

Marlyn Glen

Three Republican Women

14 July 2011

The death was announced earlier this month of a former First Lady of the USA, Betty Ford, the wife of former President Gerald Ford who assumed office following the resignation of the disgraced Richard Nixon over the Watergate scandal in 1974.

The Republicans are traditionally perceived as the party of the rich and the powerful in the US, and more recently as embracing the Evangelical Right with its agenda of consolidating women's inequality in the home and in society.

Betty Ford, however, was an outspoken advocate of women's rights and campaigned long and hard for their place in law and for changes in society's attitudes towards women.

She spoke up constantly in favour of abortion rights and for equal pay for women saying, " Many barriers continue to the paths of most women, even on the most basic issue of equal pay for equal work"

She lobbied extensively for the inclusion of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) into the US Constitution declaring that it would not be "an instant solution" to put right the wrongs against women, but that it would "help knock down those restrictions that have locked women into old stereotypes of behaviour"

The campaign for the ERA to be ratified - that "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction." - has still to be won.

The trivialisation of politics today - where policies count for so much less than the manufactured image of the perfect politician (and family) , and the male Strong Leader Syndrome - sadly holds sway.

However, in her time, Betty Ford talked openly about her problems with pills, her battle with alcohol and about her breast cancer.

She went on to champion the extension of health insurance to include mental illness and addiction.

Today's two women regarded as possible front-runners for the Republican nomination for next year's Presidential election are no Betty Fords.

Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann proudly flaunt their reactionary credentials.

Sarah Palin is a member of the anti-abortion group Feminists for Life (their slogan is "Refuse to Choose")

She opposes equal pay for women and rejects Barack Obama's national health insurance scheme, which will extend access to medical insurance for over 30 million Americans.

She has described institutions like our NHS as "evil and Orwellian".

Michelle Bachmann is less well-known in this country but just as controversial.

She opposes abortion, contraception, equal pay and the minimum wage. and regards the Obama health insurance programme as " a crime against democracy"

First Lady Michelle Obama's recent public endorsement of the advantages of breast feeding met with headlines such as " Palin and Bachmann trash Michelle Obama's breast-feeding advocacy"

(one of its advantages is a reduced risk of breast cancer in the mother).

Bachmann has described "Liberals" (and that would include all left-of-Centre women) in the US as "un-American".

In a similar vein, Palin, out campaigning , has talked of how she loved to visit the "pro-America" parts of the United States.

British politics, thankfully, is free of politicians who claim divine backing for their attempts to become elected.

Bachmann has claimed that God told her to run for election to the US Congress in 2006 and that she had received "a calling" from God to run for US President next year.

Palin has declared that her selection as the Republican candidate for US Vice-President in 2008 was part of "God's Plan".

In the wake of her defeat she said that God "will show me the way" as to whether she should countenance running for the White House in 2012.

Michelle Bachmann has already declared that she will enter the Presidential race.

Sarah Palin has yet to decide.

Wiser secular counsels may yet prevail.

The place of women in society envisaged by these backwoodswomen of the American Right is one of lesser lives and fewer opportunities.

Betty Ford's vision for women was one of hope and optimism, and while acknowledging that success would come, it would face deep-rooted, long-standing, inimical attitudes.

In 1975, she addressed the International Women's Year Conference observing that :

"This year is not the time to cheer the visible few, but to work for the invisible many, whose lives are still restricted by custom and code.

"Many of these restrictions that confine women spring directly from those emotional ideas about what women can do and should do.

"These definitions of behaviour and ability inhibit men and women alike, but the limits on women have been formalized into law and structured into social custom.

"For that reason, the first important steps have been to undo the laws that hem women in and lock them out of the mainstream of opportunities."

Last month, 36 years after her speech, the Equal Rights Amendment, which was one of Betty Ford's causes, was re-introduced into the US Congress in a fresh attempt to ensure the constitutional right of women to be equal in the eyes of the law.

website link

Marlyn Glen : <http://www.marlynglen.org.uk>