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Labour Women MPs and Housewifery in the House of Commons, 1945–1951

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Abstract

This article analyses how Labour women MPs championed the needs of ‘the housewife’ in parliament in order to improve the lives of women, especially working-class women, during the Attlee administration. Relying on personal experience to make their case, these women spoke as housewives, not just *for* housewives, using gendered experiences for political ends. This article examines how they applied the politics of housewifery to two specific contemporary economic challenges: the cost of living and the impact of taxation. In doing so, and in contrast to the established literature, it shows how far Labour women were prepared to challenge party and government policy on behalf of women. It thus contributes to historiographical debates about the Labour party’s relationship to consumerism and affluence as well as gender and austerity. Building on Brian Harrison’s influential study of interwar women MPs, it also responds to a recent call made by Miles Taylor in this journal for more attention to women as legislators in the post-war period. Methodologically, it emphasizes the benefits of qualitative analysis of ‘big data’ sources.

I

During the fourteen years she spent as MP for Coatbridge after 1945, Jean Mann was known as ‘the housewife’s MP’.¹ She was specifically encouraged to stand for election by her comrades in Clydeside who believed that housewives were a particular interest group which needed political representation, just as miners or teachers did.² During her time in parliament, she became well known as a campaigner on social welfare, especially concerned with the effects

¹ Catriona Burness, ‘Count up to twenty-one: Scottish women in formal politics’, in Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane, eds., *Women and citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the twentieth century* (London, 2010), p. 54.

² Jean Mann, *Woman in parliament* (London, 1962), pp. 170–2.

of housing and austerity policies on women.³ Though Mann had decades of political experience in local government, housing, and planning, she frequently identified herself as a housewife when speaking in the House of Commons. She raised the housewife's quotidian experiences and offered anecdotes from her kitchen. On one occasion, she told the House how she finally finished making thirty-two pounds of jam at three o'clock in the morning.⁴ On another, she lamented that she could not throw a party since a lack of chip fat meant she could not make chips.⁵ Her political interventions thus reflected her personal, domestic, experience. They often led her to be critical of government policy. However, she was even more scathing about the opposition MPs 'who masquerade now as the saviours of womenkind, and housewives in particular'.⁶ They did not share the housewife's experiences, her interests, or her priorities, and, Mann believed, were only interested in exploiting the housewife for political gain.

This article shows that Mann was far from alone in her fight for the housewife during the years of the Attlee administration. It argues that many Labour women MPs were committed to championing issues relevant to women, especially working-class women, and demonstrates that in doing so, they were often willing to challenge government and party policy as well as refuting the opposition. Labour women were not alone in presenting the housewives' case to the House of Commons. Indeed, their opponents sought to do likewise. But their personal experience meant that Labour women were able to utilize a discourse of domesticity differently. They brought direct understanding of the housewife's domain to the House of Commons in a new and distinctive way. Unlike men, these women did not just speak *for* the housewife, but as housewives, embodying the role of housewife as they articulated her needs.

This article thus extends the scholarship which has focused on how political parties have appealed to the housewife as *voter*, and the ways in which women organized themselves around the notion of the housewife as *activist*, to consider the emergence of a specific and increasingly dominant phenomenon: the housewife as *politician*. A number of factors account for this trend – the increasing numbers of married women MPs, and the centrality of housewifery to contemporary political discourse, which chimed with their ongoing search for effective political strategies – but it was most relevant to particular issues. This article examines the uses which Labour women made of housewifery in two specific contemporary debates: the cost of living and the impact of taxation. It demonstrates their interest in issues specific to women, their particular attention to working-class women, their embrace of new domestic technologies, their willingness to challenge government policy on certain issues, and their reliance on personal experience in order to make their case. This article thus presents a new perspective on ongoing historiographical debates about the Labour party's relationship to consumerism and affluence as

³ Irene Maver, 'Mann [née Stewart], Jean [Janet] (1889–1964)', *ODNB*.

⁴ HC Debs 453 (12 July 1948), cols. 936–7.

⁵ HC Debs 443 (6 Nov. 1947), col. 2081.

⁶ HC Debs 426 (31 July 1946), col. 1144.

well as gender and austerity. It also responds to a recent call made in this journal for more analysis of women as legislators in the post-war period.⁷

The notorious claim that the ‘gentleman in Whitehall knows best’, from Douglas Jay’s *The socialist case*, has often been used to critique the extent of central control under the Labour government. But as Richard Toye has noted, Jay was quite specific: the gentleman in Whitehall was believed to know better than housewives.⁸ This is just one example of Labour’s ‘problem’ with women, articulated by Amy Black and Stephen Brooke.⁹ Historians have emphasized differing but related factors to explain this ‘problem’ and its effects on Labour’s electoral performance. These included party structures which marginalized women, cultural attitudes, the influence of male-dominated trade unions which prioritized the male breadwinner model, and the party’s emphasis on full (male) employment and universal services, rather than attention to women’s specific problems and concerns.¹⁰ Historians have generally, though not exclusively, interpreted the Conservative party as making a more effective appeal to women, albeit focused on their roles as wives and mothers.¹¹ Martin Pugh proposes that during the 1950s, both parties had similar views of women, and made much the same appeal to them: the Conservatives were just better at it.¹²

But in this article, I argue that elected Labour women demonstrated a different understanding of the housewife’s needs than either their male colleagues or their political opponents. This understanding was borne out of lived experience, and a recognition that many contemporary political concerns – the founding of the welfare state, rationing, and housebuilding – were clearly ‘women’s issues’, in that they had profound consequences for women’s lives. Their experience allowed them to contest the demands made by their opponents, but also to challenge the approaches of their colleagues in government. As such, in their concern for the working-class woman, Labour

⁷ Miles Taylor, ‘Parliamentary representation in modern Britain: past, present, and future’, *Historical Journal*, 65 (2022), pp. 1145–73, at p. 1164.

⁸ Douglas Jay, *The socialist case* (London, 1937), p. 317; Richard Toye, “The gentleman in Whitehall” reconsidered: the evolution of Douglas Jay’s views on economic planning and consumer choice, 1937–1947’, *Labour History Review*, 67 (2002), pp. 187–204, at p. 193.

⁹ Amy Black and Stephen Brooke, ‘The Labour party, women and the problem of gender, 1951–66’, *Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), pp. 419–52.

¹⁰ Martin Francis, *Ideas and policies under Labour, 1945–51: building a new Britain* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 201–3, 217; Helen Jones, *Women in British public life, 1914–1950* (London, 2000), pp. 216–18; Pamela Graves, *Labour women: women in British working-class politics, 1918–1939* (Cambridge, 1994); Nan Sloane, *The women in the room: Labour’s forgotten history* (London, 2018), pp. 222–3; Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain! A new history of the Labour party* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 203–4.

¹¹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: rationing, controls and consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford, 2000); Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, ‘Rationing, austerity, and the Conservative party recovery after 1945’, *Historical Journal*, 37 (1994), pp. 173–97; Pugh, *Speak for Britain!* pp. 312–13; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, ‘Explaining the gender gap: the Conservative party and the women’s vote, 1945–1964’, in Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, eds., *The Conservatives and British society, 1880–1990* (Cardiff, 1996), p. 196.

¹² Martin Pugh, *Women and the women’s movement in Britain since 1914* (Basingstoke, 2015), p. 244.

women demonstrated their understanding of the gendered nature of class, and the classed nature of gender.

Labour women played an essential role in developing and implementing welfare policies in the first half of the twentieth century, laying the foundations for the work of the Attlee government.¹³ But we know much less about how Labour women contributed to the implementation of the welfare state in government.¹⁴ A clearer understanding of Labour women's activities in these years thus contributes to a better understanding of histories of the Labour party, of women's activism, and the relationship between the two.

The continuities in Labour women's political practice emerge clearly in this study. In the first half of the twentieth century, Labour women were keen to improve women's position as wives and mothers *and* as workers and citizens, but often had greater success with the former.¹⁵ They did not prioritize class over sex, but understood these as inseparable, and pursued different causes in response to shifting opportunities and challenges.¹⁶ The same can be seen in the post-war era, when Labour women focused on the specific challenges faced by working-class women and sought to lessen their load. Though they would not have used these terms, Labour women MPs thus advocated a form of gendered policy-making. They believed that, while women certainly benefited greatly from full employment and the welfare state, they also needed specific support. Labour women MPs turned to the language of housewifery and the power of personal experience to make this case. To date, however, there has been very little attention paid to this strategy.¹⁷ In fact, beyond the scholarship on central figures like Margaret Thatcher, there is surprisingly little historiographical work on women in high politics after 1945 at all.¹⁸ Analysis of women's political priorities and practices in this context is therefore much needed.

