

Janet Bagnall: Was the Iron Lady good for women?

Margaret Thatcher was a trailblazer, which meant she could have championed women's causes. She chose not to

BY JANET BAGNALL JANUARY 19, 2012 4:49 PM



"She waged the Falklands War in elegant suits": British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher meets personnel aboard the British Navy ship HMS Antrim during a visit to the Falkland Islands.

Photograph by: SVEN NACKSTRAND, AFP/Getty Images

Margaret Thatcher was the first woman to be elected leader of a Western democracy. She should have been embraced by women as a trailblazer who would clear out the sexist debris in the old boys' club at Westminster, making it a safe place for other women.

Instead, more than 30 years later, Thatcher is reviled by women and embraced by the men who sneered at her when she was a young, ambitious MP clawing her way in past the Oxbridge brigade, hereditary division.

Thatcher left office in 1990, hounded out by the party that she had led to power three times in 11 years, after holding office longer than any other British prime minister in the 20th century.

Today, nearly a quarter of a century on, emotions are at such a fever pitch around Thatcher that you'd think you were back in the 1980s, with the Iron Lady doing battle with miners' unions, the Irish Republican Army, Russia, the Argentinians and layabout welfare recipients.

This month's release of the movie, *The Iron Lady*, has exposed how much unfinished business there still is around Thatcher's legacy. The movie is dismissed by a lot of people who know her and worked with her as featuring scenes that are "absolutely inconceivable," as her 74-year-old former personal assistant, Cynthia Crawford, put it in an [interview with London's Daily Mail](#).

Thatcher's friends and former political colleagues don't like the portrayal of the 86-year-old former prime minister in the tightening grip of dementia, her mind wandering between past and present. This is not how they remember her or want her remembered.

Her critics also don't want moviegoers to remember her as a frail elderly woman who was a force for good in Britain, putting the "great" back in Great Britain and single-handedly ending the Cold War.

But some of the most furious arguments are over whether Thatcher was a force for good for women. Grown women who were girls when she was elected feel oddly ambivalent. There she was, every inch a woman in her pearls and statement handbag, running one of the world's greatest and oldest democracies. She waged the 1982 Falklands War in elegant suits. Six hours after she emerged from the rubble of an IRA bomb attack that killed several people, she gave a fiery speech in her hurricane-proof hair. After Thatcher, no one would ever dare say a woman could not wield power as well as, or better than, a man. She was tougher, more single-minded and more determined than any man in Britain's Parliament.

But she did not pave the way for other women, as they had every right to expect her to since she was one of them.

British historian Amanda Foreman argues that Thatcher was a prisoner of the [sexism of her era](#).

"She soon discovered that her sex elevated her visibility but undermined her credibility," Foreman wrote this month in the Daily Mail.

"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."

How bad were things? Here's Foreman again: "Each time Thatcher entered the Commons, Labour MPs chanted: 'Ditch the bitch.'"

But Thatcher was tough. Politically and personally, she made toughness her defining characteristic. If women's rights had formed part of her core beliefs like individualism and home ownership, Thatcher would not have eroded maternity and childcare benefits, urged women with children to leave the paid workforce and failed to nominate women to her cabinet other than Baroness Young, whom she made leader of the House of Lords. It is not an accident that she was the only successful woman in the boys'

club. She thought she was exceptional.

If Thatcher had thought less of herself and more of other women, she could have been their champion.

Nothing stopped her from waging the Falklands War at the same time as ensuring women got a fair break in the workplace.

Her legacy, much of which is not gender-specific, has not worn well. The revolution she started 30 years ago has seen a huge transfer of wealth from the poor to the richest.

The share of Britain's wealth held by the bottom half of the population – about 31 million people – has fallen from eight per cent 30 years ago to five per cent today.

Meanwhile, the most privileged slice of the population – the 60,000 people who make up the top-earning 0.1 per cent of Britons – now holds five per cent of the nation's wealth. Thatcher's years in power were, in many ways, an opportunity missed.

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