

Conservative Woman or Woman Conservative? Complicating Accounts of Women's Educational Leadership

Joyce Goodman

Centre for the History of Women's Education

The University of Winchester

Joyce.goodman@winchester.ac.uk

Abstract

This article uses events in May 1985 surrounding the de-selection of the Conservative chair of the Wiltshire Education Committee and her role in the campaign for comprehensive education in Salisbury, England, to pose questions about the representation of women who championed causes deemed to be progressive and to raise issues about how gender analysis is dealt with in such accounts. The article develops a frame of analysis that moves beyond the 'heroic fairytale' in ascribing agency to women, while also revealing the operation of power structures in which they manoeuvred. A frame of analysis is outlined, based on Bourdieu's thinking tools of fields, habitus and capital. These are linked with the notion of gender scripts to demonstrate the complexities and contradictions of the story of Joan Main, chair of Wiltshire education committee, and her simultaneous location inside/outside the Conservative political field and the field of local government. Bourdieu's thinking tools and the notion of gender scripts are also used to demonstrate ways in which gender was an unspoken power relation in the events surrounding Main's de-selection and in her ability to gain re-election as an independent candidate.

Introduction

In May 1985 the leaders of the Liberal and Labour groups on the Wiltshire County Council¹ sent messages of support to the Conservative chair of the Wiltshire education committee, Mrs Joan Main. Main had chaired the education committee since 1979 but was standing as an independent candidate in the forthcoming local council election.² As education committee chair, Main consistently supported the introduction of comprehensive education in Salisbury at a point when Conservative education minister, Keith Joseph, was in favour of the retention of existing grammar schools of proven worth.³ She was central to the very acrimonious debate over the introduction of comprehensive education in Salisbury that developed and which split the Tory group on the council. This stance culminated in her de-selection as Conservative candidate at the council elections.

This paper uses the story of Main's de-selection as Conservative councillor and her campaign to introduce comprehensive education in east Salisbury, to pose questions about representing the stories of women who championed causes deemed to be progressive and to raise issues about how gender analysis is dealt with in these accounts. The paper begins by recounting the events leading to Main's de-selection. It outlines a frame of analysis based on Bourdieu's thinking tools, linked with the notion of gender scripts, which are used to unpack the complexities of events surrounding Main's chairmanship of the education committee.

Joan Main and the Salisbury campaign for comprehensive education: the 'heroic fairy-tale'?

Main was in place as chair of the education committee when Conservative minister of education, Keith Joseph, vetoed Wiltshire's plans to abolish Salisbury's grammar schools and organise education in the city on comprehensive lines.⁴ At a stormy meeting in September 1983, the controversy surrounding Joseph's decision was exacerbated when the Wiltshire schools sub-committee voted to seek full council approval to retain selective education in east Salisbury.⁵ The full education committee, chaired by Main, rejected this recommendation after heated debate. By October 1983, the bitter row over the Salisbury schools had led to talk of resignations, expulsions and crisis among the ruling Conservative group on the council.⁶ The showdown between the various Conservative factions came to a head in a long and passionate council debate in December 1983 when eight 'rebel' Tories, including Main, and the two female vice-chairs of the education committee, Patricia Rugg and Esme Smith, defied a three-line Tory party whip and voted with Labour and Liberal councillors to defeat a Conservative motion that would have guaranteed the future of the Salisbury grammar schools. From December 1983, New Right Tory members began to call for the expulsion of the eight 'rebel' members, and particularly of Main, Rugg and Smith. By February 1984, the crisis was threatening to destroy Conservative control of the council. Outwardly the group had closed ranks, but all eight Tory 'rebels' were refusing to resign from the Tory group, while not agreeing to an ultimatum that they would undertake to comply in future with Tory group rules. Those on the right threatened to form their own breakaway group if the 'rebel' eight would not agree to adhere to Tory rules and called for a vote of no-confidence in Main's leadership of the education committee.⁷ The Conservative group of 41 councillors split into three factions: a New Right group led by Beth Winterton, an

'official' Conservative group, and the 'rebels', including Main, Rugg and Smith, on the so-called left of the party.⁸ In August 1984, the working party set up to consider the comprehensive issue in the wake of Keith Joseph's decision rejected a plan put forward by the governors of Bishop Wordsworth Grammar School that would have retained the grammar schools while abolishing the 11 plus selection examination.⁹ Main survived a vote of no confidence in her leadership of the education committee by 43 votes to nine at a two-hour extraordinary council meeting in September 1984. She mustered 16 Tory votes, including her own, but 13 senior Conservatives, including the council vice chair and the policy committee chair did not attend the meeting and three others abstained from voting.¹⁰

In March 1985, the working party set up following Keith Joseph's decision told the education committee that after months of discussion and study it simply had no answer to the controversy surrounding the Salisbury schools and thought that no recommendations could be produced before the May elections.¹¹ In July 1985, Tory dissidents again blocked a move to retain selective education by ignoring a three line party whip and voting with Labour and Liberal members.

Predictably the 1985 local government elections focussed on education.¹² De-selected as a Conservative candidate for the stand she had taken on comprehensive education, Main was successful in her election to the council as an independent candidate for Warminster. Conservative seats across the county fell to the Alliance as the county moved to a hung council, but such was the potency of the debate about the Salisbury grammar schools, that Salisbury Conservatives tightened their traditional stranglehold on South Wiltshire.¹³ Main went on to become Mayor of Warminster in 1986, while the two single-sex grammar schools continue to survive to the present day.

