, an inability to say no to those requesting her time, and 'sheer bloody mindedness' with regard to

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<sup>94</sup> Letter Mike Thomas MP to Wendy Buckley, 3 August 1983: 'I would have thought we would do well to stay clear of the abortion issue in our policy statements, which in my experience is like mentioning you might review mortgage interest tax relief ie highly liable to be misused damagingly against us'. SDP archive, Essex University, Box 34 A.

<sup>95</sup> S. Williams, *God and Caesar: personal reflections on politics and religion* (London, 2003), p.5 and p.6.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>97</sup> M. Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: the allegory of the female form* (London, 1985), p.52.

<sup>98</sup> B. Appleyard, 'A bustler born to the hustling', *The Times*, 19 May 1987.

timetables. Her autobiography recalls one journalist making an anagram of her name: 'I whirl aimlessly', and cartoon images frequently show her in a hurry.<sup>99</sup> '[F]erretting about', as it was put in 1980, is 'what comes most naturally to her'.<sup>100</sup>

An unkempt appearance apparently confirmed this impression of a likeable, if ill disciplined personality. As she told a *Times* journalist in 1981, '[people] like me because I listen to them and because I look as crummy as they do'.<sup>101</sup> Williams' lack of interest in her own appearance was longstanding, and as a student at Oxford she had been described as looking 'like a Shetland pony ... wearing a loud yellow blue striped dress ... and the wrong sort of jewellery'.<sup>102</sup> Despite her mother's renowned elegance, which itself reflected a particular stance on what being a feminist did or did not mean, Williams never developed an interest in clothes. Indeed, she believes childhood shopping trips with Vera 'immunised' her against fashion: 'for years I bought the first thing I saw that even vaguely looked as though it might suit me, although often it didn't'.<sup>103</sup> Her refusal to conform to standards of self presentation maintained by such politicians as Thatcher and Castle did not go unnoticed. Though it endeared her to many, for her detractors a dishevelled appearance was visual testament to her professional failings, and the failures of the liberal, or 'soft' left more broadly.<sup>104</sup> At the very least it made her the butt of jokes. The writer Clive James described her clothes as looking as though they had been produced by 'a band of blind British fashion designers', whilst a *Times* journalist quipped that her smart appearance at Westminster on her first day as MP for Crosby 'meant that she had sacked Oxfam as her couturier'.<sup>105</sup> Williams claimed to reject 'grandness' on the grounds that it was used by unremarkable people to present their 'worldly success' as inherently impressive – a position her father's naive respect for public figures less interesting than himself had surely inspired.<sup>106</sup> Her autobiographical reflection on Bernard's change of wardrobe throughout the period precipitating their separation reiterates this discomfort with fashionable dress:

both aesthetically and in lifestyle our ways were diverging...He began to dress differently, abandoning the pullovers and corduroy jackets of his years at UCL and Bedford College, for the safari suits and smart denim jackets that were becoming fashionable.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Williams, *Climbing*, p. 300.

<sup>100</sup> Wolff, 'Will Shirley Williams take the right road?'

<sup>101</sup> I.Jack, 'What makes Shirley so loveable?', *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 5 April 1981.

<sup>102</sup> Oxford university *Isis* profile, quoted in I.Jack, 'Is she too nice?', p.29.

<sup>103</sup> Williams, *Climbing*, p.6.

<sup>104</sup> For example, *The Times*, 19 May 1987: 'In the demonology of the right she is Beezlebub Lord of the muddle headed flies of the soft left. Her clothes, the way she speaks, even her hair have become the correlatives of the do-gooding, liberal, middle class ideology which was responsible for the wreckage of post-war Britain'.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in 'What makes Shirley so loveable?'

<sup>106</sup> That George Catlin 'slipped into sycophancy when encountering notable public figures' whilst having no great respect 'for his own considerable academic achievements' caused Williams to '[weep] inwardly for him' as a child. Williams, *Climbing*, p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.



Williams' dishevelled appearance is something her father regarded as limiting her career, and sought to 'correct'. As he wrote to his daughter in 1969:

One must not look like Mrs Mopp aged 50. One must not expect to escape journalistic comment if one travels to party conferences with holes in one's stockings. My mother did this. But ministers mustn't.<sup>108</sup>

With Thatcher's profile rapidly growing as a consequence of her election to the Conservative party leadership, comparisons between the two women, which presented Williams as Thatcher's progressive alternative, increased. Their respective hairstyles received particular attention. Compared with Thatcher's immaculate self presentation Williams' appearance became more of a liability, and was a prominent feature of political cartoons [figure 10]. As Peel argues, what may have once been construed as 'natural informality' increasingly 'told of a disorganised lifestyle'.<sup>109</sup> Crumpled dresses seemed to legitimise the reputation for muddle and indecision she had acquired during her stint as a junior minister in the 1960s. On the topic of Williams' professional inadequacies Tony Crosland was quoted at length in his wife's biography, published in 1982, further cementing this caricature of disorder. Amongst other things, he claimed that she was unable to delegate, was unable to make decisions without being reassured, had a 'deep psychological need' to show familiarity with trivial subjects and was prone to drawing out meetings – 'Enough to make one weep'.<sup>110</sup>

Although widely liked, her competence was regularly called into question. This was a problem exacerbated by her reputation for 'niceness'. As the front page of the *Sunday Times Magazine* asked in April 1981, 'Is she too nice? Everyone thinks that Shirley is loveable, but has she got what it takes to succeed?'. In this respect, and perhaps surprisingly given earlier assessments of her prime-ministerial potential, Williams came to fulfil the 'charming maverick' stereotype outlined by Sara Childs – she was 'loveable but going nowhere'.<sup>111</sup> A communications strategy document emphasised the 'seasoned experience' of Roy Jenkins, and the 'popular leadership' of David Steel. It was 'warm humanity' that Shirley had to offer.<sup>112</sup> Given popular discursive emphasis on the 'toughness' of the political sphere, this hardly presented Williams as equipped for high political office. Rather, her 'warm humanity' contrasted with the 'harder' competencies of her colleagues, and boosted the public image of the party for which she worked. As Warner has argued, Thatcher's success in

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<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 224.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 256-7.

<sup>111</sup> Childs, *Women and British Party Politics*, p. 141.

<sup>112</sup> Communication brief, 4 November 1983, SDP archive, 'Communications Committee papers and minutes', p.3.

‘isolating the virus that brings women into contempt’ was a product of her hardness and self discipline: her tough manner ‘prove[s] not that she is as good as a man, but that she is not under the governance of Venus’.<sup>113</sup> Shirley Williams, frequently described as ‘emotional’, sacrificed this sense of control, leaving her vulnerable to accusations of the ‘typical’ feminine weaknesses. With her scathing attacks on Tony Benn’s disloyalty towards Callaghan in September 1980 instigating fresh discussion of her leadership potential, the association between ‘niceness’ and political incapacity is made particularly clear.<sup>114</sup> The point is further emphasised by the advice, provided in 1985 by an external publicity agency, that ‘aggressiveness [is] respected’: ‘giving the impression that the SDP are reasonable people’ fails to gain respect.<sup>115</sup> As argued in chapter one, discomfort and unfamiliarity with female politicians frequently led to their being presented in ways that reflected heavily gendered stereotypes. Williams’ ‘niceness’ came to be her defining characteristic, and it is likely this quality has been exaggerated in order to fulfil popular, and self perpetuating expectations. As Susan Pederson has argued, Williams’ public image as ‘reasonable, classless and comfortably middle of the road’ failed to reflect the complexity of her character and the strength of her convictions.<sup>116</sup> Williams’ unchallenging ‘niceness’ is not a stereotype that Peel’s biography helps to dismantle.

Although Williams, like Thatcher, was considered attractive, her attractiveness was consistently presented as ‘girlish’ rather than ‘womanly’, implicitly reiterating her unsuitability for leadership roles. If Thatcher’s sexuality spoke of domination, Williams’ suggested naivety. The attention she bestowed on other speakers was said to be part of ‘her girlish charm’, and her ‘little girl modesty’ was attributed to her middle-class upbringing.<sup>117</sup> The media’s tendency to speak of ‘Shirley and co’ called to mind ‘a high spirited boarding school girl’, and in 1981 she was presented as Alice at the mad hatter’s tea party on the front cover of the *Sunday Times Magazine*.<sup>118</sup> Marcia Falkender, political secretary under Wilson, has suggested that Williams’ ‘untidiness’ made her a challenge, as realising that her attitude to life was ‘almost totally cerebral’, men would ‘listen to that soft, seductive voice’ and feel compelled to ‘introduce her to a whole new world’.<sup>119</sup> It is through references to her voice that Williams has been most consistently sexualised, perhaps reflecting an implicit comparison with Thatcher’s ‘grating and artificially lowered tone’.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Warner, *Monuments*, p. 53.

<sup>114</sup> *Daily Telegraph* 2 September 1980: ‘It is often said in her criticism that she lacks political ruthlessness, but she did not display such a weakness tonight’.

<sup>115</sup> Kirkwood and Partners, ‘The three parties as brands’, July 1985, SDP archive, box 25A.

<sup>116</sup> Pedersen, ‘You’re only interested in Hitler’, *London Review of Books*, 35, 19 December 2013.

<sup>117</sup> Wolff, ‘Will Shirley Williams’.

<sup>118</sup> Jack, ‘What makes Shirley’ and *The Sunday Times*, 5 September 1981.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Peel, *Shirley Williams*, p. 179.

<sup>120</sup> S.Bell, *Maggie Maggie Maggie: mother of the nation or monster of the blue lagoon* (London, 2009), p. 12.

## Conclusion

An examination of Shirley Williams suggests the analytical benefit of developing a context that prioritises gender above political office, or indeed party-political affiliation. This is not to say that Williams offers a 'perfect' comparison, but she does provide a route into understanding the gendered politics of both the Labour party and the SDP, which demonstrates anxiety surrounding 'feminist' messages across the political spectrum. The Labour alignment of large sections of the Women's Liberation Movement should not be taken to suggest that the Labour party was a hospitable environment for women, and dichotomies between a 'pro-woman' Labour party and Thatcher's 'anti-woman' Conservative party are unhelpful. On a representational level, comparison between Thatcher and Williams reveals the cross-party tenacity of domestic femininity as a means of both presenting political women, and appealing to female voters. The scarcity of women at the highest political levels meant that they were likely to bear a heavier representational weight than their male contemporaries. Williams was widely regarded as representing a set of values and a style of politics which were opposed to the values and style of Thatcherism. Her 'niceness' was an integral part of her public image, but whilst tokenistic emphasis on her traditionally 'feminine' qualities may have benefited the political parties for which she worked, it did little to foster confidence in her personal political ability. Examination of her political record – her committed opposition to grammar schools, or support of the Grunwick strikers, for example - reveals a principled and often uncompromising politician, but such qualities found weak expression in a public image that emphasised moderation and well-meaning compromise. Her Catholic stance on abortion and divorce, incompatible with this image, was largely forgotten. Peel notes that she was addressed as 'Shirley' by total strangers, suggesting the sense of familiarity she engendered. But whilst Thatcher may have been known to her supporters as 'Maggie', she was also 'Mrs Thatcher' and 'the Iron Lady'. Without Thatcher's 'flintiness' to act as a counterbalance to her 'niceness', Williams was *just* 'Shirley'. Her political identity became over-determined by an increasingly stereotyped personality, and 'niceness' appears to have been little compensation for the 'masculine' leadership qualities Thatcher's complexly gendered public image projected.

### **3. Thatcher and feminism**

A large volume of both academic and journalistic commentary considers the question: what did Margaret Thatcher do for women? To some degree this is a product of the fact that her success was made conspicuous by her gender. She attracted interest and generated comment as a successful *woman*, making the question of her 'feminist' legacy (broadly understood) inevitable. This was intensified by the extent to which she exploited gender norms in the construction of a distinctly feminine public image, as has been considered in the earlier chapters of this thesis. However, the nature of contemporary feminism was also significant in shaping understandings of the gendered identity that Thatcher projected. Having so-far focused on the cultivation of Margaret Thatcher's feminine public image, this chapter will consider the role of 'feminism' in informing the reception of this image. Thatcher famously rejected 'women's lib' and was widely condemned by women's liberation feminists. This should not, however, be taken to suggest that Thatcher's relationship with feminism was simple. It has often been argued that, having championed female equality in the early years of her political career Thatcher abandoned feminist issues once she had achieved success and ceased to need them. This overlooks the extent to which the connotations of 'feminist' had shifted between 1952, when Thatcher had urged women to heed their public duties in the *Sunday Graphic*, and the 1970s. The style of feminism promoted by 'women's liberation' or 'second wave' feminists in Britain presented particular problems to someone of Thatcher's political disposition. It was collectivist and left wing, and as the 1980s progressed, increasingly associated with the Labour party. Socialist feminists regarded capitalism as the root of female oppression, making a Conservative feminist a contradiction in terms. As David Conway has argued in a pamphlet produced by the Institute of Economic Affairs, 'feminism' was regarded as 'essentially and integrally anti-capitalist in outlook'.<sup>1</sup> The negative public image of feminism, which was shaped by the social and cultural conservatism of the mainstream press, similarly militated against female politicians presenting themselves as feminists.

By the mid 1990s, the increasingly individualistic emphasis of third-wave feminism allowed for a degree of revisionism towards Thatcher's feminist credentials. In 2000, Helen Wilkinson provided an essay for a collection exploring 'new' feminism, in which she argued that Thatcher was a crucial part of young women's inheritance: 'undoubtedly she has affected our choices, our lifestyle and our attitude to feminism, to politics and to power itself'.<sup>2</sup> In the wake of Thatcher's death in 2013, Emma

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<sup>1</sup>D. Conway ed., *Free Market Feminism* (London, 1998), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> H. Wilkinson, 'The Thatcher Legacy: power feminism and the birth of girl power' in N. Walter ed., *On The Move* (London, 2000), p. 30.

Barnett, women's editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, argued that the fact that the 'Iron Lady did not consider herself to be a feminist... doesn't mean she cannot be an icon to all those women who do.'<sup>3</sup> A year earlier the *Daily Mail* columnist Amanda Foreman had controversially celebrated Thatcher as 'the ultimate women's libber', arguing that only the Left's bitterness prevented wider recognition of this accolade.<sup>4</sup> That classification as a feminist had come to be considered an act of celebration is itself significant. Not only, therefore, is the complicated and changeable 'meaning' of feminism an important context for understanding femininity and female power in the 1970s and 1980s, but responses to Thatcher draw out and focus contemporary understandings of what constituted 'feminism' and 'feminist'. This chapter will first consider the political character and public image of Women's Liberation feminism, which dominated feminist discourses throughout the 1970s, before analysing Thatcher's relationship with a broader set of 'feminist' attitudes, including those espoused by protestors at Greenham Common.

The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) was a loose-knit collection of organisations and interest groups. As the feminist activist Anya Bostack explained to *the Listener* in 1972,

Women's Liberation doesn't pursue an established policy, we don't arrive at decisions by voting and we don't delegate responsibility. What unites us is a common point of view from which every each separate member is free to draw her own conclusions.<sup>5</sup>

This frustrated contemporary journalists who eagerly sought out quotable leaders and a unified ideology. It similarly complicates the task of the historian. The extent to which any one strand, and therefore any one source, might be regarded as representative is limited. Nevertheless, the movement can be characterised by its key aspirations. 'Women's Liberation' was intended to signal something broader than the early twentieth-century 'feminist' emphasis on legal equality between men and women. It sought large-scale structural change as a means of enabling women to have the personal freedom to realise identities unrestricted by conventional understandings of womanhood. This meant liberating women from their relational identities as wives and mothers by attacking taboos surrounding female sexuality, enabling women to control their fertility, providing opportunities for women to develop personally and professionally beyond the family unit, and ensuring that women were fairly paid for the work they carried out. The first UK Women's Liberation conference, held at Ruskin College in 1970, was attended by over 600 women.<sup>6</sup> Here the first four WLM demands were introduced: equal pay; equal education and job opportunities; free

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<sup>3</sup> E. Barnett, 'Margaret Thatcher: ultimate feminist icon – whether she liked it or not', *The Telegraph* online, 8 April 2013.

<sup>4</sup> A. Foreman, 'Why the Iron Lady was the Ultimate Women's Libber', *Daily Mail* online, 3 February 2012.

<sup>5</sup> 'Women's Liberation', *The Listener*, 17 August 1972, p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> Sisterhood and After Research Team, 'Women's Liberation: a national movement', British Library website: [www.bl.uk/sisterhood/articles/womens-liberation-a-national-movement](http://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/articles/womens-liberation-a-national-movement)

contraception and abortion on demand; free twenty-four hour nurseries. Legal and financial independence for all women, and the right to a self-defined sexuality were added to this list in 1974. There was a further addition in 1978: freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion regardless of marital status; and an end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and aggression towards women. As this chronology suggests, the early Movement's more traditional focus on legal rights gave way to a broader emphasis on the cultural conditions considered necessary for female emancipation. The issue of sexuality loomed large, and generated some of the fiercest debates within WLM as well as within feminism more generally. As will be shown below, it also became a central theme in media presentations of feminist activists. The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s 'emerged in critical dialogue with a broader left movement' and was strongly influenced by the 'political currents' filtering down from ex-communist party members such as Raymond Williams and Raphael Samuel, who emphasised the role of culture in politics, as well as the need for collective solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

The WLM spawned a vast literature of periodicals, pamphlets and books. Feminist publishers, such as Virago and Feminist Books, were established during the 1970s to give women a voice uncensored by male control. *Spare Rib* is widely recognised as the movement's most important magazine. It is also a valuable source for understanding Liberationist feminism's responses to Thatcher. The magazine has recently been digitised, and a publication-wide search for 'Margaret Thatcher' returns a wealth of articles considering the political significance of Thatcher's gender. As with Women's Liberation more generally, *Spare Rib* rejected a hierarchical structure, and as time went on the Spare Rib Collective acted more as facilitators than journalists, providing a platform for women generally to express their views.<sup>8</sup> As Janice Winship has argued, 'it was less a women's magazine than a women's liberation magazine', and its manifesto presented objectives defined in opposition to the practices of mainstream publications, which were considered restrictive and exploitative.<sup>9</sup> Winship has suggested that its monthly print run of 20, 000 fails to reflect the extent of the magazine's influence and cultural significance.<sup>10</sup> Despite a relatively limited readership, the magazine came to symbolise the wider women's movement. Nevertheless, despite the professed

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<sup>7</sup> L. Segal, 'Jam Today: feminist impacts and transformations in the 1970s', in L. Black et al ed., *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p. 153.

<sup>8</sup> P. Toyne, 'A Day With Spare Rib', 23 July 1982, reprinted in K. Cochrane ed. *Women of the Revolution: forty years of feminism* (London, 2010), p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> *Spare Rib's* manifesto argued that existing women's magazines treated women as 'passive, dependent, conformist' and 'incapable of critical thought', confined women to their 'traditional role of girlfriend, housewife or mother' and pitted women against each other by 'glorify[ing] the female sexual function'. They also ignored the fact that women shared a 'common frustration', and manipulated women into the unnecessary consumption of material goods through exploitative advertising. Manifesto facsimile, 1972, British Library website: [www.bl.uk/collection-items/facsimile-of-spare-rib-manifesto](http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/facsimile-of-spare-rib-manifesto)

<sup>10</sup> J. Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London, 1987), p. 123.

desire to 'reach out to all women', it never attained the mass appeal of *Ms* – a concertedly glossy feminist publication in the US.<sup>11</sup> Rather than expanding feminist ranks, *Spare Rib* preached to the converted. As an 'insiders manual', however, it is useful in suggesting the movement's concerns and tactics, as well as its vocabulary, style and aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> This is a prerequisite to developing a meaningful analysis of Thatcher's public relationship with the style of feminism popularised throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

In the month preceding the 1979 General Election, *Spare Rib* published an editorial expressing the collective's opposition to Conservative party politics generally, as well as to the style of Thatcher's Conservatism specifically. The magazine's lack of enthusiasm at the prospect of Britain's first female prime minister surprised American journalists, who had expected the collective to anticipate Thatcher's victory as a representative achievement for the women's movement.<sup>13</sup> This emphasises the diversity and fluidity which is sometimes obscured by the umbrella term 'feminism'. Liberal feminism, which focused on the capacity of individual women to achieve their liberation as they saw fit, predominated in the United States, whereas a strong tradition of class activism resulted in the British Women's Liberation Movement being shaped by a largely socialist-feminist agenda. Whereas liberal feminists were likely to celebrate the achievements of individual women, socialist feminists – who argued that female subordination was inextricably tied to the exploitative and oppressive structures of capitalism – sought collective advancement. Within this view, exceptional women did little more than provide ammunition for feminists' opponents eager to demonstrate the redundancy of feminist demands. The *Spare Rib* editorial argued that 'as feminists' their concern was 'not the success or failure of one individual woman, but whether the actual policies of Thatcher...can promote the interests of women generally'.<sup>14</sup> Thatcher's 'skilful' presentation as a housewife is described as a 'cheap' alternative to the provision of 'nurseries, housing, social security benefits and adequate healthcare', the burden of cuts to which were likely to fall heavily on women as carers of the young, the sick, the disabled and the elderly. This was a substantiated fear, for the Thatcher government instructed local authorities to cut spending by 3% in 1979, and by a further 5.6% in 1980. Savings were made through the closure of nursery facilities, the closure of homes for children, old people and the disabled, and cuts to the provision of adult education.<sup>15</sup> These are all

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. *Ms*, which retained the aesthetic and tone of traditional women's magazines, had a circulation of 400,000 in 1974: A. Erdman Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms Magazine and the promise of popular feminism* (London, 1998), p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Toynbee, 'A Day With Spare Rib', p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> 'Is Margaret Thatcher for Women?', *Spare Rib*, May 1979, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> In 1980 East Sussex planned to close all nursery schools and discontinue all nursery classes by 1982, saving over £200,000. In Nottingham more than 200 nursery nurses lost their jobs. In Kent, hot school lunches were replaced by cold snacks, allowing for 400 staff to be issued with redundancy notices, whilst to further reduce

state benefits that disproportionately benefitted women. As 'the woman who made it', *Spare Rib* argued that Thatcher would be 'a figurehead...thrown in our faces'.<sup>16</sup> In 1988 the magazine reaffirmed its initial assessment, stating that under Thatcher the government had done 'no single positive thing for women since ... 1979. Indeed, it has significantly worsened the daily life of the majority of women'.<sup>17</sup>

Despite its hostility towards Thatcher's politics, *Spare Rib* was alert to the tendency of criticism of Thatcher to slip into misogynistic terms, and, alongside other feminist groups, worked to redress this. Before the intervention of feminists, for example, Howard Brenton's and Tony Howard's anti-Thatcherite play *A Short Sharp Shock* had been provisionally entitled *Ditch the Bitch*, a phrase chanted from the Labour benches following the 'Milk snatcher' incident in 1971.<sup>18</sup> Despite the name change, the show's publicity continued to depend on images of Thatcher 'being battered and cut up'.<sup>19</sup> The play, which Conservative ministers urged the public to boycott, broke box office records at the Theatre Royal in Stratford, where it premiered. In June 1980 *Spare Rib* criticised 'the personalised sexist insults' heard at 'every anti-cuts demo', suggesting the extent to which misogyny was a fallback position for elements of the Left. It argued that such language alienated female members and ultimately damaged the socialist cause. A front cover of *Socialist Worker* displaying a sketch of Thatcher with a sword down her throat ('murderous, battering, the steel phallus') was singled out for condemnation.<sup>20</sup> In 1981 the magazine drew attention to 'sadistically sexist banner' depicting Margaret Thatcher with a missile between her legs, spotted at London's CND march in December.<sup>21</sup>

Thatcher's failure to increase the political representation of women in either parliament or government, or to improve the lives of women generally, is widely recognised. Beatrix Campbell has argued that Thatcher did not so much 'feminise politics', as offer 'feminine endorsement to patriarchal power'.<sup>22</sup> Claire Colebrook has argued that Thatcher represented 'a concrete problem for feminism' by virtue of the extent to which she failed to fulfil feminist hopes of female leadership.<sup>23</sup> Thatcher herself, of course, denied being a feminist, justifying this position with reference to the

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local authority spending neighbours were encouraged to look after elderly people, otherwise in need of residential care: Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 99-101.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> R. Brunt, 'Conference Darling', *Spare Rib*, July 1988, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Aitkin, *Margaret Thatcher*, p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> 'A short sharp shock', *Spare Rib*, September 1980, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> 'Newshorts', *Spare Rib*, June 1980, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> 'March against nuclear weapons', *Spare Rib*, December 1981, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 246.

<sup>23</sup> C. Colebrook, 'Toxic Feminism: hope and hopelessness after feminism', in R. Coleman and D. Ferreday eds., *Hope and Feminist Theory* (Abingdon, 2011), p. 20.



redundancy of feminism, as well as to the political character of women's liberation feminism.<sup>24</sup> It should, however, be emphasised that *Spare Rib's* disavowal of Thatcher did not reflect uniform 'feminist' hostility to the prospect of Thatcher's leadership. Mary Stott, a woman whom Katharine Whitehorn has described as 'a feminist in every fibre of her being', argued in the *Guardian's Women's Page* that Thatcher's election represented a fundamental and unalterable shift in the gender dynamics of the nation.<sup>25</sup> Stott was a lifelong journalist who helped found the campaign group Women in Media in 1970. She also chaired the Fawcett Society between 1980 and 1982. Importantly, Stott did not share in the feminism advanced by *Spare Rib*, and revelled in the image of Thatcher's feminine authority ('How would you like to get the boot from a female, sire?'). Although insufficiently 'radical' to be taken seriously by the likes of *Spare Rib*, the *Guardian Women* had, by the late 1960s, become a group 'important enough to be jeered at'.<sup>26</sup> Established by Stott in 1957 as a platform for women's voices, matters covered by the page frequently became campaigning issues, and to journalists such as Frank Johnson (of the *Daily Telegraph* and *Now!*) its contributors were 'wild women'.<sup>27</sup> Discussing the 'revolutionary implications' of a female prime minister, Stott argued that 'things [couldn't] be quite the same again, because a basic brick [had] been removed from the edifice of beliefs and prejudices about the roles of women'.<sup>28</sup> Stott optimistically believed that Thatcher's admission to the Carlton Club would open the door for other 'distinguished' women, whilst as an example she would encourage a series of high profile promotions in traditionally masculine domains: 'Why not a woman Director General of the BBC or the CBI? Why not a woman chairman of the BMA or the Coal Board?'.<sup>29</sup> The Carlton Club did not admit women generally until 2008, and of the organisations listed only the Confederation of British Industry has since appointed a

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<sup>24</sup> Thatcher was not entirely consistent on the point of whether women had achieved equality. Private correspondence, discussed in chapter one, demonstrates her frustration at losing out to less capable men when seeking nominations for a parliamentary seat in the 1950s, and in 1978, in a speech celebrating 50 years of equal female suffrage, she complained that 'Women are tired of being patronised and condescended to. We are bored by being considered as a curious and endangered species'. However, throughout the period of her leadership she most frequently argued that 'feminism' was unnecessary because, as she told her audience at the first Dame Margery Corbett-Ashby memorial lecture in 1982, 'The battle for women's rights has been largely won'. Whilst the legislative victories of the 1960s and 1970s might to some degree support this from a narrowly legal perspective, it fails to address the social and cultural inequalities about which she had complained earlier in her career. See Thatcher, speech celebrating fifty years of equal female suffrage, 3 July 1978, MTFW: 103725 and Thatcher, speech on 'Women in a Changing World', 26 July 1982, MTFW: 105007.

<sup>25</sup> K. Whitehorn, 'Mary Stott', ODNB.

<sup>26</sup> Toynbee, 'A Day With Spare Rib', 23 July 1982, reprinted in K.Cochrane ed., *Women of the Revolution*, p.86 and Whitehorn, 'Mary Stott', ODNB.

<sup>27</sup> Toynbee, 'A day with Spare Rib', p. 86.

