

**British Conservative Women MPs and 'Women's Issues'
1950-1979**

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**Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

December 2010

Abstract

In the period 1950-1979, there were significant changes in legislation relating to women's issues, specifically employment, marital and guardianship and abortion rights. This thesis explores the impact of Conservative female MPs on these changes as well as the changing roles of women within the party. In addition there is a discussion of the relationships between Conservative women and their colleagues which provides insights into the changes in gender roles which were occurring at this time.

Following the introduction the next four chapters focus on the women themselves and the changes in the above mentioned women's issues during the mid-twentieth century and the impact Conservative women MPs had on them. The changing Conservative attitudes are considered in the context of the wider changes in women's roles in society in the period.

Chapter six explores the relationship between women and men of the Conservative Parliamentary Party, as well as men's impact on the selected women's issues. These relationships were crucial to enhancing women's roles within the party, as it is widely recognised that women would not have been able to attain high positions or affect the issues as they did without help from male colleagues.

Finally, the female Labour MPs in the alteration of women's issues is discussed in Chapter seven. Labour women's relationships both with their party and with Conservative women are also examined.

This thesis concludes by linking Conservative female MPs' impact upon women's issues, their relationships both within and outside of their party, and the effect these had on the ability of women to fully participate in Parliament. In bringing these together, it will be shown that the impact Conservative female MPs had on the various pieces of legislation was of importance and that these women's hard work allowed them to gain more recognition within the party and society.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without help from a wide range of people, all of whom were unfaltering in their support.

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Chris Wrigley, for his advice, support, guidance and patience throughout the course of my studies. I would also like to thank Professor Liz Harvey for her insight and assistance on many of my chapters.

I am thankful to the School of History for granting me a scholarship, which lessened the financial burden of this undertaking greatly. I am also appreciative of being given the opportunity to teach during my studies. Not only has this been an enjoyable experience, but I've learned a great deal through teaching in the past two years.

I am also grateful for the help offered by Andrew Riley at the Churchill Archives in Cambridge and Colin Harris and Jeremy McIlwaine at the Bodleian Library for their assistance in accessing and decoding letters and other papers. Thank you also to Sheridan Westlake, with the Conservative Party, for allowing me access to Conservative Party archival documents.

For lending me his ear on more than one occasion, I thank Dr Daniel Barnes, who was always there to remind me how to be a superb manager. I am also grateful to all of my friends for providing necessary distractions and, most of all, for just being themselves. Thank you also to School of History postgraduate community, especially those with whom I have shared an office in Lenton Grove, for being friends, colleagues and most of all entertaining.

A big thanks to my family – immediate, extended, those who I have known all my life, and those who I have gotten to know along the way – whose support has also been invaluable. I particularly thank my mom, Laural Haessly, as her belief that I could finish this thesis has been a reassurance throughout. Finally, to my fiancé, Alex Dickenson, I am especially thankful. That he has been with me every step of the way and has provided encouragement and a voice of reason has been helpful in more ways than I could ever coherently express.

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1 – Introduction

Women in the British Conservative Party between 1950 and 1979 may have been few in number, however, a closer look at the female MPs' work on specific topics shows that they were able and willing to partake in debates and had a real impact on the passage of certain legislation. Their passion and interest not only means that their low numbers are an inaccurate measure of female MPs' importance, but it also caused their participation in Parliament to increase greatly when topics in which they were interested were being debated. Their participation varied by issue, as would be expected, and as such three specific areas have been chosen for this study – employment (including equal pay), family (including divorce and guardianship) and personal (including abortion and contraception) – all of which were of interest to various Conservative women, and all of which affected women's rights within society.

The years 1950-1979 have been chosen as the focus of this study due to the many political, societal and economic changes experienced during this time. By looking at the evolution of these issues over a 29-year period, an assessment will be made as to the influence that Conservative women had within Parliament and how, despite their low numbers, Conservative female MPs took an active role and ensure that their views were heard.

The discussion will follow the work of female Conservative MPs through the Parliamentary process, with specific focus placed on their participation in debates and committees. Utilising a variety of primary and secondary sources to gauge this, the participation and

impact of women will be discussed in order to determine Conservative women's importance in changes in legislation during the mid-twentieth century. These subjects will be approached from an historical, instead of a socio-political perspective, which allows for further analysis of the potential reasons and ramifications for the passage of certain laws and participation of Conservative women. While social policy plays a role in this analysis, adopting this perspective would have changed the shape of this study and as such a variety of social policy texts were taken into consideration in its preparation.

Women's extra-Parliamentary endeavours in organisations such as the WNAC and other groups formed specifically to aid specific causes will also be explored in order to gauge how their participation in these organisations affected not only their work in Parliament, but the wider questions themselves. Although the climate of the time (both politically and socially) was often not friendly to the idea of female advancement in politics, there were many women who were able to overcome this to become MPs and while in that position took it upon themselves to advocate changes in key aspects of women's lives. The intention is therefore to explore the impact Conservative women MPs had on legislation regarding women's issues in addition to women's changing roles within the party.

The importance of studying this period in this way can be attributed to several factors. The first is that Conservative women have largely been neglected by historians who have written about women in politics during this time. The majority of the sources

about women in politics focus on the Labour Party and the women, which at the time had a greater number of women than did the Conservatives, giving the indication that it was the number of women which dictated importance and Parliamentary influence. In addition to this, the topics chosen are not necessarily those associated with the Conservative Party. The combination of these factors necessitate the study of these women in the context of women's issues as their participation both within and outside of Parliament is notable because it often meant that they went against Party norms in order to support a cause in which they believed, an action which could potentially be damaging to their careers. Additionally, the fact that women were willing to partake in activities relating to these issues indicated that things within the Party were changing, and this is also an area which is evidence of their importance.

While some aspects of the Conservative Party's approach to women's issues have been discussed by other historians, the way in which they will be approached here, through focusing more specifically on the women themselves and their participation in debates and organisations in favour of changes intended to advance equality between the sexes, have not been. By discussing the selected women's issues, an assessment will be made as to whether without the impact and interest of Conservative women, there would have been significantly less progress made.

The way in which the Conservative Party treated its female members will be examined as well. This discussion will look at women's roles in both the constituencies and Parliament. It will be

shown that although the women were encouraged to join the Conservative Party, many members, both male and female, were reluctant to elect women to positions of significance. This, in turn, will be a demonstration of the traditional ideals surrounding women's roles as well as the desire of women to break free from these ideals and be treated as equals.

Building upon this, the next step in this study will be to discuss the female Conservative MPs in order to assess their impact on women's issues. By examining a range of topics it will be shown that despite their non-feminist ideologies, their party being male-dominated and their small numbers, women in the Conservative Party were able to have an impact on many amendments to existing legislation as well as new Bills which promoted equality between the sexes. It was a common perception among male MPs and some members of the general public that women were not interested, much less capable of participating, in debates regarding topics that did not directly affect the home, healthcare, welfare or education. However, the reality is that regardless of how interested female MPs were in women's issues they had other interests which had nothing to do with women and these often overshadowed their interest in women's issues. This is a subject that will be addressed, as though the topics to be discussed here are women's issues, not all of them are those in which women were traditionally interested. Without showing an interest in issues that fell outside of the realm of 'women's issues', it would have been impossible for women to gain positive recognition within the party and would likely have kept them out of Parliament.

It will be shown that female MPs were often expected to take an interest in 'women's issues', but that the majority of women elected were well-educated with a vast knowledge of topics and interests in other topics. Interest in women's issues was also seen to be a sign of feminist leanings, which could be detrimental to female MPs' political careers.¹ Therefore, when it came to women's issues, there tended to be limited interest shown by either men or women of the Conservative Party. For those who did choose to address these issues, it was not always an easy task. However, some Conservative women MPs were successful on many occasions. Their persistence and passion with regard to these topics gave their voices greater power and made the other MPs take notice not only of the issues, but of the women themselves.

In this study, male MPs' impact on these issues will also be discussed, a discussion which will include both the few that spoke up and were of help to women in their desire to make these changes and those who remained silent or spoke out against them. This discussion will demonstrate that without both sexes' involvement in these causes, change would not have been possible; however, this will also show that female interest and persistence was fundamental to ensuring that amendments were passed.

Thirdly, the importance of the issues in the context of the social and political climate of the time must be addressed. Within this discussion, underlying factors, such as party stance, elections and personal opinion will be examined as explanatory factors for the passage of legislation. There was a certain amount of resistance

¹ M. Philips, *The Divided House* (London 1980), pp. 159-60.

within Parliament and Conservative Party itself when it came to addressing issues concerning inequality between the sexes. Many factors contributed to this resistance. The main issue was the long standing tradition in the Conservative Party which dictated that the woman's primary job was taking care of the house, her husband and children. With regard to single women, societal norms dictated that they could work until they married, at which time they would take their place in the home as housewife and eventually mother. However, these ideas were being more frequently challenged during the mid-twentieth century, which was best reflected in much of the new legislation that was passed at this time.

In conjunction with the above, there will be a brief discussion as to why more women were not interested in holding higher positions within the Conservative Party, whether on a constituency or Parliamentary level. As part of this, a look at Conservative Party membership and the roles which women took up will allow for a further understanding of the issues behind this. When considering the reasons for women's involvement in the party, there are many factors that need to be examined. One of these is Conservative women's involvement in the women's movement. Given that the Conservatives were not known as a party which demonstrated unfaltering support for equality between the sexes, this cannot be claimed as a reason for women's interest in the party. However, as discussed in *True Blues*, this can be cited as a reason for the lack of participation of women, especially when the women's movement was gaining momentum in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Their increased interest in equality overrode their desire to participate within the confines of one specific political party and thus they were

less likely to join, but still likely to participate in politics, albeit only from the periphery of the party.²

Within the Parliamentary Party, men were afraid of the competition giving women more rights would create, as well as the potential for them to lose positions of prominence to women. It must also be understood, however that resistance was not only from men.

There were also a great number of women within the Conservative Party who were reluctant to address women's issues. This stems from women's reluctance to accept change, as well as other factors which will be considered in proceeding chapters.³

In addition to considering the Conservative Party itself, the ancillary groups which were both within and around the party and Parliament also need to be examined, especially when discussing membership and electoral results. A brief look at women's groups, of which many female MPs were members, will also allow for a greater understanding of what life was like for a woman in the party during the mid-twentieth century. In addition to the Conservative Party itself, the many organisations outside of the party which were active in these issues will also be discussed. The party's ancillary organisations and those pressure groups that were not affiliated with any particular party are worthy of note as there are many similarities between the two, as are their many differences. Not only were these groups important when it came to lobbying and ensuring that those members at constituency level

² P. Whiteley, P. Seyd and J. Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership* (Oxford 1994), p. 228.

³ G.E. Maguire, *Conservative Women: a History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874-1997* (London 1998), pp. 143-144.

were aware of issues being taken on in Parliament, but they also had input with regard to the creation of policy and were often bodies from which people were recruited for research projects.

Also of importance, however, are the instances of consensus between members of the Conservative and Labour Parties, which sometimes became clear first in nonpartisan organisations. Such organisations include parliamentary committees especially formed for the purposes of discussing particular subjects. These must be considered due to their considerable impact both with regard to policy and raising awareness of important issues within Parliament and wider society. To begin, however, those organisations directly affiliated with the Conservative Party will be discussed. Included in this category are several women's organisations and research groups set up to specifically address certain matters.

In the context of this study, however, looking at women and women's issues, it becomes clear that women did not differentiate between issues in the same way as their party leaders did. They selected the topics they pursued because of their interest in them, and often this was due to being personally affected, or knowing someone who was. Thus the male dominated governments and upper echelons of the party were happy to allow women to pursue these issues on their own, but were not always willing to back their members due to their desire to maintain Conservative values. This is not to say that men had no role in the alteration of legislation relating to women's rights, it will soon be shown that quite the opposite is true. Therefore, men's roles cannot (and will not) be neglected, the focus on women provides recognition to the women

MPs themselves and acknowledges the power, albeit limited, that they did have over issues which were of importance to women.

Focus will now shift to a brief introduction to the issues which will be discussed throughout the rest of this study. Before the issues included in this study can be addressed directly, clarification is needed for three terms. The first is impact, which can be difficult to measure. For the purposes of this study, the areas of impact will be limited to the Party organisation, Parliament and extra-parliamentary organisations; i.e. WNAC, Parliamentary Sub-Committees, Royal Commissions and other non-party affiliated organisations tied to the specific issues discussed. Narrowing the areas in which they could have an impact allows for the defining of impact within specific parameters which in turn allows for a more concise study.

Within these parameters, the impact that these women had varies from very little to invaluable. This is again dependent upon the length of time they were involved with the issues, how long they held their seats in Parliament, any offices held and the level of involvement with Bills or ideas relating to the alteration of legislation. The final clarification relating to impact is how it is determined that a woman had impact. In this light, the focus will remain within the above mentioned organisations and groups, and will be discussed in terms of such things as contribution to Parliamentary debates and level of activity within the various organisations.

The second term which requires clarification is 'women's issues'. This is an ambiguous term which has been moulded and manipulated many times to suit various periods of time as well as the person writing and the audience for which writing has been done. During the mid-twentieth century, issues involving welfare, education and consumerism were considered to be women's issues, as women were the people who largely dealt with these in their everyday lives.⁴ However for the purposes of this research, 'women's issues' are those issues which gave women more rights in regard to their bodies, their families and encouraged equality within society. As can be seen from this definition then, the traditional realm of women's issues such as education, and pricing have been set aside in favour of issues more directed at enhancing equality between the sexes and giving women more independence and control in their everyday lives.

While no female Conservative MP at this time identified herself as a feminist, there were of course some who did have feminist leanings, albeit in many cases only very slight leanings. This is best exemplified by an interview in which it was noted that Evelyn Emmet '...would hate it said that she is a feminist, or that the long hours she has put in, interviewing thousands of housewives and hundreds of women's organisations, could be described as feminism, or suffragette work.'⁵ This statement can be attributed to the connotations associated with feminism at this time. In 1948, when this interview was conducted, there were a variety of

⁴ Vallance, *Women in the House*, p. 104.

⁵ Interview with the *Daily Graphic* 16 May 1948, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS.Eng.c.5722.

negative ideals associated with feminism and thus for a woman involved in politics, especially one who was a member of the Conservative Party, to openly associate herself with feminism had the potential to be detrimental to her career. In addition to this, there was a very great chance that those who she needed to take an interest in the issues, mainly her male colleagues, would discount them if they were associated, even if only marginally, with the feminist movement.

While her motives for making this statement were valid for the above reasons, we must understand the evolution of the term in order to fully understand how it came to mean what it did in the mid-twentieth century. Offen defines feminism as a 'broad, comprehensive demand for the *equality* of the sexes', but specifies that historically, '...equality did not mean 'sameness'...'.⁶ Differentiating between equality and sameness is key to understanding the goals of female Conservative politicians. However, if equality was their goal, their reluctance to be recognised as feminists can really only be attributed to the negativity associated with the term. This is recognised by Lovenduski in 'Sex, Gender and British Politics', an article which discusses the debate surrounding women's interest and role in women's rights issues in politics. She does recognise that the main difficulty when defining feminism lies in the 'social stigma and/or political penalty attached to the word'.⁷

⁶ K. Offen, *European Feminisms 1700-1950* (Stanford 2000), p. 23.

⁷ J. Lovenduski, 'Sex, Gender and British Politics', in *Parliamentary Affairs*, (1996), p. 2.

Taking this a step further, Hannam describes the development of 'new feminism' as the desire to 'shape society to meet their [women's] own interests.' This idea was based upon women's role as mother being the most important and it was believed that without full recognition of the importance of this role, women would remain oppressed.⁸ This is not to say that Conservative women, or any political women, believed this to be the case, but they did recognise the importance of these roles and realised that the chances in society for which they were pushing were not the ultimate goals of all women. In addition to this, they held strong Conservative beliefs and were keen to see them upheld. Conversely, female MPs recognised the need for them to stand up for the rights of women within society. But they did not believe that they were the only ones who could rightly represent women's interests and perspectives, instead they recognised that it was necessary for them to do so in certain circumstances. This is something once again best summed up by Evelyn Emmet, in the same interview noted above, when she states:

I believe that the anomalies which are relics from the past and discriminate against women must be cleared away. But to-day's problems cannot be solved by women alone. The real need is the achievement of a true balance between men and women.⁹

While not the views of all Conservative women, this does succinctly express the stance of the women examined in this study on the idea of feminism and women's rights.

⁸ Hannam, 'Women and Politics', p. 235.

⁹ *Daily Graphic* interview, 16 May 1948, Oxford, Bodleian Library, CPA CCO MS.Eng.c.5722.

It must be acknowledged that women's issues, as defined here, were rarely partisan in nature. Therefore, there was usually some agreement between the parties on these issues, as well as some disagreement within them. However, the prevailing factor which remains is that many Conservative women, as will be seen, went against party norms to fight for the issues which they considered to be important. These same women subscribed readily to Conservative doctrine in other areas. Most of the women MPs involved saw injustice and recognised that they were in a position to help to right these and therefore took action.

The issues to be examined can be broken down into three categories: Employment-of which equal pay is the only topic; Family-focusing on divorce and guardianship rights; and Personal-which includes abortion and contraception. Within these three categories, there are many different topics; however those listed above are the chosen focus due to importance, time given to debates within Parliament and their effect on equality between the sexes. These are also issues which, between them, span the time period between 1950 and 1979, and therefore are representative of the changing views of society and the Government regarding women's rights at this time.

Finally, they were chosen because much of the legislation which is included in the above categories had not been amended for up to 100 years prior to their revision in the mid-twentieth century, which made reforms overdue and increasingly necessary. The old fashioned laws were no longer representative of the opinions of society, and had not been for some time. This is especially true for

the laws regarding equal pay and guardianship. Thus the changes, which were inevitable and far reaching, were significant due to their influence not just on women, but on men as well. Therefore, for a full discussion of Conservative women's impact in the debate for women's rights, it is necessary to look at each individually before tying them together to understand the overall impact.

In the 1950s women were, in many respects, treated as second-class citizens as there were many simple, everyday things that they were not able to do because they were not men. In the process of discussing the progress that women made through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and the impact of the Conservative Party on this progress, the short term impacts of these issues, which range from a better quality of life for women to the increased sense of purpose and rights which women acquired with regard to their position in society will be discussed. The impact of the Conservative Party on this increased freedom and individuality that women had is undeniable, as many Conservative women fought hard to get their voices heard and pursue these issues, which many men (and some women) in the Commons thought to be of little importance.

Between 1950 and 1979, Britain went from a struggling post-war nation to one experiencing considerable, and in many ways previously unknown, affluence. This was marked by a growing consumer and service sector, an increase in the number of white collar workers, as well as increased freedoms for individuals. Many of these changes increased equality between the sexes. However, it must also be acknowledged that these issues were seen as very important, and with regard to some of them, mainly equal pay,

they had been on the agenda for all political parties for close to 45 years. Some, due to their nature took much longer than others to be amended. Therefore, there were both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for some changes not moving through Parliament and being altered as some MPs had hoped, which will be discussed in due course.

The only issue of those which will be discussed that had nearly unanimous support throughout all parties and both Houses is that which falls into the first category of Employment–equal pay. The initiative to give women equal pay for equal work was initially introduced into the Civil Service, but not for over 40 years after it was first debated within the House of Commons. The length of time that it took to implement this principle is unreasonable considering that no government in power between 1914 and 1970, when the Equal Pay Act was passed, spoke against it, and both major parties had, in most elections during those 56 years, either in manifestoes or rhetoric, promised to do something about this injustice.

There were many reasons claimed for the delay in implementing the measures passed and agreed upon in the Commons—mainly the financial impact on the country and the potential to drive it into a recession. However after this was disproved, the Government still failed to implement it, finding other reasons including trade union discontent with the idea, conflict from male co-workers and potential dissension due to being paid the same as women. When reading *Hansard* debates on this issue, one cannot help but notice how different they were to other topics of the time. While there

were debates about the minor details, there was rarely debate about the actual issue itself. However, for a topic on which the vast majority of MPs agreed, there were a large number of very heated debates.¹⁰

With regard to the Family category, it is easy to see why changes were necessary, but also easy to understand why there was some hesitation on the part of lawmakers to implement changes. Guardianship laws had not changed since 1925, when the Guardianship of Infants Act was implemented. This meant that a woman had remarkably few rights with regard to her family both in respect of the family home and guardianship of her children, especially if the marriage were to dissolve, until 1973 when the Guardianship Act was adopted. Because the role of women was seen as being mostly in the home as housekeeper and mother, many women often had no monetary stake in the family home or other property and therefore when marriages dissolved, many women were often left homeless and desolate.¹¹

Furthermore, with regard to any children that a couple may have had, women, while expected to be the main caretakers, technically had no guardianship rights should the marriage end, or in cases of desertion. One of the long-held, traditional values was that in a marriage, the husband was the head of household, and therefore women were not seen to need rights such as property ownership, or full legal guardianship of the children.

¹⁰ M. Rendel, 'Legislating for Equal Pay and Opportunity for Women in Britain', *Signs*, (Summer 1978), pp. 897-908.

¹¹ *HL Deb* Vol. 371, 16 June 1976 cc. 1274-1280 and *HL Deb* Vol. 391, 2 May 1978 cc. 22-29.

However, there were an increasing number of instances when women did in fact require these rights as they were separated from their husbands, their husbands had died in the War or for another reason they were left to take care of themselves and their dependents. The laws were such that a wife needed her husband to authorise nearly anything for her children, from surgery for a child under 21 or simply withdrawing money from her child's savings account at the post office.¹² However, after both the Guardianship of Minors Act 1970 and the Guardianship Act 1973 (arguably the more important of the two Acts) were passed, women had increasing rights and were more able to fully care for their families than they had been in the past.¹³

There were many debates regarding grounds for divorce and separation, maintenance of wives (or husbands in some cases) and as mentioned, children as well as division of marital property. For the sake of this study, the focus will be mainly on the changes regarding guardianship of children, rights for divorced/separated women and women's ability to obtain a divorce. Up until the 1970s women were very limited in their rights as divorcees, since there was little to no enforcement of maintenance orders and the guardianship rights they had were very limited. However, due to the many changes in legislation that took place in a very short time, women's rights were greatly increased and they were able to live

¹² *HC Deb* Vol. 671, 8 February 1963 c. 886.

¹³ S. Cretney, *Family Law in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford 2003), pp. 569-573 and 574-576.

their lives more freely and easily after a divorce was made final.¹⁴

With the creation of new legislation regarding divorce, it was possible for a greater number of women to step away from damaged or abusive relationships for the good of themselves or their children. This has been argued as a negative aspect of this legislation as a high divorce rate has been cited as one of the signs of a declining society. However, for women within certain circumstances, the ability to guarantee security and safety for themselves and their children was a blessing. The fact that there were changes made does not mean that there were not stipulations attached to this legislation. There were several important factors considered when debates on these issues were taking place which will also be addressed.

The final piece of legislation to be discussed in the Family category is the Fatal Accidents Act. This particular Act was designed to aid the courts' determination of how much monetary compensation to allocate to a widow and any dependents upon the untimely death of the breadwinner (usually the husband/father) of the family. This is the most antiquated piece of legislation which will be addressed and it is therefore a key example of the evolution of thought regarding family and especially women's changing position within it and society.

Finally, within the Personal category, as stated above, the main focus will be on abortion and contraception. While these have always been contentious issues, and traditionally ones on which the

¹⁴ P.A. Bromley, *Family Law* (London 1957), pp. 80-87.

major parties were not able to reach a consensus, there were some female MPs who were in favour of more relaxed laws, mainly in order to allow for women with extenuating circumstances to acquire an abortion more easily and safely. None of the Conservative representatives of the time were in favour of making abortions available to every woman for any reason. However, many saw that the high number of back street abortions and many injuries, and less frequently, instances of death, caused by unsanitary conditions and dangerous circumstances under which they were taking place as reasons to at least consider changing the existing laws. These factors sparked the debate that some sort of regulation was necessary so as to prevent these unnecessary injuries, as women were going to have an abortion one way or another if they wanted one.

With regard to contraception, most Conservative women had similar viewpoints to those they held regarding abortion, believing that widespread availability would promote promiscuity, which was seen as detrimental to society. Conversely, the argument was made that if contraception was made more widely available to women, the number of unwanted children and illegal abortions would be reduced.

These two issues divided both major parties on many occasions, with women oftentimes being caught in the middle as they were able to commiserate and understand why increased access to both were important but they found it difficult to make their arguments fearing the ramifications of more lenient laws. These are the two issues in which religious affiliation of the MPs played the largest

role. Those who were strongly religious opposed increased accessibility of both of these things, and were unfaltering in their beliefs in this regard. However, if an MP was not strongly committed to a religion, their beliefs on these issues tended to be less strongly against loosening of laws.¹⁵

There were some laws which were outdated, but were also difficult to update due to the nature of them. Laws concerning delicate matters, in which abortion is included, were and had always been approached carefully to ensure that they were handled appropriately and that the best interest of the parties involved would be served. When it came to something such as abortion, the lobbying done by outside groups was no small matter. Lobby groups were prominent and were able to reach a large part of the electorate, which therefore made them a key source of information on these contentious issues. Thus, especially with regard to this category, the influence of outside groups, not just lobby groups, is important in understanding the way in which the parties worked and a topic which will be discussed in conjunction with the MPs' participation in activities relating to these issues.

Literature Review

There are a number of sources which have been especially useful in the process of conducting this study. Because of the wide-range of women's issues addressed here, there is a plethora of books available, but very few of these specifically relate to Conservative women and party policy or legislation. Among these books there is an obvious divide between those specifically discussing women's

¹⁵ D. Marsh and J. Chambers, *Abortion Politics* (London 1981), p. 13.

roles within the Party and how they obtained the positions they did, those which examine more closely women and the work done once in Parliament and those which address specific issues.

The majority of texts written about women in politics focus quite broadly on questions such as: why are there so few, what part do women actually play in Parliament, why are more women drawn to the Conservative Party than the Labour Party, and what should women's roles within political parties be. However, this study focuses on women within the Conservative Party and, more specifically, their interest in issues relating to women's rights. This focus draws upon the stereotype that women in the early to mid twentieth century were only capable and interested in dealing with issues that relate specifically to women – specifically such issues as welfare, education and housing. Through focusing on other, equality-based, women's issues this study will explore Conservative women's impact on areas not previously discussed and serve to answer the following questions. Why were Conservative female MPs interested in some issues, but not others? Why was Conservative women's participation minimal in Parliament? What was the impact of Conservative women on equal pay, abortion, matrimonial and guardianship legislation? How can this be measured? Thus a key area that has been neglected by previous studies will be explored and a gap in the historiography of the period will start to be filled.

There are two core texts which specifically discuss women in the Conservative Party. These are *Conservative Women: A History of Women in the Conservative Party 1847 – 1997* by G.E. Maguire and

Iron Ladies: Why do Women Vote Conservative? by Beatrix Campbell. Both of these have something to offer to this study, however, the scope of each inhibits its usefulness in this context. These books provide a great deal of background information on which this study has built its base.

The Iron Ladies is a thorough discussion of the role of women within the party and society. The way in which Campbell succinctly describes the gender roles within the party and how women have fit in to these easily is telling of deep seated tradition within the Conservative Party. This is one of the most informative and insightful aspects of this source, as its discussion of party policy and the evolution of women's roles within the Party are validated by extensive research. But when these factors are combined with the evaluation of women within the party starting from the days of the Primrose League through the 1990s, this discussion becomes a text which covers such a wide spectrum of information (albeit within the limited context of gender) the depth in which the information is discussed becomes somewhat limited.

Thus, its strengths are also its limitations – while the discussion on women and their roles is insightful, Campbell does not discuss the details of the variations in the roles women played in Parliament and does not even touch upon the role women had with regard to the advancement of women in society. However, while these things factor into the research conducted for this thesis, they are but a part of hers and therefore for background information on adaptations made by the party to make it a more welcoming organisation for women it is very useful.

The one book which has proven most useful in researching the Conservative Party and what they have accomplished with regard to women and their roles within the various facets of the party is *Conservative Women* by G.E. Maguire. The book focuses on women from the time of the Primrose League to when Margaret Thatcher was Party Leader. While highly informative, given that Maguire covers 123 years, there is no in-depth look into specific issues. Again, as with many texts to be discussed, the time span proves to be the key limiting factor of this book.

Conservative Women is very informative with regard to the changing roles of women, both in the context of the larger party organisation and also the smaller constituency associations. Of the sources used for this thesis, this one surpasses all others with its use of primary sources, as everything from *Hansard* to Conservative Party Archive documents were used extensively. Maguire's book has different motives than this study. The intention of Maguire's book is to examine women within the party, and not necessarily with regard to their participation in the specific issues which are central to this thesis.

There are two other texts which have proven to be invaluable to this study. These focus more specifically on women in the House of Commons and address both parties in order to give an overview of the transitions that women made from working within the smaller party organisations to their rise within the Commons. These are *Women in the House* by Elizabeth Vallance and *Women at Westminster* by Pamela Brookes, which are both detailed in their

descriptions of women's changing roles and the positions they held within their parties, but both cover such a wide range of information and long time periods that although they touch on many important factors, they do not have the opportunity to examine all of the details closely.

Because of the higher number of Labour women in the Commons, there has been a disproportionate amount of attention given to Labour in the above two studies. A general lack of discussion about Conservative women leads one to draw the conclusion that number of representatives is the key determining factor in importance with regard to activities in the Commons. However, this study aims to negate this idea, as it will be shown that Conservative women's impact, at least on these issues was of importance, regardless of the number of them present in the Commons or actively participating in debates.

There are also several books written by women MPs which provide insight into their time and experience while in Parliament. One of these is *Political Woman* by Jean Mann. The information she provides with regard to women in general in Parliament provides insight into what life was like for female parliamentarians, through discussion of a broad range of issues associated with being a woman in a male-dominated arena. She also discusses the relationship between women from the different parties. The use of her own personal experiences and observations make this an interesting look into Parliament through the eyes of a woman, an opportunity which is provided in some other sources as well, but not always with as much insight as Mann displays.

Other such books include the two volumes of Margaret Thatcher's autobiography, *Path to Power* and *The Downing Street Years*. These books provide good insight into some of the problems faced by women within the Conservative Party. But given that the second volume is strictly about Thatcher's time as Prime Minister, her focus is largely on the major issues she faced in this role and not as much on the problems encountered because of her gender. One important part of this volume, though, is her insight into the relationships between men and women in the Commons, from a perspective that only Thatcher can provide.

With regard to texts which discuss the Conservative Party in general, there is a wealth of texts which focus on the post-war era. One of the main texts on the Conservatives is *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, which, as stated in the title, focuses very narrowly on membership. The authors use their survey data to give many valid conclusions to their discussion of why Party membership and activity was declining in the 1990s, some of which can be traced back to the 1950s-1970s (such as increased leisure time and other developing interests, i.e. the women's movement) and thus are worth considering in the context of this study. However, with such a broad range of information covered in their survey, and the time at which it was conducted, in addition to much of the information given falling outside of the scope of this study, it has largely been utilised for its information on membership as well as a base upon which the research presented here will build.

Another text which discusses the evolution of Party membership is *Angels in Marble* by Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver, which is an interesting text that succinctly and coherently describes the evolution of Party membership from the 1800s to the 1960s and the mindset of the 'new' electorate the Conservatives were attracting – the working class. This is a very thorough study which makes several relevant points regarding why the working class were (and were not) drawn to the Conservative Party, and thus provides a good description of factors (policy, activities, etc) which encouraged new members to join. Their point regarding the blurring of class lines and the emergence of the working class as a political force which not only drew them to the Conservatives, but also the Conservatives to them, is well made and substantiated.

The next books fall into a genre which explores the Conservative Party from the Parliamentary level, focusing on those in power and the major events which each leader and Cabinet faced, in addition to party policy and membership. John Ramsden has written two books which provide relevant survey information for this study: *The Age of Churchill and Eden, 1940-1957* and *The Winds of Change: Macmillan to Heath, 1957-1975*. These both give good insight into the party and thoroughly discuss the changes that the Conservatives were undergoing in the post-war era. His focus on the leaders themselves, in addition to discussions of those who worked closely with them, provides for an interesting account of events, which give the reader good insight into the party's evolution.¹⁶

¹⁶ J. Ramsden, *An Appetite for Power: A History of the Conservative Party Since 1830* (London 1998); J. Ramsden, *The Age of Churchill and Eden*,

There are also many good examples of wide-reaching survey books, one of which is *The Tories* by Alan Clark. While Clark covers 175 years in his study, he focuses more narrowly on the important events facing the party at various times in between 1922-1997, discussing major events in the world as well as disagreements and issues which arose in the party itself. This text is not comprehensive, nor does it claim to be. However, given the space in which Clark had to write about a significant portion of the party's history, he has covered many important issues thoroughly with a fair amount of insight. This is also, quite often, the case with other books that cover such a great expanse of time.¹⁷ There are others which cover significant time periods, but focus solely on the time in which the Conservatives were in power. These include *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill*, by Robert Blake, which again, is an informative overview of the Party while in power, but limited as a discussion that goes beyond policy and very high-level party politics is beyond its scope.¹⁸

These books, and others which have been mentioned, discuss the Party as a whole and focus on basic information regarding membership, electorate, policy and the general make up of the party. However, because their focus is on the party itself and not the roles of people within the party there is little to no mention of

1940-1957 (London 1995); J. Ramsden, *The Winds of Change: Macmillan to Heath, 1957-1975* (London 1996).

¹⁷ A. Clark, *The Tories and the Nation State 1922-1997* (London 1997); J. Charmley, *A History of Conservative Politics, 1900-1996* (Basingstoke 1996).

¹⁸ R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill*, (London 1972); R. Behrens, *The Conservative Party in Opposition 1974-1977: A Critical Analysis* (Coventry 1997).

women in most of them. If women are discussed, a brief mention of their position within the party and organisations in which they took part is often the most that is offered.¹⁹

These texts are all important and valuable to this study in their own ways, however, for various reasons, whether it is length of time discussed, content or narrow focus, their works are a supplement to this study, which, with its narrow focus will build upon these works in order to examine women's role in the party and with regard to women's issues more closely. This will be achieved by drawing on *Hansard*, which has been greatly underused in past studies on women in the Conservative Party, in addition to extensive archival research and use of newspaper and journal articles.

The use of *Hansard* has been instrumental to the development of this study, as over 30 years of debates have been utilised in order to fully supplement the secondary literature, and most importantly form the foundation for most of the arguments made. The evidence provided through verbatim debate resources demonstrates not only the increased participation of women in the Conservative Party when it comes to these issues, but also indicates the passion with which the key issues were approached.

In addition to *Hansard*, extensive use has been made of Parliamentary committee reports, another important forum for

¹⁹ P. Whiteley, P. Seyd and J. Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*; S. Ball and I. Holliday eds. *Mass Conservatism: The Conservatives and the Public since the 1880s* (London 2002); P. Norton, ed. *The Conservative Party* (London 1996).

women's participation in these issues. While not all women were on committees, and there were not women on all committees, these documents are still important as they further demonstrate the commitment made by Conservative women to the issues in this study.

2 – Women and the Conservative Party

In order to understand the Conservative women and their roles within the party and Parliament, various aspects of their careers and lives must be considered. In order to do this, how they became parliamentarians, their roles in organisations within the Party and Parliament as well as the way in which women were received in their party and Parliament will be examined. To begin, the various organisations which were instrumental in recruiting women and aiding their careers will be discussed.

The main women's organisation of the Conservative Party is the Women's National Advisory Committee (WNAC). This long-established committee was not only highly influential in encouraging the evolution of women's roles within the party but it was also known to have an impact on party policy. With regard to the advancement of women in the party, the WNAC not only actively recruited women, but it also produced literature about the party and issues deemed important to women, an important function which served to inform those who were interested in Conservative policy and was used to help recruit new female members.

The WNAC's role in the recruitment of women was crucial to increasing awareness of party policy among female voters. Following the 1945 election, for example, the WNAC pressured Area chairmen to take the necessary steps to ensure that female candidates were given increased support. This move was a follow-up to a policy instituted by Central Office which dictated that every short list had to have at least one woman on it. The cooperation of

organisations within the party was essential in order for such policies to be implemented.²⁰

The importance of the WNAC was largely due to the wide array of women who made up the organisation's membership. The membership of the WNAC was largely made up of current MPs, future MPs and women who wanted to be involved but only on a local level. Thus the varied roles of members gave women more influence in the party and allowed those members who questioned some women's desire for an increased role an indication of how willing women were to become involved.

One negative aspect of the organisation, at least in the early 1950s, was that they were recruiting women for the sake of having high numbers, not necessarily with the goal of increasing membership of politically-conscious women. However, this did change as the women within the WNAC became more aware of the needs of the party and desired to be a part of the larger party instead of simply the main forum for recruitment of women.

Throughout the years there have been many women important in the Conservative Party structure who were also active in the WNAC, including Evelyn Emmet, WNAC chairman from 1951 to 1954. While holding this office, Emmet was able to relay the resolutions passed by the committee to her colleagues within Parliament and therefore was an important asset to both organisations. Some key issues which she addressed during her time in this role were widows' pensions and children's passports. While not issues

²⁰ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p. 166.

discussed in this study, they are noteworthy as they are examples of further ways in which women were legally unequal to men until quite recently.²¹

Emmet was also very interested in foreign affairs, which became clear in her desire to see more women directly involved in foreign affairs, as well as through her own participation in various international bodies. However, the most important work she did whilst serving as WNAC chairman was regarding equal pay. As will be seen in later chapters, she was very much in favour of the principle, and although she approached it cautiously, she was not afraid to make her views regarding this known throughout the party, and most of the action she took started in the WNAC.

The WNAC is an amalgamation of the Area Women's Advisory Committees (AWAC). These were also women-only organisations, but which were constructed on a constituency level. These smaller branches allowed women to address issues pertinent to their area. These smaller organisations were also responsible for recruitment of female members at a local level. Through these organisations, the party gained enthusiastic women to put forward for more nationally recognised roles, including attendance at the annual WNAC conference and as candidates for parliamentary seats. None of the women MPs being studied were recruited in this way, but they were active in their areas and constituencies prior to (and following) their election to Parliament.²²

²¹ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p. 157.

²² Area Women's Advisory Committee Resolutions, Oxford, Bodleian Library, CPA, CCO 170/5/3.

In addition to their role as a recruitment agency for the Conservative Party, the AWACs and WNAC provided the opportunity for women to express their views and listen to what others had to say regarding issues of importance to women. A variety of women took the opportunities provided by the meetings to make speeches and ensure that their voices were heard. In addition to being members of the WNAC, many women held offices within the party organisation and even more frequently gave lectures at meetings and national conferences which addressed pressing women's issues. Several female MPs, including Joan Vickers and Margaret Thatcher, participated in these events. Thus, the forum created by the WNAC was not only a way for MPs to express their views regarding certain issues, it also allowed for the MPs to listen to opinions from an audience that was genuinely concerned about the issues being discussed, in addition to being one made up of members of the electorate.²³

Other subsidiary organisations such as Women for Westminster, the Housewives League and the Married Women's Association should not be overlooked, as through their meetings and literature they, at the very least, informed the public about the views they held regarding such things as equal pay and marital rights. Their work was primarily conducted through research in local areas which they undertook themselves as they did not have a direct party connection. The Housewives' League was one particular organisation which claimed no party affiliation, but it was clear that they were Conservative-leaning in their views. The Married

²³ Memorandum from the Chairman of the Women's National Advisory Committee, Oxford, Bodleian Library, CPA, CCO 4/5/381.

