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Winning for Women

*Harriet Harman &
Deborah Mattinson*

*with a foreword by
Patricia Hewitt*

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The Fabian Society

The Fabian Society is Britain's senior think tank. Concerned since its foundation with evolutionary political and economic reform and progressive social change, the Fabian Society has played a central role for more than a century in the development of political ideas and public policy on the left of centre. The Society is affiliated to the Labour Party but is editorially and organisationally independent. Through its publications, seminars and conferences, the Society provides an arena for open-minded public debate.

Today the Fabian Society seeks to help shape the agenda not only for Labour's prospective second term but for the wider international renewal of progressive politics. Particular areas of work include taxation and public services, social inclusion, globalisation and economic policy, information technology, environmental policy and constitutional reform. Analysing the key challenges facing the UK and the rest of the industrialised world in a changing society and global economy, the Society's programme aims to explore the political ideas and the policy reforms which will define the left of centre in the new century.

The Society is unique among think tanks in being a democratically-constituted membership organisation. Its six and a half thousand members engage in political education and argument through the Society's publications, conferences and other events, its quarterly journal *Fabian Review* and a network of local societies and meetings.

New Lefts

The General Election of 1997 marked the end of a long period in which the ideology of the New Right dominated public life. Not just in the UK but throughout the world the intellectual credibility and popular appeal of neo-liberal conservatism have been undermined by economic and social failure.

But at the same time the left of centre has had to undergo a process of reinvention. The enduring commitments to social justice and to ideas of community, and the conviction that uncontrolled free markets cannot sustain the common good, hold fast. But changing social and economic circumstances force open new arguments and new visions. At the start of a new century, as throughout its history, the Fabian Society seeks to engender debate on the future of the left.

Winning for women

Harriet Harman & Deborah
Mattinson

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The authors would like to thank Scarlett McGwire and Alice Page.

Foreword

Ten years ago, Deborah Mattinson and I wrote the forerunner to this pamphlet, *Women's votes: the key to winning*. Then, as now, we were concerned that Labour should be the party for and of women, committed to equality and fairness and determined to tackle the poverty that mars so many women's lives.

Then, as now, we knew that winning women's votes was crucial to Labour being elected. We mapped out how to beat the 'Gender Gap'.

Over the last ten years, Labour has transformed: appealing to women as well as men, bringing unprecedented numbers of women into parliament and government and putting women's concerns high on our policy agenda.

But we need to do more. This pamphlet, like its forerunner 10 years ago, raises some controversial issues. But it will stimulate the debate we need to build the consensus to make further progress for women.

Patricia Hewitt MP
Minister of State, Trade and Industry

Winning for women

Foreword

Ten years ago, Deborah Matlack and I wrote the foreword to this pamphlet. Women's votes: the key to winning. Then, as now, we were concerned that Labour should be the party for both women and men. At that time, Labour was determined to tackle the poverty that men and women alike were experiencing. Then, as now, we knew that winning women's votes was crucial to Labour being elected. We mapped out how to beat the Gender Gap.

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Herbert Morrison, Secretary of State for the Home Department, 1930s

Deborah Matlack, Chair of Opinion, 1990s

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1. Introduction

There are two over-riding reasons why Labour should deliver for women. It is right in principle – Labour is a party committed to equality and fairness. And it is essential in practice – women’s votes are key to the Party’s success at the next election.

Labour has always seen itself as the party which struggles against social and economic inequality and extends opportunity. Now Labour sees itself as the natural party for those concerned with equality for women. But there have been tensions in the past: some did not recognise that a commitment to ending inequality between social classes necessarily meant a commitment to equality for women as a core value. Some within the Party assumed that gender equality was not an issue – that the only issue was class inequality. Those who argued for equality for women as a policy objective for Labour were seen as woolly and as presenting a dangerous diversion from the class struggle. It was not until recently that a consensus emerged that equality for women is of itself important and critical to tackling poverty, particularly child poverty.

Following the election victory in 1997, it is now more widely recognised that women’s votes are key to electoral success. There is also now emerging a further consensus within the Labour Party that winning the votes of women will, in the future, show the way to winning and retaining the votes of men. Men’s political support for Labour was traditionally based on their working in the same large workplace with the same group of fellow-employees. That pattern of employment, which formed the foundation for Labour’s political culture, has not only never been the case in the same way for women, but is decreasingly the case for men.

