

However, this is a very limited perspective on the phenomenon of Thatcherism. In many ways – and especially in terms of morality and social behaviour – the political conformation of the 1980s proved to be an irrelevancy. The government underlined the point in 1989 when it vetoed a survey of British sexual lifestyles, signifying thereby its disapproval of changes which it remained largely powerless to check. Moreover, the government stimulated a great deal of *unintended* change especially on the economic front. The expansion of the service industries, for example, greatly accelerated the growth of female employment; also its *laissez-faire* approach, though disadvantageous for employees in general, encouraged employers to take on much more part-time labour, a trend from which women proved to be the overwhelming beneficiaries.

Nor should one ignore the political-psychological significance of the Thatcher premiership. By the 1990s younger feminists such as Natasha Walters, a little removed from the direct blast of Thatcherite rhetoric and policy, regarded her almost as an unsung heroine. Clearly one needs to distinguish the impact of Mrs Thatcher at several different levels and from different perspectives.

At the general election of 1979 Mrs Thatcher had not, contrary to expectations, been an electoral drawback to her party, though she was less popular than her rival James Callaghan. Studies by political scientists in the aftermath, though admittedly not very extensive, indicated that her gender had made little if any impact on the result.<sup>2</sup> Though hardly a dramatic conclusion, it was important in laying to rest one of the last myths about women in politics. Mrs Thatcher went on to win elections in 1983 and 1987, admittedly without actually increasing her party's vote, but she continued to be regarded by the Conservative rank and file as their greatest asset. If never exactly popular in the country, she did finally kill off the idea that women had no aptitude for politics. The impact of Mrs Thatcher's long premiership on younger women and girls, many of whom grew up in the knowledge that their country was dominated by a woman, was intangible but surely profound and lasting:

Above all she normalised female power. She made us realise that women can do the things that men once thought were all their own. These things include being powerful and confident. They may also, less comfortably, include being cruel, megalomaniac, and war-mongering.<sup>3</sup>

In short, by the 1990s a generation of women had emerged who took it for granted that women could play leadership roles. If the prime min-

ister had done nothing directly to promote women in politics, the 1980s and 1990s were to be marked by the appearance of female role models in a variety of occupations in which they had not hitherto been prominent. For example, Stella Rimington led the Crown Prosecution Service, Betty Boothroyd presided over the House of Commons, Rosie Boycott became editor of *The Independent* and the *Daily Express*, Elizabeth Butler Sloss was appointed Lord Justice of Appeal, and in the City of London Nicola Horlick attracted widespread attention as a successful and highly paid executive who also ran a large family.

In spite of herself, then, Mrs Thatcher was almost certainly a radicalising force for British women; but her success inevitably posed a dilemma for many feminists whose own inclinations were towards socialism. If they loathed her opinions and policies, many felt some admiration for her, they refused to lend support to 'Ditch the Bitch' campaigns by fellow left-wingers, and they experienced a certain *schadenfreude* over the summary fashion in which the prime minister treated her hapless male colleagues in the Tory Party. Ironically, in the long run Thatcher had a galvanising effect, not so much on the women of her own party, but on *Labour* women, the effects of which were not to be fully appreciated until the mid-1990s when many of them sought a power base within the political mainstream.

### Feminism and Anti-Militarism

Perhaps the most striking and successful response of the women's movement to the Thatcher era lay in the return to issues of war and peace. During the 1970s the women's peace movement had dwindled as the activists focussed on violence in the domestic context. But during 1980–1 a new and revitalised movement sprang up centred around the Greenham Common peace camp at Newbury in Berkshire.<sup>4</sup> There are several explanations for this revival. Some women came to feel that women's liberation was perpetuating the male value system in respect to violence. They were also unhappy about the campaign, especially in the United States, for equality for women within the armed forces. Above all, the growing awareness of the dangers posed by nuclear accidents, both abroad in the Soviet Union and in America, and at home at Windscale in Cumbria, wholly undermined official claims that nuclear power was safe. The Thatcher government's obstinate insistence that nuclear power stations were both desirable and economically viable, which was eventually shown to be untrue, was a further provocation. By

the end of the decade awareness of the link between plutonium production in nuclear reactors and the manufacture of nuclear weapons presented opponents of the nuclear industry with an argument which attracted wide public sympathy. Consequently, the news in October 1979 that 140 Cruise Missiles with nuclear warheads were to be stationed in Britain gave a focus for a new campaign fuelled by the knowledge that the policy was a NATO decision on which parliament had not been consulted. When the Ministry of Defence announced that ninety-six Cruise Missiles would be stationed at Greenham Common a campaign was launched by Joan Ruddock, then a local Labour Party activist and Citizens Advice Bureau worker.

