How can women MPs make a difference? Reconsidering group representation and the responsible party model

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Introduction

Calls for group representation are at odds with the traditional views on representation and election that underpin democratic government as presently practised and understood. This stand-off is not only a problem of institutional design but also a wider one of democratic theory, both of which have important bases in political practice. So this discussion crosses between theoretical and practical accounts of democracy. This paper considers Phillips’ proposition, that women MPs cannot both have an impact and be accountable to voters, in relation to representation theory and parliamentary practice with the intent of clarifying the problems and suggesting both practical and theoretical answers to some of them. The first sections sketch the background on representation theory, a politics of presence and group rights then later sections examine aspects of the perceived problem, and suggest solutions for theory and practice.

‘Changing the composition of elected assemblies only improves the representation of excluded groups in what we might call a statistical sense; failing the development of more sustained conditions for consultation and discussion, it is an enabling condition’ (Phillips 1995:188). Thus Phillips concludes one of the central themes in The Politics of Presence. Having presented arguments as to why it is important to change the composition of legislatures, she laments that such desires are at odds with central components of representative democracy: ‘either gender does make a difference, in which case it is in tension with accountability through political parties, or it does not make a difference [because] we expect our representatives to do more – or other – than they promised in the election campaign.’ (Phillips 1995: 77). Phillips’ concluding problem is the starting point for this reconsideration of theories of representation. Although she states them more specifically, these views are not unique to Phillips but rather pervade thinking on group representation (for example, Dryzek 1990; Elster 1998; Dryzek 2000; Saward 2001). Thus this article deals with a core problem for arguments about group representation within legislatures. I am concentrating on women MPs but the same arguments apply to other groups seeking a presence such as indigenous and ethnic minority groups. In essence the problem is how women MPs can make a
difference to outcomes whilst being accountable to the voters, many of whom elected them because of their party. In focussing on this problem I start from an assumption that the socio-economic composition of the legislature matters and more specifically that the socio-economic composition of the legislature should make a difference to policy outcomes. I am not considering the wider issue of group influence and the supporting role of interest groups and the wider range of processes that are used to consult with women’s groups. Neither am I covering the related argument in favour of group representation that the presence of one member of the group helps to empower other members because of the dignity associated with official recognition (Guinier 1989; Taylor 1994). These arguments, while important for the overall idea of group representation, are distinct from the problems of women MPs making a difference to policy.

**Theories of representation**

Representation is the central concept in the form of democracy used by democratic governments. Indeed elections are so central to definitions and measures of liberal democracy that it is the election that provides the decision makers with their legitimacy (Dahl 1989; Beetham 1994). For some people, representation is an unfortunate practical necessity because an Athenian form of democracy - where all make the decisions - is not practical in modern states, while for others, representation has an intrinsic democratic value in assuring rule by a political elite who have the skill and time to gather information, debate issues and act for the good of the country (Pitkin 1967; Brzinski 1999; Eamnuel and Light 1999; Urbinati 2000). Key components are accountability, effectiveness, stability, a national perspective and political expertise. Representation, like so much of politics is associated with both theoretical and empirical literatures: normative, descriptive, interpretative and speculative. It is a phrase used by political practitioners and media commentators as well as the academics. However there are a number of common components.

Representation is a process, an active relationship involving voters and representatives (Pitkin 1967; Brzinski 1999; Urbinati
The voters choose one or a team of representatives through a process of preference aggregation formalised as an electoral system. Those elected make decisions on behalf, and in the best interests, of the voters and other residents, and must explain these decisions to the voters and be held accountable at the next election. Thus in seeking to explain the representation process, we need to consider the basis upon which voters make their choice and the consequent role of the MP and in particular how MPs should decide on how to act when involved in policy creation. Representation theory tends to concentrate on the question of how MPs should make decisions. Traditionally representation is categorised as trustee or delegate (independent or mandate) (Pitkin 1967; Catt 1999) with these variously describing a dichotomy and two ends of a spectrum. At the simplest, delegates follow instructions and trustees make decisions based upon their own judgement but there are variations within each. The difference between trustee and delegate is the importance that the MPs place upon the views of the electorate: if MPs listen with the intention of following then they are delegates; if they listen as part of general information gathering then they are trustees.

