Gendering the Conservative Party’s Rise From The Ashes, 1945-51

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Abstract

The Conservative Party’s shock defeat to Clement Attlee’s Labour Party at the 1945 British General Election cast the party into a period of profound crisis. For the first time in its history, the Labour Party succeeded in securing an outright majority in the House of Commons. Their victory was carried by the collective sentiment of the People’s War which was forged under the hardship of the Home Front, and spurred by Labour’s promise of a brighter future. However, despite this early postwar momentum, just 6 years later, the Conservative Party and Winston Churchill had been restored to government, thus appearing to halt Attlee’s Socialist experiment. How the Conservative Party completed this remarkable electoral recovery is the subject of this thesis. During the party’s postmortem after defeat in 1945, it discovered that while a majority of women had supported the Labour Party, women were far more likely to vote Conservative than men. Thus, it appeared that women held the key to the revival of their electoral fortunes and given the party’s long history of women’s mobilization, it was women to whom they turned. What emerged was a distinct Conservative feminism that on one hand, recognized the changes to women’s roles in the aftermath of war and on the other, spoke to their longing for the security and stability of a quiet family life. This new conservatism mobilized women in their political and professional capacities, whilst at the same time continued to embrace the ideological comforts of tradition and family life. The emergence of a 12-point gender gap favoring the Conservative Party at the 1951 General Election is testament to the success of this campaign.
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Introduction

At seven o’clock on the evening of July 26th, 1945, British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, walked down the steps of Number 10 Downing Street and into a car towards Buckingham Palace. Twenty-five minutes later he left, but not before tendering his resignation to the King.¹ Having led the country to victory in Europe, Churchill was now the subject of one of the greatest electoral defeats in the Conservative Party’s history.² The British public, carried by the reforming sentiment of the People’s War and promises of a brighter future, overwhelmingly endorsed Clement Attlee’s Socialist Labour Party with a 146 majority over all other parties in the House of Commons. Lord Woolton, soon to be Conservative Party Chairman, reflected that the Conservatives had been a victim of a “widespread fear of the past, coupled with hope for the future,” which had “swung an unprepared Labour Party into power, and Mr. Churchill was defeated.”³

The Labour Party’s extraordinary election victory was a watershed moment in British political history as it marked the first outright majority for a Labour Government. Labour’s victory in July 1945 signaled the start of six years of unprecedented reform, which fundamentally revised the role of the state and oversaw the creation of the modern welfare state as we today know it. For the Conservative Party, 1945 was their worst showing at the polls for more than a century,⁴ and triggered a profound internal crisis, having enjoyed nearly thirty years of uninterrupted power. As Lord Woolton remarked, “we had our backs to the wall: we had been

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² McCallum and Readman, 247.
⁴ McCallum and Readman, *The British General Election of 1945*, 266.
heavily defeated: we had very little money: the Party was depressed.” However despite the scale of defeat in 1945, in just 6 years Churchill found himself restored to No. 10 Downing Street.

In light of this dramatic transformation in the Conservative Party’s electoral fortunes, Clemmie Churchill’s famous remark, that defeat was “a blessing in disguise,” was made with remarkable foresight. After such a lengthy period in office, the heavy defeat in 1945 provided the Conservative Party with a much-needed catalyst for change and an opportunity to evaluate both its organizational structure and electoral platform. As R.A. Butler, who would go on to lead to party’s policy transformation, reflected, defeat “shook the Conservative Party out of its lethargy and impelled it to re-think its philosophy and re-form its ranks with a thoroughness unmatched for a century.” By the 1950 election, the Conservatives had gained 90 seats, reducing Labour’s majority to just 5. And finally, at the 1951 General Election, the Conservatives completed their electoral revival, returning Churchill to office with a majority of 17 seats over all other parties in the house.

The reasons for the Conservative Party’s victory in the election of 1951 have been subject to extensive study by political scientists and historians. However, far lesser attention has been granted to the role of women voters in this outcome. This thesis will seek to understand how the Conservative Party developed an electoral strategy to win back the votes lost to Labour in 1945 with a specific focus one of the most understudied, yet influential political groups: Conservative women.

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5 Kilmuir, Political Adventure; the Memoirs of the Earl of Kilmuir., 334.
7 Butler of Saffron Walden, 126.
This research is colored by the study of the gender gap 1945, which first gained attention in 1945 when a significant gap between male and female voting preferences emerged, undermining the long-held assumption that women simply voted in line with their husbands’ preference. The election of 1945 revealed that women were more likely than their male counterparts to vote Conservative – 43 per cent of women and only 35 per cent of men voted Conservative – although in 1945, both men and women were more likely to vote for Labour.9 This realization that men and women did indeed not vote identically, granted greater attention to gender as a category of analysis, and heightened political parties’ attention to the women’s vote. Study of the gender gap throughout the 1950s shows that the Conservative Party were far more successful in appealing to women voters, leading Perry Anderson to remark that “if women had voted the same way as men, the Labour Party would have been interruptedly in power since 1945,”10 While in 1945, a majority of women supported the Labour Party, by 1950 this had swung the other way, and between 1950 and 1964, the Conservative’s enjoyed an uninterrupted lead amongst women voters,11 thus giving credence to Perry Anderson’s statement.

The erosion Labour’s women supporters from the 2-point lead they enjoyed in 1945 to a 12-point gap favoring the Conservative Party in 1951 is of fundamental importance to understanding the revival of the Conservative Party. Figure 1 below demonstrates that between 1945 and 1951, although male support for Labour declined, they sustained a majority of male votes in the period. This fact is particularly important to explaining the Conservative’s success in 1951 versus 1950. Between 1950 and 1951, Labour maintained a 5-point lead amongst male

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10 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 194.
11 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 198.
voters, however, in the same period, the Conservative’s lead amongst women voters jumped from 2 points in 1950, to 12 points by 1951. 54 per cent of women voted for the Conservative Party in 1951, compared with 42 percent for Labour. Thus, in the context of a stable male Labour vote, Conservative revival relied upon winning a majority of support from women voters.

![Gallup Polls (1945-1964) Labour lead by gender (in %)](image)

Figure 1 - Graph showing the Labour lead by gender (1945-1964) Figures obtained from Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Explaining the Gender Gap,” 198.

Inevitably, the clear development of a gender gap in favor of the Conservative Party begs the question: how did the Conservative Party construct a successful appeal to women voters after the election of 1945? It is this question this thesis seeks to answer. By exploring the Conservative Party’s relationship to women, both inside the party and as voters, this thesis will argue that defeat, and the emergence of the gender gap, which in 1945 favored the Labour Party, provided the impetus for the party to reform its relationship towards women. The Conservative
Party made a determined effort to appeal to the fears and hopes of British women in postwar Britain. Through women’s political and professional mobilization, the Conservative Party constructed a distinctive Conservative feminism, sensitive to postwar changes to the social and economic roles of women, whilst concurrently upholding values of home and family which provided women with a sense of safety and identity after the dislocation of war.

To foreground the changes implemented in the party after 1945, it is first necessary to contextualize women’s historical relationship to the Conservative Party. Unlike the Labour Party, founded to represent organized male labour, women have enjoyed a long and active role in the modern Conservative Party since the early 19th century as the party adapted to the era of mass democracy. Although Conservative women’s political involvement pre-dates this, it was the Primrose League, founded in 1883, which first brought women (albeit exclusively from the upper classes) into the political fold, building upon their informal role as influential political hostesses throughout the Victorian Era.12 In response to the Corrupt Practices Act of 1883, which forbade “treating, undue influence, bribery, personation and the payments of canvassers and workers taking voters to the polls or posting electoral posters,”13 women were mobilized as the party’s voluntary electioneering corps and proved the political capabilities of women – even if they were still denied the vote.

However, women were not denied the vote for too much longer, and in 1918, a coalition government, led by the Conservative Party, introduced the Representation of the People Act of 1918, which granted all women over 30 the vote.14 Historians of this period, such as Martin Pugh

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14 What the Party has done for Women, n.d. Conservative Party Archive, CCO 500/9/1, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 2
and Neal McCrillis,\textsuperscript{15} suggest that the historic involvement of Conservative women through the Primrose League best positioned the Conservative Party to adapt to these changes which enfranchised a total of 9 million women over the age of 30. Sensitive to the need to formally involve women in the party, the Conservative’s formed the Women’s Unionist Association (WUO) to provide women with a national organization linked directly to the party, which quickly became the largest and most successful mass political organization for women. At the same time, it was a Conservative, Nancy Astor, who was the first woman to enter the House of Commons in 1919, a clear indication of the party’s political mobilization of women.

It is important to note that while women were successfully mobilized by the party, it remained a male-dominated patriarchy, which as Beatrix Campbell in her history of women in the Conservative Party since the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, was a “culture that embraced women, [and] that celebrated their subordination.”\textsuperscript{16} Thus the Conservative Party continued to embrace an ideology of separate spheres for men and women, whereby, Conservative women were forced to navigate male structures of power and re-assure men of their lack of ambition. As Marjorie Maxse, a key female figure in the party to whom we return to in Chapter 1, recommended to Conservative women in 1927: “Women have nothing to hide from the men; do not seek to usurp their place or power; and do not work for feminism but for the Party.”\textsuperscript{17} Through the formation of separate women’s organizations in the interwar period, women sought not to undermine Conservative


men, but instead craft their own sphere of influence through their success as fundraisers, canvassers and organizers and provided much of the social function of the party.

Given the long history of women’s involvement in the Conservative Party, it is perhaps surprising that they have been afforded very little historical attention due to the peculiar nature of Conservative women and difficulties in their historical categorization. Conservative women fit neatly into neither feminist analysis nor political histories, and thus, have been outcast as an inexplicable oxymoron. This is firstly due to political history’s obsession with ‘high politics’ which has given rise to a plethora of biographical accounts or histories of the Parliamentary Conservative Party. Consequently, the history of the Conservative Party is an almost entirely male history given women’s formal exclusion from politics until the 20th century. The premiership of Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s and 80s is an obvious exception to this rule and precipitated a plethora of works devoted to understanding her leadership and peculiar ideology.\(^\text{18}\) However, the visibility Thatcher granted to women within the Conservative Party went little beyond her period in high office, and thus did little to advance historical understandings of Conservative women more generally. Consequently, political histories of the Conservative Party such as Longman’s, *A History of the Conservative Party,*\(^\text{19}\) largely ignore gender as a category entirely. Others, such as Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball’s immense edited volume, *Conservative Century,*\(^\text{20}\) attempt to tell the entire history of women in the Conservative


Party in a single chapter. Inevitably in this case, the nuances of Conservative women’s experiences are lost.

A second factor limiting historical study of Conservative women is their difficult and complex relationship to feminist historians who have often demonstrated a reluctance to engage in research focused on right-wing women. This is unsurprising given that feminist history emerged from the left in the 1960s, and thus is closely intertwined with left-wing ideas. As a result, Conservative women, in the words of historian David Jarvis, have been outcast as “sociological deviants, a psephological category almost as inexplicable as that ultimate oxymoron, the working-class Conservative.” However, this blind focus on the Left’s relationship to feminism risks confining the history of feminism to a history of entirely left-wing feminism and ignores the many other ‘feminisms’ that arose during the 20th century. Harold Smith in his exploration of 20th century British feminism, defines feminism as “both an ideology and a reform movement seeking to improve the status of women. Feminists share a belief that women have been, and continue to be, oppressed because of their sex.” This definition does not equate feminism to a leftist ideology, but instead opens the door for a broader set of ‘feminisms’ tailored to the ever-shifting demands and challenges faced by women.

This discussion of various ‘feminisms’ is colored by the conservative feminism that emerged in the late 1940s and 1950s whereby women re-asserted both their domesticity and femininity in response to the dislocation of the war years. Left-wing feminists could not

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understand why women were so keen to return to the home after they were mobilized into traditionally male industries during the war. However, for many women, employment and single life was not liberation, but instead they welcomed the opportunity of a home and family life.\textsuperscript{25} Given this re-establishment of women’s traditional separate sphere, the period has been confined to dustbin by feminist histories and considered a betrayal of the Women’s Movement and its demands for sexual liberation and gender equality. However, the period’s characterization as the *Nadir of feminism* by Martin Pugh,\textsuperscript{26} belittles the Conservative party’s political and professional mobilization of women after 1945, and the progress that was made to further the interests of women at the time.

It is only since Margaret Thatcher’s ascent to the top of the male-dominated Conservative Parliamentary Party that historians have begun to notice Conservative women and their significant contribution to the party. Whilst Thatcher made groundbreaking strides for women in politics, she was divorced from feminist movements, embodying the very qualities of tradition and domesticity that feminists sought to attack. Thus, to a certain extent, the visibility that Thatcher granted to women within the Conservative Party precipitated greater attention on the party’s relationship with women. Inspired by Thatcher, both G.E. Maguire and Beatrix Campbell offer extensive histories of the Conservative Party and women.\textsuperscript{27} Whilst these comprehensive works provide vital historical context to this thesis, the scale of the task they take on – explaining two centuries of Conservative women’s history in a single volume – results in a relative loss in the intricacies of Conservative women’s experiences and their ever-changing relationship to the

\textsuperscript{25} Pugh, 293.
\textsuperscript{26} Pugh, “The Nadir of British Feminism 1945-1959?”
\textsuperscript{27} Maguire, *Conservative Women*; Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*. 
party. As a result, Campbell’s work has been criticized for its overly simplified portrayal of the Labour Party and is misogynistic culture which made it hostile to women.\textsuperscript{28}

Given the position Conservative women have found themselves in historical categorization, there is much ground to make up to fully understand them and their relationship to the Conservative Party. The history of male conservatism has been told for many centuries, yet women’s narratives have only emerged in the last half century, leaving many stories yet to be told. Unlike G.E. Maguire, whose \textit{Conservative Women}, bravely attempts to tell the history of women’s conservatism in a single, 200-page volume, this thesis will focus on a period of just 6 years, between the Conservative’s defeat in 1945 and their electoral revival in 1951, to understand the experience and ideology of Conservative women in postwar Britain and their relationship to the Conservative Party. The years following the end of the Second World War were a period of profound change for the social and economic makeup of the country after years of war and hardship. It was a period of political revolution, unseen for nearly a century prior, with the dawn of Social Democracy which was to set the tone for Modern Britain as it is now understood and in particular, had significant consequences for the position of women in society.

Within this time period, this thesis examines the position of women within the Conservative Party and how the Party sought to construct an appeal to women in response to defeat in 1945. Chapter 1 focuses on the political mobilization of women within the Conservative Party as part of the party’s attempt to revive its election machine and support from women voters. Using the archival material from the Central Women’s Advisory Committee (CWAC), held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, alongside memoirs of leading figures in the

Party, this chapter uncovers that women as social organizers, canvassers and campaigners were of fundamental importance in the revival of the Conservative Party Organization and membership after 1945. Although women continued to face resistance to their political activity at a constituency level, particularly in their attempt to gain representation in the Parliamentary Party, the party’s leadership recognized women’s vital role within the party.

Chapter 2 considers the second facet of the party’s attempt to appeal to women after 1945: constructing a women’s agenda. Through the example of the controversial equal pay issue, this chapter will show the Conservative Party’s sensitivity to the prevailing hopes and concerns of women. In the context of the disruptive changes to women’s role in society as a result of the war, the party constructed a form of conservative feminism, which both endorsed policies such as equal pay to improve the rights of women, whilst upholding a sense of ideological comfort through an unwavering commitment to the home and family life. This chapter relies on published memoirs from key figures in the equal pay movement such as Mavis Tate and Thelma Cazalet-Keir alongside R.A. Butler, the head of the Conservative Research Department, Mavis Tate and Thelma Cazalet-Keir. Alongside this, both Hansard House of Commons Debates and minutes of the CWAC, tell the story of how the Conservative Party came to support equal pay as a key vote-winning issue.

Finally, Chapter 3 builds on the idea that the Conservative Party continued to uphold traditional values of home and family life, to examine how Conservative propaganda leveraged the image of the housewife to connect the everyday burdens faced by women in the postwar years to a broader criticism of the Labour Government. By analyzing the pages of the party’s women’s magazines such as *Home Truths*, and literature published to appeal to a female audience, Chapter 3 explores how the party leveraged the greater burden endured by the
housewife under postwar austerity, which included continued rationing, a rising cost of living and a housing shortage, to highlight the Labour government’s failings in office. Conservative propaganda successfully appealed to women highlighting the Socialist Labour government in comparison to the image of the thrifty consumer housewife projected on the pages of Home Truths.

The following chapters will thus reveal how the British Conservative Party successfully won back the support of women after their dismal display at the 1945 election. Given the historical oversight of Conservative women, this work makes a vital contribution to color our current understanding of the party’s relationship to women. Furthermore, not only does this add to the history of Conservative women, but it also is of vital importance to understanding the Conservative Party’s remarkable transformation between 1945-51. Here we return to Perry Anderson’s famed quote: “if women had voted the same way as men, the Labour Party would have been interruptedly in power since 1945.”29 Given the scale of the gender gap which emerged between 1945 and 1951, standing at 12 points by the 1951 election, it is clear that the mobilization of women voters was key to the party’s electoral revival. Thus, given that since 1928, women have constituted the majority of the electorate, it is clear that the history of the Conservative Party cannot, and should not, be understood without recognition of the vital role that women play.

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Women in the Conservative Party Organization, 1945-51: More than the “drawers of tea”\textsuperscript{30}

On a cold December day towards the end of 1948, a young woman, recently graduated from Oxford University, sat before an entirely male Conservative Party selection panel in the Labour Party stronghold of Dartford, Kent. Luckily for the highly ambitious Margaret Roberts (fig.2), a number of friendly faces from her days at Oxford sat on the panel, a fact which she

\textsuperscript{30} Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Summary Report on the Organisation of Women within the Party, 4 November 1957, CPA, CCO 500/9/1, Bodleian Library, Oxford
would later claim to be key to her success as gaining the support of the panel was key.\textsuperscript{31} This was just the beginning of what would become a long and successful career in politics.

