Gender Politics With Margaret Thatcher: Vulnerability and Toughness

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Abstract:

This paper looks at Margaret Thatcher's political career in the light of gender. The thrust of the argument is that Margaret Thatcher's career can best be understood when interpreted as a combination of vulnerability and toughness, in which toughness was a shield against vulnerability. Thatcher started her political career in the 1950s, at a time when very few women held parliamentary or government posts in the United Kingdom or any other country in Western societies. It was of paramount importance for female politicians in the past to downplay their gender. The important political figures were all male, so it was the male perspective that counted. Women politicians were less prominent and should be as self-effacing as possible. Margaret Thatcher tried to make herself invisible through perfection. A perfected political image and a perfected image of her private and family life was her answer to the problem of being a woman in a man's world and the vulnerability this implied. Margaret Thatcher's memoirs show just how vulnerable she was as a female politician despite the tough image she often projected.

1 In June 2002 I took part in a historical conference in Manchester, where I presented a paper on Margaret Thatcher. This led to a heated discussion among the audience, indicating how controversial a figure Thatcher still was in British history. A male historian summed up a prevailing view with the following verdict: "Margaret Thatcher is not a woman." Those who believe that only men think this way should prepare to be disillusioned by Jane Pilcher's article on 'The Gender Significance of Women in Power' of 1995 in which she quotes several women who categorically affirm Thatcher's so-called "unfemininity"during her time as Prime Minister. These women, from different age groups and political parties, had been interviewed in 1989 during Thatcher's third and last term as Prime Minister, a role that she fulfilled from 1979 till 1990:

> I [the author] then asked what it was about Mrs Thatcher that made her "unfeminine": "Well, her dominance, you see" (…) [Another woman] "I can't stand her voice".[Another woman] "Well, she is getting more like a man everyday…"[Another woman] "I think she is dreadful…a dictator." (Pilcher 502,503,506)

Unflattering judgements to say the least. So how can we explain them? Are they justified? Was Thatcher unique or was her behaviour typical of female political leaders?

2 In this article I look at Margaret Thatcher's political career in the light of gender. The thrust of the argument is that Margaret Thatcher's career can best be understood when interpreted as a combination of vulnerability and toughness, in which toughness was a shield against vulnerability. Thatcher was already vulnerable by virtue of the fact that she came from the lower middle class whereas other female national leaders tended to have upper-class

backgrounds. (Genovese 21-24) But, in my opinion, Thatcher's vulnerability was related mainly to issues of gender.

Political image

3 Let's start with her political image: Thatcher actively contributed to the creation of her political image first, while in office, through attempts to control her media representations, and then by contributing to a burgeoning market in political apologia with her two-volume autobiography. The image that emerges is that of a happy childhood with loving parents who were proud of a studious and dutiful daughter, a happy family life with a rich husband and two lovely children, and a successful professional life as a good politician and a good Prime Minister. The question addressed by this article is: Why was this politically correct image so important to Thatcher? Was it somehow connected to gender concerns? To answer this question one needs to look at theories on image-building and the behaviour of female politicians from a gender perspective and at examples of other female political leaders from Thatcher's generation.

4 Thatcher was born in October 1925. She started her political career in the 1950s, at a time when very few women held parliamentary or government posts in the United Kingdom or any other country in Western societies. (Henig and Henig 2) There was a widely held belief that women did not make competent politicians. People thought that they lacked the necessary qualities to measure up to men. The following illuminating words were spoken by a Dutch female politician in the late 1950s:

> I would like to remark, that it seems to me that men do not usually stimulate active political participation by women. They take women as read, but do not think positively about their capacities. (Quoted in Schokking 66)

The few female parliamentarians who did emerge after World War II were seen as exceptions to the rule. They were expected to confine themselves to policy areas traditionally regarded as suitable for women, such as health, social work and education, and to leave more weighty and prestigious fields such as economics, foreign affairs and defence to their male colleagues. The few women who dared to storm these male bastions tended to be stereotyped as "unfeminine". Such views contributed to significantly less political ambition among women than men. (Ribberink 1998; Henig and Henig; Lawless and Fox; Van der Steen; Mostert)

