

Negotiating Gendered Institutions: Women's Parliamentary Friendships

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In 1997, an unprecedented number of female MPs — 120 — were elected to the UK House of Commons, doubling the numbers of female representatives overnight. Of these, 101 came from a single party: Labour. They entered a political institution that had hitherto been massively male-dominated (even in 1997, their number counted less than 20%) and famed for its historic traditions dominated by masculinized structures and norms (Lovenduski 2005; 2010). Many of the newly elected Labour women were known to each other, having already shared experiences of passing through their party's internal selection processes over the preceding years. Many broadly shared the same views of what the Labour party should stand for, ideologically speaking, and most were attitudinally feminist (Childs 2004). The mass media at the time of the general election, and thereafter, routinely constituted them as a collective entity — Blair's Babes — and the specifically right-wing media regularly subjected them to highly gendered criticism (Childs 2008, 140–165).

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A few years after their election, as the first female minister resigned from the government, a leading UK parliamentary sketch writer, Quentin Letts, called direct attention to the existence of what he labeled Labour's sisterhood. Writing of the 2003 resignation of Clare Short, then secretary of state for international development, he wrote that when "under attack," the sisterhood "circle the wagons."¹ He recounted the parliamentary scene:

Soon after she entered at 4:01 PM, she was kissed, hard, by tweedy, sensibly-shod Angela Eagle (Lab, Wallasey). Another embrace came from Ann Keen (Lab, Brentford). . . . Mrs. Keen handed Miss Short a postcard. From above I could see it bore the old slogan "Women with Labour for the Children's Sake". . . . Jean Corston, head of the Parliamentary Labour Party, had slotted herself into a place near Miss Short. Her arrival meant that all four MPs directly behind Miss Short were women. *The sisterhood is in a strop* (emphasis added).²

Writing six years later using the same frame, Letts reported on the resignation of the first female home secretary, Jacqui Smith:

Her friend Caroline Flint, Europe Minister, was present. Miss Flint is a great ally of Hazel Blears. . . . Shortly before the debate, Gisela Stuart (Lab, Edgebaston) rushed in to have a girlie with Miss Smith. Good old Gisela patted the doomed Home Secretary on the arm and gave her words of encouragement. Miss Smith rewarded her with a dazzling grin.

In these two journalistic accounts, a certain kind of friendship among Labour's women is depicted — one premised on a particular reading of gender relations and notably constituted as problematic. Labour's women are, in the first instance, feminists with a shared political identity. Second, they are portrayed as unreasonably unhappy, hence their stropmy stance. Yet an alternative feminist reading is possible: operating in a masculinized political environment (both within Parliament and the broader political culture), Labour women's parliamentary friendships constitute a political resource, hitherto underacknowledged, that female MPs apparently mobilize in support of each other.

1. Dodson (2006, 17) talks of U.S. Congressmen in "fear" of being outnumbered, "circle the wagons."

2. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/columnists/article-228514/No-fiddling-protocol-She-just-let-rip.html#ixzz1IHC3ZFhc> (accessed April 1, 2013). My systematic analysis of UK national newspaper coverage of ministerial resignations uncovered no evidence of Labour female MPs supporting female ministers in such a fashion, although this may be a limitation of the research component rather than proof that the phenomenon itself does not exist. Details are available from the author. Note that Letts adopts this frame in respect to the resignation of Robin Cook, too, so it might be one of his signature frames.

Informed by insights from the feminist institutionalism literature and drawing more specifically on recent work on parliamentary rituals, this article examines the second reading: that Labour's female MPs' friendships constitute a practice that reflects and seeks to counter gendered experiences of British party politics. I open by providing a short summary of feminist institutionalism before mapping the three extant approaches to the study of friendships in political studies. I then show how the idea and practice of women's parliamentary friendships enhance existing understandings of feminist institutionalism — namely, that a shared sense of identity and experiences manifested through friendship can, at least in certain circumstances, enable female representatives to negotiate gendered political institutions. Interview data from Labour women suggest that female MPs consider themselves part of a Labour women's friendship network. Many claim to experience positively their group identity as Labour women and to support their female Labour colleagues with deeds as well as words in both a personal and political fashion. I then explore media representations of women's and men's friendship among Labour MPs to show how women's parliamentary friendships are considered inappropriate for politics in singularly gendered ways: women's friendships are sometimes depicted as fake — just like among schoolgirls in the playground — and yet, and at the same time, threatening to politics as it is currently known and practiced. Female MPs' friendships, because they are based on gendered, if not feminist, sensibilities, challenge dominant expectations that political relationships in UK politics are formed around shared left/right ideology. In this case, Labour women apparently privilege their gender above their party identity — mobilizing *as women* within their own party and mobilizing *on the basis of inhabiting a gendered environment*. In so doing, their friendships destabilize accepted understandings of appropriate partisan norms of behavior within parties, within parliament, and within UK politics more generally.

GENDERED INSTITUTIONALISM AND PARLIAMENTARY FRIENDSHIPS

The study of gender and electoral politics — and women's substantive representation more specifically — often reveals the way in which institutions mediate and constrain representatives' behavior by prescribing the formal rules of the game, the informal norms, and

associated notions of acceptable behavior (Childs 2008; Childs and Krook 2006; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; Franceschet 2010; Hawkesworth 2003). Even if gender and politics scholars have, until recently, rarely used the language of institutionalism (Krook and Mackay 2010, 5; Waylen 2010), there is broad agreement that political institutions are gendered (Crawford and Pini 2011; Franceschet 2010; Hawkesworth 2003; Lovenduski 2005; Puwar 2004) and that masculinized gender is imbued in political institutions established by and for men (Chappell 2010; Krook and Mackay 2010; Lovenduski 1998). As an approach to the study of politics, feminist institutionalism seeks to map the “formal architecture and informal networks, connections, conventions, rules and norms of institutions” and consider how these differentially exert an impact on women and men and on differently raced women and men (Grace 2010; Hawkesworth 2003; Kenny and Lowndes 2011; Lovenduski 1998). It also constructs accounts “of the processes through which these differences come to be present” (Lovenduski 2010, x; 1998; see also Crawford and Pini 2011) and explores how “changing gender relations might alter” institutions, for example, through the entrance of women into particular institutions, as well as by taking agency more seriously (Lovenduski 2010, ix). Regendering of political institutions is possible (Beckwith 2005) through layering (where new institutional elements are added, ultimately supplanting older ones); conversion (where old arrangements are co-opted and reinterpreted); displacement (the removal of old institutional elements); and drift (where old arrangements are actively neglected and/or co-opted) (Mackay 2010, 186). There may also be reversal (Kenny 2010; Kenny and Lowndes 2010). Feminist institutionalists debate whether informal norms and rules are particularly resistant to change (Franceschet 2010, 62; Mackay 2010).³

