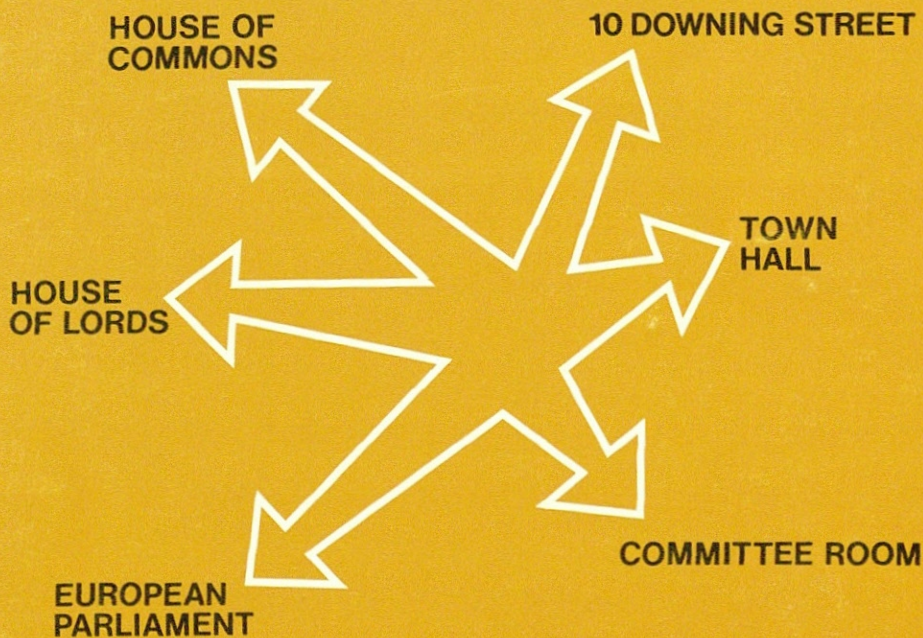


GOING PLACES

Women in the Conservative Party

by ROSEMARY BROWN



CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL CENTRE: 80p



In common with other CPC publications, this pamphlet is a personal contribution by the author to discussion and not an official Party pronouncement.

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I should like to thank again the many people who gave me their help and valuable time. I am extremely grateful to them.

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ROSEMARY BROWN

1

Going places

May 1980 will go down in history as one of the great milestones of the Conservative Women's Organisation. The date marks not only the very first occasion that the Women's Conference will have been addressed by Mrs Thatcher in her capacity as Prime Minister; it is also a Golden Jubilee occasion—celebrating the 50th Annual Conservative Women's Conference.

The connection between the two events is not entirely happy chance. For well over half a century, one of the vital strengths of the Conservative Party has been the determined involvement of women. Their contribution both to election victories and, through their active concern for the fundamental issues, to policy decisions has been immense. Indeed, if Margaret Thatcher epitomises the sense of realism and responsibility that returned the Conservatives to Government on 3 May 1979, her triumph in becoming the Western World's first woman Prime Minister is partly the result of the dynamic efforts of women at all levels within the Party.

To Margaret Thatcher herself, the fact of being a woman is rightly secondary to the enormous challenges she faces as a world leader. Her sex was never an issue as far as promotion was concerned. Likewise political eminence did not prevent her from enjoying a family life with her husband and two children. Nor, contrary to the popular myth about women in high office, has it robbed her of her femininity. But if Mrs Thatcher herself makes light of her achievement in the context of being a woman, it nevertheless represents a dramatic breakthrough.

It proves that motherhood is not an insurmountable barrier to reaching the top: that guts, drive and ability can overcome the obstacles, whether practical or theoretical. It proves that women are an electoral asset: one of the most remarkable features of the last election was the number of people—men and women across



the whole political spectrum—who positively voted to have a woman Prime Minister. It also proves perhaps that women bring an extra dimension to public life, what Lady Davidson defines as 'wisdom'; in other words, the attributes that come from running a household and bringing up a family: common sense, practical knowledge of budgeting, an understanding of everyday problems, a special degree of sympathy and imagination about people as individuals. These qualities have long been recognised and valued in local government as more women are successfully standing as councillors. It is to be hoped, following the brilliant trail blazed by Margaret Thatcher, that before long there will be an equal percentage of women in Parliament.

All women, however, including those with no personal aspirations in politics, have potentially a tremendously important role in the running of the country. As a majority of the electorate, they can largely determine which government is in power. But more than just exercising a choice, they can—and increasingly do—wield a very strong influence over national policies. It is an influence that in the Conservative Party at least is not just welcomed but actively sought.

And why not? Jobs, housing, education, the kind of society in which we live, the values we encourage, how our—the taxpayers'—money is spent, the priorities we give to defence, law and order and to our future energy requirements, these are all subjects on which today's women are more than qualified to give a positive lead.

A former Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, got right to the heart of it when he said: 'It is through the women of the Party that we can help to sustain and protect, and where necessary adapt, all that is best in the life of the family and of the nation as a whole'.

As we enter the eighties, the breadth of experience and knowledge that women offer is formidable. In addition to their expertise in home and family matters, many are engaged in running small businesses, are employed in industry, have a profession or do valuable work in the community. As a result,



The Rt Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher, MP. Britain's first woman Prime Minister

their contribution to the political debate is incisive, informed and very wide-ranging.

To the new generation of activists, the caricature beloved of cartoonists of tightly corseted ladies in flowery hats is simply funny. If a stereotype Tory worker ever existed, she emphatically no longer does today.

