

## Carla and Margaret Thatcher

Although almost no women had formal power during Mrs Thatcher's premiership, several were important in what might be called her court. They testified to aspects of her character which men tended to understand less well. In the opinion of Carla Powell, [her policy advisor] Charles's vivacious Italian wife, who frequently gave Mrs Thatcher informal assistance with clothes and home decoration, "everything about her was totally, totally feminine. She adored the details of clothes. I called her 'La Bionda' ['The Blonde'] because she loved the boys [her private secretaries]."

**M**rs Thatcher liked the way they prepared her for interviews and public appearances, and "the boys" seemed to understand this. Robin Butler, her principal private secretary, used an equestrian metaphor about getting her ready for Prime Minister's Questions in Parliament: "It was important that there was the right amount of sweat on the flanks."

With Mrs Thatcher, Carla Powell continued, "everything was a woman thing". It was important not to upstage the Prime Minister. She recalled being lectured by Robin Butler: "Remember that Mrs Thatcher is a woman, so don't overdress as you usually do."

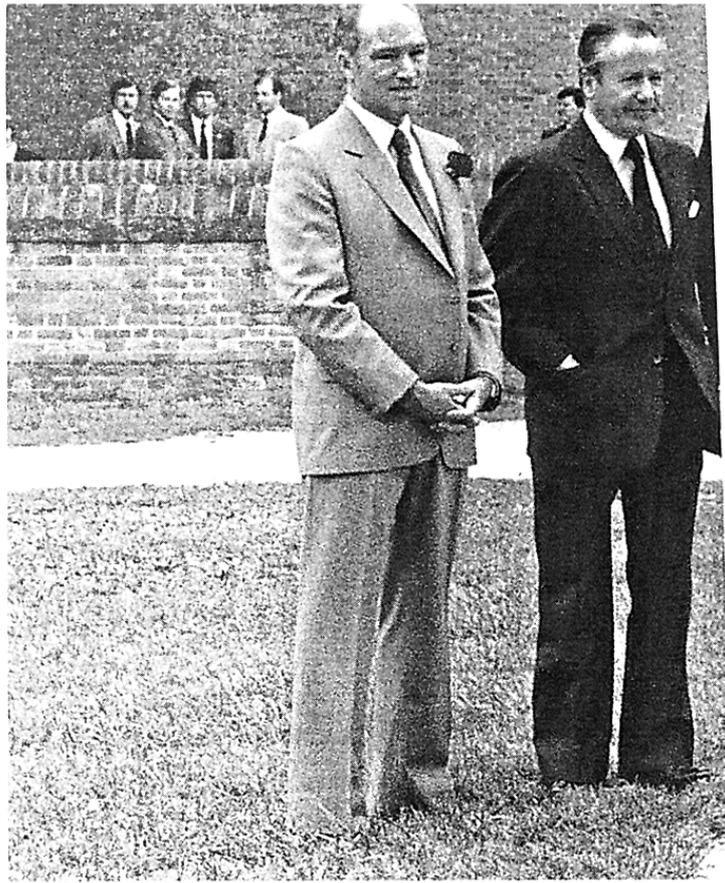
Her own marriage was undoubtedly strong and even, according to Carla Powell's testimony, which differs in this from the consensus, flirtatious. She recalled a scrap of dialogue. Denis: "You know I don't like you dressed in black." Mrs Thatcher: "I have to. I'm the Prime Minister." "Then Denis made a 'go on with you!' gesture."

According to Cynthia Crawford [her long-standing assistant], however, the marriage was "not a huge love affair, though they were great soul mates", and Mrs Thatcher always felt uneasy about Denis's first marriage, whose break-up had hurt him greatly. "Crawfie," she once said, "I shall always be only the second Mrs Thatcher."

Mrs Thatcher was ready to "use her femininity". She could be "totally, utterly ruthless", and part of this was to do with her idea of the role of her sex. Once she came across Carla Powell crying over some argument. She tried to comfort her in her trouble and then said: "Carla, if a woman takes on a battle, she has to win." This was one of her strongest beliefs, and it may explain why she was not instinctively magnanimous. She believed men would close ranks against a woman: every inch had to be fought for.

Mrs Thatcher was often criticised by prominent women and by feminists for not doing enough for the cause of her sex. Certainly she was in no hurry to seek out and surround herself with female talent in Parliament, but she kept in mind the pressures which women could experience in a man's world. On one occasion, her private office complained to her that too many ministers' wives were trying to get in on their husbands' official trips abroad, "often with a fairly flimsy justification". Would she intervene? "I think not," wrote Mrs Thatcher. "Some wives have a rotten time because husbands are away so much and late at the House so often that the odd visit is a kind of compensation." It should also be said, however, that most, though not all, ministers' wives considered themselves more or less ignored by Mrs Thatcher.

She visibly preferred the conversation of the men. She also did not necessarily take the woman's side in



questions of equality, and did not always realise that this might be held against her as indicating a lack of sisterly feeling. When the question of women priests came up, for example, she was instinctively against it, worrying that it would split the Church.

The men in her Cabinet had resources deriving from male camaraderie in public schools, university, the Armed Services and clubs. She was outside all of that and had to prevent herself being suffocated by it.

Her situation led her to odd behaviour: "To assert her will, this very feminine woman had to - or at least chose to - adopt a strident tone with nearly all of her colleagues. At times her style was abusive, rude and unpleasant." Butler, one of her closest aides, was in many ways an admirer who came to believe that the only thing that history would remember about him and many of his colleagues was that they had worked for Mrs Thatcher. But he shared some uncomfortable feelings about her. "My heart always fell when I had to sit next to her," he recalled. She had no small talk, and he felt "at risk". Dealing with her face to face was "like feeding a fierce animal".



**First among equals: the G7 summit in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1983; left to right, Pierre Trudeau, Gaston Thorn, Helmut Kohl, François Mitterrand, Ronald Reagan, Yasuhiro Nakasone and Amintore Fanfani**

**Right: flying to China with Geoffrey Howe, then Foreign Secretary, in 1984**

**Left: with Cecil Parkinson, Francis Pym and Michael Heseltine in 1983**

**Mother and daughter**



Over the bank holiday weekend in May 1984, Mrs Thatcher helps Carol to decorate her new home - a rare moment of shared domesticity. Because of her own attention to dress, Mrs Thatcher

used to fret about Carol's more casual attitude. This was connected in Mrs Thatcher's mind, thought Carla Powell, with her longing for her daughter to get married.