Trustees claim discretion and the freedom to govern as they see fit (Emy 1997) and so they make decisions on behalf of the people although advocates argue as to the proper basis for such decisions (Catt 1999: 88). A common view is that the representatives must make decisions that are in the interests of the people or nation (Pitkin 1967: 145). In a pure trustee position, MPs reach a decision based on their own thoughts. However, decisions rarely form in a vacuum and so the type of views that MPs listened to in reaching a decision are important. The key aspect is that, in contrast to delegates, trustees make up their own mind rather than following any instruction. But, although trustees as agents act under their free will, they can then be held accountable so it is a relationship and not licence to act irresponsibly (Harmon 1995). As the voters do not know how the trustee will act on any given issue they choose the person they think is good at making decisions, based upon their past record or known views or an assumption that they share core views and characteristics of the voter (Catt 1999). Legitimacy derives from the fact of the election.
Delegates follow instructions and thus act as a messenger for the preferences and decisions of others. The core question then is whose instructions are being followed (Catt 1999: 80). Under all single member electoral systems (plurality and majoritarian), one common answer has been that the MP should do as the local voters want, although it is unclear that the local voters generally have a single voice or that their will can be ascertained. The voting behaviour literature also indicates that voters are more likely to be influenced by the party of the candidate than by their personal views or character. In party list systems votes are cast for a party although in a few countries voters can indicate a preference for one or more candidates within that party. Under STV voters can express preferences for candidates across parties although again voting behaviour studies suggest that party is a dominant factor. Thus if representation theory is to have any relevance to political practice it needs to take account of political parties.

Whilst it has fallen from fashion in some quarters, the responsible party model or mandate theory is the main way in which the dominance of parties is accommodated within theories of representation. Whilst much has been written which argues about the details, there is agreement on the core components. During an election campaign a party (or president) provides voters with details of the policies that they wish to pursue. Voters choose a party and the party that wins the most seats in the parliament becomes the government, or part of a governing coalition, and is expected to implement its manifesto. In order to be able to deliver on those promises a party must maximise its voting strength in parliament and thus must discipline its MPs into voting along the party line regardless of their personal views. So MPs are ‘lobby fodder’ for the views of the party and their own views are irrelevant. The government thus claims a mandate for its manifesto but it is not clear if this means that the government has the right to introduce into parliament, or to implement unopposed, its campaign policies (Emy 1997; Goot 1999). Democracy implies a nexus between popular opinion and what the government does (May 1978; Emy 1997) and the responsible party model delivers this because voters’ aggregated election choice is consequential. Legitimacy is linked to outcomes as well as to the process in that representatives are supposed to do what
voters expected them to do (Beetham 1994: question 5). However elections have a role and thus this argument does not go as far as May who seeks only congruence between the desires of effected citizens and government decisions (May 1978). The responsible party model can be seen as a form of delegate representation because the MPs are following instructions rather than making up their own mind on each issue. In the delegate theory broadly voters make a choice based on assumptions about how the representative will behave and within the responsible party model such assumptions are based upon party election campaign material (Catt 1999: p. 88).

**The politics of presence and group rights**

Phillips suggests a new set of labels relating to representation: the politics of ideas and the politics of presence. The former describes traditional accounts based on the representation of views, beliefs and goals through party policy, programs and ideology where personal details of the representative are irrelevant. The latter seeks representation of identity and shared experience, so personal characteristics are a central component of representation. The three cornerstones of the politics of presence are: the symbolic significance of who is present, especially the inclusion of the previously oppressed; a politics of transformation especially in the final decision; and a ‘more even-handed balance of society’s groups in the arena of political discussion’ (Phillips 1995:45). The politics of presence does not relate to new social movement such as feminism or indigenous rights as each are a set of values and policies based on the interests of the group and therefore part of the politics of ideas. Rather the politics of presence focuses upon perspectives and responses. Perspective comes from personal experience whereas others can understand the interests of a group even when they do not share the defining identity (Phillips 1995:176). The two are not a dichotomy but rather both need to be considered in modern parliaments. Stated at its simplest, in the politics of presence the messenger matters as well as the message.

Claims that the personal characteristics of decision-makers need to be re-balanced are usually articulated with reference to gender
and ethnicity. One example is the demand that in each parliament half of the MPs should be women (IPU 1995). Various ethnic, indigenous and national groups are also claiming the need for a political voice and various governments are taking steps to ensure some presence (Catt and Murphy 2002). Theorists tend to claim group representation for the oppressed and disadvantaged (Young 1997:349), those systematically disadvantaged and marginalized by the system (Kymlicka 1993: 65, 69-70) and those with a distinct culture (Tully 1995: 46). Lijphart argues more generally that stability is derived from a system that incorporates all groups (Lijphart 1977). Diversity has long been seen as an important component of democracy but the difference here is in the type of diversity: social characteristics rather than ideas or economic interests (Phillips 1995: 6).

