

Women and Lancashire Conservatism between the Wars

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Abstract

The activism of women Conservatives helped Tory democracy to adapt and survive in inter-war Lancashire at a time when it was under strain by the arrival of Labour as a significant electoral force. This article utilises the surviving records of the party in Lancashire to examine the various ways that women entered, navigated, justified and expanded their membership and function in inter-war Conservatism. It acknowledges the limits on women's advancement and influence, but it also highlights how some women made significant progress in rising through the party structures, and how women's branches facilitated this political mobility. It challenges the assumption that women Conservatives were preoccupied with sociability and discussing domestic issues, and reveals their contribution to the electoral success of the party at local level, and interaction with Lancashire's distinct tradition of Conservatism.

Author Bio

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On 7 July 1934 Sylvia Assheton was elected the first woman chairman of the Northwestern Area Council of the Conservative party.¹ Referred to in party records as Mrs R.C. Assheton CBE JP, she was already President of the Northwestern Area Women's Advisory Committee. As the wife of Ralph Assheton, a local landowner, and the daughter of the sixth Baron Hotham, Assheton's election to the chairmanship might not seem that worthy of remark.² Yet the post had been held by a succession of local MPs, so that the appointment of a woman had to break with this important precedent. The area council was the largest assembly of Conservative opinion in the northwest, one of the most densely populated regions in the country, with delegates representing constituency associations and allied bodies from across Lancashire, Cheshire and Westmorland. Assheton's election to the chair was proposed by the area president, the seventeenth Earl of Derby, and seconded by the outgoing chairman, in what was a customary procedure, but it was also a necessary one given that the council contained pockets of resistance to women's advancement. Assheton's appointment was not for mere decoration; she was expected to preside over a council with a track record of being at odds with the national party leadership when local interests were perceived to be under threat. Assheton's claim to high office in the local party certainly depended on the status of her husband, but it was legitimised by her work on the Women's Advisory Committee. Its mission to educate party members and women voters alike made women activists indispensable to Lancashire Conservatism between the wars. The county's strong tradition of Tory democracy had previously limited women's advancement in the party, but the inter-war activism of women like Assheton became crucial to its adaptation and survival in the northwest, at a time when Conservatism was under considerable strain from the emergence of Labour as a serious electoral challenge.

Conservative party records for the northwest provide a revealing case study of how women advanced within the party structures and increased their influence. These demonstrate that women became increasingly active in the party at all levels, including some leadership positions; that they were especially connected with the local context and voiced local social but mainly

economic concerns; that they were interested in world affairs as well as domestic questions; and that they played an important role in attempts to reach out to the working-class electorate, especially new women voters. Given the strength in numbers of women Conservatives—around a million were party members in the late 1920s and 1930s—and the party’s popularity amongst women electors, the subject has received surprisingly little attention in historiography. There are no detailed case studies which match the consideration given to women’s involvement with the Labour party.³ Even communist and fascist women have attracted proportionally more scholarly interest than women Conservatives, despite their negligible support at the polls and even lower membership.⁴ This is explained, in part, by the close relationship between the women’s movement and the emergence and development of women’s history.⁵ According to Julie Gottlieb, ‘women who have been held responsible for betraying the promise of sexual emancipation have always received less attention and little retrospective celebration.’⁶ Another important factor is the tendency of scholarship on Conservatism to concentrate on high politics at the expense of the grassroots party.⁷ There are, of course, a number of significant exceptions.⁸ These in turn have generated greater attention to women Conservatives in the historiography of inter-war women’s politics.⁹ And the linguistic turn in gender history has led to some important contributions on the party’s electoral appeal to women and the role of women in party activism.¹⁰

This article builds on this growing scholarship by drilling down into the substantial party records for the Northwestern Area. An examination of women and Conservatism in Lancashire is especially significant given the strength of the county’s suffrage movement before the war.¹¹ This is recognised in Jeff Hill’s recent case study, ‘Politics, Gender, and New Toryism: Lancashire in the 1920s’, based on the surviving records of four local constituency organisations.¹² However, its focus on the lowest tier of women’s activism, in the years immediately after the 1918 franchise extension, justifies a further study which examines women’s involvement in all levels of the party organisation, and throughout the inter-war period.¹³ This

wider focus not only provides greater detail and chronological coverage, it also calls into question a number of Hill's key assumptions and conclusions. In particular, his suggestion that women's involvement signalled a break with the past, which he labels 'New Toryism', even though it is defined simply as their 'sociability'; his inference that the Primrose League supplied a useful precedent for women Conservatives in Lancashire; the assertion that women Conservatives were preoccupied by domestic questions; and his claims that support for and against women's advancement in the local party came from younger Conservatives and the Stanley family respectively. To place Assheton's appointment in 1934 as chairman of the area council in its appropriate context, therefore, it is instructive to first consider the nature of Conservative support and operations in Lancashire in the 1920s and 1930s, including the response of local leaders to the democratising force of women. The article then outlines the evolving role of women in the Northwestern Area, and concludes by identifying examples which illustrate women's involvement in major Conservative party debates and controversies of the inter-war period.

