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The Labour Party, feminism and Maureen Colquhoun's scandals in 1970s Britain

Abstract

Maureen Colquhoun (1928-) was the Tribune Labour MP for Northampton North during the turbulent period of Labour government between 1974 and 1979. An avowed feminist, she praised the women's liberation movement in parliament and introduced bills that brought feminist issues to parliamentary attention. Britain's first openly lesbian MP, she was outed by the *Daily Mail* in 1976 and passionately defended her relationship and the rights of gay women. Her period in parliament was marred by personal and political scandal: after she appeared to show sympathy with Enoch Powell – a position that she quickly distanced herself from – her local constituency party sought to deselect her, triggering a fight that brought Colquhoun and her supporters before the Labour Party's National Executive Committee. This article draws upon archival records, Colquhoun's autobiography of her time in parliament, and newspapers to explore the fraught relationship between feminism, lesbian women and the Labour Party in the 1970s. Beyond this, this research treats parliament as a site of feminist activism, alongside and in dialogue with the grass-roots activities of the women's liberation movement in this period.

Introduction

When, in May 1975, Maureen Colquhoun MP presented her Balance of the Sexes Bill to the House of Commons for a second reading, she did so to a nearly empty chamber. 'Where have all the Members of Parliament gone?' she asked. A Conservative MP informed her that the preceding debate, on guard dogs, was thought to be 'a filibuster, the unfortunate intention... being to prevent the hon. Lady's Bill coming before the House.'¹ Undeterred, Colquhoun persevered with her Private Members Bill: 'My Bill is designed positively to discriminate for women, to ensure that appointments to the boards of public bodies and corporations, to certain committees, panels and tribunals, and to juries and the House of Lords, shall consist of women and men in equal numbers' she said.² 'It is intolerable to women that in 1975 half of society is not properly represented on these committees' she observed, pointing to the plentiful examples of women's underrepresentation: the Sugar Board, with its five male members and no women; the Agriculture Training Board, with 27 men and no women; the National Bus Company, with seven men and no women; the Advisory Panel on Arms Control and Disarmament, with 24 men and no women, and so on.³ Colquhoun's advocacy for women's opportunities reflected the burgeoning extra-parliamentary feminist activism of the 1970s. Indeed, Colquhoun, who entered parliament as a Labour MP for Northampton North in 1974 and lost her seat in 1979, explicitly aligned herself with the feminist activism of the women's liberation movement: 'I

believe very sincerely that the women's liberation movement is the best thing to have happened to women in this country since the suffragettes' she said, in the midst of proposing the Balance of the Sexes Bill.⁴

Colquhoun's bill was ultimately unsuccessful and women's representation on public boards continued to be a cause of consternation rather than legislative action in late twentieth century Britain. It took until January 2018 for Scottish MSPs to pass a bill similar to Colquhoun's: The Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Bill set the objective for all public body boards to aim to have women comprise a minimum of 50 per cent of non-executive members by 2022.⁵ Contemporary efforts in England and Wales have not manifested in legislation and have instead relied on a voluntary approach to ensuring equal gender representation on public boards.⁶

Despite this legislative prescience, and her significance as the first openly gay female MP, Colquhoun does not feature as a significant figure in histories of 1970s feminism or histories of post-war left-wing politics. I argue that an examination of Colquhoun's experiences articulates facets of 1970s feminisms that are occluded by the otherwise valuable studies of women outside parliamentary politics: through Colquhoun we see parliament as a site of avowedly feminist legislative action and imagination in this period.

Historians have acknowledged the importance of equalities legislation passed in this period, not least the Divorce Reform Act 1969, the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, and the Employment Protection Act 1975. Amy Black and Stephen Brooke have noted that these legislative actions taken by Labour governments after 1966 might seem to be an 'apparently sympathetic response' to the resurgence of feminist activism after 1968, highlighting that the demands made at the women's liberation movement's first national conference in 1970 had, by the end of the decade, 'found their way into Labour's policy discussions.'⁷ As they reflect, however, this gives the misleading impression that Labour was in natural sympathy with these demands, while also disregarding women's activism in the years preceding the 'second wave'. These 1970s Acts do nonetheless signify important legal, cultural and political shifts informed by contemporary feminist ideas. They do not, however, constitute the full measure of parliamentary feminism in this decade. Colquhoun brought more radical and controversial feminist issues into parliament: women's representation on public bodies, concern for sex workers, and her defence of women's 'right to choose' abortion. On these issues, unlike on the economic issues that feminists had more success with, Colquhoun was not working 'with the grain of events and opinion'.⁸ The relationship between legal change and feminist activism has been characterised by Paul Byrne as 'ambiguous', as the women's

movement 'devoted most of its energies to activities outside the movement rather than outside lobbying', and moreover, 'some of the most significant legislative milestones actually preceded the time when it was at its most vibrant.'⁹ He argued that, in what he admitted was an oversimplification, 'if the 1970s was a decade of getting women's issues onto the political agenda of the mainstream established political institutions, the 1980s was one in which the issues were pursued within those institutions'.¹⁰ Colquhoun was active in 'getting women's issues onto the political agenda' in this period.

Some of the perceived ambiguity around the relationship between the legal reforms of the 1970s and the women's liberation movement was its self-confessed antipathy towards state power. However, while the women's liberation movement was on the whole pessimistic about the potential of legal reforms and parliamentary legislation to enforce the broader transformations they sought, the movement did acknowledge the importance of legislation in forcing social change.¹¹ As Sheila Rowbotham observed, 'while women's liberation has tended to be extremely suspicious of the state in theory, in practice it has drafted and lobbied and given evidence', but members found that 'a law is a declaration of intent and a staking out of territory, rather than an achievement in itself'.¹² The legislation that Colquhoun proposed and was active around between 1974 and 1979 should be seen to be a part of this 'staking out of territory'; each issue faced significant barriers to becoming legislation, but each issue created opportunities for feminist perspectives to be asserted in the male-dominated space of the Commons.

Colquhoun also attempted to change parliamentary territory, tabling an Early Day Motion, 'Sittings of the House' with five other MPs (Martin Flannery, Max Madden, Audrey Wise, John Tomlinson and Brian Sedgemore) on 22 May 1974 that resolved that the House should sit five days a week, with the working hours of 9am to 6pm, in recognition of the 'destruction to family life of Honourable Members caused by the uncivilised working hours in the House'.¹³ Colquhoun's bill was amended by Willie Hamilton, Labour MP for Fife, on 3 June, who used the opportunity to imply that women MPs were not sufficiently tough, adding to her bill the words 'the main weapon of the official opposition is time; that a truly democratic House of Commons cannot be run on an office hours timetable; and that those who cannot stand the heat should get out of, or back to, the kitchen.'¹⁴

If Colquhoun's gender drew attention and hostility from some corners, her sexuality amplified this. Colquhoun reflects the uneasy treatment of gay women by the Labour Party during the 1970s. In her study of the relationship between gay men and the left in post-war Britain, Lucy Robinson has argued that the 'development of gay politics directly problematised

the left's key assumptions in very serious ways.'¹⁵ Across the 1970s, Robinson demonstrates, parts of the left struggled to reconcile itself to identity politics. Evan Smith and Daryl Leeworthy have shown that this struggle was uneven across the political left in their study of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which was the first significant leftist organisation to endorse and adopt a policy of gay liberation.¹⁶ Colquhoun's engagement with the values of the women's liberation movement and her experience as a lesbian shines new light on the Labour Party's lack of support for gay women in the 1970s at constituency level and in parliament. As Stephen Jeffrey-Poulter has noted in his brief discussion of Colquhoun, the MP was disappointed by the lack of support she received from the Labour Party when her local constituency attempted to deselect her in 1977. As Jeffrey-Poulter suggests, this is less surprising when seen in the context of the Labour Government's record on lesbian and gay issues.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the support Colquhoun garnered outside the central party – as well as the ire she attracted – demonstrates that while queer sexuality was viewed as extraneous to the party's priorities in the 1970s, her lesbian relationship brought the intersections of feminism and sexuality to the attention of the NEC.