Women's Association, on the other hand, began as a non-party organisation but following a rift became strictly Conservative and influential with regard to the party's work, especially on marital and divorce rights.²⁴

Moving on from party-affiliated women's organisations to those linked with Parliament, potentially the most important ancillary organisation for the Conservatives is the 1922 Committee. The main function of this committee is to keep the leaders of the party informed of the feelings and ideas of the backbench. All backbench MPs make up the committee, but the most influential part of it, the Executive Committee is elected annually. Female members of the Executive Committee in the 1950s and 1960s included Lady Tweedsmuir and Betty Harvie-Anderson. While they were the only two women elected to the Executive Committee in the 29 years discussed in this study, there were others elected to sub-committees.²⁵

In addition to these primary organisations, there were also many Parliamentary sub-committees set up during this time which were formed to deal with specific legislation. These committees were made up of MPs, members of the above organisations and other party members who were interested in the issues at hand. The importance of these, as with those above cannot be underestimated as many of the resolutions passed regarding

²⁴ MWA Pamphlet Published 1950, Oxford, Bodleian Library, CPA, CCO 3/2/40 and British Housewives' League, Oxford, Bodleian Library, CPA 3/3/24.

²⁵ '1922 Committee Appointments', *The Times*, 13 November 1959 and '1922 Committee Change', *The Times*, 27 November 1963.

certain issues were at the very least seriously considered by policy makers if not adopted when legislation was being written.²⁶

The number of organisations set up to research, discuss or simply review issues of the time is too great to discuss in detail at this time. In this are included interparty organisations (i.e. Six-Point Group), other Conservative committees (i.e. Cripps Committee) and organisations that were independent of any political party but had an influence on legislation (i.e. The National Union of Teachers). These organisations proved to be important in many ways, one specific example is the product of the Cripps Committee's research, *Fair Share for the Fair Sex*, which proved to be ground breaking and well-regarded among both MPs and members of the wider party. It shed much needed light on the plight of women in many different areas of life which will be discussed further in later chapters.²⁷

The importance of women working within mixed sex organisations is itself worthy of note. The interactions, on a more personal level and in a more direct way than debates in Parliament, allowed for women to work much more closely with their male colleagues. This was not always easy, as there were tensions surrounding women's roles within the Party and Parliament, as well as deeply imbedded stereotypes regarding women's capabilities as legislators. It was also noticed that while the Party wanted women's votes and

²⁶ General Election 1955 Questions of Policy, Status of Women Committee, Oxford, Bodleian Library, CPA, CCO 4/6/109 and Parliamentary Sub-Committee Meeting Correspondence, Oxford, Bodleian Library, CPA 4/8/381.

²⁷ Conservative Political Centre, *Fair Share for the Fair Sex*, (Reading 1969).

participation, they were willing to neglect their interests when it came to creating legislation, or even raising issues in Parliament.²⁸ But it is also true that through their work in these organisations, while action was not taken especially in the immediate post war era, they were at the very least raising awareness of the problems women faced.

Beatrix Campbell recognises this problem as a problem of power and what it produces: '...the history of Conservative women is about the problem of power, and the engagement of power with the powerless.'²⁹ The recognition that it was indeed a power struggle and that women had long supported and boosted men without gaining anything in return is important in this context as within mixed sex politics, this has long been the case. Even into the later twentieth century when there was a slight shift and women were receiving more recognition for the things that they were doing as well as for their abilities as legislators, there was still a great disparity between the sexes.

Power was not the only issue in mixed sex organisations, however. There were constant struggles over the importance of certain issues – with women's issues being specifically targeted by some women and many of their male colleagues remaining unwilling to address these. However, with the changes that were occurring in Britain during the mid-twentieth century, it was difficult for the Conservatives, especially, to argue that there was no need to

²⁸ J. Hinton, 'Militant Housewives: the British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), p. 131.

²⁹B. Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why to Women Vote Tory?* (London, 1987), p. 265.

address such issues as abortion, equal pay and guardianship. Mark Jarvis recognises this in his discussion of the difficulty that the Conservatives faced when dealing with a rapidly changing society, they were forced to decide 'which areas of social legislation should be altered and what consequences there might be for society as a whole.'³⁰ Thus the decisions that were made were done so carefully – the Street Offences Acts were passed, but abortion was an issue barely touched upon by the Conservative governments of the time. Their ability pick and choose which social issues provided Conservatives with the opportunity to justify the decisions that they did make on morality and upholding long-standing Conservative values.

Focus now turns to the Parliamentary side of the Conservative Party. Within Parliament, female Conservative MPs were greatly outnumbered, not just by the men in their party, but in Parliament as a whole throughout the period 1950 to 1979.

As can be seen in the below table (Table 2.1), the numbers of women elected to the House were consistently low, with the largest number, 29, elected in 1964. Considering that these numbers at their highest represent 4.8% of the total population of Parliament, they are not, by any means, high. The fact that this great disparity had only improved minimally since women were first given the opportunity to sit in the Commons is an indication of the perception of women's role in politics. There either were not sufficient candidates for the positions or there were still great prejudices

³⁰ M. Jarvis, *Conservative governments, morality and social change in affluent Britain* (Manchester, 2005), p. 17.

within the parties against putting women up for winnable seats. Further potential reasons for this disparity will be explored by looking at the Conservative Party and the ways in which they encouraged, recruited and treated women. These will also be compared to factors within the Labour Party, as apart from the 1970 election, when the Conservative Party returned more women than Labour, there have consistently been more women Labour MPs than women Conservative MPs. In order to more fully examine the two parties, the similarities and differences in opinion regarding women's issues held by both Conservative and Labour female MPs, as well as their ability to work together will also be explored.

Table 2.1 – Elected Female Conservative and Labour MPs 1950–1974³¹

	Conservative	Labour	Other	Total
1950	6	14	1	21
1951	6	11	0	17
1955	10	14	0	24
1959	12	13	0	25
1964	11	18	0	29
1966	7	19	0	26
1970	15	10	1	25
1974 (F)	9	13	1	22
1974 (O)	7	18	2	25

There was not much interest shown in becoming an MP by women, as the traditional values and beliefs of the Conservative Party resonated through all party levels, and was especially prominent in certain constituencies.³² This is an area where women were most active and many had been a part of the Party for such a long time

³¹ House of Commons Library, Factsheet M4, 'Statistics of Women in Parliament', p. 4, accessed via www.parliament.uk/directories/hcio/cfm on 14 July 2006.

³² J. Rasmussen, 'Female Political Career Patterns and Leadership Disabilities in Britain: The Crucial Role of Gatekeeper', *Polity*, 13 (Summer 1981) p. 604.

that many of them held the same beliefs as their male counterparts and therefore believed that women were not as well suited to represent the party in Parliament as were men.³³

In addition to lack of interest, the Conservative women's path to the Commons was strewn with difficulties. The selection process could be tiring and, in some cases was demoralising and even humiliating for many women. The process of running for Parliament consisted of several steps. The first one was taken when the person interested in running put their name forward to a committee of party officers with the sponsorship of two current MPs. If this application was successful, they were put on a list of approved candidates and put forward for the consideration of the constituencies. The constituencies would then choose their own shortlists, after these had been generated, there was a series of interviews, and following these, the constituency would choose their candidate and then the final list of candidates was created.

This long, sometimes arduous process was not an easy one for a qualified male to navigate and was often even more difficult for a woman, due largely to the fact that, at least within the Conservative Party, women's roles were changing and these changes were being contested. When the traditionalist values of the Conservative Party are also taken into consideration, it is easy to see that any woman who did make it through the process successfully had to prove herself to be exceptional, not just more

³³ E. Vallance, *Women in the House: A Study of Women Members of Parliament* (London 1979), p. 9.

qualified, compared to her opponents.

The breaking point in the above described process for many women proved to be the interview stage within the constituencies, as this was the point at which some were subjected to blatant discrimination. Instead of being asked questions about her career, goals, beliefs and values as were male candidates, some women were subjected to questions regarding how her candidacy would affect her family life, how her family life would affect her candidacy and how her husband and children felt about her working. If a female candidate was not married, there was a chance that she would be asked why, if she had any intention of marrying and if she planned on continuing to work should she get married. Clearly all of these questions were inappropriate, as they had no bearing on a woman's qualifications for candidacy. However, it was described by many women as the norm.³⁴

In addition to this, Patricia Hornsby-Smith, upon her selection as the candidate for Chislehurst in 1950, recalls being asked very specific and difficult questions regarding the Education Bill which was before the House at the time. Not only were the questions difficult, but she notes that they were more difficult than those asked to her male counterparts. In addition to this, she recalled to Melanie Phillips the phone call she received the night after her interview by the selection committee and noted 'misery' in the voice of the caller who told her that she had been adopted.³⁵ Thus, not only for Hornsby-Smith was the selection process difficult, but

³⁴ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p. 166.

³⁵ Phillips, *The Divided House*, p. 77.

it appeared that she faced opposition within the constituency association which could prove detrimental to her campaign. Of course, however, she was able to overcome these obstacles and win the election.

This process does demonstrate the strength of the stereotype that women, and especially those who were mothers, were seen to be more unreliable and thus less likely to be put forward for important positions, whether it was a promotion or as a candidate for a public office, and shows that some believed that women's place was in the home. These stereotypes were so imbedded that it was never considered that the converse might be true and that women's life outside the home might determine what her home life was like.

Despite these stereotypes, many women were willing and proved themselves able of becoming candidates, and in many cases, MPs, thus proving that they were capable of working successfully outside of the home. Table 2.2 below lists those Conservative women who ran and were successful between 1950 and 1979.

Table 2.2 – Conservative Women MPs 1950–1979³⁶

Name	Constituency	Dates
Florence Horsbrugh	Dundee, Manchester Moss Side	1931-1945, 1950-59
Irene Ward	Wallsend, Tynemouth	1931-1945, 1950-Feb. 1974
(Frances) Viscountess Davidson	Hemel Hempstead	1937-1959
(Priscilla) Lady Tweedsmuir	Aberdeen South	1946-1966
Eveline Hill	Manchester Wythenshawe	1950-1964
Patricia Hornsby-Smith	Chislehurst	1950-1966, 1970-Feb. 1974

³⁶ *Former Women Members of the House of Commons by Party*, accessed via <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/Observatory%20docs/MPs%202%20by%20party.doc>, on 7 July 2006.

Edith Pitt	Birmingham Edgbaston	1953-1966
Evelyn Emmet	East Grinstead	1955-64
Joan Vickers	Plymouth Devonport	1955-Feb. 1974
(Irene) Mervyn Pike	Melton	1956-Feb. 1974
(Muriel) Lady Gammans	Hornsey	1957-1966
Betty Harvie-Anderson	Renfrewshire East	1959-1979
Margaret Thatcher	Finchley	1959-1992
Joan Quennell	Petersfield	1960-Feb. 1974
Jill Knight	Birmingham Edgbaston	1966-1997
Joan Hall	Keighley	1970-Feb. 1974
Mary Holt	Preston North	1970-Feb. 1974
Constance Monks	Chorley	1970-Feb. 1974
Peggy Fenner	Rochester & Chatham, Medway	1970-Feb. 1974, 1979-1997
Sally Oppenheim	Gloucester	1970-1987
Janet Fookes	Merton & Morden, Plymouth Drake	1970-1997
Elaine Kellett-Bowman	Lancaster	1970-1997
Lynda Chalker	Wallasey	Feb. 1974-1992

To fully understand the position of female MPs within the Conservative Party, one must look at the way in which the party changed since women were first able to become MPs. From when Lady Astor first took her seat in the House of Commons to when Margaret Thatcher became the first female Party Leader, many positive changes took place which allowed women to rise through the party. Prior to Lady Astor's introduction into the Commons, there had been a number of practical issues to consider, such as would a female MP be allowed into areas from which women had previously been barred? Would she sit amongst other Members in the House, or should she have a separate section? Women, before 1917 had not even been allowed to sit in sight of Members whilst in the gallery, they were forced to sit behind a grille. However, when it came time for her to enter the House, Astor was allowed to sit

amongst the men, although, she sat off to one side, more often than not by herself.³⁷

When Lady Astor took her seat, the country's social climate was changing so that women's place in Parliament was becoming more widely accepted. The majority of 5203 which she held in her first election has been largely attributed to her popularity in her constituency as her husband had held the seat prior to her election, and thus she was well known by most constituents. Her return to the House was a landmark occasion not only because she was a woman but also because of her lack of involvement in the suffrage campaign. This can be considered remarkable because, at the time, suffrage was thought to be the only area where women's political interest lay.

Following her introduction to the Commons, Lady Astor remained a prominent figure in the House until she stood down at the 1945 election. Between 1919 and 1945 the total number of women who held seats rose to 37, 17 of whom were Conservatives. This is by no means a large number compared to the total number of MPs at the time, but it is notable that so many women made it through the process and were elected when less than 30 years prior they were not even eligible for nomination.³⁸ However, as has been pointed out in previous studies on women in politics, the most significant thing about women's presence in the Commons is how few of them there have been. While the scope of this research does not extend into the reasons behind this, there are many contending opinions

³⁷ P. Brookes, *Women at Westminster* (Plymouth 1967), p. 20.

³⁸ Vallance, *Women in the House*, pp. 271-8.

and it would seem, rather clearly, that lack of interest in becoming an MP on the part of women and lack of support from their parties would be the most likely reasons behind this.³⁹

By 1950, the overall attitude toward women in the Conservative Party had grown to be one of acceptance of them as members, albeit in the background, as they were not truly welcome in constituency offices or Parliament at this time. Women had traditionally held the role of events planners and hostesses for parties within the constituencies, and most importantly as support for their husbands if they were MPs or otherwise active in the upper strata of the party, due to the longstanding traditions of the party.⁴⁰ However, when they wanted to run for Parliament or become an Agent or Organiser within the constituencies there was often much resistance from some party members. The major reason was that traditional roles, specifically those of wife and mother were of high importance to the Conservatives, as they had long been a family-oriented party.⁴¹ This translates to a slow, reluctant change for women who wanted to transition from these roles into ones which called them away from the home and family for any extended period of time, a battle which they had been fighting for nearly 100 years by the 1950s.

³⁹ Two examples of such arguments can be found in Rasmussen, 'Female Political Career Patterns & Leadership Disabilities in Britain: The Crucial Role of Gatekeepers in Regulating Entry to the Political Elite', *Polity*, pp. 600-620 and P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, 'If Only More Candidates Came Forward': Supply-Side Explanations of Candidate Selection in Britain', *British Journal of Political Science*, 23 (July 1993), pp. 373-408.

⁴⁰ J. Hannam, 'Women and Politics' in *Women's History Britain 1850-1945*, J. Purvis ed. (London 1995) pp. 226-227.

⁴¹ Campaign speech notes and background briefs for the General Election October 1951, National Library of Scotland, Papers of Lady Priscilla Tweedsmuir, Acc. 11884.7.

It is also important to note that much resistance to women's advancement in the party came from women. This is another often debated issue as there are many potential reasons as to why women could be so unsupportive of other women, some of which will be discussed later. There was widespread feeling throughout society that if women were given increased incentive to go out and work they would do so en masse and leave their families which would cause great disruption to society and allow a generation of children to grow up delinquent.

Another more convincing reason seems to be that women, who had been working in the home and were comfortable with that lifestyle, were afraid of the pressure they might feel to go out and become 'career women' themselves and their reluctance to do so.

Resistance from husbands also seems to be a relevant reason for this – which does harken back to one of the cornerstones of Conservatism, the previously mentioned tendency to be traditional in their beliefs about the roles of each member of a family. These views appear to have changed, if only slightly, between 1950 and 1979, with increasing numbers of women leaving the home to work, even if it was only on a part-time or temporary basis because they wanted to instead of having to take on work outside the home out of necessity. In politics, many women were being taken on in prominent roles within the Party and its organisations. The reluctance that still remained for many, however, is secondary to the fact that there were changes being made and therefore, for the first time in the Party's history, women were able to work closely with men and feel far less inferior than they had previously. Naturally, not all resistance to women in visible positions ended

with the emancipation of a chosen few, but there were fewer hurdles in women's way.

With regard to the results of the 1945 election, only one Conservative female MP was returned—Lady Davidson for Hemel Hempstead (held until 1959), who incidentally ran against another woman, Doris Mobbs. When Davidson was first returned to the Commons in 1937 it was one of the few instances in which a Conservative woman was put up for a safe seat. As was the case when Lady Astor entered the House in 1919, Davidson's electability was due largely to the fact that her husband had held the seat before her and upon his appointment to the House of Lords, she was the only candidate considered to replace him, which in itself is notable.⁴² Davidson was not the only Conservative woman in the House for long, as in a 1946 by-election, Lady (Priscilla) Tweedsmuir was elected for Aberdeen South, a seat she held for 20 years.⁴³

The interest of both women in issues which mainly affected women became obvious quickly. They were active in debates involving the most topical issues of the early post-war era: housewives' rights, consumer issues and education. As previously stated, these early topics are not those which will be discussed here, but are worth mentioning due to their importance in the evolution of women's interests. Davidson's interest in women's issues stemmed from her

⁴² Vallance, *Women in the House*, p. 28.

⁴³ Priscilla Jean Fortescue Buchan (1915–1978): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/39696. At the time of election, she was Lady Priscilla Grant, but following her marriage to John Norman Stuart Buchan, second Baron Tweedsmuir, she became Lady Tweedsmuir. For the sake of clarity, she will be referred to as Lady Tweedsmuir.

interest in the plight of housewives trying to run a family home with rations in place.⁴⁴ Tweedsmuir's chosen topics also involved housewives, but she was more focused on the fact that women had been made promises during and since the war which had not been fulfilled, and she was prepared to fight for these causes to ensure positive action was finally taken.⁴⁵

In the 1950 election there were 28 female Conservative candidates compared with only 14 in 1945.⁴⁶ Despite the larger number put forward, there were only six returned, including Lady Davidson and Lady Tweedsmuir. The other women returned were Irene Ward, (who had been MP for Wallsend 1931-1945), for Tynemouth (held until February 1974); Eveline Hill for Manchester, Wythenshaw (held until 1964); Patricia Hornsby-Smith for Chislehurst (held until 1966); and Florence Horsbrugh, who had represented Dundee from 1931 until her defeat in the 1945 election, for Manchester, Moss Side (held until 1959).⁴⁷

The Conservatives lost the election, which kept Labour in power for a further year, with Clement Attlee as Prime Minister. The loss of this election could partially explain the disparity between the number of Conservative women put forward and the number who won. However, a more likely reason, which was briefly touched

⁴⁴ *HC Deb* Vol. 439, 26 June 1947 c. 1582.

NB: All *Hansard* debates cited in this thesis, unless otherwise noted, are from the Fifth Series

⁴⁵ *HC Deb* Vol. 472, 7 March 1950 c. 198.

⁴⁶ Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, p. 171.

⁴⁷ Irene Mary Bewick Ward (1895–1980): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/45466, Eveline Hill (1898–1973): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/70443, Florence Gertrude Horsbrugh (1889–1969): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/33997, (Margaret) Patricia Hornsby-Smith (1914–1985): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/39178.

upon above, is that few women were put up for winnable seats. The Conservative Party, while encouraging more women to run, still seemed to be uncertain as to whether or not they actually wanted women in the Commons and therefore put them up against opponents who were likely to win in constituencies that were renowned for not voting Conservative. This policy, despite being very discouraging and intrinsically sexist, was clearly not a significant deterrent for some women.

The next election, held in 1951, saw the Conservatives return to power under the leadership of Winston Churchill. Known for his war-time policies, and therefore being able to lead the party and country in times of trouble, he was the clear choice for leader at this time. However, with regard to the idea of women in politics, he was known for disapproving greatly of their role both in the Commons and in prominent positions within the Party itself.⁴⁸ Despite this, he appointed Florence Horsbrugh to the post of Minister of Education, and she was therefore the first woman in the Conservative Party to be given a senior position. It must be noted in this instance that while Churchill's gesture was forward thinking and perhaps a bit out of character, it was not entirely without flaws as he claimed that he had decided that he wanted a small Cabinet and therefore, Horsbrugh, while holding the position of Minister of Education was not in the Cabinet for her first two years in the role.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, p. 180.

⁴⁹ C. Law, *Women, A Modern Political Dictionary* (New York 2000), pp. 84-85.

In the 1951 election, the same six women were returned as had been in the previous election. In total, 77 female candidates stood in this election, of which 25 were Conservative. While the number of women returned was not particularly high once again, as stated above, the Conservative Party held their majority at this election, which meant changes regarding women's rights that had been outlined in the Party's manifesto had an increased likelihood of being implemented. These pledges included better wages, most importantly, equal pay in the government services, and increased accessibility to food, as well as a generally improved lifestyle for the people of the country. There were, however, no immediate actions taken toward the realisation of these promises.⁵⁰

The 1955 General Election saw the Conservatives retain power with Anthony Eden, who had taken over from Churchill earlier that year, maintain his position as Prime Minister. Despite his aspirations and apparent abilities, his premiership was short lived and not very successful. As Blake states, 'He was...unlucky.'⁵¹ Through rates problems, domestic issues and ill health, Eden's premiership lasted only two years, as he resigned in January 1957. At this point, Harold Macmillan took over as Prime Minister and remained in that position until 1963. The 1955 election was more remarkable than previous elections with regard to the number of women returned to the Commons, as the Conservatives had, for the first time, eight female MPs. Of these eight women, only one of them had not

⁵⁰ *United for Peace and Progress: The Conservative and Unionist Party's Policy*, accessed via <http://www.conservative-party.net/manifestos/1955/1955-conservative-manifesto.shtml> on 6 December 2006.

⁵¹ R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (London 1972), pp. 274-275.

previously stood for election, Evelyn Emmet who was returned for East Grinstead, a seat she held until 1964. Joan Vickers, who was adopted for Devonport, had previously stood in 1945. The remaining Conservative women in the House all kept the seats they had previously held.⁵²

When forming his Cabinet, Eden was very cautious in considering women. He retained Patricia Hornsby-Smith as the Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Health and she was therefore initially the only woman given an appointment. However, in December 1955, Edith Pitt was given the appointment of Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance. While there was not much female representation within the government itself, there were many women who were given seats within the important backbench organisations. Eveline Hill was elected as chairman of the Conservative Health and Social Services Committee and Frances Davidson maintained her position in the 1922 Committee.⁵³

In between the 1955 and 1959 elections, there were a number of by-elections, two of which returned female Conservatives to the Commons. One of these was caused by Anthony Nutting's (Melton) resignation over the Suez Crisis in 1956. Mervyn Pike, the managing director of a pottery manufacturing firm, who had previously contested two elections (1951 and 1955), was chosen as

⁵² *Former Women Members of the House of Commons by Party*, accessed via <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/Observatory%20docs/MPs%202%20by%20party.doc>, on 7 July 2006.

⁵³ Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, p. 193.

his replacement.⁵⁴ The other seat that became available was for Hornsey, upon the death of Leonard Gammans in 1957. As had happened previously in other constituencies his wife, Muriel, was chosen to stand. While the majority that she had was reduced by 9000 from that of her husband's, she was well liked in the constituency and therefore able to retain her seat until 1966 when she stood down.⁵⁵ It must be mentioned that at this time there were two other women elected to the Commons, who in some studies are counted among the numbers of Conservative women. Patricia MacLaughlin and Patricia Ford were both elected for the Ulster Unionist Party, which while closely associated with the Conservative Party, incorporates an area and issues that, due to time and space constraints will not be discussed in this study.

Following the 1959 election, the Commons, with regard to the population of female MPs was much unchanged from the previous three elections. This election did see the departure of two long-serving Conservative women, Florence Horsbrugh (who was offered a peerage) and Frances Davidson (who stood down), which potentially lowered the number of Conservative women in the Commons to eight, but there were two new women elected. One member elected was one of the fastest rising party members of the time; the significance of this person's rise is another landmark, one of many for the Conservatives with regard to women. The person in question is Margaret Thatcher. After standing in two prior elections, she was finally elected for Finchley in 1959, a seat she

⁵⁴ (Irene) Mervyn Parnicott Pike (1918–2004): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/93152.

⁵⁵ Annie Muriel Gammans (1898–1989): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/70442.

held until 1992, a tenure which included her time as Prime Minister. The second new member elected at this time was Betty Harvie-Anderson for Renfrew East, a landowner from Scotland who had been active in the party, and had stood in three elections prior to her return in 1959. She had continued success in this constituency until 1979 when she retired from the Commons.⁵⁶ In 1960, the number of Conservative women increased by one more when Joan Quennell, who had never previously stood for election was returned for the safe seat of Petersfield in a by-election.⁵⁷

Of the ten members elected in 1959, three were given ministerial positions. The only new appointment was that of Mervyn Pike to the role of Postmaster-General. Edith Pitt and Patricia Hornsby-Smith were retained as ministers, but were appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health and Joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance respectively. Hornsby-Smith held her post until 1961, at which time she stepped down and was replaced by Thatcher.⁵⁸

The women's issues that were being discussed in the late 1950s and early 1960s began to include more equality-based topics such as marital rights and guardianship, a situation of which these women took great advantage. There were a number of laws passed at this time regarding divorce and maintenance rights for women, abortion came to the fore as an important issue, and as a

⁵⁶ (Margaret) Betty Harvie-Anderson (1913–1979): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/63849, and Margaret Thatcher *The Path to Power* (London, 1995), pp. 99-101.

⁵⁷ Vallance, *Women in the House*, p. 53.

⁵⁸ Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, p. 218.

perpetual issue, equal pay was still very much on the minds of many women in Parliament.

In 1962, Harold Macmillan decided to completely restructure his Cabinet, an action which, much to the dismay of many, included removing Edith Pitt from her position in the Ministry of Health.⁵⁹ Following this, in 1963, Macmillan stepped down amidst the swirl of controversy which had taken over the Party, also citing ill health (as he required prostate surgery) for his departure. At this point, Alec Douglas-Home took over and remained as Party Leader until 1965.⁶⁰

In the 1964 election, the party struggled greatly, as they had been losing credibility rapidly while in office, and proceeded to lose many seats, as well as the election. Two of the seats lost were held by women, namely Evelyn Emmet and Eveline Hill. While Emmet accepted a peerage and moved to the House of Lords, Hill lost her seat to Labour member Alfred Morris who retained the seat until 1997.⁶¹ The other female members managed to keep their seats, at least until the next, quickly called election of 1966.

Labour won this election, but secured their majority as the 1964 election had not. Whereas in the 1964 election, Labour won by only five seats, in 1966 they won by 111 seats, cementing their

⁵⁹ Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, p. 218.

⁶⁰ R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill*, pp. 289-90.

⁶¹ Evelyn Violet Elizabeth Emmet (1899–1980):
doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/50059 and Eveline Hill (1898–1973):
doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/70443.

position for the next six years.⁶² In this election, a number of Conservative women left the House including Patricia Hornsby-Smith and Lady Tweedsmuir. Edith Pitt died suddenly in 1966, which left a third Conservative seat to go to Labour. The only new Conservative woman to join the House in this election was Jill Knight, who won the seat for Edgbaston, a seat she held until 1997.⁶³

The election of 1970 saw an almost completely new group of female MPs for the Conservatives, as the prior two elections, as well as the four years in between elections saw either the retirement, death or loss of seat for many members. The newly elected members were as follows: Peggy Fenner (Rochester and Chatham held until February 1974), Joan Hall (Keighley held until February 1974), Janet Fookes (Plymouth, Drake held until 1997), Mary Holt (Preston North held until February 1974), Elaine Kellet-Bowman (Lancaster held until 1997), Constance Monks (Chorley held until February 1974) and Sally Oppenheim (Gloucester held until 1987). In addition to these women joining the Commons, many MPs who had previously held seats were able to retain them including Margaret Thatcher and Irene Ward. In fact, following this election the number of Conservative women reached its highest number since they were allowed into the Commons, with the total reaching fifteen.

⁶² D. Butler and A. King, *The British General Election of 1964* (London 1965), p. 101.

⁶³ Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, pp. 231-232.

This election saw the Conservatives return to power, with Edward Heath as their leader. According to Alan Clark, Heath's premiership was another that was overwrought with obstacles.⁶⁴ Given the various economic problems the country was facing at the time, the Heath Government was faced with making cuts to various programmes instituted by its predecessors. These cuts, of course, included Margaret Thatcher (as Minister for Education and Science) removing free school milk for eight to eleven year olds. The difficulties faced by the government at this time began to pave the way for Margaret Thatcher to challenge Heath for Party Leadership in 1974.

Heath's feelings about women in politics will be discussed in later chapters, however, his ministerial appointments indicate that he was not against them holding office. He thus kept very much in stride with those appointments made by Douglas-Home as he selected few women for ministerial positions. In addition to Margaret Thatcher, in 1972, Heath appointed Lady Tweedsmuir to Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.⁶⁵

While Heath was not a particularly strong supporter of women's rights, he seemed to (albeit a bit reluctantly) realise that there were problems within society and therefore put together a committee to look into the plight of women. The Cripps Committee, which researched women's roles in all areas of life including work, home and children, culminated in the publication of a well-known

⁶⁴ A. Clark, *The Tories: Conservatives and the Nation State from 1922-1997* (London 1998), pp. 413-417.

⁶⁵ *Women in the House of Commons*, accessed via <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/M04C.pdf>, on 23 May 2007.

and popular pamphlet, *Fair Share for the Fair Sex*.⁶⁶ This publication was well-received on both sides of the Commons as it brought many issues which had been widely ignored in the past to the fore. The wider importance of this will be discussed later.

In the election of February 1974 the effects of Heath's ineptitude were demonstrated, as Labour won the election, albeit marginally. The second election of that year, held in October, solidified this position though with Labour increasing their majority to 43 seats, as compared to five in the February 1974 election.⁶⁷ In the first election of this year, nine Conservative women either lost or stepped down from their seats, leaving the number at a meagre four female representatives. Irene Ward, the only MP to not lose her seat, stepped down after serving 38 years in the House which made her, at the time, the longest serving female MP. Only one of the women who lost their seats, Peggy Fenner, was to eventually return to the House (she won a seat again in 1979, which she retained until 1997), and the majority of the other women were only in the House for one term. Therefore, while the results of the 1970 election were remarkable, they were short-lived as only one new Conservative woman was to return to the House in the 1974 elections, and that was Lynda Chalker (Wallasey held until 1992).⁶⁸

It was in 1975 that Margaret Thatcher became the first female Party Leader for the Conservatives. After a very contentious

⁶⁶ Vallance, *Women in the House*, p. 135.

⁶⁷ *British Governments and Elections since 1945*, accessed via <http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/area/uk/uktable.htm>, on 30 January 2008.

⁶⁸ *Former Women Members of the House of Commons by Party*, accessed via <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/Observatory%20docs/MPs%202%20by%20party.doc>, on 7 July 2006.

leadership race, she triumphed over Edward Heath and maintained her position until 1992. Given that, at the time, there were very few women in Parliament, for a woman to become leader of one of the major parties was almost inconceivable. Thatcher herself noted that it was not easy for women in politics at the time, 'I think it would be extremely difficult for a woman to make it to the top...I have always taken the view that to get to the very top one has to have experience in one of the three important posts...they give you confidence in yourself and give others confidence in you.' The notability of her win is not only due to the fact that she was female, but also the party for which she became leader, and according to Thatcher, the fact that she had not held any of the 'three important posts'.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Interview with the *Evening Standard*, 15 October 1974, as quoted in M. Thatcher, *Path to Power*, (London 1995), pp. 261-262.

3 – EMPLOYMENT

Equal pay was a secondary goal, after receiving the vote, of the women's suffrage movement.¹ Major changes in legislation and the full recognition of the problem only came into focus some 60 years ago, despite the fact that women had long been paid markedly less than their male co-workers, often for doing the same work. The arguments defending this disparity varied from men having families to look after to the idea that women were unable to do as much or as high quality work as men. However, many proponents of equal pay recognised that most working women were equal to their male colleagues in terms of quality of work and also that many were single or had been forced into the workplace due to the needs of their families which were not being met by their husbands' low wages. Factors such as this indicate that the argument made against equal pay was incorrect, and thus the discrepancy in pay between men and women was unjust.

In this chapter, the historical background of the issue of equal pay will be examined, including the extra-parliamentary campaign, Commons debates and eventual introduction of new legislation. Both sides of the debate will be explored, building upon the above arguments to show the diverse views on this topic. The focus is especially on Conservative Party policy and more specifically the female representatives' involvement, in order to demonstrate that the importance of their impact in the passing of this legislation.

¹ M. Stacey and M. Price, *Women, Power and Politics* (London 1981), p. 174.

Conservative women's input into this issue was varied. There were many female MPs who were staunch proponents of equal pay throughout the mid-twentieth century. However, there were also many women who were opposed to its implementation. Those opposed, as will be seen, however, were not opposed to increasing equality between the sexes, but to the consequences of the implementation of equal pay. The majority of Conservative MPs, both male and female, were in favour of the implementation of equal pay. There was also support for the issue from the Labour side of the Commons. The interest from both sides created an atmosphere which allowed for a great deal of interparty cooperation. The discussion of this debate within the Conservative Party will begin with Lady Astor's role during her time in Parliament.

Despite widespread support for equal pay in the early twentieth century, there were many obstacles facing those in favour of it, and one of the most obvious was getting time in Parliament to debate the issue. The issue of equal pay for both sexes had been raised in the Commons as early as 1917.² However, given that when Lady Astor entered the Commons, certain women over the age of 30 had recently been given the right to vote, it was unlikely that the male-dominated House of Commons would consider another drastic change which would further alter women's social status. This, however, did not stop women from lobbying for these changes. Although Astor had never been a suffragette, she did feel obligated

² *HC Deb* Vol. 94, 8 June 1917 c. 506.

to be the 'spokeswoman for the women...in the whole country' and thus she became a proponent of equal pay.³

Eleanor Rathbone, a feminist and suffragist who was an Independent MP from 1929 to 1946 wrote *The Remuneration of Women's Services* in 1917, which described the situation for women in the workplace during and following World War I, a work which was often cited throughout debates on this topic. Her essay is an articulate, early description of the issue, in which she recognises the many reasons for the disparity in pay as well as the feelings of the women who were affected.⁴ Through this work, she intelligently and coherently brought an issue to light which had plagued women for many years but had not been properly addressed. However, despite her efforts, and those of Lady Astor, equal pay was no closer to being realised when Astor left the Commons in 1945 than it was in 1917.

Equal Pay in the Civil Service

Given that there was an unspoken truce during World War II regarding raising the issue of equal pay in Parliament, and too many other things legislators had to address directly following the war, there was a period of nine years during which equal pay was barely mentioned in Parliament. There was, however, a Royal Commission appointed in 1944 which reported in 1946 and had its recommendations approved by the Labour Government. Despite

³ P. Brookes, *Women at Westminster: An Account of Women in the British Parliament 1918-1966* (London 1967), p. 24.

⁴ E. Rathbone, 'Eleanor Rathbone on the Remuneration of Women's Services' Reprinted in *Population and Development Review*, 25 (March 1999), pp. 145-158.

their support for equal pay, the government did recognise that it was difficult to set a date for its implementation given the difficulties surrounding the extra expenditure which would be incurred. They were also hesitant to make promises regarding equal pay due to the logistics of its implementation.⁵

In the 1945 election, the Conservatives received a lower number of female votes than they had for several elections. It was this poor response by women which prompted the Conservative Party to renew its efforts to increase female support. In order to do this, the party not only improved the recruiting campaign for women members but sought ways to make party policy more appealing to different types of women, especially those who had traditionally voted Labour. Between the 1945 and 1950 general elections the Conservatives took soundings as to the amount of support the equal pay issue actually had within the party and the general public. They found that there was support for the introduction of the rate for the job, but also that traditional values were still held in high regard. This created problems when creating policy as there were large numbers of the electorate who were likely to be unsatisfied should policies on either be pursued. This is one potential explanation as to why, in both the major parties' 1950 election manifestoes equal pay was addressed in the form of a promise to look more closely at the issue with a view to ensuring equal pay for women would be instituted as soon as economic conditions allowed.⁶

⁵ *HC Deb* Vol. 438, 11 June 1947 cc. 1069-1075.

⁶ *This is the Road: The Conservative and Unionist Party's Policy*, 1950, accessed via <http://www.conservative-party.net/manifestos/1950/1950->

Three women involved in the equal pay issue between the two elections were Frances Davidson, Thelma Cazalet-Keir and Irene Ward. These women were all insistent that the Conservatives had committed themselves to equal pay in the 1945 election manifesto. Through their pressure, as well as the idea initially introduced by R.A. Butler, which involved using the promise of equal pay to gain more women's votes, the Central Women's Advisory Committee's Parliamentary Sub-Committee drafted a document which 'claimed that it was now generally thought the party accepted the principle of equal pay for equal work'.⁷

Despite widespread dissent regarding the issue, Butler, as Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1951 and 1955, recognised the importance of equal pay for the future of the Conservative Party and therefore pushed for the insertion of a statement into the 1950 campaign manifesto promising equal pay in the Civil Service. However, the wording suggested by Butler was too vague for Thelma Cazalet-Keir, who by this time was no longer an MP, but was still active within the party's women's organisations, who insisted that the statement be refined in order to make the party's intentions explicit.⁸ Therefore, the statement in the manifesto reads: 'We hope that during the life of the next Parliament the country's financial position will improve sufficiently to enable us to proceed at an early date with the application in the Government

conservative-manifesto.shtml and *Let Us Win Through Together: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation*, 1950, accessed via <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1950/1950-labour-manifesto.shtml> on 4 December 2006.

⁷ H. Smith, 'The Politics of Conservative Reform: The Equal Pay for Equal Work Issue, 1945-1955', *The Historical Journal*, 35 (June 1992), p. 403.

⁸ Smith, 'The Politics of Conservative Reform', p. 406.

Service of the principle of equal pay for men and women for services of equal value.⁹

Making such a statement was a bold move for the party and as should have been anticipated, was met by backlash from various organisations, perhaps surprisingly, most of which were women's groups.¹⁰ These groups called several meetings to address the issue, during which it was realised that the majority of the delegates believed that if women were given equal pay they would neglect their responsibilities in the home and, that the more important issue of the status of housewives should be taken up instead of equal pay.¹¹

These were issues that needed to be addressed collectively with equal pay. However, it was believed by Cazalet-Keir and others that the most important issue was elevating the status of women in the workplace, as there were already many women working who were not being treated fairly. The inability of some party members to see beyond their own traditionalist values indicates very clearly that gender roles were perceived by many within the Conservative Party as they always had been and change was being quite actively resisted.

Labour also addressed equal pay in 1950 not only as an attempt to retain the increased female electorate who had voted for them in

⁹ *This is the Road: The Conservative and Unionist Party's Policy*, 1950.

¹⁰ G.E. Maguire, *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874-1997* (London, 1998), p. 130.

