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Feminist Institutional Change: The Case of the UK Women and Equalities Committee

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The UK Government's decision to establish the Women and Equalities Committee in 2015 redressed an institutional deficit at Westminster—the lack of a Departmental Select Committee holding the Women's Minister and Government Equalities Office to account. This 'effective' reform was by no means a foregone conclusion, however. A feminist institutionalist (FI) approach demonstrates the limitations of traditional accounts of institutional change in accounting for this reform. With greater analytical space given to women's agency and introducing the concept of gendered parliamentarianism, FI captures the gendered constraints and conducive conditions that marked this moment of parliamentary re-gendering: identifying the critical role of women MPs; the new relations between them and women parliamentary Clerks and officials and the wider—crucially gendered—(extra) parliamentary actors and dynamics in play.

Keywords: Feminist Institutionalism, Gender, Gendered Parliamentarianism, Institutional Change, Parliaments, Women and Equalities Committee

1. Introduction

The creation of a new Departmental Select Committee (DSC) requires the UK Government to table a change to Standing Orders. It is then a political decision for MPs who, if there is disagreement, must vote in its favour. On 3 June 2015, the Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) 'was appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Government Equalities Office (GEO)'. It would have 'effect until the end of the current Parliament', at the time expected to be 2020. The Committee became

permanent only in 2017 following the foreshortening of the 2015 Parliament.¹ The new Committee redressed a structural anomaly at Westminster that was logically difficult to defend, institutionally speaking: while the Minister for Women and Equalities, like other Ministers, had a parliamentary Question Time, there was no corresponding DSC holding her to account. Internationally, the Commons was an outlier in not having either a woman's committee or caucus.²

If the establishment of WEC can be represented as a simple extension of existing parliamentary architecture, the Government had notably not been poised to act. The creation of a new DSC is an example of an 'effective' reform which are usually resisted rather than embraced by Executives reluctant to cede power to the legislature (Kelso, 2009; Russell, 2011).³ Almost to the last, WEC 'wasn't going to happen'.⁴ Indeed, earlier in the Spring the former MP, and eponymous chair of the modernising Wright Committee, Dr Tony Wright had laughed at its very possibility, unconvinced of the standing of the women MPs seeking its establishment.⁵ It was only with its listing in the Whips' Select Committee Chairs allocation on 21 May 2015 that WEC looked likely.

The Government's consent reflected the quality of the case for it and potential gains that WEC could bring. The new Committee would raise the profile of issues women MPs including Conservative ones wanted addressed.⁶ More to the fore was an awareness of perceptions of the Conservatives' record on women. There was considerable concern that rejecting WEC would generate precisely the kind of bad press that would query Cameron's post-2005, gender-friendly re-branding (Childs and Webb, 2014). This sensibility operated at both a general and individual level. In respect of the former, the Leader of the House (then Chris Grayling) was persuaded that it was 'more elegant' to accept the case for WEC, rather than see it 'raised from the floor' by cross-party 'belligerent women MPs';⁷ an 'ostensibly good cause', there was a reluctance to leave Conservative 'finger prints' on a 'no'. WEC would also open parliamentary spaces (i.e. jobs) for the higher

¹As Paul Evans suggested the new timeframe makes WEC's permanency look irresistible although interventions by the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion were essential to this happening (Childs, forthcoming)

²<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/guidelines-womens-caucuses>.

³Efficient refers to the smoother running of parliament, the more expeditious handling of government business (Russell, 2011, p. 613).

⁴Anonymous interview.

⁵Comment to author.

⁶Labour woman MP.

⁷Senior woman MP.

numbers of Conservative women elected in 2015. In any case, if the Government did not take the GEO terribly seriously—and this was suggested—then there was little need to be too concerned about Executive scrutiny.

At the individual level, the role and reputation of Maria Miller, regarded as presumptive Chair among Conservatives,⁸ was also key. A former Secretary of State, there was appreciation that she had been treated rather harshly at the time of her resignation.⁹ Arguably more importantly, Miller had ‘resonance’ with the public, and warranted an important role in the House, if not in Government.¹⁰ If there was an assumption that she would be a ‘safe’, ‘consensus-building’, and ultimately, ‘Conservative’ Chair, the Government might have under-estimated her. Labour women MPs were agreeable precisely because they were confident that ‘someone like Maria’ would become ‘emboldened’ and ‘more explicitly feminist’: ‘men don’t quite get it, that, when freed, women will become more feminist’.¹¹

If the above explains the reasoning behind the UK Government’s decision in the face of the *demand* from women MPs, what remains to be explained is its genesis. In interrogating the identities and interventions of actors critical to the creation of WEC, as well as documenting institutional support and resistance, new light is shone on extant theories of parliamentary change and feminist institutionalist (FI) analysis. This case importantly reveals to an extent not hitherto acknowledged a greater role for parliamentary Clerks and officials in advancing institutional reform, suggestive of transformed relationships between MPs, House Clerks and officials, and new ideas about the institution qua institution. Compounding this, the ways in which gender is thoroughly imbricated in the women MPs’ demand and which traditional accounts of parliamentary change would have failed to illuminate in any meaningful way. FI reveals, instead, the significance of what I term ‘gendered parliamentarianism’. This re-gendering of a traditional concept refers to the mobilisation of women MPs across the House working together for the realisation of shared gendered interests. It goes against the logic of appropriateness based on partisanship that marks political institutions of parliamentary government (Kelso, 2009, p. 194).¹² By adding gender into the mix, gendered parliamentarianism suggests a reconfiguration of the ‘interests’

⁸During 2010–15 she had been Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and Minister for Women and Equalities. She is also a friend of Grayling. A senior Conservative denied the establishment of WEC had anything to do with the Tories gaining an extra DSC chair.