I

The progress of women in Lancashire Conservatism between the wars was built on relatively weak foundations. The emergence of the Primrose League in the late nineteenth century provided Conservatives with a party machine outside Westminster; its popularity amongst women built on a tradition of upper-class women's philanthropy, and its recruitment of middle-class women provided them with a vital if subordinate role as voluntary electioneers.¹⁴ The distinctiveness of Lancashire Conservatism, however, appears to have been an impediment to the typical model of women's activism in the Primrose League. According to Martin Pugh, league membership in Lancashire was relatively low. The Liverpool Workingmen's Conservative Association already served as the party machine on Merseyside, and its Orange character meant that it was averse to the league's acceptance of Roman Catholics. The league did not have a

significant presence in Manchester either, though the reasons are less clear. Pugh suggests that 'it may reflect the separation of the middle class from the working population in the conurbation – no one was available to play the role envisaged by the league.'¹⁵ This did not harm its popularity in the cotton-spinning mill towns, where the Primrose League formed part of a rich associational culture that provided working-class members with mutual support, improvement and leisure. In all cases, however, the populist character of Conservatism across Lancashire served to limit the opportunities for Primrose dames to establish networks and influence in the local party. In Manchester and especially in Liverpool, Conservative support was stronger among the working class than the middle class.¹⁶ The other major forerunner of female Conservative activism, the Women's Tariff Reform League, from 1906 the Women's Unionist and Tariff Reform Association, was also an unlikely vehicle in Lancashire, as the county's Conservatives were staunchly for free trade and against tariffs.¹⁷

In contrast to the picture elsewhere, the evidence suggests that Lancashire did not contain substantial organised groups of Conservative women to be absorbed and accommodated after the party was restructured in 1918.¹⁸ This makes the emergence, growth and relative success of women in Lancashire Conservatism all the more remarkable. Section II below surveys some of the major factors which encouraged the acceptance of women's participation in the party across the country. In Lancashire, it may have been helped further by women Conservatives appearing to embrace the distinct local character of the party. Throughout the inter-war period, women Conservatives in the northwest gave conspicuous attention to the party's working-class membership and electorate, male and female. This perhaps reflects the care taken by women Conservatives to avoid appearing to eclipse men amongst the grassroots membership, but the evidence also suggests that leading women in Lancashire regarded efforts to democratise Conservatism as an endeavour common to women and working-class men. At a meeting of the Northwestern Area Council in 1931, the Hon. Mrs Hornyold and Lady Maureen Stanley, with

the backing of representatives from the party's workingmen's associations and Teachers Circle, succeeded in securing its unanimous agreement:

to pay travelling expenses of members attending the Meetings in London of the Central Council and the Executive Committee of the National Union, and also to pool such expenses, feeling confident that this will ensure a fuller and more democratic representation from all parts of England and Wales irrespective of distance from London, or the private means of members.¹⁹

Two high profile women in the county, Assheton and a Mrs Lawson, both representing Clitheroe, lent their support to a resolution at the Northwestern Area Council in 1932 which deplored 'the absence of Conservative Wage-earning representatives in the present Parliament.'²⁰ Later the same year, Lawson successfully persuaded the area council to pass a resolution urging the Minister for Labour:

to consider introducing legislation to enable him to be more lenient than at present with those workers who during the recent Cotton Strikes found themselves, through intimidation and mob rule, unable to work and also after 'signing on' unable to draw 'dole', thus turning those who were constitutionally minded British wage-earners into very bitter opponents of our Government.²¹

Women Conservatives from Clitheroe and other parts of Lancashire raised similar concerns the following year, in response to the 1933 Unemployment bill.²²

A potential bridge between women- and working-class Conservatives in Lancashire was their common identification with Protestantism. The minute books for Conservative women's organisations do not contain any mention of churches or theology, but this is not unexpected

given that 'religion has no formal role within the Conservative party', and it is in keeping with 'men's' branch and associational records for Lancashire.²³ However, it is well known that denominationalism remained important in the northwest. According to Peter Clarke, Anglicanism's appeal to a large section of the urban working class 'ran a straight and narrow course between the Dissent of the bosses and the Roman Catholicism of the Irish immigrants.'²⁴ Overt and covert appeals to Protestant solidarity had long been used by populist Conservatives to harness working-class support.²⁵ The establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 might have ended the automatic support of most Catholics for the Liberals, but in places such as Liverpool it failed to move in the direction of Conservatives and was instead deposited with Labour.²⁶ The Conservatives' appeal to the working class played on the defensiveness of its culture, promoting an 'essentially Tory conception of the English nation: imperial, Anglican and socially graded.'²⁷ As women already dominated the congregations of the Protestant churches, working-class male Conservatives would have been at least partially familiar with the otherwise innovative phenomenon of women's rising numbers and profile in the Conservative party.²⁸

