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Chapter Fifteen

Women political leaders are all feminists, aren't they?

Theresa May and Feminism

Rebecca J. Wray

Introduction

There is a tendency among the media to automatically equate women leaders with gender issues and feminism, regardless of their political ideologies and policies. Upon winning the 2016 Conservative Leadership election, Theresa May became the latest woman in a position of power to have the feminist label uncritically applied to her. There is currently a lack of academic literature dissecting Theresa May's politics specifically in relation to feminism. Instead, discourse regarding May's relationship with feminism is dominated by journalists, activists, and campaigners. Indeed, feminist academia responses to the question of May's feminism have been minimal, dismissive, and even derisive. For example, when Theresa May became the first British Prime Minister to self-identify as a feminist, even adorning the Fawcett Society's 'This is what a feminist looks like' t-shirt in public in 2006, Bryson (2021) expressed dismay at how the media framed May as a 'feminist success story', as well as anger at the appropriation of the feminist label by Theresa May, given how much harm her party's policies have done to women. In response to the Daily Telegraph in 2016 asking whether Theresa May was Britain's most feminist Prime Minister ever, Tirohl (2017a, 2017b) expressed frustration with how May is solely compared with Margaret Thatcher and no other previous Prime Minister, completely overlooking the possibility that a male Prime Minister could be a feminist. Such anger and frustration is understandable. Indeed, it would be interesting to see in the future whether writers reflecting on former Prime Ministers such as Boris Johnson would raise the question as to whether he is a feminist or not. This chapter focuses on exploring not only Theresa May's views and discourse on feminism, but also her voting record and policy, as well as highlighting examples of how the media portrays Theresa May.

Unequal reporting on women leaders

In discussing her feminism during interviews, May has stated that she never allowed being a woman to be an excuse or barrier to her success, and argues that her achievements are based on personal merit, rather than because of, or despite being a woman. May expresses frustration at the media's fixation on her fashion choices (specifically shoes) and their insistence on defining her by her sex. May is also frustrated by the media's negative focus in relation to reporting on women in politics, a focus on 'lack', rather than on success. May argues that if there was more focus on reporting success it would encourage more women to start a career in politics (May, 2009, Jun 17). Perkins (2010) commented on the issue by suggesting that once the Conservatives came into power in 2010, the press would be condescending toward Theresa May, portraying her as 'totty' being set up to 'fail'. This prediction was later echoed by classicist Mary Beard (2017) who contemplated that future reflections on May's premiership would view her as "a woman who was put into – and kept in – power in order to fail" (pp. 81-82).

Inevitably, May's ascendancy to Prime Minister in 2016 seemed to result in an increase (rather than decrease) in the press fixating their reports on what May is wearing rather than on her policies. For example, Kandola (2017, Aug. 14) claims that the Daily Mail's headline "Nevermind Brexit, who won Legs-it!" accompanied by a front page photograph of Theresa May and Nicola Sturgeon sat next to each other dressed in skirts is a case study in modern sexism. Critics of the Daily Mail's headline argue that rather than focusing on what these women politicians did and said, instead the journalist chose to focus on the politicians' bodies, clothing, and apparent 'cat fight' (Kandola, 2017, Aug, 14; Crockett, 2017). Shaffi (2019) points out that such sexist media coverage serves to trivialise women politicians and similar reporting was not applied to David Cameron during his time as PM. Crockett (2017) argues that both May and Sturgeon deserve to be taken seriously as politicians, but instead are reduced down to body parts, thereby demonstrating that not even being in a position of power can protect women from sexism. Focusing on women politician's appearance even if the attention is positive is arguably a form of silencing, as it is deflecting attention away from what politicians like May are saying (Walsh, 2015). Walsh also argues concentrating on women politician's appearance serves to create a 'synthetic identity' for these women, which in turn makes it more difficult for them to be taken seriously as politicians.