On reflecting on her panel interview with the young Miss Roberts, the then woman Vice-Chairman of the Party, Miss Marjorie Maxse, noted that not only was she “very attractive looking with a quiet efficiency,” but also wielded a “platform knowledge and speaking ability far above those of other candidates.”\textsuperscript{32} Another of the Committee noted that “She is a good speaker, a good Chairman of Committee, gets on well with men (without resorting to the more obvious feminine arts!) And appears to be able to avoid unpopularity with her fellow women.”\textsuperscript{33} Despite her age and her gender, Margaret Roberts demonstrated a great talent for politics and was unanimously selected as candidate by the Party. In her own words, with selection as Conservative candidate in Dartford, she had taken the first step into a “man’s world into which not just angels feared to tread.”\textsuperscript{34}

Margaret Thatcher, née Roberts, was, by any standards, no political angel. Thatcher would go on to become one Britain’s most celebrated, yet divisive politicians in Britain’s history. Her term in office is seared into the memory of many across Britain and particularly in the mining town of South Wales. She was a trailblazer for women, the first to lead any political party, and in 1979, became the United Kingdom’s first female Prime Minister. While she was certainly no feminist, Thatcher, known for her power suits, practical handbags, and an uncompromising ability to command an all-male cabinet, unquestionably was a pioneer for women in British politics.

\textsuperscript{31} Thatcher, \textit{The Path to Power}, 64.
\textsuperscript{32} “A Tribute to Baroness Thatcher of Kevesten,” Archives and Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, \textit{Bodleian Libraries Blog} (blog), April 10, 2013,
\textsuperscript{33} “A Tribute to Baroness Thatcher of Kevesten.”
\textsuperscript{34} Thatcher, \textit{The Path to Power}, 64.
Given Thatcher’s legacy, it is unsurprising that her life and legacy have been at the center of many narratives of Conservative women in British history. However, it is perhaps odd, that this chapter, with a focus on the period 1945-1951, would begin its narrative with a woman whose political life is largely remembered as beginning in 1979 as she entered No.10 Downing Street. Given the vast array of histories considering Thatcher and her legacy, this chapter is most definitely not a re-hashing of existing narratives. Rather, the political beginnings of the young Miss Roberts are just one example of how Conservative women in the post-1945 period, sought to establish space for themselves in the male-dominated Party. It is these women, and their relationship to the Conservative Party between 1945 and 1951 that are the focus of this chapter.

Conservative women, some like Mrs. Thatcher and some remarkably different in both political outlook and lifestyle, lie at the heart of this chapter as a key part of the recovery of the Conservative Party Organization after the devastation of the 1945 election. The period 1945-51 has been coined *The Nadir of British Feminism*, by Martin Pugh, thanks to a trend which saw a return to family life and domesticity after the public role played by many women during the Second World War. However, the activities of Conservative women tell a different story. The post-1945 years saw an emergence of Conservative woman as a key political force in the rejuvenation of the Conservative Party, particularly at a grassroots level and amongst the female electorate.

Although reforms intended to reduce structural barriers facing women in the party did little to reduce lingering sexualized attitudes against women in public life, they demonstrate a heightened awareness of the political importance of both women in the party and the women’s

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35 This is the focus of her own memoir, Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*.
36 Pugh, “The Nadir of British Feminism 1945-1959?”
vote after the 1945 defeat. Regardless of the success of reforms to bring women into the party’s mainstream, Conservative women carved out a separate sphere of influence within the party, relying on their traditional role as canvassers, fundraisers, and social organizers. Through this sphere, they successfully navigated existing male power structures and wielded significant influence amongst women voters, key to the revitalization of the party at a grassroots level as the establishment of the gender gap by 1951.

**Reaction to the 1945 election: Lord Woolton reforms the Party**

In the wake of their convincing defeat at the hands of Attlee’s Labour Party in 1945, the Conservative Party was in a dire position. Lord Woolton, the newly appointed Party Chairman and former wartime Minister of Food, summed up the situation: “We had our back to the wall: we had been heavily defeated: we had little money: the Party was depressed.”37 The Conservative Party Organization, which for so long had formed the bedrock of the party’s grassroots strength, had declined significantly during the war as agents were called to the frontline.38 This situation was not helped by Winston Churchill’s disinterest in the party’s organization, preferring to concentrate on grand foreign policy statements rather than the mundane “bread and butter politics” of the party’s organization.39 For this he can be excused given the gravitas of the international situation during his time as Party Leader and Prime Minister. However, as the Second World War reached its conclusion, Churchill ill-advisedly

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38 Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 140.
39 Butler of Saffron Walden, *The Art of the Possible*, 133.
ignored R.A. Butler’s recommendation to avoid the breakup of the National Government in 1945 given that the party organization “up and down the country was in a parlous condition, much harder hit than that of our opponents by the absence of agents and organizers on war service.” It was with foresight that Butler predicted the disastrous result of the 1945 election and the decimation of the Conservative Party’s majority.

Although in the immediate aftermath of the election, defeat appeared to signal a fatal blow to the party, with time, the party’s electoral humbling provided the Conservatives with the opportunity to undertake a much-needed evaluation of its organization from the rank-and-file membership to the leadership at the top. Thirty years of uninterrupted power and electoral success had given the party with very little impetus to reform its organization, but, as Butler eloquently expresses, defeat “provided the party with a healthy opportunity and a compelling motive for bringing both their policies and characteristic modes of expression up to date.” The energy behind the reforms can be credited to the Party Chairman, Lord Woolton, who remarked that in 1945 he had the “strongest possible temptation to come to a sound business conclusion and to tell the Party that the best thing to do with machinery of this nature was to scrap it and start again.” And while Woolton did not completely scrap the organization, he undertook a series of reforms to modernize the party machine and improve its efficacy before the next General Election.

Prior to locating women within this organizational machinery, it is first important to note the complexity of the Conservative Party structure. In general, the Conservative Party of 1945,
and in fact still to this day, contains three key elements: the National Union, the Parliamentary Party and Central Office. The National Union, described as the “Backbone of the Party,” is the voluntary wing of the party, organized into local constituencies and regional associations and run by the National Union Central Council containing a representative National Executive Committee with the power to appoint sub-committees. Secondly, The Parliamentary Party contains all MPs and Peers who receive the Conservative Whip and is undoubtably the most recognizable section of the party given the public nature of parliamentary affairs. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Conservative Central Office is the influential Headquarters of the Party Organization. Although officially under the control of the Party Leader, it is the Party Chairman who has oversight of the running of Central Office on a day-to-day basis. Central Office is charged with the co-ordination of the party throughout the country and works closely with the National Union to guide the party’s direction. It is this highly complex structure to which the party owes both its strength as a grassroots organization and its weakness given a lack of central control. As Woolton reflected, the party bore many similarities to the American Constitution, as “each separate organization with its officials… prevented any one section from getting undue control of the Party. There was abundant room for the conflict of personal ambitions and no room for a Party dictator.”

As part the wide-ranging modernization of the Conservative Party Organization, Lord Woolton reformed the women’s section, granting them a more mainstream role within the National Union in the hope of mobilizing greater numbers of women in support of the party. Impetus for such reform can be found in the fact that for the first time in 1945, the gendered

45 Note on the Party Organization, 1954, CPA, 7
46 Woolton, Memoirs., 332.
differences in voting were studied by political scientists. Much to the surprise of many who had assumed a women’s natural conservatism, differences in voting were studied by political scientists. Much to the surprise of many who had assumed a women’s natural conservatism, election studies found that in 1945, a majority of women supported the Labour Party. Labour’s 2-point lead over the Conservatives amongst women voters, albeit small, presented the Conservatives with a problem, particularly as women constituted the majority of the electorate. Woolton, and leading women in the party, concluded that gaining women’s support would be key to future electoral success and believed that through the mobilization of women within the organization, the party could attract a larger female constituency.

Given the historical strength of women in the Conservative Party, inevitably it turned towards them once again to revive the grassroots organization and improve the strength of their electioneering machine. Lord Woolton’s reforms scrapped the separate men’s and women’s sections which had been created in 1918 in response to the Representation of the People’s Act. Whilst separate branches were initially designed to ensure women retained a voice and responsibility inside the all-male party, this was never intended to be a permanent solution. Defeat in 1945 was a catalyst to reform this, and joint branches were introduced to better integrate women into the mainstream of the National Union. An internal party pamphlet, *Where “we women” come in*, reflected upon the new structure, concluding that “the joint branch ensured that the women’s effort is contributed directly to the main channel of the Party’s organization.” This new structure allowed for women’s greater integration and advancement with the National Union and highlighted the party’s recognition of the importance to women to

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48 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 198.
49 Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 75.
50 Maguire, 140.
51 Note on the Party Organization, 1954, CPA, 10
their electoral success. The report’s conclusion, that “there is no restriction or limiting factor in the organization of women within the Party,”\(^{52}\) signifies the confidence and ambition of women within the party organization in light of these reforms.

Despite advice from Central Office to form joint branches in the constituencies, separate women’s sections continued to exist in many areas with the aim to “extend the influence of the Party with women’s electors by working through and catering for the specialist interests of women.”\(^{53}\) Where “we women” come in, recognized that “there are many groups of women with special interests… The women’s section should frame their programme to interest women from these groups and to attract them into the mainstream of the Party organisation.” Many continued to believe separate sections for women were necessary given the continuance of male structures of power inside the Conservative Party and lingering attitudes against women’s political involvement. Some also felt that women’s “special interests” would be ignored in a joint section dominated by men. Consequently, in most constituencies it continued to be the case that separate women’s sections were linked to the male association through a joint executive.

**The “special status”\(^{54}\) of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee**

Local constituency women’s organizations were coordinated at a national level by the Central Women’s Advisory Committee (CWAC) founded in 1928 as a response women’s continued lack of representation to the National Union during the interwar years. The Committee was renamed the Women’s National Advisory Committee (WNAC) in 1951 as result of a by-law

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\(^{52}\) Note on the Party Organization, 1954, CPA, 13
\(^{53}\) Note on the Party Organization, 1954, CPA, 10
\(^{54}\) Note on the Party Organization, 1954, CPA, 5
changes, although in substance this had little effect on its function. Despite the fact the CWAC was largely consultative in nature as it did not have the power to enforce its recommendations, it performed a vital role for the party in organizing and representing Conservative women across the country. According to an internal party report on women in the party organization, the CWAC “has special status and exists to advise and guide the National Executive Committee on all questions affecting the organization of women supporters of the Party, and the subjects they are specially interested.”55 As the national voice for women, the CWAC was the most important Conservative women’s organization, on which sat leading women from across the country.

At a national level, the CWAC and Central Office were informally linked through the important figure of the woman Vice-Chairman of the Party, employed by Central Office to act as figurehead and spokesman for the female party members. The woman vice-Chairman had a vital role in acting as a means of communication between the CWAC Chairman, and the male

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55 Note on the Party Organization, 1954, CPA, 5
Party Chairman, Lord Woolton, to ensure that the women’s voice was heard in decision making. The office was also a means through which the party could retain the expertise of experience women who were close to retirement. From 1944-1951, this position of Party vice-Chairman was occupied by ever-present, highly intelligent, and always forthright, Dame Marjorie Maxse (26 October 1891 – 3 May 1975) (fig. 3)

Throughout her lengthy career as part of the Conservative Party Organization, Maxse, embodied intelligence and political ambition; characteristics which undoubtably helped her to succeed at the start of her career in 1921 when she entered a male dominated party littered with prejudice against women’s political involvement.\textsuperscript{56} The daughter of Ernest George Maxse, the British Vice-Consul at Algiers, Maxse spent much of her early years traveling, learning foreign languages, and served in the First World War in a French military hospital. After the conclusion of war, she joined the Conservative Party in 1921 and was swiftly appointed by Central Office as one of the first women Area Agents, a clear early indication of both her political talent and ambition.\textsuperscript{57} Her appointment as the Party’s Chief Organization Officer in 1931, charged with overseeing the organizational side of the Conservative Party machine,\textsuperscript{58} marks her out as an early trailblazer for women’s involvement in the party and gives credence to the Conservative’s claim that they were ahead of other parties in recognizing the political role of women. In this capacity, Maxse had a vital role in building up the Conservative Organization and its woman voters,\textsuperscript{59} although much of her time was taken reassuring men of women’s lack of political ambition. For example, to alleviate conflict between the woman organizer and male party agent, she suggested that woman organizers “do not seek to usurp [the men’s] place of power; and do not work for

\textsuperscript{56} “Dame Marjorie Maxse,” \textit{The Times}, May 6, 1975, The Times Digital Archive.
\textsuperscript{57} The Times, \textit{Obituary}, May 6\textsuperscript{th} 1975.
\textsuperscript{58} “Dame Marjorie Maxse,” \textit{The Daily Telegraph}, May 6, 1975, The Telegraph Historical Archive.
\textsuperscript{59} “Dame Marjorie Maxse,” May 6, 1975.
feminism but for the Party. Nor do women wish to become Agents…”60 Herein demonstrates what the *Times* described as “her rare gift of sympathizing with the point of view of others, even if not agreeing with it, and the patience she displayed in hearing their difficulties,”61 which must have been a vital asset when navigating the persisting male structures of power within the party.

Maxse’s most visible role within the Conservative Party Organization was undoubtedly her appointment as woman vice-Chairman of the party in 1944. In this capacity, she was the sole representative of women in Central Office’s leadership team and had responsibility for a number of key functions, including approving candidates for constituency election and organizing the Annual Women’s Conference. Amongst a career surely littered with conversations with leading politicians, she was directly involved in the selection of a young Margaret Thatcher, another politically ambitious woman who, similarly, was to become a trailblazer for women in the Conservative Party.62 Given her half-decade spent inside the Conservative Party Organization, Maxse unquestionably had a significant role in ensuring women retained an influential position within the organization and left her mark on those around her. Maxse’s wit and intelligence proved to those doubters around her that a women could be involved in politics, and could, in fact, be just as good, if not better than the men. Lord Woolton, paid tribute to this, suggesting that Maxse became his “advisor on all women’s work and [who] probably had more experience of party politics than most people in the country: I remain greatly in her debt for both her advice and friendship.”63

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60 Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 77.
As the woman vice-Chairman, Maxse sat alongside the CWAC Chairman, Mrs. Lorne Sayers (1945-1948) and Mrs. Anne Warde (1948-51), at the top of a highly complex women’s organization. The CWAC had the dual function of firstly organizing and coordinating Conservative women across the country, and secondly making the views of these women known to the party’s leadership in order to influence party policy. Local women’s committees elected members to sit on Area Women’s Advisory Committees. In turn, each Area committee elected a Chair to sit on the CWAC and represent the interests their region at a national level, thus, forming “a link between the center and the Provincial Area Women’s Advisory Committees.”

This structure of local, regional and national bodies was not unique to the women’s organization, but mirror other groups within National Union such as the Trade Unionists National Advisory Committee and the Young Conservatives, and provided a mechanism through which the concerns of Conservatives across the country could be heard.

The most important and public event of the CWAC was the Annual Women’s Conference, a forum in which members of women’s sections from across the country could meet and express their opinions on topical matters. Every year, hundreds of resolutions were submitted to the CWAC from Area Committees to be considered for Annual Conference. Whilst the resolutions covered a large remit, from foreign and Commonwealth affairs to the price to the price of bread, they most frequently covered day-to-day issues of rationing and shortages which disproportionally affected women, alongside calling for greater attention and opportunity to be afforded to women in the party. For example, at the Women’s Conference in 1947, resolutions on the “Housewife’s Burden,”, housing shortages and women’s role in politics were all discussed. The conference heard that:

\[\text{Note on the Party Organization, 1954, CPA, 5}\]
\[\text{Note on the Party Organization, 1954, CPA, 8}\]
This conference views with the most profound concern the ever increasing burden placed on the already weary shoulders of the housewives of this country because of the gross mis-management and absence of practical foresight exhibited by the present Government resulting in continued lack of food, fuel, housing, clothing and household goods and calls on the members of the Conservative Opposition to protest to the Government by every legitimate means against the intolerable conditions imposed upon housewives.66

This is just example among many, of the opportunity granted to women at the Conference to raise issues on a national level in the hope that the party’s leadership would take notice.

Even though the resolutions passed at the Women’s Conference were not binding to the party – as was also the case with resolutions passed at Conference of the National Union – the Women’s Conference still garnered significant interest and publicity. The public attention attracted by the women’s conference is exemplified by figure 4 above, showing the sold-out

66 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee: Resolutions for the Conference, 8 May 1947, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
women’s conference on the front page of the party’s main publication, *Tory Challenge*.\(^{67}\)

Moreover, the Women’s Conference was frequently addressed by leading figures in the party such as the Chairman, Lord Woolton, and Party Leader, Winston Churchill who addressed the mass meeting of over 7,000 women at the 1950 conference.\(^{68}\) Clearly, the Annual Conference was an indication of political influence Conservative women obtained in the party.

**Conservative Women – The Party’s Election Winners**

At the 1947 Annual Conservative Women’s Conference, a resolution was passed stressing:

“…that in the view of the fact that women have the majority vote, the Conservative Party should give special consideration to impressing upon them their importance and individuality as voters, that attention to problems particularly affecting women should be prominent in the Party programme, and that it should be aim of branches throughout the country to ensure the return of a reasonable number of representative conservative women at the next election.” \(^{69}\)

This resolution, passed with unanimous support from all delegates in attendance at the Annual Women’s Conference highlights the key challenge presented to the CWAC as the key organizing body for Conservative women amongst the country. As a result of demographics, since the Equal Franchise Act of 1929, women had constituted 53 per cent of the electorate, thus giving greater significance to their influence as voters.\(^{70}\) Prior to the election of 1945, gender differences in voting were largely ignored as it was assumed women simply voted in line with their husband’s political leanings. This changed after 1945 when election studies showed that there was in fact a


\(^{68}\) Report of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 1\(^{st}\) May 1950 – 1\(^{st}\) April 1951, CPA, CCO 4/4/328, Bodleian Library, Oxford

\(^{69}\) Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 8 May 1947

large disparity between men and women voters. Although in 1945, a majority of both men and women had voted for Labour, men voted for them in significantly higher numbers. 54 per cent of men, and 45 per cent of women voted Labour, signaling that women were more favorable to the Conservatives and that a special effort needed to be made to attract their votes. Inevitably, this task fell upon the women of the party and their proven success historically as canvassers and campaigners, and was conducted in two capacities. Firstly, Conservative women sought to influence the party agenda to ensure women’s interests were represented and secondly, providing social engagements and meetings at a grassroots level.

Since the Representation of the People Act of 1918, the Conservative Party demonstrated themselves capable of being sensitive to the prevailing needs of women voters. However, Miss. Maxse felt that after the war, the party “were perhaps lagging behind the Socialist and Liberals in recommendations put forward on matters of social service and of interest to women… there was room the Committee to make their views known and to play a part in the formation of policy of special interest to women.” As many women in the party felt that female electors had been swayed in 1945 by Socialist promises, they believed it essential to put forward a strong policy agenda on women’s issues before the next election. However, as all bar one Conservative woman MP had been defeated in the disaster of 1945, women lacked representation in Parliament and the ability to influence the formation of policy. Therefore, Maxse pushed for the creation of a new Parliamentary Sub-Committee as part of the CWAC to give women greater direct influence over the formation of policy relating to women’s interests.