Britain's first openly lesbian female MP is significant in her own right. The emphasis in this article on Colquhoun's voice is in juxtaposition to Colquhoun's place in other scholarship on the 1970s. Indeed, while the story of her outing – and the scandal it provoked – has come to dominate her place in the historiography, Colquhoun's own voice has been granted little audience in historical literature despite her authorship of an autobiography that focuses on her time in parliament, *A Woman in the House*, published in 1980. Nonetheless, Stephen Brooke notes Colquhoun's opposition to the Conservative Party MP's William Benyon's attempt to challenge the 1967 Abortion Act in 1977, and quotes her conviction that ~~the~~ Benyon's Private Member's bill was an attack on women's rights.¹⁸ He also notes that her battle with her local constituency against deselection in 1977 shows the 'limits of Labour's culture in dealing with homosexuality'.¹⁹ Other scholarship has mentioned Colquhoun in relation to the press coverage her outing received. Rebecca Jennings has noted that the newspaper coverage of Colquhoun 'suggest a continued investment on the part of the press in Wolfenden-era notions of homosexuality as acceptable only when confined to the private sphere and practised with discretion—and, conversely, hostility towards the new feminist and lesbian and gay political emphasis on visibility.'²⁰ Emily Hamer has noted that when Colquhoun came out – or was rather forced out by the *Daily Mail* – it formed a part of a decade in which 'lesbians and gay men came roaring out of the closet'.²¹

Certainly, the 1970s was a critical decade for members of the queer and gay community in Britain. The passage of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, decriminalising homosexuality, marked the beginnings of a newly openly politicised era for queer politics. New campaigns emerged that aimed to secure greater equality and visibility: the Committee for Homosexual Equality was founded in 1969 (and soon changed its title to 'Campaign') and the Gay Liberation Front was founded at the London School of Economics, Colquhoun's alma mater, in 1970.²² The first London Gay Pride was held in July 1972. The Labour victory of 1974 was a cause for optimism for lesbian and gay campaigners, notes Peter Purton, and under the Wilson-Callaghan government the Home Secretary Roy Jenkins requested that the Criminal Law revision Committee look into the inequalities that gay women and men faced under the law.²³ The recommendations, presented in a 1975 report, were unsuccessful. Progress for gay men and women in the 1970s, then, was not straightforward.

Nonetheless, the gay liberation movement and the women's liberation movement created new communities and established a new visibility for gay men and women in this decade, although the relationship between the women's liberation movement and gay liberation was sometimes fraught. Lesbianism, Elizabeth Wilson claimed, was politicised by the women's liberation movement, 'reconstructed imaginatively and theoretically to fit in with new political imperatives.'²⁴ Jennings has suggested that the 1970s witnessed the development of a multitude of 'new social and political conceptualisations of lesbians'.²⁵ While the women's movement struggled with the place of sexuality in women's liberation, for some feminists the relationship to lesbianism was intimate and imbued with possibility: 'For many feminists in the early 1970s lesbianism opened like the doorway to freedom', Elizabeth Wilson has observed, 'it was like the Trojan horse that was to let loose within the very citadel of patriarchy a subversive army of female desires.'²⁶

New networking opportunities developed for gay women in the 1970s: *Sappho*, a lesbian magazine and organisation, was founded in 1972.²⁷ Colquhoun wrote in 1980 that she had subscribed to *Sappho* since the demise of its predecessor, *Arena Three*. *Sappho's* 'main function was and still is to keep women, particularly isolated lesbian women, in touch', she observed. 'There are some of us who wished it had the political awareness and aliveness of the Gay Liberation Movement', she noted, but its founders, Barbara ('Babs') Todd and Jackie Forster, had 'made homosexuality an acceptable subject for discussion and both contributed enormously to the emergence in Britain of a homosexual identity.'²⁸ Through her Balance of the Sexes Bill, Colquhoun was to meet Todd, and, as Todd briefed her on the Sex Discrimination Bill, the two fell in love. The relationship prompted Colquhoun to leave her

husband, Observer journalist Keith Colquhoun, and thus began a scandal that was to be covered in Britain's tabloid press.²⁹ Martin Conboy has underlined the significance of tabloids in the ways that they 'maintain the status quo politically and culturally' whilst 'reinforcing a sense of distance between the powerful in society and those excluded from these circles'.³⁰ Meanwhile, newspapers were embracing coverage of sex and sexuality and maintained their influential role in British society.³¹

As the reaction to the scandal that Colquhoun's sexuality provoked demonstrates, despite increasing organisation and visibility, the Labour Party of the 1970s was not supportive of its queer members. Purton notes at the election of 1979 lesbian and gay activists had little to thank Callaghan or his government for.³² Moreover, by the close of the 1970s – at the point of the Conservative electoral landslide of 1979 – increasingly liberal public attitudes had begun to shift, and the 1980s witnessed a backlash against the gains of the preceding decade.³³ Nonetheless, the period in which Colquhoun was a MP coincided with a crucial period for British queer communities and for campaigns for women's rights. The lives of queer women across the post-war era have been explored by Alison Oram, Emily Hamer, Rebecca Jennings and Amy Tooth Murphy, who have given scholarly attention to the social, cultural and domestic spheres. This article argues that parliament was a site of feminist queer politics in the 1970s and that while the Labour Party did not support its first openly gay woman MP, the threat of dismissal created a bridge between parliamentary and grass-roots feminist queer activism through the establishment of the Maureen Colquhoun Action Committee.

Colquhoun is not an uncomplicated feminist and lesbian hero, however. Sympathetic comments on Enoch Powell in 1977 caused outrage and schisms within her constituency and betrayed a lack of appreciation of how Powell's views had legitimised racism. Although she claimed that her comments were wilfully misunderstood by those seeking to displace her due to their own homophobia, the incident marred her legacy in parliament. Natalie Thomlinson has demonstrated that the white feminist movement, despite its proclamations of its own engagement with race issues, was frequently blind to and complicit in the continuance of racist structures. Indeed, Thomlinson has how white feminists responded with hostility when their own racial privilege and prejudice was brought to their attention.³⁴ Colquhoun's statements on Powell form a part of this story.

