



# Conservative Women

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## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is some evidence that the Conservative Party discriminates against women. Only 8% of Conservative MPs are women (compared to 24% of Labour MPs). The same is true of the senior Party hierarchy: only 21% of senior posts are held by women. And despite the efforts of the Party leadership, there is little sign of improvement. Only 21% of candidates selected since 1997 have been women, mostly for unwinnable seats.
- Urgent and radical change is needed – for reasons of electoral expediency as well as for reasons of fairness. The Party has managed to lose touch with women voters, who were once among its strongest supporters. In the 1997 general election, the Conservative share of the vote amongst women fell far faster than amongst men. Among women in the key 18-35 age group, the Labour Party has a 22% lead over the Conservative Party.
- The reason is simple: the Conservative Party has been left behind by changes in society. Women are now more economically independent than ever before. They are more personally independent. A Party which still appears to hanker for the days of the subservient family women, and whose public face is almost exclusively male, is not going to attract their vote.
- The Party can change. It is the Tory Party which has the longest history of promoting the role of women – from the granting of full universal suffrage in 1928 to the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1975 to the economic liberalisation of the 1980s which saw more and more women join the workforce. The Party must rediscover this tradition.
- Both policy and structure will have to change. The leadership and the Party in the country as a whole should promote more suitably-qualified women. All discrimination in the selection of candidates must be weeded out.

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- The leadership of the Party will have to make a conscious effort to discuss issues of particular interest to women. Analysis of recent speeches and Conservative Party publications reveals an extraordinary silence on this matter.
- It is also a legal issue. It could be only a matter of time before a case for sex discrimination is brought in the courts against a Local Association.
- And policy-makers and thinkers must alter their mindsets – a Party which appears to distrust women and to take little account of their needs is never going to win their vote.

### Recommendations

- The Party must set out a new strategy based on the full and equal participation of women . This should be set out in a statement of intent from the Leader of the Party and supported by his shadow ministers. The leadership of the Party should talk about women and women's issues.
- The required change must be with the full participation of constituency parties. They should be persuaded to change their attitude to women at the top of the Conservative Party.
- A number of **minimum** targets for female participation within the Party should be publicly set and monitored:
  - 40% of all senior management posts in Central Office;
  - 30% of all governing committee posts in Conservative Associations;
  - 30% of candidates at the next general election;
  - 40% of candidates at all elections thereafter;
  - 40% on the shortlist of any constituency looking for a candidate.
- As it did in the days of its greatest electoral success, the Conservative Party should unashamedly promote policies and themes which appeal to today's women. This will involve developing new themes which are relevant to women in several key areas, including: women as mothers; women as entrepreneurs; women excluded from society; women as workers; women as planners. Only then will it regain the confidence of 52% of the electorate.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

This has always been a man's world and none of the reasons hitherto brought forward in explanation of this fact has seemed adequate.<sup>1</sup>

THE POSITION OF WOMEN HAS CHANGED dramatically in the fifty years since Simone de Beauvoir analysed so acutely what was then the generally subordinate role of women. This pamphlet is about the modern ideal of self realisation and how women have now made dramatic inroads into all walks of life, with one exception: the competitive world of politics. Unfortunately, this is particularly true in the Conservative Party.<sup>2</sup>

*At the last election Labour had a startling lead of 22% among women in the 18 to 35 year old age group, and 13% among women as a whole, compared to just 7% among men.*

Women, who represent 52% of the population, are now a powerful economic and social force. The importance of their vote is immense: apart from the matter of decency and fairness, promoting women is good politics. At the last election Labour had a startling lead of 22% among women in the 18 to 35 year old age group, and 13% among women as a whole, compared to just 7% among men.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1970s, Jo Grimmond wrote a striking series of articles in which he predicted that the most interesting changes to take place in Britain in the future would be the evolving liberation of women. This development, he felt, would create a great new political force. He believed that because men had exercised power for so long, their

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<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> "As important as geographical mobility is 'moral mobility': the ability of people to break loose from their traditional codes of conduct ...The rural economy ...is no longer with us; not merely because its economy has been transcended, but because [of] *the modern ideal of self-realisation*" A. Barnett and R. Scruton, *Town and Country*, Vintage/Ebury, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> MORI, 1997 Election Poll.

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culture was fairly set: we knew what to expect of them. Real vitality in the next decades would come from the gradual change in the status of women who had not then emerged as an economic and political force, though they were amassing on the threshold. How right he was. It has taken some 50 years for women's liberation to progress: the feminine factor is now influencing every aspect of modern life in Britain, Europe and America.

Women are making spectacular inroads into erstwhile male preserves. They are twice as likely to start new businesses in Britain; they enjoy top jobs in management or in the professions: 52% of new solicitors and 32% of all managers and administrators are women.<sup>4</sup> Among childless couples with degrees, women provide 48% of the household income. As women become more economically independent and therefore more powerful, they are helping to create a society increasingly shaped by feminine values. Women are abandoning the traditional, socially imposed lifestyles for ones which are freely chosen and varied. Women have become a force to be reckoned with not just in the field of commerce but more importantly in the media and with politicians – their money, their opinions and their votes all count.

*Labour, once far more reactionary on the gender issue than the Conservative Party, has understood the significance of these social changes.*

The average annual wage for full time workers in Britain stands at £20,805;<sup>5</sup> the OECD now estimates that the purchasing power of British average wages stands above that of Germany and France.<sup>6</sup> With almost half the workforce now comprised of women, their earnings are largely responsible for our new found wealth. Most significantly, whereas in 1979 most women earned substantially less than their husbands, today, only 20 years later, 41% of all working women contribute half or more to their household income.<sup>7</sup> In terms of financial power alone three-quarters of the British population is now effectively middle-class. Most British people own their own homes, holiday abroad, frequent restaurants and night-clubs, invest in the stock-market and hold private insurance. Women are playing a leading role in creating this new prosperity. Their abilities have been recognised by employers – except for the Conservative Party. Only 8% of Conservative MPs are women (compared to 24% of Labour MPs).

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<sup>4</sup> H. Wilkinson and M. Howard, *Tomorrow's Women*, Demos, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> *New Earnings Survey*, Office for National Statistics, October 1999.

<sup>6</sup> *The Tax/Benefits Position of Employees*, OECD, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> MORI Whirlpool Foundation.

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Labour, once far more reactionary on the gender issue than the Conservative Party, has understood the significance of these social changes. During the 1980s, women in the Labour party, with the help of Philip Gould, began to analyse how women's' voting intentions and priorities were changing, amongst younger women.<sup>8</sup> As a result a long-term strategy was introduced to alter the bruising male-orientated culture of old Labour and to persuade the Party to become 'women-friendly'. The Party leadership realised that if women were to be enticed into the Labour Party it was essential to improve their prospects in politics as a career; furthermore to attract women voters, there had to be a major strategic change in their treatment of this group. New media had to be found to reach out to them, new policies developed.

*Only 8% of Conservative MPs are women, compared to 24% of Labour MPs.*

At the last election Labour returned 101 women MPs to the House of Commons, seven times more than the Conservative Party. Today there are 22 Labour women ministers – four in the Cabinet, and a further 10 of them Ministers of State just below cabinet rank. In 1997 the Conservatives returned 13 women MPs, the same as they did in 1931. And once in power, Labour has continued to act in support of women: last year, in a far reaching strategic move to consolidate Labour's progressive position on gender, the Prime Minister's office sent out guidance throughout Whitehall requiring that at least 40% of all suggestions for new Quango appointments should go to women (there are some 50,000 Quango positions within the Government's gift). This 40% rule also applies to appointments within the Labour Party organisation. In other words, by the time of the next election, career opportunities for Labour women will have blossomed radically, altering the political landscape.

Yet the Conservatives remain silent on the subject of women, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a rapidly approaching juggernaut. Ironically this is the Party which for more than a century has known better than any other how to adapt to win elections. It was the first political party as far back as 1883 to involve women to create a modern party of mass membership. It was the Conservative Party which introduced full women's suffrage in 1928, followed immediately by extensive social reforms which included legislation which was to transform opportunities for women. And the stalwart

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<sup>8</sup> It is a telling that, before the transformation of the Labour Party's attitude to women in the mid-1980s, the slogan of the women's groups was "Women make policy as well as tea."



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support of the women's vote has consistently returned Conservative governments to power this century – until the 1997 election that is.

Under William Hague's leadership, the Party has attempted to reform its structure. But it seems that efforts to ensure serious participation for women were thwarted during the recent reorganisation of the Party. He has increased participation of women in the Commons and the Lords at ministerial level. He has said that he wants at least 250 women standing at the next election but there is little indication of the necessary upheaval in the Party structures to bring this about. Only 16 of the 73 candidates chosen for seats so far have been women – and the majority of those are in unwinnable seats. The present system offers little hope for improvement.

