

A Feminised Style of Politics? Women MPs in the House of Commons

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One hundred and one Labour women MPs were returned to the House of Commons at the 1997 general election. Constituting 24 per cent of the Parliamentary Labour Party, they were, according to critical mass theory, a 'tilted group' and in a position to effect change. Drawing on 23 in-depth interviews with Labour women MPs first elected in 1997, this article establishes that many of them believe that women politicians practise politics in a feminised way. This claim is, however, premised upon gender rather than sex differences and party identity is also identified as an important determinant. The women MPs' perception that women's style is less legitimate than men's is explored through a discussion of the newly elected Labour women MPs' loyalty in parliamentary votes.

Introduction¹

The contention that women practise politics in a different way to men is widely held. Women are said to 'introduce a kinder, gentler politics', one that is 'characterised by co-operation rather than conflict, collaboration rather than hierarchy, honesty rather than sleaze' (Norris 1996, 93). This contention is supported by previous research. Pippa Norris, drawing on the 1992 BCS members' survey, found that women candidates were perceived to be 'more caring, practical, approachable, honest, principled, and hardworking' (Norris 1996, 100). Catherine Bochel and Jacqui Briggs found that the British women MPs and local councillors they interviewed considered that women politicians 'are more willing to listen to the other side', 'are less adversarial [and] better team players' (Bochel and Briggs 2000, 66–67) and two thirds of the Scottish women councillors interviewed by Fiona Mackay agreed that women politicians behave differently from male politicians (Mackay 2001, 108). MPs have also acknowledged a difference between women's and men's styles. Clare Short MP (former secretary of state for international development), believed, prior to the 1997 general election, that women MPs would 'bring a change in the 'ya-boo culture of the House of Commons' (Lovenduski 1997, 717)² and Sir George Young MP (Conservative Leader of the House for much of the 1997 parliament), claimed that these women MPs did 'make less noise in the chamber' (Young 2001, 8). Interviews with more than half of the newly elected Labour women MPs in 1997 also indicated that many perceived that women MPs employ a distinct style and language (Childs 2000).

This article reconsiders the question of gendered political styles in the House of Commons. It examines whether Labour women MPs first elected in 1997 perceive,

after having been present in the House of Commons for three years, that there is a 'feminised' style of politics.³ The article draws on interviews with 23 new Labour women MPs first elected in 1997 undertaken in the summer of 2000.⁴ The interviews were in-depth, individual interviews based on an interview guide, a particularly useful approach when research aims to identify attitudes and behaviours (Lofland, in Fielding 1993, 137). The participating women were a representative sample with regard to a range of characteristics, including age, size of majority and socioeconomic breakdowns of constituencies, though the quality of qualitative research is not dependent upon generalisability (Punch 1998, 154).

Establishing whether the newly elected women MPs considered that there is a feminised style of politics is important because it adds to our knowledge and understanding of how women representatives experience their presence in British politics. Moreover, their perceptions may impact on their behaviour.⁵ If women MPs feel that their style is regarded as having lesser value, that they are judged as inferior representatives and that their impact is lessened (Childs 2000; Ross 2002, 195), then it is important to establish their reactions to this; in particular, whether they feel it necessary to adopt the norms of parliamentary behaviour in order to be effective representatives, even though they are critical of these and identify them as masculinised.

Critical Mass

It is also important to explore the women MPs' perceptions of the style of politics because it provides insights into the question of whether the presence of women politicians makes a difference. The dominant conceptual framework that has, hitherto, been employed to hypothesise this relationship is 'critical mass'. This suggests that once women reach 'critical mass', 'political behaviour, institutions, and public policy' will be feminised (Studlar and McAllister 2002, 234).

Rosabeth Moss Kanter's classic typology outlines four different kinds of groups: the *uniform* group has 'only one significant social group and its culture dominates the organisations'; in the *skewed* group, the minority constitutes a maximum of 15 per cent and is 'controlled by the dominant group and its culture' while the minority are 'tokens'; in the *tilted* group, where the minority is between 15 and 40 per cent, 'the minority is becoming strong enough to begin to influence the culture of the group'; in the *balanced* group with ratios of 60:40 down to 50:50 the culture and interaction reflect the balanced nature of the group (Dahlerup 1988, 280; Lovenduski 2001). Employing this typology the women in the parliamentary Labour party after the 1997 general election, at 24 per cent, have been regarded as constituting a 'tilted group', capable of effecting change (Norris, 1996, 94).

However, the usefulness of the concept of critical mass, at least as currently conceptualised, has recently been questioned (Grey 2002; Reingold 2000; Studlar and McAllister 2002). There does not seem to be an agreement about what figure constitutes critical mass; too often it is loosely defined as anywhere between 10 and 35 per cent. There has also been a failure to recognise Drude Dahlerup's important distinction between critical acts and critical mass, which noted back in 1988 that critical acts might be implemented before the establishment of critical mass

(Dahlerup 1988, 296). Moreover, because critical mass simply counts the numbers of biological females and males present it fails to acknowledge the importance of party differences (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Reingold 2000; Studlar and McAllister 2002; Thomas and Wilcox 1998) and neither distinguishes between sex and gender nor copes with a recognition that gender identity may vary amongst women. Indeed, because it draws inferences simply from the numbers of women in a given elected forum it gives insufficient acknowledgement to the gendered context within which those women representatives operate (Dodson 2001; Duerst-Lahti 2001; Grey 2002; Reingold 2000).