Surveying the English language literature on group representation, most arguments in its favour are based on recognition of a shared perspective amongst group members. For instance, Young talks of “experiential specificity” and claims that “a democratic public should provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed and disadvantaged” (Young 1990:184). Williams argues that a group’s shared experience of marginalization constitutes the source from which a shared perspective on issues of public policy springs (Williams 1998:5-6). As each group has a particular perspective, then the argument is that this needs to be heard in the decision-making body and only someone from the group can properly express this unique perspective (Royal Commission on the Electoral System 1986:88; Kymlicka 1995:138). As there are clearly societal differences that have an impact on life chances and people are not very good at imagining themselves in vastly different circumstances, then legislators from across societal divides need to be present to ensure that the needs and preoccupations of all are heard in debate (Phillips 1995:53). More assertive is the suggestion that political dialogue is only democratic if all significant points of views and demands are present in the debate (Miller 1995:446), and, in particular when debating issues pertaining to the treatment of the group, that good decisions can only be made when the historic and experience-based views of the group are heard (Williams 1996: 106). One common criticism of arguments that the
legislature should mirror society follows Pitkin’s contention that it is only the actions of the representatives that matter. Phillips moves beyond this argument in that she wants the message and the messenger to matter so in wanting the women MPs to have an impact she is interested in their actions, as women MPs.

Reconsidering the problem

If composition matters because different groups have unique perspectives which must be heard, then the political process must include stages where such perspectives are aired and discussion takes place. Deliberation is fundamental to the idea that the presence of women MPs has an impact because it is in this way that the range of perspectives can be heard and understood by others (Eckersley 2001:106). However such advocacy of deliberation is not totally aligned with the deliberative democracy literature. In common is the idea of deliberation as a community activity where ideas and preferences are clarified, validated and cross-examined before choices are made (Benhabib 1996; Uhr 1998). Deliberation implies that discussion can change preferences and thus is qualitatively different from aggregation (Phillips 1995:149, 164) with a feeling of endlessness such that decisions can be revised because they are a communal consensus for now (Urbinati 2000). Deliberation is about inclusion (Phillips 1995:145) because minorities have an equal opportunity to state their view and thus the chance to delay an automatic majority and remind the majority of other views (Uhr 1998; Urbinati 2000). When decisions are made through consensual deliberation then weight of numbers is not paramount, merely the chance to express a distinct perspective (Stark 1997). Underlying the thinking of those arguing for deliberation and group representation is a community based on participation rather than individual choice. In such a community, majoritarian or winner-takes-all adversarial politics and preference aggregation are anathema and competitive bargaining is replaced with deliberative judgement (Williams 1996: 44-5) which ‘demands a certain reciprocal commitment’ (Taylor 1998: 144). There is an assumption that people, or in this context MPs, are willing to listen to other perspectives and to change their own preferences because of this new understanding.

But there are major differences in thinking about the role of deliberation as it relates to the politics of presence on the one hand and on the other hand, to the deliberative democracy literature. One such difference, which is of central relevance to this article, is the forum for
deliberation. The politics of presence is interested in the legislature and other existing democratic decision-making bodies whereas deliberative democracy rarely places deliberation within parliament (Eckersley 2001). The politics of presence needs a forum for discussion, where people may change their views, but there is an assumption that a vote will follow. In contrast, deliberative democracy theories pay scant attention to decision procedures and democratic institutions and indeed frequently suggest a new form of democracy separate from such institutions (Budge 2001:195). To avoid complications related to the wider implications of deliberative democracy, ‘discussion’ rather than ‘deliberation’ will be used here.

The key means of making a difference is construed as expressing new or different views and perspectives on issues and this implies the need for an assembly that has real discussion where those listening are open to responding to the perspectives that they hear. By implication, MPs as a group must themselves be willing to respond to the perspectives that they hear, particularly if we assume that more than one group needs to air its perspectives. For example, women as well as men should respond to the ethnic minority perspective and men from all ethnic groups need to respond to the female perspective(s). Groups may want passionate advocates for their views (Urbinati 2000) but all MPs have a wider role as decision-makers. Given a desire for joint agreement rather than preference aggregation then all need to be part of a compromise and all have to come to the discussion willing to change their views. So taking account of a range of views equates with the trustee rather than the delegate model of representation. If the MPs are hearing the views then they need to be able to react to them but if they are following instructions then this cannot happen.

