

Feminizing Politics: A Reply to Ann Widdecombe and Julie Morgan

Joni Lovenduski

The reviews by Julie Morgan and Ann Widdecombe illustrate, albeit implicitly, differences between political scientists and politicians. These are different activities with different responsibilities. As a political scientist, I am obliged to declare and explain the ideas that influence my work, and report all of what I learn from my research, even if it disappoints me and does not support my preferences. As politicians they have no equivalent obligation, but are free, indeed are expected, to express opinions and to select and put forward evidence that advances their political views. Their reviews draw directly on their political experiences and reflect opposing positions on women's representation.

In reply I wish to reiterate two tenets of *Feminizing Politics* (FP) (Lovenduski 2005): (i) politics is a gendered activity; and (ii) the identity of the actors matters. If these claims are correct then they affect the practice of politics and therefore the work of politicians. Julie Morgan seems to agree as she lets us know that her expertise is influenced by her sex, her party and her nationality. Ann Widdecombe clearly does not agree. Angry at being a subject, she hates this type of book because by drawing attention to her sex, it makes a token of her. She asserts that she is not a woman politician; she is an MP full stop. But this is not true. While being 'an MP full stop' may be what she wants to be, it is not what she is. Social scientists long ago demonstrated that the social attributes of actors (class, religion, gender and so on) affect how they play particular roles in institutions.

Both reviews make criticisms. Julie Morgan writes that FP does not say enough about how things have changed. The discussion in the last chapter considers change but perhaps not enough. It was written before Boni Sones et al.'s book, *Women in Parliament* (2005), which demonstrates positive change across parliamentary activities was published. Had Sones' research been available I would have said much more and been more positive about the impact of increased women's presence in the House of Commons.

Ann Widdecombe's (AW) review is something of a diatribe, predicated both on her virulent objection to what she thought I was doing and her unwillingness to acknowledge the resistances to women representatives that I describe. But she has misread the book, which is an exploration of the processes, threats and portents of increasing the numbers of women representatives. It draws on examples in a number of countries to argue that daily sociabilities, policies and institutional cultures are likely to change when the numbers of women change. It would have been impossible to examine every case and every effect of increase. Even so, I am confident that the trends I outline broadly describe changes in the systems I selected as examples.



AW's stated objections are all founded on points of detail and directed at British examples. She says my statement that British elected institutions did not select women in significant numbers until the 1990s is wrong because I fail to acknowledge the considerable presence of women in local councils and the House of Lords. Both complaints are contrary to evidence, examples of the misperceived amplification of numbers that so often characterises observations of the presence of minority groups (Puwar 2004).

AW claims that local councils were 'full of women by the 1970s'. It is true that the proportion of women in local councils has historically been higher than in parliament, but the councils were and are hardly 'full' of women. In 1975 women comprised about 15 per cent of councillors in English local authorities, a figure that only began to rise in the mid-1980s.¹ True, Widdecombe's own council of Runnymede was, during her tenure, exceptional for its day but women still made up less than 20 per cent of councillors for most of the decade. Even today fewer than 30 per cent of councillors are women (Borisjuk et al. (forthcoming)).

On the House of Lords AW reasons that one must make allowances for the fact that systems of primogeniture associated with individual peerages determined that most hereditaries must be men. Once it became possible, many women were appointed. This is an extraordinary claim! By October 1996 there were 626 hereditary peers and 401 appointed peers in a House of 1,053 members that also included 26 (male) bishops. Only 7 per cent of the total were women (Bogdanor 1997). True, the Life Peerage Act of 1958 enabled women to become peers and women hereditary peers were admitted after 1963, by which time 67 of 382 life peers were women. The provision allowing women to inherit peerages was permissive, not obligatory. By 1996 only 16 of 767 hereditary peers were women. Although there were some lordly supporters of feminisation, there was enormous resistance to the entry of women. A telling example occurred in March 1994 when Lord Diamond proposed a bill according to which the firstborn would inherit the peerage regardless of sex. His proposal was rejected in the Lords by 74 to 39 votes. In this debate Lord Mowbray and Stourton expressed fears that 'the eldest daughter of an ancient house "might marry, shall we say, an American film star from Hollywood". Even more "appalling" would be "if a daughter of an ancient house were to marry a Frenchman and the family became French"' (quoted in Bogdanor 1997, 117–118). In 2007 the sex composition of the Lords is pretty similar to that of the Commons with 19 per cent women, comprising 26 per cent of Labour and Lib Dem benches, 16 per cent of Conservative and 15 per cent of cross-benchers.

AW attributes to FP an argument that Margaret Thatcher became leader of her party because she is a woman. In fact I was making a more subtle point about resistance to changes in gender relations. I wrote that Thatcher gained considerable support because her rarity in her party meant that she was not a precedent. Instead she was a queen bee who appointed no elected women to any of her cabinets. She may have frightened her male colleagues in many ways, but portending the imminent feminisation of politics was not one of them.

Her review claims that I ignore the 'fact' that women are under-represented because they do not come forward. Actually, I discuss this issue of supply at some length and make the following argument: more qualified women come forward

than are selected. Frequently men are selected who are not as well qualified as the women with whom they compete. When women feel welcome, as they did after the Labour party introduced quotas and after more recent Cameron reforms in the Conservative party, more come forward. Overall women are more likely to seek nomination when they believe they will be treated fairly.

AW claims that the unpleasant response women meet from many of their colleagues in the House of Commons is no more than normal teasing to which everyone is subject. Cherry-picking her example, she writes that the barracking experienced by Teresa Gorman when she was found to have lied about her age was no more than she deserved, according to the conventions of the House of Commons. Even if one approves of those conventions (I do not), this example is very selective, one of many, many examples offered in the book. Women MPs have consistently reported behaviour by their male colleagues that would count as sexual harassment in any other workplace. Does AW think they deserve to be sexually harassed?

Ann Widdecombe is well known for her opinions and is regularly invited to express them in broadcast and print media. In this role she is not an MP full stop, but a token woman opponent of policy interventions to increase women's political representation. Her views used to be more common than they are now, when women politicians have more options, more opportunities and therefore more choice. While she is undoubtedly sincere, her attitudes help to keep her in the limelight in a media that needs women willing to speak out against current demands to increase the political representation of women.

While both reviewers concentrate on the British examples they know best, FP also considers wider trends in women's political representation. In response to claims from women, levels of elected representation are increasing globally. Interventions to accelerate such changes are widespread. For example, quotas to increase women's presence in elected institutions have been adopted in over 100 countries. Women representatives are resisted and often have difficult experiences of entry. My book examines these processes and explores what they portend for the practice of democratic politics. Normatively, of course, it reflects my preference for equality for women. But *Feminizing Politics* is also an attempt at feminist social science, which seeks not to prescribe how women should conceive their role but to relate how the environment in which they operate shapes the role they do play.

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Note

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