The claim that women have a different style of politics is one of the arguments employed in support of women's greater numerical representation (Phillips 1995). Though it is questionable whether women should base their claims solely for their presence on this argument—it risks reproducing essentialist notions of sex and it runs the risk that when women's feminised style is no longer in vogue the demand for women politicians might be reduced—if it is established that women politicians have a feminised style of politics then this argument could be employed by those who seek women's greater presence in politics (Mackay 2001, 119).⁶

A Feminised Style of Politics

Just under two thirds of the women MPs argued that women had a different style.⁷ Of those who disagreed one felt that she had not seen any 'hard evidence' of a women's style,⁸ and a second that she did not consider that you could identify the sex of an MP on the basis of their 'pattern' of behaviour.⁹ But the majority subscribed to the view that women do have a different style of politics. Women prefer a 'less combative and aggressive style'.¹⁰ They 'don't do as much standing up, shouting on the floor of the House'.¹¹ Women are more 'measured'.¹² Another woman MP, whilst admitting that some women are 'shouty', said she preferred to adopt an approach in which one recognises that there will have been 'some merit in what was done before'.¹³ There was also a belief that the women operated not as individuals, but as part of teams. As one MP said: 'it's important for politicians to recognise they don't achieve things on their own'.¹⁴ A colleague felt that women were more likely to recognise this: 'women will step back and not say 'look what I've done for you' they will say ... 'look what we have done''.¹⁵ Women MPs also claimed they spoke in a different language (Karvonen et al. 1995). Women are 'not prone to political babble [and] jargon', their language is one that 'everybody understands'.¹⁶ They look at issues 'from a personal perspective rather than just looking at the sort of pounds, shilling and pence type of approach to things'.¹⁷ 'Women don't want to know global sums ... [they want to know that] every primary school will get between three and nine thousand pounds'.¹⁸

Many of the new Labour women MPs were also critical of the style practised by male MPs. A shared sense in which, to use some well worn clichés, the House of Commons constitutes 'an old boys club' or a 'boys prep school'¹⁹—even if the reality was not quite so bad as one MP had envisaged²⁰—was evident. One MP, while initially rejecting such descriptions, acknowledged that it adequately describes some of the spaces within the House, although she maintained that you could choose

where to 'hang out'.²¹ Other criticisms included the theatricality of the chamber,²² its childishness,²³ inefficiency,²⁴ and that it is negatively perceived by the electorate.²⁵ Another MP bluntly stated that it was populated by a 'bunch of wankers'.²⁶

In terms of a different political language, male MPs were identified as having a tendency towards repetition—'men always do want to say it again'.²⁷ One MP felt that 'there is so much duplication going on from one male speaker to another'.²⁸ She continued, laughing, that she recognized 'that's an old truism about men and women but it's true'. Women are 'less likely to shout out a cutting remark',²⁹ said another, although this particular woman MP recognised that she was generalising. A third woman MP also agreed: 'a lot of men, you know, like the sound of their own voice'.³⁰

Male MPs were also identified as scrutinising women's presence, appearance and performance with male Conservative MPs regarded as the worst offenders.³¹ One woman felt that they just did not know 'quite how to handle' women MPs other than by ridiculing them.³² Another felt that her contributions to debates were often ignored by male colleagues from all parties:

I gave quite a long speech which mentioned several things ... other speakers later mentioned and ... nearly all of them made no reference to ... [the] fact that I had already said certain things, but [they] mentioned other men, including men from other parties so its like this invisible women thing, you are sort of patted on the head but you are not taken notice of.³³

Yet many of the women MPs (who discussed this) believed that things have improved, although some admitted that it was difficult to judge the change because they had no direct comparison. There was a sense in which it was felt that women MPs and women's concerns were less likely to be received amidst laughter and 'sniggering',³⁴ that there was less 'ya-boo' politics,³⁵ that the chamber was a slightly softer place,³⁶ that women MPs were less 'defensive and embattled',³⁷ that sexual harassment would not be tolerated,³⁸ and that women have 'humanised'³⁹ and had a civilising influence on politics.⁴⁰ Three women MPs argued that whilst the 1997 numbers were an improvement upon previous parliaments, there was still an insufficient number of women MPs to effect considerable change.⁴¹ A colleague considered that the Labour women MPs formed 'some sort of mass that can have an impact rather than being ... picked off'.⁴² One of these women MPs also considered that there had been a greater change in MPs' style of political engagement in the departmental select committees rather than on the floor of the House.⁴³

Gender and Party

Based on their perceptions of, and experiences in, the House of Commons many of the new Labour women MPs believe that women practise a different style of politics from men. But some responses indicated that not all women shared this style: gender and party identities were also regarded as important determinants.

