

# *Margaret Bondfield, first woman Cabinet minister, 1929*

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## 26. Margaret Bondfield

*Jacqui Turner*

Margaret Bondfield was a political trailblazer and a woman of many 'firsts'. She was a founding member of the Adult Suffrage Society (ASS) in 1904 and the Women's Labour League in 1906. She became the first female President of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in 1923, following a long tenure in the Shop Assistant's Union. She was a lifelong socialist and pacifist, committed to improving women's social and political workplace rights alongside a deep ideological conviction motivated by her own experience in the workplace and her commitment to trade unionism. She was also motivated by class and experiences of poverty. But it was as a minister in the second Labour Government, when she became the first woman to be appointed a cabinet minister in and the first woman privy counsellor, that her political career reached its pinnacle.

### I. Life

Bondfield was born in 1873 in Somerset to a large working-class family, the 10th of 11 children. Her father supported the rights of working women and encouraged independence in his daughters. She began a drapery apprenticeship in Hove in 1887, and also attended meetings held by Liberal suffragist and women's rights activist Louisa Martindale, in Brighton. In 1894 she left the south coast for London. Here, poor living and working conditions for shop workers were intensified by increasing demand in terms of opening hours (often 8am until midnight). She experienced low wages, poor dietary provision, and insecurity of work where a mistake meant dismissal on the employers' terms.

Mary Agnes Hamilton described Bondfield's route into labour politics stemming from her commitment to trade unionism but also a desire for belonging or companionship.<sup>1</sup> In 1896 Bondfield began to write from her personal experience about precarity of employment coupled with living and working conditions for shop workers, under the pseudonym Grace Darer. She was published by the *Daily Chronicle* and the journal of the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks (NAUSAWC), *Shop Assistant*. In 1898 she joined the newly formed NAUSAWC, a predominantly male organisation. Bondfield encouraged women shopworkers to join delivering leaflets directly to the sales counters of their workplace. In 1898 she was appointed assistant secretary and, in 1899, became the only female delegate at the TUC annual conference.

Influenced by Bondfield's activism and vigorous lobbying, the Shop Hours Act was passed in 1904. The Act enabled local authorities to regulate or fix local shop closing hours by 7pm, or on

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<sup>1</sup> M A Hamilton, *Margaret Bondfield* (Leonard Parsons, 1924) 29-33. Hamilton was a writer and broadcaster, and Labour MP for Blackburn between 1929 and 1931.

one day a week, at 1pm.<sup>2</sup> However, while the aim may have been to reduce the working hours of shop assistants and promote their health and welfare, the law was often unenforced as most shops were small businesses whose owners were reluctant to change.

Bondfield supported adult suffrage and presided over the Adult Suffrage Society (ASS) formed in 1904. Her position was that the franchise should be extended to all adults regardless of gender or property rather than the limited 'on the same terms as men' agenda of many women suffragists and suffragettes, which would have enfranchised only certain women thus disenfranchising the working class, including men. On 3 December 1907 Bondfield engaged in a debate of adult suffrage versus sex equality with Teresa Billington-Greig, co-founder of the Women's Freedom League, who had struggled to promote women's suffrage at trade union meetings. Bondfield said:

I work for Adult Suffrage because I believe it is the quickest way to establish a real sex-equality ... I have always said in my speeches and in conversation that these women who believe in the same terms as men Bill have a perfect right to go on working for that Bill, and I say good luck to them and may they get it! But don't let them come and tell me that they are working for my class."<sup>3</sup>

The presence of Bondfield encouraged other socialist women into the organisation such as Ada Nield Chew, and Dora Montefiore who became secretary in 1919. However, the ASS was not a success and was criticized by Charlotte Despard, a prominent suffrage campaigner, and Keir Hardie, Labour Party founder, for inertia.<sup>4</sup> Bondfield herself admitted that the group was marginal and had little influence.

In 1906, along with Mary Macarthur<sup>5</sup>, she founded the Women's Labour League and by 1908 had left her trade union role to become its secretary before becoming women's officer for the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW). In 1918 she was elected to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, becoming the first female chair in 1923.

In December 1923 she was elected to Parliament as MP for Northampton. Together with Dorothy Jewson and Susan Lawrence, she was one of the first three Labour women MPs. Bondfield served as a junior minister, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Labour, in the minority Labour government of 1924. She lost her seat in the general election later that year

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<sup>2</sup> Shop Hours Act 1904. The Act had some exemptions including tobacconists, chemists, newsagent, and post offices and was amended and extended by the Shops Act 1911 which included half day closing.