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72 Note on of discussion of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee on the appointment of a Parliamentary Sub Committee, 16 October 146, CPA, CCO 500/9/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
73 S.A. Walker, Notes for discussion by the WNAC on the “General Election 1959- The Organization of the Future”, 12 November 1959, CPA, CCO 500/9/1, Bodleian Library, Oxford
These demands were heard, and in November 1946 a Parliamentary Sub-Committee of the CWAC was created, comprised of all women MPs, (although at the 1945 election, all bar one had been defeated), Life Peeresses, women officers of the National Union and three representatives from the CWAC. They met six or seven times a year, determined by the Parliamentary calendar and served to “consider proposed legislation of special interest to women and to report and advise on the passage of bills through the house, having gained the views of women members of the Party.”74 The success of this Sub-Committee is evidenced by the Conservative’s women’s agenda that emerged in period leading up to the general election of 1950 which included the publication of *A True Balance: In the Home, In Employment, as Citizens*,75 a surprisingly radical policy statement that endorsed measures such as equal pay, tax reforms and better support for women in employment. Chapter 2 offers a full discussion of the Conservative Party and women’s questions 1945-51 with a particular focus on the issue of equal pay. Here, it is enough to highlight that Conservative women believed that formulation of women’s policy was key to future success, and sought to enlarge their influence in this regard.

Alongside promoting a women’s policy agenda, the CWAC performed a vital function in promoting the party at a local level through the organization of social engagements and meetings. Conservative women’s role in providing a social organization emerged from their historic role as social organizers and was driven by the need to persuade women of the virtues of conservatism in order to shield them from the promises of socialism. Since the age of the Victorian hostess and later the Primrose League, Conservative women had proven themselves as

74 Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Proposed Parliamentary Sub-Committee ‘Draft Scheme’, CPA, CCO 500/9/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
successful social organizers, providing much of the social function of the party.\textsuperscript{76} A Conservative Party report from 1957 reflected on this social function, suggesting that many men in the party believed women were simply “hewers of bread and drawers of tea,”\textsuperscript{77} given their primarily social function. However, this is to overlook the significance of social organizing in providing the vitality of the party at a grassroots level. And while women “gladly accepted and discharged” this role, they warned against playing into this stereotype because, “when used by women themselves, it bred complacency and prejudice; when used by men… it implied the worst kind of flattery bestowed with a lively sense of securing favours to come in the shape of tea and sandwiches, coffee and even hot dogs!”\textsuperscript{78} Women certainly did not want their skills as social organizers to be taken advantage of by male party members.

This focus on social activity was driven by a belief that women voters lagged their male counterparts in terms of political experience and education, and thus social engagements were the best mechanism to bring women into the party. The report from a meeting of a Conservative Young Mothers Group in 1951, remarked that “the majority of young married women have had very little political experience or education, and, in general, have accepted the political outlook of their husbands;”\textsuperscript{79} although as discussed, the latter conclusion was proven to be false given the gap in men’s and women’s votes in 1945. Furthermore, a working party report on the organization of women in the party concluded that “on economic subjects particularly, the average woman did not have anything like the same understanding of the terms and phrases in

\textsuperscript{77} Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Summary Report on the Organisation of Women within the Party, 4 November 1957, CPA, CCO 500/9/1, Bodleian Library, Oxford
\textsuperscript{78} Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Report of a working party on the State of the Women’s Organisation Branch, 1957, CPA, CCO 500/9/1, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 4
\textsuperscript{79} Meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Appendix B: Notes on the Organization of Young Mother’s Meetings in East Fulham, 9 May 1951, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/4, Bodleian Library, Oxford
current use as did the average man.” The Women’s Organization believed that there was a need for easy access to simple information whilst avoiding “any tendency to being ‘talked down to’.” Therefore, Conservative women’s activities were primarily hidden behind a social veneer to encourage women who were not hugely politically inclined to support the Conservative Party.

Social engagement with women at a local level formed part of a broader plan to counter the Socialist propaganda which was believed to have been the cause of defeat in 1945. Given the belief that women were less politically educated, it was assumed that women tended to vote using their emotions and were thus more easily swayed by grand promises including the welfare state and more equitable distribution made by Labour in 1945. Women on the CWAC believed that the Socialists targeted women’s organizations to spread these messages, whereas, it was felt that Conservative women “did not concern themselves enough with this work, and when new organizations were formed it often happened that they were entirely dominated by Socialists, while Conservatives were indifferent and did not give their support.” Therefore, defeat in 1945 motivated women to do more to combat this “Socialists infiltration” into women’s groups through both involving themselves in the meetings and spreading Conservative principles, and organizing social engagements themselves.

In response, Conservative women were actively encouraged to join women’s other organizations to both keep watch on Socialist propaganda and to spread Conservative messages. After the war, the CWAC set up the Outside Organisations Sub-Committee to keep a "strict watch on political propaganda being brought into the meetings of other organisations.”

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80 Report of a working Party on the State of the Women’s Organisation Branch, 1957
81 Report of a working Party on the State of the Women’s Organisation Branch, 1957, 5
82 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 28 April 1949, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/4, Bodleian Library, Oxford
the monthly reports produced by the Sub-Committee, they went to great lengths to provide accurate information on hundreds of women’s organizations, for example, a report on the National Institute of Houseworkers recommended “Conservative women should take an interest in these centers to ensure they should not become a medium for Socialist Propaganda.” 85 And another in 1948 suggested women should interest themselves in the Children’s Bill to ensure “homeless children were not all brought up as socialists.” 86 From these reports, it is clear that the attraction of women to socialism was of utmost concern for the women in the Conservative Party.

Simply keeping watch on Socialist infiltration into women’s groups was not enough, but Conservative women were encouraged to spread Conservative principles when at all possible. Prior to the 1950 election, members of the CWAC encouraged their members to “take every opportunity of attending, and where possible, addressing meetings of other organizations not with a view to talking politically, but at these meetings it is often possible by diverse means to make the Conservative outlook apparent.” 87 Again, this suggestion emphasizes that this strategy was socially oriented, rather than overtly political, highlighting the party’s assumption that social organization was the best means to target women voters. After 1945, women in the party seemed willing to do anything to spread conservatism, for example, it was suggested that members could get into conversation with women on trains, and tactically let them see Conservative literature by leaving it in hotels, hair salons and other public places. 88

85 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 1 September 1948, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library Oxford
86 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, The Children’s Bill, 8 July 1948, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
87 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, The Right Road for Britain, 8 September 1949, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/4, Bodleian Library, Oxford
88 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, The Right Road for Britain, 8 September 1949, CPA
Women’s efforts to bring women into the party can be most clearly seen through the vibrant social function which they provided to local women. Local women’s organizations organized a number of women’s meetings and social events to provide women with a space to meet friends and escape the ever-increasing strain of domestic life under postwar austerity.\(^8^9\) Political messaging was confined to the background, and meetings took the form of social events. For example, an internal report on women’s suggestions for women’s meetings recommended that they could host fancy dress parties whereby a short political speech would be delivered in the middle.\(^9^0\) The same report gave an example whereby one local group organized a village party that had “resulted in an increase in membership and conversion of certain Socialists and floating voters.” Undoubtedly, these activities confined political messaging to a minimum, and focus was afforded to the social aspect to attract women into the party. As the report recommended, it was best that “as well as serious political questions, it has been found of value to ask rather more frivolous ones, in order to lighten the afternoon.”\(^9^1\)

One of the most successful examples of this were the “Young Mothers” meetings organized in East Fulham by the local women’s section. Formed in the autumn of 1950, the meetings were designed to “serve the double purpose of allowing young mothers, who otherwise were confined to the house, to have an afternoon out and at the same time gave Conservative workers the opportunity of propagating Conservative policy.” The meetings included an array of fun activities such as fancy dress, a pressure cooker demonstration, and 20-minutes of dancing, providing women light relief from the burdens of motherhood. It was only sometime after this social activity that a short political speech or an activity making a political point was introduced.

\(^8^9\) “Strain on Housewives,” *Home Truths*, March 1951, 2, CPA, PUB 285/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
\(^9^0\) Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Appendix A: Suggestions for Women’s Meetings, 8 December 1949, CPA, CCO 4/3/310, Bodleian Library, Oxford
\(^9^1\) Suggestions for Women’s Meetings, 8 December 1949, CPA
to the group. Undoubtedly, these were at heart social gatherings, but it is impossible to ignore that their main purpose was to convert young mothers to the Conservative cause. And, by-in-large, the meetings were a remarkable success. One new member remarked, “I wasn’t a Conservative when I came here. I am now because you are all so nice.” The women’s organizations’ social activity clearly broadened the party’s appeal beyond those who were naturally politically inclined by creating a welcoming, non-partisan environment, and importantly, shielded women from the promises of Socialism.

This social activity proved to be remarkably successful in reviving the Party’s grassroots strength between election of 1945 and eventual Conservative victory at the 1951 General Election. Personal anecdotes tell an individual story of the appeal of the women’s organization, but the membership numbers on a national scale are unequivocal in highlighting the success of Conservative women. During the war, party membership had fallen to 911,600, however by the time the Party were back in office in 1952, membership peaked at 2,805,032, of which over 50% are estimated to be women. This exponential growth in party membership, combined with the women organizations attempts to spread Conservative messages, particularly at election time, can be seen as vital to the party’s revival. After the 1950 election, in which the Conservatives eradicated Labour’s majority, the CWAC admitted themselves that “although the General Election did not result in victory, excellent work was done by the organization throughout the country and the Committee would like to congratulate the Women’s Branches on their untiring and successful efforts.”

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92 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Notes on the Organisation of “Young Mothers” meeting in East Fulham, 14 June 1951, CPA, CCO 4/4/328, Bodleian Library, Oxford
Conservative Women Organizers

Alongside improving the strength of the grassroots membership of the Conservative Party, the leadership sought to improve the party’s electioneering machine which had fallen into disrepute during the war as attention turned to the war effort, and men and women were mobilized in the armed forces. Despite male resistance, women historically had played a vital function in the party as campaigners and women’s organizers, and thus, given the need to win over women’s votes, the party inevitably turned to its women activists to strengthen their electioneering machine. The importance of women organizers was accepted by the male leadership in Central Office and fervently supported by members of the CWAC. As such, the role of women organizers was strengthened after the war through better education and training, and although resistance to the role of the woman organizer somewhat continued at a grassroots level, Central Office did seek to equalize male and woman activists in a clear display of their importance.

Since the days of the Primrose Dames of the late 19th century, Conservative women displayed both a passion and a talent for electioneering and canvassing. Women were first utilized in this capacity in Primrose League in response to the Corrupt Practice Act of 1883 which limited election expenses and forced parties to rely on voluntary workers during elections. Women stepped up to fill this void and provided much of the electioneering corps of the party, a role which was formalized when Women’s Unionist Organizations (WUO) were formed across the country in 1918. Women across the country were employed the newly formed WUOs as paid organizers to oversee the administrative and fundraising tasks for the constituency, giving women a great deal of importance as they provided the majority of the

95 Robb, The Primrose League, 1883-1906.
party’s workers and were remarkably successful at fundraising. This was a role that they continued to perform throughout the interwar period.

After defeat in 1945, women within the Conservative Party felt that more needed to be done to support women in their capacity as organizers if the party were to succeed at winning back the women voters who were lost to Labour. In a show of the importance of women organizers, a discussion of the CWAC noted that,

A 100% efficient organization can only be achieved in a Constituency by the employment of a qualified Agent and a Qualified Women Organizer. The Central Office are urged to promote a scheme to encourage the recruitment and employment of suitable women to this work and to bring to the notice of Constituencies the advantages arising from the work of a Woman Organizer.

From this it is apparent that the work of the woman organizer in their local constituency was vital to ensuring an effective local party organization and that the CWAC felt more needed to be done to encourage women in this capacity.

These calls increased in volume after the election of 1950 whereby Labour’s majority support amongst women was overturned and the Conservative’s established a 2-point lead in the women’s vote. Given the closeness of the 1950 vote, the CWAC concluded that “it is very probably that the vote of women will decide the next General Election,” and thus it was vital to encourage more women organizers who could mobilize more women in support of the party. This sentiment is clearly revealed in the CWAC’s report on the 1950 general election where the members reflected that,

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96 Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 75.
97 Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Resolutions for the Agenda of the Women’s Conference, 6 June 1950, CPA, CCO 4/3/310, Bodleian Library, Oxford
98 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Appendix B: ‘Ashford Scheme’, The Responsibilities of Members of the Women’s Advisory Committee, 16 March 1951, CPA, CCO 4/3/310, Bodleian Library, Oxford
It is worth considering whether we should give more encouragement to the employment of women as organisers at any rate in the marginal constituencies. There is so much work they can do among woman electors including collecting information on postal voters which women would be particularly good at, that it would probably be a good investment to subsidise their salaries.\textsuperscript{99}

Given the tight nature of the vote in the election 1950, all efforts of the party needed to be devoted to winning over voters and given that studies showed that women were more likely to be floating voters,\textsuperscript{100} the importance of canvassing women was more important than ever before. Clearly, improving the strength and position of women organizers was considered to by women in the party to be key to winning more women’s votes and ultimately, improving the party’s election results.

It was not just members of the CWAC that recognized the need to strengthen the role of women organizers, but so too did Central Office, desperate to improve the election machine after the disaster of 1945. Thus, as part of the party’s broader effort to improve its electioneering strength, women were provided with better political education and training. In 1946 the party formed Swinton College at Lord Swinton’s Yorkshire Castle to replace the Party’s old educational site, the Bonar Law College at Ashridge, and was designed a residential college to provide a political education and practical training for local activists and agents.\textsuperscript{101} Central Office asked the CWAC whether it wished to arrange courses specifically for women; a question which was unsurprising met with unanimous support.\textsuperscript{102} The first women’s course took place across three days December 1948 with a focus on training women to be more effective

\textsuperscript{100} Maguire, \textit{Conservative Women}, 120.
\textsuperscript{102} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Conservative College at Swinton, 12 February 1948, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
campaigners. The first lecture was entitled: “Women as a political force”, to give women a sense of their potential impact on voters and in the break, a demonstration, “Passing it on,” taught the students how to canvass effectively.\textsuperscript{103} The second annual course in 1949, was titled “Helping to Win the Election,” in anticipation of the upcoming general election, and focused to an even greater extent on the political activities of women within the party. Members of the CWAC “stressed that the most vital point was to give real instructions and talking points to the members attending the course and also to encourage them in canvasing.”\textsuperscript{104} This focus on the training of women electioneers and organizers demonstrates that the party considered women to be vital in the regeneration of the party’s election machine after 1945.

In addition to better training, Central Office planned to improve the status of the woman organizer, particularly in regard to their counterpart, the male party agent. Since women were first employed by women’s organizations, the role of the woman organizer had been a source of tension within the party as a result of sexual stereotypes against women’s political involvement and their perceived threat to the authority of the male party agent who performed similar a similar role as the woman organizer but who had authority over the entire constituency organization. Despite performing the same tasks as the male agent and often having the same qualifications, in a largely symbolic display or resistance to women, women organizers were denied entry into the National Society of Conservative and Unionist Agents, an organization which provided party agents with benefits such as pensions. Although Miss Maxse, having been one of the few women to achieve the position of Area Agent - a position normally reserved for

\textsuperscript{103} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Conservative College at Swinton, 12 February 1948, CPA
\textsuperscript{104} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Conservative College at Swinton, July 1949, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/4, Bodleian Library, Oxford
men – sought to re-assure men that women did not intend to take their jobs. This re-assurance did little to alleviate the tension between the two rival groups, and as a result rivalry between the male agent and the woman organizer festered throughout the interwar period, often leading to inefficiencies and duplication of effort.

After defeat in 1945, inefficiencies could no longer be tolerated, and reforms were introduced to equalize the role of male agent and organizer. Notably, Lord Woolton ensured that women organizers were admitted to the National Society of Conservative and Unionist Agent, which added ‘and Organisers’ to its title. Additionally, both men and women would begin their careers as organizers, only later progressing to becoming full party agents. Whilst this reform gave women access to new benefits such as pensions and marked a backing down of male agents who had long resisted female advancement in their profession, it failed to remove rampant sex discrimination. Organizers, who were disproportionately likely to be a woman, were only granted associate membership whilst agents were full members. Moreover, hostility to women’s political activity continued, particularly when women achieved greater power as agents. For example, one female agent for Barnsley, Nancy Matthews, was told by the constituency candidate, “I must tell you that I disapprove of women as executives in politics. If I had been around when they appointed you, I would have objected.” While the introduction of formal arrangements attempted improve the position of women, lingering attitudes against women’s political activity remained strong.

Consequently, the position of women as organizers and activists highlights both the resistance women continued to face in the male-dominated Conservative Party and their

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106 Maguire, 77.
107 Maguire, 142.
108 Maguire, 142–43.
resilience in the face of this challenge. Led by the CWAC, women continued to perform a vital function as campaigners within the party, and despite lingering resistance, given the scale of defeat in 1945, the party’s leadership in Central Office also began to recognize women organizers would be key to rebuilding their electioneering machine.

**Women and the Parliamentary Party**

Thus far, the role of women Conservative Party Organization has been discussed, revealing that although women faced continued resistance to their political involvement, they wielded a vital role in the post-1945 revival of the party and the emergence of gender gap favoring the Conservative Party by 1950. There is left one, albeit significant, area of the party, left to locate women: The Parliamentary Party, consisting of all MPs and Peers who receive the Conservative Whip. The relationship between the Conservative Parliamentary Party and Conservative women presents an interesting case, full of firsts for women, but at the same time, was undoubtably the area in the party where women struggled the most to gain representation.

It was a Conservative Government that gave women the vote on the same terms as men. It was a Conservative woman Member – Lady Astor – who first took her seat in the House of Commons. It is a Conservative Government which is proposing that women should be admitted to the House of Lords… there is no restriction or limiting factor in the organisation of women within the Conservative Party. They are accorded honour and opportunity. It would be a tragedy if the women themselves failed to see the width of the horizon before them and to shoulder the responsibilities involved.\(^{109}\)

As this conclusion to the Conservative Party pamphlet, *Where “we women” come in*, describes, it was a Conservative, Nancy Astor who was first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons after the Parliament Act of 1918 allowed women to sit in the House of Commons.

