



What part did Conservative women play in developing modern politics? What does the Conservative Party know about modern women? Does the Conservative Party have the interests of the women of Britain at heart?

Tessa Keswick argues that women were instrumental in the electoral success of the Conservative Party over much of the twentieth century. In turn, the Conservative Party promoted policies which reflected the growing status of women in society.

But in recent years, this symbiotic relationship has broken down. And as the Conservative Party has lost touch with the aspirations and concerns of modern women, so has the Labour Party listened – to its great electoral benefit.

In this ground-breaking speech, Tessa Keswick calls not only for a radical overhaul of the party organisation but for the development and proclamation of a package of women-friendly policies. Only by adopting this twin-track approach can the Conservative Party recapture the allegiance of this most important of voting groups.

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CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

The CPS Lecture at the 2000 Conservative Party Conference

Second amongst equals

Women and the Conservative Party

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THE FRENCH SAY THAT 'to understand everything is to forgive everything' but in the story to be told about women coming 'Second among Equals' in the Conservative party I wonder if that is true – about forgiving I mean!

We need to understand that a quiet revolution occurred in the 20th century, a century which will go down amongst other things as the century of women's emancipation during which their position and standing changed. So if the Conservatives are to be effective as a political party, we need to ask: what part did Conservative women play in developing modern politics? What do Conservatives know about modern women? And does the Conservative Party have the interests of the women of Britain at heart?

God created Adam but it was Eve, the 'empty vessel' according to St Paul, who was the temptress who plucked the apple and brought sin into the world. The female of the species paid for this 'crime' for a very long time and in some senses they have never got over it at all. But Adam was the first one on the scene, and there is no doubt that he turned this to advantage. For better or for worse, men have dominated the public face of history. Women were relegated to a *subordinate* position, living in a world almost entirely shaped by their male counterparts.

The process of transformation in gender roles began with the French Revolution in the late 18th century. Influential philosophers such as Rousseau emphasised the modern concept of the pursuit of inalienable human rights. Women began to demand equal rights and in particular the right to vote, the right to be elected and the

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right to gain public office. A hundred years later Oscar Wilde was still able to joke that women fare better than men in this world, as more things are taboo for them. It was in England that the most effective women's movement was launched in the second half of the 19th century, through people like Florence Nightingale and John Stuart Mill. They started the debate on university education and vocational training for women and voting rights for women. Throughout Europe at this period came a spontaneous demand for education for women. However, it was not until the First World War that women, in taking over the jobs of the men who were at the front, proudly prevented a collapse of the economy. After that, they began to look at themselves in a different way.

The 1920s saw a massive breakthrough. Barriers began to come down throughout the western world. Between 1918 and 1928 Polish, German, American and British women won the full franchise (though France resisted until 1945). In Britain, through legal freedoms introduced by the Baldwin government, women were able to compete professionally for the first time in every sphere of life, including politics. At last they could hope to achieve equality through economic independence – they could choose whether they wished to support themselves or to be full or partial economic partners in relationships. They moved from a situation where they were economically dependent and where they therefore played a secondary role, to a fuller participation in the world. That world, though, remained essentially male. A male world made for men where male sovereignty was still dominant.

The Equal Franchise Act of 1928 extended the vote to all women over the age of 21. Typically however Party leaders at the time believed that these changes would make feminist policies redundant. Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister proudly pointed out at the time:

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. Women will have, with us, the fullest rights. The grounds for the old agitation is gone, and gone forever.

How wrong he was! But his heart and head were in the right place. Within a fortnight of the Franchise Act being passed, outstanding modernising reforms were introduced which enabled women, for the first time, to participate in the professions alongside men.

Remember Baldwin was carrying on something of a tradition. It was during the Liberal coalition, with the Tories as the largest party, that Nancy Astor gained her seat in the House of Commons on the limited franchise – followed by the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act of 1919, the Jurors Act (Enrolment of Women) of 1920, the Maintenance Orders Act of 1920, and later the Widows and Orphans Act of 1925 and so on. Women began to enjoy a freedom hitherto unknown to them. At last they were able to choose whether they wished to support themselves or be full or partial economic partners in relationships. This recognition was rewarded with loyalty at the polls for decades.

It is important too to stress the crucial role that Conservative women at grass roots level played, not only in the liberalisation of rights for women but in their extraordinary contribution to the creation of the modern Conservative Party. It was the Conservative women's ability to mobilise the support of other women in the 19th and early 20th centuries which in effect created the first modern democratic mass movement. In the late 19th and early 20th century, inspired and led by Lady Randolph Churchill, the Primrose League, and then later on the National Union, mobilised well over a million loyal women members for the Conservative Party. These selfless women worked at every level, creating a social network of creative activity, drawing in all classes, within which Conservatism flourished.