Some media reactions to Theresa May's ascendancy to Prime Minister were more positive. For example, Crosbie (2018, Feb. 6) proposed that the UK being led by a female PM in the centenary year of women's suffrage demonstrated how far UK society has progressed in

regards to gender equality. In contrast, political scientist Victoria Honeyman (cited in Bond, 2016, Jul. 17) contends that while the UK having a second woman PM is a step in the right direction, gender equality issues are not going to suddenly change because a woman is leading the country. This position is supported by political scientist Rosie Campbell (Tarabay, 2016, Jul. 13) who argues that there are still gender constraints on political careers in the UK, with women in senior cabinet positions still being a rarity. Boyd (2016, Jul. 5) was critical of claims of the rise of a 'femocracy' (a feminist revolution), contesting that a feminist identity cannot be claimed by someone who does not defend basic sexual and reproductive rights. Stamp (2016, Jul. 25) describes how May was an early advocate for modernisation of the Conservative Party during their opposition years, but that despite May having liberal instincts in some areas, in others she can be more socially conservative. In an interview with Elliott (2012, Jan. 24) May talked about how she felt pressure to prove women could succeed in senior positions in politics.

When Theresa May became PM in 2016, not only did the media automatically apply the feminist label to May, but the media also tended to compare her with Margaret Thatcher for no good reason other than their shared gender, and as questioned by Tarabay (2016, Jul. 13), why not compare May with a male former PM instead? Tarabay also pointed out that May herself has never compared herself to Thatcher. Historian Julie V. Gottlieb (Gottlieb, 2016, Jul. 19) describes how the media are portraying Theresa May as a direct heir to Margaret Thatcher and commonalities between the two are being drawn upon. One such commonality being drawn is references to Theresa May being "a difficult woman" (Tarabay, 2016, Jul. 13). However, Gottlieb (Bond, 2016, Jul. 17) contends that just because both Theresa May and Margaret Thatcher are women, does not mean they are the same and that it is unhelpful to compare them. Gottlieb argues this is because they are both products of their own time and place in history, and generational differences will arguably have shaped how the two women respond to feminism.

Gottlieb (2016, Jul. 19) argues that attempting to trace May and Thatcher's political ancestry on the mere basis of their common sex is misleading. Campbell (Tarabay, 2016, Jul. 13) also contends that Theresa May is nothing like Margaret Thatcher. For example, May is a feminist and is progressive on some social issues, and unlike Thatcher does not open up her private life to public scrutiny. Further, political scientist Victoria Honeyman (Bond, 2016, Jul. 17) expresses concern regarding the media comparing Theresa May with Margaret Thatcher, pointing out that such comparisons are not made with male politicians. Gottlieb raises an

interesting point that discussions around a particular woman's political ambitions needs to be separated from a discussion of their feminist ambitions and that the two should not be conflated (Bond, 2016, Jul. 17).

From MP to Home Secretary

As a new MP in 1997, Theresa May attended equality meetings, and according to Lagan (2018, Feb. 6), women MPs from New Labour would act 'snooty' towards her, with May frequently being alone at these events. Theresa May was appointed Shadow Minister for Women and Equality in 1999 by William Hague, and occupied the role until 2001. May was re-appointed in the role from 2007-2010 by David Cameron. When the Conservatives came into power as a result of the 2010 General Election, David Cameron appointed Theresa May as Home Secretary and Minister for Women & Equalities, the latter of which May resigned from in 2012. May's ministerial role for Women & Equalities was controversial at the time, with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender [LGBT] groups criticising the appointment, and this controversy will be explored later in this chapter.