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\(^{109}\) *Note on the party organization*, 1954, CPA, 13
However, unlike the pamphlet’s conclusion that “there is no restriction or limiting factor” for women within the Conservative Party, women’s involvement in Parliamentary Party was far from uninhibited, but rather, as a result persisting male attitudes against women in politics, and societal conventions, Conservative women struggled to gain representation in the Parliamentary Party.

Although the Conservative Party proudly boast that the first woman to enter the House was a Conservative,\textsuperscript{110} it does not indicate that the Parliamentary Party was particularly welcoming towards women, for Nancy Astor was elected to Parliament not due to gender, nor her talent, but instead as a consequence of her aristocratic status. Astor, like many Conservative women MPs in the 1920s, took up the seat of a family member. The American-born aristocrat entered Parliament after her husband, Viscount Astor’s, death, leaving her son, the Member of Parliament for Plymouth, to inherit his title in the Lords. Rather than give up his seat in the Commons entirely, Astor stepped in and convincingly won the by-election called.\textsuperscript{111} Thus, women’s early entry into Parliament was largely just an extension of the party’s aristocratic dominance, known as ‘male equivalence,’ less a drive for greater women’s representation. As a result, after 1918, there was no surge of Conservative women into Parliament, but rather a steady increase as women proved themselves capable of office. 1931 marks the high point of Conservative women’s pre-war representation in Parliament with a total of 13 Conservative women MPs elected to the Commons.\textsuperscript{112}

Given the Conservative Party’s near electoral dominance throughout the interwar period and the distraction of war, the slow progress of women into the Parliamentary Party gained little

\textsuperscript{110} What the Conservative Party has done for women, n.d., CPA
\textsuperscript{111} Maguire, Conservative Women, 83.
\textsuperscript{112} Lovenduski, Norris, and Burness, “The Party and Women,” 627.
attention. That was until the shock defeat of 1945 in which all but one Conservative woman MP was defeated. The lone figure of one Conservative MP, Lady Davidson, in contrast to the Labour Party who returned a record of 21 seats, provided a stark indication that the Parliamentary Party remained relatively elusive for Conservative women. Conservative women demanded immediate reform, passing a resolution at the Women’s Conference of 1947 stating that “it should be the aim of branches throughout the country to ensure the return of a reasonable number of representative Conservative women at the next election.” For Conservative women, the lack of representation of women in Parliament posed a particular problem given the party’s need to attract more women voters before the next election. They believed it to be important that women had representation of their own sex in Parliament to ensure that women’s interests were put forward.

The reasons for Conservative women’s struggle to gain representation in the Parliamentary Party, particularly in comparison to their strength in the National Union, cannot be explained through failure as candidates to win elections, but rather in their difficulties gaining selection as candidates for election. For example, at the election of 1945, there were just 14 Conservative women candidates, compared with 41 for the Labour Party. Thus it is unsurprising that fewer Conservative women were elected to Parliament even disregarding the landslide nature of the 1945 election. The selection of women as candidates faced two challenges: firstly, there was a lack of quality candidates available for selection in the first place, and secondly, when women candidates did come forward, they were met with hostility and prejudice, even from women themselves.

113 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 8 May 1947
114 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 10 June 1948, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
A lack of potential women for selection as candidates presented the party with a significant problem. Without women to pick from, it is unsurprising that women failed to make it into Parliament. This was an issue recognized by the CWAC, who heard a resolution in 1948 which suggested that “recognizing the contribution which women can make in public life, requests the Conservative Party Headquarters to impress on all constituency associations the need for more Conservative women candidates in Local Government Elections.” The reasons for the reluctance of more women to come forward as potential candidates are not clear, however, the role of MP undoubtably had more significant time commitments that the role of social organizer more frequently occupied by women. In light of the fact that domestic duties and childcare responsibilities remained very much a woman’s job in the postwar year, it can be assumed that taking on additional responsibility was not an attractive prospect for many women.

A second factor limiting women in putting themselves forward as candidate was the expense involved. Prior to 1948, it was required that candidates contribute their own campaign costs. Given that the majority of women remained financially dependent on their husbands, such expensive was not a viable option and thus, selection as candidate was inconceivable. In contrast to the domestic responsibilities of women, financial limitations were far easier for the party to address. The Maxwell-Fyfe Reforms of 1948 made significant changes to the mechanism of candidate selection, ending the requirement for candidates to pay for their own costs and instead giving responsibility of finances to the constituency association. Although Sir Maxwell-Fyfe’s wide-ranging report on the Conservative Party Organization did not solely focus on women in the party, the removal of the financial burden upon candidates undoubtably

116 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 8 July 1948
117 Maguire, Conservative Women, 167.
118 Kilmuir, Political Adventure; the Memoirs of the Earl of Kilmuir., 157.
made it easier for women, particularly young and ambitious women candidates to put themselves forward for selection, thus indicating that Central Office recognized the importance of greater representation of women in the Parliamentary Party.

Even when women did put themselves forward for selection, the key inhibitor to their progression as candidates was resistance from selection panels and Party Chairman at a local level, fueled by sexual stereotypes regarding a woman’s political role. In order to become the constituency’s candidate, a prospective candidate had to meet the approval of the local constituency selection panel. Across the country, selection committees were dominated by men, presenting a hostile environment for potential women candidates. In a review of the 1950 General Election, the CWAC concluded in many cases, the attitude of the Area Chairman was key in determining success of women at a local level, suggesting, “where the Chairman and Agent are not keen on encouraging the women it might get no further.”\footnote{Report on ‘General Election Impressions,’ 1950, CPA} This is yet another example of resistance to the progress of women into male spheres of influence, particularly in the Conservative grassroots. Despite measures designed to enhance the representation of women, Central Office had very little power over the rank and file, and thus could do little to influence the resistance of many male party chairmen.

Adding to this narrative it is interesting that, in many cases it was the women themselves who stood in the way of more women being selected as prospective candidates, highlighting that woman were not immune to sexual prejudice. There is no doubt that women in the party at a national level on the CWAC, wanted greater representation of women in Parliament. However, this was not a view shared by all women active in the party. In response to the CWAC’s suggestion that greater effort needed to be made to find suitable women candidates, one member
argued that while this was largely agreed in principle, it was often “the women in the constituencies themselves who did not encourage women candidates.”¹²⁰ Such resistance from politically active women is hard to explain, but can be put down to jealous, or socially conservative attitudes towards women’s role as mothers and wives.¹²¹ Throughout the immediate postwar years, the rank-and-file women’s membership of the party showed a tendency throughout the postwar years showed a tendency to sit further to the right on social issues compared to women at the top of the party, and emphasized the importance of family life. The title of the party’s magazine for women, *Home Truths*, is symbolic of the importance afforded to women’s domestic role. In this context, opposition to women candidates from women on selection panels can be explained by opinion that a woman’s place was in the home, and that this was threatened by women’s greater responsibilities as an MP.

In order to combat this hesitance from both men and women on selection panels to welcome women candidates, women in the party’s leadership pushed for further reform, convinced that the situation needed to be improved to ensure more women candidates were selected before the election of 1950. Miss Maxse as Vice-Chairman led this charge, requesting that “constituencies should be persuaded to interview at least one woman among the prospective candidates.”¹²² Her request was successful and selection committees were subsequently required to interview at least one woman. It is unclear which reform to the candidate selectin process had the greatest effect, however, it is clear that the failure to elect more than one Conservative woman MP in 1945 sharpened opinion towards improving the chances of women on

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¹²⁰ Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 10 June 1948
¹²¹ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 168.
¹²² Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 16 October 1948, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
constituency selection panels. And undoubtably this worked, as the number of women candidates increased from 14 in 1945, to a new high of 29 in 1950.\textsuperscript{123}

One young and politically ambitious woman to benefit from this greater attention on the selection of women candidates was a greengrocer’s daughter from Grantham, Lincolnshire. An Oxford educated chemist, the political career of Margaret Thatcher, nee Roberts (13 October 1925 – 8 April 2013) is extraordinary and well researched, however her early political years in many ways reflect the fortunes of many politically ambitious women in the postwar years. Although Margaret Roberts would go on to become the country’s first female Prime Minister, this was far from certain at the start of her career.

A chemistry student at Somerville College Oxford between 1943-1947, she quickly became politically active, joining the Oxford University Conservative Association, rising to the top as President in 1946. Upon her graduation, she gained a job in Colchester and joined the Local Conservative Association. However, our interest in her story starts when her political activities attracted the attention of an old Oxford friend, John Grant. In 1948, Dartford’s Conservative Association was desperately looking for a new candidate with the threat of an early election looming. In discussion John Grant, suggested to the Party Chairman, John Miller, that Margaret Roberts would be a good candidate. In response, Miller exclaimed “Oh, but Dartford is a real industrial stronghold. I don’t think a woman would do at all.”\textsuperscript{124} Despite his reservations about the possibility of a woman candidate, Margaret was invited to interview for the candidacy. In her own words, Thatcher reflected that “There was a good deal of suspicion of women

\textsuperscript{123} Lovenduski, Norris, and Burness, “The Party and Women,” 626.
\textsuperscript{124} Thatcher, The Path to Power, 63.
candidates, particularly in what was regarded as a tough industrial seat like Dartford. This was quite definitely a man’s world into which not just angels feared to tread.”¹²⁵

Perhaps due to the unscalable 20,000 majority wielded by Labour in Dartford, and the potential for good publicity, the party decided to adopt Thatcher, who, at the age of 24 became the youngest woman candidate. This was a common practice whereby women, when selected as candidates were placed in seats believed to be unwinnable. Unsurprisingly, she lost to the Labour candidate at the 1950 election and again in 1951, however she would later, having married, birthed two children, and passed her bar exams, go on to enter Parliament at the 1959 election in the safe seat of Finchley. Thatcher became an unlikely trailblazer for political women in a career that reached the highest echelons of British politics. Later success in her political career, which has garnered great scholarly attention, often overshadows her path to power. Thatcher emerged during a period of unprecedented change for women in the Conservative Party after their shock defeat in 1945. It was thanks to a recognition that the party needed to appeal to women voters that they took a chance on the young and inexperienced Margaret Roberts who was to go onto become one of the best – and worst – remembered Prime Ministers in modern history.

¹²⁵ Thatcher, 64.
Finding *A True Balance*\textsuperscript{126}: The Conservative Party and Equal Pay, 1945-51

Since 1920, the House of Commons had endorsed the principle of equal pay for men and women in the Civil Service as a simple matter of justice, yet, in 1951, for the third time in just 4 years, a Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer stood before the House of Commons and refused to consider its implementation. Hugh Gaitskell, Labour’s Chancellor at the time, should have listened to advice of his Rt. Hon. Friend, the Labour MP Henry Price who declared:

> For 30 years Governments have been talking about this. Let the Socialist Government do it and prove themselves with another argument in the forecoming election. But let them beware that if they do not it will be an argument against them, and an opportunity for the next Government, which, in my opinion, will be a Tory [Conservative] Government, to do it and to have credit for themselves. If no other argument appeals to the Financial Secretary, I hope that the one of political expediency will.\textsuperscript{127}

However, Gaitskell did not, and by October 1951, a new Conservative government was in office, carried by the pledge to implement equal pay in the Civil Service. Finally, after years of stagnation, in March 1954, R.A. Butler, the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer stood before the House of Common and as part of his budget speech stated that the government was ready “to make a start with equal pay,”\textsuperscript{128} indicating that the Conservative government was willing to begin the implementation equal pay for men and women.

After years of promises and delay from both Labour and Conservative Governments, it is perhaps surprising that it was a Conservative Government who took the first step towards the implementation of equal pay. British feminism have long accepted as a given that its natural home is the Left, and thus the Labour Party, particularly given the Conservative Party’s

\textsuperscript{126} Conservative and Unionist Committee on Women’s Questions, *A True Balance.*
\textsuperscript{127} 491 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1951) col. 1718
\textsuperscript{128} 524 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1954) col. 1910
ideological tendencies towards tradition and fixed gender roles. As a result, the idea that the Conservative Party could itself support a women’s agenda is inconceivable to many who believe the idea of a Conservative feminist to be a contradiction in terms.\(^{129}\) As a result, Conservative feminism has been overlooked and the significant contribution of the Conservative Party, and Conservative women, rendered obsolete.

The apparent dichotomy between feminism and conservatism is not borne out by the Conservative Party’s record on women’s issues, and whilst the Conservative Party was, and still is, most certainly not a feminist organization,\(^{130}\) it boasts an impressive record of concern for women as voters. The Conservative Party memorandum, *What the Conservative Party had done for women*, highlights that throughout the 1920s, Conservative Governments were responsible for a swathe of legislation designed to improve the rights of women as wives and mothers, and as citizens.\(^{131}\) Notably, it was Conservative-led governments who brought forward both the Representation of the People Act of 1918 and the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that extended the suffrage to women. The Conservative Party of the 1920s showed a sensitivity to the changing nature of electorate and the need to address women as political actors in their own right,\(^ {132}\) a success borne out in the party’s electoral success throughout the interwar period. As such, the Conservative Party’s ideology, or lack of,\(^ {133}\) has shown itself both to be both flexible and highly sensitive to the changing needs of the female electorate.

This chapter seeks to explore the Conservative Party’s relationship to women’s questions, in order to explain how the party constructed a successful appeal to women in the wake of the

\(^{129}\) Jarvis, “‘Behind Every Great Party’: Women and Conservatism in Twentieth-Century Britain,” 306.

\(^{130}\) Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 1.

\(^{131}\) What the Conservative Party has done for Women, n.d., CPA, CCO 500/9/1

\(^{132}\) Jarvis, “Mrs Maggs and Betty,” 151.

\(^{133}\) Jarvis has argued that the Conservative Party has been reluctant to acknowledge that conservatism is even an ideology at all, but instead based on a number of “troupes of Conservative belief.” Jarvis, “‘Behind Every Great Party’: Women and Conservatism in Twentieth-Century Britain,” 306.
social changes brought by the Second World War. Whilst Conservative Party policy after 1945 focused on many women’s issues, this chapter will focus primarily on the issue of equal pay given its political prominence and divisiveness throughout the period 1945-51. Through the example of equal pay, the following pages show how the party developed a distinct Conservative feminism, both sensitive to the changing desires of women in postwar Britain and lingering traditional desires from stability. In contrast to the Labour Party whose six years in office were significantly blighted by economic difficulties, the Conservative Party, granted the freedom of Opposition, crafted an ideological appeal to women that was key to their electoral revival between 1945 and 1951. While Harold Smith offers a detailed account of how the Conservative Party internally came to support equal pay, and other studies touch briefly upon the issue given its significance in late 1940s and 1950s, the role of Conservative women in this debate, and the electoral impact of support for equal pay are lesser understood.

From this discussion it emerges that there were two key motivations driving Conservative support for equal pay. Firstly, equal pay was considered to be a vote-winning policy commitment by R.A. Butler and a small group of like-minded thinkers in the party’s leadership as part of the Conservative Party’s strategy to recapture the votes of professional and middle-class women who had been lost to the Labour Party at the election of 1945. In this light, support for equal pay can be seen as a pragmatic response to the realization that a majority of women favored the Labour Party in 1945. This was a discovery that shocked many who had, wrongly, assumed women to be the Conservative Party’s most reliable of supporters. 134 The first electoral study to include gender as a category of analysis in 1945 thus undermined these long-held assumptions of female voting

134 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Explaining the Gender Gap,” 202–5. This chapter offers a full discussion of the structural explanations of women’s conservatism based on “simplistic notions of female domesticity,” and their isolation from organized waged labor.
behavior, and highlighted to the Conservative Party once again that they needed to construct a policy agenda tailored to the demands of postwar women.

The second impetus for support for equal pay was driven primarily by Conservative women in the CWAC, on the Equal Pay Campaign Committee (EPCC) and in Parliament who believed equal pay was a simple matter of justice which could no longer be ignored. It must be noted, that although the most fervent support came from prominent women in the party, it did not entail that all women supported equal pay, nor was it only women that believed equal pay to be just. It appears that Butler considered equal pay to be both a matter of justice, and favorable to the party’s electoral position. Thus, with the freedom of Opposition, unlike the Labour Party who were bound by the burden of legislative action and practical implementation, the Conservative Party of the 1950s came to be one of the leading voices in the fight for equal pay.

“Promises without performance”\textsuperscript{135}: The history of the equal pay, 1918-1947

Since 1918, when women over 30 were first granted the vote, all three major parties across the British political landscape – the Conservative, Liberal and Labour Parties – had expressed support for the principle of equal pay. In 1920, the House of Commons passed a motion: “That it is expedient that women should have equal opportunity of employment with men in all branches of the Civil Service within the United Kingdom and under the Local Authorities and should also receive equal pay.”\textsuperscript{136} After several years of inactivity on the issue as other more pressing matters took precedence, in 1936, the House passed a resolution, “That in the

\textsuperscript{135} Central Women’s Advisory Committee: Parliamentary Sub-Committee, Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford

\textsuperscript{136}128 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5\textsuperscript{th} ser.) (1920) col. 1580
opinion of this House, the time has come when the Government should give effect to the resolution voted by the House of Commons in May, 1920, and forthwith place women employed in the lower classes of the civil service on the same scales of pay as apply to men in those classes.**137 Despite these two votes in support of equal pay in the Civil Service as a matter of justice, there was a widespread lethargy on the issue. Both votes failed the inspire legislative action given the practical reality that the implementation of equal pay in Government Service would entail a large investment on the Party of the Treasury. Particularly in the context of re-armament in the 1930s, this was an additional financial burden that no pragmatic Chancellor could feasibly endorse.

While equal pay and women’s issues more generally were inevitably overshadowed by the international crisis and rearmament in the 1930s, changes to women’s role during the Second World War once again brought the issue of equal pay onto the political agenda. As a result of the outbreak of war in 1939, women were mobilized in significant numbers in support of the war effort, and by the end in 1945 there were 7,250,000 women employed in industry, the armed forces and civil defense service. A remarkable 46 per cent of women aged 14-59 were now working in some capacity, bringing women once again into the public sphere.138 Despite these advances, the National Government’s Restoration of the Pre-War Practices Act of 1942 made it clear that the Government never intended the changing wartime role of women to be permanent, but rather, at the conclusion of war, women would once again retreat to the domestic private sphere, allowing men to return to their preferential position in the workplace.139 In practice, this meant thousands of women were pushed out of their wartime roles, either forced into lower level

137 Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA
jobs designated as “women’s work” or leaving employment all together. Beatrix Campbell notes the example of London Transport, where 4,000 women clippers were sacked in the 1940s. A spokesman for the company said that it was “grateful for the women who took the men’s job during and after the war” but they had to go.”