<sup>28</sup> Stott, 'Maggie May', 6 May 1974, reprinted in *Women of the Revolution*, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Conversely, Elizabeth Wilson argued in socialist-feminist publication *Red Rag* that Thatcher was 'swiftly and quietly' admitted to the Carlton Club 'not as a woman, but as a Tory', thus undermining any potentially progressive implications of the development.

female director, in 2015. In explicit opposition to *Spare Rib*, Stott argued for Thatcher's significance as a feminist exemplar:

I believe it is much more important to the future of little girls now at school that she should be there than that she should turn aside from the battles with the Treasury and the Foreign Office...to give Equal Pay or Equal Opportunities a helpful push along.<sup>30</sup>

Writing in a pamphlet commemorating Women's Action Day in November 1980, an event coordinated by the Fawcett Society and involving nearly 70 diverse women's groups, Eileen Cole, of Research International, expressed a similar view. Arguing that Thatcher 'is first and foremost a politician' Cole commended the prime minister for 'disregard[ing] feminism as a central issue for government action' and argued that Mrs Thatcher and other women in 'top jobs' should concentrate on demonstrating 'how effective they are'.<sup>31</sup> There is evidence to suggest that Thatcher's female authority was a source of satisfaction for women generally, reflecting a 'feminist' consciousness if not overt feminist identification. In the period preceding the 1979 general election, elements of the left certainly believed that women would misguidedly vote for Thatcher for 'feminist' reasons. A Midlands housewife interviewed by Campbell celebrated the Conservative party for 'put[ting] a woman up there at last. Margaret Thatcher has done most by being there and standing up to them'. Asked who Thatcher was standing up to, the interviewee replied 'men!'.<sup>32</sup> The 'thrill' that many women experienced through Thatcher's domination is the central research problem of Campbell's *Iron Ladies*. This 'thrill' is given vivid expression by Brenda Polan, again writing for the *Guardian Women's Page*. Polan suggests that female enjoyment of Thatcher's power could be separated from 'reservations about her policies'. Thatcher's 'lack of "sisterliness"', she argues, does not prevent Thatcher exacting 'a little private revenge' on 'the sex which doubtless ... patronised and circumscribed her'. Arguing that societies create the icons they need, she describes Thatcher as 'a matriarch rampant who frightens the boys and secretly thrills the girls'.<sup>33</sup>

Thatcher was unequivocal in her rejection of feminism. Going further than either Shirley Williams or Barbara Castle, she presented it as damaging, both to women specifically and to society more generally. In a press conference in 1979 she claimed not to like 'strident females', and suggested that 'the feminist ticket' was a substitute for ability and hard work.<sup>34</sup> The previous year she told the *Hornsey Journal* that 'militant feminists' had

done great damage to the cause of women by making us out to be something we are not. Each person is different... You should say that you should get on because you have the

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<sup>30</sup> Stott, 'Maggie May', p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> E. Cole, 'What I would do for Women', in Women's Action Day pamphlet, 27 November 1980, Women's Library, London School of Economics special collections: 3AMS/B/20/01.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 296.

<sup>33</sup> B. Polan, 'Handbag and Rule', 29 December 1988, reprinted in *Women of the Revolution*, pp. 129-132.

<sup>34</sup> 'General Election Press Conference', 26 April 1979, MTFW: 104045.

combination of talents which are right for the job. The moment you exaggerate the question [of gender], you defeat your case.<sup>35</sup>

She regarded the collectivist nature of contemporary British feminism as a threat to the autonomy of the individual as well as detrimental to the Thatcherite ideal of a society founded on individual merit. Her denunciation of feminism was accompanied by the elevation of the domestic roles from which second-wave feminists had sought to liberate women. Given that ‘the feminist’ and ‘the housewife’ have been typically constructed as oppositional, this is perhaps unsurprising.<sup>36</sup> Feminists were presented as fostering female discontent by undermining the value of women’s work as wives and mothers. Speaking to Robin Oakley, of *The Times*, in November 1989, Thatcher argued that women for whom a professional career was not ‘right’ should not have one ‘imposed’ upon them: ‘they’re doing a fantastic job as they are’.<sup>37</sup>

Dissatisfaction with domestic life had certainly been a central theme of the women’s movement, as suggested by key texts such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Hannah Gavron’s *The Captive Wife* and Ann Oakley’s *The Sociology of Housework*, published in 1963, 1966 and 1974 respectively. *The Feminine Mystique* in particular attracted widespread media attention, and has subsequently been recognised as a foundational text of second-wave feminism. As British feminists Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote have argued, it ‘provided the beginnings of a vocabulary for women’s liberation’, despite socialist-feminist criticism of Friedan’s middle-class focus.<sup>38</sup> Friedan argued that the widespread unhappiness of suburban housewives was a consequence of their narrow, domestic lives which offered little in the way of personal or intellectual fulfilment.<sup>39</sup> Despite an initial print run of just 3,000, the book spent six weeks on the *New York Times*’ Best Sellers list, and the first paperback edition sold 1.4 million copies. The breadth of press coverage in both the UK and US surrounding the publication’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013 suggests recognition of its enduring significance. The image of the self-sacrificing housewife became an important figure in feminist discourses of the 1970s. The Liberationist view of ‘housewife’ as a non-identity had gathered momentum before the emergence of the WLM. In response to Betty Jerman’s article in *The Guardian* lamenting the ‘dull’ suburban environment in which married women lived, Maureen Nicol, a housewife from the Wirral, suggested a network of women who wanted – apparently against the odds - ‘to remain individuals’. The Housebound Wives Register, which facilitated social events between ‘housebound’ housewives, was born in 1960. With domestic isolation brought to the fore

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Interview for Hornsey Journal’, 21 April 1978, MTFW: 103662.

<sup>36</sup> S. Gillis and J. Hollows, *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* (London, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Interview *The Times*, 22 November 1989, MTFW: 107431.

<sup>38</sup> A. Coote and B. Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: the struggle for women’s liberation* (Oxford, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Friedan argued that although more American women now worked, ‘very few were pursuing careers. They were married women who held part time jobs... to put their husbands through school, their sons through college’: B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963), p. 17.

by Women's Liberation, the organisation had 900 branches and 19,000 fee-paying members by 1976.<sup>40</sup> As Jane Lewis has written, 'the root of popular feminist understanding lay in the interrogation of women's oppression within the family'.<sup>41</sup> Second-wave feminism sought to enable women to develop identities unrestricted by their gendered, familial commitments. Thatcher, conversely, celebrated these commitments as the locus of female strength.

Popular acceptance of feminist interpretations of the housewife role should not be assumed or overstated, however, and 'housewife' remained an aspirational identity for many women throughout the twentieth century. As impressive a figure as 19,000 may be, it should be remembered that the Women's Institute, an organisation altogether more comfortable with the 'housewife' label, had in 1954 achieved a peak membership of 467,000.<sup>42</sup> In presenting herself as a housewife and celebrating women's domestic roles, Thatcher sought to mobilise hostility towards the perceived inadequacies of a 'feminist' femininity. The public image of 'feminism' itself is significant, here, insofar as it suggests a significant body of opinion that was hostile towards, or at least unconvinced by, the contemporary feminist agenda. This begins to explain the political marketability of Thatcher's anti-feminist 'housewife' image. Even before the emergence of Women's Liberation in the late 1960s, 'feminists' were marginalised by the mainstream media – presented as the pursuit of radical women intent on destroying the 'natural' pleasures and privileges of womanhood. In an article defending her belief that women should be educated, Ann Scott of the *Daily Mail* emphasised that despite such 'feminist' inclinations she was wholly in favour of 'babies', 'men', 'rich sauces', 'refrigerators' and 'thick carpets', among other 'feminine' indulgences apparently proscribed by feminism.<sup>43</sup> In 1968 Scott again condemned feminism, this time for its self-indulgence: women's 'self-absorption', reflected in a 'national wail of self-pity,' is said to be 'getting them down'.<sup>44</sup> Unsurprisingly, Thatcher's elevation of practical common sense sat uncomfortably with the WLM emphasis on introspection and self-development. In a speech on 'Women in a Changing World' given in 1982, Thatcher criticised 'self-appointed experts' for encouraging the contemporary 'emphasis on self-fulfilment', which she argued led 'parents' (read 'mothers') to neglect 'their duties to each other and to their children'.<sup>45</sup> Feminists' demands for childcare played a significant role in their media representation. Readily characterised as inadequate mothers, this maternal 'failing' was widely interpreted as further testimony to the lack of femininity betrayed by

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<sup>40</sup> History of NHR, National Women's Register website: [www.nwr.org.uk/about/our-history](http://www.nwr.org.uk/about/our-history)

<sup>41</sup> J. Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945* (Oxford, 1992), p. 61.

<sup>42</sup> V. Nicholson, *Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: the story of women in the 1950s* (Leicester, 2016), p205.

<sup>43</sup> 'Should women be educated', *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1960

<sup>44</sup> "Let's stop beefing and start being women", *Daily Mail*, 21 March 1968

<sup>45</sup> Thatcher, 'Speech on Women in a Changing World', 26 July 1982, MTFW: 105007.

feminist politics.<sup>46</sup> As Leeds-based feminist author Lee Comer remembers, Women's Liberation activists were caricatured as 'nasty butch women who want their children in twenty-four hour nurseries ... They had the babies but they don't actually want them, and that kind of stuff'.<sup>47</sup> In 1988 Polly Toynbee recalled the 'potty madness' of feminist demonstration at the time of the 1967 Abortion Act, whereby women demanded abortions 'as if [they] were ice creams or Christmas bonuses'.<sup>48</sup> Feminist demands for control over their reproductive and child-rearing functions were presented as evidence of a lack of respect for maternity, and used by the media to alienate 'normal' women for whom 'mothering' was a privilege.

Feminism, then, was broadly associated with the 'permissive turn' of the 1960s that Thatcherism would later propose to rectify. As Mary Kenny wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph* in 1978, 'If it's Women's Lib, I know it's likely to be dirty'.<sup>49</sup> The 'expert' driven prioritisation of 'self-fulfilment', reiterates the self-indulgence condemned by Thatcherite diagnoses of social discontent. Feminism could therefore be accommodated within the broader Thatcherite criticism of Britain's moral 'sickness', born of self-interest and ill-discipline. However, feminism was also presented as restrictive and disciplinarian, resulting in a tension that perhaps mirrored the incongruity between Thatcherite moralising and the neo-liberal emphasis on freedom of choice. The long-running *Private Eye* column 'Wimmin', which requested readers to send in 'loony feminist nonsense' for a payment of five pounds, presented feminism as academic, overly-serious and petty. In December 1985, for example, the feature included an excerpt from the *Daily Mail*, claiming that the Women's Committee of the Greater London Council regarded the popular children's rhyme 'The farmer in his den' as 'discriminatory' in its assumption of heterosexuality: 'the farmer wants a wife'.<sup>50</sup> In December 1983 it included a letter condemning female participation in sport as 'a degrading misuse of energy'; women's efforts would be better spent fighting the 'perniciously brutal political system'.<sup>51</sup> The column was accompanied by a cartoon of grave-looking women wearing glasses, ponchos, long skirts and dungarees. Feminism was also commonly presented as preventing women from enjoying the 'advantages' typically enjoyed by 'the fairer sex'. In 1970, Priscilla Hodgson of the *Daily Mail*

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<sup>46</sup> As Deborah Philips has written, 'the discourse of the 'bad mother' is one that has all too easily been co-opted by the politics of the right, and an anti-feminist agenda'. Women's Liberation feminists were regularly presented as neglectful and self indulgent. D. Philips, *Women's Fiction 1945- 2005: writing romance* (London, 2006) p.140. The image of the bad mother was particularly prevalent in media coverage of the Greenham Common peace camp.

<sup>47</sup> 'Oral History Project: women in the Women's Liberation Movement in Leeds and Bradford, 1969-1979, interview number one', 17 February 1995, Feminist Archive North, University of Leeds.

<sup>48</sup> 'Behind the lines: ironing in the soul', 19 May 1988, reprinted in *Women of the Revolution*, p. 124.

<sup>49</sup> M. Kenny, 'Women's Lib Loses Its Way', the *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 December 1978.

<sup>50</sup> 'Wimmin', *Private Eye*, 27 December 1985, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> 'Wimmin', *Private Eye*, 30 December 1983, p. 8.

complained that feminists denied women the simple pleasure of a wolf-whistle.<sup>52</sup> More surprisingly, a survey conducted in 1968 by the Labour Women's National Advisory Committee suggested that the majority of women questioned would choose male 'protection' above 'freedom', and 'male patronage' above 'male competition'. Having noted 'that anti-feminism among women is widespread', it argued that 'discrimination' was 'sometimes flattering, often secretly enjoyed and openly sought'.<sup>53</sup> As will be examined in chapter four, Thatcher was keenly aware of the potential advantages bestowed by 'chivalric' treatment of women, and her most successful working relationship were with men who treated her *as a woman*.

Discourses that presented feminism as a form of humourless regulation were to become particularly pronounced in later anti-feminist defences of 'lad culture' such as *the Sun's* Page Three. The term 'political correctness' did not enter popular dialogue in Britain until the mid 1990s, when it became closely associated with left-wing politics and Labour-controlled local councils in particular. However, the thrust of Conservative hostility towards 'PC' – namely that it was an infantilising waste of time and resources, as well as an undesirable extension of state power – is clearly detectable in conservative discourses of the 1980s. For example, Thatcher, who consistently emphasised the virtues of plain speech, famously condemned 'anti-racist mathematics' as a product of 'the hard left', in a Conservative party conference speech in 1987.<sup>54</sup> The educated, middle-class character of second-wave feminism allowed feminist demands to be presented as a minority, elitist interference into the 'liberties' of 'ordinary' people. In censoring nursery rhymes and prohibiting women from enjoying 'gentlemanly' behaviour, for example, feminism was shown to be a regulatory force. It is in this vein that feminist journalists who subscribed to the directives of that National Union of Journalists' Equality Working Party were criticised for 'losing their sense of humour' or getting things out of perspective'.<sup>55</sup> As John Wilson has argued, opposition to political correctness developed out of anxiety surrounding cultural change, and a desire to protect the status quo. Given the neo-liberal emphasis on freedom, presenting feminism as *illiberal* worked to legitimise such protection. Disagreement over the character of 'freedom' was an enduring theme of the Thatcher period.

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<sup>52</sup> 'What can equal the freedom of a home?', *Daily Mail*, 19 March 1970.

<sup>53</sup> 'Discrimination Against Women' report, presented at National Conference of Labour Women 2-4 April 1968 p. 20.

<sup>54</sup> Thatcher, Speech to Conservative Party conference, 9 October 1987, MTFW: 106941. Anti-racist mathematics was part of a wider drive for an 'anti-bias curriculum', promoted in the late 1980s by academics such as Mike Cole, that eliminated the white, male, middle-class prejudice from educational programmes, thus allowing for the emergence of a less hierarchical worldview. The Greater London Council and the Inner London Education Authority were powerful advocates of an anti-bias curriculum; they were closed in 1986 and 1990 respectively.

<sup>55</sup> Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 207.

Feminist activism of the 1970s onwards sought cross-class inclusivity but failed to engage with the fact that for working-class women the (implicitly non-feminist) housewife identity carried a markedly different and arguably more powerful set of meanings than it did for the educated middle classes. As has been emphasised elsewhere in this thesis, the C2, or skilled working-class voter was a key target of the Conservative's 1979 general election campaign. Within this social group, 'the housewife' was likely to resonate more positively than among the managerial and professional classes. Considering the period 1890-1960, Joanne Bourke has argued, 'of all the dreams dreamt by working class women, marriage followed by full time domesticity was the most widely shared'.<sup>56</sup> A Mass-Observation study of 1943 recorded the widespread, wistful longing among working class women for 'a little house' and 'a home of [their] own'. Importantly, this was an aspiration shared by the young: a 1945 survey that investigated the attitudes of working-class teenage girls found that most aspired to marriage and motherhood, believing that a woman's primary responsibility was to look after the home.<sup>57</sup> This has important implications for the endurance of a housewife ideal into the 1960s and 1970s. Substantial house-building programmes during the 1950s and 1960s allowed more (married) women to realise their dream of home ownership. For working-class women, home ownership was closely linked to autonomy - freedom from the authority, restrictions and interventions of parents and landlords.<sup>58</sup> When Thatcher linked family authority and the domestic sphere to personal freedom, then, she was tapping into an established set of significations. In championing familial self reliance, Thatcher mobilised 'hostility towards state and professional interference built on a long tradition of working-class suspicion of officialdom'.<sup>59</sup> The Labour party, conversely, was presented as meddling, and sceptical of individuals' ability to look after themselves. This was a presentation buoyed, and given a gendered emphasis, by memories of the Labour Minister Douglas Jay's oft misquoted remark that 'the gentleman in Whitehall knows best'. *The Socialist Case*, first published in 1937 when Jay was working as a journalist, argued that

housewives cannot be trusted to buy the right things...This really is no more than the extension of the principle according to which the housewife herself would not trust a child of four to elect the week's purchases... the gentlemen from Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> J. Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960* (London, 1994), p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> P. Jephcott, 'Rising Twenty: notes on some ordinary girls', quoted in Beaumont, *Housewives*, p. 176.

<sup>58</sup> Webster, *Imagining Home*, p. 165.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, *Women*, p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> D. Jay, *The Socialist Case* (London, 1937), p. 258.

Ferdinand Mount magnified suspicion of state intrusion in *The Subversive Family*, which describes the District Health Visitor as 'an inspector as well as an advisor...This kindly middle-aged body has at her ultimate disposal a Stalinist array of powers'.<sup>61</sup>

The reality of domestic life for working-class women frequently failed to live up to the expectation. The 'autonomy' they anticipated was often illusory; discriminatory lending practices and punitive divorce laws, combined with the low-pay typically associated with 'women's work,' meant that marriage resulted in working-class women exchange one dependency for another. Until the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, lenders had been able to block women's access to mortgage facilities, and as late as 1970 women could be required to provide a male signatory to secure funds, regardless of personal income. Only after 1967 did women gain equal rights to the matrimonial home after the dissolution of a marriage, and only after 1970 did a wife's contribution to the upkeep of a house have to be considered when dividing up family assets.<sup>62</sup> Changes to the law, however, did not guarantee a change in mentality. An article in *Equal Opportunity News* from 1980-1 reports that a furniture store refused to sell a £325 suite to a woman in full-time employment without her husband's formal approval.<sup>63</sup> It should also be acknowledged that working-class women were less likely than their middle-class contemporaries to know what their husbands earned, further emphasising the romanticised nature of a working-class domestic authority.<sup>64</sup> The image nonetheless existed, and powerfully shaped female identities. 'There's no freedom like home freedom', argued the women's editor of the *Daily Mail* in 1970.<sup>65</sup> Both Oakley's *The Sociology of Housework* and Gavron's *The Captive Wife* emphasise the importance of domesticity to conceptions of femininity within the working class, even though post-war changes to working-class patterns of life meant that few women raising families in the 1970s were able to rely on the social networks crucial to earlier experiences of domesticity. In 1978 an article in *Spare Rib* condemned Thatcher for imposing aspirations of owner-occupation despite an already inadequate stock of council houses: 'Thatcher tells us that we dream to own a house of our own'.<sup>66</sup> But this was not a dream that Thatcher had to sell. A high-profile study conducted by Callaghan's Labour administration in 1977 had already concluded that 'for most people, owning one's house is a basic and natural desire', despite the obvious fact that attitudes towards home ownership vary considerably between national cultures.<sup>67</sup> In 1982 nearly 175, 000 council homes were sold in England under Thatcher's Right to Buy

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<sup>61</sup> F. Mount, *The Subversive Family* (London, 1993), p. 174.

<sup>62</sup> A. Holdsworth, *Out of the Dolls House* (London, 1989), p. 32.

<sup>63</sup> *Equal Opportunity News*, December 1980/January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> H. Gavron, *The Captive Wife* (Aylesbury, 1975), p. 141.

<sup>65</sup> 'What can equal the freedom of a home?', *Daily Mail*, 19 March 1970.

<sup>66</sup> 'Thatcher and the Tories', *Spare Rib*, June 1978, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> Labour Housing Policy Review, quoted in J. Conway, *Housing Policy* (Eastbourne, 2000), p. 77.



scheme, and by the end of her first administration half a million families lived in council houses which they had bought.<sup>68</sup> The policy produced remarkable loyalty to Thatcher, and by 1983 it was commonplace for the upper working class to claim that 'Maggie got me my house'. Benefactors of the scheme were reportedly identifiable by the decorative improvements made to council properties upon purchase, apparently confirming the pride ownership had been expected to inspire.<sup>69</sup>

Whereas the 'new' feminism of the interwar period, spearheaded by Eleanor Rathbone, had sought to improve women's domestic lives, lobbying, for example, for a family allowance to be paid directly to women, feminists of the 1950s used their domestic competence to legitimise professional achievement. By the late 1960s, Women's Liberation feminists focused increasingly on women's ability to transcend their domestic lives, alienating those women whose primary identification was domestic and bolstering the body of anti-feminist sentiment exploited by Conservative discourses on gender.<sup>70</sup> The Wages for Housework campaign, founded by American feminist Selma James in 1972, argued that giving wages for housework would enable its dissociation from the concept of womanhood, but this was 'divisive within the women's movement' and the domestic labour debate frequently dissolved into arguments about whether housework might be formally classified as 'productive' in the Marxist sense.<sup>71</sup> This was of little practical use to women trying to maintain a home on little money and with little support. As Janice Winship has written, 'many women [were] less attracted to feminism than intimidated by what it seemed to stand for: a wholesale rejection of the personal and institutional baggage associated with femininity'.<sup>72</sup> She goes on to argue that the 'purist and puritan and morally overlaid politics' of the women's movement alienated women by presenting 'the "hazy" centre' – in which most women lived – as politically unacceptable. *Spare Rib*, for example, ran a front cover in March 1984 which included the tagline 'Children: some women

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<sup>68</sup> Statistics relating to Right to Buy sales are compromised by the fact that not all properties sold under the terms of the Right to Buy scheme were recorded as such, as local authorities were not obliged to carry out sales using the Department of the Environment's forms. Colin Jones and Alan Murie therefore argue that the number of homes bought under Right to Buy is often underestimated, and that figures indicating the total number of property sales recorded by local authorities should instead be used. This would put the number of sales in England in 1982 at over 207 000: C. Jones and A. Murie, *The Right to Buy: analysis and evaluation of a housing policy* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 55-56.

<sup>69</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, pp. 469-71. Whilst Thatcher's ideological commitment to 'the freedom and mobility' enabled by homeownership should not be underestimated, Moore emphasises the economic considerations behind Conservative enthusiasm for Right to Buy. Housing had been singled out in 1979 by a Think Tank paper as capable of 'produc[ing] proportionately greater savings than any other programme'. Further to liberating buyers, the scheme was designed to reduce the number of future council house tenants, make increases to council house rent more politically viable, and yield revenue. As Moore argues, the 'giveaway' was 'in some sense, a cut'.

<sup>70</sup> The Married Women's Association, founded in 1938, continued to lobby for improvements to women's domestic lives after the war, but deliberately eschewed the word 'feminism'.

<sup>71</sup> C. Freeman, 'When is a Wage not a Wage?', *Red Rag*, Issue 5, p. 19.

<sup>72</sup> Winship, *Inside*, p. 125.

really do want them'. A reader survey carried out by the magazine in 1974 suggests that even its readers considered the publication unlikely to win supporters for the women's movement. The most commonly presented criticisms are that the magazine was humourless, and 'too middle class' (or, as one respondent put it, 'pseudo working class'). Another reader explicitly criticised the publication for failing to represent the interested of 'housebound mothers', among whom she counted herself: 'I still feel second class even when reading *Spare Rib*'. Of the survey's 360 female respondents, only 27 women identified themselves as primarily housewives or mothers.<sup>73</sup> This was clearly not the publication's target readership.

Thatcher's stance in relation to feminism should be understood not only within the context of contemporary feminist politics, but in relation to the gender ideals of the Conservative party. Her criticisms of the feminist movement adopted an established form, relying upon (and seeking to mobilise) attachment to 'traditional' understandings of women as nurturing and overtly feminine, whilst simultaneously undermining the representativeness of feminist concerns.<sup>74</sup> For example, in 1974 Sally Oppenheim, Conservative MP for Gloucester, told *The Listener* that an 'extreme element' of Women's Liberation was trying to enforce a 'fundamental change' to women's roles that 'the majority of women themselves' did not want. She accused Women's Liberation of 'present[ing] an image which does not attract friendliness', thereby justifying the hostility it met with. Oppenheim then defended her traditionalism in 'feminist' terms: '[women] don't want to become imitation men, they don't want feminine characteristics necessarily in be classed as second rate'.<sup>75</sup> By exploiting perceptions of Women's Liberation as 'masculine', Oppenheim was able to present her position as a defence of uniquely female abilities. Thatcher, similarly, denied that 'male' attributes were superior to 'feminine' ones, telling a television interviewer in 1986 that 'best woman [in politics]' was a higher accolade than 'best man'.<sup>76</sup> The Conservative party has been keen to present itself as the champion of female participation, but it has never identified with feminism, which has traditionally been presented as at odds with the Conservative, and specifically Thatcherite, emphasis on personal responsibility.<sup>77</sup> An emphasis on personal responsibility enabled Conservative discourse to abdicate responsibility for collective female equality as a matter of principle.

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<sup>73</sup> 'Spare Rib surveys', December 1974-January 1975, Feminist Archive North, Leeds University library.

<sup>74</sup> Differentiating between a 'militant' hardcore and affiliated individuals was a rhetorical technique Thatcher employed repeatedly throughout her premiership: just as trades union leaders were differentiated from their members, and left-leaning metropolitan elite was dissociated from the morality of the country at large, 'Women's Lib' was said not to represent the true interests of women.

<sup>75</sup> 'The equality of the sexes', *The Listener*, 11 April 1974.

<sup>76</sup> Thatcher, 'TV interview for Central TV', 18 June 1986, MTFW, ref: 106426.

<sup>77</sup> Poster celebrates affiliation with Mrs Pankhurst, cites the first female MP and PM as Conservatives, Churchill College Thatcher Archive: THCR 2/6/1/202

This said, it should not be assumed that Conservative women unquestioningly accepted Thatcher's vision of hearth and home. In 1981 the annual Conservative Women's conference specifically addressed the issue of women's employment. On the less controversial recommendations to improve the rights of part-time and home workers, area working parties recommended that women be encouraged to seek advancement in industry, to acquire greater mechanical and technical skill, and to be more active within trade unions, to 'gain greater influence over their conditions of work'.<sup>78</sup> In 1985 the Conservative National Women's Committee formed a coalition built outside of the party in order to oppose Norman Fowler's proposition that Family Income Supplement, a benefit paid to low-wage families and usually collected by women, be paid as Family Credit through the predominantly male pay packet. Fowler conceded; in June 1986 it was announced that Family Credit would be paid direct to 500,000 mothers.<sup>79</sup> Women of the party had also lobbied for amendments to tax law, which until 1990 treated married women as appendages of their husbands, as well as against immigration policies which discriminated against women married to foreign nationals.<sup>80</sup>

Conservative women, then, were not averse to emphasising their rights *as women*. Pro-woman sentiments, however, rarely manifest themselves as explicit identification with 'feminism', much less Women's Liberation. By the 1980s many of Thatcher's younger ministers were married to women with independent careers, and from a Labour perspective at least high-grade female professionals were likely supporters of the Conservative party. As the *Sunday Telegraph* reported in 1987, Labour sought to 'destroy the dungaree-type image of Labour women' and create a network of bankers, businesswomen and lawyers under the direction of Jenny Jaeger.<sup>81</sup> Emma Nicholson, Conservative MP for Torridge and West Devon between 1987 and 1995, had launched a successful 'high-flyer' recruitment drive in her earlier role as the party's vice-chairman.<sup>82</sup> The initiative was supported by Thatcher, who, in a meeting with Nicholson in 1983 had emphasised her desire to secure the

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<sup>78</sup> Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, p. 163.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165.

