Women are taking over the world, you may have noticed.
Barring a shocking win for Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton will soon be America’s first female commander-in-chief. She will skip past the longstanding German chancellor, Angela Merkel, in the world’s most powerful woman stakes. Next May, the National Front’s Marine Le Pen could well become France’s first madame la présidente, though don’t expect feminists to cheer. In Great Britain, meanwhile, we feel somewhat ahead of the progressive curve: our country now has its second female prime minister in Theresa May.

Inevitably, May is compared with our first woman P.M., Margaret Thatcher, and there are similarities. Both May and Thatcher are Conservative Party leaders. They both come from solid English stock: Thatcher was a grocer’s daughter; May, a vicar’s. Both women excite right-wing men who like their women bossy and tough. And May, like Thatcher, has assumed power when British politics is in turmoil. Thatcher reached 10 Downing Street after the 1978-79 “Winter of Discontent” public sector strikes; May, after the country’s momentous vote to leave the European Union.

In her first few months in charge, May seems almost to be aping the Iron Lady, rather as Barack Obama modelled his vocal patterns on Martin Luther King, Jr. At her first prime minister questions, for instance, May, looking across the bench at opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn, deepened her voice and said, “I’ve long heard the Labour Party asking what the Conservative Party does for women—well, it just keeps making us prime minister.” The House roared approvingly, and right-wingers everywhere could imagine the late Mrs. Thatcher looking down and nodding in agreement.

The May-Thatcher parallel shouldn’t be stretched, however. May, who before becoming P.M. survived six years as home secretary, is an establishment figure—however much she now pretends to stand against “the liberal elite.” She never sat comfortably among the more privileged “Notting Hill Tories” who dominated the party before her, but she was an important part of their administrations. Thatcher, on the other hand, was an outsider and an insurgent. She was secretary of State for Education and Science before becoming P.M., but she took over her party as a fresh thinker—a free-market ideologue, radical monetarist, and individualist. May took power after supporting the losing side of a democratic argument. She reached the top of the greasy pole having gone along with her predecessor David Cameron’s argument, that Britain should remain in the E.U. Thatcher succeeded Ted Heath as a repudiation of, and antidote to, the corporate state. May, by contrast, is being called the first “post-Thatcherite” P.M. because, in her interpretation of “Brexit”—Britain’s departure from the E.U.—she appears to be running counter to an open borders globalist philosophy. She wants, like an Anglican Donald Trump, to protect Brit-
ish jobs for British workers. She has, however, adopted this radicalism only after reaching 10 Downing Street.

The concept of Thatcherism was simultaneously vague—in the sense that it had no agreed sacred text or statement of principles—and strong.... Instead of conservatism being a method of orderly retreat before the forces of socialist progress, Thatcherism saw it as a dynamic and creative force, the best way of advancing the prosperity and security of the many. Thatcherism set out to prove that the modern world could be shaped in the interests of greater liberty.

American readers will find the passages on Thatcher's bond with Ronald Reagan particularly interesting. Much has been written about these two titanic figures, whose relationship remains endlessly fascinating. Moore goes further and digs deeper than most professional historians: he shows Reagan's awe for Thatcher, and how their friendship's strange dynamic—stiff yet half-romantic—helped them muddle through difficult moments. During the American invasion of Grenada (a British Commonwealth territory) in 1983 the affection was strained. Thatcher had assured the British that U.S. military action was not in the cards, only to discover that the Americans had initiated an attack without warning her. She felt affronted and perturbed; Reagan's move was a painful reminder that, for all their shared values, protecting Britain's delicate pride could never top the United States' agenda. Nevertheless, as Howard Baker, later Reagan's chief of staff, said, "Maggie Thatcher was the only person who could intimidate Ronald Reagan." So when Reagan rang to apologize for "the embarrassment that's been caused," his tone was sheepish (like "a naughty schoolboy," according to Thatcher's private secretary, Robin Butler). Thatcher contained herself on the phone. She thanked Reagan for calling: "the action is underway now, and we just hope it will be successful," she said. In a BBC interview a few days later, however, she vented her frustration: "when things happen in other countries which we don't like, we don't just march in." These words infuriated the Americans, who felt Thatcher was being hypocritical and ungrateful, given her recent invasion of the Falklands, and America's support for that intervention.

