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Sarah Childs

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The New Labour Women MPs in the 1997 British Parliament: issues of recruitment and representation

SARAH CHILDS

Kingston University, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT The British General Election of 1997 witnessed the return of 120 women MPs to Parliament, of whom 101 are Labour women MPs. This article, structured in two parts, suggests, first, that the transformation in women's legislative recruitment in 1997 is best understood as resulting from the Labour Party's policy of all-women shortlists. Drawing on empirical research, it also reveals insights into how this policy was implemented on the ground. The second part of the article offers an analysis of women's political representation in contemporary British politics. The assumption that women's numerical representation effects feminised change is explored through a consideration of the attitudes of women representatives. The research suggests that women MPs consider that women's presence has the potential to transform the parliamentary political agenda and style.

Introduction ^[1]

The low level of women's political participation in elite British politics is widely documented.[2] The percentage of women MPs in the House of Commons between 1945 and 1983 was roughly 4%; 1987 saw an increase of women MPs to 6.3% (41), and in 1992 the percentage reached 9.2% (60) (Table I).[3] In comparative terms, prior to the 1997 General Election, the UK ranked forty-ninth in the world for the proportion of women in the lower House [4] and in European terms, British levels of women's elite political participation (in 1995) were bettered by Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy, Ireland and Belgium (Table II).[5]

However, the 1997 General Election resulted in the election of 120 women to the House of Commons: women now constitute 18% of all MPs. The distribution of women MPs is notably disproportionate to the distribution of seats won by the different parties: 101 are Labour MPs, (24.1% of all Labour MPs), 13 are Conservative, (7.9% of Conservative MPs),

three are Liberal Democrat (6.5% of Liberal Democrat MPs) and two Scottish National Party (SNP), (33% of SNP MPs).[6] The 1997 General Election was also unique regarding the method by which some women candidates were selected: it witnessed the election of 35 endorsed Labour women candidates selected from all-women shortlists.

Year	Conservative	Labour	Liberal	SNP	Others	Total	% MPs
1945	1	21	1	0	1	23	3.8
1950	6	14	1	0	0	21	3.4
1951	6	11	0	0	0	17	2.7
1955	10	14	0	0	0	24	3.8
1959	12	13	0	0	0	25	4.0
1964	11	18	0	0	0	29	4.6
1966	7	19	0	0	0	26	4.1
1970	15	10	0	0	1	26	4.1
1974F	9	13	0	1	0	23	3.6
1974O	7	18	0	2	0	27	4.3
1979	8	11	0	0	0	19	3.0
1983	13	10	0	0	0	23	3.5
1987	17	21	2	1	0	41	6.3
1992	20	37	2	1	0	60	9.2

Table I. Women elected in British General Elections, 1945-92. Source: Joni Lovenduski & Pippa Norris (1993) *Gender and Party Politics*, p. 46 (London: Sage).

Country	Number of women	Percentage
Sweden	141	40.4
Norway	65	39.4
Finland	59	33.0
Denmark	59	33.0
Netherlands	47	31.3
Germany	176	26.2
Spain	56	16.0
Italy	95	15.1
Ireland	21	12.7
Belgium	18	12.0
United Kingdom	62	9.2

Table II. Women in European Parliaments in 1995. Source: The Inter Parliamentary Union Study (1995), cited in Stephenson, *The Glass Trapdoor*, p. 32.

This article reconsiders explanatory accounts of women’s legislative recruitment in Britain in light of the 1997 General Election. It is based on

analysis of interviews conducted with 34 of the 65 newly elected Labour women MPs. The research aimed to explore the ways in which women MPs perceive their party's recruitment process and reflect upon their own selection experiences. A qualitative approach, with in-depth interviews based on an unstructured interview guide, was felt to be the most appropriate research method. It enables 'guided conversations', where participants 'talk at length' and 'elaborate upon their interpretations'.^[7] The MPs' responses are transcribed in an amended format and constitute the data of this research. The analysis of the data will be presented through the 'interplay of quotes from the interviews and commentary on the selected transcript'.^[8] The presentation of the interviewees' responses demonstrates their perspectives and the ways in which they construct them. Furthermore, the 'narrative of descriptive material' enables the assessment of the researcher's interpretation.^[9] The problem of generalising from qualitative research is acknowledged, although, because the participants constitute more than half the target group, and because they are largely similar to the whole group, the research conclusions may be more generalisable.^[10] The only caveat is that the respondents were more likely than the non-respondents to have been selected on an all-women shortlist.

