

After Thatcher

A Class Of Her Own

Class, gender and accountability dominated the November coup in the Tory Party. **Beatrix Campbell** explains why

We now live in the era of post-Thatcherism. What does this mean? For sure it doesn't mean a return to pre-Thatcherism. Her nemesis does not mark the end of the cultural revolution, it simply signals a new season in the long life of our oldest party. Because, if nothing else, Margaret Thatcher has converted the Conservative Party into the radical party, the stupid party into the thinking party, the party of consensus into the party of argument. All of that was manifest in the moment of her demise - however unseemly was her eviction, however much the drama focused on the person rather than the politics, it was always apparent that this is a *serious* party, interested not only in power but also in taking power by taking the initiative.

Thatcher transformed it in every way from a defensive party to the offensive party. Certainly it had been stuck since 1987, without a project, without popular policies. It had become defensive. More than that, it became a party doomed to defend its leaders' fancies. But the Tories' modernisation as a political party created the conditions for a new cultural revolution. Ironically, the November coup was itself the lady's legacy. The arrival of 'accountability' in the Tory Party created at least the appearance that this was more than a palace coup; and Thatcher's earlier purge of the grandees restored the necessity of representivity to the political discourse - class and gender as much as policy defined the contenders and the criteria by which they would be judged.

As my friend reminded me when we ruminated on the coup, the process presented the Conservative Party as a democratic party. This did not mean that the leadership election itself was democratic - if anything it exposed the dominance of parliamentary-party cul-

ture in our political culture. The nation became bystanders in a coup designed to defer a general election. Nonetheless, the conduct of coup overshadowed any constitutional questions. Whether the result will secure a general election victory is another matter, what counts now is that the Conservatives converted a party crisis into a public crusade.

The irony is that the Conservative Party was appropriating the Bennite reforms of the Labour Party in the 1980s, reforms which were designed to discipline elected representatives and empower their electors, introduce the practices of accountability between MPs and party members, and offer a dialogue that would be consummated either in re-selection or de-selection.

Unlike the Conservative Party conference, Labour's conference had pretensions to policy-making. The inner-party crisis of the late-70s was not only about the leader, it was about the parliamentary party's abandonment of the activist party. Accountability was thus a response to betrayal and came to be perceived not as a democratic but a paranoid process in a party that was not so much democratised as preoccupied with policing itself.

In 1990, Tory MPs scuttling to their constituencies to consult them was, by contrast, presented as an apparently decorous dialogue, the kind of conversation-with-consequences that we hardly expected constituency parties to demand. Rank-and-file still believed that Thatcher was the best thing going for them, even if she continued to defy their complaints about almost everything. And so many Tory MPs found themselves at odds with their local parties and threatened with de-selection. It was an extraordinary scene. What matters in all this is that the rhetoric of party democracy has different meanings for Conservatives and

for Labour. The Tories aren't *really* democratic, but they are slowly being democratised. Moreover, it cannot be denied that the *rhetoric has its own reality* because here was a paradigm of what Stuart Hall calls the Conservatives' authoritarian-populism: an inner-party coup by the most powerful persons, conducted in the name of the nation.

Once Sir Geoffrey Howe's heroic critique of Thatcher triggered the leadership crisis, the issue of representivity came to dominate the debate. There was, of course, no question of a woman succeeding Margaret Thatcher. She herself had seen to that. But class identities and interests determined success or failure in a way that would have been unthinkable before Thatcher. Consider the fate of dear Douglas. In the months before the crisis much of the media invented the myth that Hurd was the man most likely to succeed. They liked him because he displayed all the characteristics of Conservatism as a branch of the diplomatic service. A toff who could read and write. That didn't make him any more or less rightwing. It just made him a man of a certain age and a certain type. And of course it made him most certainly a man. Elegant and elegiac obituaries were written for Hurd by commentators distressed to discover that the transformation of the Tory Party demanded something more - a man who knows something about modern manners, which means money and the marketplace. A man who attracts deference is no longer necessarily a man who attracts attention.