Feminist institutional accounts are further enhanced by insights garnered from innovative political science research on ceremony and ritual in parliaments.⁴ While frequently dismissed as a “cultural sideshow” by political scientists (Crewe 2005, 200; Crewe and Muller 2006), ceremony and ritual “shed more light on how institutional power structures are produced and reproduced.” Distinguished from the ceremonial, parliamentary ritual refers to the everyday practices and behavior undertaken unthinkingly by political actors, albeit based on

3. See also Kenny and Lowndes (2011, 6) for a discussion of the extant literature in this respect.

4. The Leverhulme Trust recently funded a four-year, multidisciplinary, multi-institutional comparative research program into gendered ceremony and ritual in parliaments: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/gcrp/>.

norms and assumptions (Malley 2009, 12). Such approaches generate improved analysis of how representatives negotiate and manage their gender identity within institutions (Ibid., 15), with female representatives' sense of belonging to and feelings of efficacy within particular political institutions influenced by an institution's ritualized norms and practices. Indeed, because they have the potential to enhance positive feelings among female representatives and enhance their ability to act effectively as parliamentarians, parliamentary friendships should be of greater interest to scholars of gender and politics. In the words of Devere and Curtin (2009, 95), who do not make the link to institutionalism explicit, a focus on friendships might help reveal the means by which female politicians "have negotiated being the 'other' in the public world of politics," in challenging the gendered norms of politics (Devere and Curtin 2009, 95).

Unfortunately, gender and politics scholars know much less than they should about the existence and practice of friendships among female political actors, which is, in part, a reflection of women's more recent entrance into electoral politics.⁵ Devere and Smith (2010) identify three main approaches to the study of friendship in political studies more broadly: (1) *descriptive* accounts examine the "impact and function of friendship on and in politics" — highlighting solidarity, care, and reciprocity — but also friendship as a tool of power, exclusion, and confrontation; (2) *analytic* approaches trace the concept within the history of political ideas or relate friendship to other political concepts, such as power, justice, and democracy; and (3) *normative* accounts, which seek "to promote friendship as a political good or ideal" because friendship promotes equality, justice, and democracy.⁶ The first and third of these approaches speak most directly to the concerns of this article. If the former clarifies the presence of women's parliamentary friendship, then the latter points to the contribution it makes to more gender-equal, more democratic politics.

Describing the practice of parliamentary friendships among female legislators in particular institutions looks, then, to be a necessary first step in filling gaps in the existing scholarship.⁷ It might be surmised that

5. This also reflects the fact that most gender and politics scholars have adopted traditional political science approaches. I'd like to thank Elizabeth Evans for putting this point to me.

6. Devere and Smith (2010, 343) also discuss the ontological approach, where friendship refers to a "fundamental category for understanding bonds between person and person."

7. Comparisons between female and male representatives' parliamentary friendships would also be illuminating but are not central to the argument being made in this article.

fulsome evidence of women's friendships in the UK parliament will be forthcoming and that this might be little different from instances of friendships among women in other walks of life. In western societies, at least, women are expected to have a circle of close friends.⁸ As for female political actors, a few historical studies and (auto)biographical accounts document the importance of female friends to individual female politicians (Devere and Curtin 2009).⁹ Such women's friendships are found to have supplied important emotional support (Ibid., 92–93). Yet constraining the potential for women's parliamentary friendships to act as a resource is a normative concern regarding the appropriateness of friendships in politics and the appropriateness of women's friendships in politics in particular (Devere and Smith 2010). Just as women's bodily presence was once thought to disturb politics, so, too, might women's friendships, even as, or indeed because, their political presence is increasingly an empirical reality (Yoder 1991). Limited existing research informs us that women's friendships have often met with hostility or have been regarded as dangerous and of lesser quality — associated with the specter of lesbianism and threatening to male power (Devere and Curtin 2009, 95). While feminists would surely want to problematize this opposition between the public and the private and the corresponding questioning of the appropriateness of friendships in the former but not in the latter (Ibid., 90–91), the expectation here is that women's friendships in politics will likely be perceived as an unwelcome intrusion, both by their male colleagues and the wider commentariat.

DATA

I adopt a dual research design so as to gain a good understanding of the potential for women's parliamentary friendships to act as a resource. Interviews with female Labour MPs present in Parliament between 1997 and 2000 establish the nature and extent of women's parliamentary friendships, or more precisely, MPs' *claims* about their friendships.

8. I make no claims here about the empirical veracity of these claims. See Walker (1994) for an account that summarizes the extant literature. She finds that when talking about friendship in general, women and men subscribe to culturally specific notions of women having more emotional friendships and men having more active friendships. When talking about their own friends, however, men, especially in the working class, are more likely to speak of intimate friendships; middle-class women are found to have less intimate friendships than working-class women.

9. Devere and Curtin (2009, 87) note, however, that friendship has been analyzed in respect to the women's movement, where the "personal is political ... ensured a consideration of personal relationships, including friendship."

Analysis of media coverage of Labour women's friendships then captures representations of these friendships and, in particular, whether they are regarded as fitting for the political sphere. The interviews, undertaken in 2009, are with 18 Labour women first elected to the House of Commons in 1997.¹⁰ The interviewees are not representative of the 1997 Labour women's intake overall, as they are more likely than the noninterviewed women to have been selected as parliamentary candidates via the Labour party's sex quota (known as All Women Shortlists) (Childs 2004). I further qualify conclusions based on these data, as I rely on MPs' claims about, rather than objective observations of, parliamentary friendships. Lastly, in the absence of interviews with equivalent male MPs, there is no way of knowing whether the latter would have made similar claims, a limitation that is partially offset by data from the second research component.