Drawing on the interview data, the election of the 101 Labour women MPs in 1997 suggests that, on this occasion, demand-side explanations of legislative recruitment have greater explanatory value than supply-side explanations. The Labour Party's policy of all-women shortlists ensured that 'selectorates' selected women. Consequently, any negative discrimination that might function against women aspirants in an open selection process was ruled out. However, evaluations of the impact of the policy on the future participation of women in elite politics, and particularly regarding its transformative effect on the Labour Party, are contested.^[11] Reflecting upon their own successful selection processes, the new Labour women MPs stress the importance of an overt demand for women candidates by selectorates in order for women to be selected by political parties. In addition, the primary research presented in this article suggests the need for a critical reappraisal of the policy's implementation 'on the ground'. The basis for a local selectorate's voluntary adoption of an all-women shortlist is questioned by a number of women MPs. They suggest that the implementation of all-women shortlists may have operated to foreclose rather than open up opportunities to maximise women's political participation. The perception that a distinction between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' women aspirants and candidates was operating is also identified by a number of women MPs.

The presence of a larger number of women in the 1997 Parliament also offers the possibility of exploring their impact on women's political representation.^[12] Data from this study, which was undertaken in the

immediate aftermath of the 1997 General Election, enables analysis of women representatives' attitudes.[13] In particular, do women representatives consider that women's presence 'feminises', and thereby reorders, the parliamentary political agenda and style?[14] The new Labour women MPs argued that women's political presence leads, at a minimum, to the articulation of a feminised agenda. However, their perception of the likelihood of effecting feminised change on legislation is tempered by the recognition that any change may be largely invisible rather than immediately identifiable as feminised legislation. In addition, tension between a woman representative's desire to advance her own political career and to represent women is evident from the data. With regard to the style of politics, the women representatives suggest that women practise politics in a way which is feminised. For example, women MPs' speaking styles are less abstract than their male colleagues and their mode of interaction is one of 'dialogue or trialogue' [*sic*] rather than competition. There is also recognition that the articulation of a feminised agenda by women MPs is adversely affected by the style of politics they practise.

Women's Legislative Recruitment

The widely accepted analytic framework for examining women's legislative recruitment is Norris & Lovenduski's 'supply and demand' model.[15] Supply-side arguments suggest that 'the outcome [of the recruitment process] reflects the supply of applicants wishing to pursue a political career'.[16] Access to the necessary resources of time, money and political experience, compounded by the motivational factors of drive and ambition, are all identified as differentially experienced by women and men.[17] Demand-side arguments assume 'selectors choose candidates depending on their perceptions of the applicants' abilities, qualifications and experience': direct and imputed discrimination by party selectorates determines who is, and who is not, selected.[18] Norris & Lovenduski's study of legislative recruitment for the 1992 General Election stressed the importance of party-specific analysis. With regard to the Conservative Party, they identify supply-side explanations as paramount: similar proportions of women among applicants and candidates suggest that there were insufficient women coming forward to be considered as Conservative Party candidates.[19] In relation to the Labour Party, differences between the larger number of women coming forward and the smaller number being selected indicates that a lack of demand on behalf of the party selectorates was more significant.[20]

After 1992, the critical point in the history of the Labour Party and women's parliamentary political participation was the 1993 Conference, when all-women shortlists in 50% of all the key seats (defined as winnable on

a 6% swing), and in 50% of all vacant Labour-held seats, were introduced. Implementation would occur through regional 'consensus' meetings.[21] The policy, whilst short-lived (an industrial tribunal in January 1996 ruled that it was illegal under the terms of the Sex Discrimination Act), was an important feature of the Labour Party's political recruitment practices for the 1997 General Election. Moreover, if all-women shortlists are critical in explaining the recruitment of Labour women MPs in 1997, their absence from future elections is problematic. However, interpretations of the impact of the all-women shortlist policy are varied. Criddle suggests that, despite the premature ending of the practice, it continued to have a positive effect on the recruitment of women candidates within the Labour Party in the run-up to the 1997 election. He cites selection processes which, although interrupted by the ruling and which were rerun as open shortlists, resulted, in all but two instances, in the selection of women: 19 women were selected in key marginals or Labour-held seats from open shortlists. In Criddle's opinion, these selections, combined with the 'extra' women elected because of the Labour Party's electoral landslide, indicate a cultural shift within the Party regarding women's elite legislative recruitment.[22]

In contrast to Criddle's optimism, both Stephenson and Eagle & Lovenduski are more pessimistic. Eagle & Lovenduski go so far as to conclude that 'there is no evidence to suggest that the culture of the party has changed in favour of selecting women - indeed the pattern of selections for the 1997 General Election, once all-women shortlists are taken out of the equation, suggest otherwise'.[23] Their analysis distinguishes between the different category of seats: Labour incumbent seats, Labour retirement or vacant seats, key seats, unexpected or surprise Labour gains and unwinnable seats (see Table III).[24]

	Women	Men	Total	% women
Returned Labour incumbents	36	199	235	15.3
Labour retirements	11	21	32	34.4
Key seats	43	42	85	50.6
Unexpected gains	11	55	66	16.7
Total MPs	101	317	418	24.2
Unwinnable seats	57	166	223	25.6
Total candidates	158	483	641	24.6

Table III. Labour candidates by type of seat. Source: Eagle & Lovenduski, *High Time*, p. 8.