Labour in government has achieved a great deal for women. It has invested in health and education, it has introduced a National Minimum Wage and the Working Families Tax Credit. It has begun a National Childcare Strategy and introduced new rights for parents at work. It has increased the representation of women in Parliament and in Government. But still more remains to be done. And winning the votes of women will be key to winning the second term in which the next Labour Government will be able to continue with the policies that women want.

This pamphlet sets out an agenda for achieving these twin goals. It challenges the notion that Labour needs to choose between an agenda for middle England and an agenda for its ‘heartlands’. It argues that whether they are in Worcester or in Wigan, women have the same demands from government and feel the same impatience for change.

It maps out the reasons women moved away from the Tories to Labour during the late 1990s and the hopes that lay behind their crucial role in Labour’s

landslide election victory in 1997. It highlights their growing impatience that Labour should deliver on the areas of their key concerns: health, education and helping them manage their complex lives. It identifies the strong support of women in the country for women in Parliament and in Government.

It draws on opinion research through quantitative polling and in-depth discussions among women floating voters and Labour activists in focus groups across Britain. And it draws on the views of some of Labour's women MPs.

It acknowledges Labour's progress on delivering for women and identifies the obstacles that prevent the Tories doing so. But it urges more and decisive progress to consolidate Labour's support among women. Women who had always voted Tory until they turned to Labour at the 1997 election did not give us a blank cheque – only the benefit of the doubt.

Finally, it sets out policy areas on which women want to see more progress from the government. It argues for a new style of government and a better dialogue with women in the country. It argues for the greater involvement of women within the Labour Party and proposes changes to the party to build on the progress already made in increasing women's representation.

2. The Gender Gap

Women have tended to vote more 'Conservatively' than men. This is known as the 'Gender Gap' and is defined as the Labour lead over the the Conservatives amongst men, minus the its lead over the Conservatives amongst women. The Gender Gap has dogged Labour through several decades and is the single biggest electoral challenge facing the Party. If only women voted, then 1997 would have been the first General Election that Labour would have won.

At its peak in the 1970s, the Gender Gap soared to a massive 12 per cent. It closed briefly in the late 1980s, largely due to Labour successfully wooing younger women voters in the run up to the 1987 General Election. However, it reappeared in 1992 at 6 per cent. Even in 1997, in the Party's best electoral performance for generations, it still existed at 2 per cent.

The qualitative research evidence about the Gender Gap is starker still. Historically, women floating voters have seen the two main parties quite differently, with Labour characterised as being 'old fashioned' and 'male'.

Though women shared Labour's values, particularly a commitment to public services such as health and education, they did not identify with the Labour Party. It was seen by those whose votes we needed to win to be both for and of a traditional working man that at best did not seem to share any common aspirations with women voters and, at worst, cast Labour in a very negative light. Whilst in the USA, women had traditionally voted Democrat rather than Republican, the culture of the Labour Party was critical in deterring women from supporting Labour.

'If the Labour Party was a person it would be an old man in a cloth cap with a pipe and a pint.'

Woman floating voter, 1992

By contrast, the Conservative Party was, in essence, more female, not least because, for much of this time, it was actually led by a woman.

'When Thatcher was in a lot of women, especially older women, related to her a lot. They wouldn't hear a bad word against her.'

Woman floating voter, 1999

However, with the efforts of the most successful political campaign in modern times, Labour attracted more women's votes across all age groups than it had done for years. Most notably it succeeded in converting what had been historically the most difficult group for Labour: women over 55. This was a huge achievement.

Yet women remain the most volatile voting group. Their lack of instinct for the tribal nature of party politics means that their loyalty can never be taken for granted. As we will show, current qualitative research demonstrates women to be more sceptical about the Government's record than are men, both in terms of overall approach and actual performance. They are also more impatient for 'delivery'.

This is clearly borne out by published polling data. Although there is, as yet, little evidence of a return of the Gender Gap, there is an emerging 'Dissatisfaction Gap'. Women voters, especially those in the 35-44 age group are significantly less likely – by up to 13 per cent – to be satisfied with the Government's performance than are men. This confirms an underlying vulnerability in Labour's support that could cost vital votes in a General Election.

Table 1 shows that younger women are far more likely to support Labour than younger men and that older women are more likely than men to support the Conservatives. However, there are more older than younger voters, and women and younger voters are more likely than men and older voters to say they will not vote at all.

