

# Introduction

*Clarisse Berthezene and Julie V. Gottlieb*

Historians and political scientists have deemed the twentieth century ‘the Conservative Century’, owing to the electoral and cultural dominance of the Conservative Party in Britain. While the turn of the twenty-first century portended something rather different, as a Cool Britannia-Blairite-New Labourite political class inaugurated the new millennium, and the Labour Party governed from 1997 to 2010, since then, and even more so in the fallout of Britain’s recent EU Referendum (June 2016), it looks increasingly likely that the twenty-first century may also be a ‘Conservative Century’. There are many historical, political, sociological and cultural explanations for the hegemony of the Conservative Party. One aspect that has been under-explored, however, is the party’s mobilisation of women and its positioning on gender issues. By any measure, the Conservative Party has been successful at organising women and engaging them at the grass roots, and women have supported the party at and between elections.

This collection is the product of a collaborative research project embarked on soon after the death of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in April 2013. We could not have predicted that we would be putting the finishing touches on the book just as Theresa May became the second Conservative woman Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. May’s achievement is one more powerful example of the ascendancy of women to pinnacle leadership positions and, arguably, this pattern is even more pronounced on the Right and among conservative, nationalist and inward-looking and exclusionist parties worldwide than on the Left. Therefore, a fundamental anomaly emerges whereby women have been as, or even more, successful in those parties that have been, to varying degrees, hostile to feminist and women’s liberationist agendas.

Theresa May is not simply a replica of the first woman Prime Minister, no matter how easily that was assumed due to the suddenness of her stepping into No. 10 Downing Street three weeks after the Brexit vote. There is much that distinguishes the two, including May’s self-identification with feminism. That said, she was quick

to disappoint hopes that she would feminise government in significant ways, and she appointed eight women to her Cabinet against the seven in her predecessor David Cameron's last Cabinet. Indeed, as we survey the period from the 1880s to the present, more complex patterns and personalities come to view, suggesting that not all roads lead to and from Thatcher.

Nonetheless, the Thatcher legacy is a very powerful one, exemplified by the media frenzy and the re-enactment of the visceral political divisions of the 1980s that greeted her death. It was quite evident that Britain's first woman Prime Minister was largely perceived as an aberrant figure who had emerged from a party of men and, in any case, was herself a 'man' in well-tailored women's clothing. From the point of view of those more sympathetic to her political and personal achievements, she was cast as a heroic outsider who had risen *sui generis* from a hostile environment. Conversely, generations of her detractors marked the occasion by propelling 'Ding Dong the Wicked Witch is Dead' to the top of the charts. But what else became especially evident in those days and weeks of memorialisation and national reflection was that journalists were ill-served by social scientists and the historical profession in qualifying and clarifying the Thatcher phenomenon. This volume traces the relationship among women, gender and the Conservative Party from the 1880s to the present, and thereby seeks to fill that gap.

Conservative women have been under-researched for the paradoxical reason that they have not been of much interest to androcentric historians of the Tory Party, while they have never been embraced by women's historians because of their presumed reactionary views and their complicity with the patriarchal establishment. By casting our attention to Conservative women, women leaders and the changing features of institutionalisation of the party's attitudes to gender issues and sexual equality, we aim to unpack and contest these assumptions that have prevented serious and sustained study of gender politics in the most electorally successful political party of the twentieth century, the so-called 'Conservative Century'. The foregrounding of gender in political history is often understood as simply meaning the integration of women into a pre-existing narrative structure. Conversely, foregrounding conservatives in gender studies will undoubtedly lead to rethinking the too often unquestioned equation between feminism and socialism, which has implied a form of refusal to consider Conservative activists. There is therefore a need to challenge the focus, agenda and paradigms of both orthodox political history and gender studies and think, in Thompsonian terms, about the *making* of Conservative women.<sup>1</sup>

One implicit prejudice that demands closer interrogation concerns women's 'natural conservatism'. On the other hand, an assumption that equally calls for contestation concerns feminists' 'natural leftism'. Historicising the process of *becoming* Conservative women, as opposed to simply *being* women, is part and parcel of the enterprise of rewriting women, as well as historicising the process of becoming Conservative feminists. One of the most important and lively debates that the

contributors will conduct, and that will be more widely relevant to many sections of the public, is the tenability of 'Conservative feminism'. Is there a fundamental contradiction in terms between feminism and British conservatism? Do we need to differentiate between feminism and other forms of women's political empowerment? Is it more helpful to make a distinction between women in party politics and women in politics to advance a feminist agenda?