Despite resistance to women’s employment in many quarters, particularly from trade unions, the emergence of women into traditionally male spheres of work during the Second World War was impossible to ignore and sparked new demands for improved rights for women in the workplace. Significantly, during the war women had proven that they could work just as well, if not better than their male counterparts. Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour, famously remarked in 1944 that: “We thought it would need three women for the output of two men, but by the help of our production engineers, new devices, and Labour aids in one way or another, I am glad to say that the output is almost equal one for one.” Although Bevin resisted admitting that women themselves were as efficient as men, which would have been highly contentious, the point was clear: women were just as productive as men. Consequently, the conscription of women into traditionally male dominated industries irreparably altered the sexual division of labour. However despite this, women continued to be paid two thirds of a man’s salary which became both a source of resentment, and increasingly, was seen as highly unjust by not only women activists, but men with little vested interest in issue.

With greater attention turned toward the issue of equal pay after the war, the Equal Pay Campaign Committee (EPCC) was formed to organize support for the Equal Pay Movement and

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141 Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA
raise public awareness of the issue. Although the Committee, formed in 1944, was officially a non-party pressure group, it was most closely associated with the Conservative Party and was led by two former female Conservative Members of Parliament. Mrs. Mavis Tate (17 August 1893 – 5 June 1947), MP for Wilsden West and later the constituency of Frome between 1931 and 1945, who served as Chairman of the EPCC from its conception in January 1944 until her untimely death in June 1947. Following Tate’s death, Mrs. Thelma Cazalet-Keir (28 May 1899 – 13 January 1989), who also served as a Conservative MP for East Islington from 1931 to 1945, became Chairman from 1947 until its dissolution. Both women lost their seats in the general election of 1945 as casualties of Labour landslide election victory, thus providing them with greater time and energy to devote to the issue of equal pay. The EPCC was key to ensuring equal pay remained on the political agenda and offers a first glimpse at the activities of Conservative women as part of the equal pay movement.

R.A. Butler’s Education Bill of 1944, involving major reforms to the secondary education system, provided the EPCC with the perfect opportunity to press the Churchill-led National Government on the issue of equal pay. Conservative MP Cazalet-Keir moved an amendment to the bill, calling for equal pay for male and female teachers. Although Cazalet-Keir warned the Chief Whip that they risked defeat on the issue, her advice was not heeded and Churchill’s National Government was defeated by 117 votes to 116, and only overturned when Churchill treated it as a vote of confidence in the government. Despite this eventual defeat, Cazalet-Keir’s amendment highlighted the growing strength of the equal pay movement, forcing the issue back onto the political agenda after it had abated during the war.

144 Potter, 49.
145 Pugh, Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain, 1914-1999, 278.
In response to this growing pressure, Churchill as Prime Minister was forced to appoint a Royal Commission to consider the effect of introducing equal pay. Under the Chairmanship of Mr. Justice Asquith, the Royal Commission’s terms of reference were to “examine the existing relationship between the remuneration of men and women in the public services, in industry and in other fields of employment; to consider the social, economic and financial implications of the claim of equal pay for equal work.”146 With such a wide remit, the Commission did not report until October 1946, giving equal pay activists time to lobby the government over the delays.147 As a result, the final report was met with much anticipation and media attention.148

Much to the dismay of the EPCC and other equal pay campaigners, the report fell short of expectations and offered little clarity on the matter, due in part because the Commission lacked the power to make recommendations, asked only to consider the “social, economic and financial implications of the claim of equal pay for equal work and to report.”149 As a result, the result largely shied away from addressing the matter of justice, but concluded that “civil servants, teachers, and local government employees doing the same work as men should receive equal pay,”150 alongside those working in the Post Office. This was a relatively uncontroversial finding given that all parties in the House had endorsed the principle of equal pay since 1920.

Far more controversial was the Commission’s second conclusion that women in industry should not receive equal pay, given that men and women often perform different work, with different efficiencies, and that “not even the representatives of organised labour desire to see the

146 402 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1944) col. 1381
147 402 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1944) col. 1606 This is just one example of the lobbying subject to the government by backbench M.P from across the house.
149 408 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1945) col. 959
principle of equal pay introduced in the industrial field by direct government action.”151 This conclusion divided even members of the Commission, with three of four of its women members signing a memorandum of dissent.152 They concluded that:

Since we attach great importance to the beneficial effect upon productive efficiency which we believe would follow from a greater freedom of the individual to find the work best suited to him or to her irrespective of sex, we cannot agree with the majority that it is necessary to make a choice between ‘exact justice’ and ‘oiling the wheels of economic progress.’ On the contrary the claims of justice between individual and of the development of national productivity point in the same direction.153

Thus, they felt that the financial cost of equal pay and the justice of the issue could no longer be considered separately or used as an excuse for further delay due to the fact equal pay for women in industry would aid rather than hinder productivity.

Although this memorandum upheld the belief that in the long-term, equal pay would aid national productivity, most governments deal with matters of short-term priority, and the priority of the postwar Labour Government was addressing the mountain of debt in the postwar finances and the implementation of the Welfare State. And while equal pay would perhaps have a long-term benefit, the Report made clear the immediate financial cost of its implementation. The 220-page report explicitly laid out the practical implications of the implementation of equal pay across various sectors, concluding that the cost would be roughly £30-40 million: £5-10 million for the civil service; £16 million for teachers, and £0.75 million for local authority employees.154 Thus, it appeared that an additional cost to the exchequer could not be avoided.

153 Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 196.
Consequently, despite the public and media attention aroused by the Commission’s report, the financial implications it laid allowed the Labour Government, like all other governments before, to stall on the matter. Hugh Dalton, Labour’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, stood before the House of Commons in 1947 to announce the Government’s position on equal pay: “The Government are definitely of the opinion that this principle cannot be applied at the present time. In making proposals to Parliament for incurring additional expenditure and for extending social services, the Government must be the judge of priorities.”155 Although the Government supported “the justice of the claim that there should be no difference in payment for the same work in respect of sex,”156 they were unmoving on their position. Given other economic priorities, equal pay could not be justified. Thus, their position was unchanged since they had first supported the ‘principle’ of equal pay in 1920.

To a certain extent, Labour can be forgiven for this stance given the postwar difficulties facing Britain alongside their pledge to undertake a transformation of the British state and implement the recommendations of the Beveridge Report of 1942. Emerging from the war, the British economy faced a growing mountain of debt, leading to an era of rationing and austerity.157 As Stafford Cripps (Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, 3 November 1947 – 19 October 1950) reflected as he devalued the pound in 1949 remarked, “we all thought that this post-war period was going to be easier than it has, in fact, turned out to be, in the economic sphere; and we have been trying to deal with it ever since by a series of temporary expedients which have led to a series of crises as each expedient became exhausted.”158 The worsening economic crisis stood in contrast to the positive Labour manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, upon
which they were elected in 1945. The manifesto promised radical socialist reforms including nationalization of public services and utilities and major social legislation, all which inevitably involved a larger role of the state and public financing.\textsuperscript{159} Amongst a remarkable list of the Attlee Government’s achievements, Dalton explained, “Family allowances have been introduced, a National Health Service is being established, new schemes of national insurance and public assistance are being brought into effect. The government are proud of these achievements, but their cost is substantial, and some limit must be set to the rate at which new projects, involving fresh expenditure, can be undertaken.”\textsuperscript{160} In the context of these reforms, equal pay was another expense that the Labour Government believed they did not have the funds to finance.

While people were, in general, sympathetic to the economic pressures facing the government, Dalton’s statement was met with criticism both from within his own party, particularly its women, and unsurprisingly from the Conservative Opposition. In a speech to the House of Commons, Labour MP Barbara Castle, highlighted the disappointment of many women “affected by his statement fully appreciate the economic difficulties which face the country, they will be deeply disappointed by the suggestion that they alone should be expected to forgo any satisfaction of a just claim so long as inflationary pressure lasts.”\textsuperscript{161} Dalton’s refusal to even consider equal pay is even more remarkable as it came just a week after the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee (NEC)\textsuperscript{162} was overwhelmingly defeated at the Party’s Annual Conference, on a resolution calling for the immediate implementation of equal pay for men and women doing equal work.\textsuperscript{163} The NEC was defeated by its members by a heavy vote of

\textsuperscript{160} 438 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5\textsuperscript{th} ser) (1947) col. 1070-1071
\textsuperscript{161} 438 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5\textsuperscript{th} ser) (1947) col. 1072
\textsuperscript{162} The NEC is the governing body of the Labour Party which can be likened to Central Office of the Conservative Party, setting the direction of party policy.
2,310,000 to just 598,000, a clear demonstration that the Labour Party’s leadership, bound by the pressures of government, was increasingly out of touch with the popular mood. As Conservative activist Cazalet-Kier reflected: “Despite numerous resolutions and amendments… the Government mean to do their best to do nothing… never again will any Government find both their own supporters and their opponents so completely agreed on what is not just a domestic money issue, but an act of fundamental justice.”

**A political opportunity: Conservative champions of equal pay**

While the Labour Government grappled with severe postwar economic difficulties, the Conservative Party were in the midst of a re-awakening in the aftermath of their heavy defeat at the General Election of 1945. This revival took two forms, firstly the organizational reforms undertaken by the Chairman, Lord Woolton, as discussed in Chapter 1, and secondly, modernization of party ideology to adapt the party to the fundamental changes to the social and economic fabric of British society after the Second World War. The architect of this policy reform was R.A. Butler, the newly appointed Chairman of the Conservative Research Department, who had both the foresight and ambition to reform the party’s policy to provide an electable alternative to socialism. Rather than dwell on the party’s dismal display at the election in 1945, he believed that defeat provided the party with “a healthy opportunity and a compelling motive for bringing both their policies and their characteristic modes of expression up to date.”

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165 Butler of Saffron Walden, *The Art of the Possible*, 126.
Labour’s refusal to implement equal pay after the report of the Royal Commission in 1946, granted the Conservative Party with an opportunity to win back the women voters lost to Labour in 1945. Capitalizing on Labour’s position on equal pay formed part of the party’s wider strategy to construct a distinct appeal to women voters given that the Party identified women as a key constituency needed for future success. This belief was supported by quantitative studies which showed women to be the most vulnerable of Labour voters, for example a study by the newly founded Public Opinion Research Department (PORD) found that women were more likely to be floating voters than men by a ratio of six to four.\footnote{Maguire, \textit{Conservative Women}, 120.} Armed with this knowledge, Butler believed that equal pay was a vote-winning policy.

Prior to their defeat at the general election of 1945, the Conservative Party’s stance on equal pay largely mirrored the pervading attitude of all the main political parties in Britain: support for equal pay in principle as a matter of simple justice, but not in legislative action. In a 1944 pamphlet on the future of British industry the party argued that “in the long run we do not believe that any industrial difference of treatment between man and women could or should be sustained solely on the ground of difference in sex. If they are doing equal work, their remuneration should be equal.”\footnote{Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA} This was again reasserted by Winston Churchill’s final address before the General Election of 1945; “I trust the new Parliament will establish in an effective manner the principle of the complete equality of women in industry, in all walks of life and before the law.”\footnote{Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA} Whilst these statements demonstrated both the party’s support for the just principle of equal pay, they offered neither clarity on the timeline of its implementation nor did they help to separate their position from that of the Labour Party.
In this context, Conservative women, angered by the Labour Government’s refusal to do more on the issue, pressed the Conservative Party’s leadership to commit itself to equal pay as both a matter of justice and as pragmatic political calculation. The activity of Conservative women, in conjunction to the party’s male leadership was galvanized in response to the Commission’s report of 1946. As former Conservative MP, Cazalet-Keir wrote in a letter to The Times, “the justice of equal pay for teachers, Civil Servants, and local government employees emerges clearly from the report.”\(^{169}\) Alongside Cazalet-Keir and the EPCC, the women of the CWAC pressed for the Conservative Party to do more on the question of equal pay. In its report on the findings of the Royal Commission, the CWAC concluded: “A) That the Conservative Party should press for the implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work in all Government and public employment and, B) That in the long-term interest of industry that the party should restate its belief in the “Rate for the Job.”\(^{170}\) Conservative women continued to place significant pressure on the party’s leadership to take a firmer stance on the issue.

Thankfully, these cries fell on willing ears given that R.A. Butler considered equal pay to be an assured vote-winning policy to resurrect the party’s support amongst professional women. Thanks to the pressure of Conservative women, and Butler’s belief that building a Conservative women’s agenda would be a vote-winning strategy, Butler sought to clarify the party’s position on equal pay, thus marking the Conservatives as distinct from the Labour Government who continued to delay.

The first evidence of this strategy to position the Conservative Party as the champion of equal pay was the Industrial Charter, published in 1947 by the Industrial Policy Committee, of


\(^{170}\) Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA
which Butler was Chairman from 1946. The Charter, which highlighted the party’s broader strategy to present an alternative to socialism that both accepted the new era of social democracy and a larger role of the state, marked a significant step forward on the matter of equal pay. Importantly, the document firmly outlined the party’s commitment to ‘the rate for the job,’ stating that “we believe that there should be one rate for the job, provided that the services rendered, and the results achieved by men and women are the same.” 171 Although in practice, The Industrial Charter marked little change from the party’s previous statements, it was of fundamental significance given the Labour Government’s explicit refusal to consider the implementation of equal pay. The Industrial Charter which aside from equal pay was remarkably radical in scope, marked the Conservatives as the more progressive party on the issue of equal pay.

Many Conservative women, convinced that equal pay was a matter of justice, continued to believe that the party needed to do more. They believed that the Industrial Charter did not go far enough, and they demanded specific policy measures be brought forward. Members of the CWAC received a resolution that demanded:

This conference considers that the leaders of the Party be requested to define more clearly their attitude with regard to the very important question of Equal Pay for Men and Women for equal work; as it is felt that the time has now come for this matter to enter the realms of Practical Politics, instead of being, as stated in the Industrial Charter, merely a principle. 172

From this resolution it is clear that Conservative women were tired of endless vague statements of intent, followed by no significant policy commitments. As Conservative MP, Irene Ward

172 Meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Resolutions Received, 12 November 1947, CPA, CCO 170/1/13, Bodleian Library, Oxford
would later reflect, women were tired of the endless “promises without performance,”\textsuperscript{173} and thus demanded concrete policy commitments to end the discrimination against women who increasingly were performing the same work as men, yet for two thirds of a man’s salary.\textsuperscript{174}

With the recognition of both the moral justification and the strategic benefit of supporting equal pay, increasing numbers of male Conservative backbenchers began to support the issue, placing evermore pressure of the party’s leadership in Central Office to produce a clear statement of policy. This tide of support is best summed by Mr. H.A. Price, a backbench Conservative MP’s statement to the House of Commons: “We praised women all of us, myself included- for their service to the nation in time of war… let them have what is their just and due reward, and that a successful conclusion to the campaign they have been waging for 30 years, which has complete moral justification.”\textsuperscript{175} He epitomized the reality, after women’s efforts in the war, the denial of their equal pay could no longer be morally justified.

Stepping back, it is important that the increasing attention granted to the issue of equal pay should not overshadow the significant division that continued to persist between the Conservative Party’s leadership and grassroots membership, many of whom remained opposed to the principle of equal pay. Harold Smith evidences the reaction of Conservative women members to the CWAC’s report on the Royal Commission,\textsuperscript{176} cited above, which put forward the suggestion that the party “should press for the implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work in all Government and public employment.”\textsuperscript{177} This appeared to endorse the introduction of equal pay at the earliest possible time. However, when the document was sent to

\textsuperscript{173} 480 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1950) col. 379
\textsuperscript{174} Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA
\textsuperscript{175} 491 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1951) col.1717
\textsuperscript{177} Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA
Area Women’s Committees, several areas expressed strong opposition to equal pay given what they perceived to be its threat to family life and the importance of motherhood which remained at the core of Conservative ideology.\textsuperscript{178} It is interesting that the women’s membership of the party often showed themselves to be further to the right and more socially conservative than the women at the top of the party on issues such as equal pay and criminal justice.\textsuperscript{179} As a result, the CWAC was forced to emphasize that their endorsement of equal pay was not party policy, but simply intended to highlight the issue.

Despite these divisions, the publication of the \textit{Industrial Charter} heightened demands from Conservative women for an even clearer statement of policy on women’s issues to capitalize on Labour’s inaction. The CWAC – undeterred from the mixed reaction to its recommendation on the Royal Commissions findings – urged that a ‘Housewives’ Charter’ be published, “written in simple language… and published without delay, as it is felt that under present conditions satisfactory results could be anticipated from its distribution.”\textsuperscript{180} From this resolution it is clear that members of the CWAC believed that a clearer policy of statement on women’s issues, notably on equal pay, would help strengthen the Conservative Party’s appeal to voters. R.A. Butler, also keen to improve the party’s appeal to women, heard these demands and in 1947, the CWAC was informed that the party was preparing a publication that “would be an attempt to put into perspective, from a woman’s point of view, the general problems of politics to-day.”\textsuperscript{181} The publication was designed to be a clear statement of Conservative policy on women’s issues, rather than just a criticism of Labour’s record and covered problems facing

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\textsuperscript{178} Recommendations on the Report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 26 February 1947, CPA
\textsuperscript{179} Maguire, \textit{Conservative Women}, 148.
\textsuperscript{180} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Resolutions received from areas or constituencies, 16 October 1947, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
\textsuperscript{181} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 11 December 1947, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
\end{footnotesize}
women inside and outside the home, as well as dealing with the problem of women in industry and the professions.\textsuperscript{182} Notably, this “Campaign for Women” was motivated by party leadership’s desire to appeal to professional and intellectual women, as the name “An intelligent woman’s guide to Conservatism” was put forward for consideration.\textsuperscript{183}

Consequently, in 1948, thanks to the impetus of Butler, a joint committee of men and women on ‘Women’s Issues’ was formed “to undertake an investigation into the legal, economic and social conditions affecting women in the home, in industry and in Government service and to make a report.”\textsuperscript{184} The committee’s Chairman, Mr. Malcom McCorquodale MP, a member of the shadow cabinet and loyal supporter of Mr. Butler, was joined by many influential, and well-connected Conservative women including, Mrs. Emmet, who was elected as vice-Chairman of the committee, Lady Woolton, the wife of the Party’s chairman, and Mrs. R.A. Butler.\textsuperscript{185} The inclusion of key figures in the Conservative Party highlights the importance of the report.