I capture media representations of parliamentary friendships through analysis of the print media. I undertook a LexisNexus search of all national newspapers two days before, two days after, and on the day of a sample of ministerial resignations under new Labour. The sample included all resigning female ministers and a random sample of resigning men. The female cases were chosen precisely because of the potential for friendships to bear on the media's framing.¹¹ The inclusion of male cases permits comparison of representations of male and female parliamentary friendships, whether depictions occur for both sexes, and whether there are gendered differences in the accounts of parliamentary friendships.¹² The search terms were the names of the resigning minister. Between 1997 and 2010, 16 female Labour ministers resigned, out of a total of 45.¹³ The extent of newspaper coverage varied considerably,

10. The women are a subset of 34 women first interviewed in 1997 and interviewed on a second occasion in 2000.

11. This is compatible with the aim of the research, which is to explore the nature of the representations made of parliamentary friendships rather than systematically count the number and timing of representations of women's parliamentary friendships.

12. All cabinet ministers, male and female, garnered newspaper coverage at the time of their resignation. But this is not the case for five female government ministers and two of the selected male ministers.

13. Of the women, five resigned from the Cabinet and 11 from the lower ranks of government. The figures for men are 13 and 16, respectively. One woman — Beverley Hughes — resigned twice as a government minister, as did Peter Mandelson and David Blunkett from the Cabinet. Three female Cabinet ministers resigned under Tony Blair and two under Gordon Brown. At the ministerial level, the figures are seven and five, respectively, with Hughes having resigned under both leaders. As a percentage of resigning ministers, women constitute 36%. (I'd like to thank Francesca Gains and Claire Annesley, 2010 for their data.) Under Blair, the average ministerial resignation was 2.2 per year (I would like to thank Philip Cowley for his data.) Figures for Brown show that in the three years he was prime minister, 15 ministers resigned, an average of 5 per year.

particularly by seniority, but at least at the cabinet level, not obviously by sex (see Appendix).

WHAT THE NEW LABOUR WOMEN SAY: “ACTUALLY, IT’S ABOUT A FRIENDSHIP”

It is not necessary to establish that Labour’s female MPs are *only* friends with women or that *all* women MPs are friends with each other in order to support the overarching claim for the existence of women’s parliamentary friendships in the UK House of Commons or to support the claim that this may subsequently constitute a resource that female MPs can deploy. Rather, it is necessary to determine the nature of the friendships the Labour women claim to have with (some) female colleagues.¹⁴ When describing their friendships in Parliament in general terms,¹⁵ one female MP held that hers reflect a shared trade union background. A couple of other MPs remarked that theirs “crossed” the floor of the House — that is, were not limited to Labour MPs. A few considered that friendships derived from shared membership of committees and other parliamentary associations or activities or from shared political attitudes. A greater number — seven — argued that their friends were those who represented constituencies next to or near their own — that is, shared geography; the same number spoke of the importance of parliamentary cohort, of MPs arriving together in the House, for forging friendship relations akin to school or university years, although shared gender played a role here, too.

All that said, the overwhelming majority of MPs described their parliamentary friendships as primarily between fellow Labour women, especially those elected for the first time in 1997. All but two of the interviewees say they experienced, in a positive fashion, a sense of collective identity as members of the 1997 intake of female Labour MPs. And of the two who stand apart, one admits that other women “feel part of a group,” a difference of experience she explains away by her personality type (she regards herself of something of a loner). The

14. Research in the 1980s in the United States suggests that the major drivers of political friendships within the Ohio state legislature included attitudes toward legislative life, shared understandings of legislative roles, common committee service, shared partisanship, and spatial proximity (Caldeira and Patterson 1987). Note, however, that legislators were asked to identify which of their fellow legislators were their closest friends, defined as those they “most frequently” see “outside the chamber.” Sex appeared not to be one of their variables.

15. The question was phrased in a generic and not gendered way: for example, who do you associate with, hang out with, in Parliament?

second acknowledges a “sisterhood” within her parliamentary party but claims to have withdrawn from it because she felt it represented a certain “middle class type of feminism,” for which she had little sympathy. For three other MPs, the group identity of the 1997 intake was more tangible in the earlier years of the Labour government, diminishing somewhat over time as women left Parliament or were promoted, which, according to one MP, reduces the time available to “hang out” and restricts what can be said between them.¹⁶ Even so, one of these MPs maintains that she is still “pretty friendly with nearly all the women” and that “we moan together, collectively share our experiences.”

What does being part of new Labour’s women mean to the women? The symbolic importance of, and pride in, the record number of women entering in 1997 was forcefully made: “The fact that there was a good number of women at long last was very important and still is.” The 1997 intake is “very special”; it is not “a nebulous” thing but more real: “we were all Blair Babes together.” Another remarks: “We’d been through a lot to get ourselves into a position where we could be elected . . . [some were] friends, but [also] others who I’d met whilst we were candidates.” And according to yet another: “There was camaraderie between us that will never go . . . there was some special moments.”

The friendships among the women are manifest in both a personal and a political dimension. In respect to the former, this involves a “kind of more pastoral support, the mutual support that we had of one another” — hugging a woman in the tearoom; sending a note or a text; or having supper. In respect to the political dimension, it might involve ringing up a colleague — “someone that you can trust” and “somebody that understands where you are coming from” — to get their insight on how to vote. Or it might mean that on a particular policy, there were people who could be asked to support your position. Similarly, other Labour women would sign their Early Day Motion (a parliamentary motion rarely debated in the House but that acts to signal political interests).¹⁷ Note, however, that when female MPs come together as a group, perhaps dining in the House, the women were cognizant of being viewed as troublesome — either because they may want a table for too

16. Note that for another MP, being in government enhances the friendships with other female ministers.

17. In earlier case study research on the reduction of the value-added taxation (VAT) on sanitary products, it was established that Christine McCafferty, who headed the campaign, sought to get the signatures of all Labour’s female MPs (Childs and Withey 2006).

many people all at once, or suspiciously, because they must be plotting (a point returned to later).