Meaningful policies for women combined with a strong modern party machine enabled the modern Conservative party to dominate British politics for more than a century. The Tories won election after election and these were won through the women's vote. It was a massive achievement for which the women received relatively little recognition. After 1940, slogans such as Freedom and the Home

SECOND AMONGST EQUALS

exemplified the period – while the husband went out to fight for his country and his family, she not only kept the home fires burning but dabbled in politics and earned a living too.

The stereotypical family of the 1950s American TV series, *Father knows Best*, was a favourite. Father worked to support the family and came home from work to be waited upon and listened to. Mother answered the door in her apron, managed the household, raised the children and fed the dog. Unfair since women have always worked and worked hard. Today in America, however, a popular new programme is *Daddio* – the first to show a stay-at-home father as the central character.

In the mid 1960s, another great breakthrough took place. The advent of birth control – formally made available for the first time 40 years ago this summer – enabled women to take a further step. They could now make their own decisions about that central part of their lives – motherhood. Now this important part of their relationship with the opposite sex lay within their direct control – an awesome shift of power. To a considerable degree women became no longer dependent on men physically – perhaps a relief for men as well as women. In addition to their growing economic strength, women could now decide how and when they wished to use their powerful gift of maternity. In theory women could achieve anything they wished – the sky was the limit!

But there was a big fly in the ointment. Fifty years ago, Simone de Beauvoir, the greatest exponent of the worth and dignity of women, the foremost I would suggest in a long line of important feminist thinkers, warned that these new freedoms were not necessarily consistent with happiness. Nor should they be:

I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty.

De Beauvoir understood only too well that the essential conflict that was being unleashed between men and women was to be hugely difficult to resolve.

AFTER 70 YEARS OF political and economic liberty, and nearly 40 years of sexual liberty for women, it is time to stand back and make an assessment as to progress.

Women have become a force to be reckoned with, not just in the field of commerce but even more importantly in the media and in the political market place. Today their money, their opinions and their votes count. This is reflected in changes taking place to accommodate the new position of women all over the Western world. It is widely believed by the political classes in Europe and America, especially on the left, that more should be done to include them in the political process and in policy making. Following the example of the Northern European countries, others are bringing in important legislation to assist the new status and the interests of younger working women. Incredibly, France, despite remaining hugely chauvinistic, thanks partly to the remaining rigidities of the Code Napoleon, have this year and under intense debate, pushed through legislation designed to increase the presence of women on electoral lists. Madame Jospin's influence here has been particularly strong. Equal representation is now the goal. French political parties will have state finance withheld unless they comply.

Meanwhile we must not close our eyes to the serious implications to the state of European law as it will now effect equality of opportunity. Firstly, the Convention of Human Rights has recently been incorporated into our domestic law. Secondly, the Treaty of Amsterdam clearly states that "where any sector of society finds itself less equal than others", the Human Rights Act

allows for Positive Action which is 'proportionate'. This raises the prospect of aspiring female parliamentary candidates bringing cases under this legislation alleging discrimination against them by political parties. These developments demonstrate that the gender scene is now changing out of all recognition.

These changes underline the fact that outstanding progress has been made by women everywhere except in politics. There they remain so severely under-represented in all parties that equity has become the issue. Conservatives will tend to disagree with any attempt by the law to interfere with the way they run their party. But once equity becomes an issue, it makes it more difficult to argue the conservative case.

Good Conservative women candidates fail to get elected over and over again – yet they are succeeding everywhere else. Look at the reality. Women now make up half the workforce – double the number 25 years ago and the vast majority work in the new and growing service industries. And while women's economic activity rates are rising, so men's are dropping. This projection is expected to continue and is a pattern repeated throughout Europe. In other words, women's contribution to the vital economic activity of the country continues to grow in significance. A third of new businesses in Britain are started by women and, as in America, they are the proprietors of more than a third of all firms. The majority of newly qualified solicitors in the UK are women, and a growing number of all managers and administrators are women.

These changes are reflected round the world. Women are a more powerful constituency than ever before. In Europe, America and Japan, women make 80% of consumer decisions for home consumption – a phenomenon reflected in the changes in marketing strategies. Broadsheet newspapers have become much more women-friendly. The world of work continues to change as women reach the higher levels of management: in the US, 82% of those firms led by women operated a flexitime scheme. Only 56% of firms without women at the top did so.