Thus the conclusion of this line of argument is that for socio-economic composition to have an impact, MPs need to be trustees rather than delegates. However, this conclusion is problematic because it removes accountability as predictability and is counter to the only model of representation that adequately acknowledges the role of political parties. Another practical problem is where such discussion is to take place. While the debate in the assembly chamber is one frequently seen aspect of parliament, it does not provide for true deliberation. MPs, acting as delegates, are told how the party wishes them to vote prior to the debate, unless it is designated a free
vote. As all party MPs know how they are expected to vote, the purpose of the debate is not to convince the other side to change their vote.

Group representation advocates argue that group members have a unique perspective which needs to be heard in the decision making process and which can only be expressed by group members. If views are to be heard then this implies that decisions are the result of discussion rather than an aggregation of pre-existing preferences. However another aspect of democracy is that voters remain in control because their choice is consequential in that they expect MPs to follow election promises as described in the responsible party model. Taking these ideas together the question is whether we can expect woman MPs to behave other than according to the party line? If we cannot, then composition cannot make a difference but if we can, then it seems to remove the responsible party model. So we have two practical problems: where can real discussion occur; and can women MPs express their perspectives without acting contrary to their party line?

Phillips wants women MPs to make a difference by airing their perspectives. The obvious question is: a difference to what? and, by extension, where is discussion needed? While media attention tends to be on the final decision, there are other important phases in the decision-making process. Any decision contains four phases: raising an issue, proposing solutions, agreeing on and refining one solution, implementation (Catt 1999; Catt and Murphy 2002: chapter 2). Deliberation is often associated with the raising of issues and discussion of solutions and, although deliberation advocates desire a consensus decision to emerge, discussion can also predate an aggregation of preferences. In such situations the discussion is not negated because of the assumption that through discussion some preferences will have changed and some new solutions emerged. Parliamentary debate also has an impact on public debate: informing views, reflecting opinions and refining them in the wider interest. In the same way that those advocating for group representation emphasise the symbolic importance of having views aired there is also a desire to hear the alternative views put even if they will be defeated. In addition, groups ultimately want everyone, and not just MPs, to understand and incorporate their perspective when
considering policy issues. Therefore the discussion of the range of perspectives has an important role in informing public opinion.

Accepting that a range of perspectives needs to be heard throughout the policy process does not mean that decision-makers must provide all of these perspectives. A number of group representation authors talk of women (and other group) MPs providing information to decision-makers rather than of their role as one of the decision makers: ‘fairness in a decision-making procedure implies, amongst other things, that the interests and perspectives of the minority be listened to and taken into account’ (Kymlicka 1995:131). Indeed consultation with interest groups and stakeholders is a fairly common means for decision-makers to seek information and a range of perspectives (Sawer and Zappala 2001). In seeking means for groups to have an influence on policy, Young proposes that groups be given resources, that policy makers take their policy proposals seriously and that they have a veto on key decisions which impact on their interests (Young 1990: 184). So in these cases, group representatives have no explicit role as decisions makers. Increasingly government bodies, at local and national level, are using procedures designed to elicit a range of perspectives and in some cases specific groups are automatically asked for their views on policy proposals.

But the politics of presence distinctly seeks to have a broader range of views heard in the legislature, because there are MPs present who have those perspectives. The women MPs are not just providing information for those who make the decisions because as MPs, they are decision-makers. Another important point to remember is that women MPs are taking part in making decisions for all, not just for women. Women MPs can provide information for the decision-makers but can also bring their distinct perspective to the decision-making, to the weighting of information and priorities. Here group representation arguments are not for control of the decision through a veto but rather the chance to influence the result. Many indigenous and sub-state national groups seek self-determination through control of decisions on issues with a particular importance for the group. Whilst often deriving from the same set of arguments about group representation, there is an important distinction between ideas of self-determination and ideas of MPs from the group being in the
legislature. Importantly for this paper, the distinction is relevant when considering the impact on democracy and representation.