There is no visible determination to break the double lock on female entry into Parliament, a double lock which combines the often malign influence of dominant older members of the Conservative party, sometimes female, who prevent the progress of women candidates at Association level with the strong masculine political culture present at the centre. Politics is one of the most competitive of professions and is unique in that the number of available positions is finite: one more woman MP means one less male MP. It is not surprising that too many are reluctant to relinquish or share power in this most competitive of professions. Analysing the experience of the Labour Party, change must begin with serious determination on the part of the Party leadership itself.

### *Urgent and radical is changed is required.*

Opinion poll after opinion poll of women finds the Conservatives “old fashioned and out of touch” and are turning to other parties.<sup>9</sup> So what were the Conservative themes that bound women so tightly to conservatism this century and what has changed? What is it within the Conservative culture that finds it so hard to adapt to the interests and concerns of modern women? Chapters Two to Four of this pamphlet examine these questions. In Chapter Five, the failure of the Conservative Party to deal with discrimination – despite the efforts of William Hague – is considered. There are too few women MPs and too few women in the senior management of the Conservative Party. The contrast with the Labour Party (which successfully shed its male-dominated image) is striking. In Chapter Six, the way in which other European countries now accept equality of representation and parity of political influence is analysed.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the MORI poll in *The Times*, 30 September 1999.

## INTRODUCTION

The conclusions are clear. Urgent and radical change is required. With a young modern leader, the Conservatives have an outstanding opportunity to alter their approach to the 'women's question'. They will broaden their appeal by reconnecting with this great natural constituency. William Hague would be the first to accept that this is a matter of common sense. It is not just a question of decency and fairness for women . It is a matter of winning elections as well.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “THE OLD AGITATION”

WHEN THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT passed the Equal Franchise Act in May 1928 extending the franchise to all women over 21, the Party leaders believed that it made feminist policies redundant. As Baldwin said in the debate over the Bill:

The subjection of women, if there be such a thing, will not depend on any creation of the law, nor can it be remedied by any action of the law. It will never again be possible to blame the Sovereign State for any position of inequality. Women will have, with us, the fullest rights. The grounds for the old agitation is gone, and gone forever.<sup>10</sup>

These were not empty words: within a fortnight, modernising policies were devised by both Conservatives and Liberals to attract the women's vote. New freedoms and responsibilities were created for women for the first time. The law, the civil service and the police force were opened up to them for the first time. Women could now sit on juries, and could gain equal custody for their children. The grounds for divorce were equalised.

*Even before the extension of full suffrage, the Conservatives had revolutionised the place of women in society.*

Even before the extension of full suffrage, the Conservatives had revolutionised the place of women in society. It was the Tories who had the first woman MP to sit in the House of Commons – Nancy Astor. It was the Tories who passed pieces of far-reaching and far-seeing legislation, including the Sex Discrimination (Removal) Act of 1919, the

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in J. Lovenduski, P. Norris & C. Burness, “The Party and Women”, in A. Seldon & S. Bell, *Conservative Century*, OUP, 1994.

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Jurors (Enrolment of Women) Act of 1920, the Maintenance Orders Act of 1920, the Widows and Orphans Act of 1925 and the Guardianship of Infants Act of 1925.

Women rewarded the Conservative Party with their consistent support at the polls helping to elect the Party consistently right up until 1997. Opinion polls, first introduced in 1945, show that the conservative women’s vote remained consistently several percentage points ahead of the male vote (in 1945 by as much as 8%). However by the time of the 1983 election the gender vote had equalised and a trend of decline of female support for Conservatives was established. By the time of the 1997 election there was a haemorrhage in the vote of women under the age of 45.

One million women who had previously voted Conservative voted Labour for the first time in their lives. Women voted overwhelmingly for Tony Blair, showing a 22% lead for the Labour Party amongst women aged between 18-35 years against 13% for the population as a whole. Labour could now show that nearly one in four Labour MPs were now women – in stark contrast to the Conservatives who, having introduced the right for women to sit in the Commons nearly 70 years ago, could boast only 13 women MPs. Clearly something had gone desperately wrong. Traditional Conservative themes no longer held the same appeal for the modern female voter.

### **Traditional Conservative Women**

“We take her [the traditional Tory woman] for granted and we don’t take her seriously.”<sup>11</sup>

The Queen Caroline Affair (the scandal-ridden divorce of George IV and his Queen) opened up politics as a subject which could be discussed in front of women.

[The Affair had] a profound effect on women as a sex by demonstrating that not even a king could treat a woman’s rights as if they were of no consequence. It also served to bring women into the arena of political discussion.<sup>12</sup>

Women now joined in with “their tongues and their pens, in the streets and in the libraries.”<sup>13</sup> But it was not until later in the century that women began to play a central but nevertheless “doggedly deferential”<sup>14</sup> role in the development and management of the Conservative Party. The establishment of the Primrose League in 1883 by Lord and Lady Randolph Churchill helped to found the democratic Conservative mass

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<sup>11</sup> B. Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*, Virago, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> P. Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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movement. It also provided the Conservative Party with the machinery of a modern Party which reached out to new working class and urban voters.<sup>15</sup> For the next 50 years the electioneering ladies of the Primrose League would “mobilise the great body of vaguely conservative and definitely traditional sentiment which the old party organisation of the Tories had failed to galvanise into action.”<sup>16</sup> Ruled by a Grand Committee of men who kept a firm grip on the political ambitions of the Ladies Grand Council the Primrose League achieved a membership of over one million after only eight years.

The activities of the League were largely social but gave women an opportunity to participate in politics. The willingly subordinate nature of most British women in the Edwardian period is epitomised by Mrs Wilcox in *Howards End* when she tells Margaret Schlegel that Mr Wilcox knows best and that she is happy that she did not have a vote as she surely would not know what to do with it.

By the 1920s the League was subsumed into the more powerful and equally successful Women’s Unionist Organisation (WUO) which had been started following the 1918 Representation of the People Act (which gave women over the age of 30 the vote). Distrust of women was still strong at the time. Asquith commented at the time:

They [the new women voters] are for the most part hopelessly ignorant of politics, credulous to the last degree, and flickering with gusts of sentiment like a candle in the wind.

However the WUO soon enrolled more than one million women, as well as working men and young people of both sexes. Crucially, it also developed effective educational and propaganda methods that gave the Party the edge in retaining supporters and winning elections.<sup>17</sup> Its activities, though, were still largely social.

For their crucial organisational work, the Party hierarchy gave its women supporters thanks and recognition with the occasional award, much cherished, in the form of a minor gong. Real power remained in the hands of men. The attitude of many men within the Party was exemplified by ‘Uncle Fred’ Woolton, the effective Chairman of the Conservative Party from 1946 to 1955. Woolton was responsible for the comprehensive re-organisation of a shattered Party both centrally and nationally. In his

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<sup>14</sup> J. Ramsden, *An Appetite for Power*, Harper Collins, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> B. Campbell, op cit.

<sup>16</sup> G. Cornwallis West, *The Reminiscences of Lady Randolph Churchill*, quoted in B. Campbell, op cit.

<sup>17</sup> N. R. McGrillis, *The British Conservative Party in the Age of Universal Suffrage 1918-1929*, Ohio State University Press, 1998.

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autobiography the only woman helper (in the only serious reference to Conservative women) who gets a mention is his Vice-Chairman, Miss Marjorie Maxse:

She was the adviser on all women's work and probably had more experience of party politics than most people in the country: I remain greatly in her debt for both her advice and friendship.<sup>18</sup>

Gratifying – but no gong forthcoming there, I'm afraid.

By the 1980s things had not moved along too grandly for women: Beatrix Campbell in her study of Conservative women:

The first thing to say about the Tory woman is that we think we know what she is, and yet she is a remarkably unstudied political animal. We take her for granted, and we don't take her seriously....The right depend on her but don't take her seriously for sexist reasons, and the left can't stand her and don't take her seriously for equally sexist reasons.<sup>19</sup>

The remarkable fact of a woman Prime Minister in the 1980s only marginally eased the situation. Modern political women were beginning to make headway at local government and Association level and an imaginative initiative to tempt high fliers into mainline politics was successfully managed by Emma Nicholson. However policy initiatives on women's issues by political women were actively discouraged, and occasionally suppressed, on the grounds that they were discriminatory.

During the early days of John Major's administration he appeared to have some understanding of the issues. Sadly, like so many of his better policies, his enthusiasm for the promotion of women petered out within a short space of time. Any serious thinking about the changing role of women continued to be treated as a low priority by the hierarchy. Meanwhile, the older generation of Conservative women continued carrying out the majority of unpaid constituency tasks while the women's vote continued to decline.

### **A male preserve unbroken except by Margaret Thatcher**

The great and unexpected success of Margaret Thatcher when she became leader in 1975 did little to change the prevailing chauvinist culture. Indeed her success is still cited as “proof” that the Party is, in fact, women-friendly. Mrs Thatcher, who had little time for women's issues, suffered herself from chauvinism; and she encountered opposition from

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<sup>18</sup> Earl of Woolton, *Memoirs of the Rt Hon the Earl of Woolton*, Cassell, 1959.

<sup>19</sup> B. Campbell, *op cit*.

