**A ‘mixture of Britannia and Boadicea’: Dorothy Crisp’s Conservatism and the limits of right-wing women’s political activism, 1927-1948**

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Abstract

Dorothy Crisp is known for being the militant Chairman of the British Housewives League (BHL) after the Second World War, but historians have failed to recognize that her views and actions were the culmination of over twenty years of right-wing journalism and political activism through which she tried to influence the Conservative Party. This article re-evaluates Crisp’s Conservatism and her political career. It asks why such a powerful pro-Conservative female activist failed to secure a place within Conservative politics during the 1930s and the 1940s. In doing so, it shows that Crisp was not willing to conform to traditional gender roles inside the Party or the broader Conservative movement and that she was a vocal advocate for gender equality. It was the combination of her attitude towards women’s issues and her older brand of imperialist, ultra-patriotic, anti-statist Conservatism that was unusual for a right-wing woman in this period. Crisp’s views on women’s issues did not fit the domesticity agenda of the BHL or that of the ‘Tory women’s tradition’, which could not provide her with an opportunity to achieve her career goals. The article also explores how the Party handled challenges from independent right-wing activists, especially women, in a period when ‘one-nation’ Conservatism was dominant. It engages with recent debates about ‘Conservative feminism’ and argues that Crisp was also an important figure because she kept alive the model of the independent radical female Conservative, which would become the hallmark of Margaret Thatcher’s politics a generation later.

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In May 1947 the Conservative MP Cuthbert Headlam attended a meeting of the British Housewives’ League (BHL) at which its Chairman Dorothy Crisp gave a speech. Headlam recorded his impressions in his diary: ‘It seems from what Miss Crisp says that women are much wiser than men ⎯ that all “politicians” are fools or knaves ⎯ etc., etc. ⎯ I am disappointed with Miss Crisp of whose oratory I had heard so much.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Crisp’s rhetoric challenged Headlam’s Conservatism because just three years earlier he had argued that ‘women are not fitted for politics ⎯ and their cry for equality with men is only raised by the disgruntled ones ⎯ not, as a rule, by the mothers and wives’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Headlam attended the meeting because he was curious about the BHL’s attacks on the Labour government’s austerity politics and the welfare state, but he left it dismayed at the thought that housewives were now challenging the legitimacy of a predominantly male parliamentary politics.[[3]](#footnote-3) If Headlam thought that the ‘Tory women’s tradition’⎯centred on the defence of the home and the family⎯could be restricted indefinitely to a deferential women’s organization inside the Conservative Party, then he would have been shocked by the scale of Crisp’s political ambitions.[[4]](#footnote-4) Crisp had already endorsed Suffragette-style violence and announced that she wanted to transform the non-partisan BHL into a new women’s party.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Crisp was a strong personality and the BHL had some influence on political debates about rationing in post-war Britain, but historians have failed to recognize that her views and actions were the culmination of over twenty years of right-wing journalism and political activism through which she tried to influence the Conservative Party. Crisp was a prolific journalist, the founder of her own publishing company, an associate of right-wing pressure groups, a parliamentary candidate on two occasions, and, later the target for gossip and scandal.[[6]](#footnote-6) In no sense should she be considered a marginal character, but no private papers survive to document her career.[[7]](#footnote-7) She is mostly absent from the historiography and those works that do mention her only cite her book *The Rebirth of Conservatism* (1931).[[8]](#footnote-8) This is unfortunate because she was part of a younger generation of middle-class female activists who came to political prominence after the passing of universal suffrage in 1928. Unlike most women who succeeded at the highest levels of the Party she was not related to prominent male Conservatives who could have helped her establish a political career. But, more importantly, she was not willing to conform to traditional gender roles inside the Party or the broader Conservative movement, and she was a vocal advocate for gender equality. It was this attitude towards women’s issues, combined with her older brand of imperialist, ultra-patriotic, anti-statist Conservatism, which was unusual for a right-wing woman in this period. However, other prominent Conservative women shared some aspects of her politics and her high profile means that she is a figure in need of serious historical evaluation.

This article explores why such a powerful pro-Conservative female activist failed to secure a place within Conservative politics and why she ended up as the Chairman of a women’s organization. It asks whether it was mostly Crisp’s Conservatism, her political radicalism, or her sex that held her back in terms of influencing the Party. It uses Crisp’s largely unsuccessful political career as a window through which to re-examine the roles of journalism and pressure group politics in promoting intellectual cultures of Conservatism.[[9]](#footnote-9) It shifts attention away from conventional organization-focussed histories of women’s involvement in the Party by offering a valuable insight into women’s careers within the Conservative movement and the obstacles that they encountered.[[10]](#footnote-10) Furthermore, in taking Crisp’s writing seriously, it focusses on women’s agency rather than the issues of men’s attitude to the introduction of women into the Conservative Party or its construction of home-based appeals to attract newly-enfranchised women voters.[[11]](#footnote-11) Krista Cowman has highlighted ‘the rarity of specific articulations of party-political philosophy amongst Conservative women’.[[12]](#footnote-12) An in-depth study of Crisp’s journalism restores her ‘voice’ to interwar debates about Conservative thought and addresses an important gap in the historiography. At the same time, Crisp’s career is used throughout the article to explore how the Conservative Party handled challenges from independent right-wing activists, especially women, in a period when ‘one-nation’ Conservatism was dominant. In doing so, it throws new light on the scope of the roles available to such women in politics more generally.

The article engages with a new wave of scholarship on right-wing women. Clarisse Berthezène and Julie Gottlieb have argued that historians need ‘to challenge the focus, agenda and paradigms of both orthodox political history and gender studies and think, in Thompsonian terms, about the *making* of Conservative women’.[[13]](#footnote-13) They are also interested in exploring ‘the tenability of ‘Conservative feminism’ and whether or not we need to focus more on differentiating ‘between feminism and other forms of women’s political empowerment’.[[14]](#footnote-14) Berthezène’s and Gottlieb’s work builds on Beatrix Campbell’s classic account of the role of ‘iron ladies’ in British politics. Campbell argued that the Party ‘created a culture that embraced women’, but it also ‘celebrated their subordination’.[[15]](#footnote-15) On Margaret Thatcher’s relationship with the ‘Tory women’s tradition’, she argued that Thatcher was ‘a model neither of traditional femininity nor feminism, but something else altogether’. Thatcher embodied a ‘female power’ that united ‘patriarchal and feminine discourses’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Crisp never identified herself as a feminist but she addressed women’s issues and promoted gender equality before she became leader of a women’s organization that was committed to defending the domesticity of the housewife. This article explores the contradictions in Crisp’s thought in response to debates about ‘Conservative feminism”’ and ‘iron ladies’, and, in doing so, it identifies some of the idiosyncrasies of her politics and personality.

The lack of any private correspondence or information to detail Crisp’s background and career means that her two published memoirs, *A Life for England* (1946) and *A Light in the Night* (1960), are indispensable. Inevitably, this means that some of the episodes narrated in this article are based solely on Crisp’s memoirs and her personal rendering of them. Whenever possible, corroborating evidence has been found to support her claims, at least in terms of the basic facts, and no evidence has been found to challenge the authenticity of her claims. Crisp was born in Leeds on 17 May 1906.[[17]](#footnote-17) She was an only child, her father’s family were High Church Tories, and her mother’s family were non-conformists. Although Crisp’s father had once been a railway breaksman and her mother a tailoress, the family made most of its income from renting out its recently acquired property. This meant that she enjoyed a relatively privileged middle-class upbringing, first attending an Anglo-Catholic convent school, then relocating to Thoresby High School in Leeds, which prepared her for the University of Oxford’s entrance examination. Crisp’s mother supported her financially while she was a struggling writer in the late 1920s and early 1930s.[[18]](#footnote-18) Crisp then sold one of the family’s properties to pay for the publication of some her political books in 1938-39. But as she later admitted, “It did not seem when I was in my teens that there was any particular compulsion on me ever to earn.”[[19]](#footnote-19) These circumstances made it possible for her to envisage careers in journalism and politics.

As Kim Reynolds revealed, ‘Dorothy Crisp had a vision that she must become prime minister, in order to save England and the empire’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Therefore, she joined the Conservative Party when she was sixteen years old, she formed a local branch of the Junior Imperial League, and she spoke at meetings prior to City Council elections in 1923. She passed the Oxford entrance examination and went up to read economics and philosophy in 1925, but she soon quit her studies to travel around Europe. Before she embarked on her trip she decided to try ‘to revive the political world through the medium of newspapers’. She spent most of her time in Vienna where she found the political tension exhilarating, writing that ‘the open fear of but half-concealed mob rule was to me at the same time comic-opera, tragedy, and a realisation that I am one of those lunatics who are never half so alive as when in the presence of physical danger’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Crisp’s experience in Austria put her out of sympathy with the British public’s desire for a more ‘peaceable’ age between the wars.[[22]](#footnote-22) But her trips allowed her to cut her teeth as a journalist writing articles for the *Yorkshire Post* about her experiences.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Crisp voted for the first time in the 1929 general election, but after the Party’s defeat she abandoned her membership because of its ‘appeasement’ of socialism.[[24]](#footnote-24) She remained a critical friend of the Party throughout the 1930s and early-1940s, focusing most of her energy on writing about Conservatism while working with pressure groups that were both critical of and sympathetic towards the Party. After she failed to persuade the Party to adopt her as an independent Conservative candidate during the Second World War she turned her attention to the idea of leading a popular women’s movement. Crisp’s Chairmanship of the BHL was controversial but when she resigned in February 1948 she suffered a series of personal tragedies that ended her career as a political activist. Crisp’s husband, John Becker, who was employed as a special constable, was shot dead while he was off duty in Singapore. The incident occurred just four days before the birth of her second child and she spent the next three years fighting the British government for a widow’s pension. Crisp also ignored a bankruptcy order that had been filed against her, which culminated in her prosecution in March 1958 for obtaining credit while being a declared undischarged bankrupt. She served seven months in Holloway Prison and her troubles continued because she served two more terms in prison during the 1960s.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This article does not dwell upon Crisp’s legal difficulties, which began after she had left the political scene. Instead, it explores Crisp’s career in three sections. The first discusses the nature of her Conservatism, her attitude towards gender, and, her support for Christian values and class hierarchies. The second explores Crisp’s attempts to build herself a political career through her work for pressure-groups and the press during the 1930s and early 1940s. The third examines Crisp’s two failed attempts to become an MP during the war. It then considers why her leadership of a right-wing women’s organization, especially one that was limited to improving the daily lives of housewives, was always likely to be divisive and problematic after 1945.