Joan Main and the Salisbury campaign for comprehensive education: seeking an alternative to the 'the heroic fairy tale'

The events surrounding the pro- and anti- comprehensive campaigns in Salisbury and Joan Main's eventual de-selection, raise a number of issues for historians concerned to elucidate women's role in the politics of education, educational leadership and educational policy-making. Published minutes and newspaper accounts of Main's work portray a feisty woman battling against the odds for the introduction of comprehensive education – and doing so at

great personal cost in the face of national Conservative policy that favoured retention of grammar schools of proven excellence on the basis of a rhetoric of differentiation and parental choice.¹⁴ As the above account of events illustrates, it is comparatively easy to construct a celebratory account of Main's activities in the campaign in terms of an 'heroic fairy tale', in which she pushed forward her belief in comprehensive education in the face of insuperable odds. Given historians' concern to portray women educationists engaged in 'progressive' policy and practice of various types,¹⁵ the trope of the 'heroic fairy tale' is particularly seductive here. Yet, as Bicklen argues, it is a modernist tale that assumes a linear relationship between consistent institutional historical memories and the purposes of education. Furthermore, it is a trope that labels women's and men's activities as heroic in different ways: 'women can become heroes just by defying the odds'.¹⁶ This easily slides into what Marjorie Theobald has termed the 'uneasy marriage of celebration and critique' that Theobald sees as the lot of the modern feminist historians of education, in which women's activities are subsumed within a grand narrative of emancipation.¹⁷

The contention of this paper is that Bourdieu's thinking tools, nuanced by insights from gender history and linked to the notion of gender scripts, provide a lens with the potential to complicate stories about women's educational leadership and policy-making that otherwise slide into uneasy marriages of celebration and critique in the telling of heroic fairy tales. They also provide a way to deal with women whom it may be difficult to conceptualise as foremothers, particularly when the values of the historical actors and those of the researcher collide. Main's struggles and the struggles of those who opposed her policies can be seen as struggles for position and power in what Bourdieu terms 'a field'. A field refers to a structured system of social positions held by people and institutions, structured internally as a set of power relations. A field is 'a space of struggle for social position in which activity is structured and boundaries controlled';¹⁸ a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions; and a competitive area that is about material gain, in which struggles take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them, but also in terms of symbolic capital, or authority and prestige, which in turn is linked to who is accepted as having legitimate views. In Bourdieu's terms, what is significant is how and why agents within the field give legitimacy to particular claims for recognition.¹⁹ To demonstrate ways in which Main overcame de-selection as a Conservative candidate and gained election to the council as an independent, the paper will also draw on Bourdieu's argument that various forms of capital (including economic, cultural and social capital)

provide the currency of exchange in the field to enable actors to position and re-position themselves in fields.

Bourdieu links ‘field’ to ‘habitus’: acquired dispositions, ways of being or doing and a ‘feel for the game’.²⁰ Habitus is ‘a socio-historical conditioning that [is] regarded as “reasonable” by those who occupy the same social space’ and ‘that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forthcoming’. Habitus links to field in that it is ‘a system of dispositions in which agents engage in certain behaviours in context; in other words, in social spaces. Actions, therefore, are the product of ‘an encounter between an habitus and a field, that is between two more-or-less completely adjusted histories’.²¹

The paper will use the notions of field and habitus to demonstrate that Main was positioned by others and positioned herself in terms of gender. Toril Moi illustrates how for Bourdieu, gender is never a ‘pure’ field on its own. Rather, it is implicated in all other social fields and is a relevant factor in all social analysis. In Bourdieusian terms, gender is always socially variable and carries different amounts of symbolic capital in different contexts. The accent is on the shifting social relations between gender and other fields. To invoke the category of woman then, is ‘not to invoke a rather static or predictable social category, but to invite a highly flexible analysis of a variable and often contradictory network of relations’.²² In certain circumstances, the power mechanisms of male domination can be compensated for by the possession of other forms of capital.

In the analysis that follows, field and habitus will be linked with the notion of gender scripts, which imply that individuals ‘are complex beings who adjust and adapt and actively shape the world in which they are located’ and actively write and re-write [their] own lines, performing differently in different programmes in public and private and experimenting with different parts within the same play. Gender scripts include societal scripts, or ascribed statuses inherited by virtue of one’s membership of particular categories (i.e sex, age, race or class, which vary across time and place); and personal scripts that refer to the identity work ‘actively created by the individual in relation to the social world’.²³ Bourdieu’s analysis provides the intellectual space to position women inside/outside fields and to analyse their activities simultaneously in terms of subjectivity and subjection,²⁴ while the notion of gender scripts illustrates some of the narratives through which this occurs.

Main's public arguments for comprehensive education were based on economic factors. In the two following sections, Bourdieu's thinking tools are used to provide analysis of how economic arguments about education were located within two fields in which she both positioned herself and was positioned by others: the Conservative political field; and the field of local government (itself a sub field of politics). Analysis also highlights ways in which gendered strategies play out in fields in differing ways and to different degrees.

Inside/outside the Conservative political field

Beatrix Campbell argues that British Conservatism provided a space inhabited by a strong feminine presence, while structuring women's subordination as a sex and supporting the class and gender power of men.²⁵ Analysis of the location of women in the Conservative Party points to a contradictory mix of ideology about women and the Conservative political field. As Arnot, Campbell and Ball variously note, on the one hand, Thatcherism was a mix of neo liberal influences emphasizing a free market approach, an absence of state controls and the idealist ideology of the free economic agent, and on the other, neo-conservative influences which reasserted 'an orientation to the past, traditional values and collective loyalties'.²⁶ These were held together in an uneasy and shifting alliance. This led to a stress on the family, morality and role of women in Thatcherism, while for women drawn to the radical right, it meant freedom of choice, without legal or social pressures to choose whether to be a housewife, going to work or doing both²⁷ (a stance that overlooked the importance of economic capital in the exercise of choice and the rupture between public and private in the idealist notion of the free economic agent).