<sup>80</sup> Emma Nicholson, who was Conservative party vice chairman with special responsibility for women from 1983 to 1987, recalls her interactions with Thatcher in relation to independent taxation in her autobiography, *Secret Society*. Nicholson argues that Thatcher regarded married women's taxation reform as impractical, as it would cost the treasury money and win few votes: 'the equal opportunity aspect of the matter did not seem to weigh with her at all'. By 1988, however, Nigel Lawson had won the argument in favour of independent taxation, claiming in a House of Commons debate in March that year that taxing 'the income of a married woman as if it belonged to her husband' was 'no longer acceptable'. The next tax system came into effect in April 1990. E. Nicholson, *Secret Society: inside – and outside – the Conservative party* (London 1996), p. 89 and *Hansard*, House of Commons debate, vol 129, cc 997-8 (15 March 1988)

<sup>81</sup> 'Labour to Woo Women High Fliers', *Sunday Telegraph*, 16 August 1987.

<sup>82</sup> Nicholson, *Secret Society*, p.93.

support of 'professional women' in the 30-45 age bracket.<sup>83</sup> This suggests the need for Conservative discourses on 'women' and 'the family' to accommodate a range of pressures. The Conservative party's ability to accommodate contradictions is widely recognised. In relation to the issue of 'women's roles', however, the party's accommodation of contradiction reflected a broader cultural trend which enabled an attachment to traditional gender ideals to co-exist with an increasing desire for greater equality between men and women in the public sphere, alongside rising female employment figures. As Angela Holdsworth wrote in 1989, 'traditional values still hold strong, even in households which do not conform to them'. A 1987 British Attitudes Study, for example, found that three-quarters of households in which mothers worked fulltime supported the view that mothers of young children should stay at home. Nearly as many believed that women should not do paid work at all.<sup>84</sup>

Riddled with internal divisions, the Women's Liberation Movement hosted its final national conference in 1978, and from the early 1980s it became common for commentators to speak of the 'death' of feminism. This was misleading, but the movement's loss of momentum is undeniable. As Anna Coote wrote in her 'London Diary' segment of the *New Statesman* in June 1980: 'After ten years of being angry... some of us are a bit flaked. I am compiling, with like minded friends, a refresher course for clapped out feminists'.<sup>85</sup> A number of key victories, such as the passage of equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation, had been won, and removed a unifying focus. More significantly, the 'mood of the nation' shifted, with public spending cuts and rising unemployment presenting an inhospitable environment for feminist demands. With the loss of jobs, unions focused their attention on preserving the jobs of their male members: 'it seemed that women's economic equality had to be a no-cost benefit'.<sup>86</sup>

Within this context the Greenham peace camp represents an important expression of feminist activism at a time increasingly regarded as 'post-feminist'.<sup>87</sup> The camp was the largest of a number

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<sup>83</sup> Sherbourne record of conversation between Thatcher and Nicholson, 21 October 1983, MTFW: 131285. Thatcher demonstrated her support for the programme by speaking at 'high flier' events, and Nicholson's autobiography recalls Thatcher being 'particularly successful' at the first Asian women's conference. Nicholson, *Secret Society*, p. 93.

<sup>84</sup> Holdsworth, *Out of the Dolls House*, p. 38.

<sup>85</sup> A. Coote, 'London Diary', *New Statesman*, June 1980, included in a Married Women's Association Bulletin June-July 1980, Women's Library LSE: 5/MWA/8/1.

<sup>86</sup> Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 162.

<sup>87</sup> See S. Faludi, *Backlash: the undeclared war against women* (London, 1992), J. Valenti, *Full Frontal Feminism* (Berkeley, 2007), K. Mendes, 'The lady is a closet feminist!': discourses of backlash and postfeminism in British and American newspapers', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14 (2011). Mendes argues that backlash discourses emerged before a state of 'post-feminism' was generally declared by the British press: 'despite the seeming contradiction of using this term [post-feminism] during the height of the women's movement, 'post-feminist' discourses are evident throughout the 1970s... That post-feminist discourses emerged early on indicates the extent to which patriarchal and capitalist ideologies combated feminist critiques from an early

of camps that emerged throughout Europe in protest at the arrival of American nuclear missiles. It had not been planned. Rather, on the culmination of Women for Peace on Earth's nine-day march from Cardiff to Greenham, Newbury, four women chained themselves to the fence surrounding the military base in a self-conscious invocation of the suffragettes. They demanded a televised debate with the minister of defence or two ministry representatives, but were ignored, the government claiming that the issue of nuclear weapons had been fully discussed. The marchers also delivered a letter to the base commander, outlining their concerns. The commander reportedly dismissed these and told the protesters 'you can stay here as long as you like'.<sup>88</sup> The camp at Greenham, which in the mid 1980s comprised encampments at seven different locations and gates around the base, survived for almost twenty years, despite numerous evictions and the imprisonment of many activists.

Greenham Common provides a useful case-study for exploring overtly feminist constructions of female authority, as well as the media responses that such constructions elicited. It should be emphasised, however, that 'Greenham women', as the protestors were dubbed, projected a vision of femininity that sat uncomfortably with the 1970s women's liberation emphasis on securing equality in the public sphere, which many women believed could only be achieved through the rejection of their domestic functions. 'Greenham women', conversely, emphasised motherhood as integral to the legitimacy of their protest, reflecting an established pattern within the history of women's peace movements. As Jill Liddington has argued, second-wave feminism developed with little knowledge of its anti-militarist past, and relations between women's peace groups and the WLM were frequently strained. Liberationists were 'extremely critical' of organisations such as the Liaison Committee for Women's Peace Groups, which tended to engage in 'traditional, maternalist peace campaigning'.<sup>89</sup> Conversely, the Liaison Committee criticised women's liberation feminism for mounting pressure on women to balance an ever-increasing list of responsibilities. In 1971 the Committee's newsletter 'Call to Women' criticised the WLM in remarkably Thatcherite terms: 'to add to the mother's growing sense of inadequacy she is being made to feel by the more "liberated" of her own kind that she ought to be out in the streets fighting for her rights'.<sup>90</sup>

The decision, taken in February 1982, to prohibit men from staying at the camp changed its character dramatically. Not only was the residential camp to be exclusively female, but activists resolved to engage primarily with female representatives of the authorities, as well as with female

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stage, demonstrating that it took many years for notion's of feminism's illegitimacy and hence its redundancy to achieve hegemony.'

<sup>88</sup> M. Laware, 'Circling the Missiles and Staining them Red: feminist rhetorical invention and strategies of resistance at the women's peace camp at Greenham Common', *NWSA Journal*, 3 (2004), p. 20.

<sup>89</sup> J. Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common: feminism and antimilitarism in Britain since 1820* (Syracuse, 1991), p. 200.

<sup>90</sup> *Call to Women*, 93, February-March 1971 quoted in *ibid.*, p. 200.

journalists only, so far as this was possible. There were a number of practical reasons for this decision. Activists noted that male participation in the protest compromised the camp's ethos of non-violence, partly because the police were more likely to respond violently to men than women. They also resented male reluctance to participate in the 'domestic' maintenance of the camp, and in this respect considered male protestors a drain on women's energies. Most significantly, however, the decision to exclude men was a product of the lessons of Women's Liberation: organising as women alone disrupted traditional gender relations and created an environment in which women were able to set the agenda.<sup>91</sup> As a consequence of male exclusion, Greenham developed into a powerful symbol of women's maternal strength, and thus a complex target of the government's censure. Greenham Common protestors represented a diverse range of (left-wing) political positions. Collectively, however, their essentialist understandings of gender presented parallels with Thatcher's frequent reference to the 'natural' domestic aptitude of women. The form of protest that Greenham women engaged in posed particular difficulties for a government whose appeal to women had traded heavily on their vital role as guardians of future generations. As Thatcher told *Living* magazine in 1984, 'Mothers want to give their children more than they had ... we're always thinking of the future for our children and grandchildren, and that affects the decisions we make'.<sup>92</sup>

In 1982 Greenham women marked the three-year anniversary of the NATO decision to deploy nuclear missiles in Europe by encircling the base's 9-mile perimeter fence. Activists hoped to attract 16,000 women to 'Embrace the Base'; on 12 December 30,000 arrived at the camp. Women were encouraged to attach personal items to the fence, such as photographs of family members, babygrows and children's toys – items regarded as symbols of the human life that protestors believed the presence of nuclear missiles threatened. An angry reader of *Spare Rib* complained to the magazine in July 1983 that Greenham protestors had confused 'symbols of life' with 'symbols of women's oppression', emphasising the contested 'feminist' credentials of the camp.<sup>93</sup> Women, through their capacity to bear children, were regarded as the 'natural' defenders of human life. This was an established formulation, discernible, for example, in the early twentieth-century writings of South African social-theorist Olive Schreiner and the Cooperative Guild's 'Never Again' campaign against the conscription of their sons.<sup>94</sup> As one protestor explained in 1982, 'women are really in touch with what life is about. You can't even complicate having a child without considering the value

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<sup>91</sup> C. Cockburn, *Antimilitarism: political and gender dynamics of peace movements* (Basingstoke, 2012), p.38.

<sup>92</sup> Thatcher, Interview for *Living* magazine, 9 January 1984, MTFW: 105517.

<sup>93</sup> 'Reply about Greenham', *Spare Rib*, July 1983, p. 36.

<sup>94</sup> Liddington, *The Road to Greenham*, p.6. Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) presented both biological and cultural arguments for women's predisposition towards peace in her book *Woman and Labour*, published 1911.

of that life'.<sup>95</sup> Others conceived of women's 'connectedness to the forces of life' in more mystical ways.<sup>96</sup> Child-like drawings of snakes and spider webs adorned Greenham publicity material, and protesters were invited to celebrate the festival of the 'Rainbow Dragon', so as to 'reawaken buried feminine forces' capable of overcoming the country's nuclear arsenal.<sup>97</sup> The 'irrationality' of Greenham protest exasperated women such as Kate Soper, a feminist philosopher who argued that feminism needed to address, rather than to reiterate, 'tensions at the heart of...gender antitheses'.<sup>98</sup> Greenham protesters, in presenting women as the 'natural' and 'emotional' corollaries to masculine 'rationality' seemed to reaffirm the 'natural' limitations used to disqualify women from the roles to which WLM had demanded women have equal access. Similarly, the popular Greenham chant 'take the toys from the boys' relied on understandings of women as 'natural' childminders and disciplinarians.

Greenham women constituted a public-image difficulty for Thatcher. Opinion polls not only suggested that there was widespread opposition to Britain's Trident missile programme, but that opposition was particularly pronounced among women. In 1981, before Women for Life on Earth marched to Greenham, 56% of women and 43% of men opposed the installation of Cruise missiles. By October 1982 opposition had reached 64% and 51% respectively.<sup>99</sup> Peace initiatives had been gathering momentum in Britain since the late 1970s. Plans for expansion at Windscale nuclear site in Cumbria resulted in the first large scale anti-nuclear protest since the 1950s, as links between nuclear power and nuclear war were increasingly emphasised. New branches of CND sprung up – such as Oxford University's 'Campaign Atom' – and old groups were reinvigorated. In 1982 Ann Petit, who had organised the 'Women for Life on Earth' march, was invited to address 250, 000 supporters at a CND rally in Hyde Park. A triumphalist, post-Falklands Thatcher had provided one of the defining images of the 1980s, but 'Greenham woman' offered a powerful alternative, and popular support for peace initiatives tempered the Conservative government's response to Greenham activism. As Liddington has argued, 'Greenham Woman' was 'a many sided icon' incorporating 'a memorable mix of the 'ordinary' mother and housewife, white haired veteran grandmother-protestor, and intrepid young base invader'.<sup>100</sup> Although, as will be argued below, Greenham women found little sympathy in the mainstream press, the publication of individual images – a grandmother being manhandled by police, for example – could have damaging consequences. Cases against Greenham women were heard 'away from the Old Bailey spotlight', and Michael Heseltine, who replaced John Nott as

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<sup>95</sup> S. Green quoted in A. Cook and G. Kirk, *Greenham Women Everywhere* (London, 1983), p. 87.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.88.

<sup>97</sup> See K. Soper, 'Taking the Toys from the Boys?', *END: journal of nuclear disarmament*, 24 (1986), p. 17.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>99</sup> Liddington, *The Road to Greenham*, p. 253.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

Defence Secretary in January 1983, was entrusted with a one-million pound advertising budget for anti-CND campaigning.<sup>101</sup> The *Sunday Times* regarded Heseltine's appointment as an attempt to 'dazzle the 'ordinary' muddle-headed housewives who have been seduced ... by the peace movement'.<sup>102</sup> In public statements Thatcher was keen to demonstrate her admiration for the noble intentions of Greenham women, whilst undermining the logic of their protest, emphasising that the missiles were a deterrent and therefore the best means of preserving peace. Max Beloff, an historian and informal advisor to Thatcher in the early years of her premiership, expressed criticism of the government's approach to 'the so called Peace Movement' in a memo dated December 1982. He advised Thatcher to 'abandon the kid gloves' and demonstrate to the public that 'in the case of Greenham Common women ... we are dealing with ... an induced mass hysteria'. He recommended investigation into the 'personal and political background' of Greenham women, 'so that the aura of martyrdom can be stripped from them.'<sup>103</sup> Such a change of tack never materialised, however, and as late as 1988 the Thatcher government had failed to evict the dozen women still living at Greenham peace camp. Given that nuclear missiles were presented as necessary defences against the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet Union, the government had to be seen to respect the democratic right to protest. As the Conservative peer Lord Lucas put it to the House of Lords in 1984, 'we in this country have a practice whereby demonstrators may demonstrate and protesters may protest. That is exactly what is happening at Greenham Common'.<sup>104</sup> More than this, however, having emphasised the importance of women's role as mothers Thatcher was compromised in her ability to condemn women who framed their protest as a maternal obligation.

An examination of contemporary newspaper coverage suggests that few journalists considered themselves similarly constrained. Trends present within journalistic criticism of the Greenham protestors focus popular responses to 'feminism' more broadly. Their presentation conformed to a number of media stereotypes: the women were said to be sex starved, hysterical, masculine and deluded. *The Sun*, for example, described the women as 'burly lesbians'; the *Spectator* as 'hefty ladies ... a fairly gruesome bunch'.<sup>105</sup> The rationale of the peace camp was frequently sidelined in favour of an examination of the women and their environment. The 'squalor' of the camp received extensive coverage, and was often used to imply the poor hygiene of the women living there. In a particularly misogynist attack with explicitly sexual implications, Auberon Waugh claimed the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in ibid, p. 253.

<sup>103</sup> Lord Beloff memo, 14 December 1982, MTFW: 122590.

<sup>104</sup> *Hansard* House of Lords debate vol 454 cc 751-4 (10 July 1984)

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Cook and Kirk, *Greenham*, p. 95.



Greenham women smelt of ‘fish paste and bad oysters’.<sup>106</sup> The horror that the living conditions of Greenham common generated emphasised the contemporary attachment to the idea of women as regulators and sanitizers, historically enacted through domestic tasks such as food preparation and child-rearing. That women ‘abandoned’ ‘ordinary’ domestic lives to reside under plastic sheets was presented as a perverse rejection of their ‘natural’ role.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a feminist as ‘an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women’. This belies the complexity of ‘feminist’ as a contested and historically contingent identity. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s ‘feminism’ connoted collectivism, socialism and radicalism. It was demonised and trivialised by the popular media to the extent that ‘feminist’ was not a viable position for many women. The marginalisation of feminism, however, did not preclude popular satisfaction in Thatcher’s female authority. As has been shown, a ‘feminist consciousness’ informed women’s responses to Thatcher *as a woman*, and her very rejection of feminism could be regarded as a laudable demonstration of strength. For Thatcher, equality was best achieved by ‘do[ing] everything the men do—and a good deal more besides’.<sup>107</sup> The rise of a generation of liberal feminists in the 1990s offered a revisionist interpretation of Thatcher’s feminist credentials. For Natasha Walter, who regards collectivist feminism as promoting a victim-centred political vision, Thatcher is ‘the greatest unsung hero of British feminism’, for she ‘normalised female success without seeking special favours or privileges as a woman’.<sup>108</sup> The changing and variable ‘meaning’ of feminism provides a useful focus for untangling complex attitudes towards gender, which are themselves an important context for understanding the various resonances of Thatcher’s anti-feminist, overtly feminine public image.

In 2008 Theresa May, then Shadow Leader of the House of Commons, posed wearing a t-shirt that read: ‘this is what a feminist looks like’. The t-shirt had been designed by the Fawcett Society as part of a campaign to reduce the stigma associated with ‘feminism’ and to demonstrate the diversity of women concerned to promote gender equality.<sup>109</sup> Without denying the reality of this stigma, the key message in the context of this chapter is that May – a woman frequently likened to Thatcher – considered ‘feminist’ a politically ‘saleable’ form of self-presentation. Her party was in Opposition; disregarding the authenticity of May’s feminism, association with the Fawcett Society, it can be assumed, was expected to win votes. This in itself suggests the extent to which the ‘meaning’ of feminism has shifted, and emphasises the need to analyse ‘feminist’ attitudes within a framework that recognises their historical contingency.

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<sup>106</sup> Quoted in C. Blackwood, *On the Perimeter* (London, 1984) p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Thatcher, ‘If I become Chancellor of the Exchequer’, *Finchley Times*, 16 December 1966, MTFW: 101297.

<sup>108</sup> N. Walter, ‘Margaret Thatcher: a feminist icon?’ Guardian’s women’s blog, 5 January 2012.

<sup>109</sup> The Fawcett Society has subsequently produced a similar t-shirt for men.

#### **4. Gender dynamics as spectacle: Thatcher and her men**

As shown in the previous chapter, Thatcher's success was enjoyed by many women as a woman's success over men. That she did not prioritise 'women's issues', promote women to the Cabinet or increase women's representation in Parliament mattered less – to some women – than the fact that she enacted women's fantasies of forms of authority that were typically deemed 'masculine'. Thatcher's femininity was integral to the spectacle of this performance, but so too were the masculinities of the men with whom she worked, and over whom she exerted her power. Descriptions of Thatcher as 'the best man in the cabinet' reflected on the apparently inadequate masculinities of her colleagues as much as they emphasised the prime minister's 'iron' strength. This chapter will consider the public image of her relationships with men. Taken together, these constitute an integral element of the Thatcher legend that developed over the eleven years of her premiership.

#### **!**

The gendered appeal of Thatcher's dominance over her male colleagues relied on the meticulous maintenance of her feminine appearance: it was the apparently perverse combination of power and femininity that captured the popular imagination. Understanding the ways in which Thatcher used her femininity in the presentation of her power requires an appreciation of the material 'props' that shaped her gendered image. As Daniel Conway has argued, through dress, Thatcher 'created different identities, some of which became iconic symbols of ... her politics'.<sup>1</sup> The 1980s are readily evoked by reference to the power suits and pussy-bow blouses for which Thatcher was famous, and it is significant that the opening scene of BBC 4's television drama, *Margaret*, which was first broadcast in 2009, depicts the Prime Minister being dressed in an elaborate gown, as she examines herself in the mirror. Focus on clothes also helps to emphasise the performative nature of Thatcher's public image. As Margaret King has recalled, in anticipation of her visit to Moscow in 1987, which required the prime minister to descend aircraft steps in full view of photographers, she practiced descending the staircases of Downing Street in the outfit selected for this occasion: a dress rehearsal, to ensure a smooth performance.<sup>2</sup> In the context of this chapter, Thatcher's clothes should be interpreted as instruments in the dramatisation of her female authority, and as vital to the gendered narratives through which her premiership was understood.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Conway, 'Margaret Thatcher, dress and the politics of fashion' in A. Behnke ed., *The Global Politics of Fashion: being fab in a dangerous world* (London, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

As demonstrated in chapter one, Thatcher had paid keen attention to her appearance long before she entered politics. She thrived off compliments, and regularly relayed to Muriel the details of outfits that she believed had been particularly successful. Thatcher recognised early in her political career the importance of dress as a way of standing out. Having been told by Lady Williams, the wife of the MP for Croydon East, to dress ‘distinctively’ when canvassing votes in Dartford in 1950, Thatcher recalled taking this advice ‘very seriously’.<sup>3</sup> Striking images of her coloured suits amidst a sea of black demonstrate the visual advantages of a female wardrobe. Indeed, it was light-heartedly rumoured that Thatcher had sacked Janet Young from the Cabinet because ‘a second figure in a skirt surrounded by twenty-one pairs of trousers made photographs less dramatic’.<sup>4</sup> The number of political memoirists and diarists that recall Thatcher’s clothes – their colour and style on particular occasions – suggests how effectively she employed dress as a means of making an impression.<sup>5</sup> The frequency with which she herself recalls what she wore on particular days implicitly confirms the importance that she attributed to her personal appearance.

Cynthia Crawford, Thatcher’s personal assistant, kept a clothes diary recording what Thatcher wore to different events, to ensure that she was not photographed wearing the same outfit on consecutive occasions. On foreign visits, she was keen to incorporate the colours of the hosts’ national flag into her wardrobe choices, while ensuring that she always ‘look British’ and positively represented British designers. Thatcher’s autobiography also recalls her reluctance to wear favourite items to meetings she thought likely to be unsuccessful, for fear they would be sullied, and never worn again.<sup>6</sup> As this suggests, clothes were not merely a peripheral, personal indulgence for Thatcher, but a strategy for coping with and exploiting her different roles. Such attention to presentational detail was, by the 1980s, increasingly emphasised as integral to the professional woman’s success. As Marianne Thesander has argued, ‘feminine ideals always clearly express large or small changes in society’.<sup>7</sup> Dress is therefore an important source for analysing historical actors – and women in particular – within their social and political contexts, as through dress historical actors both exert agency and express the values and concerns of any given period. It is not my intention to calculate the precise balance between Thatcher’s personal agency and the various factors which will have limited her presentational decisions, although it is worth emphasising that she sought to

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<sup>3</sup> Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London, 1996), p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> S. Crosland, ‘Why First Ladies Can’t be Friends’, *Daily Mail*, 3 January 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Clark’s diary, for example, notes that on the 23 March 1977 the ‘House was v. full and [Thatcher] in black suit with white collar/blouse’, and Woodrow Wyatt recalled on the 14 October 1988 that she ‘has mastered the art of wearing the right clothes. Today she wore a blue skirt with a beautiful diamond broach’. Howe’s autobiography recalls that on the first day of Commons Television coverage Thatcher ‘had dressed for the part in a striking electric blue suit’, G. Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty* (London, 1995), p.613.

<sup>6</sup> Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> M. Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal* (London, 1997), p. 131.

encourage and manipulate media comment on her clothing choices. Chapter one, for example, demonstrated Thatcher's exploitation during the 1979 general election campaign of interest in 'feminine' issues, such as dress, to reach (female) audiences assumed to be uninterested in 'hard' politics. In 1987 her private office released details such as her dress size, shoe size and favourite shops, further emphasising the extent to which media interest in these topics was considered politically beneficial. Yet the majority of feminist literature emphasises the marginalising effect of media interest in the appearances of female politicians, with Sarah Childs, for example, arguing that focus on dress reinforces assumptions of women's unsuitability for the political sphere. Although this may have applied to Thatcher during the early stages of her career, it is not a suitable framework for understanding the role of dress throughout her premiership. Thatcher's wardrobe was certainly used to distinguish her from her male colleagues, but this was not to her political disadvantage. Clothes were then a key means through which she 'performatively constituted her personal and political identities'.<sup>8</sup>

Thatcher's dress is rarely connected by either scholars or journalists to the wider environment in which she worked. As a number of commentators have emphasised in the recent debate about the *aesthetic* value of Thatcher's wardrobe, Thatcher's dress did not push the boundaries of fashion itself. Her 'power suits', according to the *Independent's* Fashion Editor Alexander Fury, 'weren't all that powerful really, next to the shoulder-boulder stuff being shown by Claude Montana and Thierry Mugler at the time'.<sup>9</sup> The way she *used* dress, however, was significant. It both reflected and shaped contemporary attitudes towards the placement of women in typically masculine, professional environments. Thesander argues that the 'sexiness' of 1980s clothes reflected increased female self-confidence insofar as it suggested that women were no longer fearful of being undermined as sex objects. She concedes, however, that the workplace continued to demand that women 'tone down' their femininity, although a 'masculine' appearance was equally to be avoided. This balancing act is a telling indication of the contentious social positioning of professional women, clearly demonstrated by John T Molloy's hugely popular *Women, Dress for Success*, which was published in Britain in 1980.

In order to gain 'authority' in the workplace, Molloy argued that women needed to be visible and recognisable as the 'boss' or 'manager', given the counter-intuitive nature of female superiority. This required concerted, visual separation from the typically feminine secretary:

Sweaters in the office spell secretary. Any woman at any level who wants to move up should not wear a sweater to work. In the office sweaters give off nothing but negative impulses. They say lower-middle class and loser.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Conway, 'Margaret Thatcher, dress and the politics of fashion'.

<sup>9</sup> A. Fury, 'The V&A has 'politely declined' Margaret Thatcher's wardrobe. Quite right too', the *Independent* online, 6 November 2015.

<sup>10</sup> J. Molloy, *Women, Dress for Success* (London, 1980), p. 77.

For Molloy, the 'inner circle' of the professional world was upper-middle class, and the aspirant female worker should reflect this in her wardrobe choices, dressing for the job she wanted rather than the one she had.<sup>11</sup> The limiting class implications of dress were keenly recognised by Thatcher, who as a young woman sought out 'classic' pieces at discount prices. In place of a sweater, which is later described by Molloy as 'one of the greatest seduction garments in existence', women were instructed to wear jackets 'cut fully enough to cover the contours of the bust'.<sup>12</sup> Waistcoats, which he argues draw attention to the bust, should also be avoided. This is not, however, to suggest that Molloy advocated a masculine appearance. Attempts to 'ape men' are said to 'destroy a woman's authority with men', and it is in this vein that trouser suits are condemned as 'failure suit[s]'.<sup>13</sup> The media attention Hillary Clinton's 'pantsuits' have drawn indicates that this hostility has endured.<sup>14</sup> As Molloy's advice suggests, gender politics were played out in Thatcher's (trouser-free) wardrobe, connecting 'the micro politics of dress' with the 'macro politics of power'.<sup>15</sup>

The proliferation of dress manuals in the 1980s suggests the increased importance attached to self presentation as a reflection of professional aptitude. The ideal female body was tall, slim (but not thin) and strong – liberated from restrictive garments but not 'natural' as the ideal of the 1970s had been.<sup>16</sup> Physical exercise became the national pastime and employers increasingly included fitness centres in office complexes, reflecting cultural links between physical prowess and success in the business sector especially. 'Power dressing', as a strategy for professional advancement, reflected the decade's individualistic commitments. As Joan Entwistle has argued, its emphasis on the individual and her body management represents the extension of neoliberalism into the culture of everyday life.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> For example, during the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primaries Clinton was accused of wearing trouser suits to conceal 'bad' legs, and of wearing a suit jacket that exposed too much cleavage. Female reporters at CNN were warned not to wear trouser suits because this would make them look like Clinton, and brightly coloured trouser suits became a staple of satirical depictions of the prospective presidential candidate. During the 2016 Presidential election campaign a feminist, pro-Clinton campaign group formed under the name 'Pantsuit Nation', with its founder describing the pantsuit as a 'symbol of women's fight for equality in the workplace'. See BBC News 15 November 2016: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-us-2016-37987616](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-us-2016-37987616) and G.Steinman, 'Learning From a Year of Hope and Hard Choices' in 'B. Guy-Sheftall ed., *Feminists speak Out About the 2008 Presidential Campaign* (Albany, 2010) p. 266.

<sup>15</sup> Conway, 'Margaret Thatcher'

<sup>16</sup> As Thesander has emphasised, 'There are clear differences between the shapeless, liberated tomboy ideal of the 1920s, the 'natural', naked, but non-erotic look of the 1970s and the very feminine ideal of the 1980s, created both by the growing cult of body awareness and the increased self confidence of women'. *The Feminine Ideal*, p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> J. Entwistle, 'Fashioning the career woman' in M. Andrews and M. Talbot eds., *All the World and her Husband: women in twentieth century consumer culture* (London, 2000), p. 230.