During the period in which the Conservative Party were acting as the 'opposition party', May delivered a speech in 2005 asserting that the Conservatives will remain out of power, for as long as they are unwilling to embrace gender equality (Gill, 2019, Jul. 15). By this point in time, New Labour had won its third General Election in a row. In response to this, growing numbers of Conservative women were arguing that the party's neglect of gender issues, as well as its failure to select women candidates for winnable seats is not only wrong in and of itself, but also electorally disastrous for the party (Bryson, 2021; Bryson & Heppell, 2010). In delivering her 'nasty party' speech, May demonstrated herself to be a pragmatic politician, who was not beholden to Thatcherite ideology, but instead understood the need for the party to evolve and move away from previous party ideology and agendas (Williams, 2017). May lobbied then party leader Michael Howard to improve maternity leave in terms of pay and flexibility. May at the time fought both the 'old guard' of the Conservative Party and supposed party modernisers such as David Cameron to take gender issues seriously (Lagan, 2018, Feb. 6; Gill, 2019, Jul. 15). In 2001, May left the Carlton Club (a major Conservative donor) due to women only being allowed to join as associate members, and therefore unable to vote (Lagan, 2018, Feb. 6). It was not until 2008 when the Carlton Club allowed women

full membership, and May eventually accepted an honorary lifetime membership in 2016 (Hope, 2016, Sept. 21).

In 2000, May published a policy document called 'Choices' in which she set out her ideas for an initiative called 'Women in Public Life' which would be aimed at encouraging an increase in women being added to shortlists, as well as offering mentoring schemes. This document was later adapted by May, and in 2005 she co-founded the mentoring and pressure group Women2Win with Baroness Anne Jenkin (Bryson, 2021). Women2Win is credited with increasing the number of women Tory MPs in the early twenty-first century (Lagan, 2018, Feb. 6). Many of the women involved with Women2Win were self-described feminists, and so Women2Win made links with feminist networks, organisations, and experts external to the Conservative Party. This enabled the group to develop ideas and an understanding of what women voters wanted, and the kind of changes the party could make to ensure more women were selected as candidates in winnable seats. Gill (2019, Jul. 15) praised May for acting as a personal mentor to a generation of Conservative women, noting how May made personal efforts to meet women candidates, advising them, giving pep talks, and sending encouraging letters exhorting women to "keep going". The philosophical foundation of Women2Win was that as women are a group that has been disadvantaged and discriminated against, women should therefore work together and support each other in order to bring about change. However, the group's thinking was also underpinned by the notion that if women wanted to be seen as equals, than they must first be seen as individuals who compete based on merit, with no expectation for special treatment or consideration. It is this line of thinking, which led May to oppose all-women shortlists being imposed in constituencies (Bryson, 2021).

In 2007, May launched the 'Women in the World Today' report. The report found the equal pay gap was 17.1% and noted that there was still a long way to go in regards to equality in the UK. May believed the issue of continuing inequality is cultural, rather than legal, and stated that she wanted to inspire cultural change through the encouragement of girls' career choices (May, 2009, Jun. 17). In 2014 May co-hosted the first Girl Summit, speaking out against forced marriage and female genital mutilation [FGM]. This was followed by her appearance in a video called #Freedom2Choose in which she described forced marriage as a "fundamental breach of human rights" (Hope, 2016, Sept. 21; Lagan, 2018, Feb. 6). As Home Secretary, May acted on FGM, and introduced a law against coercive control. May also continued to raise equal pay as an issue, even setting up a Facebook group called 'Theresa May for Equal Pay' (Lagan, 2018, Feb. 6).