Whilst Eagle & Lovenduski acknowledge the clear success in securing the selection of women in half the key seats, they also point out that only 11 women replaced the 32 retiring MPs. Regarding the seats won by Labour because of its landslide victory, both Eagle & Lovenduski and Stephenson stress that in these 66 seats only 11 additional women MPs were elected

(16.7%), which represents the ‘worse success rate for selecting women of any of the types of seats’.[25] In the Labour Party’s unwinnable seats, where it might be thought that selectorates would be more likely to select women because there is little chance that the candidate would be elected, the percentage of women candidates increased to only 25.6%, that is, 57 out of 223 unsuccessful candidates were women. Eagle & Lovenduski interpret these figures as demonstrating that selectorates remain reluctant to select women in equal proportions to men *even* when the seats are unwinnable seats.[26] They conclude that only when compelled to do so will selectorates select women in sufficient numbers to ‘make a difference’.[27]

Eagle & Lovenduski and Stephenson’s detailed analyses provide convincing evidence that the Labour Party’s policy of all-women shortlists is the key to understanding the differences between the main political parties in terms of the numbers of women MPs selected and returned in 1997, and to the differences between the percentage of women participating in 1997 compared to preceding Parliaments.[28] Their research suggests that where political parties adopt mechanisms of positive discrimination, demand-side obstacles to women’s legislative recruitment are nullified, thereby securing greater levels of women’s elite legislative recruitment. Indeed, the policy of all-women shortlists reflects the recognition (by some Labour women at least) that the main obstacle to women’s legislative recruitment is the selectorates, particularly in winnable seats.[29]

My own research into the perceptions of the new Labour women MPs regarding their participation in politics, women’s legislative recruitment more generally, and the Labour Party’s policy of all-women shortlists provide an important contribution to the foregoing discussion.[30]

Reasons	Number of women MPs
Gendered structure of society	18
Gendered socialisation	10
Selectorate discrimination	12
Absence of mechanisms to ensure women’s participation	4
Lack of role models to engender women’s participation	1
Insufficient supply	1
Motivation	1
Lack of exhortation	1

Table IV(i). The new Labour women MPs of the 1997 Parliament: reasons given for women’s underparticipation in politics.[31]

Tables IV(i) and IV(ii) demonstrate that the new Labour women MPs emphasise supply-side arguments to a greater extent than demand-side arguments in accounting for women’s underparticipation in politics: women lack the requisite resources to take up the opportunity for political

participation. For example, the difficulties of combining domestic and familial responsibilities with political participation are acknowledged by 15 new Labour women MPs: 'If you've got children you can't do the things you need to do in the Party [to] get to the point of standing for Parliament'.

Supply	31
Demand	17

Table IV(ii) The new Labour women MPs' explanations for women's low levels of elite political participation: supply-side and demand-side explanations.[32]

Tables V and VI present the responses from the women MPs concerning the impact of supply-side factors on their own participation in elite politics. In contrast to their views about women's political participation in general, when asked to reflect upon their own experiences, they provided a rather different analysis. Tables V and VI suggest that the women MPs in this study do not perceive themselves as experiencing supply-side factors as significant fetters to their participation at the elite level. For example, 12 women stress that either they do not carry familial responsibilities, or that they benefit from a supportive partner who has an equal/primary role regarding familial/domestic responsibilities. The explanation for this difference is that the new Labour women MPs differentiate themselves from women in society on these bases. This suggests that they perceive themselves as atypical of women in general.

Familial responsibilities	5
Economic	2
Male culture of politics	2
Selectorate discrimination on the basis of age	2

Table V. Obstacles that the new Labour women MPs had to overcome in order to participate at the parliamentary level in 1997.

Lack of familial responsibilities	12
Local Constituency	3
Motivation	4

Table VI. Supply-side resources which enabled the new Labour women MPs to participate at the parliamentary level in 1997.

Table VII, which outlines the reasons determining the women MPs' recruitment as parliamentary candidates in 1997, adds some additional qualifications to the preceding analysis. It suggests that it is not sufficient for women to acquire the necessary resources and/or be exempt from the

fetters which prevent women's political participation. Rather, it highlights the importance of recruitment opportunities: seven women MPs identify the Labour Party's implementation of all-women shortlists in order to explain their decision to participate in 1997. Furthermore, eight of the new Labour women MPs state that they were exhorted to participate at the national level in the 1997 General Election. Combined, these figures indicate the importance of a demand for women's recruitment. When the demand for women is overt, with the adoption of all-women shortlists and/or when local constituency party members invite participation, women are more likely to consider, and be successful in, the recruitment process for parliamentary candidates.[33] These insights demonstrate the interaction of supply- and demand-side explanations of political recruitment and temper the earlier emphasis placed upon supply-side explanations by the women MPs (Tables IV-VI).

Exhortation	8
Institutional mechanisms	7
Unplanned opportunity/luck	4

Table VII. Reasons cited by the new Labour Women MPs for their legislative recruitment in 1997.

