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## **Representation of women: Questions of accountability**

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*Under-representation of women is an inherently ambiguous slogan with a number of layers of meaning. When we seek to increase the presence of women in parliaments it is not only for reasons of justice or recognition; we are also usually seeking to make parliaments more responsive to women in the community. Elected women, however, confront many conflicting pressures and loyalties. In this context, what structures serve to strengthen the responsiveness of parliamentarians to women in the community? This paper explores the strategies available for moving the issue of representation beyond numbers to accountability, drawing on evidence from Australia and a number of other countries.*

In the 1990s the 'under-representation of women' became a slogan of great discursive power, resulting in policy initiatives at every level of the political system, whether sub-national, national, regional or international. It is interesting that this occurred at the same time as post-modern questioning of the usefulness of the category 'woman' and an increased emphasis on the contingent nature of gender and other identities. It also happened at the same time as the increased sway of public choice discourse in the English-speaking democracies and the repositioning of equality-seeking groups as rent-seeking 'special interests'.

As I have argued elsewhere (Sawer 2000), the slogan of 'under-representation' gains its power from the multiple levels of meaning that are wrapped up in it, encompassing the representation of interests, the representativeness of the legislature, the equal right to act as a representative. I reiterate here some of the meanings and arguments that give resonance to the slogan of under-representation.

### *Justice*

Justice arguments about women's equal right to participate in public decision-making are the easy ones as Anne Phillips (1995) has observed, and they are the ones enshrined in international instruments. The right of women to participate in public life on an equal basis with men is inscribed in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This argument does not rely on women making a difference to public life. It simply assumes, like all equal opportunity arguments, that talent is not confined to one gender and that the absence of women from parliamentary positions is a consequence of direct or indirect discrimination. Such discrimination may include factors such as the electoral system or the structures of political work and political careers, particularly the failure to accommodate family responsibilities or the privileging of gladiatorial styles of politics. It may also include a shortage of mentors, given the added complexities of cross-sex mentoring and the importance of social trust, often based on sameness, in such relationships.

### *Utility*

While the equal opportunity argument is relatively straight-forward, like most justice arguments it needs to be supplemented by utility arguments to convert power holders to the cause. Such utility arguments may be in terms of doubling the pool of talent from which legislators are recruited or in terms of partisan utility - increasing the electoral appeal of parties. Women can provide a 'new look' for parties beset by scandal or associated with harsh economic policies. Electoral competition may be brought into play where one party has already significantly increased its female parliamentary representation. Arguments about the supposed utility of increasing the number of women in parliament also slide quickly into 'making a difference' arguments about the improvement of standards of parliamentary behaviour and so forth.

### *Symbolic arguments*

Justice arguments also turn quickly into symbolic arguments. These are themselves of two different kinds – one stressing effects of the presence of women inside parliament on the status of women outside and the other stressing the significance of

representativeness for the legitimacy of political institutions.

The first symbolic argument, is that the presence of women in parliament increases respect for women in society and is a form of recognition of the equal status of women, whether or not this is associated with recognition of 'difference'.

This first symbolic argument is also associated with a motivational or role model argument – that the visible presence of women in public life serves to raise the aspirations of other women, the 'girls can do anything' effect. Some have suggested this is one of the most important functions that women legislators can perform (Burrell, 1994: 173). The symbolic function of the role model needs to be distinguished from the more active role of the mentor referred to above.

The second and very different symbolic argument that is also wrapped up in the slogan of under-representation is that of institutional legitimacy – the idea that the legitimacy of political institutions will be undermined if significant sections of the community appear to be locked out of them. This assumes political mobilisation of a group identity, in this case gender identity, and a refusal to acknowledge the authority of an institution that does not represent this identity.

#### *Representation of interests, values, perspectives, experiences*

As we have noted it is common for equal opportunity arguments to be buttressed by the suggestion that the election of women will 'make a difference' in a number of ways such as improvements in the quality of parliamentary representation, introduction of more consensus-seeking political styles and an increased level of empathy with issues of daily life.

The difference expected in the style of politics is that women's socialisation and family roles will translate into an approach to politics based more on consultation and consensus seeking and less on power-broking and head kicking. Gender is seen as relevant to the way representative roles are likely to be performed and it is expected that the presence of more women will reduce the level of aggression found in Westminster parliaments where two teams face off against each other.