⁹<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-26951464>.

¹⁰MP interviews.

¹¹Labour woman MP.

¹²The extent to which this logic is strongly or weakly in play varies across different political institutions. There is considerable debate in the UK regarding the (usually considered limited) influence of Parliament on policy making (see Russell and Cowley, 2016).

of women MPs cutting across party identities and Executive/Legislative relations. In this instance, women MPs' affinity and shared goals operated in conjunction with some women Clerks and officials who shared a gendered reading of the institution.

As an approach to the study of politics, Feminist Institutionalism is introduced in Section 2, supporting the claim that existing theories of parliamentary change, because they do not see gender power, are insufficient to identify the actors and institutional dynamics at play. Section 3 reconsiders the institutional constraints and Section 4 the conducive conditions of the UK House of Commons and wider political context at the time of WEC's establishment. Section 5 examines the role of women's agency, deploying the new concept of gendered parliamentarianism alongside recognition of the importance of political/administrative coalescence around the necessity of feminised institutional change; collaboration between the individual feminist academic (putative feminist academic critical actor) and Clerk and officials collaboration; extra-parliamentary actors' friendship operating to create a 'demand' for WEC beyond Westminster; and the importance of male allies within the House.

2. Understanding gendered institutional change

FI scholars work with and re-gender new institutionalist conceptions of institutions, defined as relatively enduring rules, norms, and procedures (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, p. 4).¹³ Institutions are both formal—the 'rules and procedures that are created, communicated and enforced through channels that are widely accepted as official'—and informal—'socially shared rules, usually unwritten that are created, communication and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels' (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004, p. 727, cited by Waylen, 2017, p. 4; see also Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Curtin, 2019). Institutions differ from organisations which are the collective actors subject to institutional rules (Lowndes, 2020), and from institutional arenas, which refer to a particular site (Chappell and Mackay, 2017).¹⁴

By missing essential questions of gender power in their depiction of the rules that structure behaviour, non-gendered institutionalist conclusions about stasis and change can only be partial and ultimately erroneous (Lovenduski, 1998; Chappell and Waylen, 2013). Paraphrasing Lovenduski (1998, 2005), all actors inhabiting a parliament 'have' a sex and 'perform' gender; experience their presence in intersectional gendered ways and do so enmeshed within an institutional

¹³See Lovenduski (2010) and Krook and Mackay (2010) for a more detailed summary of different forms of FI.

¹⁴Some FI employ Ostrom's (2005) definition of institutions as the 'rules in use' (Lowndes, 2020).

culture that reproduces a particular gender regime. In line with Historical Institutionalism (HI), FI recognises the institutional tendency to preserve extant rules, practices and norms, yet with its explicitly gendered lens FI regards parliaments as created for, by and to the benefit of, the men who have, and continue to, over-populate them (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 27; Mackay, 2010a, b). Parliaments are then masculinised institutions. Palmieri's (2019, p. 175) male bastions with distinctive ideologies of how women and men should act, think and feel (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 27; see also Mackay *et al.*, 2014); what Louise Chappell (2006) has called a gendered logic of appropriateness.

FIs do not however consider institutions as *all* determining (Beckwith, 2005; Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Mackay, 2014).¹⁵ They operate as both constraints and resources (Mackay *et al.*, 2010), with ongoing contestation and power struggles between differently positioned gendered actors (Kenny, 2007; Macrae and Weiner, 2017, p. 210; see also Azari and Smith 2012, p. 3). FI is tasked with specifying both the identity of actors engaged in, and the external or internal, and dramatic or banal sources, of institutional change (Mackay, 2008, 2010a, b, p. 194; Mackay *et al.*, 2010; Waylen, 2011); the quotidian moments 'under the radar' that can be 'worked' to bring about institutional re-gendering (see Kenny, 2013, p. 32; Koning, 2015; Macrae and Weiner, 2017; Waylen, 2017).¹⁶

The potential for political actors within even highly masculinised institutions to have sufficient agency to engender feminising effects speaks to Jane Mansbridge's idea of institutional 'ripeness' and 'ripening'.¹⁷ It is the job of FI scholars to interrogate the 'interactive relationship between ideas and actors' within—bounded by and in varying degrees conscious of—their institutional contexts (Erickson, 2017; Galligan, 2017). In Lowndes' words (2020; see also Palmieri, 2019), the conceptual and empirical prize is to understand the relationship between formal and informal elements, how this differs between contexts and over time and the ways in which actors seek to shift this relationship for strategic reasons. She is moreover clear that feminists would be 'well advised to consider' the *combined impact* of institutional rules: regulatory (officially required), obligatory (gendered logic of appropriateness) and persuasive (shared understandings) (Lowndes, 2020).

With little or nothing to say about the gendered nature of political institutions, nor the sex/gender of those actors who inhabit our parliaments (see

¹⁵Erikson (2017, p. 7, following Mackay, 2014) suggests scholars speak of gendered rather than feminist change to leave open the content of any feminist revision or reform.

¹⁶Overtime studies detailing institutional change dynamics limit overly optimistic or pessimistic conclusions about institutional re-gendering (Chappell, 2010, p. 186).

