

WOMEN AND PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS

*Women in the boyzone: gender and parliamentary politics*

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## **Abstract**

This paper is based on interviews which I conducted with 75 women parliamentarians in the UK, Australia and South Africa between 1995 and 2000 and considers the differences that women can and do make both to the conduct of parliamentary politics but also to the policy agenda itself. I suggest that there are differences in style and approach which are gender-dependent, but that policy differences based on gender are as likely to be rhetorical as real when voting behaviour and policy advocacy is carefully analysed.

## **Women in the boyzone: gender and parliamentary politics**

The demand for greater rights for women, including political rights has been at the forefront of many women's agenda for at least three hundred years with campaigning treatises by women such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Abigail Adams throwing down an early gauntlet for equality between women and men. Women's location in and relationship to the democratic process has been one of continuous marginalisation and heroic endeavour from the struggles to achieve full emancipation for women to more contemporary efforts to secure women's representation in parliament. Broadly, there are four fundamental justifications for expanding the role of women in the democratic process: firstly, democratic justice; second, maximisation of resources; third, to represent the special interests of women; and fourth, as role models.<sup>1</sup> Judith Squires provides a useful way in to considering the fundamental question at the core of campaigns to improve the proportion of women politicians – why does gender matter?<sup>2</sup> She argues that included in this one big question are four smaller ones: when claiming to be a representative what is one representing, how does one represent, where does one represent and what is the purpose of representation?

There are, clearly, any number of 'answers' to the questions above, often in either—or couplets, for example, possessing the same characteristics as those whom one represents or symbolising the identity or qualities of a group of individuals, and one's belief in any of them will be determined by one's ideological position, one's experience, one's gender and all those other aspects of 'personal and past' which influence 'present and future'. While appeals to justice and efficiency are relatively unproblematic, there remain conceptual and political antagonisms towards ideas such as whether one woman can actually 'speak for' her sisters with whom she might have nothing in common apart from her sex, whether there are such special issues as 'women's' issues and whether gender makes a difference in deciding to pursue particular political aims. Many feminists strongly contest the existence of 'women's issues' for example, and their disputations are not dissimilar (although usually made for different reasons) to those of critics who would oppose the entire feminist project. For example, many Liberal/Conservative women whom I have interviewed also reject the idea of women having 'special' issues but this general disdain was bound up in a wider agenda of refusing to recognise the salience of gender in any area of life, be it personal, professional or political. The ideological positioning which is embodied by this kind of argument has been identified by numerous studies<sup>3</sup> and even Labor women are mostly reluctant to be drawn into supporting an overtly feminist agenda.

This paper tries to answer some of the questions posed by thinking about the differences that women can and do make both to the conduct of parliamentary politics but also to the policy

agenda itself. Based on interviews which I conducted with 75 women parliamentarians in the UK, Australia and South Africa between 1995 and 1999, I suggest that there are differences in style and approach which are gender-dependent, but that policy differences based on gender are as likely to be rhetorical as real when voting behaviour and policy advocacy is carefully analysed.

There does seem to be a strongly-held view, including amongst women parliamentarians themselves, that they do bring a different perspective to their politics both in terms of the way in which approach parliamentary politics and their style of doing so, but also in their political priorities. Some commentators suggest that women politicians have a fundamentally and inherently different political style to male colleagues, that women bring a higher standard of moral behaviour, are more honest, less manipulative and less combative in their approach.<sup>4</sup> Such views construct women's way of doing politics as being biologically determined by insisting that women are 'naturally' more principled than men, with more integrity and more propensity to conciliation and compromise. While such a view is seductive in its touching faith in the intrinsic 'goodness' of women - what other position is possible when thinking of motherhood, babies and apple pie? - its corollary is that women are just too nice to get involved in the dirty business of big boys' politics. When Carmen Lawrence (Labor, Australia)<sup>5</sup> was facing intense media (and political) scrutiny over alleged misinformation, she comments that she didn't mind being called to account but she objected to the fact that different standards were expected of her: In some ways, ceding a special (ie higher) morality to women is to make a generalisation which can become hard to defend but the more modest claim for a set of experiences which are gender-specific and lead to a different perspective is a more tenable position which can be seen to be rooted in an experiential rather than biological model of decision-making based on gender rather than sex.