Naturally as women become more assertive and contribute more to the economic life of the country, feminine values are becoming more prevalent in society, albeit relatively slowly. By becoming their own master, women have gained the opportunity to combine career and family. The patriarchal-hierarchic world based on authority, where the man had the principal role, has given way to an 'ideal' societal model of partnership, including the relationship between man and woman. Though this is an ideal, it is wholly to be welcomed and is an indication of a nation coming of age.

So to recap: in the last century, with the help of the Conservative Party and conservative women, women have gained a stronger legal position based on equal rights and the right to vote. They have gained independence and freedom in making fundamental choices and in shaping their lives through the effective contraceptive pill. They have access to professions long considered to be the domain of men. And they have, in their determination to speak out, changed the consciousness about their role amongst most of the population.

WHY SHOULD THIS STORY of success trouble us? The problem is that the Conservative Party has, for once, failed to keep up with these deep cultural changes and the raised expectations of women.

This is important. After all, the party largely owed its electoral success in the last century to women. However, in 1983, male and female votes for the Conservatives reached parity. Ever since, the modern women's allegiance to the Party has been in decline. Women, who once saw the Labour Party as masculine and out of touch, have transferred this view to the Conservatives. At the last election, one million women who had previously voted Conservative voted Labour for the first time in their lives. Let us hope that this is temporary. But by early 1999, Labour's lead amongst 18 to 35 year old women had reached a massive 40 point lead – though I am relieved to say that this has fallen back.

Securing the women's vote has become an essential element of political success. President Clinton, probably the most popular American President in recent history, won his re-election with a 24% gender gap. In the spring, American pundits predicted that the presidential race could turn on Mr Bush's or Vice President Gore's appeal to women. And remember that the prolonged kiss Mr Gore bestowed on his wife Tipper made the front page of most newspapers. Consider what it did to the Vice President's ratings. He has leapt from minus 17 points to enjoy a 14 point lead within a few weeks. Though that lead is being eroded again.

Why should this matter to us? In Britain there is a direct correlation between voting intention and age groupings. A distinct

line can be now drawn around the age of 45 suggesting that emancipated women born in the early 1960s think and behave in a very different way to women born earlier. Women over the age of 50 may favour a way of life with different priorities. The Conservative Party must find a means of appealing to both groups.

The Conservative Party can no longer ignore these changes. It must develop a strategy to deal with them. The Conservative Party has a proven ability to win elections but must develop meaningful policies to do so. Some progress has been made but not enough. Certainly, Theresa May and Caroline Spelman are working hard on this with a number of able women. The recent document, *Choices*, was welcome and just what is needed. But it is dismaying that Theresa and Caroline's ideas have not been taken forward more forcefully by the Party. The September Conservative draft manifesto only mentions women once.

I feel the problem is so serious and on so many levels that the whole Party needs to become engaged in the interest of change – change to win. I believe the Party must find a distinctive strategy and a distinctive voice. Look at what the Women's Institute managed to do some months ago – they did not realise how powerful their voice could be on that occasion – but they refused to accept the outrageous claims the Prime Minister was making about the Health Service. By speaking up they literally forced a change of policy. Frankly, the Prime Minister was gobsmacked – but from now onwards the Women's Institute has earned the respect of the entire Labour Government! That is as it should be. In the same way, the Conservative Party must find a distinctive voice when speaking on behalf of women. This will mean great change.

After all the changed status of women forces us to think differently. If the eight out of ten mothers who now work are bringing home a good percentage of the family finances, their expectations are different. Women's self-esteem and feelings about themselves are different. Just as in wartime when they took on the men's jobs today, they are an integral and important part of the economy. Women expect more from those around them, from the

state and from the political parties. They expect to be treated equally and taken seriously. In their life choices, moving between the responsibilities of family and the world of work, they expect understanding if not absolute accommodation.

So we can no longer accept without question a political system that was set up years ago with the male breadwinner in mind – look at the hours in the House of Commons. Other examples – of which there are too many – include the tax system which was devised originally to cope with the needs and practices of the male breadwinner with judicious tax breaks made available to smooth business practise. But we should know that the inadequacy of an old-fashioned pensions scheme has failed to provide for poorer wives. Equal pay, though enshrined in legislation, remains elusive: women still earn only 81p for every £1 earned by men. The difficult administration of the liberated divorce laws, where for 20 years a blind eye was turned by the male dominated institutions to the needs of mothers and children, has led to real distress and poverty in our society.

