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Review of Linda McDougall, *Marcia Williams:*
The Life and Times of Baroness Falkender

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LINDA MCDUGALL, *Marcia Williams: The Life and Times of Baroness Falkender* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2023), 304 pp. ISBN 978 1 785 90752 4. £25.00

The first woman to wield political power from 10 Downing Street was, in the eyes of many contemporary observers, not Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s but, one and a half decades earlier, Marcia Williams (or Lady Falkender, as she was officially known after her ennoblement in 1974). As a close confidante of Harold Wilson, she was widely known for her extraordinary influence on the Labour prime minister of the 1960s and 1970s, and equally widely feared for her extremely confrontational manner. Male members of Wilson's staff hated her fervently, and in the end, media investigations into her many scandals ruined her public reputation – and a good deal of Wilson's as well. Now, the journalist and television producer Linda McDougall has written the first biography of Williams, who died in 2019. *The Life and Times of Baroness Falkender* is a book that explicitly 'seeks to rescue Marcia . . . from the patronising, misogynistic and dismissive verdicts of various male enemies and to suggest a more nuanced . . . understanding of her actions' (p. xi).

The book is also explicitly not 'academic'. The author does not provide footnotes, and she has not bothered much with archival sources or academic literature either. Instead she relies mainly on interviews and her personal recollections. Since McDougall was married to the late Labour MP Austin Mitchell and knew many of her protagonists personally (though not Lady Falkender herself), her narrative is very much an insider's story, as evidenced by her frequent use of first names: it's not only Marcia, it's Harold, Joe, and so on. From an academic standpoint, this very subjective approach has more than a few shortcomings. But the author is certainly right in calling for historiography to tell 'more women's stories – the good, the bad and the mundane' (p. xiii) – and it is not her fault that academic historians have so far largely ignored the infamous 'Marcia saga'.

In the better parts of her book, the author's non-academic approach actually allows her to see some aspects more clearly than is usually the case in the methodologically still rather old-fashioned political historiography in Britain. This is certainly true in relation to

'gender', but partly also in relation to 'class'. More than other authors, she emphasizes what an unorthodox figure the down-to-earth Yorkshireman Harold Wilson still was at the top level of British politics when he first became prime minister in 1964—and not just from the perspective of the upper-class Tory establishment but also from that of the upper-middle-class 'Gaitskellites' in the Labour Party. Marcia Williams, born in Northamptonshire in 1932 and therefore sixteen years his junior, shared Wilson's background in the aspirational lower middle classes (characteristically, her mother had told her children that she was an illegitimate daughter of King Edward VII). Having attended grammar school on a scholarship, Williams went on to study history at Queen Mary College in London. Among McDougall's very few genuine archival discoveries are Williams' reports as secretary of the student Labour Society at Queen Mary. After graduating, Williams gained further qualifications at a secretarial college. From 1956, she worked as a secretary at Transport House, the headquarters of the Labour Party, where she first met Wilson, then shadow chancellor. The two soon formed a working partnership that, according to McDougall, had never been seen before in British politics 'between a man and a woman at the top of the political ladder' (p. xi). This, of course, ignores the important role of Frances Stevenson as a close confidante of David Lloyd George. Unlike Stevenson, however, Williams entered Downing Street in 1964 not as the prime minister's secret mistress (although there may have been a short-lived affair in the late 1950s), but as his senior political adviser.

Working in the newly created role of political secretary to the prime minister, Williams had to fight the civil service very hard to gain access to government documents, let alone proper office space in 10 Downing Street. McDougall is certainly right to attribute much of the resistance to Williams in Whitehall to misogynistic attitudes within the upper echelons of the civil service, which in those days still operated much like an informal gentlemen's club. Williams herself had always explained her experiences in this way. However, there was also a more systemic side to the conflict. The civil servants in the private office at Number Ten had always been accustomed to monopolizing access to the prime minister in order to ensure the consistency of government activities. Williams' new role was the first official

acknowledgement of the fact that the prime minister also remained a party leader and needed to communicate with his base. For Whitehall's mandarins in the 1960s and to some extent still in the 1970s, Labour's 'politicization' of the core executive through special advisers was seen as anathema to the much vaunted tradition of civil service impartiality. That curtailing the mandarins could indeed hamper the government's efficiency was demonstrated by the tragic case of Michael Halls, a relatively junior civil servant whom Wilson, because of his personal loyalty, promoted—against the advice of the head of the civil service—to the role of his principal private secretary, a job that proved to be far above his capabilities. When he died from a heart attack in 1970, overstrained and overworked, his widow sued the government for damages, accusing Williams of having harassed her husband to death.

Williams' manner of constantly harassing, bullying, shouting, and screaming at everyone in the office, first and foremost Wilson himself in front of all his staff, has been documented in detail in the memoirs and diaries of two of Wilson's other senior advisers: his press spokesman Joe Haines and Bernard Donoughue, head of the Downing Street Policy Unit. However, McDougall rightly points out that their accounts portraying Williams as a hysterical woman mainly cover Wilson's last term in office from 1974 to 1976—a period when Williams was clearly in a troubled and unstable state of mind—but do not extend back to the 1960s, when she was unanimously recognized as an efficient political operator. Williams' obvious mental decline in the 1970s is explained quite convincingly by the author as due to her increasing addiction to all manner of pills at a time and in an environment that, from today's perspective, were dangerously tolerant of drug use. To cope with her workload, Williams frequently took amphetamines ('purple hearts') and then combined them with tranquillizers prescribed by Wilson's doctor Joseph Stone (who, Haines reports, at one stage suggested "'dispos[ing]" of Marcia . . . in the interest of freeing Harold from the burden'; p. 264), as well as too much alcohol at the almost daily receptions at Number Ten. As McDougall sharply observes, it is a remarkable failure by Haines and Donoughue that, obsessed as they were with Williams' strange behaviour, they at no point in their books seem to wonder *why* she

behaved so strangely, or whether she might in fact have been in desperate need of help (p. 150).

