

Why The Iron Lady was the ultimate women's libber

As feminists snipe at the new Margaret Thatcher film, a leading historian argues her achievements should be celebrated

By [AMANDA FOREMAN](#)

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Changing perceptions: Mrs Thatcher's handbag - once a symbol of female frailty - became a symbol of

Back in 2009 Harriet Harman, the then Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, published *Women In Power*, a government document for schools that listed the 16 women politicians who had shaped British history. Deliberately omitted from the list was the most important name of all: Margaret Thatcher.

Harman's petty act of spite exemplifies the unforgiving hatred that feminists still feel for Thatcher. Not all feminists, of course, and not me. But it remains a fact that the first female leader in modern Europe has never been recognised, let alone celebrated, by feminists for her great achievement in breaking through to the highest echelons of power.

When Thatcher became prime minister in 1979, her constituency office in Finchley was picketed by a group of self-styled 'wimmin' who complained: 'We want women's right's — not a Right-wing woman.'

Here, boldly stated in black-and-white, was Thatcher's crime. Her brand of women's rights — the right to compete, fight, and succeed on equal terms with men — did not fit the fashionable orthodoxies of Left-wing feminism. She wasn't interested in banning, separating, promoting, or defining: she was interested in winning.

unparalleled power

Those who denigrate Thatcher because she wasn't the right kind of feminist are guilty not least of gross historical amnesia. The new film about her, *The Iron Lady*, goes some way to depicting the appalling chauvinism of Fifties Britain, but it doesn't go far enough. At the age of 24, just two years after graduating from Oxford, Thatcher displayed extraordinary courage by standing for Dartford, a safe Labour seat. Though she lost at the general election in 1950, her energetic campaigning led to a swing to the Tories. 'She is without exception the best woman candidate I have ever known,' the Dartford election agent reported. But soon afterwards Thatcher became a wife and mother, and to Tory stalwarts her desire to storm the male bastion of Parliament began to look pushy rather than plucky.

Chafing at the social restrictions that handicapped her, in 1952 Thatcher argued in the *Sunday Graphic* newspaper that women should not feel forced to stay at home: 'I say let her have an equal chance with the men for leading Cabinet posts. Why not a woman chancellor? Or foreign secretary?'

For the next seven years, Thatcher tried and failed five times to become a Tory candidate. By contrast, some of her male rivals won their constituencies simply by playing a round of golf with the right people. She was patronised and condescended to at every turn — even the supposedly progressive BBC displayed an appalling bias when it came to dealing with ambitious women.

'Mrs Thatcher is 30ish,' stated a internal memo in 1957, 'very pretty and dresses most attractively.' As an aspiring politician, she 'assembles her thoughts well' but 'her main charm' concluded the report is 'that she does not look like a "career woman".'

It took Finchley, a London constituency with a sizeable Jewish population, to break the pattern of rejection. Yet even here she struggled. A few weeks after her selection Thatcher confessed to the Party's Central Office 'I am learning the hard way that an anti-woman prejudice among certain Association members can persist even after a successful adoption meeting, but I hope it will subside.'

Thatcher was one of only 25 women MPs when elected to Parliament in 1959. Despite the presence of women MPs since 1919, the extent of their integration into Westminster was a separate tea room for 'Lady Members'. The gesture served to highlight their exclusion since the majority of daily business took place in the Members' Bar, a place only marginally less out-of-bounds to women than the male lavatories.

Throughout the Sixties, Thatcher ground her way through a succession of junior posts. The combination of wife, mother and politician led to such punishing hours that a year into the job she fainted in the House of Commons.

'It's nothing serious,' Thatcher chirped, just 'over-tiredness'.

She soon discovered that her sex elevated her visibility but undermined her credibility. Anything woman-related was poison and she eventually gave up arguing for fairer pension deals for widows, or for changes in the tax code to reflect the cost of childcare.

In order to be heard at all, Thatcher realised that she had to be the best-prepared person in the room. ‘We have to show them that we are better than them,’ she once told the Labour politician Shirley Williams.



© Alex Bailey
The Iron Lady: Meryl Streep plays the former PM in a film which shows some of the chauvinism Thatcher faced

In 1970, Thatcher joined Prime Minister Edward Heath’s Cabinet as his Education Minister. ‘I was principally there as the statutory woman,’ she wrote in her memoirs, ‘whose main task was to explain what “women”... were likely to think and want on troublesome issues.’

From the outset, she was cold-shouldered by the rest of the Cabinet, and the Labour Party decided that she was the weakest link and tried to drive her out of Westminster. Each time Thatcher entered the Commons, Labour MPs chanted ‘ditch the bitch’. Student organisations took up the anti-Thatcher campaign with relish; eggs, rubbish, even rocks were thrown at her.

Britain’s nascent Women’s Movement had its first public meeting in 1970, but not one of the self-styled feminists denounced the virulent abuse suffered by their sister in Parliament.

In 1974 Labour returned to power and the defeated Tories were plunged into a leadership crisis. Most Conservative MPs were fed up with Heath. But when Margaret Thatcher put her name forward, Ladbroke’s gave the odds of her beating him at 50-1.

The idea of a woman leader — and one who was famous for being a national hate figure — was deemed preposterous.

Many MPs assumed that Thatcher was a stalking horse who would stand aside after the first round of voting. Her triumph took everyone by surprise.

‘My God! The bitch has won!’ exclaimed a vice-chairman of the Party when the news of Thatcher’s victory reached Tory Central Office.

When Thatcher chaired her first Shadow Cabinet meeting on February 18, 1974, she did so in the knowledge that almost every man around the table had voted for one of her opponents. Those who weren’t in awe of her were openly condescending.