As Arnot, David and Weiner argue, Margaret Thatcher, herself, upheld apparently contradictory values. Her belief in liberal or laissez faire Conservatism offered her a number of scripts for her own personal life and direction; and her politics of individualism and liberalism in the economic sphere directed her to a kind of 'liberal, individualistic, feminism' which she applied to her politics of family life.²⁸ She played on her femininity in coiffure and couture, stressed her motherhood as typical and her career as exceptional, and portrayed herself balancing the nation's books with the same attention that a housewife would give to her domestic budget, putting both her power and her femininity on display.²⁹

There are resonances between Thatcher and Main that demonstrate that Thatcher was not unique in terms of tensions when it came to gender scripts for Conservative women. These resonances also point to the difficulties of incorporating women into established fields and habitus. Having given birth to twins, Mark and Carol, Thatcher took the decision to switch from being an industrial chemist to law at the end of her first week in hospital. She held motherhood in high esteem but also wanted a career. She sent in her application form for her Bar finals while still in hospital to ensure that she would continue with her studies when she returned home with the twins, determining in hospital that she would organise their lives ‘so as to allow me to be both a mother and a professional woman’. She later wrote that she considered herself privileged to pursue a political career in ‘a man’s world’.³⁰

Main represented a mix of the ‘old school’ of Conservative women who took up civic positions when their children were grown up. At the same time she was emblematic of the newer Tory woman who had spent a life working in business.³¹ Born in 1925, she qualified as a maths teacher, and gained experience as a qualified radio tester through war service. Between 1947 and 1949 she taught maths at St Anne’s Grammar School and left teaching in 1949 when she married. Between 1950 and 1966 she was a partner with her husband in business. She was elected to the county council in 1973 as the Conservative member for the Division of Warminster East in West Wiltshire. She continued to hold smaller company interests from 1980. In the biographical entry she provided for council records, she described herself as ‘housewife, retired co. director’.

She brought positive cultural capital to her position in local government from her paid employment in education and from her partnership in business with her husband. Like Thatcher, she had two children, and worked as well as being a mother, having begun work in her husband’s firm the year after her marriage and continuing until the 1980s, when she was becoming increasingly prominent in county council affairs.

Conservatism was highly contradictory where women were concerned. While Main was developing her local government career, Conservative women increasingly took up positions of influence. Between 1970 and 1974, there were fourteen Conservative women in the House of Commons, of whom Margaret Thatcher became minister of education and a member of the cabinet in 1970 (and only the second Conservative woman to hold this rank).³² The 1970s saw some decline in Conservative women MPs, both in the 1974 election,

and the 1979 election, despite the election of a woman prime minister, and the number of Conservative MPs remained low in 1983. Local government, on the other hand, saw a rise in the numbers of Conservative women candidates and councillors, despite the fact that Conservative women candidates were less likely to win than women in other parties.³³

At the same time, the contradictions at the heart of Conservative thinking meant that many Conservative women believed in women's equality without having a theory of inequality.³⁴ This led easily to the position in which aspects of gender were potent yet contradictory or silenced, demonstrating Bourdieu's arguments that legitimacy in a given field constitutes a situation in which institutions, actions, or usage are dominant but not recognised as such.³⁵ Lovenduski, Norris and Burness argue that Conservative women sought to take their place alongside men, rather than to displace them. They were reluctant to be thought of as feminists and typically sought the removal of barriers to their participation rather than guarantees that they would be included. They stressed the advantages that might come from the promotion of women by making their case in terms of merit: 'a central tenet of their argument was that sometimes the best man for a job was a woman'.³⁶ This stance is clear in the comments by Harold Wilson in the course of Thatcher's election to the leadership of the Conservative Party, when he said that she stood because she was the only man in the Conservative party. His comment demonstrates ways in which in Bourdieusian fields, 'sometimes a woman is a woman and sometimes she is much less so'.³⁷ In this vein, women who did not wish to find themselves outside the mainstream of the party avoided the Conservative women's groups - a position exemplified by Edwina Currie's much quoted (and later) comment: 'I'm not a woman, I'm a Conservative'.³⁸

True to this particular positioning of 'woman' in the Conservative political field, no public mention of the fact that it was women at the heart of Conservative 'rebellion' was reported in newspaper accounts of the Salisbury debate. Yet, gender was an implicit and potent thread. Both prior to and during debate, Main's stance over the introduction of comprehensive education in Salisbury resulted in a personal attack on her leadership of the education committee from a cadre of Conservative councillors that positioned her in terms of gender and thus as woman Conservative.