Whilst the principles of equity and justice should be sufficient to argue the case for increasing the representation of women as elected members in national politics, women also bring different perspectives and can bring a different leadership style to the political process. As Callaghan observes, the life experiences of many women can 'provide the material content or the experiential data which some women will interpret in ways that may predispose their moral decisions to differ from those of some males.'<sup>6</sup> Whilst there are so many contingencies in Callaghan's fuller analysis as to make it almost meaningless, there is a very real issue at stake in terms of identifying individual action and experience whilst considering them also in the context of a differently gendered consciousness. The debate about a gendered morality is fierce and ongoing, with commentators usually taking up one of the two bi-polar positions (gender-neutral or gender-specific) with many others positioned somewhere along the continuum. The work of

scholars such as Carol Gilligan<sup>7</sup> stand at one end, espousing a theory of irrevocable gender difference which is rooted in biology but also maintained by socialisation. From this view, women are more interested in the importance of relationships and use a personal moral view to inform decision-making, whilst men are seen to operate in wholly rational and logical ways where the personal dimension is absent and where moral and ethical behaviour is informed by a more abstract reasoning process. This theoretical position leans heavily on psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on biological determinism which compels women to remain circumscribed by their own biological and apparently natural imperatives.

Such a view has been heavily criticised by scholars who insist that women too can use the rational-logical model in decision-making and that homogenising all women's experiences is not only to deny a sense of autonomous will but also conflates and thus renders invisible all those *other* differences among women which determine specific perspectives, behaviours and actions. As one of the veteran campaigners for women's representation in Australian politics, Joan Kirner (Premier of Western Australia, 1990-1992) suggests, strength in politics must be related to commitment and determination in decision-making, not simply about who can shout the loudest on the floor of the Chamber.<sup>8</sup>

One of the more useful tenets of post-modernist thinking has been the steer towards rejecting a totalising essentialism in other areas of social and cultural life - we are all unique amalgams of our diverse histories and experiences – so it seems a strange contradiction that at the same time, the political arena demands that women and men are determined by their differentiated biology and that they work in different ways because of their sex rather than as a result of their politics. Women's approaches to politics, their distinctive form of campaign address, their choice of presentational style and content are more likely to be driven by a pragmatic understanding of the political climate and what will work for them, than by any spuriously 'feminine' traits such as honesty or integrity. Women who choose to enter the political fray have already challenged normative assumptions about what women's role in society is. They can be just as aggressive as many of their male colleagues and enjoy the adversarial combat, at least that performed in the theatre of parliament, the chamber, and will use their position as women to attack female adversaries in ways which would perhaps be seen as sexist if operated by men. Their male colleagues are often surprised and discomfited as these assertive and confident displays by women, not only giving as good as they get but deliberately using the small advantages they have to good effect. 'We can have a swipe at another female or toss in an interjection or make a comment the blokes couldn't because it would be regarded as sexist.. I've had occasions when they've [male colleagues] said to me, "you're a hard bitch"...but if you go in thinking that it's not gladiatorial in there, then you had better get out fast.' (Sue West, Labor, Australia)

In any case, as Carmen Lawrence points out, women can't afford to show any weaknesses, 'you can't afford to appear uncertain or tentative or equivocate in any way which is, to an extent, difficult for some women, given our upbringing and the sort of social context in which women are often asked to behave.' For her and other women, adopting a confident persona which is assertive is a prerequisite for achieving credibility amongst parliamentary peers and, in the end, can become a more authentic part of oneself: but it is always hard to operate against the grain of one's preferred modus operandi. But some women feel very uncomfortable when women use aggressive tactics with each other, believing that such confrontations simply play into men's hands who sit back and watch the spectacle. There are, of course, double standards at work here since such behaviour between men is both completely acceptable and encouraged as part of the cut and thrust of ordinary political discourse, but for some women, this is merely to get caught up in the conventions of the male-ordered macho environment (which intimidates as many men as women) rather than challenge the context and work to change it.