1980 Conservative women are professionals. Some do an excellent job fund-raising, others concentrate on recruiting new



members or conducting survey canvasses. Many bring their professional skills to discussions, the compiling of research papers and to ministerial briefings. Some join essentially for the fun and for the many social activities. Others are primarily concerned with local issues: e.g. hospital services, their children's schools, the care of the elderly in the community.

Yet another group participates mainly in consequence of their occupation and of the very constructive work being carried out both locally and nationally in their specialist field. For example, several of the leading lights of both the Conservative trade union and small business sections are women. There is also special scope for lawyers, accountants and for those who work in the health services.

Some are giving valuable service as councillors. Others contribute mainly through the voluntary work they do, perhaps as school governors, and by their loyal support at elections. A number of Conservative-minded women do not even formally call themselves Conservatives but nevertheless share our basic principles and ideals. Sometimes they are surprised to find that the very things they are saying and thinking are in fact Conservative policy. Many in this category would probably describe themselves as 'floating voters'—but as the last election showed, they floated in our direction; and many of them have subsequently joined the Party, discovering the more involved they become, the more they like what they find.

So who are these different women and what is their specific contribution? What are their successes in the past? And more to the point, what are their aims for the future?

This is partly an account of the many achievements of women within the Conservative Party. It is partly the story of the Women's Organisation, as it celebrates its 50th Annual Conference. But it is also partly about you: the future you hope to see and how perhaps you might contribute. Women provide much of the impetus of the Party and ultimately, the driving force behind many of the policies of a Conservative government. You have a part to play.

2

Pioneering spirit

Socialists like to claim that they are the Party that most identifies with women. The record shows differently. Almost every political 'first' of any significance has been scored by a Conservative. The same incidentally is true of most of the legislation that has been of benefit to women. Socialists beat the feminist drum but the majority of important reforms such as the Equal Franchise Act 1928, giving all women over twenty-one the right to vote, have been introduced or initiated by Conservative governments. It is also almost certainly a fact that one reason why the Labour Party is so notoriously weak in the constituencies is its lack of women members.

The outstanding political triumph is of course the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. Appropriately she was chosen by her colleagues as party leader in February 1975, during International Women's Year. It was a splendid vindication both of the United Nations' theme given to the Year 'Equality, Development and Peace' and of the assertion that followed it: 'The full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace requires the maximum participation of women as well as men in all fields'.

The process of encouraging women to play a full part in politics naturally started long before the United Nations came along to give the cause a prod—and right from the earliest days, it was Conservatives who led the way in grasping the challenge.

Among the now legendary names, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst—the doughiest suffragette of them all—was the prospective Conservative candidate for Whitechapel at the time of her death. In 1919, Nancy Astor took her seat in the House of Commons as the first woman MP as a result of winning a Conservative by-election victory in the Sutton division of Plymouth. It was an historic occasion for Parliament and for all women in the



country. She was escorted by David Lloyd George and Arthur Balfour who, *The Times* reported the next day, displayed the 'ingenuous shyness of boys at their first dance'.

Conservative women, however, were organising themselves many years before they became eligible to stand for Parliament. One of the earliest mentions of a formal movement was in 1904, when twenty-six women's branches turned out to support the Conservative candidate at a by-election in Oswestry. By 1905, the Women's Tariff Reform Association was boasting branches active in over forty constituencies.

The Party was a bit slow to capitalise on the enthusiasm and energy of its women supporters, despite the prodigious amount of work many were investing in the constituencies and the strong backing they gave to Joseph Chamberlain's imperial and tariff policies. Perhaps (although the women's association adopted a policy of neutrality) the cause of female suffrage slightly clouded the issue: the National Unionist Association, fore-runner of today's National Union, championed the principle of giving women the vote in 1911. Perhaps some of the more traditional gentlemen took time to adjust to the sight of women in their long skirts flamboyantly electioneering and holding meetings for the purpose of political discussion. Whatever the reason, it was not until the end of 1911 that there was any formal link with Central Office; but once the doors were open, the Women's Amalgamated Unionist and Tariff Association (as it had become) very quickly established itself as an invaluable force.

The real turning point came with the end of the war. 'After the very big part they had played in the war effort', Lady Davidson recalls, 'women were hungry for political activity'. Suddenly the whole movement seemed to explode. In 1918, women over thirty got the vote. The same year, three members of the Women's Unionist Association were invited to serve on the Party's national executive committee. Come 1926, Dame Caroline Bridgeman was appointed Chairman of the National Union—the first woman chairman of any political party. By

1923, Viscountess Astor had been joined in the House of Commons by two other Conservative women MPs of whom one, the Duchess of Atholl, was to become a year later the first Conservative woman Minister, serving for five years as Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education.

Meanwhile the Women's Association was expanding very rapidly. By 1920, the first Annual Women's Conference was held. Within five years, attendance had rocketed: from just under 400 in 1920 to 2,314 in 1924. The huge demand for seats took even the organisers by surprise. In 1923, Dame Caroline Bridgeman was apologising for the second year running for the lack of chairs, as 1600 women from 303 constituencies besieged the hall. In 1928, the Chairman of the conference—the Countess of Iveagh, MP—made the announcement. 'I am proud to say that the Women's Unionist Organisation in England and Wales has a membership of nearly a million'. Furthermore, contrary to what might have been expected, right from the start discussions were not solely concerned with 'women's subjects'. As today, women were determined to tackle the broader issues. The 1921 conference agenda included such topics as 'industrial unrest' and 'how to attract young people and teachers'.