The importance of self presentation is clearly expressed in Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls*, which uses clothes to communicate generational, familial and gendered divides between characters. Set in 1980, and first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in 1982, the play considers the nature and personal cost of professional success for women in Thatcher's Britain. The central character, Marlene, is the newly promoted Managing Director of a women's recruitment agency, from which the play takes its name. She has turned her back on her working-class background and abandoned her daughter, Angie, who has been raised by her sister under the impression that Marlene is her aunt. Throughout the play, the importance of youth and 'style' to professional success is made clear. In an interview between Win, an employee of the Top Girls agency, and Louise, a forty-six year old job candidate, Win 'reassures' Louise that while her age 'is of course a handicap ... it's not necessarily a disabling handicap'.<sup>18</sup> Speaking about the professional success of a former colleague, Louise reflects that she 'has a different style – she's a new kind of attractive well dressed [woman] ... there is a kind of woman who's thirty now who grew up in a different climate. They are not so careful. They take themselves for granted'.<sup>19</sup> A dress that Marlene gave Angie, during a visit 'home' is shown to be her most prized possession, symbolising the glamour and affluence that Marlene abandoned her daughter, and her background, in order to attain. Explaining why she wants to leave her current role, Louise claims that 'Nobody notices me ... They will notice me when I go', emphasising the issue of visibility raised by Molloy's dress manual.<sup>20</sup> Churchill voices the social anxiety caused by female superiority, equally reflected in Molloy's text, through Mrs Kidd, who encourages Marlene – recently promoted above Mrs Kidd's husband – to empathise with what 'working for a woman' will do to him: 'He hasn't been at all well all weekend. He hasn't slept for three nights ... I think if it was a man he'd get over it as something normal'.<sup>21</sup> Mrs Kidd accuses Marlene of being 'one of these ball breakers', underlining the extent to which female empowerment was tied to notions of emasculation, and emphasising the need to study femininity in relation to masculinity.

*Top Girls* explores what it meant to be a professional woman in the 1980s, but does not offer a 'solution'; sympathy shifts throughout. Marlene and her 'top girls' are presented as complicit in a masculine, capitalist regime that penalises the most vulnerable and offers scant opportunity to the majority of women. One candidate interviewed by the Top Girls agency is offered uninspiring placements marketing knitwear and selling lampshades, another is encouraged to look towards

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<sup>18</sup> C. Churchill, *Top Girls* (London, 2015) p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

'fields that are easier for a woman'.<sup>22</sup> Marlene's sister, Joyce, is presented as worn down by the drudgery of her life; let down by her husband and struggling to look after the daughter that Marlene left behind. The choices open to women in Churchill's vision of 1980s Britain are stark. The political 'context', which arguably constitutes a 'theme' in itself, is brought to the fore in Act Three, as Marlene and her sister Joyce fight passionately about the prospect of Thatcher's government. Marlene, who embraces enterprise culture and believes the 'eighties are going to be stupendous', describes 'Maggie' as a 'tough lady ... I'd give her a job'.<sup>23</sup>

Writing in 1988, the fashion journalist Brenda Pollon argued that Thatcher, who initially presented herself 'like a lady magistrate, like the vicar's wife', had become

Progressively ... sexier, and much more powerful. The fabrics are richer, there's more bulk. She's adopted ... a sort of hard edged French chic...there's a certain sort of unforgivingness to it, a certain arrogance.<sup>24</sup>

This same arrogance is suggested by *Top Girls*' Louise, who claims that 'modern women' 'take themselves for granted'.<sup>25</sup> It is also reflected in what Entwistle has described as the proliferation of 'enterprising texts'; women-targeted manuals written by successful businesswomen. Such manuals emphasise individual merit and personal motivation, thus beginning from the premise that the author's success was the product of merit alone.<sup>26</sup> While in America strands of individualistic feminism championed such a view, the British tradition, considered in chapter three, saw feminism allied more closely with collectivist action. Whereas the aesthetic of Women's Liberation Feminism sought to free women from the male gaze, individualist strands emphasised the potential advantages associated with certain styles of self presentation. For Thatcher, looking 'appropriate' was a necessary part of professional life, and a means by which women demonstrated their commitment to the task in hand. She claimed that a refusal to change one's image betrayed 'a lack of seriousness about winning power', and told *The English Woman's Wardrobe*, a BBC Documentary aired in 1986, that she dressed 'for the occasion, and for the job, and it is very important'.<sup>27</sup> If the 'hard edged' and unforgiving aesthetic of 'power dressing' suggested 'arrogance', however, it also reflected the need to manage the female body at work, negotiate gendered power structures and cultivate a 'visibility' that women were unable to expect as their right.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher*, p. 476.

<sup>25</sup> Churchill, *Top Girls*, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> Entwistle, 'Fashioning', p. 230.

<sup>27</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 285 and Thatcher, quoted in Conway, 'Margaret Thatcher'.

Tributes to Thatcher's sense of style in the wake of her death – *The Telegraph*, for example, commemorating 'the original power dresser' - suggest a perhaps unexpected legacy.<sup>28</sup> Following news that the Victoria and Albert Museum had 'politely declined' Thatcher's wardrobe, on the grounds that it is not of particular aesthetic or technical significance, The Margaret Thatcher Centre, an organisation run by supporters and inspired by The Reagan Ranch Centre, launched an 'emergency appeal' to save Thatcher's wardrobe 'for the nation': 'She delivered. Now it's our turn'.<sup>29</sup> The Centre, which offers 'Grand Committee' membership for £83 a month and special privileges for those donating hefty sums, reportedly raised over £100, 000 from private donations in just twenty-four hours, and arguably reflects the Thatcherite ethos better than a (partially) state-funded museum. The collection, which was described by the Creative Director of the Thatcher sale as a 'fascinating panorama of the life of one of the greatest leaders of our time', was auctioned at Christie's on the 15 December 2015, raising over four and a half million pounds.<sup>30</sup> The contested significance of this collection and its proper historical 'place' reflects not only the well-worn polarities of Thatcher commentary, but also a wider debate about the disciplinary context within which the visual and material trappings of political power should be situated. Thatcher's wardrobe has encouraged a reconsideration of what constitutes a historical source – as the Churchill Archive's initial reluctance to house her handbag testifies.

## II

When asked by Jenni Murray in 1993 whether she had 'played on' male attraction, Thatcher was unsurprisingly decisive in her denial, claiming not even to have been aware of it.<sup>31</sup> This is unlikely. Charles Moore's biographies suggest a woman keenly aware of her appearance and sensitive to her effect on men. In *The Path to Power*, Thatcher recalled 'friendly faces' at her interview for the Dartford constituency, concluding that 'on such occasions there were advantages as well as disadvantages to being a young woman making her way in politics'.<sup>32</sup> Having won the Conservative nomination, Thatcher's gender – and attractiveness – continued to shape her campaign. Her autobiography remembers Norman Dodds, the Labour incumbent, as 'chivalrous'. Local newspapers claimed that Dodds thought much of his opponents' beauty but less of her brains; he wrote to

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<sup>28</sup> H. Alexander, 'Margaret Thatcher: style, Aquascutum and the original power dresser', *The Telegraph*, 12 April 13

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Thatcher Centre emergency appeal: <https://www.thatchercentre.com>

<sup>30</sup> Thatcher sale video, accessible at the above URL.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Thatcher interview for BBC's *Woman's Hour*, 18 October 1993, recording available online via BBC archive

<sup>32</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 64.



Thatcher assuring her that the latter was untrue.<sup>33</sup> The two had first met at a ball in Dartford, where Dodds reportedly asked Thatcher to dance. She rather provocatively chose a tango, and the floor cleared to watch them. The *Evening Post* covered the story under the heading 'Ballroom Truce'.<sup>34</sup> Writing in 1995, Thatcher claimed that the type of 'chivalry' shown to her by Dodds had been 'dissipated' by 'today's feminists'.<sup>35</sup>

Although she did not specify when she believed that such changes occurred, Thatcher's response to Murray suggests that she saw male deference as having had little impact by the time she assumed the party leadership in 1975. This is not, however, a position widely supported by her political contemporaries. Neil Kinnock, for example, has claimed that fear of seeming 'disrespectful' inhibited male ability to challenge a woman.<sup>36</sup> Charles Powell, who served as Thatcher's foreign policy advisor from 1984 to 1990, regarded this as something she wilfully exploited as a means of dominating her cabinet:

she knew that they'd been brought up to be polite to women... [S]he would rock them to their foundations by screeching at them and yelling at them and arguing with them and generally treating them very badly in order to get her way. And she knew they would not easily fight back.<sup>37</sup>

Class is a significant factor in relation to gender discourses. Many prominent, as well as less prominent, Conservatives had been educated at an all-boys public school. When Thatcher assumed leadership the party was dominated by a 'class' of men known as the 'knights of the shire' – a male, privately-educated elite typically bolstered by their experiences of 'a good war'. William Whitelaw and Peter Carrington are key examples of this Conservative 'type', both having received military honours for their service in World War II. Such men had little experience of working with women – still less *for* a woman - and it was not a prospect they relished, as Peter Walker has testified. A self-made millionaire who attended Latymer Upper School on a scholarship, Walker was by no means the most socially cloistered of Thatcher's colleagues. Reflecting in his autobiography on his decision to select Geoffrey Howe, rather than Margaret Thatcher, as his number two at the Department of Trade and Industry, his concerns about working with a woman are telling:

I think I made the choice because I felt I would find it easier to deal with a man as number two. I thought if I had to congratulate or reprimand or issue stern orders, it would somehow be easier with a man there. Although I liked Margaret a great deal and there were no policy differences between us at this point, I felt I would be more courteous and understanding

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.72.

<sup>34</sup> 'Remarks on dancing with Labour MP', 17 January 1950, MTFW: 100852.

<sup>35</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> N. Kinnock quoted in S. Barczewski et al eds., *Britain since 1688: a nation in the world* (Abingdon, 2015), p. 322.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Powell quoted in *ibid*, p. 322.

with her than I would be with a man. In my business life I always had male colleagues and in politics I had never had a woman junior minister.<sup>38</sup>

Focusing on educational background, Andrew Adonis has argued that the social composition of the party remained largely unchanged between the interwar years and 1974. In 1923 79% of elected Conservative MPs had been educated at a leading public school. By 1974 this figure had slipped only to 74%. The percentage of Old Etonians was reduced from a quarter, to a little under a fifth.<sup>39</sup> The occupational balance within the party had also remained broadly constant, with the professions, the civil service and the armed forces representing roughly 50% of MPs throughout the period in question, and businessmen representing a third. Thatcher's first Cabinet certainly fitted with the traditional image of an upper-class Conservative elite, with 7 of her 21 ministers having been educated at Eton. Harrow, Charterhouse, Shrewsbury and Westminster were also represented. Thatcher and John Biffin were the only cabinet members to have attended state-funded grammar schools. Adonis argues that Thatcher oversaw and encouraged a decisive shift in the class structure of the party, with fewer Old Etonians returned as MPs, as well as fewer Oxbridge graduates. Conservative MPs, according to Adonis, were increasingly drawn from those sections of the salariat which formed the core of the party's support.<sup>40</sup> The victory of 'classless' John Major over Eton-educated Douglas Hurd in the leadership election of 1990 is presented as evidence of a fundamental shift in the party's class image: 'Fifty years ago the Tories reluctantly tolerated upper-middle class leaders. Nowadays inverse snobbery reigns supreme'.<sup>41</sup>

Writing in 1994, it was perhaps too early to suggest an enduring shift in the class makeup of Conservative governments, but Adonis' conclusions certainly chime with popular perceptions of the Thatcher decade. Peregrine Worsthorne congratulated Thatcher for harnessing 'the brutal energies of the C2s and Essex Man', and it was regularly quipped that the party had passed from the estates to the estate agents.<sup>42</sup> Julian Critchley famously described Thatcher's election as a 'peasant's revolt', although it is rarely added that Critchley considered himself one of the 'peasants'.<sup>43</sup> However, changes to the social composition of the party at the highest level should not be exaggerated; seven Old Etonians in 1979 became four in 1987, while the number of cabinet ministers educated at grammar schools increased from two to five. These are significant but not revolutionary changes.

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<sup>38</sup> P. Walker, *Staying Power* (London, 1991), p. 92.

<sup>39</sup> A. Adonis, 'The Transformation of the Conservative Party in the 1980s', in A. Adonis and T. Hames eds., *A Conservative Revolution? The Thatcher Reagan Decade in Perspective* (Manchester, 1994), p. 160.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>43</sup> M. Garnett, 'Julian Critchley', ODNB

More important for the role that Thatcher's gender played in the cultivation of her authoritative 'Iron Lady' image, was her forceful rejection of the outlook and style associated with the Conservative party's traditional leadership. Thatcher may have rejected 'the knights of the shire', but it should be recognised that by 1975 the phrase 'knights of the shire' was itself anachronistic, and tended more to refer to a style of Conservatism than a practical reality. In 1923 15.6% of returned Conservative MPs were primarily landowners, an 'occupation' that was in this year exceeded only by lawyers. A considerable number of the parliamentary Conservative party were members of aristocratic families; some were continuing long established, prestigious political traditions.<sup>44</sup> By 1975 the *real* 'knight of the shire' were already considerably diminished. This is not to say, however, that the *ideal* was insignificant. Thatcher's preference for combat over compromise tended to cast the Tory gentleman in an unfavourable light, with negotiation and conciliation presented as weaknesses inhibiting governmental progress. Thatcherite opposition to the mores of the upper classes has been discussed more broadly by Martin Weiner, and in relation to Swinton College specifically, by Lawrence Black. Her rejection of 'the gentleman' – reticent, reserved and slightly detached – as the leadership ideal, was symbolic as well as practical.<sup>45</sup> As Webster has argued, the term 'wet' – when used by a woman to criticise senior male colleagues – was 'a slur on a particular kind of masculinity'.<sup>46</sup> Within Thatcherite rhetoric, to be 'wet' was to be feeble, vacillating and spineless. It implied softness and a lack of control – the absence of the 'Iron' on which Thatcher's public image increasingly rested. This was the opposite of 'masculine'. That she was the 'best man in the Cabinet', a 'compliment' bestowed repeatedly by a wide range of supporters, reflected on the gendered identities of her male colleagues as much as it did her own femininity or masculinity.

Thatcher's leadership style appeared to confirm perceptions of her power as being 'matronly' in nature – infantilising if not always feminising. Lawson, for example, recalls being told by the prime minister to get a haircut.<sup>47</sup> An unnamed Conservative official recalls a 'hardening of the organs' when she reprovably buttoned-up his jacket, the ambiguity of this statement helpfully suggesting the duality of male feeling towards Thatcher, who was both 'motherly' and sexualised.<sup>48</sup> Speaking for

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<sup>44</sup> Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, p. 312.

<sup>45</sup> George Santayana's *Soliloquies* offer a compelling (and influential) portrait of the type of 'gentleman' that Thatcherism rejected. Published in 1922, Santayana argued that 'We should none of us admire England today if we had to admire it only for its conquering commerce, its pompous noblemen or its parliamentary government'. Such qualities, so admired throughout the Victorian period, were subordinated to 'a beautiful healthy England hidden from most foreigners, the England of the countryside and of the poets, domestic, sporting, gallant boyish, of a sure and delicate heart'. Thatcher's promotion of 'Victorian values' can be regarded as celebrating a set of values – entrepreneurialism, patriotism, bravery – that challenged 'effeminate' post-Victorian ideals of masculine behaviour.

<sup>46</sup> Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 150.

<sup>47</sup> Lawson, *Memoirs of a Tory Radical*, p. 249.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 122.

a television interview in Wallsend, in the north of England, Thatcher condemned those preoccupied with the unemployed as ‘moaning minnies’, whilst wagging her finger at the reporter.<sup>49</sup> She publicly admonished her colleagues, for example, interrupting Francis Pym at a press conference in 1983, to correct his view that the sovereignty of the Falklands was negotiable.<sup>50</sup> As the 1980s progressed Thatcher’s leadership style was increasingly criticised as ‘hectoring’ and dictatorial. Geoffrey Howe, in an interview with Charles Moore, attributed Thatcher’s poor behaviour to a lack of appreciation for gentlemanly codes – her gender, in Howe’s view, inhibited the social education required for leadership.<sup>51</sup> A number of memoirists condemn Thatcher’s habit of focusing unnecessarily on minute details, with Lawson, for example, accusing her of ‘play[ing] to the gallery, either showing off her own knowledge on the subject or rounding, in a profoundly embarrassing way, on some hapless colleague’.<sup>52</sup> A poll by Ipsos Mori in 1985 revealed that 49% of respondents believed the prime minister talked down to people.<sup>53</sup> This habit was not necessarily a display of arrogance, so much as a product of years spent needing to know more than her male colleagues in order to be taken seriously. As she put it herself, she ‘worked like a Trojan’, skipping mealtimes, forgoing sleep and rarely taking holidays, for women were not expected to be as good as men – they had to be better. Her attention to detail enabled her to stand out early on in her political career. John Boyd Carpenter, who was Minister of Pensions and Insurance at the time that Thatcher was promoted to a junior post there in 1961, initially considered her appointment ‘a little bit of a gimmick’. Her ‘grip on the highly technical matters’, however, convinced him that he ‘couldn’t have been more wrong’.<sup>54</sup>

Whitelaw disclosed his initial reservations about Thatcher’s ability ‘to control a whole lot of men’ in 1989, in the BBC Radio 2 documentary ‘Power Behind the Throne’. Such fears, however, were short-lived, and the image of a powerful woman dominating a group of upper-class men became a staple of the Thatcherite ‘myth’. ‘[T]he so called “feminine factor”’ is described by Thatcher as having more ‘nonsense’ written about it ‘than about almost anything else’, throughout her premiership.<sup>55</sup> If her ministers were ill equipped to handle Thatcher, by virtue of their public-school educations and professional backgrounds, she faced no such handicap. Though educated at single-sex institutions, from the moment she entered industry to work as a research chemist for BX plastics

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 154.

<sup>50</sup> A. Crines, T. Heppel and P. Dorey eds., *The Political Rhetoric and Oratory of Margaret Thatcher* (Basingstoke, 2016) p. 217.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Unlike most men, she hadn’t appeared to learn that you don’t rebuke officers in front of the other ranks’, quoted in Moore, *Not for Turning*, p. 353.

<sup>52</sup> Lawson, *The View From Number 11*, p. 129.

<sup>53</sup> See ‘Theresa May Morphing into 1979 Margaret Thatcher’, *Independent* online, 26 July 2016: [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-margaret-thatcher-uk-prime-minister-a7156261.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-margaret-thatcher-uk-prime-minister-a7156261.html)

<sup>54</sup> J. B. Carpenter quoted in Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 129.

<sup>55</sup> Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 18.

she was surrounded by men. Moving from industry, to tax law, to parliament, her professional worlds were always masculine – even within masculine realms she selected particularly ‘masculine’ specialities. She famously promoted just one woman to Cabinet, and even this did not last long. As it transpired, Janet Young had ‘insufficient presence’ to lead the House of Lords effectively, and Whitelaw took over after 21 months. Evidence of Thatcher’s preference for male company precedes her parliamentary life. She had ‘had nothing to say’ to her mother and worshipped her father.<sup>56</sup> Following dinner with Willie Cullen’s family, a Scottish farmer Thatcher was then dating, she wrote to her sister that ‘The wives were typical wives – they know of domestic matters and nothing else’. Having been persuaded ‘to join the ladies’ she found that ‘conversation flagged entirely’.<sup>57</sup> As a mother herself she doted on her son, readily forgiving the embarrassment he no doubt caused her. Discussion of Thatcher’s relationship with other women frequently centred on perceived hostility between herself and the Queen, as has been discussed in chapter one. Interest in the topic was arguably fanned by the media’s characterisation of Thatcher’s government as a ‘court’ in which handsome ‘favourites’ competed for the ‘Queen’s’ favour. For Susan Crosland, a successful author and wife of the Labour front-bencher Tony Crosland, women avoided working with other women for fear their ‘feminine wiles’ would be exposed. This is said to be particularly true of Thatcher, who it was apparently well known to ‘sometimes employ the fallback position of expecting chivalry ... Many career women do this’.<sup>58</sup>

Although comment on her appearance was confined neither to men or women, male attraction to Thatcher, particularly within the Conservative party, became a cliché, as well as a source of humour. A 2011 article in *The Mirror* asked ‘Just why did all those Tory boys fancy Margaret Thatcher?’, concluding that it was because ‘she was mummy, nanny and matron all rolled into one exciting package: exciting, that is, if you had once been a sad little 12-year-old, sent away to an all-male boarding school.’<sup>59</sup> This is not as facile an argument as it might seem, and has been made in a number of more scholarly contexts. Wendy Webster, for example, discusses the variations upon what she calls the ‘chaps’ theme – an argument which refers to the ‘the conventional beliefs about and attitudes towards women’ within the social milieu from which Conservative politicians were typically drawn.<sup>60</sup> Unaccustomed to working with women in a professional context, let alone with one as powerful and assertive as Thatcher, Thatcher’s ministers found themselves disabled by her ‘femaleness’. They were left to play ‘child to Mrs Thatcher’s nanny, schoolboy to her headmistress,

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<sup>56</sup> Thatcher interview for the *Daily Express*, 17 April 1961.

<sup>57</sup> Thatcher to Muriel, 23 May 1949, quoted in Moore, *Volume I*, p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> S. Crosland, ‘Why First Ladies Can’t be Friends’, *Daily Mail*, 3 January 1989

<sup>59</sup> ‘Just why did all those Tory boys fancy Margaret Thatcher?’, *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Webster, *Not a Man*, p. 118.

masochist to her sadist'.<sup>61</sup> As considered earlier in this thesis, Thatcher's public image incorporated and encouraged her characterisation as a typically feminine authority figure, such as the matron or nanny, adding weight to an interpretation that emphasises a particularly upper-class, male sexuality. These figures from the upper-class childhood were likely to carry considerable psychological weight. This was certainly an image which resonated throughout Thatcher's premiership, and depictions of Thatcher disciplining 'schoolboy' ministers became commonplace. A 'Spitting Image' sketch from 1984 reflected the heavily gendered dynamic which was widely regarded as characterising Thatcher's cabinets. Alternating between sickly sweetness and aggressive denigration, the 'Thatcher' puppet paces up and down behind her seated ministers, presented as incapable of challenging their leader's opinions. Asked for confirmation of their 'unanimous' support for rate capping, 'Norman Tebbit' stammers his reservations, only to be told that the 'opposite of unanimous' is 'fired'. 'Geoffrey Howe' is given 100 lines for having left his work on the bus ('I must not use London transport') and 'Nigel Lawson' is hit around the head with a ruler for getting an answer 'wrong!'.<sup>62</sup> The frequently cited 'Spitting Image' sketch in which Thatcher inadvertently refers to her Ministers as 'vegetables' became shorthand for Thatcher's doctrinaire approach to government.<sup>63</sup>

As the decade progressed, Geoffrey Howe became a favoured target of satirists, his 'slightly pudgy, soft bespectacled demeanour' emphasised in humorous contrast with Thatcher, who was consistently presented as brutally angular. Gerald Scarfe, longstanding cartoonist for the *Sunday Times*, claimed to enjoy depicting Thatcher, despite objecting to her politics: 'The stronger they are, the better caricatures they make. I could turn her into anything acerbic or cutting'.<sup>64</sup> In 1983 he famously drew her as a bloodied axe [figure 11].<sup>65</sup> Charles Moore has argued that Thatcher was persistently irritated by Howe's 'quiet, almost inaudible voice [and] his tendency to be long winded'.<sup>66</sup> After Howe's resignation *Private Eye* parodied his relationship with Thatcher through a series of satirical letters in which Howe identified himself as 'the one with the glasses who sits next to you in Cabinet – or used to'.<sup>67</sup> His decision to resign was said to have been the result of '16 years of careful consideration'. 'Thatcher' responds by paying tribute to his 'vital role in agreeing with

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>62</sup> Spitting Image series 1 episode 3, 'Thatcher's cabinet'. Clip available via Youtube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jINZBOxdja8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jINZBOxdja8)

<sup>63</sup> Addressing her as 'Sir', a waitress asks Thatcher, who is seated with her ministers, what she would like to order. After ordering a raw steak, the waitress asks 'what about the vegetables?' and Thatcher replies imperiously, 'they'll have the same as me'.

<sup>64</sup> G. Scarfe, quoted on British Cartoon Archive website: [www.cartoons.ac.uk/artists/geraldscarfe/biography](http://www.cartoons.ac.uk/artists/geraldscarfe/biography)

<sup>65</sup> See National Portrait Gallery website, ref: 6476

<sup>66</sup> Moore, *Volume 1*, p. 353..

<sup>67</sup> *Private Eye*, 9 November 1990, p. 19.

everything [she] said for sixteen years' which, 'in a minor way' helped with her 'historic triumphs'.<sup>68</sup> Cartoon depictions of Howe, which emphasised his heavy spectacles and rounded frame, similarly reflected his reputation for indecision and slowness, and present a marked contrast with depictions of Thatcher [figure 12]. Moore also suggests that Howe's apparent inability to stand up to his wife left Thatcher with the impression that he was 'rather unmanly'.<sup>69</sup> Thatcher's relationship with Elspeth Howe is widely referred to as evidence of Thatcher's dislike of fellow women. Elspeth considered Thatcher to suffer from 'Queen Bee syndrome', and described herself and Thatcher as 'two wasps in a jam jar'. Denis reportedly referred to Elspeth as 'That bitch of a wife'.<sup>70</sup> Elspeth Howe, however, was not the 'typical' ministerial wife, and wider conclusions should be drawn only carefully. Elspeth, daughter of the writer Philip Morton Shand, was educated at the leading private school Wycombe Abbey. She was, according to Moore, 'too socially confident a woman to appeal to Mrs Thatcher'.<sup>71</sup> As the Deputy Chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission, which was established in 1975, Elspeth acted politically in her own right (and would later be rewarded with a peerage, independent of her husband's). Indeed, Elspeth's professional commitments counted against Howe in 1974, when he considered standing for party leadership; it was believed she would be unable to offer him the necessary support.<sup>72</sup> Nigel Lawson has claimed that his own second wife, Therese, took 'an instant liking to [Thatcher] that never waned'.<sup>73</sup> Sheila Lawlor, who encountered Thatcher through her work on the 1987 General Election campaign and later as Deputy Director of the Centre for Policy Studies, has rejected the stereotype which presents Thatcher as hostile to women as 'entirely untrue'.<sup>74</sup> Given the scarcity of women in Thatcher's administrations, however, and the unlikelihood of political wives publishing their memoirs, the representativeness of such anecdotal examples remains difficult to establish.

Taken collectively, cartoons of Thatcher demonstrate the extent to which her authority was understood through a gendered lens, and suggest discomfort surrounding her power. For Scarfe, her femininity became grotesque; a heavily made-up mouth reveals fangs, with which – in one cartoon from 1990 - she devours John Major, her successor. Her manicured nails are claws. Scarfe first depicted her as a 'top bitch' at Crufts, excreting Edward Heath, and repeatedly drew her nude. His images contort her self-conscious domesticity - the caricatures of nanny, maid and mother are made

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 353.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 250.

