

As austerity measures begin to take full effect, the gap between the Conservative party's 'woman-friendly' rhetoric and reality will become more apparent

Apr 23 2012

Attempts at 'feminising' the Conservative Party stand in opposition to both its vested interests and its ideological tendencies. Valerie Bryson argues that so far the Party's policies have damaged the interests of many women and benefitted only a few. It is unlikely that this will change significantly before the next election.



'We know from a range of polls that women are significantly more negative about the Government than men'. So began a [restricted document](#) written by officials in Number 10 and circulated to government departments in September 2011. Leaked to the Guardian, the document identified a number of reasons for women's negative attitudes, including a 'fear for the next generation' and 'a range of policies, which are seen as having hit women, or their interests, disproportionately'.

This apparent loss of support from women must have been particularly disappointing for David Cameron, who had made determined efforts to win back the women voters when he became Conservative leader in 2005. Women had been disproportionately shifting away from his party since the early 1980s. In fact, it was women's votes which effectively won the 2005 election for Labour. In response, Cameron sought to '[feminise' his party](#), both by increasing the number of Conservative women MPs and by addressing women's interests and concerns. He was able to go into the 2010 election with a record number of women candidates and a raft of 'women friendly' policy statements.

Although 2 per cent fewer women than men voted Conservative in the election, [they swung quite strongly overall towards both his party and the Liberal Democrats](#). While men's support for the Conservatives then dropped rapidly, women's support seemed more robust. By the end of the year YouGov polls were indicating that the traditional gender gap had re-emerged, with the Conservative Party retaining a [clear lead amongst women although it had lost it amongst men](#). The Conservative Party seemed finally to have shed its image as a cosy old-boys' club and to be much more open to women's concerns. The women-friendly image was helped by the Party's alliance with the socially progressive Liberal Democrats, the increase in the number of Conservative women MPs from 18 to 48, and the appointment of a self-declared feminist (Theresa May) as both Home Secretary and Equalities Secretary. Its successes were seemingly confirmed by some early gains by pensioners and low-paid workers (the majority of whom are women).

So why by the autumn of 2011 did the government seem to have a 'woman problem'? While the leaked document blamed the loss of support from women on the poor presentation of government policies, many critics argued that it was the policies themselves that were unpopular amongst women – not least because many women are particularly badly affected by them.

Figures from the House of Commons library obtained by Yvette Cooper indicate that women would pay for [72 per cent of the savings](#) made in George Osborne's Emergency Budget of June 2010. Those adversely affected include poorly paid mothers who could no longer afford to go out to work when the tax credit which helped pay for their childcare was withdrawn or reduced. Wives of higher rate tax payers, who would lose their Child Benefit and women who suddenly found that they would have to work at least a year longer before receiving a pension were also amongst those negatively

affected.

The drastic public spending cuts imposed in the October 2010 Spending Review meant further problems for women, who are both the majority (65 per cent) of public sector employees and the main users of public services. Their traditional responsibility for the welfare of their families has also left many women struggling to fill in the gaps when provision is withdrawn. Add to that the forthcoming shift to universal credit which means that in many cases the childcare and child elements of tax credits will go to fathers rather than the mother. Plenty more disincentives for support exist including the proposal to reduce public sector pay in regions where private wages are low and the furore over the so-called 'Granny tax' in the 2012 budget. It should come as no surprise then if women were to withdraw their support from the senior party in the Coalition government.

In its defence, the government can claim to have taken some positive steps on other 'women's issues', particularly in relation to parental leave, the lack of women in top positions, and problems around sexual and domestic violence (with stalking now a specific offence). In his 2012 budget, Osborne raised the level at which Child Benefit would be withdrawn, while a new senior advisor, appointed by Cameron to assess the impact of policies on women will shortly take up her post. However, any positive outcomes have been largely negated by a reluctance to use 'hard' measures such as quotas and the impact of spending cuts on local authority funding for rape and domestic violence services. Meanwhile, the Conservative Party's policy making bodies remain male dominated, and Cameron himself has twice had to apologise for sexist comments to women MPs.

[As Ipsos Mori have pointed out](#), some commentators mistook the nature of the problem in late 2011 saying that although women's support for the Conservatives had fallen markedly since the previous year, it had actually fallen *less* than men's since the General Election, leaving no overall significant difference between the voting intentions of women and men. However, they also find women more critical of many government policies.

Attempts at '[feminising](#)' the Conservative Party run up against both vested interests and its ideological tendencies. So far, its policies have damaged the interests of many women and benefitted only a few. It is unlikely that this will change significantly before the next election. As the austerity measures begin to take full effect, the gap between 'woman-friendly' rhetoric and reality will become more apparent, and women's rejection of the Conservatives seems likely to increase.

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