To illuminate this debate we need to know first how the Conservative Party organised women. Women gained the local government vote in 1869, if they were independent householders, mainly as widows or single women with good incomes. They could be elected to school boards and Poor Law boards from the 1870s, rural and urban district councils from the 1890s and town and county councils from 1906 – and many were.<sup>2</sup> Tory women were mobilised as party workers – they were crucial for fund-raising and canvassing, and electioneering work. In fact, they were politicised long before they were granted the franchise. In the Victorian period, they participated in a range of extra-parliamentary auxiliary organisations including the Primrose League. Founded in 1883, the League helped the Conservative Party get around the restrictions on election expenditure of the Corrupt Practices Act. Over the next two decades, the Primrose League became a mass organisation central to the electoral fortunes of the Conservative Party and the development of a 'tory democracy', as many scholars have now shown.<sup>3</sup> It was women's philanthropic networking that provided the League with its activist infrastructure. Women's successful mobilisation for the party before they became citizens and, later, in the wake of women's suffrage in 1918 and universal suffrage in 1928, was instrumental in the Conservative Party's transformation and reinvention from elite to mass democratic party.<sup>4</sup>

In the interwar period, the Conservative Party offered training and examinations for women organisers in the party, who were full-time paid officials. The reinvention of the Conservative Party in the twentieth century had much to do with the place occupied by women within the party hierarchy and within the party's social activities, but also within the numerous non-political associations that emerged during the First World War and flourished in the interwar period. Non-party civic organisations were initially seen as a competing form of politics by the Conservative Party, as political ideas were being debated. However, Conservative activists, and women in particular, devoted much time to working in non-party organisations and played a vital role in turning these associations into platforms to combat the development of what they identified as divisive class politics, by which was meant Socialist politics. Clearly, the Conservative party's ascendancy in interwar British politics was built, in large part, on its ability to develop an important women's movement.

Against this backdrop, is it really so incongruous that there have been two women Conservative Prime Ministers? Given the party's historical appeals to a settled domesticity and the promotion of forthright women moved by the spirit of

public service (women's responsibilities rather than rights), is it at all surprising that in 2010 David Cameron's Conservatives won the 'Mumsnet' election?

### Historiographical framework

There was a brief moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s when a 'turn to gender' in the historiography of the Conservative Party seemed under way, but it petered out within a few years and today remains isolated and marginalised. The ground-breaking study by journalist Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory?* (1987),<sup>5</sup> designed as much as anti-Thatcher polemic as a definitive history, explored the views of the 'iron ladies' and gave them a voice. Martin Pugh's work on popular conservatism (1988) and David Jarvis's illuminating article on the Conservative appeal to women voters in the 1920s and the reinvention of the 'Conservative woman',<sup>6</sup> showed how the Conservative Party had designed specific policies to court the new female electorate and how effective these strategies had been. Neil McCrillis's study of the *British Conservative Party in the Age of Universal Suffrage* (1998)<sup>7</sup> charts the party's concerted response to the challenge of an expanded electorate and how the Women's Unionist Organisation transformed the party into a popular organisation. Finally, the first and only scholarly monograph on the feminisation of the Conservative party, Lori Maguire's study of *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party* (1998), probably over-emphasised the direct agency of women, but raised interesting questions about prevailing definitions of feminism and the complexity of Conservative definitions of gender.<sup>8</sup> Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska's research into the gender gap in the post-war age of affluence and austerity has shed light on the concomitant success of the Conservative party and failure of the Labour party in appealing to women.<sup>9</sup>

The insights of these scholars were not followed up, and women's activity within the party system is still largely peripheral to the dominant historical narratives of party development, policy and electoral tactics.<sup>10</sup> As the subjects of historical investigation and sociological inquiry, Conservative women have been doubly discriminated against. Indeed, within the larger field of British conservatism and the history of the Tory Party specifically, the study of women is often regarded as secondary and relegated to an academic ghetto – a sectional interest in 'the politics of gender'. While 'gender' as an analytical category has indeed been considered by most political historians as an 'optional extra',<sup>11</sup> the interest of which was unproven, feminist historians have shown little interest in Conservative women. On the flip side, the history of feminism has largely been written as a history of women's emancipation and, as such, inextricably aligned with a progressive tradition defended by the Left.<sup>12</sup> Of course, what came to be known as 'domestic feminism' within the Conservative Party may seem very far from feminism as defined by gender historians. Yet, these women Conservatives felt they addressed specifically 'women's issues'. The vice-chair of the Conservative Party organisation in 1945, Marjorie

Maxse, was concerned with 'the formulation of policy of special interest for women'.<sup>13</sup> In 1948, along with Lady Tweedsmuir and Lady Emmet, she worked on a 'Women's Charter' to attack discrimination experienced at different levels and call for equal pay. How far can these female bastions of conservatism also be considered feminist?