The form and importance of the friendships, at least in these MPs' views, are distinct from friendships in other places of work. For sure, the MPs behave toward each other as they believe they would outside of Parliament, supporting each other and having a laugh about "our own sex lives," holding onto "[our] humanity." But it also reflects Parliament's institutional specificity. First, it has to do with its structure and organization: "You're here from 8 o'clock in the morning until 12 o'clock at night ... so you do need to be able to ring up some people and say 'Oh ... what time are you going for dinner?'" Second, it has to do with the parliamentary culture that is experienced as "so tough and so hard ... the ability to reveal yourself emotionally to a few people is so valuable, and you can't always do that with men." In the competitive world of politics, then, it is important for these women that they could come together "without sitting there feeling as if your woman friend is looking you up and down, as if you're a threat." Third, and most importantly, it reflects what the MPs consider as the very gendered environment they experience, and the corresponding gendered criticism they face as female representatives. Previous research based on interviews with Labour women first elected in 1997 reveals their collective perceptions of Westminster as very much aping an English public school (that is, privately rather than state funded), in which the expected behavior and style of politics — and the value associated with such behavior — reflected established masculinized modes of interaction and devalued a "women's style" of politics (Childs 2004; 2008). Reconsider the "chamber moment" highlighted by the parliamentary sketches reproduced in the introduction and the women's very "public show of camaraderie and solidarity."¹⁸ One ex-minister reflected on the first time she returned to the floor of the House after she had left government: "I didn't want to go in on my own, so two or three of my friends would come in and sit with me." Another of her colleagues makes clear that the women would keep "an eye on [women] when they [are] making the personal statement. Another spoke at greater length:

18. There is, of course, the possibility that men sit in support of male ministers, too, but that it is simply less noticeable. According to the women I interviewed, support for men is, in any case, mostly regarded as less organized, less frequent, and qualitatively distinct. One woman noted how, following revelations of a senior male minister's extramarital affair, some Labour women were censorious rather than supportive.

You know what's going to come up, and you'll think, there's a woman who's going to need all the support she can get, so you go in . . . she's going to need a few women there . . . there'll be men there as well, but actually, it does help to have other women who will sympathize with you and understand the predicament you are facing, so I would always try to be there.

Note that the women were able to act in this fashion because of the House of Commons's seating arrangements: there are benches rather than individual allocated seats and desks.¹⁹

Accounting for female MPs engaging in such public support for a fellow Labour woman is, for most of the women, best understood as "subconscious," "organic," "natural" — it "just happens." To reiterate the point, it is "inherent" and "innate"; "it's just the way women are." "You just know that the other women will support you," is how one MP puts it. "I would break a leg to be there if it was a woman . . . you may be a bit worried that there won't be many there, so you'd better show up," says another.

The MPs' concern to support other Labour women is also very much about gender politics: about standing up for and being a "sister." This concern has two dimensions. First, it reflects solidarity. In the words of one MP, and very much in line with what has already been stated, the women do not want it to look like a woman has been "abandoned." As one admitted, "It's going to sound really corny, but I do think there's a bit of a sense of sisterhood . . . I think there's a certain sort of thing, what was it, about the person[al] is political." Yet another agreed that "it's personal." And even one of the two women who had distanced themselves from the other Labour women admits that she would be more inclined to "drop a note" to a female MP with whom she had a relationship and who was facing criticism, compared with a man in a similar situation. Her reasoning was that "probably women do have different support networks . . . the lads can sort it themselves." Another MP, reflecting on the resignation of Estelle Morris (who resigned as education minister, maintaining she had not been as successful in the job as she had wanted), noted that this was a particularly important collective moment for Labour's women.²⁰ There was a shared perception that had Morris received more fulsome support from them,

19. In institutions with individual desks, such behavior would not be possible. I'd like to thank Liam Laurence Smyth for making this point.

20. Sylvia Bashevkin (2009), writing of Canadian politics, notes how female party leaders (and, by implication, all female MPs) are often held to be poor leaders (and inferior politicians) on the basis of having led parties to defeat. But she notes that the individual women were not responsible for

then she might never have felt it necessary to leave her post. The same mistake would not, it was implied, be made again.

The second dimension of women's support for each other reflects the MPs' reading of the explicitly gendered nature of the Commons and the gendered criticism of women therein. The MP "wouldn't have done" what it is they stand accused of, "or there is a back story." Attacks are felt to be "grossly unfair"; women face "a baying mob"; there is overt, covert, and systemic discrimination;²¹ "there is an element of this being *because they were women*" (emphasis added). Such attacks are, on occasion, explicitly said to combine the partisan and the gendered:

It's the fact that, if you've got a whole bunch of Tory [Conservative] men ganging up on a woman, then, the women will sit round. Whereas if it's a bloke, a bloke attacked by blokes ... I think that just produces a whole different response.

Despite the dominant narrative provided to explain their behavior, a number of the MPs' statements suggest that it might be rather more organized than they first appear willing to admit. For example, one senior MP draws attention to the conscious organizing role of Harriet Harman in sending around a message. Harman is a leading Labour woman, first elected to Parliament in 1982, an unapologetic feminist with a longstanding track record on acting for women (Childs 2004, 2008). A second MP contends that the mobilization was more formalized in respect to Estelle Morris' resignation. There is, in other words, a women MPs' "grapevine" — "chatting and gossiping." "People will sort of go, you know ... shall we go and make sure we're there when so and so, you know, asks so and so? And if anyone is hurt in any way, we will gather around."

There is among the female MPs' reflections almost no evidence of wider, cross-party friendships among women. Adversarialism is a longstanding feature of Westminster politics.²² The significant asymmetry in the numbers of women in the other parties and interparty competition over women's descriptive and substantive representation, are additional factors. From 1997 to 2001, there were only 13 Conservative

their party's decline, having been mostly appointed when the crisis was already imminent. Such observations suggest the need to challenge subjective and gendered accounts of the good politician.

