

WOMEN AND POLITICAL POWER

According to most histories, women came into real political power only after they obtained the vote. But Linda Colley here tells how certain determined women played the political game in pre-ballot days—a story with valuable lessons for women today.

by Linda Colley

Two years ago, the young son of a British friend of mine asked a question that astonished and delighted his middle-aged father. "Daddy," the boy inquired, "can a man ever become prime minister in this country?" From the boy's standpoint, it was a perfectly valid inquiry. A child of the 1980s, born after Margaret Thatcher's first election in 1979, entering nursery school around the time of her second electoral triumph in 1983, and old enough to scan the newspapers when she won for a third time in 1987, he had never seen a man claim Number 10 Downing Street. He had grown up accepting that his country's premiership must somehow be closed to people like him. When his father recounted this anecdote, his purpose of course was to make me smile. How ironic it was—how cute even—that his son should believe that women were invariably central to the British political system!

When Mrs. Thatcher resigned in November 1990, the British and American press struck a similar note of bemused surprise at the singularity of her achievement. How astonishing it was that a woman should be elected premier of a Western na-

tion and then go on to dominate and devastate her male competitors for over 11 years. With her departure, though, the natural order would surely be restored. And most commentators assumed that this natural political order was traditionally and unambiguously male. "The masculine ethos of public life can reassert itself," wrote a female journalist acidly, "untroubled by this vexatious business of coming to terms with a woman in power." Watching the collective sigh of relief that went up from the Conservative Party when Thatcher's successor, John Major, chose an all-male cabinet, one knows exactly what she meant. Yet the assumption that Margaret Thatcher was the first nonroyal woman to have exerted substantial political power in the West is historically way off the mark.

Of course, the particular *type* of power that she exercised was unprecedented and would have indeed been completely out of the question for anyone of her gender before the 20th century. The political theorists of the ancient world took it for granted that only those who defended their state in war—namely men—had the right to active citizenship. And courtesy of Niccolò Machiavelli, this rationale for excluding women from political life became part of the men-



A Woman in Politics, 1990. When Margaret Thatcher resigned, the press wondered whether any of her three possible successors was big enough to fill her shoes.

tal furniture of early modern Europeans, just as it did of the Founding Fathers in America. Should their inferior musculature be thought insufficient reason to confine women to the private sphere, there was always their lack of property to fall back on. In most Western nations, it was customary for women who married to lose their independent property rights and, in the process, their separate legal identity. As the great 18th-century English jurist, William Blackstone, put it with damning clarity: "Husband and wife are one person, and that person is the husband." Being *femmes couvertes*—nonpersons in the eyes of the law—women could naturally not expect to vote, much less hold public office. True, by the 1800s, women in both Europe and America were becoming restive under these constraints and in some places were campaigning successfully to modify them. But British women did not win the right to vote in national elections until 1918, and not before 1920 were all adult women in the United States admitted to the franchise.

Before the 20th century, then, there was—in theory and in law—a virtually

complete demarcation between the masculine public sphere and the private sphere in which women were expected to find their only true fulfillment. *He* might stalk the corridors of power and talk of politics in the market place, but *her* place was by the domestic hearth, amid the sacred cares of the nursery and in the more intimate duties of the bedroom. And for many women in the past, this was close to how it was.

For a minority of women, however, the realities of life and politics were very different. Especially in European states such as Great Britain, where power was for centuries confined to a narrow landed elite, the necessary qualification for exercising a political role was not so much possession of the right gender as membership of the right social class—the "top ten thousand" as the Victorians often called them.