¹³ Pat Thane, 'Women of the British Labour party and feminism, 1906–1945', in Harold L. Smith, ed., *British feminism in the twentieth century* (Aldershot, 1990); Pat Thane, 'Visions of gender in the making of the British welfare state: the case of women in the British Labour party and social policy', in Gisela Bock and Pat Thane, eds., *Maternity and gender policies: women and the rise of the European welfare states, 1880s–1950s* (London, 1991); Pat Thane, 'Women in the British Labour party and the construction of state welfare, 1906–39', in Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a new world: maternalist politics and the origins of welfare states* (London, 1993); Pat Thane, 'Labour and welfare', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane, and Nick Tiratsoo, eds., *Labour's first century* (Cambridge, 2000); Graves, *Labour women*.

¹⁴ The historiography of the Conservative party is better developed in this respect. See, for example, G. E. Maguire, *Conservative women: a history of women and the Conservative party* (Basingstoke, 1998); Clarisse Berthezène and Julie V Gottlieb, eds., *Rethinking right-wing women: gender and the Conservative party, 1880s to the present* (Manchester, 2018).

¹⁵ Thane, 'Visions of gender', p. 96; Caroline Rowan, 'Women in the Labour party, 1906–1920', *Feminist Review*, 12 (1982), pp. 74–91.

¹⁶ June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2002).

¹⁷ Rachel Reeves, *Women of Westminster: the MPs who changed politics* (London, 2019), pp. 91–5, has a brief vignette, but in an overview history there is little scope for detailed discussion. It also elides 'housewife' and 'middle-class housewife', which I challenge in this article.

¹⁸ Paula Bartley, *Labour women in power: cabinet ministers in the twentieth century* (Basingstoke, 2019), is an important recent contribution.

This article follows the example of Brian Harrison in his study of the inter-war women MPs by examining women's contributions to parliamentary debates as recorded in Hansard.¹⁹ Since this influential work, digital technologies have revolutionized the ability of scholars to access, navigate, and interpret large-scale textual corpora. Hansard is ideally suited to these forms of analysis and has attracted scholars from a range of disciplines.²⁰ In political history, scholars like Luke Blaxill have pioneered the methods, demonstrated the possibilities, and traced the limitations of these approaches.²¹ The Hansard at Huddersfield project, combining text mining, linguistic analysis, and data visualization, is designed to be as user-friendly as possible, and has important implications for democratic scrutiny as well as scholarship.²²

But this project did not have its origins in corpus linguistics. During the pandemic, without access to archival sources, like many other scholars, I turned to digitized resources out of necessity. I began reading Hansard debates as a means of gaining insight into the personalities and styles of women MPs as well as their interests and concerns. This broader, slower, reading first highlighted how often, and in what contexts, women MPs deployed self-identification as housewives. This led me to develop a more specific dataset, comprised of each intervention for each woman, and undertake more systematic searches. This initial approach is not always possible, of course, and the ability to cope with information on a scale ordinarily beyond human analysis is one of the great advantages of digital techniques. But as I have argued elsewhere, keyword searches only show us what we are already looking for.²³ Blaxill and Beelen's important study examined the frequency of speeches by

¹⁹ Brian Harrison, 'Women in a men's house: the women M.P.s, 1919–1945', *Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), pp. 623–54.

²⁰ See, for example, Lesley Jeffries and Bryan Walker, 'Austerity in the Commons: a corpus critical analysis of austerity and its surrounding grammatical context in Hansard (1803–2015)', in Kate Power, Tanweer Ali, and Eva Lebdušková, eds., *Discourse analysis and austerity: critical studies from economics and linguistics* (London, 2019); Leslie Huang, Patrick O. Perry, and Arthur Spirling, 'A general model of author "style" with application to the UK House of Commons, 1935–2018', *Political Analysis*, 28 (2020), pp. 412–34; Sylvia Shaw, *Women, language and politics* (Cambridge, 2020); Jo Guldi, 'The official mind's view of Empire, in miniature: quantifying world geography in Hansard's parliamentary debates', *Journal of World History*, 32 (2021), pp. 345–70.

²¹ Luke Blaxill, 'Quantifying the language of British politics, 1880–1910', *Historical Research*, 86 (2013), pp. 313–41; Luke Blaxill, *The war of words: the language of British elections, 1880–1914* (Woodbridge, 2020); Luke Blaxill and Kaspar Beelen, 'A feminized language of democracy? The representation of women at Westminster since 1945', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), pp. 412–49, at pp. 421–2.

²² Alexander Von Lünen, Lesley Jeffries, Fransina Stradling, Hugo Sanjurjo Gonzalez, and Paul Crossley, 'Hansard at Huddersfield: adapting corpus linguistic methods for non-specialist use', *International Journal of Humanities and Arts Computing*, 17 (2023), pp. 25–46; Lesley Jeffries and Fransina de Jager, 'Democratising Hansard: continuing to improve the accessibility of parliamentary records', (2019), www.democraticaudit.com/2019/03/06/democratising-hansard-continuing-to-improve-the-accessibility-of-parliamentary-records/, accessed 1 June 2023.

²³ Lyndsey Jenkins, '"Where the Church had refused to perform its duty the women themselves came forward": the prayer campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1913–1914', *Cultural and Social History*, 19 (2022), pp. 161–84, at p. 182.

and about 'women' across more than seventy years.²⁴ But examining a smaller corpus and a narrower timescale shows that in this period, women (and men) did not just discuss 'women', but *housewives*. 'Housewife' and 'housewives' were not among the most common terms used by women (or men) across the longer period of their study. This was a specific political moment with a specific set of concerns. As a result, this article is a reminder of the merits of qualitative analysis alongside the undoubted advantages of 'big data' approaches.²⁵

Hansard cannot provide a comprehensive perspective on MPs' priorities. As Harrison acknowledged, it records only when an MP actually speaks, not when they hope to speak.²⁶ Nor does it capture what they would have said, given the chance. Bessie Braddock complained that the Speaker found it easier to ignore women, especially when the debate did not directly relate to 'women's questions'.²⁷ Jean Mann was told by a whip that the Speaker would only have one woman speak in a debate.²⁸ This indicates the extent to which they were seen as interchangeable representatives of women. Mann once asked the Speaker why there was sex discrimination in the House, since the chancellor ignored her but gave way to her male colleagues.²⁹ All this suggests that women would have intervened more frequently and on a greater range of topics given the opportunity. Indeed, women MPs have sometimes found different spaces in parliament more conducive to pursuing their objectives.³⁰

But there are also benefits to examining Hansard insofar as it sheds light on Labour women's interests and priorities. Despite all the acknowledged challenges, Labour women still sought to influence party and government policy through the legislature.³¹ Moreover, given the lack of scholarship on Labour women in the post-war era – and, for many of the women considered here, a lack of archival sources – Hansard has particular value.³² It is not sufficient

²⁴ Blaxill and Beelen, 'A feminized language of democracy?', p. 432.

²⁵ For a wider analysis of the benefits of qualitative analysis of political speech, see James Martin and Alan Finlayson, "'It ain't what you say...': British political studies and the analysis of speech and rhetoric", *British Politics*, 3 (2008), pp. 445–64.

²⁶ Harrison, 'Women in a men's house', p. 637.

²⁷ HC Debs 434 (11 Mar. 1947), col. 1282; HC Debs 467 (13 July 1949), col. 510.

²⁸ Mann, *Woman in parliament*, p. 17. See also Elizabeth Vallance, *Women in the house* (London, 1979), p. 110.

²⁹ HC Debs 436 (22 Apr. 1947), col. 876.

³⁰ Mari Takayanagi, 'Parliament and women, c. 1900–1945' (Ph.D. thesis, King's College London, 2012), pp. 215–16; Sarah Childs, *New Labour's women MPs: women representing women* (London, 2004), p. 199. See also Nirmal Puwar, *Space invaders: race, gender and bodies out of place* (Oxford, 2004).

³¹ Harrison, 'Women in a men's house', pp. 629–33; Richard Toye, 'The House of Commons in the aftermath of suffrage', in Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye, eds., *The aftermath of suffrage: women, gender, and politics in Britain, 1918–1945* (Basingstoke, 2013).