21. As evidence of this, the MP cites parliamentary hours and the lack of maternity leave.

22. See Young (1997) for discussion of cross-party associations in the Canadian parliament: one focused on women's access to politics and acted as a support for female MPs; the other was more focused on policy. Note, however, that Young did not talk of either as being based on friendship, although they were clearly informed by gendered and, indeed, feminist analysis.

women and only three from the third party, the Liberal Democrats. The lack of any formal institutions for women, such as a cross-party women's parliamentary caucus, which might engender friendships across the floor of the House, is moreover absent from the UK parliament.²³ And while the House's Lady Members room is available for all women, between 1997 and 2010 it was most frequently populated by Labour women, not least by dint of their greater number. And this is one location where many of Labour's women's friendships are said to take place — "you sometimes finish up making phone calls ... or reading a paper ... and somebody will come in." The Parliamentary Labour Party's (PLP) women's group — an organization that engages in substantive political activity, not least campaigning on particular women's issues through inviting ministers to speak and be questioned²⁴ — is named as a second important site for their friendship.²⁵

WHAT THE PAPERS SAID

The account by New Labour's women of their parliamentary friendships is pretty clear: they perceive themselves as inhabiting a political institution within which they are subject to explicit and implicit gendered criticism. According to their considerations, the friendships Labour women have with each other constitute a personal and political support resource. In other words, their friendships offer succour from a highly masculinized House of Commons. Yet turning to analysis of media representations of parliamentary friendships, it is apparent that there are differences in the media's accounts of male and female political friendships. Men are said to have fewer friends in politics, and the relationships among men are of association and alliance. The women are much more likely to be presented as having friends, although there is a concern over whether these are "real" friendships, with the specter of schoolgirl bitchiness never far away. The dominant representation of Labour women's

23. This is the case, despite the institutional presence of the Lady Members room. Note, too, that in 1997, Parliament's Conservative women numbered a mere 13 to Labour's 101. Adversarialism is notable through observation at parliamentary events and, indeed, parliamentary debates relating to women and politics. (See, for example, Childs and Webb 2012; discussions at the 2012 *Political Quarterly* workshop at Birkbeck College). The All Party Group on Women in Parliament is a new UK parliamentary group, but one that lies outside the timeframe of this study, although it might suggest the possibility of change in (women's) parliamentary friendships.

24. There is almost no research on the PLP women's group (Childs 2004; Childs and Withey 2006, *en passant*).

25. Addressing specifically the Chamber moments, two women identify the Parliamentary Labour Party's women's group as a space in which the women discuss what can be done.

friendships was, without doubt, of the inappropriateness of friendships based on gender.

Representations of Male Political Friendships: Allies, Praetorian, and Republican Guards

The language of friendship is both less frequently used and differently framed by the British print media for relations between male MPs. To be sure, some individual male MPs are identified as being friends with other (mostly male) MPs. But, more often than not, Labour's male politicians are considered political associates — signalled through the military terms of allies, Praetorian, and Republican Guards.²⁶ In the context of Blairite/Brownite intraparty division, friendships are claimed between the following MPs: Alan Milburn and Stephen Byers;²⁷ Milburn, Byers, and John Hutton;²⁸ Milburn and Andy Burnham;²⁹ David Milliband and James Purnell;³⁰ Burnham and Purnell;³¹ Purnell, and Miliband, Hutton, Peter Mandelson, and Tessa Jowell.³² Their friendships are, then, underpinned by shared political beliefs — they share ideological or factional identities — which is just one of the dimensions of women's parliamentary friendships. The print media also spent a considerable amount of column inches contemplating Blair's political friends, with the nature of these friendships much criticized. Blair had tried “to accommodate his friends” by giving them jobs in government, only to have his cronies “let him down,” after which he realized that “obligations to friends can't stand in the way of running the country.”³³ Such friendships were evidently inappropriate in, and damaging to, the political realm — contra the normative account of friendships in political literature, identified by Devere and Curtin (2009); they got in the way of good government and were regarded as a personal character flaw of then Prime Minister Blair.

26. *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, and *Independent*, March 18, 2003.

27. *Guardian*, June 13, 2003.

28. *Independent*, June 6, 2009.

29. *Telegraph*, June 5, 2009.

30. *Telegraph*, June 6, 2009; *Independent on Sunday*, June 6, 2009.

31. *Mirror*, June 5, 2009.

32. *Times*, June 5, 2009.

33. *Telegraph*, June 28, 2007; *Times*, October 12, 1999; *Daily Mail*, October 11, 1999; *Telegraph*, June 23, 2007; *Daily Mail*, June 28, 2007; *Sunday Mirror*, June 15, 2003; *The Sunday Times*, June 24, 2007; *Times*, June 30, 2007; *Telegraph*, June 28, 2007; *Independent on Sunday*, June 24, 2007; *Mirror*, June 25, 2007; *Mail on Sunday*, July 1, 2007.

Representations of Women's Friendships: Blairites, WAGs, and Sisters

Labour's women were, from the time of the 1997 general election, described in collective terms. The moniker Blair's Babes defined them in a direct, and subservient, relationship with the prime minister. Under his successor, the term looks to have taken on a more pointed meaning: in effect, read *Blairite* Babes. Accordingly, membership may be said to have shifted from an indiscriminate collective grouping (albeit one that also referred to the modernizing tendencies of New Labour) to one with more ideological underpinnings — now restricted to those female MPs who have “fallen out of love with Mr. Brown” and who, “without waiting for a divorce, decided to leave the cheerless home he offered.”³⁴ And in the coverage of Brown's premiership, there is an emergence of a new label for some of Labour's women MPs: WAGs — Women Against Gordon, which takes prominence, alongside sisterhood, and other gendered terms such as the Blair Witch Project,³⁵ the volupts,³⁶ and the Stilleto brigade.³⁷ These female ministers and MPs are — in the context of the resignations under Brown — involved variously in a cashmere,³⁸ petticoat,³⁹ powder puff,⁴⁰ or Pugin Room plot.⁴¹ There is, notably, considerable overlap in membership of WAGs, Sisters, and Blairite Babes (see Table 1). Note that MPs Harriet Harman and Yvette Cooper are identified in contra distinction as two of Mr. Brown's closest allies in Cabinet,⁴² even as Harman is identified as the sisterhood's Mother Superior.⁴³

Being labeled by the press as a member of the Blairite Babes, WAGs, or sisterhood does not, however, necessarily connote personal friendship. So, which MPs and ministers were designated specifically as friends by the press? Caroline Flint and Hazel Blears,⁴⁴ both of whom were in the “Division Belles” (Parliament's all-female tap-dancing troupe, which might itself constitute an informal institution within the

34. *Telegraph*, June 2, 2009.

