

Feminizing **Politics**

Joni Lovenduski

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polity

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Feminizing Politics

For Alan

Feminizing Politics

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List of Abbreviations

AM	Assembly Member
AWS	All-Women Shortlist
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
EMILY	Early Money is Like Yeast
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
GLA	Greater London Assembly
IPU	Inter Parliamentary Union
LWAC	Labour Women's Action Committee
LWN	Labour Women's Network
NEC	National Executive Committee (Labour Party)
MP	Member of Parliament
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance
MSP	Member of the Scottish Parliament
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PPS	Parliamentary Private Secretary
RPR	Rally for the Republic
SNP	Scottish National Party
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
WNC	Women's National Commission

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Introduction

In Vera Brittain's novel, *The Honourable Estate*, Ruth Alleyndene is a political activist selected to stand as a Labour Party candidate just after British women won full suffrage in 1928. She enters Parliament in 1929. The novel gives no picture of parliamentary life. But it does describe the thinking behind her selection. Alleyndene was a prominent local activist. In this fictionalized account, the rising Labour Party makes opportunistic use of her name and her sex to attract the votes of newly enfranchised women. Her talents include a good education and an ability for public speaking and to argue from a woman's perspective, examples of which are carefully described in the novel. Brittain's depiction reflects her belief – and that of many of her contemporaries – that women would be selected by parties as candidates once they were enfranchised. The expectation was that parties would be feminized, would include more women and would take more account of women's interests.

In fact, British political parties did not select women for winnable seats in substantial numbers until the mid-1990s, almost 90 years after they were first enfranchised. As a result, elected institutions did not become feminized. Nor did most important appointed institutions. Wherever decisions

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were made and power might be thought to be present, women were excluded.

Feminists and their opponents have consistently held unrealistic expectations of the possibilities afforded by real systems of political representation. Over the years since women were enfranchised, the meanings of their political action and of political representation changed; however, reactions both by traditionalists and by many feminists did not take such changes into account. Although expectations of women representatives are unrealistic, the impact of feminists on public policy has actually been underestimated. In short, both the possibilities and the achievements of women's political representation have been misunderstood.

Moreover, feminists are divided about political representation. Women's political action is understood in terms of two contradictory perspectives in feminist thought. For the sake of brevity I will label them 'equality' and 'difference' feminism. Equality feminism (sometimes termed 'equity' or 'liberal' feminism) stresses women's entitlements to be in politics on the same terms and in the same numbers as men. Difference feminism (sometimes termed 'maternal' or 'social' feminism) stresses that women have particular characteristics or interests and perspectives that may be represented only by women. For many critics the first position implies that women representatives will become political men; the second, that women representatives will change the practice and nature of politics. Both positions inform attitudes to women and politics and also impressions of what women do as politicians. Both the critics and the supporters of women's political representation tend to elide the two positions.

The tendency to elide equality and difference arguments is intertwined with misunderstandings of the nature of political institutions and is especially evident in commentary on recent British politics. On the one hand, women politicians are criticized for their failure to transform centuries-old male-designed traditions of politics. On the other hand, women MPs are expected to represent a particular model of

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womanhood – they are frequently either credited with bringing significant changes in policy that are supportive of women's traditional family roles, or blamed for not doing so. The two bases of judgement, one derived from principles of equity and the other from ideas about difference, parallel justifications for women's representation. They are contradictory and seem compatible with each other only because they come from separate intellectual communities, tend not to be confronted together and are rarely spelled out in detail.

What are the implications of the contradiction? The two kinds of judgement bear directly on women politicians and are a constant pressure on them. Equity arguments expose women representatives to assessment on the basis of inappropriate 'male' criteria. To perform effectively, women politicians are expected to conform to the rules of the game. By contrast, the difference justification of women's representation and the maternalist thrust of expectations of policy impacts risk locking political women into traditional family roles at the very moment that such roles are undergoing profound change. Arguably, British political institutions, with their deeply embedded traditional characteristics, have been especially insulated from the impact of major changes in gender relations. However, it is fair to say that political institutions in general are good at protecting their cultures and procedures.

Understanding the processes of increasing women's representation requires us to keep both equity and difference perspectives in play. Women representatives operate in a context in which expectations are insensitive not only to sex and gender differences, but also to the constraints of different political arenas, cultures and processes or of the real achievements that have resulted from feminist interventions in politics. A complex set of beliefs about what should happen obscures a complex political reality.

The interplay of equality and difference considerations frames much of the thinking behind the organization of this book. If women politicians are to make no difference, then why should we support them? But if change is expected to

result from the presence of women, then women will be obliged to produce change, probably over a very short time span, which is exactly what is difficult to do in established political systems. When change is not forthcoming, the new women politicians will be accused of failure and betrayal.

To think through this difficult situation we need to have an appreciation of political processes and outcomes. Thus feminists have interrogated theories of representation, rebuilding such theories to include concerns of women's equality. Ironically, that project contributes to the expectation that changes in the numbers of women in politics will bring changes not only in the results of representation but also in its processes. In the jargon of representation theory, descriptive representation will lead to substantive representation (Phillips 1995). Such arguments evoke Cockburn's (1991) call for a vision of equal opportunities policy in which a 'short agenda' of anti-discrimination measures leads to a 'long agenda' of a transformation of gender relations. In politics the short agenda of increasing women's presence leads to a long agenda of political transformation (Mackay 2001).