The difference in style between women and men is not, according to these women, determined by sex, so much as gender. It was not the biological difference between women and men that causes them to act in a feminised style but the way in which masculine and feminine gender roles are ascribed to males and females. 'New men'—those whose experiences were less determined by traditional bifurcated gender roles—were considered, therefore, more likely to share women's political style.⁴⁴ As one woman put it, 'maybe it's a generational thing'. Some of the 'new men'—those 'younger than sixty'⁴⁵—were 'equally shocked' by the norms of behaviour in the House.⁴⁶ There was also a sense that men were now able to voice their criticisms of the House: 'many of the men are doing things differently because they've ... got the confidence that the women are saying it', though this particular MP also noted that a 'small group of Tories' who were resistant to changes in the hours and style of the House⁴⁷ and another woman MP did not consider that the new men could voice their criticisms.⁴⁸

Party identity was also felt by the women MPs to be an important determinant of women's style of politics. The new Labour women MPs discussed their attitudes towards and experiences of having acted with women MPs from the other parties. Such behaviour might indicate a more co-operative, consensual and less adversarial style of politics. One obstacle to doing this is, however, the fact that there were so few women from other political parties in the 1997 parliament (13 Conservative, three Liberal Democrat, and two SNP).⁴⁹ This imbalance between the parties is clearly something the new Labour women were cognisant of.⁵⁰ Five MPs stated that they had not experienced cross-party co-operation with other women MPs,⁵¹ and another noted that it 'doesn't happen much',⁵² although one of these thought it 'could be a good idea'.⁵³

The question remains, however, whether there would be more extensive cross-party co-operation if the other parties had more women MPs. There was a clear indication amongst the Labour women MPs that they had had productive relationships with women Liberal Democrat MPs. This relationship was underpinned by a shared understanding regarding both gender and party analysis. For one woman MP this meant that Liberal Democrat women had a 'genuine interest in women'.⁵⁴ Two of the three Liberal Democrat women were singled out for praise in this way.⁵⁵ They were regarded as having 'similar views on certain things'.⁵⁶ And another colleague talked about how, if she was sponsoring an Early Day Motion (EDM) a particular Liberal Democrat woman MP 'would be an automatic one I would go to'.⁵⁷ One woman also reported that Liberal Democrat women had supported the campaign organised against Mike Tyson, a convicted rapist, from boxing in Scotland.⁵⁸ Another talked about how there was a shared concern between Labour and Liberal Democrat women regarding a commitment to women's equal numerical representation in the Scottish Parliament.⁵⁹ Only one of the Labour women MPs stated that she did not really know any of the Liberal Democrat women.⁶⁰

In contrast, the women MPs' responses suggested that greater co-operation with Conservative women was not likely even if there were greater numbers of them. Emphasis was placed on the Conservative party as an institution. Not only are Conservative women MPs in a minority in their party but also the party is regarded as

ideologically hostile to feminist perspectives.⁶¹ As one woman put it, 'the [Tory] women are just so different'.⁶² Another Labour woman MP concluded, on the basis of conversations with Conservative women MPs, that there was 'phenomenal sexism' in the party and it was 'very nasty'.⁶³ A colleague indicated a sense of regret for Conservative women MPs:

I feel quite sad for the Tory women ... because in order to survive they've really had to capitulate most of their ... femininity they've had to join the male agenda, live it, breathe it and now they are it, which is really sad.⁶⁴

Thus the Conservative party is, at least according to these Labour women MPs, an unsafe environment for its women MPs that restricts their behaviour. A good example of the failure of Conservative women MPs to act with Labour women MPs and for women came out of a discussion of two Conservative women MPs' attitudes and behaviour towards an EDM regarding Mike Tyson boxing in Scotland. One of the new Labour women MPs recounted how two Conservative women MPs had agreed with the Labour women MPs' action. Arguably, this suggests attitudinal convergence between (admittedly a minority of) Conservative women MPs with women from the Labour party. But, the Conservative women MPs would not, according to this Labour woman MP, sign the EDM nor would they speak out in public. The MP was clearly disappointed in the behaviour of these two Conservative women MPs, particularly because she considered that many EDMs are not partisan. At the same time, she was not surprised that the two Conservative women MPs had not been prepared to publicly endorse the EDM. Her explanation was that 'women in the Conservative party have a very rough time' because the Conservative party 'is deeply sexist'.⁶⁵

Interestingly, one of the MPs indicated that in the future the possibility for cross-party co-operation between Labour and Conservative women might be improved as the 'young ones tend to be more feminist'. Two separate Labour women MPs identified one Conservative woman as an example of a younger 'more feminist' Conservative woman MP.⁶⁶ This suggests that, at least in their opinion, it is the particular configuration of their gender and party identities that prevents cross-party co-operation between women MPs at this time. This insight suggests that in the future, as the party and gender identities of Conservative women MPs change, some Conservative women MPs might adopt a more feminised style of politics (and may act for women). Once again, this conclusion questions the assertion that it is simply the lack of a critical mass of women in the Conservative party that explains Conservative women MPs' style of politics.

