In Orwell’s *1984*, Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia. Last week came the discovery, surprising to many, that Tory leadership hopeful Penny Mordaunt has always been at war with self-ID. This is the policy - first promoted by the Tories at the behest of Stonewall - that would make declarations of inner gender identity the only relevant administrative criterion for gaining a Gender Recognition Certificate, in order to legally change one’s sex. The applicant would be freed from the existing requirement of a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria, or of any other practical constraint over and above self-declaration. In recent days, Mordaunt told the Telegraph “I've never been in favour of self-ID. I mean, I just, I haven't. That's the fact.”

On related issues, our Penny also seems to be a proud member of Team Female. She told Sky News “It makes no sense for government to be prescribing bathroom policies”. She told Twitter that she supported a “science-based approach” to the issue of transwomen in women’s sport, and claimed “It was me that changed maternity legislation that was drafted in gender neutral language … to use female terms”. Infamously, Mordaunt is the MP that once mentioned the word “cock” [six times](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvLcYUXBBuc) in a parliamentary speech, as a forfeit. Is it possible she now believes a woman doesn’t have one?

Yet when as Minister she [introduced the highly divisive Gender Recognition Act consultation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkP-dyS2I48) about moving to self-ID in July 2018, she told parliament: “Trans women are women. Trans men are men. And that is the starting point for the GRA consultation, and it will be its finishing point too." Even as late as March last year, she was still [intoning the Stonewall-approved mantra](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C9_mzQmWCk). Much of the rest of her narrative has also been contradicted in the last few days by Tory insiders, from former No 10 director of legislative affairs [Nikki da Costa](https://mobile.twitter.com/nmdacosta/status/1547287943890575362), to MP [Sir John Hayes](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11015509/Mordaunts-failed-fight-women-Suella-Braverman-fuels-row-Maternity-Bill.html), to Attorney General [Suella Braverman](Pdailymail.co.uk/news/article-11015509/Mordaunts-failed-fight-women-Suella-Braverman-fuels-row-Maternity-Bill.html). This weekend The Sunday Times revealed [leaked documents](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/leaked-documents-call-penny-mordaunts-gender-self-id-claims-into-question-g07ch5ptt) which suggested that Mordaunt had indeed expressed a wish to remove the dysphoria diagnosis requirement from the GRA - though apparently she had also wished to introduce a medical requirement that the applicant for a legal sex change be shown to be of “sound mind”.

**Even treating the matter ultra charitably, and assuming that, in her own mind, she was never in favour of self-ID strictly conceived as including the total absence of medical requirements, it’s still obvious that Mordaunt’s revised proposal,** requiring only proof of sanity for legal sex change, would have caused almost exactly the same worries as self-ID - mere proof of sanity not exactly being a high bar in safeguarding terms (ask the victims of Chris Pincher). Equally, on her Ministerial watch a huge number of institutions, influenced by Stonewall, were at that point happily dismantling genuinely single-sex services for women anyway, regardless of whether the male who wanted access to them had a gender recognition certificate or not. This all happened without any interference from government.

The real interest here is the fact that Mordaunt has felt forced to commit herself to such an easily disproved and desperate lie. I take this to be a fitting tribute to the effectiveness of the grassroots women’s resistance that first formed around 2015 - the year when Stonewall first [revealed its ambitions](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/a_vision_for_change.pdf) to change both the Gender Recognition Act and Equality Act in favour of inner gender identity. The fact that the issue has arisen so prominently during the Conservative party leadership contest is the latest indication of this movement’s success. In its infancy, though it’s not quite true to say that women who raised concerns about self-ID couldn’t get arrested – they certainly could, or at least, could be [interviewed under police caution](https://4thwavenow.com/tag/posie-parker/) – they were treated as pariahs, cranks, or bigoted obsessives. Not so much now.

Today Conservatives who positively champion policies based on gender identity are thin on the ground. The focus of public anger rather tends to be upon the embarrassed mutterings of Labour MPs about cervixes. But it’s worth remembering – and especially when commentators talk these days blandly about “toxicity on both sides” of the gender debate - that it’s the Tories who were entirely responsible for setting up the issue to guarantee hot gibbering fury from women from the start. From 2015 on, a succession of Tory Ministers, given jobs in Equalities because they were female, promptly denied that being female was a limiting condition on being a woman. They then sought to dismantle single-sex provision for women without a backward glance at those screaming in frustration in their wake.

Culprits include Nicky Morgan, Justine Greening, and of course Mordaunt herself. The trend was set right from the start, with the outrageously biased [Trans Equality Inquiry](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmwomeq/390/390.pdf) launched in 2015 under Morgan by the Women and Equalities Select Committee, with Tory Maria Millar as its Chair. This Inquiry might as well have saved itself a lot of trouble by explicitly outsourcing the whole project to Stonewall and Mermaids. Apparently blind to potential clashes with sex-based rights, and on the basis of evidence from some extremely partisan and inexpert witnesses, it recommended both moving to full self-ID - including lowering the permitted age of a recipient of a legal sex change to 16 – and that those males who possessed them should have full access to women’s services, and be able to work in women’s rape crisis services and domestic violence shelters if so wished. The Committee also recommended that the Equality Act should protect the characteristic of “gender identity” rather than “gender reassignment”. Each of these were amongst Stonewall’s main campaigning objectives at the time.