There is an important distinction between the arguments about which individuals and groups need to be consulted so that the decision-makers are fully informed, and the ideas about what constitutes a good set of decision-makers. This distinction needs to be more clearly drawn when talking about group representation and the politics of presence. Both are valid and useful in terms of ‘making a difference’ but they have different consequences. Likewise such a distinction would be a useful component within the literature on both wider ideas of deliberative democracy and that of public consultation.

Re-examining the responsible party model

The responsible party model or mandate is a central component of this argument but one response would be to jettison it as fatally flawed. However a theory about representation that relates to the real political world needs to include a role for political parties as they structure voting, elections, parliamentary structures and government formation, and the existence of competing parties is a factor in measures of democracy (Bollen and Jackman 1989; Beetham 1994; Vanhanen 1997). Dahl argues that parties are vital for representative democracy because they aggregate votes (Dahl 1989) and Budge asserts that if parties did not exist we would invent them (Budge 2001: 196). However, this is not to claim that there are no problems with the responsible party model. There are claims that governments make fewer detailed promises, that they break the promises that they do make and indeed that they make ‘implausible promises’ in order to attract votes while having no intention of implementing them (Emy 1997). Governments commonly use the defence of unforeseen and changing circumstances and decisions that they cannot control due to the global economy and international treaty obligations.

Rather than jettisoning the responsible party model, this section examines various details in the model in an attempt to accommodate Phillips’ desire for women MPs to be able to have an impact without acting contrary to the party line. One aspect of the responsible party model that bears upon this argument is the detail of the mandate or
delegate relationship. In countries using single-member electorates (plurality, majoritarian and mixed member PR) a voter participates in the election of one local MP and so is represented by that MP. Thus the mandate is between the voter and the MP or possibly with all voters in the electorate and the MP. However governments, and some academics, insist that because that party won enough seats to form a government then they have the mandate and argument centres around whether this means that the government can introduce or implement its promised policies. For instance Heywood argues that ‘the party, rather than individual politicians, is the agency of representation’ (Heywood 1997: 209-210). But traditionally representation theory is concerned with the relationship between voters and their representative (Finer 1954: 369-77). Pitkin described the aim of her book as considering reasons that a person would have for feeling represented (Pitkin 1967: 10). Living in a parliamentary rather than a presidential democracy, when I vote for a candidate I expect her to follow the policies that she campaigned on and that expectation is not negated by the actions of voters elsewhere which result in another party forming the government. Even in a PR electoral system, I am voting for the composition of parliament (Catt 1999) and expect the MPs from the party that received my vote to follow the agenda and arguments which they presented, whether they are part of the government or the opposition. I accept that my preferred candidate cannot implement the policies that she campaigned upon because she is not in government but I still expect her to argue the same agenda, to have the same concerns and interests. Parliament is not just about the government because it also has a role in framing debates.

Central to the idea of the responsible party model is that the vote is consequential: voters have expectations about the behaviour of candidates and these are fulfilled (mostly). Such expectations are currently based upon campaign promises but the extent of detail in election manifestos varies across parties, countries and time. Even within the small group of democracies that evolved from the Westminster tradition, there are differences. In Australia, there is an argument that not only should the government follow all policy promises made during the campaign but that they should not introduce policies which were not mentioned (Goot 1999). Such arguments are not common in the United Kingdom or New Zealand.
and in neither country is the language of mandate used as widely as in Australia. New Zealanders do look to a golden age when manifestos were large books containing precise details of all that a government would do and prime ministers kept a copy to hand for frequent consultation during policy discussions (Mulgan 1989:64). By comparison the current ‘third-way’ centre-left party in both the United Kingdom and New Zealand has a credit card sized pledge card which contains the core policy promises. Emy argues that in the dim and distant past manifestos were also short and concentrated upon principles rather than policy details (Emy 1997). This range in practice has occurred in countries and at times when the responsible party model has been applied which suggests that there is some room for manoeuvre on exactly what it is that parties provide in order for voters to have realistic expectations of future action.

