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For a long time, parliamentary politics and government policy were predominantly male areas and there were hardly any prominent female politicians. In the West, there was a widely held belief that women did not make competent politicians which persisted even after World War II. People thought that women did not possess the necessary qualities to compete with men. The following quote, from a Dutch female politician in the late 1950s, is illuminating:

“I would like to remark, that it seems to me that men usually do not stimulate active political participation by women. They take women as read, but do not think positively about their capacities.” (As quoted in Schokking 66).

The handful of female parliamentarians who did emerge after World War II tended to be seen as exceptions to the rule. They were expected to restrict themselves to policy areas traditionally regarded as suitable for women, such as health, social work and education, and to leave more weighty and prestigious fields such as economics, foreign affairs and defence to their male colleagues. The few women who dared to storm these male bastions tended to be stereotyped as “unfeminine”. Such views attributed to significantly less political ambition with women than men (Ribberink 1998; Henig and Henig; Lawless and Fox; Van der Steen; Mostert).

In the 1990s less than 30 percent of all cabinet ministers in ten important Western European countries were female (Henig and Henig 56).<sup>1</sup> However, women in the West acquired more political influence than ever in this same period. The development of the welfare society, better educational opportunities and new social movements such as second-wave feminism prompted a rise in the number of female politicians and led to the idea of female incompetence being challenged. There were more women in parliament, more women

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<sup>1</sup> The countries involved are Sweden, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, Germany.

ministers and there were even a few women Prime Ministers, although only two of them were influential in the West. These two female Prime Ministers came to power at more or less the same time, i.e. Margaret Thatcher (United Kingdom, 1979-1990) and Gro Harlem Brundtland (Norway 1981, 1986-1989, 1990-1996).<sup>2</sup>

Did these two women, along with other female political leaders, have certain things in common? How different were they? How were they able to attain and maintain their high positions? To answer these questions, I have primarily consulted existing literature – in other words secondary sources. Both women have been the subject of various biographies – many, in Margaret Thatcher’s case – and both women have also written autobiographies. Of course, regarding the latter sources in particular, care must be taken because of the obvious bias that is always present in autobiographies. In addition to biographical and autobiographical sources, there is an enormous pool of historiography on the acts and deeds of both Thatcher and Brundtland. In these books and articles, one can find data about their lives and careers, but also on how their lives and careers have been judged by prominent historians. Where necessary, I shall complement these secondary sources with primary sources from archives, journals, reports and so on.

Why do I work this way? Because this is a comparative biography, and in order to draw these comparisons, it is not necessary to know every detail of the lives and careers of the women in question. I am primarily interested in the phenomenon “women political leaders”, their characteristics, the obstacles they came up against and the advantages they enjoyed in comparison with other women – if any. What made these two women pioneers in the field of political leadership, what barriers were there in their careers and did they pay a price for their success? A comparative biography of female political leaders may clarify which prevailing ideas on women and politics are relevant and which are not. A good comparative biography will avoid generalizations, but can clarify the shared elements in the lives and careers of important female politicians.

The American historian John Cooper distinguishes three steps to take in writing a comparative biography (79-102). First, there has to be a rationale behind the choice of the subjects under review; they have to be representative of a larger group and they have to be historically significant. Moreover, sufficient material must be available in order to be able to investigate the subjects’ lives thoroughly. Second, there has to be a dialogue with the subjects

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<sup>2</sup> The two other female Prime Ministers in Portugal (Maria Pintasilgo, 1979-1980) and France (Édith Cresson, 1991-1992) were relatively unimportant.

in order to get good grip on their acts and motives. Third, the persons under review must be compared with one another. Cooper adds this restriction to his last step:

Comparison is a rich and fascinating approach. But I also think it is a severely limited approach. I believe that comparative biography has limited application because there are relatively few historical figures who are truly comparable. In order for this approach to work for the historian-biographer, the subjects need to be at least roughly contemporary and to have interacted with each other. (99)

