

*Feminism Under Duress:  
Was the Thatcher Government Bad for the Women's  
Movement in the U.K.?*

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*Editor's Note: "Feminism Under Duress" was completed prior to Thatcher's passing.*

**Abstract:** In 1979, the election of Margaret Thatcher as Britain's first woman Prime Minister constituted a significant achievement for the political prominence of women. Did this rise in prominence, however, correlate with enhanced success of the feminist movement? This case explores this question by analyzing statistics regarding pro-feminist legislation, the rhetoric of both Thatcher and her opponents in the Labour party, and the political consequences of Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister. By demonstrating a distinction between policy and perception, this case explores the issue of whether strides made in one can be negated by limitations of the other. Finally, this case examines Thatcher's classically liberal economic predilections, and the way in which these tendencies affected her desire to abolish the Greater London Council (GLC), a generally progressive governing body, as well as the reasoning used by the Thatcher Government for the abolition. Conclusions suggest that the GLC's abolition, in combination with other centralizing, anti-progressive policies and initiatives, constitutes a setback not only for progressivism, but perhaps feminism, as well.

### **Introduction**

In 1979, the women's movement in Great Britain seemed to be progressing. During the past twelve years, the movement had seen fourteen major legislative victories. With the failure of the Abortion Act in 1967 and the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975, and the Domestic Violence Act in 1976, as well as other feminist legislation of the time, British feminists had much about which to feel hopeful (Bashevkin 1994). The election of the first female Prime Minister (PM) in the country's history, Margaret Thatcher, might have been yet another cause for celebration. Yet proponents of feminist policy were not celebrating. Thatcher's neo-conservative rhetoric overshadowed her sex in the minds of many feminists; those wishing to promote the women's movement were too concerned with Thatcher's potentially women-unfriendly ideological positions to see much victory in the election of the first female prime minister.

This case will examine whether or not the Thatcher Government benefited the feminist movement in Great Britain from standpoints of both policy and perception. Was the mere visual presence of a woman as head of state beneficial to the feminist movement in Great Britain, or did

the choices that Thatcher made with regard to both policy and the structure of her government negate the positive influence of a highly visible woman leader in Britain?

### **A Background of the Iron Lady**

Thatcher was born Margaret Hilda Roberts on October 13, 1925 to Alfred Roberts, a grocer and small-town mayor, and Beatrice Roberts (née Stephenson) in Grantham, Lincolnshire (Johnson 1998). She studied with the aid of scholarships, eventually gaining admission to Oxford, where she earned a degree in chemistry (Johnson 1998). After graduation, Thatcher worked as a research chemist for many years while studying for the bar (“Margaret Thatcher” 2011). Thatcher had long possessed an interest in politics even before her tenure as president of the Oxford University Conservative Association. She entered the House of Commons at age 34 (“Margaret Thatcher” 2011). Ten years later, she was appointed Education Minister, a plum position that, at the time, looked to be “the summit of her career” (Johnson 1998).

Despite this prized appointment, Thatcher had further aspirations. Believing the right wing of her party to be unrepresented in the contest for Tory leadership in 1979, Thatcher decided to challenge Edward Heath, Prime Minister at the time, for his position (Johnson 1998). Thatcher went to Heath’s office to inform him of her decision to run. Upon hearing her news, Heath responded with a curt and efficient insult: “You’ll lose,” he said. “Good day to you” (Johnson 1998). Was this response indicative of sexism or merely rudeness on Heath’s part? Accordingly, was Thatcher’s decision to proceed with her campaign despite this insult feminist, or representative only of personal ambition and stubbornness? Thatcher evidently appears strong-willed and determined, but the issue of whether or not she is feminist depends upon the answer to these questions.

As Britain’s longest-serving Prime Minister of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a highly polarizing figure—both in ideology and personality—Thatcher was influential in her role as the first major, and still most well-known, woman in British politics. One could plausibly assume that Thatcher’s prominence had the potential to benefit how others perceived women’s achievement. Pro-Thatcher activists often argued that although Thatcher did not encourage other women to seek power, “her simple presence in power likely elevated female self-confidence and nurtured ambitions” amongst the general public (Bashevkin 1996).