Criticism directed at May's appointment as Women & Equalities Minister was based on her prior mixed voting record (1997-2004) in relation to LGBT rights (Pink News, 2010a, May 12). For example, May voted against equalising the age of consent in 1998; spoke in favour of Section 28 in 2001; spoke against greater adoption rights for gay people in 2002; was absent from the vote to repeal Section 28 in 2003; was absent from four votes for the Gender Recognition Act in 2004; voted for civil partnerships in 2004; voted against sexual orientation regulations in 2007; and in 2008 voted for a (defeated) bill that stated IVF treatment should require a male role model (ergo discriminating against lesbian couples) (Pink News, 2010a, May 12). May was also opposed to the Equality Act 2010 expressing fear that it would be too bureaucratic and expensive to implement (BBC News, 2010a, Jul. 17). Gay and lesbian political group OutRage! claimed that based on this voting record, May was wholly unsuited to the role of Women & Equalities Minister, whereas Stonewall stated they were looking forward to working with May and the new Coalition government (Pink News, 2010a, May. 12; Pink News, 2010b, May. 15). Pink News (2010b, May. 15) reported on the development of a Facebook group called 'Sack New Homophobic Equality Minister', which at the time of reporting, had reached over 43,000 members calling for Cameron to withdraw May from the role of Equalities Minister. The Facebook group emphasised that it was not against the Conservative Party, or Theresa May, but rather they were only opposed to Theresa May being placed in the role of Women & Equalities Minister, arguing that she is not qualified for the position and that her appointment is symbolically counter-productive (Straw, 2010, May. 14).

On BBC's *Question Time* (BBC News, 2010b, May. 20), when May was challenged on her LGBT rights voting record she said she no longer opposed the Equality Act 2010 and was now supporting it. May also claimed she had changed her mind about gay couples adopting children, and stated she would vote differently if the same votes were held again. May explained her changed position on how she had been persuaded that it is better for a child to live in a stable and loving family environment (BBC News, 2010b, May. 20). May pledged to look at considerations of asylum decisions taking sexual orientation into account (BBC News, 2010b, May. 20), and also made a commitment in 2010, to giving headteachers support in identifying and dealing with homophobic bullying in schools (Pink News, 2010b, May. 15). At the time, Theresa May made the assertion that equality is not a job for government and politicians alone, but that action also needs to be taken by business leaders, news editors, and figures in sport, arguing that cultural change is needed in order to overcome

homophobia (Geen, 2010, Jun. 18). In 2010, May launched a document setting out the Coalition government's promises on LGBT rights, which included allowing religious civil partnerships, and removing historical convictions for consensual gay sex from criminal records (Geen, 2010, Jun. 18).

In 2012, May supported the introduction of same-sex marriage, and voted in favour of it in 2013. In 2012, May joined the Out4Marriage campaign, and filmed a video for this in which May explains how because she believes that marriage brings stability, it should therefore be available for everyone (Broch, 2012, May. 24). Segalov (2017, Jul. 27) was particularly scathing in their critique, citing an interview Theresa May gave to the University of Leeds student newspaper *The Gryphon* in 2001, in which May claimed that "Most parents want the comfort of knowing Section 28 is there". Segalov contests Theresa May's changing attitude towards LGBT rights and implies the change was only made out of cowardice, as well as due to the needs of political strategy, rather than a genuine change in perspective. Segalov also argues that the Conservative Party has no place in celebrating LGBT victories until they apologise for their past refusal to support basic principles of equality.

Sarah Baker (cited in Prince, 2020, Mar. 9), a former researcher working for Theresa May in the 1990s reflects back on how at the time, May was not particularly interested in women's issues and gender equality. Baker states this changed upon May's appointment as Women & Equalities Minister in 1999. After this May rapidly became absorbed in the subject and began developing detailed policies on shared parental leave, tackling FGM, and concern regarding teenagers' body image difficulties. Baker proposes that May was reclaiming gender policy from New Labour, while working to centralise the equality agenda and make it more palatable for Conservative Party members. Labour MP Harriet Harman contends that May's efforts were part of a cynical bid to improve the Conservative Party's standing among women voters, rather than being driven by anger against women's subjugation as it is for Labour politicians. Further, some argue that May's choice of battles betrays a lack of commitment to tackling the root causes of gender inequality (Prince, 2020, Mar. 9).