II

In April 1918 the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations formally changed its rules to enable women to become members of the party organisation. Common membership did not necessarily mean common organisations. In most cases, effectively male constituency associations had women's branches which sent representation to a joint executive council. The surviving records for the Northwestern Area suggest this system of separate women's branches operated there, but due to gaps, and the lack of detail in minute books, it is not possible to determine how rigidly this separation was adhered to across the region.²⁹ The apex of the national party was divided about the wisdom of this arrangement. One of its most capable agents, the Ulsterman Robert Topping, who from 1924 was Agent for Lancashire and Cheshire, pressed in 1920 for joint associations which would integrate women and make their

utility to the party better noticed by men. Marjorie Maxse, head of the women's department at Central Office, turned this on its head, arguing that men would not give women more responsibility in joint branches, and that it was only through separate branches that the role and influence of women would increase in the party.³⁰ Maxse's position is acknowledged in the historiography, even if it tends to emphasise women's acceptance of a subordinate role in the inter-war party. Signal examples include their limited input to candidate selection and the disparity in pay and status between salaried male 'agents' and women's 'organisers'.³¹ According to G.E. Maguire, many women appear to have accepted this lesser status, and were not particularly 'pushy about wanting to have power.'³² This reflected the middle class background of the party's female membership, which in many cases possessed leisure time but lacked 'respectable and available career opportunities'.³³ Membership of the Conservative party was often part of a range of commitments to organisations that also continued to adhere to separate spheres, such as the Women's Institute, Townswomen's Guild and Mothers' Union. As historians of inter-war domesticity recognise, these organisations were part of an everyday middle-brow culture that reflected and reinforced conservative femininity.³⁴ In any case, judging the influence of women's branches against 'men's' associations risks overestimating the influence of the latter. Constituency associations had only a limited and indirect influence on the party leadership, and in stark contrast to the women's branches, they did not regard political discussion as part of their normal duties.³⁵ In a like manner, it is too simplistic to write off the immediate utility of women activists, as electoral workers and fund raisers. The massive expansions of the electorate in 1918 and 1928 made women's electoral work essential, and the money raised and held by women's branches assumed greater importance as the party attempted to move away from the traditional practice of candidates paying their own election expenses.³⁶

Pat Thane cautions against assuming that because so few would or could put themselves forward for election, women generally lost interest in political campaigning once they had the vote. Rather, 'many women discovered that they could best make an impact on parliamentary

politics through collective action.’³⁷ Conservative women’s branches quickly made it their business to organise and educate members with ‘knowledge and skills that would be useful to the party’; in Lancashire this extended to educating ‘factory girls’ in the wake of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act. The enthusiasm and growing visibility of women party members, alongside the party’s increasing reliance on them as electioneers and fundraisers, inevitably caused some resentment amongst men, especially when the latter’s apparent inaction was compared unfavourably. As David Jarvis observes, Conservative men were ambivalent about women’s participation in the party, hailing it as a success for Tory democracy, but also expressing deep concern about the ‘feminization’ of grassroots Conservative politics.³⁸ The surviving records of the Northwestern Area demonstrate wide variation in how the party responded to the incorporation of women in the early 1920s. Procedural changes to guarantee women a proportion of representative positions in the organisation were passed relatively early by some associations and branches, such as the Cheshire Divisional Association.³⁹ Others, however, including the Lancashire and Cheshire Federation of Junior Unionist Associations, rejected successive attempts to incorporate women as members on the same basis as men. On the first occasion, at its 1921 annual general meeting, the chairman Sir Alan Sykes, MP for Knutsford, remarked that branches were free to admit women, but ‘he hoped ... that delegates would see that the Branches considered the best interests of the party as a whole.’⁴⁰ On the second, delegates from Ashton-under-Lyne warned ‘that unless this is done it is impossible for our movement to make adequate progress.’⁴¹ The situation was dramatically reversed at the 1925 annual general meeting, and only after its president, Lord Stanley, eldest son of Lord Derby, proposed the necessary change in the rules and secured the unanimous agreement of the meeting.⁴² The evidence from subsequent meetings suggests that ambivalence about women remained. The party had been led to expect an equal franchise act at some point in the late 1920s, but the junior federation’s 1927 annual general meeting heard a resolution from the Lymn branch that only rate-paying householders should exercise the vote, which included married

women, with 'bachelors to become eligible at 25', and 'spinsters at 30, if not householders.' The minutes record that this 'provoked considerable discussion', but that 'the general sense of the meeting was in favour of absolute equality, although the majority of the delegates did not hide the feeling that 25 was a more suitable age than 21.' To resolve the matter, the meeting unanimously agreed to a resolution which acknowledged the Conservative government's intention to extend the franchise to all women at 21 years of age, and declared that 'every effort should be made to extend the Junior Movement in this Area.'⁴³

Once they had breached the junior federation, women members made steady progress within its ranks. The most conspicuous was Miss M.L. Jackson, who both demanded and benefitted from the increasing acceptance of women. When the juniors held a special meeting in 1927 to revise their rules, she proposed a regulation 'to the effect that at least one half, and where possible, two thirds, of the representation of any Branch on any Council or Committee of the Federation shall be 25 years or age or under, with due representation of both sexes where there are joint Associations.'⁴⁴ In March 1928, two days after the second reading of the Equal Franchise bill in the House of Commons, Jackson was elected as one of the two vice-chairmen, the other being a local councillor.⁴⁵ The following year two women contested one of the two vice-chairmanships, Miss M. Boddington of the Wirral and Miss R.M. Hartley of Wallasey, the latter winning the ballot.⁴⁶ There was competition for the post again in 1932, when Miss Alston successfully ran against Miss A.M. Corker.⁴⁷ These appointments were not merely tokenistic; by the mid-1930s a third of the junior organisation's general purposes committee were women: Jackson, Miss Ina Smith, Miss J. Brown and Miss M. Little. Jackson and Smith even chaired its meetings.⁴⁸ The prominence of these women in the junior federation is mirrored in its senior equivalent, the Northwestern Area Council. Sylvia Assheton's appointment as chairman in 1934 is noted above. The delegates of its Women's Advisory Committee regularly contributed to council debates, even on controversial questions, and there is evidence to suggest that around half of its approximately three hundred active delegates were women.⁴⁹ This demonstrates that