**CRISP’S CONSERVATISM AND HER VIEWS ON GENDER**

Crisp’s first publication was a letter she sent to the *Yorkshire Post* in March 1927, which was written in response to a male Conservative who used the initials J.H.P. to attack the proposed extension of the franchise.[[26]](#footnote-26) Crisp argued that some older men displayed a ‘complete ignorance of politics’ and that her passing of the Oxford entrance examination proved she should not have to wait ten years for the vote. ‘Justice demands that sex should no longer be made the grounds of any sort of disqualification’, she wrote, ‘What do J.H.P.’s twenty-one years’ old male acquaintances know of politics? There are many young men under thirty who are “dole-drawers” and men “on the Guardians”, but, while J.H.P. does not like this, he does not propose removing their political powers—the only course consistent with justice’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Her intervention stimulated much comment from Conservatives who were persuaded to accept her as deserving of the vote, but most regarded her as the exception to the ‘rule’—that most young women were ‘flappers’ and could not be trusted to vote the ‘right’ way.[[28]](#footnote-28) Crisp’s combative start in politics was based on her knowledge of political campaigning on the streets of Leeds and Edinburgh.[[29]](#footnote-29) She recognized that women activists were a vital part of the Party’s electoral machine and thought that votes like hers could be relied upon to help the Party win in 1929.

But the Party’s defeat and the threat of socialism forced her to rethink her Conservatism and her support for democracy. She wrote several articles for Leo Maxse’s *National Review*. In one of her most important articles, she argued that Conservatives needed to make more speeches, write more pamphlets, and publish more articles so that socialists would not be able to dominate intellectual debate in the country. Her ‘true Conservatism’ emphasized the importance of low taxation, respect for property ownership, higher rates of interest on savings, the abolition of death duties, individual liberty, Christian values, voluntary service, and minimum levels of state intervention in social policy. She adopted Jean Bodin’s argument that the state was not the sum of individuals but ‘a group of groups’. Clearly, she was attracted to Bodin’s arguments because they downplayed the idea of an organised state and favoured families (and their property) as the natural foundations for authority, even if they would still be expected to live under a sovereign authority.[[30]](#footnote-30) But her views on democracy and the British constitution were at odds with those of the interwar Party leadership. She argued for the ‘resurrection of the British Constitution’ ⎯ a rebalancing of powers between the monarch, House of Lords, and House of Commons. The monarch and a reformed House of Lords would play larger roles in governing the nation, even if the Commons would be ‘strengthened’ thanks to the abolition of the ‘pauper’s vote’ and the raising of the voting age to 25 years.[[31]](#footnote-31) The election of the second Labour government forced Crisp to accept that most 21 year olds were not educated enough to use their vote ‘responsibly’ (meaning to vote Conservative).

Crisp claimed that her article attracted the attention of parliamentarians at Westminster, including the Labour MP Oliver Baldwin who urged her to write *The Rebirth of Conservatism*. Crisp persuaded the Conservative MPs John Buchan and Oliver Stanley to write the book’s introduction and conclusion respectively. At Buchan’s request she agreed to include essays by younger Conservatives from the universities like the future cabinet minister John Boyd-Carpenter. The book served as a rallying point for young Conservatives and its publication gave her access to a wider Conservative readership. The historian Arthur Bryant read Crisp’s manuscript and recommended it for publication, which led him to invite her to write an article for the *Ashridge Journal* in 1931.[[32]](#footnote-32) Crisp discussed her years of canvassing for the Party and she confirmed her distrust of Britain’s new democracy, but when discussing what Conservatives should do to mitigate the consequences she admitted that the curtailment of universal suffrage and the reforming of the constitution were impractical suggestions. Instead, she advised Conservatives to ‘preach’ Conservatism: ‘To work directly on the average person is the task for us all.’[[33]](#footnote-33) This message matched the Party’s thinking because Conservative Central Office (CCO) founded Ashridge College to address a deficit of Conservative voices in political education.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Crisp did not often refer to women in *The Rebirth of Conservatism*, but when she did her comments hinted at an unwavering commitment to gender equality that was an important feature of her politics. She drew attention to inequalities in the law governing marriage and divorce, and argued that ‘the whole of the laws relating to sex need rearranging and codifying’. Her plans for the reforming of the constitution included roles for ‘natural senators of both sexes’, which challenged the rule that women could not sit in the House of Lords. But the only subjects that Crisp discussed at length were birth control and maternity care. Citing the high number of women who died in childbirth every year, she argued for special inquests into maternal deaths and for a new ‘army’ of women doctors to be trained to deal with maternity care. However, Crisp’s views on birth control were more problematic. She advocated sterilization policies for working-class women with large families who could not maintain their homes. Crisp saw these options as political alternatives to state-sponsored slum clearance, which she believed undermined the rights of property owners instead of punishing the ‘misbehaviour’ of tenants. Therefore, she wanted birth-control clinics to be opened ‘in connection with the maternity home’ and she called for ‘the ladies of the district’ to volunteer to raise money for their endowment.[[35]](#footnote-35)

There was a major difference between ideas of voluntary and compulsory sterilization. Crisp did not elaborate on her views in her future writings, probably because such ideas became untenable after the Nazi Party’s rise to power in Germany in 1933, but it is likely, because of her unbending commitment to individualism and her dislike of state intervention, that she would not have endorsed compulsory eugenics-based policies. As John Macnicol has argued, ‘we can find endless examples of major public figures who made quasi-eugenic utterances at one time or another and yet played no part in the movement. Eugenics may have provided them with a scientific justification of their class loyalties, but it was not the driving force behind the formation of those loyalties’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Crisp was not a member of the Eugenics Society and her interest in sterilization was driven by her class-based prejudices and her promotion of individualism, personal responsibility, and economic freedom.[[37]](#footnote-37)

It was not until Crisp published *The Commonsense of Christianity* (1942) that she discussed women’s issues in more depth. Crisp wrote the chapter ‘Christ and Sex’ in 1936, but the editors she approached refused to publish it.[[38]](#footnote-38) Her arguments about women were used to justify her view that the influence of the churches was in decline. As a Christian Conservative she lamented this in general terms, but she suggested that one of the reasons for this trend was that churchmen had misled the public for generations about issues relating to women. Crisp wanted to weaken society’s attachment to traditional gender roles because ‘Christ taught that sex is an accident of this life, and of this life only; something which causes some individuals more concern than others, but of which He had very little to say and certainly no specific rules to offer’.[[39]](#footnote-39) Crisp believed in her own readings of Christ’s interactions with women and her views on the declining influence of the churches were similar to those of Dean Inge who used his own journalism to highlight a generational, moral revolt against Puritanism. Inge was interested in a more ecumenical church and he admitted that he often found himself ‘on the side of the new morality against the old’ when it came to the questions of marriage and birth control.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Crisp tried to strike a balance between challenging some of the prevailing orthodoxies of Christian Conservatism and defending Christian values against the ‘permissive’ statements of public intellectuals. She attacked Cyril Joad and Bertrand Russell for encouraging women’s use of birth control as a means of enabling ‘the pleasures of sex to be tasted without its penalties’. She argued that without the right values and motivations sex was of little importance. She also rejected the view that marriage was always sacred and divorce automatically amounted to moral failure for women. She even rejected prostitution ‘less for its unchastity than for its gross injustice’ and praised the Victorian feminist and social reformer Josephine Butler for having fought to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act, which had imprisoned women prostitutes without punishing their male clients. But again the family was identified as the bedrock of society: ‘Ordered living involves the maintenance of the family and Christ certainly did not teach that one had the right to flout the rules and customs of the community, the political unit.’ She thought that the law should be liberalized so that women could escape ‘immoral’ marriages and have access to reproductive health care, but she never endorsed sexual license. She believed that if her interpretation of Christ’s teachings was adopted, ‘any inequality of marriage law, or of social customs and habit, whether in the training of youth, the payment of wages, the opportunities of education’ would come to an end. She prioritized legal changes but she understood that social inequality was also about ‘the thousand and one little nastinesses…that corrode individual lives without ever approaching a court of law’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Crisp accepted that women would have to work hard to change public attitudes both at home and in the workplace, but she recognised religious views as potential stumbling blocks to cultural change.