The women found an enthusiastic champion in Lord Davidson who, far from merely confining himself to glowing tributes to the 'incalculable service' they gave, took positive action during his period as Chairman of the Party Organisation (1926-30) to bring women more into the mainstream. Accordingly the National Union rules were amended, making it a requirement that between a third and a half of the executive committee be women; and in 1928, the Central Women's Advisory Committee was officially recognised and accorded much the same status as the WNAC enjoys today. Another welcome innovation was the appointment of Lady Iveagh as the first woman Vice-Chairman of the Party.

After the shock election defeat of 1945, Lord Woolton similarly recognised the vital contribution the women's branches could offer. Working with Dame Marjorie Maxse, Vice-Chairman,



he set about revitalising the Party. Under their joint efforts, confidence was restored, membership rapidly built up again and a more truly harmonious spirit was achieved between the women's organisation and the other sections of the Party. An important event during this period was the introduction of the Maxwell Fyfe reforms. By placing the responsibility on constituencies to meet election expenses, they removed one of the major obstacles against women standing as parliamentary candidates.

The red letter day was however nearly twenty years earlier. At the 1931 election, a grand total of thirteen Conservative women MPs were returned—a figure that was to remain a record until 1970 and that sadly is nearly double today's count of eight.

Fierce (Nancy Astor), feminine (Mavis Tate), forceful (Florence Horsbrugh) but above all extraordinarily able, these early women MPs certainly left their mark. The history book is scattered with their achievements; but important as their successes were in what was still seen as 'a man's world', what is equally striking was their perceptiveness in promoting reform in areas that are still very much of consequence today.

In 1923, Nancy Astor was the first woman to introduce a Private Member's Bill which became law. Entitled the 'Intoxicating Liquors Act', it prohibited the sale of alcohol to under eighteen-year-olds. By the end of the thirties, six other women had succeeded with Private Member's Bills of whom four were Conservative. Conservative women have always had a particularly strong record in this field. Out of a present total of twenty-four Private Member's Bills successfully piloted by women through the House of Commons, nineteen have been introduced by Conservatives.

Irene Ward undoubtedly took the prize. Not only had she four Private Member's Bills to her name—a twentieth-century record shared with Sir Robert Gower—but her Poor Law (Amendment) Act 1938 was the first social welfare measure for the elderly to be put on the statute book.

Also ahead of her time was Thelma Cazalet-Keir who



Conservative women MPs at the House of Commons, 1931



Conservative women MPs in the present Parliament. Front row, left to right: Rt Hon Mrs Sally Oppenheim, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher, Mrs Lynda Chalker. Standing: Mrs Peggy Fenner, Mrs Elaine Kellett-Bowman, Mrs Sheila Faith, Mrs Jill Knight, Miss Janet Fookes.



campaigned staunchly for the ban to be lifted against married women in the civil service and who earned a rebuke from Sir Winston Churchill for trying to introduce equal pay for teachers—a measure that was eventually implemented in 1956 by a Conservative government, together with equal pay for civil servants and for women in local government.

However, the outstanding success story of the pre-war intake was Florence Horsbrugh who in addition to being the first woman to move the address in reply to the Gracious Speech (1937) was also the first Conservative woman Cabinet Minister (Education). Additionally she was the only woman to be appointed both a Privy Councillor and a Dame Grand Cross of the British Empire. Her greatest achievements had to wait until the fifties. Neither a brilliant parliamentary reputation nor two junior ministerial posts already to her credit—Food and Health—saved Florence Horsbrugh from losing her seat in the 1945 landslide Labour victory. Only one Conservative woman, Lady Davidson, MP for Hemel Hempstead, was returned although she was able to share the task—particularly the heavy committee work—when Lady Tweedsmuir was elected a year later.

It was a bleak period for the Conservatives and the Women's Organisation deserves much of the kudos for helping to restore morale in the Party. Inevitably during the war years the work of the Women's National Advisory Committee (WNAC) had largely come to a halt but now, with life returning to normal, there were regular membership drives, hundreds of afternoon meetings were held throughout the country every month and much determined effort was being made by the women's branches to forge links with outside organisations.

During this time, the WNAC also produced for presentation to the 1949 Women's Annual Conference the first of what has become a steady series of booklets, designed to stimulate discussion and advance ideas for reform. Entitled *A True Balance*, it advocated widespread changes in respect of women including: the abolition of Breach of Promise actions, equal rates of pay, the removal of discrimination against women Peers

preventing them from sitting in the House of Lords and the statutory right for transfer of tenancy to a single parent mother with care of the children.

All this consistent activity paid dividends. The Conservatives were returned to power in 1951—and so began thirteen unbroken years of Conservative rule.



A new pace

Macmillan's famous slogan 'You've Never Had It So Good' might almost have been invented to describe the growing influence and prestige of women. The WNAC was flourishing under the vigorous Vice-Chairmanship of Barbara Brooke. During the decade 1950 to 1960 a dozen new Conservative women MPs were elected, of whom no fewer than six were to make a very considerable impact.