Today the worst poverty in this rich country afflicts those who have had the worst representation: that is to say, older single women and single mothers with children. The point is that the system was devised mainly by powerful men. Now, though, there are powerful women, with different priorities and expecting equal treatment. They are demanding a look in. Something must be done about this.

It would be a mistake to imagine that the Conservative Party enjoys a monopoly of chauvinism – the reverse is the case. You can regularly read similar complaints from female members of the Labour Party. Look at Barbara Follett in the *New Statesman* asking “Has a woman’s place really changed?” She complained that “Westminster culture is pernicious, outdated and damaging”. Also the recent success of the Labour Party vote from women is by no means solid. There is everything to play for. But as early as 1985 some of the more forward-looking members of the Labour party, marking the changes in voting patterns, developed a strategy for

action which changed their entire approach to women. One cannot overestimate how successful this has been.

Since 1985 Labour has engineered a lot of activity to interest women. They have learnt the lesson from America that appealing separately to individual political groupings can be effective politics. That means that the aspirations and preoccupations of each group has to be dissected with the skill of a neuro-surgeon. Of all the socio-political groups in this country, women constitute the largest at 52%. Everywhere in the Labour Party there is female visibility and wide discussion of subjects of interest to women. It is easy, but absurd, to sneer at Blair’s Babes because the fact that more Labour women are in the Commons sends an important signal that Labour supports women.

THERE ARE TWO STRATEGIC AREAS where Conservatives now need to concentrate their attentions in promoting a new women-friendly culture. The first is in the management of the Party and the second relates to policy.

I would suggest five immediate changes: Firstly it continues to amaze me that Conservative politicians remain silent on this important subject. Indeed I know of no Conservative male politician who has anything to say publicly about women at all. The women's question remains virtually a non-issue. This must change. In order to change hearts and minds, top politicians must come out and make speeches about why women matter to the party and they must do it supported and surrounded by the women of the Party.

Secondly, political power is finite. No politician will willingly hand over his limited share of power to anyone. That is the nature of politics. So as long as the management of the party is dominated by male politicians nothing much will change the culture of our political system. A strong conflict of interest remains in place. I do believe that it is almost impossible for the Chairman of the Party to represent the diverse interests of the party in the country and at the same time have to deal with the short-term considerations of daily political life. The same is true of so many of the other politicians who run Central Office. It is a recipe for short term decisions which can appear opportunistic. Therefore in the interests of the party I would call for an independent Chairman/Woman in charge at Central Office.

Thirdly, more women should be involved in the decision making process both at Central Office and around the country. Women still do most of the work for the Party but they remain largely unrewarded and marginalised. This situation has got worse since the recent reorganisation of the Party – not better. This reorganisation enshrined even further the notion that women in the Party should be treated the same as men. The CWNC which is the principal women's organisation throughout the country is not even given a desk at Central Office and they are expected to hand over hard-earned funds to the Centre. In addition, the post of Vice-Chairman/Woman remains unfilled at Central Office so there is no direct contact point available for women at the present time.

Fourthly, there should be greater visibility of talented women throughout the party structures. As Margaret Jay pointed out with some contempt in her conference speech, there were only 17 Tory women in the Lords out of 750 hereditaries and only 14 women MPs – only one more than were elected just after the Tories gave all adult women the vote in 1928. Pathetic progress really.

Today, candidates for all the key seats have been selected and now, so as to show a change of heart, I call on the party to do the unthinkable and to set all-women short lists for the few remaining seats which will come up before the election in an attempt to give a modicum of balance at the next election.

Finally, I urge the women's organisations to celebrate a new independence consistent with their increased political clout. An important lesson in gaining independence is that a public platform has value. On top of that, economic clout obtains a marked increase in respect amongst colleagues especially when you have, up until now, been providing much-needed funds. A proportion of the money raised for the party should be held back by the women for their own strategic purposes. This could be used to do surveys, to listen to women and to develop policies. The women of the Party would find that this sort of strategy and a strong sense of purpose would be of far greater interest to other women who would be better motivated to join up.

THESE MANAGERIAL CHANGES would drive a desire for change. But as far as policy is concerned, the Conservatives cannot just rely on the old approach either. The usual policies, though important, are not enough to win the women's vote. Perhaps they are not even enough to redeem the Party after the perceived incompetence and sleaze of the last Conservative administration. Some of the old Conservative certainties have fallen away or are looking bedraggled. Our traditional constitutional platform is battered. There is no particular sign that the Churches are on the Conservative's side any longer, while Prince Charles considers Church disestablishment. The armed forces are being cut to ribbons but little is heard from the Conservatives about this – after all, they did the same thing. Law and order is a disaster area for all the parties who appear at a loss – though it remains second to the health service in people's concerns. And central to all our fears is the very clear decline of the family. Of course, Labour's policies are exacerbating all this, but as the old certainties fall away, broader and more relevant policies, grounded in strong Conservative principles, are called for. While all Conservatives are wary of grand statements of principles and beliefs, Conservatives today do need to have a firmer idea of how policies are formulated and why.