When I apply Cooper's prescriptions to Thatcher and Brundtland, I come to the following results. Firstly, they both belong to a group of pioneers in female political leadership, who – presumably – met with similar difficulties, obstacles and prejudices while building their political careers. Some of the aspects shared by these women are the choice to have a relationship and children or not, the balance between femininity and masculinity, dealing with prejudices and sometimes sexism in the media. It is relevant to know how leaders such as Thatcher and Brundtland dealt with these kinds of problem. As important women Prime Ministers, they were historically significant, especially because they were pioneers from a gender perspective. As I have already mentioned, there is a great deal of literature on both women, as well as various sources such as newspaper articles, audiovisual sources and websites and their own autobiographies. Secondly, I critically investigate the literature and sources mentioned, in order to understand both women better. Margaret Thatcher is now very ill, but Gro Harlem Brundtland can still be interviewed. Thirdly, I thoroughly scrutinize their lives and careers as Prime Ministers for similarities and differences. As we have seen, Thatcher and Brundtland were Prime Ministers in the same decade. They also have met each other several times, although I have to add that I do not agree with Cooper on this point. I do not think the subjects under review need to have interacted with each other in order to be able to compare them. I think it is enough for them to have similar careers at the same time and, as such, to be pioneers in their field.

Two German historians, Levke Harders and Veronika Lipphardt, wrote an essay on collective biography, which has certain things in common with the comparative biography. The collective biography, which deals mainly with small groups, differs from the individual biography because it seeks to generalize about the subjects under review, because it deals with networks between their subjects, and also because it often restricts itself to a certain carefully chosen comparable aspect of their lives and careers. The collective biography though, also has

an open eye for the differences between its subjects. It is precisely the balance between similarities and differences that makes it difficult, but also interesting (81, 84, 87). In this paper, I will give an overview of the results of my research. Similarities and differences are what I am looking for in the first place. One similarity is already known and particularly striking: the fact that both women Prime Ministers maintained their position for a relatively long period. Without going into detail, I will try and clarify the cause of their long stay at the top.

## **The Road to Power**

It is necessary to deal with the life history of both women Prime Ministers before they came to power, in order to understand their personalities and careers. Margaret Thatcher was born Margaret Roberts in 1925, in Grantham, a small town in the Midlands of England, and Gro Harlem in 1939, in Oslo. There is thus a considerable age difference between the two women, but their period of government overlapped in part. Both women were able to make their way to power using their personal qualities and political capacities; they were both intelligent, with an academic education and highly developed political talents. The two women were also fortunate in their appearance, which is not unimportant in building up a career in a man's world (Etcoff). The setting was completely different, but the two women both had a stimulating upbringing, with the support of both their father and mother, although the influence of the latter is repeatedly underestimated in Thatcher's case. The support of both parents was of paramount importance for most women seeking to build a political career, in view of the opposition they would encounter. The political ambition they both demonstrated, and in which they deviated from the mainstream of women, was certainly due in large part to their upbringing (Sykes; Linders).

There is a considerable difference between the origins of Thatcher and Brundtland. Margaret Roberts came from a middle-class environment and did not have a lot to spare in her youth. Her parents had two grocer's shops, but her father, who had rather conservative views, was very active politically and ended up as mayor of Grantham. Margaret studied chemistry at Oxford University where she built up a useful network of contacts for her later political career and in 1951, she married the rich manufacturer Denis Thatcher. In the early years of her marriage, she studied tax law, in preparation for a political career. The family had two children (Ribberink 2005). Gro Harlem came from a prominent social-democratic family. Her father had been a minister twice in the period 1955-1965, and the well-known social-

democratic Prime Minister of Norway in the fifties and sixties, Einar Gerhardsen, was a friend of the family. In 1960, while she was studying medicine in Oslo, Gro married Arne Olav Brundtland, a student of international law. They had four children together. During her time as a student, Gro had experienced sexism for the first time in her life; it would be the basis for her feminism (Brundtland).