Table 1 – Voting intention by age and gender (per cent)

	18-24		25-34		35-54		55+	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Conservative	17	23	19	25	27	26	39	34
Labour	59	51	63	57	53	53	40	44
Lib Dems	16	17	12	13	15	15	17	15
Labour lead	42	28	44	32	26	27	1	10
Would not vote	21	16	17	16	13	10	9	8
Undecided	17	13	11	8	9	7	7	5
Percentage of all voters	6	6	10	11	17	17	18	15

Source: *The Gender/Generation Gap*, Fawcett Society, May 2000

The most recent published polling at the time of writing (ICM, May 2000) confirms that these findings show no North/South divide, but are consistent across all regions in the UK.

Why did Labour succeed with women in 1997?

After the defeat of 1987, the Fabian Society published the predecessor to this pamphlet, *Women's votes: the key to winning*. This used qualitative and quantitative research to analyse women's attitudes towards Labour and politics and set out suggestions for addressing the shortfall. These included a new focus on the policy issues that most interested women and measures to address the 'macho' image of the party through structural changes to encourage the greater prominence of women in the party.

Progress was made, but, as the failure to close the Gender Gap in 1992 – and subsequent defeat – showed, not enough. In 1995, the Party embarked on another review of its performance amongst women. The so-called 'Winning Words' team, led by Clare Short, then Shadow Minister for Women, included influential women such as Patricia Hewitt, then the Deputy Director of the IPPR, barrister Helena Kennedy and publisher Carmen Calill. Again, it commissioned voter research, which highlighted enduring problems in the Labour Party's image amongst women, and suggested a communications strategy to address this.

Labour reformed its approach in a number of key areas. It gave stronger reassurance about moving away from the perceived negatives of Labour's past and actively presented a modern, more representative party. In addition, it brought a single-minded focus on the right policy priorities with the five 'pledges'.

'It was health and education, really – neglected for so long.'

'I heard their promises on waiting lists and class sizes and thought – at last! Someone's listened to me!'

Women who switched their vote to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

Most of all, women observing the birth and early development of New Labour in the run up to the 1997 General Election believed they were witnessing the start of a new approach to politics. This new approach was fundamentally different from what had gone before because it spoke to them and their interests.

'It was time for a fresh start.'

'It felt like they were giving Government a new lease of life – people running the country would be different – of a different generation – it would be an exciting time ahead.'

Women switch voters, 1997

Work with long-term Labour voters and activists suggests that these views are not confined to 'middle England' switch voters. The emphasis on health and education has a universal appeal and the eagerness for a different style of politics is, if anything, even more strongly marked amongst Labour activists.

'We had so much hope in our hearts – it was going to be a real break from the past.'

'The whole country needed a radical change – a fresh look at things.'

Labour voters, 2000

'It was, like Blair said, going to be a different kind of government – one that was the servant of the people – in touch and understanding.'

Labour member/activist, 2000

Critically, Blair as the new leader of the Labour Party was seen by many to be the very personification of these changes. He was a youthful family man, in touch with ordinary people's lives through his own experience.

'You feel that he understands how the likes of us live.'

'He's a family man – he's got younger children.'

'They seem quite a normal couple.'

Women who switched their votes to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

'Being a young man with a young family makes him a powerful symbol – it says I understand you.'

Labour member and activist, 2000

Has Labour lived up to its promise?

Immediately after the General Election in 1997, the enthusiasm of women who had switched allegiance reflected their belief that things were changing. In research conducted at the time, we talked to women who, two weeks before, had not even been certain that they were going to vote. On election night, however, they had become so euphoric that they had caught a mini-cab into central London from the suburbs, to feel part of the moment.

'We just did it – we said let's go down to the Festival Hall and it was a fantastic atmosphere there – like a pop concert or something. Hundreds of people all cheering and waving. It felt like a fresh start for the whole country!'

Woman switch voter, 1997

Three years on, the vulnerability of Labour support amongst such women is clear from polling evidence. In particular, qualitative research reveals a widely held view that the new approach to politics for which they voted has yet to happen. This is the case both in 'middle England' and in Labour's heartlands.

Disappointment is felt by floating voters and, even more strongly, by long-term Labour voters and party members and activists.

Male voters, more content with the status quo, are happier to give the Government the benefit of the doubt and 'wait and see'. By contrast, women are impatient for change and indignant at any sign that the New Labour Government, despite its promise of a fresh approach, is, in reality, 'business as usual'.

'I thought that they were going to be so different, but now I worry that they are just like all the others – out for themselves without any interest in the likes of us.'

'Nothing's gone terribly wrong, but I suppose I just feel a bit let down – everything seemed so fresh and new, but now they just seem the same as the others.'

Women who switched their vote to Labour in 1997, talking in 1999

'It's a missed opportunity – so much was promised – so much could have been done, but they're too timid, too afraid of rocking the boat.'