despite the existence of separate women's branches, women Conservatives in the northwest interacted meaningfully with the regional party at its apex, the area council. Moreover, the area council returned women to national party caucuses and committees. In 1933, three out of the eight representatives to the Central Council were women: Assheton, Isabel Edith Phillips-Brocklehurst, and Mrs Mancknols Walton.⁵⁰ The president of the Women's Advisory Committee from 1937, Mary Hornyold, eldest daughter of the first Baron Strickland, a Maltese Catholic, sat on the party executive committee for many years, and served as chairman of the National Union between 1947 and 1948.⁵¹

III

The Conservative party formally recognised a 'Women's Advisory Committee' at its 1928 annual conference.⁵² The name underscored its purpose; the committee was to advise the party on women's questions and not to lobby for women's issues, such as greater representation in parliament.⁵³ The records for the Northwestern Area Women's Advisory Committee begin five years later. Around ninety delegates from women's committees across the northwest attended its meetings. The committee's minutes provide detail about women's involvement in the region that is largely absent in the business-like minutes of most women's branches. Their activism was chiefly in the area of education and took several forms: encouraging political discussion in women's branches and conferences; facilitating the political education of the wider party membership; and organising activities for working-class women. This was part of a wider Conservative effort in the late 1920s and 1930s to train intellectuals, party workers, and ordinary members.⁵⁴ In the case of the Women's Advisory Committee, its 'socially superior sisters' regarded their calling as chaperoning 'virgin citizens'.⁵⁵ The advisory committee's general purposes committee regularly issued suggestions for subjects to be discussed by women's branches. In December 1934 it recommended the Betting and Lotteries Act, the Incitement to Disaffection Act, and India. It also suggested that members read pamphlets on bank

nationalisation and the report of the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on India.⁵⁶ From 1935 these recommendations reflected the increasingly tense international situation. In September that year it suggested that branches 'should discuss foreign affairs' and 'Italy and Abyssinia', and consult the Chatham House pamphlets *Italy and Abyssinia* and *Sanctions*.⁵⁷ In 1936 it was 'finance and defence' and the 'International Situation', with the former becoming a recurring suggestion at subsequent meetings.⁵⁸

The Women's Advisory Committee was particularly occupied with its 'week-end political schools'. These could make a small loss, as in May 1933, but they were source of pride, and provided their women organisers with work that was more prestigious and less mundane than canvassing and fund raising.⁵⁹ The impact of the schools is evident from a report presented in November 1933 by the secretary, Miss Johnson, who indicated that a recent school was attended by seventy six resident students, ninety five 'out-students', and 361 single-lecture students.⁶⁰ The theme of its Blackpool political school, convened in February 1937, was 'the British Commonwealth of Nations', which the committee agreed in advance would 'cover as many subjects as possible, for instance, Immigration, Trade, Defence of our Trade Routes, [and] the Statute of Westminster.'⁶¹ Women did not merely organise the schools; a Miss Higham addressed the Blackpool event, and the first two lectures at a one-day school for divisional chairmen were delivered, respectively, by Mrs Whitehead, vice-chairman of the Central Women's Advisory Committee, and Lady Falmouth, deputy chairman of the party.⁶² Women would presumably have had an even more central place in the reading groups it discussed forming in 1937, to combat 'Communist propaganda carried on through the Left Book Club'.⁶³

The Women's Advisory Council's third significant area of education work lay in organising activities for female factory workers. Both the suffrage movement and Labour had been especially strong amongst Lancashire millworkers before the war.⁶⁴ Support for Labour grew after 1918, but it was unstable and led to a marked variation in general election results. In 1923 and 1929, a swing to Labour deprived Conservatives of many seats in Lancashire and aided the

return of minority Labour governments at Westminster. But swings away from Labour, in 1924 and 1931, restored Conservative fortunes and returned them to government. As a vocation for women Conservatives, educating factory girls fulfilled the role model projected in party propaganda of older worldly women addressing the ‘alarming ignorance’ of their younger counterparts.⁶⁵ It also displayed something of the long-running anxieties of middle- and upper-class women about working-class girls, especially wage earners.⁶⁶ A report from its ‘Factory Organizer’ in 1935 surveys the work undertaken over the previous year:

There are certain difficulties inherent in work among girls which all social workers agree upon, and which make spectacular effects unlikely. There is an absence of good home influence among the girls we are trying to enrol, while fewer outlets are provided for their youthful spirits than are offered to boys, through sport, Territorial training, etc.