Most women believe that when there is genuinely a critical mass of women in their respective parliaments, that the way in which business is conducted will be different. Most believe that women and men do have different working styles and that a more-women friendly approach to the political process would actually benefit both women and men. While they recognise that some of the traditional institutions of parliamentary politics could take a long time to wither away, the more consensual style of managing and chairing debates and committees will bring about profound changes to the way in which decisions are made. In predominantly two-party parliamentary systems, the adversarial slant to politics is unavoidable but most real work is done outside the chamber and it is in committees where more women are making a significant difference to the way in which the business of politics is done. In an American study of state parliamentarians, women legislators tended to have a much more task-based approach to their work and to the practice of politics more generally than their male colleagues. The authors also argue that the more common sporting or war analogies were almost entirely absent in women's versions of their lives as legislators and their hopes for what they could achieve. 'There is almost nothing of the "game" model of politics with its teams, alliances, strategies, victories and losses.'<sup>9</sup> Instead, women stress the problem-solving nature of politics and articulate a common goal of working for progress, fundamentally espousing a view of government which is avowedly public spirited and pledged to pursue the common good. 'Government for most, is one instrument among others through which good citizen can seek to improve the quality of their life.'<sup>10</sup>

## **Women in a man's mad world**

Whilst all the women interviewed for my study have made a conscious decision to pursue a career in elite politics with at least some the knowledge of what that would entail, many were nonetheless unprepared for the culture shock which awaited them when they first entered parliament. Amongst those who have been there for more than one term, many remain frustrated with the way in which some of their male colleagues continue to disrespect them, with the continuing battles to get additional facilities, with the uphill challenges they face when pointing out the myriad ways in which life in parliament is physically difficult for women - but does not need to be. Women are more than 'happy' to be targeted as individuals members of an opposing side, as fair game in the war of attrition which is regularly carried out on the floors of debating chambers around the world, but object to the use of their sex as the primary weapon of assault.

The issue of unwritten dress codes was something which many women commented on, both in terms of normative expectations and policies (only men are politicians), censure over particular forms of women's dress and challenges to the 'rules'. There was a strong sense that women could rarely get it right, damned for being too colourful (politics as frivolous fashion statement) and damned for being too conservative (you all wear the same uniform, how are you different?). And damned if they wore the same outfit twice in one week. Women new to parliament talked about the pressure to conform and found themselves consciously making themselves over in order to better fit in, although as time has worn on and they have found their feet, they have felt emboldened to revert back to their more 'natural' state. 'Basically, the testosterone level is palpable and it required a change in me...I am not an aggressive person, but it required a change in demeanour...it required a much more aggressive approach which you learn to live with [but] I don't think many women are particularly comfortable with it.' (Sue Mackay, Labor, Australia)

Parliamentarians all recognise the importance of sartorial presentation not only as a way of signalling obeisance (conformity) to the parliamentary conventions but also its opposite (radical challenge) and women acknowledged that it was often much easier to make a statement in opposition, especially in a minority party, than in government. But women are challenging the rules by, for example, expanding the range of acceptable modes of dress, often by simply wearing trousers or earrings or high heels or short skirts and seeing the reaction. Talking up women's impact on democracy in terms of extending our understanding of who can be an elected politician or the characteristics of a serious parliamentarian through their conscious clothing decisions might sound ridiculous but is significant. Jane Public likes to see her own sex reflected back to her from the parliamentary benches: she has become accustomed to women in senior positions in other aspects of her life, why not politics? For Joe Public, the

changing picture might not be so attractive but he too is benefiting from a more inclusive politics which speaks in the register of real people's lives. 'I don't think many Australians relate to middle-aged, middle-class men in suits who have lifestyles and experiences that most of us never dreamt of, so that is already a mismatch.' (Natasha Stott Despoja, Australian Democrats)