There were actually some 11,000 families who together owned about three-quarters of all the land in Great Britain and Ireland before the First World War. But it was the highest echelon of these rich and broad-acre clans—the top one thousand—who mattered most. They supplied the majority

in Britain's House of Commons, just as they made up the bulk of the peers—the dukes, the marquesses, the earls, and the barons—who sat in the House of Lords. And for all of Britain's reputation as a democratic and industrially advanced nation, these aristocrats remained dominant for an extraordinarily long time. In every cabinet until 1905, for example, men with titles outnumbered those without them. Among such a narrow elite, as among the contemporary elites of France, Russia, Germany, and even the United States, intermarriage was almost the rule. Lord Salisbury, prime minister during the late 19th century, was reputed to be related by blood or marriage to half the members of his administration. And since political life was so much a matter of powerful landed families and dynastic marriage-brokering, the female members of these superprivileged tribes were able to play a vital and recognized part in it.

Historian Gerda Lerner put it very well when she wrote that “as members of families, as daughters and wives,” patrician women were often “closer to actual power than many a man.” They did not have to vote or strive for public office to win access to the political center: They were already there by virtue of who they were, of who their families were, and of whom they married. For these women, there was no gulf between the public and private spheres. The two often converged, not least because their social life was an integral part of political life.

Since politicians were fashionable and highborn individuals, and not just grim hard-working professionals, they dominated high society to a degree that would seem strange in London or Paris or Berlin or even Washington today. And the responsibility for initiating and stage-managing the events of high society, which were also political events of a kind, lay emphatically with women. As one famous hostess wrote in the late 19th century: “Society, as well as the tone of society, is not governed or instituted by men; their role in society is a very secondary one. . . . Society in its tone and

composition is created by women.”

What did the role of hostess mean for these women? For an ambitious minority, it brought access to high-level political information and an opportunity to participate directly in political intrigue. Emily, Viscountess Palmerston, was the most famous hostess in mid-Victorian London. Her sumptuous parties had such cachet that men from all political parties clamored for invitations. And this proved invaluable for her husband, Lord Palmerston, who had to preside over a coalition administration with very little party organization of the modern type to help him. Emily's parties made him vital contacts, and her own enormous charm and inbred political instincts (one of her brothers also had been prime minister) softened up guests and teased out information. “What superficial observers mistook for indiscretion was eminently useful,” declared her obituarist:

She always understood full well what she was telling, to whom she was telling it, when and where it would be repeated. . . . Instead of the secret that was betrayed, it was the feeler that was put forth.

Emily worked for her husband, but her best friend—Dorothea, Princess Lieven, daughter of a Prussian aristocrat—worked for herself. When her husband, Count Christopher Lieven, came to London as Russian ambassador, she used her party-giving skills to meet, influence, and occasionally bed a succession of important Englishmen, from the Duke of Wellington, victor of Waterloo, to Earl Grey, a future prime minister. Banished from England for her intrigues, she promptly set up a salon in Paris and, at the age of 52, won the heart of Guizot, leader of the French administration from 1840 to 1848. Reading the hundreds of letters that passed between her and Emily at this time—Princess Lieven acting as the not-too-secret agent of the French government and Emily serving as the mouthpiece for the British foreign office—is a powerful corrective for anyone who thinks that women were politically unin-

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volved before the vote.

For the political parties themselves, the allegiance of brilliant and charismatic hostesses such as these could be a substantial organizational advantage. Take the case of Elizabeth Vassall, a beautiful, energetic, and intelligent woman, who deserted her first husband to marry Henry Richard Fox, Lord Holland, in 1797. This act made her both an important and a marginal figure: important because Holland was the nephew and political heir of the great Whig leader, Charles James Fox; marginal because divorced women were cold-shouldered by polite society. Excluded from other people's drawing rooms, Lady Holland made them come to hers instead. She converted Holland House, an elegant 17th-century mansion just two miles from Marble Arch in London, into a salon—a familiar instrument of female influence in 18th-century Paris, but relatively new as far as English life was concerned. Almost every week until her husband's death in 1840, she entertained 50 or more guests: politicians, ambassadors, literary figures, and virtually every bright young man who could talk for his dinner. The cooking was indifferent, the conversational pace terrifying, but her rudeness and wit, combined with Lord Holland's great name and geniality, were irresistible. As Emily Palmerston remarked, Holland House kept the Whig Party together. Usually out of office between 1780 and 1830, and with no formal network of party societies and caucuses to sustain them, Whig politicians cherished it as a center of intelligence, as a lavish meeting place, and as a cultural icon.