Crisp was a determined advocate of women’s rights, but she did not want to devote all of her time to women’s issues because she wanted to influence the broader outlook of the Party and make her name in Conservative circles. She showed little interest in playing a significant role in the women’s movement and her only direct link to the suffragette experience was through Flora Drummond’s right-wing Women’s Guild of Empire; she spoke at some of its meetings during the early 1930s.[[42]](#footnote-42) Her Conservatism promoted patriotism, imperialism, and anti-socialism, which limited her interest in women’s groups that were associated with the left. She criticized ‘that huge and typical meeting of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, whereat war memorials and salutations of the Flag were denounced as “militarist symbols”’.[[43]](#footnote-43) Crisp’s decision to argue for gender equality probably had little to do with her knowledge of the women’s movement or her reading of the bible. It was likely based on her own experience, her political ambitions, her commitment to individualism, and her rejection of state-financed social reform, which would have pitched her against ‘new’ feminist reformers like Eleanor Rathbone.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Crisp looked to justify her views in new ways by referencing the historical profession and early anthropology. According to Crisp, the male historian’s ‘instinctive selection’ of themes and sources had resulted in histories that were dominated by men. Common phrases like ‘the position of women’ and ‘his attitude towards women’ submerged women’s individual identities beneath their sex.[[45]](#footnote-45) Crisp used Margaret Mead’s work to support her claim that gender roles in British society were culturally and socially constructed. Mead had found that cultural conditioning was more important than biology (or hereditary characteristics) for determining women’s and men’s behaviour.[[46]](#footnote-46) Crisp also used her own amateur ‘anthropology’ to weigh up the importance of gender, the individual, and social class in Britain. ‘In an unusually wide experience of people of very different classes, and some different nationalities’, she argued, ‘I have not found a single characteristic, capability, virtue or vice to be generally the property of either sex. People differ according to type of personality, or class. They do not differ according to sex’.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Crisp wrote that ‘the Englishman has but one motto—*Noblesse oblige*’. Her respect for the British class system was central to her Conservatism and she criticized socialists for believing in a continental ‘doctrine of equality’.[[48]](#footnote-48) She wanted to rejuvenate the ‘national character’, which she thought had been undermined by the rise of Labour and the challenge of mass democratic politics. Crisp’s case for maintaining Britain’s class system was built on her belief that it was an organic development based on generations of biological and environmental struggle. While she accepted ‘the equality of common humanity’ she insisted that this did ‘not abolish those differences between class and class which by a natural process have grown out of savagery, and distinctions of birth’. But if Crisp wanted to restore the influence of Britain’s aristocracy and maintain existing social hierarchies, her vision of a ‘Conservative state’ was partly meritocratic.[[49]](#footnote-49) She endorsed what other Conservatives termed ‘equality of opportunity’ because she wanted to make room for men and women of exceptional ability regardless of their social background, but she did not want the state to intervene to create a truly level playing field.[[50]](#footnote-50) Her ideas would only have provided marginal fluidity in terms of upward or downward social mobility. She wanted to maintain the influence of an elite culture based on the aristocracy, the ‘Elder Universities’, imperial interests, and Christianity.[[51]](#footnote-51) This meant she also disliked plutocrats who could make their fortunes in the space of a generation.[[52]](#footnote-52) She accepted the idea of social and cultural construction when it came to gender, but she was not willing to abandon her support for nobility and hereditary characteristics when it came to social class. Therefore, she valued ‘character’ in a very traditional way.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Crisp was driven by her view that her writings would provide her with a valuable platform to influence a predominantly male Conservative Party. It was going to be difficult to maintain her political credibility in elite Conservative circles if she promoted women’s issues continuously. However, she did write a wartime political novel on the subject of ‘sex consciousness’. *Aprons of Figleaves* provided Crisp with a less obvious way of showcasing some of the social difficulties encountered by ambitious women like herself. The novel’s plot centers on the daily lives of two members of the Hogarth family. Patrick Hogarth is a member of the House of Commons and the future inheritor of his father’s baronetcy, and his younger sister Jane, the real heroine of the story, is an independent-minded journalist and the author of a book on Empire Economic Unity. The sub-plot of the novel focuses on the dilemma between Jane’s determination to progress her career as a serious political writer and her growing love for the wealthy Canadian businessman John Doe, but it also compares the limited political potential of good Party men like Patrick to the greater promise of more spirited and original thinkers like Jane. Crisp never revealed if the character was modelled on herself, but clearly the two shared some similarities.[[54]](#footnote-54) It is unlikely that Crisp expected high-ranking male Conservatives to read the book, but in her memoir she did describe an interesting encounter with Lionel Berry, the son of Lord Kemsley and a Conservative MP from April 1943, in which he supposedly admitted amongst predominantly male company that he had not only read the book but hated its central character Jane.[[55]](#footnote-55) If Jane was based on Crisp’s experiences and personality it is not difficult to understand why she was so incensed by this encounter, but because it was a novel it would have been easy for her to play-down the views of her fictionalized characters.

It was difficult for Crisp to overcome deeply-embedded attitudes against politically-minded women among the Conservative elite. But if her views on gender equality were a distinctive feature of her Conservatism it is important to ask how similar or different her views were to those of other leading right-wing women in this period. As a means of comparison, it is useful to draw upon Julie Gottlieb’s recent work on the Conservative MPs Nancy Astor, the Duchess of Atholl, and Irene Ward. Crisp’s views were certainly out of line with those of Astor who was a self-styled feminist. Astor collaborated with many women’s organisations, was a regular champion of women’s causes on the home front, and an international feminist campaigner. She was also deeply implicated in the politics of appeasement and was a campaigner for world peace. Crisp shared Astor’s revulsion to the Nazi regime’s attitude towards women’s rights, but she would not have accepted Astor’s pacifism. Likewise, Crisp shared the Duchess of Atholl’s imperialism and her later anti-appeasement views, but she would not have agreed with Atholl’s anti-feminism and, despite their shared criticisms of German Nazism, she would have found it difficult to associate herself with a ‘Red Duchess’ in the 1930s. However, Crisp would have respected both of these women’s forceful personalities and willingness to speak out on important issues. In this respect, Crisp’s attitude towards Conservative politics was not in tune with Irene Ward’s outlook. Ward supported the National Government and appeasement, and she was a member of the British delegation at the League of Nations on several occasions in the late-1930s. Therefore, Ward clearly possessed the kind of personal and networking skills that effective political work or activism usually requires inside the Conservative Party.[[56]](#footnote-56) As we shall see, Crisp lacked these qualities.

Crisp was perhaps closer in her political outlook to Conservative women like Lady Violet Milner and Lady Edith Londonderry both of whom she knew personally. Eliza Riedi has shown that some influential Conservative women like Milner felt they were ‘pushing at the boundaries of acceptable activism’ in the early twentieth century. Milner had played an important role as a female right-wing political activist in the Edwardian era, but she had mostly adhered to established gender conventions. This continued into the interwar years when Milner restricted herself to influencing a ‘masculine’ imperialism through the promotion of her dead husband’s and brother’s views.[[57]](#footnote-57) Milner was 34 years older than Crisp, but as her private diary shows Crisp was a frequent visitor to her home during the 1930s.[[58]](#footnote-58) Both women were committed political activists and journalists who strongly believed in the British Empire, but Crisp’s outlook on women in politics was different from Milner’s because she was representative of a younger generation of right-wing women who came to political prominence after the passing of universal suffrage. She was never able to accept a gender-specific role on the right of British politics until she joined the BHL in the 1940s. Similarly, Crisp revealed in her memoir that she had struck up a friendship with Lady Londonderry after the latter had written to her to praise her book *England’s Purpose* in 1941. When the two women met Crisp was impressed by Londonderry’s intelligence and character. Crisp wrote, ‘Born a generation later, she would certainly have run a Government department with admirable skill…She has strong ideas on women’s part in public life, and her tremendous energy every now and then runs over in the direction of arranging some other women’s life for her ⎯ with the kindliest intent’.[[59]](#footnote-59) Crisp was attracted to Londonderry’s reputation as a ‘self-proclaimed sex warrior’ and her own views had much in common with Londonderry’s ‘distinctive brand of ultra-patriotic feminism’.[[60]](#footnote-60) Therefore, what made Crisp different from all of these prominent Conservative women was her specific combination of imperialist, ultra-patriotic, anti-statist, anti-appeasement, and, for want of a better word, ‘feminist’ views. But crucially her specific brand of Conservatism was coupled with an unwavering desire to challenge the boundaries of right-wing women’s political activism in this period.

**FORGING A POLITICAL CAREER: PRESSURE GROUPS AND JOURNALISM**

Crisp’s views were based on her own experiences of trying to break into the male-dominated worlds of politics and journalism. She aimed to inspire a large political movement and ‘force the Conservative Party to become healthy, decent and active’.[[61]](#footnote-61) But when she first approached the *Daily Mail* its editors told her that her name was not high-profile enough and she over-estimated its ability to publish politically challenging material. She wrote to Leo Maxse: ‘If I can make my name known in the [local] Conservative papers, it will, doubtless, be so much the better when the moment seems opportune to approach The Mail again. Without your introduction I might have written forever, but now I hope that its practical results are only delayed.’[[62]](#footnote-62) Rothermere, the *Daily Mail*, and Beaverbrook adopted a similar programme to her own when they launched the United Empire Party (UEP) in February 1930, but she did not play a role in its organization. Crisp claimed that she rejected the opportunity because she believed that she stood a better chance of success on her own.[[63]](#footnote-63) But it is possible that she was not taken seriously because at the age of 23 she was a young woman.

In July 1931 she corresponded with Ernest Benn and the Friends of Economy—a City group campaigning for municipal and national economic retrenchment. Benn was a Liberal, but he had supported the Conservatives in the 1929 general election because he thought they were more committed to economic liberalism and individualism. Benn invited Crisp to help organize a movement that could inspire youth to support their shared views. But when she tried to play an active role in the ‘Under Forty Movement’ she encountered sexism. The movement’s organizing committee consisted of a group of high-profile male political figures like the Earls of Feversham and Birkenhead, Lord Pentland, Tresham Lever, Lord Russell of Liverpool, and Quintin Hogg. According to Crisp, the movement’s *de facto* chairman, Tresham Lever, rejected her attempts to plan a series of mass meetings because he preferred a cautious approach: ‘If we hold one large meeting here in London and we have not said too much about it before-hand, we can, if it should be a failure, let it drop quietly without hurt to our political reputations.’ This attitude frustrated Crisp, but when the committee tried to exclude her from a public meeting at the Central Hall, Westminster, she was astonished:

I learnt to my utter amazement that a committee meeting had been called, including men whom I had brought into the movement but not myself … They were, apparently, so accustomed to some woman doing all the political work for them and then retiring with the nauseating humility of an Eastern handmaiden, when it came to taking the public stage, that they could think of nothing else.