³² There has been limited historiographical work since contributions such as Pamela Brookes, *Women at Westminster: an account of women in the British parliament, 1918–66* (London, 1967), and Vallance, *Women in the house*. Pioneering political scientists such as Rosie Campbell, Sarah Childs, and Joni Lovenduski have focused their work on more recent decades. Interventions such as Bartley, *Labour women in power*, are therefore much needed. Labour women themselves are carrying out much of this work. See, for example, Christine Collette, *The newer Eve: women, feminists and the Labour party* (Basingstoke, 2009); Rachel Reeves and Richard Carr, *Alice in Westminster: the political life of Alice Bacon* (London, 2017); Reeves, *Women of Westminster*; Mary Honeyball, *Parliamentary*

to claim that leading figures or thinkers in the party did not take account of women and then replicate their absence in historical scholarship, or suggest that there is limited scope for a gendered analysis of the political issues of the day.³³ Instead, we need to draw on the records of women's own contributions wherever they can be found, and examine their own ideas and perspectives.³⁴ This article thus complements recent scholarship on Labour women's post-war contributions to local government.³⁵ But it only focuses on women's contributions in the Commons, and more must be done to examine their work both in formal and informal spaces.³⁶

II

Twenty-four women were elected to parliament in 1945. Twenty-one represented the Labour party, from forty-one candidates. This was by far the largest number since women had been eligible for election, dwarfing the previous high of fifteen in 1931: only thirty-nine had ever previously been elected to parliament. Of these, only sixteen had represented the Labour party, with just one Labour woman elected in 1935. The Labour party would not return twenty-one women to parliament from a general election again until 1987 (this time, from ninety-two candidates).³⁷ Unsurprisingly, the women represented urban areas.³⁸ Leah Manning in Epping was as close as they came to a rural seat. Labour women MPs were most often found in outer London boroughs or Scottish cities. Two, Barbara Castle and Lucy Noel-Buxton, came from multi-member constituencies.³⁹

Within two years, one, Janet ('Jennie') Adamson, resigned, and two, Ellen Wilkinson and Clarice MacNab Shaw, died, the latter having never participated

pioneers: Labour women MPs, 1918–1945 (Chatham, 2015); Mary Honeyball, *Edith Summerskill: the life and times of a pioneering feminist Labour MP* (London, 2022). The most substantial archive collections for these women relate to Barbara Castle, Edith Summerskill, Eirene White, and, to a much lesser extent, Caroline Ganley. The lack of archives for women as prominent in their day as Bessie Braddock is a source of deep regret.

³³ Noel Thompson, *Social opulence and private restraint* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 7–8.

³⁴ Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, is exemplary in this respect. See also Colm Murphy, *Futures of socialism: 'modernisation', the Labour party, and the British left, 1973–1997* (Cambridge, 2023) pp. 123–51.

³⁵ For example, Daryl Leeworthy, *Causes in common: Welsh women and the struggle for social democracy* (Cardiff, 2022); Daisy Payling, *Socialist republic: remaking the British left in 1980s Sheffield* (Manchester, 2023), pp. 83–132; Krista Cowman, 'Municipal socialism and municipal feminism: women and local Labour politics from the 1900s to the 1980s', in Nathan Yeowell, ed., *Rethinking Labour's past* (London, 2022), pp. 128–35.

³⁶ Such as Takayanagi, 'Parliament and women'.

³⁷ Elizabeth Vallance, 'Two cheers for equality: women candidates in the 1987 general elections', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 41 (1988), pp. 86–91, at p. 86.

³⁸ They were thus particularly affected by post-war boundary changes. Urban seats had larger electorates than rural seats, which tended to favour the Conservative party. Neil Johnston, 'Constituency boundary reviews and the number of MPs', House of Commons Library Briefing, Nov. 2021, pp. 42–3.

³⁹ Noel-Buxton was elected alongside John Paton, the husband of Florence Paton.

in parliament due to illness.⁴⁰ Four more were elected before Labour's defeat in 1951: Alice Cullen in a by-election in 1948, and Elaine Burton, Dorothy Rees, and Eirene White in the 1950 general election.⁴¹ The Independent MP Eleanor Rathbone died in February 1946. Megan Lloyd George was the sole Liberal MP, but was welcomed as a colleague by the other women long before her formal defection to Labour in 1955.⁴² The Conservative party elected a single woman, Frances Davidson, in 1945. Four more Conservative women joined her between 1946 and 1951: Priscilla, Lady Tweedsmuir, Patricia Hornsby-Smith, Eveline Hill, and Irene Ward. To all intents and purposes, therefore, Labour women were the voice of women in parliament. After the 1945 general election, Labour women made up 87.5 per cent of the women elected. Though the absolute numbers are very different, the nearest comparison is 1997, when they were 84 per cent of the women elected.

As a group, they were highly educated. Around half had attended universities – four went to Oxbridge colleges – and several others had attended teacher training colleges.⁴³ Those with limited educational opportunities, like Bessie Braddock or Caroline Ganley, were a small minority.⁴⁴ A few, like Barbara Ayrton Gould or Eirene White, came from privileged backgrounds where higher education was an increasingly common option for young women. But for the majority, it was a means of accessing valuable white-collar jobs with the promise of secure and stable wages.⁴⁵ Almost all had experience of paid work. Eleven had been teachers, while Grace Colman and Edith Wills had been tutors in workers' education. For several, including Alice Bacon, Leah Manning, and Lucy Middleton, paid work had involved positions in union organizing and the labour movement. Many came from families which were deeply involved in politics and public service, and Alice Bacon was surely far from alone in believing she had been 'born into politics'.⁴⁶

Most of the women were old enough to remember the suffrage campaign, and some had participated, but with the notable exceptions of Barbara Ayrton Gould, Ellen Wilkinson, and Edith Summerskill, few had formal connections to the contemporary organized women's movement. Labour's insistence

⁴⁰ Jennie Adamson, MP for Dartford, resigned to take up an appointment on the Unemployment Assistance Board. Ellen Wilkinson, minister of education and MP for Jarrow, died in February 1947. Clarice McNab Shaw, MP for Kilmarnock, resigned in September 1946 and died the following month.

⁴¹ Burton and White (standing as Eirene Jones) had been unsuccessful candidates in 1945.

⁴² Mann, *Woman in parliament*, p. 21; see also Barbara Castle, *Fighting all the way* (London, 1984), p. 126; Leah Manning, *A life for education* (Letchworth, 1970), p. 204.

⁴³ These four were Leah Manning, Barbara Castle, Grace Colman, and Eirene White.

⁴⁴ This remained a long-standing characteristic of Labour women MPs, in part because unions remained reluctant to sponsor women candidates, further restricting opportunities for working-class women. See Kristine Mason O'Connor, *Joan Maynard: passionate socialist* (London, 2003), p. 284.

⁴⁵ Frances Widdowson, *Going up into the next class: women and elementary teacher training, 1840-1914* (London, 1980); Gillian Sutherland, *In search of the new woman: middle-class women and work in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, 2015).

⁴⁶ Quoted in Reeves and Carr, *Alice in Westminster*, p. 21. This took a variety of forms: Muriel Nichol's father had been an MP, Bessie Braddock's mother was a well-known activist, and Eirene White's father had been cabinet secretary to David Lloyd George.

that members prioritize the party limited their ability to engage in other political organizations.⁴⁷ Many consciously distanced themselves from the controversial language of feminism. Leah Manning, for example, said she had never been 'outstandingly feminist' despite having campaigned for women's enfranchisement, equal pay, and other women's causes.⁴⁸ For Bessie Braddock, feminism carried connotations of female superiority, while Jennie Lee suggested it made women prioritize their own needs over those of their children.⁴⁹ Most were also keen to avoid being solely or primarily associated with the concerns of women. Barbara Castle claimed that she had not 'been particularly interested' in 'women's issues' and 'always thought of myself as an MP not as a woman MP'.⁵⁰ But as Brian Harrison found in the interwar period, though their concerns were not limited to 'women's issues', women seemed to have found it easier to engage in debates on social welfare.⁵¹

Brian Harrison also argued that 'Labour women often entered parliament because they had married their party'.⁵² This does not hold true for the post-war period. While only eight of the sixteen women elected to represent the Labour party in the interwar period were married, only five of the twenty-four elected during the Attlee years were unmarried.⁵³ Four women were married to other Labour MPs, and several others were married to men who had various roles within the party: Lucy Middleton's husband, for example, was the former general secretary.⁵⁴ But as with earlier generations of Labour activists, these women were not drawn into politics by their husbands. They were already

⁴⁷ Mann, *Woman in parliament*, p. 45; Jones, *Women in British public life*, p. 132.

⁴⁸ Manning, *A life*, p. 190.

⁴⁹ Millie Toole, *Mrs Bessie Braddock MP: a biography* (London, 1957), p. 130; HC Debs 515 (8 May 1953), col. 830; see also Patricia Hollis, *Jennie Lee: a life* (Oxford, 1997) pp. 147–58.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, p. 312.

⁵¹ Harrison, 'Women in a men's house', pp. 636–7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 626. Early women MPs often won seats formerly held or contested by their husbands: see Eleanor Lowe, "'To keep it in the family': spouses, seat inheritance and parliamentary elections in post-suffrage Britain, 1918–1945", *Open Library of Humanities*, 6 (2020).

⁵³ Among the earlier cohort, seven had never married and Mary Agnes Hamilton was divorced. The five unmarried women post-1945 were Ellen Wilkinson, Alice Bacon, Grace Colman, Margaret 'Peggy' Herbison, and Elaine Burton. Barbara Ayrtton Gould was a widow, and Jennie Adamson, as noted below, was soon widowed. There are, of course, problems with utilizing these categories, which exclude other kinds of relationships and partnerships, such as that between Eleanor Rathbone and Elizabeth MacAdam, for which see Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the politics of conscience* (London, 2004).

