Institutional sexism

Parliament is one of many gendered institutions in which power, process and behaviour operate to favour the men who created them and have been sole occupants for so long. When women enter legislatures they enter masculine territory. They may or may not face hostile men, but they do face institutions that are constructed to exclude or marginalize them. Institutions such as the House of Commons carry memories, habits and ways of doing things that persist even as they adapt to change and implement decisions to redesign their work. Tradition interacts with innovation to good or not so good effect. Practices, norms, attitudes and procedures may continue unexamined until something starts to obstruct them. Thus do many aspects of institutional life continue unchanged. In the case of the UK House of Commons a legacy of institutional sexism has proved remarkably difficult to shift. Embedded in it is a culture based on white middle class male assumptions about what it was to be a representative, an MP. While assumptions about class have changed with the reconfiguration of the professional middle classes, the absence of women members until recently has ensured that parliamentary gender relations have remained more or less static. Thus, parliamentary norms are founded on often unspoken assumptions about a traditional gendered division of labour, shaped over centuries of women’s absence. The normative order is relatively hostile to women and femininity except traditional forms of femininity in which women are not present as legislators, but as cleaners, caterers and wives of legislators. The regime manifests itself in rules, procedures, discourses and practices with which many men are comfortable and most women are not. Formal and informal requirements for masculine dress, provision for hanging up one’s sword but none for looking after one's child, admiration for Oxford Union styles of debate which typically include jibes, taunts, farmyard noises, finger stabbing, in a chamber whose acoustics favour loud voices, the frequent use of sporting and military metaphors, and the regularly reported experience of women MPs and members of ethnic minorities being asked for their passes to 'Member-only' areas more often than men are all manifestations of the continuing gender regime in Parliament.

When we think about questions of political representation and the presence of women, we are thinking about power. The assumed ‘masculinity’ of politics excludes women from powerful institutions and underwrites a culture in which politicians are ‘naturally’ male. This naturalness of a masculine form of power is extremely difficult to contest. Any successful effort to contest it must show how it operates in the institution. To remove discrimination it
is necessary first to identify the mechanisms and configurations through which it operates and what attitudes and ideas support and change it. ii

Recent research suggests that each new cohort of women is surprised by the degree of sexism and hostility they meet in the House of Commons, and each cohort reports that things have got better by the end of the parliament. We may hope that they have seen the regime changing, but possibly each new cohort simply gets used to it.

**Key arguments for women’s representation**

It is important to have women in parliament for at least six reasons.

First, justice. The accidental side-effects of the male-breadwinner model biases the political system in ways not justified by any political end.

Second, intelligence. Excluding women disproportionately from the representative process deprives women and the country as a whole of the insights that women bring to governing. Research now shows that diversity in teams produces better outcomes. It does so because each team member in a diverse team can bring different insights and perspectives to the problem.

Third, sensitivity to the issues of women as well as men. Sensitivity to the perspectives of women is particularly important on issues where interests are “uncrystalized,” meaning that the issues have not been signalled, discussed, campaigned upon, and otherwise previously deliberated in the political system. When a parliament must address issues that are relatively uncrystalized (as sexual harassment was, for example, in the early 1990s), it needs on its committees and in the body as a whole a significant number of women to capture the kind of heterogeneity of perspective that is now provided among the men. In discussions within the parties, in questions at question period, and in committees, when questions relating to women’s experiences come up, when there is new or neglected information to bring to bear, it women are more likely to have access to those experiences and be sensitive to the way they will be interpreted among those whom the laws will affect.

Fourth, communication. A growing body of research shows that constituents are more likely to contact representatives who they think are “like them” in a relevant way. In some cases, representatives with the same characteristics as a constituent are also more likely to respond to that constituent’s needs. Gender is relevant to many concerns that women have.
Fifth, symbolism. Having women in parliament makes a statement to the country that women are capable of ruling. It makes a statement internationally that this country is one in which women have an equal role.

Sixth, role modelling. Having women in parliament sends a signal to young women and girls that they too can aspire to a role in politics. Recent research shows that these effects can be significant.

Specific questions

What should the Government, political parties, the House of Commons and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority be doing now to ensure better female representation in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond?

We know what the problems are. Since the 2010 Speakers Conference Report on Political Representation, five further HC reports (listed below) analyse and propose remedies for gender biases in the House of Commons. It is time to take them seriously.