There was a huge difference in the way the two women handled their families. Margaret Thatcher's children, growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, were often supervised by nannies and sent to boarding schools. The traditional ideal of the family was dominant and it was she who was primarily responsible for taking care of the children. This was how she resolved her "combination problem" – to state it in contemporary terms. In another article, I have written about the frustrations experienced by her daughter, in particular, as a result of this type of upbringing (Ribberink 2005). There was a supportive husband though: Denis Thatcher partly financed Margaret's political career. He was also an important source of psychological support: according to several spokesmen he was a necessary qualifying figure in the background (Maddox; Campbell). Gro Harlem and her husband Arne Olav Brundtland raised their children together in a modern feminist way; they shared the household tasks and responsibility for the childcare. It was even the case that, from the start of the 1970s, as Gro's political career was taking off, Arne Olav carried out most of the child care duties. He was a feminist, notwithstanding the fact that in political terms he was a right-wing conservative. He stuck to this political choice until the end of the 1980s, after his wife already had been Prime Minister for the Social Democrats for a couple of years (Ribberink 2006). Yet Gro Harlem Brundtland paid a price for their private solution. Several times she spoke of her feelings of guilt because she saw too little of her family as a consequence of her busy job. Notwithstanding the differences in the situation of the two women, one can conclude that in both cases a favourable family situation was an enabling factor in pursuing their political careers. Thatcher could profit from her husband's wealth so that she could hire household aid and child care. Brundtland had a husband who shared the care for household and children with her on an equal basis.

Politically-speaking, Thatcher and Brundtland were very different. Since her student days, Thatcher had been active in the Conservative Party, while Brundtland was a social-democrat and active in the Arbeiderpartiet. The British Conservative Party adhered to values like the importance of the monarchy, a strict immigration policy and good family life. Until the 1970s, it did not differ that much from the Labour Party in economic affairs. The Norwegian Labour Party (Arbeiderpartiet) mostly adhered to the same views as other social

democratic parties: that is, it was liberal in cultural and sexual affairs, and in support of more equality in economic and social areas. Thatcher and Brundtland both had to face opposition in building up their political career because of their sex, but Thatcher more so than Brundtland. The Tories were not very feminist and there had never been many women on leading posts in this party. The representation of women in political bodies in Great Britain was, moreover, not as high as in some other countries. Immediately after the Second World War, female members of the House of Commons remained at around three to four percent of the total and even in the late 1980s, during the second feminist wave, it did not exceed six (Oldersma 146). Compare this to Norway, where 34 percent of MPs were female at that time, which was the highest percentage in Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, through hard work and despite opposition, Thatcher succeeded in building up a network in the Conservative Party. In 1959 Thatcher was elected to the House of Commons, and in the late sixties she was a member of Edward Heath's shadow cabinet. From 1971-1974, she was the Minister of Education in his cabinet. She functioned reasonably well in this post, succeeding in broadening infant education, modernizing primary schools and raising the school-leaving age to sixteen. However, she was temporarily unpopular with the general public for ending free school milk for primary school children older than seven. It earned her the nickname "Margaret Thatcher, Milk Snatcher" (Evans 4-5). Thatcher was no feminist and was consistent with her position as a leader of a party that was an enemy of feminism. Nevertheless, she owed her political career in part to feminism. Heath admitted her into his shadow and later his real cabinet because he had to take account of the fact that female emancipation was gathering pace; he therefore had to appoint a "token woman". However, Heath never took Thatcher seriously. Many other members of the party shared much the same attitude and they watched her candidacy for the party leadership with scepticism. Much to their surprise she beat her main rival for the leadership, Heath, and became "Leader of the Opposition" from 1975-1979 (Maddox chapter 7).

Gro Harlem Brundtland had a much easier time building up a network than her British counterpart, as she could benefit from her parents' associates in the social-democratic party. Moreover, in the sixties, the party's commitment to equality was already much less anti-feminist than the British Conservative party, and in the seventies, like a few other Norwegian political parties, it had become feminized under the influence of the second wave of feminism (Skjeie). Gro Harlem Brundtland, who since her student days had been a feminist and active in the movement for the legalization of abortion, attracted attention partly because of this

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<sup>3</sup> Norway has one chamber in parliament.

attitude. From 1974 to 1979, she was Minister for Environment in the cabinets of Trygve Bratteli (1973-1976) and Odvar Nordli (1976-1981), and she functioned well in this position. Since her student days, she had been interested in the relationship between medicine and society, including the environment. There was great concern about the environment in Norway and a sharp eye was kept on the Minister. She was active in the fight against acid rain, and amazed everyone in 1977 when her bold actions prevented the accident with the Bravo, an oil platform in the North Sea that sprang a leak from developing into a real disaster.<sup>4</sup> In 1975, she became the deputy party leader, partly due to the central position she had adopted. On the one hand, she had sympathy for the new social movements, including the environmental movement and the second wave of feminism. On the other, she advocated a moderate foreign policy. The proximity of the Soviet Union, which had a large military base on the northern border of Norway, made the Norwegian population extra sensitive to the threat from the East. It was characteristic of Norway's foreign policy after 1945 that people tried to steer a careful middle course between the two superpowers, but that a pro-Western orientation and a focus on the NAVO predominated. Brundtland fitted well in this course.<sup>5</sup> In 1981, she won the battle for the party leadership, whereby she also became nominee for Prime Minister. In February of the same year, she took up that position. At the age of 42, she was the youngest ever Prime Minister of Norway, besides being the first woman.