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many within her original 1979 Cabinet. Some were appalled at being led by a woman and said so privately. And Ted Heath's bile towards his rival – whom he referred to openly as “that Woman” – was strongly based on his defeat by a dreaded female of the species. Less damagingly Lord Carrington, both before and after his resignation, affectionately referred to the Prime Minister as “my mistress”.

The claim is often made, by both Conservative men and women, that there is equal opportunity for women within the meritocracy. “If the women are good enough, they will get through,” they say. This ignores the obvious fact that a number of good women do not get through. Too many are turned away – repeatedly. This in turn inhibits others from coming forward. Ann Widdecombe's remark about women finding any help ‘patronising and humiliating’<sup>20</sup> demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of the reality facing too many prospective women candidates.

It also ignores the fact that we still have a largely male Establishment which remains exceptionally strong. The British political and social system was naturally developed for men and by men (with a few obvious exceptions) over a long period of time. The same can be said for most of the great British institutions. A recent publication<sup>21</sup> catches photographically the massively elaborate and exquisitely designed, gold and silver embroidered uniforms developed over the centuries, bearing testimony to the power traditionally exercised by men. Power bestowed on men by men. Conservatives, as instinctive supporters of tradition, remain attached to this male-dominated vision of power and the Establishment.

The British tax system and the legal system was created to cater almost solely for male concerns (though it has since developed). The male club world reflects cultural priorities; so do the arcane rules of the House of Commons. While there has been some modernisation, MPs still have to rush back to the House for a 10pm vote. Meanwhile women are still to be found breast feeding their babies in the lavatories of the Palace of Westminster. It is within this historical male culture that women must fight to succeed.

The idea that we live in, or would wish to live in, an untrammelled meritocracy is pure fiction. There is almost no part of government administration that does not recognise the different needs and aspirations of the individual. People who smoke and drink are taxed heavily. Businesses are given tax breaks to encourage wealth creation. Minority and disadvantaged groups are helped.

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<sup>20</sup> See page 32.

<sup>21</sup> A. Bruce, J. Calder & M. Gator, *Keepers of the Kingdom: the great offices of State*, Orion, 1999.

## “THE OLD AGITATION”

In addition to the intimidating masculine orientation of the political world all political parties have operated a 'fast track' for favourite candidates. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was said that eligible young male candidates were, on occasion, 'parachuted' into safe seats through a combination of influence from Downing Street and from Central Office. This was not easy to do: local Conservative Associations claim total independence from Central Office. But talented male candidates appeared to enjoy – and boast about – an existing network of support throughout the Party simply not available to women. It was also clear that the few top women appointments at Central Office, ostensibly appointed to support women candidates, were sometimes chosen for their skills as 'fellow travellers'. Those who still believe that the Conservative Party operates in a meritocratic fashion ignore the fact that potential women candidates are instinctively discriminated against. Those who believe that the playing field on which men and women compete is level are hopelessly naïve.



### DO TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVE THEMES APPEAL TO YOUNGER WOMEN?

SINCE THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, most Conservative women have accepted the masculine and often martial nature of the themes which have shaped this century's conservative outlook. But it is important now for modern Conservatives to reassess the tone – if not the content – of their core beliefs to discover how they resonate with female voters.

John Barnes identifies “the importance of *moral and religious authority, the rule of law and the rights of property, suspicion of the directing role of the state, imperialism and constitutionalism*” as the most notable Conservative themes.<sup>22</sup> To these might be added, particularly from 1940 onwards, *Britain's place in the world, defence and the defence of freedom, economic rigour, the importance of the family and concern for the less fortunate*. Apart from the last two, these concepts have appealed to Conservative women largely in the abstract, particularly when they were able to lend support from the relative peace of the kitchen. Indeed there remains an important and substantial female voting constituency over the age of 50 which continues to support these traditional themes and who in voting terms must not be ignored.

#### *Are some Conservative themes not just inappropriate but alien to modern women?*

Younger voters may share some of the same thematic priorities. But they have other pressing concerns too. Modern conservative themes such as *freedom, choice, responsibility, opportunity* or the *merit of risk* are intellectual concepts of a sophisticated kind which may be meaningful to successful women. But how relevant are they to the hard pressed working woman? Are some of themes not just inappropriate but alien to modern women? And in a culture in which younger women pride themselves on their ability to free themselves from traditional codes of behaviour in favour of self

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<sup>22</sup> A. Seldon & S. Bell, op. cit.

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realisation, do they want to be 'lectured' about traditional values by men about whom they know little and care less? How relevant to the lives of these women are White Conservative Male Politicians? An early lesson learned by the Labour Party was to make sure that women politicians should talk on those issues about which women feel particularly strongly.

An example of the clash in priorities is that faced by many younger mothers. For those on or around average wages, their responsibilities and income potential do not afford them the luxury of freedom in any transcending sense. On the contrary the majority of women with dependants find that their main preoccupation in life is juggling the overwhelming demands which beset them. Admittedly such complications may well have been brought on by their own life choices and/or by a real need to provide for their families. Many young mothers spend this early period wracked with guilt and exhaustion. They often feel that their responsibilities are disproportionate to the father's and this will be a cause of resentment. Though they may be freer than women were in a historical sense, they may not feel that they are. In addition they may feel that their problems have been exacerbated or even created by 'freedoms' brought about by Conservatism: the liberation of markets has meant less perceived job security; easier divorce laws might improve freedom, but at the cost of security; the emphasis on "standing on your own two feet" implies a withdrawal of the safety net. And it is not just mothers who feel these pressures. Those young women without children will be fully aware of the struggle which their friends with dependants will be labouring under.

*Some women may feel that their problems have been exacerbated or even created by the freedoms brought about by Conservatism.*

Younger working women feel a heightened sense of frustration. 23% say that they are angry much of the time.<sup>23</sup> 51% of working women in Britain now view their work as a career rather than as a job.<sup>24</sup> Giving up a career to look after children may be a greater sacrifice than giving up a job. Others choose to remain independent: it is predicted that a fifth of women born in the 1960s will remain childless.<sup>25</sup> More freedom does not necessarily lead to greater contentment. Conservatives need to understand this paradox.

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<sup>23</sup> H. Wilkinson & M. Howard, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> MORI Whirlpool Foundation.

<sup>25</sup> *Social Focus on Women*, Central Statistical Office, 1995.

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### Conservative academics and traditionalists

Conservative thinking is still heavily dominated by traditionalists, who espouse a brand of politics which many women can find old-fashioned, irrelevant.

The virtue of a sense of responsibility is now freely exploited by all political parties. It is also used by Conservatives in particular to bolster historic arguments about the importance of family values, linked to a sense of duty. This message may go down well with the older voter (and perhaps the *Daily Mail* reader) but it has a strong negative resonance for the younger woman: it implies a sense of historic servitude and the notion of female duty and deference.

The Conservative attachment to family policy has its roots in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*<sup>26</sup> and its exhortations: "to love the little platoon... is the first principle, the germ as it were, of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind". This theme remains popular with many Conservatives. It is not so far off Oliver Letwin's thoughts in a recent article, *Time the Tories Came Home*.<sup>27</sup> Mr Letwin, seeking a new formulation for traditional Conservatism, ends up burrowing back with a 'homing agenda'. "When the world is hostile, we seek solace among, and draw strength from our families and friends, our colleagues and compatriots, the 'home team'... Nor is there any conflict between the 'homing' instinct and the instinct to be free." Here the home is seen as a source of strength – a secure little platoon from which to sally forth to conquer the world! A younger woman may find this attitude old-fashioned.

Time and time again a somewhat tactless tone underlines the masculine, martial and classically-based messages which continue to inform conservatism. For example, the noted Conservative thinker, Professor Kenneth Minogue, writes of freedom in the following terms:

With us, freedom is more often something hard and unyielding, a crystallisation of feeling or conscience that bubbles up from within an individual, and may make him hard and immovable...to the classical Greeks, *freedom* was the condition of things enjoyed by a free male when adulthood made him eligible to participate in the political discussions in the agora... Roman freedom began with a young man assuming the *toga virilis*....The ancients were clear that freedom required qualities which are by no means universal in human nature. To be free was to be mature or grown up, which is to say self-moving and responsible.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: ed. G.A. Pocock, Hackett, 1987.

<sup>27</sup> *Spectator*, 19 June 1999.

<sup>28</sup> K. Minogue, *Freedom and its Many Facets*, in *The Risk of Freedom*, IUSS, 1999.

## TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVE THEMES & WOMEN

Influential Conservative traditionalists too often continue to treat women as though their position in society was in no way different from the position women held in the 19th century. In consequence when they do refer to women it may be in derogatory terms, because in traditional conservative thinking the modern woman disappoints. Digby Anderson comments:

In the 1960s, radical feminism demanded that *all* women must be absorbed into the workforce except perhaps when having children. Women were to be lined up and marched into the social plan. Positive discrimination rapidly led to forcing women into areas where they are not suited.<sup>29</sup>

*Equally, modern woman cannot be trusted to be educated in sexual matters.*

Equally she cannot be trusted to be educated in sexual matters. Thus Britain has the highest incidence of teenage pregnancies and under age pregnancies in Europe. Says Roger Scruton:

We know that teenage girls run a great risk of pregnancy, and that this *risk* can be reduced by making contraceptive pills freely available from an early age. But in this case we diminish one *risk* only by increasing the risk of something worse – teenage promiscuity and all the moral and physical disorders that come with it.<sup>30</sup>

These sort of sentiments are hardly likely to draw young women towards Conservative thinking. Another well-known Tory, Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, reveals to the nation his classically-based proclivities in an article in the *Daily Telegraph*:

Intense, romantic and even physical friendships between young men are not only natural but even ennobling, different from, and superior to, the love between men and women. Unfortunate is the young man who has never experienced them.<sup>31</sup>

It appears that women are incapable of attaining a similar intensity of friendship. Lord Byron's obsessive interest in women has been the source of huge interest and discussion and his imprint on the nineteenth century romantic movement was incalculable. Writing about his mistresses to John Cam Hobhouse and Douglas Kinnair in 1819 he knew that his letters would be read aloud to select male gatherings. He wrote:

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<sup>29</sup> D. Anderson, *Reason, Responsibility and Risk*, in *The Risk of Freedom*, IUSS, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> R. Scruton, *Reason, Responsibility and Risk*, in *The Risk of Freedom*, IUSS, 1999.

<sup>31</sup> P. Worsthorne, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 September 1999.

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Some of them are countesses – and some are cobblers; wives – some noble – some middling – some low – and all are whores...I have had them all and thrice as many to boot since 1817.

His misanthropic but highly influential view of women still finds something of an echo in the reactionary traditionalism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is incredible that similar sentiments exist today. Conservative academics and writers contributed thoughtful essays to a recent pamphlet entitled *The British Woman Today: a qualitative survey of the images in women's magazines*.<sup>32</sup> The preface and summary of this slim volume is entitled "Selfish, superficial and obsessed with sex?" The opening paragraph reads:

Today's British woman has no children, no cares, and no responsibilities. Her life is a round of indulgences, and indulgences of a distinctly tawdry kind. She rarely thinks, and when she does it is about sex. In pursuit of sex and other whims she is happy to desert a faithful and loving husband. Increasingly she enjoys drunken pranks once associated with adolescent boys. She calls this "Girl Power". When sex and exhibitionism pall she soaks up the make-believe of soap opera as if it were real. Her world is devoid of values except those of fashion. She rarely needs to make judgements so long as she is wearing this season's lipstick and the current partner has an ample bank balance. She is committed only to her favourite film star's choice of underwear, indifferent to literature, art, learning and civic responsibility and reluctant to make an effort in any cause except the gym. When these narcissistic and trivial attitudes occasionally cause problems, there is always the counsellor to turn to and the latest therapy to make her feel good about herself again.<sup>33</sup>

These almost byronic conclusions follow their study of the images presented from Britain's best-selling magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Company* and *Bella*. They demonstrate an almost evangelically unforgiving attitude towards women.

On a political level it is well known that women, less interested in politics than men, tend to avoid newspapers and normal political outlets and find their empathetic interests elsewhere especially at the age catered for in the above magazines. It is instructive that it is not beneath the dignity of the Prime Minister, Mr Blair, to contribute to such magazines giving regular interviews and submitting articles. He, it seems, fully appreciates the importance of remaining in touch with the views of millions of younger women readers.

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<sup>32</sup> D. Anderson and M. Mosbacher (eds), *The British Woman Today: A qualitative survey of the images in women's magazines*, Social Affairs Unit, 1997.

## TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVE THEMES & WOMEN

Another publication by distinguished Conservative academics, entitled *Come Back Miss Nightingale*<sup>34</sup> (itself a title perfectly capturing the backward-looking spirit of these writers) examines “Trends in the Professions Today”. The themes are similar throughout and bemoan a loss of professional integrity and independence. The section headed *The Crisis in Nursing* reads as follows:

Nursing has its origins in monasticism from which it derived rules of silence, obedience, ritual and duty...The order and ethos of the old ward depended upon strict discipline and a system of clear rank. Rank has been destroyed by the modern obsessions with ‘equality’ and informality....Feminism has emphasised the nurse’s rights at the expense of her duties.<sup>35</sup>

*Exhortations to turn the clock back to a time when women were more servile and their lives much harder is absurd.*

Exhortations to turn the clock back to a time when the majority of women were more servile and their lives much harder is absurd and makes such reactionary opinions appear even more exclusive and quirky than ever. Surely a more relaxed nursing style – more suited to the modern age – does not preclude, as in the egalitarian northern European countries, both well trained and highly competent nurses? And how is it that in the northern European countries where women are accepted fully as equals – where there is an adult relationship between the sexes and good sex and moral education in schools there is far less teenage and under age pregnancy?

Conservative writers must realise that the promotion of sentiments such as those quoted above has one effect and one effect alone: to alienate those whom the Conservative Party needs most.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> D. Anderson (ed.), *Come Back Miss Nightingale: trends in professions today*, Social Affairs Unit, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> J. Warren & M. Harris, *Extinguishing the Lamp: the crisis in nursing*, in D. Anderson (ed.), *Come Back Miss Nightingale* (see footnote 9)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TOWARDS A CONSERVATIVE AGENDA FOR WOMEN

Every few hundred years in western history...we cross a divide. Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself – its worldview, its basic values, its social and political structures, its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world. And the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and to which their own parents were born.<sup>36</sup>

HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN have now fallen from 38% of the total in 1961 to 23% in 1998. Twenty years ago, three out of four mothers chose not to go back to work after their first child was born. Today only one in three give up their jobs. The proportion of divorced people in the population is expected to almost double between 1990 and 2020.<sup>37</sup>

Women under the age of 40 in 1999 have different priorities and preoccupations to those of their parents. The modern ideal of self-realisation has changed everything. Without the constraints of any coherent moral or philosophical framework, educated in a system which is loath to impose “values, the consequences can be disastrous. The political and educational system is failing to understand these changes, changes which are particularly important for Conservatives to grasp. For they strike at the heart of that most threatened institution: the family. New thinking on this issue must be done with the full participation of women.

*The modern ideal of self-realisation has changed everything.*

On present trends by the year 2020 married people will be in a minority. While most Conservatives will agree about the importance of the family, modern younger women will reflect, and may have been victims of, the betrayal of the governing classes on marriage and upbringing of the country's children. They will have seen the gradual abandonment of fiscal support for families over the last 30 years: single earner families with children are now greatly over-represented in the poverty statistics.<sup>38</sup> They will

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<sup>36</sup> P. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, Butterworth-Heinemann, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Institute of Personnel & Development, quoted in the *Mail on Sunday*, 7 November 1999.

<sup>38</sup> See Patricia Morgan, *Are Families Affordable?*, Centre for Policy Studies, 1996.

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have realised that since the 1969 Divorce Law reforms, when divorce was granted virtually on demand, the protection for wives and children has been greatly reduced. Some will associate the plans to introduce no-fault divorce – originally proposed by the Major Government, now withdrawn by Labour – with the Conservative Party.

They will reflect on the wholly inadequate legal system which, over the last 30 years, allowed judges in the Family Division to award minimal financial settlements to millions of mothers for the support of their children which were rarely paid – and which the judges were well aware were unlikely to be paid. These factors have undermined the status of the woman as mother and caused huge damage to children.

The sense of betrayal and cynicism in the system which allowed such a state of affairs to continue over such a long period of time should not be underestimated. Perhaps some of the blame may be put at the feet of women themselves. As Melanie Phillips has said: “women are driving a collapse in moral values [which] is undermining the family and ultimately themselves.”<sup>39</sup> But surely the greater blame must lie with those who have propagated the ideals of self-interest exclusive of a sense of responsibility?

The Conservative Party must concentrate on the positive rather than the negative elements of womanhood. Instead of asking why women wish to go into politics they should be encouraging them to do so – mothers of small children or not. Instead of asking why women are not leading more responsible lives, Conservatives should be praising those role models who do well. They must bring them to public attention. Instead of asking why some women are not better mothers and housewives, they should accept that most women perform these roles well. Instead of suggesting that women are frivolous or uninterested in politics, why not find out which policies are meaningful and therefore interesting to them? Where women are having difficulties balancing work and family, why not consider ways of making things easier for them?

The role of women is increasingly important: their participation in the British economy, their positions in the corridors of power, their new professionalism, their enhanced consumer power and their mixed roles as employer, employee and as mother, nurturer and provider all mean that they must now be treated as equals. Conservatives should welcome this and seek to maximise the opportunities created by this success.

There is huge potential for political development here – just as Labour effects to have become “business friendly” so the Conservatives need to become “women friendly”. To do this Conservatives will need to undergo a profound cultural change.