The fieldwork also suggests some interesting interpretations by women who were selected from all-women shortlists, regarding the implementation of, and support for, the policy within the Labour Party at the local level. A perception that the policy was, at times, subverted by local constituency selectorates is identifiable from the data. The subversion is said to have occurred when constituencies volunteered to adopt all-women shortlists, knowing that they would select the woman candidate who had previously stood in the constituency at the 1992 General Election.

Four women who had previously stood as the candidates in the same constituency which they won in 1997 felt that it was because they had stood before in that constituency that their local party volunteered to have an all-women shortlist.[34] Crucially, it was felt that this let the party 'off the hook' and 'undermined' the policy:

I had some actual misgivings about the fact that my constituency decided to become [an] all-women short list because I had no doubt that they did it in quite a few cases because they felt it was a way of easily helping the party to reach the quota because they knew they were going to select a woman anyway, and as I got 92% of the vote in the selection process ... my concern was that there was some people in the local party who felt that it let the rest of the party off the hook.[35]

When the regional meetings with the constituencies about which constituencies [would] like [to] consider all-women shortlists ... [the] constituency [was] happy to put itself forward principally because they had virtually made up their mind ... if I was going to stand again they would select me again, so really [they] didn't mind having all-women shortlist.[36]

This interpretation, by the women MPs, of their constituency's decision to adopt an all woman shortlist voluntarily on the basis that it had already been established that they would stand again, suggests that rather than the policy of all-women shortlists extending opportunities for the selection of women candidates, its implementation, in some instances, may have actually foreclosed opportunities. The argument suggests that women who had previously stood as candidates in a particular constituency, and who were likely to be selected as the parliamentary candidate again in 1997 in an open selection process, did not need their constituencies to opt to be an all-women shortlist. However, because their constituencies did opt for all-women shortlists, the regional quota of women candidates was met by constituencies who were, in any case, going to select a woman. This would leave other constituencies to select their candidates through open shortlists. Following Eagle & Lovenduski's analysis, it is noted that open shortlists are less likely to select women. Had these constituencies not opted for all-women shortlists, other constituencies would have needed and/or been forced to adopt all-women shortlists. This would have had the effect of increasing the numbers of women selected in a region.[37]

Two new Labour women MPs also felt that their personal candidacies eased the passage of all-women shortlists within their constituencies. In one instance, the woman MP felt that her candidacy solved the conflict within her constituency party because she was a 'known' and 'acceptable' woman.[38] The woman MP retells how her candidature came to pass:

he said, 'are you saying you would let your name go forward ... if you would I know a lot of people in [the constituency] who would be very relieved ... [you would] unite the party, you would get behind your people [from] both sides.[39]

She continues by stating that a couple of weeks later, this particular individual came back to her and revealed that he had 'had a quiet word' and that other constituency activists were happy with her possible candidature, even on an all-women shortlist. Here the criteria of acceptability were being 'known' in the constituency, and her relationship with a male Labour former MP. Together these positive attributes acted to negate her gender. As she put it, 'I was, I suppose, the least offensive'.

In the second instance, the woman MP, whose recollections of her own candidacy also reveal this phenomenon of acceptable and unacceptable

women prospective candidates, felt that despite her background in feminist organisations, and her self-identification as a feminist, 'I've got the same views'; she was not perceived as a 'loony feminist' and therefore unacceptable because she was known locally. Moreover, her interpretation suggests that other women aspirants who might also be perceived as feminists would be labelled unacceptable. More generally, this analysis points to an opposition between feminist attitudes and behaviours and acceptability as an MP. However, it should be noted that her reflections, at the same time, indicate that under certain circumstances the negative association of female gender and feminism can be overcome by other more positively interpreted attributes: in this instance, being local.

These interpretations, which highlight women MPs' perceptions of themselves as acceptable notwithstanding the fact that they were women, suggest that a distinction between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' women candidates may have operated in the implementation of all-women shortlists. Crudely, these women MPs considered that some women were seen as 'okay' by local selectorates *despite* the fact that they were women. According to this argument, the identification and co-option of such 'acceptable' women rendered all-women shortlists more acceptable within particular constituencies, indicating, at least, something less than wholehearted support for the policy of all-women shortlists within the Labour Party.

What conclusions then, can be drawn from a study of the Labour Party's policy of all-women shortlists? The numbers of women within the parliamentary Labour Party, as a result of the 1997 General Election, can be understood within the framework of the supply and demand model of political recruitment. The Labour Party's policy of all-women shortlists, through artificially creating a demand for women candidates, ensured the selection (and election) of proportional numbers of women candidates to male candidates in its key seats. In the absence of this policy, the rate of women's selection in winnable seats would, more than likely, have reflected their rates of selection in the non-key seats, that is, less than 35%. In addition, the empirical research reveals a number of important insights which contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation and meaning of all-women shortlists.[40] The reluctance of the party leadership, intra-party conflict more generally, the implementation of the policy on the ground, and the patterns of political recruitment in the era after all-women shortlists were abandoned, temper suggestions that the Labour Party has experienced a feminist cultural sea-change regarding women's elite political participation. The implication of this analysis for the continued participation of women at 1997 levels within the parliamentary Labour Party, as well as women's recruitment in other political parties, is pessimistic. In the absence of legal mechanisms, levels of women's political recruitment are likely to remain low.[41] The 120 women MPs are still only

18% of all MPs; hardly equitable and, perhaps more importantly, rather precarious.