5 The Dutch historian Mineke Bosch has pointed out that it was of paramount importance for female politicians in the past to downplay their gender. The important political figures were all male, so it was the male perspective that counted. Women politicians were less prominent and should be as self-effacing as possible. The few female politicians with a

husband and children had to ensure that their family life looked perfect so as to avoid criticism which would increase their vulnerability. After all, the commonly held view was that married women ought to look after their husband and children and should not have a paid job outside the home, let alone participate in the male world of politics. Female politicians tended to be unmarried and tried to hide their private life: all that counted was their political – and public – career. (Bosch 55-62) A prime example in the Netherlands is Marga Klompé, the first female member of the Dutch Cabinet (1956). Klompé was unmarried and is famous for concealing her private life. She used to boast that the only difference between her and her male colleagues was her powder compact. She could not be persuaded to write her memoirs because – she told everyone – it testified to a kind of vanity. But her reluctance may have been linked to a fear of vulnerability. Hilda Verwey-Jonker, a famous Dutch social democratic politician and social scientist in the 1950s and 1960s, who was married and the mother of four children, did write her memoirs. But this piece of work, which is notable for its modesty in many ways and the writer's frequent contentions that her political acts and career achievements were un-important, could be interpreted as an attempt at self-effacement. The predominant view that women were less important than men was translated into invisibility.

6 Margaret Thatcher, however, was far from modest, and certainly not in her memoirs, but she too tried to make herself invisible – through perfection. A perfected political image was her answer to the problem of being a woman in a man's world and the vulnerability this implied. Invisibility could be achieved by going down the same road as Marga Klompé in government affairs. As far as political leadership was concerned, Thatcher did not wish to distinguish herself from men. She was tough in parliamentary and government affairs. As Prime Minister she could not conceal her private and family life, but she endeavoured to make it look as perfect as possible.

Vulnerability

7 Margaret Thatcher's memoirs show just how vulnerable she was as a female politician despite the tough image she often projected. As mentioned earlier, the picture the memoirs paint is of a rather perfect life and career. But between the lines Thatcher does, on occasion, criticize her own performance and does offer a view on the sexism she encountered. Precisely because in her later life and career Thatcher demurred to comment on the sexism she came up against in her past, these memoirs may be taken as a reliable source.

8 A few years after the birth of her twins in 1953, she applied several times to stand as a parliamentary candidate and appeared before several selection committees between 1954

and1958, before eventually contesting the seat for Finchley, North London, in 1959. In her memoirs she highlights the questions asked by the committees:

> With my family commitments, would I have time enough for the constituency? Did I realize how much being a Member of Parliament would keep me away from home? (…) And sometimes more bluntly still: did I really think that I could fulfil my duties as a mother with young children to look after and as an MP?

She continues:

> I felt that Selection Committees had every right to ask me these questions. I explained our family circumstances and that I already had the help of a first-class nanny. I also used to describe how I had found it possible to be a professional woman and a mother by organizing my time properly. What I resented, however, was that beneath some of the criticism I detected a feeling that the House of Commons was not really the right place for a woman anyway. Perhaps some of the men at Selection Committees entertained this prejudice, but I found then and later that it was the women who came nearest to expressing it openly. (…) I was hurt and disappointed by these experiences. They were, after all, an attack on me not just as a candidate but as a wife and mother. But I refused to be put off by them. (Thatcher 1995, 94)