Colquhoun's biography

Maureen Colquhoun was born on 12 August 1928 and joined the Labour Party aged 18, feeling herself to have 'given my heart to the Labour movement' and 'knowing almost instinctively

that it held the key to the future of radical politics.’³⁵ She read for a degree in Economics at the LSE before she later entered political life. In 1977 she told *The Guardian* that she was in part drawn into politics after being frustrated by the bureaucracy she encountered when seeking help for her youngest son, who was deaf.³⁶ Prior to becoming an MP for Northampton North, Colquhoun was a councillor in Shoreham-by-Sea and led a Labour minority group. There, she made headlines in 1970 after the council, following a vote of twelve to five, removed her from all the committees of the Urban District Council, and from her external positions as school governor and a member of the county library committee, because she ‘talks too much’.³⁷ The twelve council members who voted to remove her were all men. The ban on these external appointments was short-lived, however, as the Clerk to West Sussex County Council wrote to clarify that the council had no power to depose Colquhoun from her outside appointments; the ban on her speaking and voting on the council committees stood.³⁸ Colquhoun received some support from the Conservative chair of the housing committee, Florence Richards, who refused to abide by the ban and allowed Colquhoun to speak, explaining that she would treat Colquhoun as she treated other councillors.³⁹ The county council intervened and repudiated the local council’s silencing of Colquhoun, but the story had already made it into the national press.⁴⁰

She first stood as a candidate in a general election for Tonbridge, Kent – a constituency which the *Guardian* noted ‘could hardly be described as a Socialist area’ – and although she lost, she went on to put herself forward in other constituencies, telling the *Guardian* that ‘what I want... is an opportunity to get on a short list to compete on the basis of “here we are at a selection conference and one of us just happens to be a woman”’.⁴¹ She continued, ‘We’re educated to believe that we live in a democracy but in reality we live in a male-ocracy. This is the first time there have been more Tory women in the House than Labour, which is disquieting for the Labour Party’. Colquhoun was part of a ‘small but militant’ cohort of women organised by left-wing Labour activist, and later MEP, Janey Buchan⁴² to run for safe Labour seats, which, the *Guardian* assured its readers, ‘is aimed at better representation of all women in Parliament, not just the Germaine Greers of politics. Mrs Buchan and her ladies have absolutely nothing to do with the Women’s Liberation Movement.’⁴³ Except, of course, as Colquhoun said in parliament, she was in active sympathy with the aims of the women’s liberation movement.

Colquhoun was selected to be the Labour electoral candidate for Northampton North for the early 1974 election. The reputation for being a trouble-maker followed her, however, and *The Times* noted her candidacy with the headline “‘Talker’ chosen’.⁴⁴ Northampton was going through a period of growth in the early 1970s, with its towns and villages expanding to

make way for an increasing population.⁴⁵ In 1974 this led to protests by ratepayers who felt that they had been bearing the burden of this expansion.⁴⁶ Famous for shoe-making, by this period the area's primary industry was engineering, which in September 1974 the *Guardian* estimated employed some 20,000 of the area's residents.⁴⁷ In February 1974, at the first of the two general elections held that year, she won the constituency with 16,321 votes, 40.72 per cent of the vote. This was a marginal majority of 1,033 over that of her nearest rival, Conservative candidate CM Jackson.⁴⁸ In the October election of the same year, Colquhoun increased her majority to 1,538, winning 43.79 per cent of the vote to the Conservative candidate's 39.66 per cent.⁴⁹ The October 1974 gave Labour a small majority and 319 seats to the Conservative's 277, Liberal's 13, and Other's 26. Colquhoun joined parliament at a point of faltering progress for female MPs: just 23 women MPs were elected in the early 1974 election, 13 of whom were from Labour, nine of whom were Conservative, and one Scottish Nationalist.⁵⁰ In the October 1974 election this increased to just 27 female MPs. Colquhoun found the House of Commons to be an exclusionary – if not outright hostile – space. Gendered assumptions abounded. In her autobiography Colquhoun recounts that on her first day in the Commons her friend Arthur Blenkinson, then Labour MP for South Shields, spotted her in the canteen and, after welcoming her, implored her to do something to improve the quality of the food. ““You deal with the bloody food”” Colquhoun retorted, ““I’m going to be Chancellor of the Exchequer.””⁵¹ Colquhoun and her female colleagues were not uniformly warmly welcomed by the media: the *Daily Mail*, about whom Colquhoun would later complain to the Press Council, observed that ‘Mrs Colquhoun is one of the new posse of stern and determined Labour Ladies who always look as if they have just come from reorganising Holloway and are shortly off to do the same for Parkhurst.’⁵²

Colquhoun, feminism and the Commons in the 1970s

While scholarship on 1970s feminisms has almost exclusively maintained a focus on extra-parliamentary, grass-roots feminism, Colquhoun demonstrates that parliament in the 1970s could be, and indeed was, a site that offered opportunities for feminist action, albeit one in which such action was highly constrained by patriarchal structures and composition of its membership.⁵³ While Colquhoun was frustrated by what she perceived to be the complacency and lack of feminist imagination on the part of other MPs, she declared herself to have ‘a distinct advantage’ for she read materials on contemporary feminisms generated outside parliament: *Spare Rib*, *Shrew*, *Women’s Voice*, *Power of Women*, *Women’s Report* and *Sappho*.⁵⁴ Like other members of the women’s liberation movement, Colquhoun strongly

opposed Margaret Thatcher and disavowed her as a feminist: in the discussion of her Balance of the Sexes Bill in the House of Commons in May 1975, Colquhoun retorted that she had not stipulated that leaders of political parties should be women, for as Leader of the Opposition Thatcher had ‘failed to appoint women to her Shadow Cabinet in suitable numbers and therefore let down the role of women in society.’⁵⁵

The extra-parliamentary feminist activist agenda influenced the bills that Colquhoun brought before parliament. In March 1979, as she neared the end of her parliamentary career, Colquhoun sought to bring a Protection of Prostitutes bill to parliament. The bill, would, as Colquhoun said, ‘amend the Sexual Offences Act 1956 and the Street Offences Act 1959; to provide for the better protection of prostitutes from exploitation and victimisation; and for connected purposes.’⁵⁶ The current laws, Colquhoun said, reduced sex workers’ human rights, attached stigma to them, and reduced their opportunities to exit prostitution. Her proposed Bill would, she suggested, abolish prison sentences for soliciting, remove the term ‘common prostitute’ and remove the stipulation in the Sexual Offences Act 1956 that classified more than two women living together as ‘a brothel’, instead creating one offence that covered street nuisances. She pointed out in the Commons that the law as it stood punished ‘the immature, inexperienced, ageing or socially inadequate women’, while ‘Successful and competent prostitutes operate within the law’.⁵⁷ Going beyond this, she appealed to the Commons that ‘prostitutes and prostitution are not a menace. I have spoken with many eminent psychiatrists who say that it is accepted in their profession that prostitutes have great therapeutic value in society.’⁵⁸

The Protection of Prostitutes Bill was, perhaps inevitably, of interest to the press, although its coverage was increased by the objections expressed by Reverend Ian Paisley (Antrim, North), who objected to the bringing of the Bill on the grounds that ‘I believe in the sanctity of our womenfolk’.⁵⁹ In the face of his objections – ‘the standards that have made this nation and protected its womenfolk in the past are in serious jeopardy’ – female MPs rallied in support of Colquhoun. Renée Short, MP for Wolverhampton North East, interjected to tell Paisley to ‘sit down’ and Joan Lestor, MP for Eton and Slough, expressed the rejoinder that it was Paisley who would need protection after he declared that he stood ‘for the protection of all womenfolk’.⁶⁰ Paisley’s attack was unsuccessful – the bill carried its first reading 130 votes to 50 – and caused amusement in the press. The *Morning Star* labelled his intervention ‘hilariously humourless and absurdly religious.’⁶¹ The *Guardian* noted the quality of Colquhoun’s speech and observed the ire attracted by Paisley’s intervention, concluding that the day was ‘a triumphant day for feminists.’⁶² For Labour Party MPs, the newspaper observed,

Colquhoun had succeeded in appealing to their world view; whereas the Conservatives ‘seemed subdued by Ms Colquhoun’s implicit appeal to the free enterprise spirit, for small businesses free from petty restrictions and red tape. And quite possibly references to “the peculiar sexual hypocrisy” of the British struck home to the party of Profumo, Lambton and Jellicoe.’⁶³ In the *Daily Mail* Colquhoun’s bill was received less warmly. Colquhoun, it observed, was ‘a small, cheerful dumpling of a woman’, and while ‘her speech contained some sensible matter’ she brought in ‘sociological jargon about deprivation and the class war.’⁶⁴ *The Daily Telegraph* sought to put Colquhoun’s bill in personal context. ‘She is either the most stupendously courageous MP or the most exhibitionist: perhaps a little of both’ it stated, for

Some time ago she announced to the world that she was a Lesbian. Short of announcing that she was also a practicing monetarist, it was difficult to think of what else she could do to outrage her apparently rather bigoted constituency Labour party, many of whose members have been trying to prevent her from being their candidate at the General Election.