¹⁷In passing, during Mansbridge's lecture at the University of Edinburgh in 2016, confirmed through personal correspondence.

Waylen, 2014), traditional studies in the UK look to the presence of three factors to explain successful institutional reform: (i) a window of opportunity, usually understood as the period following a general election (GE); (ii) a coherent and agreed reform agenda and (iii) either the support of the Leader of the House, and, or backbench support (Norton, 2000). HI add to this the concept of parliamentarianism—MPs' collective sense of themselves as members of the legislature in contexts of parliamentary government—and detail the extent to which legislators act upon this, at times against their own party leaderships and the Executive (Kelso, 2009). On its own terms, these traditional conditions have importantly been shown to be neither necessary nor sufficient especially in the face of Executive dominance (Russell, 2011).¹⁸ Their worth regarding gendered institutional change is even more open to critique.

In opening the investigation into the establishment of WEC in 2015, FI immediately draws attention to the role of women MPs as likely institutional change actors; they are the usual suspects, variously referred to in the wider gender and politics literature as critical actors and feminist and/or gender equity entrepreneurs (Chappell, 2006; Mackay, 2008; Kenny, 2013; Waylen, 2014).¹⁹ That women's parliamentary bodies—committees, caucuses and all-party parliamentary groups—are created by 'feminist mothers' following the arrival of larger numbers of women MPs is widely observed (Sawer and Grace, 2016, p. 745; Sawer, 2020). Regarded as an example of Mackay's notion of nested newness—feminised institutions created inside masculinised ones—academic studies explore women's parliamentary bodies' role in women's substantive representation and institutionalising links with women's civil society (and oftentimes the latter's role in the feminist substantive representation of women),²⁰ alongside reference to women MPs' capacity building, empowerment and collaboration (Piscopo, 2014, p. 31; Costa, 2016, p. 750; *Parliamentary Affairs Special Issue*, 2016; Sawer and Turner, 2016, p. 775). Practitioner literature (IPU, 2011, 2012, 2016; CPA Gender Sensitizing Parliaments Guidelines/CWP, 2020; EIGE; UN Women, 2020) has been to-date most explicit in depicting the establishment of women's parliamentary bodies as an indicator of institutional re-gendering—of achieving more gender sensitive parliaments (GSPs) (although see Grace, 2016, and most notably Sawer, 2020). If Johnson and Josefsson (2016; Holli and Harder, 2016) speak of

¹⁸In this, the Government and Opposition frontbench (and hence at times Opposition backbenchers) act to maintain Executive power, the latter on the grounds that they expect to become the Executive in time, and to do so with their powers maintained rather than diminished (senior Labour male MP, interviewed as part of another project with the author; see also Kelso, 2009.) NB. Russell (2011) addresses the role of extra-parliamentary actors.

¹⁹Even if their ability to so act and bring about change is an empirical question (Palmieri, 2019, p. 175; Childs and Krook, 2006, 2008).

²⁰An evaluation of the work of WEC lies beyond this article.

how women's parliamentary bodies challenge the 'way politics is done', Marian Sawyer contends that as examples of 'feminist institution building', they 'can provide a space for *naming workplace experience*' (2020, p. 650, emphasis added; Palmieri, 2019, p. 177). Sonia Palmieri, a scholar who moves between international organisations and the academy—arguably one of Chappell and Mackay's (2021) feminist critical friends—has most explicitly linked GSP work on the ground with FI (Palmieri, 2019; Childs and Palmieri, 2020). Critical to her position is that too little attention has been focused on transforming institutions and that parliaments have a responsibility to institute the re-gendering of institutional power (Palmieri, 2019, p. 176–7). In this she moreover makes a clarion call for 'greater collaboration between academics and practitioners' (ibid, p. 191).

The lacuna in research on *how* women's parliamentary bodies are established is redressed here in respect of what this illuminates regarding institutional re-gendering, albeit with a single case providing detail and depth over comparison and generalisation. The three data sets are (i) House of Commons documents and materials associated with the establishment of WEC (e.g. draft Standing Orders, Standing Orders and Parliamentary debates) and (ii) interviews with 11 Clerks and officials and MPs directly involved in its creation, conducted in Spring 2017 at Westminster. The data were analysed 'by hand' and inductively. For reasons of anonymity, the names of interviewees are not revealed. Their status alongside sex and party (for MPs) is identified only where it is possible to do so without risking anonymity. And (iii) reflections on being a participant observer.²¹

Table 1 details the broad institutional factors—constraining and conducive—in place at the time of the women MPs' claim for WEC, *as identified by the traditional literature*. This suggests a far from promising prospect, with considerable constraints in play. Perhaps this explains Wright's springtime incredulity. If Norton's (2000) first condition was met (the window of opportunity afforded by an upcoming GE), his second (agreed and coherent agenda) and third (backbench and, or advocacy by the Leader of the House; Campbell and Childs 2015) were much less certain. The claim for WEC was made in an institutional context where *the House Leadership was agnostic at best* and where an incoming Conservative Government was *likely to see few women in senior House and Government leadership positions*. The Government's public position had been that the financial cost of any new Committee went against its commitment to reducing the expense of politics. It was, furthermore, a reform *articulated by only a minority of backbench MPs* and within this one group: women MPs. It was also an

²¹Sarah Childs had been the gender adviser to the 2010 Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, and later advised the Women in Parliament, All Party Parliamentary Group (WIP APPG) during 2013–4, when it undertook its inquiry into women's representation at Westminster.