¹¹ Smith, 'The Politics of Conservative Reform', p. 403.

the previous election but because they, too, realised that it was time to address the topic properly. They had more support for the issue from their female members than did the Conservatives, but there was still hesitation on the part of the party's leaders to make any promises regarding equal pay due to the economic state of the country at the time. This is evidenced in Labour's 1950 manifesto: 'Labour will encourage the introduction of equal pay for equal work by women when the nation's economic circumstances allow it', a carefully worded statement that did not commit Labour to take any action unless they deemed the economic situation as greatly improved, but which acknowledges their awareness of and dedication to the cause.¹² The main difference between this statement and the one made by the Conservatives is interesting in that the Conservatives were much more specific in what they hoped to achieve and thus committed themselves more than did Labour.

In addition to losing women's votes because of the equal pay issue, it was noted in the 1950s that the old fashioned appearance and beliefs of many female members of the Conservative Party were driving many politically conservative-minded working women away from the party and, more worryingly for the Conservatives, to Labour. In addition to this, the older generation's unwillingness to allow new, younger members the opportunities to express their ideas and hold office was also a deterrent for many young women. Among others, Frances Davidson recognised this and realised that for the party to increase its female support they would need to change their ways and address the issues (equal pay being key)

¹² *Let Us Win Through Together: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of Nation*, 1950.

which were important to this emerging demographic.¹³ Although this was easier said than done, there were gradual changes and more young women were eventually given opportunities to become prominent members of the women's organisations and the Party.

The societal changes in women's roles, mainly the transition from homemaker to career woman, saw many women's needs change and in turn their voting patterns were also altered. Also, for many years, the Conservatives had been able to rely on female support due mainly to the passing on of political beliefs to women from their fathers and spouses, but this shifted as women became more independent and began to develop more of their own political ideas. These are both important and tie into the one of the major reasons that women's votes had shifted away from the Conservatives, which is that many young professional women voters were put off the Conservatives because of the women in the party.

The Conservatives lost the 1950 election, but Conservative women's perseverance regarding the issue was unfaltering. In fact it was after this election, in which Irene Ward was once again returned to the Commons after losing her seat in the 1945 election, that the issue was once again raised in the Commons. Her first influential speech on equal pay was given on 2 November 1950, when she reintroduced the topic to Parliament for the first time in 30 years in a response to the King's speech.

¹³ Correspondence between Frances Davidson and Marjorie Maxse, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 4/3/90.

In her speech, she stated '...I intend to raise the question of equal pay for equal work. This is not a controversial party issue, and it has the formidable support of many men and women in the country who are critical of all parties alike for having made many promises, without redeeming their pledges' and 'but time has passed, the pledges have not yet been redeemed, and we are becoming extremely impatient.'¹⁴ In addition to the fact that it was the first time the topic had been raised in the Commons in a number of years, this is worthy of note as it was a Conservative woman who was the first to address it. This speech was the first of many on equal pay made by Ward. These were all an extension of her extra-parliamentary work carried out on the subject. Her genuine interest in and care for this topic was evidenced not only in the Commons, but also in that much of her correspondence from this time was concerning equal pay, as will be discussed.

The issue quickly became one which was frequently raised in Parliament. Whether in debates, written questions or in speeches made which included more general topics, Ward and others were fast to prove that it was not going to be laid down until a reasonable conclusion had been met. Through her persistence, not only did she address the need for equal pay's implementation, but Ward also addressed some reasons why the idea had been met with, in her words, 'resentment'.

As will be seen here, the focus in the equal pay debate was on women. This focus allowed those opposed to argue that families in which both parents worked would have a much higher standard of

¹⁴ *HC Deb* Vol. 480, 2 November 1950 cc. 379-80.

living than those where they did not, without taking into consideration that single men were experiencing a better living standard than women because of the pay discrepancy. This was one of the main argument with which Ward took issue and she was not hesitant to raise this issue, and she did so several times during her work on equal pay.¹⁵ Her comments were taken into consideration by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but it was not until 1952 that action was taken toward equal pay in the Civil Service.

In 1952, the issue was formally addressed in Parliament, with the support of many MPs and the promises of the 1951 election behind it. There were several debates regarding how the implementation of equal pay should be handled, as by this time it was widely recognised by most MPs that, at least within the Civil Service, it was desired by most workers. One debate in particular, which took place on 16 May 1952, saw three Conservative women speak up in favour of the idea. The three women in question were Irene Ward, Frances Davidson and Eveline Hill. The latter two had previously shown support, but had not been vocal in debates. Ward, being the first Conservative woman to speak in this debate succinctly summed up her approach to the issue:

...we are asking for justice for women by removing the discrimination against women inside those three services [Civil Service, teaching, local government] and removing for ever from our national economy the decision, which has remained in operation for so long, that Government and local government services should use cheap labour to do exactly the same work as is being performed by men.¹⁶

¹⁵ *HC Deb* Vol. 491, 2 August 1951 cc. 1704-1706.

¹⁶ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 c. 1790.

Eveline Hill's contribution to this debate included a statement apologising that it had taken so long for a debate to take place on this issue and that the Conservatives, who had just returned to power, needed to ensure that action was taken to implement equal pay in the Civil Service in the near future. She went on to stress the importance of the issue as well as to tackle the previously unmentioned issue of hospital workers, as healthcare was another government-run sector in which there was a great disparity in pay for female employees carrying out the same jobs as males. Her main point was that something needed to be done quickly in order to rectify the problems caused through the use of delay tactics by both parties and that equal pay was a pressing issue worth the attention it had been receiving.¹⁷

Davidson's contribution to this debate was very similar in that she acknowledged her support for the issue and also believed change was long overdue. She mentioned that she and Ward had conducted an inquiry during the war into the conditions of factories in which women were working, and used this as an example of how women were not only capable of doing the same work as men, but were able to do it competently, an observation on which she based her support of the issue. She also mentioned that the issue had been largely ignored by Chancellors of the Exchequer for the previous six years and thus it was time to take action.¹⁸ She then went on to emphasise that by shifting at least some of the Conservative Party's focus to an issue such as equal pay, they could begin to gain the support of women who had been doing the

¹⁷ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 cc. 1825-1826.

¹⁸ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 cc. 1896-1807.

same jobs as men but for significantly less pay for many years, which was crucial for the party's plan to increase their popularity among the female electorate.¹⁹

However, she also recognised that despite the importance of increasing the size of the Conservatives' female electorate through taking action on issues such as equal pay, it was crucial for the party not to alienate housewives, who had been a central element of the party's support for many years. Thus, it was essential to find a way to maintain their current base and build upon it. The party's policies of the 1950s encouraged this as they acknowledged a desire to see equal pay implemented, but also addressed the ever-present needs of the housewife in areas such as pricing, housing and family allowances in order to not alienate this important part of the electorate.²⁰

At the end of this debate, which lasted for over five hours, however, the House was no closer than it had been previously to reaching an amicable plan for the implementation of equal pay. As was pointed out by Barbara Castle (Labour, Blackburn East) during this debate, women were sick of rhetoric and no number of speeches in favour of the principle could raise women's wages. They demanded that action was taken so that another 32 years would not go by without reform.²¹ It was resolved by the Commons that there was a strong belief in equal pay for equal work. However, this resolution included qualifiers which aimed to

¹⁹ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p. 130.

²⁰ 1950, 1951, 1955 and 1959 Conservative Party Manifestos, accessed via www.conservative-party.net/manifestos on 6 December 2006.

²¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 c. 1833.

ensure the economic stability of families through allowances and other means. One of the main points recognised was that the previously mentioned 32 years delay in action was unacceptable and not to be repeated, thus the call was for an early and definite date for implementation to be declared by the government. These were important steps which were taken after prodding by Conservative women, as noted by the women themselves and some MPs from the other side of the Commons.²²

A problem raised in conjunction with equal pay in the Civil Service was the shortage of teachers. Although a female-dominated profession, there was a shortage of women teachers in the early 1950s, due to the fact that many women chose to stay home and take care of their families and not return to work after having children. This became commonplace because of the low remuneration received by women teachers, which often made it unreasonable for them to work as they would have to pay for childcare, which was neither widely available nor affordable for everyone.

However, given that the children of the post-war baby boom were reaching school age, the MPs pushing for equal pay for teachers were wise in their pre-emptive strike. They realised that to ensure that there would be sufficient teachers to teach the incoming students, it was necessary for the government to take steps to encourage women to return to teaching after having children, even if they did not return until their own children had reached school age. It is important to note that part of the original proposal for

²² *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 cc. 1834 and 1857.

equal pay in the Civil Service included teachers, and though it was fought by many MPs, there were quite a few, including Irene Ward, who found it to be an important issue which needed to be addressed.

When the equal pay issue was debated, Florence Horsbrugh was the Minister of Education and although she was in favour of equal remuneration for teachers, she was still relatively powerless in making this possible for them as it was attached to the proposal for equal remuneration within the Civil Service. Eventually it was decided that equal pay for teachers should be instituted gradually along with equal pay in the Civil Service. Again, this important issue was taken up with much fervour and passion by those who believed in it as a necessity to guaranteeing children a quality education, as well as opening a door for women teachers to return to work.²³

Referring back to the 16 May 1952 debate, Castle mentioned her work with Irene Ward during the previous Parliamentary session and how she admired not only her dedication but also her passion for the issue. While this is notable, it is also important to recognise that while some, such as Castle and Ward, were willing to work together there were others, such as Elaine Burton and Alice Bacon who saw the collaboration as disgraceful.²⁴ The different viewpoints on interparty cooperation posed an interesting problem, especially with regard to an issue such as equal pay. Given that it

²³ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 cc. 1791-1792 and Vol. 522, 28 January 1954 cc. 1944-1945.

²⁴ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 c. 1834.

was something which both parties generally supported, and which affected women of all walks of life regardless of political views, surely cooperation such as this would only help speed up the implementation of a suitable plan. However, Bacon and Burton's unwillingness to cooperate demonstrates that for some, party lines were not to be crossed, no matter what the issue.

Castle's speech highlights another noteworthy aspect of this issue. Given that it was something which affected all women, and was also widely supported on both sides of the House, there was a great deal of collaboration and cooperation both inside and outside of Parliament. It is important to note that some women within the Commons were unafraid to cross party lines and work together as women, towards ending what they saw as a great injustice.

Outside of the Commons, many of the Conservative women already mentioned were also actively involved in the equal pay issue.

Although Evelyn Emmet's contribution to this issue was predominantly conducted outside of the Commons, due mainly to the fact that she was elected in 1955 when equal pay in the Civil Service was implemented, her work was still crucial in the process of the implementation of equal pay. The influence of the WNAC and other organisations was largely in their direct consultation and representation of the women for whom the MPs were fighting. During her time as WNAC chairman (1951-1954), she was active in the debate, and showed that she was very much in favour of the implementation of equal pay. In August 1951, in notes made at a WNAC meeting, she wrote: 'It would, I feel, be disastrous to the Party if we gave the impression to the Professional Women in this

country that we are content with the status quo.’ This indicates that she was not only aware of the necessity of change, but also willing to encourage her party to take steps to implement equal pay.²⁵

Following this statement, she went on to support the idea of taking the issue step by step and was unable to determine any reason, except for those based on fabrications for the implementation not to go ahead. She also notes the types of arguments being used against equal pay, and describes them as being similar to those used to keep women from voting and was confident that in fifty years these arguments would look just as ridiculous as the anti-voting ones did in 1951.²⁶

A further statement made by Emmet that year reinforces her dedication to this topic and recognition that it was not simply an issue of equality but an issue of improving and increasing the workforce: ‘...any appeal for the return of large numbers of women to industry at the present time would be greatly assisted by the knowledge that the government had given a lead by establishing equal pay within its own services.’²⁷ The validity of her point can be found in the fact that in order for the wider public to believe equal pay was on its way for the whole of the workforce, the best place for the government to start was within itself. This approach was very effective in getting the equal pay issue the attention that

²⁵ Chairman’s notes from 9 August 1951 WNAC Meeting, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 3/3/27.

²⁶ Chairman’s notes from 9 August 1951 WNAC Meeting, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 3/3/27.

²⁷ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p. 129-30.

it deserved and also in proving to the public that the government was going to lead the way.

The effort made by women's groups in the constituencies was also very important to this cause. They produced a significant body of literature and participated in national meetings at which the topic was discussed, the resolutions for which proved influential to various organisations. Their work in recruiting women who believed in the cause is also noteworthy. Not only did this contribute to Conservative support for the cause, but it increased Conservative support among women, which, as mentioned, was one of the party's goals in taking on this issue.

Other groups that were run by these women, such as the British Housewives' League and Married Women's Association were the key venues for discussion of this, and other important issues affecting women. They also produced literature and held meetings with speakers at which women were able to ask questions and debate equal pay. This forum allowed women to participate in debates held in a welcoming atmosphere. This, in turn, encouraged them to further participate in these organisations and the party alike.

As seen above, during her tenure as WNAC chairman, Evelyn Emmet took advantage of her role by publicising the committee's position and making it known throughout the party. However, even in these efforts, she was cautious with regard to making promises, especially regarding when equal pay would be implemented, to the women of the party, as there was no guarantee that these would be kept. Being the difficult, economically driven issue that it was,

equal pay was not something that could be easily implemented, but it was necessary to assure the proponents that it was something the party favoured, and as soon as conditions allowed, would implement.

Emmet was also aware that there were many women against equal pay, and in the interest of not alienating any female voters, especially housewives, she made the following statement:

We must expect a large portion of the Public who do not like changes anyway to be apathetic or even hostile but it is surely our duty to explain the issue to them. The greatest disservice, I think, which can be done, is to make the Housewife feel aggrieved because her Earning Sister's wage has improved. If the Housewife does not go out to work, she, herself, will be no worse off; if she does – and she was probably, in any case, earning before marriage – she will be the better off for the principle of the Rate for the Job. The Housewife is not necessarily jealous of every man who is earning a better wage than her husband or of the single man; why should she be encouraged to feel jealous of a woman earning the same as her husband?²⁸

This statement, made to reassure and ease potential jealousy of housewives, addresses an issue that many on both sides of the debate did not consider to be a factor in the fight for equal pay. However, it is one reason that many women were against the idea. Whether it was jealousy due to the fact that they were unable to go out to work because of family commitments, of the financial advantages that women who received equal pay would have over them (and their families) or any other array of potential reasons, it was a feeling that proved to be an issue among some women who did not work.

²⁸ Chairman's notes from 9 August 1951 WNAC Meeting, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 3/3/27.

Another argument against the implementation of equal pay concerned its potential adverse effect on the economy. Estimates of what it would cost were high and the fear of the increase adding to inflation was widespread. When the principle of equal pay was reintroduced in the Commons, it would have cost the Government £25 million to slowly integrate equal pay into the Civil Service, beginning with the higher ranks and working its way down to the lower ranked jobs, with full equal pay throughout the Civil Service realised in 18 years. Compared to what the wage increase was overall between 1946 and 1950, this amount was minimal.²⁹

However, those against equal pay publicly stated that the effects would be crippling to the economy. Based upon the actual figures, though, this change would in fact, not have severely damaged the economy, and while it was still worth considering the financial implications they would not be as severe as opponents said. The potential reasons for citing this as a reason for not implementing equal pay stem from the fear that once equal pay was enacted in the Civil Service, the entirety of the workforce would be demanding it and the economic climate did not allow for this. This was, however, the goal of many proponents. They realised that it would not be possible to implement equal pay throughout all industries immediately, and saw implementing it in the Civil Service as an initial step in a long process.

The most commonly raised economic reason against implementing equal pay was the fear that if single women were earning as much as married men, there would be a demand for more family

²⁹ *HC Deb* Vol. 491, 2 August 1951 c. 1703.

allowances. It was feared that this would put an even larger burden on the government than would equal pay alone. However, to counter this argument, Ward pointed out the amount of money going out from the Exchequer every year for family allowances and tax benefits. The basis of her argument was that if the money that went toward these things was not given, then the expenditure of the Exchequer would be significantly less every year, but this was justified and necessary spending. However, since the government was willing to look after families in this way, implementing equal pay for women was the least they could do for women who were funding these benefits from their pay packets, which in many cases, were smaller than those of the people their taxes were going to help.³⁰

Unlike those stated above, other arguments against the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service were founded on facts, not fear. Most opponents argued that married women, unlike their male counterparts did not have families and children to care for, and thus, if equal pay was introduced, women would be able to afford a much better lifestyle than men, or women who did not work. The truth in this cannot be denied, to an extent. Surely single men were able to afford more luxuries than were their female counterparts, was this not an injustice? Also, families being able to afford better lives for themselves and their children should have been considered a factor in favour of its implementation, instead of being used by the opposition as a means to maintain things as they had been.

³⁰ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 cc. 1795-1796.

Another major issue, which was often overlooked in anti-equal pay arguments, was that of single women having to take care of dependants, whether children or other relatives. The pay which women received was often insufficient for them to provide a comfortable life for themselves, let alone the others who depended on them. There were allowances given by the government to help subsidise the costs, but they were not enough to provide all the services and care needed in many instances. These situations may have been few and far between when viewed in the bigger picture, but they were still worth considering as some women were left destitute and therefore more of a burden on society than they would have been if their wages had been higher.³¹

Also in her speech of 16 May 1952, Ward noted that at an appearance at a meeting of the Equal Pay Campaign Committee (EPCC) at which the issue of the re-soling of children's shoes was raised, a question was asked regarding how a man could be expected to pay for everything for his family, without much (if any) assistance from the government and yet the EPCC was trying to justify implementing equal pay for women. It was then noted that single women oftentimes did not have dependants to look after, making raising their pay an injustice as it would afford them more luxuries than their male colleagues who did have dependents. In her response, Ward pointed out that many women, specifically widows and deserted wives, did have the sole responsibility of caring for dependants and that the price of re-soling shoes was not less for them, however they were forced to pay for this and other necessities on a smaller budget than men. Not only is the

³¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 cc. 1772-1774.

important issue of single women with dependants approached here, the assumption that every single woman who would earn equal pay to that of men would be able to afford a markedly better lifestyle than other women or men is also rebuked. This, as has been noted, was a point of contention from the start with many of those opposed to equal pay.³²

Ward's dedication to this issue is noteworthy for not only the above reasons, but also because of the considerable lengths to which she went to ensure equal treatment of women in the workplace, which makes her stand out above the rest of the women involved. This relentless dedication was shown not only in Parliamentary debates but also in her work outside of the Commons. The best example of Ward's work outside of Parliament is evidenced in her pursuit of equal pay for one woman. Mrs. Winder was hired as a temporary recorder in the House of Commons, and was eventually offered a permanent contract, at which time she was told that she would receive pay equal to that of her male colleagues. When she did not receive this, she contacted Ward in order to seek aid for her cause.

Because she wanted to not only ensure that Mrs Winder was given what was promised to her, but also because she believed so strongly in the cause, Ward took up her case and doggedly pursued John Boyd-Carpenter, Financial Secretary of the Treasury, to get the matter resolved. It took nearly a year and a half to reach a resolution all involved parties considered acceptable, and upon reading her correspondence regarding this issue, Ward's persistence is seen to be admirable. The matter could have been

³² *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 c. 1795.

resolved within in a year, as at that point (July 1953), an offer was made which would have given Mrs Winder an annual raise of £30 a year until she reached the men's maximum, which was anticipated to take three years.

However, due to the length of time this had been going on, Ward believed the offer to be unacceptable. She approached this in the way in which she approached everything else – she was very outspoken and did not hold back her true feelings regarding the situation. This is evidenced in her letter to John Boyd-Carpenter 31 July 1953:

Dear John

I had a very unpleasant interview with the Speaker over Mrs. Winder. It seems quite Gilbertian that when his predecessor recommended Equal Pay, the Treasury objected, and when after seven years the Treasury agrees, the Speaker repudiates his own predecessor's original intention and expects another three years to elapse before Mrs. Winder gets the man's maximum. I am bound to say, though it might have been difficult, that I think under the circumstances you might have advised a wiser decision. However, I could do nothing immediately, until the Speaker had made it clear to me that the decision was his (or Sir Ralph Verney's) and not yours. I do not propose to argue any further with the Speaker but I still remain free, and I intend to produce the most embarrassing Motion that it is possible to do. I will, as Patrick has been helpful over this, let him see a copy before it goes down, but it may well be that you might care to have a further conversation with Harold and Patrick on the original agreement which was really made with me. You see, the Speaker led me to believe that the Treasury was the final arbiter, and I am somewhat shaken to find that it was not so.

I am somewhat tired of exhortations to employers to be fair and reasonable and discuss matters with their employees and to find that we do not set an example in the House of Commons, and that even to date, Mrs. Winder has herself received no communication. I doubt very much whether it will be helpful with the employers to find that the House of Commons does not practice what the Minister of Labour preaches on behalf of the Government; this is no concern of mine,

but I have always been brought up to believe that the great should lead.

Yours ever

Irene Ward³³

This letter demonstrates clear frustration on Ward's part as she was not only not receiving the results she sought, but her concern was also being passed around between those with the power to make changes. One can see from this that she not only addressed the issue at hand but also expressed the fact that she was aware of the way in which this issue was being treated by certain members of the government. She continued to pursue this matter until December 1953 when Mrs. Winder was finally given the full compensation that she had been promised, including all arrears owed to her.

This is the best example of Ward's dedication to the cause of equal pay, and her dogged pursuit of equality. From reading her correspondence it is clear that she would have taken an interest in almost any issue which affected equality, on a large or small scale, with which someone affected or concerned approached her. That equal pay was of particular interest to her is evidenced in the number of letters she wrote regarding the plight of women and the large amount of post she received from women and women's organisations thanking her for her dedication as well as relating further stories of unjust treatment with regard to pay.³⁴

³³ Letter from Irene Ward to John Boyd-Carpenter, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA MS.Eng.c.6970.

³⁴ Various letters, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA MS.Eng.c.6970-6972.

While Conservative women's work both inside and outside of Parliament was vital to the implementation of equal pay, there were other groups who were heavily involved in the issue. There were Royal Commissions created by the government which consisted of MPs and other knowledgeable figures who worked together to explore the idea of equal pay.

There were two such Royal Commissions set up to study equal pay in the Civil Service before 1950. Their reports were used throughout the debate on equal pay in the Civil Service. They served an undoubtedly invaluable service and provided both sides of the debate with a great deal of information. Throughout the debate within and outside of the Commons, the reports generated were cited countless times, demonstrating their relevance and usefulness to those involved. Thus, the necessity of discussing these in the context of the discussion at hand is clear.

The first of these was a Royal Commission set up in 1929, with a view to 'report on conditions of service in the Civil Service with particular reference inter alia to the existing differentiation between the rates and scales of remuneration payable respectively to men and women Civil Servants.' This Commission reported in 1931 and made no recommendation either for or against the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service, as there was an almost equal split amongst those on the Commission.³⁵ At the time of the report, equal pay was a much more contentious issue than it was in the 1950s, given that women were still largely expected to fulfil the role of wife and mother before even considering getting a job.

³⁵ HMSO, *Report of Royal Commission on Equal Pay*, 7 October 1944.

However, it is clear in the research and report of this Royal Commission that society's views and feelings on this matter were changing.

Thus a second Royal Commission was set up in 1944 and lasted until 1946, as has already been mentioned. This Commission was formed to look into all aspects of the equal pay issue. In their report, published in 1946, the conclusions reached included the extension of equal pay to the entire Civil Service, not just the industrial side, which had been the primary focus up until this point. There was also a memorandum submitted by the EPCC separately from the Commission's report, but used in conjunction with it, which showed that not only equal pay, but equal opportunity would be beneficial to all aspects of society and the country itself.³⁶ These findings proved to be very important and useful to legislators. The inability of the Commission to make recommendations speaks not only of the changes in society since the first report, but also of the hesitation of the government to have it written anywhere that implementing equal pay was recommended, as they might then feel more pressure.

The Burnham Committee, which serves to listen to and consider concerns surrounding any issues that teachers may have, whether it is with regard to pay, treatment or just general concerns about the system, was also involved in this issue. A report issued by the committee in 1945 concerned the scales of pay for teachers, specifically discussing the potential for equal pay for female

³⁶ *The Case for Equal Pay in Government Service Now*, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA MS.Eng.c.6970 #33.

teachers. This was an issue due to female dominance in the field, especially with regard to primary schools. In this case, the majority of the workforce was being paid markedly less than their male colleagues (in the mid 1960s, female teachers were earning 59% of the salaries of their male colleagues) and were growing restless and increasingly unhappy about their situation. This, however, did not speed along the Committee's recommendation of implementing equal pay for teachers, which was not realised until 1955, at the same time it was agreed for the Civil Service.³⁷

The Whitley Council, set up in 1919, is a committee which deals with conditions of service in the non-industrial Civil Service. It was heavily involved in the debates and decisions taken on this issue. Its influence was important not only because of who they represented but also because of the weight that was placed on it by the policy makers. There were several meetings between the Whitley Council and R.A. Butler in order to determine the desire and feasibility of equally pay. Their many published papers and meetings demonstrated that discontent was rife among women civil servants due to the disparity between men's and women's rates.

Beyond party and government organisations, there were many organisations campaigning actively for implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service. The main organisation was the previously mentioned EPCC. The EPCC had been in existence since the 1920s, but it was not until the 1940s that its impact was felt throughout the Government, at which time it joined forces with the Joint

³⁷ A. Oram, 'A Master Should Not Serve Under a Mistress: Women and Men Teachers 1900-1970', in *Teachers, Gender and Careers*, ed. S. Acker, (London 1989), p. 24.

Committee on Women in the Civil Service. It was then that Parliament began to recognise the intense support for the issue and thus called for the formation of the first Royal Commission on equal pay. Going into the 1950s the group had a say on the final content of the Burnham Committee's report which impacted the recommendations made by the Whitely Committee.³⁸

Despite its wide-reaching influence, the EPCC was accused of being too closely tied to the Conservative Party given that the majority of its information regarding Parliamentary activities came from Irene Ward.³⁹ Having an organisation on their side was something which served to benefit the Conservatives, as the EPCC was widely known for its work and thus regarded highly by many involved with this issue. Therefore, through this connection to them, the Conservatives were able to keep in closer touch with those outside of Parliament than they perhaps would have been able to without such close ties.

One major factor that managed to keep the EPCC from being entirely taken over by the Conservatives was that it was essentially an amalgamation of smaller organisations. However, this was only a minor limiting factor, due partially to the limited scope of the EPCC (they were only interested in public services) and also due to reluctance on the part of organisations to ally themselves with the EPCC. Allen Potter discusses the hesitancy of the trade unions to

³⁸ Letter from E. Sturges-Jones at Conservative and Unionist Central Office to the CPO cc Lady Maxwell Fyfe and Miss Fletcher (WNAC Secretary) dated 1 February 1954, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 4/6/109.

³⁹ A. Potter, 'The Equal Pay Campaign Committee: A Case-Study of a Pressure Group', *Political Studies*, 5, (February 1957), p. 51.

become involved as they were '...bedevilled by the mutual suspicions of the large and small unions in the same fields, [ties] were finally broken off over differences in policy.'⁴⁰

In the 1950s, the EPCC's main activities included holding meetings, lobbying and publishing literature. One pamphlet, published in 1952, was aimed at the public and concisely described both the Government's reasons for not implementing equal pay since the acceptance of the initial resolution in 1921 and the following 30 years as well as the reasons that it should be implemented. Its arguments highlighted the reasons given by the Government as to why equal pay was not feasible at that time. The three main arguments raised involved inflation, a call for an increase in family allowances and the repercussions in private employment. With regard to the first two, the EPCC was able to demonstrate that there would not be severe inflation caused by equal pay because purchasing power would be given to women and the amount of money put into circulation would not be more than what was there already. Also the supposed crippling effects of an increase in family allowances would actually be manageable, as the higher wages would be balanced by higher taxes. As far as the third reason for hesitating on equal pay in the Civil Service, it was clear that eventually private industries would have to be addressed and the EPCC simply stated that it would be a matter of time before this became imperative and thus this should not have been a factor either.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Potter, 'The Equal Pay Campaign Committee', p. 52.

⁴¹ *The Case for Equal Pay in Government Service Now*, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA MS.Eng.c.6970, #33.

These two explanations helped proponents to form cogent arguments that equal pay would not cause the problems anticipated by many within the government. Thus, they moved onto the reasons that equal pay should be implemented, citing that women's elevation to a status equal to men's was the main goal of the campaign and should be embraced as a positive move for society and the economy alike. The theory behind this, as briefly mentioned above, was that giving women, who tended to do most of the shopping for their families, more money would help the economy by enabling them to spend more than they had been able to previously.⁴²

Equal pay was very personal for many Conservative women, even if they had not experienced the effects of unequal pay themselves. This could be due to many factors. The main reason for this was its tie to the larger, much more general campaign for equality between the sexes. This is not to say, of course, that women universally supported the idea. There was a significant backlash against equal pay, as it was believed that *all* women would, if offered better pay and opportunities, neglect or completely abandon their roles as wives and mothers which were of course the roles that were deemed most important for women in the 1950s. In addition to this, there was a fear that children, when left home alone or with carers would become delinquent, which would inevitably lead to a full breakdown of society. This demonstration of the perceived inabilities of women to both work and have a family, as well as

⁴² *The Case for Equal Pay in Government Service Now*, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA MS.Eng.c.6970, #33.

their inability to make the decision to have both, undermined many women and exacerbated a major social problem of the time.

In 1955, years after the principle was first accepted, equal pay in the Civil Service and teaching profession was enacted. After nearly five continuous years of discussion, it was at this time that the government finally felt that the economy was stable enough to implement this principle. After waiting for a report from the Whitely Committee, R.A. Butler was able to confirm that equal pay in the Civil Service would be implemented. The proposition allowed for women, starting on 1 January 1955, to receive seven annual instalments which would give them equal pay to men, so that by 1961 all women Civil Servants would be receiving equal pay.⁴³ Therefore not only did this give women more equality in the workplace, but also it paved the way for future legislation which would promote equality within other facets of society. In addition to this, that it was implemented by a Conservative Government indicates that there was support for the principle within the party, which shows a shift in the previously discussed traditional gender roles.

The Equal Pay Act 1970

The Equal Pay Bill, introduced in 1970, was not met with as much resistance as was the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service. In the fifteen years between the two, there had been several changes taking place in society which spurred on the equal pay debate and indicated that many people were ready for the

⁴³ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p. 132 and *HC Deb* Vol. 536, 25 January 1955 cc. 31-34.

implementation of equal pay throughout all of industry. Although there was no equal pay legislation passed between 1955 and 1970, the issue never truly left Parliament as questions were regularly asked regarding the status of the economy and when it could be considered.

It was Barbara Castle, the First Secretary of State and Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity, who introduced the Bill into the Commons. While her interest in the issue began long before this, this discussion will start in 1970, in order to maintain focus on the issue and the Conservative Party. In her opening speech to the Second Reading, she not only acknowledged the importance of the topic, but also the strong background of support which had been given to it. This included not only a discussion of the many steps which had been taken in the past by Labour in the Commons, but also a recognition of work done by certain Conservatives, although she did condemn the current Conservative Party for their lack of action on the issue.⁴⁴

Castle's belief that the Conservatives would not have passed the Bill, if given the chance, is off-base as there was much support shown for the principle by the Conservative Party as there had been opposition demonstrated by Labour. The Bill finally passed in 1970, but did not come fully into force until December 29, 1975 when it was enacted alongside the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA), passed 12 November 1975. The Equal Pay Act (EPA) covered employment throughout all industries and allowed employers five years to fully implement the Act in order to give them ample time

⁴⁴ *HC Deb* Vol. 795, 9 February 1970 cc. 913-915.

to adapt to and institute the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. It encompassed many issues from night working and overtime pay to holidays and terms of notice. However, there were many important matters, such as pensions which remained untouched and thus this supposedly comprehensive piece of legislation was still inadequate in many respects, a factor which can be attributed to the way in which the Bill was rushed through Parliament.

The debates held regarding this issue varied in intensity, as it had generally been accepted that inequality such as that which still widely existed in the workplace was no longer acceptable. In addition to attempting to right a wrong, there was a growing consciousness that the UK was one of the only countries which had not adhered to the European Economic Community's Treaty of Rome (1957) and the International Labour Organisation's Convention on equal pay.⁴⁵ Thus between internal and external pressure, it was recognised that changes in how workers were paid were overdue. However, there were great debates regarding how it should be implemented and enforced. There was also some animosity regarding women working in positions that had previously only been held by men, as well as women working in previously male-dominated occupations. While the latter two issues were not directly addressed, they were affected by reluctance of employers to implement equal pay in such industries which was translated to mean that they were hesitant to implement

⁴⁵ M. Povall, 'Positive Action for Women in Britain', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 523 (September 1992), p. 176.

a measure which might encourage women to take up such vocations.

The Bill had many supporters within the Conservative Party, including Jill Knight, Margaret Thatcher and Mervyn Pike. These women were not necessarily unique in the perspectives they brought to the debates, but they had worked in male-dominated industries, and Pike was, at the time of the debates, still a director of such a company. Thus, because of their own experience, these women were fully aware of the consequences of the Act, both financially and industrially, and although they did push for some caution in its implementation, they did welcome these changes.

Pike, in a debate in early 1970 stated, 'I hope that the Bill will be not only to the advantage of women working in industry, of women who at the moment are at a disadvantage because of the pay structure, but to the advantage of industry in making efficient and effective use of the labour force.' Also, from her perspective as a director, she was able to see how many companies could deem such schemes as training and increasing pay for women as a misuse of their resources, as it was true that at the time many women did not return to work full time, if at all, when they married or after they had children. However, as a woman, she also understood that this training was important to them in order to encourage them to return to work as well as to make them feel as though they were valued in their jobs. Her statement demonstrates that she not only believed in the cause, but also believed in the viability and usefulness of female workers. However, instead of blindly making equal pay the standard throughout all of

industry, she was in favour of workers being given better job evaluations and restructuring of jobs to allow the right person, regardless of sex, to hold the right position.⁴⁶

Knight, although a supporter of the Bill, was also apprehensive as she was concerned that calls for equal pay and equal treatment of women would lead to women not being hired for many jobs for which they were competing against men. The Women's Equal Rights Campaign (WERC) called for equal treatment of men and women and for women to not suffer any loss at the workplace because of having children and taking maternity leave. This was an issue with which many employers would clearly have problems as this would limit their workforce and could potentially mean that women would be less reliable workers than were men. While she understood these demands as they were put forward by the WERC, she also understood the unlikelihood of these being put into place. Thus, she instead asked that the Bill acknowledge the differences between the sexes and therefore their different needs in terms of work and benefits available through their employers.⁴⁷

Always the pragmatist, Margaret Thatcher was the first Conservative woman to approach the subject of the costs of equal pay in depth. While others had mentioned the importance of considering this side of the issue, none had examined in depth the effects on income tax and allowances. Her point was that as wages go up, so do taxes and thus take home pay would never be completely equal due to the selective employment tax which was in

⁴⁶ *HC Deb* Vol. 795, 9 February 1970 cc. 946-948.

⁴⁷ *HC Deb* Vol. 795, 9 February 1970 cc. 972-975.

place at the time. While her points were well taken, and despite the sometimes negative tone of her speech, they were overshadowed by her clear support for the principle, 'I believe that the Bill will lead to better pay for many jobs, and I support it as another step in the equal pay story.'⁴⁸

These women believed that women's contributions to the workforce had not only been underrated in the past, but were invaluable and thus it was worth increasing their opportunities. Therefore, they were in favour of equal pay and increased opportunities for training and promotion for women. Their belief in this was unwavering and so they were patient and believed that the Bill should not be passed until it was right and so they were willing to wait as long as it took for the Bill to be perfected. In her contributions to the 9 February 1970 debate, Thatcher noted many potential problems with the implementation of industry-wide equal pay as it was presented in the Bill at the time. Addressing everything from taxation to job evaluation, she recognised several potential issues and stated quite clearly that she did think most were problems which could be overcome.⁴⁹

However, despite recognition in the Commons that the Bill was insufficient as it stood, it was rushed through and thus left quite a few issues unaddressed. The importance of the Act is that action was taken which moved the nation closer toward equality in the workplace. As a result of the Act many employers did finally make changes regarding the way in which they treated their employees

⁴⁸ *HC Deb* Vol. 795, 9 February 1970 cc. 1021-1022.

⁴⁹ *HC Deb* Vol. 795, 9 February 1970 cc. 944-950 and 1019-1026.

and raised women's pay in many jobs, even if there was not a man holding the same position.⁵⁰

The five years between the Act's passage and implementation were to be used by employers to not only adjust pay grades and ensure that women were being paid equally to men for like work, but they were also intended for the implementation of the other processes that were required in order to fully comply with the legislation. One of the essential issues to be addressed was how to measure what was considered 'like work'. In order to fully assess this, many companies had to implement, for the first time, a performance review system in addition to writing explicit job descriptions. This proved to be quite a task for many employers as for the first time they were required to examine their employees' jobs and responsibilities as well as assign titles to them for the purpose of pay determination.

Despite instances of employers attempting to thwart the law, there was evidence of progress being made as early as 1972 at which point there was a debate on the issue in the Commons. It was determined at this time that progress was being made and that the government was instituting a survey in order to ensure the full implementation of the Act as soon as possible. This particular debate involved Sally Oppenheim, who had only been elected in 1970 and was thus not present for the debates on the EPA prior to its passage, but she quickly took up the equal pay cause and pursued it within Parliament to ensure its enactment. She was

⁵⁰ A. Carter, *The Politics of Women's Rights* (London 1988), p. 58.

adamant that the government demonstrate its support for equal pay by pursuing faster progress and implementation.⁵¹

Her concerns were raised because of information received from various organisations regarding the apparent lack of support from the government and rumours that it was attempting to bury the Act. These had begun due to the language in the EPA, as it was ambiguous in places. This ambiguity enabled many employers to take advantage of the five years between its passage and enactment to ensure that there were differences between men's and women's positions, even if only on paper, instead of instituting the programmes as described above. This was noted in *The Times* in 1973, at which time there was an article printed which stated instead of introducing equal pay as per the EPA, some employers were taking the five years to think of ways around giving women equal pay such as promoting men above women in title only and switching to automated manufacturing to cut down on manpower.⁵²

Actions such as these were possible because it was difficult for the government, employers or tribunals to accurately determine what constituted 'like work'. This was therefore a part of the EPA that left much to be desired for many women who were affected by it and expecting pay increases. However, MPs were aware of this and were taking steps to ensure that this kind of avoidance was not only limited, but also discouraged. In 1973, Oppenheim brought the attention of the Secretary of State for Employment to the fact that the *Financial Times* had been running advertisements stating

⁵¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 840, 4 July 1972 cc. 232-234.

⁵² 'Can We Make Equal Pay Work?', *The Times*, 17 January 1973.

that equal pay could be avoided by switching to automated assembly lines. The response she received was that action such as this was not prohibited by the law, but was of course frowned upon by the government as it meant an increase in unemployment.⁵³ Therefore, while not condoned, there was very little the government could do about such practice.