However, internal party divisions over equal pay did not disappear overnight. Some Conservative women, particularly at a grassroots level, resisted equal pay given their continued belief in fixed gender roles. In an unusual move at the Party’s Annual Conference in 1948, a resolution expressing support for the work of the ‘Women’s Charter’ committee was defeated.\textsuperscript{186} Some women opposed the Charter Committee, believing that a separate Women’s Charter pandered to the feminist belief that women’s interests differed from men, and thus felt that women’s issues should be considered as general policies. Others felt that the Charter was going too far and threatened undermining women’s traditional role in society.

\textsuperscript{182} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 8 January 1948, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
\textsuperscript{183} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 8 January 1948, CPA
\textsuperscript{184} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Long term policy for women, 16 March, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
\textsuperscript{185} Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Campaign for women, 8 January 1948, CPA
\textsuperscript{186} Maguire, \textit{Conservative Women}, 147.
When the Women’s Charter Committee sent a Questionnaire to Women’s Area Advisory Committees to gain their opinion of women’s work outside of the home in May 1948, it provoked a swathe of discontent in some areas. The questionnaire asked Conservative members questions on their employment outside of the home, for example:

1) Do married women go out to work to supplement:
   a. The total family income?
   b. Housekeeping money?
   c. To have some money to spend of their own?, or
   d. Their personal interest?

Other questions included whether they considered it to be in the national interest for married women to work, whether women’s lower wages made it impossible to employ a housekeeper, and whether they believed the married man had greater expenses than the single woman. For some party members, they, rather shockingly, “thought that the Conservative Party was approving policy that women should go out to work.” Any suggestion that women should be encouraged to go out to work was considered a threat to women’s traditional role in the home as housewives and mothers. Mrs. Emmet, the CWAC Chairman, assured Mrs. Hawkins that the “this was not so… the questionnaire was sent to bring forth facts, not opinions.” Equal pay remained a highly controversial issue for many female members of the party who sat further to the right that many in the party’s leadership.

With such importance and controversy surrounding the ‘Women’s Charter,’ and its focus on women’s employment, it is unsurprising that the title, when finally published in March 1949,

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187 Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Report from the Women’s Charter Committee, 6 May 1948, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
188 Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Report from the Women’s Charter Committee, 6 May 1948, CPA
189 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Women’s Charter Committee Questionnaire, 8 July 1948, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
190 Women’s Charter Committee Questionnaire, 8 July 1948, CPA
was changed to *A True Balance: In the Home, in Employment an as Citizens* to alleviate fears that the policy statement contained radical feminist demands. Despite this name change, the final document was remarkably radical in both scope and its content, whilst at the same time successfully upholding women’s traditional position and the importance of family. No other document produced by the party between 1945 and 1951 reflects more clearly the Conservative Party’s ability to incorporate what Jarvis, in reference to the 1920s, described as “a comforting sense of ideological continuity,”\(^{191}\) whilst also adapting to the changed social and economic postwar climate.

*A True Balance* highlighted both the traditions and the achievements women within the Conservative Party and the party’s record of reform in government. The Charter opens with a recognition that women’s role in society had undergone a radical change throughout the early twentieth century, particularly during the Second World War. They recognized that having taken on this new more public role, “there can be no return to the past.”\(^{192}\) Thus, having accepted this new role, *A True Balance* argued that:

> Women should play and equal part with men as citizens. The partnership has roots in the home and family for whose well-being father and mother are jointly responsible. The extension of this partnership to life as is whole is a logical outcome of our modern thought, yet in certain laws and customs there is still discrimination against women.\(^{193}\)

In criticizing the continued discrimination against women as citizens, the Charter was a clear declaration of the Conservative Party’s acceptance of this new way of life and that there was no return to pre-war gender roles upon which their ideology had, for so long, rested.

Despite this recognition of a new more public role for women, the Charter did not abandon Conservative ideals of the importance of family life and motherhood but placed this at

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191 Jarvis, “Mrs Maggs and Betty,” 151.
192 Conservative and Unionist Committee on Women’s Questions, *A True Balance*.
193 Conservative and Unionist Committee on Women’s Questions, 7.
the fore. The Charter’s first section, *Women in the Home*, described the family as “the rock upon which a well-founded society must be based,” and sought to alleviate the burdens of the housewife including providing adequate housing, lightening housework, improving infrastructure and ensuring a sufficient supply of food. The Charter saw no contradiction between this support for women as housewives, and the section on *Women in Employment*, which aimed to improve the rights of working women in light of their increased participation in the workforce. *A True Balance*, went further than previous statements of Conservative policy and recommended “that the next Conservative Government should proceed with the application of this principle of the Rate for the Job during the period of its first Parliament.” This was the first clear pledge by the party that they would implement equal pay when in office, and is a clear example of how the Conservative Party constructed a Conservative feminist agenda which both retained traditional values of home and family, whilst accepting women’s new public role in the postwar era.

*A True Balance* largely received a positive reaction in the public, and given its wide circulation, made clear the Conservative Party’s women’s agenda and their stance on equal pay. When put before the Women’s Annual Conference in 1949, a resolution approving the recommendations of the Committee on women’s questions was supported and it was requested that “these be embodied in the policy on which the Party will fight the next election.” Area Chairmen also reported from their areas that there had been a positive reaction towards the Charter, and that the number of copies sold had reached 150,050. They also produced a leaflet to

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194 Conservative and Unionist Committee on Women’s Questions, 7.
195 Conservative and Unionist Committee on Women’s Questions, 14.
196 Report of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 1st April 1949-1st May 1950, CPA
make clear the points raised in the report, which itself had over 100,000 copies, highlighting the widespread appeal of the publication.197

However, hostility towards equal pay amongst Conservative women members had not disappeared overnight and in 1951, when reflecting upon the Charter, the WNAC recognized that “the women of the country are not unanimously in favour, a very large number of “Noes” were received to the questionnaire on this subject when “True Balance” was being prepared.”198 It appears that this opposition to the implementation of equal pay was primarily motivated by concern for the position of housewives, a case which is exemplified by Conservative member, Mrs. Prior-Palmer’s letter to The Times, 14 July 1951. Palmer stated, “the majority of women are not gainfully employed at all, but are engaged in what seems to them an equally important and vital national task—home-making and the bringing up of children.”199 She was deeply concerned that the introduction of equal pay would lead to a relative decrease in the standard of living of women in the home and devalue the housewife’s vital societal role.

In light of this ongoing division and perhaps the reality that they soon might be in government, the Conservative statement of policy produced in 1949, The Right Road for Britain, backtracked on A True Balance’s pledge to implement equal pay immediately. Instead, while the document strongly supported the principle of equal pay, it only vaguely suggested the next Conservative Government would proceed with the principle in Government service.200 This was again re-stated in the Conservative Manifesto for the 1950 general election which stated: “We hope that during the life of the next Parliament the country’s financial position will improve

197 Meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Report on women’s questions, 28 April 1949, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/4, Bodleian Library, Oxford
198 Notes on a Discussion at the Meeting of the Women’s National Advisory Committee: A True Balance, 2 July 1951, CPA, CCO 4/4/327, Bodleian Library, Oxford
sufficiently to enable us to proceed at an early date with the application in the Government Service of the principle of equal pay for men and women for services of equal value.” Despite the vagueness of this promise to proceed with equal pay, it still placed the Conservatives ahead on the issue of equal pay compared with the Labour Government whose stance on the issue had remained unchanged since the Chancellor’s speech before parliament in 1947. Smith notes that the inclusion of equal pay within the party’s manifesto only could have been possible with the support of key figures in the party such as Butler and Anthony Eden as Deputy Leader of the party and future Prime Minister, highlighting the in contrast to Labour, the leadership of the Conservative Party had come to view equal pay as a vote-winning policy commitment.

The Conservative Party’s narrow defeat at the election in 1950, in which the Labour majority was reduced from 146 to just 5, thanks in part to the reversal in the gender gap, suggested that their Conservative feminist policy approach was working and resonated with women. Although there was a 2.8% national swing towards the Conservative Party, the party disproportionately increased their share of the vote amongst women, by 4% nationally. Moreover, the Conservative’s improved results at the 1950 General Election saw the election of several women MPs, including Irene Ward (23 February 1895 – 26 April 1980), who was to become a thorn in the side of the Labour Government for refusing to let the issue of equal pay fall from the political agenda.

Ward, described by her good friend Thelma Cazalet-Keir as a “battle-axe,” and remembered by future Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan as having “complete independence and

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201 Conservative and Unionist Central Office (Great Britain), This Is the Road the Conservative and Unionist Party’s Policy, General Election 1950. (London, 1950).
203 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Explaining the Gender Gap.”
204 Thelma Cazalet-Keir, From the Wings (London: Bodley Head, 1967), 127.
lack of any unreasonable respect for Ministers,” was unafraid to put her sense of justice above her party affiliation. Amongst her numerous interventions in Parliament on the issue of equal pay, one of her first was the most memorable. In 1950, Ward tabled an amendment to the King’s Speech, regretting its omission of equal pay and appeared to criticize all political parties in the House for their repeated policy statements before the general election but lack of action on the matter. Repeated stalling had led women to have “been too starry-eyed about the promises of all the parties,” and subsequently disappointed. Throughout her time in Parliament, Ward demonstrated that she was willing to cast aside her party loyalty to ensure equal pay remained on the political agenda, perhaps a reason why unlike her Conservative colleague, Florence Horsburgh, she failed to progress in the party’s hierarchy.

At the same time as Ward’s entry into Parliament, the issue of equal pay once more came to the fore when the new Labour Chancellor, Hugh Gaitskell stood before the House of Commons in June 1951 when the Civil Service Union asked the Government to reconsider the possibility of introducing equal pay. Again, the Chancellor refused to begin its implementation due to his belief that firstly, equal pay in the Civil Service would have the unintended consequence of forcing equal pay in other industries and thus, “would raise industrial costs substantially and so drive-up prices further.” Secondly, Gaitskell argued equal pay would have to be combined with an increase in family allowances to avoid the decline in living standard of married men with dependents compared to unmarried women with no dependents. Both these implications would have inflationary effects and thus, the government claimed they had “come

207 489 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1951) col. 528
208 489 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1951) col. 528
Thurston 76

with great regret to the conclusion that they cannot for the present depart from the decision announces in 1947.” 209

Gaitskell’s unmoving rejection once again prompted equal pay advocates, particularly amongst the Conservative Party to heighten their activities and capitalize on public mood against the government. In what was her most famous intervention in Parliament, Irene Ward vociferously attacked the Labour Government and the Chancellor’s speech, believing it to be “both unfair and inaccurate and has caused great resentment and bitterness among the Civil Service, the local government service, and, I notice from Press reports, the T.U.C. itself.” 210 In the lengthy and impassioned speech she attacked all of the Chancellor’s central arguments against equal pay to highlight the injustice of denying it to women. Perhaps her most emotive argument was her support for Mrs. Winder, the single female employee on the Hansard staff who was paid less than her male colleagues despite performing the same work. She claimed that the Treasury had twice declined the Speaker of the House of Commons’ request that Mrs. Winder receive equal pay, thus directly inculpating the Chancellor with obscuring a matter of justice. Ward’s speech was plauded from members across the House including Labour MPs, who praised her bravery and sense of principle. And thus, the Labour Government, attacked by MPs from both the opposition and their own party, alongside the T.U.C, increasingly appeared out of touch with the prevailing popular mood.

As the potential for another election in 1951 grew increasingly likely, demands from Conservative women placed increasing pressure on the party’s leadership to commit themselves to equal pay. As has been established, both Butler and leading women in the party were united in their support for equal pay as part of their appeal to women and as a matter of justice. However,

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209 489 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1951) col. 529
210 491 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser) (1951) col. 1702
given the increasing likelihood of their election victory and a new Conservative Government, the 1951 manifesto, *Britain Strong and Free*, was a relative retreat from previous promises to implement equal pay. The manifesto stated that the party ‘hoped’ to introduce equal pay in the civil service if that nation’s financial position improved sufficiently.²¹¹ Although disappointing many Conservative supporters of equal pay, this was not entirely unexpected given that the party’s policy statements on women’s issues, most notably *A True Balance*, had been published whilst the party enjoyed to freedom of opposition, unbounded by the financial restraints of government. As shown by 30 years of stagnation over the issue of equal pay, despite near universal commitment from across the political spectrum, the realities of government and competing Treasury demands makes its implementation far harder. The caution of *Britain Strong and Free*, suggests that Butler too feared making binding manifesto pledges that would be costly to introduce when in office.

Even though *Britain Strong and Free* signified a backstep in Conservative support for equal pay, throughout their years in opposition, thanks to the drive of Conservative women and the ambitious leadership of R.A. Butler, the party had marked themselves as distinct from Labour on women’s issues. Equal pay is just one example of the party’s attempt to construct distinct ideology of Conservative feminism that retained the comfort of traditional values of home and family – issues of particular salience given the trauma of the wartime years – alongside and acceptance of women’s changing public role. The success of this women’s agenda was borne out by the results of the general election where the Conservatives re-established their support for women, expanding the gender gap from -2 in 1945, to a convincing 12-point lead

amongst women voters in 1951. In the face of Labour’s refusal to act on the issue, the Conservative’s positioned themselves as the party for women with remarkable success.

The story of equal pay does not end with Conservative election victory in 1951, but instead plagued politics for much of the 20th century. It was not until 1970 that the Equal Pay Act was passed by Wilson’s Labour Government to outlaw any wage discrimination between men and women in employment. In 1954, Butler, as Chancellor of the Executive stood before the House of Commons and pledged to introduce equal in the Civil Service, finally bringing women’s salaries in line with their male colleagues. In many ways, once in office the Conservatives were little different from the postwar Labour Government, forced to delay equal pay until the country’s economic situation improved. However, unlike the Labour Government who had endured six years in Office, blighted by post-war economic challenge, Butler as Chancellor oversaw a period of relative prosperity, which thus made the implementation of equal pay a practical reality.

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215 Maguire, Conservative Women, 132.
The “Housewife’s Burden”: Conservative Propaganda and Women, 1945-51

It was Christmas of 1950, and Winnie Welcome’s children looked longingly through the window of shop at the toys they could not afford. Five long years since the conclusion of the Second World War and Britain was still saddled by the economic legacy of war. Rationing and shortages continued to limit consumer freedoms, and the rising cost of living made luxuries out of the consumer goods that had been taken for granted during the interwar years. Despite her thrift and her husband’s hard work, Winnie’s purse had begun to look barer than ever. When she tucked her son into bed with his barren stocking, Winnie let her mind wonder towards bulging stockings she had enjoyed as a child in contrast to her son’s half-empty sack. As her Christmas wish, Winnie hoped “for a new Conservative government in the New year – they have a positive policy to meet the problem of the rising cost of living,” which had become a daily burden on her

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216 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Resolutions for the conference, 8 May 1947, CPA

217 Home Truths, December 1950, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
role as a housewife. Winnie would not have to wait long for her wish to come true, for in October 1951, the Conservative Party completed a remarkable turnaround, and were returned to government.

Just six years previously, in 1945, Clement Attlee’s Labour Government swept to power, carried by promises of reform and the egalitarian spirit of the ‘People’s War’ cultivated in the British home front during the Second World War. For the first time in its history, the Labour Party had achieved an outright victory, with a 146-seat majority to give it a strong mandate to undertake their promised transformation of the postwar nation. The government’s list of remarkable achievements – including the maintenance of full employment, nationalization, and the establishment of the welfare state – “set the standard against which all subsequent administrations have been marked,” and irreparably transformed the nature of the British state. However, despite the momentum and success of Labour’s early years in office, by 1951, the Conservative Party had been returned to office, bringing to an end Attlee’s Socialist experiment.

Given this reforming momentum, the Labour Party’s failure to complete the Socialist revolution, launched with so much acclaim in 1945, appears remarkable; however, behind Labour’s Promised Land, lies a darker tale. While for policy makers, the period of 1945-51 was one profound excitement, bringing fundamental changes to the nature of the British state, for most of the British population, the years following the conclusion of the Second World War were remembered as one of shortage and strife. Although Britain emerged from the war victorious, it was burdened with debt and crippled by years of war. With the continuation of rationing and

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218 McCallum and Readman, The British General Election of 1945.
austerity after the conclusion of war, Labour’s *Promised Land*, quickly transformed itself into *The Age of Austerity*.221 This image of austerity became a major source of discontent, blighting the lives of the British people, none more so than the British housewife who bore the greatest burdens of all.

The dire postwar economic situation provided the Conservative Party with the opportunity to capitalize on the domestic discontent and revive its dismal electoral showing at the election of 1945. Given that the study of the gender gap in 1945 revealed to the Conservative Party the importance of the women’s vote, it is unsurprising that they launched a concerted effort to appeal to women. The greater burden and hardship experienced by British housewives provided the perfect foil for the Conservative’s propaganda campaign towards women voters, directly linking the continuation of austerity to the failure of the Labour Government. As the women’s vice-Chairman of the Party, Lady Maxwell-Fyfe wrote in 1951, “It is the task of the Conservatives to relate these muddles to the incompetence of the Socialist government and to ensure that everyone to whom they talk realized the connection between the muddles and the government.”222 In highlighting the persistence of austerity and burdens under Labour, the Conservatives positioned themselves as the party of sound economic management and promised a return to affluence and economic prosperity.

This chapter builds upon a framework provided by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska in her analysis of the Conservative Party’s recovery after 1945. Her short work, *Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party Recovery after 1945*223, offers a unique analysis of the significance

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222 Lady Maxwell-Fyfe, “A Message from the New Vice-Chairman”, *Tory Challenge*, April 1951, 6, CPA, PUB 214/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
of rationing and shortages in the Conservative Party’s electoral recovery. She argues that the Conservative Party leveraged popular disaffection with continued rationing, austerity, and controls to recover the support that had previously abandoned them in 1945. Given this thesis’ focus on the role of gender in the Conservative Party’s recovery, this chapter introduces a gendered element to this framework and considers how Conservative propaganda preyed upon the greater dissatisfaction of women and particularly housewives, under continued austerity. Firstly, this chapter will background the development of the Conservative Party’s “Campaign for women,” and will briefly outline the changes to *Home Truths*, the party’s publication designed for women, particularly middle-class women. The main body of analysis focuses on how Conservative propaganda leveraged three key issues of particular salience to women – rationing, the rising cost of living, and government controls – to address women in their capacity as housewives and as citizens. Through a focus on the housewife’s burden, symbolic of the wider suffering of the postwar nation, the party positioned themselves as the party of women and of affluence which stood in direct contrast to the austerity and shortage of the Labour years.