It is not only the electorate that expects women to make this difference (Saulwick

1994) – women MPs themselves would like to have this effect. A recent study of 39 Western Australian women MPs found that almost without exception they believed that more of their number would lead to a greater emphasis on consensus politics, something summed up in the remark by one of them that: ‘desire for consensus may be a woman’s greatest contribution to political life’ (Black and Phillips 2000: 163). Another recent study of 120 women politicians in Australia and New Zealand also found dismay at masculine parliamentary culture to be a consistent theme (Henderson 1999: 265). However the very norms of parliamentary conduct that have resulted in such disenchantment make it difficult for women to perform effectively and make the hoped-for difference (Broughton 2000). This is exacerbated by the privileging of confrontational politics by the electronic media.

One advantage of proportional representation (PR), apart from increasing the representation of women and minorities, is that it shifts parliamentary configurations from two-party shouting matches to multi-party bargaining, supposedly closer to the consensual style of politics with which women feel more comfortable. Another difference expected to flow from women’s presence relates to the representation of ‘women’s interests’. For example, the Beijing Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 states that: ‘Women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account’ (1995: § 181).

‘Necessary’ perhaps, but not sufficient. An increase in the number of women in parliament may in fact coincide with a down-turn in debate over issues of special concern to women. A recent study has found that women in the Australian Senate are five times as likely to raise issues such as domestic violence and paid parental/maternity leave as their male colleagues (Williamson 2000). As Figure 2 shows, however, there is, however, no simple correlation between proportion of women in parliament and the amount of attention given to these issues. While both paid maternity leave and domestic violence are still matters of major concern to the women’s movement (in a country where there is no universal provision for paid maternity leave), their salience cannot be predicted simply from the numbers of women in parliament.

Changes in party composition of the parliament and of government may be one important variable in Westminster and European political systems. While the total

number of women may go up, they may be from a party in which there is ideological opposition to 'feminism'. Where a party has a strong women's platform, male MPs will probably show stronger support for such issues than women MPs in a party that eschews such a platform. This was not the case in Australia, as can be seen in Figure 1. Nonetheless, Labor women were twice as likely to raise the issues tested for than were

Liberal women. Critical individuals were also of great importance, with, for example, one woman Senator (Rosemary Crowley) consistently raising these issues over time. Even though excluded from the data set for the period in which she had ministerial responsibilities, she outperformed all others (Williamson 2000). . She had a strong background in the women's movement.

It is easier to raise doubts about the ability of men to represent women, to question whether those allocated the role of 'woman' in society can ever be truly represented by those who have not shared these experiences, than to put the positive case concerning whether women's interests will be better represented by women. Even if agreement could be reached on the nature of women's interests or standpoints, a more representative legislature does not guarantee the more effective representation of such interests. 'Standing for' is not the same as 'acting for' (Pitkin 1972). Indeed the presence of women may be used as an alibi for policies with a disproportionate impact on women, such as cuts to social expenditure.

At this point it is common for the goal of increasing the number of women in parliament to be redefined as the goal of increasing the number of feminist women in parliament, who will promote justice for women other than themselves. Indeed it can be argued that this was always the aim, however wrapped up in equal opportunity discourse. For example, former Australian Finance Minister, Senator Peter Walsh, complained that the trouble with affirmative action was that you 'do not end up with women... you end up with feminists'(Sawer & Simms, 1993: 185). So it is not just the representation of women's experience that is important, but the feminist perspectives that derive from the collective mediation of that experience.

### **Relevance of parliamentary representation**

The strategies to increase women's presence in parliaments adopted all over the globe as part of the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action embody the

assumption that parliaments remain an important sphere of decision-making. This is despite the effects of globalisation and the leaking away of power from national institutions under the pressure of global market forces and closed-door multilateral trade and financial negotiation. Indeed some would argue that the increased presence of women in national parliaments signals the decreased power and relevance of the latter.

The question of the relevance of parliamentary representation to women is also linked to the historic ambivalence of women's movements concerning representative democracy and the party system on which it rests. This ambivalence manifested itself in the many 'non-party' organisations created in the aftermath of suffrage to encourage women's active citizenship without being drawn into the compromised world of man-made party politics.

In the last 30 years this ambivalence has again revealed itself in the turn to participatory rather than representative models of democracy within women's organisations themselves. On this view, organisational hierarchies and specialised representational roles reinforce the subordination which women's groups are seeking to redress. Influencing representative politics without mirroring its forms becomes a complex task, often mediated in Australia, as in Canada, by bureaucratic bodies responsible for funding advocacy groups and ensuring women's perspectives are represented in policy making.

In addition, post-modern theoretical developments within feminism have emphasised the operation of power in all aspects of social life rather than the central allocation of resources through formal political institutions. From a postmodern perspective, the mobilisation of collective identity as 'women' for the purpose of influencing allocative decisions is regarded with suspicion, and as perhaps reinforcing (or 'normalising') an existing subject position rather than challenging the discursive production of such identities.