Whether the anti-nuclear campaign that emerged from these circumstances was a *feminist* cause aroused some disagreement. The women only groups were seen as divisive within the peace movement, and at first organised feminism was slow to take up the issue. But from 1980 onwards local groups sprang up spontaneously; and the Cruise issue was effectively articulated by *Spare Rib* when it wrote about it under the heading 'Take the Toys from the Boys'.<sup>5</sup> Then in the summer of 1981 a group of women organised a march from Cardiff to Greenham Common under the banner 'Women for Life on Earth', an expression which captured the wider concerns over the way in which male-led science and technology was steadily destroying the earth – a kind of eco-feminism. 'Women for Life on Earth' was thus a spontaneous movement which welled up from the grass roots and was not closely involved in the ideological debates of the women's movement; but it effectively accelerated the momentum of women's liberation during the 1980s. One of the most striking aspects of the campaign was the way in which it recaptured – for the only time in the twentieth century – something of the élan and the tactics of the Edwardian suffragettes. By chaining themselves to the perimeter fence at Greenham Common, by fixing hundreds of domestic artefacts to it, by encircling the whole base as a human chain, by cutting the wire and entering land from which they were banned, and by continuing to camp on the Common in the face of eviction orders, the women brilliantly symbolised the issue and offered a challenge to male space and male authority. Like the suffragettes they argued that a woman-only campaign would maximise non-violence in confrontations with the police or troops. As a result, by 1982 the peace camp had achieved a high profile which was maintained by a series of court cases leading to sentences in Holloway for some of the women involved.

In spite of this success, Greenham Common continued to generate

some dissension within the wider movement; some feminists regarded it as little more feminist than Women's Institutes, as too biased towards maternalism, and as a symptom of the decline of women's liberation rather than of its revitalisation. Nonetheless the peace camps continued through the 1980s; and though the government stubbornly maintained its policy, the women's message gradually got through to the country at large. Polls showed that a higher proportion of women than men opposed both nuclear weapons and the nuclear industry, and this helped to bring about a broader change in the political stance of women as a whole which became evident during the 1990s. The campaign also left its mark on the women's movement in that it accelerated the shift away from Socialist feminism towards an emphasis on gender difference and on the positive celebration of a woman-centred culture.

### The Revolution Continues

However unfavourable the political configuration of the 1980s and 1990s may have been, an empirical approach to the period suggests that the changes that had occurred in women's lives in the previous decade were by no means checked; if anything they accelerated. Nowhere was this more apparent than in marriage and motherhood. The marriage rate, which had reached its peak in Britain in the early 1970s, fell by about half between 1971 and 1991. To a large extent marriage was being replaced by cohabitation which increased ninefold – from 3 to 26 per cent – among single women aged twenty to forty-nine years between 1978 and 1993; in this period it became almost usual to cohabit prior to marriage. In the process the old double standard in sexual relations greatly diminished. On the other hand women continued to be the victims of violence within and outside marriage. In 1981 a conference of eight hundred women organised by Women Against Violence Against Women helped to focus the debate on this issue, and feminists regularly attacked judges who treated offences involving rape too lightly. The House of Lords ruling on marital rape in 1981 marked an important victory in this struggle.

Increasingly in this period women succeeded in limiting the effects of child-bearing on their lives. By 1990 the average age for giving birth had risen to twenty-seven years, and to twenty-five for the first child. Moreover, it was estimated that 21 per cent of all women born in 1965 would remain childless. As a result, statisticians expected the population of Britain to begin to fall for the first time since the Black Death.