These arguments have considerable appeal. But the expectations they create produce conditions in which new women politicians are condemned to disappoint their supporters and provide ammunition for their many opponents. Often opponents incorporate hopes for change (that they do not themselves share) into their attacks. In the introduction to her book, *Women Representing Women* (2004a), Sarah Childs details the press reaction to the election of 101 Labour Party women to the House of Commons in 1997. The increase in the numbers of women was one of the big stories of the election. They were presented on the one hand as harbingers of change, but on the other as 'Blair's Babes', criticized (often in terms of some cruelty) for their alleged lack of fashion sense, for their behaviour and for not making a difference from day one.

What they were actually doing on day one and during the first few months of the new Parliament was getting organized

in their new jobs, as were all the other new MPs. The initial unpleasantness became set-piece stories that recurred frequently in the first parliamentary year. As time went by the sniping accelerated as women attempted to introduce changes. For example, when they tried and failed to get the Speaker's permission to breastfeed in the House of Commons, they were accused of being unprofessional (*Guardian*, 15 April 2000). The tone of commentary was destructive. Where the content of a press report might be even-handed, the sub-editor ensured that the activities of women MPs were trivialized (see for example, 'Blair's Babes at Westminster say the House is no place for mothers', *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 May 2000). Unpleasantness became a feeding frenzy at the end of 1997 when new women MPs failed to rebel against the party in a vote on an issue of special concern to women. Only one new Labour woman MP, Ann Cryer, was among the 47 who voted against the Social Security Bill that included a reduction in benefits paid to lone parents (almost all of whom are women). From that point vilification accelerated as, triumphantly, commentators proclaimed the failure of the new women MPs.

The pattern of criticism described by Childs is a fairly typical example of backlash, of resistance to change in a gender regime. The number of women in the House of Commons was not large, but it was larger than ever before. The proportion of women MPs doubled in 1997 to around 18 per cent of the House of Commons and 24 per cent of the Parliamentary Labour Party. This change, far short of balanced representation of women and men, was quite different from previous breaches of parliamentary maleness. For example, two decades previously, Margaret Thatcher was able to become leader of the Conservative Party and later the first woman prime minister, with considerable support from male MPs *because* of her rarity. As historian Linda Colley observed: 'she was not a precedent. There were no groups of others like her "queuing up to follow"' (Colley 2000). Thatcher did not portend a danger to the established gender

regime of politics. Indeed, she never appointed another elected woman to her cabinet during three successive terms of office. Not only was she a token, she was a special kind of token: a queen bee. By contrast, despite their minority status, the group of Labour women MPs after 1997 threatened the end of the 'token woman' at Westminster and portended major changes (Colley 2000). There were, and are, others queuing up behind. Moreover the queues are forming across the party system and throughout the political apparatus.

Before going on to explain the structure of this book, I want to say something more about the issue of equality and difference. When I first thought about writing this book in the late 1990s, I was interested in revisiting equality and difference arguments in the context of women's political representation. Some five years later it had become clear to me that that work has been done. Good accounts of the politics of equality and difference feminisms have been written by scholars who explore the arguments attending each formulation. Many argue that difference feminism should be revisited and revalued. Such accounts are most effective when they take account of the context in which feminist actors must operate. Five examples have particularly impressed me. Jane Freedman (2001) explores the evolution of feminist theory from the standpoint of equality and difference. Fiona Mackay (2001) finds strong evidence for a version of the politics of care in the 'common sense' of women politicians. Sarah Childs (2004a) has researched the experiences, attitudes and styles of new Labour women MPs to consider if they 'act for' women. Hilary Footit (2002) identifies a 'women's' language of politics that is distinct from men's in ways that reflect the concerns of difference feminism. Lynne E. Ford (2001) describes the politics of women's equality in the USA using distinctions between difference and equality feminism as her organizing concepts. These very successful studies argue from qualitative evidence that some women bring new concerns to the political agenda and suggest that women politicians have altered the political

discourse. All acknowledge that their studies are institutionally specific.

It is likely that the phenomena they describe are also temporally specific, moments, sometimes rather long moments, in a history of change at a time of transition both in political life more generally and in gender relations. In the same way that gender relations shape state institutions, even at moments of major change, so also are gender relations shaped by political institutions. When mobilizations to claim women's representation coincide with other changes, sources of transformation may quickly be obscured. We therefore need to disentangle the various processes to assess their effects.

Recent feminist research captures the change in state institutions. In general, over the period in which women's political representation has expanded, changes have taken place both in the structures of states and in gender relations. States have offloaded some capacities to quasi-state organizations, downloaded others to regional units and uploaded others to international organizations in processes that were affected by women's movements (Banaszak et al. 2003). In industrialized democracies demographic change and patterns of increased women's employment and education led to changes in gender relations and increased possibilities of autonomy for women. Established political institutions slowly began to catch up as governments started to include more women politicians in high office.

Such inclusion appears to vary. The patterns of political representation with which we now live were first apparent in the Scandinavian states, where the proportions of women in politics began to increase in the 1980s. Scholars who tracked the progress of women through Scandinavian institutions have closely examined these patterns. Their studies show that, while women remain in a minority, there are two common features to their position as representatives. Both are visible in British politics. First, there is a persistent pattern of decreasing numbers of women representatives the further up the decision-making hierarchy one looks. Second, a functional division of