But there she was yesterday, getting up to put the case for women who go out to work. And the case she put was highly convincing.⁶⁵

Colquhoun’s bill did not become law. Similar arguments were, however, picked up in the 1980 discussion of the Street Offences (Amendment) Bill, by which time Colquhoun had left parliament.⁶⁶

Throughout her years in parliament Colquhoun was also a supporter and a defender of women’s ability to access abortion. In 1975, ahead of James White MP’s private member’s bill that sought to restrict the 1967 Abortion Act, she wrote to the Commons Select Committee to encourage it to disregard the allegations presented in Michael Litchfield and Susan Kentish’s inflammatory book, *Babies for Burning*, calling it a ‘book for burning... a disgraceful publication’.⁶⁷ The following January, she, along with seven other female MPs, wrote a letter discouraging MPs from establishing another Select Committee on abortion, pointing out the opposition by MPs and trade unionists, as well as the ‘majority of the people in this country who support the 1967 Act.’⁶⁸ Later, speaking against the Abortion (Amendment) Bill in February 1977, Colquhoun labelled the legislation ‘an anti-woman measure’, telling the Commons that its outcomes would be acute for poorer women: ‘If the 1967 Act were amended in the way the Bill seeks, women in the lower income groups would suffer far more than those who can afford, and always have been able to afford, a private abortion.’⁶⁹ The language and discursive frame that Colquhoun employed reflected that put forward by the women’s liberation movement, appealing to MPs to recognise that ‘the fact that women, and only

women, have the right to decide what is to happen to their bodies, and have the right to control them and their own lives.’⁷⁰ Unlike the medical profession’s recommendations around the 1967 Act, the MP considered abortion to be a ‘fundamental right’.⁷¹ ‘As a feminist’, Colquhoun said, she believed anti-abortion organisations had little sympathy for women, noting that ‘sometimes a woman has to make that terrible choice, and I say that that choice should be hers alone.’⁷²

Colquhoun, coming out

When, in the mid-1970s, Colquhoun ended her relationship with her husband and began a relationship with Babs Todd, it marked the first time a woman MP had been publicly outed while in Parliament. Although Colquhoun’s relationship with Todd was not her first with a woman, it was the relationship that was to draw her into the public eye for her sexuality.⁷³ As Jennings notes, the 1970s witnessed increased discussion of lesbianism in British newspapers.⁷⁴ Colquhoun reported that her first instinct, upon realising that she had fallen in love with Todd, with whom she had been working on legislation, was ‘to run away’.⁷⁵ In May 1975 she and Todd went for dinner having been to see *Fansheen* – a play about revolutionary China – and it was on this, their first opportunity to be alone together, that Colquhoun ‘sat down, looked into her eyes and said, “what on earth are we going to do about us?”’.⁷⁶ ““You too?”” Todd replied, and Colquhoun found that ‘there we were, two middle-aged women, ridiculously, totally and very much in love, and there wasn’t anything that either of us could do, or even wanted to do, to change that. It was just irreversible.’⁷⁷ This sense of irrevocability was followed by a more apprehensive conversation, but soon the two women had informed their families – which for Colquhoun included three grown up children, and for Todd included two daughters – and began to live together.⁷⁸

Colquhoun’s outing by the press was, she said, deeply unsettling and destructive. In April 1976 Nigel Dempster’s diary in the *Daily Mail* reported that Colquhoun had moved out of her shared house with her husband and had moved in with Todd, giving Colquhoun’s children’s names, Todd’s children’s names, and naming the street that she had moved onto in the article.⁷⁹ According to Colquhoun, the newspaper had uncovered the story through blackmailing a friend of a friend who was invited to attend their housewarming party. Dempster’s diary cited the invitation to the party, which featured two women embracing. Her ensuing complaint to the Press Council about the *Daily Mail*’s invasion of her privacy was unsuccessful. The Press Council found that the MP had ‘taken a very strong stand on feminist issues and has not been loathe to publicise her views on them’, and that this had informed its decision.⁸⁰ Colquhoun declared this reasoning to be contrary to the Sex Discrimination Act,

and to be prejudicial against her based on her involvement in the women's movement, a stance that was supported by other MPs, including Arthur Latham, MP for Paddington.⁸¹

This controversy took place against the background of increased debate about privacy and the British media in postwar Britain. As Tom O'Malley has said, 'During the 1970s the question of media policy and accountability moved to the centre of the political debate in the UK.'⁸² In 1972 the government established a Committee on Privacy, and the resulting report's examination of the meanings associated with the word 'summarized what appeared to be a growing bifurcation in popular understanding' in distinguishing between freedom from intrusion and privacy of information.⁸³ Nonetheless, dissatisfaction with the functioning of the Press Council was such that a Royal Commission on the Press was commissioned in 1974, publishing its report in 1977. The report was met with scepticism, O'Malley says, and the continued emphasis on self-regulation implied a conservatism that disappointed those who wished for more robust recommendations.⁸⁴ While Colquhoun received supportive coverage from the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, she was met with limited support from the mainstream media.⁸⁵ While *The Observer's* coverage was sympathetic to Colquhoun, other parts of the press were less supportive.⁸⁶ *The Spectator* noted in December 1976 that 'The public surely has a right to be curious, even if it has no absolute right to have its curiosity satisfied', but also claimed that 'A speech in favour of women's liberation has quite different validity if one knows it is delivered by a practising lesbian.'⁸⁷ *The Economist*, too, noted the importance of Colquhoun's feminism to the Press Council's decision-making.⁸⁸ The *Daily Mail* marked the complaint's rejection in December 1976 with coverage that noted that there had been 'no harassment of Mrs Colquhoun' but acknowledged that the Press Council had found that the paper had invaded the privacy of 'the woman friend with whom Mrs Colquhoun went to live.'⁸⁹ According to Bingham, Colquhoun did receive support from outside the media: in response to a particularly vituperative article by Jean Rook in the *Daily Express*, he says, a group of women sympathisers 'stormed into the *Express* office to protest.'⁹⁰

For Colquhoun these challenges had, 'by the end of 1976 and all through 1977 and 1978... built up to such a momentum, and were such an intricate maze of horror upon horror that we had many despairing days when we hardly knew just how we could face one more crisis.'⁹¹ The freedom that she felt she had won, however, was significant: when Colquhoun left her husband she found that 'I suddenly, for the first time in my life, knew I was in control of my own space in the world, had my own time scale, and was living my life in the way I wanted it – sharing with another woman.'⁹²