The next step in Phillips’ argument to be considered is the idea of the party line. In the group representation literature, the party line seems to be taken as a given: something from which the women MPs cannot deviate. However the party line is not delivered on tablets of stone but has to be created within the party. If we were always talking of a new MP then perhaps the party line was created before she had the ability to participate but in the run-up to the next election she may well have the chance to influence the party line. Thus it seems that internal party workings are an important consideration when looking for women MPs to have an impact. Of course internal party workings have also been shown to be an important factor in gaining more women MPs because of the crucial role of parties’ candidate selection processes (Norris 1997). Again parties vary within and across countries as to who creates the election manifesto and there has been a tendency to move away from conference influence towards decisions taken by the party leader and a few senior party members. However if composition is to have an impact then this is one place where new issues are raised and new arguments heard. The women’s movement has used party conferences to prioritise certain issues but has often faced frustration when these are forgotten, relegated or compromised away inside parliament. While rank and file party members from the group can play an important role in wider issues of group influence this article is focussed upon the impact of MPs. Phillips argues that the women
have to be present at the decision-making phase to safeguard the policies (Phillips 1995: 78) and having senior women in the party is one way in which this can happen. Here another possible confusion is whether the politics of presence is transitional or permanent. Once women MPs have positions that give them access to the agenda does this mean that the number of women MPs is no longer an issue because women are no longer disadvantaged and oppressed? The answer is probably ‘no’ but the literature tends to assume that the women MPs are powerless.

Returning to the issue of women MPs and the party line, we should remember that however the manifesto is created, the party line is not just the manifesto, as parties have to decide how to respond to changing circumstances and to issues that were not specified in their election campaign. Discussion by definition precedes the final decision but while the vote in the legislature is formally the final decision, MPs follow the party whip so in effect the final decision is that taken by each party when determining details of the whip. Again there is wide variation on how such decisions are made. At one extreme are the major British parties where the leader and a small number of senior colleagues make such decisions, although not necessarily the entire cabinet or shadow cabinet. At the other extreme, the parties in New Zealand all have a weekly caucus attended by all of the MPs from that party where such issues are discussed (Mulgan 1994: 102). Caucus offers backbenchers the opportunity to have a say in the policies and tactics being pursued by the leadership and thus allows the parliamentary party to reach a common position on major political issues (Palmer 1987: 70). Here, then, is one possible forum for discussion where women MPs can raise alternative perspectives without acting against the party line, because they are creating the party line. One accepted aspect of caucus discussion is consideration of local interests because MPs are deemed to represent a local community. Calls for group representation are no different, they just refer to a different community of interest (Kymlicka 1993: 81). This point is where the earlier arguments about the details in an election promise are important. If the promises are couched as priorities and approach then such evolving discussion of policy detail can stay within the remit of the election promises. Caucus may also provide a more receptive forum where members are willing to
incorporate the range of perspectives that they hear. The literature on deliberation suggests that the deliberative process in working towards a consensus view is more likely to occur in a homogeneous company of people, where arguments will be based on shared beliefs and reciprocity prevails (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Given some assumption of a common set of views amongst MPs from one political party this should assist with such discussion and ensure a real audience for the range of perspectives brought by women MPs.

Once it has been agreed, where can the party line and the range of perspectives it incorporates be aired in public debates? The debate in the assembly is along party lines but this is not always so in committees, thus the parliamentary committees could provide a forum where alternative perspectives may be raised. In many parliaments the committees debate and vote on strict party lines so again there is no opportunity for debate to alter preferences. However in some parliaments there have been strenuous moves to create committees which do not operate on strict party lines, for instance in the Scottish Parliament (Consultative Steering Group 1998: 5-6, 26-30; Brown 2000: 549, 552). In such instances the different perspective could have an impact on some details for instance in adding a clause that would allow for differential implementation for certain identified groups such as has happened for First Nations in Canada (Catt and Murphy 2002). Committees also tend to have a scrutiny role and here there is a chance for different perspective to be raised. Such a perspective may lead to new questions being asked, for instance introducing a gender audit on all departmental activity.

My arguments tend towards ideas of backbencher power, for otherwise the majority of representatives have no role in decision-making, rendering the whole debate over representation and delegation void. However moves to allow freer debate in the legislative assembly on the formal passage of a bill are unlikely to occur and would not be helpful for the current problem. Party discipline in voting on legislation is integral to the responsible party model, so it is only forums for debate that occur while the party line is being crystallised which allow perspectives to be considered without acting contrary to electoral expectations.
Conclusion