Crisp was prevented from speaking from the platform, but when only 300 people turned up she was surprised to learn that the committee blamed her for the debacle.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Crisp convinced the committee to consider a new manifesto that she wrote herself, but apart from Hogg **‘**they all behaved like the man in the parable’.[[65]](#footnote-65) Undeterred, she published the manifesto inthe *National Review*. She emphasized permanent economic retrenchment, individualism, low taxation, the abolition of death duties, and the complete rejection of state insurance against unemployment and ill-health. She called for a reduction in the number of cabinet ministers and all unemployed men to be drafted into a territorial force until adequate work could be found. Controversially, she wrote, ‘It shall be a purpose of this movement … to promote a great national uprising, in the finest spirit of the Regular and volunteer forces’.[[66]](#footnote-66) Crisp’s virulent patriotic rhetoric was written for the *National Review* and it was not a call for fascist revolution, but for Conservatives who intended to forge a successful parliamentary career this language was alarming. By the time the manifesto was published the Friends of Economy, which did much to fuel the atmosphere of ‘national crisis’ in the autumn of 1931, had moved to support the National Government.[[67]](#footnote-67)

With the Under Forty Movement stalled, Crisp intensified her journalism in order to gather support for a patriotic movement.[[68]](#footnote-68) In the *National Review* she praised the efforts of two right-wing movements, the Legion of Loyalists and the English Mistery. Of the English Mistery, she explained, they ‘are convinced that a crash must come, and that, generally speaking, one can only ignore the present, and work steadily, each by completing the Tory character within himself, for the rehabilitation of the country when the worst has come’.[[69]](#footnote-69) As Dan Stone has written the English Mistery claimed they were not fascist, but they were dedicated to ‘the concepts of service to the monarch and *noblesse oblige*, and obsessed with the need to revive England’s emasculated hereditary aristocracy along with the medieval guild system’. The movement was also anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, and eugenicist.[[70]](#footnote-70) But Crisp never pledged her support to the Mistery and one of the reasons for this was her opposition to its anti-feminism. Crisp recalled that ‘none of their work … ever came to anything. I had no tears to shed over that for among their ideas, mainly taken in this instance at least from Ant[h]ony Ludovici, was that of male dominance in politics and public life, and I was not standing for that’. [[71]](#footnote-71) Ludovici was the Mistery’s main intellectual spirit and she was appalled by his attacks on women and Christianity. But her flirting with proto-fascist movements symbolized her frustration and the increasingly radical tone of her journalism.

Crisp then started writing a weekly political column for the *Saturday Review*. Lady Houston, its proprietor, was unaware of her role because she wrote under the name of her friend, Thomas Polson.[[72]](#footnote-72) Crisp insisted that articles written in her own name were often rejected by the *Saturday Review* because of her youth.[[73]](#footnote-73) The column gave her a regular opportunity to publicize her ideas, but it could not be used to make her reputation because readers were unaware that she was the author. Although she published occasional articles under her own name, the ruse under-scored the limits of her own ‘feminist’ sensibilities. On domestic affairs, she attacked the National Government for ignoring the ‘great suffering’ of the middle classes who she claimed were being taxed out of all proportion.[[74]](#footnote-74) She criticized Neville Chamberlain’s housing policies in the 1920s, and the more financially restrictive and market-orientated measures introduced by the National Government in the 1930s.[[75]](#footnote-75) Her anti-statist politics targeted the Widow’s and Old Age Pensions Act (1925). She also accused Baldwin of introducing ‘Socialism on a grand scale’, calling for his resignation.[[76]](#footnote-76) On foreign affairs, she promoted Britain’s ‘civilizing mission’ of empire.[[77]](#footnote-77) In December 1933 she seized upon the National Government’s poor performance in by-elections to accuse it of a lack of imperial endeavor. She blamed Baldwin for a lack of rearmament and criticized the government’s ‘cowardly’ diplomacy with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. [[78]](#footnote-78) Crisp believed that the Fascist powers could not be trusted because they would look to destabilize the British Empire.[[79]](#footnote-79) Her imperialism and her anti-Germanism prevented her from being seriously interested in fascism both at home and abroad. Like many Conservatives, she did attend a BUF meeting in March 1934 where she heard William Joyce speak about Oswald Mosley’s fascist ideas.[[80]](#footnote-80) But she was never seriously interested in the BUF. She would have rejected their opposition to a dominant aristocratic House of Lords, their plans to adopt a Corporate State and public works schemes, and their radical plans to transform British society and culture. Furthermore, she would not have been willing to play a secondary (or segregated) female role in any political movement and she would not have accepted the BUF’s ethos of ‘male-supremacy’.[[81]](#footnote-81)

Crisp’s plan to use her journalism and her association with right-wing pressure groups to influence the Party came to nothing during the 1930s. She was forced to accept Baldwin’s strategy ahead of the 1935 election: ‘When the choice lies between Mr. Stanley Baldwin and Sir Stafford Cripps, whatever the anger or contempt in our hearts, we can but act on the old saying, “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t know”.’ Crisp argued that the public’s ‘hearts yearn for the loyal and traditional policy of England and the Empire, the policy of the *Conservative and Unionist* Party, which is now so sparsely represented in the House of Commons’.[[82]](#footnote-82) But her radical Conservatism was crowded-out by a more moderate and successful anti-Labour effort. Crisp’s ability to write seriously about Conservative thought led to her publishing in a number of important periodicals, but she was an isolated figure because she was not willing to tone down her views to play a role in mainstream Conservative politics.

Therefore, Crisp could not have predicted a sudden change in fortune during the Second World War. Her nationalist and imperialist thought was now in demand and she continued to write for periodicals like *Everybody’s Weekly* and *Truth*. *Everybody’s* was a general interest consumer magazine and it appealed to a popular readership, which meant it incorporated a large amount of pictorials and photography.[[83]](#footnote-83) In it, Crisp published articles promoting the history of Britain’s contributions to the world, the importance of the British Empire, and Britain’s contribution to the war effort.[[84]](#footnote-84) She also wrote about religion and the ‘secrets of happiness’.[[85]](#footnote-85) But *Truth* was a well-known weekly political periodical that had a more select right-wing readership.[[86]](#footnote-86) It was controlled and edited by the Conservative journalist Colin Brooks between 1940 and 1952.[[87]](#footnote-87) In *Truth* she wrote articles attacking the Fabian Society and socialism.[[88]](#footnote-88) As Reynolds has also highlighted, Crisp broadcast for the BBC during this period, making two broadcasts on the *Calling All Women* slot on the Home Service in 1940, and, again on two occasions in 1942 on the themes of ‘British pride, courage, and distinctiveness’.[[89]](#footnote-89) In addition, Crisp worked as an unpaid public speaker for the Ministry of Information. But more importantly she published many books including the best-seller *England’s Purpose*, which was published by the commercial firm Rich and Cowan.[[90]](#footnote-90) In fact, Crisp’s publisher claimed that she wrote like a ‘mixture of Britannia and Bodicea’.[[91]](#footnote-91) As a result, Charles Eade, editor of the *Sunday Dispatch*, and Lionel Berry, editor of the *Daily Sketch*, approached her to write articles for their newspapers. She accepted Eade’s invitation, later claiming that she was glad she had rejected the *Daily Sketch* because its proprietor Lord Kemsley believed women should return to the home after the war. She argued she would have fought ‘to the limit—or beyond it—on that issue’.[[92]](#footnote-92) Her new column was a significant achievement because it was extremely difficult for women to become regular political commentators for national newspapers. Most were restricted to freelancing, working on features, or writing for women’s pages.[[93]](#footnote-93)

Crisp used her column to attack the coalition government’s interventionist policies. She contributed to a wave of anti-socialist thought that prepared the ground for Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (March 1944).[[94]](#footnote-94) Crisp publicized her pre-Hayekian fears of ‘state planning’, ‘controls’, and ‘totalitarianism’ throughout 1943. She warned her readers that state officials were being ‘reduced to a soulless cog in a ponderous machine’. She quoted the Liberal historian Ramsay Muir’s book *Civilisation and Liberty* (1940) in order to suggest that Britain’s civil service or ‘state bureaucracy’ was a foreign idea that had been adopted in the nineteenth century. She also referred to G.D.H. Cole’s and Herbert Read’s Fabian anthology *Programme for Victory* (1941) because it highlighted the importance of ‘tolerance, freedom, and diversity’ and warned against the potential links between centralized planning and ‘totalitarian despotism’.[[95]](#footnote-95)

Crisp used the political failures of the 1930s and the rise of dictatorships to justify ‘the reversal of practically every political trend’.[[96]](#footnote-96) She argued that the state could not cure unemployment without it becoming a dictatorship and that ‘the “profit motive” in the greediest individual is a weak thing compared with the determination of committees of bureaucrats’.[[97]](#footnote-97) She also urged the government to develop social services outside of the state (meaning voluntary action) so that individual freedom could be maintained and voters could not be bribed at election time.[[98]](#footnote-98) Much of her criticism was directed at Labour’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, Stafford Cripps, and the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison. She rejected their plans to use taxation to pay for ‘full employment’ policies and social services after the war.[[99]](#footnote-99)

But it was Crisp’s highlighting of the government’s Irish policy that drew the most publicity. Her first article on this subject attacked the De Valera government, which she referred to as a dictatorship. She pleaded for ‘England’ to impose one government on the whole of Ireland so that Britain’s enemies could not work within the British Empire.[[100]](#footnote-100) De Valera took such an exception to her article that he threatened to ban the *Sunday Dispatch* in Ireland. However, Eade refused to give in to De Valera’s demands and Crisp’s second article used an unpublished lecture by the former Prime Minister of Canada Lord Bennett to argue that under the terms of the Statute of Westminster Ireland could not be neutral if the British Empire was at war.[[101]](#footnote-101) She accused the British government of ‘appeasement’ and suggested that the politicians who were refusing to compel Ireland to end its neutrality ‘must go’.[[102]](#footnote-102) This resulted in the banning of the *Sunday Dispatch* in Ireland and the situation was only resolved when Eade agreed to publish an article by a Dublin-based journalist expressing Eire’s view on neutrality.[[103]](#footnote-103)

The episode marked the beginning of a strained relationship between Crisp and Eade. She believed his discontent related to the fact that he was close to the Prime Minister Winston Churchill; he was editing his speeches for publication. When Crisp approached Eade to discuss letters she had received that were critical of Churchill’s subservience to President Roosevelt, Eade told her that she would not be allowed ‘to write an article criticizing our official attitude to the United States directly, or even by implication’.[[104]](#footnote-104) After threatening to resign Crisp was allowed to write an article in response to five American senators who had criticized the British for using lend-lease funds to win influence in the Middle East and the Far East.[[105]](#footnote-105) But she claimed that they ‘fought over the article sentence by sentence’. When Eade rejected another of her articles the relationship broke down and she resigned because of the loss of her journalistic independence. She argued that this disagreement resulted in her being blacklisted by Fleet Street.[[106]](#footnote-106)

Crisp broke into the world of national newspapers during the Second World War, but it had taken her over a decade of hard work, the spending of a considerable amount of her own money, and the outbreak of a world war before she could establish herself as a high-profile political commentator. Her reception in Conservative circles throughout the 1930s certainly tells us something about the male clubbiness and Baldwinite moderation of interwar politics, even if she lacked some of the personal and networking skills that were required for effective political work and activism inside the Conservative Party. To what degree her early experiences of male chauvinism in Conservative circles contributed to her radicalism and her determination to refuse to play the Party game is impossible to know. But her notoriety during the Second World War did not result in her influencing the Conservative Party’s or the government’s policies. After her resignation it became difficult for her to publish her views, which is why she decided to explore the idea of standing for Parliament as an Independent Conservative candidate at the next by-election and setting up her own publishing company.