9 The United Kingdom was not particularly friendly towards women politicians. Immediately after World War II, women accounted for only around three or four percent of the membership of the House of Commons. Even by the late 1980s the percentage did not exceed six. (Oldersma 146) This is in stark contrast with the Scandinavian countries, which, with a female membership of over 30 percent, led the field in Western Europe. (Elgán 473) In addition, the Tory Party was not particularly feminist and had never had many women in leading posts. In 1959, after becoming MP for Finchley, Thatcher was "one of only twelve women compared to three hundred and fifty male Conservatives in the Commons." (Carol Thatcher 2008, 30) And yet, Margaret Thatcher owed her position and career in the Conservative Party to some extent to the feminist movement. The second feminist wave which lasted from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, tried, among other things, to increase the number of female politicians. Edward Heath included Thatcher as the "statutory woman" in his shadow and real cabinet because he had to pay lip service to the emancipatory mindset of the late 1960s. Thatcher had this to say about the shadow cabinet (1967-1970):

> For my part, I did not make a particularly important contribution to the Shadow Cabinet. Nor was I asked to do so. For Ted and perhaps others I was principally there as the statutory woman whose main task was to explain what “women” – Kiri Te Kanawa, Barbara Cartland, Esther Rantzen, Stella Rimington and all the rest of our uniform, undifferentiated sex – were likely to think and want on troublesome issues.

In October 1974, when she had been Education Secretary for four years, she told the press:

> I think it would be extremely difficult for a woman to make it to the top… I have always taken the view that to get to the very top one has to have experience in one of the three important posts…(Margaret Thatcher 1995, 144, 261)

She was referring to the posts of Foreign Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary. And as she correctly implied, these were all posts, which had scarcely ever been held by women, not only in the United Kingdom, but in most western and northern European countries as well. (Henig and Henig 58,59)

10 A short while after this, in February 1975, Thatcher was elected Leader of the Conservative Party, the first female leader of a political party in Britain. There was much surprise inside and outside the party, and there were mixed feelings and resistance as well. In her biography of her father Carol Thatcher writes:

> The grandees of the party couldn't bear the thought of being led by a woman, especially a "suburban housewife" brought up above a grocer's shop in Grantham – the wrong side of the tracks.

And:

> After the excitement of victory – and the novelty of having a female leader – had worn off, sections of the press and the Conservative Party began promulgating the idea that Margaret's grip on the leadership was both tenuous and temporary. She was a misfit: a woman in a man's world, a political curiosity and – worse – a feminist experiment. How long could she survive before the Conservative Party regained its senses and dumped her for a man? Bill Shelton, who became one of her first parliamentary private secretaries, remembers, "For the rest of that year Ted ran a campaign: "She must be out by Christmas." Heath referred to her as TBW – That Bloody Woman – and he wasn't the only one. Many in the Establishment and the City were appalled to find Conservative MPs apparently embracing feminist principles. (Carol Thatcher 1996, 4, 103,104)

However, this did not mean that there were no advantages to being a woman, particularly, a young and beautiful one. This observation can be derived from Carol Thatcher's comment in her biography of her father on her mother's campaign for parliament in 1959: "A young, attractive woman destined for Parliament was wonderful material for the women's pages" (Carol Thatcher 1996, 80,85).[1]

Leadership style

11 Part of Margaret Thatcher's political image was her leadership style. Much has been written about her demeanour and actions, from both (at least seemingly) gender-neutral and gender-specific perspectives. The term Thatcherism primarily points to her neo-liberal economic policy and her mission to restore Britain as a great power. But it is also taken to

[1] Also see Nunn 39.

include her militant, aggressive and authoritarian bearing as Prime Minister. (*Women as National Leaders* 200) According to the historian Peter Hennessy this "very personal style of government", in which an "over-mighty Prime Minister" dominated the cabinet, really took shape after the victory in the Falklands War in early 1982 when her popularity increased dramatically. (Hennessy 422,428)

12 The question of her so-called aggressive leadership should be approached with caution, because women are far more likely than men to be labelled arrogant and aggressive when they are behaving in a resolute manner. After all, such behaviour does not qualify as feminine. Notably, the other pioneer woman Prime Minister in the West in the 1980s and 1990s, Norwegian Gro Harlem Brundtland, as well as Marga Klompé and Hilda Verwey-Jonker were also accused of "arrogant and masculine" behaviour. Each of these women was different, but all of them regarded their leadership as thorough and vigorous and definitely not as authoritarian. (Brundtland 150, 151, 153; Sykes 219-229) But maybe, given the endless accusations levelled at Margaret Thatcher, none of them exercised such a dominant leadership style as she did. One telling example of Thatcher's leadership style can be found in a letter from her husband Denis to his daughter in 1983:

> Some criticism has been made of the Prime Minister's "style". We all know she is brisk and determined, but leaks in Whitehall from Cabinet Ministers (amongst others) to the press accuse her of being "dictatorial"; this is clearly unfair. She has been rather hurt by this. I have tried to say "ignore it" but "remember not everyone can comprehend difficult problems and is able to think as fast as you can." (Quoted in Carol Thatcher 2008, 170,171)

Thatcher's drive for perfectionism instilled in her a desire to control.

13 My research into female leadership indicates that this perfectionist urge to control, to being "brisk and determined" (to quote Denis Thatcher), coupled with an inability to delegate, is definitely linked to gender isssues. In Thatcher's case, the urge to control was sharpened by her vulnerability as the first female PM in the UK. Another aspect of this urge, however, was a sense of deep personal involvement, as demonstrated, for instance, when the wife of Trade and Industry Secretary Norman Tebbit was paralysed in the IRA bomb attack in Brighton on 12 October 1984. Carol Thatcher writes:

> …Mum arranged for Norman to move into Chequers, where he could be waited on hand and foot, and be close to the hospital to visit his wife. I remember seeing him there at weekends as he came to terms with what had happened.' (Carol Thatcher 2008, 175)

14 But Thatcher's alleged "masculine" leadership style did not deter her from exploiting her status as a woman. All her cabinets had exclusively male ministers, thus even further

emphasising the exemplary position of the Prime Minister. (Margaret Thatcher 1993, 865-882)[2] As mentioned before, being a woman did indeed have advantages. Thatcher's leadership style was marked by a high degree of skill in switching between gender roles: She was an expert "gender-bender". She used her toughness to confound her (male) colleagues, who were not sure how to react, precisely because she was a woman. On the other hand, she also used her feminine charms when necessary. The historian Eric Evans quotes one of Thatcher's advisors, a Hungarian emigrant, on her personality: "He believes that her 'perplexing charm' enabled her to 'be getting away with' political ploys and stratagems which a man would not." (Evans 44)

15 She paid a lot of attention to her appearance. Her love of clothes is legendary. On becoming Conservative Party leader Thatcher put herself in the hands of Gordon Reece, a former television producer who engineered the manufacture of her image. As the contemporary historian Peter Clarke argues in the London Review of Books

> The hair was wrong, too suburban; it was restyled. The clothes were wrong, too fussy; they were replaced. The voice was wrong, too shrill; it was lowered in pitch through lessons from an expert in breathing. With singular dedication, Thatcher made herself into "Maggie", the leader who is remembered, and she did so knowing full well that she was not born to it, that it did not come naturally or easily.

Margaret Thatcher loved and relished her role as Prime Minister. It was, as her daughter Carol says in her latest book, the pinnacle of her political career. So, one might interpret the gender-bending game as an expression of her joy in the office she held.

Feminism, Competence and Vulnerability

16 Thatcherite policies have been much discussed by feminist critics, and an important aspect here is Thatcher's own gender identity. The verdict is far from positive: Thatcher showed no solidarity or sorority whatsoever with other women who shared political aspirations. As a Prime Minister, Thatcher made no attempt to promote the careers of other women. On the contrary, she sometimes even worked against the interests of women. Thatcher owes her successful career in part to the achievements of the women's movement, which pressed for an increase in the number of female politicians, but she never acknowledged this. She always claimed that she owed her success exclusively to her own performance and personal qualities. (Pilcher 495; Pugh 335)

[2] Lady Young was Leader of the House of Lords and LD Privy Seal from September 1981 until June 1983 Downing street years, 874, 875. Thatcher did have a female junior minister (of health), Edwina Curry, from 18 September 1986-20 December 1988.