<sup>3</sup> JF(42)/D180, 'Sex Equality (Tersea Billington Greig) versus Adult Suffrage (Margaret Bondfield), Verbatim report of debate on Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup> 1907', *Women's Freedom League* (Manchester, 1908). Isabella Ford was in the Chair.

<sup>4</sup> Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c. 1689-1979* (Bloomsbury, 2010) 109-110.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Macarthur was a trade union leader and adult suffragist. She was the secretary of the Women's Trade Union League from 1903 and founded the National Federation of Women Workers in 1906.

which brought in a Conservative government with a large majority. Bondfield was re-elected to Parliament at a by-election in Wallsend in 1926.

Adult suffrage was finally achieved with the passage of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928. Bondfield welcomed the Act in terms of humanity rather than gender equality, saying in Parliament, 'Since I have been able to vote at all, I have never felt the same enthusiasm because the vote was the consequence of possessing property rather than the consequence of being a human being'.<sup>6</sup>

In 1929 Bondfield reached arguably the pinnacle of her political career when she was appointed Secretary of State for Labour in the second Labour minority government, the first woman to hold a senior cabinet position while sitting in the UK Parliament.<sup>7</sup> It was, however, a short and tumultuous term during a politically and economically turbulent time. Bondfield had previously been accused of betraying the working-classes as a member of the Blanesburgh Committee which had recommended cuts in unemployment insurance in 1927.<sup>8</sup> Now, as Minister for Labour, Bondfield herself had ultimate responsibility and came under enormous pressure to cut unemployment benefit. Her willingness to contemplate cuts alienated her to many in the Labour movement.

The financial crisis split the Labour party two years later when nine Cabinet ministers resigned rather than accepting cuts in unemployment benefits and in salaries of state employees in August 1931. The Labour government fell, caused by a lack of public confidence after a failure to balance the budget and with no prospect of economic recovery in sight. It was replaced by Ramsay MacDonald's National Government.<sup>9</sup> Bondfield did not join the National Government. She lost her seat in the general election of October 1931 to Irene Ward (Conservative), which marked the end of her career in national politics.

Bondfield remained active in the trade union movement and the NUGMW until 1938 and carried out investigations for the Women's Group on Public Welfare during the Second World War. She died in 1953 in Surrey, aged 80. Bondfield had never married stating that:

I concentrated on my job. This concentration was undisturbed by love affairs. I had seen too much - too early - to have the least desire to join in the pitiful scramble of my workmates. The very surroundings of shop life accentuated the desire of most shop girls to get married. Long hours of work and the living-in system deprived them of the normal

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<sup>6</sup> HC Deb 29 Mar 1928 vol 215 c1415,

<sup>7</sup> **Constance Markievicz** had previously become the first woman Cabinet minister in Ireland in 1919, sitting in the Dáil Éireann.

<sup>8</sup> The Blanesburgh Committee recommended some cuts in benefits and a requirement for claimants to have made 30 contributions in the previous two years. These recommendations were included in the Conservative government's Unemployment Insurance Act 1927.

<sup>9</sup> The National Government introduced an emergency budget increasing taxes on those in work and reducing unemployment benefits and civil service pay. More broadly, Britain abandoned free trade adopting a nationalistic, protectionist policy while also leaving the gold standard.

companionship of men in their leisure hours, and the wonder is that so many of the women continued to be good and kind, and self-respecting, without the incentive of a great cause, or of any interest outside their job... I had no vocation for wifehood or motherhood, but an urge to serve the Union.<sup>10</sup>

Her obituary in *The Times* paid tribute to her as 'one of the most notable women' of the British Labour movement, recognising her pioneering spirit, generous nature, selfless devotion to practical causes, and success as a public speaker.<sup>11</sup> Tributes were led in the House of Commons by the Lord Privy Seal:

It is many years now since the right hon. Lady graced our assembly. She was not a Member for very long, but she will always have a unique place in the history of Parliament. She was the first Lady to be admitted to the Privy Council and the first right hon. Lady to be a Cabinet Minister. She was Minister of Labour at a very difficult period, but she was a good Parliamentarian. As one who had constantly to cross swords with her, I know that she was always a courteous and generous opponent.<sup>12</sup>