**FROM PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATE TO CHAIRMAN OF THE BHL**

Crisp believed she stood a chance of persuading the Conservative Party to back her as a parliamentary candidate because of her work for the *Sunday Dispatch*. When the Acton by-election was called for 14 December 1943 she gained the support of the Chairman of the London National Liberal Party Alfred Suenson-Taylor who tried to lobby officials at CCO on her behalf. But her attempts were thwarted by CCO and the chairman of the Acton Conservative Association. The latter argued it was too late to consider her candidacy. Yet, Crisp claimed that the Party’s General Director Robert Topping continued to let her and Suenson-Taylor believe that she stood a chance of getting Conservative backing eight days after the decision had been made.[[107]](#footnote-107) It is possible that her candidacy was rejected by the local association because of gender discrimination as this was a common occurrence at the time, but there is no evidence to suggest this was the case. The Party might have wanted to weaken her chances as an independent candidate because she had previously threatened CCO that she would run if the Party failed to back her.[[108]](#footnote-108) In the end, Crisp ran as an independent and circulated an election leaflet that highlighted the distinctive features of her Conservatism.[[109]](#footnote-109) But she was unlikely to win when so few independents were elected in this period.[[110]](#footnote-110)

Crisp’s main opponent was the Conservative candidate Henry Longhurst who was a famous golf commentator. He was also a ‘progressive’ Conservative on the left of the Party and a member of the Tory Reform Committee. When the election took place, Crisp came third and lost her deposit. Her high profile was not enough to overcome a candidate who had the official support of the coalition government, Winston Churchill, and an experienced election agent. Longhurst drew attention to Crisp’s unwillingness to play the party game:

it seemed to be accepting defeat with a rather ill grace, when she decided to stand as an “Independent Conservative”. We felt rather badly about this at the time, and, as she lived in the May Fair Hotel, I permitted myself to refer to her, ungallantly but with a certain degree of wit, as ‘the nightingale from Berkeley Square who wants to sing in Acton.’[[111]](#footnote-111)

In frustration, Crisp set up her own publishing company with the support of a Birmingham industrialist (she never revealed his name in her memoirs). Dorothy Crisp and Co., Ltd was used for the publishing of her own books and others who wrote about imperial and war-related issues. She argued that this gave her more political independence.[[112]](#footnote-112) She then ran as an independent candidate in the constituency of Westminster St George’s at the 1945 general election, but again she lost to an official Conservative candidate.[[113]](#footnote-113) Crisp was right to feel that the odds were stacked against her because of her sex, but first and foremost it was her independent Conservatism and behaviour that prevented her from being accepted by the Party.

Crisp had exhausted all of her opportunities to influence the Party, which is why she made the decision to join a women’s organization in March 1946. As she recalled, ‘I, in the first place through the intervention of a woman journalist, had become one of the committee of the British Housewives League … Non-party and critical of bureaucracy, it was made to measure where I was concerned. I very quickly became chairman, and the League very quickly became headline news’.[[114]](#footnote-114) What separated the BHL from other women’s groups was its unwillingness to tolerate the conditions of austerity that were being imposed on the housewife. When it became clear in early 1946 that austerity was going to get worse under the Labour government the BHL started to enjoy some success. It picked up momentum when it mobilized itself against bread rationing in July. But Crisp transformed it into a more professional movement. She wrote the BHL’s *Newsletter* and organized its large-scale public meetings. After she became Chairman in March 1947 the BHL claimed to have a membership of 80,000 members, but Hinton argued that a more accurate figure would be 15,000. The BHL attracted working-class housewives, but it was more representative of middle-class opinion. Its leadership was made up of middle-class women and it was most successful in middle-class suburbs.[[115]](#footnote-115)

Significantly, Crisp continued to use her maiden name professionally after her marriage, which was at odds with the traditional conservative culture of the BHL.[[116]](#footnote-116) She had met her future husband John Becker, a former captain in the Irish Guards and member of the Society for Individualists, during her ill-fated by-election campaign in Acton. Becker had volunteered to help run her campaign and he quickly became her chief political ally. They were married on 21 March 1945 and had their first child in 1946. The former Conservative MP Ida Copeland was the Godmother of Crisp’s daughter and, some years later, after Crisp had been declared bankrupt, she and her children lived at Trelissick House in Cornwall with Copeland. However, Crisp never mentioned Copeland by name in her second memoir probably to save her from any public association with a convicted criminal.[[117]](#footnote-117) Crisp, then, had her first child at the relatively late age of 39 and perhaps this explains the lack of a strong maternal identity in her politics, which other political women and maternalist feminists often displayed. This was true even when Crisp was Chairman of the BHL. Throughout her BHL days and afterwards her children were looked after by a nanny, although she did claim in her memoir that she home-schooled them herself for many years before she was sent to prison.[[118]](#footnote-118) Still, Crisp was no ordinary middle-class housewife.

Crisp’s chairmanship of the BHL resulted in two important changes. First, as Hinton revealed, ‘Crisp announced a new commitment to militant direct action⎯synchronized chanting outside Food Offices; harassment of Whitehall and Westminster with deputations arriving in non-stop relays; telephone blockades of the Food and Fuel Ministries’.[[119]](#footnote-119) She wrote in the BHL’s newsletter: ‘Our precious politicians are doing their best to turn the House of Commons and Party politics generally into a closed shop … And if they persist in that attitude they can leave us with no alternative save to adopt the short term policy ⎯ the policy of the militant suffragettes.’[[120]](#footnote-120) Crisp’s threat of violence was common, but she also identified the peaceful nineteenth century Anti-Corn Law League as the most appropriate model for the BHL. The second major change was her goal to convert the BHL into a women’s party. Crisp explained that ‘when the ground has been thoroughly prepared, it means candidates backed by ourselves, standing for, AND WINNING, seats both local and Parliamentary’.[[121]](#footnote-121) In August 1947 she spoke of running as many as 50 parliamentary candidates at the next general election and she claimed to have the financial backing of George Nelson, the Chairman of English Electric. Both of these changes ran counter to the original aims of the BHL.[[122]](#footnote-122)

It was Crisp’s militancy and her desire to unsettle the party system that propelled the BHL onto not only the national but the international stage. The American *Life Magazine* devoted a two-page pictorial to the BHL’s disorderly meeting at the Royal Albert Hall in June 1947 in which ‘white haired wives’ were pictured beating up young communist girls with their handbags.[[123]](#footnote-123) To a large extent this publicity depended on Crisp’s personality. The political cartoonist David Low portrayed her as ‘Dotty’ Crisp in a series of cartoons in the *Evening Standard* in June 1947.[[124]](#footnote-124) But in one of them he highlighted her place in a Tory pantheon of ideas and personalities, which had been used to rival the left since the 1930s (Figure 1). When the Party opened its ‘Trust the People’ exhibition in the Dorland Hall on Regent Street, which was meant to ‘educate’ the public about the Party’s tradition of support for social reform and organized labour, the *Evening Standard* argued that it was devoid of personalities and over-reliant on Party slogans. Low echoed leftist accusations that the BHL was secretly associated with the Conservatives. But in presenting her as the latest in a long line of Tory gimmicks he put her at the centre of his cartoon, recognizing her as one of the most prominent and important ‘Tory’ personalities of the day.