Colquhoun's treatment by fellow Labour MPs demonstrates some of the discomfort with homosexuality on the part of the parliamentary Labour Party. The reaction of both male and female MPs spanned from unsupportive to hostile. Colquhoun acknowledged the work that female MPs were doing on feminist issues such as single-parent families and domestic violence, but noted that 'not one of them ever discussed lesbianism with me or were initially more than totally aghast when a gossip column article in the *Daily Mail* about my relationship with Babs was published in 1976.'⁹³ She details one confrontation with Millie Miller, Labour MP for Ilford North, who rued that women MPs who fell below a threshold of feminine dress would too be assumed to be gay; an accusation that Colquhoun firmly rebutted and Miller retracted.⁹⁴ Putting the hostility down to ignorance and prejudice, Colquhoun reflected that

Society has taught most straight women to despise and fear the lesbian. There is this extraordinary myth that lesbians turn to one another because they cannot get the ultimate prize – a man... Heterosexuals believe theirs are normal relationships, but there are no normal relationships, just relationships, and most relationships arise from social conditioning both of women and men – social pressures not natural emotions.⁹⁵

Moreover, Colquhoun put the hostility in part down to envy. 'I think it was a fear of lesbians which straight women do feel, often because of the lesbian inside themselves, and because, too, we present a challenge... The anger directed towards our relationship... was because Babs and myself had found a way out that they themselves were afraid to take.'⁹⁶

Support from male MPs was no more forthcoming. From some quarters, the dynamic between class and sexuality was revealed: the perceived association between queer sexualities and middle-class lifestyles resulted in some suspicion from her Labour colleagues. From her friend Dennis Skinner, Labour MP for Bolsover and a fellow member of the Tribune Group, Colquhoun got the impression that 'It was almost as if I had indulged in something which was strictly for the upper-classes and most definitely public school.'⁹⁷ In the end, she felt that he came around, and that while 'Dennis lacked tolerance', he 'yet supported tolerant causes.'⁹⁸

The perceived lack of support for Colquhoun's relationship with Todd from her fellow women MPs was reflected on other issues: in February 1976 Colquhoun asked that the Speaker of the House, George Thomas, refer to her either without a prefix or with the prefix 'Ms' rather than one that expressed her marital status.⁹⁹ The Speaker replied that he would 'slur it in such a way as to reduce, if not to entirely eliminate, the audible distinction between "Mrs" and "Miss"'.¹⁰⁰ Colquhoun's reasons for such a request were predicated on seeking equality, as she explained in 1980: 'it was time we took the lead as women MPs and got rid of the hopelessly outdated and ridiculous assumptions that if we marry we should be viewed as an appendage of

our husbands and if we didn't marry we should remain open to ridicule as waspish, spinsterish, old-maidish.'¹⁰¹ Colquhoun felt that her fellow women MPs were not supportive, dismissing her request as trivial and as setting them apart from their male colleagues.¹⁰² Colquhoun's autobiography has short shrift for the feminism of her female colleagues. Other female MPs, Colquhoun claims, had limited understanding of extra-parliamentary feminism: 'their knowledge of feminism, the theory of political, social and economic equality of the sexes, was conditioned by their rather narrow views obtained from working rather rigidly within the structure of the Labour Party', she explained.¹⁰³ The Labour Party itself, here, was framed as actively obstructing the development of a feminist consciousness.

Enoch Powell and race

In 1977 Colquhoun ignited controversy due to seemingly sympathetic comments on Enoch Powell. It was down in part to these comments that Northampton North attempted to deselect her, before the case was reviewed by the Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC), which found that Northampton North had not followed due process. Colquhoun was quoted in the *New York Times* saying that she had changed her mind about Powell, right-wing and anti-immigration zealot: 'I am rapidly concluding' Colquhoun said, 'that Mr. Powell, whom I had always believed to be a racist before I went into the House of Commons, is not one.'¹⁰⁴ The *Guardian* said that Colquhoun thought Powell should be taken 'seriously rather than contemptuously'.¹⁰⁵ In her autobiography Colquhoun admits that the 'Enoch Powell incident' was 'the most serious mistake of my political life' but dedicates a little over two pages to unpacking it.¹⁰⁶ She explains that the telephone call with a journalist occurred early in the morning at a hotel in Norwich, where she was staying for a seminar on women's rights. 'I told him in a few sharp sentences... that I was sick and tired of politicians pretending that no race problems exist, and setting up Enoch Powell as the bogeyman' she writes.¹⁰⁷ Instead, the 'real bogeymen are in the Labour Party, who use soft words and put no money into solving the problems of poor blacks and poor whites in inner cities.' She also said that it was difficult to talk unemotionally about race in the Labour Party: 'I was thoroughly disgusted by the Labour Party over race and I let off a great deal of steam' to the journalist, she admitted.¹⁰⁸

Despite her protestations that she was not a racist the remarks gained significant coverage in the press and her party.¹⁰⁹ *The Guardian* noted in 1977 that her remarks were viewed with surprise and consternation by party members as well as by her fellow members of the Tribune group.¹¹⁰ Colquhoun was soon replaced as Treasurer to the Tribune group. Colquhoun was quoted in the *Guardian* protesting that 'politicians had for too long preferred

to use Mr Powell as a bogeyman', declaring her 'concern is with the underprivileged, the starvation of resources in education, and the environment. I want to see more done to help the poor black and poor white in the inner city areas.'¹¹¹ Reflecting on her time in parliament, Colquhoun argued that 'Race was too uncomfortable for Labour Party politicians to talk about honestly. They preferred to mouth cliches to the party faithful and to rely on attacking the views of Enoch Powell. I preferred to tackle racism.'¹¹² This does not acknowledge the extent to which Enoch Powell's views were racist, nor the extent to which Powell had facilitated and legitimised the articulation of racism; indeed, it does not address how support for, or opposition to, Powell had become a political shibboleth. As Amy Whipple has argued, Powell became more than a mouthpiece for those claiming white superiority and who equated whiteness with Britishness: he was considered to be a 'new leader who promised to remedy national follies and ills'.¹¹³ Colquhoun's failure to acknowledge Powell's broader importance demonstrated a lack of appreciation for the meanings and status he had acquired in the eyes of his supporters.

The attention Colquhoun's remarks attracted reflected the fraught politics of immigration and race in the 1970s. During the 1960s the Labour government had passed a number of pieces of legislation around immigration and race, including the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968. In 1971, however, it was ried within the party that 'in the field of race relations we in the Labour Movement had little or no success.'¹¹⁴ By the early 1970s anti-immigrant groups, including the National Front, had stirred further anti-immigration sentiment. The passage of the Immigration Act 1971 did little to quash anti-immigrant and racist sentiment and the 1976 Race Relations Act was not considered successful. As Lauren M. McLaren has shown, in the late 1970s opinion polls indicated that the Conservative Party was seen to have better immigration and asylum policies than the Labour Party.¹¹⁵ Colquhoun's comments on Powell were therefore made in a period of tension around immigration and at a time when both political parties were grappling with their approaches to Britain's increasingly diverse communities.