Table 1. The establishment of WEC and non-gendered accounts of institutional change

	Factor	Evidence
Conducive	Coherent Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 2014 Women in Parliament APPG Report identified the establishment of a WEC as one of its eight key recommendations (Norton condition 2, part 1)
	Backbench or Leader of the House support/Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backbench women might be expected to support the WEC (at least following the WIP APPG Report in 2014) • The Leader of the House was agnostic (Norton Condition 3)
	General Election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 2010 Parliament was entering its final year; following the Fixed Term Parliament Act the GE was scheduled for May 2015. (Norton condition 1)
	Effective/Efficient reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DSCs are a key site for Executive scrutiny. • Conservative Government would likely be held to account more critically on gender/women's and equalities agenda, given the historical legacy of conservative politics and the Coalition's gendered austerity policies
	Parliamentarianism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy of WEC was more likely to be supported by women rather than men MPs • (Norton condition 2, part 2—Agreed Agenda)
	Backbench or Leader of the House Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • House Leader's agnosticism (as noted above) • The Government's public position had been that the financial cost of any new Committee went against its commitment to reducing the cost of politics.⁴⁸ Hence, the 'one in-one out' informal norm for committee establishment. • Leadership positions in the House (in the event of a Conservative Government) would be likely to be disproportionately male, reflecting the over-representation of men in the parliamentary Conservative party, especially pre-2010.

effective reform in a policy terrain that had witnessed the Conservative-led Government facing leftist–feminist criticism.²²

Even using a non-gendered analytic framework, the very gendered nature of this case is revealed if one is open to 'seeing' gender; an FI approach is more

²²Seasoned Westminster observers regard DSC as key sites for scrutiny.

starkly revealing still. It draws immediate attention to the composition of the House and indeed the party who might constitute the winner or largest party at the election. But it is not just about numbers. The enhanced priority given to agency in FI should not be misinterpreted as a return to ‘critical mass theory’ (Childs and Krook, 2006, 2008). Change is better understood by considering the identity and actions of critical actors ‘for women’ within specific political arenas.²³ Despite a concern with the way in which the term has become rather ‘catch all’ (Allen and Childs, 2017), the original conceptualisation was intended to specify those who act in conditions where women’s issues, perspectives and interests are marginal and unlikely to be well received (Childs and Krook, 2006, 2008). In this, there is a clear appreciation of a ‘cost’ of acting for women within masculinised political institutions and wider political contexts. As already noted, although institutions are not all determining, women enter institutions not of their own making and do so as gendered actors.

3. Institutional constraints

The constraining factors illuminated by FI look on paper at least daunting (Table 2); *fewer Conservative women in senior positions (with men making up around 80% of the parliamentary party), in a party less historically aligned with feminist politics and in a context where party efforts to modernise on the women’s policy terrain were increasingly being called into question.* In such a context, it was a moot point whether WEC’s scrutiny would be welcomed by the Government. In addition to these broad institutional constraints, three more specific ones are evident, whose gendered aspects would likely have been missed by traditional accounts. The first refers to the widely accepted ‘one-in-one-out’ DSC norm. The Leader of the House pre-election, William Hague, was clear that there would need to be ‘reduction elsewhere’ if a new committee was to be created.²⁴ This norm, and its underpinning rationale, had gendered effects (Gains and Lowndes, 2014). Even if establishing WEC could be (legitimately) represented as a simple extension of extant parliamentary practice, the obstacle of removing an existing committee remained. WEC’s advocates would need to not only persuade the Government and MPs of its *particular* merit, but also that it was of *greater* merit than an already established committee.²⁵ In other words, *in a masculinised*

²³It is an empirical question as to whether they are men or women.

²⁴Commons Hansard, 5 March 2015: Column 1078. The Government could, if so disposed, override the norm, as senior official put it, and this is what happened. NB, the Petitions Committee established in 2015 is a ‘different animal’ to a DSC.

²⁵The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (Polcon) was on a temporary standing order and probably the obvious one to go. However, the Environmental Audit Committee, another cross-cutting Committee was also an option. While permanent it was regarded as a New Labour creation, and arguably had been superseded by the new Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, leading to an interesting hierarchy of ‘merit’: gender versus the environment.

Table 2. WEC and gendered institutional change thesis

	Factor	Evidence
Constraining	Parliamentarianism	The composition of the Conservative parliamentary party was expected to still be overwhelmingly male post-2015, despite some inter-party re-balancing, because of Conservative resistance to sex quotas
	Backbench or Leader of the House Sex Composition of Institutional leadership	Only, belatedly persuaded of the WEC case Inter-party asymmetry in women's descriptive representation and ideological differences regarding gender equality (on a left/right, and feminism scale) suggest a Conservative Government would be less favourably disposed to a WEC Some male MPs explicitly contend that women's/ equality agenda is secondary, marginal or biased issue
Conducive	Male/institutional resistance	WIP APPG Report GEO was lacking DSC; institutional deficiency Supportive Women Members of the Cabinet Proximity to 2018, the Centenary of Women's Suffrage
	Coherent Agenda Effective/Efficient reform A (partially) Gendered Executive Gendered Time	The overall composition of Commons was expected to be more (but not dramatically more) diverse after the 2015 GE, given the use of AWS by the Labour Party, and informal efforts by the Conservatives
	Gendered Parliamentarianism	Enhanced gender consciousness among Conservative MPs from the 2005 and 2010 cohorts, alongside