### **International agenda setting**

Why was there a surge of interest all over the world in the 1990s in the issue of women in public decision-making? One catalyst may have been the rapid drop in the parliamentary representation of women at the global level, following the overthrow of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (see IPU, 1997a). Another possibility is that the issue of the political representation of women is seen as

neutral in relation to questions of economic distribution, whereas other feminist demands such as childcare and equal pay are seen as requiring public expenditure or intervention in the market incompatible with current globalising economic agendas. In other words, the attraction of the slogan of women's under-representation may in part rest on the assumption that women will *not* make a difference, as well as from the assumption that they will. As we have noted above, many also believe that globalising agendas have made national parliaments less relevant and therefore there is more room in them for women.

Regardless of the reason, the picking up of the issue by international bodies resulted in rapid policy dissemination across the globe and mutual reinforcement of national and international agendas, through, for example, the reporting process required under CEDAW. This deals with women's equal rights in politics and public life in Article 7 and . By March 2000 165 countries had ratified CEDAW and had corresponding reporting obligations with regard to implementation of its provisions, including Article 7 on equal rights in political and public life.

Further national reporting obligations have flowed from the Platform for Action adopted by the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. The Platform described women's equal participation in political life as playing a 'pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women' and prescribed a range of positive measures to achieve it. The process of reporting back at Beijing + 5 in New York involved a large number of preparatory meetings which focused attention on participation in power and decision-making, as one of the 'twelve critical areas' of the Platform. One example was the Global Forum of Women Political Leaders held in Manila which argued that the penalties of unequal access to power were not 'not borne by women alone but by the whole world' and called for statutory quotas (Forum Declaration 19 January 2000).

Another important international player in relation to parliamentary representation of women is the IPU, which provides the basic monitoring information on trends worldwide. This was at first in print form (e.g., IPU 1997a) but is now readily available and constantly updated on the IPU web site. Adequate monitoring systems are an intrinsic part of effective equal opportunity programs. In addition, the IPU adopted in 1994 a 'Plan of Action to correct present imbalances in the participation of men and women in political life'. National parliaments have been asked to report to the IPU on implementation of both the IPU Plan and the relevant section of the Beijing Platform. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has also spawned a

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Group, which focuses on the 'need for better representation for women, both in Parliament worldwide and in the Commonwealth.'

Another source of international pressure to develop programs in this area is provided by multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, particularly those of Northern European and Scandinavian countries. One example was the role played by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and by aid money from Australian and New Zealand in fostering the women in politics movement among Pacific Island countries in the 1990s. From 1995 aid money supported women in politics conferences and the creation of women in politics groups across the region, building on existing networks such as National Councils of Women (Drage 1998). The workshops run by these groups had an immediate impact both in terms of increased number of women candidates in countries such as Fiji and increased lobbying of all candidates for women's policy commitments. Increased pressure from women within the Pacific Islands was reinforced by international reporting requirements under CEDAW to which most Pacific Island countries had acceded in the 1990s.

Women's international organisations are yet another source of support for initiatives to bring more women into parliaments. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has surveyed organisations that promote women's political participation. Their sample includes those operating at the international or regional level, such as the Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics in Manila, the Organization of Women Parliamentarians from Muslim Countries, Parliamentarians for Global Action and the South Asian Network for Political Empowerment of Women (Karam, 1998: 223). As part of Beijing+5, Parliamentarians for Global Action met at the United Nations in New York to explore strategies being used by women parliamentarians worldwide to ensure 'ensure women's priorities influence the public policy agenda'.

In Australia the increase in activity around parliamentary representation of women was signalled in 1992 by the formation of the non-government Women into Politics Coalition. The following year the Ministerial Conference on the Status of Women, which includes Australian and New Zealand Ministers, commissioned research on the representation of women in parliament. Parliamentary enquiries into the subject were set up in the federal and South Australian parliaments in the same year and their reports added to the growing volume of action plans and strategies to remove gender imbalances in parliamentary representation. On the supply side, Women's Advisory



Councils around the country and the Office of the Status of Women in Canberra produced 'how-to' manuals, nicely illustrated by feminist cartoonists. Suffrage centenaries in South Australia and Western Australia provided additional momentum in terms of government funding for conferences and events marking a hundred years of women's political rights.

### **Responses by political parties**

In most countries political parties are the gatekeepers to political office. In Australia the party response to increased pressure for women's representation has followed a similar pattern as in other countries. Parties of the Left have adopted quotas, while those of the right have preferred more individualist strategies such as training and mentoring programs. The Australian Labor Party adopted a target in 1994 whereby women would constitute 35 per cent of all its parliamentary parties by 2002. Labor women had mobilised to achieve this goal using justice slogans, including the argument often put by former Premier Carmen Lawrence that justice would be achieved when mediocre women had just as much chance of sitting in parliament as mediocre men. The Labor Prime Minister, on the other hand, used a utility argument to justify his support for the target. He referred to the need to harness the talents of all people in the community, rather than the principle of equal opportunity for mediocre men and women.