Heseltine is a toff, too. He is rich, public school and Oxford. But he has elan, lives dangerously, and isn't afraid of the people: though he'd never be a man of the people, at least he knew where they lived and visited them when there was a row on. More populist than popular, Heseltine was a contender both because he *created* politics and appeared to be in conversation with the people.

John Major benefited from Thatcher's benediction, despite the embarrassment when she anointed herself his back-seat driver. His most important feature was his lack of class - never has such a monochrome man had so much going for him. That wasn't because it made him That Woman's Man, nor because being not-much-of-a-man was less dangerous than being something stronger. It was everything to do with the snobberies that met his candidacy, nowhere more evident than in Hugo Young's literary lament for Douglas Hurd in *The Guardian* on November 27. Peregrine Worsthorne in the *Sunday Telegraph* on December 2 warned after Major's triumph that 'classlessness must not get out of hand'. Clearly, the grandees haven't given up. But the difference between before and after Thatcher is that they don't run the Tory Party.

Major the man doesn't interest the

grantees, Major the manager reassures them, but Major the classless man can claim to represent *something*. The significance of his class difference was that he could claim some connection to the majority, having lived amidst them. His lack of education became as significant as his success in the City. Two o-levels! Not only did that place him with the majority of his generation but also his failure made him into a man with a history. He gained glamour from his father, a failed vaudeville act and failed garden-gnome maker. All this brought a modest heroism to the Majors. And maybe most important of all it located the family not in the working class but in the genteel-but-broke middle class. The Majors were thus people with ambition. But his class origins were represented in the American mode: he was a lower-middle class poor boy made good - a success. It would have been no good at all if he'd remained a poor boy - a failure.

The symbolism of all this is as serious as the substance. Major's trajectory, like Thatcher's, was taken to mark the demise of class as a collectivity in British politics. Despite all the talk of the decline of class, it remains a rich, resilient cultural and economic category. But what has been detonated by Thatcherism are the old fixities, the dominant forms of popular collectivities. Class appears increasingly as a condition, a culture, and less and less as a form of historical agency.

Thatcherism addressed the people as individuals, not through their institutions. And of course this coincided with the collapse of the institutionalised expression of class identities within the working class. A Left which, fatally, conflated the working class with the labour movement, was swiftly outmanoeuvred by a new Right which spoke directly to the people, not as 'the masses' but as individuals. For Thatcherism, and it seems for post-Thatcherism, too, the popular classes have metamorphosed - in fact they have made the working class disappear. The people are the middle class and the poor. This allows class to be re-interpreted: the middle class succeed by self-improvement. The iconography of the poor represents them as victims rather than the authors of their own history, as deprived, depressed and disorganised.

What Major's post-Thatcherism shares with its predecessor is the conviction that there is no *organised* class collectivity. Thatcher's class background was expressed only to deny class. What she did was to individualise the experience of class by de-institutionalising it. She simply ignored the institutions of organised labour. She made them irrelevant.

Despite having a background that most of us would have regarded as a bit posh - after all a grocer's shop, an alderman for a dad, and grammar school education stationed her above 75% of her contemporaries - her class came to be defined not by *us*, but by



Class of the 80s: Thatcherism's free individuals

them. Thus the mandarin designated Thatcher the acceptable face of the masses, when in fact she was middle-class middle-England. Nonetheless, that proved to be a much more potent redoubt than the establishment, from which to resist the rabble holding the nation to ransom. After all, the establishment had, historically, felt some obligation to the masses, even if they hated them for it. The middle class of middle-England felt no such *responsibilities*, and therefore no twinge of respect for people's *rights* to resistance. The point was that Thatcher hated the working class with an intensity peculiar to the petty bourgeoisie, that class which could be relied on to resist working-class pressure because it only ever felt victimised by it.