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<sup>39</sup> *Sunday Times*, 17 October 1999.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# OVERCOMING DISCRIMINATION IN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

EARLIER THIS CENTURY, it was no surprise that, despite their contribution to the Conservative Party and despite the Conservative Party's support for women's issues, women were so under-represented on the Conservative Party benches. But it is no longer acceptable today. The task of the Conservative Party is to turn this around.

### **Women in the Party hierarchy**

Women are under-represented in the key decision-making bodies and positions of the Conservative Party. Following the introduction of a new Party constitution in 1998, the main decision-making body in the Party is the Management Board, comprising representatives of the Party from the House of Commons, House of Lords, Wales, Scotland, the voluntary party, the professional staff, councillors and the European Parliament. Of the 16 members of the Board, only four are women.

*Of the 49 most senior positions in the Party, only 11 are held  
by women.*

Beneath the Board, the important constituent parts of the Party are the parliamentary, voluntary and professional wings. The representation of women among Conservative MPs is, as stated above, a mere 8%. The main decision-making body of the voluntary Party is the National Convention, in the main comprising the chairman of constituency associations. Of the ten members of the Committee on Candidates, only two are woman. Of the seven professional staff of the rank of Director in Conservative Central Office, only two are women. Of the 49 most senior positions within the Party, only 11 are held by women (22%).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See F. Buxton, *Equal Balance: electing more women MPs for the Conservative Party*, Bow Group, 1999.

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In the lower levels of the Conservative Party, women form a far more representative proportion of activists. 50% of the membership is female. 42% of the National Area Chairs are women; 31% of the National Area Treasurers are women; 25% of the Constituency Chairs are women. No one can claim, therefore, that there is not a deep pool of committed Conservative women from whom MPs and senior officers can be drawn.

Yet few women make it through to become candidates for Parliament.<sup>41</sup> And even fewer ever become MPs. Only 14 of the Conservative Party's 164 MPs are women (8.5%).<sup>42</sup> The result is that the public face of the Party is overwhelmingly male. This compounds what is in danger of becoming a self-perpetuating problem: the more the Conservative Party seems like a gentlemen's club, the less likely women are to join the Party to rectify the situation. If things go on as they are today, things will only get worse. It is time for a radical change of approach.

### *The public face of the Party is male.*

There are some positive foundations that can be built on. More women are applying to be candidates. Currently up to a third of those going to the Parliamentary Selection Board are women. The end results of this improvement, however, are far from good enough. There are currently 450 candidates on the approved list: only 17% are women. Only 16 out of the 73 (21%) candidates selected for seats so far are women – mostly in unwinnable seats. The goal is to make it a quarter by the next election – a very modest ambition, but one which, at this rate, the Party will only achieve by continuing to select a disproportionate number of women for unwinnable seats such as Sedgefield.<sup>43</sup>

### **The attitude at the top**

The message sent out by the Party leader is of vital importance to the public perception of the party. That John Major's first cabinet did not include a single woman was not merely unfortunate: it was negligent.

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<sup>41</sup> Only 10.6% of Conservative candidates in the 1997 election were women, compared to 24.6% of Labour candidates.

<sup>42</sup> 13 women were elected as Conservative MPs in the 1997 election; in addition, Jacqui Lait, won the Beckenham by-election of November 1997.

<sup>43</sup> It is somehow symbolic that a woman was chosen as Conservative candidate for Sedgefield (the Prime Minister's seat) in the 1997 Election.

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William Hague has made a point of trying to shake the Tory Party out of old attitudes. In his speech launching the debate on a new Party constitution on 23 July 1997, Mr Hague said:

When we resolve as we must, to encourage more women into a career in our Party, the whole Party, including constituency selection committees, must feel committed to that same goal... I want to see more Conservative MPs who are women.

However, much more needs to be done.

A key method for senior Conservative politicians to signal their priorities to the Party is through their speeches at the Party Conference. Since 1997, only cursory mention has been given to the need for the Party to reform in order to give women a more central role. In 1997, in a single reference to women, William Hague noted that he wanted, 'to see many more women on our benches in the House of Commons.' In 1998, he mentioned women only in regard to marriage, for which he advocated support through the tax system. In 1999, his only mention of women was in regard to a new policy, Family Scholarships, which provide financial support for mothers who require training to return to the labour market.

*Since 1997, only cursory mention has been given to the need for the Party to reform in order to give women a more central role.*

Of recent Party Chairmen, Lord Parkinson made a strong statement in support of reform in 1997, noting that the Party had to attract more women as candidates, as councillors and as professional staff in Central Office. However neither he nor Michael Ancram returned to the subject in their speeches at the 1998 and 1999 conferences.

The Party's policy documents have also all but ignored women. The report on the *Listening to Britain* exercise, designed to show that the Party was no longer out of touch with the electorate, did not mention women at all. The only policy specifically relevant to women in the policy document launched at the 1999 Conference, *The Common Sense Revolution*, is the Family Scholarship referred to above. For the *1997 Conservative Party Manifesto*, the only policy specific to women was the commitment to minimise the barriers to affordable, high quality childcare.

Similarly, in *Fresh Future – The Conservative Party Renewed* (which describes the Party's internal reforms), women are mentioned only twice. Central Office's booklet *A*

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*Glance at the Conservative Party* makes no mention of Conservative women at all, or of the body supposed to represent them, the Conservative Women's National Council. The European Union of Women, currently affiliated to the Party is also ignored. That two organisations with a combined membership of over 100,000 women should be left out of such a publication speaks volumes. Nor does the new Constitution make any mention of women in the Party, or of equal opportunities for men and women. The guide for aspiring MPs, *Becoming a Conservative Party Candidate*, uses the words "he", "his" and "himself" to refer to a candidate. It is a minor point, but an unwelcome and unwelcoming one.

*The Party's recent policy documents have all but ignored women... the overwhelming impression is that the Party leadership does not see women's issues as worthy of attention.*

Meanwhile, the Shadow Cabinet, usually the public face of the Party, now contains three women (compared to 19 men), and the front bench team in the Commons contains three more. This is not bad from such a small pool in the Commons: to get more women to the very top, more women are needed at every other level of the Parliamentary Party.

The overwhelming impression is that the Party leadership does not see women's issues as worthy of attention.

### **The selection process**

Part of the problem lies in the details of the process by which candidates are selected. To become a candidate, all applicants must be "approved". This involves the following six stages:

1. *Filling in the application form and providing references*
2. *An interview with a Regional Director*
3. *An interview with a Special Adviser on Candidates*
4. *A possible third interview with a three person panel*
5. *Attendance at a Parliamentary Selection Board*
6. *Constituency Selection Interviews*

There has been something of a move to encourage women to apply to be candidates, reflected in the slightly improved figures above. The Candidates Department at Central Office has asked members of the national Party board to let

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them know of anyone they think should apply. The Party's women's organisation, the Conservative Women's National Council (CWNC) has also been asked to forward any suitable names, and has already done so. Attempts have also been made to encourage women in industry to consider applying.

The Parliamentary Selection Board is held over a weekend in a hotel. The Selection Board has not been the real focus of complaints by women, but a few flaws are apparent which make it more difficult for forceful women to make it through. In particular, selectors do not undergo formal training for the event and evidence has emerged of significant inconsistencies in selection practices: it appears that some selectors are, unconsciously or otherwise, discriminating against women who do not fit the perceived stereotype.

The next stage is the constituency selection interviews – firstly by the Selection Committee, then by the Constituency Executive Council, and then by the membership at large.

Most of the problems seem to arise in the membership interviews: flagrantly sexist questions, the dismissal of women candidates, the outdated attitudes of many members. It is at these meetings that the rather quirkiest and old-fashioned elements of the Conservative Party membership tend to emerge and make the most of their prized constituency autonomy.

The Conservative Party does have *Rules and Best Practice for the Selection of Candidates*. This contains Guidance on Discrimination Law in Section 10. However, only those who conduct the first interview (the Selection Committee) need read these rules. The Special General Meeting which actually chooses the candidate may be attended by all members of at least three months' standing. Few are likely to have a detailed knowledge of the local constituency rule book, or of the Rules and Best Practice from Central Office. Even fewer are likely to have much knowledge of the provisions of, say, the Sex Discrimination Act. And the suspicion must be that even if they did, there are plenty of people in the Party who wouldn't care.

Even worse, those who do take the trouble to read Section 10 will be little the wiser. All that it contains is a collection of half-hearted exhortations not to be overtly discriminatory, and vague snippets of information about anti-discrimination law. Nowhere does it state plainly that *all discrimination is unacceptable in the modern Conservative Party*. The very title of the Chapter, "Guidance on Discrimination Law" does little to inspire confidence, leaving one with the distinct impression that the Party is doing no more than it has to stay on the right side of the law.