It was the era when women Ministers really came into their own. In addition to Florence Horsbrugh at the Department of Education, Patricia Hornsby-Smith served variously at the Ministry of Health, the Home Office and the Ministry of Pensions. Edith Pitt also held office at both the Ministries of Pensions and Health. Mervyn Pike became Assistant Postmaster-General and then later moved to the Home Office. Lady Tweedsmuir was appointed to the Scottish Office, where she served first as Under-Secretary and then (1970-72) as Minister of State, after which she achieved another important breakthrough as Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In 1961, one of the newest and youngest MPs in the House, Margaret Thatcher, became Joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Pensions.

The list is remarkable for two reasons: firstly because, in proportion to their numbers, the total of women holding government posts was extraordinarily high; secondly because, for the first time, women were given the opportunity to make their mark outside the narrow range of ministries that are still apt to be labelled as female areas. On both counts, it signified a new credibility for women.

Indeed, two other women who entered Parliament during this period were to hold special positions of eminence. Betty Harvie Anderson became the first woman Deputy Chairman of the Ways

and Means Committee and the first woman to occupy the Speaker's Chair in the House of Commons (1970-73). A couple of years earlier, Baroness Emmet was appointed Deputy Speaker and Deputy Chairman of Committees in the House of Lords.

Another positive strike for equality introduced by the Conservative government was the 1958 Life Peerages Act, giving women the right to take their place in the House of Lords as Life Peers (five years later, hereditary Peeresses were also admitted through the Peerage Act). It was a fundamental reform, not simply because it ushered in equal opportunity but also because it created a new channel for high calibre women to enter the top echelons of public life.

Whatever some of their Lordships might have thought, right from the start the women had no intention of merely decorating the Chamber: they were there for a job of work. Baroness Elliot of Harwood, one of the first women Life Peers to be created, moved the address in reply to the Gracious Speech in the House of Lords in 1962—the first woman Peer to be accorded the honour. Lady Brooke of Ystradfellte created history with her husband Lord Brooke of Cumnor, when both served as Conservative Front Bench Spokesmen in the House of Lords—the first husband and wife team on a front bench.

Today there are fourteen Conservative women Life Peers: some like Baroness Vickers of Devonport who 'stepped up' from the Commons; others like Baroness Faithfull who carved a name for herself outside Parliament. Between them, they represent a formidable array of talent with specialised knowledge and experience over a wide range of areas—local government, foreign affairs, community service, legal matters, consumer issues and employment.

It is generally agreed that one of the most outstanding appointments to the Lords has been that of Baroness Young, Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science and Vice-Chairman of the Party with special responsibility for the Women's Organisation—a job that despite her onerous ministerial duties she takes exceptionally seriously, fired by the



conviction that women have a special contribution to make both in the constituencies and in the wider political spectrum. Under her challenging leadership, the WNAC has become more involved in 'the sharp end' of politics, more professional, more confident about its role and its ability to influence government thinking.



The Baroness Young, Vice-Chairman of the Conservative Party Organisation, and Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science

4

WNAC—the changing outlook

One of the hallmarks of Women's Advisory Committees and the WNAC in particular has been their readiness to re-think their position in the light of changes happening in society.

In the sixties a new mood was sweeping the country. Women were beginning to demand greater freedom. Fashion became more daring, as tights supplanted stockings and Mary Quant was the hot-selling influence. It was the era of the Beatles and of the highly popular television programme 'That Was The Week That Was'. There was a strong emphasis on youth. Pressure groups were beginning to be a force and at all levels many of the previous formalities were being discarded, as people were increasingly 'doing their own thing'.

Looked at in terms of the Women's Organisation, Joan Varley and others were very conscious that a new approach was needed in order to appeal to younger married women. It was decided very sensibly not to attempt to impose a different style on existing local Conservative branches, which were functioning very happily. Instead, under Joan's imaginative pioneering, the New Groups were launched, specifically designed to cater for the twenty-five to forty-year-old age group.

The movement spread literally like wildfire. Within months there were scores of groups meeting regularly up and down the country. Other than the requirement that they help at elections, there were very few rules. Nevertheless, a common pattern developed. Rather than book a hall, members met in each other's homes. Coffee and biscuits were usually provided and mothers were welcome to bring young children. Formality was kept to a minimum but most of the groups made a definite feature of holding political discussions and some, such as London's Contact Group, were undertaking serious research. One of Contact's several studies resulted in Elspeth Howe's booklet



Under Five, urging the need for more pre-school facilities, which commanded widespread attention in the press and in the House of Commons alike. In time too, many of the groups were not so much helping at elections but taking responsibility for a part of the constituency—and in some cases providing local government candidates.

Important changes were also taking place within the Women's Organisation as a whole. The WNAC rules were changed to encourage a broader representation on the Committee and very real efforts were made to involve younger women both at branch and national level. Moreover, a great deal of study and research was being conducted. Working parties were set up and pamphlets such as *Work for Married Women* were being published that very much reflected the demand of women throughout the country for wider opportunities.

The WNAC Parliamentary Sub-Committee was in the forefront of the battle to give women greater equality and it was in response to their efforts that Edward Heath set up the Cripps Committee in 1968, charged with the task of examining the legal position of women and of recommending changes to enable them to participate socially, economically and politically on an equal basis with men. Of the eight members of the Committee, five were women: Beryl Cooper, Diana Elles, Shelagh Roberts, Elizabeth Steel and Joan Varley. Their report *Fair Share for the Fair Sex* led to many fundamental reforms of benefit to women.

A working party was also set up by the WNAC to present evidence to the Finer Committee on one-parent families. It was chaired by Diana Elles and its report *Unhappy Families* helped to accelerate some of the reforms recommended by Cripps and additionally contained some valuable new proposals to assist widows and other parents bringing up children on their own.