The third characteristic of the November coup was sex. Or rather the March of the Men. 'The Battle of the Sexes' the London *Evening Standard* dubbed it. Major's first mistake was to omit women entirely from his cabinet. Thatcher hadn't appointed any either, but her absence clearly demanded a new presence. What became clear was that the march of the men would be halted, it had to be: both feminism and Thatcherism - though for entirely different reasons - now made it impossible to purge women from the political stage for long. Labour women immediately exposed Major's mistake (four women are in Kinnock's shadow cabinet, and half the Labour women MPs are front-benchers). And Tory

women swiftly protested. Men were constituted as a political problem, official. Thatcherism always depended on Thatcher's gender and the nuances of her sexuality for its force. Only a woman could have done it. And yet her power as party leader, if not as prime minister, was always *contingent*. It depended on the denial of difference. She was never to take the side of women. Her gender was to be suppressed except insofar as she was able to give a feminine endorsement to what was, in fact, a profoundly patriarchal project.

She tried to suppress sexual difference, denying its difficulties and the differential effects on men and women, because that would have meant honouring a history of political struggle, stamina and personal pain among women that had no place in the Conservative conversation. At the same time she increasingly inhabited an intensely sexualised persona. This lent a wanton emotionality to her *modus operandi*, it was a kind of emotional terrorism. It was certainly excessive. It was probably necessary to secure her survival. After all, she had few weapons available to her as a woman, and she used the only ones she possessed, those assigned to women. This contradiction lies at the centre of Thatcher and Thatcherism. It is a contradiction that despite her own difficulty with it, puts gender at the heart of Thatcherism, both as a style and a strategy.

She made it up, made herself up, so to say, as she went along. That made her interesting. The timbre of Hurd's or

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Howe's or Heseltine's or Major's masculinity isn't interesting. We already know all about it. Say grey suits and you've said it all, because, despite their differences, their sexuality is inert, predictable and unproblematic precisely where Thatcher's femininity is perplexing, active, diverse, and, most important of all, surprising. She made herself and her party the centre of attention because she was the only woman among the men. Manners put her in the middle. But she claimed our attention because as spectators and protagonists we participated in a process in which we, and she, changed.

Barbara Castle noticed when Margaret Thatcher became Tory leader that she looked as if she was in love - in love with power. That love affair transformed her, she acquired a grandeur that was achieved not so much by a dignified distance as by bruising beligerence which confused her enemies. You always felt that Neil Kinnock really wanted to throw a punch across the dispatch box, but being an old-fashioned lad he seemed to think it wasn't done to hit a woman. It took a man with no manners, the Beast of Bolsover, to match her. Power also contributed to Thatcher's metamorphosis as a middle-aged woman: at an age when most women are asset-stripped by a culture that denies their autonomous desire as well as denying their desirability, Margaret Thatcher's sexual resources seemed to expand.

She was re-fashioned for our collective consumption, and the imaginary or symbolic dialogue with her public transformed her image, her voice, her teeth, her hair. Her power transformed her sexuality, her style as a woman. Her mutations were among the keys to her modernity, she was a multiple personality, the housewife in a flak jacket, a manager, a wife and a warrior. The politics of fashion during the 1980s gave us the shoulder. Power dressing gave women, and Thatcher, too, the architecture of the suit without its uniformity. Suits - or costumes as they used to be called - are sexy but safe. Above the waist she boldly synchronised shoulder, bosom and smile as only a woman would. All were statements about both sex and power. What she did in every gesture was to make it absolutely clear that she *wanted* something, she wanted power, she loved it. And women loved that. She was thus a *demanding and desiring* woman. Her pleasure was in power.

Her modernity lay in the mobility and multiplicity of her identities. The endless confusion about her identity - was she a woman or a man in disguise? - was misplaced. She exposed the limits of masculinity by transcending femininity and appropriating masculinity. She was always a woman and she was always more than a man. What she exemplified was the way that in these times it is women who transcend the limits of their gender.

