

# The very fact that Thatcher can be lauded as the woman who broke the mould is indicative of the challenges which women still face in contemporary politics

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**Anne Phillips** reflects on the legacy which Margaret Thatcher, the UK's first female Prime Minister, left for women. This debate has tended to be a polarised one, with sweeping claims made on the basis of what is, in essence, a single case. Furthermore such claims have tended to distract from a broader assessment of Thatcher's social and political legacy.



For years, anyone troubled by the under-representation of women in politics, or arguing for some form of gender quota to address this, had to face the Thatcher question: how can you think it matters to have more women in politics? Look at Margaret Thatcher, the first woman to become Prime Minister in the UK, what has she ever done for women? Now that she is dead, we are deluged with the opposite comment: Look at Margaret Thatcher. She has transformed the political landscape for women, making it possible for any woman with the determination and talent to aspire to the highest office in the land.

The two positions are equally absurd, depending on the fallacy of the single exemplar. When it comes to social and cultural change, it is numbers that matter, not the lonely examples of Margaret Thatcher (or Golda Meir or Indira Gandhi or Benazir Bhutto or Sirimavo Bandaranaike, for even in her own time, powerful female leaders were not so rare as is sometimes thought). The very fact that Thatcher can be lauded as the woman who broke the mould tells its own story, confirming that even today it is thought unlikely that a woman – a mere woman! – can be politically driven, willing to dispense with the advice of more moderate colleagues, and capable of leading a society in new and unanticipated directions. That she was a phenomenon is true enough, but as evidence of a fundamental shift in the public status of women, this falls a long way short. The numbers tell a different story. Only one woman was appointed to the Cabinet in Thatcher's entire eleven years, and that one was Janet Young, Leader of the House of Lords and therefore not even permitted the responsibility of running a department. After Thatcher's resignation in 1990, not one woman followed her lead to run for the leadership of the Conservative Party, and it is only now (in 2013) that we hear rumblings of a possible female challenger. Most telling of all, women currently make up only 16 per cent of Conservative Party MPs; not much more than three women elected for every seventeen men. If Thatcher did indeed pave the way for women to succeed in politics, Conservative women have proved themselves astonishingly dilatory in following her lead.

In a lecture in 1982, Thatcher repudiated the 'strident tones' she associated with what she called the 'Women's Libbers'. Her message for women, if any, was to get on with it, if possible with a husband's support, but failing a Denis in the background, then under one's own steam. The biggest error, for her, was to turn to the state for support, and under the mantra of the 'free market' (later adopted, to our cost, by virtually all political parties), she helped usher in the era of rising inequality; 'loadsamoney' for some, low wages and job insecurity for others. The free market was never going to deliver opportunities and life chances for all, but for women in particular, still assuming the main share of the caring responsibilities for the young, sick, and elderly, it was always going to be an empty promise. One of the few joys of the week-long media saturation with Thatcher stories is that you come across the occasional quote you had not heard before. My favourite comes courtesy of Harry Eyres in the Financial Times (April 13): Thatcher apparently said that 'a man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus, can count himself a failure'. Anyone who could say that had minimal understanding of, or sympathy for, the life of the average woman (or man).

In Thatcher's own area of stridency – her anti unionism – she helped to stymie some of the more promising developments of the 1970s. We are encouraged, today, to think that whatever else she did, she should at least be

celebrated for implementing what Barbara Castle had failed to achieve: the reform of the trade unions. There was, indeed, much at fault in the way the unions operated in the 1970s, not least the macho presumption that the jobs of male workers mattered more than those of part time and dispensable women. But 1979 was not only notable for the election of the UK's first woman Prime Minister. It was also notable for the largest ever demonstration in defence of the 1967 Abortion Act called – of all things – by the male dominated TUC. This iconic moment of joint action between the women's movement and labour movement saw an estimated 80,000 people marching to express their opposition to the Corrie Bill. It was the latest, but not last, in a seemingly endless series of private members' bills aimed at restricting the availability of abortion. Trade union activists, many of them members of the women's movement National Abortion Campaign, mobilised to persuade the TUC conference to commit to a national demonstration if and when the Abortion Act was next threatened; and in October 1979, the TUC delivered on this commitment.

Thirty four years later, women make up more than half the (much reduced) membership of the trade unions, the language and priorities of the labour movement are far more feminised, and the TUC has its own 'first woman leader' in the form of Frances O'Grady, the new General Secretary. It is hard, nonetheless, to imagine a similar event taking place today. The anti-union rhetoric and legislation that characterised the Thatcher years penalised unions for engaging in 'political' or solidaristic action, and in the process forced them into a narrower frame of reference in which the immediate interests of their own members were to become the overwhelming concern. That same rhetoric operated to discourage feminist interest in working with the unions. The heady possibilities of a wider collaboration between the women's and labour movements were among the casualties of the Thatcher years.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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