

Can a woman be both a feminist and a Conservative?

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*Studies into female Conservatives are sparse compared to that of their Labour counterparts. The term “Conservative feminist” is still for many the ultimate oxymoron. **Sex, Gender and the Conservative Party** attempts to address this gap in the literature by examining the political choices and associations of female Tories. **Krista Cowman** thinks the book captures a party on the verge of change and offers a clear and concise picture of how it shifted its focus to its female members, merging quantitative and qualitative approaches into a highly readable account.*



Sex, Gender and the Conservative Party: From Iron Lady to Kitten Heels. Sarah Childs and Paul Webb. Palgrave Macmillan. November 2011.

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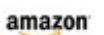
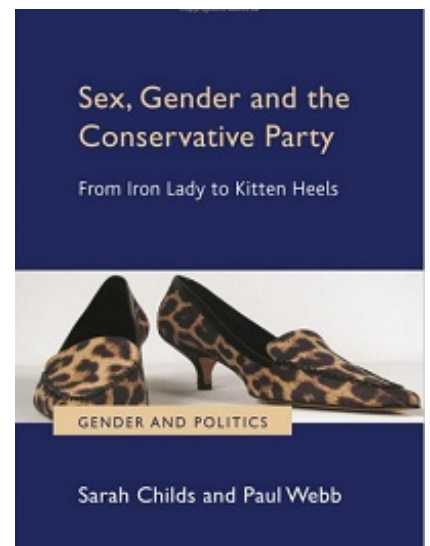
More than two decades have passed since Beatrix Campbell published her path-breaking work *The Iron Ladies* with its subtitle that summarised popular and academic approaches to women and conservatism, ‘Why do women vote Tory?’ Yet in the intervening years little has been done to answer this question.

The phrase ‘Conservative feminist’ remains seen by many as the ultimate oxymoron, and as Childs and Webb remind us in their introduction, there is still a lacunae of work investigating the political choices, priorities and associations of women aligned to the Conservative Party, particularly in comparison with studies focussing on their counterparts in the Labour Party.

The silence is surprising, given the pace of change in the Party’s attitudes towards its female members and voters, which is described in this book. In some respects the party of Campbell’s *Iron Ladies* in which the Iron Lady herself was frequently conspicuous as the only woman present, is far removed from today’s version with the kitten-heel wearing Theresa May sharing the portfolio of Home Secretary and Minister for Women. Although as the authors acknowledge the arrival of 49 Conservative women MPs still falls far short of the Labour Party’s peak of 101, the growing numbers of women on the Party’s back benches is a clear signal of a shift at a number of levels.

The book starts by describing the challenges in Party attitudes towards women which David Cameron inherited on assuming the leadership. With 17 women in Parliament and an internal women’s organisation which looked old-fashioned against its competitors, there was clearly ground to make up on this issue. Yet, as Childs and Webb note, accounts of the Party’s modernisation in preparation for the 2010 general election have taken little account of its moves towards feminization as part of this.

Childs and Webb describe the numerous approaches through which Cameron’s party sought to win women over to its cause. Some of these involved swift action in changing party rules and regulations to bring the rank and file in line with the views of the Party leadership. Hence the approach to selection, an



issue which women MPs from all parties have identified as the main stumbling block to their advancement since the 1920s.

A series of reforms were introduced between 2005 and 2010, including a surprising if half-hearted move towards All Women Shortlists which Cameron announced in 2009 (although as the book makes clear, little finally came of this). Only a handful of the most active or committed members of any party achieve the status of Prospective Parliamentary Candidate, however note the importance here on party organisations, the sites in which supporters are transformed into members and activists.

The Conservative Party has historically been strong in this area from its pioneering Primrose League, formed in the 1880s to the larger post-enfranchisement network of women's branches that dwarfed their Liberal and Labour rivals in the inter-war years. Legacies are not always a blessing in politics, and as Childs and Webb observed, the current Conservative Women's Organisation (CWO) was looking 'rather tired' as it entered the twenty-first century. The examples cited here of approaches aimed at recruiting younger women such as drawing in a Rolling Stones tribute band or hosting a fashion show could hardly be described as edgy, and suggest that the Party still has a long way to go if it is to make politics cool. More radical, and more surprising given the overall impetus behind such moves were the Conservative Women's Forums held close to Westminster which were open to non-members and offered a mixture of political address and networking space.

There is much detail here about specific structural changes within the Party's organisation aimed at attracting more women and maximising their contribution. This detail is enhanced through the qualitative methodology that Childs and Webb adopted as a means of attempting to unpick the complex and at times contradictory attitudes held by individual Party members. Sometimes the results are quite shocking, such as the Party member who dismissed the idea of the Priority List by explaining 'I don't like this idea of a shortlist completely of women, or,....of dwarves'. Whilst these are tempered by more moderate comments, the authors' broader findings that around 60 per cent of men and 65 per cent of women in the Party felt that there should be some (or many) more women MPs, this still left around 40 per cent opposing such changes.

Childs and Webb are clear that feminisation does not necessarily involve an increase in the presence of either feminism or feminist ideas within the Conservative Party. Nevertheless, their thorough analysis of gendered behaviour by Conservative politicians around three key pieces of legislation, the Work and Families Act, the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act and the Equal Pay and Flexible Working Bill shows important developments in recent Conservative attitudes to the point at which issues like gender equality at work are being actively promoted.

Such analysis suggests, as the authors maintain, that the question of whether a party is feminized, and if so, to what extent, involves something more complex than simply counting the numbers of women in either its membership or its leadership (although the proportional lack of women in either of these may say something about the way they are viewed more broadly in the ranks). What is depicted here is a Party on the verge of change, which is arguably paying more attention to the political priorities and concerns of its female membership than in at any time since the 1920s. The book offers a clear and concise picture of how it arrived at this point over the past decade, merging quantitative and qualitative approaches into a highly readable account.

As Childs and Webb suggest, the field remains open for further research into the preceding decade as well as more detailed branch or regional studies that will add to our understanding. This, though, is a book which all future research will have to engage with.

Krista Cowman is Professor of History in the School of Humanities, University of Lincoln. She has published widely on the history of women in political movements in Britain, and on the history of

women's suffrage. Her most recent book, 'Women in British Politics 1689-1979' was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010. [Read more reviews by Krista.](#)

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