Another new Conservative MP, Joan Hall was also keen to ensure that the Act was being implemented properly. In 1973, she inquired as to what steps the government was taking to ensure that employers were 'aware of their obligations under the Equal Pay Act.' The response she got was simply that a leaflet had been published which was meant to notify employers of their responsibilities under the EPA and that advisers were available to answer any questions employers (or employees) may have had.⁵⁴ While not an entirely satisfactory answer, it is an indication that the government was doing something to ensure that steps were being taken in the right direction. This issue was important as it was stated in the Act that it was intended, as stated in Section 9 of the EPA that women's rates would be at least 90% of men's by the end of 1973.⁵⁵

In the next two years several more debates took place regarding checks that were being carried out to ensure that the Act was being properly implemented, but the work did not stop there. In the

⁵³ *HC Deb* Vol. 855, 17 April 1973 cc. 253-254.

⁵⁴ *HC Deb* Vol. 857, 11 June 1973 c. 244w.

⁵⁵ HMSO, *Equal Pay Act 1970*, Chapter 41, s. 9.

years following the EPA's implementation, there was still a large amount of Conservative interest in it, which was demonstrated in 1976 when Janet Young asked a question regarding its progress in the House of Lords. When told by Lord Jacques that it was too soon for any accurate data to be collected, Irene Ward and Evelyn Emmet spoke up and were not satisfied until all of their questions were answered. The questions asked encompassed most issues involved with the EPA including implementation and provision provided to local government bodies for remuneration to the women who had made complaints to the tribunals.⁵⁶

It is nearly impossible to successfully and completely discuss the EPA without a consideration of the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA). The two were designed separately, but were used together in many circumstances as there were cases in which a woman was unable to claim unfair treatment under the EPA where she would be covered under the SDA, and vice versa. However, one of the main differences was that the SDA protected men as much as it did women whereas the EPA was much more focused on the protection of women. The SDA also ventured into various parts of life, including education and provision of goods, services and facilities.⁵⁷ While most of the changes made in areas outside of employment were welcome, there were some hesitations within employment itself, as both Acts addressed the issue of equality in the workplace.

Most Conservative women's input on the SDA took place in the House of Lords. Janet Young was the first Conservative woman to

⁵⁶ *HL Deb* Vol. 369, 6 April 1976 cc. 1507-1509.

⁵⁷ HMSO, *Sex Discrimination Act* 1975.

speak up in favour of the Bill. Although in favour of it, she was also aware that positive discrimination could take the place of the prejudices against women that were currently the norm. Instead of wanting this, she sought equality across the board, which was not something that could be guaranteed by a piece of legislation and was thus very difficult to attempt to obtain. However, she maintained that it was necessary '...to make it possible for women to compete fairly with men and ensure that equal qualifications will lead to equal opportunity.'⁵⁸ Thus the links with the EPA can be clearly seen, as it was also dictated in that piece of legislation that opportunities to work, or for promotion, must be presented to anyone eligible, regardless of sex.

When the House of Lords resolved into committee on the Sex Discrimination Bill, there was once again a high amount of Conservative input. Ward was joined in this discussion by two other women. Joan Vickers and Patricia Hornsby-Smith also participated in the committee's debates on the Bill. Joan Vickers introduced an amendment, which, with the help of Ward was withdrawn. The amendment sought to ensure that within political parties there would no longer be separate men's and women's sections. The explanations given for introduction of this clause indicate that Vickers was in favour of removing all forms of discrimination, which was the aim of the Bill as a whole.

However, as Ward saw it, there was no need for men and women to be together all of the time. Hornsby-Smith was also on Ward's side in this debate, acknowledging that there were certain parties

⁵⁸ *HL Deb* Vol. 329, 14 March 1972 cc. 372-376.

within the UK which had sections dedicated solely to one sex or the other. She deemed these sections as necessary in order to properly address issues related more to one sex than the other. As there was a great deal of agreement from other present Members, the amendment introduced by Vickers was withdrawn, although the clause for which she introduced the amendment was still part of the Bill. This, however, only meant that there were opportunities for women to join men's groups and vice versa and that neither type of group could be completely exclusive.⁵⁹ This is an interesting amendment largely because of the fact that it would have limited women's opportunities for work in some areas. This, as seen above, was not the intention of the SDA or the EPA and thus its exclusion from the SDA was warranted.

However, limiting women's work was not Vickers' intention when introducing the amendment, which adds another point of interest to it. Her intentions were to increase integration between the sexes, with the idea that this would increase the likelihood that women could further their careers within politics and work more closely with their male colleagues. Although her intentions were good, the likelihood was that they would instead be marginalised in many organisations which is what Ward and Hornsby-Smith saw happening, hence their opposition to it.

While the two Acts essentially worked well when utilised together, there were often issues with regard to enforcement of both as there were some instances which arose that pertained to both laws. The tribunals set up to deal with complaints were at times at a loss with

⁵⁹ *HL Deb* 15 July 1975, Vol. 362 cc. 1186-1194.

regard to jurisdiction over certain cases which not only prolonged the complaint process but in some instances caused complaints to be all but ignored altogether. These problems arose for the first time because, under the SDA, there could be no discrimination in advertising or hiring based upon sex, unless it was necessary to be of one gender or other to perform the job correctly.⁶⁰

There were many means through which women could fight against such discrimination, but the difficulty often lay in gathering evidence. If a man was given a different job title, and was therefore on a higher rate of pay than a woman, but was technically still performing the same job, there would usually be something in his job description, or the title itself would be enough for the tribunal to find that there was no discrimination. However, the SDA could then be used by women wanting to fight if there was evidence of discrimination, and this was an avenue that was often pursued in such cases.⁶¹ Therefore, both pieces of legislation were necessary and worked together to ensure not only equal pay in the workplace, but also to take steps towards equality of opportunity for both sexes.

The impact of all of the above mentioned women, as can be seen from the examples given, is not to be taken lightly. It is a demonstration that the Conservative Party was moving forward, not only in its thought and words, but in action. While the EPA took a number of years to pass through the Commons, the importance of it was not diminished in the process. Without the

⁶⁰ HMSO, *Sex Discrimination Act 1975*, s. 38.

⁶¹ P. Hewitt, *A Step by Step Guide to Rights for Women* (Nottingham 1975).

effort of Conservative women representatives, the party would not have gained the recognition that it did and would therefore have remained in opposition for many years to come. However, through the efforts of these women, progress was made toward gaining more women Conservative supporters. The publicity gained also acted as a catalyst to get more women involved in the Conservative Party generally. As previously mentioned, women have always played a significant part in the Conservative Party, but seeing the work that was done by these women and the way in which they fought for women's rights while still gaining the respect of their male colleagues demonstrated to a new, younger generation that things were changing in Parliament and the Conservative Party.

4 – FAMILY

This chapter focuses on legislation relating to family law, specifically on laws regarding divorce, marital rights and guardianship. The main trend which emerged between 1950 and 1979 was to implement legislation designed to give women more rights as mothers and people independent of their husbands. In order to achieve this independence, women sought and were gradually granted increased rights in the above mentioned areas. Female representatives from both major parties were heavily involved in addressing these issues, as they realised the importance of increasing a mother's rights with regard to her children and giving women more rights upon the dissolution of a marriage. Therefore, they took the need for better protection of mothers to heart. By discussing these issues, both with regard to Parliamentary debates and action taken outside of Parliament, the impact Conservative women representatives had with regard to changing the plight of women as mothers and wives will be assessed. It will be shown that the issues taken up by Conservative women were chosen as they were the ones which would have the greatest impact on women and their roles within the family. The contribution that Conservative women made to changes in policy in these matters will be discussed.

There was a great change in the perceptions of women's roles from the 1950s to the 1970s which affected the existing law. This can be at least partially attributed to the changing roles of women within and outside the home. The social climate was shifting in such a way that women were increasingly valued in all of their roles, and were also losing the stigma of being less capable in areas once

considered to be a 'man's domain', i.e. economics and politics. Laws had been created in the past which aimed to make husbands and wives equal partners in the rearing of their children and the marriage itself, but none of this legislation had fully realised these goals due to lack of enforcement by courts and ambiguity of language in the legislation.¹

In addition to the level of Conservative female impact on the specific issues, the legislation to be discussed was chosen based upon its importance in making men and women equal partners in their relationships, the fact that most of it had not been updated in as many as 100 years, and the length of time each was debated.

Table 4.1 below contains a full list of the legislation to be considered here.

Table 4.1 – Matrimonial and Family Legislation

Legislation	Year Passed
Maintenance Orders Act	1950
Maintenance Orders Act	1958
Matrimonial Causes (Property and Maintenance) Act	1958
Matrimonial Proceedings (Children) Act	1958
Matrimonial Causes and Reconciliation Act	1963
Matrimonial Causes Act	1965
Matrimonial Causes Act	1967
Maintenance Orders Act	1968
Divorce Reform Act	1969
Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act	1970
Guardianship of Minors Act	1971
Guardianship Act	1973
Domicile and Matrimonial Proceedings Act	1973
Matrimonial Causes Act	1973
Fatal Accidents Act	1976

There were two Conservative female MPs more deeply involved in these issues than any of their female colleagues. The first, Janet Young, held an interest mainly in the area of the family in general.

¹ S. Cretney, *Law, Law Reform and the Family* (Oxford 1998), p. 156.

Her interest encompassed such issues as housing, taxation and government care for the increasing number of one-parent families. She was deeply involved in debates within the House of Lords regarding the family generally as well, specifically on two occasions, the first in 1976 and the other in 1978, during both of which the debates became heated as there were many differing views expressed regarding the direction legislation should take.

The second woman, Joan Vickers, had interests which were more narrowly focused than Young's in that she approached specific issues by introducing Bills to simplify the legislation regarding guardianship rights and participating in debates on both guardianship and divorce rights. In addition to this, she actively pursued guardianship issues in her extensive work outside of Parliament. Her interest in guardianship was unprecedented for a Conservative woman, as was her persistence regarding divorce reform. She was also heavily involved in committee and other organisational work which helped to move the amendments forward. She participated in several groups which dealt with many topics from the amendments proposed for the Marriage Acts to various Maintenance Orders Bills. Her views were traditional in many ways, but she did believe that women deserved more rights than those they had within a marriage and she also wanted to see things made easier for women when a marriage dissolved.

The impact of the various other female members can be seen clearly in their participation in the debates in the Commons. Many were not only more outspoken than they had been on other issues, but they took an interest which contributed to the amendments in

the legislation as well as the Conservative Party's commitment to these causes. It is fair to say that their impact not only brought some important issues to light within the party but it also enabled the party to realise that addressing such issues could increase the level of female electoral support they received.

Although these topics had been discussed throughout most of the mid-twentieth century, by the late 1960s and 1970s, family law was still hotly debated, and in some areas, especially divorce reform, the urgency for reform had increased since the 1950s. As stated above, there had been efforts for reform made previously, however, as with all legislation regarding contentious issues, there was a delay in the passing of amendments due to strong opposition. This culminated in the majority of reforms regarding women's rights in terms of guardianship and marital property not being passed until the late 1960s/early 1970s. However, the fact that they remained in the consciousness of some MPs for such a long time span speaks of their significance.

Guardianship

The majority of the legislation passed with regard to guardianship in the 1950s and 1960s involved women's limited abilities in terms of their guardianship rights and ability to fully care for their children. In the aftermath of World War II, many women were required return to the home and resume taking care of their homes and children. However, there were others, who due to the loss of a spouse in the War, or because of a divorce, were forced to continue taking care of their families alone, as they had done during the war, which made increased provisions for women with regard to

property and guardianship a matter requiring immediate attention. There were two clear problems when it came to guardianship and general care for children, both of which were exacerbated upon the dissolution of a marriage or when a woman was deserted by her husband.

A solution to the first problem had been attempted by the Guardianship of Infants Act 1925 which, for the first time, gave women rights with regard to their children, at least in principle. Prior to this, in the eyes of the law, fathers had sole parental rights and it was only upon the father's death or by obtaining a court order that a mother could gain guardianship rights. However, there was still a great disparity between the sexes with regard to guardianship under the 1925 Act, as mothers were unable to obtain passports for their children, withdraw money from their children's post office savings accounts and authorise surgery without the father's signature. Even though mothers' rights remained limited after these reforms, they were greater than they had been previously. The legislators were explicit about their intentions when designing this piece of legislation, the most important of which was the opportunity for equality between the parents with regard to their children. This can be clearly seen in the preamble, which reads as follows:

Where in any proceedings before any court...the custody or upbringing of an infant, or the administration of any property belonging to or held on trust for an infant, or the application of the income thereof, is in question, the court, in deciding that question, shall regard the welfare of the infant as the first and paramount consideration, and shall not take into consideration whether from any other point of view the claim of the father, or any right at common law possessed by the father, in respect of such custody, upbringing, administration or application is

superior to that of the mother, or the claim of the mother is superior to that of the father.²

Despite the fact that it clearly states that one parent's beliefs/opinions would not be held in higher regard than the other, if the mother were to apply to a court for guardianship rights, as evidenced in *Law, Law Reform and the Family*, when put into practice this was often not the case. More often than not, the courts upheld the father's right to make all decisions regarding the children's upbringing.³ It would seem that tradition was the underlying reason for the remaining inequality as there was still widespread belief that women were less capable than men when it came to making sound decisions. Also, men were seen as heads of their households and for them to have to relinquish sole guardianship would diminish this role.

The second major issue regarding the care for children was that of maintenance payments. Collecting maintenance was a considerable problem for many mothers, as many fathers refused to pay and the courts were unwilling to chase them for payment until the amount in arrears reached £30-£40. At this point, the courts would issue an attachment of wages order to ensure that maintenance payments were automatically deducted from the man's salary. However by the time the amount in arrears was this high, the mother had been waiting for up to two months which meant that some women had insufficient funds to provide properly for their children.

² HMSO, *Guardianship of Infants Act 1925*, preamble.

³ S. Cretney, *Law, Law Reform and the Family* (Oxford 1998), p. 156.

Also, it was not always possible for the payments to be collected directly from men's pay check as they were not always truthful about their employment situation. With regard to collection of payments, an additional problem was that the mothers would have made two trips to the court to pick up the cheques, as there was no notification system in place to let the women know if their cheques were not there and they could not be sent by post. The trip to the court to collect the cheque caused large problems for many mothers as it often involved a long journey and obtaining childcare for the day or alternatively taking the children with them which was undesirable due to the length of time that they would sometimes have to wait.⁴

In order to rectify these problems, there had been several attempts to introduce new amendments and legislation which would encourage equality and provide mothers with rights that they had previously not known. A Maintenance Orders Bill was introduced in the Lords on 21 March 1950 by Sir William Jowitt. The intention of this Bill was '...to enable certain maintenance orders to be made and enforced throughout the United Kingdom.'⁵ This Bill went part way to solving the problem of maintenance orders payments. However, there were still inadequacies which needed rectifying as there were no specifications regarding how the payments were to be made, which proved problematic for many mothers.

Because of these inadequacies, Joan Vickers deemed it necessary to introduce a new Bill to attempt to solve this problem. She

⁴ Finer Committee Report, *Unhappy Families* (London 1971), p. 7.

⁵ *HL Deb* Vol. 166, 4 April 1950 c. 728.

therefore introduced the Maintenance Orders (Attachment of Income) Bill in 1957, which was designed to ensure that maintenance payments were automatically taken directly from a man's earnings to prevent the previously described problems. The Bill was defeated in the Commons, but in late 1957 was introduced by the government as the Maintenance Orders Bill and was guided through by Vickers. Although imperfect, as there were still elements missing which would have provided for the full care of children by their mothers in situations of parental separation, the 1958 Act went at least part way to ensuring that children were taken care of by their estranged fathers.

Evelyn Emmet's involvement with this issue began in 1957 during debates on the above mentioned Maintenance Orders Bill. Especially following the introduction of the second Bill, Emmet's level of interest increased and she carried out a great deal of work in favour of the Bill, although largely outside of Parliament through her activities in the WNAC and various letter writing campaigns.⁶ Notably, on 10 April 1959, Emmet wrote a letter to the Editor of *The Times* about the status of mothers:

...where she has duties she must also have rights. Until she is given the latter it will be difficult to impress on the mother her immense and fearful responsibility to the nation for the growing generation. Where families are happy, equal rights with the father will make no difference; where families are unhappy, both parents should have recourse to courts if they cannot agree.⁷

⁶ WNAC Meeting Minutes, Oxford Bodleian Library CPA CCO 4/8/379 and Untitled article from unknown newspaper, 22 May 1958, Oxford Bodleian Library MS.Eng.c.5726.

⁷ *The Times*, Letter to the Editor, 10 April 1959, Oxford Bodleian Library, MS.ENG.C.5724.

This is evidence of her strong support for increased rights and recognition of the necessity of changes in favour of mothers. While her support for this was widely recognised, her efforts only raised awareness instead of pressuring her colleagues in Parliament to see amendments passed. Thus, given the imperfections in the 1958 Act, Emmet remained intent to ensure that the law was changed in order to grant mothers more rights and thus continued to pursue this issue, as will be discussed.

In 1963, Joan Vickers introduced the Guardianship of Infants Bill, which aimed to rectify problems regarding legitimacy and statutory declarations to protect women's parental rights in cases of desertion. Although its intentions were good, and it had a great amount of support, the Bill was talked out in the Commons. It is important to note, however, that much of the support this Bill had was from female Conservative MPs. Evelyn Emmet was a supporter of the Bill, and although they were not formally listed when the Bill was presented to Parliament, Lady Tweedsmuir and Mervyn Pike supported the Bill and acknowledged the necessity for amending the law as it was at the time while working with the Women's Policy Group. In their policy statement, they demonstrated awareness of the complications that could arise should more liberal guardianship laws be adopted. Although this may indicate a negative feeling toward the Bill, they were interested in further investigations regarding potential changes which would prove beneficial to both parents.

We appreciate that equal guardianship between man and wife might raise problems in the event of disagreement between them but we recommend

further examination of the position with a view to overcoming the difficulties which exist at present.⁸

The next piece of legislation introduced in this area once again aimed to increase guardianship rights and was introduced in 1965 by Vickers with the aim to give mothers equal guardianship rights to their children. At the time of this Bill's introduction, mothers still only had customary rights and thus were remained limited in their ability to provide fully for their children.⁹ In addition to increasing a mother's rights, this Bill retained an important clause from previous legislation which allowed the courts to rule should any disputes arise between the parents regarding the upbringing of the child. This was an option to be utilised only if the parents were unable to resolve problems themselves, and the court's duty was to act with only the best interests of the child in mind.¹⁰ However, after a second reading in the Commons, the Bill was laid down and it was not until the passage of the Guardianship of Minors Act 1971 that there were finally changes made to guardianship legislation.

The issue of maintenance orders was once again addressed in 1967 when Quintin Hogg (Labour, St Marylebone) introduced a Bill which aimed to increase the amount of maintenance to be paid each week and to make the payments exempt from income tax. This narrowly focused Bill received support from Conservative women in both Houses. Joan Vickers was one of the initial supporters of the Bill, and Evelyn Emmet introduced this Bill to the Lords in 1968. During

⁸ Women's Policy Group Report 1962-1963, Oxford Bodleian Library CPA CCO 20/36/1.

⁹ *HC Debates* 7 April 1965, Vol. 710 cc. 486-489.

¹⁰ HMSO, *Guardianship of Minors Bill 1971*, s. 3.

her speech on 6 May, Emmet acknowledged that there were wider issues to be addressed, however, due to the number of committees which were sitting at the time, Hogg felt it best to attempt to rectify one simple issue at that time. This is important due to the fact that there were many varied ideas regarding maintenance, some of which had been raised during Vickers' many attempts at introducing amending legislation. A lesson had also been learned by the numerous Bills proposed which had similar aims, but because of the large number of topics covered in them, had been talked out or laid down. Because of this Bill's narrow focus, it did not meet a great deal of opposition and passed with ease through both Houses.¹¹

The Guardianship of Minors Bill 1971 received fairly widespread support throughout Parliament. Another measure introduced by Hogg, this Bill aimed to consolidate several Acts relating to guardianship and clarify existing legislation instead of introducing new amendments. While this Bill was passed easily, there was still much discord regarding the existing legislation as there were many issues which remained unaddressed. Thus, further reforms, which would not only clarify existing law, but amend it to ensure equality between the parents and, above all, to bear the best interest of the children in mind were desired as this had still not been fully realised.

In 1972, Irene Ward wanted to take this further and introduced a Private Member's Bill in the Commons with the aim of amending

¹¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 755, 8 December 1967 cc. 1837-1855 and *HL Deb* Vol. 291, 6 May 1968 cc. 1284-1301.

the law further to ensure equality. However, she laid this down after the second reading as the Government introduced their own Bill in the Lords, which was to become the Guardianship Act 1973.¹²

The Guardianship Act 1973 was introduced into the Lords by the Conservative Government and aimed to make guardianship completely equal. It amended the 1971 Act, mainly by altering wording to ensure clarity of the terms of equal rights of parents in custody or child-rearing cases. Also, instead of requiring both parents to agree on all aspects of child rearing, it allowed either parent to act alone as long as the best interests of the child were maintained as the most important factor. These changes did not occur easily, as there was resistance and intense debate regarding them in the Commons. Thus it was this Act which finally gave increased rights to mothers and saw through those measures which had been previously discussed and even made sure that some of the promises made in the Guardianship of Infants Act 1925 were finally put into practice.

Illegitimacy was another problem which was on the rise and was therefore addressed in the mid-1960s. This is worth mentioning as affiliation laws affected maintenance orders and guardianship issues. Problems in this area arose more often than not when single mothers were given conflicting advice about whether or not to list the father on the child's birth certificate. Advice given to new single mothers from adoption agencies and the Registrars of Births was often not to list the father given that recognition of who

¹² *HC Deb* Vol. 847, 29 November 1972 c. 428 and April Carter *The Politics of Women's Rights* (London 1988), p. 63.

it was could lead to the mother having limited to no guardianship rights and losing her child. However, the DHSS advised new mothers to name the father, when known, so that they would be able to claim maintenance payments from them.¹³ The contradiction in advice given was not only a problem for the mothers themselves, but also created difficulties for legislators. This advice was also indicative of the complications and ambiguity in the legislation up to the early 1970s. This, however, was addressed by the 1973 Act which did not completely eradicate this problem, but it did make it easier for mothers and also made their rights clearer.

Conservative support for the proposed changes was strong, largely because the Government introduced the measures. Vickers' participation in this was as avid as it had been with previous amendments introduced during her tenure in the Commons. Emmet's contributions were also consistent and important with regard to these issues. Her activities both inside and outside of Parliament ensured that there was action taken toward equal rights for mothers and fathers alike. They were both in favour of the proposed legislation and welcomed the idea that it would give both men and women equal rights over their children.¹⁴ These women's unrelenting belief and persistence in their fight for equal guardianship was effective in keeping awareness of the problems raised within Parliament, the party and outside organisations. Therefore, their impact on the various issues relating to

¹³ Finer Committee Report, *Unhappy Families* (London 1971), p. 4.

¹⁴ *HC Deb* Vol. 856, 8 May 1973 c. 443 and *HL Deb* Vol. 339, 20 February 1973 c. 33.

guardianship which have been discussed was substantial; they were present more often and contributed more to the debate than did many of their female Conservative colleagues.

Matrimonial and Divorce Law Reform

Legislation regarding marital property and divorce also underwent a series of changes between 1950 and 1979. Some reforms had begun prior to 1950, but the scheme which was being instituted by the government saw major reforms coming into force in the early 1970s, after having been passed mainly in the 1960s. This series of alterations not only modified the conditions under which a couple could divorce, but also the status of each partner within the marriage and their rights while the marriage was intact as well as upon its dissolution. For divorce law to reach this point, however, there were many concessions made by those in favour of reform with regard to how the existing law was structured due to large amounts of dissent from those opposed.

Divorce was directly addressed for the first time in 14 years in 1950, when Eirene White (Labour, Flint East) introduced a Matrimonial Causes Bill which aimed to allow new grounds for divorce in addition to those which were already in existence.

The proposal was to allow for a couple who had been separated for seven years and had no 'reasonable prospect' of reconciling the opportunity to divorce citing irretrievable breakdown as the reason.¹⁵ This introduced the idea of a blame free divorce, a concept which had previously been suggested but was strongly fought by many MPs from both sides of the House and several

¹⁵ *HC Deb* Vol. 480, 17 November 1950 c. 2042.

outside bodies. Therefore, when reintroduced, the extent to which this was unwanted was immediately highlighted by several groups, including both the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches and the Mothers' Union. This idea was objectionable to these groups as they believed that the necessity of citing a matrimonial offence was one of the things which helped to maintain the sanctity of marriage. Thus, in their eyes, to provide circumstances under which a divorce could be obtained without an offence having been committed would encourage couples to view divorce as a way to resolve marital issues instead of attempting to fix any problems which arose in the relationship.

In addition to these groups, there was one particular Conservative MP staunchly against this reform. Patricia Hornsby-Smith, in one of her few speeches on these issues, stated that she believed that the proposed Bill was unnecessary for several reasons, one of which was the time at which it was being proposed. Given that the country was still recovering, in many ways, from the Second World War, the separation and divorce rates were higher than normal. Hornsby-Smith saw these figures as 'abnormally inflated' and thus she did not believe that creating legislation to combat the problem was necessary. Her beliefs were also based upon the fact that the Bill would allow 'the guilty party...to force, providing financial arrangements are made, the innocent party, who may hold the strictest views of conscience about divorce, into a divorce which is unpalatable to that spouse'.¹⁶

¹⁶ *HC Deb* 9 March 1951, Vol. 485 cc. 974-976.

Hornsby-Smith was steadfast in her views, and had the support of many other MPs. Therefore, as tends to be the case with issues that draw a large amount of attention both within and outside of Parliament, the pressure on White was increasing steadily after the second reading. This caused her to eventually agree to withdraw the Bill in favour of the formation of the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce.¹⁷

The Royal Commission's terms were clear: 'to enquire into the law of England and the law of Scotland concerning divorce and other matrimonial causes...and to consider whether any changes should be made in the law or its administration, including the law relating to property rights of husband and wife, both during marriage and after its termination...'¹⁸ Thus it was with this in mind that the 19 members, who hailed from several different sectors of the workforce including education, law, the clergy and healthcare, set out to research the topic and generate a report based upon their findings. It was here, however, that they fell short of expectations.

The Royal Commission took four years to produce its report, at which time its conclusions were essentially that they were not able to reach a consensus on most of the questions posed, with the exception of the retention of the matrimonial offence as reason for divorce. However, support for maintaining this as the only reason for divorce was far from unanimous as there were nine members of the Commission who believed that the addition of a clause which

¹⁷ B.H. Lee *Divorce Law Reform in England* (London 1973), pp. 26-27.

¹⁸ *Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce 1951-1955*, Cmnd. 9678, p. 1.

allowed for irretrievable breakdown of a marriage to also be cited (either on its own or in addition to a matrimonial offence) would not only clarify the existing law but would enable more unhappy unions to be dissolved without one or both partners having to commit perjury.¹⁹ It was because of this inconclusiveness that historian O.R. McGregor referred to this commission as ‘...the worst Royal Commission of the twentieth century’.²⁰ This also proved to be a limiting factor with regard to its use to legislators as it only told them what had been previously recognised regarding societal views of the topic and drew no new or definitive conclusions regarding terms for divorce.

That said, however, there were changes made to the existing legislation soon after the report was published, but none were proposed which addressed the causes for divorce until 1963. It was at this time that Leo Abse (Labour, Pontypool) introduced another Matrimonial Causes Bill which had very similar aims to those of White’s 1951 Bill. It took into consideration the recommendations of the Royal Commission and expanded upon them, suggesting that divorce should be accessible:

- a. by either party of a marriage when a matrimonial offence has been committed, after seven years’ separation
- b. with the consent of both parties after seven years’ separation²¹

¹⁹ *Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce*, Cmnd. 9678, pp. 22-23.

²⁰ O.R. McGregor, *Divorce in England* (London 1957), p. 193.

²¹ HMSO, *Matrimonial Causes Act 1963*, s. 1 (e) and (f); Lee, *Divorce Law Reform in England*, pp. 32-34.

He also included measures to encourage reconciliation, which was looked upon favourably by many MPs. In order for his Bill to be deemed acceptable by those resistant to change, the clause regarding non-consensual divorce was greatly altered, which helped it to pass. Despite the restricted changes which occurred with the passage of this Act because of the strength of the opposition, it proved to prepare Parliament for the amendments which were to be proposed in the following years.

There were two Bills introduced in 1958, one which aimed to give women increased rights over matrimonial property and to maintenance payments upon the dissolution of a marriage and another which aimed to increase the powers of courts to make decisions regarding the children before issuing a *decree nisi*. There was no female Conservative input in the passage of the first, which, given the nature of the Bill is unexpected, however, there were many other issues being addressed in the late 1950s which were occupying their time.

However, the Matrimonial Causes (Children) Bill was another Bill which Joan Vickers readily supported. During her speech, she recognised this and indicated her sympathy for them:

...it is very difficult for them [children] to maintain divided loyalties. I have been struck by the loyalty of children to their parents, even in divided families. I have done a considerable amount of training in child welfare, both in hospital and among well children, teaching and in care committee work.²²

Once more, her personal experiences enabled her to make a valid argument which spurred on discussion. The perspective she could

²² *HC Deb* Vol. 581, 7 February 1958 cc. 1525-1526.

offer, that of someone who had worked within the social services, shed light on the reality of the situation for many of her colleagues who had never worked with families which were attempting to deal with the difficulties associated with illegitimate children and divorced or separated parents before.

The first Divorce Reform Bill introduced under the new Labour Government was yet another introduced as a Private Members' Bill. The Matrimonial Causes Act 1965 served to consolidate and simplify the legislation which had gone before. This simple, yet useful piece of legislation served to set the stage well for the coming years, when divorce legislation became an important issue in the Commons and society, was welcomed by many legislators. This would prove to be the first in a series of many proposed alterations to divorce legislation in the span of less than a decade.

It was following this that the Anglican Church, another important group with a great deal of influence over and interest in family issues, publicised its views. Naturally, due to the nature of divorce, the church was quite vocal and remained involved as a lobby group, producing several reports and partaking in discussions with parties on both sides of the argument. Their most influential report was the pamphlet *Putting Asunder* (1966), which was the result of a group, formed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to examine the legislation and proposed amendments. *Putting Asunder* generated more interest in the divorce issue than there had previously been as it was the first time the Anglican Church issued a statement directly addressing divorce which demonstrated support for reform, albeit on a limited scale.

It was not meant to be an official statement, but as those involved were all well-respected members of the church, it was interpreted by some to be just that. Their parameters were quite simply to examine 'the law of the State exclusively, in order to see if there is any amendment or reform of that law we can recommend in the interests of the nation as a whole.'²³ These restrictions provided the background for what proved to be an extensive look at the proposed amendments from the 1960s in addition to church doctrine, with the intent of attempting to dictate between the two without creating disturbances (unnecessarily) in the relationship between the church and state. Given that early divorce law was based on ecclesiastical law, this posed a problem for those involved, but one which they managed to work around quite well to produce an informative and well-researched document which was, as previously said, widely used.

The largest problem facing this group was that they were working within a nation in which church and state were becoming increasingly separated. The way in which the group overcame this issue was to make its objective as stated above, but they also stated that 'We have not concerned ourselves with the matrimonial doctrine and discipline of the Church of England, and we neither make nor imply any recommendation concerning them.'²⁴ That said, they could not help but address the church's principles and devoted a section of the document to their views of the law as it was at the time, citing its many weaknesses, not just in terms of

²³ Archbishop of Canterbury's Group on the Divorce Law, *Putting Asunder: A Divorce Law for Contemporary Society* (London 1966), p. 4.

²⁴ Archbishop of Canterbury's Group, *Putting Asunder*, p. 4.

church doctrine, but also with regard to practical application. It was with this in mind that they recommended the introduction of divorce due to irretrievable breakdown.

A second important and highly regarded report was issued by a group formed by the government in 1965. The newly formed Law Commission's first task was to study divorce reform, and the end result of this study was the report *Reform of the Ground of Divorce: the Field of Choice*, which was published in 1966. While similar to the Archbishop's group, the Law Commission focused on divorce from a legal perspective and thus made recommendations with regard to what amendments should be made to the existing legislation from a strictly legal standpoint. Thus, it gave recommendations involving provisions made for wives and children, divorce by consent and the retention of the three year minimum length of marriage before a divorce could be granted.²⁵ These recommendations, which were well researched and presented, were taken into consideration by legislators when designing new amendments regarding the issue in conjunction with those made by the Archbishop's group. Both reports were highly regarded by people from both sides of the debate, and thus the Commission's non-partisan nature put forward objectives which both groups set out to achieve.

In addition to these groups, there was one other key pressure group which was influential in these reforms. The Divorce Law Reform Union (DLRU) was important as it was a single-minded

²⁵ *Law Commission Report on Reform of the Grounds of Divorce the Field of Choice*, 1966-1967, Cmnd. 3123, HMSO, November 1966, pp. 53-56.

organisation which had a strong following both within and outside of Parliament and therefore influenced the media as well as the parties through their lobbying tactics and hard work. Especially with regard to a controversial issue such as this, such groups have in the past proven themselves to be indispensable to their respective causes and in this case it was no different. It is clear that the DLRU was influential in swaying those who were on the fence with regard to this issue either one way or the other, and luckily for the reformers, they were able to gain many supporters through their campaigns.²⁶

In order to address issues such as grounds for divorce, along with the more commonly debated and contentious issue of separation periods, lawmakers had to acknowledge that society was changing as was the structure of the family which indicated new legislation was needed. Legislators did not take making these changes lightly, as they were concerned that should divorce be more easily obtainable, the divorce rate would rise, and they did not want to diminish the sanctity of marriage. It was therefore through much deliberation the creation of several committees, the publication of the findings of the above groups and input from other outside bodies, including the DLRU, that the changes were finally made.

The Divorce Reform Act 1969 was highly controversial when introduced into Parliament and within the individual parties there were a great number of MPs in favour of it, however, the opposition was also quite strong. The main points made by the opposition in debates revolved around the potential increase in divorce rates as

²⁶ Lee, *Divorce Law Reform in England*, p. 211.

well as the ease of access to divorce generating the idea that marriage was not considered, as it had previously been, a permanent institution. However, their main concern tended to be that the wife could be left without an income should her ex-husband wish to marry someone else. This was a valid concern, as it could be considered unreasonable for a man to be expected to maintain two households on one salary. However, there were many other factors which opponents neglected to consider. These included the point made by Joan Lestor (Labour, Eton and Slough), that it was not always the husband who left his wife. It often happened that the wife left her husband with the children and in those cases, where the wife had not been working, she could neither be expected to support her husband nor could she expect him to support her.²⁷

Therefore the question of post-divorce economic dependence is one which had to be addressed independently of which partner petitioned for the divorce as wives were more often than not economically dependent upon their husbands. When divorce law had first been introduced, the only thing that could be cited as reason for divorce was adultery on the part of the wife. Though the law had evolved since the nineteenth century, adultery, or another offence as named by early twentieth century legislation, had long been seen as the only reason that a couple could not make their marriage work, despite evidence of cruelty, neglect or abuse in some instances.

²⁷ *HC Deb* Vol. 784, 12 June 1968 c. 2046.

After being introduced during the 1967-1968 Parliamentary session, the Divorce Reform Act 1969 was passed with a clause which provided that irretrievable breakdown would be an acceptable reason to seek divorce and what exactly constituted the breakdown of a marriage in the eyes of the law. Another clause stipulated that the petitioner must be made aware of qualified people to assist with reconciliation, in case it was even a remote possibility, before proceedings were to be held. While the changes made to the existing legislation by this Act were great, they were still not completely satisfactory in the eyes of many legislators and thus more amendments to further address such things as division of property and maintenance were deemed necessary.

As with most contentious issues, Conservatives' views of this particular Act varied. While many party members supported the idea behind it, there were others who were afraid that making divorce more widely available would encourage couples to seek divorce instead of trying to work out problems in their relationships, thus causing the divorce rate to soar. Among those who held this belief were Margaret Thatcher and Irene Ward, who both voted against this Bill.

When it came time for the division after the second reading, there were only 23 Conservatives who voted in favour of it, while 88 voted against. These numbers are indicative of the general feeling within the party. However, the three in favour of the Bill who participated in the debate were not only passionate about the cause, but were among its sponsors and had been heavily involved in committee work, thus demonstrating their dedication beyond the

confines of Parliamentary debates. Conversely, those who spoke out against the amendments also did so with passion and thus it is clear that this was not only a non-partisan issue, but as will also be seen with regard to the Abortion Act, quite contentious within each individual party.²⁸

With regard to women's interest in this legislation, again this greatly varied. As discussed above, Joan Vickers was not only a proponent, and one of three women to speak up during the debate, but she was also only one of two Conservative women to vote in favour of the Divorce Reform Bill at the second reading, the other was Joan Quennell.

Vickers' interest in this legislation stemmed from a belief that women should be protected from desertion and thus they should have the opportunity to receive some compensation upon being divorced.²⁹ This influenced her participation in the Commons and in the Committee, in which she demonstrated a firm grasp of the information as well as a deep care and passion for those affected. Being the only Conservative woman to speak up in the debates in favour of this issue, she was in an extraordinary position which left her to stand up against her colleagues in the Conservative Party as well as to serve as a representative of those on her side of the debate.

As stated previously, Margaret Thatcher and Irene Ward were among Vickers' colleagues who opposed the Bill. Ward participated

²⁸ Lee, *Divorce Law Reform in England*, pp. 132-133.

²⁹ *HC Deb* Vol. 784, 12 June 1969 c. 1957.

minimally in some of the debates and in the committee stage, whereas Thatcher simply voted against the reforms whenever present for the divisions. Ward's resistance to these reforms was due to the inclusion of a clause which made citing irretrievable breakdown an option for those seeking a divorce. The fact that this could be used as the only reason for divorce, without any offence having been committed allowed too much opportunity for divorces to be used as solutions to problems and detracted, as previously mentioned, from the sanctity of marriage. Even though these two women were important figures in the party, their minimal participation in the debates can be interpreted as evidence that they were not as passionate about this topic as were some of their colleagues, and also their lack of influence on this issue as the reforms which they stood against were passed.

With regard to home and other property, there were drastic changes made in the 1970s. These changes came in the form of the Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act 1970, under which contributions made to the home, which included such things as care for the home or any improvement work done on the house, were counted toward a wife's claim on the property. These new provisions gave women a legitimate right to either the house itself or any proceeds from the sale for the first time.³⁰ Also due to these changes, money, in the form of both pensions and savings, was presented to the court as an asset that could be split up, with the wife's entitlement being based on whether or not the couple had children and on the lifestyle in which they had been living. In addition, with the implementation of these laws, there were many

³⁰ HMSO, *Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act 1970*, s. 37.

more restrictions put on what could and could not be done with marital property upon the dissolution of a marriage with regard to the sale and proceeds of any property. However great these changes were, they were once again altered by the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973.

The Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 consolidated various earlier pieces of legislation in order to make the law clearer. In addition to addressing issues associated with reasons for divorce, it also tackled those regarding matrimonial property and maintenance. It stated that in order to qualify for divorce, a couple had to be married for at least one year, which was a reduction in the time period of three years that had been dictated by previous legislation. As had been instituted in the Divorce Reform Act 1969, the judge was able to defer divorce proceedings if there was any hint of possible reconciliation and the attorney of the petitioner was to provide names of people to assist the couple should reconciliation not have been out of the question at the time of filing for a divorce. In addition to these clauses relating specifically to the divorce itself, there were also provisions made regarding division of property, ensuring maintenance would be paid on time and assigning custody when necessary, considering the best interests of the child, all of which were to be determined by the courts based upon the circumstances of each family.³¹

The Domicile and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1973 was another important piece of legislation which gained Conservative interest and support in the early 1970s. Introduced by Ian MacArthur

³¹ HMSO, *Matrimonial Causes Act 1973*, s. 21-41.

(Conservative, Perth and East Perthshire), this piece of legislation aimed to allow married women to maintain their own domicile, instead of that of their husband in the case of separation/desertion, and also remove anomalies regarding jurisdiction in such cases. This legislation was the occasion when Conservative MP Mary Holt spoke up for the first time on a women's rights issue. She recognised the importance of this Bill as '...one further step in the slow march of every woman towards obtaining equal rights with men in law. It is to be welcomed on that account and also because it implements certain recommendations made by the Cripps Report...' ³² Once again, not only was a Conservative woman interested in the Bill itself, but she was also interested in the wider issue of increased rights for women. Another important Conservative woman was also actively involved in the debates on this issue. Joan Vickers also actively supported this Bill, referring to it as 'excellent' and recognising its importance not only within the realm of marital rights but also, as did Holt, the wider scope of women's rights. ³³

As arguably the most vocal Conservative woman on these issues, Vickers was active not only in Parliament but also in several ancillary organisations. In 1966, when she was chairman of the Status of Women Committee, the group issued a manifesto which called for several changes regarding women's rights, the most relevant to this issue being the equal distribution of assets acquired

³² *HC Deb* Vol. 850, 16 February 1973 c. 1633.

³³ *HC Deb*, Vol. 850, 16 February 1973 cc. 1649-1651.

during a marriage to both partners following the dissolution of the marriage.³⁴

One important point made was the fact that the group did not want changes made simply because it was women being treated unfairly; they pursued change because women were people who were being treated unfairly in a society which claimed to treat all people equally.³⁵ Vickers' participation in such an organisation showed her dedication to the cause and increased her command of the topic so that she was more knowledgeable and influential in debates in the Commons.

One of the most active lobbying organisations on these issues was the Married Women's Association (MWA). When it was founded in 1938, the MWA was an interparty organization, however following a rift regarding divorce reform, it split into two factions, one retaining the MWA name and the other adopting the name Council of Married Women (CMW). The MWA became a Conservative-dominated organisation while the CMW became a Labour-dominated organisation. Due to the association between the MWA and the Conservatives, its work needs mentioning here.³⁶

In 1950, the MWA printed a pamphlet entitled *How the Law is Unfair to the Married Woman*. This pamphlet included a list of ways

³⁴ Women's Policy Group Report, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 500/9/18.

³⁵ Women's Policy Group Report, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 500/9/18.

³⁶ Bibliographical History of the Married Women's Association, accessed via http://www.aim25.ac.uk/cgi-bin/vcdf/detail?coll_id=10644&inst_id=65&nv1=search&nv2=basic on 21 December 2007.

in which the MWA saw that, as the title states, women were being treated unfairly by the laws of the time. Four of these main ways in which the laws at the time were unfair to women were:

2. The wife has no certain legal share in the ownership of the matrimonial home or furniture if it is provided by her husband or purchased with his earnings. At present the wife must prove ownership even of her own possessions.
3. The maximum amount of maintenance obtainable in the Magistrate's Court is £2 per week, regardless of the husband's income.
4. To obtain a maintenance order against a deserting husband, the responsibility of finding him rests with the wife unless she is in receipt of Public Assistance.
5. The wife cannot obtain or enforce an order for maintenance if her husband is outside the British Dominions.

In the same pamphlet, the MWA went on to list their solutions to these problems in the following way:

1. That the wife should have the right to an equal share with the husband of the family income after the expenses of the home have been met.
2. That wives and children should be entitled to a legal share in the matrimonial home and furniture.
3. That the limit on the amount of maintenance obtainable in the Magistrate's Court should be removed.
4. That the onus of tracing husbands who evade their responsibilities should rest on the State.
5. That maintenance orders for women and children be enforceable all over the world by international agreement and arrangement.
8. That damages in divorce suits should be abolished.³⁷

Another pamphlet by the MWA, which was printed in order to promote equal partnership between men and women, much the

³⁷ *How the Law is Unfair to the Married Woman*, MWA (1950), Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 3/2/40.

same way as the previously mentioned pamphlet was, made several statements regarding the state of married women. One key statement is as follows: 'In the eyes of the law a wife has no financial value while the marriage is intact. She can be assessed in hundreds of pounds when she is lost to her husband in divorce.' This demonstrates, if not the truth of how women were treated within a relationship, the perception of their treatment. As it was a pamphlet published by the MWA, it was written and supported by many married, and Conservative-minded, women which indicates that their concerns were those shared by other women within and outside of the party.³⁸

A second statement that stands out in this pamphlet is: 'A maintenance order cannot be enforced. A man can escape liability of arrears by choosing to go to prison rather than pay a magistrate's court order. No order can be obtained against a husband living outside the British Colonies or Dominions.'³⁹ This shows the difficulties that women faced when trying to maintain a normal standard of living for her children (and herself) following desertion. Statements such as this demonstrate the way in which marital laws were lacking in that wives were devalued, seen as property and the fact that they were unable to acquire maintenance payments that had been ordered to them is a complaint which resounds through much of the literature on this subject.

The Conservative Party's increased interest in these issues was demonstrated by the time dedicated to the topic of the family at

³⁸ MWA Pamphlet (no date), Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 3/4/19.

³⁹ MWA Pamphlet (no date), Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 3/4/19.

the 1977 Party conference. At this conference, Janet Young gave a speech entitled *The Family and Conservative Policy*, a topic which, as stated in her speech, was given more time than any other topic at the conference that year. While she addressed many issues of importance to families as a whole including housing, education and taxation, she also paid special attention to the increased numbers of one-parent families and instances where married women needed to work, as well as an increased prevalence of married women working because they wanted to. It was not her main goal in addressing the conference to draw attention to these two specific issues, but they had become increasingly important given the shift within the party in attitude toward divorce and guardianship issues. Also, the fact that these points were raised in a speech to which so much importance was given highlights this as well as a change in Party ideology which created a climate that was more open to discussing changes.⁴⁰

Young's strong Christian values are an essential part of the explanation of her interest in and beliefs with regard to family law issues. In addition to believing in strengthening the family, she was also known for holding beliefs regarding morality and other issues which were guided by her strict Christian values.⁴¹ It seems that these values spilled over into her ideas regarding the Government's role in helping families to remain strong and to aid families in crisis. It was in this spirit that she was not willing to

⁴⁰ Various documents relating to Conservative Family Policy, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 170/5/19.

⁴¹ C. Jackson, 'Young, Janet Mary, Baroness Young (1926–2002)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn, Oxford University Press, Jan 2006, accessed via <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/77303>, on 18 January 2008.

support new divorce legislation that did not encourage reconciliation. These values could be seen by some as an inhibiting factor, but because of the matched strength of her political knowledge and abilities, she was able to use them mainly to her advantage. She did, of course, meet opposition but she was able to maintain her views in order to convey her point in a way that was effective in aiding her cause.

These were especially evident when she spoke up in two debates in the Lords in 1978 on the topic of 'The Family in Britain Today'. While many similar topics to those which she discussed in her speech at the Party Conference were raised on these occasions, she ensured that those in attendance fully understood her ideas. This was done through her use of succinct, coherent arguments regarding the importance of the family to society. She again demonstrated a strong belief in the family unit and a desire to see the government take a lesser role in family life, while not abandoning them altogether. She also acknowledged the Conservatives' views regarding the family 'I speak on behalf of a Party that believes in the importance of the family, and in the need for the support of it.' This confirmation of party beliefs was emphasised by Young's reiteration of a statement Thatcher had made in the Commons regarding Labour policy.⁴² The strength of the individuals within the party exemplifies the Conservatives' dedication to the topic. Young held the viewpoint that families should receive increased support for housing as well as in the form of child allowances, as there were many instances where families, sometimes even those in which both parents were present, were

⁴² *HL Deb* Vol. 391, 2 May 1978 c. 22.

left desolate under the legislation of the time, as adequate housing and assistance were not being provided.⁴³

In addition to these auxiliary organisations, the Conservative Political Centre actively published several reports regarding women and families, many of which were widely used and were highly influential. Two such publications are *Fair Share*

for the Fair Sex and *Unhappy Families*. Both of these examined different ways in which the law was unfair to certain groups of people. As can be ascertained from the title, *Fair Share for the Fair Sex* applied directly to women, and its purpose was to examine '(a) what changes are desirable in the law and in administration in order to allow women to participate equally with men in the political, economic and social life of the community; (b) what changes are desirable in the law relating to their rights and obligations within the family.'⁴⁴ The pamphlet covered a wide range of issues, from marriage to rights for working women. *Fair Share for the Fair Sex* was landmark because it focused on women specifically and recognised the problems that they were having in a society which was still adapting to their changing roles and needs within it. It was widely read and heavily used as a source in debates and papers, as well as in the shaping of Conservative Party Policy.

⁴³ *HL Deb* Vol. 371, 16 June 1976, cc. 1274-1280 and Vol. 391, 2 May 1978 cc. 22-29.

⁴⁴ Cripps Committee Report, *Fair Share for the Fair Sex*, (London 1969) p. 1.

The most important statements made in *Fair Share* regarding family law concerned the matrimonial home. These called for such things as the consideration of women individually for tax purposes; for family allowances to be tax deductible from women's income; for child relief to be granted to the parent who has custody; and for women be entitled to a share of the matrimonial home upon its sale or be granted

the right to remain living there upon the dissolution of marriage. The financial aspects of each of these, and other recommendations demonstrates that the majority of the ways in which Conservatives felt women were being treated unfairly involved the financial implications of raising children and caring for their homes. While taxes will not specifically be discussed here the consequences of high or unfair taxes are reflected in the shortages which some women felt when trying to take care of their families on their own.⁴⁵

Unhappy Families on the other hand, focused on the plight of single parent families and the rights of single parents, as well as the way in which women, specifically, were often left in difficulty with regard to maintenance and job opportunities and were therefore oftentimes unable to care for their children properly. This publication was important in that it brought attention to a problem which had been present for many years, but the prevalence of this was increasing due to more cases of divorce and desertion. The recommendations of the committee called for fairer treatment, including increased guardianship rights and maintenance for the

⁴⁵ Cripps Committee, *Fair Share for the Fair Sex*, pp. 43-44 and 48-49.

parent who had custody of the child as well as equal share in the matrimonial home for the wife/mother.⁴⁶ The recognition of this and apparent desire to see children given a better start in life was important because it helped to shape future legislation affecting children. It also drew attention to the general problem of an increased divorce rate which encouraged further legislation regarding rights for all involved as well as the regulations involved in divorce proceedings.

Another debate not directly related to any one piece of legislation, it is important to discuss the debate conducted in the Commons on 20 October 1975 regarding one-parent families. This debate followed the publication of *Unhappy Families*, for which the above publications were prepared to provide information. It was in this debate that Lynda Chalker first spoke on family issues. She was ardently in favour of amending the existing legislation in favour of providing more support for families in this situation. She had dealt firsthand with many one-parent families in her constituency and was thus able to understand the importance of government aid.⁴⁷ Although no further legislation was created or amended during the time period being examined here, this is an indication that Conservative interest and support did not end with the passing of the aforementioned legislation.

The Fatal Accidents Acts

The final section of this chapter will focus more narrowly than the previous sections in order to address often neglected, yet important

⁴⁶ Finer Committee Report, *Unhappy Families*, (London 1971), pp. 4, 6-8.

⁴⁷ *HC Deb* 20 October 1975, Vol. 898 cc. 124-126.

pieces of legislation, the Fatal Accidents Acts, 1846-1976. Their importance with regard to this chapter is not only in the way in which they affected many families, but also the fact that these pieces of legislation covering these issues were not amended for an extended period of time. The premise of the legislation itself is not particularly remarkable, as it was intended to aid courts in determining how much compensation for accidental death should be awarded to the deceased person's dependants as well as to how the compensation should be divided among them. The purpose of this section is therefore to discuss the process through which this clause was finally removed from the Act. The importance of this Act, in terms of this study, lies in the unjust way in which women were treated when left as a single parent due to an accident. The fervour with which some Conservative women took up this issue is notable, as it is further evidence of their care for the well-being of women.

Despite the many amendments that were made in the 130 years in which this Act was in force before the idea of marriageability was reconsidered, this was not changed. There was no mention made of altering the idea of judging marriageability in the debates on the Act until the 1970s. Various other aspects of the laws affecting the award of damages were also passed during this time, however, this section will focus on the amendment of the marriageability clause, specifically during the time between 1959 and 1976.

The main purpose of the 'marriageability clause' was to determine the amount of damages awarded to a widow. Marriageability, as defined for this Act, was quite simply the likelihood of a woman to

marry again based upon a number of criteria. These included such things as her age, whether or not she had any children, her appearance and housekeeping skills. As this was a matter for the courts, it was a judge who would compile a list to determine a woman's marriageability. Those women who were found to be attractive, young and generally 'presentable' would be awarded less in damages than would a widow who was older, less attractive and perhaps had children. The injustice of this law does not end there, however. The amount a widow was awarded, along with her age and the judge's ruling would then be published in the newspaper for all to see.

There were two main Conservative proponents of reform of the legislation as it stood. The first was Evelyn Emmet, who was a widow herself and could therefore commiserate with the situations the women who would be affected by the legislation. It was her belief that it was '...derogatory to a woman who is having damages assessed for the judge to assess what he thinks is her marriage value. It dates back to the old slave market attitude, and I am sure that that is something that should be abolished.'⁴⁸

Jill Knight also commented on this during the Commons debate five years later on 29 January 1971:

She would be fortunate indeed if she did marry. But, being realistic, one must assess the chances as low. Poor woman! That was said in court. I do not know whether the judge made that observation because she had several children or was perhaps at an age when she might not be thought to be readily or easily

⁴⁸ *HL Deb* Vol. 277, 16 November 1966 c. 1323.

marriageable. It may have been that her style of beauty did not commend itself to that judge.⁴⁹

The amount of damages awarded was almost completely subjective as it was based mainly on the judge's opinion of the woman and what he perceived to be her marriage prospects. Although the amount of income a woman could have expected to receive from her husband, had he still been alive, was taken into consideration as a starting point for a judge when deciding the amount to award, thus removing a small element of subjectivity from the decision making process. The injustice of this procedure did not go unnoticed by many legislators, one of whom was Lena Jeger (Labour, Holborn and St Pancras South). In the same debate in which Knight stated the above, Jeger pointed out that there were many examples of cases in which damages were reduced because of appeals from insurance companies and different judges trying the cases and thus holding different opinions regarding the widow's marriageability.⁵⁰

Once the amount had been determined, the court kept control of the money awarded to the children (until they were of legal age), but gave the widow her money in a lump sum – another outdated aspect of this legislation which was initially designed (in the nineteenth century) to protect the children, while at the same time potentially making the widow more appealing to potential suitors.⁵¹

One of the main reasons for the insertion of this clause was that lawmakers were afraid that women would be taken advantage of by

⁴⁹ *HC Deb* Vol. 810, 29 January 1971 c. 1126.

⁵⁰ *HC Deb* Vol. 810, 29 January 1971 c. 1129.

⁵¹ Cripps Committee, *Fair Share for the Fair Sex*, p. 15.

opportunistic suitors given that when this law was first written, women were seen to be weak and naive. The perception of women, as it changed over time, surely should have made legislators realise that women were becoming increasingly capable of taking care of themselves.

The fact that this clause was not removed from the statute books until 1971 exemplifies several things. First of all, it is quite likely that there were many more pressing Acts to be passed through Parliament which caused this one to be easily overlooked. Also, with the increased number of life insurance policies and less reliance on damages from guilty parties, this was perhaps not as heavily relied upon as it had been when it was first designed. Given the large number of amendments to other family legislation at this time, however, this seems an important piece of legislation to be overlooked given the ramifications it had for the families involved and thus an unlikely one to be overlooked.

As an example of this Act being put into practice, in the case of *Woodroff v National Coal Board*, a judge took on board the fact that a large sum of money could actually be an advantage for a widow when he stated that 'the widow was an attractive young woman, that she would make a good wife to someone, (and) that she would have the award as a dowry'.⁵² The suggestion made by the judge to use the money awarded as a dowry demonstrates the old-fashioned views still held by some judges, even as late as 1954.

⁵² *Woodroff v National Coal Board*, 1 January 1954, accessed via www.westlaw.co.uk on 28 October 2008.

In 1967, another time when this Act was in the process of being amended, there was a suggestion made by an all-male committee to introduce medical examinations for widows to determine life expectancy before a judge awarded damages.⁵³ This was not implemented, but the introduction of this would have just been another way for a distressed widow to be exploited. Surely the amount of damages awarded should be based upon the lifestyle in which a woman was living and the amount of money she would be losing from her husband's wages.

While it could be considered valid to consider such things in determining the amount which a widow should receive, it is impossible to determine when accidents will occur – hence the necessity for this legislation in the first place. Therefore, something such as life expectancy has no place in determining this as, if the law were simply to be amended to give a woman weekly or even monthly payments, a question such as this could be avoided completely as they would naturally stop upon her death. In addition to the unfairness of this, judges took into consideration the possibility that the husband could have suffered from such things as a heart attack or other ailment which could prevent them from working, had they not died accidentally, and often reduced the damages awarded based upon this speculation.⁵⁴

Outside of the debates in the Commons, this issue was addressed by Conservative women at conferences and committee meetings.

⁵³ Anthony Cripps Memorandum on Marriageability and Damages, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 500/9/16.

⁵⁴ K. Wharton, *Must Widows Really Suffer This Too?*, 5 February 1967, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 500/9/16.

The party itself had supported amendments to this legislation and both Edward Heath and Anthony Cripps had issued statements making their beliefs clear – that the Act as it stood was unfair to women and was overdue for amending.⁵⁵ Support from well-respected and high ranking people within the party not only made party policy clear but also showed further support to women's rights issues.

The WNAC's opinion on the subject was that changes needed to be made, along the line of altering the way in which widows received compensation as well as the process through which they had to go in order for the courts to determine the amount of compensation that they would receive. While the necessity of determining the widows' health and general state was understood as necessary, it was also thought that instead of a lump sum, a widow should be assessed annually in order to make sure that the amount she was receiving was still adequate year after year. They also recommended that the widow be given control of any damages she might be awarded, as opposed to them remaining in the courts' control.⁵⁶

The changes made in this piece of legislation, along with the others discussed here, are indicative of the time and how ready Parliament and society as whole were to see positive action taken. The role of the Conservatives in these matters, as has been seen, was crucial. Many of the women MPs, including Joan Vickers, were able to speak

⁵⁵ Anthony Cripps Memorandum on Marriageability and Damages, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 500/9/16.

⁵⁶ Cripps Committee, *Fair Share for the Fair Sex*, p. 19.

from their firsthand experience of dealing with families who had to cope with these issues on a regular basis. This made them more capable as legislators as they were in touch with those for whom they were creating the laws. This is not to say that their male colleagues did not have the same sort of experiences, but this is one instance where approaching the subject from a female perspective seemed to not only help them to perform better as MPs but also to develop more effective legislation.

Given the importance of the family to the Conservative Party, it is no surprise that the issues discussed received the attention that they did from MPs, both within and outside of Parliament. For those who were proponents of reforms in the legislation, their work on these topics can be seen as valuable to the overall cause. Those who were not in favour of amending these laws were not as active which demonstrates that they were perhaps not as invested in these issues as were their colleagues on the other side of the issue. However, the most important thing to note about the above legislation and women's interest in it was based around those issues which were most directed toward increasing equality between the sexes. There were several pieces of legislation discussed which involved little to no female input, however, these were the ones which centred on consolidating or simply clarifying existing legislation. This is not to diminish the importance of these pieces of legislation, but simply to draw attention to the fact that women's work was, importantly, focused on those Bills which were aimed at ensuring meaningful changes were being made.

5 – PERSONAL

There were two major issues raised at this time which were of particular interest to women due to their intimate nature: abortion and contraception. As these were highly controversial topics, there was not a great deal of input from many Conservative female MPs. While some women participated to an extent in debates and displayed interest through active roles in Standing Committees and other organisations, this was limited in both level of participation and numbers. Although the number of female Conservative MPs participating in debates on these issues was inconsistent throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, there were a few individuals who were consistently active throughout. Beginning with a brief history of the abortion issue, this chapter will explore the extent to which Conservative women participated in the debate on the 1967 Abortion Bill, both within and outside of the Commons, as well as their role in the amendments which were proposed in the late 1960s and 1970s. In addition to these, the National Health Insurance (Family Planning) Act 1967 will be discussed in order to explore the women's roles in this important legislation.

In examining these, it will be shown that those Conservative women who actively participated in debates and lobby groups were able to influence the passage, or help to prevent the passage, of the associated Bills and amendments. The level of participation is indicative of the nature of the topic and how affected women were, whether for personal or professional reasons.

History of Abortion Law

Prior to the 1967 Act, there were two pieces of legislation which regulated abortions. The Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 and the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 both dealt with various aspects of abortion and were thus used together to determine whether or not abortions had been carried out lawfully. With regard to the 1861 Act, it contained specifications of various offences, most unrelated to abortion, but in one section dictated that abortion was illegal if carried out intentionally regardless of the reason.¹ However, the 1929 Act created circumstances under which abortions could be legal, although these were still ambiguous.

The provisions were divided into sections, the most important in this discussion is section one, 'Punishment for child destruction', which states:

...any person who, with intent to destroy the life of a child capable of being born alive, by any wilful act causes a child to die before it has an existence independent of its mother, shall be guilty of felony, to wit, of child destruction, and shall be liable on conviction therefore on indictment to penal servitude for life...

Provided that no person shall be found guilty of an offence under this section unless it is proved that the act which caused the death of the child was not done in good faith for the purpose only of preserving the life of the mother.²

The language of these laws left room for interpretation and confusion which led to many practitioners being tried for performing abortions based upon their interpretations of the especially ambiguous phrasing of the final line of section one of the

¹ HMSO, *Offences against the Person Act 1861*, c. 100, s. 58 and s. 59.

² HMSO, *Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929*, c. 34, s. 1.

Act, as stated above. It was these many cases that set the case law precedents which were often cited and thus carried more weight in prosecuting for performing abortions than did the existing legislation. This is notable for several reasons. First of all, it was widely recognised within both the medical and legal fields that the law itself was too ambiguous, and therefore open to varying interpretations. Also, due to problems with the legislation, exemplified by the increasing number of public trials as well as the lengths to which some women would go in order to procure abortions, there was increased public interest in the topic.

Arguably one of the most important precedent-setting cases occurred in 1938, when a physician performed an abortion on a fourteen year old girl who had been raped. Given the trauma endured by this young woman, and in order to prevent further damage, either psychological or physical in nature, Aleck Bourne, a prominent London doctor interpreted the law, which did not specifically dictate that the pregnant woman's medical problems had to be physical, to include mental damages and concluded that those which would be inflicted upon the young girl by carrying the pregnancy to full term would be more severe than any she would have to deal with because of the abortion. Bourne was put on trial for performing the abortion illegally according to s. 58 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 which made it illegal to '...[use] an instrument with intent to procure miscarriage'.³

Aside from the fact that this case cited mental health reasons for carrying out an abortion for the first time, there were other issues

³ HMSO, *The Offences against the Person Act 1861*, s. 58.

which arose, not because of the ambiguity of either Act independently, but because of the way the 1929 Act dictated that the two could be used together:

Where upon the trial of any person for the murder or manslaughter of any child, or for infanticide, or for an offence under section fifty-eight of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 (which relates to administering drugs or using instruments to procure abortion), the jury are of opinion that the person charged is not guilty of murder, manslaughter or infanticide, or of an offence under the said section fifty-eight, as the case may be, but that he is shown by the evidence to be guilty of the felony of child destruction, the jury may find him guilty of that felony, and thereupon the person convicted shall be liable to be punished as if he had been convicted upon an indictment for child destruction.⁴

Thus, Bourne was tried under the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929, because of its tie to the 1861 Act. Therefore, his defence was that he had performed the procedure to save the life of the mother, as was allowed under section 1 of the 1929 Act.⁵ Given that this was the first time that mental health was cited as the main reason for a doctor approving and performing an abortion, the controversy surrounding Bourne's decision is understandable. He was found not guilty not only because it was determined that mental health should be taken into consideration under the legislation as it was, but also due to his reputation within the medical community and the personal circumstances of the girl. Because of the verdict and circumstances involved, the Bourne case became the most important of its kind in the early to mid-twentieth

⁴ HMSO, *Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929*, s. 2(2).

⁵ *The King v. Bourne*, 19 July 1938, accessed via www.westlaw.co.uk on 20 August 2008.

century. Therefore, after this case, some doctors did perform abortions more freely, but the law remained unclear.⁶

While this case did not cause automatic improvement in the abortion laws, as pointed out by Stephen Brooke, it '...brought attention to the ambiguities of abortion law...'⁷ After this, the lobby and public awareness of the issues involved in abortion began to grow steadily and continued to do so through the proceeding decades. Addressing the existence of damage that was mental rather than physical in the context of abortion is important in this debate, and after the Bourne case there were many factors including the morality of the girl involved, her age and class, which were brought to light and eventually seen as points for doctors to consider with regard to the carrying out of abortions. Given that medical science and technology were, in the 1930s, greatly improved from what they had been in the 1800s, when abortion law was first written, the necessity for change was clear. However, it was not for nearly 30 years after the Bourne case that changes were finally made.

The Abortion Act 1967

While there were several Bills introduced into the Commons prior to 1966, none of them approached the success of David Steel's Bill. The changes proposed in previous Bills varied from simply making abortion easier to access to changing the latest stage of pregnancy at which abortions could be carried out. While important because

⁶ D. Marsh and J. Chambers *Abortion Politics* (London 1981), pp. 12-13.

⁷ S. Brooke, 'A New World for Women?' Abortion Law Reform in Britain during the 1930s', *The American Historical Review*, (April 2001), pp. 450-451.

they demonstrated that there was an increasing interest in the topic and also due to the amount of support they received from various MPs (Conservative women included), the fact that these amendments were introduced over a period of nearly 30 years and that none of them reached a second reading indicates that there were several contributing factors which caused the introduction of these new amendments to existing abortion legislation to fail. As will be seen, these factors did not completely disappear by 1966, but the social climate had changed to the extent that it was clear that changes in this legislation were needed.

Given that the two major parties in Britain refused to adopt a firm line, from fear of alienating any constituents or their own members, there were no government-sponsored initiatives taken on the abortion issue. Instead individuals within the parties took an interest in the issues and reported their findings to their colleagues. This, in addition to various reports from lobby groups and the media left MPs in a strong, well informed position to make independent decisions. This became important in Parliament as all proposed changes to abortion legislation were introduced as Private Members' Bills.

The Conservative Party's fear of alienating voters, especially staunch Catholic voters, and due to this, their reluctance to make statements on these topics, was recognised by the public. This was best demonstrated by a survey conducted in 1973 for Conservative Central Office. In this survey 927 female electors were asked a series of questions relating to various women's rights issues, many of which were quite general, but the one question specifically

addressing abortion showed that only 1% of the women in the survey recall Conservative action on abortion. This is not to say that MPs' voting records were represented here, nor were Conservative female MPs the main subjects of the questions asked, but the fact remains that for other issues, such as equal pay and guardianship, there were much more positive response rates, such as 13% of the women polled crediting the Conservatives with introducing equal pay.⁸ Thus, despite, or perhaps because of, the problems associated with this issue in terms of individual opinions and ideas regarding what actions should be taken, the party maintained its position of not adopting specific policy.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill, introduced in the Commons by David Steel in 1966, aimed to amend the provisions in place regarding access to and regulation of abortions. The Bill itself provided for a woman, under the appropriate conditions, to be eligible for an abortion after consultations with two registered doctors which led them to conclude that an abortion was the best course of action for the mother. The circumstances which made abortion legal under the terms of the Bill included risk to the health of the mother and/or baby; the likelihood that should it be born, the child would suffer from a severe physical or mental disability that would leave them seriously handicapped and unable to experience a normal quality of life; that any existing children the woman might have would suffer either physically or mentally because of the birth of another child; and finally that the conception was the result of the woman being raped. There were

⁸ *A Survey on Phase 2, Economic Priorities, Women's Issues and Worker Participation*, carried out between 27 June and 1 July 1973, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 180/9/3/9.

also provisions made for instances in which a mother's health was seriously at risk which allowed for a practitioner to perform the abortion as an emergency procedure, as well as stipulations which allowed for any practitioner who objected to the idea of abortions to be exempt from performing them, except in cases of emergency.⁹

The Bill introduced by Steel was one which, as would be expected with an issue such as abortion, stirred up a great deal of conflict and strong emotions among those involved in the debates on the measure. As with most conflict-ridden issues, there was also a great deal of compromise involved with regard to not only wording, but also the intent and meaning of the clauses. The Bill, in its initial form, was deemed insufficient by both those who supported the idea of amending the law, as well as those opposed, due to its approach to many of the issues and also inappropriate wording in many places. The fact that abortion legislation had not been amended properly for many years, in addition to the amendments proposed and the compromises made, can all be seen as indicative of the time. They were also deemed to be the best options to make this procedure more widely available, but still heavily regulated. Thus the views of the major parties' members can be clearly seen in the actions taken by the various lobbies, Parliament and other organisations/committees.¹⁰

One of the main points of contention raised both in Committee and the Commons was the inclusion of a clause which dictated a time

⁹ HMSO, *Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill 1966*.

¹⁰ Marsh and Chambers, *Abortion Politics*, p. 68.

(in the period of gestation) after which abortions could no longer be carried out. This was stated, quite clearly, in the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929. However, in the nearly 30 years between 1929 and 1967, science had been able to prove the viability of a foetus at 28 weeks (which was the maximum allowed according to the 1929 Act), and some doctors claimed foetuses were viable as early as 22 weeks. Because of both Houses' inability to reach a consensus on an acceptable cut off time for the carrying out of abortions, there was nothing added into the 1967 Act regarding this which meant that the timeline dictated under the 1929 Act remained intact.

Steel's original Bill focused more on the welfare aspects of abortion than the technical details, such as the stage in the pregnancy at which abortion would no longer be allowed or which methods of performing abortions would be legal. Following the passage of the 1967 Act, many MPs were quick to propose amendments which would change the latest point in a pregnancy at which abortions were allowed, in addition to proposing many amendments which often proved to be more contentious than Steel's original Bill. The importance of his Bill was that it did address some previously untouched areas, such as the welfare and health of the unborn child, concern for which had been increasing among legislators and doctors alike since the Bourne case of 1938.

Neither the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 nor the Offences against the Person Act 1861 gave consideration to the woman's home life, or the lives of her children. There was also no consideration given to the health and wellbeing of the unborn child,

or as pointed out by David Steel in his introduction to the Second Reading, was it stated under what terms, specifically, abortion was lawful.¹¹ Thus, according to these laws, abortion, whether carried out by a physician regardless of circumstances, or the much more dangerous alternative of self-induced abortion was a felony and punishable by life imprisonment.¹² As was shown in the instance of the Bourne case, this made abortion a difficult issue within the courts and for many doctors.

The changes proposed in the Steel Bill were welcomed by many both within and outside of Parliament, although a large number of MPs who supported the general idea behind some of the amendments took issue with several clauses included in Steel's original Bill. Many Conservatives believed that making abortion more widely available would have a negative effect on society and therefore support for reform was given within very restricted confines, however, there were others within the party who stood staunchly on the other side and were against any sort of reform. For those in the majority who did believe that the law needed changing, there were two primary concerns. The first was to ensure the safety and health of mothers and children, both born and unborn. The second was to ensure that abortions were not available on demand, thus preserving the idea of the importance of the family unit.

However, in the 1960s, perhaps due to the furore that had been stirred up by the reintroduction of this issue into Parliament, the

¹¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 732, 29 June 1966 c. 1069.

¹² HMSO, *Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929*, s. 1.

Conservative Party, while not making a statement regarding abortion in its policies, produced several reports regarding abortion, the most important being *Abortion, A Conservative View* which was published in 1966. This report was the result of the work of seven Conservative representatives, of which the most notable in this study was Joan Quennell. While it was published by the CPC, it was simply what those involved believed Conservative policy on abortion should be and was in no way reflective of actual party policy.

The main points discussed involved many of the same issues which were addressed by the Steel Bill, but this group strongly opposed abortion due to the possible inability of the mother to care properly for the unborn child, as dictated in section c of the Bill as it was proposed in the 1964-1965 session of Parliament. This section allowed for abortion on the grounds of the existence of 'a grave risk of the child being born grossly physically deformed or severely mentally abnormal'. However, it was determined that tests used to diagnose such things were difficult to carry out and their results were not always clear.¹³ By the time changes were made to the Bill and it was presented to Parliament again, this section had been changed to 'that there is a substantial risk that if the child were born it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped', which is more precise in its wording thus addressing the concerns regarding ambiguity addressed in this document.¹⁴

¹³ Conservative Political Centre, *Abortion: A Conservative View*, (London 1966), p. 4.

¹⁴ HMSO, *Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill 1966*, subsection 1b.

However, this was replaced by another, much more disagreeable clause in the eyes of many Conservatives. The 'social clause' as it became known stated that abortions could be obtained if the doctors who consulted with a pregnant woman were of the opinion 'that the pregnant woman's capacity as a mother will be severely overstrained by the care of a child or of another child as the case may be'.¹⁵ In the eyes of many Conservatives, this was the most disagreeable clause in the Bill, as the wording did make it seem as though abortions could be easily obtained by any woman who desired one simply because she did not want to have a baby. Therefore, this clause was often revisited in the debates in the Commons.

Conservative women's support of this Bill was once again varied. Of the female MPs in the Commons in the 1960s, there were two who were very vocal during the Second Reading of this Bill in July 1966. These two women were Joan Vickers and Jill Knight. Vickers had been in the Commons for several years and had been heavily involved in many issues regarding women's rights, particularly when it came to guardianship and family rights, as has been discussed. Knight, on the other hand, had only been elected in 1966 and thus was fairly new to the Commons, and was apprehensive about the proposed legislation. While the two women held similar views on some aspects of this debate, there were many instances during which they found themselves on opposing sides.

Upon initially reading the Bill, Knight supported the proposed amendments, noting the need for further regulation of this

¹⁵ HMSO, *Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill 1966*, subsection 1c.

particular area of healthcare. However, because of her personal interest in the subject, she conducted a great deal of research into the many issues associated with it and therefore became extremely knowledgeable about the topic. In addition to the research she conducted through correspondence with constituents and medical practitioners, Knight also had a background in social work which aided her greatly. Thus her contributions were comprehensive, and it became clear that she was passionate and well-informed about both sides of the debate and the associated issues.

Through her correspondence, Knight found that opinions were mixed in her constituency and the medical community, but largely the consensus was that abortion on demand was not desirable for the majority of people with whom she corresponded. Based upon this, as well as her further research into the statistics and altered interpretation of the Bill, her opinion was altered greatly. She therefore spoke out quite often about the necessity for amending the legislation as it was, but she was very cautious with regard to any amendments which would increase the availability of abortion on demand, or so called 'social abortions', as she claimed subsection 1c would allow.¹⁶

Being only one of two Conservative women to speak up during the debate on the Second Reading, she was in the difficult position of being a woman and from the minority party in the Commons, representing not only her own views but also, and perhaps more importantly, the many constituents with whom she had corresponded on this topic. After noting in her speech that she

¹⁶ *HC Deb* Vol. 732, 22 July 1966 c. 1100.

struggled to approach this issue in a non-emotional way, she made her points clearly and succinctly, stating: 'I believe that abortion should take place where a woman or girl has been raped. I believe that the back-street abortionist is an evil...'¹⁷ During this speech, she also acknowledged correspondence received from obstetricians in her constituency who shared her views and used their letters to make her final point, which summarised the rest of her speech well.

I believe that a mother should have an abortion if her health is endangered; but that, of course, is already done, and, if it is necessary to make that more clear, I would support it wholeheartedly. I believe that, if it comes to a choice between the mother's life or the baby's, the mother is very much more important. She has ties and responsibilities to her husband and other children...I believe that an extra pregnancy can be a wretched thing for a woman with a large family already, but there are other ways of tackling the problem than the extreme one of abortion, and it is far more preferable and humane to help women not to start babies...¹⁸

Thus, although she started out supporting the Bill, the ideas behind and wording which comprised subsection 1c, in addition to the information she gathered whilst researching abortion, were enough to put her off and she was left unable to support it. This is not to say that she withdrew support for further legislation regarding abortion, as it has been shown that she was in favour of abortion in certain circumstances, but this simply indicates that she was in favour of much stricter regulations than those that were being proposed by Steel and his supporters.

Knight's observations fuelled the debate on subsection 1c, which, as mentioned, proved to be one of the main points of dispute raised

¹⁷ *HC Deb* Vol. 732, 22 July 1966 c. 1104.

¹⁸ *HC Deb* Vol. 732, 22 July 1966 c. 1104.

by those who were against the Bill. However, the Bill also stated that necessity must be demonstrated and proven to two practicing doctors who were to then approve (or deny), as appropriate, abortions for the women they counselled. While this could be easily abused, this provision was necessary in order for those women who did not specifically fall into any of the other described categories but still believed that an abortion was their best option. Given this clause as an option under which to perform an abortion, it was then up to the doctors to decide if a woman qualified. This clause was also a benefit to them, as it reduced their chances of being prosecuted for illegally carrying out abortions and gave them the opportunity to justify their reasons in instances when other criteria were not met.

Due to the all-encompassing nature of subsection 1c, medical practitioners' rights to refuse to counsel women based upon their own beliefs were called into question. Because of this, the 'conscience clause' was introduced which entitled any medical personnel to refuse to participate in the counselling of a pregnant woman seeking an abortion and also exempted them from performing the operation except in emergencies. This was the one clause for which there was little to no opposition in the Commons, and for which there was actually a great amount of support from both sides of the debate. The inclusion of this made many medical professionals and other members of society more accepting of the Bill than they had been previously – although that is not to say that there was suddenly unconditional and widespread support.

Joan Vickers, unlike many of her female Conservative colleagues, was a supporter of Steel's Bill. She understood the importance of reforms and how extremely difficult the decision to seek an abortion was for many women. She also refuted Knight's idea about abortion on demand being allowed under the Bill as it was through her consideration of the wording itself and others' arguments regarding subsection 1c that she believed abortion would be deemed acceptable if the mother would be overburdened by having to take care for the unborn child. Vickers aptly stated that '...if a woman has six or seven children she does not have time to spend two or three hours a day, or even a week, with a psychiatrist going over her problems. She is anxious not to create further problems for herself.'¹⁹ This succinctly sums up the motive behind this clause, and although it could be interpreted differently, at this stage in the debate, the ideas behind the legislation were of utmost importance, as the exact wording could be ironed out in committee.