17 Despite this justified feminist criticism, we should investigate the reasons for it. Wasn't Thatcher's lack of solidarity with her own sex prompted to a large extent by the fear of seeming weak? I have already quoted several examples of the resistance she met along her political career path. The antagonism she experienced from other women in this respect may have helped to shape a negative attitude. Her daughter Carol writes in 2008 about the relation between her mother and the feminist movement in the early 1970s, when Margaret was Minister of Education in the Heath Cabinet.

> Feminists didn't think she was doing enough for their cause. This was the era of "Women's Lib" but my mother was a stratosphere away from the bra-burning demonstrations of the time. On the contrary, she felt the movement had done very little for her. She was a hard-working example of female success from relatively lowly beginnings who had achieved cabinet rank by pragmatically getting on with the task in hand rather than by manning barricades and wasting precious time protesting. (Carol Thatcher 2008, 47,48)

18 Thatcher needed to hold her own in a world where female politicians were in danger of not being taken seriously. The Henigs comment on how a British female member of parliament needed to behave in the 1960s as follows: "To be successful, and to make their mark in such a male-dominated environment, women had to compete with men on their terms and be tough." (Henig and Henig 19) Being tough as a female politician meant, among other things, to avoid 'women's issues', such as health, social work and legislative emancipation. In the course of her political career, Thatcher always sought to concentrate on 'men's issues' such as finance and economy. She had already specialised in fiscal law when studying for her second degree. Her ambition in the 1960s was to become the first female Chancellor of the Exchequer (Thatcher 1996, 95). But her fear of being undervalued as a woman surfaces in a remark she made when taking office as Prime Minister: "I don't think of myself as the first woman Prime Minister." (Quoted in Pilcher 495)

19 She strongly felt the necessity for competence and perfection in government affairs, as female politicians had always been in danger of being considered incompetent (*Women as National Leaders* 5). Communication lecturer Heather Nunn writes about Thatcher's time as Prime Minister:

> Readers of biographies and magazine articles were continually informed that Thatcher only needed four hours sleep, exhausted all about her on walkabouts or political campaigns, cultivated backbenchers with "manic energy" (…), tirelessly researched, memorised detail and mastered any political brief. (Nunn 40,41)

20 I conducted some research into the question whether Margaret Thatcher was a competent politician in terms of the content of her policy. (Ribberink 2009) I concentrated specifically on two areas, her socio-economic and her foreign policy, which together formed

the core business of her term as Prime Minister. Of course, her policy was and still is highly controversial, especially on socio-economic issues. But after 2000, in contrast with the negative historiography of the 1990s, leading historians in this field started taking a more positive view, especially with regard to her foreign policy. Probably the time distance has worked to her advantage, assisted by the popularity of the Blair government in the beginning of 2000. The social democrat Tony Blair did not hide the fact that he greatly admired Thatcher's government and the legacy she left.[3] Besides this, research on the elections she won in 1983 and 1987 indicates that most people voted Conservative on the basis of policy rather than personality. It appears therefore that her policy was popular with a large part of the public as well. (King)

21 A woman who thought and acted like Margaret Thatcher could not immediately be expected to show "feminist" solidarity by promoting the careers of other women. In spite of this she opened the doors for other women, however unintentionally. The historian Martin Pugh points out that Margaret Thatcher functioned as a role model. Through her political achievements she put a definitive end to the widely held view that women could not be skilled politicians. In the Britain of the 1990s a number of women were appointed to high positions, amongst others in the sphere of justice, the House of Commons and in publishing houses, profiting from Thatcher's shattering of the "glass ceiling." (Pugh 336,337; Pilcher 498,499) And if we look further afield, we find that women in the West acquired more political influence than ever in the latter part of the twentieth century. In the 1990s almost 30 percent of cabinet ministers were female in ten important European nations. (Henig and Henig 57) Although still far from being equal, this proportion was higher than ever. The development of the welfare state, better educational opportunities and new social movements such as second-wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s prompted a rise in the number of female politicians and challenged the notion of female incompetence. But it is also very likely that a direct line runs from these developments to the performance of pioneers in political leadership like Thatcher and Brundtland.