Colquhoun received support from traditional sources of public Labour support: Polly Toynbee wrote a sympathetic article in *The Guardian* in September 1977, noting that while the MP was a counsellor in Shoreham she advised that ten per cent of council houses should be set aside for black people from the inner city and arguing that 'the only reason the constituency thinks differently of her now than they did at the election is that since then she has abandoned her family and declared herself as lesbian... Lesbianism is still a great deal less acceptable than male homosexuality.'¹¹⁶

These comments on Powell, as well as Colquhoun's presence in the media for other less than salubrious reasons – in December 1976 she had made headlines for striking a car park attendant who had damaged her car – were initially given as some of the reasons for deselection by her local constituency Labour Party.¹¹⁷ But in September 1977 *The Guardian* wrote that Norman Ashby, chairman of Northampton North constituency Labour Party, had admitted that the deselection was motivated by Colquhoun's disclosure of her sexuality. 'Some people think that her image has been blackened', Ashby said, and noted that when Colquhoun was chosen as the candidate for the 1974 election her marriage and children had presented a 'family image'.¹¹⁸ The MP retorted that 'I am glad to have the love and care of someone' and that 'my sexuality has nothing whatsoever to do with my ability to do my job'.¹¹⁹ The constituency later acknowledged that they had misunderstood her remarks about Powell. Nonetheless, in September 1977 Northampton North Labour Party voted 23 to 18 to deselect Colquhoun and to replace her on the ballot.¹²⁰

Colquhoun explained her frustration with the constituency and process by which they had attempted to deselect her in an October 1977 article for the *New Statesman*. It was 'the Left eating the Left', she claimed, setting forth the ways in which she had sought to make herself accountable to her constituency.¹²¹ The constituency Labour Party's internal structures were, she claimed, dominated by one particular branch, which had earlier in the year passed a notion to reselect the MP with just 11 members in attendance; members were not notified of the motion in advance, and a petition of protest was ignored. Colquhoun heard about the resolution from a Northampton councillor and, at that point, the issue had made it into the newspapers, she explains.¹²² In August 1977 Colquhoun attended a special General Management Committee meeting in her constituency and was assured that the attempt to deselect her had nothing to do with her private life; this claim, she said in her *New Statesman* article, was unconvincing. Those seeking to deselect her were 'professional-class people – the doctor, the lecturer, the teachers – who ran the CLP' hiding their own bigotry behind the 'ordinary men and women in the party who have been members for decades', she argued. She worried that the anti-democratic nature of her deselection 'could put power into the hands of a few activists rather than into those of many members'.¹²³ The anxiety that local constituencies were falling sway to 'infiltrators' was not isolated to Northampton North in the 1970s; as *The Economist* noted in the summer of 1977, other Labour MPs were being threatened with deselection. Colquhoun, however, at 49, was younger than the other MPs facing such threats and was also on the left of the party, unlike the moderates that constituencies were seeking to displace.¹²⁴ Indeed, she was in favour of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, a group

that had formed in 1973 and that demanded the mandatory reselection of MPs.¹²⁵ Colquhoun, was, however, determined not to step away from her seat without a fight.

Fighting deselection

Attempts to deselect Colquhoun met with resistance from her supporters. Colquhoun herself argued in *Gay News* in 1977 that ‘I am not “Britain’s Lesbian MP”. I am the working Member of Parliament for Northampton North and I am carrying on with my job.’¹²⁶ She was no more defined by her sexuality than her heterosexual counterparts were, she suggested. Despite the lack of support from the Labour Party, Colquhoun did not fight her constituency party alone. Based at 5 Grove Dwellings, Adelina Grove, in East London, a group came together in 1977 to form the Maureen Colquhoun Action Committee.¹²⁷ It promoted its existence in *Spare Rib* magazine.¹²⁸ The group described itself as ‘An adhoc committee mainly of lesbians and gay men’ and it wrote to a range of trade unions, gay groups and women’s groups, as well as pressure groups, civil rights groups and to all Labour MPs, urging them to give their support to Colquhoun. It suggested three steps to defend the MP. First, it asked supporters to write to the Northampton North constituency Labour Party Management Committee and to send a copy of their letter to the NEC. The grounds on which Colquhoun was deselected were ‘not the real ones’, the group urged supporters to write, as ‘The real reasons are that she is a lesbian and an outspoken feminist. We deplore this decision and ask that you reconsider it.’ The second step that the Action Committee recommended was to write directly to the NEC, calling upon it to make ‘its position clear on discrimination against women and gays, inside and outside the Labour Party, now and in the future.’¹²⁹ Third, it urged supporters to raise the issue in local groups, with members of parliament and in the press. ‘An Attack on Maureen Colquhoun is an Attack on All Women’ the Action Group claimed, as ‘The attack on Maureen Colquhoun is an attack on the ways that all women are struggling to defend and win more emotional, legal and financial independence’.¹³⁰ Wages Due Lesbians, based in London, also wrote to the Labour Party in defence of Colquhoun.¹³¹

To show their support, the Maureen Colquhoun Action Committee organised two pickets; the first, on 7 December, outside St Stephen’s Gate to lobby female MPs and to demand that they speak on Colquhoun’s sacking in Parliament, and the second picket was held to coincide with Colquhoun’s meeting with the NEC on 13 December at the Labour Party Headquarters at Transport House.¹³² As Colquhoun and Todd turned the corner into Smith Square the picket was singing songs of support to the tune of *London’s Burning*: ‘Labour Party, Labour Party, We want Maureen, We want Maureen, In, In, In In the House, In the House’.¹³³

The Action Committee was quoted in *The Time's* coverage of Colquhoun's appeal as saying that 'it is clear to everyone that the real reason for her sacking is that she has come out publicly and unashamedly as a lesbian woman.'¹³⁴ Colquhoun claimed that through the inquiry she could hear the singing as the Action Committee amended the words to various well known songs, including *We Wish you a Merry Christmas* and *Frere Jacques*.¹³⁵ What her opponents, Norman Ashby, Michael Thomas, Stan Liburd, Patrick Garnett, who were also in the room, made of the singing is not known. But for Colquhoun, the Action Committee 'made it a heartening occasion', despite the event itself.¹³⁶

The reasons behind the support were expanded in statements and letters drafted by the Action Committee. The Committee based its support for Colquhoun on the conviction that 'It is clear that Maureen Colquhoun was sacked... because she is an unashamed lesbian and a feminist. The local management committee have attempted to cloak their prejudice with a variety of feeble accusations'.¹³⁷ In a statement written by the group the accusation of racism by her local constituency was labelled a 'FICTION' that had been 'blown up by the press'.¹³⁸ The Committee noted that this accusation had been withdrawn when 'it became clear that they had misunderstood what she meant', and listed quotes from Colquhoun in which she denounced Powell, ('Powell has the most appallingly racist solutions', 'Blacks are not a problem, poverty's the problem', 'what I was trying to point out is the irrelevance of Powell... all that effort against a tin god, instead of dealing with the problem of money.')¹³⁹ Instead, they commended Colquhoun for exposing 'the charade of the labour government's ineffective policies to combat racism' and quoted Colquhoun saying that the Labour party had failed to make material interventions into the lives of poor white and black people in cities, leaning instead on ameliorating words.¹⁴⁰ It also contested the accusation that Colquhoun had 'neglected her constituency', pointing out that she had attended 85 per cent of her surgeries and had spent 25 of the 28 weekends at the constituency; moreover, it argued, she voted for Michael Foot for leader against her personal preference for Tony Benn at the local management committee's behest.¹⁴¹