Though Thatcher was clearly a highly visible, powerful woman, any benefit of her “simple presence” may have been negated by the fact that, ironically, after she removed Janet Young from her position as leader of the House of Lords, Thatcher was the first post-war Prime Minister not to have a woman in the cabinet. Accordingly, her neo-Conservative policies and failure to appoint fellow females to her cabinet ultimately had a detrimental effect on British feminists. Whether her mere presence was beneficial to the women’s movement in the U.K. as a whole, however, is uncertain. Moreover, Thatcher’s ambivalence towards feminism was well documented. When asked about her ties to the British women’s movement, Thatcher countered by asking what the movement had “ever done for” her (Bashevkin 1994).

Thatcher actively opposed progressivism seeing “the social interest in the clash of self-interests” (“To the Victor” 1990). She “gave greed back its good name as the source of wealth,” and gave Britain “a record number of home-owners—and of homeless” (“To the Victor” 1990). Thatcher’s classically liberal tendencies opposed the social programs that were a core feature of modern progressive, feminist policy. Emphasizing economic efficiency and privatization over the public good, Thatcher’s policies seemed to violate the core tenets of feminism (“To the

Victor” 1990). Thatcher relentlessly advocated for “free markets and free minds,” a classically liberal position that sounds almost utopian in theory, but usually proves detrimental to anyone reliant on social programs, a group among which women are often present (Johnson 1998). The pro-market Thatcher became the enemy of anyone who advocated for “interventionist strategies” on any scale (Bashevkin 1994). Prominent among this group of interventionists were local governments, most notably the Greater London Council.

### **Killing the GLC, Squashing Progressive Uprisings**

In the general election of 1983, most voters overlooked a crucial phrase in the Conservative Party’s platform: “We shall abolish them [the Greater London Council (G.L.C.) and metropolitan counties] and return most of their functions to the boroughs and districts” (Jones 1984). The GLC, a relatively autonomous, municipal government within the U.K.’s centralized system of governing, had recently grown in power and was beginning to exhibit even more liberal and socially democratic tendencies than ever before. With this shift towards the Left came Thatcher’s increased desire to abolish the Council.

The Greater London Council’s predecessor had been the London County Council (LCC), established in 1934. The LCC was very strong and had been controlled exclusively by the Labour party since Ramsay MacDonald’s tenure as Prime Minister (“Ramsay MacDonald”). In a move akin to gerrymandering efforts in the U.S., Conservative Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home enlarged London to take in wealthier suburban areas (Jones 1984). His Government redrew borough boundaries, and the LCC became the Greater London Council (Jones 1984). Clearly, the intent of enlarging the Council and the area which it oversaw was to add wealthier, more conservative suburbanites to the Council’s constituency, thus shifting the Council’s policies to the Right. However, the resizing of the Council did not have its intended effect: some of London’s new territory encompassed industrial communities “which consistently voted for Labour” (Jones 1984).

Due to the Conservatives’ miscalculations, the GLC elections were generally close calls, and control of the GLC shifted from Labour to Conservative and back again. In 1981, however, there was a large shift to the Left. Not only did Labour win 50 of the Council’s 92 seats, but “most of the elected members were radicals” as opposed to the moderates who had predominated in earlier Labour Governments (Jones 1984). The first act of this new Government was to dismiss its leader, Andrew McIntosh (who was “tactfully elevated” to the House of Lords) and appoint Ken Livingstone as the new head of the GLC (Jones 1984).

“Red Ken,” as Tories and members of the media referred to Livingstone, was a self-proclaimed member of the “New Left” who had once aided American draft-dodgers during the Vietnam War (Jones 1984). Allegations of socialism aside, Livingstone promoted an unquestionably progressive agenda that was deeply disconcerting to the Thatcher government. Under Livingstone’s reign, the GLC instituted Affirmative Action policies, giving jobs to more women and ethnic minorities, and redirected arts funding from established galleries and the opera to “street theater groups and mural artists” (Jones 1984). Additionally, and even more to the Thatcherites’ dismay, the GLC gave recognition and funding to local activist groups which promoted benefits for the homeless, battered women, gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities, and many other disadvantaged groups and progressive causes (Jones 1984). In reaction to this leftist agenda which Thatcher and her cabinet actively opposed, her government made moves to abolish both the GLC and its pockets of local autonomy which resembled federalism in the U.S., and facilitated the promotion of progressive—often feminist—goals.

