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### Change is Constant: Women, Leadership and Margaret Thatcher



LECTURE RECALLED: *The women's movement of the 1980s tended to see Margaret Thatcher as a hate figure rather than a paradigm of female leadership virtue. But latterly attitudes began to change — "Even committed Thatcher haters are feeling a sneaking admiration for the former prime minister after watching Meryl Streep in The Iron Lady" wrote India Knight, The Sunday Times, November 2011, "...what if Margaret Thatcher was really impressive all along?"*

*During a busy July in 1982, the then Prime Minister, took time out to deliver a lecture titled 'Women in a Changing World' to commemorate the ninety-nine year life of former suffragette and educational reformer Dame Margery Corbett-Ashby. Here is a short extract:*

"The life and work of Dame Margery spanned almost a century, from her birth in 1882 to her death last year. And rarely, I think, has a century so exemplified Disraeli's maxim that 'in a progressive country change is constant'. Dame Margery who was instrumental in bringing about so much change, was herself born into a world of change..

... the educational change, the social change, the political change, the legal change, the scientific change. And really change is an essential characteristic of the human condition. But history is shaped by the way in which men and women respond to that change. They may resist it absolutely, so that all its opportunities are wasted, like the religious sect who will not use buttons because they regard them as a product of a decadent modern civilization. Or they may accept change so wholeheartedly that novelty becomes a virtue in itself and all the lessons of history and experience are just dismissed. This attitude has caused much political upheaval, as whole regimes and civilizations have sometimes been swept away in the name of change which is assumed to be beneficent just because it is change.

Then there is another response, that is one which welcomes and uses change, but refuses to be ruled by it, testing each new development against the eternal verities.

I believe that this last was the attitude of Dame Margery in her great contributions to the century of change through which she lived, in her services to women and society, in Britain and throughout the world...

Her first concern was that women should have the same political rights as men. With that end in view she became Secretary of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies as far back as 1907 working tirelessly until full adult female suffrage was achieved in 1928. Some of you will recall that women first got the vote in 1918, but only women who were aged over thirty. I think it's the only time in legislation when the year 30 has been of legal significance in a woman's life. And then in 1928 on the same terms as men.

The task was not made easier—the task of women's suffrage when Dame Margery took it up—wasn't made easier by the fact that the leader of her chosen party, Mr. Asquith, was resolutely opposed to votes for women. He followed the tradition of Mr. Gladstone, who in 1884 and then Prime Minister, had spoken against women's suffrage. He—and I quote —'feared that voting would trespass upon their delicacy, their purity, their refinement, the elevation of their whole nature'."

*Margaret Thatcher herself had no such fears—in fact it was politics that was the 'elevation of her whole nature'. In the prologue to her recent book 'The Real Iron Lady' Gillian Shephard quotes a reporter at the Eastern Daily Press 1974 who was so impressed "by her mastery of facts and femininity" and by "...her professionalism, attention to detail, immaculate appearance, regard for parliamentary conventions and, seemingly indefatigable energy."*

*At a time when women are still poorly represented in governments and on the boards of most global corporations, and when flat-lining economies cry out for change and innovation, it is good to remember the achievements of a female leader who performed at the very*

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highest level and to whom constant change was an elixir.

Photo: Prime Minister Margaret Thather delivering her famous Bruges speech, 1988

### Further Information

Read the full lecture 'Women in a Changing World'



[The Real Iron Lady](#)  
Gillian Shephard  
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