Of course, women like Lady Holland were the dazzling and flamboyant exceptions. But every political hostess could arrange for individuals she was interested in to meet each other and push forward any bright young man she favored. This is what happens to the hero of Anthony Trollope's novel *Phineas Finn*, which was published in 1869. Phineas is a young, impoverished Irish M.P., who finds it hard to get the great men in London to take notice of him. Fortunately he is handsome and the ladies like him. Lady Laura Standish, who is "related to almost everybody who was anybody among the high Whigs,"

asks him to dinners and house parties so that he can meet powerful men. Another aristocratic heiress, Violet Effingham, uses her contacts to find him a new seat in Parliament after he loses his first. And the Duchess of Omnium, wife of a cabinet minister, nags her husband to give him an official post.

Trollope himself had profoundly conservative views about the proper division between the sexes and probably intended for us to smile at these unwomanly intrigues. Yet the effect he achieves is rather different: Phineas emerges from the text as the creation of so many female Svengalis. And cases like Phineas's occurred in real life. Benjamin Disraeli was an outsider—a baptized Jew but a Jew nonetheless—and as such found it hard to gain a foothold in a traditionally anti-Semitic political world. But his wit, his good looks, and his genuine fondness for women made him a favorite among aristocratic hostesses. They asked him to their soirées and dinner parties, and his acceptance was eased. Of the young Disraeli—who would eventually climb to the top of the greasy pole as prime minister—it could be said, as Trollope said of Phineas, that though he "was excluded from the Liberal government, all Liberal drawing rooms were open to him, and that he was a lion." Only for Liberal, read Tory.

Being able to advance masculine careers gave elite women considerable power. Some of them, we know, demanded favors from their protégés in return, material appreciation of one kind or another, and just occasionally more intimate services. But most women seemed simply to have relished the sense of superiority that exercising patronage always gives, soaking up the flattery and attention that ambitious men showered upon them and enjoying being at the center of things. As late as the 1920s, the very last of Britain's great political hostesses, Lady Londonderry, so captivated the first Labour prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, that he agreed to give her husband a government post—even though he was a rather unpleasant and not particularly competent Tory!

To be sure, there was always a less gaudy and far more secretive side to female power. Then, as now, the wives of politicians lived with the men who had power on

a day-to-day basis, slept with them, and knew—as no one else was likely to do—the nature of their weaknesses. But before the late 19th century, politicians' wives could be important in ways usually denied to their modern equivalents. The inflated bureaucracies, civil services, and secretariats that keep the business of government moving today simply did not exist in the past. So ministers, senators, M.P.s, and congressmen often had to rely on their wives for secretarial services—and in the process inform them of the nature of their business, however secret and high level it might be. Take the case of George Grenville, the man who tried to inflict the Stamp Act on Americans in the 1760s. His wife, Elizabeth, was the granddaughter of the Duke of Somerset and, as one contemporary commented, “the first prize in the marriage lottery of our century.” She brought Grenville a substantial dowry, which helped him in his career. She had two brothers in Parliament, who became his firm political allies. Best of all, she was astute and the perfect political companion. She drafted the letters that her husband could entrust to no one else, she discussed troublesome issues (such as upstart colonists) with him, and she kept his political diary for him.

Such women were invaluable auxiliaries. But since the precise boundaries of their role were strictly determined by their husbands' needs and wishes, they were also passive and essentially subordinate creatures. A political wife's opportunities for initiative expanded markedly, however, when her husband, while still retaining power or ambition, was removed from the center of events in some way. When Winston Churchill lost his cabinet post in 1915 and stormed off to fight at the Front, for example, he relied on his wife Clementine as never before. It fell to her to seek out political intelligence from his friends and allies still in London and send it on to him in France, so that he would not lose touch with political events. To do this, Clementine had to calculate just whom to talk and listen to, and she had to work out how much of the gossip and rumor she picked up Winston really needed to know.