<sup>73</sup> Lawson, *The View From Number Eleven*, p. 74.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with the author, 16 November 2015.

violent and perverse.<sup>75</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, discussing a recent Scarfe exhibition at the Bowes museum in Durham, argued that the 'visual language' he used to explore Thatcher was 'rooted in the fact that she [was] a woman who [was] aware of her femininity', focusing specifically on her handbag and the extent to which 'handbagging' came to symbolise the particularly feminine aggression associated with Thatcher's leadership.<sup>76</sup> Marina Warner, in *Monuments and Maidens*, has similarly emphasised the pervasiveness of gendered symbols in satirical depictions of Thatcher through a sustained comparison of a Franklin cartoon of Thatcher, featured in the *Sun* in 1983, and the *Sun's* customary page three pin up. Placed opposite each other, Warner argues that 'the most interesting thing about the juxtaposition was their similarity'.<sup>77</sup> Both women were 'cast in received and understood images from the repository of female types'. Model 'Caroline' was an 'angel'. Thatcher, in this instance, was a 'cowgirl' – though a cowgirl in high-heels and a pussy-bow blouse. 'Nipped waist, high bust and parted legs' sexualise the cartoon image of Thatcher, whom the newspaper was endorsing for a second term. The implication, Warner argues, is that she not only represents the best interests of Britain, but does so in 'the most appetising and attractive' way.<sup>78</sup>

Conservative attraction to Thatcher has become a shorthand critique of the upper-class male sexuality described above, as well as of the privilege seen to sustain it. The extent to which this attraction shaped relationships within government, however, warrants serious attention as a means of exploring the gendered dynamics of high politics, as well as the role of femininity in the cultivation of Thatcher's personal authority. The published diaries of Alan Clark, a junior minister under Thatcher, suggest the destabilising potential of femininity within the masculine walls of Westminster. Having watched Thatcher in the television studio while she was being interviewed by Robin Day, in 1980, Clark's diary recalls:

But goodness, she is so beautiful; made up to the nines of course, for the television programme, but still quite bewitching, as Eva Peron must have been. I could not take my eyes off her and after a bit, she quite properly, would not look me in the face and I detached myself from the group.<sup>79</sup>

Elsewhere Clark describes speaking in the House of Commons as 'exposing' himself before 'Mrs T.', and reflects that catching Thatcher's eye is 'very exciting'. On a day that she looked 'rather small and

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<sup>75</sup> See Scarfe, *Milk Snatcher* (Durham, 2015) page 147 for John Major image, page 20 for 'Top Bitch' image, pages 37, 138, 148, 151, 152 for topless/nude images and pages 55 and 61 for examples of 'domestic' images.

<sup>76</sup> L. Jordanova, [www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk/visitus/whatson/milksnatcher.geraldscarfethethatcherdrawings](http://www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk/visitus/whatson/milksnatcher.geraldscarfethethatcherdrawings), accessed 27 October 2015

<sup>77</sup> M. Warner, *Monuments and Maidens* (London, 1985), p. 39.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>79</sup> A. Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics* (London, 2000), p. 147.



nervous, and, as always, very feminine’, he concludes his diary entry with the hope that she ‘noticed’ him.<sup>80</sup> The sexual undertones are clear.

Described by John Ure as ‘given to fantasising about every nubile woman that crossed his path’, Clark’s diaries should not be uncritically accepted as broadly representative, but neither should they be rejected as lacking in historical value. As Ure has argued, Clark had access to ‘the great’ without the preoccupations of high office, making him well placed as a diarist.<sup>81</sup> Witty and forthright, his diaries – of which there are three volumes in total - provide frank and compelling insight into the idiosyncrasies of political life. In the introduction to his first volume, Clark claimed that published versions reflected the authentic products, though ‘much of course has been excised’.<sup>82</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that such excision would itself seem to undermine this professed authenticity, it is unclear for how long Clark had entertained the idea of their publication. Had they always been meant for commercial distribution, they would surely be susceptible to the criticisms levied at political memoirs and autobiographies – namely that these are primarily narrative vehicles for the defence of an author’s political legacy. Woodrow Wyatt, a comparably colourful diarist of the Thatcher period, explicitly refers to his diaries as a ‘nest egg’.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly to Ure, Clark would refer to his unpublished diaries as his wife’s ‘pension fund’.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, he was rumoured to have made in excess of one million pounds from the *Diaries* before his death in 1999, largely owing to their salacious and iconoclastic tone. His publisher, Weidenfeld, bid £150, 000 for the contract. Whether financial considerations encouraged such a tone can only be hypothesised, although the frankness with which he discloses his own failings suggests that collectively, *Diaries* present a reasonably undoctored account of his parliamentary experiences. Of course this is not a ‘reliable’ account in any objective sense. As Richard Crossman, another famous diarist of the period, has written, ‘A day to day account of a Government at work, as seen by one participant, is bound to be one sided and immensely partisan. If it isn’t, it would fail to be true to life’.<sup>85</sup> In understanding relationships, however, the ‘one sided and immensely partisan’ accounts can provide valuable insight. Clark’s apparent obsession with Thatcher was not reciprocated – he warrants only a brief mention in *The Downing Street Years*. He was, however, promoted by Thatcher against the wishes of senior Conservative figures and defended by Thatcher when Heseltine wanted him sacked for criticising Government policy on the BBC’s ‘Question Time’. This was despite the fact that his inherited wealth,

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 150, 167, 251.

<sup>81</sup> J. Ure, ‘Alan Clark’, ODNB

<sup>82</sup> A. Clark, *Diaries*, (London, 1993) p. xii

<sup>83</sup> W. Wyatt, *The Journals of Woodrow Wyatt, volume I* (London, 1999), p. xi.

<sup>84</sup> Ure, ‘Alan Clark’

<sup>85</sup> Crossman, quoted in G. Egerton ed., *Political Memoir: essays on the politics of memory* (London, 1994), p. 331.

Eton education, and rather blasé attitude towards his political duties seemed at odds with the ideals of ‘Thatcherism’.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Clark’s reputation for snobbery, and ‘disregard for bourgeois virtues like thrift and caution’, would appear to be diametrically opposed to Thatcher’s emphasis on ‘Victorian values’.<sup>87</sup>

David Waddington, who served as Thatcher’s Chief Whip as well as her last Home Secretary, has claimed that ‘when it came to discussing ministerial appointments, one thing was quite apparent ... the Prime Minister liked a pretty face’.<sup>88</sup> Clark was handsome and charming, and he seemed to have enjoyed a better relationship with Thatcher than his behaviour might otherwise have warranted. Importantly, he had ‘dash’, and – as Moore has emphasised – this was something that Thatcher liked.<sup>89</sup> Ronald Reagan, with whom Thatcher enjoyed a famously close relationship, certainly shared this quality. According to the White House Official Jim Rentschler, the Reagan administration was ‘determined to throw off the grungy, downtrodden look of the Carter administration ....’ ‘Glamour’ was a word often used, and “class’ too’.<sup>90</sup> As Moore has argued, Thatcher and Reagan shared ‘a sort of aesthetic’.<sup>91</sup> Reagan appreciated Thatcher’s femininity, and reportedly ‘treated her in a very courteous and sort of slightly flirtatious way’.<sup>92</sup> Thatcher, though not blind to Reagan’s faults, considered him charming. A number of sources suggest the tendency for their relationship to be conceptualised in pseudo-romantic terms. Nancy Reagan, for example, recalls hanging a ‘gag poster’ of *Gone With the Wind*, starring Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, in the billiard room of the White House [see figure 13].<sup>93</sup> In a book exploring the relationship between Thatcher and Reagan, Nicholas Wapshott employs the metaphor of ‘political marriage’ throughout. More crudely, a Gerald Scarfe cartoon from 1985, titled ‘Better Felate Than Never’, depicts Thatcher nude at Reagan’s feet [see figure 14]. Thatcher and Reagan undoubtedly subscribed to a number of highly compatible

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<sup>86</sup> Clark’s family money had been amassed by his great-grandfather, a Paisley textiles merchant. His father was the celebrated art historian Kenneth Clark, famous for his *Civilisation* television series. Clark and his wife, who was President of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, ‘became stars of London high society, intelligentsia, and fashion, from Mayfair to Windsor’. Although not ‘old money’, he lived an aristocratic lifestyle. Clark inherited Saltwood Castle from his father in 1971, owned a set of chambers in The Albany, a 27, 000 acre estate in Sutherland, a chalet in Zermatt and a house in Devon. He collected expensive cars and believed a good bottle of claret could not be bought for less than one hundred pounds. Though a many ways a social snob – the publication of his diaries prompted much discussion of the differences between ‘nouve’ and ‘toffs’ – he regarded Thatcher as an equal, and is generally critical of the snobbery she encountered. D. Piper, ‘Kenneth Clark’, ODNB and J. Ure, ‘Alan Clark’.

<sup>87</sup> J. Paxman, quoted in H. Lacey, ‘Real Life: keeping up appearances’, *Independent* online, 4 June 1994.

<sup>88</sup> D. Waddington, *Memoirs: dispatches from Margaret Thatcher’s last Home Secretary* (London, 2012), p. 172.

<sup>89</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 353.

<sup>90</sup> J. Rentschler quoted in Moore, *Volume I*, p. 545.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>92</sup> R. Butler quoted in *ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>93</sup> N. Reagan, *My Turn: the memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (New York, 1989), p. 250.

values, which have been discussed at length in the existing literature, but it was the gendering of this 'compatibility' that dramatised their relationship.

Cecil Parkinson and John Moore can also be cited as beneficiaries of Thatcher's fondness for a particular type of masculinity. Moore, the son of a factory worker turned publican famous for his 'film star good looks', joined Thatcher's cabinet in 1986 as Secretary of State for Transport. He had an American wife, had spent a number of years in United States and was said to speak with a slight American accent – factors which probably endeared him to Thatcher's pro-American sensibilities. As with Reagan, media depictions of Thatcher's relationship with Moore implied sexual attraction. The *Daily Mail* presented him in July 1987 as 'a good example of a Thatcher glamour boy. She admires him for his record ... But his youthful good looks helped catch her eye, too'.<sup>94</sup> Despite having been described by Brian Walden as having 'future Tory leader written all over him', when he was fired from the Cabinet in July 1989 most commentators suggested that he was a weak politician who had been promoted beyond his abilities.<sup>95</sup>

In addition to being 'a clean-limbed looking fellow, plausible on television and smartly presented', Cecil Parkinson's social background represented the fulfilment of the Thatcher ideal.<sup>96</sup> Son of a railwayman, he graduated through grammar school to Cambridge, becoming a chartered accountant and successful businessman before entering Parliament as MP for Enfield West in 1970, at a by-election necessitated by the death of Ian Macleod. He was both politically and financially ambitious, and was reportedly determined to prevent politics inhibiting his financial prospects.<sup>97</sup> Succeeding the aged Lord Thorneycroft as Chairman of the Conservative party in 1981, he 'imported glamour' to an organisation 'depressed' by redundancies and frozen pay. During the Falkland's war Parkinson was brought into the inner cabinet, where he demonstrated 'toughness' and solidified a link between himself and the prime minister. Describing their relationship, Young argues that '[Parkinson] possessed a quality that eluded the great majority of his colleagues ... He was able to make [Thatcher] stop and listen'. For Young, Thatcher's respect for him suggested 'a talent difficult to explain', although he argues that 'it had something to do with his willingness ... to treat her as a woman'.<sup>98</sup> This is something that Howe, by Nigel Lawson's assessment, had failed to do - at great expense to his political career.<sup>99</sup> Having been tipped for Foreign Secretary after overseeing a

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<sup>94</sup> Paul Johnson, 'At the Court of Good Queen Margaret, *Daily Mail*, 2 November 1987. See also Moore, *Volume II*, p. 431.

<sup>95</sup> Brian Walden quoted in *the Times*, 14 June 1987.

<sup>96</sup> H. Young, *One of Us* (London, 1989) p. 314.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>99</sup> In his autobiography, *The View From Number 11*, Lawson claims that the relationship between Howe and Thatcher had never been close, owing to a lack of 'personal chemistry: he for his part never sufficiently treated her as a woman'. Lawson, *The View*, p. 653.

successful general election in 1983, revelations relating to Parkinson's personal life prevented Thatcher promoting him as had been expected. Parkinson's twelve-year affair with his one-time secretary, Sara Keays, was exposed. Responses to the scandal can usefully be read as a barometer for gendered attitudes towards sexual morality and familial obligation, supplementing the analysis provided in chapter two. Though Parkinson would eventually resign, Thatcher's reaction to the affair is indicative of his perceived value, especially given its concurrence with her promotion of 'Victorian values'. As one 'left winger' told the *Sunday Times* 'we talk about Victorian values and now this'.<sup>100</sup> Wider party reaction suggests the status of women within the masculine world of parliamentary politics, while media coverage indicates the different frameworks within which men and women tended to be characterised. Within which contexts, and against what standards, were men and women judged? Recognising this double standard is helpful in understanding the extent to which Thatcher's public image had to navigate entrenched prejudices towards women.<sup>101</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given the nature of political memoir, Parkinson's autobiography is reticent about what became known as 'the Sara Keays affair' (tellingly, it was Keays, rather than Parkinson, whose name became a byword for the scandal). Keays, however, published her version of events in 1986, in response to what she considered to be widespread misrepresentation. Despite having a clear agenda, she presents a compelling case which is supported by broader analysis of media coverage, as well as by passing comments made in a number of political memoirs. Over the course of Keays' relationship with Parkinson he proposed on numerous occasions, both before and after the affair had been made public. On discovering that she was pregnant, he encouraged her to have an abortion, or leave the country. He disclosed the affair to Thatcher in full only after Keays' father had sent a letter informing her of the pregnancy. Initially, Thatcher asked Parkinson to stay on as Secretary of State for the Department of Trade and Industry. Right-wing media coverage of this decision emphasised Thatcher's loyalty to her minister, *The Times*, for example, reporting that despite being 'a hard political task master' she was 'a loyal friend'.<sup>102</sup> Parkinson himself describes Thatcher as 'immensely sympathetic' and 'not at all censorious', which given her Methodist upbringing and professed commitment to family values is surprising.<sup>103</sup> A not-insubstantial number

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<sup>100</sup> 'Top Tories tell Thatcher: sack Parkinson', *Sunday Times*, 9 October 1983.

<sup>101</sup> See Keith Thomas, 'The Double Standard', *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20 (April 1959) for a discussion of the history of punitive social attitudes towards women's sexual conduct. Whereas for men sexual relations outside of or before marriage have historically been considered a 'mild and pardonable offence', they are 'a matter of the utmost gravity' for women. Thomas argues that the route of this double standard was an entrenched view of women as the property of men. Given that the value of this 'property' was believed to depreciate through 'unchaste' behaviour, a feminine ideal developed which emphasised passivity and asexuality of women, highly exaggerating innate differences between the sexes.

<sup>102</sup> 'The Parkinson Affair', *The Times*, 7 October 1983.

<sup>103</sup> C. Parkinson, *Right at the Centre* (London, 1992), p. 234.

of journalists argued that in making a cabinet post contingent on his not marrying Keays, Thatcher's commitment to Victorian values had in fact played a key role in saving Parkinson's marriage.<sup>104</sup> Keays and Parkinson are in agreement over the limited damage the affair did to his personal reputation. Commentators spoke of Parkinson as 'a warm blooded man' whose affair would be viewed by 'most experienced MPs ... as a lapse brought about by the long, arduous hours they are expected to work'.<sup>105</sup> The sheer duration of Parkinson's 'lapse' underlines the willingness of such reporters to excuse his behaviour. Parkinson received a standing ovation for his party conference speech, given shortly after his public statement disclosing the affair and was 'swamped' by invitations to speak at Conservative Associations 'across the country'.<sup>106</sup> He claims that colleagues 'on all sides were tremendously supportive'. Maverick Conservative supporter Brian Bateson even flew a plane trailing a 'Don't sack Cecil' banner over the conference proceeding in Blackpool.<sup>107</sup>

Parkinson's 'appeal', to men and women alike, could be examined as a topic in its own right. Although gender ideals may not, historically, have been as punitively applied to men as they have been to women, men seen to exhibit the 'right' style of masculinity – attractive, articulate and self assured – have certainly been rewarded. In the context of this thesis, however, the public appeal of Parkinson is significant insofar as the support he received is in stark contrast to the hostility shown towards Keays, who was frequently cast as manipulative and greedy – as having tricked her lover into a pregnancy for the financial leverage, and as a means of thwarting his promising career. Her hostile reactions to press coverage were presented as 'the less than logical' rantings of a pregnant woman.<sup>108</sup> Following Parkinson's resignation, Thatcher wrote to him claiming to be 'saddened beyond words' by the loss of his 'great contribution ... and the tragic circumstances in which that loss has come about', suggesting a reluctance to acknowledge Parkinson's agency in bringing about the 'circumstances' to which she referred.<sup>109</sup> In 1985 she made it clear that it had been her wish to return him to the Cabinet. Though eventually persuaded that this would have been too soon, he was to be brought back in 1987 as Secretary of State for Energy. Keays, conversely, was removed from

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<sup>104</sup> See for example, 'Thatcher's key role on Parkinson Marriage', *Times*, 17 October 1983. Whether Thatcher played a decisive role in Parkinson's decision to remain with his wife is unclear, though such claims, as Keays' account outlines, were never denied. This seems to suggest either that she was involved, or that it was believed expedient for the electorate to continue believing that she was.

<sup>105</sup> *Sunday Express* and *Daily Telegraph*, quoted in S. Keays, *A Question of Judgement* (Bath, 1986), p. 131 and p. 121 respectively.

<sup>106</sup> Parkinson, *Right at the Centre*, p. 40, supported by press coverage, for example, 'Parkinson given ovation at dinner', *The Times*, 8 October 1983.

<sup>107</sup> 'Parkinson Show', *the Times*, 12 October 1983.

<sup>108</sup> *Daily Express* quoted in Keays, *A Question*, p. 196.

<sup>109</sup> Thatcher to Parkinson, 17 October 1983, MTFW: 130994.

the Party's list of accepted candidates that she had been on since 1982.<sup>110</sup> It was not that support for Parkinson, or condemnation of Keays, was universal. The significance of the affair, in terms of gender discourse, is the extent to which support for Parkinson mobilised established gender prejudices surrounding the unreliability, vindictiveness and material greed of 'spurned' women. In closing ranks on Keays, the Conservative party demonstrated the vulnerability of women in an environment that held men and women to different standards, as well as the media's readiness to endorse such a 'masculine' perspective. Thatcher's role in the scandal suggests a pragmatism at odds with her moralistic public image, as has been considered elsewhere in this thesis. Her autobiography recalls that, on learning of the affair, she 'marvelled that with all this on his mind he had run such a magnificent [election] campaign'.<sup>111</sup> It also emphasises her dependence on particular allies within Cabinet. Her reluctance to accept Parkinson's resignation, despite the controversy this was bound to generate, suggests a continuing sense of isolation despite her recent general election success. As a wide range of commentators have emphasised, Thatcher's sense of isolation encouraged her to build up informal networks of trusted colleagues, leading to resentment amongst those excluded and perpetuating an atmosphere of distrust.

### III

Discussion so far has centred on the gender dynamics of Thatcher's political relationships. The most important man in Thatcher's life, however, was her husband. Denis Thatcher, whom Margaret married in 1951, performed an unprecedented public role: Britain's first male prime-ministerial consort. The 'political wife', a phrase which itself ascribes to the wife 'something of the character of the [political] institution', has been widely recognised as a highly valuable asset, both emotionally and materially.<sup>112</sup> There are established 'ideal types' of political wife, ranging from the 'family centred, private' style of women such as Mary Wilson, through to the explicitly 'public' style of Jackie Kennedy.<sup>113</sup> Feminist literature of the 1970s increasingly recognised the extent to which unpaid, female labour facilitated male careers. Elite careers are described as 'two person careers', owing to the practical necessity of spousal contribution. Denis Thatcher was a supportive and stabilising influence in Thatcher's life, but he never performed the traditional role of a political wife. As has been suggested in chapter one, he was a 'traditional' husband through whom Thatcher was able to demonstrate her credentials as a traditional wife. Her commitment to his cooked breakfasts became

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<sup>110</sup> The party denied that she had been removed, but declined to send her constituency openings after news of the affair became public. See *A Question of Judgement*, p. 287.

<sup>111</sup> Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 23.

<sup>112</sup> 'Political wife' implies an intrinsically political identity, compared with the alternative: 'wife of a politician'. See H. Callan and S. Ardener eds., *The Incorporated Wife* (Kent, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>113</sup> R. M. Kelly and M. Boutilier, *The Making of Political Women* (Chicago, 1978), p. 97 and p. 103.

shorthand for the 'ordinary' femininity she sought to project. Whereas Shirley and Bernard Williams had shared childcare duties, the Thatchers' nanny has recalled that 'Mr Thatcher left parenting to Mrs Thatcher and me'.<sup>114</sup> Denis maintained his own career, initially as general manager for his family's paint and preservatives firm; later as a director at Castrol and Burmah Oil, the firms that successively purchased it. Frequently travelling, he missed a number of key events, including the birth of his children. This occasionally put Thatcher in a difficult situation, such as when she had to simultaneously confirm his support and excuse his absence, at her adoption interview for Finchley.<sup>115</sup>

Denis determined to keep a low profile. He refused all interviews, and only rarely gave speeches, which were always short and anodyne. By his own account he was shy, prone to saying the wrong thing, and bad at public speaking. The picture painted by Thatcher's friends and colleagues is rather different. Woodrow Wyatt, for example, has claimed that Denis 'survive[d] much better' in upper-class social circles than his wife: 'He makes jokes and laughs uproariously and is quite oblivious of the Queen's unpleasantness'.<sup>116</sup> Christopher Collins has described him as 'cheerfully hedonistic, irreverent and good natured'.<sup>117</sup> Although Denis was far richer than Thatcher, and his money certainly accelerated her political career, his social background did not grant her access to the social elite. He attended a minor public school, and as a young man felt immense financial pressure to provide for extended family whose wealth was invested in the business he ran. Wyatt's description, more than his own, reflects 'Denis' as he would become popularly known through *Private Eye's* satirical 'Dear Bill' letters – a column that from 1979 to 2003 presented fictional letters from Denis to 'Bill', presumed to be ex-cabinet minister and editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, Bill Deedes. Within these columns, Thatcher is afforded only a supporting role. She is 'The One Who Must Be Obeyed', or 'The Boss', and is prone to interrupting his golfing plans with 'some state opening of parliament or other'. Following Thatcher's general election success in 1979, *Private Eye* ran a spoof advertisement for 'the Gnome Copper-Bottomed wife Prime Minister indemnity policy':

Denis Thatcher was an ordinary oil company executive. For years he had been looking forward to the benefits that retirement would bring him. Things like:- A quiet game of golf with chums. A round of drinks in the club house after ... Then suddenly his life was changed beyond recognition. He woke up one morning to find that his wife was Prime Minister.

Married men over sixty are urged not to 'let that unexpected wife premiership' stand between them and their retirement plans.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume I*, p. 119.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>116</sup> Wyatt, *Volume I*, p. 176.

<sup>117</sup> C. Collins, 'Denis Thatcher', ODNB

<sup>118</sup> *Private Eye*, 11 May 1979, p. 16.

When Hillary Clinton announced that she would be running for a seat in the Senate and Bill Clinton's presidential term was coming to an end, the couple produced a spoof video addressing the 'inherent' comedy in such a role reversal. By making fun of themselves, they sought to diffuse the threat that the 'unnaturalness' of their situation was seen to pose. Bill is shown rushing after Hillary with her packed lunch – a satire of the 'househusband'.<sup>119</sup> Of course some of the 'comedy' in this scenario is derived from Bill Clinton's presidential status, but the assumed link between professional inferiority and 'domestication' is significant in relation to Denis. Denis' comedic public image allowed him to retain his masculinity, and the independence associated with it, without being seen to undermine his wife's authority. He was not domesticated; he broke the rules, if only by saying the wrong thing. Given that Thatcher famously lacked a sense of humour, the humour generated by Denis' public image inflected positively on hers. She was made fun of in ways that focused attention on her gender, but was not vilified. Light relief helped to distil anxieties and discomfort generated by 'the exceptional coalition of femininity and power she manifested'.<sup>120</sup> In an article published shortly after Denis' death in 2003, a *Telegraph* journalist claims that 'Dear Bill' had turned him into 'a national treasure'. Although this is debatable, the column was immensely popular. It spawned a successful stage play, 'Anyone for Denis?', the premier of which both Denis and Margaret attended. Although she said that the portrayal of Denis 'was not at all right', Thatcher claimed to be impressed by the skill of the actress playing herself: 'she obviously spent a tremendous time studying everything that I do'.<sup>121</sup> Such (uncharacteristic) good humour suggests, perhaps, recognition of the feature's popularity, and the futility of (stauncher) opposition.

### Conclusion

Thatcher's relationships with men are collectively significant because it was through these relationships that her distinctive style of femininity was developed, relayed and mythologised. Her femininity, which was emphasised by dress, dramatised the spectacle of her authority. As Beatrix Campbell has argued, many women 'relished Thatcher's performance as a woman'. Pleasure, however, was not derived from her political representation of women, but 'her ability to outwit men'.<sup>122</sup> Her relationship with men created spectacle, whether glamorous – as with Reagan – demeaning, triumphant or comedic. Her superior courage was established when she stood for the party leadership; 'Willy-come-lately', bound by loyalty, was regarded as insufficiently decisive. This

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<sup>119</sup> Description of the video provided by B. Perry in M. Nelson, B. Perry and R. Riley eds., 'Hilary Rodham Clinton: recasting the role', *Inside the Presidency of Bill Clinton* (London, 2016)

<sup>120</sup> L. Jordanova, *The Look of the Past*, p. xx.

<sup>121</sup> Thatcher, 'Remarks after watching 'Anyone for Denis?', 12 July 1981, MTFW: 104518.

<sup>122</sup> B. Campbell, 'Margaret Thatcher: to be or not to be a woman?', *British Politics*, 10, April 2015, p. 44.



provided a narrative 'hook' on which future media 'stories' could be hung. These stories represent important sources in the analysis of popular attitudes towards gender, and the gendering of power.

## **5. Thatcher and Downing Street**

Number Ten Downing Street fulfils four overlapping functions: it is the private residence of the prime minister, a political office headed by the prime minister, the venue for meetings of the Cabinet and the site of government events hosted by the Prime Minister. It is also a powerful symbol, the black front door and iron railings being synonymous with an idealised Britishness: restrained and dignified; powerful but modest. Thatcher's occupancy of Number Ten, which gave material form to her political power, generated considerable popular interest for a number of reasons. Commentators wondered how a woman would wield power within Number Ten, and as her premiership progressed interest in the networks of relationships and structures of influence within the building only increased, partly in response to the public deterioration of the relationships between Thatcher and key members of her Cabinet. Before 1979 interest in the domestic elements of political leadership had been funnelled through prime minister's wives, with Mary Wilson's tenure attracting particular attention. Not only did Thatcher's election put an end to this, but her self-presentation as a housewife intensified and legitimised such interest. The intricate interconnectedness of public and private within Number Ten is routinely emphasised in popular commentaries. Thatcher's workaholic tendencies made living 'above the shop', as she often called it, a particularly convenient arrangement. As will be shown, Downing Street also constituted a valuable discursive resource through which both her work ethic and domesticity could be presented.

