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Mrs Thatcher: Her 'Iron Lady' image displays her as having more guts for a desperate political gamble than any wimpy man

Thatcher Uses Her Woman's Touch

The prime minister's qualities as housewife, refined lady and warrior queen have been critical to the success of Thatcherism, argues **Ros Brunt**

Margaret Thatcher – such a familiar, seemingly permanent figure on the political landscape. So hard to recall now just what an extensive shock-wave her rise to power first caused: she appeared to come 'from nowhere' and, most devastatingly, she was a woman. The Tories were abashed at what they had done – knocked out their first democratically-elected upstart, 'Grocer Heath', only to replace him with 'the grocer's daughter'. But the reverberations were muted by Tory good form and the familiar closing of ranks, diffused by displays of gallantry or camp delight that the new Leaderene would mock any Labourist aspirations towards equal opportunities.

Much of the Left, however, felt no such inhibitions about its misogyny, and was immediately on the lookout for scapegoats to blame for Thatcher's sudden accession. For otherwise 'progressive' men, it appeared as yet another instance of a Pandora's Box opened too hastily by the women's liberation movement. Woman-hating combined with woman-blaming as the supreme 'irony' of Thatcher was repeatedly and ponderously explained to socialist feminists. 'See what you've done now! Look where all this can lead!' The triumph of Thatcherism represented the threat of a feminism gone completely out of (men's) control. While leftist men got the point that Thatcher herself was hardly the apogee of

feminism, they still had a gut fear of what a woman in power might mean – as expressed in the slogan 'Ditch the Bitch'. Labour Party stalwarts appeared baffled when asked to stop reproducing the phrase: could it be that socialist women weren't *that* opposed to Thatcher after all?

Since the late 70s, men on the Left have cleaned up their anti-Thatcher act. Today's more astute response combines total opposition to Thatcherite politics with an awed admiration for Thatcher herself as an authoritative 'conviction' politician. As the best-known anti-sexist politician, Ken Livingstone, says, 'I have a lot of respect for her. She believes in things and she has fought for them.'

The new respect for Thatcher's leadership is an undeniable advance on, say, Denis Healey's continued lumbering innuendo about her intimacy with world leaders. But by concentrating exclusively on her politics, it actually denies the extent to which Thatcherism relies on what Thatcher represents as a *woman*. I want to argue two apparently contradictory things: that Thatcher's politics have absolutely nothing to do with women, women's politics or the feminist movement, but that they have everything to do with Thatcher being a woman in politics.

In the first place, because some versions of the Pandora's Box theme are still current, implying that the content and

style of Thatcherism represent what the world would look like if ever women, or Women's Libbers, 'took over', it is worth stressing just how much Thatcher as politician is the creation of particular men and how the politics of Thatcherism are bounded by patriarchal values.

Thatcher's political career has been entirely constructed by men, both ideologically and materially. The biography begins with the baseline philosophy and fatherly encouragement of Alderman Alfred Roberts. It includes the crucially advantageous marriage to Denis Thatcher, which, since 1951, has provided emotional support, the ideological cover for normal wifedom and natural motherhood, and the where-withal to buy freedom from childcare with nanny help and boarding school. The marriage also subsidised the legal career that contributed to Thatcher's successful entry into Parliament in 1959 and oiled the political wheels thereafter – as she says, 'it is expensive to be in politics, one has to be so mobile, one has to be well-groomed, and one has to entertain'. Then there is the bid for the Tory leadership under the patronage of Edward du Cann and Sir Keith Joseph, masterminded by Airey Neave, the most experienced conspirator of the Right. And there is the prime ministerial image-building by Gordon Reece, subsequently knighted for his services to hairstyles, fashion and voice modulation. The whole process acknowledges no womanly influence, no maternal advice, no girls' get-together – or certainly not as Thatcher herself tells it.

There is also a studious avoidance of the 'pitfalls' of any identification with 'women's issues'. Thatcher's background in the male-dominated areas of industrial chemistry and tax law gave her the political dispensation to specialise in Treasury-type areas while in opposition and be 'spokesman' on matters like 'energy' and 'housing' before becoming responsible for education.

This political trajectory indicates the extent to which Thatcher has always been the 'loner', the extraordinary and unique woman operating in a man's world. Such isolation from other women is of course still a structural 'given' for most 'top women', but it has been accentuated by Thatcher's personal choice. It has also been strengthened by the way she has deliberately rejected any identification with existing models of the Tory woman politician.