The WNAC has just cause to feel a sense of achievement. The vast majority of the Cripps recommendations as well as a great many of those advocated in *Unhappy Families* have since become law and can rightly be claimed as a turning point in the history of women's rights. By the time the Conservatives had

left office in 1974, many key reforms were already on the statute book.

In 1971 the offensive practice of assessing a widow's remarriage prospects in court, if she were suing for damages following a fatal accident to her husband, was abolished (Law Reform—Miscellaneous Provisions—Act). The same year, three important changes affecting maintenance were introduced: the right to receive payment by post, instead of as before having to collect it at the court; the Attachment of Earnings Act; and provisions to facilitate the recovery of maintenance if the husband has gone abroad (Maintenance Orders—Reciprocal Enforcement—Act).

In 1972, the Criminal Justice Act broadened the qualifications for jury service, making more women eligible. Dame Joan Vickers introduced the Affiliation Proceedings (Amendment) Act, removing injustices against unmarried mothers and their children. Additionally the 1972 Finance Act brought in two welcome measures: the right for married women to elect to be taxed separately from their husbands; and, very important, the raising of the exemption limit for estate duty—enabling many widows, who previously would have been forced to sell, to remain in their homes.

In 1973, a further two of the committee's recommendations were enacted: the Guardianship Act, giving both parents equal rights to make decisions about a child's upbringing; and the Domicile and Matrimonial Proceedings Act, allowing a woman living apart from her husband to have her own domicile—and the right for any children living with her to share her domicile.

One other initiative, although it did not specifically derive from Cripps, must be mentioned. In 1973, the Conservative government produced the Consultative Document *Equal Opportunities for Men and Women*, proposing a raft of measures to end discrimination against women across the whole field of employment. It formed the basis of the subsequent Sex Discrimination Act which, with the Equal Pay Act, has revolutionised women's career prospects. (Later, a great deal of the spadework



in helping to get the new laws established in practice was due to Elspeth Howe, as former Deputy Chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission).

A large share of the credit for many of the reforms that have helped women belongs to the WNAC. Without their spirited demand for action and the research work that went with it, legislation would certainly have taken much longer to become a reality. During the late sixties and early seventies, however, Conservative women were doing far more than stimulating high-level research. Under the dynamic lead of two young women Vice-Chairmen—first Katie Macmillan and then Sara Morrison—changes were taking place at every level.

The format of the Women's Conference has been altered over the past four years. Instead of the rather staid affair it had tended to be, the event became a forum for genuine discussion. Topics were decided in advance and all over the country WACs were investigating the subjects in the context of their own area: discovering at grass roots level the effect of conditions or legislation on the local community and in consequence putting forward proposals in their speeches based on hard factual knowledge, much of it very enlightening for the Ministers who attended and who were called on to reply. In 1978, for the first time, the Conference had a theme—Family Matters.

At the same time, the Women's Organisation began to undertake proper surveys to determine local feeling about specific issues, for example housing, and largely as a result of their extremely effective pioneering work the survey canvass has become standard practice. Another innovation, inspired by the WNAC, which has now become a regular feature is an interchange of ideas—via meetings and conferences—with outside organisations and special interest groups.

This new communications network has become international as well as domestic. Following the integration of the British Section of the European Union of Women (EUW) into the Conservative Party Organisation as a specialist committee of the WNAC, close working links are now established between



Attending the 1930 Women's Annual Conference at the Queen's Hall, London. Left to right: Miss D. Spencer, Lady Falmouth, Lady Iveagh, Mrs S. Baldwin, Mr J. C. C. (later Lord) Davidson, and Miss M. (later Dame Marjorie) Maxse



The Rt Hon Sir Winston Churchill with Mrs Walter (later Baroness) Elliott before addressing the 1954 Women's Annual Conference



Conservatives and women of similar political outlook in thirteen other countries. Trixie Gardner, current Chairman of the British Section EUW, is a Vice-Chairman of the WNAC and through her and the other EUW officers' active interest in both movements there is very useful two-way co-operation.

Today, the women's branches are facing up to the new challenge. In addition to the vast sums of money they raise, and the contribution they made in the constituencies both to winning the General Election and to the Conservative success in the European Election, this last year has been unequalled for the sheer volume of political activity.

Among the highlights of 1979/80 have been: the publication of the report *Women and Tax* under the Chairmanship of Shelagh Roberts, stressing the 'over-riding importance of making women independent entities for tax purposes'; a highly successful younger women's conference, attended by many voluntary organisations and pressure groups, on the theme of 'Caring for Children'; and a working party report on the Immigration White Paper, which was produced in ten days in time to influence the debate in the House of Commons (several of the WNAC's proposals to reduce discrimination against women have subsequently been incorporated). The Standing Committee of the WNAC has also submitted evidence to the Criminal Law Procedure Committee and to the Occupational Pensions Board.

Most recently, there was a working party report on the family budget which was presented to the Chancellor of the Exchequer prior to the March Budget, cogently arguing the case for increasing child benefit. If there is some disappointment that in the event the Budget did not do more to help families, the WNAC is unrepentant at having publicly taken what the media hailed as a controversial line. Pam Hunter, the very articulate Chairman, and her committee emphatically do not see themselves as 'yes women' but believe that a vital part of their role is to represent to the Government priorities held by women throughout the country on family issues and other matters.