⁵⁴ Jennie Lee, Lucy Noel-Buxton, and Florence Paton were married to MPs, as was Jennie Adamson, though her husband died in October 1945. Bessie Braddock's husband Jack was a Labour councillor; Barbara Castle's husband Ted was an activist later elected to the Greater London Council and created a life peer; Caroline Ganley's husband James was active in both his trade union and the Co-Operative party. After James Middleton's retirement in 1944, he served as his wife's election agent. This mutual commitment was common among married Labour women activists; see June Hannam, 'Women as paid organisers and propagandists for the British Labour party between the wars', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 77 (2010), pp. 69–88, at p. 77. This is a long-standing characteristic of Labour women MPs, stretching back to Ruth Dalton and Agnes Hardie in the 1930s, and there are many comparable examples today, including Ellie Reeves and Yvette Cooper.

politically active, and met their spouses through shared interests and activities.⁵⁵ Twelve had children. A few, such as Lucy Noel-Buxton and Edith Summerskill, had the resources to employ a housekeeper. But most had direct experience of managing the responsibilities of a household, frequently alongside both paid work and party activism.

Six of the Labour women had previously been elected to Westminster. Continuities with the immediate pre-war period were limited, however, as three of those women, Jennie Lee, Leah Manning, and Lucy Noel-Buxton, had lost their seats in 1931.⁵⁶ They all had extensive political experience in other forms, including as local councillors and magistrates, as well as party activists. While Ellen Wilkinson was undoubtedly the most prominent Labour woman, both within and beyond the party, others held influential roles, including a number who served on the party's National Executive Committee. Jennie Adamson had helped draft the 1935 manifesto and Barbara Ayrton Gould had served in several important party roles: both were former chairs of the party's annual conference.⁵⁷ These women also benefited from the pioneering contribution of earlier women MPs, and several paid tribute to the inspiring example of their forebears.⁵⁸

As women at the highest levels of politics, they remained very much in the minority. In 1945, there were 372 men alongside the twenty-one women in the Parliamentary Labour Party, women made up less than half a per cent of the total members of the Commons, and there were, of course, still no women in the Lords.⁵⁹ A quarter of Attlee's first cabinet had been privately educated, 10 per cent had attended Eton, and a quarter had been to Oxford or Cambridge.⁶⁰ He proudly made several appointments of men with whom he shared a school or college.⁶¹ Women did not arrive in parliament to see their classmates from public school or university assembled on the benches.⁶² Nor were their colleagues from the union ranks necessarily more welcoming.⁶³ Jean Mann recalled in her autobiography that 'on our arrival we were taken around by some of the old hands and were told what was expected of us – exactly nothing'.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ Graves, *Labour women*, p. 64.

⁵⁶ The other three who had previously been elected were Ellen Wilkinson, Edith Summerskill, and Jennie Adamson.

⁵⁷ Hugh Dalton, *The fateful years* (London, 1957), p. 70.

⁵⁸ Manning, *A life*, p. 101; Castle, *Fighting all the way*, p. 62; unpublished autobiography of Caroline Ganley, chapter II, Ganley/1/1, Bishopsgate archives; Ellen Wilkinson, 'Myself when young', in Margaret Oxford, ed., *Myself when young* (Plymouth, 1938), p. 414.

⁵⁹ On women in the Lords, see Duncan Sutherland, 'Ladies in a Lords' house: women in the House of Lords since 1958', in Bruce Kinzer, Molly Baer Kramer, and Richard Trainor, eds., *Reform and its complexities in modern Britain* (Oxford, 2022).

⁶⁰ Tim Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945: the drivers of party change* (Oxford, 2012), p. 16.

⁶¹ Clement Attlee, *As it happened* (Kingswood, 1954), p. 156; Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992), p. 93.

⁶² Hugh Dalton, *Call back yesterday* (London, 1953), p. 33.

⁶³ Mann, *Woman in parliament*, p. 45.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Women remained excluded, by convention if not always by regulation, from the informal spaces which were so important to men's political as well as social lives.⁶⁵ The 'guardians of this masculine institution', in Barbara Castle's words, were still unused to seeing women in spaces reserved for MPs.⁶⁶ Aside from Castle, few of the women seem to have been respected or admired by their male peers, and some, notably Edith Summerskill, were actively disliked.⁶⁷ Only Castle seems to have dared to brave the smoking room where men traded gossip.⁶⁸ Consequently, the women – except Castle – did not generally benefit from mentoring or sponsorship by senior party figures as their male peers did, and Jennie Lee was increasingly seen as a representative of her husband rather than a person in her own right.⁶⁹

Women did not respond to this exclusion by forming their own organized group in the party. They represented various traditions and perspectives, from the Fabians to the trade unions to the co-operative movement. Some, notably Jennie Lee and Barbara Castle, were associated with the left of the party, while rather more were linked with the right. They did not agree on all policy issues, even those relating to women. Jean Mann, for example, felt that her single colleagues were indifferent to the needs of widows.⁷⁰ They took different positions on questions such as the rights of natural mothers versus adoptive mothers, or nursery provision for young children.⁷¹

But it would be extraordinary to find women in agreement on all issues at all times. Their differences did not prevent them from making common cause on a variety of issues relating to women. Several developed strong friendships which sustained their political and parliamentary careers. Leah Manning, for example, was close to Lucy Noel-Buxton, their relationship grounded in their strong religious faith, and Lucy Middleton, with whom she shared a long-standing commitment to peace activism and an office.⁷² Caroline Ganley recalled that, she, Edith Wills, and Mabel Ridealgh, the three co-operative women MPs, 'were known as the three graces because we were so much together, and had such common interests'.⁷³ There is thus much to be gained from an examination of the ways they deployed the language of housewifery in pursuit of a shared agenda. They evidently found it a useful political strategy, both in the context of contemporary political debates and within this particular setting.

⁶⁵ Ben Griffin, 'Masculinities and parliamentary culture in modern Britain', in Christopher Fletcher et al., eds., *The Palgrave handbook of masculinity and political culture in Europe* (London, 2018), pp. 413–14.

⁶⁶ Castle, *Fighting all the way*, p. 127.

⁶⁷ Diary of Hugh Gaitskell, 2 and 3 Aug. 1956, Philip Williams, *The diary of Hugh Gaitskell, 1945–56* (London, 1983), p. 515; Ian Mikardo, *Backbencher* (London, 1988), pp. 129, 133; Hollis, *Jennie Lee*, pp. 152–3.

⁶⁸ Castle, *Fighting all the way*, p. 131; Manning, *A life*, p. 202.

⁶⁹ Dalton, *The fateful years*, p. 470; Manning, *A life*, p. 36; Hollis, *Jennie Lee*, pp. 171–3. Dalton made a limited exception for Barbara Castle.

⁷⁰ Mann, *Woman in parliament*, p. 69.

⁷¹ HC Debs 461 (18 Feb. 1949), cols. 1477–534; HC Debs 466 (24 June 1949), cols. 675–94.

⁷² Manning, *A life*, p. 202.

⁷³ Caroline Ganley autobiography, p. 325.

III

The housewife's multiple social, cultural, and political meanings have been the subject of significant scholarly investigation in recent years.⁷⁴ In contrast to earlier research, which primarily conceptualized the home as a site of oppression, historians have been increasingly interested in how housewifery was valued and embraced, including by working-class women.⁷⁵ Social and cultural historians have shown that in the interwar period, housewifery was associated with professionalization, technology, and modernity as part of a broader re-evaluation and celebration of the domestic.⁷⁶ In the wake of women's enfranchisement, both political parties specifically courted the housewife, albeit on different terms. The Conservative party appealed to her financial prudence, desire for consumer choice, and moderate patriotism, while the Labour party stressed her interest in social welfare, belief in fairness, and, over time, concerns over the cost of living.⁷⁷ As a result, housewifery had begun to be discussed in parliament in the 1920s. In a metaphor which would become familiar, Margaret Wintringham, a Liberal MP between 1921 and 1924, suggested that 'just as the woman is the housekeeper in the home, I look upon Parliament as the housekeeper of the nation'.⁷⁸ Agnes Hardie, a Labour MP between 1937 and 1945, was known as a champion of housewives.⁷⁹

The centrality of the housewife to British political discourse was only magnified by the Second World War and its aftermath. Housewifery was seen as a public, not a private, concern, because it had profound implications for the country's ability to survive the war, and, subsequently, to manage the impact

⁷⁴ For an excellent summary, see Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Housewifery', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in twentieth-century Britain* (Harlow, 2001).

⁷⁵ Joanna Bourke, 'Housewifery in working-class England 1860–1914', *Past & Present*, 143 (1994), pp. 167–97; Judy Giles, 'A home of one's own: women and domesticity in England, 1918–1950', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16 (1993), pp. 239–53.