The National “Keep fit” movement has been created to supply a need among girls, and our organiser has established friendly relations with several of their organisers ... For instance, a large “Keep Fit” class has met weekly at Leigh for gymnastics all through the winter, under the auspices of our Optimist Club and in their room. So large was the attendance (nearly ninety on one occasion) that we have had to hold two classes a night. This has resulted in an increased membership of the Optimists proper, not all of whom join in the gymnastics. Under the excellent chairmanship of Mrs Magilton, of Leigh, further programmes have been arranged ... The Bolton Club now have a comfortable room ... The Nelson Branch has had meetings throughout the winter, though at less frequent intervals...⁶⁷

The utilisation and emulation of non-party associational culture was typical of female Conservative activism in the inter-war period.⁶⁸ As David Thackeray highlights in his study of

women Conservatives in Birmingham and Leeds, it was especially useful in industrial areas for providing a means to break down social barriers and reach the new electorate.⁶⁹

IV

The advancement of women at provincial level was supported by the Stanleys. As noted already, Lord Stanley lent his weight and authority to enable rule changes in the junior federation. The Countess of Derby and Lady Maureen Stanley patronised and supported women's organisations including the Women's Advisory Committee. Upon Assheton's election in 1929 as vice chairman of the Northwestern Area Council, Lord Derby informed another senior Conservative: 'we must try and bring in the younger people, both men and women. Mrs Assheton is a first-class worker, and it was quite right that she should be elected a vice-chairman.'⁷⁰ Given the earl's growing unease about the resilience in Liverpool of militant Protestantism and the rowdiness of its public meetings, he may have anticipated that a greater role for women would encourage the development of more peaceable politics in Lancashire.⁷¹ The inter-war Conservative party's success in appealing to women did not depend solely on messages aimed at female voters, it also attempted to distance itself from the worst excesses of masculine political behaviour. This allowed Conservatives to claim that they represented an 'orderly politics' that was supposedly threatened by Labour.⁷² The surviving records for the northwest make it difficult to test this proposition, though as Jon Lawrence acknowledges, the deep roots of electoral disorder in Liverpool meant that it persisted there throughout the inter-war period.⁷³ What is clear is that the large proportion of women on the area council, and Assheton's election as chairman in 1934, did not diminish its independence when in conflict with the local and national party leadership, as demonstrated during the party crises over fiscal policy (1930–31) and Indian responsible government (1933–35).

Lancashire before the First World War had been synonymous with opposing tariff reform; free trade meant cheap food and a competitive advantage in exporting manufactured cotton. In

the late 1920s, however, opinion in Lancashire changed gradually as a result of the government's decision in 1917 to grant India the right to set its own tariffs, and the determination of Indian politicians to protect their own cotton industry.⁷⁴ Still, when the area council first debated tariff reform following the party's defeat at the 1929 general election, it initially expressed 'unabated confidence' in the party leader, Stanley Baldwin, who resisted the policy in the belief that it aided his Liberal and Labour opponents.⁷⁵ The first obvious sign of dissent emerged in January 1930, when delegates representing the Women's Advisory Committee successfully persuaded the area council to pass a resolution that 'respectfully' urged Baldwin to give 'an early declaration' on the fiscal question, and which 'would be of great help and encouragement to his supporters and workers.'⁷⁶ The committee's delegates did something similar again following the apparent resolution of the party crisis in October 1930. When the area council was summoned to discuss Baldwin's request for a 'free hand' in tariff policy, Mrs Phillips Brocklehurst and Mrs Hornyold proposed an amendment urging the party leader 'when framing the details of his fiscal policy to take counsel with some of the leading younger members of the Party'.⁷⁷ The women did not succeed with their amendment on this occasion; the presiding chair, Lord Derby, insisted that Lancashire's endorsement of Baldwin appear unequivocal. It is noteworthy that women delegates were so prominent in these debates; this is probably explained by the high levels of female employment in cotton manufacturing, and the recruitment of women in the 1920s to the ideal of 'buying empire', through the British Empire Exhibition and the Empire Marketing Board.⁷⁸

Women delegates to the area council were less conspicuously vocal during the party crisis over India, though several took a prominent part in debates at the Central Council. The issue aroused deep feeling on the area council as many delegates feared that increasing the power of Indian politicians would make the decline of cotton exports to the subcontinent irreversible. This was the message trumpeted by the Cotton Trade League, a local pressure group of fifty or so manufacturers which demanded government action to stall Lancashire's declining exports.⁷⁹ Conservatives in the northwest were divided on the issue; a dozen of Lancashire's 54

Conservative MPs were prepared to defy the party whips; and the area council made its views clear in a series of resolutions critical of National Government policy.⁸⁰ The importance of Lancashire to Conservative debates on India was demonstrated by the involvement of its most prominent women at two successive meetings of the party's Central Council. At the first, in February 1933, Assheton succeeded in proposing motion in favour of safeguarding the cotton trade, in defiance of government denials that this was a possibility.⁸¹ At the second, in June 1933, Hornyold seconded an amendment which, in contrast to Assheton's, unequivocally supported the government's India policy.⁸² Assheton and her husband were not diehard Conservatives, but her resolution pointed to the existence of considerable unease in Lancashire that made itself apparent at the area council convened on 29 April 1933.⁸³ The government's representative in attendance, Rab Butler, Under Secretary of State for India, struggled to speak as delegates assailed him with questions.⁸⁴ One senior Conservative confided afterwards to Derby that 'we should have gone down had there been more men present. As it was the women seemed to be in the majority.'⁸⁵ The idea that women saved the day for party officers appears to be personal judgement rather than objective fact, for the area council went on to pass a series of resolutions, between the publication of the India white paper in 1933 and the introduction of the India bill in 1935, criticising the government's India policy for failing to contain adequate safeguards for cotton exports.⁸⁶ These resolutions commanded large majorities, which implies that women as a category of delegates did not deviate significantly from the position adopted by all delegates.