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But it is questionable even whether this much is being done in practice. The laws against sex discrimination in employment are clear and can be interpreted broadly. The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 states:

- 6(1) It is unlawful for a person, in relation to employment by him at an establishment in Great Britain, to discriminate against a woman:
- (a) in the arrangements he makes for the purpose of determining who should be offered that employment, or
  - (b) in the terms in which he offers her that employment, or
  - (c) by refusing or deliberately omitting to offer her that employment

In the case brought by the two Labour Party members who complained about the Labour Party's all-women shortlists, it was argued that selection committees to choose candidates for Parliament were not caught by the legislation. This notion was firmly rejected by the court. Any selection committee which operates in a discriminatory fashion is, therefore, extremely vulnerable to legal action.

In addition, Article 119(4) of the Treaty of Amsterdam will give limited scope for measures designed to encourage positive discrimination:

With a view to ensuring full equality in practice between men and women in working life, the principle of equal treatment shall not prevent any Member State from maintaining or adopting measures providing for specific advantages in order to make it easier for the under-represented sex to pursue a vocational activity or to prevent or compensate for disadvantages in professional careers.

Thus the Conservative Party will no longer be able to hide behind the precedent set by the two Labour Party members who (successfully) took the Labour Party to court over the issue of women-only shortlists.

The Equal Opportunities Commission put it very simply:

The starting point is to look around you: what is the current gender balance of your staff? How many women hold senior posts? Look at the record of your recent recruitment to see the number of women and men, married and single, that have applied for jobs and the type of vacancy for which they have applied. If you find discrepancies, you need to examine all the elements of your recruitment process to look for discriminatory barriers.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted from the Equal Opportunities Commission website.

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The Conservative Party is, despite its recent efforts, failing on all points. For once, it may be wise to look to the Labour Party for how to overcome long-established discrimination.

### **The Labour party: from chauvinism to results**

The history of Labour chauvinism is a long one, as implied by the slogan adopted by Labour women in the 1980s: "Women make policy as well as tea." That the Labour Party could overcome its prejudice within ten or so years gives hope to those campaigning for a similar outcome in the Conservative Party.

In the first decades of this century, the Labour Party's attitude to women and the expansion of the suffrage was, at best, ambivalent. Certainly, some factions of the Labour Party (such as the Fabian Society which had its own women's group from 1908) believed that the extension of the vote and the promotion of working class interests should go hand in hand.<sup>45</sup>

But this was the exception, not the rule. Despite Mr Blair's claims at the recent Labour Party Conference,<sup>46</sup> in the early years of the century the Labour Party opposed women's suffrage, preferring instead to concentrate on extending the vote to working men (one third of men were at that time still without the vote). This hostility to female suffrage caused Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst to break all their ties with the Labour Party in 1906 and 1907. Even after the First World War, the Labour Party campaigned vigorously for women to return to the home, being one of the major forces behind the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act. Throughout the Twenties and Thirties, motions passed by the Labour Women's Conference on subjects ranging from birth control measures to family endowment were continually voted down by the Labour Party Conference. Only nine women were elected as Labour MPs during the whole of the inter-war years.

The Labour Party's patronising attitude towards "the housewife" continued well into the century. Douglas Jay's remark typified this attitude when, as a minister in the

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<sup>45</sup> See for example the important pamphlet by Isabella Ford, *Women and Socialism*, 1907.

<sup>46</sup> In his speech to the 1999 Labour Party Conference, Mr Blair said: "To us today, it almost defies belief that people had to die to win the fight for the vote for women. But they did. That battle was a massive, heroic struggle. But why did it need such a fight? Because Tory MPs stood up in the House of Commons and said: 'voting is a man's business.'" He either does not know or chooses to conceal the fact that the Labour Party actively campaigned against the extension of the suffrage until 1913 and that it was the Conservative Party and not the Labour Party which first gave women equality at the ballot box.

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Attlee Government, he said that "Housewives as a whole cannot be trusted to buy the right things... The gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for the people than the people themselves."<sup>47</sup>

The Labour Party has, until the most recent election, never held the same appeal for women as the Tory Party. But it was aware of this problem, and took active steps to deal with it. The result was a remarkable change in both representation and voter behaviour. On April 30 1997, 13.6% of Labour MPs were women. On 1 May 1997, the proportion had gone up to 24.2%

The Labour Women's Network was formed by a group of four women in 1987. To get a clear picture of how women were being dealt with by the Party, confidential questionnaires were sent to all women candidates asking them about issues including:

- their experiences in the selection process;
- how much it cost them;
- and how it could be improved.

The result was a considerable expansion of the Network. The Network currently numbers about 300 women. It is not affiliated to the party, but maintains strong links with it. It has put resolutions to the Party Conference; made alliances with women in the TUC; and kept in touch with women in the constituencies and in the Labour Women's Organisation. Most importantly, it won the active endorsement of the leadership of the party.

Their message was not always well-received. In the same way that some elements in the Tory Party are reluctant to accept this particular message of change, the network encountered considerable hostility from traditionalists in a Party which had no great record in fighting women's issues.

*The public position of the Party leader was seen to be just as important.*

Their success was remarkable. In 1989, the Labour Party introduced a quota of 40% in the whole party, and in all its committees: of 5 branch officers, 2 had to be women. If two men were elected first then the next had to be a woman. Local Labour parties were not allowed to send more male delegates than women delegates to the Conference: that in itself radically altered its composition.

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in M. Kandiah's unpublished thesis, *Lord Woolton's Chairmanship of the Conservative Party 1946-51*, 1992.,



## CONSERVATIVE WOMEN

The public position of the Party leader was seen to be just as important. The Network advocated the presence of more women in the speechwriting team. They persuaded Neil Kinnock and then Tony Blair to be positive in speeches about the advancement of women, and about policies of interest to women.

At the top, the position was to be the same as further down the party. It was agreed that there should be reserved places in the Cabinet for women. A quota of 50% was also agreed for candidates for Parliament, though this did not operate until selection for the 1997 election. Before this, women were required to be on every shortlist. All too often, they proved to be a token presence. When the quota system started to operate, all the parliamentary seats which Labour might win and which needed a new candidate were considered for a women only shortlist. Constituency parties were talked through the new procedure, and volunteer constituencies were called for. It is not often realised that 90% of the constituencies with women-only shortlists were volunteers.

When half of the women-only shortlist constituencies had chosen, the principle was challenged under the sex discrimination laws by two men – Messrs Elliott and Jepson – who claimed that the Labour Party's approach discriminated against them. They won their case, but 37 women had already been selected. However, the Party got round the problem in the Scottish Parliaments (elected by proportional representation) by the process of "zipping" – so that male and female followed one another on the lists – and by "twinning" constituencies – so that one man and one woman was chosen for each pair.

Throughout the 1990s the Network continued its operations. They got headquarters in London; they found able women and trained them, having recruited experienced people to do the training; members started Emily's List to provide financial backing for these women. Throughout, they ensured that women and women's issues maintained a high profile in the party.

And Labour won the lion's share of the women's vote at the 1997 election.

### **The Conservative Women's National Council**

The Conservative Women's National Council (CWNC) is a rather different animal from the Labour Women's Network. It is rooted far more in the traditional role for Conservative women: in the words of Moon Landrieu, "women do lickin' and stickin'."

Traditionally, members of the women's organisation were encouraged to see themselves as the eyes and ears of the party. They were its intelligence gatherers (as well

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as its fundraisers and local backbone). Constituency women would act as listening posts for voter concerns at a local level; if those further up the chain of the women's movement spotted a pattern emerging, they would write to the minister concerned. All too often, however, their contribution was ignored if it conflicted with party policy. On issues ranging from in vitro fertilisation, to child benefit to transferable tax allowances, the Party ignored the contributions the party's women were making until it was too late. This is perhaps unsurprising given the findings of a study a few years ago which found that the Tories had the least developed communications network of any major European party.<sup>48</sup>

This role continues to this day for the women of the Conservative Party; there are signs, moreover, that the Party hierarchy are becoming more responsive to the concerns raised.

A new group, called the Conservative Network, was also set up, specifically to attract and help younger professional women who might be interested in the Party. This was rather more along the lines of the Labour Network, even mimicking its name. However, it very quickly evolved into an organisation which included men as well, and the CWNC retained its role as the body for Conservative women.

The CWNC has also extended its role, and has become more professional and more involved in helping able women throughout the country to become members of parliament. The CWNC is now actively pursuing the objectives set out in its constitution:

...to ensure that women are given every opportunity to play a full part within the Conservative Party....to identify and promote the involvement of Conservative women in all aspects of political and public life by setting out a political agenda which will include political events, training and policy presentation.

Its recent activities have included helping women to gain public speaking experience, holding training meetings for high-flyers who have been spotted within the Party organisation. Recent meetings have, for example, dealt with how to deal with hostile questioning from an audience – an unfortunate necessity given some of the evidence of constituency selection meetings.

During the consultation process on the recent Party reforms, the abolition of the group was much mooted. In the end, it was retained, with a new constitution and a looser relationship with the Party. The old battle between those who found it patronising and those who found it essential was fought again.

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<sup>48</sup> See P. Whiteley et al, *True Blues: the politics of Conservative Party membership*, OUP, 1994.