But Thatcher refused to engage women. She would not use her own experience as a woman to endorse their experience of themselves. They could admire her but they could not be like her. It can be no accident that in every general election won by Margaret Thatcher the Tories suffered a significant bleeding of women's votes. Thatcher's own inclination and her speechwriters' ignorance produced a peculiarly regressive rhetoric about women, because the dominant themes of Thatcherism *demand* the subordination of material support for women, something which could only be *socially* resourced. Thus Thatcher's anti-egalitarianism and anti-statism left her with only one icon - the housewife. She only ever addressed women as housewives (something she herself had never been), and thus while claiming solidarity with other women she in fact subordinated her own sex. Other women were exactly that - other.

What she implied in her address to other women was not that she, and they, were equals, but that she was exceptional. Her antipathy to the state and egalitarianism meant that she had nothing to offer the modern woman other than her image. Heroism and ingenuity describe British women's efforts to organise their work and their personal relationships and responsibilities. But it is not that private and informal networking that Thatcher celebrates when she invokes the joys of motherhood. Actually she doesn't talk about motherhood much. That might mean talking about relationships. She doesn't do that. Hence housework: the domestic world is invoked as household *management*. The paradigm of active citizenship is the housewife, a creature realised in service, not in solidarity, in a language of responsibilities not rights.

She has supported Mary Whitehouse and Victoria Gillick, women whose crusades against sexual pleasure expressed an authoritarian-populist pessimism about the price paid by women. Both believe that women are undone, defeated by desire. Thatcher has been represented by the Right as a liberal when it comes to sex and by the Left as a repressive reactionary. She is neither. She is a fatalist. Thatcher has always supported repressive sexual legislation, but has always forgiven her minister's misdemeanours. But this is not the contradiction that it first appears to be. It is entirely consistent with the Conservative culture that represents men as babies or beasts. Modern women are made of sterner stuff: the *British Social Attitudes* surveys during the Thatcher era have revealed a chasm between women's common sense and Thatcherism. If anything women are the 'permissive', egalitarian and democratic sex.

And in 1990 Thatcher's language has seemed increasingly estranged from her own experience - her contemptuous invocation of the winter sales,

woolly hats and thermos flasks insulted her natural constituency, the thrifty, self-sufficient bargain-hunter. While during the leadership crisis she mobilised inept cricketing metaphors which placed her madly on men's territory. Her success was achieved by her escape from the female condition rather than her embrace of it. She repudiated feminism much as she repudiated femininity, for both were associated with a condition of subordination. Her efforts to prevent the proliferation of powerful women - hence the absence of any sisterhood to sustain her during her reign - left her defenceless against the power of men. And yet that was the very thing which she had seemed to control. Her personal power over men was the *only* thing which she gave to women.

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But what her demise revealed was that her personal power was no match for their collective power once they needed her no more.

One of the remarkable features of the coup was the gendering of it. Yes, there were women in the campaign - among the dissidents were Edwina Currie and Emma Nicholson. They were important. But were they instrumental? No, not as far as the media were concerned. Whatever else it was, the coup was a masculine plot, which was defined as such by the ubiquitous grey suit. *The Times* on November 22 went further in its suggestion of masculine menace, the grey suits became *eminences grises*. We learned that the enigmatic but powerful 1922 Committee was expected to 'dispatch the men in grey suits' and *The Times* began its editorial thus: 'In went the grey suits...'

Men were getting a taste of their own medicine, they were being dehumanised, defined by dress in a way that was utterly familiar to women. But if women have been demeaned by that, these men were being placed differently - the grey suit signified their collective difference - the gender of their corporate and class power. Here was a woman, marooned in a Westminster gulag of grey suits. Why else did people begin to relent when she went down? Partly, people so relished her last performance as Queen of the Dispatch box and realised that whoever her successor, whether kinder or gentler, he would not be as good as she was, for she was a woman who managed to be more than a man.

Ironically, the only time she identified with the reality rather than the rhetoric of the female experience was in her interview in *The Times* in the week of her demise. 'When a woman is strong, she is strident. If a man is strong, gosh he's a good guy. Some of the things that have been said about me...but never mind.' Then at last she was able to share with feminism a critique of men's scorn for strong women, and in so doing she was able to share an experience all women know something about - defeat. Losing like this was one of the best things she did for women. •