V

Outside of the area council, women Conservatives in the northwest responded to the party crisis over India in a number of ways. Hornyold continued to be a vocal proponent of the government. She wrote to *The Times* in October 1934, criticising rank and file Conservative supporters of the diehards for presuming to know more about India than members of the Joint Select Committee on India and other experts.⁸⁷ The Women's Advisory Committee in December

1934 duly recommended that branches discuss India and read the introduction to the report of the joint select committee.⁸⁸ The surviving records indicate that some women's branches were reluctant to tackle the subject, probably out of concern for its divisiveness. The No. 4 Group of Women's Unionist Associations, for example, which covered north-eastern Lancashire, and which included Assheton amongst its members, declined the offer of a speaker on India from Miss Johnson, secretary of the advisory committee.⁸⁹ The No. 4 Group organised annual conferences which addressed major issues of the day. In advance of its 1934 conference, it agreed that one of its resolutions would be that 'this meeting pledges its full support to Lancashire MPs in their efforts to protect the Cotton Industry from the destruction of its markets by Japanese competition.'⁹⁰ A line was subsequently drawn through the copy of this resolution preserved in the archive, and the minutes of the following meeting indicate that it was dropped from the agenda of the forthcoming conference.⁹¹ It was only after the parliamentary passage of the India bill seemed to be secure that the No. 4 Group finally heard a Miss Hole give a 'splendidly comprehensive address on India'.⁹²

The Women's Advisory Committee, in contrast, was not reticent about discussing India. It hosted a talk on the 'Indian women's franchise' in November 1933, given by Irene Ward, MP for Wallsend, one of the thirteen women Conservatives returned to parliament at the 1931 general election.⁹³ The minutes do not record what she said, but the chairman's invitation afterwards to Miss Maitland, 'to put the government point of view', suggests that Ward dissented to some extent from the government's policy.⁹⁴ Ward was not among the eighty four Conservatives who on 11 February 1935 voted against the second reading of the India bill.⁹⁵ She might not have been in complete agreement with the government, but Ward was not a diehard or willing to join their rebellion. Numbering around 30–40 MPs throughout the inter-war period, diehards were distinguished from the rest of the parliamentary party by regularly being at odds with the front bench over the direction and aims of party policy.⁹⁶ In their attempt to derail Indian constitutional reform, diehards opportunistically endorsed Katherine Mayo's controversial

exposé, *Mother India*, which criticised the treatment of women in Hinduism.⁹⁷ It is possible that Ward alluded to Mayo's work in her address to Lancashire Conservatives, and she perhaps made reference to the low turnout of Indian women at elections, and their increased activity in the Indian National Congress.⁹⁸ What is certain is that the Women's Advisory Committee did not turn the question of Indian women into a political issue either for or against the government's India policy. Embedded in Lancashire Conservatism, committee members were undoubtedly preoccupied with the impact of Indian constitutional reform on the local cotton trade. The avoidance of any commentary about Indian women is also in keeping with the expectation that advisory committees advise and not proselytise. Moreover, the committee was probably aware of the warm reception accorded to Mohandas Gandhi by women cotton workers, during his tour of several Lancashire mill towns in September 1931, to explain the nationalist boycott of Lancashire cotton. If nothing else this demonstrated that there was little profit locally in appearing to attack the man or his cause.⁹⁹

The next and final time the advisory committee discussed India was in the wake of the controversial Liverpool Wavertree by-election of February 1935, when Randolph Churchill, an opponent of the India bill, ran against the official Conservative candidate resulting in a Labour gain.¹⁰⁰ Churchill received the strong backing of the populist right-wing press, including Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mirror*, which in the 1930s had a predominantly female working-class readership.¹⁰¹ Its coverage of the contest stands out for noting Churchill's support amongst local women.¹⁰² The Women's Advisory Committee, unlike the area council, was keen to address the outcome. A resolution condemning Churchill's action was proposed by Phillips Brocklehurst. Several speakers took part, including Mrs Horridge, of Bury, who 'reported that she had been asked to say, by her Association, that they were not in complete agreement with the resolution.'¹⁰³ There was unanimous agreement, nevertheless, that the resolution be sent to the Central Women's Advisory Committee. In Liverpool itself, the Women's Unionist Federation gave its support to the official party candidate, but individual women activists lent their services

to Churchill.¹⁰⁴ One of these, a Mrs Dunne, afterwards admitted to having taken part, and offered her resignation as honorary secretary of a women's committee in north Merseyside; her absence from subsequent records suggests that it was accepted.¹⁰⁵