Long-term Labour voter, 2000

'I feel they've been quite dishonourable – all those broken election pledges.'

'Why don't they listen to the people more – consult more like this – they said they'd listen, but now they're in power they know best.'

Labour Party members/activists, 2000

Women are also impatient for change in the specific services where pledges have been made. Because they are on the practical, receiving end of these services no amount of rhetoric will convince them that improvements have taken place if their own experience in the playground or hospital tells them otherwise. Men, who generally, when it comes to judging the Government, rely less on personal experience and more on hearsay, make easier converts.

'In my kid's school, there are still classes with up to 35 or 40 kids. They're nowhere near solving the problem.'

'My mother's operation has been cancelled twice due to bed shortages – I think it's disgusting.'

Women who switched their vote to Labour in 1997 talking in 1999

'The NHS is failing people now as it was before...'

Labour member/activist talking in 2000

3. Meeting the voters' policy priorities

Research undertaken for this pamphlet confirms earlier work, especially that conducted in late 1999, which highlights the need for tangible improvements in key policy areas, notably health, education and help for working parents. This message is also consistent with qualitative research conducted by the Fawcett Society amongst voters, activists and politicians in Wales and Scotland. It is clear that the Government's overall approach and image is, in some ways, as important as its actual performance; the way the Government goes about things matter, as well as what it does.

The bread and butter issues – health and education

The Government's mandate was to 'fix' the long-term erosion of public services like health and education, which many argued had been neglected for far too long. While this was true of both men and women, the call from women was much more immediate and heart-felt. Working or not, it has tended to be women who have the closest connection with schools, GPs' surgeries and hospitals. The women who took part in the research were very clear about their main priorities – shorter waiting lists and smaller primary school classes. This was within the context of a wider wish list, which included broader aims like better standards, better discipline, and ending regional differences as well as specifics like more books and better managed Accident and Emergency departments. Promises were made about these priorities very clearly in the run up to the 1997 Election and these were the issues on which women, both in Labour's heartlands and in 'middle England', voted.

Bluntly, these women do not believe that the Government has delivered in these areas, most notably on the very specific pledges. As discussed earlier, a fundamental difference between men and women is that women use their own or their immediate family's experiences to judge rather than media reports or politicians' announcements. So, for education, class size has become a benchmark against which the Government has been judged by women who switched to Labour in 1997. So far, the Government has been found wanting. Other priorities include more nursery places, better special needs support and improved school buildings. Against this backdrop, respondents make more specific demands to build more, better secondary schools.

'Everyone should have access to a decent local school – why should we have to travel miles?'

Woman voter, 2000

An interesting new development is a growing concern about the very full and prescriptive nature of the national curriculum combined with support for teachers' complaints about the amount of change that they must manage and the volume of administration that their job now includes. Testing for seven year olds, in particular, now comes in for some criticism.

'I'd abolish testing – it takes up too much time.'

'Give teachers more support – more class room assistants to improve the adult-child ratio and lift the admin. burden.'

Women voters who switched to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

'There has been so much change for teachers to keep up with – how can they do their jobs as well?'

Labour Party member, 2000

Student tuition fees is another issue on which women voters feel strongly. These floating voters – often economically stretched – felt particularly hit by this move which they see as counter to the 'education, education, education' rhetoric of the Government.

'It's the likes of us – people in the middle that get hit – the poor get everything handed to them and the rich can afford it anyway – we miss out on every score.'

Women voters who switched to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

For health, waiting lists and times remain the main, most commonly quoted issue. Although hospital use is less universal than that of schools, most people know someone who has suffered the worry of an apparently unacceptably long wait for hospital treatment. An even more widespread experience, especially amongst voters with children, is waiting in A&E. NHS Direct may help to ease both burdens, but as yet is not sufficiently widespread to make a difference.

Again, there is considerable support for medical staff – though not the administrators. Many respondents referred to junior doctors' long working hours and to the generally poor pay and conditions of nurses.

'If I or my child go to hospital we'd like to be looked after by someone who hasn't been on duty non stop for 48 hours!'

'There is a real crisis in that we are not attracting new nurses in as it's so badly paid – so we then have to rely on really expensive agency staff which costs a fortune – why not just pay the nurses more in the first place?'

Women voters who switched to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

These problems are compounded by the knowledge amongst some respondents that a seemingly enormous amount of public money has recently been poured into the NHS. Yet they see no improvement in services, provoking the response that the Government is just 'throwing money at the problem'.

'All that money and still nothing to show for it – £40 billion – I don't know what it buys but it seems like a lot to me.'