Women's Political Presence: transforming the parliamentary political agenda and culture?

The effect of women's political presence has been identified as central to the research agenda on women and politics in the twenty-first century.[42] The 1997 British Parliament, with its cohort of 120 women, and especially its 101 Labour women MPs, provides a timely and important case study for empirical analyses of women's political representation. With regard to the parliamentary dimension of women's political representation, the question of whether women MPs articulate women's issues and regender the political agenda and style of political interaction needs to be explored: substantive changes and unsuccessful attempts at change need to be documented.[43] However, at this stage of the 1997 Parliament, it is too early to draw conclusions about the impact of women's presence. Rather, analysis will be focused on the attitudes and objectives of the women MPs. What emerges is support amongst the new Labour women MPs for the contention that their presence enables the articulation of women's issues at the centre of political debate. In addition, the language and style of women's interaction in politics is identified by women MPs as both different from, and judged negatively in comparison to, men's mode of political interaction.

With regard to regendering the political agenda, half of all the interviewed newly-elected Labour women MPs in this study articulate this effect: there will be the 'setting [of] a new sort of agenda', one with 'different priorities'. This new agenda is variously defined as encompassing 'women's concerns', 'women's issues,' 'our experiences', the 'women's agenda', the 'cluster of problems facing women', and the 'issues [that] specifically affect women'. Of those women MPs who talked more specifically about what constituted the gender agenda, three identified violence against women, and two respondents identified childcare, education, including equal opportunities, women and employment and women's health. These findings indicate that the identification of women MPs with women and women's issues and the resultant articulation of women's issues is, at the minimum, the outcome of women's political presence.

It is not possible, at this stage of the 1997 Parliament, to analyse the impact of the articulation of a feminised agenda in terms of legislative change. However, six of the new Labour women MPs did outline their perceptions of the likely impact. Five were optimistic, with one arguing confidently that women's presence in committees would hold government 'to account from the experiences of women themselves', and another that the numbers of women will ensure that women are sufficiently confident in

asserting their agendas, and of having an impact; also, that legislation will be 'better informed' generally and 'more appropriate for the community'. Finally, two other women MPs perceive that Ministers are responding to the pressure emanating from women and identify the prioritisation of previously classified 'women's issues', such as education and the welfare state, as central issues to the current Government.

The statement which refers to legislation being 'better informed' and 'more appropriate to the community' is worth considering in greater depth because of the way in which the term 'community' is apparently elided with women. It can be argued that, by employing apparently degendered language to talk about the effect of women's political presence, overtly gendered criticism of current parliamentary discussion is minimised. Whilst in this MP's terms the effect of women's presence is to produce more rounded policies and legislation, it can be suggested that what is being added in is actually previously absent women's perspectives.

One of the more optimistic MPs also introduces a note of caution about how one might qualify or quantify the effect of women's political presence. She rejects as outdated the desire to see 'gender-based legislation', comparable to that of the 1970s, in the 1990s. A second woman MP makes a similar point when she asks women to resist the temptation of expecting the new Labour women to deliver 'some sort of landmark policy' for women. These two statements imply that the women MPs perceive that times have changed and that avowedly feminised legislation will not be passed in this Parliament. At the same time, the responses can be read as a strategy to pre-empt criticism of women representatives for their failure to feminise legislation: women, according to the second of the women MPs, must trust the women MPs to represent them 'behind [the] scenes'.

The one more pessimistic new Labour woman MP feels that because most of them, especially the 1997 intake, are confined to the backbenches, their effect in the 1997 Parliament will be limited. Interestingly, she also argues that any transformation will be determined by the behaviour of the women themselves; in particular, whether or not they actively 'pursue changes' and make politics 'more gender conscious [and] more gender sensitive'. She contrasts this with the action of the women MPs who seek to 'further their own careers'.^[44] However, this statement indicates tension between a feminised transformation of politics, that is, a more adequate representation of women, and a successful parliamentary career for individual women representatives. These perspectives signal, once again, the limited freedom women representatives perceive that they have to advocate women's issues. It can also be argued that this statement undermines her earlier assertion that it is up to individual women representatives to seek actively to transform the political agenda. This is because she acknowledges that women MPs operate in an unfavourable institutional context.

A relationship between the presence of 101 women representatives and the style in which politics is practised in the House of Commons is also often widely assumed. The question of whether women representatives will effect a regendering of the modes of political interaction in British politics was explored with the women who participated in this research. Their responses, which suggest that many of them perceive that they practise politics in a different way from men, are summarised in Table VIII.