Angered by Main's refusal to support their moves to retain selective education in east Salisbury, the New Right group claimed that Main had been a failure as chair of the

education committee and had hindered progress in the county's schools system. This led to a call for a vote of no confidence in Main's leadership of the education committee. During debate, Salisbury Conservative Col. Rex Nichols, who tabled the no confidence motion, launched a personal attack on Main, accusing her of lack lustre leadership, mismanagement, poor judgement and undemocratic methods and said that her performance as education committee chair had done education in Wiltshire a gross injustice. In particular, he accused her of not being astute as a financial manager and leader. He drew on stereotypes about women's supposed inability when it came to the management of financial resources and their supposed inability to provide strong leadership. In his personal attack he attempted to position debate itself outside the political field in which it was located and reduced it to one of performance:

This is not about Salisbury schools and nor is it a party matter. It is a question of overall performance over a period of time ... A budget of this magnitude calls for a chairman able to give thoroughly competent imaginative yet realistic leadership and certainly an ability to control finance and policy. Mrs Main claims education is under funded, yet money is being wasted wherever you look.³⁹

Conservative Roger Peach also attempted to position Main and her 'dissident' colleagues beyond the boundaries of the Conservative political field, arguing that they had in effect, declared themselves as independents by their espousal of comprehensive education and presumably hoped to survive with the support of Labour and Liberal members.⁴⁰ Other Conservatives came to Main's rescue, stressing instead her (more 'feminine') tireless work for the children of Wiltshire.⁴¹

Both pro- and anti-Main Conservative arguments drew on what Bourdieu terms symbolic violence - the discriminatory acts that are arbitrarily imposed by the dominant in the field to their advantage.⁴² As Bourdieu remarks, 'An action or usage is legitimate when it is dominant but not recognised as such, in other words tacitly recognised'⁴³ in a process through which agents recognised as powerful possessors of capital in the field struggle to relegate challengers to their position as *heterodox*, lacking in capital, and as individuals whom one cannot credit with the right to speak. The result of the 'system of dispositions attuned to [the] game [of the field] is that the strategies employed are rarely if ever

perceived as such by the agents themselves'.⁴⁴ In this case, views about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour for women active in the public sphere constituted taken for granted aspects of Conservative habitus.

Inside/outside the field of local government

The attack on Main in terms of her inability to control finance and policy was made possible by the position she adopted in the field of local government. Her political arguments were focussed around economic factors and particularly the difficulty of dealing with the longer term problems of falling roles and poor school accommodation with which she believed the scheme for comprehensive education would have dealt. In locating herself in this way, she opened the path for others to reposition her in terms of gender. Yet, the position she adopted in the field of local government and her ability to manoeuvre was in part a result of how the Conservative political field was structured around economic policy.

Economic factors played an important part in Keith Joseph's rejection of Salisbury's comprehensive scheme. Joseph was a confirmed monetarist who believed in retrenchment on the grounds that money spent on public services deprived the 'wealth-producing' private sector of resources.⁴⁵ As a founder member of the Centre for Policy Studies with Thatcher, he was a key actor in the development of free enterprise thinking, in which a 'simulating inequality' was preferred to a regimented drive for equality, which it was believed killed enterprise and endeavour.⁴⁶ Much of the ideology for Thatcherism, and for the privatisation of public services that formed a plank of Thatcherism, came from the work of free market economists Friedman and Hayek, both of whom rejected Keynesian orthodoxy. As Denis Lawton notes, Joseph thought that good basic education and training for the less able could be better and cheaper if it were separated from academic secondary education. 'Selection would be an important element for reasons of cost and excellence: "relevant" and "fitness for purpose" became key concepts. For Joseph, "good schools for all" did not mean the same for all.'⁴⁷ Underlying such policies was the drive to remove blocks, barriers and obstacles to the free play of market forces and to re-create individualism, consumerism and competition. 'Equality of opportunity was recast as the individualising of opportunities for economic and social enhancement'.⁴⁸ In rejecting the Wiltshire comprehensive scheme, Joseph cited the excellence of the Salisbury grammar schools, the strong local support for their retention and the cost of the proposed reorganisation scheme. In expressing her disappointment at his

decision, Main spoke of Wiltshire's longer term problems of falling roles and poor school accommodation, with which she believed the rejected scheme would have dealt.

Campbell notes that the economic liberalism of Thatcherism left limited room for economic manoeuvre, with the result that it imposed spending limits on the public sector and rate capping.⁴⁹ This provided Main, in turn, with little room for manoeuvre in the game that constituted Salisbury's local Conservative education politics. Local authority finance and poor school buildings had been a consistent problem during her period as chair of the education committee, attracting criticism from Her Majesty's Inspectors [HMI].⁵⁰ By 1983 Wiltshire's finance management committee had all party backing to recommend the county council to defy government rate capping and raise total spending in real terms.⁵¹ Worried about the cost of maintaining the grammar schools when school rolls were expected to fall by 27%, 'rebel' Tories thought that retaining the grammar schools would be at the expense of other parts of the county.⁵² As Main noted, the extent to which the county council could manoeuvre in its secondary reorganisation was framed by financial exigencies,⁵³ the anticipated drop of at least 25% in the number of secondary school pupils by the end of the decade, dilapidated school buildings and no money allocated for them in the next three years.⁵⁴ Like other 'rebel' Tories, she saw retention of the grammar schools as a 'blank cheque' for Salisbury at the expense of other parts of the county.⁵⁵ Throughout 1984, Main argued against the spending cuts being imposed on education, which were a result of Tory national policy for local government.⁵⁶ But by January 1985, she had lost her battle to boost spending on schools.⁵⁷

Main's argument that a re-organised comprehensive system would be less costly than maintaining the existing grammar schools was framed in economic terms. But the rules of the game for Conservative councillors were set by the Conservative party, as was Main's room for manoeuvre. She both framed her arguments within Conservative policy for lowering local government costs *and* critiqued the implications of this policy for provision in Wiltshire. In this way, she continued to locate herself in debate on the terrain of the Conservative political field. Main's focus on issues of economic management opened her location within the field to re-positioning by others in terms of contemporary stereotypes and power relations of gender, focussed around issues of the perceived inabilities of women to deal with issues of financial management as an aspect of their leadership. This resulted in a contradictory positioning as an insider/outsider within a Conservative political field that

had no clearly worked out politics of gender, and in a contradictory positioning in the field of local government.