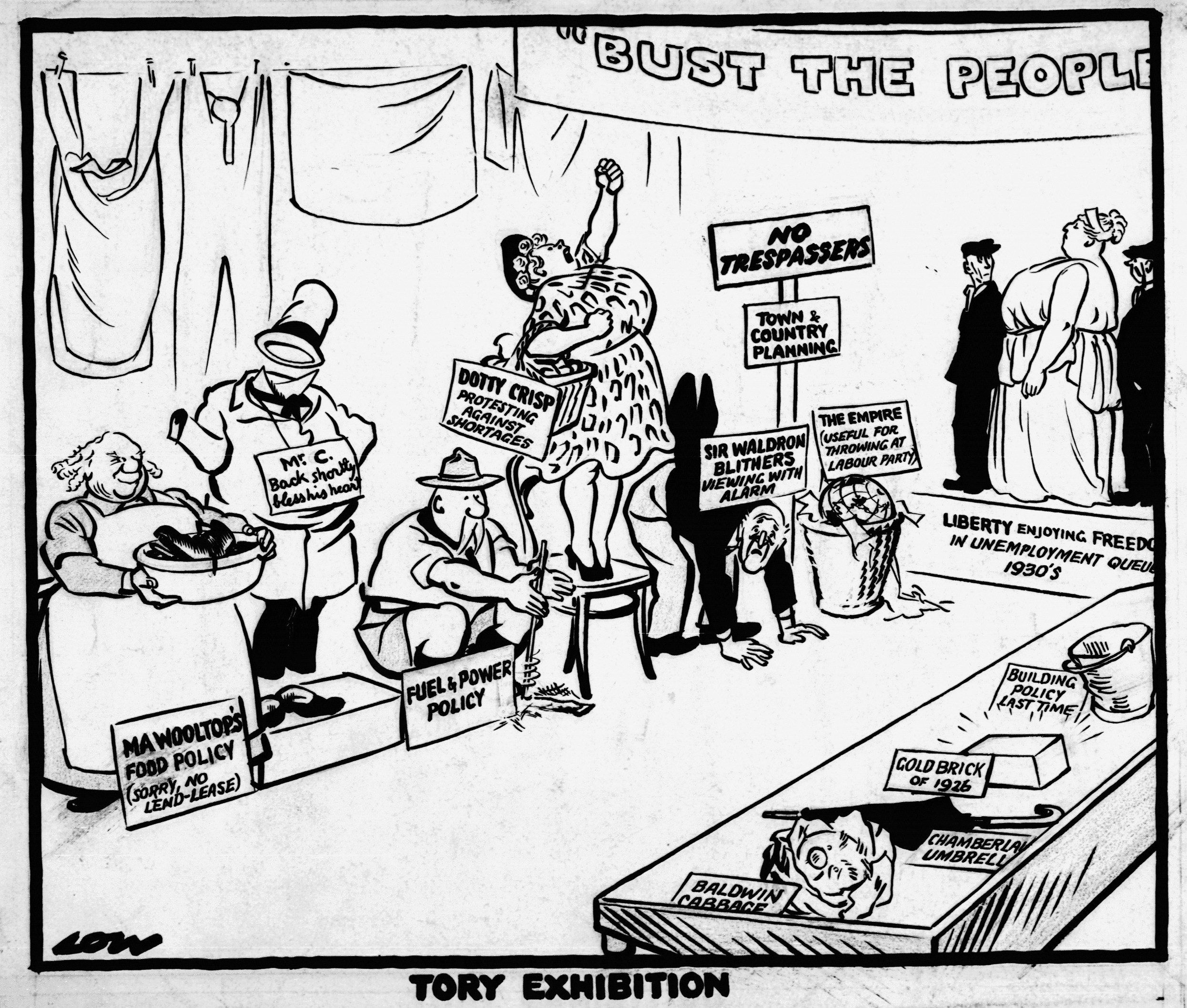


Figure 1⎯David Low, ‘Tory Exhibition’, *Evening Standard*, 12 June 1947 (David Low/ Solo Syndication).

Crisp’s status on the right was confirmed when the journalist Gordon Beckles wrote a profile of her life for *Leader Magazine*. His portrait was a patronizing one, using heavily gendered language to describe her appearance. In his words, Crisp was a ‘buxom, brown-eyed, voluble little woman’ who was ‘naturally furious’ at everything, which happened to match Low’s caricature perfectly. At some stage after the 1945 General Election Crisp seems to have adopted the stereotypical image of a middle-class member of the BHL.[[125]](#footnote-125) The plump matron figure was certainly an exaggeration, but the media commented on her increasingly elaborate hats and flamboyant style. Beckles’s account, which included a more recent photograph, testified to these facts, and because his article was heavily based on Crisp’s memoir he recognized her full history as a right-wing political activist and journalist. His headline ‘Housewife of England!’ confirmed that her own ambitions far exceeded those of the BHL.[[126]](#footnote-126)

The BHL remained non-party, even though Crisp corresponded with Lord Woolton and CCO to try to acquire funds.[[127]](#footnote-127) In fact, it was members of the BHL who were also members of the Party who challenged Crisp’s Chairmanship when she tried to adopt militant tactics and develop it into a women’s party. Crisp was accused of running the BHL like a ‘dictatorship’ and of mismanaging its finances, which attracted national press attention and damaged its reputation. Crisp survived the challenge, but the BHL was struggling for money.[[128]](#footnote-128) The negative publicity resulted in Crisp’s wealthy donors pulling out their financial support. At the same time, her bank recalled the overdraft for her publishing company. These developments caused major difficulties for the BHL because Crisp had been using these funds to produce the BHL’s *Newsletter* and to guarantee the rent for its office.[[129]](#footnote-129)

When Crisp announced her resignation as Chairman in February 1948 she explained to Woolton that she was willing to send a personal message to BHL members asking them to join the Conservative Party in exchange for continued funding for the movement and a new periodical, which she wanted to launch with the Conservative MPs Alan Lennox-Boyd and Ivor Thomas.[[130]](#footnote-130) As Hinton argued, her actions would have jeopardized the BHL’s political independence and it is unlikely that other members of the BHL were aware of them.[[131]](#footnote-131) Maguire suggests that Crisp resigned because she knew it could not continue in its current form without fresh funding.[[132]](#footnote-132) But it is clear from her correspondence with Woolton that she had already stated her intention to resign before asking him for financial support for the BHL.[[133]](#footnote-133) At the age of 41 Crisp was pregnant with her second child and she announced that she would be accompanying her husband on a tour of the Far East. In the *Daily Herald* she was quoted as saying, ‘I am keeping my membership of the League … but I shan’t be very active for many months to come’.[[134]](#footnote-134) It is more likely that she had to resign as Chairman on ‘personal grounds’, which is what she told Woolton, and that she was forced to accept her doctor’s advice to discontinue her political activities for the immediate future, which is what she wrote in her second memoir.[[135]](#footnote-135) In any case, Woolton’s refusal to give Crisp funds marked the end of her long relationship with the Party.[[136]](#footnote-136)

Crisp saw the BHL as a political vehicle primarily for herself so that she could become an independent Conservative MP in all but name. That said, the fact that Crisp was never a complete outsider or entirely hostile to the Party, but nonetheless a determined independent voice, made her a huge asset for a pressure group like the BHL when they looked to turn up the heat on the post-war Labour government’s austerity politics and the Conservative opposition. Crisp possessed all of the necessary skills to propel the BHL onto the national stage and her unique political position troubled the Party, and, forced it to take the plight of housewives more seriously, even if its promise to ‘Set the people free’ did not result in the ending of rationing altogether. But Crisp’s attempts to turn the BHL into a women’s party and her endorsement of violence damaged its reputation. It continued to limp on, but as one Conservative official who had attended a BHL meeting put it, ‘My impression was that without Dorothy Crisp the whole point and driving force of the movement had gone’.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Without Crisp the BHL would have failed to distinguish itself from other women’s organizations who were defending the values of home and family in the late 1940s. Campbell argued that ‘The banner of the Tory women’s tradition was initially carried after the Second World War by the British Housewives League’. She also argued that up until the establishment of the post-war welfare state right-wing women ‘had built their alliance with the traditional cause of Conservatism itself rather than with the causes of women’.[[138]](#footnote-138) But Crisp’s own views on women’s issues did not completely fit the domesticity agenda of the BHL, or that of the ‘Tory women’s tradition’. Her determination to create a women’s party and to get herself elected as an MP distinguished her from that tradition. For Crisp, the ‘Tory women’s tradition’ was not enough because it could not provide her with an opportunity to achieve her career goals, or the types of policies that most members of the Party were not interested in adopting. CCO and Conservative women’s leaders probably wanted little to do with Crisp because she was a threat to that tradition, which was recognized as important but still relegated to a ‘separate sphere’.[[139]](#footnote-139)

**Conclusions**

Crisp never accepted a gender-specific role in British politics until she joined the BHL. She succeeded in the world of newspapers because she established herself as a national political commentator, but her larger goal was to make her name in the male-dominated world of Conservative politics so that she could become Britain’s first female Prime Minister.[[140]](#footnote-140) In this respect, it is clear that she failed because her independent Conservatism was out of step with the Party. Crisp tried to find a place on the mainstream right of British politics before she turned to an alternative political movement to pursue her political ambitions. Fortunately for her, the BHL’s basic political agenda matched her own anti-statist concerns.

Crisp was influenced by the suffragettes in the sense that she was willing to adopt their methods of political militancy and in this respect she did represent genuine continuity with an older, rowdier political culture, which had declined with the onset of mass democracy after 1918.[[141]](#footnote-141) But Crisp wanted to win political power in any way possible, which is why she tried to use the BHL to revive the idea of an independent women’s party.[[142]](#footnote-142) As June Purvis has argued, the message of Christabel Pankhurst’s Women’s Party ‘appealed to a wide range of the female population, including middle-class and working-class employees such as schoolteachers and munition workers’.[[143]](#footnote-143) Therefore, Crisp would have had to construct a much broader appeal and she would have had to have had a stronger base among women’s organizations if she wanted to succeed with her idea for a women’s party.[[144]](#footnote-144) There were some similarities between Crisp’s politics and Pankhurst’s Women’s Party. Both women were strongly patriotic, anti-pacifist, and imperialist, and, Pankhurst had campaigned for the better coordination of rationing during the First World War. But there were some big differences between the two women. Purvis argues that ‘the Women’s Party diverged widely from Conservative thinking in regard to the progressive feminist and industrial programmes that it advocated’.[[145]](#footnote-145) Crisp was committed to gender equality and she wrote about her desire to see progress on a number of women’s issues, but she never put these issues at the heart of her political activism or her leadership of the BHL. She knew that the BHL’s membership was more in tune with an older ‘Tory women’s tradition’, which was focused on domesticity and pressuring the government to end rationing. Crisp’s Conservatism was full of class-based prejudices and she endorsed sterilization policies for some working-class mothers. She never wanted to represent all women.

However, Crisp helped to keep some progressive attitudes towards women’s issues alive on the right until Conservatives began to soften their attitudes towards personal morality in the late-1950s. She also kept alive the model of the independent radical female Conservative, which would become the hallmark of Thatcher’s politics a generation later. Crisp was unusual for a female right-wing activist in this period because she actively voiced her support for gender equality by directly confronting prejudicial attitudes towards women in the Church, media, and politics. She challenged the ‘Tory women’s tradition’ and explored the limits of right-wing women’s political activism, but she drew upon and exploited that tradition when she was Chairman of the BHL. Crisp was also a model of what not to do if you wanted to succeed as an independent-minded, radical right-wing woman. Whereas Crisp quickly left the Party, Thatcher worked her way up through the Oxford University Conservative Association (though not the Party’s women’s organization), by being loyal and persistent in her search for a winnable constituency, and by toeing the Party line throughout the early years of her career. It was also not until the 1970s when Thatcher started to emerge as a radical Conservative voice who was capable of challenging the Party’s dominant post-war outlook. As Heather Nunn has argued, when she did emerge, ‘The expectations of the “Tory woman” and her political engagement with the party were the template against which Thatcher’s behaviour was measured, and aspects of that stereotype were drawn upon to represent her as a strident woman who offended boundaries of mannered political decorum’.[[146]](#footnote-146) Crisp threatened the same tradition in the 1940s because she sought to mobilize it behind her own radical Conservative and potentially ‘feminist’ views.