Analysis of Downing Street entails the consideration of the diverse range of practices and relationships the building contained. It also invites comparison with the administrations of other prime ministers. An understanding of how different premiers used Downing Street's warren of rooms, for example, indicates the patterns of daily life and suggests the relationships between those who worked there. Under Wilson, the formidable political secretary Marcia Falkender's acquisition of office space adjacent to the Cabinet room was widely understood as evidence of her political influence, and battles over particular rooms recur throughout the building's history.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, seating at the Cabinet table was integral to a minister's strategy for influencing policy. Access to the prime minister's ear was in many ways a matter of physical geography, and as Kavanagh and Seldon have argued, 'proximity to the fount of influence is critical'.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a focus on Downing Street encourages analysis of the material features associated with inhabited space, such as decor. Thatcher was vocal about her belief that Downing Street should represent 'Britishness' to its best

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<sup>1</sup> D. Kavanagh and A. Seldon, *The Powers Behind the Prime Minister: the hidden influence of number ten* (London, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

advantage, and whilst Kevin Morison has criticised the equation of 'national identity' with 'interior decorating', art and objects have long been used to shape and project 'national' sentiments. Anthony Smith, for example, has emphasised the capacity of art to provide 'memorable images of abstract notions', such as 'nation', and argues for the importance of the contribution made by a 'visual record' in fostering national identities across Europe.<sup>3</sup> This 'visual record', however, extends beyond the fine art examples to which Smith refers. As Louise Ward has shown in relation to the 1980s, companies such as Laura Ashley traded on and augmented a particular, fabricated vision of 'Englishness' centred around the English 'country home', with chintz and drapery used to evoke cultural proximity to the imagined lifestyles of a country elite.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its fame, Number Ten is understudied. Few biographies of prime ministers contain substantial detail on how their subjects interacted with the building in which they worked and lived, and Anthony Seldon recalls that when contacting biographers for help with his *Illustrated History of Number Ten* the majority claimed to know very little about 'which rooms the Prime Minister lived in and used, or indeed how they organised their day'.<sup>5</sup> There are, however, a number of political diaries that usefully suggest the atmosphere and mechanics of Number Ten under different leaders. John Colville's *The Fringes of Power* recalls Number Ten's difficult mid-century years, but is more frequently celebrated as an intimate portrait of Churchill himself than of the private office.<sup>6</sup> Bernard Donoghue's *Downing Street Diary*, a chronicle of the two years he spent as head of Harold Wilson's Policy Unit, is a compelling testament to the effect of personalities within the loosely defined political structures of Number Ten. Donoghue was never formally asked to join Wilson's campaign team and describes his political role as 'simply a daily renewal'. He emphasises the importance of 'various personal and power structures' within Downing Street, as well as the extent to which its occupants' energies were absorbed by 'irritating tensions' and 'the ordinary routines of daily life'. These daily stresses are uniquely captured by diaries. The Thatcher period, which inspired the

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<sup>3</sup> See A. Smith, *The Nation Made Real: art and national identity in Western Europe, 1600-1850* (Oxford, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> L. Ward, 'English Country House Style, 1930-1990' in S. McKellar and P. Sparke ed., *Interior Design and Identity* (Manchester, 2004), p. 108. Peter Mandler has written of the 'country house mania' of the Thatcher decade, arguing that stately homes came to be regarded as 'the quintessence of Englishness: they epitomise the English love of domesticity of the countryside, of hierarchy, continuity and tradition'. P. Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (London, 1997), pp. 411 and 1. See also P. Borsay, 'The Georgian House: the making of a heritage icon' in L. Gibson and J. Pendlebury ed., *Valuing History Environments* (Farnham, 2009). Borsay argues that in the late twentieth-century Georgian buildings in particular gained status as 'icons' of Englishness.

<sup>5</sup> A. Seldon, *10 Downing Street: the illustrated history* (London, 1999), p. i.

<sup>6</sup> J. Colville, *The Fringes of Power, Downing Street Diaries Volume Two* (London, 1987) Colville joined the diplomatic service in 1937. His first role within Number Ten was as Neville Chamberlain's assistant private secretary. He joined the Royal Air Force volunteer reserve during the Second World War, before serving as princess Elizabeth's private secretary from 1947 to 1949. In 1951 he returned to Number Ten as Churchill's principal private secretary.

publication of numerous ministerial diaries, produced little in relation to life at Number Ten, and nothing comparable to Donoghue's book. Ingham's *Kill The Messenger*, which was published in 1991, contains diary excerpts, but is clearly driven by a desire to counteract his 'media legend' and shape the legacy of his Downing Street tenure.<sup>7</sup> The dominance of this agenda limits the book's content, and as Paul Foot has complained in the *London Review of Books*, 'Sir Bernard has managed 400 pages without a single disclosure of the remotest interest to anyone at all'.<sup>8</sup> This is a little severe, but the publication was certainly not revelatory in the way that may have been hoped. John Hoskyns' *Just in Time*, which is an analysis of the 'Thatcher revolution' from his then perspective as head of Thatcher's Policy Unit, comprises commentary more formally organised around diary excerpts. It provides a useful counter-narrative to the argument developed throughout this chapter: that Thatcher's more abrasive tendencies were reserved for party-political competitors. In a memo entitled 'Personal Survival' he listed her failings:

you lack management competence ... you break every rule of good man-management ... you bully your weaker colleagues... You criticise colleagues in front of each other ... They can't answer back without appearing disrespectful, in front of others, to a woman and to a Prime Minister. You abuse that situation. You give little praise or credit, and you are too ready to blame others when things go wrong.<sup>9</sup>

An ex-soldier and self-made millionaire, Hoskyns was a far from typical member of Number's Ten's staff, however, and it would be unwise to extrapolate too broadly from his criticisms of Thatcher, which were at least partially fuelled by the particular tensions of their relationship. Bent on the cultural and structural overhaul of Whitehall, Hoskyns railed against what he described as 'the inbred political establishment', and grew frustrated with Thatcher's apparent lack of commitment to reversing Britain's decline, leading him to resign in 1982. While *Just in Time* is a valuable contribution to the period's historical literature, Hoskyns' experience of Number Ten should not be uncritically accepted as representative.

Downing Street is well served by popular histories, however, to which the vast number of anecdotes associated with life at Number Ten lend themselves.<sup>10</sup> These have different priorities to the academic literature, and are generally more concerned to convey the 'feel' of Downing Street than to interrogate its personal and political networks. They are also frustratingly short on references, disrupting the chain of evidence required of academic practice. Nonetheless, popular histories are a valuable source and will be referred to throughout this chapter. In addition to

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<sup>7</sup> Ingham, *Kill the Messenger*, p.167.

<sup>8</sup> P. Foot, 'Lunchtime no news', *London Review of Books*, 27 June 1991.

<sup>9</sup> J. Hoskyns, *Just in Time: inside the Thatcher revolution* (London, 2000) p. 326

<sup>10</sup> In 1987 William Douglas-Home published *The Prime Ministers: stories and anecdotes from Number 10*, suggesting the volume of available material.

providing 'factual' content, they indicate the popular discourses through which Number Ten is understood. This is particularly significant given this thesis's emphasis on Thatcher's public image.

The physical and political structures of Number Ten will be described and the key figures within Thatcher's staff introduced, before the nature of her relationships with these members of staff more generally are considered. This chapter will then examine the material changes Thatcher made to Number Ten, and consider what broader conclusions may be drawn from these. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the role that Downing Street played in the creation and projection of Thatcher's public image. The chapter brings together a number of ideas raised elsewhere in this thesis. It considers Thatcher's female 'intrusion' into a male-dominated political space, emphasises the political significance and historical value of visual and material culture, and analyses Thatcher's performances of domestic femininity within the context of popular expectations of female leadership.

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The relatively modest frontage of Ten Downing Street masks a complex sprawl of interconnected buildings which have been variously extended and remodelled over the last three centuries.<sup>11</sup> Number Ten is formed of two houses, and includes a number of rooms originally belonging to Number Twelve, historically the Chief Whip's Office.<sup>12</sup> Number Ten comprises the Downing Street terrace house, built for profit by George Downing in the 1680s, and a much grander building facing Horse Guards Parade, which had been built by Charles II for his illegitimate son, the Earl of Litchfield. The original frontage of this grander building is rarely photographed, and few would recognise its significance from an image alone. The two structures have been connected by an internal corridor since the 1730s. George II had attempted to entrust the properties to his First Lord of the Treasury, Sir Robert Walpole, as a personal gift of thanks, but Walpole accepted on behalf of the nation. The 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this gift was celebrated under Thatcher in 1985, and will be discussed below. To the left of Number Ten when facing the front door is Number Eleven, the official residence of the Chancellor, and beyond this, Number Twelve. All three buildings interconnect internally. As Wilson told his interviewer in 1985, whether the internal door between Ten and Eleven was left open reflected the state of governmental relations. Under his occupancy, Wilson claimed, it was always left open.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Significant extension was undertaken in the 1730s, when the Office of Works funded a wing of apartment blocks. See S. Bradley and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, London 6: Westminster* (London, 2003), p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Under Blair, who himself chose to live at Number Eleven, Number Twelve was used as the Prime Minister's Press Office.

<sup>13</sup> *Number Ten Downing Street: a unique film history*, 1985, BBC

Political roles within Number Ten reflect the building's irregular and informal physical structure.

As George Jones has written:

Good spirit is aided by the fact that Number Ten is such an admirable setting for intimate interactions. Number Ten is not a department. It exudes the atmosphere of a house ... it does not have the feeling or look of a department. Doors are open, people pop in and out ... It is a very informal, not bureaucratic atmosphere.<sup>14</sup>

The flexibility of roles within Number Ten largely undermines the need for Prime Ministers to impose formalised, structural change, and J. Lee has described 'the carefully cultivated flexibility that surrounds the nexus of relationships within...10 Downing Street' as integral to its ability to adapt to changing circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Thatcher did not seek to make dramatic changes to the structure of Number Ten upon taking office in 1979. As Denis Kanavagh and Anthony Seldon have argued, 'if on politics she was radical, on institutions she was orthodox'. Thus, having appointed Sir Derek Raynor – director of her beloved Marks and Spencer – to lead an Efficiency Unit based within the Cabinet Office, Thatcher resisted his efforts to expand this unit into a Ministry, resulting in his resignation in 1982. Neither would she countenance the Prime Minister's Department proposed by a number of her advisors as a means of augmenting her authority and better controlling the machinery of government.<sup>16</sup> Rather, the structure of Number Ten under Thatcher remained much as it had been under Callaghan. Its size remained similar, also, with 70-80 staff employed throughout the building in both political and official capacities.<sup>17</sup> By 2007 this number had risen to 215, with Tony Blair making use of an unprecedented number of aides as well as an expanded Policy Unit.<sup>18</sup> The balance of power between different roles and offices within Number Ten, can, however, vary significantly across premierships. As Jones has emphasised, 'At Number 10 temperaments, personal drives [and] neuroses are all crucial elements' in the shaping of power structures.<sup>19</sup> This reiterates the emphasis of Donoughue's diary, mentioned above above. The role of Thatcher's advisors, along with the prominence and apparent politicisation of key civil servants, was to attract considerable attention – and condemnation - as her premiership progressed. She may have resisted a formalised Prime Minister's Department, but it was a common view that Thatcher's ability to influence government

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<sup>14</sup> G. W. Jones, 'The Prime Minister's Aides', in A. King ed., *The British Prime Minister* (Basingstoke, 1985), p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> J. Lee, G. Jones and J. Burnham, *At the Centre of Whitehall* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> The creation of a Prime Ministers Department had been intermittently suggested since Lloyd George's premiership, whose 'garden suburb' of private secretaries appeared to signal the development of a presidential system of government. Lewis Baston and Anthony Seldon have argued that the prospects of a Prime Ministers' Department being established were highest under Heath, who was 'personally inclined...to experiment with Britain's central institutions': Baston and Seldon, 'Number 10 Under Edward Heath' in S. Ball and A. Seldon ed., *The Heath Government 1970-1974: a reappraisal* (Abingdon, 2013) p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, 'The Prime Minister's Aides', p. 88. There is nothing to suggest that Thatcher increased staff levels within Downing Street in the period after this book was published.

<sup>18</sup> Kavanagh and Seldon, *The Powers Behind the Prime Minister*, p. 252 and p. 290.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, 'The Prime Minister's Aides', p. 86.

departments through key members of her Number Ten staff had created such a department in all but name.<sup>20</sup>

Ferdinand Mount, who worked as the head of the Number Ten Policy Unit in the early 1980s, complained in 1992 of sketchy knowledge as to how 'the office [of Number Ten] actually operates'.<sup>21</sup> In 1998 the authors of *At The Centre of Whitehall*, a text examining the combined functions of the Prime Minister's Private Office and the Cabinet Office, wrote of 'the machinery at the heart of British government' as being only 'gradually demystified'.<sup>22</sup> Despite the symbolic capital of Number Ten's front door, the nature of the business behind it was only loosely understood by all but specialists. Number Ten comprises a mixture of political staff, whose positions are tied to the governing prime minister, and career civil servants, referred to as 'official' staff. Staff are split between a number of offices: the Prime Minister's Private Office, the Press Office, the Policy Unit, the Office for Appointments and Honours and the Cabinet Office, which housed the Central Policy Review Staff between 1971 and 1983. The prime minister may also employ more or less informal advisors. The Cabinet Office is functionally distinct from the Office of Prime Minister (Number Ten) in that since 1916 it has served the entire Cabinet as opposed to just the Prime Minister. Until 1963 this distinction was reflected geographically, the Cabinet Office being located first in Richmond Terrace and later in Great George Street. In 1963 it was relocated to the Old Treasury Building directly adjoining 10 Downing Street. Although still physically distinct – and access to the Cabinet Office continues to require a swipe card – the relationship between Number Ten and the Cabinet Office has tightened since this latest relocation.<sup>23</sup> The Cabinet Office and Number Ten are together widely recognised as the centre of British government. The Principal Private Secretary and the Cabinet Secretary are the correspondingly central civil service positions. Occupants of both roles expected regular access to the Prime Minister, although a degree of ambiguity surrounding the precise remit of each position meant that as the influence of one increased that of the other was likely to decline. The writers of the satirical television series *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister* made much play of the rivalry between the Principal Private Secretary and the Cabinet Secretary.<sup>24</sup>

Robert Armstrong, who had been Principal Private Secretary for both Wilson and Heath, was appointed Cabinet Secretary in 1979 – a position he retained until 1988, when Robin Butler took

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, 'All the Prime Minister's Men', *Daily Mail*, 9 November 1982: 'It will never be called by the name. But block by block Mrs Thatcher is building a Prime Minister's Department'.

<sup>21</sup> F. Mount, *The British Constitution Now* (London, 1993), p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> Lee et al, *At the Centre*, p.viii.

<sup>23</sup> Select Committee on the Constitution, *The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government*, 2009-2010, p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> The title of the programme was itself an irony: upon each episode's conclusion a civil servant would invariably assent to his minister's request - 'yes minister' - having already manipulated him into accepting the approved civil service view. As Eric Evans has argued, 'Thatcher did not 'do' humour .... But she understood the point of *Yes, Minister* and was determined to do something about it'. E.Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, p.58.

over the role. From 1985 to 1988 Butler had been the second of Thatcher's four Principal Private Secretaries. Their relationship was successful; she admired his charm and wit, and he had the advantage of already knowing Denis Thatcher, who had refereed rugby matches at Harrow during Butler's schooldays. Thatcher also appreciated Butler's sensitive handling of scandals, including Mark Thatcher's alleged exploitation of family connections for business purposes in the Middle East, and the Parkinson affair.<sup>25</sup> More generally, however, Thatcher was deeply suspicious of the higher echelons of the civil service, which she saw as both out of touch – by virtue of 'inflation-proof' pensions - and complicit in Britain's 'orderly' decline.<sup>26</sup> She also regarded the Civil Service as a site of 'intellectual snobbery, recalcitrance and at times outright opposition'; a bulwark of the liberal establishment alongside the BBC and the universities.<sup>27</sup> This suspicion was perhaps justified; in the words of her foreign policy advisor Charles Powell, Whitehall regarded Thatcher as a 'rather shrill housewife'. The Foreign Office apparently likened her to George Brown 'in a skirt'; he was an anti-intellectual Labour minister who had developed a reputation as a bully in the 1960s.<sup>28</sup> In November 1979 it was put to Thatcher that she might issue an official Christmas message to the Civil Service, in order to counter low morale born of governmental criticism. Thatcher refused.<sup>29</sup> In 1981 she dissolved the Civil Service Department and prematurely retired its director, Ian Bancroft. The Department's functions were then divided between the Treasury and the Cabinet Office, with Armstrong assuming sole directorship in 1983. The *Daily Mail*, emphasising Bancroft's 'inflation proof pension' and 'official chauffeur', gleefully reported: 'Thatcher wields the big axe on Whitehall'. The department had been 'carved up' in 'the swiftest ... close down in Whitehall's history'.<sup>30</sup> As Kavanagh and Seldon have argued, this was as 'symbolically significant' as Thatcher's routing of the 'Wets' in her 1981 Cabinet reshuffle.<sup>31</sup>

While suspicious of the machine, however, Thatcher was to develop important and long lasting relationships with two civil servants in particular: Bernard Ingham and Charles Powell. Ingham, who served as Chief Press Secretary for the duration of Thatcher's premiership, excepting the initial four

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<sup>25</sup> Kavanagh and Seldon, *Powers Behind the Prime Minister*, p.150. When Butler first discovered Sara Keays' revelatory article in the *Times*, considered in chapter two, he told Denis first, who helped him to break the news to Thatcher. See C.Moore, *Volume II*, p.89.

<sup>26</sup> In 1980, a senior civil servant was reported in the *Listener* as claiming 'The task of the Civil Service is the orderly management of decline'. As Geoffrey Fry has argued, 'few remarks could have been more calculated to enrage Margaret Thatcher', who believed that government's responsibility was to reverse Britain's decline. G. Fry, 'The attack on the Civil Service and the Response of the Insiders', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 37 (1984), p. 353.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 149 and Campbell, *The Iron Lady*, p. 326.

<sup>28</sup> Interview by Kevin Tebbit with Charles Powell, produced by the Policy Institute at King's College London, accessed online 6 July 2016: <http://www.thatcherandnumberten.com/>

<sup>29</sup> 'Sir Ian Bancroft minute to Thatcher', 20 November 1979, MTFW: 112148.

<sup>30</sup> See 'Thatcher wields the big axe on Whitehall', *Daily Mail*, 13 November 1981, and 'Last day for the top man in Whitehall', *Daily Mail*, 14 November 1981.

<sup>31</sup> Kavanagh and Seldon, *Powers Behind the Prime Minister*, pp. 152-153.



months, was her most enduring colleague. An ex-*Guardian* columnist specialising in industrial affairs, and one-time press secretary for both Barbara Castle and Tony Benn, Ingham was not an obvious ally.<sup>32</sup> His parents had been active Labour supporters, his father having served as a Labour member on Hebden Royd Urban District Council. Ingham himself was secretary of his local Labour Youth League as a teenager.<sup>33</sup> Neither, however, does the nature of his recruitment to Number Ten suggest that an ally had been sought: the job was filled without any direct contact between employer and employee, and upon arrival at what he had assumed was to be an interview in 1979, Ingham was put immediately to work. Any trace of Labour sympathy evaporated under Thatcher, his loyalty to whom was widely criticised for compromising the neutrality his official role demanded. As early as 1982 it was speculated that Ingham's association with Thatcher would prevent him from retaining his position under a new prime minister; when Thatcher left office eight years later Ingham, 'tainted' by association, left also.<sup>34</sup> A 'large Yorkshireman with eyebrows of Healeyesque dimensions' Ingham was himself readily caricatured by the press, attaining a public profile hitherto unknown for someone in his role.<sup>35</sup> As Gerald Kaufman argued in September 1983, Ingham's refusal to 'shrink bashfully into anonymity' contravened the proper view of 'press officers in their official roles as non-persons'.<sup>36</sup> Ministers complained regularly of being undermined by Ingham's lobby briefings; his dismissal of Howe's role as Deputy Prime Minister, which he suggested was a tokenistic 'gift', was particularly damaging to governmental relations. The issue of Ingham's impartiality was a not infrequent subject of parliamentary debate.<sup>37</sup> Despite problematic media coverage and parliamentary scepticism, Thatcher recognised Ingham's loyalty and competence, and valued his forthright nature. She therefore resisted calls for his reassignment.<sup>38</sup>

Charles Powell, employed as Thatcher's Foreign Affairs Private Secretary from 1984, was subject to similar criticism for overstepping his official duties. Indeed, his wide-ranging responsibilities and apparent influence resulted in his public misidentification as Thatcher's Principal Private Secretary.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ingham speaks highly of Castle's commitment to 'get[ting] the philosophy right', a quality he admired equally in Thatcher. Quoted in A.Perkins, *The Red Queen* (London, 2003), p.279.

<sup>33</sup> Ingham, *Kill the Messenger*, p.18.

<sup>34</sup> 'Warning on Political Promotions', *Times*, 1 November 1982.

<sup>35</sup> 'Off the Record: the voice behind the view from number ten', the *Times*, 14 January 1983.

<sup>36</sup> 'Why Mr Ingham is Such Bad News', *Times*, 12 September 1983.

<sup>37</sup> Tam Dalyell, Labour MP for Linlithgow, who in March 1988 described Ingham as 'the most important man in British politics', was a particularly vocal critic of Ingham's prominence. Hansard HC debate, vol 129 col 17 (7 March 1988).

<sup>38</sup> In February 1989, asked when she expected Ingham to return to a government department Thatcher replied 'in due course'. Asked later the same year if she would transfer Ingham, she replied 'no'. See *Hansard HC debate*, vol 146 col 755 (9 February 1989) and *Hansard HC debate*, vol 151 col 254 (20 April 1989).

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, 'The Key Men at the Heart of Maggie's Kitchen Cabinet', the *Daily Mail*, 28 January 1986, which claimed that as Principal Private Secretary Powell was responsible for 'the organisation of Mrs Thatcher's working life'.

Like Ingham, he came to be strongly identified with Thatcher and resigned from the civil service entirely upon leaving his Downing Street post in 1990. His six years as Thatcher's Foreign Affairs Private Secretary far exceeded the position's normal duration. Against the advice of Armstrong, Thatcher rejected multiple proposals to move Powell to another post, with whom she developed a close relationship. After the customary three years the Foreign Office pressed him to take up the role of Ambassador to Berne. Thatcher intervened, and rejected the appointment as too junior. His proposed appointment as Ambassador to Madrid encountered a series of delays before falling through for undisclosed reasons.<sup>40</sup> More than anyone else Powell would spend weekends with Thatcher at Chequers, whilst as a foreign policy advisor he would also accompany her on trips.<sup>41</sup> His influence was such that veteran mandarin Percy Craddock remarked 'it was sometimes difficult to establish where Mrs Thatcher ended and Charles Powell began'.<sup>42</sup> As testimony to the affection between Thatcher and Powell, it is worth mentioning that they remained close throughout her retirement and into her final months, when – conversation being impossible – they instead watched Songs of Praise together.<sup>43</sup>

As Hugo Young has argued, no politician attained comparable status, and Thatcher's reliance on key advisors – both from within the civil service and outside of it – led to accusations of a kitchen cabinet; a powerful and largely unelected sub-committee of decision makers.<sup>44</sup> Such accusations were not new, and Wilson's government in particular had come to be associated with the concentration of power within an unofficial, unelected group. That Cabinet authority had been circumvented in the past, however, was scant comfort to the ministers who considered themselves overlooked. Howe's autobiography complains of his being undermined by Thatcher's references to '[her] people in Number Ten', while Francis Pym accused Thatcher and her advisors of attempting to run 'a government within a government'.<sup>45</sup> This thesis does not seek to assess the legitimacy of such accusations; within the context of analysing the network of relationships within Number Ten it is sufficient to recognise that they existed, and were publicly debated. Thatcher's political isolation within the Conservative establishment has been considered in chapters one and four. Given her vulnerability, it is perhaps unsurprising that she relied heavily on networks of support beyond official party political structures.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>42</sup> P. Craddock, quoted in J. Campbell, *The Iron Lady*, p.257.

<sup>43</sup> R. Butler in I. Dale ed., *Memories of Margaret Thatcher: a portrait by those who knew her best* (London, 2013), p. 122.

<sup>44</sup> Young, *One of Us*, p. 446.

<sup>45</sup> G. Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, p. 395 and F. Pym, *The Politics of Consent* (London, 1985), p. 34.

If Thatcher was an outsider in the House of Commons, this was equally true of Number Ten. Its civil service secondees were overwhelmingly upper-middle class males. There has never been a female Cabinet Secretary, nor a female Principal Private Secretary. Women at Number Ten have been concentrated in clerical roles, most notably as ‘Garden Room Girls’ – the prime minister’s pool of secretaries. Compared with the clubby atmosphere of the House of Commons, however, Number Ten is hospitable to outsiders. As Donoghue noted, the building’s frantic pace left ‘little scope or time for hierarchy or ceremony’.<sup>46</sup> The typically short tenure of civil servants also prevents the cementing of potentially inhospitable factions. Of course the most obvious difference between the House of Commons and Number Ten is the authority of the prime minister within Number Ten. That staff are charged to serve the prime minister simplifies and regulates relationships between the building’s employees and the person in charge, reducing the role of socially founded networks and alliances. Thatcher’s class and gender, together with her workaholic tendencies and social unease, left her ill-equipped to cultivate social relationships through the Commons. This increased the importance of parliamentary private secretaries, responsible for facilitating backbencher access to the Prime Minister and maintaining relations between the leader and the party rank and file more generally.

The relationships between Thatcher and her ministers are usefully contrasted with those between Thatcher and her staff. Not unusually, Thatcher initially approached her private office with caution, but was surprised and deeply appreciative of the support it provided her. Thatcher’s treatment of more junior members of the Downing Street staff in particular has spawned a number of well known and oft-repeated anecdotes, suggesting both popular interest in the subject and the cultural capital of paternalistic domestic management. For example, it has been widely repeated that when a member of service staff poured gravy into the lap of Geoffrey Howe one lunchtime, Thatcher leap up not to attend to Howe, but to reassure the unfortunate server that it could happen to anyone.<sup>47</sup> While ministers may have been considered fair game, secretaries, drivers and kitchen-staff were not. Indeed, reports that emerged in 2010 of Gordon Brown’s mistreatment of his staff led to calls for him resign. His ‘abusive’ tendencies were regarded as evidence of poor character. Furthermore, they were understood as indicating his inability to cope. Discussing Andrew Rawnsley’s *The End of the Party*, which was serialised in the *Observer* in 2010, the *Guardian* reported:

[Rawnsley] paints a picture of an often lonely and desperate figure who took out his frustrations on those around him as he struggled to cope with the pressures of running the country in his early months in No 10.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Donoghue, *Diary*, p. 58.

<sup>47</sup> Douglas-Home, *The Prime Ministers*, p. 266.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Civil service chief warned Gordon Brown over abusive treatment of staff’, *Guardian*, 21 February 2010.

Given that Thatcher had emphasised feminine practicality and domestic competence as a qualification for high office, charges of mismanagement within a pseudo-domestic context would have been particularly damaging.

It is worth considering Thatcher's relationship with domestic workers specifically, because as Lucy Delap has argued, 'the treatment of servants by patrician figures is still a yardstick of good breeding and suitability to govern.'<sup>49</sup> Although particularly true in relation to women, who are liable to fall victim to unflattering 'villa mistress' stereotypes, this applies also to men. When the journalist Martin Kettle assessed the early days of David Cameron's leadership in the *Guardian*, he emphasised the way in which Cameron treated the staff at Chequers, compared with the lack of appreciation shown to them by Brown.<sup>50</sup> Downing Street's residential facade invited the blurring of private/public distinctions. As Thatcher said of Number Ten in Christopher Jones' *Number Ten Downing Street*, 'it is, above all, a home'.<sup>51</sup> Those who work there, members of 'a close and immensely loyal group', are by implication a 'family'.<sup>52</sup> Importantly, this 'family' extended to domestic workers, who had throughout the twentieth century been discussed and understood through models of 'fictive kinship'. Thatcher employed two 'dailies' for the residential flat, funded privately, and eight government cleaners maintained the official areas of Number Ten. Unfortunately this is an element of Number Ten life in relation to which few sources exist. Thatcher's professed concern for the wellbeing of domestic workers is, however, well attested. Indeed, the matter's discursive prominence itself testifies to what Delap describes as the 'insistent emotional ties' of domestic labour.<sup>53</sup> In 1984 Penny Junor, for example, claimed that Thatcher had ended the Chequers' tradition of the Prime Minister having a drink with staff, in the staff room, before Boxing Day dinner. Instead, staff were invited to the main part of the house to have a drink with her guests, which Thatcher served.<sup>54</sup> Lord Forsyth recalls that at a city dinner Thatcher kept guests waiting whilst she spoke with 'cleaning ladies' downstairs, and Moore's biography emphasises her concerns about the standard of servants' quarters at the Delhi High Commission.<sup>55</sup> She approached domestic service from a limited and nostalgic perspective, however, and never engaged with the unregulated and potentially exploitative nature of casual, domestic employment.