The accusation that provoked the greatest ire from the Committee was that Colquhoun had – in the Committee's words - 'spent her time on trivial issues, such as women's rights'.¹⁴² Rather than refute this, the Committee asserted Colquhoun's commitment to women's rights and her legislative record on the topic. 'We accept that she has spent a lot of time on women's issues. We do not consider them trivial', the committee said. Her sacking was argued by the Committee to be 'just one example of the current backlash against oppressed and dissenting groups in this country.' Here the Action Committee's language reflected that of the women's

liberation movement. 'Any woman without a man faces abuse and discrimination in this society in her dealings with the welfare state, the courts, doctors, psychiatrists, etc... the existence of the single woman who sees herself as strong and independent shows the possibility of women living without men and not needing to rely on them', the Committee claimed.¹⁴³ In a 1977 interview, Solveig Francis noted that class politics and gay politics were not incompatible or mutually exclusive: 'we know, particularly as lesbian women, that we are not marginal to the working class [laughs], and that there is a lot more of us than the Labour Party might want to recognise'.¹⁴⁴

The legislative track record of the Labour Party did not assuage the Action Committee's sense of disillusionment: 'The strength of women is a force for social change, which the Labour Party, like other political parties, attempts to disarm by treating our needs as marginal, by fobbing us off with the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act, and by attempting to silence those of us in a position to speak.'¹⁴⁵ The Action Committee was clear that it would not be 'fobbed off', particularly as gay women like Colquhoun were seen to be significant role models. 'Any well-known lesbian... is a powerful source of support to other lesbians and a public example of an independent life-style for all women', it argued, and quoted Norman Ashby as saying that Colquhoun was selected by the constituency because of her adherence to a "'conventional morality of a marginal working class constituency'".¹⁴⁶ This implied that class politics and gay politics were incompatible, and painted the working class members of her constituency as more prone to discriminate against lesbian women than their middle class counterparts elsewhere. The Committee reflected 'One way that such movements are neutralised is by treating their members as isolated cases, freaks, "sick" people or extremists, whose "personal" lives should be kept neatly away and separated from everything else that they do.'¹⁴⁷

Colquhoun's defence, therefore, created a space for the discussion of other issues related to the struggle for liberation for gay women, and for a critique of the relationship between liberation movements and the traditional locations of power. 'Society tries to absorb, commercialise and defuse our militancy,' the Action Committee observed 'so Women's "Lib" and Gay "Lib" become household words in such a way that their significance is watered down and made ridiculous.'¹⁴⁸ Colquhoun was seen by these allies to pose a threat to the traditions and structures that attempted to contain liberation movements. 'She has clearly become an embarrassment to the Labour Party because she challenges them to do something about issues to which they have paid little more than lip-service, including poverty, racism, and discrimination against gays and women', the Action Committee argued.¹⁴⁹ That even

Colquhoun could be deposed, they suggested, ‘shows that the demands of women and gays cannot be met within this system, and that the only way that the state can really respond to our growing strength is through repression.’¹⁵⁰ This feeling of personal vulnerability was reiterated by Action Committee member Sue Mansi on the letter pages of *Spare Rib* when she wrote ‘we’re all Lesbians on the Committee, we all know that we can be sacked, lose our children, lose our homes. If Maureen goes down without a murmur, we’ve all been shown to be weak, and the floodgates are then open for further attacks on women everywhere.’¹⁵¹ It also implied that a working-class constituency was liable to be less tolerant of a gay parliamentarian than a middle-class community.

Colquhoun’s treatment at the hands of her local constituency existed as part of, and on the continuum with, other forms of state and social suppression, it argued, citing the marches at Grunwick, Lewisham and Ladywood, the attacks on *Gay News*, and the legislative attempts to curtail women’s access to abortion as examples of this. The committee reminded readers in this statement of support that ‘the gains of “progressive” legislation and attitudes can easily be reversed when their provision is no longer convenient. The dismissal of a Labour M.P. who has proved too much of a threat to the “respectable” image of a party calling itself socialist is a reminder of this.’¹⁵² In January 1978 the NEC upheld Colquhoun’s appeal on the basis that Park Ward, which initially passed the motion of no confidence in March 1977, had not given appropriate notice of the motion.¹⁵³ Solveig Francis, a representative of the Action Committee, attributed the victory to the reaction amongst women that it had provoked.¹⁵⁴

The Labour Party’s discomfort with Colquhoun reflected its ambivalent relationship with the issue of gender and sexuality. As Martin Francis has argued, some parts of the Labour Party have had a conflicted relationship with feminism, viewing the liberationist aims as subordinate to the goal of supporting the rights of manual workers.¹⁵⁵ As he shows, women’s contributions to the Labour Party did not always engender rapid progress on feminist issues: on the issue of equal pay the NEC dragged its feet in the late 1960s, and it was only in the 1980s that feminism began to make significant inroads into the party.¹⁵⁶ Despite the antipathy that she faced from her local constituency and the lack of support she enjoyed from party leadership, Colquhoun did not lose faith in the Labour Party. Indeed, a year after 1979 she said that ‘Fighting Northampton in 1979 confirmed for me something I had known innately before – there is a future within the Labour Party for an openly gay person.’¹⁵⁷ Notwithstanding her experiences, she urged gay people to be open: ‘There is nothing to hide.’¹⁵⁸ Beyond this, she determined to find a safe seat to stand for in the following general election, as ‘The very least

a fighter for the people can now expect, a woman who has served her party apprenticeship, is a good Labour majority in the next House of Commons.’¹⁵⁹

At the 1979 election the country, and Northampton North, turned towards Thatcherism. Northampton North was won by the Conservative candidate Tony Marlow, who was the MP for the constituency until the 1997 election.¹⁶⁰ For her part, Colquhoun noted that upon leaving Northampton North in May 1979 she and Todd found themselves to be ‘different people, happier, more alive, free’, with the ‘hostile world of Northampton North Labour Party... overcome. Finished. Ended.’¹⁶¹ That was not the end of Colquhoun’s interest in politics or in women’s rights, however. Colquhoun became the Labour Liaison Officer for the 300 Group, which had been established in 1980 with the aim of encouraging women candidates to stand for election: the group singled her out as a particular hope that she would stand at the following election.¹⁶² At a Steering Group Meeting in 1980, Colquhoun ‘(herself a past and probable future MP)’ set out the qualities an MP should embody: ‘these were determination, stamina, commitment – and (!) the ability to suffer fools gladly’.¹⁶³ Later, she was involved with Gingerbread, which supported single parents, giving advice on how to run for public office and seek housing.¹⁶⁴ Between 1982 and 1990 she was a Labour councillor in Hackney, winning 741 votes in Wenlock, Hackney South and Shoreditch in the 8 May 1986 London borough council elections.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

Colquhoun’s contribution to parliamentary life was one that was attentive to gendered and feminist issues. Although she had little meaningful legislative success during her years in parliament, her feminist interventions in the Commons asserted the principle that women should have the right to choose around abortion, that women should be equally represented on public bodies, and that sex work should not be subject to the ‘peculiar sexual hypocrisy of the British’ in its legal standing.¹⁶⁶ Her legacy in parliament was to have asserted the ideas proposed by the women’s liberation movement, creating a new space for dialogue between the feminist movement and mainstream politics. Her outing in the 1970s exposed the Labour Party’s unwillingness to defend Members of Parliament who were seen to draw the party into scandal - even if this scandal emerged from a climate of hostility to their romantic and sexual lives, and occurred at the expense of their personal privacy. While Colquhoun’s partner attributed the antagonism to a small minority of local Party members – many of whom she argued had only recently joined the Party - rather than to longstanding members, the Party’s treatment of Colquhoun confirms its discomfort with gay politics in this period and reflects the

lack of institutional party support for lesbian women.¹⁶⁷ Colquhoun remained politically active: she was an elected representative on Hackney Council in the 1980s. She also retained an interest in the treatment of sex workers, protesting the press and police handling of the Yorkshire Ripper case outside the Old Bailey in 1981.

