British women came into their own in the Conservative Party in the aftermath of suffrage as party workers, as MPs, as local and national leaders, and as part of a notional women’s bloc of voters that Conservatives felt they could rely on at election time. The valuable work performed by Conservative women at grass roots has been acknowledged in the scholarship, as have the strategies developed by the party to mobilise women as both party workers and voters, while much less attention has been conferred on those Conservative women who became virtual national celebrities. By the late 1930s the two women Conservative MPs to achieve this celebrity and notoriety were Lady Nancy Astor, the first woman MP to take her seat, a committed feminist, and hostess of the so-called Cliveden Set, and the Duchess of Atholl, the first woman MP from Scotland, an avowed anti-(non) feminist, and the Chamberlain scourge at the height of appeasement. Both defied stereotypes of Tory femininity with their own personal styles, by taking an abiding interest in international affairs when most Conservative women were expected to be focused on the local and parochial, and by engaging with women across party lines to advance their favoured policies. This paper will consider the interplay between gender, power, and conservative conviction and party affiliation in the period leading up to the outbreak of war in 1939.

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