

## Re-gendering the UK House of Commons: The Academic Critical Actor and her 'Feminist in Residence'

### Introduction: Centenary Celebrations

2018 was the centenary of two pieces of legislation - *The Representation of the People Act* and *The Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act* - that respectively gave some women the right to vote, and all women the right to stand for election to the Commons.<sup>1</sup> There were numerous #vote100 celebrations: statues, marches, plays, and exhibitions. In the Chamber Harriet Harman MP hosted women parliamentarians from around the world;<sup>2</sup> and on the centenary of the Qualification Act MPs invited women into Parliament as part of the #Askhertostand campaign.<sup>3</sup> All this to the good<sup>4</sup> but there were no 'deeds' in 2018 worthy of the suffrage meaning of the word. Notably, the Government singularly failed to act on the big campaign ask: the enactment of Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010<sup>5</sup> that requires political parties to provide candidate diversity data. More high profile outside of activist circles was the publication of Dame Laura Cox's Report into sexual harassment and bullying in Parliament.<sup>6</sup> Unforgiving in its account of the gendered nature and extent of the problem there was no doubt that Parliament required immediate and substantial gendered reform. This should not have been surprising to anyone working in Parliament although clearly it was.

### A Diversity Insensitive House

The UK Parliament's diversity insensitivities had been systematically documented in 2016 in *The Good Parliament* Report (Childs 2016).<sup>7</sup> Underpinned by the Inter-parliamentary Union's (IPU) Gender Sensitive Parliament's framework,<sup>8</sup> it addressed (i)<sup>9</sup> *Equality of Participation in the House*, to ensure a diverse composition and achieving equality of participation; (ii) *Parliamentary Infrastructure*, how Parliament organizes itself and supports the work of Members; and (iii) *Commons Culture*, making the culture more inclusive. Once the Report was handed over the House as an institution could no longer claim that it was not aware of what needed to be done, nor claim ignorance of possible solutions. Each of its 43 recommendations were technically accurate and linked to particular individuals and groups with Parliament.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/case-study-the-right-to-vote/the-right-to-vote/birmingham-and-the-equal-franchise/1918-representation-of-the-people-act/>; <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/parliamentary-collections/nancy-astor/parliament-qualification-of-women-act/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-46136404>

<sup>3</sup> <https://5050parliament.co.uk/askhertostand/>; <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/event/askhertostand-breaking-down-the-barriers>

<sup>4</sup> Our review says nothing about the policy and legislative outputs of Parliament and the extent to which these advance, maintain, or threaten gender quality.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.centenaryaction.org.uk/2018-statement>; <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/make-equality-law-21st-century>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cloisters.com/news/house-of-commons-independent-inquiry-report>

<sup>7</sup> Childs was funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Award, ES/M500410/1, May 2015.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/gender-sensitive-parliaments>

<sup>9</sup> Unlike the IPU's 7 dimensions, it did not address either policy outcomes and processes nor the 'staff' or official side of the House. It is for the latter reason that *The Good Parliament* said little about harassment and bullying.

Prior to the Report's launch, Mr Speaker agreed to the establishment of a new group of MPs to take forward and implement *The Good Parliament* agenda – The Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion.<sup>10</sup> Eight recommendations have since been implemented, with another 10 ongoing, and another eight identified for 2019. The most recently implemented recommendation is No. 5. An IPU 'Gender Sensitive Audit' of both Houses of Parliament took place in November 2018.<sup>11</sup> This was the first IPU GSP Audit of an established democracy and involved IPU personnel working with Members and parliamentary officials over four days. This recommendation was itself the realization of institutionalization: designed to commit the House on both the official and the political side to undertake data gathering and external institutional assessment two years after the publication of *The Good Parliament*.

If we had been told at the start of Childs' secondment back in September 2015 that her report would give rise to the establishment of a new parliamentary body that would bring about the changes that it has within two years, we would have been very happy. Critics might query how significant changing the rules about what MPs can wear<sup>12</sup> or whether it matters that the misogynistic '10-year dead' artwork rule has been abolished.<sup>13</sup> Others will note that where Mr Speaker has been able to 'lead' changes have been easier to deliver. It was *his* decision *vis a vis* parliamentary attire, and also his permission that allows children into the division lobbies and babies in the Chamber.<sup>14</sup> Recommendations where the House (i.e. Members) need to agree via a vote or a resolution of the House, and, or where the Government needs to act, have admittedly proven harder. We briefly examine the government's failure to lay a voteable motion to provide for proxy voting for MPs on #babyleave in the Conclusion. This would implement Recommendation No. 12, Produce a 'House Statement' on maternity, paternity, parental, adoption.