Table 2. Continued

<p>New Feminist Institutions and Critical Actors</p>	<p>longstanding feminist identity among Labour women MPs Establishment of Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, Chaired by Mr Speaker in 2016</p>
<p>MPs Gendered Mobilisation</p>	<p>Intra-party women's friendships; despite a history of inter-party competition among women MPs, enhanced cooperation following APPG Women in Parliament 2014 report was notable in the latter years of the 2010 Parliament</p>
<p>Gendered links between the political and official sides of the House Extra-Institutional gendered</p>	<p>Parliament and other WENs encouraged collaboration between MPs and House staff Women MPs links with women's and feminist extra-parliamentary groups in civil society, academics, women in the media underpinned MPs mobilisation</p>

institution, a majority male House would need to be persuaded that an explicitly feminist Committee was of greater importance than an existing apparently non-gendered one. Its creation would also remove positions of prestige from established MPs (and for DSC Chair, a salary of some 13.5K). That the decision was made to seek temporary status for WEC—because this might make the new committee more palatable²⁶—is indicative of such reasoning and the expected resistance to WEC.²⁷

The second constraint further illustrates the likely difficulty in making the case given that by very definition it would hold the Government to account. Not procedurally necessary, but considered by Clerks a means to enhance the political impetus behind WEC, a commitment to its establishment was included in the Liaison Committee's legacy report.²⁸ This strategy very nearly backfired.²⁹ When raised by a Labour woman MP late in the meeting, only a few mostly men MPs were left in the room.³⁰ Yet in the (perhaps naïve) belief that there would not be any resistance, no effort had been given to creating a supportive stance among Committee members. According to certain members present, it was assumed that Conservative opposition would be limited because the 'WEC claim' came ostensibly from Miller. The mood of the meeting turned: 'oh god, not another women and equality thing'. One Conservative woman MP directly contested the case and looked to be persuading others, with her sex arguably giving additional symbolic weight to the 'antis'. Fortuitously, a Labour male MP 'saved the day' by suggesting a delay to any decision—for a Labour woman MP to have so acted was considered too risky.

The norm of impartiality as appropriate clerkly behaviour is the third specific constraint. Although 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', there is little documentation of this, nor is it integrated into existing analytic frameworks (though see [Evans, 2017](#); [Gay, 2017](#)). As [Crewe \(2017\)](#) has highlighted, Clerks innovate but exercise caution about being seen to do so, for good reasons inherent in their role as impartial stewards of parliamentary rules.³⁰ Support for WEC went beyond established notions of transgressing the official/political divide, challenging the elision between impartiality and partisan politics. It risked being regarded as a

²⁶A temporary basis has precedent, for example Polcon.

²⁷In the early SO draft, WEC had been advocated on either a permanent or temporary basis.

²⁸Even with its inclusion, there is little evidence that the Liaison Committee would have pressured for it without women MPs subsequent mobilisation. Two senior officials.

²⁹Labour MP.

³⁰A key advocate for WEC felt that this was disadvantageous (woman MP). No assumptions are made that women MPs on the Committee would be more likely to support the establishment of a WEC.

feminist, not a party-political act and might raise concerns that woman Clerks and officials would become pigeon-holed and thereafter regarded as committed to an identifiable position (in this case, feminism).

4. Conducive conditions

The *gendered window of opportunity* manifest in the run up to the 2015 GE operated at three levels. At the *international level*, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) had a few years earlier launched its GSPs framework (GSP, 2011, 2012, 2016).³¹ A key GSP indicator is a women's caucus and/or a legislative committee. Globally influential among (especially women) parliamentarians, knowledge about the GSP framework had permeated more widely, also among Clerks and officials.³² Overtime, the IPU's framework would become central to arguments for WEC on both political and administrative sides of the House. For example, an early draft Standing Order for the Committee explicitly drew on the IPU's database of equalities committees.³³

At the *national level*, inter-party competition over women's votes, representation and policy terrain had been a feature of Westminster politics for a parliament or so (Childs, 2008; Campbell and Childs, 2010, 2015; Childs and Webb, 2014). Such attention was maintained, if not increased during the 2010–15 Parliament. The 2010 Speaker's Conference had created a reform agenda around which MPs, civil society actors and academics coalesced (Childs, 2016). It also established inter-personal relationships that would later prove important (as discussed below). Civil society activism—for example the Fawcett Society and the Women's Budget Group—generated broad campaigns for enhanced descriptive and substantive representation (Campbell and Childs, 2015, 2010). Journalists, particularly but not exclusively women newspaper columnists, would also keep these issues on the media's agenda and in February 2015, the BBC TV documentary 'Inside the Commons' provided popular images that laid bare its very masculinised ways.

At the *institutional level*, there were significant developments that would support Parliamentary re-gendering. On the political side, the feminisation of the Conservative parliamentary party 2005–2010 (Childs and Webb, 2014) gave rise to the establishment of the Women in Parliament APPG in 2010, chaired by then newly elected Conservative MP, Mary Macleod. She would later become PPS to Miller (later WEC's inaugural Chair). This new cross-party women's grouping provided a clear statement of intent on gendered parliamentary reform in its

³¹<http://www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/caucus-e.pdf> accessed 31 December 2021.

³²This included at least one senior male clerk.