Thus government, parliament, the political parties and IPSA should follow up on the recommendations of The Good Parliament Report, The APPG Improving Parliament Report, and the 2010 Speaker’s Conference Report. On the basis of strong and compelling arguments, these reports call for the increased use of quotas and associated deadlines across the activities of Parliament. Together they are good examples of how to analyse the configurations of power in a political institutions.

Taking the reports seriously means implementing the recommendations.

The Good Parliament Report makes 43 recommendations and suggests mechanisms for their implementation. It therefore offers a detailed strategy for change and identifies the actors who can introduce change.

Examples

Government and the Political Parties should;

- address the points raised in The Good Parliament Report relating to IPSA, especially the suggestion to aggregate data on childcare costs so that these not be linked to individual MPs. This is a matter of family privacy. It should be fairly easy to prevent
abuse of the provisions without public disclosure. This measure is particularly important for increasing the ability and willingness of parents to be MPs.

- address security issues associated with women’s concerns about the risks of violence against MPs. This means listening to what MPs say and, for example, considering the impact of overly restrictive IPSA regulations about MP’s (and their staff’s) use of taxis (after late night sittings for example) or to and from constituency offices located in difficult neighbourhoods. Another serious form of violence occurs on social media, where trolling of women MPs has become a particular problem. Parties should at least expel members who troll women. Government should undertake preventive behaviour, including tightening legislation and increasing penalties where appropriate. Violent behaviour that targets elected politicians undermines democracy.

- undertake a review into the possibility of MP job-share to enable people with caring responsibilities and or health needs to become Members of Parliament.

- Devise, debate and implement proper arrangements for MP parental leave that take into account both constituency and Westminster responsibilities.

- recognizing that the public form their impressions of politics via the news media, introduce gender and diversity quotas in the Parliamentary press lobby via lobby passes. Currently women are only 25.7 % of Lobby journalists, although this figure is up from 5.2 per cent in 1983.

Have parties made female representation enough of a priority?
Parties claim to have been working to increase the diversity of their MPs since the 1970s. Although they have made some progress, so far the outcomes suggest that they are not doing enough. The increases in the representation of women in the UK have trailed other similar countries. On women’s legislative representation, the UK ranks 49th among the 193 countries listed in the Inter Parliamentary Union. Although we could be said to have achieved large percentage increases, these numbers are misleading, achieved in the UK only because the
starting base was so small. Today women still comprise fewer than 30 per cent of MPs, compared to Rwanda with 63%, Sweden with 43%, Finland with 41%, and Spain with 41%. By party, Labour has the highest proportion of women MPs, with 43%; the Conservatives have 21%; and Scottish National Party 33%.

Parties have not sufficiently utilised candidate quotas. Only Labour has used such quotas for general elections; the Conservatives have avoided them, as have Liberal Democrats, who currently have no women MPs.

Government regulation of parties, which is currently minimal, could be extended to diversity requirements. For example, party funding could be tied to quotas of women candidates and MPs, i.e., to quotas of women in winnable seats in each party.


Are parties giving sufficient attention to female representation at other levels of political life, including Mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners?

As with MPs, parties claim to be making an effort but the outcomes are not good. In the recent London Mayoral elections the main party candidates were all men. Similarly the first elections of Politics and Crime Commissioners resulted in 6 women and 35 men.

The presence of women as council leaders appears to have stalled. 14.7% of 2015/16 council leaders in England are women – a tiny increase from 14% in 2014/15.

17% of Labour leaders are women, 13% of Conservative. These levels are about the same as in the previous year.

Just 4 of the 16 elected mayors in England are women

How can a consensus be reached on emerging proposals from The Good Parliament report?
Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) should

- promote awareness of the obstacles to equality of representation including those highlighted so well in The Good Parliament Report. Note that some of the highlighted issues are not widely known.

- work with the new Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, and the APPG.

- undertake regular reviews of party candidate selection and ensure that the House debates candidate selection every 2 years.

- call the Minister for Women before the Committee to ask her about commencing Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 which requires political parties to publish information about their candidates and aspirant candidates.

- work to secure an all-party statement that commits all political parties to not tolerating threats of violence by party members/supporters; seek information from House authorities about enhanced protection for MPs.

- call IPSA before the committee to explain how it takes account of gender and diversity issues, including security issues.

- secure permanent status as a select committee.

September 2016

Key Reports


John Benger 2015, Report for the House of Commons Administration Committee on the findings of the interview study with Members on women’s experience in Parliament. 21
Arguably all institutions are gendered in the sense that they affect both women and men. However the term “gendered institution” usually refers to a bias in favour of one or the other sex in a particular institution.


Centre for women and democracy. http://www.womenanddemocracy.org/