35. *Sun*, June 6, 2009; *Mail on Sunday*, June 7, 2009.

36. *Times*, June 4, 2009.

37. *Mirror*, June 4, 2009.

38. *Sunday Telegraph*, June 7, 2009.

39. *Mirror*, June 5, 2009.

40. *Guardian*, June 9, 2009.

41. *Times*, June 4, 2009; June 6, 2009. The Pugin Room is one of the bars at Westminster. <http://www.parliament.uk/site-information/foi/foi-responses/foi-disclosures-2011/foi-disclosures-july—september-2011/bars-in-the-house-of-commons/>

42. *Mail on Sunday*, June 7, 2009.

43. *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2009.

44. *Mail on Sunday*, June 7, 2009; *Independent*, June 4, 2009.

Table 1. Membership of the WAGs, the Sisterhood, and Blairite Babes

	WAGs	Sisterhood	Blairite Babes
Harman		X	
Blears	X	X	X
Flint	X	X	X
Smith	X	X	X
Kelly	X	X	
Jowell*	X	X	
Hughes	X	X	X
Hewitt	X	X	X
Prentice	X		
Kennedy	X		
McDonagh		X	X
Ryan		X	X
Hodge		X	
Anderson		X	
Mactaggart		X	
Sources:	<i>Mail on Sunday</i> , June 7, 2009; <i>Guardian</i> , June 3, 2009; <i>Observer</i> , June 7, 2009; <i>Independent</i> , June 4, 2009	<i>Daily Mail</i> , June 4, 2009; <i>Sun</i> , June 6, 2009; <i>Times</i> , June 4, 2009	<i>Sun</i> , June 6, 2009; <i>Mail on Sunday</i> , June 24, 2007; <i>Times</i> , June 4, 2009

*Mary Riddell (*Daily Telegraph*, June 6, 2009) contends that Jowell had been “commendably loyal” to Brown.

House);⁴⁵ Jacqui Smith and Blears;⁴⁶ Flint, Smith, and Blears;⁴⁷ and Blears and Melanie Hughes.⁴⁸ Some reports questioned these friendships and, in so doing, women’s and girls’ friendships more generally, reinforcing everyday assumptions about sex, gender, and friendship. They suggested (1) that Smith blamed Blears for the leaking of her resignation;⁴⁹ (2) that Smith refused Blears’ suggestion to step down together;⁵⁰ (3) that Smith and Blears thought Flint had “gone too far;”⁵¹ (4) that, despite “sisterly warmth,” Smith and Blears were never “best friends;”⁵² and (5) that

45. *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2009; *Telegraph*, June 4, 2009.
46. *Telegraph*, June 4, 2009; *Sun*, June 4, 2009; *Telegraph*, June 4, 2009; *Telegraph*, June 3, 2009; *Independent*, June 4, 2009.
47. *Sun*, June 6, 2009; *Guardian*, June 3, 2009.
48. *Observer*, April 4, 2004.
49. *Times*, June 4, 2009; *Telegraph*, June 3, 2009.
50. *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2009.
51. *Sunday Telegraph*, June 7, 2009.
52. *Telegraph*, June 6, 2009.

rather than being “fiercely loyal to each other . . . Hazel and her Sisterhood will all have fallen out with each other long before poor old Gordon is dispatched.”⁵³

According to the newspaper reports, the WAGs’ friendships were manifest in “six weekly” pesto and Chianti dinners⁵⁴ (or in the words of the *Daily Mail*,⁵⁵ “whinging sessions,” diarized as “girls night out”⁵⁶); a meeting the previous Christmas “to discuss the prospect of a joint bid to push the PM out;”⁵⁷ and the “giant bouquet” that the departing Minister Blears was presented with on resigning.⁵⁸ Some newspaper reports contained the direct views of the MPs themselves and/or their proxies. A spokesperson for Blears is said to have clarified that the women met for dinner “as friends” (personal dimension). These were “regular social events,” rather than places where plots against the PM were planned.⁵⁹ That any meeting of female MPs invites gender suspicion from male colleagues rather than constitutes evidence of anything more political (or sinister) is highlighted, not least by Flint, who noted that nobody had suggested that her male colleague Purnell had been “chatting to people over a pasta and pesto dinner.”⁶⁰ One of the women cited in the *Times* newspaper provides more detail:

Any Monday or Tuesday evening you would find some or all of us in one of the tea rooms in the Commons. We meet because we are friends and [of] our social circle rather than because we share the same views. One male MP told me he was really jealous of us because of our friends . . . we are all friends, even though we have very different political careers.

Another explained, too, that while they were all Blairites (a political identity),

We all first got together in 1997. We are all hard workers and campaigners. We all have a reputation for doing quite a lot for our constituents. I think that that is quite a female thing. We all try to stick up for one another. But there is no coup.⁶¹

53. *Daily Mail*, June 5, 2009; June 4, 2009.

54. *Mail on Sunday*, June 7, 2009.

55. *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2009.

56. *Times*, June 4, 2009.

57. *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2009. See also *Times*, June 4, 2009; June 6, 2009.

58. *Mail on Sunday*, June 7, 2009.

59. *Mail on Sunday*, June 7, 2009.

60. *Observer*, June 7, 2009; see also *Times*, June 4, 2009; *Guardian*, June 5, 2009; and Katherine Rake of the Fawcett Society in *Observer*, June 7, 2009.