### **Gendered Parliamentary Change**

Parliamentary change at Westminster, as existing research makes clear, is rarely easy. Even when there is a window of opportunity, a coherent and agreed reform agenda and backbench or Leader of the House support, Government dominance and limited parliamentarianism constrain reform efforts (Russell 2011). In the current climate, we would add Brexit's displacement and disruption of 'normal' parliamentary business. That said, mainstream accounts of institutional change at Westminster have little or nothing to say about the gendered nature of political institutions (see Mackay 2010; Waylen 2010). Feminist institutionalism in contrast establishes that parliaments are masculinized institutions with distinctive ideologies of how women and men should act, think and feel (Lovenduski 2005; 27). Key to institutional re-gendering are Parliament's gender-conscious

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/reference-group-representation-inclusion/>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2018/december/gender-sensitive-parliament-audit-published-today-/-/](https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2018/december/gender-sensitive-parliament-audit-published-today-/)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/29/mps-ties-house-of-commons-says-speaker-john-bercow>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/works-of-art/PI04-25-October-2016.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jul/26/kirsty-blackman-snp-mp-westminster-parliament-childcare-london>; <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jo-swinson-mp-baby-commons-debate-work-proxy-voting-mother-a8538021.html>

actors - usually assumed to be women MPs (Lovenduski 2010, 2005a; Mackay et al 2014, 95; Wangnerud 2015; Waylen 2014).

This is the point where we - the feminist academic and the parliamentary clerk – come in. Childs was not doing anything particularly new in accepting the feminist imperative to seek gendered change (Campbell and Childs 2013, 186); because of their feminism many gender and politics academics want to change as well as observe the world. Whilst recognizing the wider gendered politics of ‘doing’ impact - activities that often sit in tension with the sexual division of labour within the University and in the home - gender and politics scholars are only belatedly beginning to document and theorize their influence and impact (Childs and Dahlerup 2018; Dunlop 2018). Achieving feminist change is likely harder than ‘ordinary’ change. The feminist academic faces issues of (i) access, with feminists having fewer established relationships and networks; (ii) a greater likelihood of misrepresentation and suspicion regarding their ‘objectivity’, reputation and research goals; (iii) marginalization, as feminist ‘others’ to the institution they remain at some distance from its inner workings; (iv) resistance and backlash, the feminist is by dint of her feminism a ‘radical’ critic (Campbell and Childs 2013, Childs and Dahlerup 2018).

What of the role of the parliamentary official in understanding (gendered) institutional change at Westminster? According to a very senior official there is a ‘long history of staff of the House, especially clerks, proposing and advocating, sometimes publicly and more often privately, parliamentary reform’.<sup>15</sup> Yet we know very little of this role; it is overwhelmingly absent from existing studies. The clerkly norm is impartial and apolitical professionalism; they must refrain from overstepping the official/political line or leading MPs or acting in such a way as to be perceived to be so doing. How then, could a ‘feminist in residence’ legitimately act to support the feminist academic critical actor, and do so mostly with the support of her clerkly colleagues, including senior male ones? Such questions bring us to our case: of how our professional relationship developed and how working together became integral to the success of first of *The Good Parliament* (its content and initial reception), and secondly of acting to institutionalize and embed it within Parliament thereafter (supporting the take up of its recommendations across the House since its publication).

### **Feminists in Arms**

Childs had no difficulty gaining access the House of Commons. Her ‘self-invitation’ was agreed.<sup>16</sup> Childs had been the special adviser to the 2010 Speaker’s Conference, which the Rt Hon John Bercow MP chaired following the resignation of the then Speaker, Michael Martin and she had advised the Women in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group at the time of its 2014 Report, *Improving Parliament*. As a member of the Study of Parliament Group Childs was also known to some Clerks and officials for more than a decade, a relationship that was strengthened by the UK Parliamentary Studies scheme. However, if feminist concerns over access were in this case less relevant Childs academic credibility and independence was at times questioned. Widely known by both clerks and MPs as a feminist with longstanding relationships with women MPs albeit from across the parties, for some MPs explicitly and perhaps for some clerks privately, she was by definition ‘biased’ and

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<sup>15</sup> See Crewe forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> Childs and Dahlerup (2018) discuss the privilege of being so positioned.

easily swayed by a minority of women MPs who themselves were said to ‘mis-read’ the House. In the eyes of some politicians her presence in the House also challenged the proper ‘order’ of things (i.e. their power): she was represented at different times as both a stooge of Mr Speaker and of senior Clerks. One senior Conservative male MP was very put out by her presence.