Vickers also seemed to have a fair grasp of women's reasons for seeking abortion. Upon hearing of the Bill's introduction, she too made it a point to research the topic and as part of this attended a meeting of the Family Planning Association at which she heard a medical practitioner speak on the topic and learned that many doctors were as unsure about performing abortions as women were about seeking them. Her empathy for practitioners put in the position of assessing whether or not a woman should be given an abortion was apparent throughout her contributions to this debate,

¹⁹ *HC Deb* Vol. 732, 22 July 1966 c. 1107.

and so her belief that the law should be amended was largely based upon a desire to make things easier for doctors.

In addition to this however, she recognised that seeking an abortion was usually a difficult decision for a woman ‘...they [women] rarely seek an abortion for its own sake, but for the sake of the family and the unborn child. I suggest that we know very little about what drives a woman to try to terminate her pregnancy.’ As this would be impossible to gauge, given that women’s reasons for seeking abortions were varied and innumerable, she thought it best to regulate the law and make it easier for those who were determined to have an abortion. Therefore, she did recognise that many women who wanted abortions but, under the law as it stood, were unable to obtain them legally, would go to any lengths possible. Thus she desired a change in the law which would make ‘back street’ abortions less appealing, stating that ‘...until our antique and confusing abortion laws are changed, many women will continue to seek these illegal abortions.’²⁰

With these three key ideas as the basis of her reasoning, Vickers made her stance on the issue clear and was well prepared to handle any opposition that may have stood against her, including Jill Knight. Although the two never went head to head in debate, there were references made by Vickers to Knight’s speech, which demonstrated that the two had opposing views and were both unwavering in them. This intra-party opposition is only one example of why it was important for abortion amendments to be introduced as Private Members’ Bills. It was not only within the

²⁰ *HC Deb* Vol. 732, 22 July 1966 cc. 1108-1109.

Conservative Party that there were differing views, given the many variables that affect personal perspective on an issue such as abortion, there were many varied views throughout all parties. This made not only for lively debates, but also interparty cooperation.

Although only two of the seven Conservative women in the House spoke up in the debates on the second reading, their roles remained important as the collaboration between men and women from both parties (on both sides of the debate) played a major part in the debates on this issue and both Vickers and Knight were involved. This is a good demonstration of how a few dedicated MPs could put their energy, strengthened by their beliefs, into an issue and make progress toward their end. The debates on this topic took place in the late spring/early summer of 1967. Though disputed, the general consensus within the Commons seemed to be that abortion was a desired option for some women. It was also acknowledged that those who sought one were going to do all they could to have the procedure and therefore government regulation was necessary in order to ensure the safety and well being of the mother as well as to minimise the pain suffered by the unborn child.²¹

Another issue addressed was the public's lack of knowledge about the subject, as well as the differences in the types of abortions which were being offered at the time, an issue of which most people were not aware. The horrific details offered by Knight in her speech seemed to affect many MPs and increased their awareness

²¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 749, 5 July 1967 cc. 925-929.

of the procedures, thus making them more aware of the lack of information given to the public. While this may have encouraged many MPs to become supporters of further regulation, there is no indication that any MPs' views were drastically altered by these revelations.²²

There was another key issue addressed during the Second Reading regarding the experience and specialty of doctors who would be able to consult with women seeking abortions. Knight was of the opinion that there should be a panel appointed to make the decision as to whether or not an abortion should be carried out as well as to provide guidance to women seeking abortions. She believed this panel should not only include doctors, but also workers from the social services, as they had more direct contact with women seeking abortions. They were also more knowledgeable about the trials faced by women raising many children, sometimes on their own. The idea of a panel meeting being necessary to tell a woman what she can or cannot do with her body seems extreme, as the previous method of assessment (a consultation with two doctors, one of which was the woman's GP and the other a gynaecologist) was deemed sufficient by many MPs to determine if the woman was seeking the abortion for reasons within the confines of the law. Instead of giving women more freedom over their bodies, should the panel idea have been adopted, legislation would be, in theory, widening the scope of circumstances under which a woman could legally qualify for an abortion, but would have made the process longer, and the involvement of more people would have actually made it more

²² *HC Deb* Vol. 749, 5 July 1967 cc. 930-933.

difficult. In all likelihood, however, these measures would have caused an increase in the number of women seeking abortions from non-qualified doctors, or even worse, attempting to self-abort at home.²³

In order to fully examine this Bill, one must also look at the debates which took place in the House of Lords. Prior to the 1966 Bill, Lord Silkin had introduced a Bill in 1965 which was met with good success in the Lords, and had the Parliamentary session not ended, likely would have seen similar success in the Commons. Following the failure of this Bill, it was not until 1967 when the issue was properly raised in the Lords again. One of the most important debates on this topic took place on 27 July 1967 when Lord Dilhorne, who was Deputy Leader of the Conservatives in the House of Lords, moved two amendments, which were both carried, although neither with an overwhelming majority. The first dictated that one of the doctors involved in the decision to terminate a pregnancy should be a consultant or a doctor approved by the Minister of Health. The second deleted the part of the Bill which allowed for the consulting physicians' consideration of the physical and mental well-being of other children in the family when taking a decision whether or not to terminate a pregnancy.²⁴ The first was a topic also hotly discussed in the Commons, however, the second was quite contentious as the argument could also be made that more children would not only affect the family but more specifically the mother, thus the effects of one on the other were not always exclusive.

²³ *HC Deb* Vol. 749, 29 June 1967 c. 1033.

²⁴ 'Plea for no amendments ignored', *The Guardian*, 27 July 1967, p. 2.

With regard to the Steel Bill, there was only one Conservative woman active in the Lords' debates. Evelyn Emmet was a supporter of an amendment concerning subsection 1b of this Bill. This was one of her main concerns, as the medical profession was unable to accurately diagnose mental and physical handicaps accurately in all situations. Thus, she did not believe that this should be an option unless doctors were completely assured that the child, if born, would suffer greatly. She also believed that the legislation should be focused upon the welfare of the mother, and stem from a social, instead of a medical perspective. She based this upon her belief that to allow women to obtain abortions easily would increase the numbers of and frequency at which women would seek them. In addition to this, the medical profession, in her view, was under a great enough strain as they had to make decisions regarding a woman's eligibility and carry out the operations. Alongside the necessity for more intervention to help women prevent pregnancy was the important point of the father's role in both the pregnancy and the decision to have an abortion.

Although nothing was added to the Bill regarding this, it is an important point to note, as all discussion relating to prevention of pregnancy and subsequent decisions should it not have been prevented, was centred on the mothers' role. This focus contradicts the idea fathers' roles as heads of household, which, as has been discussed, many Conservatives were keen to maintain.²⁵

The abortion lobby, while not as active in the 1960s as it had been previously, was still active on both sides of the issue, although at

²⁵ *HL Deb* Vol. 285, 29 July 1967 cc. 1002, 1032-1034.

this point more on the pro-abortion side. The influence of this was important in the formation of debates and development of legislation on this issue. Although Conservative female MPs were not as active in those organisations which specifically dealt with abortion as they were in other, more general, women's organisations, their limited participation is noteworthy. Again their work outside of Parliament was important in the Parliamentary debates and ensured that their arguments were intelligently formulated and that they were as knowledgeable about the subject as possible, as well as ensuring they were well informed about the standpoints of key groups.

The two main lobby groups during the 1960s and 1970s were the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) and the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC). ALRA had been in existence for over 30 years by 1970, whereas the SPUC had only formed after the second reading of the Steel Bill in 1967. Thus, ALRA had longevity on its side, as well as a larger membership and wider scope, but the SPUC was on the same side of the debate as many influential organisations including various religious organisations.²⁶ Given that after the Bill had passed, SPUC's membership dropped by nearly 50%, it is difficult to argue that their influence and desire was as strong as that of ALRA.²⁷ However, that they were able to gain the attention of MPs as well as the media in order to further their campaign does indicate that, for a short time at least, they were a group whose views were taken into consideration.

²⁶ *SPUC Manifesto*, (London 1974), pp. 3-4.

²⁷ Marsh and Chambers, *Abortion Politics*, p. 56.

Aleck Bourne, the aforementioned doctor from the precedent-setting 1938 court case, was one of the founding members of the SPUC. Thus, while his case was used to show the necessity of various forms of assessment with regard to decisions about abortion, his own views were not reflective of this and he did not agree with his case being used as an example of the necessity of more widely available abortions.²⁸ This is interesting because at the time of his trial, and even into the 1960s, it was believed by many that he was a proponent for extending the abortion laws to include more 'on demand' services. Perhaps instead of making this assumption, an examination of the exact situation in which he was involved and why he reacted the way that he did should have been carried out. Upon doing so, one could determine that a case-by-case judgement should be made with regard to abortion decisions and that any form of sweeping and generalised legislation is not only insufficient but ignorant to the needs of those involved in each individual case. In the way that Bourne made his decision, based on the principles of protecting both the mother and child physically and mentally, so was the SPUC formed.

The influence of these two groups was felt throughout Parliament, and there were MPs on both sides of the debate closely associated with each group. Knight, as mentioned before, debated in the Commons on the side of limited reform with extreme caution and restrictions imposed. The way in which she influenced, and was influenced by the SPUC, is obvious as her speeches reflected their policies in addition to her own opinions on the topics. Naturally their reach extended beyond the Steel Bill and into other areas with

²⁸ *SPUC Manifesto*, p. 4.

which their organisation was concerned. Thus, though the membership of the group dropped after 1967, the organisation remains intact and active even to the present day.

Although the SPUC quickly gained supporters after its formation, the reputation and longevity of ALRA enabled them to have more wide-reaching influence and they were in fact heavily involved Parliamentary activities on the issue. Lord Silkin had taken on their original Bill in 1965, and with great success, but unfortunately for ALRA the Parliamentary session ended and the 1966 election was called. Following the election, various MPs were approached regarding the Bill after the Private Members' Ballots had been drawn.²⁹ Steel agreed to take on the issue, which proved to be a great step forward for this organisation as they had believed for so long that reform was necessary and finally their proposed Bill had a chance of passing. ALRA's involvement with the issue did not end there as they were consulted throughout the process of the Bill's passage in both Houses. They ensured that most of what they sought from reform was included in the Bill as well as provided guidance and information as necessary to Steel and other MPs.

Two other important organisations involved in this debate are the Royal College of Gynaecology and the British Medical Association. Both produced reports in the 1960s which were taken into consideration by both sides of the debates on this Bill. However, ALRA considered both organisations to be too conservative and 'hostile to worth-while reform' and so were quick to disregard their findings. The two most important reports published, both in 1966,

²⁹ K. Hindell and M. Simms, *Abortion Law Reformed* (London 1971), p. 154.

largely agreed on the major issues of the Bill, only disagreeing on the types of doctors who should be allowed to carry out the operation.³⁰ The influence of these reports, and those which followed was felt throughout the debates on Steel's Bill by MPs on both sides of the debate, which increased their importance and also gave more weight to the organisations themselves.

The National Health Insurance (Family Planning) Act 1967

The second women's issue of a personal and controversial nature raised in the mid-1960s was that of access to contraception. The contraceptive pill had only become widely available in 1961, and its distribution was so highly regulated that there were very few women able to obtain it. Knight's support for increased access stemmed from the idea that if doctors were to prescribe it more widely, the number of unwanted pregnancies, and therefore the number of abortions, would decrease. When presented in this manner, most MPs found this a difficult argument with which to disagree. It would seem that, given the large amount of opposition in the Commons to abortion in any case, making contraception more widely available and educating the public better about these issues would be a viable solution.

One argument proposed by Edwin Brooks (Labour, Bebington), who introduced the National Health Insurance (Family Planning) Bill, was that Britain was a leading society in the world and if they were to promote contraception as a viable and accessible option, not only would the number of unwanted pregnancies in Britain decrease, but other countries throughout the world might follow suit. Most

³⁰ Hindell and Simms, *Abortion Law Reformed*, pp. 167-169.

MPs seemed to agree with his reasons for introducing this Bill. However, there was one contentious issue with which many disagreed: making the contraceptive pill and general advice available to young and unmarried women.³¹

One of the main concerns with regard to increased access to abortion and contraception was that promiscuity would become a plague on society. Making contraception (in all forms) more available was presented as a way to attempt to protect the health of those young people engaging in premarital sex. It would also ease the pressure on those married couples who were not yet ready for children. However, it is easy to see the logic behind this thinking. With all the changes occurring in society, and the recent (if not ongoing) sexual revolution, the alarmist attitudes of those opposed to increased access is almost understandable.

Joan Vickers and Mervyn Pike both participated in the debate on the National Health Insurance (Family Planning) Bill as well and were both in favour of increased access to contraception for everyone. Vickers' main points included the younger age at which girls were now maturing which indicated that it was unmarried people who were in need of advice relating to and access to contraception, a point which was contested by many within the Commons. Her other points dealt with making access to advice on contraception more widely available through the Family Planning Association and other such bodies, including hospitals, and education for all young people, not just young women. Her belief regarding these was that to not only make contraception and

³¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 741, 17 February 1967 cc. 946-947.

advice more widely available, but also to educate the younger generation would aid the cause of family planning and population control and would benefit the country by helping to minimise the allowances the government would have to pay to single mothers with several children, as well as the burden to those mothers in terms of time, finances and overall wellbeing.³²

Mervyn Pike approached this Bill from a very similar perspective to that of Joan Vickers. She believed so strongly in the issue that she repeated several times in the course of her speech that she was disappointed the government had not introduced it, but that it had instead been introduced as a Private Members' Bill. Her reasons for supporting the Bill included necessity to get the medical profession's approval and involvement to make the plan work properly, but largely because she saw the problems caused through the limited way in which birth control was available to most people as 'one of the most serious and worrying social problems which we are facing at the present time.'³³

Pike's constituency was very different from that of Vickers. In Melton, the population was largely religious and thus opposed to measures such as this. However, she did also note that as part of the Bill, counselling would also be available on those methods of birth control which were endorsed by the Catholic Church. She also noted that there would be a conscientious clause, as there was in the Abortion Act, which would allow any doctor with religious or other objections to abstain from providing advice or administering

³² *HC Deb* Vol. 741, 17 February 1967, cc. 949-982.

³³ *HC Deb* Vol. 741, 17 February 1967 cc. 996-998.

contraception.³⁴ While this went some way to easing the minds of those opposed for religious reasons, there was still apprehension within the Catholic Church regarding increased availability to contraception.

The passing of these Bills is a clear demonstration of how women's issues can be addressed and Bills regarding them can be passed using political and (in this case) medical means without much, if any, feminist influence. The impact of various Conservative women, especially Jill Knight, is undeniable. She held strong views which she was unafraid to express and thus pursued this issue doggedly. Not only was she vocal in debates, but she kept in close contact with constituents and members of the medical profession in order to ensure that she had the most up-to-date information from their perspectives.

The lobbying done with regard to this issue, by such organisations as ALRA, was largely the sole example of feminism's presence in the debates on this issue. Those who participated in the debates in the Commons did so from the perspective of legislators seeking alterations in unjust legislation and provisions which limited the rights of and, in many cases, endangered the lives of those they served. While the legislation did not fully rectify the wrongs of the previous legislation, it went a long way to doing so, and at the very least brought to light the existence of a problem which was only growing larger.

³⁴ *HC Deb* Vol. 741, 17 February 1967 cc. 997 and 1000.

Proposed Amendments to the Abortion Act 1967

Upon the passage of the Abortion Act 1967, the abortion debate was far from over, and if anything, interest in the topic had increased because of it.

There were several Bills proposed in the mid-1970s, none of which passed, but all of which attracted some attention not only within Parliament but also from lobby groups. The list of proposed legislation, along with the amendments is below.

Table 5.1 – Bills Proposed to Amend the Abortion Act 1967³⁵

Sponsor	Party	Year Proposed	Proposed Amendments to 1967 Bill
Norman St John-Stevas	Conservative	1969	One of the two doctors involved in the decision had to be an NHS consultant
Bryant Godman Irvine	Conservative	1970	One of the two doctors involved in the decision had to be a consultant gynaecologist with the NHS
John Hunt	Conservative	1971	Prohibited non-medical groups from collecting money for referring/recommending to medical services or treatment
Michael Grylls	Conservative	1973	Excluded charities from prohibition of charging fees for abortion consultations
James White	Labour	1975	Limited charities input into the process, take away 'statistical argument' clause

³⁵ St. John Stevas, Godman Irvine, Hunt, Grylls and White: David Marsh and Joanna Chambers, *Abortion Politics*, pp. 21-24; Benyon: *HC Deb* Vol. 926, 25 February 1977 c. 1783; Corrie: *HC Deb* Vol. 969, 27 June 1979 c. 455.

William Benyon	Conservative	1976	Sought to 'Make further provision with respect to the termination of pregnancy and matters consequential thereto...'
John Corrie	Conservative	1979	Amended the regulations under which abortions could be given, the conscience clause, the time limit for abortions and the licensing procedures for clinics and advice bureaux

These proposals demonstrate quite clearly the large amount of Conservative interest in the topic. Not only were most introduced by Conservatives, many had the support of several other party members. This is one area in which the female MPs were especially heavily involved, with such MPs as Jill Knight, Elaine Kellett-Bowman, Janet Fookes and Mervyn Pike supporting the Bills. The debates on these Bills were heated and involved a much larger number of Conservatives than had participated in the debates on the 1967 Act. This is evidence of the persistence necessary to try and change a controversial law. Given that none of these Bills were supported by the Government, each person who introduced an amendment knew that it stood a greater chance of being talked out than it did of passing. However, this did not seem to hinder their ambition.

The first proposed Bill was introduced by Norman St. John-Stevas under the 10-Minute Rule, but was defeated by 11 votes. He was fully supported in his efforts by members of the medical profession and many MPs. Jill Knight was among these. It was clear, as discussed by Hindell and Simms that Knight was unsatisfied with

the 1967 Act and believed further regulation was necessary, as she spoke out in favour of this Bill, claiming that 'aborted babies were being put into boilers alive'. This, however, was a claim which she later had to retract as she admitted that she had no evidence of such activities. However, the fact remains that she was willing to make such bold statements in order to aid the cause in which she believed so strongly.³⁶

The second Bill aimed at amending the Abortion Act was introduced in 1970 by another Conservative backbench MP, Bryant Godman Irvine. While the aims were the same as the above Bill, due to the amount of press the issue had been receiving and the statistics that had recently been released regarding fatalities related to abortion as well as the number of abortions carried out had swayed those MPs who had previously remained unsure about the issue to look at the Act favourably. Vickers and Knight were both active once again in the debates on this. Simply by asking questions regarding the Bill and statistics, they were able to represent their views and ensure that they were heard. The main ideas of both women were that it was too soon to amend the 1967 Act as it was too soon to tell what parts were and were not working properly. They were not the only ones who held this view, and because of these arguments, the Bill was defeated.³⁷

The next two proposed Bills were also very similar in their goals, and met similar outcomes in the Commons to those mentioned above. The first did not reach the second reading stage, but the

³⁶ Hindell and Simms, *Abortion Law Reformed*, p. 219.

³⁷ *HC Deb* Vol. 795, 13 February 1970 cc. 1653-1703.

second failed due to the dissolution of Parliament in 1974. These were the least controversial of those proposed due to the fact that they did not deal directly with the execution or procurement of abortions. Regardless, the fact that they failed (although one only did because of time constraints) indicates that there were many MPs who believed that the 1967 Act should be left alone and given a chance to work before amendments were introduced.³⁸

Following the failure of the above four Bills, there was a rejuvenation of the abortion debate. This was sparked largely because reformers were insistent that action was necessary. To spur on their efforts, there were several publications which helped raise awareness of their cause to Parliamentarians and members of the public alike. One particular publication was a book written by two *News of the World* reporters, Susan Kentish and Michael Litchfield, and published in 1974. *Babies for Burning* created a sensation due to the content and context within which it was written.

The basis of the book was that the two reporters, one male and one female, posed as a couple who had got pregnant unexpectedly and were thus seeking an abortion. The idea behind the book was to expose the horrors of back street abortions and demonstrate that the 1967 Act did not in fact regulate abortion in the way that it had been intended by legislators. In order to show this, the 'couple' went to various abortion clinics in which they discussed their circumstances and were able to successfully procure abortions in every one. There were different fees charged in each clinic as well

³⁸ Marsh and Chambers, *Abortion Politics*, pp. 22-23.

as obvious neglect for the legislation. Furthermore, there were often appalling conditions and a low standard of care. Despite their ability to easily procure abortions, the two people were not in a relationship and the woman was not, nor had she ever been pregnant, despite testing positive at nearly every clinic they visited.³⁹

Based on that information, it is easy to see how such a book could cause the sensation that it did. However, its use by MPs as a source upon which to base proposed abortion reform amendments remains questionable.

The couple did not go to any NHS hospital to observe the situations there with regard to the number of abortions or conditions under which they were performed, nor did they speak to any physicians associated with such clinics. Thus, their research was biased and although it served the purpose of their study, it in no way gave an accurate picture of the actual situation with regard to the implementation of the restrictions. It would seem right that those who questioned the validity of this as a source should have done so based on these facts. However, it is clear that the things described in the book were happening, as Litchfield and Kentish had seen them firsthand and thus the Conservatives' use of it as a source can also be justified.

John White and Leo Abse both admitted to using this book as a source of information when presenting White's Bill in 1975.⁴⁰

³⁹ M. Litchfield and S. Kentish *Babies for Burning* (London 1974).

⁴⁰ Marsh and Chambers *Abortion Politics*, p. 27.

Because of the stir caused by this book, when it was used as a source for legislators' information the issue itself got even more attention than it had already been receiving.

The book therefore not only served its purpose in drawing attention to the abortion issue, but also gained recognition as containing valid evidence which would be used to amend the 1967 Act.

However, there was severe doubt in Parliament over the validity of using it as a viable source given the way in which information was obtained and the contents of it. Not only did the recognition by several MPs that the book was perhaps unreliable discredit its use in the Commons, but it also caused White to clarify in the Commons that the Bill he proposed was not done so because of the book, which was how some MPs had interpreted his use of it, but he had simply used it for information. It was then Jill Knight who came to his aid and pointed out that at that point, February 1976, nothing stated in the book had been discredited.⁴¹

The furore caused by the book not only resonated through the Commons, but also through the country as a whole. MPs recognised this and decided that it fell within the scope of the Lane Committee to interview the authors, which they did on 7 July 1975. At this interview, the authors were requested to not only justify their claims, but to provide evidence, in the form of the tapes recorded in their interviews, to the committee for their judgement. However, many of the tapes had seemingly been lost or were in the possession of the police, who were investigating several of the

⁴¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 905, 9 February 1976, cc. 100-170.

claims made.⁴² The inability to produce the evidence made the results of the interviews largely inconclusive and thus only served to aid those who had claimed that it was not a reliable source to be used as evidence for the passage of new legislation.

In 1974 Knight co-authored *To Be...Or Not To Be? The Pros and Cons of Abortion* with Christine Beazley (a prominent member of the Bexley constituency), furthering her involvement in the issue. This pamphlet, published by the CPC, was an attack on the 1967 Act and called for changes in the legislation by highlighting the ways in which the Act had not only let down society, but the ways in which legislators had been lied to during the debates in Parliament.⁴³ The issues highlighted included many of those also brought to light in *Babies for Burning*. The sensation created by this publication was slightly less, as it reached a smaller audience and did not receive the same amount of press, but for many of those who read it (especially those within the Conservative Party) it became very clear that further amendments were needed. Therefore, this pamphlet can be cited as one of the reasons for the increased amount of amending legislation which was proposed during the 1970s.

Other committees, which were not affiliated with religion or lobby organisations, were also active following the passage of the Bill and introduction of amending legislation. The Lane Committee was formed under Chief Justice Lane in order to explore the workings of

⁴² *Report on the Committee on the Working of the Abortion Act*, Vol. 1, April 1974, pp. 240-274.

⁴³ C. Beazley and J. Knight, *To Be Or Not To Be...The pros and cons of abortion*, (Crawley 1974).

the 1967 Act and look into how the provisions were being enforced, if indeed they were at all. Elaine Kellett-Bowman's participation with regard to this issue did not begin fully until 1974 with the formation of the Lane Committee. She sat on the committee and thus was present for and influential in the writing of the committee's reports and recommendations.

The committee heard evidence from a wide body of witnesses ranging from doctors to representatives of the police and the clergy. Kellett-Bowman's input into this was representative of those Conservatives who remained on the side of the issue that wished to see better regulation instead of increased access to abortion. She made her views very clear and following the report of the Lane Committee, her activity in Parliament on the proceeding proposed amendments increased, and she even stood in support of several Bills which were introduced.

Of those Bills in the above table, arguably the most important amendment proposed was the 1979 Corrie Bill. This Bill had a great deal of Conservative support and given the large number and scope of provisions it is not difficult to understand why. John Corrie was not the first choice of SPUC or their fellow conservative lobby organisation, LIFE, to support their Bill as they were unsure of his intentions or dedication to their cause. However, having drawn first place in the Private Members' Ballot, his desire to amend the Act became clear and he was quoted by various sources as wanting to propose a Bill to do just that. This Bill had four aims: to introduce a time limit of 20 weeks, alter the grounds for

procuring an abortion, amend the conscience clause and to license charities which provided information and guidance on abortion.⁴⁴

Kellet-Bowman's interest spurred her on to be a sponsor of the Corrie Bill, and she was the only Conservative female to speak up in the second reading. Although her input was minimal, it is noteworthy that she spoke as there were several others present who voted in favour of it, but either did not take the chance, or were not given the opportunity to participate in the debate.⁴⁵

From the time that it was announced that John Corrie would be introducing an abortion amendment, there was a great deal of lobbying from both sides of the debate, despite the fact that the provisions of the Bill were not known at this time. He had several MPs on his side – including Jill Knight, who supported his amendment as it would not increase availability of abortions, and was aimed toward making abortions safer. Knight was involved in lobbying Members to encourage them to vote in favour of the Bill, as well as being an active participant in the Standing Committee. She supported amendments to the 1967 Act which would create more restrictions on the accessibility of abortions as well as give the unborn child more rights.

Knight's stance on the issue remained very much the same as it had in 1966-1967, in that she believed that in certain instances abortion should be considered as an option, but only with strict regulations in place. In terms of time, her participation in the

⁴⁴ HMSO, *Abortion (Amendment) Bill 1979*.

⁴⁵ *HC Deb* Vol. 970, 13 July 1979 cc. 891-983.

debates was minimal, but her work outside of the Commons proved useful as her research and correspondence continued and thus her passion for and knowledge of the issue only grew. Although Corrie's Bill was highly regarded by many, there was a great deal of opposition and eventually, in 1980, it was withdrawn. Thus, even though the Bill was given ample time and was of significance in the abortion debate, there were no amendments made at this time.⁴⁶

As can be seen from the legislation proposed after the passage of the 1967 Act, most of the male Conservatives who took up the issue did so in order to either increase regulation or to try and prevent any changes being made to liberalize the legislation that was in place. The reason for this can be traced back to the previously stated idea that Conservative ideals were focused on the family and as part of this they were interested in keeping families together and were intrinsically against the prevention of birth. However, this only goes so far as they were involved in the alteration of legislation relating to divorce and therefore one could argue that their ideals were changing along with the times. Despite this however, they could not completely abandon these ideals. The argument could also be made in favour of the Christian-leaning tendency of many Conservatives.

A sweeping statement involving religion would of course be out of place, but those MPs who were more religious, especially those who were Catholic, were more likely to be opposed to liberal legislation than were those who were not religious. Hindell and Simms discuss the affect these affiliations had, noting that there were

⁴⁶ Marsh and Chambers, *Abortion Politics*, pp. 90-100 and 109-110.

several MPs from both sides of the Commons who were opposed to new legislation based upon their beliefs. Not only that, but it is worth noting that there was widespread outcry from the Catholic community regarding the Bill, sparking Cardinal Heenan to address the World Congress of Roman Catholic Nurses by stating that he was surprised that such legislation was even being considered. That said, however, when it came time for the debates and votes, Catholic MPs were more likely to abstain from both than to participate.⁴⁷

The Church of England was a different story, however, as those who were Anglican were divided on the issue. There were many against reforms, however, there were also many people who believed that abortion should be permitted, at least under certain circumstances. A report published by the Anglican council was actually berated by both those opposed and proponents of the Bill as it was seen as falling short of both religious beliefs and the necessity of reforms taking into considerations the well-being of the unborn child.⁴⁸

Therefore, it would seem that neither side of the religious debate were satisfied with the proposed legislation nor was there anything that could be done in order to appease both sides. Thus, those MPs who were religious and wanted to participate in debates were forced to look more closely at the facts presented and the outcomes of the Bill, instead of relying solely on their beliefs.

⁴⁷ Hindell and Simms, *Abortion Law Reformed*, pp. 87-90.

⁴⁸ Hindell and Simms, *Abortion Law Reformed*, pp. 90-94.

Despite the larger than usual female input on this issue in Parliament, the fact remains that no piece of legislation relating to abortion was introduced by a woman between 1950 and 1979. The reasons for this could be numerous, and many are the same as reasons surrounding why they did not introduce Bills on other women's issues. Possible explanations range from low levels of female representation to not wanting to appear too feminine and thus avoiding the introduction of any Bill relating to women's rights. The conclusion here is that there was interest, and women were keen to see reform, but given the difficulty caused by the abortion issue both within the Commons as well as socially, it was best for such an issue to be introduced by a man.

The historian Elizabeth Vallance in a way agrees with this view, however, stating that 'It is very unlikely that, unless these Bills had been introduced, the women would have concerned themselves with this issue.'⁴⁹ While this is amenable to an extent, she then goes on to say that many women were 'constrained' to act once the amendments had been introduced. However, based upon the amount of research conducted and interest demonstrated by women who were involved in the debates and lobbies, it would seem that women did not simply take this issue up out of obligation, but that they held strong opinions on abortion and the pill which they intended to defend.

The Conservative women who were active in the debates on these issues were representative of the varying views held by female MPs

⁴⁹ E. Vallance *Women in the House: A Study of Women Members of Parliament* (London 1979), p. 88.

at the time. Through speaking out on both sides of the debate, they demonstrated the value of their hard work outside of Parliament as well as the Private Members' Bill. This is especially true for Joan Vickers and Jill Knight can be considered to have made valuable contributions to their sides of the debate. This is true for Vickers, because the Bill passed and new legislation was put in place to make abortions more easily available for many women. Conversely, it is true for Knight as subsection 1c, which was her biggest point of contention, was removed and there were strict regulations in kept in place in the new Act. These two examples alone, but without forgetting the efforts of their colleagues in this and the Family Planning Act, demonstrate the impact that a few, not often heard, but strong and determined voices could have.

6 – CONSERVATIVE MEN: RELATIONSHIPS AND IMPACT

In exploring the influence and impact of Conservative women MPs on legislation relating to women's rights it is necessary, for balance and fuller understanding, to consider the impact made by Conservative men on these issues. The interplay between male and female Conservative MPs is also important to fully understand how the changes occurring within the Party and the legislation came about as these relationships affected not only the way in which men and women worked together, but also how they helped to shape MPs' views and to a lesser extent, party policy. As the House of Commons was male-dominated, men's attitudes and actions were often crucial in determining political outcomes. When this male domination is looked at in conjunction with the low number of female MPs, one can see why there were many disparities in party policy, as well as the party's approach to women's issues in Parliament.

An analysis of the significance of men's influence on the careers of female MPs was conducted for the years 1919-1945 by Brian Harrison in an article published in 1986. Although the period of Harrison's study is outside the scope of this thesis, his article provides a valuable background to understanding post-1945 developments. He discusses not only the evolution of the role of women but the challenges they faced along the way to achieving their goals.¹ However, one of the most important of Harrison's conclusions was that many women recognised that without male support and aid, they would not have reached the positions that

¹ B. Harrison, 'Women in a Men's House, the Women MPs 1919-1945', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 29, no. 3 (September 1986), pp. 628-629.

they did. The extent to which women were dependent on male support requires further analysis and that is where this chapter will begin.

Given the low numbers of Conservative female MPs elected between 1950 and 1979, it may seem likely that they had little impact in the party. Within Parliament itself, the roles of women had been changing since 1919, when they were first allowed to sit in the Commons. Although the changes that they brought simply by being present in Parliament were initially greater than those instigated by them in terms of legislation or debate, the changes seen in the behaviour of male MPs on the Commons floor as well as in places such as the Parliamentary smoking room are notable.² However, the late twentieth century saw not only the first Conservative women in the Cabinet, but it also saw the fastest (and most remarkable) rise of a woman through any party and was arguably the most important era for women in the Conservative Party to date.

For many women, the men in their lives were the most important factors in determining their interest in politics and ability to advance through party ranks. As Harrison states 'Labour women often entered parliament because they had married their party, Conservative women often entered because they had married their husbands.'³ Thus, for the Conservative woman, the relationship between man and wife was one of the most important connections

² P. Brookes, *Women at Westminster: An Account of Women in the British Parliament 1918-1966* (London 1967), p. 9.

³ Harrison, 'Women in a Men's House', p. 626.

of all. Two examples of women who sat in the Commons largely because of their husbands were Nancy Astor and Frances Davidson, who both decided to run for their husbands' seats when they received peerages and moved to the House of Lords, as has been discussed. After their first elections, however, their returns were largely due to the fact that their seats were Conservative safe seats, which was a rarity for a woman candidate as they were more often than not put up as candidates for unwinnable seats.

There was a long history of patriarchy in the Conservative Party, with many women adopting Conservative views and becoming members of the party due to their fathers' influence. One example of this is Margaret Thatcher's reverence for her father. In her autobiography, and very openly in discussions, she could not emphasise enough the impact that her father had on her life, and her political and economic policies – an impact which undoubtedly aided her rise through the party.⁴ She also mentions how, when she was adopted as the candidate for Dartford in 1949, her father's presence at the meeting was of utmost importance to her.

'Perhaps what meant most to me, however, was the presence of my father. For the first time he and I stood on the same platform to address a meeting.' It was in this same section of her autobiography that she recognised that although she had been raised in a Liberal household, and thus her father's allegiance had always leaned that way, it was important to her that he was proud to stand up and support her, stating '...it was the Conservatives

⁴ M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London 1993), p. 11.

who stood for the old Liberalism'.⁵ Although her views differed from her father's in some ways, his unwavering support of her was important and influential to her desire to pursue politics.

The marital status of Conservative female MPs in the mid-twentieth century is also worthy of note. Despite Harrison's assertion that Conservative women entered into politics because they marry their husbands, there were very few MPs at this time who were married.⁶ With regard to the single MPs, some, such as Joan Vickers and Irene Ward had never married. There were others, however, such as Evelyn Emmet, who were widowed and only decided to pursue a career in politics upon the death of her husband. An important point to note, though, is that Emmet still had children at home, but she was able to focus on her career as she had help taking care of them, an advantage that was not an option for all MPs. For other women who were not as fortunate, this situation still posed problems.

Because of their home lives, these women were able to take on important roles within the party, committing themselves more fully than were their colleagues who had husbands and families. As has been demonstrated, though, married women were not necessarily less committed to their role as MP, but there were often other obligations for them to fulfil that the single MPs did not have. This is also not to say that single women had it any easier when it came to acquiring a seat than did their married colleagues. The example in the introduction which highlighted an interview in which Patricia

⁵ M. Thatcher, *Path to Power* (London 1995), p. 65.

⁶ Harrison, 'Women in a Men's House', p. 626.

Hornsby-Smith was asked about her marital situation and what would happen to her career if she were to get married and have children. This demonstrates that regardless of the marital situation of these women, they were often still only adopted hesitatingly.

Given the large number of single women MPs, the role of husband can be said to have diminished into the mid-twentieth century. However, other male family members' influence, regardless of relation, was not only intrinsic to women's rise in the party, but also remains an important concept to grasp in order to understand the Party's stance on many issues and the inner workings of the organisation itself. With such patriarchal authority in place, it was often difficult for the party to accept the idea of women's changing position in society and need for increased rights in many areas. However, also due to this, it was natural for the party to promote women's rights with regard to their children as the family was seen as the centrepiece of society and they recognised the importance of women's role within it.

The role of fathers in these changes were also important given that they were in many ways still seen to be the heads of the family. Hence the complexity of these issues plays a key role in the types of changes supported by the Conservatives. Diminishing fathers' roles within the family was never a goal of the changes supported by the Conservatives, instead, they sought equality between the parents so that mothers were able to provide sufficient care if the fathers were unable (or unwilling) to amply provide for their families. The importance of equality between parents resonated throughout the Conservative Party not only in its policies and

actions, but within the organisation itself, as it was often believed that women were best suited to be housewives and not for work outside of the home, which is one reason for the party's reluctance to encourage increased female participation.

Despite the support that many women had from family members, making the transition from wife and mother to politician was not always easy. Women had traditionally been present in the party organisation as wives and supporters, voters (from 1918) and canvassers. However, when drastic changes were being made, such as allowing women to hold office and participate more fully in the party, there was resistance on the part of many members. As the party had traditionally been a primarily male-run body, the hesitation to change the structure to allow women a more active role was not surprising.⁷ However, given the way in which society was changing during the mid-twentieth century in terms of demands for increased equality, as well as how this was reflected in the government, it was necessary for the party to allow women's roles to evolve.

While changes in the party were slower than those in wider society, the congruence between the two cannot be ignored. It can be seen that as women within the Conservative Party were given more important roles which took them beyond event planning and canvassing, similar changes were happening in society. They were more readily able to leave the home to work, were more active within their communities and through interest groups were

⁷ R. Morris, *Tories from Village Hall to Westminster: A Political Sketch* (London 1991), p. 46.

becoming politically active beyond the scope of the constituency itself.

As Harrison has pointed out, without men's input and backing, changes in women's roles would not have been possible and Conservative Party policy would not have reflected a desire for change, even in the minimal way that it did. Unsurprisingly there was some opposition and many men who believed that women's roles should remain as they were and therefore resisted change and were quite hostile towards women in certain situations.⁸ It was Lord Woolton who changed the party's rules regarding the positions that women were able to hold while chairman in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Within the constituencies, as women had separate branches from the men until Woolton's reforms, women were often challenged by their male colleagues when the two branches were joined together.

One good example of this is that when the two branches joined, men and women organisers started out at the same level and were given the same opportunities to become agents. However, this was not always put into practice, for the reasons listed above.

Following these reforms, women were more often retained as organisers than agents, and the few women who held the post of agent often met with resistance from some male party members.⁹

⁸ Morris, *Tories*, pp. 45-48.

⁹ G.E. Maguire, *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874-1997* (London, 1998), p. 142.