⁷⁶ Judy Giles, *The parlour and the suburb: domestic identities, class, femininity and modernity* (Oxford, 2004); Judy Giles, *Women, identity and private life in Britain, 1900–50* (Basingstoke, 1995); Alison Light, *Forever England: feminism, literature and Conservatism between the wars* (London, 1991); Adrian Bingham, *Gender, modernity, and the popular press in inter-war Britain* (Oxford, 2004).

⁷⁷ On the Conservative party, see, for example, David Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: the Conservative appeal to women voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994), pp. 129–52; David Jarvis, "'Behind every great party": women and conservatism in twentieth-century Britain', in Amanda Vickery, ed., *Women, privilege, and power: British politics, 1750 to the present* (Stanford, CA, 2001); David Jarvis, 'The Conservative party and the politics of gender, 1900–39', in Francis and Zweiniger-Bargielowska, eds., *The Conservatives and British society*; David Thackeray, 'Home and politics: women and Conservative activism in early twentieth-century Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 49 (2010), pp. 826–48; David Thackeray, 'At the heart of the party? The women's Conservative organisation in the age of partial suffrage, 1914–28', in Berthezéne and Gottlieb, eds., *Rethinking right-wing women*. On the Labour party, see, for example, Rowan, 'Women in the Labour party'; Karen Hunt, 'Labour Woman and the housewife', in Catherine Clay et al., eds., *Women's periodicals and print culture in Britain, 1918–1939: the interwar period* (Edinburgh, 2017).

⁷⁸ HC Debs 148 (9 Nov. 1921), col. 466. I am grateful to Mari Takayanagi for highlighting this point.

⁷⁹ Burness, 'Count up to twenty-one', p. 54.

of austerity.⁸⁰ As a result, the housewife was, in theory, understood as both an equal and a valuable citizen, who made a crucial contribution to Britain's economy and society. This was reflected in the Beveridge Report, which paid particular attention to the 'special class of housewives' in Britain, but also conceptualized the (female) housewife as an equal partner to the (male) breadwinner.⁸¹ In consequence, the use of 'housewife' in parliament became far more prominent in the immediate post-war period. Analysis from Hansard at Huddersfield indicates this was one of two moments when 'the housewife' was most frequently deployed in parliamentary discourse. It returned in the 1970s during a period of renewed concerns about the cost of living and was a key feature of debates on entry to the European Community.⁸²

Women themselves, including Labour women, identified with and organized around the notion of housewifery. The women's co-operative guild was explicitly conceptualized as a trade union for housewives.⁸³ Labour women developed distinctive understandings of housewifery during the interwar period. Interpreting the housewife as a working woman, they sought to improve the home as her workplace.⁸⁴ During these years, feminists, philanthropists, and labour activists alike saw the wider focus on housing as an opportunity not only to improve the living conditions for working-class women, but also to create a space within which to enact the responsibilities of citizenship, albeit without challenging the gendered nature of housework.⁸⁵ After the Second World War, housewifery served as the basis for the claims of many

⁸⁰ For example, see Sonya O. Rose, *Which people's war? National identity and citizenship in wartime Britain, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2003), ch. 4; Maggie Andrews, *Women and evacuation in the Second World War: femininity, domesticity and motherhood* (London, 2019), especially chs. 5 and 7; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*.

⁸¹ Sir William Beveridge, 'Social insurance and allied services' (London, 1942), p. 49. On the longer-term relationship between gender, consumption, and citizenship, see, for example, Susan Pedersen, 'Gender, welfare, and citizenship in Britain during the Great War', *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), pp. 983–1006.

⁸² Robert Saunders, *Yes to Europe! The 1975 referendum and seventies Britain* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 183–209; Richard Johnson, 'Women against the Common Market', *Contemporary British History*, 38 (2024), pp. 23–44. Hansard at Huddersfield was unavailable at the time of publication so it was not possible to reproduce the data here.

⁸³ Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the politics of working women: the women's co-operative guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (Brighton, 1998).

⁸⁴ Karen Hunt, 'Negotiating the boundaries of the domestic: British socialist women and the politics of consumption', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), pp. 389–410; Karen Hunt, 'Gendering the politics of the working woman's home', in Elizabeth Darling and Leslie Whitworth, eds., *Women and the making of built space in England, 1870–1950* (Aldershot, 2007); Karen Hunt, 'A heroine at home: the housewife on the First World War home front', in Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas, eds., *The home front in Britain: images, myths and forgotten experiences since 1914* (Basingstoke, 2014); Hunt, 'Labour Woman and the housewife'.

⁸⁵ Barbara McFarlane, 'Homes fit for heroines: housing in the twenties', in Matrix book group, ed., *Making space: women and the built environment* (London, 1984); Krista Cowman, "'From the housewife's point of view': female citizenship and the gendered domestic interior in post-First World War Britain, 1918–1928", *English Historical Review*, 130 (2015), pp. 352–83; Caitríona Beaumont, "'Where to park the pram"? Voluntary women's organisations, citizenship and the campaign for better housing in England, 1928–1945', *Women's History Review*, 22 (2013), pp. 75–96.

women's organizations with varied intentions and priorities. Civic and voluntary groups such as the Women's Institute and Mothers' Union used housewifery to call for citizenship rights. Drawing on a long-standing tradition in women's politics, they claimed their experiences as housewives and mothers gave them both the right and the duty to contribute to the body politic.⁸⁶ The British Housewives' League developed a more populist form of women's politics, resolutely anti-state in its high-profile opposition to rationing and controls.⁸⁷

When Labour women asserted themselves as housewives, they therefore drew on a set of widespread assumptions about the housewife's life and role. Asserting themselves as housewives was the closest that they could come to the strategy of associating themselves with the heroism of mining or military service available to their male colleagues.⁸⁸ 'Housewife' could simply mean 'woman', but was imbued with connotations of respectability and responsibility, and was something to be celebrated and honoured. There were overlaps with the term 'mother', though there was also a recognition that women with no children, or older women whose children had left home, were housewives too. Housewifery did not exclude the possibility of paid work, but there was clearly an assumption that for most women, housewifery was their primary, even natural, function. There were also unspoken exclusions, creating and reinforcing uneasiness around women who did not fit accepted definitions of the housewife: notably single women eschewing their 'natural' functions to pursue their career. As a result, perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the married Labour women MPs who most frequently adopted this identity in the House of Commons. Single women largely spoke in more general terms about 'housewives' they had met, as did (Lady) Lucy Noel-Buxton. Jennie Lee, who was 'bored' by 'women's issues' and 'had no domestic skills', was distinctive among the married women MPs in also adopting this approach.⁸⁹

Identifying as housewives was therefore most appropriate and useful in certain circumstances. When Labour women raised questions of equality – whether at work, or in terms of citizenship – they did not feel the need to identify themselves as housewives. The controversial debates on nursery provision addressed women's roles as workers and mothers, not as housewives.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Maggie Andrews, *The acceptable face of feminism: the women's institute as a social movement* (London, 1997; rev. edn 2015); Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and citizens: domesticity and the women's movement in England, 1928–1964* (Manchester, 2013).

⁸⁷ Beatrix Campbell, *Iron ladies: why do women vote Tory* (London, 1987), pp. 76–82; James Hinton, 'Militant housewives: the British Housewives' League and the Attlee government', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), pp. 129–56; Joe Moran, 'Queuing up in post-war Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 16 (2005), pp. 283–305, at pp. 284–8; Gary Love, 'A "mixture of Britannia and Boadicea": Dorothy Crisp's conservatism and the limits of right-wing women's political activism, 1927–48', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2018), pp. 174–204.

⁸⁸ Griffin, 'Masculinities and parliamentary culture in modern Britain', pp. 405–6.

⁸⁹ Hollis, *Jennie Lee*, pp. 133, 201.

⁹⁰ Compare the positions of Leah Manning and Barbara Castle during the debate on the nurseries and childminders regulation bill in HC Debs 451 (28 May 1948), cols. 513–55, with Grace Colman's views at HC Debs 434 (12 Mar. 1947), cols. 1375–6. On the history of wartime and post-war nurseries, see Denise Riley, *War in the nursery* (London, 1983), pp. 110–48; Penny Summerfield, *Women workers in the Second World War: production and patriarchy in conflict* (London, 1984; repr.

Similarly, when Labour women spoke about maternal healthcare – notably, and poignantly, in debates on access to analgesia during childbirth – they drew on a different form of shared personal experience.⁹¹ Housewife was an expansive category, but was primarily relevant to debates on austerity. Indeed, it was a way for Labour women to assert their right to intervene on questions of economic policy, import controls, and trading policy which were not conventionally understood as ‘women’s issues’.