'Either they're lying about the amount of money or, worse still, they have spent that money and it's been wasted.'

Women voters who switched to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

Women voters are not impressed by announcements about millions of pounds to be spent on health and education; they simply become cynical if they do not see improvements at their local school and hospital. The most important influence for women is their own experience. When they are influenced by others, it is more likely to be by the opinions of their child's primary school teacher or their health visitor than by the public statements of the Secretary of State. Here too, gender is an issue; women will listen to the local women they know, rather than a man they do not. This raises the issue of what teachers and health visitors say about the Government – and the need to keep them on side.

The policy commitments made by Labour on health and education at the last election were right in principle. They reflect Labour's commitment to the NHS and concern to extend opportunity and tackle inequality through education. These commitments strongly appealed to women voters – whether they were traditional supporters or had voted Labour for the first time in 1997. On health and education, women are not looking for policy changes – far from it. Women want the Government to deliver on its pledges and to fulfil the hopes they had when they elected it.

Help for working parents

Helping women balance the competing demands of their bread-winning and their caring role is possibly the most pressing new policy area for the Government to address. As the *Listening to Women* exercise, led by women Ministers, found:

'The overwhelming concern we heard – across the UK – is the challenge women feel in trying to strike a balance between home responsibilities and an outside job.'

***Women's Voices*, 1999**

Here the Government face a dilemma. The focus on developing policies to help working mothers has implied to some women that the Government believes that mothers *should* work. The further implication is that only women who are

economically active are respected, and correspondingly, that the mother's role is not, in itself, one that the Government values.

Despite the fact that seven out of ten women now work, this sometimes provokes a strong and negative reaction among women voters. Some women (and men) believe that mothers with young children should not work. All would like to have more choice and would expect a women-friendly government to support them in making that choice, rather than pronounce strongly on either side of the debate.

'You just feel that they're pushing us out to work all the time – mums must work – that's the message.'

'It's like you're only a worthwhile person if you work and I just don't agree with that – I think there's no more important job on earth than being a mother – you're looking after the next generation.'

'I do work, but I do it because I have to, I'd much rather not.'

Women voters who switched to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

As well as promoting policies to help working parents (many do not believe that they have happened yet), the Government should also consider strengthening the 'Mums Matter' campaign, launched in 1997. In addition to verbal support, there need to be practical initiatives that demonstrate the Government's desire to facilitate choices for mothers who stay at home with their children, as well as for mothers who work.

The majority of women with children either work or want to work. Over the past two decades, women have been entering the labour market with little public policy support for their dual role. Unlike in the rest of Europe, British women could not look to a well-established childcare infrastructure or the support of generous maternity pay and leave.

Many women would welcome good quality after school clubs and school holiday clubs, as well as more workplace crèche facilities. Opportunities for more flexible working patterns are another high priority, as many working mothers would prefer to work part-time in a way that fits with school or nursery hours. Another popular option would be childcare tax credits for payment of a relative, rather than a childminder or nursery, as this remains many working mothers' first choice for care of their child.

'It's not just after school that's the issue, but what are you meant to do in the school holidays?'

Women voter who switched to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

'I'd have loved to go back to work if I could have gone back part-time, but that just wasn't an option so I gave up completely whilst mine are pre-school.'

Women voter who switched to Labour in 1997, talking in 2000

The Government has introduced the National Childcare Strategy to ensure quality, affordable childcare for all children, which is being delivered through local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. In addition, a new right for parents of children born after December 15th 1999 to take up to three months unpaid leave in the first five years of the child's life has been introduced. But women either do not know about their new rights, or they cannot afford to take unpaid time off work. The evidence is that these new rights are not, as yet, helping many parents.

'One problem is that we don't publicise what we have done – too many people just don't know how Labour is helping them, so they don't get the help.'

Labour Party member, 2000

One of the most important issues in this area is that of maternity pay and leave. Maternity pay, as a proportion of women's average earnings, has halved in value since 1964. Many women go back to work when their baby is at most 18 weeks old – before they want to and before they feel their baby is ready for that to happen – because that is when Maternity Pay ends. And a woman has to choose whether to go back to her job, or lose it, when her baby is just six months old. What is more, there is no right to return to work on a more flexible basis – part-time, for example.

It is clear that maternity pay is too low, maternity leave too short and work too inflexible. Maternity pay should be restored to its 1960s level, taking it from the present £60 to over £100 a week. The Government should also extend maternity leave from six to 12 months. However, an extended right to maternity leave will not help low income women unless backed by year-long financial support. This could be provided through a new 'Baby Tax Credit' for families in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit to enable women in low income families take their full year off work.