One quirky result of the women's organisation being seen to

be so effective is that the question is sometimes asked: why continue to have a separate women's organisation? It is a serious question; and there are several very good answers.

Firstly of course, as the following pages illustrate, women in the Conservative Party can—and do—participate fully in every sphere, be it local government, the Conservative Political Centre (CPC), Central Office administration, the Research Department, the trade union sector, Asian and West Indian groups—plus all other activities. Likewise, membership of a women's branch does not preclude involvement in any other sector but—and this is important—it has often provided a powerful springboard for advancement. Of the seventeen women Chairmen of the National Union, fourteen were previously Chairmen of the WNAC.

The real point however is that the women's organisation is an unparalleled success—and without it, the Conservative Party would be greatly weakened.

Firstly, women enjoy it: the Party's very large female membership is at least partly due to the existence of a wing that specifically sets out to welcome women and whose particular flair is to cater both for women's more specialised interests and for those who relish the challenge of being part of a thrusting political force.

It has also become a byword in the Party that the women get things done. Whatever they undertake—organisation at election time, fund-raising, research—from top to bottom, the movement has a reputation for action. And because of their thoroughness and informed comment, what the women say is listened to and helps influence policy.

If the WNAC working party reports are held in high esteem and are frequently acted on, the views of the local branches are also studied very seriously for their common sense, realism and uncanny knack of accurately pin-pointing the issues. 'Their reporting system is of inestimable value' says Janet Young, who as a Party Vice-Chairman and a Minister of State appreciates the work from two important stand-points. 'Women don't waste



time theorising; they get straight to the nub of the matter and in consequence, the information they provide is highly relevant.'

The opinions women feed into the Party command respect. Equally important is the message they take out into the community. Formally through WNAC local and national activities, informally through contacts at work, collecting the children from school and involvement with neighbourhood organisations, women are the grass roots publicists of the Party. Talking about our Conservative aims, when the subject crops up naturally in the conversation, is a vital element of what we mean by communications—and one which women do easily and well. However, we need to extend our reach. Local media—newspapers and radio—provide an often under-used method of getting Conservative principles across to a wider audience. Editors particularly welcome contributions from women. The many phone-in programmes and correspondence columns offer an unrivalled opportunity for women members to explain, in simple language, that Conservatives care. It is a job that all could and should be doing.

5

Impact

If the WNAC is exclusively female, there is no single branch of the Party where the reverse is true. In every sphere of the Conservative organisation, women are operating as equals in their own right; and when in fierce competition they make it to the top, they do so on merit and not as a concession to their sex or in deference to any notion of a statutory woman.

In most Conservative activities the presence of able women is now so much taken for granted that the fact of their participating has long ceased to excite any sort of comment. They are there, on exactly the same basis as men: for the contribution they can make. In one field however, the Trade Union sector, the number of female activists is legitimate cause for special satisfaction since, despite the fact that a third of all union members are women, the TUC is notorious for its under-representation.

Conservative Trade Unionists have rightly carved an important place for themselves. They represent the voice of sanity on the shop floor, they are in touch with the day-to-day developments within their own union and, via their local CTU branches and the national committee (CTUNC), they are in regular dialogue with the Minister for Employment.

It is often said that if women were more active in union matters, greater moderation would prevail. Of those who do hold a position of responsibility, many are also very influential in the Conservative Trade Union movement. The list of senior women is too long to include everyone by name but special mention should be made of: Winifred Crum-Ewing, ACTT National Vice-President; Anne Walker, pay official with COHSE; Helen Gardner, branch officer of the NUT and Secretary of the CTU Teachers' Group; Joy Bushby, an APEX shop steward at BL and member of the CTUNC; Anne Carroll, also APEX and CTUNC and a member of the negotiating committee for British Airways; and



Margaret Daly, formerly a full-time trade union official for twelve years with ASTMS and currently, Assistant Director of the Department of Community Affairs at Central Office with special responsibility for employment and union matters.

These and other women are giving an important lead to all Conservatives who are members of a trade union. Too often critical union decisions are taken by a small unrepresentative minority, who win the day through failure of the moderates to be present at meetings and cast their vote. One of the ways of helping to ensure that Conservative policies are thoroughly understood and given support where it matters—namely with rank and file members—is for Conservatives to make this the year for attending and participating in their union meetings.

Another specialist section whose views are of vital concern to the Conservative government are the self-employed and those engaged in running small businesses. And here too, both at the Small Business Bureau and in the many local Small Business Groups that exist up and down the country, women as well as men are bringing to the attention of the Party their special difficulties and, as a result of much constructive work, have helped to compile the information that led to some of the changes of special benefit to small businesses in the March 1980 Budget.

Just as there have been seventeen women Chairmen of the National Union—including the present officer-holder, Ann Springman—so the influential CPC, the political education wing of the Party, has had its quota of dynamic and innovative women of whom two, Dame Margaret Shepherd and Daphne Preston, have in recent years been National CPC Chairmen. Likewise girls play a leading role in the YCs, the Federation of Conservative Students, the Society of Conservative Lawyers—and, of course, in the constituencies. Women Association Chairmen are now commonplace and at the last election, there were three women Area Chairmen.