Yet the awkwardness did not last. In fact, Thatcher's unwillingness to play along with whatever the world's greatest power wanted strengthened the special relationship. Thatcher was no Yankee poodle, and for that she commanded Reagan's admiration. Her atti-
tude towards America was more robust and healthy than the soppy love-in between President George W. Bush and Tony Blair. Where Blair wrote fawning memos to Dubya—“with you, whatever,” he told Bush in an Iraq War memo—Thatcher never shied from telling Reagan what she really thought. Over the Middle East peace process, for instance, she risked causing Reagan difficulty by seeking accommodation with moderate Arab leaders over the Palestinian question. This irritated the more hawkish elements in Washington and Tel Aviv. But the Gipper let her be. In the words of National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane, “To him, [she] was kind of a child of Churchill. This was the person above all others whom he was privileged to know in his presidency and he was confident would have an enduring place in history.” Thatcher was for her part always won over by what Moore calls Reagan’s “gentlemanly charm…his courtesy to her as a woman.”

One doesn’t have to be a Thatcherite to share Moore’s obvious nostalgia for Thatcher. Say what you want about her, she was undeniably a woman of substance and immense courage. Today’s P.R.-driven political figures shrivel in comparison. Thatcher indulged in play-acting when occasion demanded, as Moore shows, but she always pursued what she believed to be true. She was frank even though it made her despised. As Philip Lar-kin put it, “Her great virtue is saying that two and two make four, which is as unpopular nowadays as it has always been.”

How would Thatcher have got out of the European pickle that May finds herself in? Would she have approved of Brexit? During the referendum campaigns, the pro-E.U. “Remain” camp stressed to right-wingers that even Thatcher, their heroine, saw the value of a united Europe. The single market appealed to her free-market instincts; British businesses, she insisted, would benefit from “the cold shower” of continental competition. But it is disingenuous to make Thatcher out to be a Euro-federalist avant la lettre. As Moore, a keen “Brexiteer,” shows, she did everything she could to restrain the political ambitions of the union’s architects. She agreed to European idealism’s “windy rhetoric” when it helped her secure concrete gains in her nation’s interest. She believed Ted Heath had negotiated a terrible financial arrangement with the E.U.’s predecessor, the European Economic Community, and was determined to put it right. “We want our money back,” she said, repeatedly. Through sheer stubbornness, she succeeded: the rebate she negotiated infuriated other European leaders, but it saved Britain a fortune. The official Treasury figure for the amount recouped by 2015 is £78 billion. Still, as the French diplomat Hubert Védrine noted, “[s]he did not see it at all as a victory.” French economist Jacques Attali told Moore that President François Mitterrand was surprised to see Thatcher “almost in tears” as she struck the deal. Moore is keen to stress that, in her later years, Thatcher realized she had underestimated the extent of the E.U.’s supranationalist nature: “In her memoirs, Mrs. Thatcher wrote that she had been ‘wrong’ to think, as she told the House of Commons at the time, that ‘European and political union…mean a good deal less than some people over here think they mean.’”

On the European front, then, Thatcher is perhaps the opposite of May, who seems more technocratic and cautious than Thatcher. May has come to power on the back of a democratic demand to take Britain away from Brussels, despite not supporting that risky cause prior to the vote. She now says “Brexit means Brexit”; Eurosceptics are understandably suspicious of her intentions. Thatcher, on the other hand, supported closer European integration against her political instincts. “It was only later that she worked out—and publicly declared—what she thought,” Moore concludes. Her late conversion to a more hardline Euro-skepticism would “cause delight and dismay in roughly equal measure.” Precisely the same words could be applied to the 2016 E.U. referendum result.
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