Adoption of quotas did not put an end to resistance to women within the party nor to the loss of women MPs on the electoral tide because of their disproportionate presence in marginal rather than safe seats. For example, when the party was defeated in the federal election of 1996 the proportion of women in the Parliamentary Labor Party fell from 13 to 8 per cent.

Another issue was the influence exercised by factions over which women were pre-selected for parliamentary seats. The Australian Labor Party is characterised by formal factions and it is very difficult to achieve pre-selection for a winnable seat without factional endorsement. Such endorsement comes with a price-tag of demonstrated loyalty to the faction, a loyalty that must be placed above feminist solidarity.

Concerns over the influence of such machine politics have led in two different directions: on the one hand to exit and on the other to renewed efforts to achieve voice. The most conspicuous example of exit was the departure in 1995 of a number

of women from the Queensland Branch of the Labor Party to create the most recent Australian Women's Party. Such women's parties in Australia have had more success in bringing pressure on existing parties than in attracting significant electoral support.

Those who opted for voice continued the struggle from within the party, but using a new organisational strategy. Led by two former women Premiers they set about creating a body independent of party control to provide financial and moral support to endorsed party candidates who met certain criteria. This was modelled on the US EMILY's List set up to raise campaign funds for pro-choice Democrat women candidates. The Australian version of EMILY's List is an interesting initiative designed to assist the entry of feminist women into parliament and to hold them accountable for upholding equity commitments. It began endorsing Labor women candidates in 1997 who were able to demonstrate commitment to equity and pro-choice goals to an interviewing panel of senior feminists. Candidates were asked what policies they would advocate to help people balance work and family responsibilities and in what ways they would support other women. Before receiving funding and campaign support, candidates also had to sign a separate questionnaire/declaration relating to abortion.

EMILY's List has certainly reinforced the inflow of Labor women into Australian parliaments above that which would occur with the electoral tide, as can be seen in Figure 4. To what extent it has provided a structure of accountability for feminist commitments is yet to be really tested. In the year 2000 there will be reinterviewing of MPs in two jurisdictions, South Australia and Queensland, to see if they should again receive EMILY's List endorsement. Different kinds of questions will be asked of those in Queensland, who have been in government, and those in South Australia, who have only been able to engage in gender advocacy from the Opposition benches.

Institution-building such as EMILY's List helps to provide a forum within professionalised party politics where gender perspectives can be identified and promoted. Women's caucuses within parliamentary parties serve a similar function (Tremblay 1998). For example, the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party Status of Women Committee was created in 1981 and meets weekly when parliament is sitting. It reinforces femocrat monitoring of gender impact of policy and has been singled out for its significance in bringing together women who would otherwise be divided from each other by factional loyalties (Broughton & Zetlin, 1996). A similar women's caucus exists within the New Zealand Labour Party. One recent Canadian study has argued the importance of such structures in reinforcing collective identity and

aspirations, finding that even feminist parliamentarians with a commitment to making a difference get isolated from each other by the competing pressures of government (Burt et al 2000).

### **Figure 3: Women in Australian parliaments\* 1972-2000**

\* Combined data for Federal, State and Territory Parliaments.

### **Figure 4 Party affiliation of women in Australian parliaments\* 1972-2000**

\* Combined data for Federal, State and Territory Parliaments.

### **The significance of separate institution building**

EMILY's List is an example of the kind of separate institution-building (now often referred to as creation of alternative public spheres) in which political women have engaged since the 1890s in Australasia. Separate institutions provide a framework for woman-centred debate and the development of oppositional discourses. They can play a significant role in both supporting and monitoring the work of women who enter the male domains of parliament and local government.

In the post-suffrage era, Laura Bogue Luffman set out the rationale of separate associations in terms of the need to give the political world the full benefit of women's distinctive contribution through associations acting with, rather than under, men: 'Associations free to make their own laws, think their own thoughts and work out their own political salvation' (Luffman, 1909). Such associations were intended to assist women take up their full responsibilities as citizens, and were contrasted with existing political institutions where men invariably took charge and defined the terms of debate. As Nancy Fraser has recently put it, if members of subordinate groups have no space in which to deliberate free from the supervision of dominant groups they are less likely to find the right voice or words to express their own thoughts.