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The CWNC has a strong partner in the European Union of Women. The British section of this Europe-wide organisation is affiliated in the UK to the Conservative Party. Yet it too has not been given the support which might be expected: for example the European Woman of Achievement Annual Award Scheme, created to draw attention to the abilities of women in business, the arts and in humanitarian enterprise, was founded in the teeth of Party opposition.

The CWNC is making moves in the right direction. But in many ways, it is forced to work against the grain of the Conservative Party. Professor Joni Lovenduski of Southampton University comments that:

It was much easier to get the Labour Party to do something. Because they have a tradition of in-fighting, a network was not unusual, whereas the Conservative Party has a tradition of loyalty.<sup>49</sup>

### **Finance**

One of the great barriers for women seeking election is the lack of financial support.

In the US, the "Emily's List" group has proved an invaluable tool for female Democrats. With its motto that "Early Money Is Like Yeast", it was set up by a woman candidate, Ellen Malcolm, who, with little money behind her, was defeated by her male opponent's negative advertising. At that point, no Democratic woman had ever been elected to the Senate in her own right, no woman had been elected as governor of a large state, and the number of Democratic women in the House of Representatives had declined to 12. Though restricted to Democratic and pro-choice candidates, it has had a major effect on the ability of women to seek office, and now boasts some 50,000 members. In 1998 it managed to raise \$7.5 million to help these candidates seek office.

Labour Women's Network set up "Emily's List UK" in 1992, raising the profile of women in the Party to a remarkable degree, in spite of the fact that Britain has much less of a history of the sort of political action committee which Emily's List exemplifies. At the last general election, the group distributed up to £500 to 70 women seeking selection as parliamentary candidates, and it has since extended its ambit to cover the new devolved bodies and local government. Emily's List Australia followed in 1996. The funnelling of funds to women's groups and women candidates has given women a real boost, and allowed a real base to be established to secure future success. Will the Conservative Party learn from these examples?

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with the authors.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SOME LESSONS FROM EUROPE

IT IS NOT JUST THE LABOUR PARTY which offers an example of how more women can be elected to Parliament. Europe too offers some examples to be followed.

The numbers of female legislators varies widely from country to country as can be seen from the following table:

COUNTRY	FEMALE LEGISLATORS (%)
Sweden	40.4
Denmark	37.4
Finland	33.5
New Zealand	27.5
Germany	26.2
Australia	24.9
Spain	24.7
UK (Labour Party only)	24.2
Canada	21.9
UK (all parties)	18.2
Portugal	13.0
USA	12.0
Ireland	12.0
Italy	11.1
France	10.9
<b>UK (Conservative Party only)</b>	<b>8.5</b>
Greece	6.3

Before the last election, the UK was firmly in the bottom quarter of the table (on the eve of the 1997 general Election, only 9.5% of all MPs were women). Now it can at least claim a mid-table position. Unfortunately, most of this improvement has been brought about by the Labour Party – if the Conservative Party was typical of Parliament as a whole, the UK would find itself second from bottom, with a meagre 8.5%. In general, it seems that left of centre parties have learned faster the importance of women's contribution.

What lessons can they learn from their counterparts?

## CONSERVATIVE WOMEN

### Quotas and quorums

There remain strong voices against quotas – particularly from the centre-right. For example, Rt Hon Ann Widdecombe strongly criticised proposals contained in the Conservative Party's consultation paper which suggested reserving places for women on parliamentary selection boards. She told BBC TV's Conference Live programme:

This is part of the consultation paper that I think is highly misconceived. If there is any circumstance at all in which men and women are competing and the decision is not made on merit but is made on a percentage having to be interviewed, that in my view is a backward step. It is very patronising, it is very humiliating. I don't want a group of second-class citizens in Parliament who haven't got there on the same basis as everyone else.

Yet throughout Europe they have been the most effective and direct method of increasing the proportion of female representatives.

In the Party consultation exercise after the last General Election, members of the Conservative Party were asked to consider the use of quotas in the Party. They decisively rejected them. Sceptics feared that they will isolate women legislators; they worry that they smack of tokenism, and that they patronise women. They hint that they dislike the idea of politicians being elected for their gender rather than their ability, and that more qualified candidates might get pushed aside. Any party advocating a quota system, whether formal or informal, must be prepared to face up to and deal with these criticisms.

*The first point to note is that quotas per se are not enough.  
Strong women's networks and a large pool of suitably  
qualified candidates are essential.*

The first point to note is that quotas *per se* are not enough. Strong women's networks and a large pool of suitably qualified candidates are essential. Indeed, some parties which have introduced quotas without these prerequisites (such as the SDP in Germany) have tarnished the concept of quotas: if women are being appointed to positions of high office simply on the grounds of their gender, not their capability, then the system which got them there must bear some responsibility for their failure.

The second point is that there are many different types of quota system in operation in Europe, each with its own degree of coercion.

## SOME LESSONS FROM EUROPE

The most direct way is to proscribe that a certain percentage of the elected representatives be women. This is the strongest and most intrusive form of quota system, but it has the virtue of leaving little to chance.

Alternatively, a quota system may demand that the parties field a certain number of women candidates. The Greens in Germany instituted something of a culture change in German politics by managing in 1987 actually to send more women to the federal parliament than men. The SPD now has a similar quota system, both for candidates and for internal party committees: every second person must be female.

A third possibility is that the parties adopt informal mechanisms to ensure that the requisite proportion of women are adopted as parliamentary candidates. This system is popular in Scandinavia, and has been used with some success – particularly in Scotland – by the UK Labour Party.

The fourth option is not strictly speaking a quota but a *quorum* system. This system has, after fierce internal debate, been successfully adopted by the Christian Democrats in Germany. In this system, a target is established for a minimum proportion of women appointments (in the case of the CDU, it is every third appointment or candidate on the list should be female). If, however, this target is not reached, and three men are appointed, the third male candidate must go to a direct “play off” against the female candidate. This gives women a stronger chance to show their abilities. It has helped to expose the innate gender bias in many selection committees. It promotes well-qualified women while still avoiding the danger of being over-prescriptive.

Recent converts to a quota system include the French state, which has changed the constitution to implement parity in decision making, though the details and practical import of this still have to be worked out. Further debates are under way on how to implement the principle. Belgium has also recently written gender equality into its legislation. In Denmark, all public committees must have a gender-balanced composition. In Belgium and the Netherlands, on all representative bodies, if there is not a balanced list, those places which should be occupied by women must remain blank.

It is likely that, given the in-built reluctance of the constituency associations to accept Central Office control, and given the hostility of the Party to quotas, the leadership would be uncomfortable with any system of quotas or quorums. But such a system may, should the Party fail to adapt, one day be necessary.

# CONSERVATIVE WOMEN

## Organisation within parties

Much of the success of women in politics in Europe and America can be attributed to the work of women's groups at least as much as it can to any system of quotas or quorums.

Those providing financial support, such as Emily's List, have proved invaluable, but they and other groups and networks have also had a key role to play in promoting women's interests, issues and status within political parties. The vitality of women's branches of parties and other organisations is a crucial factor in bringing women into the political mainstream.

On a practical level, they can provide valuable help in training women for the selection process, for campaigning and beyond. In the US, Emily's List and the high-profile National Federation of Republican Women organise training projects for their respective constituencies, dealing with central issues such as selection, staff training, fundraising, use of the press, campaigning, and budgeting. Moreover, they provide an invaluable network for women wanting to get involved with the party while their strength allows them to provide a very powerful voice for women and women's interests within the party. These groups should be models for any women's group in the UK.

## Electoral systems

Different electoral systems can dramatically effect women's chances of political success. While in "first past the post" and single member electoral systems (such as the UK and the US) women are significantly under-represented, in those countries with proportional representation, the position of women is often much better. Indeed there is an striking correlation between a high level of female representation and the adoption of a proportional electoral system.<sup>50</sup>

Figures compiled by International IDEA show the clear gulf. The difference is clear for all to see. This tale is backed up by the fact that in all EU countries in which women exceed 25% of the elected representatives, a PR system has been adopted.

List systems in particular seem to have a particular effect on levels of representation of women. In such systems, the party "gatekeepers", who are often particularly sensitive to public perceptions of the party, tend to have greater control of who represents the party, and often see balance as a vote winner, if not a good in itself.

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<sup>50</sup> It should be noted however that in the one national election in the UK conducted under PR (the May 1999 Elections to the European Parliament), only 3 out of the 36 (or 8.3%) Conservative MEPs elected were women – almost exactly the same proportion as elected to Westminster two years earlier.

## SOME LESSONS FROM EUROPE

### Percentage of women MPs across 24 national legislatures 1945-98

#### A comparison of majoritarian and proportional systems<sup>51</sup>

	1945	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	1998
Majoritarian systems*	3.05	2.13	2.51	2.23	3.37	8.16	11.64
Proportional systems†	2.93	4.73	5.47	5.56	11.89	18.13	23.03

\* Majoritarian (or single member district) Systems: Australia, Canada, France (1960 onwards), Japan, New Zealand (1945-90), UK, USA.