The balance of power between a politician and his wife was likely to shift even

more dramatically if he fell ill. William Pitt the Elder, the great British war minister of the mid-18th century, was sporadically the victim of acute manic depression. At the height of such attacks, he would shut himself in his room and refuse to come out or talk to anyone. This was when his wife Hester (who was George Grenville's sister) came into her own. She would rearrange his appointments and correspond directly on political matters with Pitt's fellow ministers, employing all the while the polite fiction: “My Lord commands me to write . . .” Since her Lord was in fact locked up in his bedroom, what this meant was that Hester had taken over part of his job for the duration—a fact that Pitt's colleagues tacitly recognized by writing directly to her during such crises. By virtue of what she did behind the scenes, Hester has some claim to be regarded as Britain's first woman prime minister.

But there is no need to go back to distant examples. Twentieth-century America can furnish several cases of politicians' wives moving far beyond the secondary and supportive role that is customarily theirs. When Woodrow Wilson was incapacitated by a stroke from 1919 to 1921, his wife, the former Edith Bolling Galt, stepped in where no woman had gone before. “I studied every paper sent from the different secretaries or senators,” she wrote later:

and tried to digest and present in tabloid form the things that, despite my vigilance, had to go to the President. I, myself, never made a single decision regarding the disposition of public affairs. The *only* decision that was mine was what was important and what was not, and the very important decision of when to present matters to my husband.

In this context, the word “only” seems a touch disingenuous. Choosing exactly what papers the president should get to see and just when he should get to see them gave Mrs. Wilson considerable control over the agenda of government. The defensive tone of her apologia suggests that she recognized this herself. A president's physical or mental fragility, combined with the constitution's complete silence about the role of the First Lady, is always going to be an ambitious and determined woman's opportu-



A Woman in Politics, 1784. The British press depicted the Duchess of Devonshire as indecent in persuading tradesmen to vote for her friend Charles James Fox.

nity. And one need not believe every word of Kitty Kelley's biography to conclude that Nancy Reagan, particularly in her husband's second term of office, made abundant use of the opportunities that were open to her.

The fact that women who were closely related to male politicians could use their positions to obtain power without being responsible to the public or to their country's laws worried some 18th- and 19th-century reformers acutely. John Stuart Mill, for example, devoted part of his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) to attacking patrician females who "neither knew nor cared which was the right side in politics, but knew what would bring in money and invitations, give their husbands titles, their sons a place, or their daughters a good marriage." Much better, he argued, that women should have the vote and engage in politics openly than be forced to resort to backstairs intrigues and indirect influence. To

most critics, though, the prospect of such a cure seemed far worse than the disease.

Female politicians—far from campaigning overtly for political rights for themselves—were expected to conduct themselves discreetly and within the accepted limits. Just what those limits were is suggested by the controversy over the participation of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, in the election of 1784. An extremely beautiful and vivacious woman, she had married at 16 on her parents' instructions William Cavendish, fifth Duke of Devonshire, who was undoubtedly grand, but also dull, unfaithful, and completely unambitious. She found herself, as she later wrote, living "in a continual bustle without having literally anything to do." Partly because of this, she became a fervent supporter of the Whig Party, acting as a political hostess in London, passing letters and rumors between great men, encouraging her political friends to vote in the House of

Commons in certain ways, and serving as the (apparently) platonic confidante of Charles James Fox, the Whig leader. In acting this way, Georgiana did no more than many other politically interested women of her class. Then, in 1784, she decided to help Fox campaign for election as M.P. for Westminster. She canvassed for votes, distributed propaganda, and appeared prominently in processions of Foxite supporters. The result was an avalanche of vicious pamphlets and obscene cartoons.