The next great wave of separate institution-building was in the 1970s. Of the new organisations that sprang from the women's liberation movement Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), a non-party lobby group created in Australia and later in New Zealand, was the most directly oriented to exerting external pressure on parliamentary

politics. Like its first-wave predecessors, WEL rated parties and candidates on their knowledge of, and commitment to, issues of particular concern to women. It was particularly successful in the 1972 Australian election where it placed new issues on the policy agenda and obtained rapid implementation after the election of a reform government.

As in other countries with strong party systems, most Australian parliamentarians have little scope to vote other than with their party. Hence influencing, monitoring and rating party policies, particularly at election time, is a first priority for advocacy groups. However there is a decreasing trend for party leaders to feel closely bound by an election platform, and an increase in the number of policy decisions that are taken 'on the run', independent of platform commitments. In this context, monitoring and rating of parliamentary interventions is still important in maintaining an accountability nexus between women's movement organisations and the politicians they hope will represent their issues in parliament.

### **Redesigning political institutions**

In relation to parliament itself, feminists have set about doing two things, which they hope will end up as one. The first is to unpick the masculine bias of parliamentary institutions so that women can perform more effectively in them; the second is to create structures to make parliaments more sensitive to gender concerns.

As Carole Pateman (1989) has pointed out, women have been differentially incorporated as citizens, meaning that their primary obligations as citizens have historically been construed as being in the private rather than the public realm. It is only in the last 25 years that there has been real discussion, let alone action, on how public life might be changed to accommodate family responsibilities. Prior to this, women's family responsibilities were construed as insuperable barriers to equal participation in public life.

Parliamentary arrangements have assumed that parliamentary representatives are not at the same time primary carers for family members. Indeed political careers have been regarded in the past as typically a two-person career, where the 'incorporated wife' not only takes over full responsibility for the care of the family but also stands in for the representative, particularly in constituency roles. Today, recommendations for childcare centres, family-friendly sitting hours, parliamentary sessions aligned with school terms and increased travel for family members have become standard in

proposals to reduce the pressure on parliamentarians with family responsibilities. While the Scandinavian and German parliaments have creches, this is uncommon in the English-speaking democracies, including Australia.

In Australia late-night sittings were limited in the federal parliament in 1994, but became less family-friendly again after a change of government in 1996. While it can be argued that late-night sittings in the federal parliament shorten the parliamentary week and enable parliamentarians to return to their families inter-state, perhaps over 2000 miles away, it does not have the same benefit for the families of Canberra-based parliamentary and political staff. In Tasmania the Premier recently limited parliamentary sitting times to 6pm, stating that later sitting hours were discriminating against women with young families (*Canberra Times* 16 March 1999: 5).

Another aspect of masculine institutional bias is the kind of confrontational politics encouraged by Westminster two-party systems, exacerbated by the physical configuration of the chamber so that the rival teams line up against each other. Few women perceive themselves as doing well in such adversarial chamber politics where they have to contend with both psychological and physical intimidation, such as the hostile wall of sound from the benches on the other side. Chambers where parliamentarians are seated by region, as in Sweden, or by lot, as in Iceland, may mitigate the pressure towards aggressive confrontation.

Women parliamentarians tend to feel more 'at home' in more intimate forums such as provided by parliamentary committees, in which members from different parties sit next to each other rather than shouting at each other from opposite sides of the chamber. One recent inquiry into the effects of parliamentary procedure and practice on women's parliamentary participation suggested that a way to both facilitate women's participation and improve the quality of legislative debate was to enhance the role of parliamentary committees in the legislative process (Parliament of South Australia 1996).

The Australian Senate has a strong committee system, with standing committees functioning as both legislation and references committees. When functioning as references committees (and any matter may be referred by the Senate, including current legislation) they have a non-government majority and non-government chair. Such chairs come from both the Opposition and from the minor party that holds the balance of power, and women have dominated the chairing of, for example, community affairs legislation and references committees. However parliamentary

committee work is often 'low profile' for the very reason that, at its best, it does not offer the confrontational images on which the electronic media thrive.

Committees are not only a forum for effective performance by women parliamentarians, they may also serve the responsiveness aim by providing a structural focus on gender issues. In Australia, the women's budget process introduced in 1984 required all portfolios to provide gender disaggregated information on outlays for the purposes of a special budget document. Senate Estimates Committees could then use this data to pursue issues of the gender impact of Budget decisions. Unfortunately the women's budget process was finally abolished with the election of a conservative government in 1996 and much less gender-disaggregated Budgetary information is now being provided by government, Committees usually have to make special requests for it.

Subject-specific standing committees found in European parliaments may also help raise awareness of gender issues - for example, committees on women's rights in the Irish, Spanish and European parliaments and on equal opportunities for men and women in the Belgian and Luxembourg parliaments. Such committees have varying mandates, including in the case of the Belgian Senate looking inwards at the working of the parliament and issues such as family-friendly sitting hours and the gender balance of expert witnesses (CCEO, 1997). Apart from such specialist committees, all committees may be given terms of reference which include taking gender impact into account when examining legislative proposals, as in Sweden.