May's premiership

In July 2016, Theresa May won the Conservative Party leadership competition and replaced David Cameron as Prime Minister. During her premiership, May wanted the Conservative Party to become the voice of 'ordinary working people' (Wright, 2017, May. 17), with a

mission to 'build a better Britain' (BBC News, 2016a, Jul. 13, n.p.), and claimed hers would be a government which "must make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few but for every single one of us" (quoted in Goodlad, 2018, p. 14). May's 'shared society' agenda launched in early 2017, and comprised: a reduced central state; greater social co-operation; increased mutual responsibilities; and social mobility for all. May advocated social mobility due to perceiving its aspirational potential as serving a wider demographic than social justice which focuses on society's most vulnerable (Williams, 2017). May's 2017 Conservative manifesto was anti-Thatcherite in tone, highlighting injustices in modern Britain between socio-economic classes and condemning: "the cult of selfish individualism" (quoted in Goodlad, 2018, p. 14). Political activist and journalist Beatrix Campbell was particularly critical of May's 'one nation' discourse here, arguing May's rhetoric about a 'better Britain', a 'Britain for all' and 'national unity' really only applies to British people, and not immigrants or refugees. Campbell highlights how as Home Secretary Theresa May was hostile towards immigrants risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean and English Channel, and refused to engage in any kind of European re-settlement strategy (Gottleib and Campbell, 2019).

In response to May's appointment as Prime Minister, Sanghani (2016, Jul. 13) was optimistic about her tenure, believing that it is in this role where May would show "her true colours" (n.p.). In contrast, Boyd (2016, Jul. 5) raised concerns over May's prior record in regards to women's rights including: voting for welfare cuts; voting to reduce the abortion limit from 24 weeks to 20; trying to get abstinence lessons into secondary school's sex education classes; and setting targets for deporting women and their children back to war zones. Speaking on the centenary of women's suffrage, May continued to express interest in encouraging more women into politics, advising women to be themselves, believe in what they are doing, and avoid trying to mould themselves into a masculine stereotype, not feeling like they have to change who they are to meet society's expectations. May asserted that "a woman's place is in elected office" and called on women politicians around the world to work together (Rigby, 2018, Feb. 6; Lagan, 2018, Feb. 6). Rigby (2018) notes that May's encouragement of women entering a career in politics is in stark contrast to Margaret Thatcher who did little to promote women under her leadership claiming none of them were good enough or experienced enough. May also promised to tackle women politicians' experience of online abuse (Crosbie, 2018, Feb. 6).

While as PM, Theresa May may have continued with supporting women politicians (whether to stand for Parliament, or tackling online abuse towards them), May has arguably done little to help women's rights and equalities in other aspects and criticisms have been made. For example, in 2017, May made a deal with the anti-abortion Democratic Union Party in order to form a minority government. Other examples include: little action being made towards parity in pay between the sexes (Gill, 2019, Jul. 15); and speaking out against sexual abuse, while simultaneously restoring the whip to two MPs accused of sex offences (Levin, 2019, Jun. 6). May's government has also been criticised for continuing the legacy of Cameron's 'age of austerity', with financial cuts still being made which had the greatest impact on poor and vulnerable women.

Oppenheim (2019, May. 24) suggests that it is a mistake to make the assumption a woman in power is going to address gender equality and women's rights. Vivienne Hayes, chief executive of Women's Resource Centre (cited in Oppenheim, 2019, May. 24) maintains that during her premiership, May did nothing to reverse sexist austerity policies and that any contribution May did make towards feminist causes is minimal. Hayes believes that in order to drive change towards gender equality, a woman politician is required who has a clear analysis of women's discrimination and oppression as the centre of their worldview, and that feminism needs to be the central driving force for them standing for election in the first place. Dawn Butler, Shadow Women & Equalities Secretary (cited in Oppenheim, 2019, May. 24) decried May's contribution to feminist causes, dismissing her work as 'tinkering around the edges'. Butler highlighted how May's government cut the budget of the Women & Equalities department by over £1 million, with the associated secretarial role being diminished to four part-time positions. Further, that May failed women in Northern Ireland by staying silent on the abortion issue; and failed to address structural inequalities such as maternity discrimination, despite her earlier focus on improving maternity leave entitlements. Butler asserts that as PM, May has not been a very good, or particularly progressive feminist, with little bandwidth given over during her premiership to much of anything outside the Brexit process.