One common attack charged that the Duchess had persuaded plebeian voters to support Fox by granting them sexual favors. But some satirists adopted a more insidious line of attack. A print called *Political Affection* showed the Duchess pressing a fox to her breasts while her hungry child clamored for milk. The obvious implication, that she was neglecting her own realm of private affection to interfere in the public sphere, was made plain in another caricature showing the hapless Duke of Devonshire being forced to change his child's diaper in the absence of its mother.

Such attacks had the intended effect. Although Fox won his election, and although the newspapers of the time calculated that Georgiana's activities made a material contribution to this result, she was sadly demoralized. At the next general election, in 1790, she turned down invitations to campaign again and remained carefully out of town, cowed into silence and private life. Just what was it about her conduct that aroused so much virulence?

The problem was not, I suspect, that she had involved herself in electioneering as such; this was common enough among women of her rank. In the eyes of her opponents, Georgiana's sins were very different. First, the man she had assisted in the Westminster election, Charles James Fox, was not a male relation. He was a well-known rake and a radical—a man who even had the temerity to suggest in the House of Commons that women should have the vote. Moreover, she had made it clear that her efforts on his behalf were prompted by political ideals and not just by personal friendship. Her actions reeked of female initiative, and this was made all the worse by the fact that her actions were in

Westminster, the largest and most democratic constituency in Great Britain and the place where Parliament itself was situated. No other campaign was likely to attract so much publicity as one occurring there. Georgiana was martyred because she had crossed the divide between private female influence on politicians (which was acceptable) and autonomous and public political action (which was not).

This vilification of the Duchess of Devonshire shows some of the limits to the kind of female political power I have been describing. There were many others. The number of women able to participate in politics in this way was always very small. Those who did so had to work through male politicians. What they could achieve was usually determined by the position, the receptivity, and the talent of the men involved. And it should go without saying that such women were not feminist heroines in any contemporary sense. They thought of themselves not as women primarily but as members of a social and political elite. They did not expect to advance others of their own gender or to prove anything about the capacities of women as a whole. Indeed, many of them made no secret of the fact that they would have liked to be men and to have had a man's opportunities for a public career. "I should have been the greatest hero that ever was known in the Parliament House if I had been so happy as to have been a man," wrote one duchess wistfully in the 18th century.

Yet few of the women I have discussed seem to have been in any doubt that, though disadvantaged, they nonetheless had a significant political role to play. "All women of a certain age and in a situation to achieve it should take to politics," Lady Holland wrote breezily. Some 80 years later, just before British women won the vote, Lady Selborne, daughter of a prime minister and wife of a cabinet minister, was in no doubts that a minority of women had long exerted political influence without the vote. "Women can be politicians," she said. "Political ability, a capacity for the science of government, seems to be almost more common among women than it is among men." And the letters and speeches of public men often make the same point, albeit grudgingly. "There can be no more base-

less assumption than [that] the polling booth is the main source of influence in politics," declared a leading M.P. in 1884, "Women already enjoy greater influence in other ways, both public and private, than the franchise would give them."

There are at least two reasons why it is important to establish the dimensions of this kind of influence in the past—not only in Britain but in other countries as well. Most obviously, women such as these have almost always been left out of serious history books. If they turn up at all, it is usually only in the more gossipy accounts of times past or in amateur and unreliable biographies. Lewis Gould has set out the problem in an article on American First Ladies and their historical neglect:

The large body of scholarly literature on the occupants of the White House pays relatively little attention to their wives except in passing. As a result, most writing about the First Ladies has tended to be anecdotal and impressionistic. There are a number of useful memoirs and interesting biographies of individual First Ladies, but the books published before 1980 about these women as a group did not have much intellectual rigor. Nor did such overview studies as there were rest on original sources or attempt to place presidential wives in a broader context of the history of American Women.

It is simply not enough to wheel in these women to illustrate that coy adage "behind every great man, there is a great woman" and then to dismiss them jokingly from the record. We need to establish the precise nature of their influence over their husbands and over other male politicians: what they did exactly, whom they talked to, and what they thought at different times and why. Otherwise, the history of past politics will remain incomplete. Put crudely, historians cannot afford to leave out the likes of Nancy Reagan or to leave them to the likes of Kitty Kelley.