According to the American political scientist Michael Genovese, most female national leaders after 1945 have come to power in times of social unrest (211). He gives no explanation for this statement, but one might think of a kind of *Umwertung aller Werte*, so that even a female government leader was accepted. In desperate times people are more likely to accept uncommon solutions than when everything is functioning smoothly. His statement also holds true in the case of Thatcher and Brundtland. The socio-economic situation of a country is a good measure of social stability. In both countries there was social unrest when these women leaders came to power.

In the seventies, the United Kingdom was badly off socially and economically. The country was plagued by stagflation, a disastrous combination of inflation and economic stagnation, strikes and high unemployment. In 1975, inflation was running at 25 percent and there were 1.5 million unemployed. The "Keynesian consensus" that had been generally adhered to by both the Labour party and the Tories since 1945 was beginning to waver and was challenged by the "New Right" in the Conservative Party, of which Margaret Thatcher

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<sup>4</sup> *Scandinavian Review* March 1976, September 1977.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, March 1976, March 1983.

was also a prominent adherent. This movement advocated combating inflation through control of the monetary supply, reduction of taxes and aiming towards a balanced budget. Her affiliation with the political right in the seventies contributed to a large extent to her election as party leader in 1975. James Callaghan's Labour cabinet modestly improved economic performance in the couple of years after 1976, manifesting itself in a reduction of inflation to 7 percent, in a considerable wage restraint and in severe expenditure cuts. But in the long run it did not last: the final blow came in 1978/1979 with the "winter of discontent", in which the unions were merciless in their strikes against the wage ceiling enforced by the government. In May 1979, the Tories had a magnificent victory in the elections and Margaret Thatcher could take up power with her cabinet (Morgan chapter 10 and 11).

Since 1945, Scandinavian countries had developed a strong welfare state "... distinct from the models applied in other industrialized countries. Characteristics such as a large state sector, extensive welfare provisions, high social welfare costs, high taxes, generous benefits and active labour market policies have been used by various writers to describe the degree of "Nordicness"". Thus stated by the economic historians Staffan Marklund and Anders Nordlund (19, 21). The part played by the respective social-democratic parties after World War II in these countries was a large one. They could boast of years of practically total employment and relatively small differences in income. Since the seventies, when the income from the oil finds in the North Sea began pouring in, Norway had been the richest of the Scandinavian countries. Until the end of the seventies, it remained comparatively free from the influences of the international economic recession. Only then did economic growth, which until then had amounted to 4 percent annually, begin to stagnate, which created unrest among the population. In 1981 and 1982, there was zero growth for the first time. At the end of 1981, unemployment started to increase for the first time, to 2 percent, and it was precisely in that period that Gro Harlem Brundtland came to power.

At this moment, we can conclude that both women came to power with the aid of their personal qualities, an upbringing that encouraged them to foster certain ambitions, a supportive family situation, the building of a network, a favourable party situation and favourable socio-political circumstances. Five differences can also be identified: Gro Harlem Brundtland was born in a prominent political family and in this respect she fits into a broader pattern of female political leaders, in contrast to Margaret Thatcher (Sykes 214). Brundtland was a feminist, whereas Thatcher was not. This difference influenced the way the two women dealt with their families and children. Brundtland, moreover, was younger than Thatcher and she was a Social Democrat, whereas Thatcher shared the political ideology of the New Right.



Both women faced scepticism when they took up their positions and the belief that a woman political leader was bound to fail. That said, one can point to the fact that the political climate in Norway was friendlier to women than that of the United Kingdom.