Labour women frequently asserted themselves not just as housewives, but as ‘ordinary’ housewives. Edith Wills, for example, announced that she ‘would like to deal with this Budget as I see it, as an ordinary housewife’.⁹² Barbara Castle began her contribution to a debate on the nationalization of electricity by saying:

I am a housewife. I run a home, and in it I use a considerable amount of electricity ... I have as a housewife, a very immediate and practical interest in this Bill. I think I can say that I represent the ordinary domestic consumer’s attitude of mind and desire for clarification.

She went on to describe herself as a ‘simple housewife’.⁹³ Claire Langhamer has argued that the notion of ‘ordinariness’ took on new political meaning in British post-war politics.⁹⁴ To be ‘ordinary’ meant to possess expertise in the form of common sense and practicality. When women MPs were self-evidently exceptional, rather than ordinary, invoking ordinariness served several purposes. It gave them a form of legitimacy, credibility, and authority grounded in everyday experience and thus justified their interventions. There was a strong class dimension to the notion of ordinariness too. For Labour women MPs, the ‘ordinary’ housewife was working class. She lacked the resources of her middle-class counterpart and thus the attention of the press and the opposition. Florence Paton asked the minister for food specifically ‘to give a little more for the ordinary housewife’ rather than all housewives ‘because there are some who go café visiting and restaurant haunting’.⁹⁵ There is a clear contrast between the issues they focused on and the duchess of Atholl’s insistence in 1929 that ‘practically all the housewives of this country’ were concerned with the shortage of domestic servants.⁹⁶

2013), pp. 67–98; Helen McCarthy, *Double lives: a history of working motherhood in modern Britain* (London, 2020), pp. 176–82 and 197–209.

⁹¹ 4 Mar. 1949. See also Richard Barnett, “‘The future of the midwife depends on her power to relieve pain’: the rise and fall of the analgesia in childbirth bill (1949)”, *International Journal of Obstetric Anesthesia*, 16 (2007), pp. 35–9; Joanna Bourke, ‘Becoming the “natural” mother in Britain and North America: power, emotions and the labour of childbirth between 1947 and 1967’, *Past & Present*, 246 (2020), pp. 92–114.

⁹² HC Debs 421 (10 Apr. 1946), col. 1983.

⁹³ HC Debs 432 (4 Feb. 1947), cols. 1622–7.

⁹⁴ Claire Langhamer, “‘Who the hell are ordinary people?’ Ordinariness as a category of historical analysis’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), pp. 175–95.

⁹⁵ HC Debs 424 (3 July 1946), col. 2247.

⁹⁶ HC Debs 233 (9 Dec. 1929), col. 190.

It is striking that the professional, middle-class, MPs were as likely to identify themselves as ‘ordinary’ housewives as those more obviously working-class MPs. In practice, women like Eirene White or Leah Manning may have had little in common with the housewives they claimed to speak for beyond their shared responsibility for the home. Even women like Alice Cullen or Caroline Ganley were hardly ‘ordinary’ housewives in that political activism and public service took up much of their time. Shared responsibility for the home, however, could be used to blur these differences. This emphasis on ordinariness also offered reassurance that female participation in politics did not mean that women neglected their duties at home. There was a strong social expectation, reflected in press coverage of women MPs, that they would continue to prioritize family over career.⁹⁷ Women MPs tended to conform to these expectations rather than challenge them.

There was also a sharp distinction to be made with other groups who claimed to speak for housewives. There was broad consensus on the housewife’s importance, but not what she needed, and this had profound implications for the extent of government intervention and public spending.⁹⁸ This was a period in which the supposed travails of the housewife were continually invoked by the right, spearheaded by the British Housewives’ League and eagerly taken up by the Conservative party. Labour women MPs were uniquely placed to counter their charges by presenting themselves as housewives who could legitimately claim to represent other housewives. In their view, the Conservatives, with few women on their benches – including a viscountess and a baroness – could not. Frances Davidson was unusual among Conservative women in her few references to her own personal experiences.⁹⁹ As Leah Manning said, ‘It is no good hon. Members opposite shrugging their shoulders. They do not happen to be housewives.’¹⁰⁰ In Jean Mann’s opinion, the opposition were ‘a bunch of hypocrites’ for pretending to care about the housewife’s concerns.¹⁰¹ Though the Conservative party had long sought to appeal to housewives, Labour women MPs argued that they were best placed to articulate her concerns, because they shared her daily experiences.

Labour women MPs therefore identified as housewives in order to make their case for the Labour government. They staunchly believed that only a Labour government, committed to achieving prosperity and security for all through full employment and the welfare state, could make the housewife’s life easier and happier. Jennie Lee spoke of

the joy of seeing the matron, who has reared a family, and is now wearing a decent pair of shoes, turning up at a social or a meeting in her village with a decent dress and with her hair permed. If mother’s hair

⁹⁷ Emily Harmer, *Women, media, and elections: representation and marginalization in British politics* (Bristol, 2021) p. 55.

⁹⁸ Laura Beers, *Your Britain: media and the making of the Labour party* (London, 2010), p. 9.

⁹⁹ For example, HC Debs 425 (18 July 1946), col. 1480; HC Debs 439 (27 June 1947), col. 770.

¹⁰⁰ HC Debs 463 (5 Apr. 1949), col. 1953.

¹⁰¹ HC Debs 424 (3 July 1946), col. 2251.

is permed you can be sure that means the rent is paid and the grocer's bill is met.¹⁰²

The housewife was also understood to be the prime beneficiary of Labour's policy of fair shares, designed to secure a more equal distribution of goods. Caroline Ganley movingly described how rationing and controls had raised the standard of nutrition, so that 'our mothers are better cared for and our babies are better born than ever before in our history'.¹⁰³ The working-class housewife and her family benefited not only from a basic safety net provided by the welfare state, but overall improvements in their standard of living.

Labour women MPs were thus stalwart defenders of the Labour government's overall food strategy. Indeed, if anything, they were more cautious about the lifting of restrictions and controls, recognizing that food inflation would be particularly detrimental to working-class women: 'families of small means and...the women in industry who cannot search the shops for the goods they want in the same way as their more favoured sisters do', as Lucy Middleton put it.¹⁰⁴ They were vocal champions of bread rationing, controversially introduced in July 1946. They saw this as a necessary and temporary measure to deal with the global food crisis, and a fairer and more effective response to shortages than queuing. They believed the opposition painted false pictures of socialist mismanagement and abundance elsewhere, and gave these ideas short shrift. Jean Mann claimed that 'a great deal of the criticism I have read comes from people who never made a pot of jam in their lives...and who know nothing at all about thrift in the running of a home'. As a housewife herself, she could insist that 'there has been a very great improvement in the supplies coming to the tables of the housewives of this country'.¹⁰⁵ She was able to use her own experience in the shops to rebut her opponents' claims about the costs of food subsidies with a detailed account of the low cost of eggs, butter, and bananas.¹⁰⁶ This was experience which few wealthy women, and even fewer men, possessed.

IV

At the same time, Labour women used their identification as housewives in order to challenge their own party in government. They were supportive of the overall strategy but often critical of the ways that policies operated in practice. While housewifery was essential to the health of the family and the nation, it was burdensome for the individual. Lucy Middleton described 'the harassment, the fatigue, the anxiety, and the expenses of the women of our war-damaged cities who, together with the housewives of other cities, have borne the greatest burden during the postwar years'.¹⁰⁷ Grace Colman said

¹⁰² HC Debs 452 (24 June 1948), col. 1646.

¹⁰³ HC Debs 470 (15 Dec. 1949), col. 2927.

¹⁰⁴ HC Debs 451 (25 May 1948), col. 79.

¹⁰⁵ HC Debs 453 (12 July 1948), cols. 937, 935.

¹⁰⁶ HC Debs 465 (26 May 1949), cols. 1539–41.

¹⁰⁷ HC Debs 456 (16 Sept. 1948), cols. 370–1.

she thought these women were 'the hardest working section of the community, without exception; a section of the community which has put up with difficulties probably more patiently than any other section'.¹⁰⁸ Housewives were acknowledged to put themselves last, tending to their husbands, children, and homes before their own needs. As a result, Labour women MPs argued that women needed to be not only recognized but rewarded for their efforts. If that balance could be struck, Edith Wills said, 'it will give them a sense of security, and of being almost out of the wood and looking forward to a very much brighter future'.¹⁰⁹

They therefore used their own experiences in kitchens, shops, and queues to offer critiques of government policy as well as to rebut Conservative claims. The price and availability of foodstuffs was their primary concern. In 1951, for example, Elaine Burton recruited a group of housewives to undertake a survey of the cost of fruit, vegetables, and other perishable foods in their usual shops. This drew attention to the fact that the costs were higher at the weekend, thus discriminating against the working woman.¹¹⁰ Comparing Britain unfavourably with America, she argued that 'greater attention should be paid to women at the consumer end in this country'.¹¹¹ As parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of Food, the task of defending the government's position often fell to Edith Summerskill.¹¹² She too invoked her own status as a housewife. 'I know, as is known by all women who have to feed a family, that at times it has been difficult to obtain the particular food that we would like.'¹¹³ Responding to Barbara Castle about the difficulties housewives faced in accessing soap, Summerskill replied tartly 'I would remind the hon. Lady that I am a housewife and that I use soap'.¹¹⁴ Where possible, she also sought to assuage their concerns by paying tribute to their own skills as housewives. For example, she said that the government was managing supply 'in the same way as my hon Friends would do it, because they are prudent, responsible women'.¹¹⁵

But the housewife's challenges ranged far beyond food availability. For Barbara Castle, 'the problem that faces the housewife today is, as we all know, one of great difficulty and inconvenience'.¹¹⁶ The cost of living for housewives was not just measured in shillings and pence, but also in time and effort. Labour women MPs thus sought to make visible the issues faced by housewives which were overlooked by, or irrelevant to, their male colleagues. Grace Colman described what she termed the many 'unnecessary irritants' which working-class housewives brought to her, such as the difficulties in acquiring baby clothes or the shortage of cups and saucers.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸ HC Debs 437 (23 May 1947), col. 2741.