Different style	9
Different language	7
Rejection of the notion of a feminised approach	8

Table VIII. The perceptions of the new Labour women MPs regarding women and men's gendered political styles.

Interestingly, whilst the absolute number of responses from new Labour women MPs who support the argument making a link between gender identity and a distinctive style and language of politics, and those who reject a causal link between gender and style is not large, it is important to add a qualification: all but two of the new Labour women MPs who reject the notion that women bring to politics a feminised approach, at the same time provide responses which support such a link. An indicative example includes one woman MP who rejects the notion that women's political presence will bring with it a 'softer, more gentle style of politics' at the same time as she is critical of the conventional 'old-fashioned speaking styles' of referring to 'people in the third person'.

The responses from new Labour women MPs who reject the notion that women and men have different approaches to politics are varied. One woman feels that this analysis relies upon a crude division between women and men, and is underpinned by an implicit association of goodness with women's behaviour. Another rejects outright that her behaviour is, or will fit, some kind of women's mode of political operation. She adds that women who have previously been successful in British politics have been 'hard and tough [and] played the game like one of the boys'. Clearly this interpretation raises the question of whether women in British politics have the space to function in a way different from the male norm *and* be successful. A third MP, whilst recognising the process of assimilation, maintains her belief that some space is available for women representatives to act differently, in 'a womanly fashion'.

However, overall the perception of the new Labour women MPs is that women employ a distinctly feminised language and style in political debates. The basis upon which the new Labour women are substantiating their claims to a feminised style of political interaction derives from an appreciation of gendered socialisation and experientially-based differences.

For example, one MP argues that the 'directness' of their approach derives from women's experiences of 'dealing with millions of things at once' and their desire to 'move on to something else' and that women have a more holistic approach. Interestingly, the term 'holistic', arguably, hides the fact, once again, that it is women's experiences which are being introduced.

Criticism of the 'convoluted', and 'old-fashioned speaking styles' is, as indicated earlier, raised by one of the new Labour women MPs, and six expressly identify a women's language of political debate. One talks of how women MPs relate issues to people's lives rather than 'talking about PSBR' (public sector borrowing requirement); another, drawing on a pensions debate in the 1997 Parliament, recalls how 'all the men without exception talked about pension actuaries, [the] size [of] pension funds, lots of statistics'. In contrast, the contributions made by women MPs apply arguments to 'real people' and in more concrete ways. This analysis is reinforced by two more women MPs, one of whom argues that women politicians derive their arguments and perspectives from personal experiences rather than relying upon 'scientific research'. Her colleague rejects a male style in which figures are 'bandied' about, which relies upon statistics and which is confrontational.

One of the new Labour women MPs is explicit, however, in her refutation that women MPs should adopt such a feminised approach in political interactions:

We mustn't constantly be identifying ourselves [as women]. I mean a man would sound silly if he said, as a man I think this, that and the other ... so I don't see why women should be saying, as a woman it's important for me to say this, that or the other.[45]

This statement is interesting because of the way in which it challenges the link made by feminism between women's experiences and women's perspectives.

In addition to employing different language, the way in which men and women representatives interact is also perceived to be determined by gender by 10 of the new Labour women: a critique of the aggressive and confrontational style, particularly that of Conservative men MPs, is articulated by three of the new Labour women MPs. There is also a belief that women will not 'stand up and waffle on for about 35 minutes in the Chamber'. Their approach will be less going 'around in circles' and be 'more direct'. In contrast, therefore, to dominant male norms, the responses of the new Labour women MPs point to alternate ways of operating: 'dialogue or trialogue' (*sic*), rather than an opposition between a correct government position and an incorrect oppositional one; less aggression and more cooperation, teamwork, inclusiveness, consultation, and a willingness to listen. Interestingly, one of these MPs argues that part of the reason for this

tendency towards cooperation is related to the mass entrance of women in this particular Parliament, which, in her opinion, creates a collective identity.

Discovering whether women employ a different language and style of interaction within politics, whilst valuable in itself, is also important in regard to the ways in which unequal evaluations are attached to the different gendered modes of functioning in politics. The new Labour MP who was critical of women representatives 'identifying themselves' as women, at the same time recognised:

[that a] premium is put upon what is predominantly a male style of political practice, which is quite aggressive and quite confrontational ... [the] debating society style of presentation which men are often much better at, have more confidence in doing, taught more to do and doesn't necessarily make for any greater government.[46]

These analyses point to notions of acceptable and unacceptable, legitimate and illegitimate forms of language and style appropriate to politics. In these oppositions, the former are associated with male language, modes of interaction and men MPs, and the latter with women's language, modes of interaction and women MPs. Consequently, this reinforces the valuation of men over women as political representatives. The ability of the women MPs to regenerate the political agenda is arguably affected by the language and modes of interaction which they employ. Thus, any analysis of women MPs' political presence within Parliament, and their effect on the political agenda, must recognise that this is also (negatively) determined by the political style of the House.

