

Margaret Thatcher: The Accidental Feminist

By Amanda Foreman

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A loner for most of her political career, the former prime minister Margaret Thatcher faced vicious sexism, but she triumphed to transform the status of women in Britain. Just don't call her a feminist. By Amanda Foreman.

The late Margaret Thatcher never called herself a feminist. In 1975, during her first tour of the United States as the newly elected leader of the Conservative Party, Thatcher refused to give the feminist movement any credit for her success. When asked by a reporter about her debt to "women's lib," she angrily replied, "Some of us were making it long before women's lib was ever thought of."



British politician Margaret Thatcher at the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool, England, 1972. (Jamie Hodgson/Getty)

Thatcher's anger was understandable, she had climbed the treacherous road to political power on her own, without the help of any movement, interest group, or fan base. Born into a solid lower-middle class family in the north of England, Thatcher's political instincts were as tribal as any of her left-wing peers. Only, rather than being of the collectivist, big government, social engineering sort, her views reflected the hopes and aspirations of the small-business class: free movement, labor, free market. The patrician wing of the Conservative Party was no more sympathetic to Thatcher's politics than the rank-and-file of the Labour Party. It is impossible to overstate just how isolated and incongruous Lady Thatcher was when she entered Parliament in 1959. Nor did her isolation end with her first promotion. She remained a loner in every sense of the word for most of her political career. Even as prime minister she never enjoyed the unanimous support of her own cabinet.

From the outset, Thatcher was belittled and ignored because she was the wrong type of woman for progressives and the wrong type of Tory for conservatives. The true extent of her vulnerable position in British politics was fully revealed in 1970 when she became education minister under Prime Minister Edward Heath. Her promotion to the cabinet had been controversial: "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." Her views were not welcome, and in meetings she was continually interrupted or prevented from talking. But the real trouble began when she implemented the education cuts demanded by Heath. The country reacted to the phasing out of free school milk as though it was the greatest attack on childhood since King Herod's edict. The Labour Party decided that she was the weakest link in Heath's cabinet and turned its entire firepower on her alone. She became the victim of an unprecedented national vendetta jointly spearheaded by the press and her political opponents. She was barracked, booed, shoved, pelted with rocks and trash; nowhere was safe—the House of Commons least of all, where Labour M.P.s would chant "Ditch the Bitch" every time she appeared on the floor. Even today, the "Thatcher the Milk-Snatcher" campaign remains in a class by itself in terms of the hysteria and violent abuse generated against an elected female politician. Shamefully, Britain's nascent women's movement maintained a complete silence on the virulent bullying suffered by their sister in Parliament.

Thatcher battled through the crisis, but the social ostracism and denigration of her had been so successful that even her fellow Conservatives considered her fair game. At one infamous Downing Street lunch, an eminent guest forgot that she was sitting at the table behind him and joked, "Is there any truth in the rumor that Mrs. Thatcher is a woman?" He was shushed but not before the entire table burst out laughing in agreement.

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Thatcher’s national vilification proved to her that she could survive anything. But even more important, it proved to millions of women that they had it in them to succeed because Margaret Thatcher had taken the very worst that the country could throw her and still carried on. This was the trigger for a seismic revolution, a tectonic shift in the way men and women regarded the position of women in Britain.

In late 1974, when Margaret Thatcher put her name forward as a political challenger to Edward Heath, Britain’s largest betting chain put the odds of her winning the Tory leadership at 50–1. The idea of a woman leader—and one who was famous for being a hated national figure—seemed preposterous. *The Daily Express* claimed that fewer than one in 10 Tories supported her candidacy. In her campaign pronouncements Thatcher cleverly turned the persecution she had recently suffered into an advantage: “I’ve had a fiery baptism in politics,” she admitted. “If I’ve not had as much experience as Ted, I’ve a woman’s ability to stick with a job and get on with it when everyone else walks off and leaves it.”