Williams became even more unstable in 1974 when the press began investigating her personal affairs, whether it was dubious property deals involving her family, or the revelation that she had had two children in the late 1960s following an affair with a married *Daily Mail* political correspondent—a ‘scandal’ that had been kept secret for many years with threats of legal action by Wilson’s lawyer Arnold Goodman. At the height of the media intrusion into Williams’ private life, Wilson (as McDougall aptly puts it) ‘raised two fingers to the press’ (p. 178), and, to the complete surprise of everyone in Westminster, elevated his confidante to the House of Lords. She chose the title ‘Baroness Falkender’ because in the fairy tale her mother had told her, Falkender had been the name of the ‘aide-de-camp’ who covered for the king by claiming to be her father. Here, McDougall misses the politically more relevant point that by the time Wilson gave Marcia her peerage, Whitehall’s proverbial ‘corridors of power’ had been shaken by the frightful rumour that the prime minister’s real plan was to make Williams, the most critical of all civil service critics, a Lords minister for civil service reform (a rumour that turned out to be unsubstantiated).

The infamous ‘Marcia saga’ reached its climax in 1976, when Wilson resigned from government and, in his last act as prime minister, destroyed much of his reputation with a resignation honours list—allegedly handwritten by Lady Falkender on purple paper and therefore dubbed the ‘Lavender List’ by the press—that handed out knighthoods and peerages far too generously to cronies of both Wilson and Lady Falkender. Significantly, the latter never denied that she had written the list, but was later at pains to point out that the lavender-coloured paper had not been her own, but simply happened to be lying around the office. Lady Falkender lived another forty years after leaving Downing Street, but these are only sketched in a few paragraphs in this biography. The Lady never made her maiden speech in the upper house, but humiliated herself by sending begging letters to her fellow Lords when she ran out of money in old age. As late as 2006, she successfully sued the BBC to suppress the docudrama *The Lavender List*. At one point in the book, McDougall

also mentions the BBC comedy series *Yes Minister* (p. 112), but she seems unaware that Falkender – along with Donoughue, ironically – was a primary source for the writers of this ultimate satire on the politics-administration dichotomy, and that the character of Dorothy Wainwright was modelled on her.

McDougall's interest in Marcia Williams is primarily, if not exclusively, centred on her role as a pioneer for women at the top of British politics. It has to be said that, in order to emphasize this, the author repeatedly falls into the amateur trap of overinflating her protagonist's importance. Reading her account of the 1964 general election, for example, one might get the impression that Williams won it more or less single-handedly for the Labour Party, which is of course nonsense. It should also be made clear that even at the height of her influence, Williams never exercised any real power in government. Her brief in Downing Street was always limited to party matters, and she had little to do with the key policy decisions of the Wilson governments, be it devaluation, applying for entry to the Common Market (which she personally strongly opposed), or the 'social contract'.

It is also unfortunate that McDougall fails to take a closer and more systematic look at Williams' other, at least equally important pioneering role, namely that of the first modern 'special adviser'. Since the days when Williams first entered Downing Street in 1964, special advisers have undoubtedly become some of the most powerful informal players in British politics. Andrew Blick dubbed them 'people who live in the dark' in the title of his early analysis of the spad phenomenon in 2004.¹ But since at least the day Dominic Cummings tested his eyesight at Barnard Castle and was subsequently allowed to give a press conference in the rose garden of Number Ten, everyone knows that quite the opposite is true. Special advisers are constantly in the public eye and were so right from the start, as proven by the hundreds of press photos of Williams, Haines, Donoughue, and all their successors up to the days of David Cameron walking just a few paces behind their respective ministers. By contrast, in the case of civil servants, one struggles to find a single photograph showing even the most legendary Whitehall

¹ Andrew Blick, *People Who Live in the Dark: The History of the Special Adviser in British Politics* (London, 2004).

figures together with their political masters. Edward Bridges and Norman Brook, Britain's most influential civil servants in the 1940s and 1950s, were pictured 'together' with Winston Churchill only once, and that was when they followed his coffin up the steps of St Paul's Cathedral. In contrast, Marcia Williams, as the first modern special adviser, was already a well-known public figure, and one who was already surrounded by political scandals, too.

And one more characteristic feature of the spad phenomenon can be traced right back to the Wilson years. Notwithstanding the territorial fights between special advisers and the civil service, a closer look at the Wilson governments reveals—and this lesson holds true for all succeeding governments up to the days of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss—that the most brutal confrontations always take place elsewhere, namely between the rival camps of the special advisers themselves. Unlike their equally unelected but at least constitutionally secured counterparts in the civil service, Williams and her kind had no other source of legitimation than the personal trust of the prime minister—and hence in Wilson's time we already see deeply bitter fights for this scarce resource among his 'kitchen cabinet'.

Limiting herself thematically to the gender aspects of her story, McDougall seems at times surprisingly unfamiliar with basic institutions of the British administrative system, for example confusing commonly known civil service ranks such as 'permanent secretary' and 'principal private secretary' (see for example p. 93). There are also some minor factual errors in the reconstruction of Marcia Williams' biography. Lady Falkender's interview with Judith Chalmers in 1984, for example, was by no means her only television appearance; she was also interviewed by the BBC on the night of the 1979 general election. Far more annoying, at least for the academic reader, is the author's emphatically personal and sometimes naive narrative style. Time and again, McDougall interrupts her real story to tell anecdotes from her own life in the 1960s and 1970s which often bear little relation to the topic of her book. The topic itself is without question very interesting and relevant—but overall, it could have been much better told.

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