Clement Attlee added, 'She was a very distinguished Member of this House and she gave unwearied service for very many years to the cause of women workers. She was a very old friend and colleague of mine. She was a very fine character'.<sup>13</sup>

## II. Context

Bondfield came from a Trade Union background. Trade Unions were historically male-dominated and conservative in attitudes to any state interference in family life. A substantial proportion of women in paid work worked in domestic service, difficult to unionise. However, in industries where women were present in large numbers they could effect change, such as the match women's strike of 1888,<sup>14</sup> and in Bondfield's area of shop work. She worked closely with other pioneering women trade unionists who might also have become leading politicians, such as Mary Macarthur who was one of the first women to stand following the **Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918**; but Macarthur did not have the chance to stand again before her death in 1921.

As one of the earliest Labour women MPs, Bondfield's election in Northampton (a working-class seat held by Liberals for many years previously) was to an extent a party political response to the elections of **Nancy Astor** (Conservative, 1919), Margaret Wintringham (Liberal, 1921) and Mabel Philipson (Conservative, 1923) which had a profound effect on the Labour party. In 1918,

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<sup>10</sup> Margret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (Hutchinson, 1948) pp. 36-37

<sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 18 June 1953.

<sup>12</sup> HC Deb, 18 June 1953, vol 516 col 1187.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Jacqueline Lane, 'Match Women's Strike 1888', in Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty (eds) *Women's Legal Landmarks* (Hart Publishing, 2019).

the first women voters had been assured that 'The Labour party is the woman's party'<sup>15</sup> but despite having been able to join the party on equal terms to men since its inception, the party had not yet returned a female MP. Bondfield benefited from a programme reconsidering constituencies to provide women candidates with winnable seats and strong grassroots support, avoiding marginal constituencies. Bondfield never underestimated her appeal to the working classes but said little about her own background beyond her work experiences nor that of other Labour women MPs, focusing instead on their qualifications that fitted them for the role.<sup>16</sup> But even so, she won her seat only after two unsuccessful attempts in 1920 and 1921. The number of female candidates remained tiny and successes even fewer throughout the interwar period.

With such a small pool of female MPs across all parties, there was no prospect of a woman minister, let alone cabinet minister, before Bondfield. The traditional route to Cabinet is to first become a Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS), effectively an apprenticeship to then becoming a junior minister, and then a Cabinet minister. However male ministers in this period were reluctant to accept a woman as their PPS, as such a position required access to gossip and discussion in spaces such as bars, smoking rooms and cloakrooms in Parliament from where women were either formally or informally excluded.<sup>17</sup> Bondfield's appointment as a junior minister immediately after her election reflected her long service to the trade union movement and the party, and also the fact that Labour arrived rather suddenly and unexpectedly as a party of government, and with a large number of new MPs.

Bondfield's appointment in 1924 in turn increased pressure on the Conservatives to find a woman minister when they next took power later that year. Stanley Baldwin duly appointed the Duchess of Atholl as a junior minister between 1924 and 1929, but Atholl never rose to Cabinet position.<sup>18</sup> By the time Labour returned in 1929 Bondfield was 56 years old, with her previous ministerial experience in the Ministry of Labour as well as her extremely impressive trade union credentials she was a clear choice to be the new Minister of Labour.

### III. What happened next

Bondfield's term as Cabinet minister was dominated by the backdrop of global economic turmoil caused by the Wall Street Crash and the ensuing Great Depression, an economic decline which provided a sharp contrast to the relative economic growth of the 1920s. The lack of a majority also left the Labour government in thrall to the Liberals, to the disappointment of the many on the left of the party. As the economic climate worsened and unemployment increased,

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<sup>15</sup> Labour Party general election manifesto, 1918.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Bondfield introduces Labour women MPs 1929, British Movietone  
[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KUvSZkgjSk>] last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> November 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Paula Bartley, *Labour Women in Power: Cabinet Ministers in the Twentieth Century* (Springer, 2019), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Katharine Murray Stewart (Scottish Unionist MP for Kinross and West Perthshire, 1923 -1938), the Duchess of Atholl, was the first woman in Scotland to be elected to Parliament. She was made Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education in 1924, and therefore became the first woman to serve in a British Conservative government – but not in Cabinet.

it became clear that government spending would need to be rationalised but many Labour MPs were vehemently opposed to the working classes bearing the brunt of any punitive measures.