The House of Commons: A 'Safe Space' for Women?

Though many of the women MPs who participated in this research clearly supported the contention that women have a different style of politics, a number of them suggested that the dominant style of the House was not conducive to women acting in a feminised way. For example, one woman MP spoke with regret that she and other women MPs had been unable to act differently 'to the extent I would like to see'.⁶⁷ A colleague stated that 'the culture here is very strong ... you really have to learn to operate within it or you are lost'. Another MP concurred: '[the

chamber is an] institutional framework that demands performance, that demands adversarial conduct'.⁶⁸ In such a context, trying to 'impose a different kind of culture is a very long-term process'.⁶⁹ Older, 'successful' women MPs were regarded as employing the traditional masculinised style and were perceived as 'male': 'I think up to this generation of women MPs, generally the women who were successful in politics were women who didn't do politics differently, Margaret Thatcher fits into the classic criteria of that ... [and] Gwyneth Dunwoody'.⁷⁰ As another MP stated: women who had 'been here a long time ... have been subsumed by the tradition'.⁷¹

The notion that women MPs may not feel comfortable in the chamber was evident in a few of the interview discussions.⁷² Four women MPs directly stated this,⁷³ another simply stated that she preferred to use other means,⁷⁴ while two MPs used the term 'alien' to describe their feelings about the chamber.⁷⁵ In contrast, only one woman MP explicitly stated that she felt comfortable in the chamber.⁷⁶

One of the new Labour woman MPs talked quite extensively about how she experienced the House. She had 'no problems with the robustness of politics' and considered that she was capable of fighting back 'if any man is sexist to me', although she considered that her experience in local government had prepared her for the House. However, this suggests that some women MPs might not be similarly experienced and thus able to 'fight back'.⁷⁷ One of her colleagues' responses also indicated that she was more than capable of coping with the chamber. She asserted: 'I wouldn't allow a man to make me feel uncomfortable'.⁷⁸ But, as she continued discussing this she started to say how she needed 'lots of reassurance at home' that she was 'up to the job'. When she was probed about whether she had felt such insecurity in her previous career she admitted: 'you're right I didn't ... and of course ... women dominated the profession'.

Some women MPs recalled how colleagues had criticised their style of politics. For example, one woman MP felt that they were regarded as naïve for talking in everyday language.⁷⁹ Another recalled that one of the whips had said to her that she was 'too quiet' and that she didn't do 'enough barracking and shouting'.⁸⁰ And a third took issue with the ways in which women's style was judged negatively against the masculinised norm.⁸¹ If men did not 'like the way women do it' she considered it to be their problem. Clearly, some women MPs believe that women's style of politics has been found (unfairly) wanting. One of the women's responses to this negative judgement was that she would not be 'put off by men' and that women had to 'carry on doing it their way'.⁸² When probed further as to whether this would reduce the impact of women MPs' interventions she was adamant that women had to 'stick to' their approach, although the laughter which accompanied her responses, and her qualification, 'I know what you are saying', suggested that she was not unaware of the tension in what she was saying. Namely, that in the short term, at least, there may be a cost associated with women employing a style of politics that is regarded as less legitimate, less effective and is, hence, able to be ignored.

That women MPs perceive that their effectiveness may be limited by their style is further supported by comments from two additional women MPs. Both were discussing the Labour party's plans for the modernisation of parliament (referring here

to ending debates in the early evening and some timetabling of legislation). In both cases, Margaret Beckett MP (then leader of the House) was directly criticised for seeking consensus in the face of deliberate obstruction.⁸³ As one of the woman MPs put it: 'she ain't going to get it [consensus]'.⁸⁴ When this woman was probed about the apparent contradiction between her own preference for a women's style of politics and her criticism of Beckett, she admitted this might be the case. But she then added that she was more concerned about the outcome rather than the means: 'I'm a collaborative person and if you can achieve it that [way] ... [but] the outcome is ultimately what I am here for'.

Where women's style of politics is less valued and less effective, women politicians face the choice between either adopting the male 'game playing' (assimilation) or 'standing out against it' (resistance) (King 1995, 67).⁸⁵ However, if women choose the latter there may be costs—acting in a feminised way within an institution characterised by masculinised modes of behaviour may limit one's effect. Thus, how women 'do' politics is a determinant of women's substantive representation; in order for women MPs to act for women they may need to act like men even though observations that women are 'turned off' by 'ya-boo' politics suggests women MPs *should* act 'like women' (Odone 2001, 19; Toynbee, 2001, 24; Ward 2001, 19; Kingham 2001, 16).