May's legacy

After May resigned her post as PM in 2019, various news outlets reflected on her legacy. Historian Julie V. Gottlieb (Bond, 2016, Jul. 17) argues that politics was becoming more

‘feminised’, with the observation that more women are emerging in right-wing political parties, with women politicians ‘cleaning up’ men’s mess such as May handling the aftermath of the EU referendum when David Cameron resigned as PM. Gottlieb also put forward that people should be questioning why it is the Conservative Party which has produced two female Prime Ministers (and by 2022, a third female PM), in contrast with the Labour Party which has produced none. Labour MP Jess Phillips concurs with this position, asserting this fact shames Labour, and that having a woman in a position of power matters to girls in school (Phillips, 2019, Jul. 15).

One reflection on May’s legacy was that she transformed the Conservative Party’s image from the ‘nasty party’ and helped bring about modernisation within the party (Lagan, 2019, May 24). Perhaps surprisingly, The Guardian praised May as a “true champion of women” (n.p.), pointing out that May never discussed promoting female advancement while also ‘pulling up the ladder’ (Gill, 2019, Jul. 15). Rigby (2018, Feb. 6) lamented that the legacy of May’s premiership would be almost entirely subsumed and perhaps even defined by the all-consuming task of Brexit. Catherine Mayer, co-founder of the Women’s Equality Party maintains that during her premiership Theresa May did little to promote gender equality, suggesting this is a classic example of what is called ‘glass cliff syndrome’ whereby women are promoted during times of crises and maximum risk, and are ultimately set up to fail. Applying this theory to Theresa May’s premiership being subsumed by Brexit, Mayer suggests that it is difficult for a single woman to make any kind of significant change in such a scenario (CNBC, 2019, Mar. 7). The notion that the Brexit process dominated May’s tenure as PM, is attested to by Baker (cited in Prince, 2020, Mar. 9) who believes Brexit was the ‘death knell’ of May’s equality work. Even May’s critics such as Jess Phillips MP (2019, Jul. 15) agreed that Brexit left May with no time or ‘bandwidth’ to lean in on any equality policies made.

Shaffi (2019) argues that the media crowing over Theresa May’s resignation as PM acts as a reminder of how unfairly she was treated as PM, with a permeation of sexist news coverage focusing on May’s clothing and cooking, rather than on her political agenda. Shaffi argues that the media’s sexist treatment of Theresa May has served to obscure the ‘real’ criticisms which should be levelled at her and the impact of her work. Examples of criticisms Shaffi cited include: the long-term detention of women at Yarl’s Wood; the slashing of police budgets, and ‘go home’ anti-immigrant vans during May’s tenure as Home Secretary; as well as May’s refusal to stand up to Donald Trump’s Muslim ban; tackling Islamophobia in the

Conservative Party; and dodging questions on abortion in Northern Ireland during her premiership. The Independent (2019b) similarly countered the more celebratory reflections by stressing that May's sporadic history of small, delicate gestures towards women's rights does not make her a champion of equality. Levin (2019, Jun. 6) described May's feminist policies as being too often additions and afterthoughts, rather than any kind of substantial policy. MP Jess Philips' summation of Theresa May's record on gender equality is more mixed. Philips notes that as Home Secretary May brought in key laws to help women, but as PM, May under-performed. In particular, she criticises May for failing to see how her government's policies were impoverishing and trapping women on Universal Credit; as well as for removing legal aid; making cuts to Local Authorities; and providing a hostile environment to migrant women. Further, Philips argues that while May made many statements about ending sexual harassment, there was little action to back these words up. For example, recommendations made by the Women and Equalities Select Committee and women's rights groups led to little more than reviews and consultations (Phillips, 2019, Jul. 15). May also displayed an inconceivable lack of empathy in response to the 2017 Grenfell catastrophe, in which 72 (at least) of London's poorest residents were killed in a tower block fire. It was only after negative publicity that May met with the survivors (Goodlad, 2017). Ironic, given May's earlier claims that the Conservatives were the 'worker's party' and party 'for the poor' (Williams, 2017).