³³Noting that some 30 countries already have such dedicated committees, The WENs draft.

2014 Report. In focusing on the creation of a women's committee, the APPG was—as already highlighted—advocating for established and highly respected Commons architecture. By pointing out a scrutiny failing the logic of parliamentary effectiveness was deployed. In this way, the demand might be both presented and perceived less as a women's or even a feminist demand.³⁴ As importantly as the Report's content, the APPG created new relationships between women MPs cross party (as detailed further below).

Turning to the administrative side, the Commons' new and more substantive commitment to diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the 2010 Parliament gave rise to innovative House infrastructure that would also prove beneficial. The 2015–18 D&I Strategy agreed by the Management Board and the Commission³⁵ addressed wider organisational culture (the interface between staff and MPs where D&I are relevant to staff).³⁶ The establishment of Workplace Equality Networks (WENs) from 2010 was another major institutional innovation.³⁷ ParliAOUT (LGBTQI) and especially Parliagender would play important roles in the creation of WEC. In October 2014, Parliagender agreed a new annual strategy with the super-goal of 'achieving commitment from both Houses of Parliament to become a GSP by July 2015'.³⁸ One aspect of this was to 'conduct gender-based analysis of legislation, budgets and policies', with the creation of a women's committee cited as the *key tactic* towards its achievement. What this effectively meant was that an administrative goal—to achieve GSP status—now required the establishment of WEC, something that was seemingly regarded as a secondary administrative goal notwithstanding its evident political focus. Compounding this, Parliagender constituted a new space for women MPs and Clerks and officials to interact. While WEN membership is open to all parliamentary pass holders, few included MPs as part of their leadership. Parliagender was one of two who adopted a 'Member Advisory Panel'. In 2014–15, this included MacLeod and Labour's Sharon Hodgson MP, who—when time permitted—advised on policy, put their name to events and championed the network's causes. This period overlapped with both

³⁴A senior Clerk helped make the analysis more precise in this respect.

³⁵This built on the House Equality Scheme 2009–11 and the 2012–15 D&I Scheme. <https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/commons/house-of-commons-commission/single-equality-scheme/>.

³⁶An example is the Parliamentary Role Models campaign, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/working/workplace-equality-networks/parliamentary-role-models/>.

³⁷Parliagender's top listed priority is 'to raise awareness of gender inequality at every level' and to change 'attitudes and organisational culture' at Westminster. ParliAble (disabled people) and ParliREACH (race, ethnicity and cultural heritage). In 2017, a new WEN for social mobility/class, ParliON, was established.

³⁸Parliagender ToRs.

MPs central involvement in the APPG Report that recommended a women's committee.

5. Women's agency

5.1 Gendered parliamentarism

If in the past women MPs had mostly seen themselves less a collective and more as partisans in line with the logic of appropriateness characteristic of parliamentary government,³⁹ what emerged in this instance is gendered parliamentarism. This concept signals something more than the temporary if regular coming together of women MPs 'acting for women' which is the overwhelming focus of politics and gender research (Sawer, 2020).⁴⁰ Where gendered parliamentarism is in play women MPs think of themselves as sharing gendered interests as MPs and act together for the achievement of these interests, contra expectations of political institutions characterised by party politics and Executive dominance. In this, the women MPs are not limited to a substantive policy focus but hold also a critique of Parliament as gender insensitive in the round. That a cross-party consensus was emerging is first evidenced by the 2014 WIP APPG⁴¹ *Improving Parliament* Report.⁴² Its recommendation to redress the DSC deficit would act as a blueprint for action when the window appeared in 2015. Support for WEC spread from APPG members to other women MPs across the House, constituting symbolic unity and creating the possibility of further cross-party action. These MPs would work with other actors—on the political and administrative side of the House and with feminist friends outside (see Table 3).

The cross-House mobilisation *as* women MPs requires further explanation given the legacy of inter-party competition among women (Childs, 2013). By the end of the 2010 Parliament, the extent of cross-party 'quiet cooperation' was publicly noted.⁴³ Specifically, the Labour Party Women's Committee (WPLP) became more favourably disposed to working with others, not least Conservative MPs, reducing the impact of partisanship. Macleod's initial overture to the WPLP to be part of the WIP APPG had originally been rebuffed. Labour's distancing was significantly diluted through individual MP's participation in the APPG (not least by longstanding MP Dawn Primarolo, holding the symbolic

³⁹That the UK Parliament has no women's caucus is a key illustration of this.

⁴⁰See (Paxton *et al.*, 2020) for an overview of global studies.

⁴¹<http://www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/apg/>.

⁴²They had been persuaded, in part by Childs that the establishment of a WEC would be one means by which the Government—via the Minister for Women and Equalities—could be held to account.

⁴³'The Guardian view on the Women and Equalities Committee', 31 May 2015.