On the professional side, it is a very long time since anyone has talked about 'women agents' as such. Susan Hewitt, WNAC

Secretary and a qualified agent for thirty years, says that in the fifties perhaps you still had to be lucky as a woman to get a constituency. Today, it is completely taken for granted. About twenty-five per cent of Conservative agents are female and, like their male colleagues, they do a tough, demanding job: acting as a main pivot in the constituency, handling the administration and keeping the Party operating efficiently through thick and thin. Among the many success stories, Dame Susan Walker who began as an agent, was appointed Party Vice-Chairman in 1964—the first practising agent to become an officer of the Party Organisation. Joan Varley is now Director of the Local Government Organisation at Central Office. Angela Hooper, who was nominated as one of the twenty 'Women of the Year' by the Sunday Times in 1966, was the UK representative for the Atlantic Alliance Information Conference in 1972 and 1973 and today is Chief Woman Executive of the Party and Deputy Director of Organisation.



The electoral challenge

Have you ever thought of standing as a councillor and then dismissed the idea on the basis that perhaps you are not really qualified? Hundreds of women have thought the same way—and then gone on to make a brilliant success of the job.

Agreed, local government is time-consuming; and equally, it is hard work that requires stamina, a liking for people and a genuine interest in the town or area in which you live. But if you are the sort of person who enjoys the satisfaction of getting things done, who believes in service and who is attracted by an outlet that demands commitment you could be just the candidate your council is wanting.

Although the numbers have been steadily increasing, it is estimated that fewer than a third of all councillors are women. Yet this is an area of public service where women very easily could—and should—be making an equal contribution. The work is part-time and local; allowances are paid, so there is no problem about being out of pocket; and, unlike many other worthwhile occupations, no special training is required. Moreover because of their familiarity with schools, housing and other aspects of the neighbourhood, right from the outset women bring considerable background knowledge to the job.

Once elected, the scope is potentially as broad or as narrow as you choose to make it. A councillor can concentrate either at parish or district level, become a chairman of a committee in time or move into the larger county council arena. Inevitably, as with all politics, there is an element of luck and if you live in a Labour stronghold you are hardly likely to become Leader of the council but even in the toughest areas, a caring and conscientious councillor can wield a powerful influence (and even an unsuccessful candidate is strategically placed to challenge the more inane Labour council decisions).

Not only are there thirty-two Conservative women Group Leaders of county and district councils but, among other distinguished names: Dame Kathleen Ollerenshaw was Leader of the Conservative Opposition, Manchester City, Alderman and then Lord Mayor: Dame Elizabeth Coker was Chairman of the Association of County Councils; Angela Rumbold is currently Chairman of the Council of Local Education Authorities.

For any woman with parliamentary aspirations, local government can provide a first-class training ground. Shelagh Roberts, a former WNAC Chairman and today European Member of Parliament for London South West, made her name on the GLC as a talented all-rounder and the first woman to sit on the Conservative front bench. Janet Young, who prior to becoming a Minister spent fifteen years on the Oxford City Council—ending up as Alderman and Leader of the Conservative Group—describes the experience as 'absolutely invaluable'.

If there is one thing wrong with women councillors, it is simply that there are not enough of them. No-one is pretending that you do not have to be at least as good as a man but that is hardly an obstacle, since countless women have proved that they are. One never hears about discrimination in the selection of council candidates but what one constantly hears is that insufficient women put themselves forward. It is high time the situation was remedied. So the message to potential candidates is—don't just think about it—get the inside picture from any councillor you know and have a talk with your Conservative agent.

However, if there are too few women in local government, the parliamentary score is far worse. There has never been even five per cent female representation in the House of Commons and today's total of nineteen (eleven Labour, eight Conservative) is actually lower than at any time since 1951. Yet, of the eight Conservative women who have made it: Margaret Thatcher is Prime Minister, Sally Oppenheim is Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Lynda Chalker is a junior Minister at the DHSS and Peggy Fenner, who recaptured Rochester and Chatham at the last election, was Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of



Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1972-74). Additionally, Elaine Kellett-Bowman is one of the very few members to be elected to both Westminster and Europe—scoring a family first with her husband as the first married couple in the European Parliament.

Once women get elected, they not only prove to be high flyers but they also have a reputation as exceptionally conscientious constituency members. So why are there so few of them? The point is often made, and rightly, that only a tiny number of women try to get into Parliament. But it is also a fact that of those who do try, the majority fight unwinnable seats. At the last election, there were 210 female candidates: 31 Conservative, 52 Labour, 51 Liberal and 76 representing all other parties. But of more than 80 new MPs, only two were women: Sheila Wright (Labour) and Sheila Faith (Conservative), whose splendid victory at Belper was one of the real surprise gains.

Although women still have a long way to go in the numbers game, they should not be daunted. On the contrary: precisely because the statistics are so bad, arguably the opportunities have never been better. Certainly there is deep concern among thinking Conservatives about the current imbalance and the need to see women better represented. In the 1979 General Election more women voted Conservative than men. There is no inherent reason why, following the next election, there should not be twenty-five Conservative women MPs—and fifty at the election after that. But it won't happen unless more girls apply to get on the Candidates' List and unless those with the ability are given a crack at the safe seats. Janet Young sees this as a challenge, not just for those women who want to stand—but for all women in the Party who, she says, could very positively help by ensuring that more women are interviewed by selection committees.

One really encouraging sign has been the European elections where, out of a total of eighty-one British seats, eleven were gained by women—in other words, over 13 per cent. Among the Conservative contingent of six, in addition to those already mentioned, there are: Beata Brookes from Wales, Novela Forster,

Gloria Hooper who against the odds triumphed in Liverpool and Diana Elles, former International Chairman of the EUW and Opposition Spokesman in the House of Lords on Foreign and European Affairs (1975-79), and now a Vice-Chairman of the European Democratic Group.