Many of the women MPs who were critical of the dominant style did not, unsurprisingly, want to act 'like men'. One MP, who considered that she probably could behave differently, stated that she simply did not 'like those sorts of arguments'.⁸⁶ Another colleague was even more explicit about the choice she faced:

I am still struggling not to involve myself in the cheering, in the booing, in the 'ya-booing', in the confrontational style of this place and I still don't want to exploit the system ... I want to be here, be respected for what I do, for how I do it ... there are issues here which are taken as confrontational simply because that is the style of the place and it's a good way to have a knock about and harm politically one or other party, that is stupid I do not want ever to find myself involved in that style.⁸⁷

When it was suggested to this woman MP that it might be personally advantageous and/or beneficial in terms of the arguments and concerns she was advocating to reject the feminised style she added:

I don't think at the parliamentary level I've had many opportunities or that I would have had the kind of character to take them, that's not my style and I would find it quite difficult.

Other women MPs too were explicit in recognising the dangers, in their views, of assimilation. One asked, 'how do you not get sucked into that?'⁸⁸ This was particularly difficult in this instance, because this woman MP also acknowledged that she needed to participate in supporting her front bench against the opposition. A second woman MP admitted that she could get 'more stuck into the debates' if she wanted to but that she 'just [didn't] see the point of it'.⁸⁹ Again, she recognised that she could 'enjoy' this practice, that it was attractive to her at one level, and that she 'could get drawn into it'. However, at the same time she regarded it as 'playing games' and sought to resist the temptation. Another colleague considered

that it was 'almost impossible' to resist and to behave different[ly]'. This was because,

The pressures to produce ... the outcomes demanded by the system are almost irresistible ... the pressure to make a joke, to make a smart remark ... the very fact that you know what you are trying to do is either promote an argument or to find holes in somebody else's argument ... is a very adversarial process.⁹⁰

One of her colleagues also admitted that she had had to 'compromise' and learn to 'put [herself] about as an individual' in order to be regarded as a successful MP.⁹¹

Taking, perhaps, a 'realist' position, one of the women MPs considered that there came a point when 'you have to stick the knife in' or 'the stiletto', because that was what was demanded by the 'system'. However, her ambivalence was also revealed when she added that this should be achieved in a 'way ... which isn't unpleasant and adversarial'.⁹² As another of the women MPs acknowledged, 'I think you have to be strong, vigorous and decisive'.⁹³ She had come to reject the notion that 'if one stood up and spoke in a very quiet voice when one was putting over one's point that was somehow more effective'.

Even if women politicians choose to adopt the masculinised norms their ability to 'master' them is open to question. This is because while women are forced to step outside their gender in terms of the norms of female behaviour in order to meet the norms of political behaviour, they cannot quite adopt the masculinised style because they remain peculiarly gendered. As one woman MP phrased it: 'imagine if we all did start shouting and yelling ... then we would be strident ... you actually can't win'.⁹⁴ So, perhaps the choice for women MPs between the feminised and masculinised style of politics is more apparent than real.

The responses from some of the women MPs also suggest that they are choosing not to engage fully in the chamber because they do not wish to have to adopt its style. In turn, this might mean that they focus their attention elsewhere, down-playing in their own minds the importance of the chamber. One woman MP, because she could not 'relate at all' to the 'ya-boo' style, was 'finding other ways of ... getting questions [addressed]'. This 'turning away' from the chamber, however, begs the question whether MPs who do not fully participate in the chamber will be regarded as 'good' MPs.⁹⁵ This might have repercussions in terms of women's individual career prospects, collectively for women's equal numerical representation in government⁹⁶ as well as for the substantive representation of women more generally (Childs 2002a).

There were some women MPs who accepted the norms, or at least some of the norms, of male parliamentary behaviour. For example, one woman MP felt that she had over time begun to understand the meaning of 'ya-boo' politics.⁹⁷ Whilst she had initially regarded Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) as 'outrageous' she had subsequently revised her opinion and now regarded it as fulfilling the function of 'rallying the troops'. When probed about the notion that women's numerical representation may be negatively affected because of how Prime Minister's Questions is represented and perceived, she replied that there was a responsibility for women MPs to say to women who might seek selection that, 'you don't have

to be afraid'. Another woman MP seemed to support the perspective that women could perform well on the floor of the House, because they 'could learn a real turn of phrase'.⁹⁸

The New Labour Women MPs' Loyalty: A Question of Style?

The voting records for the 1997 parliament demonstrate that the new Labour women MPs voted disproportionately with the government. They were less than half as likely to rebel against the party whip as the rest of the PLP; and even those that did rebel did so around half as often (Cowley and Childs 2003). A wide range of explanations have been suggested for this difference: their newly elected status, their sex, all-women shortlists, the electoral environment, their pre-Westminster experience, ambition, their values and attitudes. However, comparing the newly elected women MPs with their male peers, Cowley and Childs concluded: 'once we control for everything else that might be explaining the differences, sex still appears to exert an influence on the propensity to rebel ... the difference is not large enough (or consistent enough) to be statistically significant ... but it still exists' (Cowley and Childs 2003).