There are two types of women who have traditionally 'made it' in Tory politics and who, unlike Thatcher, have usually attempted at least to address women's issues – particularly if they've had a grounding in local politics, which she managed to avoid. First, there is the tradition best exemplified by the long-serving Birmingham MP, Jill Knight, which draws on reactionary populist

religion, appeals to petit-bourgeois anxieties and women's fears about male violence and takes up issues like pornography, football hooliganism, and the restoration of capital punishment. Then there is a more flamboyant type of Tory woman who shares a similar perspective on 'women as the repositories and guardians of moral values' while explicitly despising any narrow-minded 'provincialism', delights in the company of men and enjoys conspicuous consumption. But the latter woman also recognises that there's a price to pay for pleasure and privilege and so combines a flair for narcissistic publicity with aristocratic and enlightened Christian beliefs about dedication to the service of often unpopular causes. This is a tradition of progressive Toryism, well exemplified by the novelist Barbara Cartland's campaigns for improved maternity grants and midwifery services and permanent sites for travellers, which lost her a council seat; and by her daughter Raine's attacks on public hygiene standards as the rent-a-quote Lady Lewisham of the 1950s and later, as Countess of Dartmouth, supporter of the Covent Garden community battle against the property speculators and other GLC Tories.

Most women Tory politicians present some amalgam of these two campaigning models. Thatcher owes nothing to either, although her voting record and her support for so-called Victorian values align her closer to the Jill Knight position. But in so far as both these positions relate to a recognisable 'women's politics', they form no reference point for Thatcherism. As a politician, Thatcher has never made any claim to 'represent' women or speak in any way on their behalf. Nor indeed has she ever done anything for women, apart from make the majority much more hard up. All her 12 years at the top only serve to confirm what *Spare Rib* said in a 1975 editorial: Margaret Thatcher is not a sister. Furthermore she is not even a sister 'under the skin' in the way socialist feminists have more recently argued that, in particular circumstances, we might regard those other types of Tory woman politician. Nor can she be regarded as the outcome of the feminist movement. She set out to make it in a man's world and was never interested in even negotiating the terms of patriarchy.

At the same time, everything about her politics is related to gender, is inseparable from images of femininity existing in competition and conflict with versions of masculinity. Indeed, Thatcher's success in the realm of patriarchal politics is precisely to do with her effectiveness as a woman and the way she inhabits particular feminine roles while appearing to disavow femininity.

Now that Thatcherism looks so powerful, it requires some effort of

political memory to recall just what a risky strategy it appeared to be in 1979 and the extent of the forces ranged against it in Thatcher's first cabinet. Because of the subsequent distance between Heath and Thatcher, it is now forgotten that Thatcherism was once Heath's project too, but it ran aground amid U-turns and the three-day week. Thatcher thought that Heath's original policy of free enterprise hammered out at Selsdon Park was right. His mistake was simply lack of the guts needed to fight it out at all costs. He had stopped being Selsdon Man, but 'I was still Selsdon Woman', she said in 1975¹.

But when the chance came to put Selsdon Woman into operation, she had ranged against her a heavy battery of conventional political wisdom and the Heathite alliance which, quite simply, feared that to go down that road again, with its inevitable social divisiveness and mass unemployment, would be electoral harikiri. How could the Tory party ever offer itself again as the embodiment of the nation united?

From this position, Margaret Thatcher not only managed to 'carry off' Thatcherism, but also to see off all subsequent challenges in a way that made her 'invincible', and, despite every indication to the contrary, still the Defender of One Britain, indeed the personification of Britannia. Her way of doing it, I think, is deeply implicated in the politics of gender.

For a start, the collapse of internal Tory opposition to Thatcherism was also about 'impotence', a failure of the familiar strategies of smoothy upper-class masculinity when confronted with a lone woman operator needing to establish her cabinet authority. The popular term Tory 'wet' sums up the way Thatcher managed to convey to the public that opposition to her was both politically and sexually inept. These men could not even stand up to a woman. 'Are they one of us?' is the first question Thatcher asks of any political challenger. According to her own gendered terminology, the wets are not 'us', simply because she could brand them all as 'old women'. In turn, she became known to her colleagues as 'the best man in the cabinet', and masculine attributes were grafted on to her femininity in ways that made her doubly superior. The soviet epithet 'Iron Lady', and her own slogan, 'The Lady's Not For Turning', displayed her as a woman with more guts for a desperate political gamble than any wimpy man.