Considerations of how to make parliaments more women-friendly must also extend to how to facilitate access by women in the community to the parliamentary process. In Australia federal parliamentary committees hold hearings around the country. When a Senate Committee inquired in 1995 into outworking in the garment industry, where most employees are women from non-English speaking backgrounds, advertisements were broadcast on ethnic radio stations and submissions were taken through the telephone interpreter service. In addition, committees enquiries are advertised and submissions taken through the internet and there are live webcasts of hearings. Evidence and discussion papers are also published electronically to stimulate community dialogue.

In 1989-1992 an exemplary parliamentary committee inquiry was held into equal opportunity for women by the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee of the Australian House of Representatives (LACA 1992). As well as holding hearings around the country and taking evidence from many witnesses, the committee entered into partnerships with bodies with gender expertise to ensure its terms of reference were fully explored. These bodies included one non-government organisation, and three women's agencies within government who co-sponsored public seminars with the Committee. Considerable efforts were made to ensure that a cross-section of women in the community were able to participate in these seminars. For example, after speakers such as equal opportunity commissioners and barristers explained difficulties caused by existing definitions of indirect discrimination, the audience broke up into syndicate groups to come up with creative solutions. The sense of ownership created by this process (together with the government's shortfall in women's votes) played an important role in the eventual acceptance by government of most of the Committee's recommendations for strengthening equal opportunity legislation.

Another issue worthy of consideration is the treatment of parliamentary petitions. Petitions are one of the forms of political participation in which women are more likely to engage than men, unlike activities such as attending public meetings.. The Australian Senate has, since 1997, allowed the tabling of electronic petitions, as long as a Senator will vouch that the full text was visible to those who added their names on-line. The largest electronic petition tabled so far was initiated by women protesting against the imposition of a GST on tampons. (The petitions, with some 23,000 signatories were tabled in the Senate in February and June 2000.)

In the Australian House of Representatives a new procedure was adopted in 1999 of tabling an annual report detailing petitions and ministerial responses to them, signalling increased responsiveness to this form of political action. While this may be seen as increased responsiveness to a form of political action often engaged in by women, it is a two-edged sword, as it is also popular with anti-abortion and men's rights groups seeking changes to family law and child support formulae.

To return to the norms of parliamentary behaviour, we have noted it is very difficult even for determined women to shift established norms of adversarial behaviour in Westminster systems. What about the case when determined women help design a new parliamentary system, as in the campaign for a Scottish parliament? When women are centrally involved in creating new political institutions, are they able to

ensure features which will promote more consensual and inclusive forms of political behaviour?

Alice Brown (2000a and 2000b) has provided compelling accounts of how Scottish women campaigned both for greater parliamentary representation of women and for new ways of conducting parliamentary politics. The Scottish parliament not only adopted 'family-friendly hours of operation' but also established a standing Equal Opportunities Committee with a mandate directed both inwards and outwards, requiring it 'to consider and report on matters relating to equal opportunities and upon the observance of equal opportunities within the parliament'. In general the Scottish parliament established a much stronger committee system than that found at Westminster, and as we have seen parliamentary committees provide a forum both for effective performance by women MPs and for outreach to women in the community,

One of the most striking ways in which the Scottish parliament tried to distinguish itself from Westminster was through the adoption of a European-style horseshoe-shaped seating system instead of the traditional opposing benches. This was a logical accompaniment of a new electoral system that fostered a multiparty system, but it was also seen as a symbolic break with the adversarial ways of Westminster. As we have seen, the ritual warfare of Westminster both disadvantages women and feeds into community disenchantment with politics.

At that same time as these features were established in the new Scottish parliament, women's machinery was set up in the Executive to ensure mainstreaming of equality considerations and a Women in Scotland Consultative Forum was established as a channel for women's input into policy processes. Alice Brown reports that despite this sustained effort to create new institutions for a new politics, traditional forms of political behaviour are still very much alive in Scotland, making it difficult to predict what the longer-term effects will be (2000b).

### **When do women represent women?**

Characteristically the 'first women' in parliaments, as beneficiaries of the women's suffrage movement, were expected to be representatives of women at large, in the sense both of standing for and acting for women. As part of a generation of maternal feminists they were usually happy to take on this responsibility of representing the interests of women and children (Sawer 1986). This representational role was



additional to responsibilities to electorate and party. The subsequent willingness of politicians to identify as representatives of women has varied over time. Factors impinging on such willingness have included: the extent to which gender identity is politically mobilised in society; the existence of structures that mandate a focus on gender; the extent to which party discourse accommodates such identity; and the related issue of whether such identity is perceived as a career liability.