Although some women may well find the media's constant request for comments on the number of women's toilets in parliamentary complexes irritating,<sup>11</sup> there are very real problems in the culture of elite politics which continues to perpetuate the myth that only men are and can be parliamentarians. And the point is, that it is precisely the little things that make the difference, that signal that women parliamentarians are a routine part of formal politics, not a temporary aberration which must be endured and then celebrated when over. When I visited South Africa in 1999, there were lavatories in parliamentary buildings which still had a hand-written sign on them saying 'ladies', five years after the first democratic elections saw an exponential increase in the number of women parliamentarians. Gertrude Fester (ANC, South Africa) suggests that the new parliamentary buildings do have designated lavatories for women but they are located at the furthest end of corridors and the more numerous men's lavatories are, 'five times the size and they need a quarter of the space'. Such practices comprise small but crucial signifiers of the way in which women's presence in parliamentary life is 'tolerated' rather than embraced. Val Viljoen (ANC, South Africa) points to the seemingly trivial issue of seating in the chamber, where the original design only envisaged men: 'I am not particularly short but if I sit so my back is supported, my feet don't quite touch the floor! A lot of us take books in to put our feet on and perhaps it is something we should campaign about, but you have to choose which issue to concentrate on.'

Fiona Mactaggart (Labour, UK) makes a similar point about the stone floors in the House of Commons: 'It might seem trivial but since I've become an MP, I wear rubber-soled shoes all the time because this place makes your feet hurt instantly, but women are supposed to [look feminine and] wear heeled shoes with thin leather soles and I'm not bloody going to because they make my feet hurt too much.' Such things *are* important because they materially affect the way in which women (and many men) are enabled to do their job by working in (un)comfortable surroundings: they signal the considerable ideological work yet to be done which will enable these practical issues to get resolved because of their impact on efficiency, not as grudging responses to the whinges of women parliamentarians who should be grateful just to be there.

Women recognise that their sex often precludes them from joining in the kinds of activities that men feel comfortable doing, so that if not directly excluded from the 'boys club', they opt out of

membership themselves. This argument is very much about not being able to ‘fit in’ with the dominant norms of the (albeit informal) Parliamentary culture, and carries with it an acceptance of the difficulty of trying to penetrate this male world rather than strategising how to make that world more inclusive. Women also acknowledge the conscious and explicit efforts to marginalise their work by male colleagues who are often confident enough in their own security and belief in a shared (misogynistic) view to make overt their prejudices towards women Members. ‘I’m very familiar with that facial expression which says, “a woman speaking, I don’t need to listen.”’ (Kathy Sullivan, Liberal, Australia). This happens both within and between parties, where women are often seen as soft targets for particularly crass forms of barracking. However, women are mostly (but not always) reluctant to retaliate in similar terms, unwilling to resort to personal attack and invective but instead keep focused on the policy issue at hand. Margaret Reynolds (Labor, Australia) describes vividly the frustration of trying to retain one’s own sense of propriety in discussions with male colleagues in an avowedly aggressive debating context and the realisation that whatever tactic she used, she could still be undermined. For her, neither aggression nor hysteria came naturally so that her only means of survival was to be true to herself and hope, often fruitlessly, that quiet reason would prevail.

I used to come into my office after some fairly horrendous Cabinet sessions and say to my staff, “do you think it would help if I thumped the table, if I lost my temper, screamed fucking this and fucking that to whoever cared to listen?” and they’d say, “no Margaret, it wouldn’t work for you, just keep your information, your knowledge of the subject and just keep going calmly.” But there were times when I used to think, you know, this is ridiculous, I’m one of the few reasonable people at the table, and I still lose. But I knew that if I burst into tears or kicked or screamed and shouted, I’d still lose, so I had no option but to play it straight.