¹⁰⁹ HC Debs 421 (10 Apr. 1946), col. 1984.

¹¹⁰ HC Debs 483 (5 Feb. 1951), cols. 1497–506.

¹¹¹ HC Debs 478 (28 July 1950), col. 879.

¹¹² Honeyball, *Edith Summerskill*, pp. 107–30.

¹¹³ HC Debs 456 (24 Sept. 1948), col. 1333.

¹¹⁴ HC Debs 450 (3 May 1948), col. 893.

¹¹⁵ HC Debs 445 (12 Dec. 1947), col. 1428.

¹¹⁶ HC Debs 436 (22 Apr. 1947), col. 944.

¹¹⁷ HC Debs 437 (23 May 1947), col. 2470.

The time and inconvenience of queuing and searching for goods were common complaints. Even when shoes were in the shops, Alice Bacon lamented, the shops themselves were shut.¹¹⁸ Mabel Ridealgh said that 'one very important way of easing the housewife's burden would be to remove the necessity for her to stand in queues or to travel from shop to shop to find the goods that she needs'.¹¹⁹ These concerns, however, were not always – or even often – taken seriously. The difficulties larger women faced in clothing themselves on the limited coupons available generated snide remarks from men on both sides of the House when raised by larger women themselves.¹²⁰

Labour women also emphasized the physical demands of housework. Barbara Ayrton Gould, for example, proposed cheaper bus fares for housewives and older people, because carrying the shopping home caused such fatigue.¹²¹ When it came to rationing, Florence Paton argued that housewives should have

at least the same amount as an expectant mother or a woman manual worker, because, believe me, the housewife is a manual worker. I have done it for five people – all the washing and everything else – and I have been really tired and have wanted something to eat after I have finished.¹²²

Labour women thus constructed domestic labour not only as work but as *hard* work. Though they did not go as far as to argue that housewives should be paid for this work, they certainly did believe that it should be recognized and rewarded in policy terms. In their view, small treats and brief respites which demonstrated consideration for the housewife and her needs had a disproportionate impact. Edith Wills was a stalwart champion of civic restaurants, not only because it gave housewives a break from cooking, but also because it allowed them the rare pleasure and enjoyment of a meal out.¹²³ Jennie Lee concurred, arguing that these restaurants offered women 'companionship and company' to help provide respite from 'the loneliness and the monotony of their work', especially for those who did not want to visit the pub.¹²⁴

It was all the more discouraging, then, when their male colleagues in government added to the housewife's burden rather than relieving it. Labour women MPs believed housewives needed to be treated fairly by the government: trusted with timely, accurate, clear information explaining what had to be done. They portrayed the housewife as a reliable and sensible woman, who could be counted on to make the sacrifices required. Jean Mann said that 'the housewives of Great Britain will struggle through for the good of our country. The housewife is a reasonable woman. If a case is put to her reasonably and honestly, she will put her back into the task and

¹¹⁸ HC Debs 415 (29 Oct. 1945), col. 10.

¹¹⁹ HC Debs 441 (6 Aug. 1947), col. 1585.

¹²⁰ Bessie and Jack Braddock, *The Braddocks* (London, 1963), p. 146; Toole, *Bessie Braddock*, p. 143.

¹²¹ HC Debs 426 (29 July 1946), col. 508.

¹²² HC Debs 424 (3 July 1946), col. 2247.

¹²³ HC Debs 430 (28 Nov. 1946), cols. 1829–33.

¹²⁴ HC Debs 433 (10 Feb. 1947), col. 1428.

get through.¹²⁵ Alice Bacon said that ‘during the last few years our housewives have co-operated to the full with the Government in order to make our fair shares policy work, and they will continue to co-operate so long as they are getting a fair deal’.¹²⁶ In a party in which, as Steven Fielding has suggested, ‘activism was defined by “duties” and “obligations”’ and ‘demands for “sacrifice”’, they hoped that this message would resonate.¹²⁷ If fair shares were to work effectively, especially for those who needed them most, the government’s relationship with the housewife should be characterized by transparency and trust.

So Labour women were aggrieved when their colleagues in government failed to treat housewives with the fairness or care they deserved. In a 1947 debate on the economic crisis, Mabel Ridealgh let her annoyance show. ‘I have said before in this House, and I say again, that the splendid job of the housewife is not being fully recognised.’¹²⁸ They saw, as their male colleagues did not, that the nature and extent of sacrifice was gendered, and that women bore the brunt. For example, Lucy Middleton highlighted that the coupons needed for household furnishing usually came out of the housewife’s allocation even though the benefits were shared across the household.¹²⁹ Women were expected to adjust to new rationing measures at a moment’s notice, with little explanation. They needed to cope with more and more, while given less and less, with little recognition of the cumulative impact of years of sacrifice. Thus, when rationing was brought in for dried eggs, Barbara Castle asked in exasperation:

Is the Minister aware that the housewives object not only to the content of the Minister’s decision but to the way in which it was announced? Will he bear in mind that the housewives of this country will loyally try to do their best under grave national difficulties if they are taken into his confidence?¹³⁰

Jean Mann said likewise, ‘I do not think the women of this country will object when the situation is presented to them. When they know the situation no one will stand by the nation more than the mothers’, but simply removing their ration ‘is not the way to woo the women of this country’.¹³¹ The housewife was too easily taken for granted and her needs were not taken seriously. Labour women recognized that these policies would impact negatively on housewives and play into Conservative hands. Jennie Lee offered a characteristically robust assessment of the problem:

¹²⁵ HC Debs 424 (3 July 1946), col. 2251.

¹²⁶ HC Debs 472 (6 Mar. 1950), col. 48.

¹²⁷ Steven Fielding, ‘Activists against “affluence”: Labour party culture during the “golden age”, circa 1950–1970’, *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), pp. 241–67, at p. 258.

¹²⁸ HC Debs 441 (6 Aug. 1947), col. 1585.

¹²⁹ HC Debs 451 (25 May 1948), col. 79.

¹³⁰ HC Debs 418 (6 Feb. 1946), col. 1723.

¹³¹ HC Debs 419 (14 Feb. 1946), col. 595.

I would assure the House that the British housewife is not the moron some people imagine she is, that she is a sensible person, and that she is also a kind person and that if a little more care were taken to help her to know the realities in the lives of women in other countries, our Minister of Food would have great cooperation and sympathy from her.¹³²

V

There is now a well-developed literature on Labour's difficulties in adjusting to the development of the 'affluent society', the emergence of new consumer goods, and rising living standards and expectations. As a whole, the party became increasingly suspicious and critical of affluence, associating consumption with capitalist advertising, brash Americanism, and political passivity. This resulted in elitist and paternalistic presumptions about what people 'should' consume and sometimes even a sense of disappointment with the electorate.¹³³ Towards the end of the 1950s, key figures such as Tony Crosland and Michael Young attempted to chart a new course, embracing prosperity and choice, and emphasizing education and protection through new consumer associations.¹³⁴ But there has been little attention to women's contribution to these debates. Investigating their concerns, however, suggests that Labour women MPs actively embraced certain types of consumer goods, arguing that they would particularly benefit working-class housewives. This section shows how Labour women MPs sought to resist and modify the 'moralisation of consumption' and 'paternalist consumer politics' which dominated party thinking.¹³⁵

Labour women's concerns manifested as resistance to the purchase tax imposed on consumer goods, especially those goods which would lighten the housewives' load. Supposed luxuries were subject to purchase tax, a consumption tax which was the forerunner of VAT. Labour women MPs argued that not all new consumer goods should be understood as luxuries. Rather, they enabled the housewife to carry out her vital work. Jean Mann described these as the housewife's 'tools of trade' and even suggested that housewives might be given vacuum cleaners for free.¹³⁶ Telling the chancellor that he had made a mistake in imposing the tax on gas and electric cookers, she assured him that 'no one switches on a cooker just for fun'.¹³⁷ Mabel

¹³² HC Debs 421 (4 Apr. 1946), col. 1445.