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<sup>49</sup> L. Delap, *Knowing their place*, p. i.

<sup>50</sup> Whereas upon vacating Chequers Brown left no thank-you note, after his first weekend at the property Cameron 'returned to London leaving a handwritten note of appreciation'. M. Kettle, 'A Man of Grace', the *Guardian*, 9 July 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Thatcher, quoted in C. Jones, *Number 10 Downing Street: the story of a house* (London, 1985), p. 182.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Delap, *Knowing*, p. i.

<sup>54</sup> P. Junor, *Margaret Thatcher: wife, mother, politician* (London, 1984), p.152.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Forsyth was the Conservative Member of Parliament for Stirling from 1983 to 1997. Blundell ed., *Remembering Margaret Thatcher*, p. 337 and Moore, *Volume II*, p. 663.

The volume of stories testifying to the kindness that Thatcher showed her staff suggests credibility, although their retelling no doubt furthered an agenda. She endeavoured not to disturb even senior officials over weekends, was always keen to ensure staff were well fed and was not averse to preparing meals, and washing up, herself.<sup>56</sup> When Ingham's wife suffered an accident she instructed him to take a week off, despite this falling in the middle of the Falklands' war. When George Newell, one of her drivers, unexpectedly died of a heart attack she provided another driver with a car and time off, allowing him to look after his friend's bereaved wife.<sup>57</sup> An excerpt from Ingham's diary recalls Thatcher's determination to 'pamper' Number Ten's pregnant press officer:

Mrs Thatcher clearly feels we should not now be sending her on arduous regional visits. So she spends the day pampering her, slowing down her visit, making her sit down at every opportunity. And while the rest of the party flies home Coleen travels back from London in the back seat of the Prime Minister's car with instructions to put her feet up across the back seat.<sup>58</sup>

Janice Richards, head of the Garden Room secretariat between 1985 and 1999, remembers Thatcher as a 'motherly' figure who addressed her female staff members as 'dear'.<sup>59</sup> In an interview with Charles Moore, Caroline Ryder (nee Stephens), who worked as a Diary Secretary within Thatcher's Private Office, similarly described the Prime Minister as fussing over her personal staff in the style of a 'Jewish mother'.<sup>60</sup> This was an element of her personality amplified by the media and, throughout the early years of her premiership at least, encouraged by Thatcher herself. As already suggested, a quasi-domestic setting permitted the reiteration and exaggeration of common, female stereotypes. For example, in a book exploring the lives of prime ministers at Downing Street, Frank Longford subtitled Thatcher's chapter 'the family governess', while Penny Junor's 1984 biography argued that Thatcher's practical domesticity, demonstrated by her willingness to wash the dishes after a working supper, revealed a submerged, psychological need 'to play mother'.<sup>61</sup>

Thatcher was keen to understand the practical operation of her Office. Kavanagh and Seldon's book quotes a number of unnamed officials describing the discomfort her close attention to their work caused them.<sup>62</sup> Her Number Ten staff, however, generally had a more favourable view of Thatcher than that espoused by her political colleagues. Powell denies that she had sought to furnish

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<sup>56</sup> John Selwyn Gummer, who was the Conservative MP for Suffolk Coastal and Chairman of the Conservative party under Thatcher, recalls that upon arriving at Downing Street 'The first thing she would ask if you were late was, 'Have you had something to eat?' Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>57</sup> Junor, p. 151.

<sup>58</sup> Ingham, *Kill the Messenger*, p. 221.

<sup>59</sup> J. Richards, interviewed by N. Grimley, accessed online 6 July 2016: [www.thatcherandnumberten.com](http://www.thatcherandnumberten.com).

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume II*, p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> F. Longford, *Eleven at Number Ten* (London, 1984), p. 155 and Junor, *Margaret Thatcher*, p. 180.

<sup>62</sup> Kavanagh and Seldon, *The Power Behind the Prime Minister*, p. 151: 'She would stand by your desk and rifle through your in tray 'What is this?'... you'd be pretty careful what you put in your in-tray if you suspected she might drop in'.

her Private Office with yes-men, a position supported, for example, by her appointment of Armstrong, who was so identified with Edward Heath that the press had pejoratively referred to him as the 'deputy Prime Minister'.<sup>63</sup> A number of advisers have argued that while she would not countenance being undermined in public, private criticism was likely to be taken on board.<sup>64</sup> In an interview with retired civil servant Kevin Tebbit, Powell suggests that whilst Thatcher was unlikely to admit error, her ideas evolved in response to the advice she was given: 'she would never admit that she was wrong but sometimes you would find that the next day she was saying what you had been saying the day before'.<sup>65</sup> A Permanent Secretary within the department of education offered a similar account in his comparison of Thatcher and Shirley Williams:

When you entered Williams's office she would welcome you and be very interested in what you had to say. As you talked she would put her head on one hand, look very hard at you and drink in every word. She could not have been more sympathetic. Thatcher, on the other hand, was never very pleased to see you and when you said, 'Minister, there's something I must say,' she would reply: 'Do you absolutely have to?' She would listen with an angry look as you tried to persuade her of the folly of one of her policies and at the end she would shout that it was all rubbish and handbag you.

However, the next day you would notice that Thatcher had accepted some or all of your recommendations and now considered them her own, whereas Williams never altered what she had decided in the first place. She had given you tea and sympathy but had refused to hear a word: Thatcher had given you hell but had allowed your words to percolate through.<sup>66</sup>

While the Civil Service was overwhelmingly male, there was a strong female element to Thatcher's personal staff. Thatcher may not have felt sisterly towards her female equals, but she developed a number of lasting relationships with the women she employed. To some degree this was merely pragmatic. Caroline Stephens, for example, would often be called upon to deliver messages to – or retrieve messages from - Thatcher when she was dressing or in the bath.<sup>67</sup> Such intimate access to the prime minister was not unique to Thatcher's tenure: John Peck, a private secretary to Churchill, recalled sitting with the prime minister whilst he undressed, in case he should have any 'special ideas'.<sup>68</sup> Had Thatcher employed women at a more senior level, such intimate access may have been better exploited. As has been emphasised throughout, Thatcher's appearance was of greater political importance than that of her male predecessors; the maintenance of this

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<sup>63</sup> D. Beetham and S. Weir, *Political Power and Democratic Control in Britain* (London, 1999), p. 171.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, J. Coles, *Appreciation of Margaret Thatcher*, 14 June 1984, MTFW:135761.

<sup>65</sup> Powell interviewed by Tebbit, accessed 6 July 2015.

<sup>66</sup> See Pedersen, 'You're only interested in Hitler, not me'

<sup>67</sup> Kavanagh and Seldon, *Powers Behind the Prime Minister*, p. 164.

<sup>68</sup> *A Unique Film History*, BBC, 1985.

appearance required a largely female cohort of hairdressers, make-up artists and dressers.<sup>69</sup> The Private Office, believing that reference to hair appointments ill-befitted the dignity of the Prime Minister's diary, opted to use 'Carmen rollers' as code.<sup>70</sup> Guinevere Tilney, a friend of Thatcher's from their shared search for parliamentary seats in the 1940s, was mockingly known as 'mistress of the robes' before Cynthia Crawford, a secretary within Thatcher's Political Office, succeeded to the title around 1983. Crawford, known as 'Crawfie', was responsible for compiling a record of the occasions for which Thatcher had worn particular clothes, allowing for easy recollection and preventing unsuitable repetitions. She also claims responsibility for introducing Thatcher to the Aquascutum power suits that came to define her later public image.<sup>71</sup> Crawford was the most enduring female presence in Thatcher's political life. She assumed the diverse responsibilities of a personal assistant, although little is known of the mechanics of her role beyond the fact that she was paid for by David Wolfson, Thatcher's (unpaid) Chief of Staff. Crawford served Thatcher right up until her death, and yet is scarcely mentioned in *The Downing Street Years*. The scant references that do exist, however, suggest the intimacy of their relationship: Thatcher recalls, for example, Crawford wiping mascara from her cheek before she left Downing Street for the last time, and they prayed together after surviving the Brighton bomb in 1984.<sup>72</sup> In her will she left Crawford her flower brooch with emeralds and ruby diamonds, as well as £50,000.<sup>73</sup>

## II

Given the dual public/private function of Number Ten, material features of the building's interior should also be recognised as instruments in the projection of Thatcher's public image. The public rooms of Downing Street at least were designed to be seen, and the extent to which the private rooms actually were 'private' is debatable. Thatcher's closer colleagues routinely spent evenings in the private flat, and in 1985 Thatcher opened the residence up to television cameras for the filming of 'Life above the Shop', the second of a two-part documentary produced by the BBC to commemorate Downing Street's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary as the prime minister's official residence. This documentary provided viewers with unprecedented, if carefully selected, access to the Prime Minister's private quarters and domestic routine. As Clare Ritchie has argued, 'the home', along with personal appearance, has been long established as a key location for the construction and projection of feminine identity. In relation to both, women were expected to demonstrate competence and

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<sup>69</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 434.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, For example Thatcher engagement diary, 10 October 1980, MTFW: 113599.

<sup>71</sup> Carla Powell, wife of Charles, with whom Thatcher formed a close friendship has elsewhere been credited with introducing Thatcher to 'power dressing'.

<sup>72</sup> Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 860 and p. 380.

<sup>73</sup> 'Thatcher's £50, 000 bequest to Crawfie', *Daily Mail*, 29 November 2013.

taste.<sup>74</sup> In 1881 Mrs Haweis' interior design manual *The Art of Decoration* described furniture as 'a kind of detached dress', and the association between dress, decor and femininity continues to be reiterated by women's 'lifestyle' magazines.<sup>75</sup> This thesis has discussed Thatcher's wardrobe at length, arguing for its significance as a tool through which Thatcher negotiated and made use of her femininity. It will be argued here that Downing Street, too, presented opportunities of which only a woman could take full advantage. While male premiers certainly oversaw changes to the fabric of Downing Street, it provided Thatcher with a domestic 'set piece' against which to stage gendered performances of practicality, economy, accessibility and generosity. Despite the fact that its private flat occupied a relatively small part of the building, Number Ten remained primarily a domestic residence in the popular imagination. Given the rhetorical emphasis she placed on women's domestic competence, Thatcher's management of Downing Street – loosely understood as the 'residence' of an extended political 'family' – was intimately bound up with the public image she conveyed, as well as the style of femininity she sought to promote.

When Thatcher moved into Number Ten during the summer of 1979, she was unimpressed by the decor from both a personal and a political perspective. Her memoir described the Cabinet Ante room as looking like 'a down-at-heel Pall Mall club', whilst the upstairs rooms had 'a furnished flat to let feel'.<sup>76</sup> She set about replacing dark baize surfaces with lighter alternatives, and also redecorated the first floor study. As this was not a necessity she did so at her own cost. More significantly, she sought to furnish Number Ten with British art and furniture, believing that 'when visitors came to Downing Street they should see something of Britain's cultural heritage'.<sup>77</sup> She asked that Wendy Baron, then director of the Government Art Collection, provide her with works of art which 'displayed the greatness of Britain'.<sup>78</sup> The selection and promotion of 'cultural heritage' is of course deeply political, but although Thatcher displayed the predictable portraits of Wellington, Nelson and Churchill, as well as of her personal hero Rudyard Kipling, she also borrowed work by Henry Moore – an artist with communist sympathies famous for abstract sculptures of the human form.<sup>79</sup> A sculpture or drawing by Henry Moore has been continuously displayed in the 'Henry Moore alcove' in the main hallway, since Thatcher borrowed the first figure from the Henry Moore Foundation in

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<sup>74</sup> C. Ritchie, 'The Housewife and the Modern: the home and appearance in women's magazines, 1954-1969', (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in A. Myzelev and J. Potvin eds., *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modernity* (London, 2010) p. 77.

<sup>76</sup> Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 23.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>78</sup> Interview Moore and W. Baron, quoted in Moore, *Volume II*, p. 654.

<sup>79</sup> Annual reports of the National Portrait Gallery reveal a long list of portraits on long-term loan at Downing Street between 1979 and 1990, including Sir Philip Burne-Jones' image of Kipling. Naval heroes and stage figures are well represented among the artworks borrowed.



1984. The Private Office also purchased Henry Moore prints to present to heads of state attending the economic summit held in London that year. She was personally gifted a signed Moore etching by the gallery from which these prints had been bought, 'as a small token of ... admiration and support'.<sup>80</sup> Procurement of the original Moore, however, was not her own initiative, but that of Lord Gowrie, Minister for the Arts, and it is unclear the extent to which she was aware of Moore's (now dated) political associations. The only picture that Thatcher personally discovered and persuaded the government arts fund to buy was a painting of a sunset by Winston Churchill.<sup>81</sup> British artworks were complemented by British furniture, largely borrowed from the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>82</sup> Thatcher's most distinctive contribution to the Downing Street art collection was a gallery of eminent scientists, displayed in the small dining room. Images of Sir Humphry Davy, Ada Lovelace and Joseph Priestley, along with a bust of Isaac Newton, reminded visitors that Thatcher was not only the country's first female prime minister, but the first Prime Minister with a science degree.<sup>83</sup> In a speech given to the 300 Group in 1990, Thatcher referred to Lovelace, 'a gifted mathematician but condemned to obscurity', to demonstrate the progress made in the field of women's rights.<sup>84</sup>

Thatcher's most enduring contribution to the appearance of Number Ten was her employment of the architect Quinlan Terry to remodel the state drawing rooms. The White Drawing Room and the Terracotta Room gained ornate plasterwork ceilings; in the White Drawing room this included the national emblems of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The gilded plasterwork above the door from the Terracotta Room to the Pillared Room includes a small figure of a thatcher, in Thatcher's honour.<sup>85</sup> Terry, an architectural neo-conservative favoured by Prince Charles, had already received several commissions from Conservative politicians in the early eighties. He had also been involved with the extensive remodelling of Downing Street in the 1960s, under the tutelage of Raymond Erith. Having been for years considered 'an eccentric figure on the fringe', Terry enjoyed popularity in the 1980s, which witnessed the burgeoning of 'the heritage industry' and the 'fetish of the country house'.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, architectural commentaries continued to describe his designs as 'unfashionable', and as reflecting his 'unfashionable' admiration for Eric Gill and William Morris,

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<sup>80</sup> Letter from Marlborough Fine Art director, 4 June 1984, MTWF: 143932

<sup>81</sup> Moore, *Volume II*, p. 654.

<sup>82</sup> D. Farr, *Five at Ten: prime minister's consorts since 1957* (London, 1985), p. 206.

<sup>83</sup> Moore, *Volume II*, p.654. Priestley is widely credited with the discovery of Oxygen and Lovelace pioneered algorithms designed to be carried out by machines. Humphry Davy was chemist whose significant achievements include the identification of the element iodine and the invention of the 'Davy' safety lamp.

<sup>84</sup> Thatcher, Pankhurst Lecture to the 200 Group, 18 July 1990, MTFW: 108156.

<sup>85</sup> C. Brown, *Whitehall: the street that shaped a nation* (London, 2010), p. 111.

<sup>86</sup> M. Filler and Q. Terry, 'Neoconservative Architecture, neoconservative politics', *Assemblage*, 9 (June 1989) p. 121.

among others.<sup>87</sup> As has been shown throughout this thesis, reclamation of the unfashionable was integral to Thatcher's elevation of both independent-mindedness and stability. Terry's reputation, therefore, only increased his suitability in relation the cultural designs of Thatcherism.

### III

Thatcher's commitment to hard work was frequently demonstrated by reference to her daily routine, and her capacity to go without sleep quickly became a key component of the 'iron lady' legend. She would rise before six, complete any left-over boxes while listening to the 'Today' programme on the radio, and descend to the first floor study – her preferred working location – by eight thirty. She would then work until the early hours, often with close aides in the living room of the private flat. The month of her 1979 election victory the *Daily Mail* ran an article describing 'the short sleepers of Downing Street'.<sup>88</sup> Her Private Office staff would regularly try and persuade her to decline invitations, and encouraged her to take holidays.<sup>89</sup> Stamina being such a central element of her public image, she was at pains to conceal indications of tiredness and physical weakness, although John Coles, Thatcher's private secretary for foreign affairs from 1981 to 1984, has written of a decline in her energy levels after the 1983 general election.<sup>90</sup> Despite referring to the private flat as a refuge, however, she was not protective of it as a private space. In addition to regularly inviting colleagues into the private flat, she would invite them to Chequers over holidays. Colleagues suffering marital problems in particular were encouraged to attend.<sup>91</sup> Murdoch, who was the only newspaper proprietor to have been invited to the Downing Street event that marked her 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, also received several invitations to spend Christmas at Chequers. Despite this, and perhaps unsurprisingly given widespread criticism of his speculated political influence, he is not once mentioned in her memoirs.<sup>92</sup>

Although Thatcher claimed to 'love' Chequers, the country house bequeathed to the nation by Lord Lee of Fareham in 1921, she was most comfortable in the city. She disliked horses, dogs and country sports; courtiers at the Queen's estate in Balmoral struggled to entertain her when she undertook the customary annual visit.<sup>93</sup> Whilst books such as *The Sloane Ranger Handbook* continued to sell an idealised country lifestyle to a largely metropolitan 'Yuppie' elite, Thatcher's

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<sup>87</sup> R. Kent, 'Building from God's Blueprint', *Third Way* (May 1989) p. 22.

<sup>88</sup> 'The Short Sleepers of Downing Street', *Daily Mail*, 20 May 1979.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Alison Ward to Peter Morrison MP, 14 March 1979, MTFW: 112191: 'I know you understand how keen we are that Mrs Thatcher should have a holiday'

<sup>90</sup> Coles, Appreciation of Margaret Thatcher, 14 June 1984, MTFW: 135761.

<sup>91</sup> O. Maitland, *Margaret Thatcher, the first ten years* (London, 1989), p. 58.

<sup>92</sup> Campbell, *The Iron Lady*, p. 335.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.360.

leadership railed against entrenched associations between Conservatism and rural Englishness. For Lawrence Black, Thatcher's distaste for Conservatism's rural affectations is symbolised by her closure of Swinton College, a Conservative training facility housed in a North Yorkshire stately home.<sup>94</sup> Her ideal citizen was not the Edwardian gentleman, but a 'merchant adventurer' of the Elizabethan period, or a wealth-creating, Victorian industrialist.<sup>95</sup> Upon moving into a flat in Pimlico as a young woman, she enthused to her sister Muriel about living in the centre of things: 'It is a great thrill to come to London. In Grantham it was like swimming in a very small pool: you keep bumping into the sides'.<sup>96</sup> She was also pleased to escape the intrusions of her 'enquiring landlord and landlady', from whom she had rented a property in Dartford.<sup>97</sup> Several letters to Muriel relay 'in enormous detail' the domestic and decorative particulars of the new property, suggesting that a degree of authenticity informed her later, publicly projected enthusiasm for homemaking.<sup>98</sup> The Dulwich property she bought with Denis in 1985 was a mistake. Finding Dulwich too far removed, she and Denis spent only a handful of nights there during the remainder of her premiership. Whilst they lived in Dulwich briefly upon her resignation, number 73 Chester Square, Belgravia, was the home in which she passed most of her retirement. Their Dulwich property nonetheless performed a valuable psychological function in providing somewhere for them to go on Thatcher's leaving office. As Denis told Charles Moore, 'Ted Heath got flung out without any notice at all...He didn't have anywhere to go. I said to Margaret, we've got to have somewhere to go, when we go'.<sup>99</sup> In the event, Thatcher had five days notice to prepare before leaving Downing Street for the final time.

A domestic setting provided an opportunity to showcase not only Thatcher's softer qualities, as discussed above, but also the practicality and frugality upon which she had campaigned for office. She was conscious that lavish spending would be interpreted critically by both opposition MPs and the public, as the handwritten notes added to a breakdown of the private flat's refurbishment costs demonstrates. Thatcher requested that unneeded bed linen be returned to storage, and insisted on personally reimbursing the cost of a £19 ironing board, deemed unnecessarily expensive.<sup>100</sup> The total cost of refurbishment amounted to £1,736, whilst £2,685 had been spent on improving Number Eleven.<sup>101</sup> This emphasis on frugality extended to the management of the building's political

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<sup>94</sup> L. Black, 'Tories and Hunters: Swinton College and the landscape of modern Conservatism', *History Workshop Journal* (2013) p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> 'George Thomas in Conversation', 13 September 1983, MTFW:105188.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume I*, p. 102.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Moore, *Volume II*, p. 670.

<sup>100</sup> 'Expenditure of refurbishing at Number 10 Downing Street', 25 June 1979, National Archives, Kew, CM/1/181

<sup>101</sup> Letter to department of Environment, 21 June 1979, MTFW: 129898.

functions, and in December 1979 the prime minister's press office released a bulletin announcing that Thatcher had reduced the department's running costs by an estimated £56,000, by cutting the building's staff by seven: 'the prime minister has set a good example'.<sup>102</sup> It had been customary for prime ministers and their wives to live in the private flat on the third floor of Ten Downing Street since the turn of the twentieth century. During his second administration Harold Wilson was the first peacetime prime minister since Salisbury in 1902 not to make Downing Street his home, with Mary refusing to return to the 'Downing Street goldfish bowl'.<sup>103</sup> Heath, although generally more positive, had complained about the flat's lack of a drawing room.<sup>104</sup>

In contrast, Thatcher enjoyed life at Number Ten. The arrangement also allowed her to draw parallels between her childhood in Grantham and adult life. Describing the refuge offered by Downing Street's private quarters, she told a television audience in 1983, 'I can always retreat upstairs, just as we did at the shop. I still live over the shop'.<sup>105</sup> This was clearly an image that Thatcher enjoyed: the second part of the BBC's 1985 documentary on Downing Street was called 'Living above the Shop', as was the first chapter of her autobiography. When appearing on an ITV talk show alongside Barry Manilow in 1984, Thatcher told an amused studio audience that being 'always on the job', it was sensible to live 'above the shop'. Unaware of the double entendre, she later asked what had engendered such laughter.<sup>106</sup> The incident suggests Thatcher's keenness to reach a wider public through popular, television culture, as well as her incomprehension of its cruder colloquialisms.

The domestic deficiencies of Number Ten were used by Thatcher in support of her self-presentation as an 'ordinary' woman, motivated by the same desires and concerns as any other. For example, discussing Number Ten's galley kitchen she told Christopher Jones that she '[longed] for a really large kitchen where you can spend a lot of your time', and when she and Denis bought their Dulwich property she enthused to *Women's Own*: 'for the first time in my life I've got the kitchen I've always wanted'.<sup>107</sup> She told a journalist for *Vogue* that she had 'made the changes at Number Ten that any woman in charge would make. Not expensive ones, but we have bombarded people to get nice pictures, nice furniture'.<sup>108</sup> The luxuries of living at Number Ten were downplayed: she was

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<sup>102</sup> Press Office bulletin, 6 December 1979, MTFW: 112524.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in C. Ballinger and A. Seldon 'Prime Ministers and Cabinet' in A. Seldon and K. Hickson eds., *New Labour, Old Labour* (London, 2004) p. 174.

<sup>104</sup> *Number Ten Downing Street: a unique film History*, 1986, quoted by A. Morrison 'There's no place like home' in L. Hadley and E. Ho eds., *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and her afterlife in contemporary culture* (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 125.

<sup>105</sup> Thatcher, TV interview for HTV George Thomas in Conversation, 13 September 1983, MTFW, ref: 105188.

<sup>106</sup> See S. Booker, 'A Brush With Greatness', *Observer Magazine*, 19 June 2016.

<sup>107</sup> Jones, *Number 10*, p. 182 and *Women's Own*, 12 October 1985, quoted in Moore, *Volume II*, p. 669.

<sup>108</sup> 'A Certain Style', *Vogue*, 30 July 1985, Churchill College, Cambridge: THCR 5/2/175.

not given 'nice pictures', but had to 'bombard' people for them. She was keen to state that the works of art displayed on Number Ten's walls were beyond her personal means, and emphasised that galleries refused to let her 'have the best. They hide it when you go round'.<sup>109</sup>

By 1974 Thatcher was able to exploit a domestic setting to more positive effect. In December that year, having announced her candidacy for the Conservative leadership, she found herself at the centre of a minor political controversy when Heath's supporters unearthed an interview she had given some six weeks previously, in which she recommended storing tinned food as a buffer against inflation. She was widely criticised for 'hoarding' or 'stockpiling' – accusations resonant for their unpatriotic, wartime connotations.<sup>110</sup> To take control of media coverage Thatcher invited journalists to photograph her larder, seeking to recast the issue as a matter of prudent housewifery. Within a domestic setting she was able to press upon the public the extent to which she differed from establishment Conservative figures, adding substance the domestic rhetoric that featured heavily throughout her leadership campaign.

Thatcher was helped in her endeavour to obscure the luxury of Downing Street by frequent media references to its relative modesty. In 1985, to mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Downing Street as the official home of the prime minister, the BBC produced a two-part documentary and an accompanying book, *Number Ten Downing Street: the story of a house*, by Christopher Jones, the BBC's political correspondent. Jones repeatedly emphasised the building's restraint: rooms are neither showy nor exceptionally large. The Cabinet Room, for example, 'the very centre of power and authority in Britain', is described as 'bright and well proportioned ... Many companies have boardrooms which are far more grand'.<sup>111</sup> The private flat, which comprises four to five bedrooms depending on designation, is likened to the sort of house a successful businessman might occupy.<sup>112</sup> In a similar vein the documentary describes Downing Street as an unassuming 'row house' in an 'unfashionable' part of London; it is said to be 'pokey' by international standards.<sup>113</sup> Given the unprecedented access that Thatcher provided to the BBC in the making of these documentaries, it is likely that the finished products were carefully managed by Number Ten staff. Ingham's autobiography recalls his colleague working on the project for 'many months'.<sup>114</sup> It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that its narrative arc reaffirms the domestic normality projected by Thatcher herself. Thatcher as the 'housewife' of Downing Street was nonetheless an image promoted by the popular media more generally. Correspondence between the *Mail on Sunday* and Number Ten

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<sup>109</sup> Thatcher, quoted in Jones, *Number 10*, p. 178.

<sup>110</sup> Moore, *Volume I*, p. 278.

<sup>111</sup> Jones, *Number 10*, p. 160.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Morrison, 'There's no place like home', 124.

<sup>114</sup> Ingham, *Kill the Messenger*, p.207.

reveals a rejected request for Thatcher to be photographed whilst 'doing some small domestic chore' in the private flat: 'something with which everyone could identify' such as 'taking something out of the fridge'.<sup>115</sup> The *London Standard's* Anne De Courcy commenced her write up of an interview with Thatcher in 1985 by claiming that 'momentarily it could have been any woman welcoming me into her home'.<sup>116</sup>

More than providing a physical context within which to locate her domestic expertise and demonstrate her normality, however, Downing Street's 'modesty' enabled Thatcher to promote the very same efficiency with which she sought to inject the broader Civil Service. The building's inability to house an amorphous staff imposed restrictions that she believed engendered good working practices. As she told George Thomas in a television interview for HTV

We run a very happy ship at No. 10, very happy. It's small and when people come to me in the departments and say they want more staff, I say you won't do your work half as well if you do. You don't want so many people that you can put your work on someone else's desk and then they've got to co-ordinate it with someone else. No. If you have a small staff you all know one another and they are marvellous.<sup>117</sup>

The size of Ten Downing Street, and its capacity to cope with the needs of the times, was a source of debate throughout the 1980s.<sup>118</sup> By celebrating its relative smallness, Thatcher reiterated her opposition to big government, which she regarded as both wasteful and intrusive.