Simply by virtue of their different sex (notwithstanding many other reasons), women exist outside the dominant (male) norms of parliament and they believe that they are often judged against a male paradigm of how a Parliamentarian should behave and conduct *himself*, and they don’t match up and are thus open to criticism. Often the crucial ‘test’ is how one performs in the theatre of parliament which is the chamber and most women simply don’t measure up against that marker as far as their male colleagues are concerned. For younger women, they are doubled marginalised by their gender and their youth. The woman currently credited with being the youngest ever Australian senator, Natasha Stott Despoja (Australian Democrats) has a fund of stories and anecdotes relating to routinised putdowns she has experienced from men in the few years she has been in parliament.

Every day, there's some comment, like "your skirt is too short" or "isn't it past your bedtime?" or "be more polite to your elders", or people treat me like their daughter – well intentioned but patronising or just constant references to age, "you are too young", "you'll grow out of it", "what would you know, you haven't live in the real world" and they add up to a point where it wears you down, it demeans you, it is *designed* to irritate you but it does get to you.

For women who wield even the smallest amount of power, they are constantly denigrated by male colleagues through the articulation of a lewd discourse of sex-related slander relating to how women have achieved success through sleeping their way up the ladder. This could be seen to be a defence mechanism to rationalise why the men themselves haven't quite managed to achieve the same success. It is clearly unthinkable that women could attain positions of authority merely on the basis of their ability to do the job. By reducing women to their base sexuality, their threat is diminished and tamed.

Although the great majority of women I interviewed for this study had stories to tell about their own (negative) experiences of male colleagues, there were a small handful of women who completely rejected any suggestion that they had been treated badly by male colleagues, merely differently. For those women, they tended to be unable to conceptualise the validity and even possibility of women's experiences which were different to their own, in some cases suggesting that claims of gender discrimination were both party-specific and exaggerated. The argument here seems to be that women come into politics as a conscious decision and once there, they should not complain about unfair treatment: it's a hard world and they better toughen up.

Interestingly, whilst many women are frustrated with the way in which they have had to battle to achieve even small gains for themselves in their working environment, there remain quirky anomalies about facilities. For example, unlike in Australia and Britain, the South African parliament does have a well-used crèche and men will take their children into committees with them quite unself-consciously. On the other hand, the Australian and British parliaments have facilities such as gyms which are open to all, whereas when a new gym was recently built within the South African parliamentary complex, the only entrance was through the men's urinals.<sup>12</sup> Whilst it is tempting to compare the progress of different parliaments to each other in terms of embracing women, the different cultural contexts which exist in different places means that it is always difficult, if not entirely inappropriate to try and give meaning to those differences. The point is that in all three study sites, women continue to campaign to improve both their own lot as Parliamentarians and the lot of women more generally, with varying degrees of success:

what matters, arguably, is that they see such campaigns as worthwhile for themselves and for the women who come after them.

Whilst no one expects that the job of a politician should be easy, the environment in which parliamentarians work is not conducive to the development of balanced women and men who are able to combine work with some kind of personal life and the impact can be devastating.

Melanie Voerwoerd (ANC, South Africa) reports that in the first year of the first democratically- elected Parliament in the country, there were approximately 30 divorces, 'all of them women MPs. It was extraordinary.' And women in politics are experiencing the same kinds of backlash as women are facing in society more generally. Whilst high profile women such as Harriet Harman (Labour, UK) are trying to force their own parties to acknowledge that ordinary women want more women to represent them in parliament, there appears to be the opposing view that women have already had more than their fair share of accommodations to their unreasonable demands. 'Many people simply don't see the importance of the debate [on women's unequal position], and its categorised as, "oh, there they go, those Beijingers" and "what do you want now? You've already got the Gender Commission, the Office of the Status of Women, the Human Rights Commission, what more do you want?"' (Suzanne Vos, Inkatha Freedom Party, South Africa) In other words, don't push your luck because we might withdraw the few concessions we have already made. Even in the South African Parliament where nearly thirty per cent of all parliamentarians are women, 'the leadership is 99 per cent male.' (Suzanne Vos, IFP, South Africa)