We have set out to consider the impact of Conservative political culture on women, and of women on the Conservative Party from the 1880s to the present. The choice of a chronology going from the 1880s is to enable us to trace 'The making of Conservative women' – that is to say the process by which, stemming from the feminine philanthropic tradition of the nineteenth century, the women's Conservative movement came into being and endowed it with a new language that received mass support and contributed to redefining its identity. We explore the construction and performance of gender identities by Conservative politicians at local, national and international levels. Bringing together scholars with a specialist interest in the dynamics between British Conservatism and gender at various junctures and in related contexts since the 1880s when the party 'modernised' and took on the form that we recognise today, our chapters are tied together by particular themes. The most prominent of these are the relationship between Conservatism and feminism; causes and levels of sexual antagonism within the Tory Party; and the feminisation of the party and Conservative culture and identity – here the processes to discern are cyclical rather than linear.

Starting in the 1880s, Urquhart demonstrates that the alliance between Conservatives and Unionists, typified by the Tories' name change to the Conservative and Unionist Party in 1912, was hugely significant in the history of female politicisation. Using the legislative frame of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883, which forbade the payment of political canvassers, and the 1884 Reform Act, which enfranchised the majority of men in Britain, as well as the backdrop of three successful Irish Home Rule bills, she explores the processes by which an unprecedented number of women became politically active for the first time. From the introduction of the first Home Rule Bill in 1886, women became involved in unionism in ever increasing numbers. Northern and southern Irish female unionist organisations were subsequently established, the largest of which, the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, had amassed over 100,000 members by 1913, thus becoming the largest female political force ever mobilised in Ireland's history.

But what of the relationship between Conservative women and the suffrage movement? Christabel Pankhurst's biographer, June Purvis, traces her famous subject's encounters with the Conservative Party, demonstrating Christabel's growing scepticism about the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Labour Party, and a class-based feminism. Yet this does not mean she was, at least in the heyday of the suffragette movement, right wing and, by implication, reactionary. Purvis shows how Christabel engaged with Conservatives, and gives some insight into the lesser

strain of Conservative suffragism. There is a more tangled history of Toryism and suffragism, more complicated than the historiographical focus on Tory anti-suffragism has tended to allow for.

Thackeray reflects on new research on women in the party – their activities, organisation and representation – in the first decade after enfranchisement. In May 1918, Mary Maxse, the outgoing chairman of the Women's Unionist Association, met her organisation's decision to disband and form a Conservative Party women's organisation with foreboding. She despaired that her supporters had 'amalgamated like lambs with the official Unionist men'. Yet ten years later, the Conservative Women's Organisation claimed one million supporters, comfortably more than its rivals, and Maxse's successor, Caroline Bridgeman, chaired the party's National Union. Thackeray considers what these successes meant and whether they proved that women had become fully integrated into the Conservative Party. Clearly, there was a marked disparity between women's importance to grassroots organisation and the four female MPs who sat on the Conservative benches after the 1929 election. Moreover, women's position within the wider party organisation, so unclear in 1918, remained problematic.

Hendley carries on examining how women were mobilised for party political work before attaining citizenship. With a hierarchical and vaguely medieval structure, the Primrose League peaked at two million members (most of them female). It was well known for its political propaganda and electoral canvassing. It also promoted social integrative functions through large-scale entertainments, garden fetes and whist drives. The League played an important role in Victorian Conservative politics through operating in the 'social sphere' in which politics could be mixed with conviviality in a non-confrontational setting and absorbed almost unconsciously. Hendley examines how the Primrose League reacted to a shifting political landscape from 1900 to 1918, arguing that by 1918, though it was no longer the crucial body of female auxiliaries to the Conservative Party it had been in the past, the League had avoided the fate of becoming a body of superfluous women. The adaptability of the Conservative Party and its related organisations was a key to the long-term success of Conservatism.

What difference did the vote make to the status and organisation of women in the party? These are the questions raised by Gottlieb and Berthezène. Gottlieb takes a more biographical approach, focusing on some of the first Conservative women MPs. The valuable work performed by Conservative women at grassroots has been acknowledged in the scholarship, as have the strategies developed by the party to mobilise women as both party workers and voters, while much less attention has been conferred on those Conservative women who became virtual national celebrities. By the late 1930s the two women Conservative MPs to achieve this celebrity and notoriety were Lady Nancy Astor, the first woman MP to take her seat, a committed feminist and hostess of the so-called Cliveden set, and the Duchess of Atholl, the first woman MP from Scotland, an avowed anti-(non)

feminist and the Chamberlain scourge at the height of appeasement. Both defied stereotypes of Tory femininity with their own personal styles, by taking an abiding interest in international affairs when most Conservative women were expected to be focused on the local and parochial, and by engaging with women across party lines to advance their favoured policies. The early Tory women MPs achieved public-facing leadership positions in the Conservative Party, and they were, inevitably (unacknowledged) role models for and forerunners of Thatcher's construction of female leadership.