Despite this resistance, there were many constituencies through which a woman agent could rise, although this ability did not guarantee an easy tenure for any woman selected. In one such constituency, as mentioned by Rupert Morris, a female agent, Nancy Matthews, was blamed for the loss of an election by the male candidate, Gordon Spencer, who in no uncertain terms stated that if it were up to him she never would have held the position and that he would have won had a man been in her position, telling her 'It is all your fault. I'd have done better without you'. It is important to note, however, that Barnsley was at this time (1948) a hopeless seat for the Conservatives and thus his chances of winning were slim anyway. Despite this, though, his overt disdain for a woman in the position of agent was not uncommon. This dislike for women in positions of power, even at the constituency level, or perhaps especially at the constituency level, was something remained an issue throughout much of the twentieth century.¹⁰

Within the Parliamentary Party, women fared slightly better than they did in the constituencies after Lord Woolton's reforms. The first Conservative woman to hold a ministerial position was Florence Horsbrugh, who in 1951 was appointed Minister of Education by Winston Churchill. Putting a woman in a key position (although Churchill kept Horsbrugh out of his Cabinet until 1953) was a major step forward, as it was finally recognised that women within the Conservative Party were capable of participating at more than a basic parliamentary or constituency level. Many male MPs

¹⁰ Morris, *Tories*, p. 52 and M. Phillips, *The Divided House* (London 1980), p. 55.

still believed, however, that women's scope of interest and knowledge lay in specific areas – mainly education, social issues (such as pricing) and welfare. In addition to this, women, in the mid-twentieth century, tended to be given positions outside of the Cabinet, instead holding ministerial positions. Through giving them important roles, but keeping them out of the Cabinet, the party ensured that women were holding higher, more prominent positions, but were not necessarily impinging on the Cabinet, which was still widely regarded as a man's realm. This is one way in which women were prevented from becoming prominent members of the parliamentary side of the party.

However, changes began in the party in the 1960s that saw women being placed in positions which hitherto had been reserved for men. Their knowledge in areas outside of those which had traditionally been reserved for women was finally being recognised. In an interview with the *Finchley Times* in 1966, Margaret Thatcher acknowledged this shift in mentality and general acceptance of women, 'Now while we are still expected to have a special knowledge of these subjects modern Prime Ministers have also sent women to the Home Office (Dame Patricia Hornsby-Smith, Miss Mervyn Pike and Miss Alice Bacon); Commonwealth Relations (Mrs. Judith Hart; and the Foreign Office (Mrs. Eirene White).'¹¹ This statement demonstrates that women were finally being recognised for their ability in areas outside of welfare, education and housing. However, many male party members considered these new interests to be an addition to their work on women's issues, not a

¹¹ Margaret Thatcher interview for *The Finchley Times*, 16 December 1966, accessed via www.margaretthatcher.org on 13 July 2007.

substitute. Table 6.1 below lists the offices held by Conservative female MPs in the period.

Table 6.1 – Conservative Women in Office, 1951 – 1974¹²

Name	Office Held	Dates
Florence Horsbrugh	Parliamentary Secretary – Ministry of Health; Parliamentary Secretary – Ministry of Food; Minister of Education	1939-1945; May-July 1945; 1951-1954
Patricia Hornsby-Smith	Parliamentary Secretary – Ministry of Health; Parliamentary Under-Secretary – Home Office; Joint Parliamentary Secretary – Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance	1951-1957; 1957-1959; 1959-1961
Edith Pitt	Joint Parliamentary Secretary – Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance; Parliamentary Secretary – Ministry of Health	1955-1959; 1959-1962
Mervyn Pike	Assistant Postmaster General; Joint Parliamentary Under Secretary of State – Home Office	1959-1963; 1963-1964
Betty Harvie-Anderson	Deputy Speaker	1970-1973
Margaret Thatcher	Parliamentary Under Secretary – Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance; Secretary of State for Education and Science	1961-1964; 1970-1974
Priscilla Tweedsmuir	Parliamentary Under Secretary – Scottish Office; Minister of State – Scottish Office; Minister of State – Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1962-1964; 1970-1972; 1972-1974

Although women's roles were changing, there was still hesitation on the part of many Conservative Party leaders when appointing women to high ranking positions within the party. Churchill, as mentioned above, was the first Conservative leader to put a woman in the Cabinet, but despite his appointment of Horsbrugh to Minister of Education, Churchill was not a proponent of women holding political office. He was, as were many other leaders of his generation, reluctant to allow women into roles such as Cabinet minister. As well as the views which have already been discussed,

¹² *Women in the House of Commons*, House of Commons Information Office, 2003. Accessed via <http://www.parliament.uk/directories/hcio.cfm> on 22 May 2006.

Churchill once told Lady Astor that 'he found a woman's intrusion into the House of Commons as embarrassing as if she had burst upon him in his bathroom when he had nothing to defend himself with but a sponge.'¹³

In addition to this, Churchill, and many other parliamentarians of his generation viewed women as being less capable of making policy-related decisions than were men. They also thought that women were more suited for work in the constituencies, or at best as an MP. Churchill also believed that women had different requirements to men and would be more difficult to work with, if placed in high ranking positions, than were men.¹⁴

Jean Mann notes that Anthony Eden was similarly willing to put women in positions of relative importance, as under him, both Florence Horsbrugh and Patricia Hornsby-Smith were given ministerial positions. While neither reached Cabinet rank under Eden, the fact that he put them into such positions indicates that he was more willing than were many of his predecessors to aid the advancement of women within the party.¹⁵

Mann also notes that Harold Macmillan only appointed one woman, Mervyn Pike, to a junior post which she noted was 'surprising' due to the fact that Pike had no discernable skills which qualified her for this role.¹⁶ However, Maguire notes that Macmillan was willing, as

¹³ Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, pp. 180-181.

¹⁵ J. Mann, *Woman in Parliament*, (London 1962), p. 42.

¹⁶ Mann, *Woman in Parliament*, pp. 42-43.

many of those who led the party before him, had not been, to put women into positions of importance, and even some which required them to step out of the normal women's role and issues. He retained Pike, Pitt and Hornsby-Smith in the positions they had held under Eden. Upon her resignation from the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance in 1961, he was determined to find a female replacement for Hornsby-Smith, for which he called upon Margaret Thatcher. Despite the fact that Pitt was a victim of the 'night of the long knives' in 1962, the number of women in ministerial positions was soon raised again upon Lady Tweedsmuir being appointed Under-Secretary of State for the Scottish Office.

This situation demonstrates that some of the ways in which women were held back by men were due to circumstances, and in regard to certain men, this was more often the case than was reluctance. The years 1962-1964 were tumultuous for the Conservatives as in addition to great changes occurring in the parliamentary side of the party, public opinion was moving left which caused many Conservative female MPs to lose their seats in the 1964 election.

In a 1966 interview, as noted by Melanie Phillips, Ted Heath stated that he was in favour of the idea of women in politics as long as their contribution was different to that of men. 'I have seen it so often: women on our advisory committees, for instance, coming up with ideas and approaches which apparently have never occurred to men, contributions which made you look at the whole thing again.'¹⁷ Despite this recognition, he was as reluctant as many of his contemporaries when it came to appointing women to high

¹⁷ M. Phillips, *The Divided House*, (London 1980) p. 155.

ranking positions within the government. His views are indicative of the fact that while men, in the 1950s and 1960s were growing accustomed to women's positions within Parliament, and even beginning to welcome them more readily, were still not ready to accept women's capability to successfully carry out more prominent roles.

As mentioned, although some women were involved with and particularly focused on women's issues, in many instances their interests extended above and beyond those issues which related directly to the women's domain. Despite all of the constraints and hesitations involved in women holding high positions within the party, one must see the progress made for what it was. Women may have been pigeon-holed into specific roles, but by the mid-twentieth century, they were finally being given the opportunity to take up positions of influence and importance and thus Churchill's appointment of Horsbrugh and women being appointed to other ministerial positions can be seen as yet one more small step along the long road to equality.

The friendships formed between women and their male colleagues, whether within or outside of Parliament, were also instrumental to women's success. Although these were not always easy to develop, a working relationship, and thus an element of respect between some members of the two sexes was inevitable.

In terms of examining the professional relationship between female MPs and their male colleagues, there is no better example than that of Margaret Thatcher. In Thatcher's autobiography, she recognises

that while in Heath's Cabinet she did not have many allies amongst her colleagues there. She states 'I therefore found myself with just one political friend in the Cabinet – Keith [Joseph].'¹⁸ Further to this, she recalls a conversation between the two in 1974, when the Party was in the process of choosing a new leader. He told her that he would not run due to the large amount of press he had been receiving since the speech he made in Edgbaston concerning social deprivation in Britain and the stress this had been causing his family.

It was at this time that Thatcher said that she would run if he did not because '...someone who represents our viewpoint *has* to stand.'¹⁹ This conversation and the context in which it was held demonstrates that not only did Joseph see her as an ally, but he also viewed her as someone capable and with whom he could discuss important matters. Therefore, her rise to the leadership was not only aided by her political prowess and drive but she also had the backing of at least one man within the party, who, if he had run would have potentially prevented her from reaching the heights within the Party that she did.

Contrary to the support she was receiving from Joseph at this time was the response of the press, who directly attacked her in November 1974 simply because she was a woman. Claims that she was hoarding food were printed in several newspapers until they were finally discredited upon one paper going too far and

¹⁸ Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 202.

¹⁹ Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 266.

fabricating a story regarding her buying sugar in bulk.²⁰ Despite overcoming this obstacle, she still believed that her chances of winning the contest were slim, especially because of her sex.

This potential problem was once again raised later that month when rumours began to fly that Edward du Cann was going to run, as at this point she realised that she could easily lose simply because she was a woman. In addition to concerns about the race, she was growing concerned about those who had allied themselves with her, especially Airey Neave. Thatcher realised she needed him as an ally, but because of the rumours that du Cann might be running, she was afraid Neave would ally himself with du Cann instead of her. However, these fears were allayed when Edward du Cann confirmed that he would not be running and Neave told her that he would 'bring Edward's troops behind Margaret.'²¹ Neave proved to be her most trusted supporter in the leadership competition, helping her to prepare strategies, campaign and generally as a confidant. His show of support for her campaign from its early days did not waiver and proved to be of vital importance to her.

Upon her election as Opposition Leader in 1975, Thatcher had varied support from her male colleagues, but quickly gained, if not their support, their respect. The language Geoffrey Howe used in his autobiography when talking about her as leader was very cautious; he indicated that they were able to develop a working

²⁰ R. Lewis, *Margaret Thatcher: A Personal Political Biography* (London 1975), p. 105 and *The Times* 'Housewives to protest at Mrs Thatcher's 'hoard'', 29 November 1974, p. 2.

²¹ Thatcher *Path to Power*, p. 269-272.

relationship, which is evident in his role throughout her premiership, but he does not ever speak of her in a particularly friendly way, nor does he indicate that he supported her fully. He also indicated that, at least initially, this feeling was reciprocated.²²

These examples demonstrate that not only was Thatcher able to, eventually, win over many of her male colleagues, but this task was daunting as initially she had the support of very few. However, those very few were instrumental in her rise through the party and thus it cannot be denied that she was influenced by her male colleagues. The relationships she developed with men through her time in the Cabinet, as Leader of the Opposition and finally as Prime Minister, thus proved to be very influential in her career in the Commons. Even those who did not support her initially spurred her on and drove her to prove to them, and everyone else, that she was capable of performing the duties she took on.

Other, more varied relationships developed between Thatcher and her male colleagues, often as a result of being forced to work together but not necessarily being on friendly terms. These relationships, too, were important in shaping the view of women in Parliament during her time there and beyond, as well as impacting her tenure in the party. This is also the case for other women in Parliament who encountered similar attitudes from their male colleagues, as has previously been discussed. The impact of men on women's careers, therefore, should not be understated and must be considered as an important influence on them.

²² G. Howe *Conflict of Loyalty* (London 1995), pp. 91, 94, 98.

Once women were more able to attain higher positions both within the Parliamentary Party and the constituencies, in addition to being more widely accepted, there was a better opportunity for them to influence the leaders and policy. Once in Parliament and in a position to form a close relationship with high ranking male colleagues, women were even more able to do such things. There were some who took advantage of these opportunities and became known for putting pressure on leaders regarding certain issues. Two women well-known for this are Thelma Cazalet-Keir and Irene Ward in their approach to the equal pay issue, as was discussed previously. Cazalet-Keir, even after leaving Parliament in 1945, maintained an interest and stayed active in various party organisations, seeing through the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service in 1955. Ward, who retained her seat in the Commons until the mid 1960s, maintained a high level of activity in Parliament and was quite relentless with regard to the implementation of equal pay.

The pressure put on R.A. Butler by Cazalet-Keir and Ward in 1946 did pay off and the party started to recognise that they needed to, if not alter their existing policies, adapt them to accommodate the newly emerging demographic of the career woman. This new group of women was important as they were the ones who were more likely than housewives to vote Labour given the progressiveness of Labour's policies versus those of the Conservatives. The only specific policy that Cazalet-Keir and Ward were requesting was the addition of the promise to address the equal pay for equal work issue in the 1950 Conservative Party

manifesto, as previously discussed.²³ Therefore, the fact that women were able to influence someone as high up in the party as Butler demonstrates that both sexes were able to be influenced by the other – even though it was more frequently the men in the party who influenced women. The fact that these two women were able to influence party policy and have the impact on leaders that they did speaks volumes for the influence that women could have had if they had been more persistent and so desired.

This is not the only way that women influenced men during the mid-twentieth century, but it is one of the most overt. Although this particular example extends beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting that women were able to influence men, which indicates that there was a certain amount of parity within the Conservative Party, even if it was on a lesser level than was men's influence on women. The example set by these two parliamentary veterans is one which has been emulated, albeit in a lesser form, several times since then. However, the issue at hand, equal pay, was as much an influencing factor as were the women themselves. The time had clearly come for changes to be made – the Labour Party was deliberating on the same topic, it had been widely called for by pressure groups and it was largely recognised by Parliament and society that women deserved equal pay for equal work.

Thus, not only was the pressure put on Butler by Cazalet-Keir and Ward important, but the topic for which they were lobbying was also of utmost importance in this instance. The significance of this

²³ H. Smith, 'The Politics of Conservative Reform: The Equal Pay for Equal Work Issue, 1945-1955', *The Historical Journal*, 35 (June 1992), p. 403.

particular instance lies also with those who pushed for reform and recognition and that this was the first time that women had had such a strong influence over an important piece of policy. However, had they approached him in a similar manner with any other issue, or at any other time with the same issue, they may not have been as successful.

Although there was a certain, and important, level of male participation in debates on women's issues, those who did take an interest were few in number, and often the same male MPs were active in debates on a variety of issues while many others remained silent (or were absent) for most. This differs from their female colleagues in that women tended to be involved in one or two particular topics, but they did not consistently partake in debates on women's issues regardless of the topic at hand. Despite these differences, those men who did participate in the debates on women's issues had a great impact and often demonstrated a genuine interest in and care for them.

The majority of new or amending legislation introduced at this time was introduced by male MPs from both sides of the Commons. This can be attributed to the significantly larger number of men in the Commons which allowed them to have a greater chance of being chosen for Private Member's Bills. After the ballot was drawn, however, was when the pressure increased as those who had been successful had to decide on a Bill to introduce. Lobbyists, constituents and colleagues were all very influential in this important decision. The decision to take on an issue relating to women's rights was never an easy one. They were often

controversial and therefore stood a great chance of being talked out. One example of this is the Corrie Bill, which was discussed previously. As an amendment to the Abortion Act 1967, it was contentious from the start. However, upon being debated, there were far too many problems raised, both in debates and in committee and the Bill was eventually withdrawn, as it was realised there was just not enough time to adequately examine all of the issues covered in the Bill.²⁴ Men were very influential with regard to the debates held on these issues. Again, their significant majority in Parliament gave them a distinct advantage when trying to get their voices heard. However, a reason for their influence which went above and beyond this is what seems to be genuine interest and care.

The women's issues in which men became the most involved were those concerning the family and such controversial topics as abortion. These issues directly affected men in not only their family life but also potentially at work, depending upon their vocation. As an example, most doctors, 78% in 1974, were male and therefore the rights that women were being given with regard to contraception, abortion and signing for children's medical procedures had the potential to affect their practices. The same can be said for lawyers, 93% of whom were male, with regard to marriage and guardianship law reform.²⁵ However, the most important way in which men were affected is the direct impact that the new legislation could have on their family lives. The personal

²⁴ D. Marsh and J. Chambers, *Abortion Politics* (London 1981), p. 155.

²⁵ E. Vallance, *Women in the House: A Study of Women Members of Parliament* (London 1979), p. 6.

aspect is therefore important in this respect, but cannot account for all the male interest in these issues.

Another reason for men's increased interest in women's issues relates to equal pay especially as for the first time it meant there would be equality between the sexes in the workplace. Having traditionally been a male-dominated arena, for women to be able to work as equals was a new concept which generated fears of unemployment, loss of prominent roles and potential loss of wages. These factors support the idea that fear of change, and the unknown, was one of the main reasons for opposition to introducing equal pay.

It was also a concern because of the way in which equal pay would have affected their home lives. By introducing equal pay, many men were afraid that women would be drawn away from their homes and children in favour of work, and thus children would be left in care of non-family members, either in crèches or private care. Therefore, one reason for men's opposition to this was due to how they wanted their children raised and fear that they would not be brought up by their wives.

However, it was debates regarding matrimonial causes, guardianship and abortion which seemed to attract the most attention from male MPs from all sides. The delicate nature of these issues is one way to account for this, but, it would seem that, in most cases, legislation regarding these issues had been discussed at length, failing to get through in the time available to them and thus had not been amended in an inordinate amount of

time. The fact that most of these laws had not been amended in at least 40 years meant that many were not only outdated, but the changes being proposed were notable in the way in which they were directed toward giving women increased rights. This, in many respects, threatened to change the role of men more with regard to their homes and families than other amendments had in the past. Thus, male interest was only natural as their rights stood a great chance of being diminished in an area which they had previously been in a superior position to women.

While male interest is important, it cannot account for all of the impact that they had with regard to women's rights issues. Surely their position as legislators was the most important factor. But can one argue that men participated in debates, committees and commissions because they were simply doing their jobs? It would seem that this would be a gross misunderstanding of not only the MPs themselves, but also the issues. Women's rights issues, as discussed here, tended to be controversial ones on which most MPs had an opinion and, given the fact that most voting done was in the form of free votes, these views and opinions were of utmost importance.

While men in Parliament were greater in number than women, not all of their success can be attributed to this. Discrimination against women was sometimes blatant. As previously discussed, there were many instances within constituency associations when women were openly discriminated against by men. There were instances in Parliament as well when women were noticeably discriminated against by their male colleagues. Evelyn Emmet noted, in a 1959

interview that 'There was a time when women MPs were somehow expected to assert themselves in Parliament merely 'as women'. They were supposed to concern themselves almost exclusively with a somewhat limited range of topics...'²⁶ Evidence such as this not only demonstrates that women were pigeon holed, but also notes the view that was taken by many (presumably male) MPs, that women were, in a very condescending manner seen as just women, which accounts for their lack of success in many areas.

In discussing the elevation of women from the lower ranks of the party to higher positions, one will notice that there were very few women who did achieve high rank. Throughout the research conducted for this study, several conclusions regarding why women were not as able to rise through the party as were men have been reached. The first is that many women did not have the desire to hold high offices. Certain women, such as Margaret Thatcher in the Conservative Party and, within the Labour Party, Barbara Castle, were remarkably successful in their respective parties compared to others. However, one must then question why others who were quite active and willing to move upward were denied the same opportunities granted to these two women. Perhaps the time was not right for them, or their policies did not mesh well enough with the leaders' ideas in order to get them into a Cabinet position. It could be argued, however, that there was a certain amount of discrimination against women in the Commons, especially during the 1950s and early 1960s. Being the male-dominated arena that it was, acceptance of women after the First World War was not

²⁶ *The Times*, 'MPs' tax plea for Married Women', 1 April 1960, Oxford Bodleian Library, CPA MS.Eng.c.5727.

popular with certain male MPs, even forty years after they had first been admitted.

The difference in women's success between the Conservative and Labour parties is notable, if not only for sheer numbers elected but for recognition given. Highlighting one party over the other as being more willing to support women would lead to an inaccurate assessment. In their own ways, both the Labour and Conservative parties gave women opportunities to advance, as much as both held them back. Neither party was particularly welcoming to women who sought seats in the Commons, although both were willing to accept women's roles within the constituencies and in public spaces.

That idea leads to a second conclusion, which is that women were denied the opportunities required to rise through the Conservative Party. The reasons for this encompass many issues from the historical oppression of women to the small numbers of women putting themselves forward. The two are not separate matters, however. The historical oppression of women within the Conservative Party, while mostly eradicated in the mid-twentieth century, did not completely disappear. Although it was earlier argued that Florence Horsbrugh's appointment to the post of Minister of Education under Churchill was a large step for women, and this is not being denied here, the fact that she was initially kept out of the Cabinet speaks volumes of the limited position in which many men in the party thought women should be kept. This was not only demonstrated through Churchill's actions, but also

through the reluctance of other leaders of the mid-twentieth century to appoint women to Cabinet positions.

The fear of change is one of the underlying themes in debates regarding increased women's rights – no matter the context. As Elizabeth Vallance rightly points out, there were many conflicting views regarding the necessity of the Sex Discrimination Bill 1975, from both men and women. Those opposed to the Bill were representative of both sexes and their arguments were only vaguely different from those used with regard to issues such as abortion and equal pay. They were based upon arguments warning of the potential downfall of society and the claim that there was no definitive evidence that women wanted equal rights. Whereas the proponents of the Bill argued the opposite, that women would not be forced to go out and work because of equal opportunities and that there was, in fact, a lot of support for this Bill from the public. The question then becomes which side is correct? The short answer and the one which comes across very clearly when reading on this particular piece of legislation and others, is that both are. They were both able to find statistics and people to support their sides.

Discrimination is such a contentious issue in many ways that there were people available to give their views, and most did so quite vehemently, from both sides of the argument and thus both sides were able to back up their claims with a fair amount of evidence.²⁷

²⁷ Vallance *Women in the House*, pp. 143-146.

As we now know, the side in favour of the anti-discrimination legislation came out on top. The relevance of this in a discussion of the impact of men on women in the political sphere lies in the fact that there were representatives from both sexes on both sides of the argument. This demonstrates that even at this point, in 1975, when women were climbing higher and further up the political ladder than they had previously been able to do, there was still a great deal of discontent regarding their role. Vallance also points out that the 1970s, which were considered to be quite a progressive decade with regard to women's rights, saw some of the most blatant discrimination against women for sixty years.²⁸ Perhaps this is due to the fact that this was the year which saw Margaret Thatcher become Leader of the Opposition, contained International Women's Year and also saw the implementation of the Equal Pay Act and passage of the Sex Discrimination Act. The discriminatory reaction was just a response to widespread feeling that too much progress was occurring too quickly.

The link between International Women's Year, Thatcher's rise to power and the impact that men had on women's rights legislation is largely due to the fact that men inevitably have had an impact on women's lives – whether directly through relationships formed in Parliament, or indirectly through voting on women's rights legislation. There is also a more direct link, however, in the way that men influenced female parliamentarians' voting and vice versa and how these impacted wider society and women's lives for the whole of the country. In the context of this study, it is important to understand these ties in order to gain a fuller picture of the context

²⁸ Vallance *Women in the House*, p. 133.

within which these women were working and some potential external influences on their views and decisions to support or not support various issues.

7 – FEMALE LABOUR MPs AND ‘WOMEN’S ISSUES’

Although the main focus of this study is on the Conservative Party, the changes aided by the activities of female Conservative MPs would not have been possible without help from the other side of the House. Therefore, a consideration of the Labour Party and their policies and actions relating to women’s rights issues, as well as their attitude toward women generally, is necessary for a fuller understanding of the process of the passing of these issues. This chapter will begin with an examination of the ways in which women were associated with the Labour Party from its early stages and the evolution of the party’s relationship to women. The next section will consist of a discussion of the Labour Party’s policies regarding women’s issues as well as individual female party members’ participation in debates on these issues. Then the focus is on the cooperation between Conservative and Labour women MPs during the debates on women’s issues. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the relationship between female and male Labour MPs during the mid-twentieth century.

Very early on in the labour movement, women were showing an interest in politics. Their motives involved mainly women’s issues including suffrage, women’s position within marriage and morality. There were calls in the late nineteenth century for a separate women’s section of the party, which would exist only to address those issues which directly affected women. Such groups were created, including the Women’s Cooperative Guild and the Women’s Labour League, and this attracted a new cohort of women to the party. Even though the formation of their own section of the party might sound like a divisive move, the fact that they were drawing

women, namely married women, who had not traditionally been particularly active in politics, to the party shows that this was an effective recruiting tool.¹

These developments are strong signs of changes taking place within the Labour Party, even while it was still in its early stages, as not only were women being accepted, they were developing their own factions. This does not mean that women were easily accepted into the party, or that the party was willing to take on women's issues, as there was still much resistance from male party members. The fact that they were showing an interest in becoming a part of the Labour Party was the first step toward integration and approval of women's place in the party, however.²

This began to change gradually in the early twentieth century, with women's increased integration into the wider party. While women's issues were still of importance, women were gaining an interest in politics which went beyond suffrage and into other areas affecting women. This is especially the case after certain women over the age of 30 were given the vote.³ Party loyalties felt by women increased and along with this, women's interests continued to diversify. Worley describes women's activities during the interwar years to include 'a mixture of gendered, electoral, social and domestic policies', demonstrating that not only were their interests

¹ J. Hannam, 'Women and Politics', in *Women's History Britain 1850-1945*, J. Purvis ed., (London 1995), p. 220-228.

² J. Hannam, 'Women and Labour Politics' in *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives*, M. Worley, ed., (Farnham 2009), p. 171.

³ M. Francis, 'Labour and gender' in *Labour's First Century*, D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo eds., (Cambridge 2000), pp. 192-193.

diversifying, but they were becoming more proactive in what were considered women's issues following the Second World War.⁴

In 1918 women were welcomed into the Labour Party organisation as members. This saw the number of women in women's sections rise considerably. While much of their focus was still on women's issues, there was an increase in interest shown in issues unrelated to the women's movement. For example, Ellen Wilkinson was known for her support of the unemployed and industrial workers. While both important issues, these were far from the topics included on previous women's agendas. The importance of this diversification is that it allowed women to integrate into the party. That they were becoming more interested in issues which were not typical women's issues does not mean that they were no longer interested in them, it was just necessary for them to look beyond this realm in order to further their positions within the party.⁵

In the years following the World Wars, the Labour Party had increased its female membership and was more accepting of women, although it still remained reluctant with regard to giving them positions of significance within the party. The party's interest in women's issues had remained largely as it was from the beginning – limited. The impact of the party on many women's issues since the Second World War has been discussed by Amy Black and Stephen Brooke in a 1997 article entitled 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender, 1951-1966'. However,

⁴ M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars*, (London 2005), p. 41.

⁵ B.D. Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson*, (London 1982), p. 59 and Hannam, 'Women and Politics', p. 237.

as their article discusses the period following World War II only up to 1966, it is important to revisit these issues in order to build upon them using evidence from the post-1966 period. Black and Brooke have drawn many important conclusions regarding women's position in the Labour Party, and these will not be refuted. By building upon their conclusions, it will be shown that while some of these remain valid, there were changes in party ideals and therefore policy during the late 1960s and 1970s which are worth considering in order to more fully examine Labour's role in the issues discussed in this study.

Black and Brooke argue that Labour did not recognise the 'potential importance of sexual difference in political culture...' and that the party was 'bemused, if not hostile' toward women's issues in the post-war period.⁶ While this may have been true in the immediate post-war period, the increasing numbers of women involved in the party indicates otherwise. However, their point retains some potency throughout the latter part of the twentieth century as although the Labour Party may have had a greater number of female MPs than the Conservatives, and also may have been more involved in the second wave of feminism of the 1960s, the Labour Party itself adopted very few policies aimed at increasing equality between the sexes.

One of the main points to note is that although the Labour Party itself may not have been forthcoming with support for women's rights issues, it is clear that many individuals within the party were

⁶ A. Black and S. Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender, 1951-1966', *The Journal of British Studies*, (October 1997), p. 429.

supportive and willing to actively pursue increased equality between the sexes. This is evidenced in the number of Bills proposed by Labour MPs in addition to the organisations outside of the Commons in which many were involved. Thus, a sweeping statement such as the one above may have applied directly following World War II, but clearly into the 1960s and beyond there were changes occurring in the Labour Party which altered the way women were treated and interest in women's issues and the corresponding legislation.

Even in the early twentieth century there is evidence of individuals within the labour movement taking a stand for women's rights. One such example is George Lansbury (ILP, Bow and Bromley 1910-12) who gave up his seat after a clash in the House of Commons over suffrage, an issue of which he was a staunch supporter.⁷ While support such as this was rare after suffrage had been achieved, there were still many heavily involved MPs who were willing to go to great lengths, such as clashing with their own party members, in order to ensure that changes were made.

There has been much written regarding the Labour Party and women, much of which covers a greater expanse of time and therefore treats the subject in less depth than is done by Black and Brooke. In many of these publications there are several valid points raised regarding women's position within the Labour Party and the party's reluctance to take on women's issues before the 1960s. Pat Thane, for instance, highlights women's increased

⁷ J. Shepherd, *George Lansbury: At the Heart of Old Labour*, (Oxford 2002) pp. 126-128.

activity on a local level and acceptance of women's new roles by their male counterparts. In addition to this, their activities with regard to welfare issues in the interwar years, which proved to be important for the party as women were the ones mostly involved in these topics, are also discussed.⁸

The progress of women's roles in the Labour Party is also discussed by Joni Lovenduski, who notes that part of the reason for women's lack of participation was their hesitance to take part in the male dominated culture of the party. This is important as noting that there was hesitancy on the part of women and not just unwillingness of their male colleagues indicates that some women were as reluctant to join the party as men were to have them. However, during the latter part of the twentieth century, this changed and women were more welcomed into and willing to join the party. Although not rapid change in either ideology or membership, the fact that there was a change is notable and was also visible in the party structure.⁹

Highlighted in these writings are two important things to consider when looking at women in the Labour Party as they identify two trends which recurred throughout the twentieth century. The first is acceptance of women in the party, in a limited and confined capacity. Throughout the twentieth century, up until the 1997 election when women were forced into the forefront of the party, they were often marginalized in the Commons by their male

⁸ P. Thane, 'Labour and Welfare' in *Labour's First Century*, D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo eds., (Cambridge 2000), pp. 93-94.

⁹ J. Lovenduski, 'Sex, Gender and Politics', *Parliamentary Affairs*, (1996), pp. 11-12.

colleagues. There are examples of women who were able to rise above this and hold high ranking positions within the party and were recognised for their work, not as women but as colleagues. But these women, as they were within the Conservative Party, were in the minority. These women, some of whom will be discussed below, often found that camaraderie with male MPs helped them to achieve this end.

The second thing to consider is the trend that women increasingly tended to be the main proponents of welfare issues. Welfare issues, while not women's issues as they are classified here, have often been cast into the same category, but the differences can be great. The main issues included under the 'welfare' umbrella were healthcare, housing, and pricing. These gained more interest from many Labour women than did the women's issues discussed here for much of the early mid-twentieth century. Thus, women in the Labour Party were no more likely to take up women's issues than were their Conservative counterparts. Although not issues discussed in this study, the shared interest in such topics is another uniting factor for women from the different parties.

Of the Labour women MPs in the Commons during the mid-twentieth century, the most notable in terms of women's issues and the positions which they held in the party included Barbara Castle (Blackburn 1945-1950, Blackburn East 1950-1955 and Blackburn 1955-1979), Shirley Williams (Hitchin, 1964-Feb 1974 and Hertford and Stevenage, Feb 1974-1979), Judith Hart (Lanark 1959-1983), Edith Summerskill (Fulham West, 1938-1955 and Warrington, 1955-1961), Renee Short (Wolverhampton, North East)

and Alice Bacon (Leeds North East 1945-1955 and Leeds South East 1955-1970).

The similarities between these women and their Conservative equivalents are numerous not only because of their shared interest in women's issues, but also because of the way in which they were treated within their individual parties. Upon entering the Commons, women were treated not as equals by their male colleagues, but simply as seat fillers for their side of the House who were there to vote along party lines.¹⁰ The women themselves were not always kind to each other and often the animosity felt between new women and those who had been in the House for a while was palpable. However, eventually, most women were able to be civil to each other, a factor due to not only their shared sex but also the confined space they shared in the women's room.¹¹

The Labour Party was, in many ways, a less welcoming organisation for women than was the Conservative Party. Due to Labour's history as a working class party, largely because of its close affiliation with the TUC, equality issues and women themselves were often not considered when the Party was developing policies. Women's role was perceived to be primarily within the home and thus Labour policies regarding women focused on welfare and pricing issues, with neglect for things such as women's health. This remained mostly true throughout the 1950s; however there were an increasing number of signs that Labour was becoming more accepting of women than the Conservatives in the

¹⁰ J. Mann, *Woman in Parliament* (London 1962), p. 13.

¹¹ S. Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves* (London 2009), p. 148.

latter part of the mid-twentieth century. One sign of this was the growing number of women elected to Parliament. There are several factors which contributed to this increase, including a more welcoming electorate, more viable candidates and simply more women putting themselves forward.

Women were not only unlikely to find a place within the Labour Party organisation; they were less likely to vote Labour than Conservative. Given that between 1950 and 1951 there were two elections, the first of which was won by Labour, and that the country was dealing with various issues due to the war and readjusting to life after its end, that women's issues, as discussed within this study, were not readily addressed is unsurprising as there were more pressing concerns to be dealt with in Parliament. Pricing and welfare were high priorities, as these were seen to be the most urgent matters affecting women in the time immediately following the war. The one way in which equality issues were addressed was through widespread recognition of the need for an increase in the workforce which caused both parties to make vague statements regarding the implementation of equal pay in their election manifestos.¹²

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, there were more Labour women than Conservative women in the Commons, as has been discussed. Although this is significant in some respects, with

¹² *This is the Road: The Conservative and Unionist Party's Policy*, 1950, accessed via <http://www.conservative-party.net/manifestos/1950/1950-conservative-manifesto.shtml> and *Let Us Win Through Together: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation*, 1950, accessed via <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1950/1950-labour-manifesto.shtml> on 4 December 2006.

regard to participation in debates on equality issues, such as those discussed here, the difference proved to be of minimal importance. The numbers of those who participated from each party are similar and the only difference in this respect lies in the fact that more significant legislation, namely the 1970 Equal Pay Act, was introduced by a Labour woman whereas any Bills or amendments that were introduced by Conservative women either did not pass or were not sponsored by the government.¹³ This seemingly minor difference is notable as it shows that not only were women in the Labour Party given more opportunities to take part in issues that directly affected women, but also that the Labour Government was more willing to sponsor Bills aimed at equality.

In the 29 years between 1950 and 1979, individuals within the Labour Party were generally more willing to show support for equality issues than were individual Conservatives. This could be attributed to the involvement of Labour women in second wave feminism in the 1960s, but societal pressure and recognition from those in the party that society's needs were changing can also explain this. As for the Conservatives' reluctance, their general apathy toward women's issues has already been discussed. Thus, the conclusion drawn is that the steps taken towards equality by Labour during the mid-twentieth century were simply due to timing and opportunity, as well as a willing body of MPs to encourage the necessary changes. In the early post-war years there were a series of proposed amendments to various pieces of women's rights

¹³ Although Joan Vickers introduced the Maintenance Orders Bill in 1957, which proved to be unsuccessful, when the Bill was sponsored by the Government in 1958, it was she who piloted it through.

legislation brought to the Commons by members of the Labour Party.

The reluctance of the Labour Party to take on women's rights issues dates back to the early twentieth century. However, by the mid-twentieth century, due to evolving ideologies which were more radical than those of the Conservatives, many believed that they would be the likely party to support these policies. Given their affiliation with the trade union movement and their strong male following, popular ideologies, such as women's right to work, were not accepted by many party members and so Labour was not positively responsive to women's rights policies.¹⁴ Despite the many changes in the party which occurred between the early and mid-twentieth century and the changing ideologies of Labour Party members, the party's reluctance to take on women's rights issues remained a constant until their 1964 election victory.

Following the 1964 election, Labour held the majority in the Commons for six years before losing to the Conservatives in the 1970 election. During this time there were many changes in the legislation regarding women's rights, most of which were introduced by members of the Labour Party. While they had the support of various members of the Labour Party, only one was a government-sponsored initiative. Thus the Private Members' Bill proved to be an important tool once again as it allowed for those who were chosen to introduce a Bill which would not only attract a

¹⁴ O. Banks, *The Politics of British Feminism 1918-1970* (University of Virginia 1993), p. 81.

large amount of attention, but also allowed both sides of the Commons to work outside of the Whip system.

The main pieces of legislation which passed between 1964 and 1970 included the Abortion Act, Equal Pay Act, Divorce Reform Act and various Matrimonial Causes Acts. The importance of these has already been discussed in previous chapters. The extent to which female Labour MPs participated in the debates and generally influenced these issues is noteworthy. There were several Labour women involved in the many and varied debates on these topics, which was not necessarily reflective of the wider party's ideologies. That said, however, the party's support did increase in the mid-twentieth century, as demonstrated through the large body of legislation passed during this time.

It can be argued that the seemingly sudden interest in women's issues shown by the Labour Government was largely the result of the party attempting to attract more women voters in the mid-1960s as they had not increased the number of women voting for Labour after the decrease which occurred immediately following the war.¹⁵ A more probable argument, however, is that Labour representatives became involved in the second wave of feminism as women's participation in the party's organisations began to revolve more around women's issues due to the large amount of support that these issues were receiving in the constituencies. Whether by choice or force, but at least partially due to increased pressure from the electorate, many Labour Party MPs took up these

¹⁵ P. Norris, 'Mobilising the 'Women's Vote': The Gender-Generation Gap in Voting Behaviour', *Parliamentary Affairs*, (April 1996), pp. 335.

issues both within and outside of Parliament. While not necessarily vote-gaining issues, ensuring that they were included in their speeches and publications raised public awareness of Labour's willingness to take on these issues which, it was hoped, would increase female support for the party.

While neither hypothesis indicates that Labour did not support women's rights issues, using these issues as a ploy to gain more voters or taking up these issues because of the influence of the women within the party was not unique to Labour or this time period and thus seems likely. Given the apparently sudden way in which these issues were taken up, it would seem that these were the key reasons for Labour's interest in these issues.¹⁶ It can therefore be deduced that gaining female support was important to Labour, given that, as previously mentioned, it had traditionally been a male-dominated party. This is especially evident in the fact that many women's rights issues were not favoured by the trade unions. Regardless of individuals' reasons for participation, the fact remains that it was under a Labour Government that many changes occurred.

Labour's acknowledgement of the need for equality between the sexes extended beyond this, as evidenced in their October 1974 election manifesto in which they dedicated an entire section to stating what they were going to do for women. The list was comprehensive, covering many areas of life in which women were

¹⁶ A. Black and S. Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender, 1951-1966', pp. 424-425.

unfairly treated, including the below four points, which are those most relevant to this study.

The Labour Government's decisions provide a new deal for women. We will:

- ensure that by the end of 1975 Labour's Equal Pay Act will be fully effective throughout the land
- introduce a free comprehensive family planning service
- bring a fairer system of family law with new family courts
- reform housing law, to strengthen the rights of mothers on the break-up of marriage: and introduce other reforms proposed by the Finer Committee on One Parent Families¹⁷

These policy decisions committed Labour to taking action on women's issues as no previous statements had. While most of these changes had already been in progress for some time, for the party to commit themselves so wholly speaks of the increased recognition of these issues' importance by the party as a whole instead of only by individual members as had been the case in the past.