The strategies which women parliamentarians employ to cope with an often hostile working environment are many and various. Some women who are already assertive appear simply to exaggerate those so-called masculine traits, so that they function (and are often perceived) as honorary men. This was especially true of a politician such as Margaret Thatcher but other women, such as Golda Meir were also described as pseudo-men, the latter most famously termed as the only man in the cabinet at the time of her premiership.<sup>13</sup> For many women, the support of other women colleagues, either semi-formally through friendships or mentoring programmes and formally through mechanisms such as women's caucuses (usually Labor-oriented networks) has been invaluable in keeping them grounded and able to survive, especially in their first months, in the male-ordered world of parliamentary politics. Outside Labor networks, cross-party or other kinds of party-orientated women's networks have little or no tradition of success, largely because Liberal and Conservative members are often few in number and rarely believe that their shared gender is much of a reason to work with other women unless they have similar political ideas and want to fight a common cause.

As Gertrude Fester (ANC, South Africa), points out, it is sometimes hard to prioritise gender issues when so many other things are equally important, especially in the South African context which continues to work to overcome its bloodied history of apartheid. In such circumstances, talking about gender in the context of parliamentary processes becomes almost an indulgence. The follow-through to supporting parliamentary women in South Africa's new democratic society is taking time to become established, not always helped by some women's suggestion that a women's caucus has as its primary intent, to denigrate men. Tersia King (New National Party, South Africa) argues that although she did go to the women's caucus when it was first set up, she didn't return a second time as she felt that she didn't want, 'to gang up against the men, I think that's wrong, one must become part of the system and although it is difficult for women, I think that I have made it easier for those who've come after me.'<sup>14</sup> Whilst King may be right in that women in non-traditional domains do become role models for others, it is arguable whether her desire to become 'one of the boys' and 'part of the system' is, in fact, a good model to emulate since it stresses incorporation into the status quo rather than challenging the basic tenets of that existing system to make it, if not more women-friendly, then at least more human.

Although life for most parliamentary women is tough at the beginning, most women were positive about the way in which their presence, in increasing numbers, has begun to materially change the political environment and atmosphere in which they work, challenging the orthodoxies which took for granted that only men could be Parliamentarians. Tersia King (New National Party, South Africa) was a member of the South African government in its pre-democratic mode and remembers being one of the first women to take their seat in government, and the unpreparedness of the political structure for the inclusion of women Parliamentarians. For her, challenging the system just by her presence signalled a sea-change in attitudes but she nonetheless played by men's rules to become 'accepted', a strategy which was probably safest in the circumstances at the time. Often, it has been the small triumphs which have made most difference, in the same way that it is often the small irritations that cause the most damage because of the slow accretion of so many tiny but debilitating discriminations and discourtesies. 'The moment we came into government, smoking just stopped. Apparently before you smoked in committee meetings, everywhere was smoking. It didn't occur to us that you would be able to smoke in committees, so we just threw the ash trays out and there was never anything written down. It was almost overnight that it became accepted that you didn't smoke in committee meetings. That was really the women in the committees that pushed that out. It wasn't a decision, it was almost a mutual consensus.' (Val Viljoen, ANC, South Africa)