¹³³ Lawrence Black, *The political culture of the left in affluent Britain, 1951–64: old Labour, new Britain?* (Basingstoke, 2003); Nick Tiratsoo, 'Popular politics, affluence and the Labour party in the 1950s', in Anthony Horst, Lewis Johnman, and W. Scott Lucas, eds., *Contemporary British history, 1931–61: politics and the limits of policy* (London, 1991); Fielding, 'Activists against "affluence"'.
¹³⁴ Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in twentieth-century Britain: the search for a historical movement* (Cambridge, 2003); Lawrence Black, 'Crosland's consumer politics', in Kerstin Brückweh, ed., *The voice of the citizen consumer: a history of market research, consumer movements, and the political public sphere* (Oxford, 2011); Ben Jackson, *Equality and the British left: a study in progressive political thought, 1900–64* (Manchester, 2007); Lise Butler, *Michael Young, social science and the British left, 1945–1970* (Oxford, 2020).

¹³⁵ Hilton, *Consumerism in twentieth-century Britain*, pp. 144, 147.

¹³⁶ HC Debs 449 (7 Apr. 1948), col. 256.

¹³⁷ HC Debs 437 (19 May 1947), col. 2098.

Ridealgh was among those who found it frustrating that as new domestic technologies came in – ‘irons, washers, cleaners and all things of a like nature which go to lighten the burden of the housewife’ – they were being taxed at very high rates.¹³⁸ For Leah Manning, these were goods ‘needed in the home’, so taxing them ‘penalised’ the housewife and her family.¹³⁹ Barbara Castle concurred that electric irons should not be placed beyond the reach ‘of the ordinary housewife’ because ‘the housewife is today forced increasingly to do her own laundry at home...The women have earned the right to these items of increased convenience’.¹⁴⁰ Her language of rights reflects her ongoing concerns about the nature and extent of the sacrifices that women were supposed to accept.

This underscores the point that Labour women MPs were concerned above all with the working-class housewife, rather than all housewives. Indeed, Jean Mann argued that in some instances the purchase tax should actually be higher. She suggested that it did not make sense that ‘sham’ jewellery and real jewellery, or utility stockings and expensive gowns, attracted the same rate of tax.¹⁴¹ As a result, Labour women had little time for Conservative attacks on the purchase tax as a whole, calling instead for targeted modifications. Their concern was that while better-off women would buy these new consumer goods anyway, poorer housewives could not. Freda Corbet complained that just ‘when the housewives are looking for an easing of their burden’ a tax on new water heaters would mean ‘that people who have the money will continue to have these appliances installed, but people without money will be hit’.¹⁴² The point was to ensure widespread access to products and services which would make their lives easier. Barbara Castle argued, for example, that the housewife was interested in ‘the democratisation of electricity. She wants to see it cease being a middle class privilege and become a privilege available to every home’.¹⁴³

Labour women MPs also argued that the government’s strategies were counterproductive and undermined their broader economic objectives. Forcing housewives to use older, more inefficient, technologies would not help to address fuel shortages but only exacerbate them. Rejecting arguments that vacuum cleaners used too much electricity, Jean Mann conducted her own experiments to compare their usage with radiators and immersers.¹⁴⁴ Barbara Castle made the same argument with respect to electric irons. Reimposing taxes on electric irons would either force the housewife to pay a higher price for this necessary item, or to waste fuel, time, and energy using a more inefficient flat iron.¹⁴⁵ This was important, because, in the context of full employment and the need for higher exports to address the balance of

¹³⁸ HC Debs 436 (22 Apr. 1947), cols. 946–7.

¹³⁹ HC Debs 425 (19 July 1946), cols. 1593–4.

¹⁴⁰ HC Debs 436 (22 Apr. 1947), cols. 944–5.

¹⁴¹ HC Debs 475 (16 May 1950), col. 1098.

¹⁴² HC Debs 451 (8 June 1948), col. 2065.

¹⁴³ HC Debs 432 (4 Feb. 1947), col. 1627.

¹⁴⁴ HC Debs 449 (7 Apr. 1948), col. 256.

¹⁴⁵ HC Debs 438 (17 June 1947), col. 1486.

payments crisis, the government looked to women to make up the shortfall by undertaking more paid work.¹⁴⁶ Unless the demands of housework were lessened, women would struggle to respond to this call.

Occasionally, the government was prepared to make some concessions. Pleasantly surprised to learn that the chancellor was prepared to remove purchase tax on washing machines, Barbara Castle pressed him to eliminate it on vacuum cleaners too. This was preferable to removing the purchase tax on fridges, since Castle saw vacuum cleaners as a more realistic purchase for working-class women.¹⁴⁷ But overall, Labour women MPs failed to persuade the chancellor and the treasury of the need for an approach to taxation which took account of the specific needs of the working-class housewife. Gendered inequity was thus inscribed into the taxation system just as it was embedded within the welfare state. However, Labour women MPs would continue to critique the terms of the purchase tax throughout the 1950s, especially around the 'pots and pans' budget of 1955.¹⁴⁸

VI

This article has demonstrated that during the Attlee administration Labour women MPs sought to utilize their own identities as housewives in order to improve the daily lives of 'ordinary' women. There were a number of related reasons for this. There were far more married women among their ranks, and, regardless of their professional experience, housewifery was also a central part of their daily lives. Emphasizing this aspect of their identity enabled them to conform to gendered expectations even while subverting them in many other respects. As a result, they laid claim to a form of gendered knowledge beyond the reach of both their male colleagues and their male opponents. They were able to use their own shopping lists, recipes, and other domestic responsibilities to refute the opposition and challenge the government.

At a time when the concerns of the housewife were central to public discourse, Labour women MPs stressed that some housewives needed more attention and support than others, and offered practical, meaningful ways to make her life easier. In their concern for the working-class housewife's purse, time, resources, health, energy, and well-being, they demonstrated an understanding of how gender and class combined to produce inequality. Labour women MPs wanted to ensure the housewife had practical support as well as warm words, so that she was appropriately and adequately rewarded for her essential contribution to family and nation. They particularly sought to ease the burdens on poorer housewives, ensuring they did not miss out on goods which better-off women had the time to seek out and the money to buy. As a result, while

¹⁴⁶ Gerry Holloway, *Women and work in Britain since 1840* (Abingdon, 2005) pp. 183–93; McCarthy, *Double lives*, pp. 197–223.

¹⁴⁷ HC Debs 438 (17 June 1947), col. 1868.

¹⁴⁸ For example, Alice Cullen's interventions in HC Debs 546 (28 Nov. 1955), cols. 2040–1, and HC Debs 571 (28 May 1957), cols. 285–6; and Margaret Herbison's comments in HC Debs (23 Nov. 1955), cols. 1535–6. See also Reeves, *Women of Westminster*, pp. 94–5.

defending the overall strategy on policies like rationing, they raised frequent concerns about its implementation, and the unequal burdens which government policy imposed on those who were least equipped to manage them. They argued that housewives would support the government so long as they were treated honestly and fairly.

However, Labour women MPs also faced ongoing difficulties in persuading their colleagues that the housewife was neither self-interested nor grasping, but had genuine concerns and limited patience. The government's apparent disregard for the needs of the housewife frustrated Labour women MPs. They were all too aware that this left the government and party vulnerable to Conservative attack. Jean Mann argued that 'there is one way to win the women's vote. It is to fight and fight, and fight again on their behalf.'¹⁴⁹ Yet, it was easy to overlook women's perspectives in a male-dominated political culture, where women were equal in theory, but subordinate in practice, and all too easily marginalized. The primacy of class within the party, its long-standing suspicion of other identities, and its consequent disregard for gender were also important. In effect, the party in government could not recognize that gendered demands might also be working-class demands. Instead, it associated the claims of the housewife with the claims of the middle-classes, the excesses of the British Housewives' League, and the supposedly selfish desire for affluence. Labour women's claims to speak as housewives and for housewives did not mean that they would be heard.

Karen Hunt suggests that after the Second World War, "the housewife" became a rallying point for a certain sort of women's politics – middle-class and often quite right-wing'.¹⁵⁰ But this article suggests that Labour women continued to offer their own understandings of the housewife and her needs. These bore significant continuities with older traditions within Labour women's politics and women's activism more widely. They drew upon contemporary ideas about the housewife, but also highlighted specific aspects of her life and needs: simultaneously asserting the commonalities of domestic womanhood and interpreting them through the prism of class. As historians continue to reappraise the Attlee governments, then, it is essential that women are considered as active agents within the party, and that their views and perspectives are made central to an analysis which places gender, as well as class, at its heart.

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¹⁴⁹ Mann, *Woman in parliament*, pp. 172–3.

¹⁵⁰ Hunt, 'A heroine at home', p. 79.

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