Local concerns shaped the Women's Advisory Committee's response to the India question, just as the local activities of the British Union of Fascists moved it in 1934 to declare the unsuitability of fascism to British methods of government.¹⁰⁶ In a like manner, the committee's belated interest in the League of Nations Union (LNU) was not so much a newfound concern for international cooperation, but an expression of anxiety about it becoming a vehicle for left wing activists. For many on the advisory committee, efforts at engaging with the LNU were intended to monitor its work rather than pursue effective collaboration.¹⁰⁷ Labour and Liberal women were considerably more disposed to international networks and organisations, and the LNU's liberal internationalist discourse did not sit easily with many Conservatives. Nevertheless, the Women's Advisory Committee, like the party, contained a range of attitudes to the LNU.¹⁰⁸ The 1935 conference of the No. 4 Group of Women's Unionist Associations neatly encapsulated these with the discussion, 'Has the League of Nations justified its formation?'¹⁰⁹ The contrasting positions held by Conservatives were exacerbated during the LNU's 1934–35 peace ballot. George Herbert, chairman of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, advised party members to boycott the poll.¹¹⁰ The Northwestern Area Women's Advisory Committee discussed its position in September 1934. Mrs Wilson Fox of the Central Women's Advisory Committee attended to state the party's position, and the local committee dutifully passed a resolution which endorsed the 'action taken by Colonel Herbert.'¹¹¹ It is unclear, however, if all Lancashire Conservatives heeded the party line, for the county had one of the best turnouts in England.¹¹² In any case, boycotting the poll did not mean cutting links with the LNU. In 1936 the Northwestern Women's Advisory Committee responded to a request from the Central Women's Advisory Committee to compile a panel of those willing to attend meetings of other societies; a Miss Pilkington was asked to represent the party 'on the League of Nations

Union'.¹¹³ In November 1937 Miss Hickey proposed a resolution which recognised 'the vital importance of creating a close and active relationship between our Association and the League of Nations Union.' The chairman, Hornyold, intervened with an amendment that diluted Hickey's but was still agreeable to her:

That this meeting of the Women's Advisory Committee welcomes the efforts made by the National Government to restore and preserve the peace of the world. It recognises the vital importance of creating sound opinion of peace problems, and feels there is need for more Conservative support and influence in the branches of the League of Nations Union.

This provoked 'a great deal of discussion' and the suggestion of an addendum, from a Miss Rayner, to insert the word 'individual' between 'more' and 'Conservative.' Even after these two changes, thirteen out of the fifty present abstained.¹¹⁴ Whatever this says about the attitude of committee members to international co-operation, it should be contrasted with their reaction to the suggestion, from Rayner, that the advisory committee support the International Entente against the Third International. This was simply ruled by the chairman as out of the question, though she was not against individual participation.¹¹⁵

VI

If the Women's Advisory Committee reflected the ambiguity of Conservatives towards the LNU, it also shared the party's broad support for rearmament and the appeasement of Nazi Germany.¹¹⁶ According to Maguire, this was not out of the ordinary, 'Conservative women were less interested in women's issues than in Conservative ones.'¹¹⁷ However, comparing the subjects discussed at the Northwestern Area Council with its Women's Advisory Committee, it is telling that the latter dealt with a number of domestic questions which did not feature at meetings of

the former. In September 1935, for example, the advisory committee heard a resolution on the neglected education of ‘barge children’, an issue it subsequently took up with the Education minister, Oliver Stanley, and which was the subject of follow up reports.¹¹⁸ In 1936 it passed a resolution expressing concern about the rising cost of milk to health and education institutions, encouraged branches to discuss the Education bill, and assigned Lady Worsley-Taylor to report on societies concerned with ‘Maternal and Child Welfare.’¹¹⁹ It also passed resolutions calling on the government to take action on road accidents and concerning the maintenance of sewage systems.¹²⁰ A resolution in March 1935, calling for the publication of information on the Representation of the People Act, ‘to help place qualified people on the register’, probably had women in mind, given that there had been only two general elections since the most recent extension of the franchise.¹²¹ The committee also addressed itself to the working hours of factory women. However, in contrast to the confidence expressed in its 1935 report on keep fit classes, a resolution which called on factory women to decide for themselves if they work overtime was withdrawn after ‘a number of different opinions were expressed’.¹²² The committee appears to have been sensitive to any definite statement on the subject, in case it somehow risked undermining the still significant levels of support for the Conservative party amongst women mill workers.¹²³

Other issues discussed by the Women’s Advisory Committee were more typical of those that preoccupied the majority of grassroots Conservatives. The menace of socialism and communism was a recurring topic, and in particular, the counteraction of ‘Soviet propaganda’.¹²⁴ In January 1938 Worsley-Taylor drew the attention of the committee to a BBC broadcast by the poet and Labour candidate, Joseph MacLeod, on ‘What is happening in the Russian theatre to-day’. After some discussion the committee referred the matter to Central Office.¹²⁵ A visit from Marjorie Maxse in June 1937 seems to have prompted an ‘emergency resolution’ that recommended the formation of the reading groups mentioned above. Assheton and Lawson proposed that ‘Groups be formed wherever possible, to read and study the books published by the National Book

Association and the Right Book Club, in order that they may be reviewed and commented on in the local Press and brought to the attention of the electorate.’¹²⁶ The resolution was subsequently presented by Assheton to area council, which in turn referred it to the party’s central education committee in London.¹²⁷ The Right Book Club had been founded by Christina Foyle for the purpose of countering supposedly fashionable left wing bias and its output included traditionalist and pro-fascist texts. The club’s membership, somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000, did not succeed in matching the Left Book Club; it lacked the latter’s capacity to commission original work, and it faced competition from Arthur Bryant’s National Book Association.¹²⁸ This might explain why the proposed reading groups were not mentioned again in the minutes of the Women’s Advisory Committee, for all the alarmism of its ‘emergency resolution’.