In an effort to increase legitimacy, the Thatcher Government's stated reason for abolishing the GLC was economic, not political, in nature. A goal of the Thatcher Government in abolishing the GLC and the six other municipal county councils was to achieve a net of 7,000 job cuts, thus saving £50 million ("BBC On This Day"). Ultimately, most of these intended cuts did not come to fruition, with most of these roles shifting to jobs within new organizations ("BBC On This Day"). Nevertheless, these changes negatively affected more than 50,000 staff in the GLC and metropolitan districts ("BBC On This Day"). The "sending-off" of the GLC had a festive atmosphere, with £250,000 worth of fireworks, a performance of Haydn's Farewell Symphony by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and taunts from the GLC directed towards Thatcher's government ("BBC"). Despite this, at the end of the evening on March 31, 1986, the festivities were over. The GLC's building had become the property of the London Residuary Body.

The abolition of the GLC was a clear loss for both progressives and proponents of the women's movement, who generally favored the social programs that the GLC promoted, and a decisive victory for Thatcher and the Conservatives. Constituting a significant "modification to central-local relations and a change in central state policies," the dismantling of the GLC resulted in a return to a "single tier of metropolitan government" (King 1989). This centralization significantly weakened the power of local government and the prominence of local politics and contrasted sharply with other Western democracies. At the time of the GLC's abolition, France, Italy, and Spain were undertaking significant *decentralization* policies. The singularity of England's decision to centralize underscores Thatcher's intent in ending the GLC: she wished to squash the "new urban left," whose goal was to maintain city services and expand local democracy (King 1989). The GLC's policy goals contrasted with Thatcher's desire to centralize and cut spending, so she abolished the Council and, with it, much of the institutionalized local opposition to her policies. As the GLC primarily represented progressive interests and progressive interests frequently overlapped with feminist interests, the abolition constituted an affront, on Thatcher's part, to the women's movement.

### **A Statistical Analysis: How Thatcher's Policies Affected Women's Policy**

As previously mentioned, feminists in the U.K. were generally succeeding in influencing policy prior to 1979. Between 1967 and 1979, before Thatcher's first election, 17 major legislative decisions were recorded in the areas of equal rights, family law, reproduction, violence, and employment. Fourteen of these decisions, or 76.5%, were favorable to feminist interests, while 3, or 17.6%, were opposed by women's groups (Bashevkin 1996). This high percentage of decisions favorable to the women's movement during this period is notable and indicated broad legislative support for incipient equal rights and feminist movements within a highly tradition-oriented, somewhat conservative state.

During Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister, the administration announced another seventeen major legislative decisions regarding women's issues (Bashevkin 1996). One could consider eleven of these decisions, or 64.7%, as favorable to the women's movement, and five decisions, or 29.4%, as unfavorable (Bashevkin 1996). While this decrease in pro-feminist legislation is not drastic, it is curious that legislation that supported the women's movement would regress during the government of the first female Prime Minister of Great Britain. Although all judicial decisions rendered during Thatcher's tenure are considered favorable to the feminist movement, these decisions were less beholden to Thatcher's interests and, thus, not indicative of pro-feminist advocacy on her part (Bashevkin 1996).

With regard to equal rights, most academics consider the 1989 Local Government Act as a setback for feminists as it “permitted municipal authorities to implement contract compliance with respect to race but not gender” (Bashevkin 1996). Under Thatcher, the arena of reproductive rights was somewhat more nuanced; in a pro-feminist turn, the Thatcher Government “refused to grant additional parliamentary time to three restrictive private members’ bills on abortion” (Bashevkin 1996). Nevertheless, it also “enacted a system of regulating sex education that was supported by the Catholic Church” in 1981 in a conservative, less feminist reversal. Clearly, there was inconsistency in the Thatcher Government regarding legislative decisions favorable to the women’s movement. When viewed through a comparative lens, however, decisions under Thatcher’s tenure seem quite feminist; legislation in the U.K. during the Thatcher Government was considerably more favorable to feminist interests than that, for example, in the United States during Reagan’s administration (Bashevkin 1996).

### **Rhetoric and Perception: The British Parties Alter their Discourse with the Women’s Movement**

Thatcher was not only the first female Prime Minister of England, but also the first female Prime Minister in Europe (“Margaret Thatcher” 2011). Thus, the media and other groups examined her actions and their implications through this lens. Despite her allegiance to the Conservative Party and her identification as a Tory and a barrister along with other components of her identity, she most prominently represented a female British politician. Her position as the most powerful woman in politics of her time and as a pioneer within Europe in her leadership role rendered her opinions, actions, and policy positions very influential.