### **Period of Government**

In order to judge how Margaret Thatcher and Gro Harlem Brundtland performed in government, a distinction must be made between the substance of what they achieved in office and their political style. Both factors are important. As we have seen, in the past doubts were frequently raised about the political competence of women politicians and often took a heavy toll on their political ambition. Research also shows that “substance”, in terms of the policies implemented, is still an important factor in politics, notwithstanding an increasing tendency towards personalization in politics.

Although Margaret Thatcher worked on her own image a great deal, research into voting patterns at the general elections of 1979, 1983 and 1987, when she was elected and re-elected, points out that issues of policy substance were decisive (Van Holsteyn and Andeweg; King). The same statement can be made on the basis of research into the elections of September 1985 and September 1989, which were those that brought Gro Harlem Brundtland to power (1986) and out of power (1989), and the election of September 1993, when she was returned to office: policy issues were decisive.<sup>6</sup> I presume therefore, that both women Prime Ministers performed well in terms of policy. This thesis is confirmed by experts in this field.

I carried out research into two crucial areas of policy for both women -- areas that were decisive for their reputations as Prime Ministers (Ribberink 2009b). For Thatcher, I chose her socio-economic policy, which was and still is very controversial, but is these days viewed as being necessary for the United Kingdom at the time. Besides this, I chose her foreign policy, which is less controversial and more positively evaluated. In the case of Brundtland, I also chose her socio-economic policy, and alongside this, her emancipation policy. Both areas of policy are judged positively. I analysed the historiographical discussion on this subject. The influence of historians should never be overestimated, but one can reasonably presume that the work of famous authors will be influential on the judgments of contemporaries and later generations. For Margaret Thatcher, I used the works of Jane Lewis, Kenneth Morgan, Eric Evans, Peter Hennessy, Antony Seldon and Daniel Collings, Rodney Lowe and John Campbell. I also benefited from the views of the British historian Pat Thane,

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<sup>6</sup> *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 1986, 177-189; 1990, 277-290; 1994, 171-180.

who was nice enough to share these with me in a friendly letter.<sup>7</sup> For Brundtland I consulted the economic historians Oesterberg and Nilsen, the volume *Nordic Social Policy*, and the historians and social scientists Rebecca Davis, Monique Kremer, Hege Skjeie and Nico Keilman. Finally of course, I consulted written and audio-visual sources on both women politicians. I presume the contents of their performance to have been an important factor in their long stay in government.

The aforementioned rather positive view on both women political leaders is not meant to say that there is no criticism possible. On the contrary, Thatcher is hugely criticized for her anti-feminist attitude, the social disadvantages of her economic policy, and her centralistic policy. A strong point of criticism for Brundtland was for one decision that aroused world-wide furor and would be a serious blow to her reputation as a champion of the environment. This occurred when the Norwegian government broke an international ban by resuming the harvesting of whaling in 1992.

Apart from substantial issues of policy, style is also important for politicians -- for women even more so than for men. Female politicians are constantly judged on their appearance, behaviour and presentation. I only need to point to Angela Merkel's dress with the low neck-line and Hillary Clinton's tears. In the case of Margaret Thatcher, as well as Gro Harlem Brundtland, their gender contributed to an increased personalization of politics. Both women had to endure, especially at the beginning of their careers as Prime Minister, that the media were very critical and not only as regards the content of their performances, but also about their looks, their behaviour, their clothes, their hair and so on. This made them uncertain, but both have learned to deal with it in their own way. Margaret Thatcher learned to manipulate the media and to use her femininity as well, and the same holds true in a part for Gro Harlem Brundtland. Their uncertainty did not totally disappear however, and both reacted to it by behaving as tough women, who could be quite authoritarian if need be. There is reason for caution regarding this point because women are far more likely than men to be called arrogant and aggressive when they behave in a resolute way. After all, such behaviour does not count as feminine. It should be mentioned that both women have a different perspective and see their leadership as thorough and vigorous. In the end, one could say that both women learned to control the style complexity, by combining so-called "masculine" and "feminine" behaviours. Both women could be tough, but they were not afraid to show that they were women either. Carefully cultivating image was part of this project.

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<sup>7</sup> Pat Thane, Letter to author, Spring 2006.

