

Staying loyal and getting on: the behaviour of Labour's women MPs

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Ever since they entered the Commons taking digs at the women MPs elected in 1997 has been a popular sport. Complaints began with their appearance, moved on to their devotion to the party line, and ended up with their overall lack of achievements.¹ Complaints have come both from those (misogynists?) who always wanted the women to fail and also from those (feminists?) who somehow feel let down by the women.

The voting of the women MPs has been a particular topic of contention. A key difference in their behaviour – noted early on in the 1997 Parliament – was that the newly elected women were less likely to rebel than their male colleagues. By the end of the 1997 Parliament, just 11 of the 65 women elected in 1997 (17 per cent) had voted against their party whip; the figure for male MPs elected at the same time was exactly double, at 34 per cent.

This short briefing note updates the data on the women MPs' voting, as well as showing one lesser-noticed consequence of their behaviour.

Staying loyal

Table 1 lists all of the 1997 Labour women who have voted against their whip, together with the number of times they had done so by the end of the second session of this Parliament, in November 2003. The table is led by Ann Cryer (with 30 dissenting votes in total during the first two sessions), followed by Betty Williams (24) and Julie Morgan (22).

Out of the five 1997 women who left the Commons at the last election, four had rebelled. Since the 2001 election, all but one of the remaining seven rebels has continued to vote against the Government – and they have since been joined by 13 new rebels from the 1997 intake who did not vote against their party whip during the last Parliament.

Despite the increase in the number of the 1997 women now prepared to rebel, there is however *still* a difference in the voting behaviour of the 1997 men and women. Of the 1997 Labour women on the backbenches permanently since 2001, 65 per cent rebelled against their whip during the Parliament's first two sessions. For the men, the figure is 86 per cent, a difference that is statistically significant (at $p < 0.05$). Although there are not yet complete data for the third session – which is yet to finish – the 1997 women were also less likely to rebel over University top-up fees, the most high profile issue of this session. Of those 1997 women on the backbenches, 23 per cent rebelled over top-up fees, compared to 39 per cent of the men.

The difference in behaviour was especially sharp over Iraq. Of the 1997 women MPs on the backbenches throughout the main Iraq votes, 39 per cent rebelled. But of the 1997-intake men, 61 per cent rebelled (a difference that was

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¹ See Sarah Childs's *New Labour's Women MPs: Women Representing Women* (London, Frank Cass, 2004), esp. ch. 1.

statistically significant, at $p < 0.05$). The Iraq vote is particularly interesting, because there were clear differences between the views of male and female voters over the Iraq war – with women being much more opposed to military action. Not only were these differences not replicated on the Labour benches, but the opposite occurred: whilst women voters were disproportionately opposed to the war, Labour women MPs (or at least those from the 1997 intake) were disproportionately supportive of it.

Table 1. 1997 Labour women to have voted against the whip, 1997-2003

Name	<i>Number of votes against the whip, 1997-2001</i>	<i>Number of votes against the whip, 2001-2003</i>	<i>Total number of votes against the whip 1997-2003</i>
Ann Cryer	16	14	30
Betty Williams	16	8	24
Julie Morgan	14	8	22
Christine McCafferty	4	13	17
Linda Perham	0	9	9
Karen Buck	0	7	7
Janet Dean	3	4	7
Jenny Jones	6	Retired 01	6
Helen Brinton/Clark	0	6	6
Eileen Gordon	5	Defeated 01	5
Geraldine Smith	1	4	5
Julia Drown	0	4	4
Diana Organ	0	4	4
Valerie Davey	0	4	4
Debra Shipley	0	4	4
Helen Jones	0	3	3
Jane Griffiths	0	3	3
Christine Butler	2	Defeated 01	2
Tess Kingham	2	Retired 01	2
Anne Begg	0	2	2
Louise Ellman	0	2	2
Joan Humble	0	2	2
Jackie Lawrence	0	1	1
Oona King	1	0	1

The cause of this difference is difficult to identify. Previous research has found that it is not possible to explain this away as a result of differences in the MPs' background or other characteristics. For critics of the women, it is therefore proof that they are second-class MPs, unable to stand up to the whips. For the women – and their supporters – it is instead proof of a different style of politics, more consensual, less macho, less confrontational.

Getting on

A second widely-heard complaint is that the women have somehow vanished without a trace. So what did happen to those women elected in 1997?