In the 1960s, for example, the few women engaged in formal politics were often trying to escape the constraints of gender identity which meant consignment to low-status health and welfare areas. The quest to break out of these gender-stereotyped roles and gain access to the more prestigious masculine portfolio or committee assignments led to the disavowal of gender ('I'm a politician not a woman'). The desire to have their gender overlooked required distancing from any constituency of women.

At the same time, women's sections within political parties were atrophying or being dismantled because of the perceived restrictions they placed on women. Non-party advocacy organisations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters were aging and failing to recruit young members. This meant that there was little in the way institutional support for raising 'women's issues' and women politicians were dependent on the approval of their male colleagues which might easily be withdrawn if male priorities were challenged.

The arrival of the new wave of the women's movement and the increased number of women entering Australian parliaments in the late 1970s, led to a renewed willingness on the part of women MPs to identify themselves as representing women (e.g. Sawyer 1986; Whip, 1991). Growth of the women's movement created a political base for women who spoke out on movement demands and introduced feminist discourse into parliamentary debate. Women's organisations within political parties were revitalised and new ones were created. A recent Inter-Parliamentary Union survey of 200 women parliamentarians in 65 countries found that 89 per cent of them believed they had a special responsibility to represent the needs and interests of women and a common theme was the need to maintain linkages with women's groups for

information sharing and support (Waring 2000: 133-141). Only a minority were offended by the suggestion they might be seen as a representative of their sex.

In Sweden, the Parliament Studies of 1985, 1988 and 1994 have likewise shown in each case over 50 per cent of women MPs regarded 'representing the interests/views of women' as very important to them personally, compared with 10 per cent or less of men MPs (Wängnerud 2000). Again a small minority of women regarded this particular representational duty as 'unimportant' – averaging 11 per cent over the three studies.

The role of 'representing women' has been facilitated in Australasia in recent decades by reforms to the electoral system and introduction of PR for a number of upper houses and for the New Zealand parliament. Under PR, representative functions are less tied to serving a geographical constituency and dealing with local issues and there is more scope for representation of broader issues that cross geographical boundaries, such as equal opportunity for women. On the other hand, women often believe that looking after constituencies (sometimes seen as akin to social work) is one of their particular strengths as MPs.

In Australia, the influence of the resurgent women's movement extended into existing political parties in the 1970s. This occurred most notably with the Labor Party, which was embarking on a coalition-building strategy of reaching out to a changing electorate. The influence of the women's movement became even more evident in the policies and practices of newly emerging 'post-materialist parties' such as the Australian Democrats and the Greens. As in other Westminster systems, party affiliation is more reliable than gender as a predictor of the stance of candidates and parliamentarians on women's issues, although gender is also significant within that partisan framework (McAllister & Studlar, 1992; Considine & Deutchman, 1994; Norris, 1996; Erickson, 1997).

At the same time as parliamentarians, particularly those from parties on the left, were becoming more inclined to articulate representational roles deriving from gender and other forms of personal identity, a countervailing trend was beginning to appear. This was the professionalisation of politics and changing characteristics of those involved, including entry into political careers at a younger age. Consequences of professionalisation have included the reduced likelihood of community activism as a pathway to parliament for women and an increased likelihood of a background in law

and paid party work. Politics as a professional career usually means party and factional discipline taking precedence over other affiliations.

Another countervailing influence, impinging on whether politicians were willing to 'represent women', was the discursive shift taking place on the right of politics. By the 1990s the conservative parties in Australia were positioning themselves as 'governing for the mainstream', undistracted by 'special interests' such as women and other equality-seeking groups. This has meant that Coalition women parliamentarians have been particularly anxious to avoid the career-threatening implications of being identified as an advocate for women or belonging to the sisterhood (Henderson 1999: 150).

Despite the variable willingness of women politicians to 'represent women', the expectations of the community are that they will do so. We have already noted expectations that women will bring greater altruism and consensus-seeking to politics. There are also expectations that women politicians will share the concerns of women in the community (Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996; Wängnerud 1999). The electorate expects greater responsiveness from those who share their social characteristics and women and women's non-government organisations still tend to look to women MPs for support. This contact may itself have consciousness-raising effects. It is women politicians who belong or have belonged to women's organisations who are more aware of gender and gender-related issues (Tremblay 1998).

On the other hand women parliamentarians articulate the problems involved in being called upon to represent all women, to be the 'women's voice'. This goes beyond the additional representational burden involved and encompasses the difficulty of representing the diversity of women. One response by politicians is to share or help secure resources to assist women's groups to represent themselves. Women parliamentarians in Australia, familiar with the shoe-string nature of community politics, are particularly likely to be found sharing their fax and photocopier with community groups as well as providing lobbying advice.