61. *Times*, June 4, 2009.

The second basis for the women's friendships identified in the press was more explicitly gendered: "arch supporters of Tony Blair,"⁶² they became the "Blairite sisters" under Brown,⁶³ "disgruntled at the diminished role women were given" in his Cabinet. This was the "sisterhood's revenge on his sex."⁶⁴ "Ms. Blears was castigated [and] . . . Smith was hung out to dry;"⁶⁵ Flint had not been promoted in the previous year as a "warning to Blears . . . [for Flint] had ran Blears' campaign for the Labour deputy leadership in 2007."⁶⁶ To this, add the (perceived) gendered treatment of other senior Labour women: Harman, Margaret Beckett, and Mo Mowlam.⁶⁷ The WAGs were less about "consensus of [party political] aims or even sympathies." Rather, what united them was "the macho culture of No. 10." For the *Mail on Sunday*,⁶⁸ such friendships problematically put loyalty to sex above loyalty to party, something considered both egotistical and simply wrong, and, again, an interpretation that challenges positive normative claims about the role of friendships — and especially women's friendships — in politics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Labour women's friendships are, in their own words, underpinned by gender: they are friends *because they are women* and *for gendered reasons*. The women may well be political friends as more traditionally understood — political associates or allies — but they are also personal friends. On this definition, there can simply be no corollary for male MPs whose gender is normalized and dominant at Westminster. This does not mean that subsequent research might not compare women's and men's friendships within politics, but it does rule out men's parliamentary friendships based on their marginalized gender, given that masculinity is dominant within the House. (Subgroups of men and women may, however, mobilize on the basis of other or intersecting identities, such as class or race, for example, and this invites subsequent research.) While the female MPs' parliamentary friendship was clearly

62. *Mail on Sunday*, June 7, 2009; see also *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2009; June 5, 2009.

63. *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2009.

64. *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2009; see also Joan Smith, *Independent on Sunday*, June 7, 2009; *Independent*, June 8, 2009.

65. *Times*, June 4, 2009.

66. *Guardian*, June 6, 2009. Boris Johnson suggested that Flint had been denounced by other Labour women (*Telegraph*, June 8, 2009).

67. *Sunday Telegraph*, June 7, 2009.

68. June 5, 2009.

perceived as a resource by the women themselves and one that could be, and was, deployed, it is by no means necessarily regarded as an acceptable relationship by others within Parliament, or by onlookers. As the *Daily Mail* coverage exemplifies, there is much concern in the print media's representations over the appropriateness of women's (parliamentary) friendships — of women's prioritizing their gender.⁶⁹ This is regarded as highly problematic: gender-based friendship disrupts the traditional political division in UK politics, that between and within parties over the left/right political spectrum. Hence, all the media copy at the time of Brown's premiership, the conflation of dinners with *coup d'etat* and the numerous plots with their gendered prefixes.

The basis for the women's parliamentary friendships is located by the women, in many cases, in their preparliamentary experiences of negotiating the gendered Labour party political recruitment processes that brought them into public office. But these shared experiences were then magnified by their gendered experiences within the House. It is for these institutionally specific gendered reasons that the women's parliamentary friendships are understood to be distinct from the friendships that might be said to occur between women in other workplaces, though this remains an empirical question. That said, the institution of the House of Commons makes, in the MPs' minds, for a particularly gendered environment in which their parliamentary friendships are an important bulwark. It might also be that the presumption of a link between women's descriptive and substantive representation — experienced by many new Labour women — further engenders friendships as the women face a backlash when they seek to act for women (Childs 2004; 2008; Childs and Krook 2012; Dahlerup 1988). The role of the Parliamentary Labour Party Women's Group, a more formal institution, was one site where these friendships played out, acting as a physical place where women would come together. Other sites include the Labour Member's room (open to all female MPs) and the cafes and restaurants in the Palace of Westminster and beyond, where Labour's women ate and socialized together. It is important not to forget, though, the more informal interventions — the notes, the e-mails, the chats, and the hugs. At moments when female ministers have been subject to what the women see as at least partially gendered criticism, they very much appeared to have deployed both informal and formal

69. June 5, 2009.

practices, not least in *performing* their friendship by sitting around a minister in the Chamber of the House.

In going beyond documenting who is friends with whom, how such friendships manifest, and on what basis they forge, this analysis of women's parliamentary friendships in the 1997–2010 UK parliament demonstrates how women's parliamentary friendships were perceived as a resource by the women themselves — a resource that enabled them to inhabit and operate better within a particular gendered institution. The logic of the argument is straightforward and, in principle, applicable to similarly gendered political institutions: female MPs' presence in the House is mediated by its extant formal and informal rules, influencing their behavior, sense of belonging and efficacy, and, arguably, their substantive and symbolic impact. Subject to such gendered environments, the women found in their group identity-based parliamentary friendship a resource that helped them negotiate and challenge Parliament's masculinized institutional norms and practices. They met socially in the House; they offered each other shoulders to cry on; and they were prepared to act politically for each other. Indeed, in their claim to support resigning ministers by surrounding them in the Chamber, they arguably performed a ritualized behavior. Whether subconscious or more organized, the women act to stand up for other women. Such parliamentary friendships, which may well have originated in their Blair's Babes cohort status, over time became both *Blairite* (sharing a more particular political set of ideas) and, also critically, about their *sex and gender identities within the House*. Accordingly, their friendships can be interpreted as a response to their gendered marginalization within various gendered institutions — Parliament, Government, Cabinet, and the Labour Party (Yoder 1991; Puwar 2004; Childs 2004; 2008).