Husband and Family

22 Carol Thatcher wrote two personal accounts, a biography of her father, published in 1996 and her own memoir in 2008. These provide an interesting picture of the role that

[3] The historians with an overall negative view on Thatcher's government were Rodney Lowe, Kenneth Morgan and Eric Evans. A more positive judgement came from Brenda Maddox, Peter Hennessy, Anthony Seldon and Daniel Collings and John Campbell. Strictly spoken Heather Nunn is not an historian, but her book draws heavily on historical sources; although written in 2005, one cannot say that her book gives a positive picture on the Thatcher government.

husband and family played in Margaret Thatcher's life and career and how they relate to the question of toughness and vulnerability. In another article I pointed to the way in which the positive image of her marriage and family played an important part in Thatcher's media presentation as a successful Prime Minister. (Ribberink 2005) Similarly, modern American presidents have good reason for devoting so much attention to the presentation of their family life in the media. (Knapen) In this respect one should also consider Thatcher's political background. Part of the New Right ideology – later to become known as Thatcherism – focused on family and personal life. The core of these ideas was to be found in the idealization of the traditional family, accompanied in the 1960s by a rejection of the rising youth revolution and permissive society with its characteristic loose morals. A happy full-time housewife and mother and a happy, harmonious childhood for the children completed the picture. According to Nunn, "consumerism", the pursuit of material goods and prosperity, was an integral part of the Thatcherite ideal picture of the family. Such an ideal family earned these goods by itself and did not rely on state welfare (Nunn 104-123). Throughout her political career and her time as Prime Minister, Thatcher presented this traditional model as an ideal – although it was at odds with her own reality as a paid working mother – and realized it in part by modelling her own family on a "desirable conservative" pattern. In her own words:

> The family is the building block of society. It is a nursery, a school, a hospital, a leisure centre, a place of refuge and a place of rest. It encompasses the whole of society. It fashions our beliefs. It is the preparation for the rest of our life. And women run it. (Quoted in Nunn 126)[4]

Carol Thatcher's books provide sharper insight than her mother's memoirs into the role the family really played despite the almost saintly depiction of her father in his later years, which is however, qualified by Carol's criticism of his absence during her own upbringing.

23 In an article of 1990, the Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok states that in the past important female political leaders could only survive as leaders if they were free from male tutelage. They either had to be unmarried or widowed, or they had to be symbolically unmarried, i.e. their husbands played a secondary role. Inverting traditional gender roles the female leader had to develop into an „honorary man", while her partner possibly played „the woman". Blok pointed to Margaret and Denis Thatcher as perfect examples. But a distinction must be drawn between the period before and after Denis's retirement in 1975. You could say that Denis supported Margaret during their marriage, but before he retired his support was more passive, albeit loyal. His demanding job as an important business man made him a

[4] Quoted from Thatcher"s speech to the national conference of Conservative women in 1988.

mostly absent husband and father. His support was mostly financial, which was certainly important, because it made things a lot easier for Margaret. They both had a life and career in separate spheres, as was common in those days: „He had long ago perfected the art of compartmentalizing his life and never permitted his wife's political activities to interfere with his own duties and interests…" (Carol Thatcher 1996, 4, 8, 76, chapter 3 and 4).