Berthezene examines the contribution Conservative women made to the formulation of Conservative principles. She reflects on their claim that they were 'practical', 'commonsense' women, as opposed to what they saw as their cerebral, theoretically minded Labour and Liberal counterparts. The deliberate cultivation of the identity of 'the middlebrow' was an important means to embrace democracy and speak to all social classes, which led them to develop a particular view of 'responsible womanhood' and citizenship, notions which they felt had been inappropriately annexed by 'the Left'. It was also a response to the emergence of a new culture of non-partisan organisations, which provided an important challenge to the position of political parties in interwar Britain. Women's voluntary associations were particularly instrumental in educating in citizenship and provided a female sphere of political activity that was removed from the rough-and-tumble of party politics. Looking at the Women's Voluntary Services, which were set up in 1938 by Lady Reading, at the request of the Home Office, Berthezene shows how they played the role of antechambers to the political world.

How have Conservative men reacted to women's new roles in the party? How accepting and welcoming was the patrician, paternalist and patriarchal male leadership to women pioneers in Parliament and to the new strategies developed to capture the 'women's vote'? Toye, one of Churchill's biographers, offers a case study of the 'great man's' relationships with women and his stand on gender issues, from his famous opposition to women's enfranchisement to a more accommodating attitude later in the course of his varied career. In turn, Toye draws on the available evidence to try to understand what women voters made of Churchill over the span of his political life.

It is the question of political engagement and party appeals to women that is the focus of Bingham's investigation. By the 1950s, Conservative Party politicians, strategists and activists had developed a range of appeals to female voters which centred on the relevance of politics to everyday life, and which celebrated women's domestic roles as chief consumer, guardian of the family purse and prime defender of the household. Party propaganda warned that under the Labour Party, the state and the unions would encroach and intervene into the private sphere and reduce individual and family freedoms. The party gradually developed and refined these appeals as more women moved into work, calls for gender equality increased, and affluence and permissiveness raised new political and social issues: nevertheless,

many of the key underlying messages about the politics of everyday life remained in place. Yet while some historians have traced the formulation and articulation of these gendered appeals, they have been far less attentive to the ways in which this resonated with ordinary women and their understanding of the politics of everyday life. Bingham's chapter draws on opinion polls, social surveys, diaries, memoirs and media sources to seek to address this important gap, examining the ways in which different groups of women perceived the Conservative Party and their various ideological appeals from the 1950s to the 1980s.

It is the same relatively neglected period that concerns Cowman as she offers a new portrayal of Margaret Thatcher from the vantage point of her early years as an MP. Thatcher is usually represented as having no time for feminism or the feminist movement. Throughout her tenure as leader of the Conservative Party she has been characterised as derisive of the contemporary women's movement, cutting local authorities' funding for women's groups and committees and being slow to promote women within the ranks of her own government. Cowman's chapter suggests that the reality may have been more complicated. Although recent portrayals (such as Abi Morgan's film script) have focused on Thatcher as a 'woman alone' in a man's world, other sources suggest that she may have had a more fruitful working relationship with other political women, especially in her early political career as a backbencher. Exploring Thatcher's early work for women's issues and with women's groups as well as her early relations with other women MPs reveals her to be a less one-dimensional political figure than critics of her later political career have suggested, and help unpick further the complexity of her appeal to women.

The thorny issue of Conservatism and women's liberation is illuminated by Beers in her study of feminist responses to Thatcher and Thatcherism. The polarisation of feminism and Thatcherism facilitated a rapprochement between the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) and the Labour Party. Beers offers new insight into Thatcher's ambivalent relationship to other women. She never identified herself as a feminist. In fact, she remained derisive of the 'dungarees only, no skirts allowed' unfeminine pose of the 'strident' feminists who so vehemently opposed her administration. Thatcher did not understand feminists, and they in turn were slow to appreciate her appeal to a substantial sector of British women. Feminists, in turn, launched a scathing critique of female Thatcherites. Women who supported Thatcher were either dupes, or hang 'em and flog 'em old biddies, the blue-rinse foot soldiers of the Conservative army.