Margaret Thatcher is particularly famous for having cultivated her image. Various sources emphasize that Thatcher was able to combine femininity with ruthlessness. Prefiguring the spin and image politics of the present day, on becoming Conservative Party leader Thatcher put herself in the hands of Gordon Reece, a former television producer who engineered the manufacture of her image. Her love of clothes is also legendary and she paid close attention to her wardrobe. In an interview with the BBC, she showed off her favourite clothes, in order to emphasize that she was just one of the people. There was a similar attention to detail and developing a media-friendly image in terms of speech writing, and Thatcher turned to others for expert help. Essentially, the distinctiveness of Thatcherism was not only in terms of ideas and ideology, but also in terms of political technology and the manipulation of the media as the vehicle for Thatcher's populist messages. As Peter Clarke argues: "Her purposeful projection of herself, moreover, was part of her populism – not to distance herself from those whom she often referred to as "our own people", but to represent them more effectively." Thatcher was an expert "gender-bender". She could seem masculine and instil fear through her aggressive and iron-ladylike behaviour. In this way she confounded her (male) colleagues, who were not sure how to react to this precisely because she was a woman. Nor did Thatcher hesitate to make use of their confusion. On the other hand, she also played the female card by using her charms when necessary (Evans 44).

It is also striking that both women have built up a reputation for being "workaholics without a sense of humour"; a coincidence or is this common label a consequence of their gender?<sup>8</sup> In one aspect of style the two female Prime Ministers differed hugely: whereas Margaret Thatcher was famous for her lack of ability to delegate, Gro Harlem Brundtland on the contrary was very good at this. She demanded a great deal from people (as from herself), but let them go their own way.<sup>9</sup>

One can ask the question whether in her autobiography Brundtland does not make things look easier than they were when she writes that she trained herself to have "a stiff upper lip" in her first period as Prime Minister (Brundtland 53, 154). Undoubtedly she did, but it is also not a secret that she could be very emotional, sometimes got angry, shouting and crying during her performances as a Prime Minister on television and elsewhere in public. Of course, this was a great joy for the media who did not hesitate to tease her whenever they could and point to the fact that such behaviour was typical of a female political leader. Like Margaret Thatcher, although less intensively than her British counterpart, Gro Harlem

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<sup>8</sup> *Trouw*, 10 September 1993.

<sup>9</sup> *NRC Handelsblad*, 6 March 1989; 15 September 1997.

Brundtland paid attention to her image and underwent a great deal of media training. During her career she learned to control her emotions and she became rather popular with the Norwegian people, as for instance was showed in the many condolences she received after the death of her youngest son. The public used to call her “Gro”, as a kind of affectionate name. Her popularity with her own party was as great as elsewhere and for a long time it looked as if there was not replacement for her. A fact she used to boast about, which further increased the accusations of arrogance made against her.

### **Final Observations**

Both women had their differences – their age, their origins, their political views and cultural differences – but there were also striking similarities in their biography and in their performance in government. They were both intelligent, ambitious and had an aptitude for politics. Both women benefited from encouragement during their youth and a good, academic education. Furthermore, both female politicians succeeded in building up social and political networks and both profited from a favourable party situation and favourable socio-political circumstances. Besides, both Thatcher and Brundtland were cabinet ministers before becoming party leader and Prime Minister. Both women are also judged to have performed well as Prime Ministers in terms of policy. This is rather remarkable in view of the fact that both were the first female Prime Ministers in their respective countries and against the background of the severe economic crisis of the 1980s. This is probably the main factor why both women were able to remain on as Prime Ministers for so long. Both Thatcher and Brundtland were judged according to their style, as was the case with other female political leaders. Both women learned to combine masculine and feminine behaviour in a certain way in order to deflect sometimes heavy criticism from the media and the public.

Notwithstanding their differences, the two women knew each other as colleagues to a certain extent. They met a few times and got along reasonably well, although their divergent political visions on issues such as nuclear disarmament, the Cold War, the economic crisis and the promotion of other women’s careers formed an obstacle to their becoming true friends. One can presume that had the two women been friends, this would have made things easier for both of them, in view of the similar obstacles they encountered. On a visit to Norway by Margaret Thatcher in the autumn of 1986, the British newspaper *The Observer* wrote about “The Iron Lady Versus the Super Woman” (as quoted in Brundtland 253). And that seems an apt epithet with which to close this contribution.

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