Bondfield believed unemployment insurance should be a contributory benefit funded by an insurance fund, rather than more generous benefits from general taxation. However, as Minister for Labour she faced an impossible task, trying to contain the fund's deficit while also massively increasing borrowing.<sup>19</sup> She was fiercely criticised by both sides either for betraying the unemployed or for being too soft on them.<sup>20</sup> Under enormous pressure from the Treasury to cut costs, amongst the economies she took were cutting benefits for married women.

Although some women MPs worked together within and across parties, it would be wrong to pigeon-hole women MPs into a homogeneous group motivated primarily by their sex. As Krista Cowman has observed, women on the left of the Labour Party such as Jennie Lee and Ellen Wilkinson

felt no solidarity as women with the Minister of Labour Margaret Bondfield, as she struggled to keep unemployment relief within affordable levels during the economic crisis of the 1920s. For Lee and Wilkinson the privations of their working class constituents were more important than government policy or any other woman MPs.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this, along with most women MPs of the interwar period, Bondfield did much to advance the interests of women. The agenda that she pursued in parliament was motivated by her commitment to addressing the causes of gender inequality in the workplace, poverty and unemployment much of which she described in terms of the disproportionate impact on women. Bondfield believed her greatest contribution was to connect the Labour movement 'with women's work.'<sup>22</sup> That said, there remained an ambiguity in the Labour party's attitude to feminism. While feminists demanded 'equal opportunity of employment ... trade unionists wanted discriminatory legislation on working hours and conditions: to protect the health of mother and child, and to promote the full employment of men at a "family wage"'.<sup>23</sup> Thus Labour MPs criticized Conservatives for dragging their feet in terms of universal suffrage, the Conservatives criticized Labour for effectively excluding women from the Labour market though protective legislation.<sup>24</sup>

After Bondfield's departure from Cabinet in 1931, the UK had to wait fourteen years for its next woman Cabinet minister – Ellen Wilkinson, Minister of Education in Clement Attlee's Labour

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<sup>19</sup> As unemployment soared, Bondfield had to repeatedly return to Parliament to ask for increases which also soared, from £40 million in April 1930 to £131 million in June 1931.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Williamson, 'Bondfield, Margaret Grace (1873–1953), trade unionist, campaigner for women's interests, and politician, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Cowman, n 4 above, 109-126.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, (Hutchinson, 1948) p.329

<sup>23</sup> Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1987) 127.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*



government of 1945. The first Conservative woman Cabinet minister was Florence Horsbrugh who was appointed Minister of Education in 1953. As of March 2023, there are just seven women full Cabinet ministers (30 per cent) and only 55 women have ever been Cabinet ministers.<sup>25</sup>

#### IV. Significance

Margaret Bondfield's career spanned first-hand experience of the dismal conditions experienced by shop workers fueled by an increasing consumer society, to her reign as Britain's first female Cabinet minister overseeing employment issues at a time of greatest depression. Her commitment to trade unionism was exemplary. Indeed, her obituary in *The Times* called her 'first and foremost a trade unionist rather than a politician', with her essential work for social betterment carried out elsewhere than at Westminster.<sup>26</sup>

However, this should not overshadow her achievements as a female pioneer in Parliamentary politics and government. When Bondfield was first elected to Parliament in 1923, full adult suffrage had not yet been achieved and many poorer and younger working-class women could not vote. Women had been in Parliament for less than a decade when Bondfield became a Cabinet minister in 1929.

Her support for adult franchise rather than women's suffrage on the same terms as men, alongside her decision to deny married women the 'dole' in an effort to balance the national books, have undermined her position as a feminist pioneer. But when she was appointed Minister for Labour, her contribution to British parliamentary democracy was sealed as a crucial female first. She believed her appointment was 'part of the great revolution in the position of women which had taken place in my lifetime and which I had done something to help forward'.<sup>27</sup>

#### Further Reading

- Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (Hutchinson, 1948).
- June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (Routledge, 2002).
- Tony Judge, *Margaret Bondfield First Woman in the Cabinet* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018).

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<sup>25</sup> House of Commons Library research briefing, *Women in politics and public life*, Standard Note 1250, March 2023. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01250/SN01250.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> N 10 above.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (Hutchinson, 1948), 276.