If impact poses academic, political and personal challenges (Childs and Dahlerup 2018). Childs’ ‘feminist in residence’ aided all three. Regarding the *personal*, Challenger provided - on a daily basis – a safe ear. Here was someone as committed to re-gendering Parliament and one who could validate and empathize with the sometimes uncomfortable and challenging parliamentary situations she frequently found herself in. Providing emotional support, the feminist in residence re-energized the feminist academic who spent much of her time in the House undertaking a ‘double performance’ - with MPs, Ministers, and other clerks and officials. Double performance refers to Childs’ need to gain information from various parliamentary actors and in many cases to persuade them of the necessity and importance of her work. Where Campbell and Childs (2013) spoke of the fire in feminists’ bellies, the feminist in residence most certainly shared and intensified Childs’ ambition in the face of a secondment that required accumulation of institutionally specific knowledge, alongside an appreciation of inter-personal and intra-institutional dynamics.

Embedded in parliamentary culture, the feminist in residence offered additional unique institutional insights that helped with the *political* challenges faced by the feminist academic undertaking impact at Westminster. In drafting the 43 Recommendations Childs required extensive expert advice. Only those ‘of’ the institution could provide the technically appropriate solutions. To this, a good reading of the politics of the institution – of relations between the executive and the opposition, the executive and backbenchers, the Speaker and MPs, and between clerks and officials and MPs, ministers and leaders of the House - was critical. Only by grasping this would the likelihood of each recommendation being impactful be ascertained. In all this Childs benefited from a panel of sympathetic MPs and an advisory board of clerks and officials, chaired by Mr Speaker. The feminist in residence – also member of the advisory board - crucially helped Childs in not acting as an academic *betterwisher* with those whose daily and intimate experiences of political life are greater than the academic’s (Childs and Dahlerup 2018).

The feminist in residence offered something distinct again vis a vis the *academic* challenges of feminist impact. Specifically, she constituted a critically important – indeed the only - means to keep the feminist content of *The Good Parliament* centre stage. Equally desirous to achieve the greatest re-gendering possible, when others might suggest a watered-down recommendation or to drop one or other recommendation to secure a third, the feminist in residence acted as a positive check on Childs’ reading of particular parliamentary encounters, including moments of implicit and explicit resistance to her change efforts. Working together - bolstering each other’s ambition - the content of *The Good Parliament* remained truer to its initial goals.

What of the feminist in residence? She was conscious of inhabiting a highly masculinized institution, with until recently few women clerks in middle and senior positions, and constrained by the necessarily apolitical clerkly norm; re-gendering efforts were in many

ways a risky endeavour. The presence of an independent feminist academic with good connections to senior MPs and Mr Speaker opened up an opportunity in which Challenger was able to act in a more interventionist fashion. Childs secondment moreover took place soon after the establishment of Workplace Equality Networks – specific equalities architecture set up by Mr Speake. This facilitated Challenger as Chair of Parliagender to act. Seeking gender reform at Westminster became a more legitimate activity in light of such academic and political ‘cover’. It has also contributed to a broader cultural shift over time in how (some) women clerks approached their role as guardians of the institution which they wanted to be more gender equal.