Misogyny apart, the 'best man in the cabinet' tag also ignores the likelihood that if the prime minister had been a man, Thatcherism might well not have triumphed. For the 'wets' literally spoke a different language from Thatcher. Theirs were the conventions of irony, nuance and understatement, the famous 'coded' remarks of those accustomed to rule without raising their voices. By contrast, Thatcher was confrontationally direct, monolithically

'She set out to make it in a man's world and was never interested in even negotiating the terms of patriarchy'



straight-talking. The wets were simply outmanoeuvred by the sort of woman they had no experience of 'handling' and knew they could not hit.

If Tory gallantry and the continued blessing of a divided opposition combined to disperse the challenges to Thatcherite policy, what has sustained the success of Thatcherism has undoubtedly been its identification with Thatcher's own persona as a woman. It has been crucial for her politics that she could draw on family 'cover' to compensate for the near-disaster of her earlier incarnation as 'milk snatcher'. She has never entirely overcome the previous impression of 'unnatural woman, depriver of innocent children'; and the caring-and-nurturing aspect of wife and mother has never been that convincing to the electorate despite maternal anxiety over Mark. The success of her family status owes more to the public image of Denis Thatcher. His persona has made it a recognisable sort of marriage where the wife is clearly The Boss; but she can't be all bad if such a transparently easy-going and decent old cove as her husband continues to support her.

To this extent it hasn't even mattered that Thatcher's femininity isn't particularly *likable*, nor that she has lost out in both the family and good breeding stakes to the Queen. The point is that the sort of woman she speaks as is instantly familiar and understandable. You know where you are with Margaret

Thatcher: she makes it perfectly plain and obvious and what she has to say is based in identifiable everyday experience. Pre-eminently it is the language of 'making the best of yourself' and 'making do'. It belongs to the realm of the housewife, of putting the best face on it, of perfect grooming, smart but practical, of care with the household budget.

The famous Thatcher comparisons of domestic and national economies are, at an analytical level, clearly ridiculous and unreal when most households run on extended credit and unpaid bills. But at another level, what she says is so obvious it almost appears to go without saying. For it appeals to the most atavistic commonsense: 'My policies are based not on some economic theory but on the things I and millions like me were brought up with. An honest day's pay; live within your means; put by a nest egg for a rainy day; pay your bills on time; support the police.' The very banality of Thatcher's sayings formulates some kind of basic aspiration for the nation: if only we could all 'return' to a world that was that simple, that unified.

Thatcher's rhetoric is that of the housewife who is also Britannia. It speaks for a political strategy which a new class of Tory men has devised but which it has taken one Tory woman to implement successfully. Heath didn't bring it off, Joseph passed up the

'If the prime minister had been a man, Thatcherism might well not have triumphed'



opportunity and I doubt if Tebbit would make it. Their problem is that they give the game away in every sense. In their mouths and through their personas, the self-same politics that Thatcher espouses is much more clearly revealed for the savage class warfare it really is. I would suggest that the effectiveness of Thatcher's femininity is the degree to which it serves as cover for what would otherwise be transparent Heathism, or its ultimate extension, 'naked Tebbitry', where the full extent of the present government's devastating sleaziness and mean-minded corruption would be amply displayed. Is it only the fact of the prime minister being a woman with the overdetermined attributes of ordinary housewife, refined lady and warrior-queen, that prevents that point being crystal clear in the election?

The one positive aspect of Thatcher's femininity is that she has made political leadership by women thinkable. And at least she hasn't 'blown it' for women. On the contrary, she has coped extremely effectively with the demands of the job; indeed, she has positively radiated a self-confident ability to perform well. At the same time, the political strategy she represents is so unacceptable in its social and economic consequences, that it literally 'takes a woman' to front it successfully. ●

1. 'For a very readable summary of this period, see John Cole's *The Thatcher Years*, BBC Books, 1987.



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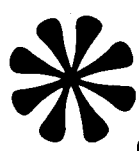
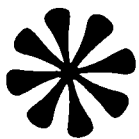
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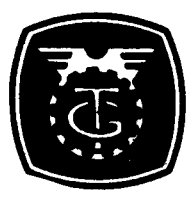
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The Gorbachev Offensive

The Soviet leader is consolidating his power to strengthen his drive for reform. **Archie Brown** considers his chances of success

Western publics were not very well prepared by their mass media for the changes which began to take place in the Soviet Union under the General Secretaryship of Yuri Andropov and which – following the Chernenko interregnum – are being carried much further under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. Disproportionate attention was focused on the health and person of the top leader. While the subject of the succession to Leonid Brezhnev was a very important one, Brezhnev merely had to disappear from public view for a week or more (as he often did in his later years) for massive attention to be concentrated on his life expectancy and the possible identity of the next General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.