Childs' and Campbell's contribution, from the point of view of political sociology, reflects on the post-Thatcher era of Tory success, and the attempted feminisation of the party, or certain aspects of it, under David Cameron's leadership. The UK Conservative Party at the general election of 2010 was undoubtedly a more feminised institution: it was to more than double the number of its women MPs returned to Westminster; had established new women's forums for policy debate among its women members; and had fought on a much more competitive women's



agenda, reflecting the interventions of key women party and parliamentary actors. Almost immediately feminist criticism surfaced: suggestions that anonymity would be given to men accused of rape were met with the accusation that the Coalition was being sealed over women's bodies; economic austerity was soon revealed to have a female face, as state benefits and welfare were cut, disproportionately and negatively impacting women. The charge was clear: Cameron's commitment to feminisation had been mere electoral opportunism masking both a neo-liberalism that fails to see how gender structures society, and a social conservatism that valorises the traditional gendered division of labour. Feminisation – the integration of women and women's issues in politics<sup>14</sup> – is best understood as a process rather than an end point. The 2015 general election is an obvious moment to hold the party to account. To establish whether its commitment to the greater participation and descriptive representation has been maintained; and to explore the nature of its representational claim for women, and to investigate the relationship of these to the party's wider political programme: in sum, to subject the contemporary Conservative Party to a gendered audit.

The final two contributions bring us right up to the present and will no doubt inspire future research on gender and Conservatism. The contributors to this volume all took part in a conference hosted by the Conservative Party Archives (CPA), Bodleian Library, Oxford, in June 2015. A major issue that scholars have faced in researching Conservative women is the limitations or inaccessibility of the source material. Certainly for the pre-1945 period, the record of Conservative women's activism is patchy. The CPA's archivist, Jeremy McIlwaine, offers here an invaluable insight and guide to the archival situation, and draws our attention to collections and records that are recent deposits or that have never been properly exploited. Scholars do not always understand the constraints and strains faced by archivists – and the politics of the archive – and McIlwaine presents a refreshingly honest and revealing behind-the-scenes perspective.

Finally, the Baroness Anne Jenkin of Kennington tells the story of the creation of Women2Win, which she founded with Theresa May in 2005, when the under-representation of Conservative women in politics was particularly conspicuous. Indeed, there were only seventeen Conservative women MPs in 2005 when they decided to make party feminisation their mission and to create Women2Win to ensure the Conservative Party fairly represented women at all levels of politics. After the election in 2010 the number of Conservative women MPs increased from 17 to 49 MPs, from 9 per cent of the Parliamentary Party to 16 per cent.

As a whole, our research taps into ever-current debates about women's political preferences, the politicisation of gender and the gendering of politics. It attempts to make sense of why women have, and have not, voted Conservative since the 1880s and their relationship with the party. It aims to discard stereotypes that essentialise women as being innate Conservatives or that present them as 'the power behind the throne'. It documents the contingent nature of female support for the Conservative

Party and the constant need for the party to construct political identities compatible with women's agendas. Finally, it asserts the agency/instrumentalism of women within the Conservative Party.

### Notes

- 1 David Jarvis, 'Review of G. E. Maguire, *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874–1997* (1998); and Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884–1911* (1996)', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10: 4 (1999), 540–51.
- 2 Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect. Women in English Local Government 1865–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 3 Alistair Cooke, *A Gift from the Churchills: the Primrose League, 1883–2004* (London: Conservative Research Department, 2010); M. Pugh, *The Tories and the People, 1880–1935* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); Janet Robb, *The Primrose League, 1883–1906* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942).
- 4 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*.
- 5 Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory?* (London: Virago, 1987).
- 6 Martin Pugh, 'Popular Conservatism in Britain: Continuity and Change, 1880–1987', *Journal of British Studies*, 27: 3 (The Dilemmas of Democratic Politics) (July 1988), pp. 254–82; *Women and the Women Movement in Britain, 1914–1999* (Marlowe & Co, 1995); David Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994), 129–52.
- 7 Neil McCrillis's study of the *British Conservative Party in the Age of Universal Suffrage* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998).
- 8 G. E. Maguire, *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).
- 9 I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 10 The classic example is the Longman's series, *The History of the Conservative Party*. A notable exception is David Thackeray's recent study of Conservative cultures, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age. Conservative Cultures and the Challenge of Mass Politics in Early Twentieth Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), which shows how the Conservative party focussed on addressing women as consumers at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- 11 David Jarvis discusses this in his review of books by G. E. Maguire and Karen Hunt (see note 1).
- 12 Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004); Françoise Thébaud, *Ecrire l'histoire des femmes et du genre* (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2007).
- 13 Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p. 141.
- 14 Joni Lovenduski, *Feminizing Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).