Softer side: Mrs Thatcher with her twins Carol and Mark in 1959

During one notable Shadow Cabinet meeting in 1976, Thatcher mused out loud whether Jimmy Carter would make a good President, but ‘sometimes the job could make the man’. ‘Yes,’ replied Reginald Maudling, her Shadow Foreign Secretary, ‘I remember Winston [Churchill]’s remark — “if you feed a grub on royal jelly it will grow into a Queen Bee.”’

The snide jibe reflected Maudling’s bitter resentment towards his new boss. But slowly, Thatcher faced down her detractors within the party.

She made two tours to the U.S. while in Opposition, where her bold statements on everything from the dangers of socialism to the irrelevance of the feminist movement made her a sensation.

When asked by a journalist in Chicago whether she felt she owed a debt to Women’s Lib, Thatcher snapped: ‘Some of us were making it long before women’s lib was ever thought of.’

'For a woman to get to the top and effect change, she can brook no argument... she had to go battling through like a tank... And, occasionally, tanks get it wrong'

On her second visit, she berated a well-meaning journalist for referring to her as Ms Thatcher. She was proud of being a wife and mother, and despised feminist attempts to denigrate either role.

Nevertheless on her return home, she was astute enough to allow the party’s media advisor Gordon Reece to perform reconstructive surgery on her suburban house-wife image: the shrill voice was softened and lowered, while the fussy clothes were toned down.

Thatcher’s new hard persona was inadvertently sealed by the Russians. Moscow objected to a speech in which she claimed that the Soviet Union was ‘bent on world dominance’.

The Red Star newspaper denounced her as ‘The Iron Lady’, and a myth was born. The term strengthened her image at home, but also led to vitriolic attacks by foreign leaders who feared looking weak next to a woman.

In November 1976 former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was told by U.S. Treasury officials that the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt had complained: ‘She is a bitch, she is tough, she lacks scope and cannot lead.’

The question whether she could lead or not came to a head on May 4, 1979 when Thatcher defeated Jim Callaghan in the General Election. The size of Thatcher’s victory — a 44-seat majority — stunned not just Britain but the world.

‘I remember everybody was sort of secretly (pleased) that she got in,’ admits Meryl Streep who plays Mrs Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*. ‘That a woman got in. We thought any second that meant here we’d have a woman President.’

A seismic shudder passed through the political establishment once a woman was in charge — but accepting the change was harder for some than for others.



Admirable achievement: Mrs Thatcher rose to power in a male dominated world

Shortly after Thatcher’s election, Central Office was visited by a flustered civil servant who demanded to know the identity of ‘Carmen’. Apparently, diary entries showed that

Mrs Thatcher was having secret meetings with the said Carmen every other morning, without her civil servants being present. This was a matter of the highest importance! It was explained to him that Carmen referred to Mrs Thatcher's Carmen hot hair rollers — a necessity for millions of middle-aged women but an alien artefact to the male Whitehall mandarins.

A cautious and pragmatic operator by nature, Thatcher never directly confronted the prejudices of her civil servants, though she did on occasion scribble on the margins of Whitehall shortlists: 'Are there no women who could do this?'

It has often been noted that Thatcher made only eight female ministerial appointments during her tenure, all of them junior. The reasons for this are far more complicated than the idiotic assertion that she was 'against women'. Rather, she was 'for' holding on to power, and that meant selecting her team in anyway she thought would help.

WHO KNEW?

Today 22 per cent of MPs in the House of Commons and 20 per cent of members of the House of Lords are women

Some ministers accused Thatcher of using her femininity to unfair advantage. 'She could be very shrill, partly as a tactic,' concedes her Foreign Advisor Lord Powell (then Charles Powell), who stood by her through thick and thin.

'She used being a woman pretty skillfully in many sorts of situations, for instance in getting her way with her political and cabinet colleagues. She knew that private-school-educated British men weren't brought up to argue with women.'

'Only one or two of them could stand up to that sort of treatment, or if they came from the same background as her... but most of the others got uncomfortable about arguing shrilly with a woman.'

As the years passed and Thatcher won two more elections, her handbag — once a symbol of female frailty — became a symbol of unparalleled power. At one Cabinet meeting ministers arrived to find her absent but the iconic article sitting on the table. 'Why don't we start?' suggested one, 'The handbag is here.'

The phrase 'To be handbagged' became part of the vernacular, meaning to be utterly squashed by one's female opponent.

'Her strengths [became] her weaknesses,' writes Lord Vinson, as Nigel Vinson one of Thatcher's political gurus in the Seventies. 'For a woman to get to the top and effect change, she can brook no argument ... she had to go battling through like a tank ... And, occasionally, tanks get it wrong.'

In Thatcher's case, she ultimately foundered over a combination of the Poll Tax, the party's split over further European integration, and her alienating style of leadership. Protestors outside Downing Street sang 'ding dong, the witch is dead' when Thatcher resigned in 1990. To some, she remains the wicked witch — the single greatest insult to feminism. For the rest of us, she is the role model that we grew up with — the proof that a woman can be anything she wants to be if she puts her mind to it.

Last Christmas, Lady Thatcher was taken to the ballet by her great friend, Romilly McAlpine. During the intermission a queue of little girls appeared at their box, all wanting an autograph. Lady Thatcher said to one of them: 'What do you want to be, dear, when you're grown up?'

The girl replied, 'I want to be like you. I want to be Prime Minister.' That is surely one of her greatest achievements.

A World On Fire by Amanda Foreman is published by Penguin at £14.99.
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