Looking ahead

One of the most frequently heard comments during the general election was: 'It's time we had a woman Prime Minister'. Millions of people, many who had never voted Conservative before, felt they had in Margaret Thatcher a leader with conviction and with a strong sense of moral purpose; a woman who got down to reality, talked common sense and was saying what they were thinking.

The Conservative Party attracted the largest trade union vote in its history and the largest female vote ever recorded. It was an expression of faith: a belief that with the Conservatives we could not just halt our national decline but positively reverse it. It was a demand for integrity in government: a reaffirmation that what people wanted was a fair balance between union rights and responsibilities, respect for the law, less collectivism and more individual freedom. It was an identification with the most fundamental Conservative principles: support for the family and a belief in people as individuals. For women especially, it marks an era of new opportunity and challenge.

A 50th Conference should be a time, not just for celebration, but for setting specific goals. There is much to be achieved. Firstly, we must build on and consolidate our successes. During year one of the present Conservative government, there have been several new gains. The WNAC publication *Women and Tax* has spurred action on three fronts: the coding regulations which operated against working wives have been altered; the Revenue has stopped treating women as dependants and now corresponds with them direct, instead of with their husbands; the Chancellor has promised a Green Paper on married women and tax.

Equivalent reforms have been promised in the social security field, enabling the Government to meet the EEC directive on

Equal Treatment (signed in November 1978). Subject to certain basic conditions, women will be able for the first time to claim social security for their husbands and children without, as now, having to prove that their husbands are totally incapable of self support. The provisions affect: Unemployment, Sickness, Maternity and Supplementary Benefits and also Family Income Supplement—though sadly not Housewives' Non-Contributory Invalidity Pension and Invalidity Care Allowance. A third gain is the Bereavement Allowance, announced in the Budget, entitling widows to the full benefit of their husband's married man's allowance during the year of his death.

These are important steps. But far from resting on its laurels, the Women's Organisation envisages a developing role: as an informed conscience of the Party, to represent to the Government priorities held by women throughout the country and to play a key part in promoting the values on which the stability and well-being of our society depends.

Women must act as the voice of realism. The Women's Organisation can help explain what every housewife knows: that we cannot spend money we have not got. This realisation is at the core of our battle against inflation. Success in driving this crucial message home affects not only prices—but also our schools, hospitals, the care of the elderly and our ability to do more for those in real need.

Women can take a positive lead, both in the home and in their places of work, to help avert strikes that damage the family and that may result in loss of jobs. We can make sure that it is fully understood that the first to suffer, in the event of irresponsible action, are the wives and children. There have been some magnificent examples of strikers' wives using their influence precisely this way. Equally, women belonging to unions have set a proud example of service, duty and responsibility to others. There is a very major role for women in industrial relations.

One of the immediate aims should be to encourage more women to participate fully in all aspects of public life: by appointments to public boards, as school governors,



magistrates, councillors and as MPs. Important as it is, proper representation is not simply a question of trying to right the balance: women are needed in their own right for the very qualities they bring.

During the past fifty years, the Women's Organisation has been admirably setting the pace. From now on, we must all ensure that women are truly going places.

The author

Rosemary Brown is a journalist who writes regularly for *The Times* and *Management Today*, a broadcaster and author. She is married to Peter Brown, who started and runs a group of small businesses. They have two sons.

Rosemary Brown contested Newham North West in the October 1974 General Election and Truro in May 1979.

She is a member of the Executive and the General Purposes Subcommittee of the WNAC and a member of the Conservative Trade Unionists' National Committee. She has also been Chairman of Kensington CPC, Secretary of the Conservative Candidates' Association (1976-79) and Research Assistant to the Rt. Hon. Sir Geoffrey Howe, QC MP (1974-77).

Since 1977, she has been a member of the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the London Voluntary Service Council.



List of women's publications since 1971

Unhappy Families Report of the Working Party set up by the Women's National Advisory Committee to present evidence to the Finer Committee on one-parent families, chaired by Mrs Diana (now Baroness) Elles (CPC 477, April 1971), 25p.

Measure for Measure: a viewpoint on metrication Study based on discussion and research by members of the Contact Group, part of the Greater London Conservative Women's Advisory Committee, chaired by Mary Baker (CPC 484, May 1971), 15p

Women Prejudice and Protection written by members of the Contact Group—GLA, about financial aspects and attitudes.

*A Fairer Deal for Women** (Conservative Central Office, ON 5065, October 1973).

Widening Horizons: Women and the Conservative Party by Sue McCowan (CPC 571, May 1975), 40p.

Delinquents . . . at Large? Report of a Working Party of the Conservative Women's National Advisory Committee, chaired by Mrs P. M. E. Springman (PY 5229), 45p.

The Cinderella Service Report on the Nursing Profession presented by a Working Party of the Women's National Advisory Committee of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, chaired by Mrs Gordon Hunter, 10p.

Women and Tax Report of the Committee on Women and Tax established by Baroness Young under the aegis of the Women's National Advisory Committee of the Conservative Party, chaired by Miss Shelagh Roberts (February 1979), 25p

Women in Politics edited by Elisabeth Sturges-Jones and Susan Hewitt for the Conservative Women's National Advisory Committee (February 1980), 40p.

*No longer available.

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