Yet, many of the women MPs themselves do not seek to explain away this difference; they claim it is part of the different, feminised, style of politics. Rather than rebelling, the women MPs claim to operate 'behind the scenes': 'we've probably tend[ed] to use the tools that are available to us behind the scenes as a first course of action ... I have always found it possible to use the avenues that are open behind the scenes'.⁹⁹ They consider that criticism can be communicated to government in many different ways,¹⁰⁰ through lobbying, private conversations and holding meetings with ministers¹⁰¹ and through the parliamentary Labour party group.¹⁰² One woman MP did, however, reject the idea that lobbying had an effect¹⁰³ while another argued that one's ability to effect change through personal contacts was dependent on who you knew in government.¹⁰⁴

Admittedly, this argument cannot be subject to empirical testing in the same way as the other explanations, although it does seem to fit with the preference indicated above for the contention of a feminised style of politics. And while it is difficult to document the work that is done by MPs 'behind the scenes', the women MPs appear convinced. As one woman MP stated:

[A] lot of working behind the scenes goes on and I think [that] is not appreciated, anyone who thinks that ... all the Labour women are too loyal, if I can put it that way, has not been at meetings with say the home secretary over hunting, with the trade and industry secretary over employment rights.¹⁰⁵

Moreover, it is not just that the women MPs consider that women operate differently; some go further and suggest that it is a superior mode of political engagement. 'Working behind the scenes' may be a more effective strategy than rebelling, although these assertions fit uneasily with the earlier analysis that suggested that

there were costs associated with adopting a feminised style. One woman claimed that:

If you are a sort of macho 'oh I'm going to vote against the government'... I don't [think] that your influence is even as much as the people that are saying 'look Jack, this is ... not working ... you don't really get anywhere [by] being a rebel ... people [who] vote against the government [are] ... not really doing anything other than making a gesture.'¹⁰⁶

Colleagues who asserted that supporting the government in the lobby has the effect of ensuring that when they raise criticism with ministers they are more likely to be listened and responded to reiterated this interpretation: 'if those of us who genuinely vote with the government come along and say "this has got to stop" you know people listen'.¹⁰⁷ Discussing specifically the cut in lone parent benefit in the autumn of 1997, this woman MP added:

I don't think that any government would have reversed it [the lone parent cut] if there had been a mass rebellion ... if they'd won it by a handful of votes, I don't think then a few months later they would have turned it around.

Another MP agreed: 'we didn't vote against you we voted for you [pause] ... we should have something in return, what are you going to do?'¹⁰⁸ Or, as another said:

You can get up, make a speech, piss everybody off, get bad publicity for your party and not make a step further but you're regarded as a better person than the one who beavers away, who provides the evidence.¹⁰⁹

The new Labour women MPs perceived, then, that they are engaged in 'doing politics differently', not adopting a 'macho' approach,¹¹⁰ nor 'rubbishing' or 'trashing' people publicly.¹¹¹ In this context, rebelling is regarded as a masculine way of 'doing politics' more concerned with gesture politics.¹¹² One woman MP stated that the women were not seeking to 'boost our own egos and for the press release'.¹¹³ Another, whilst laughing, claimed that 'men are prima donnas'.¹¹⁴ In contrast, there is a sense in which women have a more consensual approach and that they 'won't posture' on issues.¹¹⁵

Three of the interviewed women MPs argued that loyalty was an attribute associated with women.¹¹⁶ One of the women MPs who had rebelled also considered that she was a loyal person and did not think she was 'naturally a rebel'.¹¹⁷ Interestingly two of these women discussed their party loyalty by making analogies to the family. One woman MP stated:

I absolutely adore my family, sometimes I don't like one or two things my [children] ... do ... privately I will give them all sorts of grief about it ... publicly I support them wholeheartedly.¹¹⁸

The second woman MP talked of how women are the 'natural conciliators' in family life and that this role 'translates into parliament'.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

Many of the Labour women MPs elected for the first time in 1997 believe that women politicians have a different style of politics. Women, they claimed, are less combative and aggressive, more collaborative and speak in a different language compared to men. Yet this difference is, in their view, a gender and not a sex difference. Women MPs do not act like women and men MPs like men because of their biology but rather because of the way in which masculine and feminine gender roles are ascribed to males and females. Moreover, gender identity is not fixed. As some of the women MPs noted, not all women MPs have a feminised style of politics—party identity was regarded as an important difference. A number of the women MPs also claimed that as women and men experience less bifurcated gender roles their style of politics would become similar.