Crisp, like Thatcher, was not a feminist in the traditional sense, but she believed in gender equality and women’s rights. According to Gottlieb, ‘in the final analysis it is not tenable to argue that feminists and feminism (even in the diluted interwar variants) could flourish within the sphere of Conservative politics. However, some Conservative women could also be Tory feminists, and pursue their liberationist agendas from the right of the political spectrum’.[[147]](#footnote-147) Crisp seems to have fallen short of this qualification, but she did write about women’s issues and arguably, like Thatcher, she led by example.[[148]](#footnote-148) In the end, Crisp would have also disliked the use of the label ‘feminism’ because it ‘seemed to imply the defence of sectional interests rather than the defence of the nation as a whole’.[[149]](#footnote-149)

Crisp’s successes and failures between the late-1920s and the late-1940s confirm that it was very difficult for independent right-wing women to make an impact on the highest levels of the Party, even if it was possible to make more progress in journalism and publishing. To articulate a truly independent Conservative woman’s voice was difficult, but to voice a radical or even militant one, while advocating equality of the sexes, was impossible if you wanted to influence the Party leadership, or be taken seriously by a majority of Conservative MPs. Crisp had plenty of backers amongst the British elite, including some right-wing Conservative MPs, editors and journalists, and, Liberal and other anti-statist intellectuals that were sometimes influential on the fringes of the Party, but she failed to find a way to be independent-minded, radical, and Conservative.