Women should also have the right to vary their hours when they return to work after a baby. However, to ensure that employers do not resent this, the Government could consider introducing a new 'Baby Bounty'; either a one-off payment to the employer or a National Insurance rebate to compensate for extended maternity leave and for the extra management cost when a woman who previously worked full-time returns to work part-time.

The key policy priorities for Labour, therefore, should be:

- Paying for – the currently unpaid – parental leave.
- Introducing rights for part-time workers and the right to work part-time for family reasons.
- A new focus on the modernisation of services and benefits (including the Invalid Care Allowance) to make it easier to combine work and caring for older relatives.
- Improving childcare provision – particularly for the under threes where the cost is highest and the demand is greatest.
- Strengthening the Equal Pay Act.
- Creating more opportunity for fathers to adapt their work pattern to share the childcare and family responsibilities.

4. A different way of governing

The case for more women Labour MPs arose from a number of concerns, some of which were about principle and some of which were pragmatic. First, it was seen as important that Labour should not be a party that discriminated against its women members; everyone should have a right to participate on equal terms. Further, women were under-represented in a House of Commons largely made up of men and hence policy issues of particular concern to women – such as childcare – were never high on the political agenda. A Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) dominated by men could not deliver for women.

There are also pragmatic reasons for increasing the representation of women in Parliament. Women like to see women politicians and are less likely to vote for a Labour Party that appeared to be male-dominated. A predominantly male PLP looks out-dated.

The 1997 General Election saw 101 women Labour MPs elected to Parliament, 65 for the first time. Labour now has a far higher proportion of women MPs than any other major UK party. This dramatic shift in the gender balance of the Commons - whilst insufficient - raised hopes that there would be a new style of politics.

Have more women MPs made a difference?

Much of the feminisation of the Labour Party has been attributed personally to Tony Blair, and his strong, yet un-macho style of leadership. However, women voters are also very much aware of another feature of this Government: the increased number of women MPs, which is felt to have been very influential in shaping the key, positive differences in this Government's approach.

'Tony Blair has brought in a lot of women politicians which has made a real difference.'

Women voters, 1999

Women, with their more hands-on approach to the family and home are thought by many women voters to be better equipped to be politicians (in a new, more popular model that is both 'can do' and caring) than men.

'Like I said, women and men are just made differently and they're [women] more likely to think about other people than men'

'They'll get on with it – get things done' 'More down to earth'

Women who voted Labour for the first time in 1997, talking in 1999

Women now find it hard to understand why, even with the increase of the 1997 intake, there are so few women politicians. Polling carried out by NOP in January 2000 suggests that 44 per cent of women think that there should be parity or something close to it – 250 women MP's or more (Powerhouse ITN Poll, 17 January 2000). The equal representation of women is clearly seen as an important goal.

'Women have got a different point of view – that's why there needs to be a balance of men and women.'

'For it to be really fair you need the same numbers of each.'

Women who voted Labour for the first time in 1997, talking in 2000

The famous 'Blair's Babes' image (the photograph of Tony Blair surrounded by the team of women MPs) was derided both by the media and by many Labour women. However, it was a positive icon for women floating voters – a vivid image apparently characteristic of the way that Labour is changing politics.

'I remember that photo that was everywhere at the time – Tony Blair with all the Labour women – I was really impressed.'

Labour switch voter, 2000

This is also pointed out by women voters as a key difference between the Labour and Conservative approach.

'The Tories seem to be more that it's a job for the boys – a closed shop.'

'William Hague wouldn't dare to bring a load of women in like Tony Blair has – he couldn't hack it, he's too busy thinking of clever-clever things to say in parliament.'

Women who voted Labour for the first time in 1997, talking in 1999

Yet, in this area, too, so important in terms of what it says about New Labour's distinctive approach, there are apparent disappointments. In focus groups conducted at the end of 1999, respondents were quick to praise the efforts of female politicians in general and some senior politicians specifically.

However, by May 2000 the symbolic 'disappearance' of prominent women had not gone unnoticed, even by women who were only relatively casual observers. This led to a more general concern that, as in other areas, the promise has not been delivered. Women are felt to be marginalised – further reinforcing the belief that it is 'business as usual' rather than 'time for a change'.

'There don't seem to be as many of them [women MPs] as there were – or they're not putting them forward and giving them jobs – that's the impression I get.'