The party admired her grit and voted her in. But when Thatcher chaired her first shadow cabinet meeting on February 18, 1975, she did so in the certain knowledge that almost every man around the table had voted for one of her opponents. Heath promptly started a campaign to persuade the party to have TBW—“That Bloody Woman”—out by Christmas. Those who weren’t in awe of her were openly condescending. 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 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.” Behind her back they called Thatcher “Hilda”—her middle name—because of its lower-class origins. The cabinet publicly demonstrated its distaste for her by subtly effective means. It was the custom during the gladiatorial debating sessions in the Commons for the cabinets of each party to cram shoulder to shoulder along the front benches, giving physical as well as mental support to their leader.

Thatcher's shadow cabinet squeezed away from her, leaving a noticeable gap of green leather on either side.

Thatcher's unpopularity, at least within her own party, was inadvertently upset by the Russians. Moscow objected to a speech in which she claimed that détente was impractical when the Soviet Union was "bent on world dominance." The *Red Star* newspaper denounced her as "the Iron Lady," and a myth was born. Immediately, of course, the myth created its own problems. In November 1976, German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt complained, "She is a bitch, she is tough, she lacks scope and cannot lead."

The question whether she could lead or not was decided on March 28, 1979, when Thatcher won a vote of no confidence against the Labour government. Not since 1924 had a British government been brought down by such a method, but then no other prime minister had been hobbled by such untrammelled anarchy as James Callaghan. The chaos began in 1976 when the government had to apply to the IMF for a \$3.9 billion bailout. The deep cuts to public expenditure demanded by the IMF led to a mass revolt by the unions. In late 1977 Callaghan's announcement that there could be no wage increases above 5 percent, despite inflation levels of 14 percent, led to a national stoppage. Dubbed "the Winter of Discontent," from December to March the unions held the country ransom. The miners stopped the supply of coal, the electrical workers turned off the lights, the railway workers closed the train stations, the garbage collectors stayed home, undertakers left bodies unburied, hospital workers decided which patients were treated, unloaded cargoes froze in the docks, farm animals starved, rats swarmed through the streets. All of this was played out on national TV—when the technicians' union was not on strike.

The election was set for May 3. Maggie, as the press now styled her, offered a clear alternative to Labour. Her message was simple. Between 1954 and 1977, Germany's GDP had grown by 310 percent, France's by 297 percent—and Britain's by a measly 75 percent. She would make Britain great again, restore productivity, and bring down the current 27 percent rate of inflation. Yet as she toured the country in the campaign bus, it was not obvious that the public believed her message. The party managers tried everything. She was photographed going shopping to show her "ordinary" side. To appease rural voters she hugged a cow. She lost weight. But with days to go, the campaign bus was cast into a gloom by a newspaper poll giving Labour a 4 percent lead. The combination of the appalling weather, the cheerless motels, and the 20-hour days was too much for one of the campaign managers, and he berated Thatcher until she started to cry. Her daughter, Carol, leaped to her defense: "Look what you've done to Mummie." The Conservative politician David Howell was on the bus. "I remember looking out of the window and thinking things can't get any worse than sitting here, in the snow, with Mrs. Thatcher shedding a tear."

The size of Thatcher's victory in 1979—a 44-seat majority—stunned not just Britain but the entire world. On arriving at 10 Downing Street she paused on the front step to address the throng of reporters. She quoted the famous prayer by St. Francis of Assisi: "Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth." Thatcher had cried when the lines were originally suggested by her speechwriter Ronald Miller. But many among the Conservative old guard cringed at its "feminine" sounding message. "I was

nearly sick on the spot” claimed James Prior, a supporter of Edward Heath who became her new employment secretary. Prior and many others hoped to soon squeeze her out and force a new leadership election. The fact that it took three terms for Thatcher’s Conservative enemies to achieve her downfall is a testament to her strength and determination.

Thatcher’s record as prime minister between 1979 and 1990 will always be a source of contention between historians. What Thatcherism meant then and means today is still a highly divisive subject. But what is clear, and remains indisputable, is the great service Thatcher rendered to all women around the world by proving that a woman has the strength and capability to achieve anything if she sets her mind to it.