24 To understand Margaret Thatcher, it is necessary to bear in mind that politics and life as a politician came first, even superseding her family. She married Denis because it suited her political ambitions. After four difficult years as Prime Minister she said to her daughter in 1983: "I've had the best four years in one's life." And: "…it is the job I most wanted to do in the world…"„ (Carol Thatcher 1996, 204; 2008, 102, 103). This does not mean she did not love her husband. Reading her memoirs and her daughter's books, one can conclude she loved her husband and children deeply. However, Carol makes it clear in her biography of her father that not only her father but both her parents were very much absent when she and her brother were little. Much of the upbringing was left to nannies and boarding schools. Of course, boarding schools are part and parcel of the British tradition, but questions can be asked about the decision to send children to them. Denis had disliked boarding school in his youth. Besides, the children were very young when they were sent away. Mark was eight and Carol was nine. Carol writes: "We were together as a family only at half-terms, summer holidays, Easter and at Christmas." (Carol Thatcher 1996, 30, 85)

25 Nonetheless Margaret Thatcher had to cope with a double burden. As customary in the 1950s and 1960s, the mother was responsible for the household and the children. Margaret had to organise family life, with her husband so often away on business. What is more, Denis needed a lot of time for his hobbies, rugby and golf. And although the children did not see much of their parents, this does not mean that Margaret took no interest. From the accounts of her daughter it appears that she took her family very seriously in her own way: she knitted for the children, baked cakes for birthday parties, wallpapered their rooms herself, went to parent-teacher meetings and so on. Until the twins were five years old, Margaret was not particularly active in politics – she studied law during these years. (Carol Thatcher 1996, 71, 72, 86, 87; 2008, 17, 30, 31)

26 There would be little point in condemning Margaret Thatcher for the way that she tried to combine her duties as a mother with a political career. Not only were there few female MPs in the 1950s and 60s, in the United Kingdom as elsewhere in the Western world; but a large number of these women remained unmarried or only began a political career in later life when family obligations receded in importance. For most of them, the combination of parliamentary

work and raising children was simply too difficult. (Linders; Ribberink 1998) In this respect Thatcher was one of the exceptions, but she was in part able to take this position because she received support from other quarters.

27 One can, however, ask why Margaret Thatcher did not admit how difficult this combination of work and private life must have been for her, even though she had help from others. It is not enough to say that she preferred to avoid the subject because it was a sensitive one in right-wing conservative circles. An explanation can also be found in the importance she attached to a positive presentation of herself in the media. A toiling housewife and mother seemed less reliable and "perfect" as a political leader than someone who gave the impression that it was easy to juggle the demands of work inside and outside the home: better to be a "superwoman" than a household drudge. Carol Thatcher had good reason for using the description "superwoman" for her mother, and she writes: "Somehow she juggled working, studying, organizing the household, shopping, cooking, sewing, ironing and liaising with nanny." (Carol Thatcher 1996, 71)

28 It is striking how affectionately Carol writes about these things and how she bears her mother very little rancour for her youth. This is especially noticeable in her latest book, published in 2008, where her loyalty to her mother stands out. Indeed, this book looks like an answer to John Campbell's rather critical biography of Margaret Thatcher, which she mentions in her bibliography. The following paragraph is most revealing about Carol Thatcher's vision of her upbringing:

> I was brought up to see home life as a base or launch pad for everything you did in the outside world. I didn't always understand this as a child. I remember finding my mother in the kitchen one day making Scotch pancakes and I said: "Why can't you be at home more? All my school friends' mothers are around. Why can't you be more like them?" She stopped making the pancakes. "Darling, you have to understand that you have a lot of benefits that other children don't have: you can come to the Opening of Parliament and have supper at the House of Commons. You can go on overseas holidays." She was quite right, of course, although it wasn't until I was older and wiser that I realized it." (Carol Thatcher 1996, 86, 87)

It is quite clear, especially from Carol Thatcher's writings, that the family bond was strong when the twins were grown up. Denis and Margaret did not need to devote a lot of time to upbringing anymore – which neither of them wanted – and their children apparently appreciated their life of affluence with a famous mother.