Other recommendations of this Inquiry have also aged terribly: for instance, that there are only a very few occasions where transwomen can be justifiably excluded from women’s sport; that dysphoric children’s access to puberty blocking drugs should be *speeded up*; and that all university staff should receive “gender identity awareness training”. Overall, it’s hard to imagine a more divisive bomb to drop on women, parents of dysphoric children, or academics who wished to criticise the problems involved in the proposals.

Most of these recommendations were received positively by the Government in [their response](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/535764/Government_Response_to_the_Women_and_Equalities_Committee_Report_on_Transgender_Equality.pdf), and a year later Prime Minister Teresa May herself was [announcing plans](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/oct/18/theresa-may-plans-to-let-people-change-gender-without-medical-checks) to move ahead with self-ID at the PinkNews awards. I remember my incredulity as I watched these events unfold from the sidelines, each one smoothly presented as sensible and compassionate by whatever Tory woman was championing it, and with all dissenting voices positioned as bigoted or stupidly misinformed. The Tories were in power, but the Opposition offered no hope of relief either - for Labour and the Liberal Democrats enthusiastically agreed with the reforms too. The mainstream media, peppered with Stonewall Champions, was largely complicit or indifferent. It felt like a total stitch-up. I felt like I was going mad.

It takes a special kind of indifference to half the population to be like this. On the modern Left, we can explain the enthusiasm for self-ID partly as an attraction to sexily complicated-sounding ideology, and partly as an attraction to reforming existing cultural traditions generally. But neither of these explanations are readily available to Tories. They are supposed to be both commonsensical and conserving of tradition. One would think that at the very least, they would be prepared to conserve the internationally ubiquitous tradition of naming biological sex in humans.

Perhaps then, it’s a different and more hidden ideological commitment of Conservatism, individualism, that explains the attraction to self-ID and associated lunacies: explains how both the party generally and some women MPs in particular could have got so thoroughly behind such a radical and damaging set of reforms without blinking at the consequences. For, bar a bit of urine on National Trust toilet seats, most of the worries about self-ID won’t make any negative difference to them personally. They won’t ever have to share a prison wing with a male rapist. Their private hospital ward won’t be impacted by the presence of a chaotic male in the bay next to them. If their daughter starts saying she is a boy, they can fast-track her into whatever kind of therapy they want, rather than rely on the mad ministrations of a captured NHS gender identity service. If their cancer screening information talks about “cervix-havers”, their first language and education will give them the ready capacity to work out what this means. Their heterosexual dating life won’t be impacted by males pretending to be lesbians either.

In other words: in order to care about the multiple impacts of saying that men can become women by saying they are, you have to be able to care about (actual) women who aren’t just you, or your friends. The Left, and particularly the old Left, has the habit of this. Despite a massive propaganda campaign to deny it, it was largely women on the Left that organised the grassroots fightback to self-ID in the UK. Organisations such as [A Woman’s Place UK](https://womansplaceuk.org/), [Fair Play for Women,](https://fairplayforwomen.com/) and [We Need to Talk](https://www.feministcurrent.com/2018/09/24/interview-irrepressible-venice-allan-fight-changes-uk-gender-recognition-act/), were started by (then) Labour members and voters, who were practiced in thinking in terms of social structures rather than individuals, and knew how to feel solidarity with the most dispossessed. They also knew how to organise in order to reach a wide range of women, including voices that are often ignored.

A related question concerns why most Conservatives MPs are on board with rejecting self-ID, whereas previously they were indifferent. Do they actually care about women now, or are they mostly interested in the issue only because they have accurately identified it as a wedge, damaging to a Left currently tying itself into knots on womanhood to the derision of potential voters? One promising sign would be if they also prioritised women’s welfare and interests in other less febrile areas: the [disproportionate impact](https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf) of the cost-of-living crisis on women, say, or [scandalously low](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/may/23/fewer-than-one-in-60-cases-lead-to-charge-in-england-and-wales) rape conviction rates. But here they seem much less convincing. One is left overall with an impression of opportunism and culture warmongering, not principle.

There are of course exceptions within Tory ranks. In the Lords, Baronesses Emma Nicolson and Anne Jenkin have been committed and courageous in getting the word out to others that gender law reform isn’t the rainbow-bedecked path to universal happiness often presented. More recently, both Liz Truss and Kemi Badenoch appear to have grasped this point thoroughly too. But it should not be presumed that the party is wholly cleansed of the temptation to throw women under a bus. Under Tory Chair Carolyn Nokes, last year the Women and Equalities Committee launched another [Inquiry](https://committees.parliament.uk/work/658/reform-of-the-gender-recognition-act/) into Reform of the Gender Recognition Act, eventually [finding in favour of self-ID](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/23/why-am-i-being-abused-for-trying-to-improve-gender-recognition-process) yet again. I was called as a witness to this Inquiry, and it was clear to me from observing the process that most of the Committee still had no real understanding of the potential impacts of gender law reform on the interests of women and girls. Throughout my session, Nokes was dismissive, looked bored, and left early, later predictably painting criticism of the Committee’s position as “bile and abuse”. She is also [on record](https://unherd.com/thepost/caroline-nokes-is-confused-about-gender-self-id/) as having no idea why you might want to know someone’s birth sex.

**Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the current leadership battle, Nokes has come out strongly** [**for Mordaunt.**](https://www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk/news/20278384.caroline-nokes-mp-announces-supporting-penny-mordaunt-new-prime-minister/)

**I’m sure that both these women think of themselves as enthusiastically pro-women. Arguably, though, a pro-women politician who doesn’t know what a woman is, is worse than none at all.**