For others, it has been their own campaigning, together with some male colleagues, which have resulted in, for example, reductions in the number of late-night sittings. There are clear

historical precedents for a culture which thought it 'normal' to be taking votes on key policy areas at midnight. When politicians were exclusively male who had women to 'service' them in a variety of ways, who would spend their afternoons drinking in bars and dine 'in', there was little hardship in spending a few hours after port in the chamber, secure in the knowledge that any family they had would be looked after by their wife and/or other domestic staff. For contemporary parliamentarians who want to spend time with their families, the life of a politician is difficult and new rules on late-night sittings begin to make it possible to have a 'normal' life for part of the week at least and to work and meet with constituents whose interests they are supposed to be representing in Parliament. It is interesting to note that the newly formed (1999) Scottish parliament has sitting hours which reflect a more regular professional schedule which enables women and men with family commitments to be able to enjoy a private life which will not be endlessly compromised by late night sittings and long-distance travel. It is also interesting to note that the media's response to this entirely sensible working context has been consistently negative, complaining that members of the Scottish parliament have given themselves a very easy life.

However, as Patricia de Lille (Pan African Congress, South Africa) suggests, changing the sitting times to enable women (and men) to have a more normal family life was a priority for many women arriving in Parliament in 1994. She states that although men were hostile to the suggestion at first, they soon saw the advantages to their own lives. The principal reason for resistance can be seen in terms of 'punishing' women for their audacity to seek parliamentary office – when they should really stay at home and look after children – and that once there, they had to adapt to the existing structure rather than change that structure to make it more welcoming to *all* members with families. Having a strong voice in the form of the Speaker of the House was also significant in securing change. Another crucial impact that women have had on the conduct of parliament has been in making men more circumspect when they get up to speak on policies which affect women's lives. Lynne Jones (Labour, UK) points out that the arrival of a significant number of women MPs has meant that men 'feel less able to stand up and pontificate about issues which affect women when there are a load of women sitting on the benches.' Gill Marcus adds, 'I feel that when you have a combination of men and women as you have here, it creates a very different dynamic, very lively, no longer the hallowed tombs where the men in suits walk around...it is more in touch with life...' (Gill Marcus, ANC, South Africa) For many women, the driving force in their ambitions to get involved in elite politics has been their disgust with the way in which women's lives are circumscribed as much by their elected (male) representatives as other forms of male dominance. A desire to be on the inside making change rather than on the outside being ignored has pushed many women to seek election to parliament.

### **Gender and a shifting policy agenda**

But the impact of women in Parliament has been much more than simply changing internal systems, important though these are, nor simply about making their male colleagues more conscious, if not yet influencing their attitudes towards gender equality. Crucially, their presence is materially affecting the lives of real women as they challenge policy and put the questions which have never before been asked. Sheila Camerer (New National Party, South Africa) recalls a specific incident where government was forced to rescind an earlier decision because of the force of women's voices which rose against it. Part of that show of strength has been underpinned and nurtured by the Joint Standing Committee on Improving the Quality of Life and Status of Women, where women from every political party fought for the establishment of that committee for three years, and are still fighting to get it more formally recognised and supported.

Where women have been promoted into ministerial positions, particularly in South Africa (but also elsewhere) where many women are members of the ruling party, their different perspectives and experiences are materially affecting the lives of women in ways which may have happened anyway, in the dismantling of discriminatory legislation, but where the involvement of women in senior positions has effected a more speedy progress of key policy in the areas of gender discrimination and other unfair practices against women and children. For many, the fact that women have tended to have backgrounds in community development or otherwise worked in communities as teachers, doctors and other community-based environments rather than politics before they come to Parliament, gives them unique insights into how legislation affects real people. Indeed, some women have made a deliberate decision to take on 'tough' portfolios in order to have a voice in an otherwise male-ordered domain. When Fiona Mactaggart (Labour, UK) was compiling a report to document the changes which women MPs had wrought in their first 1000 days in Parliament, she recalls asking a woman colleague who was a member of the defence select committee, what contribution she felt she'd made to effecting change. The colleague in question left the room abruptly and when she returned she looked relieved. When Mactaggart asked what had happened, her colleague said that she thought that some positive things *had* come out of women's involvement but she had no knowledge of the former regime, so she had checked things out with the committee clerk. "So I went and talked to him and I asked him if it was different now, and he said, god, of *course* it's different. This used to be the committee for boys with toys and now it focuses on service families' lives and personnel issues and so on – it's completely transformed."