A perennial topic of Conservative meetings across the country was the demand for economy. According to Ball, ‘As it was led by those who paid taxes but received comparatively little in the way of direct benefit from the expansion of state activity, it was hardly surprising that in times of economic depression the Conservative party called for the reduction of expenditure’.¹²⁹ It is remarkable, therefore, that the minutes of the Northwestern Area Women’s Advisory Committee contain no obvious references to making ‘economies’. A partial exception is the resolution passed at its 1934 conference which declared that ‘the urgent economic problem of the world is to achieve a balance between production and distribution ... the Conservative Party should show vision in putting forward or supporting a comprehensive economic plan for the future.’¹³⁰ It is tempting to link this with contemporary ideas about social credit and distributism that influenced elements on the radical right; the resolution was, of note, seconded by Rayner, who advocated that the party support the anti-communist International Entente.¹³¹ But it is more likely that the approximately four to five hundred people attending the conference would have understood this resolution through the lens of Lancashire’s declining export trade, especially in manufactured cotton products. The conference was convened, after all, at a time when the area council’s economic objections to the government’s India policy were well known. If anything,

the records suggest that the Women's Advisory Committee handled economic questions in a way that was more typical of Conservatism in the northwest than the party's prosperous redoubts in the south of England. This is evident from their interventions in the acrimonious party debate over tariff reform noted above. The committee also advocated classes on 'simple economics', and recommended that branches discuss legislation on gambling, bank nationalisation, unemployment assistance, and deprived 'special areas'.¹³² This is not to suggest that women Conservatives in the northwest did not share with Conservatives elsewhere a frustration with taxation and government spending. Rather, that the economic difficulties faced by local industries, notably in shipping and cotton manufacturing, and the party's reliance on working class votes at general elections, directed their attention instead to calling for limited forms of government intervention to protect export trades.¹³³

VII

This article examines the various ways that women in the northwest of England entered, navigated, justified and expanded their membership and function in the inter-war Conservative party. It is important to emphasise, however, that this was highly circumscribed, not least by the expectations of gender roles that were policed by female as well as male party members. In many important ways, women remained in the background, integrated with yet autonomous of the party structure at all levels. As Davies and Morley confirm, women did not figure prominently as candidates or appear to be especially active in election campaigns in Lancashire's mill towns.¹³⁴ Maguire notes that it was in the inter-war period that the standard refrain, 'women are more opposed than the men to women candidates', first emerged.¹³⁵ At the same time that women associated with the advisory council made headway in the party structures, a contrasting picture is found in the records of some local associations. A discussion among Prestwich Conservatives in 1928, about 'engaging lady speakers', was left in 'abeyance' and not considered again; the opinions of the three women sitting on its general purposes committee are not recorded.¹³⁶ A

proposal at the area council in 1932, from delegates representing the Women's Advisory Committee, to allow allied women's organisations to nominate representatives to the area council, was diluted instead to consultation and recommendation after a succession of speakers objected, and even then some delegates expressed their dissent.¹³⁷ The following year, women in Liverpool complained about being prevented from entering a Conservative Club during a meeting of the Conservative Workingmen's Association.¹³⁸

If analysis of women's presence in the inter-war Conservative party is reduced to measuring their influence, it is hard to dissent from the conclusion that women's branches serviced the decisions taken by men.¹³⁹ However, it is necessary also to acknowledge the development of women's roles in the party, and especially how they constructed and reconstructed these through negotiation with one another and the wider party. Women Conservatives disavowed the label feminist, but they demanded the right to participate in the party, and carved out an especial role in education. Their progress, however limited, was against the background of wider social and political change following extensions to the franchise in 1918 and 1928, a period during which women were encouraged by political and non-political organisations to extend the scope of their participation in public life. The Northwestern Women's Advisory Committee, and to a lesser extent women's branches across the region, provided women Conservatives with the experience, confidence and knowledge of public speaking, chairing meetings, committee work and organisation, that enabled some of them to go on to take roles in the wider party and in public life. To paraphrase Helen McCarthy, it is not difficult to assemble evidence of limited empowerment in the inter-war period if one is determined, but historians must also highlight the resources and ideas utilised by British citizens to gain knowledge of public affairs.¹⁴⁰ The rich archival sources bequeathed by the Conservative party make it possible to redress what remains a neglected area of study.¹⁴¹ These are not solely occupied with fund raising fetes and the periodic election of officers, nor do they necessarily paint a homogenous picture of women Conservatives' progress across the country. As this article attempts to demonstrate, the surviving

party records, when effectively plumbed and placed in their regional and national contexts, make it possible to uncover women's vital contribution to the electoral success of the party at local level, and reveal how they interacted with and reflected distinctive traditions of Conservatism such as that pertaining in Lancashire.¹⁴²

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¹ Note on terminology. The masculine form 'chairman' is always used in party records for women holding this position. The Northwestern Area of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations was the alternative name for the Lancashire, Cheshire and Westmorland Divisional Association. The Lancashire and Cheshire divisional associations amalgamated in 1925, and again in 1929 with Westmorland. This article refers throughout to the Northwestern Area for consistency and convenience. References to 'Miss' or 'Mrs' are taken from party records which rarely mention the first names of women.

² At the time of Sylvia Assheton's appointment, her husband was the Conservative by-election candidate for Rushcliffe. See, Michael Stenton and Stephen Rees (Ed.) (1981) *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament, Vol. 4: 1945–1979* (Brighton: Harvester Press), p. 11.

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