Also in their October 1974 election manifesto, Labour addressed two other points which had been an issue for some time, in addition to their statements regarding women's rights as discussed previously: the number of women in Parliament and women's role in politics. Their statement '...and we are determined to see more of them [women] from all walks of life - in Parliament, on local councils and other public bodies - including political parties and trade union committees' clearly shows their awareness of the problem of the low number of women in politics as well as the

¹⁷ *Britain Will Win With Labour*, October 1974 election manifesto, accessed via: <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1974/Oct/1974-oct-labour-manifesto.shtml> on 24 September 2008.

party's dedication to seeing changes made in this area.¹⁸ Although there was not a great increase in the number of women in the Commons until 1997, the acknowledgement of the lack of numbers in 1974 indicates a desire for change. This does, therefore, demonstrate that although Black and Brooke's argument, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, was true directly following World War II, in the mid-1970s, the Labour Party had clearly altered its policy on women.

As equal pay was the most prominent equal rights issue discussed in this study, spanning the majority of the 29 years between 1950 and 1979, this will be the main example of interparty cooperation discussed here. The early fights for equal pay did not prove to be easy for women of either party. This is evidenced by the fact that neither party, when in power in the 1950s, formally supported Bills to see through their promises of equal rights. Instead, various members of each party brought the issues forward throughout the course of the 29 years discussed here. The reasons for lack of formal government support for these are many and varied, and thus will not be discussed in-depth here. The important point to note is that neither party was more ready or willing than the other to adopt policies aimed at equality. Instead, it was the hard work of the men and women within the Commons who believed in this issue enough to push for the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service.

Barbara Castle, one of the best known of all of the above mentioned women, was the female Labour MP most heavily

¹⁸ *Britain Will Win With Labour*, October 1974.

involved in the equal pay issue. Elected in 1945 for Blackburn, she remained in Parliament continuously until 1979, a tenure during which she lobbied for changes in legislation regarding equal pay for over 25 years. She was very much in favour of the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service, as demonstrated by her persistence in raising the issue in the early 1950s. Her participation in the debate of 16 May 1952 was passionate and influential. She made many well-substantiated arguments in favour of the immediate implementation of equal pay and was joined in this by many other members of her party.¹⁹

Castle's interest and participation did not end in 1955 with the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service. It was she who introduced the 1970 Equal Pay Act to the Commons and guided it through. However, her activism for pay equality did not wane between the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service and the introduction of the Equal Pay Bill. Following the strike of women workers at the Ford plant in Dagenham, which saw women workers seeking fair raises and wages which would match those of female workers in other Ford factories across the country, Castle's persistence increased. One important aspect with which she had to deal was the trade unions' influence in this decision and thus her interest in the Donovan Report, which was published in 1968 and discussed trade unions and strike action, was high. Following analysis of this as well as countless consultations with trade union representatives and other members of the Cabinet, she was

¹⁹ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 cc. 1833-1840.

assured of some support, but there was also quite a bit of opposition to the principle of equal pay.²⁰

The women from both parties often worked well together, regardless of which party was in power, or who had introduced the Bill. But, even more importantly than that, they admired each other for the work put into those topics which were deemed important. The importance of these relationships lies in not only in the fact that the issues at hand concerned women more than men, but more in the fact that a minority in the Commons banded together to meet a common goal.

The cooperation of the two parties, especially between the female MPs, was most notable in terms of equal pay, especially with regard to the implementation of equal pay in the Civil Service. The women involved worked together both inside and outside of Parliament to ensure that their common goal of reform, whatever that may have entailed, was met. As acknowledged by Barbara Castle, with regard to equal pay in the Civil Service: 'She [Irene Ward] and I acted together, cutting across party lines on this issue, concerned not to score party points but to get positive action with regard to a principle in which we both believed.'²¹ The fact that two such prominent MPs were able to put their political differences aside in order to work together to reach a common goal speaks of the importance of the issue to them.

²⁰ B. Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964-1974* (London 1990), p. 356.

²¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 c. 1834.

However, despite the camaraderie that developed between these two women, there were feelings of animosity which arose from other female MPs regarding their cooperation. In the same speech, Castle also noted: 'I incurred a good deal of opprobrium from some of my women colleagues—from the hon. Lady the Member for Coventry, South (Miss Burton) and the hon. Lady the Member for Leeds, North-East (Miss Bacon)—because I joined with the hon. Lady the Member for Tynemouth in the iniquitous action of leading an all-party deputation to the Minister to demand equal pay.'²² The women mentioned by Castle were both active in the debates on equal pay which shows that they were interested in the issue, but also in gaining favour within their party. In addition to this, their refusal to cooperate with women from the other side of the House indicates that they were keen to see the principle implemented as a Labour-only initiative.

This kind of animosity was not unique to this issue and thus remains important when discussing women in Parliament. It was widely believed that women, once allowed in the Commons, would feel an automatic bond with one another simply because of their sex. While this has been repeatedly disproved, many male MPs believed that all women were very similar to each other and thus assumed that they would all have the same beliefs and would largely be interested in women's issues. This is despite having women, such as Castle and Margaret Thatcher, in distinctly 'male' Cabinet positions and the fact that many women did not speak up on women's issues. It seems as though some male, and perhaps female, MPs were of the belief that politics would be pushed aside

²² *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 c. 1834.

for the sake of the female bond. However close they may have come during their time working on these issues, as aptly put by Eleanor Rathbone, 'We could never have a women's party because of politics.'²³

Although there was not the same level of collaboration in 1970 as there was in the 1950s, there was agreement and recognition of similar circumstances which brought women from both parties together. Barbara Castle's work was acknowledged by a Conservative woman when Mervyn Pike spoke up in favour of the principle of industry-wide equal pay during the 9 February 1970 debate on the Bill. Throughout her speech, she mentioned points on which she agreed with Castle and also that it was essential that '...we do it the best way, thus achieving our objectives and giving women a real chance, a real opportunity and a real equality in industry...' and disregard party affiliation in order to achieve this goal.²⁴ The recognition that it was necessary for the two parties to work together to achieve a common goal denotes that women members from both sides were willing to work together once again to ensure that the Bill was passed and was as complete as possible.

When it came to issues in which they had firm beliefs or which directly affected their constituencies, Labour women's participation and cooperation increased. They not only frequently spoke up in debates on women's issues, but they also actively participated in activities outside of Parliament to promote their sides of the issues. The National Labour Women's Advisory Committee and the National

²³ Mann, *Woman in Parliament*, p. 20.

²⁴ *HC Deb* Vol. 795, 9 February 1970 cc. 948-949.

Labour Women's Conferences were both forums for women interested in equality issues and were thus used by female MPs to gather information and express their opinions. Their participation in the many issues varied, but each approached their issues of choice with passion and persistence, and in that way too, they were very similar to their Conservative counterparts.

Despite the opposition and spurred on by supporters, Castle pursued the issue and in 1970 introduced the Equal Pay Bill into the Commons. She recognised that it was important to ensure that the Bill was as comprehensive as it could be and she did not want it hastily passed. However, the government was ardent that it was passed as soon as possible and so it was rushed through and there were many issues caused by the wording of the Act. The problems caused by this were partially rectified by the Sex Discrimination Act, but there were far too many concerns which fell into a grey area that was not sufficiently accounted for in either Act. Therefore, while her intentions were good, the end result was not what Castle had envisioned.²⁵ Despite this, the fact that a woman was able to, with Government support, introduce and pilot through such an important piece of legislation is noteworthy.

Alice Bacon acknowledged that she had experienced unequal pay herself when she worked as a teacher. She therefore made most of her arguments on behalf of teachers, highlighting the importance of their jobs as well as the teacher shortage which the country was experiencing following the war. It was from this standpoint that

²⁵ *The Times*, 'Mrs Castle claims Bill will make equal pay for women a reality', 10 February 1970, p. 4.

she began her speech in which she highlighted the unfairness of teachers' pay then, the overall effects of equal pay on the family and economy and also the non-committal way with which the issue had been treated previously by both major parties. She implored the Commons to recognise that implementing the principle would have many more positive effects than negative.²⁶ Elaine Burton was also active in this debate and she too stood staunchly in favour of the implementation of equal pay as soon as possible. Even though she was only in the Commons during the 1950s and was thus not present for the passage of the Equal Pay Act, her influence in getting equal pay in the Civil Service implemented was of importance.

The Equal Pay Act is one of the few government-sponsored pieces of legislation discussed in this study. The Labour Government was in power in 1970 when the Bill was introduced and was very keen to see this particular piece of legislation passed. Labour's interest in this topic can be attributed to several factors, including the rejuvenation of the women's rights movement and increased participation of women in the trade unions. Although they were still not adequately represented, women were increasingly taking up positions in the trade unions which they had not previously held, allowing them to be heard as they had not been in the past.²⁷ Therefore, many women within the party were adamant that it was time for equal pay to be instituted industry-wide. As a result of these factors, the Equal Pay Act was passed in May 1970. While it was a landmark in its intention, due to the Government's rush to

²⁶ *HC Deb* Vol. 500, 16 May 1952 cc. 1785-1791.

²⁷ M. Francis, 'Labour and Gender', pp. 198-199.

get it on the statute books, the Act only partially solved the problem of equal pay. Ensuring that the Act passed at all was important, but the haste with which this occurred is evidence that in addition to wanting to institute equal pay, Labour leaders wanted to see changes made to the legislation while they were in power.

Between 1970 and 1975, the main focus with regard to women's issues was on the implementation of the Equal Pay Act as there were many changes which needed to occur within industry for the Bill to be effective. During this time, however, the steps toward equality were also being taken through the passage of legislation regarding guardianship and marital rights. The most important of these was the Guardianship Act 1973 which introduced new measures to make parents equal partners in the raising of their children and thus received quite a bit of interest from female MPs from both sides of the Houses.

With regard to the other legislation passed at the time, there was further recognition that women, from both major parties had long supported changes to such legislation as that regarding guardianship rights. Evelyn Emmet recognised the importance of this during her speech in the House of Lords during the debate on the Guardianship Bill in 1973: '...the noble Baroness, Lady Bacon, told us that the Labour Party equally on their side had written a booklet: I have mine here. Subsequently we had the Cripps Committee. So it has not been for want of trying by the women on

both sides: we have always seen eye to eye about these problems...²⁸

The Guardianship Bill was introduced in the Lords and thus gained the interest of several female peers – most notably Alice Bacon. She was an enthusiastic supporter of this piece of legislation, noting in the second debate on the issue that

...not only does the Bill give equal rights to the mother but also it gives her equal responsibilities. Not only will a mother now having equal rights in respect of the upbringing, custody, administration of property, et cetera, but also her responsibilities are recognised as being equal in that she may be required to pay maintenance should the father obtain the custody of the child. I believe that in this Bill the full implications of sex equality are realised. Only when that is done can women withstand the criticism that their liberation means privileges at the expense of men. I hope that the Bill will help to overcome the criticism that women want equal rights without responsibility.²⁹

While she may have been exaggerating the influence of legislation such as this, her speech does indicate that she was not only aware of the problem, but was willing to do her part to rectify it. She further demonstrated this by actively advocating the Bill in committee, and was one of only two women present. Upon reaching the Commons, the Bill received similar support from female MPs there, but only from the Conservative side. This is another example of the cooperation, albeit indirect in this instance, between women of the two parties. Raising many of the same points as Baroness Bacon did in the Lords, Joan Vickers was

²⁸ *HL Deb* Vol. 339, 20 February 1973 c. 33.

²⁹ *HL Deb* Vol. 339, 20 February 1973 c. 29.

persistent and informed on this topic and both women played an important part in the Bill's passage.³⁰

Edith Summerskill was another active female Labour MP who was active in the equal pay debate of the 1950s and in the debate on Joan Vickers' Maintenance Orders Bill in 1957. Summerskill, in her speech on the Maintenance Orders Bill, recognised that it took great courage on Vickers' part to introduce the Bill in the first place and that she, too, believed strongly that men who deserted their wives and children should be held accountable for their responsibilities. Although this Bill was not passed, the way in which Summerskill demonstrated her knowledge of the subject and how eagerly she stood up to those opposing the measure speaks of her genuine interest in the issue and appreciation for the difficulties faced when proposing such a Bill.³¹ In addition to this, Summerskill's actions are another example of women standing up for issues in which they believe, despite opposition from both sides of the House, and they also serve as an example of women from both parties working together.

Throughout her career, she had been consistently active in issues relating to equality within marriages. Her introduction of the Women's Disabilities Bill in 1952 was of great importance. Through her work at the MWA, she became aware of the increasing instances of women being unable to provide for themselves when their marriages ended. She sought to rectify this by introducing a Bill which would ensure that women had some entitlement to

³⁰ *HC Deb* Vol. 856, 8 May 1973 cc. 423-460.

³¹ *HC Deb* Vol. 565, 1 March 1957 cc. 1539-1610.

marital property and savings acquired during the time of the marriage, as well as rights to maintenance if her marriage were to end. She met a great deal of opposition to this as there were many MPs afraid of what the ramifications of giving women increased rights within the home would do. While this Bill was unsuccessful, many of its aims were met through legislation previously discussed in this study. She piloted the Matrimonial Homes Bill through the Lords in 1963, another piece of legislation, which while not focused upon in this study, is of importance for the rights to marital property it aimed to provide to married women.³² Between her work in Parliament and her activities in outside organisations, Summerskill's contributions to these women's issues are a demonstration of the genuine desire to see changes to the legislation. Therefore, her participation both inside and outside of parliament is notable.

For many of these women, their participation continued after their time in the Commons had ended. For instance, Summerskill's participation in debates on women's rights issues increased once she had left the Commons. Once in the Lords, she remained actively involved in the equal pay debate as well as debates on other issues such as those regarding access to contraception and one-parent families.³³ This is also the case for many other Labour women, as was their continued work with Conservative women on many issues. The continued participation and cooperation of these women indicates dedication to the causes as well as prolonged

³² E. Summerskill, *A Woman's World: Her Memoirs*, (London 1963) pp. 145-153 and 243.

³³ *HL Deb* Vol. 244, 28 November 1962 cc. 1203-1207 and *HL Deb* Vol. 379, 19 January 1977 cc. 101-105.

working relationships, and a respect for each other, which has also been evidenced in their behaviour within the Commons.³⁴

With regard to abortion reform, Renee Short was the most active female Labour MP during the debates on the Steel Bill. In the debates, Short went head to head with Jill Knight, challenging her by quoting Knight's election speeches and pointing out discrepancies between those and her speeches in the Commons. Short's support for the Bill was based upon the idea of abortion being allowed in cases of incest, rape and pregnancy in school-age girls.³⁵ Her interest in this topic was not limited to the 1966 Bill and she remained active throughout the 1970s when there were several amendments introduced. This is the one clear example of proposed Bills which saw women of the two parties go head to head in debates. Her staunch support of the Bill was in stark contrast to Knight's opposition. While Short and Knight were on opposite sides, the Conservative women who participated in this debate were also on opposite sides, but Short and Vickers were both in favour of reform. This indicates that there was an amount of cooperation, although the bond was not as strong as it had been for debates on previously discussed issues.

The relationships which women of both parties had with their male colleagues are also of interest, as it is clear that there were some significant similarities. Men on both sides of the Commons were reluctant to appoint women to high positions and, until the late 1950s, ministerial positions which were not directly related to

³⁴ Mann, *Woman in Parliament*, p. 25-26.

³⁵ *HC Deb* Vol. 732, 22 July 1966 cc. 1106 and 1158-1162.

women's issues. This is evidenced by the small number of Labour women in Cabinet positions in the mid-twentieth century. Harold Wilson appointed three women to his Cabinets, Barbara Castle, Judith Hart and Shirley Summerskill, whereas Attlee only appointed one, Ellen Wilkinson. These appointments are indicative of the fact that, as Francis states, 'women were clearly marginalised from the centres of power in the party...', a situation which is another parallel that can be drawn between the Labour and Conservative Parties at the time.³⁶

It was more common for men to befriend women, but these relationships often did not have a great effect on their professional lives. There were instances, of course, where the relationships developed were only done so on a professional level and the impact of these is important in discussing women's position within the party. This discussion will allow for a comparison between the two parties which serves to give a better idea of the atmosphere in the Commons as a whole in the mid-twentieth century. Shirley Williams recognises the importance of the relationship formed between the women of the two parties, noting that 'There was a certain camaraderie among the women MPs, which even extended beyond party. We wanted to see one another do well.'³⁷ Despite what Eleanor Rathbone has said, therefore, female MPs felt a certain amount of appreciation for each other – if only because many women realised that they were in similar situations.

³⁶ Francis, 'Labour and gender', p. 198.

³⁷ Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves*, p. 148.

Williams also notes that that she was friends with many of her male colleagues, largely because they met each other early on, either at university or through the Fabian Society, and entered the Commons at the same time. The importance of the relationships she formed with these men, among whom she included Roy Hattersley (Birmingham Sparkbrook) and Bill Rodgers (Stockton-on-Tees), helped her as ‘...I was one of a close and mutually supportive cohort, and that went a long way to compensate for the loneliness of being a woman in a world of men.’ Despite this, however, she does recognise that she was still considered an ‘outsider’ because of her sex.³⁸ This does further make the point that women, even those who had befriended their male colleagues, were not immune to the pressures put on them and the isolation felt because of their sex which makes the relationships women had with each other even more important.

Jean Mann aptly states, ‘Like most women in public life I owe all the positions I occupied to men.’ This is an indication that not only were women largely dependent upon their male colleagues for comradeship once in the Commons, as discussed by Williams, but also that it was necessary to have reliable male connections prior to entering Parliament. Mann discusses fondly her early days with the ILP, going into detail about how men were her main supporters and there were many women who opposed the idea of women going out and speaking publicly on behalf of the party.³⁹

³⁸ Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves*, pp. 148-149.

³⁹ Mann, *Woman in Parliament*, p. 117.

The distinction in the reception she received from members of the different sexes is interesting, but serves mainly as an indicator of the troubles which many women encountered on their way to Parliament. Mann's experience, although by no means unique, demonstrates that even in the early twentieth century (she first ran for Parliament in 1931), there was a great amount of discrimination by women, which seemed to change over time almost in sync with the men's growing appreciation for women in Parliamentary seats.

This is not to say all men were in favour of women's presence in the Commons, nor were all women against women holding seats, but there was a notable number of both male supporters and female antagonists which makes this a point worth noting.

Barbara Castle speaks most fondly of her relationship with Harold Wilson, whom she met in 1947 when she became his Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Board of Trade. Their relationship was 'affectionate', but strictly platonic and it is clear that she revered his political prowess as well as many aspects of his personality. In addition to being a friend to her, she describes him as 'an instinctive feminist: the first Prime Minister to have two women in his Cabinet...he never regarded women as rivals, but rejoiced in their success and was always trying to promote them to new opportunities. Such men are rare.'⁴⁰ Not only did she regard him highly as a professional, but she also respected the way in which he treated women in politics.

Within the Labour Party, as it was within the Conservative Party, family was also important, as was evidenced in the relationship of

⁴⁰ B. Castle, *Fighting all the Way* (London 1993), pp. 162-164.

Jennie Lee and Aneurin Bevan. Both were MPs for the Labour Party in the mid-twentieth century, both were from mining backgrounds and neither showed a great interest in the issues included in this study except for equal pay. Their backgrounds and political interests aside, however, their relationship was notable because they were married and both held seats in the Commons between the years 1945 and 1960. Having entered politics before she met Bevan, Lee is one of many women in the Labour Party, who, in contrast to some of her Conservative counterparts, entered politics with no prodding or inspiration from a husband. From an early age, however, she was exposed to politics as her father was active in the ILP.⁴¹ That she met Bevan while in the Commons and their relationship developed from there indicates that there was room for both of them to have careers and a home life, although they never had children. Concern for the home life of women politicians was one of the potential problems raised during the candidate selection process, as previously discussed.

In contrast to Lee's relationship with Bevan is the relationship Bevan had with Bessie Braddock. Both were active in the Labour Party in the 1950s, a time of great change in the party, and never saw eye to eye. Braddock saw him as someone who 'made it fashionable to be a dissident' and someone who caused great disruption within the Labour Party.⁴² She also believed that he and his followers were '...reactionary Right Wing...'⁴³ It is clear to see that they, while members of the same party, clearly held differing

⁴¹ J. Lee, *This Great Journey* (London 1963), pp. 44-52.

⁴² J. and B. Braddock, *The Braddocks* (London 1963), p. 203.

⁴³ M. Toole, *Bessie Braddock, MP* (London 1957), p. 181.

views of what the Labour Party's ideologies should have been. This relationship, while one wrought with tension, is important to note. Given Braddock's popularity, but also the fact that there were many people who did not care for her, her views or her approach to politics, her career is notable. That she did not have the support of one of the important members of the Labour Party indicates that relationships with men were not always necessary in order to further women's careers. However, as she was not a participant during the debates on women's issues, this could be a sign that for those women who did not take up such issues, their relationships with male colleagues were less important as they were less likely to be branded as having feminist leanings.

Braddock's opinion of Bevan was not helped when, in 1948 at a conference of Labour women, Bevan was asked about representation on hospital committees, a pressing issue as this meeting was held during the time when Parliament was ironing out the details of the introduction of the NHS. His response was 'I am not going to be dictated by a lot of frustrated females.'⁴⁴ Braddock was incensed that he would reply this way to a question which she deemed to be of high importance. This indicates that Bevan's acceptance of women in the political sphere often depended on them agreeing with him on most issues and did not pose too big a challenge.

Through their relationships with each other, the men in their party and various Conservatives, it is clear that Labour women were able to have an impact on women's issues during the mid-twentieth

⁴⁴ J. Braddock, *The Braddocks*, p. 212.

century. Their impact can be deemed greater than that of Conservative women in some instances, as they introduced a greater number of Bills than did the Conservatives and their party was drawn into the second wave of feminism more than the Conservative Party. However, time spent in Parliament debating and participation in organisations outside of Parliament indicates that there were many similarities between the women of the parties at this time, showing that despite their smaller numbers, the Conservatives were able to have as great an impact (greater in some cases) as their more numerous Labour colleagues.

8 - CONCLUSION

Looked at singly, most of the legislation discussed in this thesis was not of great significance with regard to promoting equality between the sexes. However, when considered together, the Bills and amendments passed form an important part of the body of legislation that has been generated in the past 60 years and has increased women's rights in all aspects of life. As has been demonstrated in this study, a significant proportion of the success of these Bills can be attributed to the work of a number of Conservative female MPs. Their success would not have been possible without the support of colleagues, from both the Conservative and Labour Parties, as has also been discussed.

The notability of Conservative women's participation both within and outside of Parliament on these issues, however, does not lie solely in the fact that increasing numbers of women were becoming involved in the party and related activities. The main reason that this increase is notable is due to the issues for which women were increasing their activity. In addition to this, that women's issues were being given more attention is an indication of the changing roles of women within society during the time in question.

Since Lady Astor took her seat in the Commons in 1919, the number and importance of roles which women have taken on within the Conservative Party have changed significantly. These new roles, which were within the constituencies and, most significantly, the Parliamentary Party, can be attributed to various factors. The most important is that society was changing greatly in the mid-twentieth century, allowing for women to step out of traditional

roles and take on more varied and visible roles in the workplace and society. Without such societal changes, regardless of the women who were elected in this time period, the chances of a woman being put in the Cabinet, much less elected as Party Leader, would have been minimal. Therefore, through the work of women's rights movements and the increasing desire felt by women to take on more varied roles, women in politics were helped along greatly.

The second most important reason for these changes is the women themselves. Their experience working in the constituencies and other political organisations outside of Parliament, as well as the lessons learned from their predecessors, educated them as women had not previously been. The understanding gained by these women was acquired from a variety of sources including the work carried out by the suffragettes in the early twentieth century, the formation of new and proactive women's organisations (i.e. the WSPU in 1903) and the experiences of their Parliamentary predecessors. They were therefore able to use these experiences, as well as their own, to further their careers. This is closely linked with the first issue, but without the initiative being taken by the women to demonstrate their skills and abilities there would likely have been far fewer women in high posts.

These were changes that were clear even from the mid-1940s, when women were taking places in the workforce that had previously been reserved for men. Due to being forced into the workplace, women were proving to society once again, as they had done previously during the First World War, that they were as capable as men. Some of these changes were resisted when the

War ended, as many men, home from the front, needed to return to their jobs. Overall though, there was an increased awareness of women's capabilities in the workplace. Nevertheless, lessons learned from wartime changes contributed to the renewed interest of MPs in instituting equal pay.

Given that women were in similar situations in both 1918 and 1945, there were a remarkable number of differences which made changes, such as the advent of equal pay, possible. Such changes were facilitated by changing social attitudes. Although the political climate of 1945 was different from that of 1918, this is an ancillary factor. Since gaining the vote, women were becoming increasingly aware of the disparities between their rights and those of men. In addition to this, they realised the benefits that working could bring to themselves and their families, which encouraged them to pursue careers outside of the home. Therefore, while women had been forced into the workplace during both wars, it was only after World War II that the climate was right for them to pursue increased equality in the workplace. This desire which was, according to Tilly and Scott, largely due to the advantages an additional salary would afford their families.¹ However, the increased independence and awareness of societal disparities which women acquired through work outside of the home encouraged them to seek out further rights, including those relating to guardianship and marriage.

Throughout, this study has assessed the impact that women had while active both inside and outside of Parliament. It was not

¹ L. Tilly and J. Wallach Scott, *Women, work, and family* (London 1987), pp. 216-224.

necessarily participation in Parliament which indicated a high level of interest. There were many instances where women's work conducted outside of Parliament proved to be more important, at least in terms of informing their colleagues and the public about the key points associated with these issues, than did their participation in debates. However, in this thesis the issues chosen are ones that were debated in Parliament and attracted a high level of women's interest in them. The women discussed are all MPs, so the Commons was the most important forum for expressing their views and ensuring that changes were made to the legislation.

The importance of the Conservative Party as a whole within the equal rights campaign during the mid-twentieth century can be considered minimal. That is not to say that women's roles within the party had not changed. As has been shown, women were increasingly given more important positions within the party and Cabinet. These are substantial changes, and demonstrate that women in the Commons were increasingly gaining importance within their parties and were receiving recognition in new areas. Margaret Thatcher provides the best example of this within the Conservative Party, as upon her election as Party Leader, she demonstrated her political abilities as no woman had previously.

Although whole-party influence on the legislation discussed was minimal, the steps that the Conservative Party did take enabled women to secure more rights than they had previously. It was through policy statements and publications that the party's influence was the strongest. It has been noted, however, that the majority of women's rights legislation passed during the mid-

twentieth century was introduced as Private Members' Bills, which once again reiterates the importance of the MPs themselves. The women involved in the issues which have been discussed here showed an interest that went beyond party policy and was of a more personal nature. Their genuine care for these issues encouraged them to partake as fully as possible in order to ensure that necessary changes were made.

At the beginning of this study, it was noted that the women to be discussed were not feminists in the sense in which the term developed in the mid-twentieth century. This statement remains true even though it has been shown that many female Conservative MPs agreed with many ideas which have been attributed to the feminist movement. The way in which they approached the issues, through legislative and collaborative means, instead of more radical routes, differentiated their work from that of many feminist groups. In addition to this, the mentality held by many of these women, that equality was impossible without the help of their male colleagues, as well as the fact that equality between the sexes and nothing more, was their goal, also separates their actions and beliefs from those of many sections of the feminist movement. These beliefs include those mentioned in the first chapter that some feminist movements sought to alter society to suit women's needs and others whose goal it was to '...remove discrimination against women and to break down male domination of society.'²

² D. Dahlerup, *The New Women's Movement, Feminism and Political Power In Europe and the USA* (Virginia 1986), p. 6.

The issues which Conservative women took up were approached with great interest and concern, as has also been discussed. Despite their apparent dedication, it has been widely documented that women in the Commons between 1950 and 1979 were not often outspoken during debates on most issues. Various newspaper articles written during this time discuss women's lack of participation in Parliamentary debates, in which some MPs openly questioned women's role within the Commons. The reasons for women's lack of participation are numerous, stemming from an inability to get the Speaker's attention to the particular topic being debated not being one with which they were particularly concerned.

In an interview with the *Evening News* in 1957, Evelyn Emmet stated: 'I'm beginning to wonder whether a woman is really better off when she has a hard objective. Is she more active, vital and interesting when she's trying to right what she considers a wrong?' The context of the rest of the article from which this quote was taken is largely about the potential reasons for the inactivity of women in the Commons, and thus it can be seen that that Emmet was drawing attention to the fact that women needed to feel a sense of purpose in order to participate in the Commons. She also mentioned that she felt that there had not been enough encouragement for women to participate in issues which did not necessarily garner their interest.³

This statement, therefore, sums up the reasons behind women's increased participation in debates which was seen while the Bills

³ Evelyn Emmet interview with Mary West, *Evening News*, 3 January 1957, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS.Eng.c.5726.

discussed here were in Parliament. Thus, the fact that some female MPs were more outspoken during the debates on women's issues indicates that many women had personal interest in these issues and therefore were keen to make an impact. It was this feeling of purpose which encouraged many of the women discussed to partake in debates and other activities related to the causes that interested them.

Women's level of participation on debates pertaining to these issues increased, and in turn, so did their level of impact upon them. However, beyond these issues, women's level of participation remained largely the same. While, again, each woman had her particular issues of interest, there was not a great increase in the contributions made by Conservative women in debates. In the late 1970s most women were still known more for their minimal participation in the Commons than for their contributions. The increased participation of women during the debates on these issues is notable, but their continued interest and pursuance of workplace equality beyond this time is as well. Peggy Fenner, for instance, spoke up during a debate on women's rights in the Commons in 1981 stating that the goal had not yet been met and she was anxious to see equality reached in all parts of women's lives.⁴

While just one example, there are several others which demonstrate that the pursuit of equality in the workplace by female Conservative MPs was not simply a passing interest. Overall, it has been shown that for each particular issue there were different

⁴ *HC Deb Sixth Series*, 11 June 1981, Vol. 6 cc. 616-617.

women who actively participated in Parliamentary debates and extra-parliamentary activities. Their objectives, whether to prevent new legislation or amendments, or help it along, as has been demonstrated here, were often achieved.

In addition to a pursuance of workplace equality, the insistence that mothers be given increased rights was also prevalent. Various women participated in the debates on family issues, building upon their own experiences either in work or their personal lives in order to ensure that injustices were made right. Again, Emmet's statement rings true. It was these experiences which sparked their interest enough to partake in the debates on these issues. Even when Bills they proposed were defeated, the women themselves were not. This shows that it was not simply due to pressure from lobbyists or colleagues, but their own desire to see changes implemented that spurred them on.

There were issues on which female Conservative MPs held differing views. However, in most cases, these differences were not that extreme, for when the arguments are looked at in their most basic sense, their intentions were the same. This is especially true with regard to the abortion issue. Although some MPs were against increased access to abortion for all women, they were not opposed to making the operation safer and making abortions more readily available for women who did fit certain criteria. For those who were in favour of increased access to abortion, they were not in favour of on-demand services, and also felt that women seeking abortions had to meet certain criteria. As was the case with all women's issues on which Conservative women disagreed, none of

the women were in favour of decreasing, or often simply maintaining, women's position in society. Equality was the overarching goal, but MPs had differing views on how to achieve this aim.

The fact that many Conservative women spoke up on a controversial issue such as abortion, including speaking in favour of the proposed amendments to the 1967 Act, is another indication of changes within society spurring on changes in politics. Being the traditionalist party that it was, the Conservative Party was not known for being in favour of increasing access to abortion. However, while the party itself did not make any statements either way, that there were MPs who did gives an indication that the party was changing. The slight changes in the party occurring at this time, including the election of more liberal-minded representatives, shows that some of the traditional values were being shed, or more aptly, altered, in favour of more practical and contemporary ones.

It has been shown that without men's influence, women would not have been able to reach the political status that they did. Conversely it was often their male colleagues who were holding them back from advancing further in the party. This is also evidenced throughout the debates on the amendments and new Bills. Women's relationships with their male colleagues appear to never have diminished in value, if anything, they grew in importance between 1950 and 1979. As the political activities of women have increased, women have relied on men for guidance, friendship and most importantly professional support. Without the men in their lives, both within and outside of the party,

Conservative women would not have known the successes that they did with regard to these, or any other pieces of legislation. Thus, this is one aspect of the Conservative Party which did not change significantly during the time in question.

Some women disregarded advice given to them by their male colleagues regarding women's role in the Commons and participated regularly in all debates in which they held an interest, but there were others who were noted more for not speaking up than for their contributions, as previously discussed.⁵ With regard to the women's issues discussed in this study, one key reason which has been briefly explored is the fact that interest in women's issues could potentially be detrimental to their careers, especially if they wished to move upward through the party ranks. However, too much interest in other, non-women's issues led to women being described as unfeminine, another potentially severe detriment to their careers.

This paradox is an important point to consider when discussing the careers of women MPs in the mid-twentieth century. Many female MPs experienced long and varied careers, none of which were hindered by their participation in activities relating to women's issues. This is an indication that mentalities within the party were changing and that these women were able to demonstrate that they were capable legislators. Not only were women able to pursue issues deemed controversial by several party members and often shunned by their more conservative-minded colleagues, but many of them held ministerial positions.

⁵ Various newspaper articles, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS.Eng.c.5726.

This is not to say that the success of these women was due only to their activities which focused on women's issues, but these were issues in which several women of the Conservative Party were especially active. They were working toward goals which were important to them as women, and they were also working together on these. The cooperation between women on these topics was not only evident within the Commons, but also in their work in such organisations as the WNAC. The work on women's issues carried out by the individuals as well as various organisations proved to be a uniting factor which enabled women to work together to meet goals. This collaboration also served to raise women's profiles within the wider party organisation. However, despite the work that they did on these issues, there was still discontent felt by some other MPs with regard to the work carried out by female MPs.

The main argument put forward by such dissenters was that women MPs were not doing enough for professional women, and had wrongly focused most of their energies on the housewife. Simply by looking at the impact they had on the equal pay debate alone, this can easily be disputed. In addition to this, there were also several instances when various female MPs recognised that the party could not afford to alienate housewives and thus a balance needed to be struck between their desire to recruit working women voters and retain the large population of housewives who had long been supporters.⁶ This balance was maintained through female MPs' work with housewives' groups and in taking on such issues as guardianship and property rights for women.

⁶ Notes on a Discussion at the Meeting of the Women's National Advisory Committee, 12 July 1951, Oxford, Bodleian Library, CPA CCO 4/4/328.

In addition to this, several Conservative women showed interest in welfare issues at this time as well. Although not a topic of focus for this thesis, Conservative women's interest in issues regarding welfare and housing were further demonstrations of not only their desire to see enhanced equality between the sexes, but also of their recognition of the importance of the housewife, not just to the party, but to society.⁷ Therefore, although not discussed previously, given the chronological overlap of the issues examined, as well as the variation in activists for each issue, it is clear that Conservative women were not neglecting either the working woman or the housewife.

It has also been demonstrated that female Labour MPs' input was important in the passage of many of the pieces of legislation discussed here. The similarities between the two parties have become more apparent. Although the women from opposing sides of the Commons often held very different ideologies, there were many instances during which Conservative women found themselves on the same side of the debate as Labour women MPs when it came to women's issues. The cooperation which occurred because of this proved to be important, not only in terms of the legislation, but also for morale. Working together on these issues often gave women respect and sometimes admiration for their counterparts from the opposition, creating a bond that went beyond gender and improved relations between them.

⁷ The WNAC and Status of Women Committee both issued statements, when chaired by female MPs, declaring the party's need to re-emphasise the role of the housewife as an integral part of not only the family, but society, see Oxford, Bodleian Library CPA CCO 4/6/409 and CCO 500/24/299.

The similarities between the women of the two parties do not end with their largely similar views on women's issues, however. Women from both parties, upon being returned to the House, were entering a male-dominated arena. This encouraged them to bond and made them able to relate to each other as they could not to their male colleagues. Therefore, although they held different political views on many issues, they found common ground in their sex, and thus as a minority in the Commons.

Labour women tended to participate more frequently than did their Conservative counterparts in Commons debates. However, part of this is due to numbers, as there were larger numbers of female Labour MPs in the Commons in the mid-twentieth century. There were women on both sides of the House who were known more than others for their participation in debates. It is clear, through reading *Hansard*, that party affiliation had very little to do with the amount of participation, which indicates that individual personalities and interest were the main reasons for certain women's participation.

When comparing the relationships between women from both parties with their male colleagues, there are again few differences. Women from both sides were not always openly welcomed by all of the men in the House, but were able to gain support from these colleagues. Again, this shows that the women themselves were not that different. Some relationships varied depending upon the level within their party that women reached, but for the most part, friendships between male and female MPs remained regardless of party affiliation or office held.

The focus on the women who contributed the most to the debates is not intended to indicate that those whose participation was not as frequent were not important as well. Figures such as Mervyn Pike, Sally Oppenheim and Elaine Kellet-Bowman also worked toward improving women's situation in their own ways. However, their participation in Parliamentary debates was not as frequent or as lengthy as was those of the women who have been mentioned consistently throughout this study. It has been noted throughout that the issues discussed here did not garner the interest of all women MPs, at least not to the same extent.

This addresses an interesting point. It was believed, as was mentioned in the introduction, that many men believed that women's role in Parliament was only to discuss issues which related solely to women. Instead of focusing on women's issues, the three women mentioned above, as did many of their colleagues, expended most of their time and energy on issues not directly affecting women, disproving this point. This is not to say that they were the first women MPs to disprove this, but it is an explanation for the lack of discussion about their participation in debates on the issues examined in this study.

Through the consideration of the issues discussed, the participation of women, influence of men as well as a brief look at female Labour MPs' impact on these issues, a final assessment can be made. By taking all of these factors into consideration, it is clear that the impact Conservative female MPs had on the various pieces of legislation discussed in this study was of importance. This is not to say that without them, changes would not have occurred, but they

did ensure that changes in legislation occurred relatively quickly and were as comprehensive as possible. In addition to this, female MPs' dedication and hard work gave women more prominence within the party organisation.

The changes in some legislation that occurred during the 29 years in question were largely due to two factors: female MPs and society. The impact of the first is inextricably linked with the second, as it is clear that had society not been changing to accept women's emerging roles outside of the home, the equality movement would have taken a different shape and likely have been oppressed. Thus the female Conservative MPs were reacting to what was happening around them. Many of them did hold equality-based ideologies, but without the impact of changing social attitudes these perhaps would have not been as easy to pursue.

With regard to changes within the Conservative Party which took place during this time, a similar conclusion can be drawn. The dynamic of the party meant that changes were necessary in order for the party to meet the needs of the changing society. Although traditional ideals were, and still are, largely adhered to, there were necessary alterations in ideology which took place at this time. Much of this had to do with the changing role of women within society, which in turn affected women's roles in the party. Regardless of the fact that women were still marginalized within politics to an extent at the end of the 1970s, they had made great strides since women were first welcomed as Parliamentary candidates into the Conservative Party, which makes them an important part of an evolution which has not yet ended.

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