Change *can* be achieved by women who achieve political power. When Scotland had its first national election in 1999, one consequence of the Labour Party's strategy of 'twinning' was that

37 per cent of the Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) are now women and, unlike their Westminster counterparts, were immediately given serious portfolios rather than the usual gender-flavoured ones. The Ministers for Health (Susan Deacon), Transport (Sarah Boyack) and Social Inclusion (Wendy Alexander) were making their mark as soon as they took up their offices.<sup>15</sup> In health, Deacon launched a £250,000 project to stop smoking amongst young, socially disadvantaged young women, backed a pilot project to give young women free bulk supplies of the morning-after pill and, in so doing, laid down a direct challenge to the radical pro-life organisation - Precious Life – not to mention the catholic church with the setting up of more family planning clinics. In transport, Boyack has proposed road tolls to fund improved public transport in a nation which has the lowest rate of women car drivers in Britain. These are initiatives which would probably not have been proposed by men and it is ironic that the women MSPs who were immediately dubbed ‘Donald’s Dollies’ (after the Scottish Minister, Donald Dewar), parroting the ‘Blair’s Babes’ label which the media gave to the incoming Westminster MPs in 1997, are anything but toy politicians. There is also a recognition on the part of women politicians themselves that they are actively seeking out support on key gender issues from their male colleagues and, moreover, that men are much more likely to at least pay attention to policy issues affecting women than they have been in the past.<sup>16</sup> Gender is, at last, on the policy agenda, put there principally but not exclusively, by women parliamentarians. How long it stays there will depend on the extent to which political parties commit themselves, genuinely, to using the talents, skills and experiences of all their members, by putting equal numbers of women and men forward as parliamentarians, based on merit instead of only supporting those who use the men's room rather than the powder room.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Phillips, *Democracy & Difference*, Polity Press, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> J. Squires, *Gender in Political Theory*, Polity Press, 1999, p.202.

<sup>3</sup> see for example, M. Simms, M (1985) ‘The 1984 Australian elections: find the woman?’ *Politics*, 1985, 20(1); M. Sawyer and M. Simms, *A woman’s place: women and politics in Australia*, Allen & Unwin; Ross, 1993; K. Ross. and A. Sreberny-Mohammadi, ‘Playing House - Gender, Politics and the News Media in Britain’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 1997, 19(1).

<sup>4</sup> H. Woods, ‘Are women becoming too nasty?’ *Los Angeles Times*, 14.9.1992, B5.

<sup>5</sup> in this essay, political party and country are indicated in brackets after quotes from and discussion about women politicians: since being interviewed, some women stood down or were not re-elected at the subsequent general election.

<sup>6</sup> S. Callaghan, ‘Does gender make a difference in moral decision making?’ *Second Opinion*, 1991, 17(2), p.67.

<sup>7</sup> C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. Cambridge MA, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> cited in M. Reynolds, M, *The last bastion: Labor women working towards equality in the parliaments of Australia*, Business & Professional Publishing, 1995, p.120.

<sup>9</sup> J. Kirkpatrick, *Political Women*, Basic Books, 1974, p.143.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p.144.

<sup>11</sup> see L. McDougall, *Westminster Women*, Vintage, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> although a second entrance has since been built to enable women to access the facilities by an alternative route

<sup>13</sup> Y. Yishai, ‘The great losers: women in the 1996 election’, *Israeli Affairs*, 1997, vol 4(1).

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<sup>14</sup> the Joint Standing Committee for Improving the Quality of Life and Status of Women.

<sup>15</sup> L.Riddoch, 'Twinning Peaks.' *The Guardian*, 13.12.1999, p10.

<sup>16</sup> M.M. Conway, M M, G. A. Steuernagel and D. W. Ahern, *Women and Political Participation*, CQ Press, 1997.