Contradictory alliances between women in the field of local government

Main's positioning in the field of local government in Salisbury was complex. Conservative women in Salisbury were split between support for, and opposition to, her stance. Main found allies with a small cadre of Conservative women and with women in other political parties but it is difficult to attribute these to female ways of knowing, being and acting, particularly as other women were diametrically opposed to her stance. Rather, the positioning of women in the local government field in Salisbury demonstrates Bourdieu's contention that 'despite the specific experiences which bring women together ... women [are] separated from each other by economic and cultural difference'⁵⁸ and that these affect their objective and subjective ways of operating in particular fields.

Main's two key Conservative female allies were the vice chairs of the education committee, Patricia Rugg and Esme Smith. Rugg (born 1929) 1st vice chair of the education committee, and chair of the further education and youth services sub committee, was first elected to the county council in 1975 as the Conservative councillor for Devizes South in the district of Kennet. Married with four sons, she had studied medicine for one year at Bristol University. Smith (born 1928), 2nd vice chair of the education committee, and chair of the schools sub committee, also married, was first elected to the county council in 1977 as the Conservative member for the division of Purton in North Wiltshire.⁵⁹ Two women in the group of six New Right Conservatives were at the forefront of the attack on Main. The leader of the New Right group was Chippenham councillor, Mrs Beth Winterton, a former state registered nurse before her marriage, whose chief education interest was in special education and who led the New Right group.⁶⁰ Winterton believed that comprehensives were much more divisive than the selective system.⁶¹ A second New Right woman at the forefront of the opposition to Main was Melksham councillor Mrs Pat Joyce, who was a partner with her husband in an electrical business, and school governor at George Ward School and Trowbridge College.⁶²

Liberal Marjorie Whitworth was closer to the Tory New Right group than to Main. Whitworth called for selection to be reintroduced into west Salisbury if it were being

retained in east Salisbury in order to produce a fair and just education system – a view that was to lead to threats to her personal safety. A self employed antique dealer, with a war service background, Whitworth had been a senior interviewer on government social surveys relating to health, housing and education.⁶³ She brought this cultural capital to her argument that two systems of education in Salisbury would cause house prices to soar in east Salisbury leaving the west of Salisbury a deprived area.⁶⁴ Whitworth was a governor of Westwood St Thomas secondary school and of Wilton middle school. The Westwood St Thomas School governors disassociated themselves publicly from her remarks.⁶⁵ Whitworth was also at variance with the majority of the Liberal councillors who shared Main's pro-comprehensive stance. At a meeting of the schools sub-committee, where her proposals were rejected by 17-3, Whitworth told committee members that bigoted political idealism had become the name of the game, not the future of education.⁶⁶

Labour councillor, Celia Lamberth, shared Main's desire for comprehensive re-organisation. Lamberth, a Salisbury born 36 year old mother of four, had taken the Bemerton Heath division from the Conservatives in the 1981 local elections. She was a member of the working party that had forwarded the plan to abolish the two grammar schools and was a governor of a number of educational institutions: Westwood St Thomas School (along with Whitworth), Salisbury College of Technology, Avon Middle School and two special schools. Her symbolic capital was based on her political credibility with the electorate that accrued from her experience of secondary modern education - she had left Salisbury's Westwood School for Girls at fifteen to work in a shop. She thought that Keith Joseph's decision failed to meet the needs of the children of Salisbury and was made purely on political grounds.⁶⁷ Lamberth told a packed meeting organised by the National Union of Teachers to hear the educational policies of the three main parliamentary candidates that she could not justify any manner of selective schooling: 'comprehensive education is the only form of education in my book'.⁶⁸ In this she followed Labour, which was committed to a fully comprehensive system for all young people and pledged to take all possible steps to end selection at 11 plus in Salisbury immediately.⁶⁹

Lamberth was a leading light in the local Labour party, which gave whole hearted support to the Campaign for Comprehensive Education, and invoked arguments relating to equality to support its view. It urged the abolition of the 11 plus on the grounds that it split parents, families, teachers and communities because secondary modern schools were

thought of as being second best.⁷⁰ The local Labour party slated Bishop Wordsworth Grammar School governors' plan to retain the grammar schools while abolishing the selection examination as 'an attempt to safeguard the notion of the privileged minority'. In their view, it would continue to cream off all the brightest children and so retain selection at 11 in effect.⁷¹ The executive of the local Labour party, of which Lamberth was a member, warned that reform of the city's education system was constantly being blocked by the snobbery of a Conservative clique and pointed out that falling school rolls gave the opportunity for modernisation. Unlike Main they linked this to issues of equality framed through notions of class:

What is standing in the way of reform is the attitude of those who seem to believe in their own superiority ... Their claim that schools of proven worth must remain unchanged is merely a cover for their snobbish attempt to sustain a divisive Victorian view of education. What we need in Salisbury are schools that can prove their worth in the 1980s and give all children the best opportunities. The obstructive clique wants to ... restrict opportunities to their own children.⁷²