There were 65 women elected in the cohort of 1997, along with 119 men.² Three of the women lost their seats at the 2001 election, and two retired, leaving 60 (92 per cent of the cohort) still in the Commons. Of the men, none retired and three were defeated, leaving 116 (97 per cent of the cohort). The women were therefore slightly more likely to have been defeated than their male peers, and more likely to have resigned – although in both cases the numbers involved are so tiny as to be effectively meaningless.

Table 2 shows the success of the remaining members of the 1997 intake at getting into government. By the end of the second session of the 2001 Parliament, of the 60 women elected in 1997 and still in the Commons by November 2003, almost two-thirds (62 per cent) had made it into Government. Of the 116 men, the figure is 64 (55 per cent).³

2. Success rate of entering government, by sex, 1997 intake remaining in 2001

Sex	Into government?	
	No	Yes
Men	52 (45%)	64 (55%)
Women	23 (38%)	37 (62%)

Moreover, having made it into office, the women are marginally better at staying in post. Of the 64 men who made it into government (and who are still in the Commons), 13 (20 per cent) had returned to the backbenches by November 2003, compared to seven (19 per cent) of the 37 women to have made it into government.⁴

These differences cannot be attributed to greater levels of ambition on the part of the women – evidence from a pre-election survey in 1997 found equal levels of ambition amongst the men and the women. Some 61 per cent of the new women wanted to be a Government minister in ten years' time, compared to 64 per cent of the new men. Similarly, the women were no younger, or more Blairite, than their male colleagues.⁵

Instead, part of the explanation lies precisely in the much-maligned loyalty of the 1997 intake. Although the Government has occasionally promoted MPs who have voted against the party line (as long as they have not done so repeatedly), an MP's chances of making it into government are significantly reduced if they have defied their whip.

² These figures include MPs first elected earlier, but returning to the Commons. With 'retreads' excluded, the figures are 64 women and 115 men.

³ None of the five Labour women who left the Commons in 2001 had made it into government, whereas one of the three men defeated in 2001 had done so. The figures with these included are 55 per cent for the men, and 57 per cent for the women.

⁴ These seven include Karen Buck, even though although her position is somewhat anomalous since she was offered but then did not take up a post as an assistant whip. With her excluded, the figure is 17 per cent for the women, compared to 20 per cent for the men.

⁵ See Philip Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions: Parliamentary Voting Under Blair* (London, Politico's, 2002), pp. 134-138.

The differences in the rates of rebellion between men and women of the 1997 intake help to explain the rates at which the women MPs have been promoted into government. Of new male MPs who did not defy the whip during the 1997 Parliament, 75 per cent had made it into government by November 2003. For the new women MPs who had not defied the whip, the figure was 68 per cent. For those who defied the whips at some point during the 1997 Parliament, the rates of promotion by November 2003 were 18 per cent (men) and 14 per cent (women). Loyalist women therefore made it into government at a slightly lower rate than loyalist men, but for both sexes the overwhelming majority of loyalists made it into government. Rebel women also make it into government at a slightly lower rate than rebel men, but for both sexes the overwhelming majority of rebels stay glued to the backbenches. But because the new women were much less likely to have rebelled than the men, they were overall therefore more likely to have made it into government.

None of these differences are huge (none are statistically significant), but they are at least consistent. The 1997 Labour women have been more likely to have been promoted (and then having been promoted they have been more likely to have remained in government). Although marginal, if these differences had been in the opposite direction – if the women had been *less* likely to have made it into government – it is easy to imagine what the reaction would have been. It would have been seen as evidence that the women were made of inferior stuff (from misogynists) and/or (from feminists) that the government was discriminating against the women.⁶

Instead, if anything, the women are slightly more likely to have been promoted, precisely because of their much-criticised loyalty. This could be merely coincidental (the happy by-product of a less macho style of politics) or it could be more instrumental (a deliberate strategy by the women of holding their tongues to get into government). And if the latter, the motivation for being instrumental could be a selfish desire for office, for personal self-aggrandisement, but it could be more altruistic, a belief that they will only be able to influence policy in a pro-women direction if in government, rather than on the backbenches. But whatever the motivation, there is no doubt that the women MPs elected in 1997 have been staying loyal and getting on as a result.

⁶ Similarly, counter to all the arguments about the women selected from All-Women Shortlists (AWS) being of inferior quality, there is absolutely no difference between the performance of those women selected from AWS and those selected from open lists: 62 per cent of each have made it into government.