**Constructing an appeal to women after 1945**

After nearly half a century of uninterrupted power, the Conservative’s convincing defeat in 1945 cast the party into a profound crisis, forcing the party into a period of self-reflection. In searching for a solution, the party was presented with an opportunity as, although a majority of women and men voted for the Labour Party in 1945, women were significantly more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than compared to men. Studies later confirmed that women were the most vulnerable part of Labour’s support, more likely to be floating voters than men by

a ratio of six to four. Consequently, it became clear that it was these women, lost to Labour in 1945, that the party needed to convince of the merits of conservatism prior to the next election.

For the Conservative Party in search of a publicity strategy to win over women voters, the postwar economic situation provided the perfect opportunity to capitalize upon the growing discontent of women. After the initial postwar momentum of the Labour government, it quickly emerged that women were the most discontented section of the electorate as a result of continued rationing, shortages and restrictions on consumer goods. By 1950, polls showed that just 36 per cent of women were satisfied with the government’s performance in office. This was a finding supported by research in 1949 conducted by the Conservative Party’s Public Opinion Research Department (PORD) which found that:

In so far as there is a sex difference, it is clear that there must be some factor of dissatisfaction with the government which is peculiar to women. This is unlikely to be, for example, losses on nationalised industry, while housing difficulties are common to both sexes. The probability is that it has something to do with food, which means that it may vary with variations in the government’s food policy.

Thanks to this research it became apparent that the greater burdens endured by women under austerity provided the Conservative’s in opposition with ample material with which to undermine the Labour Government’s record in office and present themselves as an electable alternative.

This was a strategy strongly supported by the women of the CWAC who acted as a mouthpiece for women across the country and their concerns. At the Conservative Women’s Annual Conference in 1947, a resolution was passed stating that:

This conference views with the most profound concern the ever increasing burden placed upon the already weary shoulders of the housewives of this country because of the gross mis-management and practical foresight exhibited by the present Government resulting in

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225 Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 120.
226 Maguire, 120.
continued lack of food, fuel, housing, clothing and household goods and calls upon the 
members of the Conservative Opposition to protest to the Government by every 
legitimate means against the intolerable conditions imposed upon housewives.228

This resolution not only drew attention to the effect of the shortage of food and consumer goods 
but called on the Conservatives to do more to highlight this burden as a consequence of the 
government’s mismanagement. This reveals the beginnings of the party’s propaganda strategy to 
directly link the “Housewife’s Burden” to a broader criticism of socialism in light of the 
dissatisfaction of many women. The party positioned themselves as the natural home for this 
female discontent through a propaganda campaign that addressed women in their capacity as 
consumers, housewives and citizens.

Conservative Party propaganda had historically displayed an ability to adapt to the 
popular demands of women. The 1920s is particularly illustrative of this sensitivity to women’s 
concerns, whereby there was a significant uptick in party literature aimed at women voters in 
response to women’s suffrage in 1918 and 1928. The party’s new magazine, Home and Politics, 
attempted to address women as political actors in their own right. As can be garnered from its 
title, Home and Politics, it reflected the new public and private role of women and crafted a new 
identity of the ideal Conservative woman: “the responsible citizen, the anti-socialists, the caring 
capitalist, and the imperialist,” to whom women could identity.229 This proved remarkably 
popular, with circulation growing from 40,000 a month to 200,000 by 1930, even outselling the 
party’s main publication, Man in the Street.230

The party’s need to economize in the years following the Great Depression and the 
outbreak of war in 1939, led to the decline of this specific appeal to women in the 1930s and 40s.

228 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Resolutions for the conference, 8 May 1947, 
CPA
229 Jarvis, “Mrs Maggs and Betty,” 134.
230 Jarvis, 132.
It became party policy to avoid specific women’s literature, and instead time and space was devoted to issues considered to be of specific relevance to women, such as rationing and the cost of living, in more general publications. The party’s magazine, *Tory Challenge*, often featured an odd mix of party-political messages juxtaposed with knitting patterns. It can only be assumed that the absence of women’s representation in the all-male Publicity Department of Central Office was to blame for this stereotypical opinion of women’s interests.231

However, defeat in 1945 and the emergence of a gender gap favoring the Labour Party, exposed the Conservative’s failure to attract women voters, and provided the impetus for the party to re-launch a specific appeal towards women voters. To ensure this appeal was sensitive to the prevailing demands and concerns of women throughout the country, members of the CWAC pushed for greater avenues for Conservative women to influence propaganda, and at a meeting concluded that “It is agreed that the information provided in our Party literature is excellent, but that what the Publicity Department lacks is someone with a big enough mind to grasp the potentialities of publicity, especially with regard to the women electors.”232 These demands were heeded by the party’s leadership and a women’s officer was appointed to the Publicity Department to oversee publicity directly relating to women. What resulted was a campaign for women that was far more sensitive to the changing stresses and demands of women in postwar Britain.

To further improve the party’s approach toward women, the party turned to its strong contingent of female members for guidance. In January 1948, the Chairman of the party, Lord Woolton, approached the CWAC for advice on the party’s new “Campaign for women,” and

231 Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 121.
232 CWAC sub-committee on Party Literature for women, minutes, 14 February 1946, CCO 170/1/4/1, cited in Maguire, 122.
from this it emerged that the CWAC believed women to be less educated than male voters and therefore, propaganda needed to be simple and made “as attractive as possible.” This is unsurprising given the most successful aspect of the Women’s Organization was its social function, and canvassers were frequently encouraged to avoid overt political messaging at meetings. Members expressed the view that they felt that the party’s current publications for women “were not simple enough for the basic issues and went right over their heads.” Furthermore, they considered articles for women in political papers to be ineffective because women were not interested in such material and thus it would just not be read. One member even suggested that “it might be possible to publish an attractive magazine for women… which gave propaganda in a very subtle manner and was not, in fact, a political magazine as such.” They recommended attractive material, presented in a simple manner that could be easily understood by the average housewife.

From these recommendations, the party launched their new appeal to women, designed to appeal specifically to British women, saddled by the continuation of rationing and austerity measures. ‘Women’s issues’ such as food shortages and the cost of living continued to feature prominently in mainstream party literature, including the party’s magazine, *Tory Challenge* (July 1947 – Sept 1953). Most importantly, the Publicity Department produced a new series, *Home Truths*, as the cornerstone of the Conservative’s appeal to women. Published in its original format from 1948, *Home Truths* was a leaflet, produced monthly or bi-monthly and as the name suggests, dealing primarily with domestic matters, reflecting the re-emergence of domesticity in postwar Britain. Its main monthly feature, “Notes for Housewives’ Committees” provided

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233 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, ‘Campaign for Women’, 8 May 1947, CPA CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
234 See Chapter 1 for a full discussion on this social function
answers to housewives’ questions on the main issues of the day, normally addressing the rising cost of living and the difficulties women encountered in feeding their families. This attempt by the party to position itself as the mouthpiece for women’s concerns went beyond party literature and in 1947, the CWAC set up Housewives’ Committees to provide a forum for women “to voice their protests on the hardships that [were] being imposed upon them.”235 By addressing the everyday issues encountered by women, *Home Truths* gave credence and a political voice to British housewives, who struggled silently under the strain of austerity. Moreover, in addressing women in their capacity as housewives, *Home Truths* re-established the societal worth of domesticity and motherhood, which for many was believed to be under threat from the radical demands of feminists and the changes brought by the Second World War.

This appeal to the British housewife should be placed in context of a resurgence of women’s domestic and feminine identity in the aftermath of war. Feminist histories have characterized the immediate postwar years as a backwards step for the Women’s Movement and progress towards equality. With the outbreak of war, women were called upon to take up a more public role in traditionally male employment, thus irreparably altering gender roles.236 However, whilst some women embraced this newfound freedom and the opportunity to work, for others, given the disruption of the war to family life, they simply longed for stability and the opportunity to start their own family.237 As a result the late 1940s and early 1950s witnesses a resurgence of the ideal of a stable home life and women’s role as mother and wife, however, the continuation of austerity and hardship threatened the reality of this ideal and placed evermore burdens on women in their role as housewife.

235 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 12 March 1947, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford
236 Refer to Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of this
237 Pugh, “The Nadir of British Feminism 1945-1959?”
This re-assertion of domesticity found a home in the Conservative Party whose ideology understood the changing role of women, whilst asserting the value of tradition and a stable family life. This postwar re-branding of the Conservative feminist agenda is clear from the Conservative’s policy output which too addressed the dual role of women in society. While *A True Balance* embraced women’s issues such as equal pay, it also re-affirmed the importance of traditional family life, describing the family as “the rock upon which a well-founded society must be based.” As a result, Conservative feminism both acknowledged postwar changes to gender roles while providing women a sense of ideological comfort.

*Home Truths*’ focus on housewives clearly resonated with the popular mood, thus encouraging the party to grant it further attention and money. In 1949 the pamphlet’s format was changed, expanding its size, and adding more color to strengthen its appeal further. A new monthly feature ‘Pam Peggotty’s Diary’ followed the daily life and reflections of Pam Peggotty, a young housewife in postwar Britain, whose life undoubtedly resembles that of many of its readers’. This new edition was again based on the insight that most women were not politically inclined, nor did they have time for reading. Instead they required something easily digestible with minimal overt political messaging. Thus, upon first glance, *Home Truths* does not appear to be a political pamphlet. Its pages, filled with images, cartoons, knitting patterns and recipes, bear remarkable similarity to the popular women’s magazines of the postwar years such as *Women’s Own* and *Woman*. However, reading behind the narratives and pictures, *Home Truths* undoubtedly carried a clear political message. In little change from its previous format, the pamphlet’s new edition, through the lens of the housewife, focused on domestic issues such as

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239 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 16 June 1949, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/4, Bodleian Library, Oxford
rationing, the rising cost of living and increasing government controls. These issues were framed in terms of their effect on the daily life of the housewife to position the Labour Government as a threat to the domestic ideal of many. This new format proved the be highly popular amongst Conservative women and by the general election of 1950, *Home Truths* had reached a circulation of c.150,000 monthly.  

While *Home Truths* was widely circulated, it is important to note that its appeal to housewives was not universally popular. Anecdotal evidence suggests that its focus on the daily lives of housewives did not resonate with the daily lived experience of all women, highlighting that the effects of austerity were not shared universally. Undoubtedly, *Home Truths* appealed to the effects of rationing and austerity which were particularly felt by middle-class women when compared to their relative material prosperity during the interwar years. While the working class also enjoyed the benefits of the new welfare state including universal access to healthcare, improved unemployment benefits and easier access to public housing, the middle classes witnessed and erosion of the luxuries and consumer goods considered to be staples of middle-class life, such as private housing, travel and an abundance of food. As a result, *Home Truths* failed to gain traction in many areas, with one report suggesting that only 134/625 constituencies had regular ordered of the publication. However, the party’s refusal to adjust the contents of *Home Truths* reveals that it was these middle-class women, most severely affected by austerity, that the party sought to target.

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240 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 8 December 1949, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/4, Bodleian Library, Oxford
243 Morgan, 10.
244 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, ‘Home Truths’ 10 November 1919, CPA, CCO 170/1/1/4, Bodleian Library Oxford
This strategy to focus on middle-class housewives was undoubtably a success. At the 1950 election, middle class women moved more strongly than any other group towards the Labour Party. Interestingly, while between 1945-50 there was a two-point swing towards Labour among working class women, middle class women swung dramatically in the other direction, with a 16-point swing to towards the Conservatives.²⁴⁵ This large swing suggests that rationing and austerity provoked greater dissatisfaction amongst the middle-classes, a dissatisfaction that Conservative Party was wise to tap into.

The success of this strategy re-assured the party that this was a successful formula. In the general anticipation of a second general election due to the Labour government’s slim majority of just five seats, the party planned once again to strengthen this appeal to the middle-class women electors who had turned out so strongly in their favor in 1950. Encouraged by the electoral showing of 1950, the CWAC urged that before the next general election, “particular attention should be given to the propaganda or domestic matters affecting women… it is felt this could be more topical, more attractively presented, and in terms more closely related to their every-day lives.”²⁴⁶ Given that the propaganda strategy had proven to be a vote-winning success, the Publicity Department in Central Office was willing to listen, and yet more money was poured into another larger edition of Home Truths.

The new edition of Home Truths, first published in June 1950, was significantly larger than its earlier iteration and devoted far greater space for the inclusion of news and political facts (fig. 8 below). Despite this change in design, the new format again signaled little change in substance, and the pamphlet continued to focus on austerity-related issues through daily lives of

²⁴⁶ Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, Resolutions to be considered for the agenda of the Women’s Conference, 28 April 1950, CPA, CCO 4/3/310, Bodleian Library, Oxford
the British housewife. Undoubtedly the star of the new format was the front-page Winnie Welcome cartoon, which followed Winnie, “the Housewife who shares YOUR problems.” Like her predecessor, Pam Peggotty, the day-to-day encounters of Winnie Welcome served to highlight the additional burdens placed upon the housewife under the Labour Government.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 6** - An extract from the first edition of the Winnie Welcome cartoon series. *Home Truths, June 1950, 1*

Having told the story of the development of the Conservative appeal towards women, it is now time to open the pages of *Home Truths* to understand how the Conservative’s, through the lens of the housewife’s daily burden, highlighted the failures of the Labour Government. Propaganda focused on ongoing rationing and austerity, a rising cost of living crisis and the ever-greater government controls to underline Labour’s failure to protect the British housewife from the worst effect of austerity. Additionally, the housewifely characters of Pam and Winnie gave readers a strong character with whom to relate to. As such, *Home Truths* was a re-assertion of women’s traditional values of domesticity and femininity, thus tapping into the popular spirit of the postwar period.

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247 *Home Truths*, June 1950, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
“The Housewife who shares YOUR problems”: Rationing, the cost of living and a criticism of controls

Rationing and Austerity

In February 1951, Winnie was getting desperate. Like many other housewives, she was tired of the endless rationing and shortages that had been in place since 1940. Whilst for most, rationing and restrictions had seemed a reasonable sacrifice during the war, after years of fashioning inventive dishes using peculiar ingredients such as dried egg and snoek and patching together old clothes, the sacrifice no longer seemed worthwhile. Winnie thought to herself: “I wish I could think of something new for pudding – I wonder if other wives find it as difficult as I do to invent fresh dishes with the same old food.”

Undoubtedly they did, because rationing and austerity, rather than improve after the conclusion of war, significantly worsened throughout the period 1945-51, placing an ever-greater burden on the British housewife. Unsurprisingly due to the salience of the issue in the minds of the British people, rationing became the primary target of Conservative propaganda.

No issue better symbolizes the burden faced by housewives in the postwar period than the continuance of rationing, shortages and austerity measures after the conclusion of the war. Rationing was first introduced in January 1940 as part of the government’s attempt to take control of imports and production. During the period of the war, most housewives had willingly accepted the challenge of rationing and shortages persuaded by the National Government’s campaigns such as “Dig for Victory!” Coping with rationing and shortages were positioned as a key part of the war effort on the Home Front. However, by the Spring of

248 Home Truths, February 1951, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
1946, Mass Observations identified it as the “top civilian grumble,” and women were fed up with endless queues and limitations on their consumer choice. Studies indicated that the average housewife spent up to an hour standing in queues every day by 1947.

Queues and shortages became synonymous with postwar austerity, and in 1947 this erupted into open revolt in the form of the British Housewife’s League (BHL), a middle class, right-wing protest organization. The organization provided a voice for the dissatisfaction of housewives against the “over-control of the state in the interests of happy home life and the development of personality in accord with Christian Principles,” and in particular, focused on the cost and lack of food and clothing, housing shortages, and the abolition of rationing. Described as “populist rather than popular,” the League found its support amongst the middle-classes but failed to make significant inroads into mainstream women’s groups. Regardless, its criticism continued austerity and government controls undoubtedly resonated with the concerns of many British women and by November 1947, the BHL boasted a membership double that of the British Communist Party, an indication of the scale of the dissatisfaction with continued austerity.

Although the Conservative Party refused to support or endorse the disruptive actions of the BHL, it was keen to tap into this issue of austerity which clearly provoked a strong reaction amongst many women. Therefore, Conservative propaganda made rationing and austerity the chief target of its campaign, upholding rationing as a symbol of the Labour Government’s failure to protect British housewives who had already endured so much hardship.

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253 Campbell, The Iron Ladies, 76.
254 Campbell, 78.
256 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, 8 May 1947
during the war. Pam and Winnie both were depicted as struggling to provide for their families under continued rationing. For example, in May 1949, as the meat ration continued to fall, even below the wartime level, Pam wrote in her diary, “I wish visitors would bring rations with them, especially now our meat ration is lower than it has ever been even during the war.”

To highlight this continued decline in meat, the January 1950 edition lays how the meat ration had dropped under the postwar government from 93.3 lbs. per head in 1946/47 to a low of 70.8 lbs. per head in 1948/49. Both these examples clearly demonstrate how the food situation had worsened, rather than improved after the war, indicating that rationing and austerity were no longer a necessary wartime sacrifice but instead the result of the Labour Government’s incompetence.

Conservative propaganda explicitly linked austerity to the failings of Labour, which on the pages of *Home Truths*, was pitted against the thrifty housewife’s attempts to manage her home. In the February 1951 edition of *Home Truths*, Winnie agonizes over what to make for her

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257 *Home Truths*, May 1949, 2, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
husband for dinner after he complains about having “cereal and toast again” for breakfast.\textsuperscript{259} Despite consulting with the butcher, fishmonger, and the grocer (Fig. 7), to the disappointment of her husband, she returns home with just fish cakes and spaghetti. Winnie frets that “Jim’s beginning to think I’m a bad manager!” epitomizing the strain that rationing placed on housewives and their task of providing for their family. Winnie’s husband re-assures her: “I understand that you do \textit{your best} old girl!... but if this is the best the socialist planners can do after nearly six year of government – then it’s high time they went out, and the Conservatives given a chance!” Here, the housewife’s hard work to provide for her family is directly contrasted to the “socialist planners” who, even after six years in government, have failed to fix the situation.