'Why has she [Mo Mowlam] been sacked? – she was doing so well – all the credit for Ireland should belong to her, it seems very unfair and you wonder what's gone on behind the scenes.'

'They don't seem to have done anything really to encourage more women to become MPs.'

'Are the women judged on the same basis as the men? Men seem to get away with murder but if a woman doesn't absolutely toe the line all the time she's out!'

Women who voted Labour for the first time in 1997, talking in 2000

'You think 'what is going on' with the government – there are no high profile women now – no one heading up a proper spending department – I'm very, very disappointed.'

Labour member, 2000

The role of women MPs

How do women MPs see their own role? Harriet Harman is undertaking in-depth interviews amongst the women MPs, which will form the basis of a forthcoming publication. Early interviews show a striking consistency of view amongst Labour women MPs; new and longstanding, Ministers and backbenchers, and those representing the heartlands and constituencies won for the first time in 1997. The findings are also consistent with the Fawcett Society's research amongst women politicians and activists in Scotland and Wales.

Most of the new intake of women MPs took over constituencies from male MPs. But in many cases, their predecessors were also older and Tory. This change not only in party, but in style, background and gender is starkly illustrated in the constituency of Burton where Janet Dean won the seat from Sir Ivan Lawrence QC MP. This marked a big change for the people in that constituency. Not only did they swap a man for a woman, and a Tory for a Labour MP; they also replaced a barrister and chair of the Home Affairs Committee, (well known for his pin-striped trousers) for a woman who had been a full-time mother and local councillor who had focussed on work in her community and social services. The contrast, particularly for women constituents of Burton, could not have been more striking.

Differences of age, background and party are clearly important. However, many women MPs feel that gender has an impact on the way that they do their job in their constituency and in Westminster. In particular, they feel that it is easier

for their constituents, especially women, to approach them. They report that women constituents are quite explicit about this, asserting the common identification of them as women by saying to their MP 'as a woman, you'll understand how concerned I am about...' or 'as a mother, you'll know why I'm worried about...'. However, it is not only women to whom women MPs feel they are more accessible. Karen Buck MP says that she always takes a box of tissues to her advice surgeries. At every one, there is at least one woman, or man, who breaks down in tears as they tell her about their problems.

There are some cases where women MPs feel that their female constituents would simply not have been able to talk to a man. One Labour woman MP was able to take up the case of a constituent who had been the victim of a gang rape. She was only able to speak to her MP, despite her deep sense of shame at being the victim of such a crime, because the MP was a woman. Ann Cryer MP has been able to put the issue of forced marriages high on the political agenda, and prompt the government into action, because she is able to talk to her women Asian constituents, who are simply not prepared to talk about their concerns with a man. Women MPs also believe that they deal with constituents' problems differently from male colleagues. They talk of helping their constituents solve their own problems rather than taking the problem over for them.

Woman MPs have a strong sense that their women constituents are proud to have a woman MP. Women expect their MP to be a man – they are both surprised and pleased to find themselves with a woman MP. Somehow, the women in their constituencies feel that they are more important because their MP is a woman too. And they are particularly proud if their woman MP is a Minister too. Hilary Armstrong echoes the views of other women Ministers when she says of her constituency,

'The women like the fact that they have a woman as their MP. And they love it that it is a woman Minister who comes along to their local Women's Institute.'

Finally, whereas most male MPs have had a wife at home in the constituency caring for their children, women MPs are themselves often wives and mothers, or daughters with responsibility for elderly parents.

This can create a bond between women MPs and their constituents, and it makes the issue of balancing work and family life one that they put high on their political agenda. It can also engender a sense among the women MPs that they have coped with more than their male counterparts to become and remain an MP. Women MPs, who are combining their work as an MP with their family responsibilities, feel that they are more focussed and purposeful than their male counterparts who have had the support of a wife at home.

Changing Parliament

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given both their fresh perspective and their additional responsibilities, there is a high degree of criticism from the women MPs about the way the House of Commons works. These views are strongly echoed by the Fawcett Society findings amongst women politicians in Scotland and Wales.

Women MPs complain that the chamber emphasises oratory – something men are more likely to do than women. As one woman MP said,

‘I’m not as happy in the chamber as I am with other aspects of my work – it’s either aggressive or dull. But there are plenty of men who don’t like it either.’

The adversarial culture of the House Commons is something which is unappealing to women voters. Indeed, many point to shortcomings in both the culture and practice of politics, believing them to be a barrier to women participating fully.

‘Why do they work the hours they do – all that sitting around and then working all night.’

‘It’s just like a Gentleman’s Club – no wonder women can’t get on.’

