Representation of women: Questions of accountability

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Justice

Justice arguments about women's equal right to participate in public decision-making are the easy ones as Anne Phillips (1995) has observed, and they are the ones enshrined in international instruments. The right of women to participate in public life on an equal basis with men is inscribed in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This

representativeness for the legitimacy of political institutions.

The first symbolic argument, is that the presence of women in parliament increases respect for women in society and is a form of recognition of the equal status of

1994) – women MPs themselves would like to have this effect. A recent study of 39 Western Australian women MPs found that almost without exception they believed that more of their number would lead to a greater emphasis on consensus politics, something summed up in the remark by one of them that: 'desire for consensus may be a woman's greatest contribution to political life' (Black and Phillips 2000: 163). Another recent study of 120 women politicians in Australia and New Zealand also found dismay at masculine parliamentary culture to be a consistent theme (Henderson 1999: 265). However the very norms of parliamentary conduct that have resulted in such disenchantment make it difficult for women to perform effectively and make the hoped-for difference (Broughton 2000). This is exacerbated by the privileging of confrontational politics by the electronic media.

One advantage of proportional representation (PR), apart from increasing the

number of women may go up, they may be from a party in which there is ideological opposition to 'feminism'. Where a party has a strong women's platform, male MPs will probably show stronger support for such issues than women MPs in a party that

neutral in relation to questions of economic distribution, whereas other feminist demands such as childcare and equal pay are seen as requiring public expenditure or intervention in the market incompatible with current globalising economic agendas. In other words, the attraction of the slogan of women's under-representation may in part rest on the assumption that women will *not* make a difference, as well as from the assumption that they will.   As we have noted above, many also believe that globalising agendas have made national parliaments less relevant and therefore there is more room in them for women.

Regardless of the reason, the picking up of the issue by international bodies resulted in rapid policy dissemination across the globe and mutual reinforcement of national and international agendas, through, for example, the reporting process required under CEDAW. This deals with women's equal rights in politics and public life in Article 7

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Group, which focuses on the 'need for better representation for women, both in Parliament worldwide and in the Commonwealth.'

Another source of international pressure to develop programs in this area is provided by multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, particularly those of Northern European and Scandinavian countries. One example was the role played by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and by aid money from Australian and New Zealand in fostering the women in politics movement among Pacific Island countries in the 1990s . From 1995 aid money supported women in politics conferences and the creation of women in politics groups across the region, building on existing networks such as National Councils of Women (Drage 1998). The

Councils around the country and the Office of the Status of Women in Canberra produced 'how-to' manuals, nicely illustrated by feminist cartoonists. Suffrage

aspirations, finding that even feminist parliamentarians with a commitment to making a difference get isolated from each other by the competing pressures of government (Burt et al 2000).

Figure 3

politics. Like its first-wave predecessors, WEL rated parties and candidates on their knowledge of, and commitment to, issues of particular concern to women. It was particularly successful in the 1972 Australian election where it placed new issues on the policy agenda and obtained rapid implementation after the election of a reform government.

As in other countries with strong party systems, most Australian parliamentarians have little scope to vote other than with their party. Hence influencing, monitoring and rating party policies, particularly at election time, is a first priority for advocacy groups. However there is a decreasing trend for party leaders to feel closely bound by an election platform, and an increase in the number of policy decisions that are taken 'on the run', independent of platform commitments. In this context, monitoring and rating of parliamentary interventions is still important in maintaining an accountability nexus between women's movement organisations and the politicians they hope will represent their issues in parliament.

Redesigning political institutions

In relation to parliament itself, feminists have set about doing two things, which they hope will end up as one. The first is to unpick the masculine bias of parliamentary institutions so that women can perform more effectively in them; the second is to create structures to make parliaments more sensitive to gender concerns.

As Carole Pateman (1989) has pointed out, women have been differentially incorporated as citizens, meaning that their primary obligations as citizens have historically been construed as being in the private rather than the public realm. It is only in the last 25 years that there has been real discussion, let alone action, on how public life might be changed to accommodate family responsibilities. Prior to this, women's family responsibilities were construed as insuperable barriers to equal participation in public life.

Parliamentary arrangements have assumed that parliamentary representatives are not at the same time primary carers for family members. Indeed political careers have been regarded in the past as typically a two-person career, where the 'incorporated wife' not only takes over full responsibility for the care of the family but also stands in for the representative, particularly in constituency roles. Today, recommendations for childcare centres, family-friendly sitting hours, parliamentary sessions aligned with school terms and increased travel for family members have become standard in

proposals to reduce the pressure on parliamentarians with family responsibilities. While the Scandinavian and German parliaments have creches, this is uncommon in the English-speaking democracies, including Australia.

In Australia late-night sittings were limited in the federal parliament in 1994, but became less family-friendly again after a change of government in 1996. While it can be argued that late-night sittings in the federal parliament shorten the parliamentary week and enable parliamentarians to return to their families inter-state, perhaps over 2000 miles away, it does not have the same benefit for the families of Canberra-based

committee work is often 'low profile' for the very reason that, at its best, it does not offer the confrontational images on which the electronic media thrive.

Committees are not only a forum for effective performance by women parliamentarians, they may also serve the responsiveness aim by providing a structural focus on gender issues. In Australia, the women's budget process introduced in 1984 required all portfolios to provide gender disaggregated information on outlays for the purposes of a special budget document. Senate Estimates Committees could then use this data to pursue issues of the gender impact of Budget decisions. Unfortunately the women's budget process was finally abolished with the election of a conservative government in 1996 and much less gender-disaggregated Budgetary information is now being provided by government, Committees usually have to make special requests for it.