But there is another, and a much broader, reason for taking these women seriously. What they did in the past has some important—though uncomfortable—lessons for would-be political women in the present.

Ever since the 19th century, feminist movements on both sides of the Atlantic have tended to stress two things: first, the importance of collective rather than individual action on the part of women, and, second, women's difference from men, not just their equality with men. Whether we like it or not, these two principles still shape the way that women approach politics. In 20th-century America, as in Britain, women have usually been more eager to join voluntary associations and political pressure groups than to invade the political arena as individuals, making speeches, standing for election, and competing for office. Indeed, for good historical reasons, many women, including many feminists, still regard the institutions of government—Parliament, Congress, or whatever—as alien territory uncongenial to women and inappropriate for their endeavors. And the majority of women still behave as though there was a particular "woman's sphere" in the realm of politics. They will agitate over abortion, over birth control, over education, and over street crime. But they tend to steer clear of questions of foreign affairs or economic policy, as though such matters only affected men.

In the realm of politics, then, feminism

has worked to perpetuate separate male and female spheres as often as it has helped to dissolve them. More utopian feminists might well say that this was a good thing: that their purpose was not to infiltrate a man's world so that women could compete in it on equal terms but rather to change the world and make it into something different and something better. Those of us who are not utopians, however, must wonder how far a separate style and agenda of female politics is either feasible or fruitful. In default of a revolution, major changes can only be brought about by securing a substantial presence in the existing corridors of power. At present, very few women walk there in their own right. Women make up less than seven percent of the membership of the House of Representatives and about the same proportion of the British House of Commons. And as the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill affair reminded us, there are still only two women senators.

In the face of these lamentable statistics, we might usefully consider the attitudes and behavior of that minority of privileged women in the past who exercised political power behind the scenes. I am not for one moment suggesting that their essentially indirect power was a substitute for the vote. That would be absurd. But in some respects they were wiser perhaps and certainly more realistic than many of their enfranchised descendants today. To begin with, they did not believe that only collective action was worthwhile or that individual enterprise was somehow politically incorrect. Told that ambition and competitiveness were inappropriate female responses, Lady Holland would have cackled as derisively as Margaret Thatcher, and with good reason. Moreover these women never made the mistake of supposing that their sex should confine itself to a particular set of directly relevant and "softer-edged" issues. To read their letters is to discover that they concerned themselves with foreign policy, with imperial affairs, with war and peace, and with party tactics at home. They may be at fault in our eyes for

not championing the cause of their less fortunate sisters. But they deserve to be commended—and emulated—in their refusal to be parochial.

Finally, these women accepted, however reluctantly, that the political world in which they had to operate was a man's world and adjusted their actions accordingly. Behaving in such a manner sticks in the craw of many women today—indeed it sticks in mine—but at least for the foreseeable future we may have to swallow this same strategy or go hungry. One of the reasons why the Equal Rights Amendment was lost in 1982, some political scientists argue, is that the women who lobbied so hard for it eschewed the recognized organizational hierarchies and acted in their own, more improvised fashion. The result was failure in the masculine world of state legislatures. Many would dispute this analysis. But the Harvard political scientist Sidney Verba makes a good point:

Success in mainstream American politics—the world of partisan electoral politics; of local, state, and national legislative, executive, and bureaucratic policymaking; of interest group lobbying; and of bureaucratic implementation—may be impeded by a style of politics that is principled rather than pragmatic, communal rather than individualistic. Principled communal politics flourishes in social movements outside mainstream politics—and, indeed, that is where the women's movement has grown and where it has a major impact on the policy process. But mainstream politics may demand another style.

As those powerful, if irresponsible, patrician ladies of the past knew very well, if you wish to play a part in the political arena, you must learn its rules and adapt to its conventions or risk remaining on the margins or even outright exclusion. Just how long will it be, one wonders, before a little boy can ask here: "Daddy, can a man-ever become president of the United States?"