This is not to say that the government did not \textit{try} to fix the situation. However, the government’s numerous failed attempts to alleviate shortages provided Conservative Party propagandists with yet more opportunity to attack the government’s record. To combat dwindling rations of meat after a series of economic crises in 1947, the government introduced a variety of foreign meats to supplement domestic supplies, infamously including whale meat and snoek, a South African fish intended to replace sardines.\textsuperscript{260} Despite the Minister of Food, Mr. Strachey’s attempt to extol the benefits of snoek,\textsuperscript{261} it was wholeheartedly rejected by the British people. For housewives who had put up with numerous wartime substitutes such as powdered eggs and milk, patience had run out.

\textsuperscript{259} \textit{Home Truths}, February 1951, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
\textsuperscript{261} Cooper, 51.
The Conservatives launched a scathing attack on the government’s policy, for example, the December 1949 edition of *Tory Challenge* (fig. 8), featured a poem written by a “Conservative Housewife,” taking aim at the ongoing shortage of food, and ridiculing the government’s solution. The housewife’s suggestion of “Baracouta, Beaver, or Snoek?” was met with the reply, “Since no one would eat them, why bother to cook?” While this reflects the unpopularity of the government’s proposed solutions, it also highlights how the shortage of food undermined women’s role as housewives. Without the luxury of consumer choice or an abundance of food, women were robbed in their role as the manager of the household. Why bother cooking when you are forced to use snoek that no one will eat. In fact, housewives refused to buy snoek, and by 1949, more than a third of the fish imported since 1947 was left

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unsold.\textsuperscript{263} Even when the policy was later abandoned, the Conservatives continued to triumph it as an example of the government’s mishandling of austerity, and in the March 1951 edition of \textit{Home Truths}, declared, “see what a wide choice of food you have under the Socialists. Butchers are selling all sorts of things they never used to before- reindeer, horse meat or whale meat, what is your choice for a joint this week?”\textsuperscript{264} Unfortunately for the government, snoek and whale meat had become fixed in the minds of the British people as an enduring symbol of the government’s failure to end austerity and allow the housewife to fully exercise her role as manager of the house.

\textit{The Cost of Living}

Second only to rationing on the list of the housewife’s daily struggle was the rising cost of living. When rationing and shortages eased after 1950, with the much-hated points rationing ended in May 1950,\textsuperscript{265} there was no let up for housewives as the effects of rising inflation and the cost of living were already beginning to be felt in the housewives’ shopping basket by 1947. The rising cost of living was largely driven by global economic forces outside the government’s control, such as the convertibility crisis of 1947 and the devaluation of the pound in 1949, but was undoubtably worsened by the rising cost of financing the welfare state. While the working classes benefitted from greater state provision, all the middle-classes saw was a rising cost of living and the erosion of their luxury commodities such as foreign travel and consumer goods. Conservative propaganda – perhaps unfairly, but certainly astutely – portrayed the rising cost of living as a direct result of socialist extravagance, which was directly contrasted to the image of

\textsuperscript{263} Cooper, “Snoek Piquante,” 53.
\textsuperscript{264} Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party Recovery after 1945,” 188.
\textsuperscript{265} Cooper, “Snoek Piquante,” 53.
the thrifty housewife on the pages of *Home Truths*. As a result, not only did the propaganda undermine the Labour Party, but it also positioned the Conservatives as the party of sound financial management.

*Home Truths*, devoted significant attention to the effects of the ever-increasing cost of living. To highlight price rises, a segment in the June 1950 edition of *Home Truths* entitled “Prices Soaring – Wages Frozen” noted that in 1945, British beef was 1s. 4d. per lb, but in 1950 it cost 1s. 8d. per lb, which, alongside other products, was a sizeable increase in just 5 years.266 The article noted that “Every housewife knows that the money in her purse seems to melt these days and yet prices continue to soar,” highlighting the strain rising prices placed on housewives. Similarly, another article, “What do we get for 20/-,” takes aim at the Chancellor, Sir Stafford Cripps’ devaluation of the pound in 1949, noting that whilst the pound was worth 20/- in 1938, in 1949 it was now worth 11/4.267 Concluding that “every housewife going shopping knows this fact, too,” to indicate that devaluation resulted in the money stretching less far.

The attention afforded to the cost of living went further than simply highlighting rising prices and focused on the effect of rising prices on the housewife as a consumer, despite her attempts to overcome the challenge. Winnie Welcome felt the effect of rising prices and on the front cover of the June 1950 edition of *Home Truths*, is unable to buy her daughter a new dress.268 Instead, in a characteristic display of her domestic skills and thrift, she fashions a new baby dress out of her old wedding dress. Similarly, the November 1950 edition of *Home Truths*, shows how much it cost Winnie to furnish their bedroom (fig. 9).269 Winnie desperate to

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267 “What do we get for 20/-,” *Home Truths*, May 1949, 3, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
268 *Home Truths*, July 1950, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
269 *Home Truths*, November 1950, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
maintain her image as a sound manager of her home, reminds her husband, “next time you think I am not thrifty, *do* remember that the purchase tax is a tax on the home.”

![Cartoon of人物 in a room with prices on goods.](image)

**Figure 9** - Extract from the Winnie Welcome cartoon, highlighting the rising price of commodities. *Home Truths*, November 1949, 1

The genius of this propaganda strategy is that it focused on staples of middle-class lifestyles such as an abundance of food and consumer goods, which were taken for granted during the pre-war years. This is exemplified by the Christmas editions of *Home Truths* in both 1949 and 1950. At Christmas in 1949, Pam Peggotty complains that there is “yes, more in the shops this year but unfortunately prices so high that Christmas shopping seems to be more difficult than last. Where will it stop?”

The cartoon on the edition’s front page (fig. 10), shows how prices have increased on Pam’s Christmas shopping list, which is supported by a segment inside the edition “Christmas Gifts,” which highlights how the price of Christmas presents had increased even since “the bad old days” of the 1930s. By the following year, the situation remained very much unchanged, with *Home Truths*, showing how the rising cost of living made Christmas a burden for Winnie and her husband. When Winnie asks Jim is they can afford a...

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270 *Home Truths*, December 1949, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
turkey, he replies, “I hate to be a scrooge darling, but I’ve been checking our Christmas budget! We’ll have to make do with a joint!” From this narrative, it is clear that the rising cost of living was making items such as food and toys for the children – taken for granted before the war – an unaffordable luxury for the middle class who felt the squeeze on their incomes. Jim concludes that the only hope for reducing the cost of living is “a Conservative government in the New Year – they have a positive policy to meet the rising cost of living.”

Not only did Conservative propaganda highlight the effect of the cost of living on middle-class lifestyles, but they presented it as a direct result of Socialist extravagance. This was juxtaposed to the image of the thrifty Conservative housewife as a sound financial manager. Whilst the Conservatives undoubtably understood that high government spending inflation were
unavoidable consequences of funding the welfare state, propaganda attacked the high levels of spending as an example of socialist extravagance at the expense of the family who bore the effect through the rising cost of living. An article in *Home Truth’s* September 1949 edition, “Where your money goes,” listed examples of the government’s spending which included £20,000,000 on the groundnut scheme – the government’s failed attempt to plan peanuts in Africa to improve margarine supplies – £16,000,000 on government publicity and information, £500,000 a year to provide Ministers and Civil Servants with cars, and £21,000,000 on nationalized Civil Aviation. This selected list of government expenses, focusing on luxury items contrasts the government extravagance with the erosion of middle-class consumerism due to higher prices. Whilst Winnie sacrifices her wedding dress for her baby, the Socialists spend half a million pounds on luxury cars!

Clearly, Conservative propaganda sought to exploit the erosion of housewives’ consumer capacity as a symbol of Socialist extravagance. While the Labour Government was not entirely to blame for the rising cost of living, Conservative propaganda ensured that fault for the pinch felt by housewives was sent directly towards the government. As a result, the idea of “Socialist extravagance” was directly contrasted with the image of the thrifty consumer housewife as a sound manager of the family’s finances presented through Winnie Welcome and Pam Peggotty. The Conservative’s thus positioned themselves as the Party of sound financial management in contrast to the high-spending Socialists.

\[274\] “Where your money goes,” *Home Truths*, September-October 1950, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
**Government Controls – The Housing Crisis**

The final major strategy employed by Conservative propaganda was to launch a criticism of Socialist planning and controls, which were upheld as a threat to Conservative values of individual freedom, enterprise, and a private family life. No issue dealt with by the postwar Labour Government is more symbolic of the failings of Socialist central planning than the housing crisis. After years of war and distribution to family life, many women welcomed peace as an opportunity to marry and start a family. Marriage rates increased from a wartime low of 67.6 per thousand population, to 75.7 in 1946-50.\(^{275}\) And with marriage came the expectation of a new home to start a family. However, due to the destruction of the Blitz and demobilization of nearly two million men and women from the armed forces,\(^{276}\) the nation faced a shortage of 3 million homes.\(^{277}\) In London alone there were 700,000 bomb-damaged houses in need of repair, leaving thousands homeless or in inadequate housing.\(^{278}\) In *Home Truths*, Winnie reflects the experience of many, and is forced to celebrate her second wedding anniversary in a two-room only to later discover that she is low on the waiting list for a new one.\(^{279}\)

Although Attlee’s Government was at no fault for causing the initial shortage of housing, Conservative propaganda used the crisis as a criticism of Socialist planning, pitting government red tape and bureaucracy against the people. Housing provided the Conservative Opposition with a clear example of the failure of central planning given that the left-wing Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan undertook a failed attempt to overhaul of the housing system in an attempt to

\(^{276}\) Cooper, “Snook Piquante,” 43.
\(^{279}\) *Home Truths*, June 1951, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
improve the postwar situation. Bevan centralized the system, removing almost all private provision of housing and placing local government in charge. Whilst this did reduce some bottlenecks and in 1947, 200,000 new houses were built, it failed to make significant inroads into the unprecedented shortages the nation faced. Winnie discovers that Labour planning was at fault for the shortages when she asks a local builder to explain the cause of the crisis. Mr. Holmes explains: “We’re short of bricks, we’re short of cement, timber and building sites- all because of bad government planning and controls- with tens of thousands wanting houses the government won’t let us build more than 550 a day!” This is a point further illustrated by an anecdote included in *Home Truths’* May 1949 edition, which tells the story of Mr. Reynolds who was fined £100 for building a house with material he sourced himself. In the context of a housing shortage, such bureaucratic controls, which limited private enterprise and initiative appear completely irrational. Instead, the Conservatives positioned themselves as the party of free enterprise which would free the builder to “build as fast as [he] can!” and bring an end to the housing crisis which had denied so many families a home of their own.

As this analysis has highlighted, Conservative propaganda, through the lens of the thrifty consumer housewife, sought to implicate the Labour Government with the daily burdens faced by housewives. Rationing and austerity pitted the government against housewives and was a symbol of their mismanagement; the cost-of-living crisis was used to emphasize the extravagance of socialism in contrast to the housewife’s thrift; and the housing crisis highlighted the virtues of enterprise in contrast to the failures of socialist planning. This strategy, embodied

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281 Morgan, 10.
282 *Home Truths*, October 1950, 1, CPA, PUB 585/2, Bodleian Library, Oxford
284 *Home Truths*, October 1950, 1, CPA
by the pages of *Home Truths*, was remarkably successful in appealing to the concerns and hopes of middle-class housewives. While the effects of austerity were not universally felt across Britain, *Home Truths*’ focus on the daily burdens of austerity doubtlessly resonated with the lived experience of many middle-class housewives who witnessed an erosion of the staples of their consumer lifestyles under the Labour Government. Its success is evidenced by the emergence of the 12-point gender gap favoring the Conservative Party at the 1951, driven by-in-large, by a swing in middle-class women’s votes.285

Sadly for *Home Truths*, its fate did not match the Conservative Party’s electoral success. Despite the popularity of the publication, it appears that the party had gotten ahead of itself in pushing for an ever more impressive women’s publication. In the party’s attempt to produce an attractive magazine, similar to other popular women’s periodicals, the price of *Home Truths* rose three-fold between 1950 and 1951.286 Consequently the cost of the new publication was increased from £2 per thousand to £6 per thousand and as a result, after the election of 1951, sales of the Winnie Welcome edition of *Home Truths* fell from 70,000 monthly to just over 4,000.287 Much to the dismay of the women involved, it was decided that it would have to be discontinued. However, its most important work, the establishment of a strong women’s support for the party, had already been achieved.

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287 Minutes of a meeting of the Central Women’s Advisory Committee, February 8 1951, CPA, CCO 4/4/327, Bodleian Library, Oxford
Conclusion

On the 8 May 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the first female Prime Minister in British political history. That the Conservative Party was the first to elect a woman to its leadership might seem remarkable given the party’s reputation as a rich “boys club.” Boris Johnson has struggled to shake his characterization as a typical Conservative: aristocratic, Eton and Oxford educated and a white man. An image which has not been helped by his personal life, littered with rumored affairs and several failed marriages. He has also been dogged by more than the occasional gaffe, for example likening Muslim women wearing Burkas to letter boxes, or describing “semi-naked women playing beach volleyball” as “glistening like wet otters.”

The pervasive image of the Conservative Party as a boy’s club stems from a widespread assumption that conservatism and feminism are diametrically opposed ideologies. Whereas conservatism embraces tradition if not reaction, feminism is associated with radicalism and a challenge to traditional gender norms. From this perspective, Margaret Thatcher’s extraordinary rise to the top of the Conservative Party of the 1970s, can only be explained by her dislocation from the feminist movement, and her embodiment of the very qualities many feminists sought to attack. In this narrative, Thatcher succeeded not because she strove to

advance women’s place in British politics, but because she, as her friends and enemies described her, was “just like a man.”

This characterization of Thatcher tells but half the story of her incredible rise to power. Thatcher was not a one-off exception who proves the rule of the Conservative Party’s general distain for women. Almost half a century after Thatcher’s reign as the longest serving Prime Minister came to an end, the Conservative Party elected the second woman to occupy the office of Prime Minister, Theresa May. May’s rise to the top of the Conservative Party casts doubt on the assumption that Thatcher’s election was an anomaly, that Thatcher was somehow an aberration whose rise to power can be explained away by her idiosyncrasies. Rather, the emergence of the only two women Prime Ministers – or party leaders of a major political party for that matter – from the Conservative Party, indicates that there is a deeper relationship between the Conservative Party and women than is popularly understood.

Casting new light on this relationship between the Conservative Party and women, this thesis has considered the mobilization of women by the Conservative Party in response to the party’s disastrous defeat to Clement Attlee’s Labour Party in 1945. One of the most important, yet understudied discoveries of the Party’s postmortem was that while a majority of women (as well as men) supported the Labour Party, women were more likely to vote Conservative than men. The party, desperate and with their “backs to the wall,”295 turned towards women, with an increasing recognition that they held the key to the party’s revival. Since the Representation of the People Act of 1928, women had constituted the majority of the electorate, thus ensuring their greater influence on electoral outcomes. As the Conservative Party had a long history of

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294 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Explaining the Gender Gap.”
295 Kilmuir, *Political Adventure; the Memoirs of the Earl of Kilmuir.*, 334.
women’s mobilization, dating back to the days of the Primrose Dames, the solution facing them in 1945 was not unfamiliar territory. It sought to increase the numbers and influence of women political activists to revive the party’s grassroots strength, which in turn, prompted the growing status of women as campaigners, canvassers and organizers. For Thatcher, who first entered the political fold as a Conservative candidate in 1950, she found that despite sexualized stereotypes, the party needed women to improve its electoral fortunes.

Not only did defeat awaken the Conservative Party to the contribution of women as political actors, but it also led to a fundamental re-evaluation of the party’s policy agenda. The Party increasingly framed traditional conservative issues, such as thrift and low government expenditure, as women’s issues in their own right. The emergence of a conservative variant of feminism emerged, simultaneously acknowledging the public facing ambitions of many women without denigrating their domestic and family responsibilities. This sensitivity was nothing new, for it was the Conservative Party after 1918 that best adapted to the new women’s vote and introduced a legislative agenda that reflected the demands of women at the time. Support for equal pay was a clear example of how the party’s sensitivity to the complexity of women’s lives worked to its electoral advantage. Thus, the Conservatives paved the way for professionally minded and ambitious women, like Margaret Thatcher, whose saw no inhibition to her political ambitions despite her embrace of her traditional roles as mother and wife.

It was this ideological flexibility that allowed the Conservative Party to put forward policies that supported somewhat radical demands such as equal pay, but a propaganda campaign that glorified the image of the housewife to appeal to the rise in domesticity and femininity that emerged after the conclusion and disruption of war. The party could support the political and

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296 What the Conservative Party has done for women, n.d., CPA
professional mobilization of women, whilst at the same time, present a propaganda campaign that protected the domestic and homely responsibilities of women that were threatened by the continuation of austerity in the postwar years. Through the images of Pam Peggotty and Winnie Welcome, the virtuous and thrifty consumer-housewife, the Conservative Party appealed to the postwar woman, burdened by continued rationing and austerity, to present themselves as the party for women in contrast to the Labour government who lacked the answers to women’s concerns.

The endorsement of both women’s public role in politics and employment, and their role in the home as wives and mothers, at first appears contradictory when viewed from the vantage point of second wave feminism. From the view of women in 1945-1951 Britain, the Conservative Party took a clear lead in supporting a conservative feminist ideology that was relevant to the pressures of the time. Post-war conservatism spoke to women, who on one hand, sought recognition for their wartime service and their new public role, but also longed for the security and stability of a home and family life. Conservative feminism thus provided an ideological safety net as well as opportunities for professional and political advancement. Far from being The Nadir of Feminism, postwar Britain experienced both the mass mobilization of British women. Their lives and influence contradict what are still commonplace assertions that women retreated from public life after the conclusion of the Second World War, living quiet lives of domestic confinement until their emancipation by feminism’s second wave during the tumultuous 1960s.

The salience of this Conservative feminism is evidenced by the remarkable transformation in Conservative electoral fortunes between 1945 and 1951 and the emergence of a

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297 Pugh, “The Nadir of British Feminism 1945-1959?”
large gender gap in 1951, a trend which was to continue throughout the 1950s. Although there are numerous drivers to explain the Conservative Party’s rapid revival, undoubtedly, the reconstruction of its appeal to women was of utmost importance. In 1945, a majority of women voted for the Labour Party, but by 1951, the women’s vote witnessed a 14-point swing in favor of the Conservative Party. Given that there was just a 200,000-vote difference in the popular vote between Labour and the Conservative Party, the Conservative’s 12-point lead amongst women is of fundamental importance to understanding the overall result. Without the majority of the women’s vote, the story of the Conservative Party’s rise from the ashes of 1945 would have been far different.
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