But besides being a highly visible female politician, Thatcher seemingly strived to avoid a feminist persona. In an effort to dodge the stereotype that positioned powerful women as opinionated and shrill or nagging, Thatcher “took elocution lessons...to lower the pitch of her voice” and tried to disassociate herself from “petulant females” (Ponton 2010). Yet despite her wish to avoid portraying some of the characteristics associated with women, Thatcher was not afraid to appear as a wife and mother, as well as a politician. She often posed for photographs in the kitchen and spoke of “cooking,” “shopping,” and “spending time with the children” in order to encourage the idea that she was the archetype of the “housewife politician” (Ponton 2010). While this archetype is novel and somewhat groundbreaking, the presentation of the “housewife politician” is arguably *not* feminist. In suppressing some aspects of her own femininity, Thatcher negated any positive, pro-feminist implications that may have resulted from presenting the notion that a woman can be a wife and mother while being a powerful political leader.

While Thatcher was altering her self-presentation and rhetoric to seem less feminist and more like the colloquial “only man in the cabinet,” a term satirists originally applied to Golda Meir, the first female prime minister of Israel, Labour party leaders were doing quite the opposite (Vedantam 2007). Less than a decade after Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister, Labour was on the crest of a major surge in female supporters. Based on opinion polls, voters see the Labour party as more trustworthy than the Tories on important women’s issues: “‘caring’ issues such as the welfare state and public services, on which more women than men depend” (“Gendermander” 1995). Notwithstanding this statistic, however, women still vote in higher numbers for the Conservative party than they do for Labour in most elections (“Gendermander” 1995). This fact raises the question of whether or not the increased Conservative allegiance among women is a result of loyalty to or nostalgia for the Thatcher Government. Based on policy

analysis alone, this hypothesis seems highly unlikely. How could women, who sympathize with Labour on issues such as social welfare, feel any loyalty to or affinity for Thatcher, a staunch Conservative and, in her pursuit of unfettered capitalism in Britain, an opponent of social welfare programs and any other government intervention in the economy?

When considering another statistic, however, the proposal that women's increased likelihood to vote Conservative has something to do with Thatcher becomes more plausible. While younger women "were much more likely to have voted Labour" in Britain's 1992 general election, 47% of women aged 35 to 54 voted Conservative, compared to only 30% of that demographic who voted Labour ("Gendermander" 1995). Thatcher's tenure as PM likely influenced the women in this age group, most of whom were at a relatively highly-engaged political age during her administration. They may thus identify more readily with the Conservatives, the party of Thatcher, perhaps because of her policies, or perhaps because they identified with her as a woman. In other words, she looked like them, and voters often prefer candidates in whom they see themselves.

Ironically, the greatest electoral success for female political candidates in Britain came with Labour success. Labour's landslide victory in the 1997 election was "also a breakthrough for women," as the number of female members of parliament "rose to 120, of which 101 were members of the Labour party" (Hayes and McAllister 2001). Additionally, the Labour party embarked on an unprecedented effort in 1997 to win the female vote and, in doing so, became more feminist. The Labour party's outreach effort to women included both policy changes and rhetorical shifts. Notably, Tony Blair pledged to spend £10 million to create a network of centers that would diagnose breast cancer (Hayes and McAllister 2001). Labour candidates also altered their rhetorical style in order to increase their appeal among women, focusing on "real people's lives" and not using technical jargon in order to create a more "feminised image" (Hayes and McAllister 2001). With the additional publicity initiative of giving interviews to women's magazines, Labour was ensuring not only that their rhetoric pleased more women but also that women would notice this shift (Hayes and McAllister 2001). Labour's strategies succeeded, and "11 percent of women voters swung to Labour"—a dramatic margin that surpassed the increase among male voters, which totaled only eight percent (Hayes and McAllister 2001).

The first female prime minister was Conservative; yet, at the same time, she was the only PM to have no women in her cabinet since the Second World War, and ostensibly did little to assist other women in gaining electoral success, prominence in other areas, or even, particularly, equality (Bashevkin 1996). Because Tony Blair, in his quest to attract female voters, presented a "more 'feminised' image of both himself and his party" and addressed issues that were important to women, such as "the growing problem of breast cancer," the Labour party ultimately achieved much success with female voters, despite the recent memory of Thatcher, a Conservative, and the most high-profile woman in British political history (Hayes and McAllister 2001). Additionally, the fact that the vast majority of women who achieved electoral success in the 1990s were affiliated with the Labour party further calls into question Thatcher's relevance to the women's movement in Britain. Ultimately, despite Thatcher's status as the first woman to gain the most powerful position in British politics, Labour was the party through which women gained widespread electoral success, and, thus, more equality in the field of politics. Despite the visual prominence of Thatcher as an early *female* political figure in the U.K., it was a *man* (Tony Blair) and the Labour party that ultimately proved more *feminist* insofar as attaining a primary goal of the feminist movement, increased equality.