### Conclusion

Number Ten Downing Street occupies a complex place within popular discourses of public and private space. Under Thatcher, this was complicated further by the emphasis she placed on private, domestic qualities as both facilitating and demonstrating her public competence. Interest in the domestic elements of Number Ten was increased by the building's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and provided Thatcher with plentiful opportunities to reiterate the 'ordinariness' upon which she had campaigned in 1979. Through effective and tireless management of Number Ten – both as a private residence and a political office – she was also able to demonstrate her stamina, efficiency and practicality. The building's public function – and her unusually lengthy tenure - allowed Thatcher to cultivate and project a particularly 'Thatcherite' national image through the building's material culture, which was neoclassical and dominated by portraits of war heroes. However, the influence of figures such as Lord Gowrie – responsible for Downing Street's association with Henry Moore – warns against an analysis that assumes prime-ministerial independence. Indeed, the informal, 'homely' atmosphere

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<sup>115</sup> Minute to Thatcher, Churchill College, Cambridge, ref: THCR 5/2/79.

<sup>116</sup> 'The Lady over the shop at number 10', *London Standard*, 4 September 1985, p. 20.

<sup>117</sup> Thatcher, George Thomas in Conversation, 13 September 1983, MTFW: 105188.

<sup>118</sup> H. Bradon, '10 Downing Street' in A. King ed., *The British Prime Minister* (London, 1985), p. 142.

of Number Ten, combined with the flexibility of roles contained within it, encouraged collaboration. The affection shown to Thatcher by her private staff provides a useful contrast to the hostility she inspired in countless ministers. That Thatcher's private staff included women in key, if not in senior roles, provides a rare opportunity to consider Thatcher's relationships with other women. However, as with the House of Commons, Downing Street was a predominantly male political environment. It was an environment that fostered relationships of a different personal and political character, but to which Thatcher's femininity was no less significant.

## Conclusion

To celebrate the programme's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, BBC 4's Woman's Hour compiled a 'power list' list of seven women deemed to have made 'the biggest impact on women's lives over the past seven decades'. Margaret Thatcher topped the list, ahead of women such as Jayaben Desai, who campaigned against low pay and poor conditions for women workers, and Helen Brook, who in founding the Brook Adversary Centres pioneered women's reproductive rights. Defending their decision, the judging panel's chair, Emma Barnett, claimed that Thatcher had 'redefined power...she shaped how women viewed what it was to be a woman in power'. Barnett also stressed that 'impact' did not have to be positive, and said that the award recognised that a generation of feminists had been galvanised by opposition to Thatcher's policies.<sup>1</sup> This was nonetheless a striking – and deeply controversial – decision. It also helpfully demonstrates the continuing centrality of Thatcher's gender to her cultural and political legacy. Responses to Thatcher cannot be divorced for the fact that she was a woman, and, as Keith Joseph emphasised in 1978, a 'womanly woman' at that. Understanding first the nature of Thatcher's femininity, and then its role in the shaping of Thatcher's leadership image, is therefore an integral part of explaining the values and motivations that contributed towards Thatcher's extraordinary electoral success.

Thatcher's presentation as a housewife is widely recognised by the existing literature. However, this tells us little in and of itself. The common assumption that Thatcher's domestic public image can be explained by her opposition to women's professional independence simplifies the issue by underestimating the extent to which public images, in the age of 'political marketing', are carefully-wrought publicity strategies designed to win popular support, and ultimately votes. Overemphasis on the ideological prescriptivism of Thatcher's domestic image undermines the extent to which it exploited contemporary attitudes towards gender, domesticity and female power. It also neglects the mediated nature of public images, which are shaped by the popular and political cultures through which they are communicated.

'The housewife' is a richly symbolic figure. Political women have been presented – and have presented themselves - as housewives throughout the twentieth century, and female voters have consistently been appealed to as housewives. 'The housewife', however, which is commonly used as shorthand for the 'ordinary' woman, is a more complex figure than is often acknowledged. As Catherine Hall has argued, the 'meaning' of 'the housewife' fluctuates across time and between social and cultural locations, underlining the need to analyse domestic ideals within carefully

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<sup>1</sup> H. Ellis-Petersen, 'Margaret Thatcher names most influential woman of last 70 years', *Guardian* online, 14 December 2016.



delineated contexts.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps owing to the figure's association with 'traditional' values, the fluidity and changeability of the figure's 'meaning' is often overlooked. This has recently been emphasised by Caitriona Beaumont and Judy Giles, who argue for the scope of domestic identities to encompass and reflect women's experiences of modernity.<sup>3</sup> As this thesis has shown, a number of contexts help to elucidate the 'meanings' of Thatcher's domestic image, which shifted over time and drew on a wide range of social, cultural and political traditions. The political culture of the Conservative party, the birth of women's liberation feminism, working-class cultures of domesticity, anxiety about 'permissiveness' and anti-establishment sentiment all informed the 'meaning' of the domestic femininity that characterised Thatcher's early leadership image. Only once these various strands are untangled can Thatcher's 'housewife' image be understood.

In 1979, the Conservative Party's general election campaign strategy, which had its roots in political and electoral research conducted throughout the 1970s, hinged on attracting votes from the skilled working class, and the wives of 'traditional' Labour voters in particular. This involved reversing both the party's image as 'out of touch', and Thatcher's personal image as a 'Tory Lady in a hat'. As this suggests, Thatcher's domestic image was deeply classed, and the complex interrelations between class and gender powerfully shaped responses towards her leadership. Her Dartford adoption speech, which took place before she was married, encouraged the government to do 'what any good housewife would do' and take care of its accounts.<sup>4</sup> She was routinely photographed with her children throughout the 1960s, and upon her appointment as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Pensions in 1961, a newspaper headline celebrated 'The housewife who became a Minister'.<sup>5</sup> She did not, then, *become* a housewife upon announcing her candidacy for the Conservative leadership in 1974. Rather, her presentation shifted from a wealthy middle-class housewife towards a lower middle-class housewife affected by inflation to the extent that, as she told the *Daily Mail* in 1977, she had been left unable to buy a new winter coat, or a new pair of curtains.<sup>6</sup> Whereas in 1970 she had demonstrated her domesticity by enthusing about the importance of an 'English nanny', in 1979 she argued that her experiences as an ordinary 'mum' forced to 'cope' with domestic crises had equipped her for high political office: 'There is no point complaining about it. You have to get on and do it ... because in most cases it's your job because Dad has gone to work and mum is left to cope'.<sup>7</sup> The contrast is stark, and reflected not only the changing requirements of Thatcher's political role, but also a shift in popular attitudes towards the political

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<sup>2</sup> C. Hall 'The History of the Housewife' in E. Malos ed., *The Politics of Housework* (London, 1980), p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> See Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Conservatives to Fight at Election', *Erith Observer*, 4 March 1949, MTFW: 100821.

<sup>5</sup> 'Interview on becoming a Minister', unidentified cutting, 10 October 1961, MTFW: 101112.

<sup>6</sup> 'Feeling Rich? No I'm saving for a pair of Curtains', *Daily Mail* 8 February 1977.

<sup>7</sup> BBC Panorama Profile, 1970, and quoted in Campbell, *Iron Lady*, p. 101.

establishment. This focuses attention on one of the key tensions within Thatcher's domestic image, which mobilised traditionalism and emphasised respect for traditional gender norms at the same time as signalling protest and promising change.

Comparisons with Shirley Williams and Mary Whitehouse recognises that Thatcher's public character was informed by attitudes and values that shaped the public images and political fortunes of other 'political' women, both within and beyond Westminster. Historical actors do not exist within self-evident contexts. Rather, the process of contextualisation requires the prioritisation of certain characteristics above others, in order to establish a meaningful framework for comparison. By establishing a context that prioritises gender, as opposed to prime ministerial office, this thesis has developed a more nuanced analysis of Thatcher's leadership image than comparison with her male predecessors would have allowed. There are more contexts likely to yield revealing comparisons; for example, the professional strategies of contemporary women in sectors other than politics.

That Shirley Williams could be convincingly cast in a 'housewife' role by the Labour party demonstrates the scope of the housewife image, and warns against a tendency to regard domestic femininity as a specifically Conservative social ideal. Criticism of Williams' appearance in the popular media also demonstrates the political dangers of failing to live up to the high presentational standards imposed on political women. That Williams' unkempt appearance was regarded as evidence of professional incompetence illustrates the extent to which women's wardrobes need to be recognised as political props, the mismanagement of which could have damaging consequences. This emphasises the value of analysing visual and material evidence in the study of political figures. The failure of Williams to develop a public image that demonstrated 'masculine' competencies emphasises the need for political women to negotiate gendered expectations. While emphasis on 'feminine' qualities, such as 'niceness', may have helped to 'sell' the political parties for whom she worked, it did little to benefit her own political career. Indeed, without Thatcher's 'flintiness', Williams was widely written off by the popular media as ill-suited to the 'hurly burly' of high politics. A compelling mix of 'masculine' and 'feminine' styles, qualities and characteristics informed Thatcher's public image, allowing her to avoid the simplistically gendered caricatures that limited Williams' political advancement.

Comparison with Mary Whitehouse indicates both the opportunities and the dangers that were associated with a 'housewife' identity. Both Thatcher and Whitehouse presented themselves as housewives, despite their demanding, full-time careers, to mobilise female support; to align themselves with 'the family'; and to emphasise their representative 'ordinariness' in comparison with the 'elite' institutions they opposed. They were 'just' housewives, whose public achievements demonstrated the ability of hard-working and committed individuals to carve out a place for

themselves on the national stage. Far from demure examples of the Victorian 'angel in the house' ideal, however, Thatcher and Whitehouse reflected a tradition of 'militant' domesticity associated with the mid-century housewives association, the British Housewives League. Whereas established organisations, such as the Women's Institute and the Townswomen's Guilds, conceived of 'the housewife' in terms of responsible, female citizenship, the British Housewives League mobilised 'the housewife' as a voice of protest.

Thatcher's housewife image clearly signalled her opposition to 'feminism'. Negative characterisations of 'feminism' and 'feminists' predominated in the popular media throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and the Conservative party in particular was hostile towards what it regarded as a collectivist substitute for individual talent and hard work. Feminist commentary of the 1970s routinely presented 'the housewife' as the archetypal victim of gender inequality: unpaid, overworked, bored and dependent. Thatcher's celebration of domestic competence rejected this narrative of exploitation. Her success in appealing to working-class women through the elevation of domesticity speaks to the failures of contemporary feminism, which, as Angela Weir among others emphasised, was dominated by young, university-educated, middle-class women who struggled to understand the limited options available to their working-class 'sisters'. Even as Thatcher's premiership progressed, and the housewife image declined in significance, her visual presentation continued to emphasise her anti-feminist femininity. With 'feminists' routinely referred to as 'the dungaree brigade', the prime minister's sharply tailored power suits of the later 1980s functioned as a visual demonstration of her opposition to feminist politics.

Thatcher's explicit rejection of 'women's lib' has often led to simplifications of the relationship between Thatcher and 'feminism'. However, 'feminism' is not only an important context for understanding Thatcher's pointedly feminine visual image, but also for analysing women's responses to Thatcher's female power. As has been shown, a 'feminist consciousness' informed many women's enjoyment of Thatcher's success, which was commonly presented as a victory over men. The notion of a 'housewife prime minister' made little practical sense, yet it captured the imaginations of a group of women described by Patrick Cosgrave as having been 'touched by the women's movement to the extent of feeling some discontent with their lives'. Thatcher's domesticity satisfied their 'old fashioned views on the place of women' at the same time that her political success challenged the social prejudices that sustained such attitudes.<sup>8</sup> The specifically feminine nature of Thatcher's success was emphasised by media narratives that presented many of her male colleagues as besotted, emasculated and infantile, demonstrating the extent to which she disturbed the masculine culture of high politics. It is often emphasised that Thatcher did not

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<sup>8</sup> P. Cosgrave quoted in Beers, 'Thatcher and the women's vote', p.124.

'feminise' politics; she did not promote female politicians, develop a less combative political style, or advance 'women's issues'. The mere fact of her sex, however, constituted a major cultural and psychological disruption, and caused many of her privately educated male colleagues, who had little experience of working with, let alone for, women, considerable discomfort.

Thatcher's relationships with men generated enthusiastic media interest. The *Spitting Image* sketch which shows 'Thatcher' inadvertently refer to her male colleagues as 'vegetables' has been quoted ad nauseam, and the 'thrill' which Wendy Webster describes as characterising many women's responses to Thatcher's power is evidenced in a broad range of sources. Indeed, Thatcher's very refusal to prioritise 'women's issues' was regarded by many as an empowering testament to women's ability to meet men on their terms. The continuing debate over her 'feminist' status demonstrates the multiplicity of 'feminisms' that informed women's responses to Thatcher. While Women's Liberation feminism of the 1970s gave short shrift to the isolated achievements of a socially privileged Conservative, Liberal Feminists of the early 1990s, such as Natasha Walter, celebrated the 'feminist' example that Thatcher had set. This was a sentiment recurrently expressed in commentaries of the 1980s. In analysing Thatcher's appeal to women it is therefore important to recognise the emotional draw of her power.

Thatcher performed 'male' roles in a style off-limits to women, and her dominance over men was widely understood as a *woman's* victory. It was through her relationships with men that her distinctive style of feminine authority was developed, relayed and mythologised. Key to this narrative of female power were her cabinet colleagues, presented as helpless, stammering schoolboys; Ronald Reagan, a pseudo-romantic 'partner'; and Denis Thatcher, the supportive husband whose penchant for gin and political incorrectness informed a comedic public image that absorbed popular discomfort with Thatcher's feminine authority. She may have been the prime minister, but she was also the familiar, 'nagging' wife.

Compared with the attention paid to Thatcher's party political leadership in the House of Commons, her occupancy of Number Ten has been neglected by the existing literature. Analysis of Downing Street offers insight into a series of relationships quite different from those between Thatcher and her political colleagues, which were typically characterised by suspicion and competition. As has been shown, her relationships with Downing Street staff were more generous than is often recognised, suggesting Thatcher's preference for the hierarchic simplicity enabled by structure of the Prime Minister's political office. This was true across a wide spectrum of seniority, and reemphasises her enduring sense of vulnerability within the Conservative party. Number Ten Downing Street was also an important element of Thatcher's domestic public image, as it provided a physical location within which to enact the 'housewifely' commitments and characteristics upon

which she had campaigned for office. Journalistic depictions of Thatcher, who was frequently interviewed in the public rooms of Downing Street, were keen to emphasise the domestic elements of Thatcher's tenure as these befitted popular understandings of the building as primarily a domestic residence. The willingness of media outlets to reinforce the fiction of Thatcher's 'ordinary' domesticity suggests the popular appeal of such narratives.

Thatcher's femininity provoked complex emotional and psychological responses among both men and women. It disrupted the political environments within which she worked, and challenged popular attitudes towards the role, status and capacities of women. Contrary to Thatcher's claims that gender was an insignificant element of her leadership, this thesis has argued that she constructed a leadership image that carefully negotiated the dangers and opportunities associated with her feminine authority. She exploited popular interest in the 'feminine' elements of her 'private' personality whilst simultaneously emphasising typically 'masculine' qualities such as toughness, decisiveness and single-mindedness. Far from being superficial propaganda, her public image reflected – and shaped - a complex system of gendered attitudes. The tensions inherent in Thatcher's public image expressed and exploited acute popular ambivalence towards the 'proper' place of women, reflecting the same tug between radicalism and traditionalism that was a common feature of broader Thatcherite discourses. Cultural attachment to 'traditional' gender norms and generalised nostalgia for past certainties coexisted with rising levels of female employment and mounting frustration about gender inequality. The ideological contradictions suggested by Thatcher's feminine public image therefore did little to diminish its emotive or political force.

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Appendix



Figure 1: 'Remind Him of Anyone?', *The Times*, 21 July 2016. Following a combative performance at Prime Minister's Questions, media comparison between Thatcher and May intensified, with the *Metro*, for example, claiming 'Theresa May turned into Margaret Thatcher during first PMQs', and the *Independent* describing the new Prime Minister as 'eerily reminiscent' of 'the party's previous female premier'. The above image clearly references Thatcher's reputation for 'handbagging' her political colleagues.

Figure 2: Front page of the *Sun*,





Figure 3: Thatcher photographed during the 1979 general election campaign, demonstrating the effect of inflation on the housewife's budget. Image originally displayed on *Daily Mail* website; 'Maggie: The Masterpiece. Is this the greatest political biography ever?', 27 April 2013

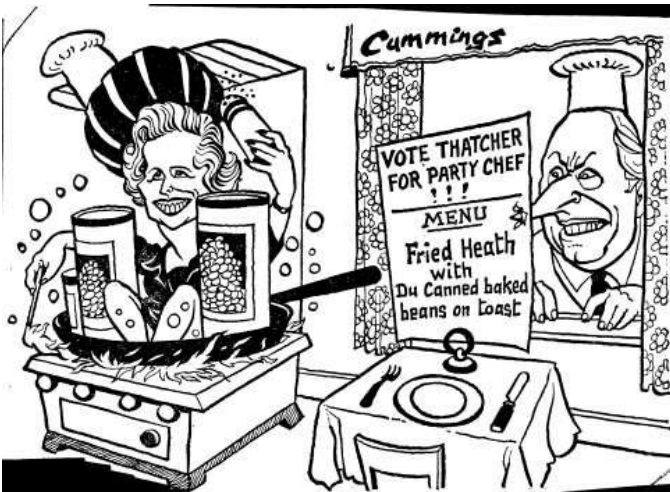


Figure 4: A cartoon by Michael Cummings featured in the *Daily Express*, 1 December 1974. Thatcher is pictured wearing the black and white hat which became synonymous with the narrow class interests she was believed to represent. The kitchen setting, however, reflects Thatcher's increasingly domestic public image. The 'Canned' beans are a reference to Edward Du Cann, chairman of the 1922 Committee, who was expected to stand against Thatcher for the Party leadership. Image accessible through British Cartoon archive website: [www.cartoons.ac.uk](http://www.cartoons.ac.uk)



Figure 5: Conservative Party newspaper adverts, produced by Saatchi and Saatchi 1978/9. Accessible through Conservative Party poster collection archive: <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/sevlet/ODLodl~6~6> The adverts demonstrate the Conservative party's emphasis on the communication of clear, simplified messages.



Figure 6: A photograph of Thatcher's cabinet, taken May 1989, clearly demonstrating the focus drawn by Thatcher's feminine wardrobe. Image included in C.Newman, 'Labour women open up about Margaret Thatcher's legacy', the Telegraph online, 17 April 2013.

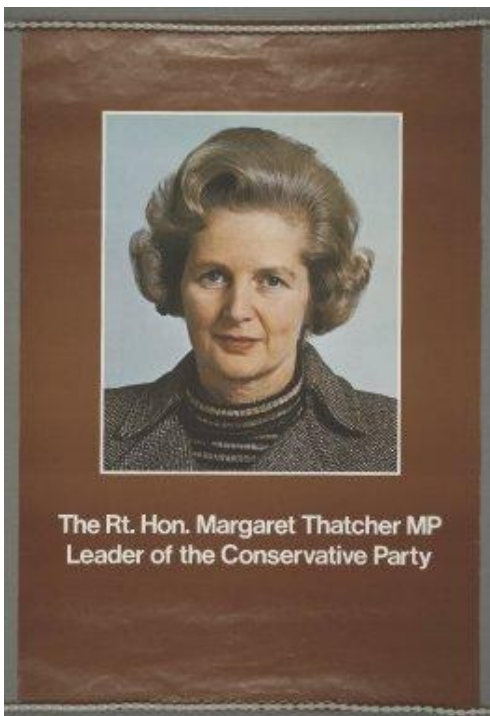


Figure 7: Conservative party posters demonstrating changes to Thatcher's public image over the course of her leadership. Poster 1975 -01 (shelf mark), CPA Poster Collection, and post 1987-05 (shelf mark), CPA Poster Collection. Both images can be viewed through the CPA poster collection website.



Figure 8: 'Mary Whitehouse...she's heard you intend to televise parliament', Keith Waite, *Daily Mirror*, 29 April 1985. Image can be found on the British Cartoon Archive website. Waite's cartoon usefully demonstrates popular perceptions of Whitehouse as old-fashioned, domestic (note the rolling pin) and indiscriminately angry. The placard, which reads 'No Dr Who, Robin Hood, East Enders etc', suggests the NVALA's lack of interest in the targets of its protest. Waite also satirises Denis Thatcher's professional inferiority, presenting him as a domesticated 'house husband'.

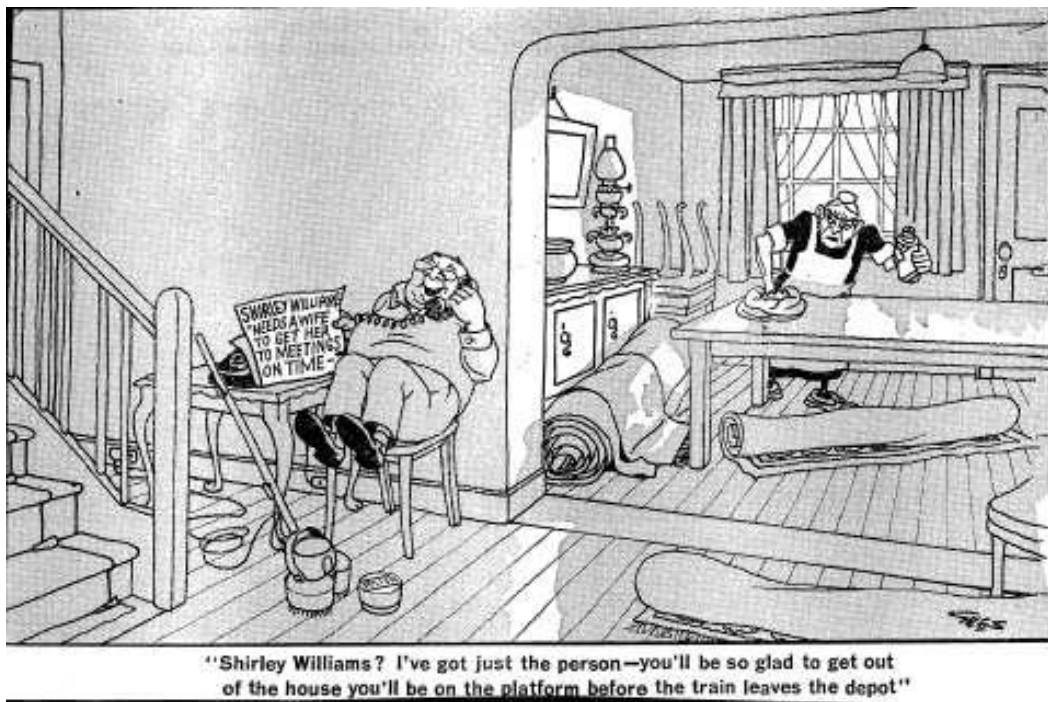


Figure 9: 'Shirley Williams? I've got just the person – you'll be so glad to get out of the house you'll be on the platform before the train leaves the depot', Ronald Giles, *Daily Express*, 6 October 1981. Image can be found on the British Cartoon Archive website. The male figure is shown to respond to a newspaper headline reading 'Shirley Williams needs a wife to get her to meetings on time'.



Figure 10: 'Really, Mr Steel! Shirley Williams' frumpish appearance doesn't show much respect for the dead', Michael Cummings, *Daily Express*, 11 November 1981. Accessible through the British Cartoon Archive website. Shirley Williams' appearance is shown to contrast unfavourably with that of David Steel and Thatcher.



Figure 11: 'Off with their heads', Gerald Scarfe, ink and watercolour on paper, 84cm by 59.5cm, 1983, NPG 6476. Image also reproduced in Scarfe, *Milk Snatcher*, p.125. Scarfe's cartoon drawings of Thatcher are characterised by sharp, cutting lines. Her teeth, nose and fingernails in particular are depicted to suggest a predatory character.

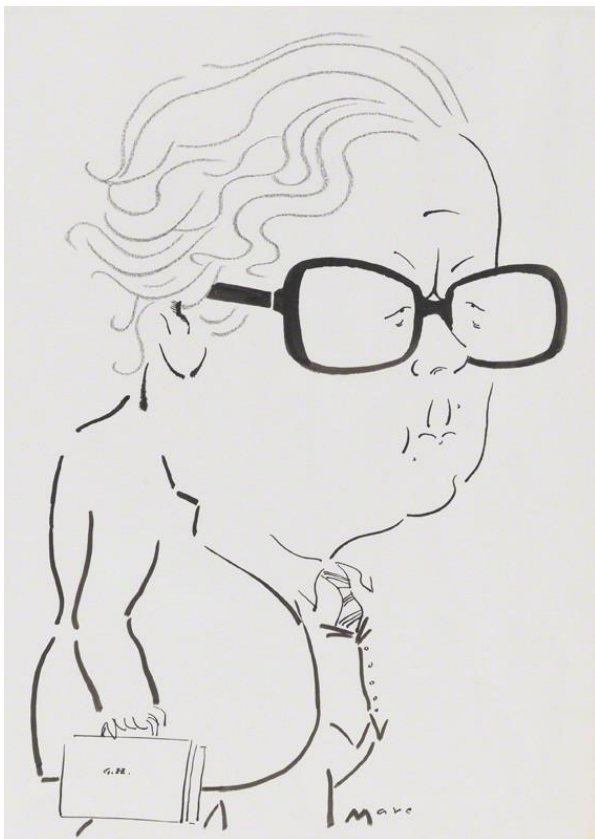


Figure 12: Geoffrey Howe by Mark Boxer, ink and black crayon, 29.5 by 21cm, 1987, NPG 5920.

Cartoon images of Howe tended to be constructed with rounded lines, suggesting a 'softer' political character from that of his Prime Minister. Cartoonists also emphasised Howe's heavy spectacles and squinting eyes, suggesting an academic hesitancy far removed from the cutting decisiveness of Thatcher's political style.

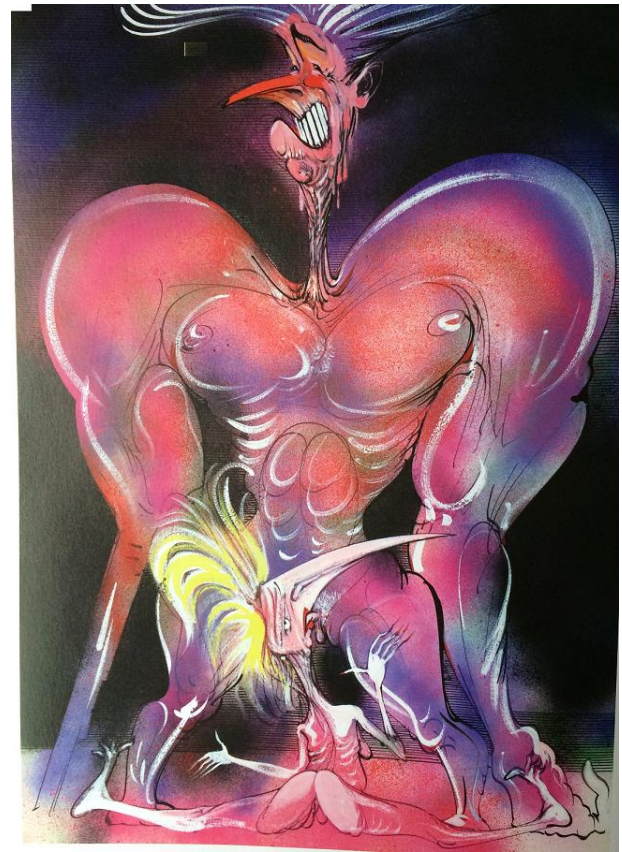


Figure 13 (above left): The satirical poster, produced by the Socialist Workers Party, hung by Reagan in the billiard room of his Santa Monica Ranch. Poster measures 63cm by 45cm. Image is reproduced by N.Wapshott, *Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher: a political marriage* (London, 2007)

Figure 14 (above right): 'Better Felate Than Never', Gerald Scarfe, 1985, reproduced in G.Scarfe, *Milk Snatcher* (Durham, 2015), p.138. Thatcher's relationship with Reagan was often conceptualised in sexualised term. For example, Nicholas Wapshott, writing in the *New York Times* in 2013, claimed that it was a 'sense of subdued danger and not-quite-erotic excitement' that inspired Reagan and Thatcher's 'special relationship'. 'Thatcher Reagan and their Special Relationship', *New York Times* online, 8 April 2013.