Spratt (2019, Jul. 24) referred to Theresa May as an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms of her feminism. Spratt postulated that on paper, May was the most feminist PM the UK has had so far, but in real terms did not come close enough, arguing that if someone only cares about certain women then they cannot claim to be a feminist.

Conservative Feminism?

Oxymoron is perhaps an apt description for May's brand of feminism. As Bryson and Heppell observe (2010), conservatism and feminism at first glance can appear to be at odds in terms of ideology. Traditionally, Conservative Party politicians were anti-feminist; the party was frequently criticised by activists; and feminists were unlikely to vote Conservative. Maguire (1998) describes how there is often a tendency to view right-wing political movements as reactionary and obfuscate any of their progressive tendencies. Since his election as party leader in 2005, David Cameron had a modernising agenda for the Conservatives, with

‘feminisation’ of the party being a core plank of this plan. However, despite attempts at creating a more ‘feminist-friendly’ guise, Bryson and Heppell argue that many of the party’s underlying assumptions means the Conservatives are unlikely to pursue key feminist goals (and even values) with consistent success.

As Bryson and Heppell point out identifying Conservative ideology is notoriously difficult due to the party members claiming they are: 1) anti-ideological; 2) that conservatism is instinctive, not theoretical; and 3) a disposition, not a doctrine. Adding another layer of difficulty is feminism is not a unified or cohesive field of thought. Feminism does not consist of a unitary set of shared values and goals. May has used the term ‘conservative feminism’ to describe herself (Bryson & Heppell, 2010). Maguire (1998) describes conservative feminism as being characterised by women who behave in a feminist way, while declaiming the feminist label, and maintaining their ties with traditional family values. This definition does seem to chime with May’s brand of feminism who places value on family, marriage, and has lobbied for better maternity leave. However, there is a lack of clarity and study done on whether Conservative feminism truly constitutes a meaningful strand of feminist thought (Bryson & Heppell, 2010).

Lagan (2018, Feb. 6) queries why Conservative feminists’ achievements are dismissed when they should be celebrated, while Gottlieb (2016, Jul. 19) questions why it so difficult for people to comprehend the concept of Conservative feminism. Indeed, May’s supporters claim that while her feminism is different to Labour’s, it does not mean May was any less committed to gender equality (Prince, 2020, Mar. 9). Levin (2019, Jun. 6) raises the question as to why in the first place a woman Prime Minister is being held to standards rarely met by their male counterparts. Berthezène and Gottlieb (2019) claim that Conservative women’s contributions to feminist campaigns such as women’s suffrage have not been sufficiently recognised, and argue this is because Conservative feminism looks different from feminist campaigning that has its roots in left-wing politics. Berthezène and Gottlieb also suggest that feminist historians are reluctant to research Conservative feminism; though they speculate that the omission of Conservative women from feminist history is less a result of structural concealment than perceptions of Conservative women being mediated through layers of contradictory images (e.g. women in ancillary sandwich-making roles or Margaret Thatcher being made an ‘honorary – bullying – man’).

Lagan (2018) claims that women (including Theresa May) with centre-of-right politics often find themselves labelled as the ‘wrong’ type of feminist, or are told their political views are

incompatible with the main principles of feminism. Similarly, Berthezène and Gottlieb (2019) observe how Conservative feminists tend to be rendered as problematic, due to a general assumption that feminism is allied only to left-wing politics. Lagan (2018) contests this view, arguing that feminism is not a political party issue, nor that being a feminist and being a Conservative are mutually exclusive. Lagan emphasises that no one woman nor one party has the right to claim feminism for themselves, and even less authority to determine who is and is not a feminist. Maguire (1998) claims that conservative feminism was wrongly removed from the feminist lexicon by feminist political theorists, leading to contributions by conservative women to be obscured; while Swift (2019) suggests the concept of Conservative feminism has not penetrated into the public consciousness, and many in politics would decry the term as an oxymoron.