Engaging with academic analysis, not least comparative primary and secondary research on the diversity sensitivity of parliaments, suggested to the feminist in residence new ways in which parliamentary officials can support if not initiate institutional re-gendering. Notably, it led to an appreciation that rather than ‘bolting on’ reforms, gender sensitive reform at Westminster needed to be structural and bicameral. It generated a renewed ‘push’ by Parliagender on the necessity of reform in general – something that was reinforced by the fallout from the bullying and harassment scandal from 2017 – and a consciousness that a commitment to any individual reform had also to be part of a wider institutionalization of the principle of diversity sensitivity. Accompanying this there needed also to be a transformation in the relationship between MPs and Clerks; that they should work together as co-professionals. Finally, in co-authoring academic papers, Challenger became convinced that to embed and strategize for future gender sensitive reforms, critical reflection on both successful and unsuccessful change at Westminster was necessary.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined only one type of direct impact undertaken by gender and politics scholars: consultancy and advisor roles (Childs and Dahlerup 2018). In consciously seeking to act as a feminist change actor, Childs entered an institution which on reflection she little understood, either in terms of formal and informal rule and norms, or party and institutional political dynamics. Fortunately, and amongst support from other mentors and champions, Childs developed a key relationship with a middle-ranking feminist clerk. They had worked together before: on the establishment of the Women and Equalities Committee, and the trust and sympathy developed in the run up to the 2015 formed the foundation of their collective efforts in 2015/16 and since. In short, their parliamentary friendship enabled Childs to better negotiate the institutional context in which she found herself, not least in interactions with various parliamentary actors who were necessary to facilitate the development of individual recommendations, and over time would be those acting on *The Good Parliament*. In the opposite direction, their friendship enabled Challenger to acquire greater knowledge of theories and practices of gender sensitive parliaments and institutional change.

The House of Commons has not been an unchanging institution in the face of feminist criticism. Like other parliaments around the world there is an expectation that women MPs should be present in greater numbers and that the interests of women will be addressed by parliaments. Gender Sensitive Parliaments in other words, is becoming something of an international norm. At Westminster, *The Good Parliament* avowedly rejected the idea that

just a few changes would suffice. It is one thing to give up on writing a fantasy feminist report and quite another to offer only a partial and limited blueprint. - as if three or four recommendations could resolve the diversity insensitivities. There had in sum to be so many recommendations. *The Good Parliament* has received considerably support from Mr Speaker. It was also institutionally acknowledged on publication by The Commission. The Report's agenda has been taken up inter alia by the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, the Women and Equalities Committees, the Liaison Committee on the political side, and on the official side by the WENs, and the wider administration. In our view, a good number of recommendations have and are being implemented. But there is as our introduction made clear no room for complacency.

In understanding political change at Westminster, the actions of the academic change actor will only ever be one part of any story of institutional change. Notwithstanding our strategic efforts to institutionalize the Report, we cannot know what will happen in 2019 when the current Speaker retires and when there is a new Clerk of the House in place. Those seeking greater changes at Westminster – ourselves included - should be preparing for the new circumstances. With impact rarely a 'one off' intervention, questions are left begging for both the academic and the feminist in residence: there should be some considered academic thought given to the possibility of the feminist impact imperative becoming tyrannical; when the desire to do feminist good might risk overwhelming the individual academic, privileged by institutional access to be sure, but nonetheless exhausted or battered by institutional resistance. It might also be the case that other actors – insiders or outsiders, academic, civil society or political - may be more effective in the future. For the feminist in residence, there is a risk of overload too; that an informal role in institutional change becomes to sit too heavily on her shoulders. There is the potential for this to (be perceived) in conflict with the 'day job'. Its status as legitimate work may also not be permanent.

We close, as promised, with some brief commentary on Recommendation No. 12, a House statement on maternity and paternity leave. The Leader of the House, Andrea Leadsom repeatedly stated that what has become known on the twittersphere as '#Proxyvoting for #Babyleave' would happen in autumn 2018. Prioritized by the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion and jointly taken up by the Mother of the House, the Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP, a debate was secured in Westminster Hall. With the House agreeing in principle the Procedure Committee undertook a swift inquiry and reported on the means of implementation. A second debate was held although there was no votable motion.<sup>17</sup> At this time, concerns were raised that this was designed to allow for criticism by MPs unaware of the first debate. The Jo Swinson debacle over pairing – when her pair voted - would later make the case even more compelling; ditto the impending births of a handful of MPs' babies. But Christmas 2018 came and went. Brexit business may have been one reason, although we suspect that the Whips are less than happy with arrangements that take power away from them. '#Proxyvoting for #Babyleave' could have been – should have been – one of the Government's centenary Deeds; it would have been a hugely symbolic

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/constitution/electoral-reform/news/98197/commons-leader-andrea-leadsom-proxy-voting-mps-will>; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/feb/01/baby-leave-proxy-voting-system-for-mps-close-to-approval>

and substantive example of institutional re-gendering. Instead it looks like this will be something for 2019.

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