Conclusion

This article has reconsidered women's political participation in elite politics in the UK in light of the election of 101 Labour women MPs in the 1997 Parliament. The disproportionate increase in the numbers of women in the Labour Party compared to the other main parties has been accounted for by its policy of all-women shortlists. By creating seats in which all prospective parliamentary candidates had to be women, the Labour Party ensured that a woman was selected. This had the effect of cancelling out any discrimination that women face in open selections. The research presented in this article extends existing analyses of women's legislative recruitment in British politics and the Labour Party's policy of all-women shortlists: it explores the Labour Party's selection processes for the 1997 General Election by examining the perceptions of more than half of the newly elected Labour women MPs, including 25 of the 35 endorsed women candidates selected from all-women shortlists. The article provides additional support for previous research, which concluded that the policy was associated with intra-party conflict: it demonstrates that all-women shortlists were far from

embraced, even in those constituencies which volunteered to adopt them. Moreover, it suggests that the implementation of the policy may have foreclosed opportunities for greater numbers of women to be selected and that a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable women was created.

The latter part of the article has explored the widely assumed relationship between women's political presence and a feminised transformation of politics. Focusing upon the parliamentary dimension of women's political representation, the new Labour women MPs' perceptions of whether women's political presence will regender the political agenda and style are outlined. Crucially, the women MPs argue that women MPs seek both to articulate women's issues in Parliament and conduct politics in a new and feminised way. They also draw attention to the problems of doing this in an environment that remains male dominated.

Together, the research findings presented in this article offer an analysis of the question of women's legislative recruitment in contemporary British politics and contribute to ongoing research exploring the effect of the presence of women representatives in the 1997 British Parliament.

Notes

- [1] I would like to thank Clare Midgley and the two anonymous reviewers for their editorial comments. I would also like to thank Joni Lovenduski for her comments on an earlier draft of this article and to participants at the Colloque Du CESCIB, Université Paris VIII, 20-21 November 1998.
- [2] Pippa Norris & Joni Lovenduski (1995) *Political Recruitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [3] Mary-Ann Stephenson (1998) *The Glass Trapdoor: women, politics and the media during the 1997 General Election*, p. 32 (London: The Fawcett Society).
- [4] The Inter Parliamentary Union Study (1995) cited in Stephenson, *The Glass Trapdoor*, p. 32.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Byron Criddle (1997) MPs and Candidates, in David Butler & Dennis Kavanagh (Eds) *The British General Election of 1997*, pp. 186-209 (Basingstoke: Macmillan). Criddle gives the number of women candidates for the three main political parties in the 1997 General Election as: Labour 155 (24%), Conservative 66 (10%) and Liberal Democrat 139 (21%).
- [7] See Nigel Fielding (1993) Qualitative Interviewing, p. 136 in Nigel Gilbert (Ed.) *Researching Social Life* (London: Sage) and Fiona Devine (1995) Qualitative Analysis, p. 138 in David Marsh & Gerry Stoker (Eds) *Theory and Method in Political Science*, pp. 137-153 (Basingstoke: Macmillan) and Fiona Devine (1994) *Studying Voting Behaviour*, Issues in Sociology and Social Policy (Liverpool: University of Liverpool). The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour, were tape-recorded and anonymity was guaranteed.

- [8] Devine, 'Qualitative Analysis', p. 144.
- [9] Devine, *Studying Voting Behaviour*, p. 28.
- [10] Devine, 'Qualitative Analysis'. With regard to age distribution, educational level, size of majority and socio-economic breakdowns of constituencies, the participating new Labour women MPs reflect the whole population of new Labour women MPs.
- [11] Criddle, 'MPs and Candidates'; Stephenson, *The Glass Trapdoor*; and Maria Eagle & Joni Lovenduski (1998) *High Time or High Tide for Labour Women?* (London: Fabian Society).
- [12] Extensive analysis of the concept of critical mass lies outside the remit of this article. See Drude Dahlerup (1988) From a Small to a Large Minority: women in Scandinavian politics, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 11, pp. 275-298.
- [13] See Pippa Norris & Joni Lovenduski (1989) Women Candidates for Parliament: transforming the agenda, *British Journal of Political Science*, 19, pp. 106-115; and Susan Carroll (1994) *Women as Candidates in American Politics*, 2nd edn (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).
- [14] In this article the impact of gender differentiated attitudes and behaviours upon politics will be discussed in terms of 'feminisation' and 'masculinisation'. Employing these terms ensures that sex and gender are not elided and emphasises the non-essentialist construction of gender identity.
- [15] Norris & Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*. The distinction between the supply and demand side of the model should not be taken to imply that the two do not impact upon each other. Clearly the perceptions of the demand side may be an important factor in determining who comes forward. Personal correspondence with Joni Lovenduski 1998. Cf. Mary Ann Stephenson (1997) *The Best Man for the Job* (London: The Fawcett Society).
- [16] Norris & Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*, p. 15.
- [17] Norris & Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*, p. 14. Joni Lovenduski (1996) Sex, Gender and British Politics, p. 15, in Joni Lovenduski & Pippa Norris (Eds) *Women in Politics*, pp. 3-18 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- [18] The concept of discrimination is defined in two distinct ways by Norris & Lovenduski. Firstly, direct discrimination refers to 'the positive or negative judgement of people on the basis of characteristics seen as common to their group, rather than as individuals' and secondly, imputed discrimination acknowledges that selectorates may, for example, wish to select more women but are concerned that this will result in a loss of electoral support. Norris & Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*, p. 14.
- [19] Norris & Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*, p. 116. This should not be interpreted as meaning that the Conservatives are more women-friendly. Indeed, Lovenduski argues that when more women come forward within the