Furthermore, many of the Labour women MPs considered that the House of Commons was not conducive to women acting in a feminised way. They talked about their perceptions of how their style of politics was considered less legitimate and less effective and they discussed the pressures they experienced to conform to the traditional norms of the House. There was also an acknowledgement of the costs associated with acting like (and for) women. In addition, the women MPs' discussion of the criticism levelled against them for their loyalty to the government demonstrates how they considered that their style of politics is judged as an inferior *modus operandi*. Increased numbers of women politicians may not, then, guarantee a feminised style of politics, as the concept of critical mass suggests. This is because critical mass relies simply on the counting of biological females to explain the difference women make in politics. It is more useful, when conceptualising the relationship between women's presence and women making a difference, to think of different kinds of women acting in different gendered environments and to explore whether particular political contexts are 'safe' for women to act like (and for) women.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank the participants at the Women and Politics annual conference at Birkbeck College and the PSA annual conference at the University of Aberdeen as well as Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. See also Mo Mowlam talking about the Women's Coalition in Northern Ireland (Mowlam 2002, 146).
3. The use of the term 'feminised' style in this article should not be taken to refer to a fixed style practised by all women determined by their biological make-up. Rather, it refers to the style of politics practised by women as a reflection of women's gender and gendered experiences and stands in contrast to that style practised by men as a reflection of their gender and gendered experiences. As such, it is relational and subject to change over time and place. The nature of women's feminised style of politics reported in this article derives from the perceptions of Labour's new women MPs.
4. Interviewing women MPs resulted from my concern with identifying and examining the perceptions and experiences of women representatives in British politics following the 1997 general elec-

tion and because feminist theories of representation suggest that a relationship between women's presence and the descriptive, numerical, symbolic and substantive representation of women. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, were tape-recorded and anonymity was guaranteed. The interviewees in 2000 constituted two thirds of the Labour women MPs first interviewed in 1997 for an earlier research project (Childs 2000).

5. This is not to say that perceptions are always true or that they determine, in a simple way, behaviour. Nonetheless, the fact that the MPs 'said it' should be treated as data (Mannheim and Rich 1995, 163). Subsequent studies should explore the perceptions of male MPs and analyse the actual behaviour of both women and men MPs in the House of Commons.
6. Currently, feminist pressure groups and party activists in the UK are trying to ensure that the political parties respond positively to the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act that permits positive discrimination in the selection of candidates (Childs 2002b). The Bill gained Royal Assent in February 2002.
7. Interviews 1 (12-07-00), 2 (13-06-00), 3 (14-06-00), 4 (21-06-00), 5 (22-05-00), 7 (13-06-00), 8 (20-06-00), 9 (22-06-00), 14 (8-06-00), 15 (23-05-00), 16 (26-07-00), 18 (12-07-00), 23 (19-06-00), 24 (10-05-00) and 33 (13-06-00).
8. Interview 12 (14-05-00).
9. Interview 31 (10-07-00).
10. Interview 5 (22-05-00).
11. Interview 23 (19-06-00).
12. Interview 8 (20-06-00).
13. Interview 7 (13-06-00).
14. Interviews 31 (10-07-00), 2 (13-06-00) and 9 (22-06-00).
15. Interview 3 (14-06-00).
16. Interview 23 (19-06-00).
17. Interview 2 (13-06-00).
18. Interview 9 (22-06-00).
19. Interviews 2 (13-06-00), 9 (22-06-00) and 18 (12-07-00).
20. Interview 3 (14-06-00).
21. Interview 31 (10-07-00).
22. Interviews 15 (23-05-00) and 24 (21-06-00).
23. Interview 18 (12-07-00).
24. Interview 25 (21-06-00).
25. Interview 15 (23-05-00).
26. Interview 14 (08-06-00).
27. Interview 29 (15-05-00).
28. Interview 13 (13-06-00).
29. Interview 8 (20-06-00). See also interview 7 (13-06-00).
30. Interview 16 (26-07-00).
31. Interviews 14 (08-06-00), 29 (15-05-00) and 22 (16-05-00).
32. Interview 1 (12-07-00).
33. Interview 29 (15-05-00).
34. Interviews 1 (12-07-00), 2 (13-06-00), 7 (13-06-00), 22 (16-05-00) and 23 (19-06-00).
35. Interview 1 (12-07-00).
36. Interview 27 (17-05-00).
37. Interview 18 (12-07-00).
38. Interview 1 (12-07-00).
39. Interview 24 (10-05-00).
40. Interview 33 (13-06-00).