29 The second period in the marriage of Margaret and Denis is a different story. Shortly after Margaret Thatcher became Leader of the Opposition on 11 February 1975, Denis retired, having turned sixty in June. This turned out to be very lucky for her. The available material suggests that he was indeed the ideal male consort, a role that he had to invent all by himself,

because there was no model available. Thatcher's three predecessors as female leaders of a nation were all widowed when they came to office.<fn>The predecessors were Sirimavo Bandaranaike (Ceylon and Sri Lanka; 1960-1965,1970-1977,1994-2000), Indira Gandhi (India, 1966-1970,1980-1984) and Golda Meir (Israel, 1969-1974).</fn> Denis helped and supported her wherever he could without claiming the limelight. On the contrary, naturally a shy man, he preferred to stay in the background, not least because he thought this better for his wife's sake. He did not interfere in political affairs. Many times he saved her from mistakes and from responding too emotionally and too hastily. Though she often followed his advice, she took crucial decisions alone. In the biography of her father Carol mentions that her mother alone took the decision to stand for the leadership of the Conservative Party: "Margaret's decision to stand had shocked him." But his typical reaction was: "Of course, I told her I'd support her all the way – that's what marriage is all about."(Carol Thatcher 1996, 2-4, 153) From different sources it can be concluded that he was the stable, calm factor in her life and career.

30 However, it is intriguing that in both her books (biography of her father in 1996 and her memoir in 2008) Carol Thatcher gives the impression that without the support of her husband Margaret Thatcher would have been a less competent politician and PM. This could lead to the conclusion that women cannot perform well in politics without male support, but there is no proof of that. On the contrary, Margaret Thatcher was a very good politician whatever you may think of her policies, and she would have probably performed just as well without the support of Denis. She would have found what she needed elsewhere. But it still stands that Denis's support was deeply important. Some examples from Carol Thatcher's biography of her father are quoted below. Quoting Gordon Reece:

> He was wonderful with her and she was wonderful with him. People mustn't underestimate that she had loyalty to him; many think that it was his loyalty to her that mattered, but it was her loyalty to him that was even more important because she knew that he was the commonsense point of view. That's what Denis has always been.

Regarding Margaret's term as Prime Minister Carol writes about her father:

> With his dry sense of humour and slow smile, he had the knack of defusing a panic. "Come off it, Love", he'd say when she was in the middle of a tantrum, "let's get relaxed," and offer her a drink. Sometimes when a crisis was brewing, someone from the Private Office would give Denis prior warning so that he could batten down the hatches before the storm arrived."

The admiration was mutual. Carol quotes her father, who was proud of being married to "one of the greatest women the world has ever produced."(Carol Thatcher 1996, 113, 153, 290)

31 Denis was a mainstay for Margaret in her struggle to hold her own as a politician and as PM. But he was not indispensable. Margaret Thatcher was too strong and too competent a politician for that despite her vulnerability along the lines of class and gender. Her lower-middle-class origins contributed to her vulnerability in a political party that was famous for its aristocratic and upper class traditions. But she was not unique in this respect: her predecessor Ted Heath also came from relatively humble origins but he had less difficulty being accepted by the Tories than she. It is difficult to prove this gender-related vulnerability, because Margaret Thatcher did everything to hide it. But the way that she tried to maintain her perfect political image can be explained by her strong awareness that she, as the first woman Prime Minister, was in great danger of being shot down. Invisibility through perfection and toughness were the answers. She shared this role and position with other pioneer political women, particularly Gro Harlem Brundtland. It can be argued, however, that Thatcher was the most outspoken. This might be explained by the fact that her role as PM was more significant than that of any other female politician of her time, due to the powerful international status of the United Kingdom.

32 Many people hated Thatcher's "toughness". The label "iron lady" was well-earned. She did nothing to improve things when, as an old lady in the late 1990s, she poured oil on the flames of a public debate by calling the former Chilean dictator Pinochet an "excellent democrat" and "friend of Britain", because he had lent a helping hand during the Falklands War.[5] But no one can deny that she made a huge imprint as political leader, who mastered the vulnerability of her position as a woman, albeit in a controversial manner.

[5] NRC Handelsblad, 22 October 1999 and March 2000; Also see „Thatcher stands by Pinochet", BBC News, 26 March 1999 (downloaded 16 August 2010).

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