Table 3. Actors and actions and the claim for a WEC 2011–2015

Actors	Activity	Outputs
Women MPs	Individual MPs call for WEC in Chamber	2011 Call for Establishment of WEC in Parliamentary debate on UN Women, Labour and Lib Dem Women ⁴⁸
	Individual MPs call for WEC in media	Guardian newspaper, Cooper and McTaggart http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/may/20/women-coalition-government-equality
	Cross-party Activity	2014 APPG Report, Improving Parliament: WEC one of eight key recommendations 2015 Write to Liaison Committee chair in support of WEC 2015 March, Oral question to Leader of House, building on APPG recommendation for WEC; cross-party support expressed in IWD debate 2015 May, Approach to the Deputy Leader of the House
Parliagender	Strategy	2014 September, 'Super Goal' of GSP; WEC is key milestone
	Collaboration with Mr Speaker	2014 September, Meetings begin; held approximately quarterly 2014 November, Cross-WEN proposal for WEC submitted to Mr Speaker 2015 Letter to Prime Minister and Party Leaders, stating cross party support for WEC
	Collaboration with MPs	2014 December, Letter to Leader of the House, from Nicky Morgan MP 2015 February, Letter to Liaison committee from Sharon Hodgson MP; number of Chairs support WEC
	Collaboration with other organisations	2015 March, Co-host with IPU/CPA IWD breakfast event, discussion of WEC 2015 April, Meeting with external feminist groups, for example Fawcett Society
	Collaboration with Clerks	2015 May, Prepare drafting of Standing Order in response to MP approaches
	Academic and Official	2015 January, Regular meetings start. 2015 March, Informal contact between Childs and Labour MP re: Liaison Committee
	Extra-parliamentary mobilisation	2015 April, Strategy Meeting with external campaigning activist 2015, May, BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour

Continued

Table 3. Continued

Actors	Activity	Outputs
Feminist Friends	Media outputs	2015 March, Huffington Post article by Baroness Jenkin http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/baroness-jenkin/women-politics_b_6940682.html 2015 May, Civil Society Groups sign letter in Guardian calling for WEC http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/26/gap-for-house-of-commons-select-committee-on-women-and-equalities ; Guardian editorial welcoming WEC https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/31/guardian-view-on-women-equalities-committee 2015 June, BBC Radio 4 Today in Parliament features WEC

cross-party leadership position of Deputy Speaker and the newer MP, Hodgson) and during drafting of its 2014 Report. As momentum gathered, its Chair and Hodgson helped build support. When McLeod lost her seat at the 2015 election, Miller took up her efforts. Miller and Chair of the WPLP, Fiona MacTaggart, would for the first time directly liaise on the issue. Part of senior Labour women’s reasoning was that having been out of power for five years, there was a ‘real risk that what we had made happen’ in respect of gender equality might be ‘under threat’; WEC was supported as a means to protect these Labour-made gains.

5.2 Women’s collaborations across the political and the administrative sides of the House

Another original finding lies in relationships established between women MPs and some women Clerks and officials. The latter similarly experienced the structures, rules and norms of the Commons as masculinised and sought a re-gendering of the House, with the WENs crucially constituted a new means by which staff was enabled to act in support of the establishment of WEC. Parliagender worked with its Advisory Board, and through them to many other MPs, as well as with the WIP APPG. The relationships were not uni-directional, from MP to Clerks and officials. Parliagender members as well as Commonwealth Parliamentarian Association and IPU staff who had worked on parliamentary strengthening

projects—including trips overseas—felt able to ‘look up’ known women MPs to garner support; encouraging them to, for example, meet the Speaker and participate in the International Women’s Day debates. Individual Clerks and officials also acted to: (i) provide MPs with technical advice on the process and paperwork for establishing a new committee. Here, clerky professionalism was reinterpreted. A senior official for example, voluntarily ‘costed’ the project for a more junior colleague and (ii) to galvanise MPs and help smooth cross-party relations at a time when many were focused on election campaigning. Parliagender also met with Mr Speaker, the Director of D&I and attended the Management Board, contributing to wider D&I discussions to ensure that senior Clerks and heads of departments were kept abreast of the WEC claim. In short, the institution was, in other words, subject to some sequential ripening, as some women Clerks and officials exploited new Commons architecture, developed new or deeper relations with elected members and with the latter’s political cover were able to re-gender expected Clerky behaviour. For their superiors, this was not without limits but was nonetheless aligned with acknowledgment of the House’s institutional deficiency represented by the absence of a women’s DSC.

5.3 Academic and Clerks and officials’ agency

A collaboration between an academic and the former co-Chair of Parliagender emerged out of Childs’ role in advising the WIP APPG. It originally took the form of informal discussions, saw her act as a quasi-specialist adviser to Parliagender on IPU accreditation and became a more strategic commitment by the WEN to support the establishment of a WEC.⁴⁴ The relationship had a significant, albeit less formal basis rooted in feminist ‘parliamentary friendship’ (Childs, 2013), engendering collaboration at the interface of research and practice (Challender and Childs, 2019). Critically for Parliagender, Childs’ reputation and relationship with women MPs meant her academic advice was seen as authoritative. Independent of the House, and hence not accountable to it, she was able to exploit a longstanding association with senior woman MPs from across the House. She would also call for the establishment of WEC on the GE Special on BBC Radio 4’s Woman’s Hour. At the same time, WEN architecture—with political and administrative backing—permitted Parliagender co-Chairs and members to act as a ‘friendly challenge’ to existing Common’s practices. More specifically, providing technical expertise that a non-Clerk would find almost impossible to

⁴⁴This relationship continued as Childs successfully applied for funding to support a secondment to the House (Childs 2016).

discern; and by providing insight into how institutions work on the ground, helped navigate unspoken conventions that are particularly influential in Parliament, and which have significant gendered effects. Knowledge of individual MPs and of wider Executive–Legislative relations would further inform the strategy to support the MPs seeking WEC’s establishment.⁴⁵