In contrast, critics of May's brand of feminism dismiss it as reducing feminism down to a narrow, tame, and establishment-friendly version. Bryson (2021) contends that while this 'establishment feminism' may indeed endorse (much needed) campaigns against domestic violence, sexual harassment, and online misogyny, while working to promote greater workplace and political equality, it has a tendency to avoid making connections between these issues, and therefore fails to direct resources to their solutions. A particular weakness of establishment (or Conservative feminism) is that it tends to prioritise the needs of society's most privileged women, at the expense of the most vulnerable. Conservative feminism is also oversimplistic in terms of how gender equality is conceptualised, with any broader context being overlooked. All of this means, that Conservative feminism cannot act as a route to meaningful change (Bryson, 2021). Bryson and Heppell (2010) argue that it is difficult to see how conservative feminism could ever deliver beyond the most limited of feminist goals, as despite the Conservative Party's more recent swing towards compassion, it is still underpinned by ideas around competition, individual success, and meritocracy. These ideas render it difficult for conservatives to not only develop collective solutions, but to even conceive of collective problems.

"Theresa May is happy to admit that she is a feminist. But almost everybody qualifies for feminist credentials, under her definition" (quoted in Elliott, 2012, Jan. 24 n.p.). May defined feminism as being about ensuring there is a 'level playing field' and equal opportunities for people. Elliot quipped that no one can disagree with this definition as it is a bland and cautious 'catch-most' statement. This image of May as a 'safe pair of hands', a leader the entire party can get behind, a reassuring figure with an unexciting sense of pragmatism has

been described as what the UK needed during the Brexit transition due to it being a period of uncertainty (Goodlad, 2017). Dikwal-Bot and Mendes (2022) highlight how the co-optation of feminism by politicians is largely understudied in comparison to research on the co-optation of feminism by media, popular culture, and marketing. In his research on Conservative feminism, Swift (2019) observes how politicians such as Theresa May construct their identity through a ‘flat’, ‘abstract’ version of feminism, allowing to distance themselves from feminism when convenient or adopt it as necessary.

Jess Phillips raises a key concern when summing up Theresa May’s feminist status, in that while women at the top end of society (such as middle class women, women leaders, women in senior roles) may have fared more favourably as a result of May’s policies (e.g. improved representation on boards; and gender pay gap monitoring), there has been no time or opportunity to see how much these policies benefit women in the lower strata of society (such as working class women or unemployed women) (Phillips, 2019 Jul. 15). Phillips (2019, Jul. 15) sums up Theresa May as a woman with a core set of beliefs and goals, but little in the way of ‘steel or teeth’ to deliver on them.

Conclusion

It is perhaps more useful to reframe the question from ‘is Theresa May a feminist’ to ‘what kind of feminist is Theresa May’? As this chapter highlights, May’s enthusiasm and interest in gender equality has shifted during her career in politics, moving from indifference and disinterest, to it being the driving force of May’s push towards modernising the Conservative Party. As critics of Theresa May have noted, May has had a mixed record in regards to equality issues, while encouraging and supporting more women to enter careers in politics, and showing concern for girls in regards to issues such as body image, forced marriage, and FGM; on the other hand May was initially anti-progressive in regards to LGBT issues showing support for Section 28, and voting against improving LGBT rights. May did change her position over time on LGBT issues such as adoption rights, but whether this change was due to a genuine change in perspective or a cynical political tactic it is difficult to say. May’s brand of feminism is fairly limited, as it only serves to help women who are already in a position of privilege (e.g. white, straight, middle-class), while more vulnerable women are overlooked. Upon her premiership May did little to allay the harm caused by her party’s austerity policies, nor alleviate the UK’s increasingly hostile environment to immigrants.

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