I expect my MP to fulfil the expectations she created during the campaign, whether or not her party is in government, and to do this she has to be able to argue her views and thus within the legislature there must be forums for discussion where views are aired. However such discussions need to occur at all phases of the decision process and not just at the moment of final decision. I have these expectations whoever my MP is but they are of particular importance to arguments about the impact of women MPs. Such MPs are deemed to represent an otherwise unheard perspective and thus it is vital that they can take part in discussion at each stage of the decision process and present these unheard perspectives. If airing perspectives is to have an impact, then all MPs must be open to reacting to them and thus there has to be room for manoeuvre during the process of creating legislation. But such latitude is generally seen as meaning that the MPs are trustees rather than delegates because they are making up their own minds rather than following instructions, in this case party election promises. However, if the election promises concentrate on principles and priorities, then the details will be determined inside parliament and thus there is some room for discussion and consideration of a range of perspectives. One such venue is committees where party discipline is not paramount. The forum where this discussion can happen is amongst MPs from each party while determining the details of the party line, based on the priorities in their manifesto.

This line of argument suggests that under-represented groups should pursue, ultimately, a strategy of MPs in each of the political parties and that it is having sufficient MPs to make a difference within each party that will make a real difference, rather than in the parliament as a whole. Such a spread probably has greater consistent influence than would dominance in one party. For women, the goal of MPs in all parties in sufficient numbers to have an impact is in line with calls for women to make up half of the MPs in each legislature. But, looking at the situation within each party is also important. For many indigenous and sub-state national groups, having sufficient presence within each party would mean that their presence in parliament is larger than their proportionate presence in the total
population. However arguments for proportionate or mirror presence are based upon statistical neatness rather than impact. Many indigenous groups are such a small proportion of the population that proportionate presence would provide too few MPs to have any chance of impact but the intent of presence is to make a difference for the group so a larger presence is needed (Lijphart 1984: 22-3; Young 1990: 184-7; Kymlicka 1993: 77-8; Taylor 1994: 90; Kymlicka 1995: 146).

I have suggested two discussion sites and ways for the MP to make a difference without being contrary to the party line, both assuming that the party has some room for manoeuvre within its election promises. There is acceptance that changing circumstances may necessitate deviation from election promises so one question would be whether hearing new perspectives constitutes a change in circumstances. The crux of the problem is voter expectation. How much deviation from the details in the election manifesto is acceptable before voter expectations are ignored? Here there is a crucial issue of what it is that parties promise. For instance on unemployment a party can: set a benchmark such as ‘in three years long-term unemployment levels will have halved’; or detail policy such as ‘introduction of job-seeker incentives and assistance’; or specify the priority and objectives such as ‘reducing long-term unemployment through assistance rather than penalty’. Are election manifestos most usefully a detailed list of benchmarks or all policy that the party deems important or are they an indication of the general priorities, principles and approach that the party will use on all issues that it faces? The latter seems both more realistic and allows for input from the range of MPs within the party including the different perspectives from women MPs. Such an approach could still fit within the responsible party model in that voters are instructing the party to follow its principles and priority list which may include details on some core policies.

However this move may be too extreme for some advocates of the responsible party model. Alternatively we could conceive of this situation as a partisan trustee role. In the pure trustee model, the MP has free rein to make decisions that she believes to be for the good of the nation. In the absence of believing there is only one knowable right answer to each question, then voters must choose the candidate
who they think is most likely to arrive at decisions which they accept. Party affiliation would seem to be a good clue as to how MPs will determine what is for the good of the nation. Thus if we assume that the MP will act within the known principles and past norms of the party then we can trust them to have autonomy over the details within that remit. But we expect all MPs from the party to discuss the party’s response to each issue and in the process, to consider a range of perspectives. This combination constitutes a partisan trustee model and provides a solution to the problem identified by Phillips at the start of this paper. The presence of women MPs can make a difference without them losing accountability through political parties. With the airing of perspectives and their incorporation into policy occurring primarily within each party’s internal process, then women MPs are not acting contrary to their party but are rather helping to shape the party. The remaining problem, which I must leave for future debate, is that internal party policy discussion is not open to public scrutiny and thus makes it hard for voters to know what role their MPs are playing and does not assist public debate.

References


Eamnuel, E. and D. Light (1999) 'Choice and Representation in Health Care', *Medical Care Research and Review*.


Other papers published by the Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics include:


#5 **Elizabeth Meehan** (2003) *From Government to Governance, Civic Participation and ‘New Politics’; the Context of Potential Opportunities for the Better Representation of Women*

#7 **Paul Chaney** (2003) *Women and Constitutional Change in Wales.*