Channels through which groups representing women can make input to parliament can also be strengthened in a number of ways as we have seen above, such as the establishment of standing committees with responsibility for women's rights or

gender equality, through requiring committees routinely to examine the gender impact of proposals and to hear from both male and female witnesses, or through changing the mode of operation of committees to make them more women-friendly.

## **Conclusion**

It is parliamentarians who have been given the mandate to engage in legislative deliberation and executive scrutiny and are therefore in a position to hold governments to their international commitments to improve rather than diminish the status of women.

Who will hold parliamentarians, whether male or female, accountable for their contribution to advancing the status of women? It is the lack of accountability mechanisms which has been one of the major criticisms of identity politics and of the mirror theory of representation (Squires 1996: 84). Discourses of difference assume too readily that those with certain characteristics and related life experiences will act in ways inflected by those experiences. On the other hand, where strong accountability mechanisms do exist, as with reserved seats elected by those who identify as Indigenous peoples, this is seen as having the narrowing effects of corporatism rather than the broadening effects of seeking to represent diverse interests and views.

I have already noted the significance of separate institution-building for strategies of accountability. One important aim of EMILY's List, for example, is both to support the feminists it has assisted into parliament and to hold them accountable. It is clearly not sufficient to assist feminists into parliament (let alone women *per se*). There have to be strategies to support feminists operating within political institutions where the institutional culture is antithetical to feminism. The non-party women's political organisations created in the immediate post-suffrage period were very aware of this and could be relied on for messages of support whenever a woman parliamentarian spoke out against prevailing patriarchal attitudes. Such support involves monitoring the women who have entered parliament and accountability is the other side of this coin.

Forms of accountability that apply both to men and women have also been noted. These include the watching brief of women's caucuses within parliamentary parties and strategies to encourage participation of women in parliamentary hearings. The media are always an important component of accountability. In Australia the annual 'Ernie' awards were developed by a feminist politician who is now the presiding

officer over the upper house in the New South Wales Parliament. The Ernie awards spotlight things said or done by politicians, whether male or female, that have most set back the cause of women. They are judged on the basis of the volume of booing from the audience and attract widespread media attention.

More serious forms of accountability include the consistent monitoring of politicians by equality-seeking advocacy organisations. As already noted, candidate questionnaires, ratings and form guides have been prepared by women's organisations for over a hundred years. During the last century the Woman's Christian Temperance Union introduced such techniques to the Australian women's movement. During this century the Australian Federation of Women Voters continued the tradition of rating candidates on their record in relation to women's rights and this role was taken over by WEL in the 1970s. Despite the apparent continuity in techniques of social action, WEL was more immediately inspired by overseas example - the rating of US presidential candidates reported in the pilot issue of *Ms Magazine*. Ratings can be particularly important if they move beyond 'women's issues' to analysis of gender impact of policy platforms as a whole. In a recent State election in NSW the female leader of the Opposition was a self-declared feminist with pro-choice and other commitments. Her industrial relations policy, however, involved further deregulation of the labour market, which would have been particularly detrimental to women so her party did not receive a high rating from WEL.

The issue of accountability for 'representing women' is an important one for the discursive strategies discussed in this article. Clearly all politicians must be held accountable for their contribution to improving gender equity. This is the principle applied in the gender audit of government programs and in international reporting, where 'mainstreaming' of gender accountability is regarded as a fundamental principle. Just as gender equity in government cannot be made the responsibility of women's units alone, so responsibility for representing women's interests in parliament cannot be borne solely by women. There is a danger that if too much emphasis is placed on the relationship between embodiment and representation this will reduce the pressure on all politicians to take responsibility for 'representing' women (Phillips 1995). That is, a focus on embodiment or discursive strategies centred on gender identity may be at the expense of considered strategies for gender accountability.

They also, as we have noted, run counter to current concerns of academic feminism with the fragmented and contingent nature of identity. Despite such concerns we

cannot expect campaigns for the greater presence of women in politics to give up on 'making a difference' discourse. There is too much advantage in suggesting to an electorate deeply cynical and apathetic about traditional politics that women will do politics differently. These discursive appeals have great resonance because voters believe that women are more altruistic than men and more concerned with human consequences of policy.

As we have seen, the ambiguous demand for the increased 'representation of women' has been effective in mobilising support and achieving a range of institutional reforms. The impact of this discursive strategy has been strengthened through its inscription in international instruments such as the Beijing Platform for Action. Providing the structures that will enable women parliamentarians to perform more effectively and that will enhance responsiveness of parliaments to women in the community is the next step.

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