Conservative philosophy is based in the fostering and encouragement of individual freedom and responsibility. This emphasis on individual freedom has always been tempered by

support for progressive social reform and improvement, and a need to protect those who cannot look after themselves. There is no more enduring theme in the history of the Conservative Party and attachment to it has enabled the Party to command the high ground of politics for much of its existence.

The philosophical arguments in favour of valuing the separate identity of women should be based on equity and on the need for social reform. My own attachment to this notion is based largely on a Christian view of the world that we are equal, but that each is given a separate basket of talents. Others might prefer to see this question in terms of equal rights – or both of course. But Conservatives believe with Simone Weil that rights should be seen as secondary to the notion of obligations and duties. These are subordinate and relative to the former. Rights are conferred on people by others – after all if you are the only person on earth, you would have no rights, but you would have obligations. Conservatives should not be frightened to say so.

Secondly, we must look to the Conservative sense of community based on the Burkean notions of the importance of locality, the small platoons and a multiplicity of centres of power. Women play a crucial role in developing home and community links but how has their role changed?

Thirdly, more value must be attached to the family and the difficult role of the mother, who is still principally responsible for the bringing up of children. Consult widely and deeply around the country. Ask advice from the many expert women's organisations who deal on a daily basis with problems in the family and discover what policies will make a difference. The problem of finding a balance between work and family is perhaps the crucial issue facing women today. Conservatives must find a better way of dealing with this than the highly regulatory and statist approach that Labour has adopted.

Fourthly, the new phenomenon of women determined to combine work and family in the new partnership model is unleashing more entrepreneurial talent than ever before. This is

an open door for Conservatives. Encourage self employment, better educational possibilities, careers advice. Develop an understanding of flexible working arrangements and promote them – all carried out within the context of women, not of men.

If the Conservative Party is looking for an agenda for women distinct from the Labour's, there is one waiting there to be picked up. It can highlight the Labour Party's commitment to over-regulation which impinges most on the jobs held by women. It can highlight the chaos over private pensions which are being taxed or regulated to destruction, compounding the problems of many women in their old age. It can promise a different approach from the nannyish attitude of the Blair Government, helping women make their own life decisions through better education and by discussing with them how facilities can be improved and run better. It should note the success of the Tories in overturning the Labour landslide of 1945 by targeting the women's vote in their promises to get rid of socialist controls.

If Conservatives offer a commitment to freedom of choice, they must make sure that they can deliver it. There has been too much talk about choice in the past often without ensuring that it can be delivered. Most people live and work within enormous constraints. Women can decide for themselves the balance they wish to strike between work and family but Conservatives need to know what they are thinking. The Labour Party's determination to force all mothers into the labour market should be abandoned so that Conservatives can offer their support *both* to those women who are making it in the world of work, and also to those who choose to commit themselves to family life. It should be their choice, not the Government's.

It is particularly important for the Conservatives to find a sympathetic and understanding ear in the struggle to balance work and family. The horrible irony is that, in many ways, the female quest for independence has made it more difficult for some women to find that balance. In certain sections of society, there is no mature and sustained sharing of the burdens of parenthood by

men and women. Rather, the impulse to go it alone is on the rise. Some are rejecting, it seems, the stable structures which would have made much easier an attempt to have elements of both worlds in our lives. The altogether admirable determination of women to stand on their own two feet too often seems to leave them reluctant to use marriage or even partnership as a platform for a life balanced between family and work.

This is a worrying development which must be addressed.

MY AIM HERE TODAY has been twofold. Firstly, it has been to identify where useful changes can be made in the thinking and management of the Conservative Party. I do so in the interest of the Conservative Party since it will not do for this great party to continue to treat women as Second among Equals.

Secondly I have ranged over the past for a time to reassert the extraordinary contribution that women have made and still make to the fortunes of the Party. It is a story of hard work, courage and noble selflessness, largely unsung and unrewarded. But times have changed and women have changed. Now there is a unique opportunity, which coincides in a marked and disastrous decline in electoral support, for Conservative women of all ages to take power into their own hands to bring change about. Their country needs them now. Economic independence is here to stay – political activism is all the rage – women's issues are waiting to be marshalled. Ladies, to the barricades!