Shared political alliances built on differing philosophies, (particularly in the case of Main and Lamberth), and political rifts between women who otherwise shared political stances, and the positioning of women in the local government field in Salisbury, all demonstrate that the category of woman does not 'invoke a rather static or predictable social category but ... invite[s] a highly flexible analysis of a variable and often contradictory network of relations'.⁷³

Social capital, networking, 'rebel' and 'independent' political identities

In overcoming her de-selection as a Conservative councillor and gaining re-election as a Warminster independent, Joan Main drew on her extensive networks across local government and voluntary organisations to re-position herself in the field of local government. Her re-positioning demonstrates the power of 'social capital', the power and advantage one gains from having a network 'of culturally economically or politically useful relations', as well as a series of other more personal or intimate relations.⁷⁴ Lorraine Blaxter and Christina Hughes argue that for Bourdieu, social capital consists of two key elements: first, social networks and connections, 'contacts and group memberships which through the

accumulation of exchanges, obligations and shared identities, provide actual or potential support and access to valued resources'; and second, sociability, in other words, how networks are sustained, which requires necessary skill and disposition.⁷⁵ Like Martin, Blaxter and Hughes note that social capital helps its possessor to develop and increase other forms of capital and may greatly enhance his or her chances of achieving legitimacy in a given field.⁷⁶

During her career in local government, Main had built extensive networks that provided her with social and symbolic capital and stood her in good stead at this key moment. She had been a member of the Warminster urban district council [UDC] from 1970, serving on the housing committee, the finance and establishment committee, the planning committee and the area social services committee. She was the UDC representative on Age Concern Wiltshire and the West Wiltshire district steering committee. She was a member of Warminster Town Council, which she chaired for a time, as she did their general purposes committee. She was a member of West Wiltshire District Council from 1974-79.

On the Wiltshire County Council, she had chaired the schools sub committee, the finance and general purposes education sub committee, as well as serving on the chairman's panel. She was also ex officio member of all county committees except the police, local joint and county local government joint committees. Spanning her county council career, she had also served on a range of committees and advisory groups, independent of her position as chair or vice chair of education. These included finance management, economic development, emergency planning, libraries museums and transport, the regional waste disposal committee, the standing advisory council on religious education, the careers service advisory committee, the schools curriculum development committee, and the youth services negotiating body for youth workers. She was also a member of a range of outside bodies concerned with education, some as County Council representative. These included the University of Bath Court and its Council, Southampton University Council, Southampton University Court of Governors and the governing bodies of all further education establishments in the county.

Her service on other committees placed her in a range of wider networks, many of which were connected with health. She was chair of the Family Planning Clinic (later Community Heath Council), opened at her instigation in 1966 – and national council member

to 1973, member of the committee of the Hospital League of Friends' committee, Bath Community Health Council (for six years), and Warminster Hospitals League of Friends committee. She was president of the mentally handicapped club (and helped annually at a camp for the blind), a founder member of the Business and Professional Women's Club (and executive chair for Somerset, Wiltshire and Dorset National Council on which she was the London representative), founder member of the Inner Wheel Club of Warminster (of which she was founder treasurer, president, club correspondent and a member of the district extension committee), member of the Wessex regional land drainage committee, and chair of the managing committee of Warminster Kingdown Sports Centre.

At a point when others were positioning her outside the boundaries of the Conservative field, her networks and the offices she held provided Main with significant social and symbolic capital on which to draw to re-position herself in the field of local government. With a few exceptions, her social capital demonstrates that her engagements with education and health replicated the long-standing strategy by which women had extended what were seen as their familial duties in the public sphere and so the longevity of the power of social motherhood.⁷⁷ In this sense, she came close to the traditional definition of female activities and so woman Conservative⁷⁸ but in ways that were 'converted from a liability to an advantage'.⁷⁹

Conclusion: Conservative woman/woman Conservative

Main demonstrates some of the gender scripts and strategies adopted by Margaret Thatcher, suggesting that Thatcher was not a unique case. As Campbell argues, Thatcher embodied female power in a way that united patriarchal and feminine discourse and represented the triumph of the long march through the institutions of the Conservative party by traditionalist women. Campbell sees this less as the experience of a united front among Conservative women than a tactical re-alignment within a party that is an unstable coalition.⁸⁰ Analysis of Joan Main's position and those of her Conservative colleagues on the Wiltshire education committee demonstrates just how unstable this coalition could be.

While positioned as 'rebel' on some points of Conservative education policy, Main's stance remained in tune with other aspects of Tory monetarist policy, a situation that drew on some of the contradictions at the heart of Thatcherism. Her espousal of comprehensive

education was about rationalisation and competing aspects of Tory monetarist and social policy. She simultaneously drew on and attacked Conservative ideology about reducing the costs of local government through her economic arguments about the relative cost of grammar and comprehensive education. Consequently, although she was seen as a Tory ‘rebel’, her political identity could remain resolutely that of Conservative woman.

When Main’s politics did not accord with some of the Salisbury Conservative councillors, they attempted to locate her outside the political field, by positioned her as woman Conservative, drawing on strategies of gendered power that equated with aspects of Conservative habitus around the abilities of women to provide leadership and management of financial affairs in public service. Here they invoked contradictions that suffused Thatcherism and Conservatism more generally around issues of equality as they pertained to women. Main’s own positioning in terms of financial matters in the comprehensive debate opened her up to this repositioning as woman Conservative. At the same time, she had accrued sufficient symbolic and social capital in areas of the field with a long tradition in terms of social motherhood. Here, she played on the designation woman Conservative. She both positioned and repositioned herself and was positioned and re-positioned by others, through aspects of gendered power that had a long history and which related to the field of local government in complex ways.