1. Stuart Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries 1935-1951* (Cambridge, 1999), 507-508. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics*, 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On housewives and austerity, see Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939-1955* (Oxford, 2000), 203-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Beatrix Campbell, *Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory?* (London, 1987), 76-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives: The British Housewives’ League and the Attlee Government’, *History Workshop Journal*, 38, 1 (1994), 143-150; and, Paul Martin, ‘Echoes in the Wilderness: British Popular Conservatism, 1945-51’, in Stuart Ball & Ian Holliday (eds), *Mass Conservatism: The Conservatives and the Public since the 1880s* (London, 2002), 124-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. K. D. Reynolds, ‘Crisp [*married name* Becker], Dorothy (1906-1987)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2013, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/96367, accessed 26 March 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Crisp’s son Hugh Becker confirmed this in private email correspondence with the author on 29 July 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. W.H. Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition Volume II: The Ideological Heritage* (London, 1983), 297; G.C. Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939* (Beckenham, 1986), 85-86; and, Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain 1918-1945* (Oxford, 2013), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On intellectual cultures, see Gary Love, ‘The Periodical Press and the Intellectual Culture of Conservatism in Interwar Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, 57, 4 (December 2014), 1027-1056; and, Clarisse Berthezène, *Training Minds for the War of Ideas: Ashridge College, the Conservative Party and the Cultural Politics of Britain, 1929-54* (Manchester, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See G.E. Maguire, *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874-1997* (Basingstoke, 1998). On women’s careers, see Helen McCarthy, *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (Bloomsbury, 2014); and, Helen Jones, *Women in British Public Life, 1914-50* (Harlow, 2000). On women journalists, see F. Elizabeth Gray (ed.), *Women in Journalism at the Fin de Siècle: Making a Name for Herself* (Basingstoke, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. David Jarvis, ‘Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 5, 2 (1994), 129-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, C. 1689-1979* (Basingstoke, 2010), 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Clarisse Berthezène & Julie Gottlieb (eds), *Rethinking Right-Wing Women: Gender and the Conservative Party, 1880s to the Present* (Manchester, 2018), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Berthezène & Gottlieb (eds), *Rethinking Right-Wing Women*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See K. D. Reynolds, “Crisp, Dorothy (1906-1987),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2013, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/96367, accessed 26 March 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dorothy Crisp, *A Life for England* (London, 1946), 1-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dorothy Crisp, *A Light in the Night* (London, 1960), 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Reynolds, ‘Crisp [*married name* Becker], Dorothy (1906-1987)’. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Crisp, *A life for England*, 12-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jon Lawrence has argued that there was a shift in public attitude towards the acceptability of political violence between the late nineteenth century and the end of the First World War, even if there was some support for it among some elements of the population at particular moments. See Jon Lawrence, ‘Fascist Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Inter-War Britain: the Olympia Debate Revisited’, Historical Research, 76, 192 (May 2003), 238-267; and, ‘The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War’, *Past and Present*, 190, 1 (February 2006), 185-216. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 32-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Reynolds, ‘Crisp [*married name* Becker], Dorothy (1906-1987)’. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. J.H.P., to the Editor, *Yorkshire Post*, 11 March 1927, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Dorothy Crisp to the Editor, *Yorkshire Post*, 14 March 1927, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Adrian Bingham has shown that opposition on the right to the lowering of the female voting age was shallower than historians have supposed. See Adrian Bingham, ‘“Stop the Flapper Vote Folly”: Lord Rothermere, the Daily Mail, and the Equalization of the Franchise 1927-28’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 13, 1 (2002), 17-37. But under its editor Arthur Henry Mann the *Yorkshire Post* was famous for publishing independent Conservative views. It is not surprising that letters written by local Conservatives who were critical of young women’s suffrage were still being published. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Dorothy Crisp, ‘A Yorkshire View of “The Conservative Message”’, *National Review*, 94 (November 1929), 437; and, ‘The Heart of the Nation’, *Ashridge Journal*, 7 (August 1931), 7-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This reading of Bodin’s work as social theory was based on his work *The Six Books of the Commonwealth*. For a useful academic discussion of Bodin in this period, see Eva J. Ross, ‘The Social Theory of Jean Bodin’, *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, 7, 4 (December 1946), 267-272. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Crisp, ‘A Yorkshire View’, 431-438. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 43-75. The *Ashridge Journal* was the periodical associated with Ashridge College, which was a political education training centre for Conservative Party activists. On Ashridge College and the *Ashridge Journal* see Berthezène, *Training Minds for the War of Ideas*. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Crisp, ‘The Heart of the Nation’, 7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Berthezène, *Training Minds for the War of Ideas*, 12 & 32-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Dorothy Crisp (ed.), *The Rebirth of Conservatism* (London, 1931), 77-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. John Macnicol, ‘The Voluntary Sterilization Campaign in Britain, 1918-39’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2, 3 (1992), 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Such views were not uncommon, see Bradley W. Hart & Richard Carr, ‘Sterilization and the British Conservative Party: Rethinking the Failure of the Eugenics Society’s Political Strategy in the Nineteen-Thirties’, *Historical Research*, 88, 242 (November 2015), 719. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Dorothy Crisp, *The Commonsense of Christianity* (London, 1942), 7-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change c. 1920-1960* (Cambridge, 2011), 101-102 & 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Crisp, *The Commonsense of Christianity*, 37-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Crisp, (ed.), *The Rebirth of Conservatism*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven and London, 2004), 176-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Crisp, *The Commonsense of Christianity*, 50-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York, 1963; first published in 1935), 279-288. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Crisp, *The Commonsense of Christianity*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Crisp (ed.), *The Rebirth of Conservatism*, 63-70; and, Dorothy Crisp, ‘A Demand for Intolerance’, *English Review*, 53, 3 (August 1931), 313-320. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Crisp (ed.), *The Rebirth of Conservatism*, 67-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Crisp (ed.), *The Rebirth of Conservatism*, 63-4; and, Crisp, ‘A Demand for Intolerance’, 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Crisp, ‘A Demand for Intolerance’, 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Crisp (ed.), *The Rebirth of Conservatism*, 67-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven and London, 2006), 106-195. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Dorothy Crisp, *Aprons of Figleaves* (London, 1943). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Julie V. Gottlieb, ‘Modes and models of Conservative Women’s Leadership in the 1930s’, in *Rethinking Right-Wing Women*, 989-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Eliza Riedi, ‘Imperialist Women and Conservative Activism in Early-Twentieth-Century Britain: The Political World of Violet Milner’, *Women’s History Review* 22, 6 (2013), 942-946. Violet’s second husband Lord Milner died in 1925 and her brother Leo Maxse in 1932. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Bodleian Library Oxford, Violet Milner papers, MS. Violet Milner 4, F1/4-18, see diary entries for 13 and 20 November, and, 6, 12, and 16 December 1932, 28 March 1933, 1 April 1933, 1 February 1934, 7 and 17 March 1934, and, later in the decade, 11 and 17 January, and, 21 February 1939. A newspaper clipping in Milner’s papers also shows that Crisp attended the *National Review* jubilee dinner when Milner was the periodical’s editor in 1933. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 194-197. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Gottlieb, ‘Modes and models of Conservative Women’s Leadership in the 1930s’, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 38-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. West Sussex Record Office, Maxse Papers Part III: Leopold J. Maxse, Maxse/ 480/ f.277, Dorothy Crisp to Leo Maxse, 10 October 1929. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 47-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 73-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Dorothy Crisp, ‘The Under Forty Movement’, *National Review*, 97 (December 1931), 783-5; and, Crisp, *A Life for England*, 83-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Philip Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government. British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926-1932* (Cambridge, 1992), 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Dorothy Crisp, ‘The Battle of the Young’, *National Review*, 99 (December 1932), 744-745. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. On the English Mistery and Anthony Ludovici, see Dan Stone, *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2003), 169-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Crisp made the claim in her first memoir and it was repeated by journalists in the 1940s, see Crisp, *A Life for England*, 119-120; and, Gordon Beckles, “Housewife of England!,” *Leader Magazine*, 12 July 1947, 15. Polson was a former MP, treasurer of Lord Rothermere’s Anti-Waste League, and Chairman of the United Empire Party. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 119-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Dorothy Crisp, ‘The Most Bitter Farce in History’, *Saturday Review*, 22 July 1933, 90-91; Thomas Polson, ‘The Abolition of Income Tax’, *Saturday Review*, 21 April 1934, 436; and, ‘Down the Path to Revolution’, *Saturday Review*, 27 April 1935, 523. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Thomas Polson, ‘Socialism Gone Mad’, *Saturday Review*, 31 March 1934, 349; and, ‘Pirate Government’, *Saturday Review*, 27 July 1935, 914. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Thomas Polson, ‘Stanley Baldwin, Socialist’, *Saturday Review*, 3 August 1935, 969. For more criticisms of Baldwin, see Dorothy Crisp, ‘Bringing M.P.’s to Heel’, *Saturday Review*, 22 September 1934, 143; Thomas Polson, ‘Funk-Hard Conservatives’, *Saturday Review*, 14 April 1934, 399-400; ‘This Government’s Black Record’, *Saturday Review*, 28 September, 231; and, ‘Mr. Baldwin and Blasphemy’, *Saturday Review*, 16 November, 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Thomas Polson, ‘England’s Duty is to Lead’, *Saturday Review*, 1 June 1935, 681. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Thomas Polson, “The Menace of Baldwinism,” *Saturday Review*, 23 December 1933, 652. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. On foreign policy and empire, see Dorothy Crisp, “Impose the Pax Britannica!,” *Saturday Review*, 21 April 1934, 855; Thomas Polson, “The Strong Man Armed,” *Saturday Review*, 30 September 1934, 175; Thomas Polson, “Fallacies of Pacifists,” *Saturday Review*, 6 April 1935, 425; Thomas Polson, “This Other Eden,” *Saturday Review*, 13 July 1935, 872-3; Thomas Polson, “Our Pious Humbugs,” *Saturday Review*, 10 August 1935, 11; and, Thomas Polson, “The Impossible League,” *Saturday Review*, 17 August 1935, 45-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 131-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain’s Fascist Movement* (London, 2000), 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Thomas Polson, ‘Confound their Politics’, *Saturday Review*, 2 November 1935, 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Howard Cox and Simon Mowatt, *Revolutions from Grub Street: A History of Magazine Publishing in Britain* (Oxford, 2014), 83-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Dorothy Crisp, ‘What Britain Has Given the World’, *Everybody’s Weekly*, 16 May 1942, 3; ‘Britain – Heart of Empire’, *Everybody’s Weekly*, 20 June 1942, 3; ‘What the British Have Done’, *Everybody’s Weekly*, 21 November 1942, 3; and, ‘The Myth of German Greatness’, *Everybody’s Weekly*, 26 December 1942, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. For example, Dorothy Crisp, ‘Secrets of Happiness’, *Everybody’s Weekly*, 5 September 1942, 3; and, ‘Cobbler, Stick to Your Last’, *Everybody’s Weekly*, 17 October 1942, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Viscount Camrose identified *Truth* as a serious rival to other political weeklies like *The Economist*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *Time and Tide*, and *Tribune* when he compiled a report on the British press. He found no circulation figures for *Truth*, but under Brook’s editorship it was a relatively thin and very right-wing publication. It is unlikely that it would have matched the *New Statesman* or *The Spectator*, which had weekly circulations of 76,572 and 50,000 copies respectively in 1947. See Viscount Camrose, *British Newspapers and Their Controllers* (London, 1947), 145-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. N.J. Crowson, ‘Brooks, (William) Collin (1893–1959)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/53233, accessed 16 Oct 2017. For a history of *Truth* in the 1930s, see Richard Cockett, *Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement and the Manipulation of the Press* (London, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. For example, see Dorothy Crisp, ‘The Socialists’ Bedlam’, *Truth*, 15 May 1942, 388; ‘The Destruction of Government’, *Truth*, 19 June 1942, 490; ‘The Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, *Truth*, 25 September 1942, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. For a discussion of Crisp’s broadcasts using the BBC Written Archives, see Reynolds, ‘Crisp [*married name* Becker], Dorothy (1906-1987)’, [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Dorothy Crisp, *England’s Purpose* (London, 1941). *England’s Purpose* was described as a best-seller in the BBC’s *The Listener* magazine, see 9 July 1942, 57. Other books written by Crisp during this period included *The Path for England* (London, 1944) and *Why We Lost Singapore* (London, 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Anonymous review of *England’s Purpose*, *The Spectator*, 2 January 1942, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 167-184 & 205-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Sarah Lonsdale, *The Journalist in British Fiction & Film: Guarding the Guardians from 1900 to the Present* (London, 2016), 188-189. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Crisp had been publishing similar views in the local press since 1939. In a letter to the editor of the *Yorkshire Post* she argued that there was no use in the country fighting totalitarianism abroad if it was not going to ‘fight the octopus at home’, see Dorothy Crisp, ‘State Control: Where Our Social Services have Failed’, *Yorkshire Post*, 15 April 1939, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Dorothy Crisp, ‘Will You Stand for Bureaucracy?’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 28 February 1943, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Dorothy Crisp, ‘The Curse of Party Politics’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 28 March 1943, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Dorothy Crisp, ‘Political Corruption. The Worst Kind of Immorality’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 9 May 1943, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Dorothy Crisp, ‘The Equality Myth. Democracy Means Liberty’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 16 May 1943, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Dorothy Crisp, ‘Taxes Are Strangling Our Inventors’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 20 June 1943, 4; ‘What I Think of Mr. Herbert Morrison’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 10 October 1943, 4; and, ‘Really, Mr. Morrison!’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 24 October 1943, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Dorothy Crisp, ‘I See the Tragedy of Ireland’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 5 September 1943, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 225-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Dorothy Crisp, ‘My Plan for Ireland’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 12 September 1943, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Robert Cole, *Propaganda, Censorship and Irish Neutrality in the Second World War* (Edinburgh, 2006), 157-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 236-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Dorothy Crisp, ‘Five Wandering Senators’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 17 October 1943, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 253-261. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 191-193. On women candidates, see Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, 323-324. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Bodleian Library, Oxford, Conservative Party Archive (CPA): PUB 229/1/9, Dorothy Crisp’s election leaflet (1943). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Paul Addison, ‘By-Elections of the Second World War’, in Chris Cook & John Ramsden (eds), *By-Elections in British Politics* (London, 1997), 130-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Henry Longhurst, *My Life and Soft Times* (London, 1983), 174-176. Longhurst’s agent had fought twenty-two elections and lost two of them. Sources in the Conservative Party Archive confirm that Crisp was living in the Mayfair Hotel, but why she was living there and how she was financing her stay is not clear. For example, see Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: CCO 3/1/12, Dorothy Crisp to Lord Woolton, 9 February 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 288-301. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: PUB 229/8/2, Dorothy Crisp’s general election leaflet (1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Crisp, *A Light in the Night*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 132-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Although her legal name was now Dorothy Becker. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. See Crisp, *A Life for England*, 264-266; Reynolds, ‘Crisp [*married name* Becker], Dorothy (1906-1987)’; and, Crisp, *A Light in the Night*, 19, and 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Crisp, *A Light in the Night*, 24, 57-58, and 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. See the Editorial ‘Action!’ (written by Dorothy Crisp), *The British Housewives’ League Newsletter*, 4 (October 1946). [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. ‘Action!’ (written by Dorothy Crisp), *The British Housewives’ League Newsletter*, 4 (October 1946). [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Anon., ‘Embattled Britons. British Ladies, Young and Old, Turn Albert Hall into an Arena’, *Life Magazine*, 23 June 1947, 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. David Low, ‘Tory Exhibition’, *Evening Standard*, 12 June 1947; and, ‘One Thing Leads to Another’, *Evening Standard*, 18 June 1947. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Crisp’s appearance had not changed before the 1945 general election, see Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: CCO, PUB 229/8/2, Dorothy Crisp’s general election leaflet (1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Gordon Beckles, ‘Housewife of England!’, *Leader Magazine*, 12 July 1947, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*, 76-82; Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 131; and, Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 144-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 146-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Crisp, *A Light in the Night*, 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: CCO 3/1/12, Dorothy Crisp to Lord Woolton, 1 February 1948; and, CCO 3/1/12: Lord Woolton to Dorothy Crisp, 5 February 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: CCO 3/1/12, Lord Woolton to Dorothy Crisp, 5 February 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: CCO 170/1/1/2, ‘Miss Crisp Resigns’, *Daily Herald*, 9 February 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: CCO 3/1/12, Dorothy Crisp to Lord Woolton, 9 February 1948; and, Crisp, *A Light in the Night*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: CCO3/1/12, correspondence between Dorothy Crisp and Lord Woolton between 1 and 9 February 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Bodleian Library, Oxford, CPA: CCO 170/1/1/2, Miss Sturges-Jones to Miss Fletcherm, 14 December 1948; and, Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*, 75-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women’s Suffrage in Britain* (London, 1978); and, Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Crisp, *A Life for England*, 12-13, 42, & 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. On the decline of political violence and some notable exceptions in this period, see also Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. June Purvis, ‘The Women’s Party of Great Britain (1917-1919): A Forgotten Episode in British Women’s Political History’, *Women’s History Review*, 25, 4 (2016), 642. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Hinton, ‘Militant Housewives’, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Purvis, ‘The Women’s Party’, 640-641. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Heather Nunn, *Thatcher, Politics and Fantasy: The Political Culture of Gender and Nation* (London, 2002), 26-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Gottlieb, ‘Modes and models of Conservative Women’s Leadership in the 1930s’, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Krista Cowman, ‘“The Statutory Woman whose main task is to explore what women…were likely to think”: Margaret Thatcher and Women’s Politics in the 1950s and 1960s’, in *Rethinking Right-Wing Women*, 152-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Clarisse Berthezène, ‘The Middlebrow and the Making of a “New Common Sense”: Women’s Voluntarism, Conservative Politics and Representations of Womanhood’, in *Rethinking Right-Wing Women*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)