Subject-specific standing committees found in European parliaments may also help raise awareness of gender issues - for example, committees on women's rights in the Irish, Spanish and European parliaments and on equal opportunities for men and women in the Belgian and Luxembourg parliaments. Such committees have varying mandates, including in the case of the Belgian Senate looking inwards at the working of the parliament and issues such as family-friendly sitting hours and the gender balance of expert witnesses (CCEO, 1997). Apart from such specialist committees, all committees may be given terms of reference which include taking gender impact into account when examining legislative proposals, as in Sweden.

Considerations of how to make parliaments more women-friendly must also extend to

ensure features which will promote more consensual and inclusive forms of political behaviour?

Alice Brown (2000a and 2000b) has provided compelling accounts of how Scottish women campaigned both for greater parliamentary representation of women and for new ways of conducting parliamentary politics . The Scottish parliament not only adopted 'family-friendly hours of operation' but also established a standing Equal Opportunities Committee with a mandate directed both inwards and outwards, requiring it 'to consider and report on matters relating to equal opportunities and upon the observance of equal opportunities within the parliament'. In general the Scottish parliament established a much stronger committee system than that found at Westminster, and as we have seen parliamentary committees provide a forum both for effective performance by women MPs and for outreach to women in the community,

One of the most striking ways in which the Scottish parliament tried to distinguish itself from Westminster was through the adoption of a European-style horseshoe-shaped seating system instead of the traditional opposing benches. This was a logical accompaniment of a new electoral system that fostered a multiparty system, but it was also seen as a symbolic break with the adversarial ways of Westminster. As we have seen, the ritual warfare of Westminster both disadvantages women and feeds into community disenchantment with politics.

At that same time as these features were established in the new Scottish parliament, women's machinery was set up in the Executive to ensure mainstreaming of equality considerations and a Women in Scotland Consultative Forum was established as a channel for women's input into policy processes. Alice Brown reports that despite this sustained effort to create new institutions for a new politics, traditional forms of political behaviour are still very much alive in Scotland, making it difficult to predict what the longer-term effects will be (2000b).

When do women represent women?

Characteristically the 'first women' in parliaments, as beneficiaries of the women's suffrage movement, were expected to be representatives of women at large, in the sense both of standing for and acting for women. As part of a generation of maternal feminists they were usually happy to take on this responsibility of representing the interests of women and children (Sawer 1986). This representational role was

additional to responsibilities to electorate and party. The subsequent willingness of

and paid party work. Politics as a professional career usually means party and factional discipline taking precedence over other affiliations.

Another countervailing influence, impinging on whether politicians were willing to 'represent women', was the discursive shift taking place on the right of politics. By the 1990s the conservative parties in Australia were positioning themselves as 'governing for the mainstream', undistracted by 'special interests' such as women and other equality-seeking groups. This has meant that Coalition women parliamentarians have been particularly anxious to avoid the career-threatening implications of being identified as an advocate for women or belonging to the sisterhood (Henderson 1999: 150).

Despite the variable willingness of women politicians to 'represent women', the expectations of the community are that they will do so. We have already noted expectations that women will bring greater altruism and consensus-seeking to politics. There are also expectations that women politicians will share the concerns of women in the community (Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996; Wängnerud 1999). The electorate expects greater responsiveness from those who share their social characteristics and women and women's non-government organisations still tend to look 9ea30.2 (nd)en .2 (l) 070(a) 0M iti(e) 0(a) 0-0.2 (o0(a) 0t) 0.2 (iuppo.9 (a) 0.58.n

gender equality, through requiring committees routinely to examine the gender impact of proposals and to hear from both male and female witnesses, or through changing the mode of operation of committees to make them more women-friendly.

Conclusion

It is parliamentarians who have been given the mandate to engage in legislative deliberation and executive scrutiny and are therefore in a position to hold governments to their international commitments to improve rather than diminish the status of women.

Who will hold parliamentarians, whether male or female, accountable for their contribution to advancing the status of women?   It is the lack of accountability mechanisms which has been one of the major criticisms of identity politics and of the mirror theory of representation (Squires 1996: 84). Discourses of difference assume too readily that those with certain characteristics and related life experiences will act in ways inflected by those experiences.   On the other hand, where strong accountability mechanisms do exist, as with reserved seats elected by those who identify as Indigenous peoples, this is seen as having the narrowing effects of corporatism rather than the broadening effects of seeking to represent diverse interests and views.

I have already noted the significance of separate institution-building for strategies of accountability. One important aim of EMILY's List, for example, is both to support the feminists it has assisted into parliament and to hold them accountable. It is clearly not sufficient to assist feminists into parliament (let alone women *per se*). There have to be strategies to support feminists operating within political institutions where the institutional culture is antithetical to feminism.   The non-party women's politicup

cannot expect campaigns for the greater presence of women in politics to give up on 'making a difference' discourse. There is too much advantage in suggesting to an electorate deeply cynical and apathetic about traditional politics that women will do politics differently. These discursive appeals have great resonance because voters believe that women are more altruistic than men and more concerned with human consequences of policy.

As we have seen, the ambiguous demand for the increased 'representation of women' has been effective in mobilising support and achieving a range of institutional reforms. The impact of this discursive strategy has been strengthened through its inscription in international instruments such as the Beijing Platform for Action. Providing the structures that will enable women parliamentarians to perform more effectively and that will enhance responsiveness of parliaments to women in the community is the next step.

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