One can, moreover, posit that women's parliamentary friendships might, in constituting reciprocal and collective personal and political support relationships, enable female representatives to act more fully and effectively within gendered Parliaments (following Malley 2011) and to challenge existing masculinized traditions and practices (following Marilyn Friedman, cited by Devere and Curtin 2009, 93). So it becomes, or rather has the potential to become, one of the means by which to counter perceived and/or real marginalization, discrimination, and explicit or implicit gendered criticism. In turn, such parliamentary friendships, with their personal and political dimensions, might well engender women's substantive representation — although determining

this possibility, even in this case, lies beyond the remit of this article. Nevertheless, women's friendship might be thought to contribute to, if not constitute, one aspect of the "safe spaces" that gender and politics scholars suggest enable female representatives to act within political institutions (Childs 2004; 2008; Devere and Curtin 2009, 99; cf. Puwar 2004).⁷⁰ In this way, the practice of parliamentary friendship may constitute an example of institutional layering — where a new institutional element has been introduced. Of course, such a statement begs subsequent empirical investigation to see if what is claimed here holds.

There are, admittedly, a number of additional questions left begging. First is the extent to which women's parliamentary friendships exists in other UK political parties. At the 2010 general election, which saw the Labour government replaced by a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, the Conservative party witnessed, if not an increase of the same magnitude to Labour's 1997 figure, a doubling of its women nonetheless. Subsequent research might investigate whether the claims identified and analyzed here hold for a subsequent cohort of women entering a later parliament and from a different political party. In particular, did these Conservative women MPs experience the House in the same gendered way as Labour's 1997 entrants? And was this the basis of any friendship? Perhaps, newly elected Conservative women benefited from the prior presence of Labour's women and entered a House more amenable to women. Might their party identity make a difference to their perceived experiences at Westminster, with their conservatism making them less likely to experience the House as uncomfortable for women? In either or both cases, perhaps the dynamic for a women's parliamentary friendship among them would be less evident.

The 2010 coalition government has also changed the partisan nature and institutional structures of Westminster, and this, too, may impact the nature of parliamentary friendships. It has, for example, specifically created formal working relationships between MPs from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, and this has the potential to see parliamentary friendships develop across parties to a much greater extent.⁷¹ Once again, the basis and nature of their friendships might be different. And even if coalition politics engenders friendships between women from different parties, this might be thought more likely among

70. The latter is a secondary question not addressed here.

71. I'd like to thank Mona Lena Krook for her reflections on this.

ministers, who are driven more by governmental experience than gender politics.

Comparative research would be fruitful, too, in order to see how female representatives in other institutions negotiate their presence in masculinized institutions and whether the notion of friendship defined as a political resource travels. A *Washington Post* (January 12, 2011) article following the shooting of Gabrielle Giffords in the United States noted how Gifford's "*friends*' voices filled her hospital room" (emphasis added). These Congresswomen had either arrived with her in Washington, had shown her the ropes, played softball with her, and had enjoyed double dates with husbands. There is indication here, once again, of both personal and political dimensions to these Congressional women's friendships. Issues of partisanship need to be explored as well, and comparisons between parliamentary and presidential systems need to be undertaken. In cases with electoral systems producing coalitions as the norm, alternative interparty relations may well enter the fray, as individual representatives sometimes find themselves in government with one party and then another over time. Such differences might be instructive to the formation and continuance of parliamentary friendships.

Future research will also need to address, first, whether the exceptionalism of the parliamentary friendship claimed by the female MPs in the UK holds or whether politics experienced as a gendered institution may not be so very different from other nonpolitical institutions, such as the corporation (Kanter 1977; Yoder 1991). Second, future research should address how the concept of sisterhood plays out with ideas and practices of women's friendships in parliaments and elsewhere. In this study, the term was spontaneously employed by a number of individual Labour women, but this might be due to their leftist party ideology or their identification with second-wave feminism. A different generation of women, or female MPs of a different political persuasion, may well not have used this term. And then there is the question of whether conceptions of sisterhood are ones feminist scholars should seek to valorize precisely because of their association with the second-wave western women's movement (see also Devere and Curtin 2009, 88 on the New Zealand case). Younger generations may not identify with second-wave feminism and its associated concepts, and, in any case, intersectionality critiques problematize the privileging of sisterly relations as the mode of association and relation between women. Sisterhood might, therefore, be both anachronistic and politically

problematic for defining relations between women. Solidarity has been suggested in its place, and this might prove a more politically tenable alternative (bell hooks cited in Bryson 1999, 35), although this begs questions of fit with concepts of friendship, both theoretically and in practice.

By taking women's parliamentary friendships seriously, this article set out to make an initial contribution to an underresearched dimension of gender and politics research. It has, in addition to documenting UK Labour women's parliamentary friendships between 1997 and 2010, offered an account of how women's parliamentary friendships might be considered a political resource for women and a ritualized practice that reflects and seeks to counter female MPs' experiences of gendered marginalization. In so doing, and by applying the new theoretical approaches of feminist institutionalism, I have attempted to advance both conceptual and empirical understandings of women representatives' lived experiences of gendered political institutions.

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APPENDIX

Media coverage of ministers' resignations

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of Articles</i>
Female cabinet ministers	Clare Short	190
	Estelle Morris	183
	Patricia Hewitt	20
	Hazel Blears	76
	Jacqui Smith	192
Female government ministers	Glenda Jackson	19
	Barbara Roche	3
	Beverly Hughes*	4
	Hilary Armstrong	2
	Caroline Flint	48
	Kitty Usher	20
	Jane Kennedy	2
Male cabinet ministers	Alan Milburn	118
	Frank Dobson	72
	John Hutton	79
	Robin Cook	111
	Tony Blair	895
Male government ministers	John Denham	10
	Michael Wills	7
	Malcolm Chisholm	25
	Lewis Moody	1
	Peter Kilfoyle	20
	Nigel Griffiths	10
	Frank Field	35

Notes: Because some resignations are close to, or at the same time, as others, newspaper coverage overlaps in many cases — not least the resignations under Brown in June 2009. The relatively extensive coverage of Flint's and Field's resignations reflects the contemporaneous newsworthiness of their resignations: Flint's came at a time when there was much debate as to whether Prime Minister Gordon Brown could survive any more resignations (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/5454538/Labour-in-crisis-Cabinet-resignations.html>). Field, appointed to "think the unthinkable" on social security was caught up in the sacking of Harriet Harman, the leading feminist minister. It was widely reported that they did not get along and that Field wanted her job (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/141824.stm).

*This refers to Hughes' first resignation.