These facts invite the question: should the women's movement prize the election of female candidates for political office over all else, or is it better for feminists to value policy and ideological orientation over sex? If the latter should be valued, what does this say for organizations such as EMILY's List? Are they hindering the progress of their own goals by not being blind to sex, or is the stipulation that the candidates they support must be Democratic (in the U.S.) and pro-choice enough to properly promote their agenda? In Great Britain, where the issue of women in politics is less prominent than in the US, is it better for feminists to focus on the sex of the candidate, or his or her ideology and policy goals? If the goal is merely the enhanced prominence of women, the answer is most certainly the former. However, if the goal is more power for women *collectively*, not just electorally, as well as the implementation of policies that benefit women as a whole, feminist activists in Great Britain might do well to look to the case of the Thatcher Government and its policies to answer the question.

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## **Appendix A: Teaching Uses**

The author intends for undergraduate students in Political Science or Gender and Sexuality studies to use and study this case. Its primary purpose is to prompt a discussion about female political leadership, and whether or not having a woman in power is enough in itself to benefit the feminist movement. The case asks whether the sex of the political leader, the leader's policies and ideology, or his or her position on the feminist movement is the most important criterion for determining whether or not a political leader benefits the women's movement.

This case can also facilitate a discussion of power in local government, including the relationship between the British Parliament and the Greater London Council. As Great Britain has no written constitution, local governmental institutions have long functioned as a unit of national government. This contrasts the federal system inherent to the US that is provided for in its Constitution. Thus, this case can provoke an important discussion of the implications of abolishing the GLC, a strong local government institution which had previously functioned as an integral component of British politics.

### **Case Objectives**

After reading and discussing the case, students will be able to do the following:

- ï Take a position on whether or not Margaret Thatcher's tenure as PM benefitted the feminist movement in the U.K.
- ï Discuss, in a knowledgeable and constructive manner, the necessary elements for a political leader to be "feminist."
- ï Identify the importance of the GLC and the controversy surrounding its dissolution.
- ï Identify differences, both in policy and approach to garnering votes from women, between the Conservative and Labour Parties.
- ï Discuss the way in which the perception and evaluation of female political leaders differs from that of male politicians.

### **Key Issues**

1. While it is clear that Margaret Thatcher's tenure as PM left an indelible mark on both British politics and the feminist movement, the evidence points to her influence as negative. Still, the legislation passed under her Government is, on the whole, beneficial to feminist interests, and thus there is room for debate regarding her impact on feminism in the U.K.
2. Not all powerful women are feminists; if they do not facilitate other women's success or, if they are in government, do not promote pro-feminist policy or pass pro-feminist legislation, it is very possible for them to be anti-feminist.

## **Appendix B: Discussion Questions**

- In what ways were Thatcher's policies antifeminist, or detrimental to the feminist movement?
- What argument can be made for Thatcher's tenure as PM being good for feminism?
- How is the abolition of the Greater London Council indicative of the Thatcher Government's hostility towards progressivism?
- What is the link between hostility towards progressive causes and hostility towards feminist causes?
- Since the Labour party in the 1990s made such a conscious effort to recruit female voters, and 84% of female members of parliament, following the 1997 election, were members of the Labour party, why is the Conservative-Labour vote split roughly evenly, if not favoring the Tories, among female voters? Does Thatcher's influence have anything to do with this?
- What further efforts could both the Labour and Conservative parties (and, for that matter, the Liberal Democrats) make to both promote feminist policy and gain more female voters?
- Is it important to have a political leader, or at least a candidate for political office, who looks like you? Does a candidate's sex or ethnicity matter as much as, or more than, his or her policies?

## **Theoretical Links**

1. Women in Politics
2. Tensions between Local and National Government
3. Feminist/Anti-feminist Policy

## **Methodology**

This case was written as coursework for INTU 3000: Women Leading Change in Organizations, at Tulane University, under the guidance of Professor Sally J. Kenney. The author relied primarily on articles from academic journals and magazines to reconstruct and discuss events.