Despite her tumultuous years in Westminster, Colquhoun concluded her autobiography of her years in parliament by noting that her 'regret upon leaving the House is that such a marvellous time lies ahead in Labour politics with the agreeable task of bashing one of the most vulnerable Tory governments of this century'.¹⁶⁸ The Conservative governments did not live up to this promised vulnerability.

At the 1979 election, in which Colquhoun was defeated and left parliament, 19 female MPs were elected: eleven Labour and eight Conservative, making up 2.9 per cent of parliament's total.¹⁶⁹ By this year the British women's movement had also undergone substantial changes. The women's liberation movement, whose importance was lauded by Colquhoun as she proposed her Private Members Bill proposing an equal representation of women on public boards in 1975, had become fractured and divided. Antagonism around the issues of sexuality and race had resulted in an acrimonious national conference held in Birmingham in 1978. But this did not mark the end of the women's liberation movement's significance: one way that the women's liberation movement's legacy continued was in women's move towards party politics. This move was in part tactical: as Sarah Perrigo reflected, by the late 1970s alliances with other movements appeared to be necessary to defend the women's movement's achievements.¹⁷⁰ For some women, involvement with the Labour Party was a direct consequence of their experiences as feminist activists. 'Many of us had gained enormous experience and confidence through our involvement in feminist politics and felt more able to enter (or in some cases re-enter) the more formal arena of Labour Party politics and make our voices heard', Perrigo writes.¹⁷¹ Feminists who joined the Labour Party brought with them 'different methods of organizing, which was really exciting and started things moving' remembered one feminist who joined the Labour Party in 1977.¹⁷² Another feminist, Mildred Gordon, a long-standing member of the Labour Party by the mid-1980s, a member of the Women's Action Campaign and an advisor to the Greater London Council's Women's Committee, noted that after the 1970s the nature of the women's sections changed: 'many of us within the party felt that we must do something to use the structures that were already there, that is to turn the women's sections outwards, and make them more militant fighting organisations which took up women's issues and fought for women's rights.'¹⁷³ A new membership of these sections developed and more women's sections emerged, while 'the

whole atmosphere within the women's sections changed, and what happened in the women's sections has had an effect on the constituency parties.'¹⁷⁴

By the 1980s the Labour Party itself was entering a period of flux around gender issues. After the heavy defeat in 1979, the party refocused on the issue of accountability and the demands of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) began to gain traction.¹⁷⁵ The CLPD and a resurgent left wing faction within the party led some women to feel that the party could be used 'to achieve some of the aims of the women's liberation movement.'¹⁷⁶ Perrigo has argued that 'Despite a rhetorical commitment to equal participation of men and women, the Labour Party in 1979 - its culture, organization and ways of working - reflected deeply held assumptions of gender difference which served to privilege the male political actor and severely circumscribe the activities of most women members.'¹⁷⁷ The period from 1979 to 1983, she suggests, was one of struggle around gender issues within the party. In the early 1980s the Labour Women's Action Committee was formed as a sub-group of the CLPD; one of its five demands was that there should be at least one woman on shortlists from which councillors were selected. Once again, the issue of ensuring women's voices were heard on public committees had been made visible within political circles, a few years after Colquhoun had placed it so concertedly on the parliamentary agenda.¹⁷⁸

Notes

1 HC Deb 16 May 1975 vol 892 cc930-66, 930.

2 HC Deb 16 May 1975 vol 892 cc930-66, 931.

3 HC Deb 16 May 1975 vol 892 cc930-66, 932-934.

4 HC Deb 16 May 1975 vol 892 cc930-66, 936.

5 Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018

⁶ While there is a general duty on the public sector to advance equality of opportunity for people with protected characteristics – of which gender is one – under the Equality Act 2010, this does not legislate for minimum representation. In 2013, the government established an aspiration that women should comprise 50 per cent of new public appointments made each year, and that by 2022 women should be 50 per cent of public appointments. At the time of writing, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, Peter Riddell, offers 'tips and case studies' on his website to encourage the appointment of diverse public boards. See Public Appointments Diversity Action Plan, Centre for Public Appointments https://30percentclub.org/assets/uploads/UK/Third_Party_Reports/Diversity_Action_Plan_WEB.pdf (accessed 20 July 2018) and 'Making Boards More Diverse', <https://publicappointmentscommissioner.independent.gov.uk/making-boards-more-diverse/> (accessed 19 June 2018).

7 Black and Brooke, "The Labour Party, Women, and the Problem of Gender.", 424.

8 Pugh, *Women and the women's movement in Britain since 1914*, 274.

9 Byrne, "The Politics of the Women's Movement.", 55-56.

10 *Ibid.*, 63.

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- 11 Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, 152.
 - 12 Ibid.
 - 13 Parliamentary Archives. *House of Commons Early Day Motions: 1974, Vol 1, 1-140*, 22 May 1974 (140, 1).
 - 14 Parliamentary Archives. *House of Commons Early Day Motions: 1974, Vol 1, 1-140*, 3 June 1974 (140, 3); Colquhoun, *A Woman in the House*, 13-14.
 - 15 Robinson, *Gay men and the left in post-war Britain*, 1.
 - 16 Smith and Leeworthy, "Before Pride."
 - 17 Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers & Commons*, 136-137.
 - 18 Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, 212-213.
 - 19 Ibid., 234.
 - 20 Jennings, "Lesbian Motherhood", 573.
 - 21 Hamer, *Britannia's Glory*.
 - 22 For a history of the Gay Liberation Front, see Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles*.
 - 23 Purton, *Sodom, Gomorrah and the New Jerusalem*, 31.
 - 24 Wilson, "I'll Climb the Stairway to Heaven: Lesbianism in the Seventies.", 185.
 - 25 Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*, 176.
 - 26 Wilson, "I'll Climb the Stairway to Heaven: Lesbianism in the Seventies.", 180.
 - 27 For more on *Arena Three*, see Oram, "Little by Little? Arena Three and Lesbian Politics in the 1960s."
 - 28 Colquhoun, *Woman in the House*, 64-65.
 - 29 Ibid., 64-67.
 - 30 Conboy, *Tabloid Britain*, 13.
 - 31 Jennings, "Lesbian Motherhood.", 572.
 - 32 Purton, *Labour and lesbian and gay rights*, 32-33.
 - 33 Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers & Commons*, 5.
 - 34 Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England*.
 - 35 Colquhoun, *Woman in the House*, 18.
 - 36 Toynbee, 'I find it impossible to believe', *The Guardian*, September 5 1977.
 - 37 "Council ban on woman who talked." *The Times* 15 January 1970, 2.
 - 38 "Councillor gets posts back." *The Times* 21 January 1970, 3; Maureen Colquhoun, "Banned From The Council." *The Times* 22 January 1970: 11.
 - 39 "'Talkative' councillor welcomed." *The Times* 28 Jan. 1970, 3. Richards, who in 1971 was the urban council's most senior member and had served on it for 15 years, later accused the council of passing her over for Chairman due to her sex and was quoted in the *Daily Mail* noting the council's 'Victorian' attitude towards women. Colquhoun extended her support to Richards across party lines. "Secret council vote keeps woman out." *Daily Mail* 20 May 1971.
 - 40 "Setback for 'dirty dozen' council." *Daily Mail* 21 January 1970.
 - 41 "Women in Labour: Elizabeth Dunn discovers a new Commons conspiracy." *The Guardian* 5 November 1970.
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