† Proportional (or multi-member district) Systems: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France (1945-50), Greece (1980 onwards), Iceland, Ireland, Israel (1950 onwards), Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand (1998 only), Norway, Portugal (1980 onwards), Spain (1980 onwards), Germany (1950 onwards; West Germany prior to 1990).

International IDEA research suggested that three elements of the system are particularly strong factors: the number of members to be elected from each multi-member constituency (as women tend to be further down the list, and this system allows them to be reached); high electoral thresholds (which discourage “mini-parties which tend to be run by men”); and closed party lists. While the last of these may be surprising, research has shown that the extra effort required to persuade voters to elect women is not always undertaken sufficiently wholeheartedly by parties. As a result, women tend to get struck off, or do less well than they would under a closed list system. There is also the fear that it lets the parties “off the hook”: they can blame the voters for failing to elect women, when it is usually the system which is at fault.

Crucial, of course, in a list system is how high the women are placed on the list. A strong showing by women in the lower parts of the party lists is no more than a token gesture if it means that no women actually get elected. This phenomenon has certainly been apparent in Germany, but women and the electorate at large soon get wise to it.

With proportional representation being introduced into the voting system in Britain (however regrettably), there is a growing opportunity for the Conservative Party to experiment with measures designed to improve the gender balance of candidates.

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<sup>51</sup> Data taken from International IDEA website.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### RECOMMENDATIONS

THE PARTY STILL HAS THE OPPORTUNITY to prove that it has changed its attitude to women before the next general election, and for the Conservatives to go into the next Parliament a better party. The vast majority of winnable seats have not yet chosen their candidate for the next election. If constituencies and Central Office both show sufficient determination, the next election could be a defining moment for the Party.

Above all, the Conservative leadership must recognise that there are real and tangible barriers preventing talented qualified women to share in the running of the Party and in Parliament. This is born out by the low proportion of women at senior levels within the Party. This lack of success relates to a reactionary attitude towards women that pervades the Party at all levels. The Party will continue to decline unless it accepts the right of women to participate fully in the political process.

#### **Issues for Leadership of the Party**

1. The Conservative Party needs to develop a coherent strategy, based on the full and equal participation of women. This should be set out in a statement of intent from the Leader of the Party and supported by his shadow ministers
2. The Party leadership should campaign throughout the country to win the hearts and minds of constituencies showing why it is important for the Party to have the full support of women throughout the country and how this can be done.
3. William Hague should state that, he is setting the target of a minimum of 40% of all positions on the Management Board, the National Convention and at Conservative Central Office are occupied by women.
4. The number of political appointees and potential politicians running Central Office should be reduced in order to develop a more disinterested political climate at the Party Headquarters.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

5. William Hague should tell all Conservative Associations to reconsider their policies towards women and explain that women should be in a minimum of 40% of all the governing committee posts by the time of the next election.
6. He must re-emphasise his desire to have many more women in parliament by the next election. He should set a target that 30% of all candidates at the next election be women, with 40% thereafter.
7. There should be a 40% women rule on the selection list of any constituency looking for a candidate
8. Top quality women who are interested in making a career in politics should be approached and wooed to stand as candidates. Resources and effort should be dedicated to this end.
9. A female Party official should be appointed to produce an annual Progress Report on the status of women within the Party, both at the National Convention and at each Conservative Party Conference.
10. The leadership of the party must indicate publicly the value they place on the contribution women can and do make to the country and the Conservative Party. They need to talk about their awareness of the need for balance, and then act to involve women at all levels, and with a high profile. Every time a senior party figure speaks, he or she must emphasise the idea that the Tory Party welcomes women (a few female speech writers for William Hague would be no bad thing).
11. Mentors who can advise, assist and monitor women candidates (as well as male candidates) should be appointed.

### **The selection process**

12. Incorporate good equal opportunities practice into the rules of every constituency association.<sup>52</sup>
13. Ensure that all selection meetings are aware that discriminatory practices will not be tolerated. The compulsory attendance of a trained agent or a supervisor from Central Office, fully trained in every aspect of British and European Equal Opportunities law, could oversee this.

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<sup>52</sup> See *Guidelines for Equal Opportunities Employers*, Equal Opportunities Commission.

## CONSERVATIVE WOMEN

14. Videotape and monitor *all* selection meetings. At present the Chairman has the option of doing so, but this rarely happens. Too much bad practice slips through the net. Videotaping is a sensible precaution – for all those involved – in the event that a candidate choose to take legal action. An *independent* monitor should be appointed to review all videotapes.
15. Any constituency meeting which the independent monitor feels does not conduct its affairs in a satisfactory fashion could expect to have a candidate of Central Office's choosing imposed on them.
16. Publish explicit criteria for the selection of candidates set by Central Office and by the constituency associations.
17. Encourage younger members to get involved in the selection process.
18. Consider headhunting of suitable women and placing them onto the candidates list directly.

### **The Conservative Women's National Council**

19. The Conservative Women's National Council needs a much higher public profile. The party must provide full media support in its efforts to promote a modern progressive image. It must do what Emily's List and the National Federation of Republican Women have done for Women in America – give proper funding and high quality support and training to prospective women candidates.
20. Use established training bodies – such as those organised by the British section of the European Union of Women – to train prospective women candidates.
21. In particular, the CNWC can take the initiative in implementing some of the above recommendations. In particular, it can:
  - develop support networks so that more women can campaign for public office;
  - create a database of suitably qualified women;
  - compile and publish statistical data on the position of women within the Party;
  - encourage senior Conservative women to act as mentors to other women;
  - set up special training programmes for potential women candidates based on the experience of groups such as the European Union of Women.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### The re-appraisal of key themes

22. Philosophical themes and policies must be reconsidered bearing in mind the modern ideal of self realisation which is so important to younger women.
23. Policies should be rooted in the positive belief that women have as much to offer as men, both within the party structure and in Parliament; and that their talents are often under-utilised. A Conservative agenda that is directly relevant to the needs and aspirations of today's women must be developed.
24. Discussion of the following subjects should help to create an atmosphere from which issues of particular interest to women can emerge:
  - Women as Mothers: both in the gender equal northern European countries and in America the mother is accorded a particularly position in society. In southern European countries, the mother is accorded a particularly high status. In Britain, neither seems to be the case.
  - Women and children: Conservative politicians should seek to understand, discuss and develop policies to deal with the difficulties inherent in bringing up children and maintain a career.
  - Women and work: workers in Britain have the longest working hours in Europe and one of the lowest productivity rates. Policies to encourage greater flexibility for workers so that they can enjoy a more fulfilling home life can be considered.<sup>53</sup>
  - Women and sex: if young children do not receive sensible sex education at school firmly enshrined in a moral and legal framework, is it surprising that there are so many teenage and under age pregnancies? Conservatives must stress the benefits of being taught not just about the facts of life but also the hazards of unplanned pregnancy.
  - Women as entrepreneurs: more and more businesses are being started by women. Can this encouraging trend be further developed? What are the difficulties which should be studied? Imaginative arrangements giving access to capital, portable pensions and financial packages can and are being developed to help women succeed in starting businesses.

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<sup>53</sup>

Such changes are now being carried out in Japan.

## CONSERVATIVE WOMEN

- Women as planners: if career women wish to stop work to look after their children, what arrangements can be made to make the transition from two salaries to one more bearable?
- Women as social victims: how can single mothers and victims of domestic violence be helped? 100,000 children leave home every year because of violence in the home, frequently from violent stepfathers or partners yet the police continue to return these children to the home and to further violence.

## APPENDIX ONE

### POSITIONS HELD BY WOMEN IN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

Margaret Thatcher occupies a unique position as the only woman female Prime Minister in the history of this country. It is even more of an outstanding achievement when one considers how few other senior positions have ever been occupied by a woman.

- There has been no other female leader of a major political Party.
- There have been no female leaders of the Conservative Party in the House of Lords.
- There has been no female Chair of the Conservative Party Organisation.
- There has been no female Professional head of Central Office Organisation.
- There has been no female Treasurers or Joint Treasurers of the Conservative Party.
- There have been no female Conservative Chief Whips.
- The first female Conservative Whips were appointed after the 1997 election.
- There has been no female Chair of the Private Members' 1922 Committee.
- There has been no female Chair of the Executive Committee of the National Union.
- Margaret Thatcher remains the only women to hold any of the principal Cabinet Offices (Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary).

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*David Willetts MP, with Richard Forsdyke*

The Conservative landslide defeat in the General Election of 1997 was not unprecedented. The Party suffered similar electoral disasters in both 1906 and 1945. The Party had to wait for sixteen years to form a Government after its first landslide defeat this century - but just six years after its second. What did the Party get wrong after 1906, and what did it get right after 1945? David Willetts examines the reaction of the Party to its earlier landslide defeats. His analysis suggests that electoral success will only be achieved if the Party accepts the need for change, not only in terms of party organisation but more importantly in terms of policy.

*...this elegant and beautifully researched work – Peter Osborne in the Sunday Express*

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