Debates about Main’s abilities in financial leadership and her repositioning in terms of social motherhood point to the importance of analysis taking note of difference-making. A Bourdieusian framework of fields and habitus, linked to the notion of gender scripts, enables difference-making in Main’s story to be analysed in non-essentialist ways. It also illuminates ways in which women are separated from each other by economic and cultural difference, despite specific experiences which may bring them together.

The intersection of identities of Conservative woman and/or woman Conservative that Main’s story demonstrates, suggests that contradictory designations of this type belong within the writing of history (and auto/biography) as an intellectual and political enterprise. It demonstrates, too, the complexities of stories of women’s leadership and policy-making and the need to move beyond the telling of linear and heroic fairy tales. The latter is of importance to any project striving to ascribe agency to women, while also revealing the operation of power structures in which they manoeuvred.

Notes

¹ Wiltshire is a rural area in the south-west of England with a long tradition of Conservative political administration.

² "Why Liberals and Labour wished a Tory good luck." *Salisbury Journal*, 2 May 1985.

³ Lawton, Denis. *Education and Politics in the 1990s, Conflict or Consensus?* Brighton, Falmer, Press 1992: 40.

⁴ "Public notice: Wiltshire County Council, Salisbury Diocesan Council of Education Incorporated." *Salisbury Journal*, 26 August, 1982.

⁵ "Schools betrayal sparks outcry." *Salisbury Journal*, 15 September 1983.

⁶ "Tory Schools bid beaten by rebels." *Salisbury Journal*, 1st December 1983.

⁷ "Hush up as Tory crisis deepens." *Salisbury Journal*, 16 February 1984.

⁸ "Tories split into three." *Salisbury Journal*, 13 September 1984.

⁹ "Grammar schools plan rejected." *Salisbury Journal*, 2 August 1984.

¹⁰ "Education vote widens Tory split." *Salisbury Journal*, 27 September 1984.

¹¹ "Grammar group files stay secret." *Salisbury Journal*, 14 March 1985.

¹² "School lobby dumps Farris in poll war." *Salisbury Journal*, 27 April 1985.

¹³ "Alliance calls for coalition." *Salisbury Journal*, 9 May 1985.

¹⁴ Lawton, *Education and Politics*, 40.

¹⁵ See, for example, Sadnovik, Alan R, and Susan F. Semel (eds). *Founding Mothers and Others: Women Educational Leaders During the Progressive Era*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

¹⁶ Biklen, Sari Knopp. *School Work: Gender and the Cultural Construction of Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1995: 2-4; Goodman, Joyce and Sylvia Harrop. "Within marked boundaries': Women and the Making of Educational Policy Since 1800." In *Women, Educational Policy-Making and Administration in England: Authoritative Women 1800*, edited by J. Goodman and S. Harrop. London: Routledge, 2000: 1-14; Martin, Jane and Goodman, Joyce. *Women and Education 1800-1980*. Palgrave, 2004: chapter 1.

¹⁷ Theobald, Marjorie. "Teachers, Memory and Oral History." In *Telling Women's Lives: Narrative Inquiries in the History of Women's Education*, edited by K. Weiler and S. Middleton. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999: 19.

¹⁸ Gunter, Helen. *More Leadership?* Inaugural Lecture, University of Manchester, March 2005: 33; Gunter, Helen. *Leaders and Leadership in Education*. London: Paul Chapman, 2001: 2.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre and L.J.D. Wacquant. *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993; Jenkins, R. *Pierre Bourdieu*, Routledge, London, 1992, 84, quoted in Gunter, *More Leadership?* 32; Gunter, *Leaders and Leadership*, 13.

²⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Sociology in Question*. London: Sage Publications, 1993: 15.

²¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. M. Adamson, Cambridge Policy Press, in association with Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1990: 109; Bourdieu, Pierre. *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000: 210, both quoted in Gunter, *More Leadership?*, 32-33.

²² Moi, Toril. *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 270, 291, 295.

²³ Henry, M. "Voices of Academic Women on Feminine Gender Scripts." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 11 (1990): 121-135, 122.

²⁴ Martin, Jane. "Shena D. Simon and English education policy: inside/out?" *History of Education* 32 (2003): 457-459.

²⁵ Campbell, Beatrix. *The Iron Ladies. Why do Women vote Tory?* London: Virago, 1987: 265.

²⁶ Arnot, Madeleine. "British feminist educational politics and state regulation of gender." In *Feminism and Social Justice in Education: International Perspectives*, edited by M. Arnot & K. Weiler. Brighton: Falmer Press, 1993: 189; Ball, Stephen. *Politics and Policy Making in Education*. London: Routledge, 1990: 214.

²⁷ Cambell, *The Iron Ladies*, 87, 72, 229, 232.

²⁸ Arnot, Madeleine, Miriam David and Gaby Weiner. *Closing the Gender Gap: Postwar Education and Social Change*. London: Polity Press, 1999: 42.

²⁹ Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*, 162, 242.

³⁰ Quoted in Arnot et al, *Closing the Gender Gap*, 44, 45.

³¹ Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*, 219, 223.

³² Other women holding office in the period included Peggy Fenner, parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food 1972-4; Betty Harvie Anderson, the first woman speaker of the House of Commons; Lady Tweedsmuir, minister of state for the Scottish Office in the House of Lords during the first two years of the Heath government and then the first woman in the Foreign Office; Baroness Young the first woman whip in 1972 and then parliamentary under secretary of state to the Department of the Environment 1973-4.