41. Interviews 14 (8-06-00), 16 (26-07-00) and 29 (15-05-00).
42. Interview 13 (13-06-00).
43. Interview 14 (08-06-00). Unfortunately, the research did not address the possibility that the style of politics will vary, and that women may be more or less likely to act like women, according to the different sites where MPs act. That some women MPs may choose to act less in the chamber of the Commons is discussed at a later stage in the article. There is some evidence to suggest that women MPs find it easier to act for women in select committees and in the constituency (Childs 2004).
44. Interviews 1 (12-07-00), 3 (14-06-00), 9 (22-06-00), 14 (08-06-00) and 18 (12-07-00).
45. Interview 14 (08-06-00).
46. Interview 18 (12-07-00).
47. Interviews 3 (14-06-00) and 9 (22-06-00).
48. Interview 18 (12-07-00).
49. Both parties returned an additional woman MP in by-elections.
50. Interviews 7 (13-06-00), 3 (14-06-00), 24 (10-05-00), 29 (15-05-00) and 31 (10-07-00).
51. Interviews 4 (21-06-00), 9 (22-06-00), 12 (15-06-00), 16 (26-07-00) and 24 (10-05-00).
52. Interview 25 (21-06-00).
53. Interview 9 (22-06-00).
54. Interview 24 (10-05-00).
55. Interviews 8 (20-06-00), 24 (10-05-00), 25 (21-06-00) and 29 (15-05-00).
56. Interview 8 (20-06-00).
57. Interview 25 (21-06-00).
58. Interview 18 (12-07-00).
59. Interview 3 (14-06-00).
60. Interview 7 (13-06-00).
61. Interviews 13 (13-06-00), 24 (10-05-00), 27 (17-05-00), 29 (15-05-00) and 31 (10-07-00). Interviews 27 (17-05-00) and 29 (15-05-00).
62. Interview 22 (16-05-00).
63. Interview 23 (19-06-00).
64. Interview 7 (13-06-00).
65. Interview 18 (12-07-00). A second woman MP considered that on another issue there was some Conservative support in private but that they women were 'still stuck in using [a report] as a partisan point scoring issue'. This she considered 'very unhelpful' (Interview 13 (13-06-00)).
66. Interview 22 (16-05-00).
67. Interview 28 (12-07-00), see also interview 5 (22-05-00).
68. Interview 4 (21-06-00), see also 24 (10-05-00).
69. Interview 28 (12-07-00), see also 14 (8-06-00).
70. Interviews 3 (14-06-00) and 14 (8-06-00).
71. Interview 9 (22-06-00).
72. Interviews 4 (21-06-00), 14 (08-06-00), 16 (26-07-00) and 31 (10-07-00).
73. Interviews 14 (08-06-00), 15 (23-05-00), 16 (26-07-00) and 25 (21-06-00).
74. Interview 23 (19-06-00).
75. Interviews 25 (21-06-00) and 2 (13-06-00). One of these talked about how she did not know how she would have felt in the previous parliament where the numbers of women were much less, implying that, for her, numbers matter. Interview 29 (15-05-00).
76. Interview 5 (22-05-00).
77. Interview 18 (12-07-00).
78. Interview 24 (10-05-00).

79. Interview 23 (19-06-00).
80. Interview 1 (12-07-00). She also suggested that some new men were also less likely to adopt the traditional masculinised norms of behaviour.
81. Interview 18 (12-07-00).
82. Interview 5 (22-05-00).
83. Interviews 2 (13-06-00) and 9 (22-06-00).
84. Interview 9 (22-06-00).
85. Interview 16 (26-07-00).
86. Interview 7 (13-06-00).
87. Interview 9 (22-06-00).
88. Interview 13 (13-06-00).
89. Interview 15 (23-05-00).
90. Interview 4 (21-06-00).
91. Interview 9 (22-06-00).
92. Interview 33 (13-06-00).
93. Interview 5 (22-05-00).
94. Interview 22 (16-05-00).
95. Interview 25 (21-06-00).
96. There is no sign of this in practice.
97. Interview 24 (10-05-00).
98. Interview 31 (10-07-00).
99. Interview 15 (23-05-00).
100. Interviews 7 (13-06-00), 9 (22-06-00), 13 (13-06-00), 14 (08-06-00), 15 (23-05-00), 22 (16-05-00), 28 (12-07-00) and 29 (15-08-00).
101. Interviews 1 (12-07-00), 2(13-06-00), 8 (20-06-00), 9 (22-06-00), 14 (08-06-00), 28 (12-07-00), 29 (15-08-00) and 31 (10-07-00).
102. Interview 9 (22-06-00).
103. Interview 12 (15-06-00).
104. Interview 9 (22-06-00).
105. Interview 29 (15-05-00).
106. Interview 29 (15-05-00).
107. Interview 1 (12-07-00).
108. Interview 8 (20-06-00).
109. Interview 22 (16-05-00).
110. Interview 29 (15-05-00).
111. Interview 14 (08-06-00).
112. Although this section draws only on the parts of the women MPs' interviews where they are discussing loyalty, there is more general support for the notion that women function behind the scenes. Interviews 31 (10-7-00), 2 (13-06-00), 3 (14-06-00), 14 (08-06-00) and 31 (10-07-00).
113. Interviews 1 (12-07-00) and 22 (16-05-00).
114. Interview 3 (14-06-00).
115. Interviews 2 (13-06-00), 15 (23-05-00), 23 (19-06-00) and 27 (17-05-00).
116. Interviews 23 (19-06-00), 24 (10-05-00) and 22 (16-05-00). A number of women MPs were also forthright in their questioning of the assumption that voting with your government was a negative activity in itself (Interviews 4 (21-06-00), 5 (22-05-00), 7 (13-06-00), 16 (26-07-00) and 29 (15-05-00)). There was acceptance that party membership entails the packaging of ideas (Interviews 15 (23-05-00), 13 (13-06-00), 16 (26-07-00), 4 (21-06-00) and 24 (10-05-00)). There was also awareness that disloyalty has electoral costs (Interviews 2 (13-06-00), 22 (16-05-00), 24 (10-05-00), 28 (12-07-00), 3 (14-06-00) and 7 (13-06-00)).

117. Interview 25 (21-06-00).
 118. Interview 24 (10-05-00).
 119. Interview 23 (19-06-00).

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