That even under the conservative Brezhnev there were different political tendencies within the Soviet Communist Party – in broad terms (though many further distinctions can be made) reformist, conservative and neo-Stalinist – went largely unnoticed. A vast amount of attention was, of course, paid in the mass media to overt dissent, and the average Western newspaper reader or television viewer could have been forgiven for picking up an exaggerated idea of the dissidents' salience within Soviet political life and for coming to the conclusion that apart from them the Soviet Union consisted entirely of like-minded conformists.

Yet those Brezhnev years also saw debate, much of it esoteric, conducted in Soviet specialist journals and books. Many of the people who stayed within the boundaries of the system were far from satisfied with the status quo. Some criticised it from a neo-Stalinist or a Russian nationalist standpoint; others (and it is they who are coming to the fore today) as advocates of economic and political reform. Those who wished to exercise influence and avoid the marginalisation which became the fate of most Soviet dissidents (for the

political context in the Soviet Union was very different from that of Poland where a great part of the nation were 'dissidents') abided by certain rules.

Thus, for many economic reformers this meant praising the Hungarian economic reform rather than directly advocating a significant role for markets within the Soviet economy (especially after Kosygin's attempted reform, which was launched in 1965 and which made some nods in the direction of the market, petered out in the face of conservative opposition, of which Brezhnev was a part). Similarly, the rules of the game involved (and still involve) emphasising the need for development of the 'democratic' component of 'democratic centralism' rather than making a frontal attack on that latter concept. They likewise entailed – and accommodated – advocating the recognition of the existence of different interests in Soviet society and the idea of 'diversity within monism' rather than embracing the notion of political pluralism which (especially following the 'Prague Spring') remained firmly taboo.

Without such efforts by within-system reformers, people who tried to push further the limits of the possible and broaden the political space within them (rather than attempt to destroy such boundaries totally and destroy themselves politically in the process), there would be no changes of the kind which are under way in the Soviet Union today. The reform-minded wings of the party apparatus and of the party intelligentsia were an important part of the coalition which supported Gorbachev when he overcame considerable conservative opposition to attain the General Secretaryship. Today they are the most enthusiastic element in the coalition which bolsters his power.

There were also, of course, 'objective factors' which led to the policy innovation which we are now seeing. These included a secular decline in the rate of economic growth from the 1950s to the

early 1980s, a growing technological gap in many sectors of the economy between the Soviet Union and the most successful capitalist countries and growing international tension (with the associated burden and insecurity imposed by the spiralling military competition between the Soviet Union and the United States). But though Gorbachev appeared to some Western observers (myself included) to be both a reformer and a very likely future General Secretary some years already before he got that job, it would be a mistake to think that there was an inevitability about his coming to office and to the acceptance of the policies which are now being pursued. When I asked a Soviet jurist in Moscow in October 1984 whether the very seriousness of the economic and political problems would not lead to the adoption of many of the policies which we see now (and with Gorbachev implementing them as the most likely successor to the already physically failing Chernenko), he replied: 'Yes, either that or the complete opposite!'

It was clear that something new had to be tried. The quasi-corporatism of the Brezhnev era – a style of rule which produced a lowest common denominator of agreement within the elite – would no longer work. The Soviet Union could not afford to try to 'muddle through' the remaining years of the 1980s and the 1990s in the way in which it had, in domestic affairs, muddled through the 1970s, for it was becoming increasingly evident that this would mean, as Seweryn Bialer put it, 'a process of "muddling down"'.¹

There remained, however, reactionary as well as reformist alternatives. The person within the top leadership team who could have personified the former tendency was Grigori Romanov, the former Leningrad regional party leader who by this time supervised the military and military industry within the Central Committee Secretariat. Like Gorbachev, he was a senior secretary (a full member of the Politburo and a secretary of the Central Committee) at the time of Chernenko's death. Romanov did not control nearly as much of the apparatus or have as many friends as Gorbachev, and so he supported instead the elevation of another 'interim leader', the distinctly conservative 70-year-old Moscow party chief, Viktor Grishin, under whom the balance of power within the Secretariat could have been tilted in favour of Romanov and against Gorbachev.²

That Gorbachev was a far more skilful as well as a more appealing politician than Romanov and Grishin put together was a fact of no small importance. For

1. Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980), p. 305.

2. Rather remarkably, an article by the Soviet author, Mikhail Shatrov, in the journal *Ogonek* (No. 4, 1987, p. 5) recently confirmed that there had indeed been an attempt to secure the General Secretaryship for Grishin and put a stop to the rise of Gorbachev.