³³ This paragraph draws on Maguire, G.E. *Conservative Women: a History of Women and the Conservative Party 1984-1997*. London: Macmillan, 1998: 193.

³⁴ Ibid., 200.

³⁵ Moi, *What is a Woman?* 270.

³⁶ Lovenduski, Joni, Pippa Norris and Catriona Burness. "The party and women." In *Conservative Century: the Conservative Party since 1900*, edited by A. Seldon and S. Ball. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 612.

³⁷ Moi, *What is a Woman?* 292.

³⁸ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 181, 195.

³⁹ "Irresponsible splinter group." *Salisbury Journal*, 27 September 1984.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Education Vote widens Tory split." *Salisbury Journal*, 27 September 1984.

⁴² Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Trans. Richard Nice. London: Polity, 2001, first published 1998: 59.

⁴³ Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 70.

⁴⁴ Moi, *What is a Woman?* 270.

⁴⁵ Simon, Brian. *Education and the Social Order, 1940-1990*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991: 489-504.

⁴⁶ Maguire, *Conservative Century*, 20-1.

⁴⁷ Lawton, Denis. *The Tory Mind on Education, 1979-94*. Brighton: Falmer Press, 1994: 50.

⁴⁸ Arnot, et al., *Closing the Gender Gap*, 82.

⁴⁹ Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*, 215.

⁵⁰ "Joan Main and no cash. New rap over schools cash." *Salisbury Journal*, 28 July 1982.

⁵¹ "Schools cash. County to defy Maggie?" *Salisbury Journal*, 13 October 1983.

⁵² "Tory Schools bid beaten by rebels." *Salisbury Journal*, 1st December 1983.

⁵³ "Education cash row flares up." *Salisbury Journal*, 13 October 1983.

⁵⁴ "Expulsions threat in Tory row over schools." *Salisbury Journal*, 20 October 1983.

⁵⁵ "Tory Schools bid beaten by rebels." *Salisbury Journal*, 1 December 1983.

⁵⁶ "Cut may cost 80 teachers their jobs." *Salisbury Journal*, 8 November 1984.

⁵⁷ "Joan loses school books battle." *Salisbury Journal*, 17 January 1984.

⁵⁸ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 93.

⁵⁹ Biographies of Wiltshire Councillors. Wiltshire Record Office.

⁶⁰ Winterton was a governor of Middlefield Special School in Chippenham, founder chair of Chippenham Civic Society, former chair of North Wiltshire Sports Advisory Council, organising secretary of the Chippenham and Calne Family Planning Association from its inception in 1963 until its incorporation within the NHS and founder of the Corsham Leisure Centre, where she was a swimming instructor before her election. Biographies of Wiltshire councillors.

⁶¹ "Grammar schools saga – its back to square one." *Salisbury Journal*, 28 September 1983.

⁶² Joyce (born 1939) managed the electrical shop. She was a member of Melksham Town Council and executive member of Melksham Chamber of Commerce. Her committee memberships included education, schools sub committee, further education sub committee, youth services sub committee, education services sub committee, environment and highways. She was on the managing body of the Christie Miller Sports Centre and of the Chippenham district plan working party. Her chief interests were in environmental matters, including tree planting, countryside, and conservation of buildings, as well as museums and the arts. Biographies of Wiltshire Councillors.

⁶³ Biographies of Wiltshire Councillors.

⁶⁴ See also Mursell, F C. "Letter to the press." *Salisbury Journal*, 6 October 1983.

⁶⁵ "Comprehensive governors back school." *Salisbury Journal*, 6 October 1983.

-
- ⁶⁶ "Education row splits Liberals." *Salisbury Journal*, 26 April 1984.
- ⁶⁷ "Westminster target for Bemerton's battling mum." *Salisbury Journal*, 15 July 1982; Biographies of Wiltshire Councillors. As well as education, the schools sub committee and the education services sub committee, Lamberth served on social services, building and estates management sub committee, and libraries and museums and her interests included housing and unemployment as well as education. She was a member of the district health authority and the Wessex children's regional planning committee, the social and personal education steering committee and the managing body of Westwood St Thomas Sports Centre. She was interested in the blind and disabled.
- ⁶⁸ *Salisbury Journal*, 2 June 1983.
- ⁶⁹ "Campaign for comprehensives." *Salisbury Journal*, 1 December 1983.
- ⁷⁰ "Exams splits families." *Salisbury Journal*, 17 May 1984.
- ⁷¹ "A sinister plot." *Salisbury Journal*, 24 May 1984.
- ⁷² "Tory snobs jibe over new plan for schools." *Salisbury Journal*, 11 October 1984.
- ⁷³ Moi, *What is a Woman*, 291,
- ⁷⁴ Moi, *What is a Woman*, quoted in Martin, "Shena D. Simon and English education policy," 483.
- ⁷⁵ Blaxter, Lorraine and Christina Hughes. "Revisiting Feminist Appropriations of Bourdieu." Unpublished paper, Gender and Education Conference, Sheffield, 2003.
- ⁷⁶ Schuller, Tom, Stephen Barron & John Field. "Social Capital: a Review and Critique." In *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*, edited by S. Baron, J. Field and T. Schuller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000: 18, 19.
- ⁷⁷ Yeo, Eileen. "Social Motherhood and the Sexual Communion of Labour in British Social Science, 1850-1950." *Women's History Review* 1, no.1 (1992): 63-87.
- ⁷⁸ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 94.
- ⁷⁹ Moi, *What is a Woman?* 292.
- ⁸⁰ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 246.