5.4 *Extra-Parliamentary feminist friends (male and female)*

By liaising with established contacts outside Parliament, within civil society and in the media, MPs, Clerks and officials ‘turned up the background noise’. An external expert in political campaigning developed an implementation strategy: ‘multiplier’ women MPs to advocate for the Committee were identified; support from the LGBTIQ lobby was sought; MPs were identified to speak to the Prime Minister; the Leader of the House should be brought ‘on board’; efforts to keep the issue, which might be perceived as ‘small fry’, on the agenda would be developed and sensitivity to perceptions that WEC might be stepping on the toes of the Joint Committee on Human Rights addressed. One result was a letter highlighting the ‘critical gap’ in scrutiny arrangements on women and equalities (a point already made by MPs and Clerks and officials), co-signed by the CEOs of nine UK charities, NGOs and unions.⁴⁶ Another outcome, utilising relationships with members of the parliamentary press lobby, resulted in a national newspaper editorial (*The Guardian*).

5.5 *Male allies*

Rarely able to act on their own in male dominated and masculinised institutions, women MPs, Clerks and officials will usually require the support of men situated in positions of institutional power. Strategically deploying male support is a proven tactic to limit opposition and garner wider support (Childs and Webb, 2014). All this holds here. First, *Mr Speaker*. Not only central to the creation of the WENs, John Bercow met with women MPs and with Parliagender on a number of occasions prior to the GE, providing institutional and personal support. He also wrote to party leaders, including the Prime Minister in March 2015, stating cross-party support for the Committee.⁴⁷ Secondly, *senior male Clerks*. A number offered technical support. In this, senior men chose to support an explicitly feminist intervention acting as ‘champions’ for the WEN. This is to be

⁴⁵This example is left without specifics to protect anonymity.

⁴⁶<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/26/gap-for-house-of-commons-select-committee-on-women-and-equalities>.

⁴⁷Following the 2015 election there was a Conservative attempt to unseat the Speaker. According to one insider, it might have been counter-productive if Mr Speaker ‘had pushed it’.

regarded as an extension rather than a subversion of the institutional culture of Clerkly impartiality, supported as noted above by the WENs architecture and wider D&I institutional focus.

6. Conclusion

Even before women MPs arrival at Westminster post-1918, women disrupted the UK House of Commons by their very presence; WEC is merely a modern manifestation of ‘belligerent women’ demanding more from a very male and masculinised institution. Had women Members from across the House not demanded WEC the Government would not have established it. Its successful creation is a clear example of feminist institutional conversion (Mackay, 2010a, b; Waylen, 2014), where old arrangements—here, a DSC—are co-opted and reinterpreted, in this case to women’s and equalities’ ends, explicitly re-gendering the committee system at Westminster. The 2015 GE proved the classic window of opportunity, but the wider political, institutional and party context constituted this moment as a *gendered opportunity*. Women’s agency was essential to its exploitation. Women MPs came together to argue for the establishment of WEC, reflecting general support for gender equality across parties, and in light of the emerging international norm of GSPs. While constituting an effective reform that potentially tipped Executive–Legislative relationships in the latter’s favour and against a Conservative Government, WEC was represented and mostly received as a continuation of Commons’ scrutiny best practice—and hence much harder to resist.⁴⁸

Informed by the particularities of this case, three important interventions to the established non-gendered parliamentary change literature are made, extending accounts of agency in FI approaches more generally. First, *shared feminist critique*. If there had been no shared consciousness of a parliament structured by gender inequalities there would have been no need for the reform, or its associated and successful campaign. Secondly, *gendered parliamentarianism*, going so far to suggest that the gendered perspectives, relationships and the collaborative acts it supported were necessary conditions for institutional re-gendering. Collaborations between women MPs from different parties aimed at securing GSP reform was more comprehensive than the periodic observations of women MPs working together in the 20th Century on individual policies. In 2015, it had formal, institutional form, the WIP APPG; secured the support of senior women MPs in the two main parties and created a culture among women MPs that would over time see them emerge as collective actors seeking the wider redress of

⁴⁸The Government’s commitment to cost savings has been questioned by the expansion in the size of the House of Lords. 10 March 2011: Column 1087; 1092; 1100; 1116–1117; 1126; 1143.

the Commons' gender insensitivities as a workplace and in respect of substantive representation (Childs, 2016; Childs, forthcoming). Third, *new gendered relationships between Members and Clerks and officials, and, indeed with gender equality activists outside*. These collaborations 'unlocked the doors' by providing crucial technical support, as well as enhancing campaign dynamics.

In studying institutional change, whether seemingly non-gendered or gendered, failure to adopt a gender lens risks producing inaccurate and misleading accounts of parliamentary change. In this instance, the Government's decision to create the WEC is suggestive of a shift in gendered power relations within the UK Parliament, the Conservative party and wider politics. WEC is one of a now considerable set of GSP reforms at Westminster dating from 2015. This is not to suggest that these are compete or permanent. The recent experience of Covid-19 and hybrid parliaments will offer a test of any assumptions of linear GSP progress (SPG, 2021; Smith with Childs, 2021). Subsequent studies of institutional change at Westminster—and more generally—must accordingly be gendered, sensitive to any common ground occupied by Clerks, officials and Members and to the exploration of the agentic possibilities of their interactions within their specific contexts. It is in the gendered institutional relationships that exist between these potential critical actors, and indeed the feminist academic critical actor that lies greater parliamentary re-gendering.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

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