Is Margaret Thatcher for women?

In the run-up to the election, several newspapers have asked Spare Rib whether we would regard a Thatcher victory as a victory for women's liberation, proof of what-the-modern-woman-can-achieve. For us as feminists, the issue is not the success or failure of one individual woman, but whether the actual policies of Thatcher, and of the party which she leads, can promote the interests of women generally.

The whole Tory ethos, however, is based on the denial of oppression: if you do well in life, it's because you've got brains and determination and deserve success. If you 'fail', it has nothing to do with your sex or colour or class, and everything to do with your own deficiencies as a person.

Within this system, which depends on the mass of people remaining at the bottom, those few who do escape 'the station in which it has pleased God to place them' — the Cockney Freddies, or the women like Margaret Thatcher — can only ever be exceptions.

But Thatcher is not just a 'token woman'. She now leads her party as a representative of the strongest faction inside it — the extreme right. As the economic and political crisis of the 70s has hardened, Edward Heath's concern to show 'the human face of capitalism' has been rejected as a 60s luxury. Thatcher is committed to two main policies:

- the defeat of the trade union movement, and the running down of the welfare state, state industries, and public spending, so that the capital presently invested in them may be 'freed' for the needs of private enterprise. From the higher profits which ensue, we will all, supposedly, benefit.

- The flaw in this argument is that, in a free-market economy, the only people guaranteed to benefit are the owners and shareholders of private industry. The pursuit of profit, far from meaning higher employment, usually means the opposite. Increasingly, industrialists are investing in areas of work which are capital rather than labour intensive — for the simple reason that machines cost less than people.

The Conservatives are also committed to abolishing price controls, and cutting government subsidies on basic goods. Lower prices, we are told, can only be achieved by free competition. In these days of giant monopolies, that's merely a meaning higher employment, usually means

30 The Tories' attempt to appeal to women across class lines, via the common factor of being housewives, is calculated and very skilful. Providing praise for the housewife, however, comes cheap; providing nurseries, housing, social security benefits and adequate health care does not. Labour has already massively reduced public spending, but the Tories plan heavier cuts. The temporary inconvenience caused by strikes is negligible compared to the burden this will place on women, as caring for the young, the sick, the disabled and the elderly — and with minimum state aid — becomes even more our responsibility.
Another of the Tories stated intentions — curbing the right to strike — would weaken one of the few weapons most ordinary people have. And it is **women** workers who most need that power. On average, we still earn only £50 p.w., compared with an average male wage of £80 p.w. What gains women have made, in achieving higher pay, have mostly come about through industrial action, or the threat of it — not through the voluntary ‘generosity’ of employers. For all the Tory press to play off one another against strikers, and create an image of militancy as male, the most disruptive strike this winter has been by the ‘dirty jobs’ workers of NUPE who are, in fact, 65% female.

In this winter’s spiral of strikes, however, many wage demands have been argued on the basis of ‘preserving differentials’ between the high and low paid. It’s a dubious tactic, because this leaves the low-paid — who are predominantly female — vulnerable to productivity demands that the only thing which stands between them and a higher standard of living is the greed of other workers. Yet money ‘saved’ on wage claims by brick-layers or printers never goes to nurses or cleaners — it stays in a company’s profit reports. The real gap in society is between those who produce, and those who own. In 1978, 20% of this country’s wealth was owned by just 1% of the population — Sally Oppenheim, one of the rich few: much of her money, like other Tory MPs’, has been made from property speculation — a polite phrase for the exploitation of everyone’s most basic need: a place to live. The Tory commitment to selling off council houses means that more and more people would be forced to buy or rent on the private market. The Women’s Liberation Movement — which has led the fight on crimes against women — is already suffering (and, under a Conservative government, we can doubtless expect worse).

At Mrs Thatcher’s recent letter I am replying on her behalf to your recent letter. I hope you will not think me too blunt if I say that it may well be that your council accommodation is unsatisfactory, but considering the fact that you have been unable to buy your own accommodation you are lucky to have something, which the rest of us are paying for out of our taxes.”

The following lines contain a concise but complete description of what I am sure you wish to be.

**Spare Rib**

Y B A Wife?

Dear Spare Rib,

I enclose a cutting from the Sunday times (Malta).

Maltese women make good wives

Her role requires of her on occasion to play a hidden and silent part, in effect a Word speech but wisely and with much love, besides she should learn to come to term with the monotony of the daily routine, to be patient in adversity, truthfully awaiting the recompense which is offered by the loving thankfulness of her husband and the tender respect of her children.

It is just about impossible to compile a complete list of virtues and qualities which mark the ideal wife but perhaps the most important are goodness of heart, tenderness, loving apparence of one’s lot and of course intelligence.

The following lines contain a concise but complete description of what I am sure you wish to be.

**Spare Rib**

I feel that the words ‘AND YOU DON’T COST A PENNY’ should be added to the end of the final quotation.

I am receiving SR every year by subscription here in Malta (It is not available in the bookshops, of course). I look forward to it tremendously. Thanks for a wonderful magazine.

With love,

V.J Stevenson (Ms)

Melliecha, Malta.

That difficult stage . . .

Dear Spare Rib,

My young nephew made an ‘objet d’art’ in his woodwork class and brought it home for the family to admire. His older sister promptly asked her mother why she could do woodwork, too. Her mother, very decisively, said no! I was appalled at the way the 12-year-old daughter appeared to accept this decision unquestioningly. Then I was told confiden­tially that she was ‘getting to that difficult stage’, and I’m surprised at the parental blindness to the situation.

What on earth does the future hold for women when young girls today are so easily squashed in their ambitions when they don’t fit the stereotype? Do any readers have some suggestions about what an ordinary person can do about this situation? I am a relatively new reader of women’s literature and have sometimes thought your writings a little extreme.

This one incident has made me review my thinking, though, and all I can say is more power to you.

Martha Lyn.

St Helens, Merseyside.

Learning Young

Dear Spare Rib,

An example of what we’re up against: for weeks I’ve been going to an adventure playground to teach a group of girls disco dancing. They enjoy it, and a nice feeling has been built up as a result of it.

Until today the ‘male nonsense’, is the best that’s been on the periphery, always present but never troubling too badly. Until today.

Today the atmosphere and the class were destroyed. How was this achieved? Nothing drastic, the boys watched the girls dancing. A passive activity, watching, might have cost a penny.

Predatorial animals watch. It was that kind of watching. You know the look, the kind of look we’ve all seen when a gang of blokes get together and settle on a female. That look that seems like lust but is usually just contempt.

They watched and watched lots of them, in silence except for the occasional unlooked for comment. The girls drifted away.

When tackled about their behaviour later, a typical comment was: ‘well they’ll have to get used to it, I mean it’ll be the same when they go to parties and discos later on, won’t it? I have an article in SR 80 re being disabled could i please make a plea for myself and others that are treated as ‘normal’. Many people speak to me very loud and enunciate their words very clearly so if i were disabled could i please make a plea for myself and others that are treated as ‘normal’.

Most people speak to me very loud and enunciate their words very clearly as if i were deaf or blind. I have epilepsy and have had it for many years, due to an accident when I was 16. I can hear, I can see, and understand conversation. Also due to the same accident I’ve got osteo­arthritis, and carry a walking stick sometimes. The physical pain is dreadful but the mental anguish and the way other people treat me is almost unbearable, it makes me aggressive and standoffish. I’m not really that way, i’m capable of loving. I want to share my life with others if only they would let me.

Please ask your readers to try and understand that I and others
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