Conservative Party, demand-side explanations will be at least as important as they are in the Labour Party. Personal correspondence with Joni Lovenduski, 1998.

- [20] Norris & Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*, pp. 116–118; and Joni Lovenduski (1997) Gender Politics: a breakthrough for women, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 50, pp. 708–719.
- [21] The 1993 Conference decision was a compromise resolution, which acknowledged intra-party conflict; see Clare Short (1996) Women and the Labour Party, in Joni Lovenduski & Pippa Norris (Eds) *Women in Politics*, pp. 22–23 (Oxford: Oxford University Press). See also Sarah Perrigo (1996) Women and Change in the Labour Party 1979–1995, in Joni Lovenduski & Pippa Norris (Eds) *Women in Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) and Criddle, ‘MPs and Candidates’.
- [22] Criddle, ‘MPs and Candidates’, p. 191.
- [23] Eagle & Lovenduski, *High Time*, p. 29.
- [24] Eagle & Lovenduski, *High Time*, p. 7.
- [25] Eagle & Lovenduski, *High Time*, p. 8; and Stephenson, *The Glass Trapdoor*, pp. 52–53.
- [26] Eagle & Lovenduski, *High Time*, p. 9.
- [27] Eagle & Lovenduski, *High Time*, p. 10.
- [28] Lovenduski, *Gender Politics*, p. 710.
- [29] Stephenson, *The Glass Trapdoor*, p. 9; and Eagle & Lovenduski, *High Time*.
- [30] The women MPs were asked to talk about their own and women in general’s political participation and recruitment in British politics.
- [31] The women MPs were asked to discuss their understanding of why women are underrepresented in numerical terms in the House of Commons. Some women MPs provided multiple explanations. In respect of the ‘Gendered Structure of Society’ category, the numbers are calculated on the basis of the numbers of women MPs who cite at least one fetter to women’s political participation derived from the gendered structure of society; as such, it arguably underplays the significance of these factors. In less abstract terms, responses in this category refer to women’s domestic and familial responsibility.
- [32] The responses given by the women MPs in Table IV(i) have been categorised according to Norris & Lovenduski’s supply and demand model of political recruitment.
- [33] Qualifications to the support for all-women shortlists are raised by seven women MPs, three who argue that it undermines legitimacy, two who consider the policy too crude, and one each who think it is unfair to men and a mechanism of central control. Even for the women MPs who qualify their support, their concerns are not held sufficiently strongly for them to be incompatible with the advocacy of the policy. Interestingly, three also

voiced their support for the continuation of the policy beyond the 1997 General Election.

- [34] The constituencies cannot be identified as the empirical research was undertaken on the basis of anonymity.
- [35] Interview no. 32, 19 November 1997.
- [36] Interview no. 27, 8 July 1997.
- [37] The Labour Party Women's Office confirmed the logic of this argument.
- [38] In this example, there was opposition within the constituency party relating to the ambitions of a particular man and opposition to what was perceived as the imposition of the all-women short list.
- [39] Interview no. 8, 3 July 1997.
- [40] See Donley T. Studlar & Ian McAllister (1998) Candidate Gender and Voting in the 1997 British General Election: did Labour quotas matter? *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 4(3), pp. 72-91.
- [41] For alternative possibilities, such as twinning constituencies and zipping, see Eagle & Lovenduski, *High Time*.
- [42] Lovenduski, 'Sex, Gender and British Politics', p. 17. Theoretical perspectives on gender and democracy include Anne Phillips (1995) *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press); Anne Phillips (1993) *Democracy and Difference* (Cambridge: Polity Press); Anne Phillips (1991) *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity Press); and Cynthia Cockburn (1996) Strategies for Gender Democracy, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 3, pp. 7-26.
- [43] This distinction emphasises the context in which women MPs are operating and which may or may not be favourable to their demands.
- [44] See Dahlerup, 'From a Small to a Large Minority'.
- [45] Interview no. 17, 5 November 1997.
- [46] Interview no. 17, 5 November 1997. She is supported in her interpretation by two other new Labour women MPs.

SARAH CHILDS is a part-time lecturer in Women's Studies and Politics, Department of Social Science, Kingston University, Penrhyn Road, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT1 2EE, United Kingdom (sarah.childs@virgin.net). She is currently writing up her PhD thesis, 'Women's Political Representation in Contemporary British Politics'.