‘We all want to work part-time nowadays – I suppose they probably do if they have children themselves which some of them do.’

Women who voted Labour for the first time in 1997, talking in 2000

Many men in the PLP are determined to change the hours of the House of Commons. Yet the impetus for change has come from the women MPs and they are leading the campaign. Common cause could also be made with women journalists, including in the House of Commons Lobby. They too face sexism and find it difficult to reconcile the hours of the House of Commons to their family responsibilities.

Currently, the Chamber opens at 2.30pm (except on Thursdays and Fridays) and can keep going until the small hours of the morning. One option for reform is to start at 9.30am and finish at 7pm (except for Mondays when a late start will still be necessary to all MPs from far away constituencies to get to Westminster). Whatever the detail, an end to all-night sittings and reform of the House is essential on the grounds that it will make the House:

- More efficient – no-one is at their best at 1am after already having worked a 14-hour day.
- More family-friendly, particularly for the women MPs whose families live with them in London.

- Consistent with the family-friendly changes that the Government is demanding from business.

Increasing Labour's representation of women in Parliament

Labour's election victory in 1997 was characterised by a dramatic increase in the number of the Party's women MPs. Around a quarter of Labour MPs are now women, a far higher proportion than other major parties (see Table 2). But this is still some way from a fair representation.

Table 2 – Total Members of Parliament by party and gender, 2000

	Male	Female	Total	% Female
Labour	315	101	416	24
Conservatives	148	14	162	9
Lib Dems	43	4	47	7
Ulster Unionists	10	0	10	0
SNP	4	2	6	33
Plaid Cymru	4	0	4	0
SDLP	3	0	3	0
UDUP	2	0	2	0
Sinn Fein	2	0	2	0
UKU	1	0	1	0
Independent	1	0	1	0
Scottish Labour	1	0	1	0
Total	534	121	655	18

NB. One vacant seat

Table 3 – The number of women MPs Labour would lose of percentage swings

Percentage swing against Labour	No of women MPs lost
2.5	3
5.0	11
7.5	28
10	41

The major factor in the success of women in 1997 was the decision taken by the Party to designate half of all the target seats – i.e. those that were needed to win the election – as subject to 'all-women' shortlists for selecting candidates.

However, late in the process this was challenged as discriminatory against men and was found to be unlawful. Those women who had been selected remained in place, but the idea was quietly shelved and, nationally, nothing has replaced it. Without such a system in place, it is unclear whether women will be selected for winnable seats.

For the elections to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and London Assembly, the concept of twinning was introduced. This meant that each seat had a 'twin' and a man and a woman were selected for each pair – ensuring equal representation for men and women. Yet, in the current round of selections for parliamentary candidates for the next General Election, Labour have simply introduced a requirement that half of those on every shortlist should be women.

This has not prevented local parties from selecting a man from each of these shortlists. Of the constituencies where Labour MPs are retiring, most are held by men. In particular, there are men in Scotland and in Wales standing down from Labour seats in Westminster because they have become Members of the Scottish Parliament or Members of the Welsh Assembly. As Tables 4 and 5 show, it is clear that, thus far, no significant inroads have been made in terms of maintaining - let alone increasing - the number of women candidates in Labour seats.

Table 4 – Women Labour MPs retiring in England, Scotland and Wales

Constituency	Sitting MP	Replacement (as at 10 June 2000)
Dagenham	Judith Church	Not yet selected
Wolverhampton South West	Jenny Jones	Man
Newcastle under Lyme	Llin Golding	Not yet selected
Gloucester	Tess Kingham	Not yet selected

The increased representation of women in Parliament has been a positive development. As a first step towards fair representation, it has been a considerable advance. Yet that advance is at risk because the instrument that brought it about – all-women shortlists – is no longer available. The Government should seek to amend the law to make it clear that it is not illegal discrimination for a party to adopt measures which ensure women's selection by excluding men if it is to redress historic representation of women. That would mean that positive action would be available for the round of selections after the next General Election.

For this next General Election, however, there is scope for the National Executive Committee (NEC) to act. The NEC is responsible for drawing up shortlists to fill vacancies that arise after normal selections have been completed. A num-

ber of seats become available shortly before the General Election because MPs who had initially thought they would stand again decide to retire. Here there is an opportunity for the NEC to ensure that as many of these late selections as possible result in women candidates.

Table 5 – Male Labour MPs retiring in England, Scotland and Wales

Constituency	Sitting MP	Replacement (as at 10 June 2000)
Cardiff West	Rhodri Morgan	Not yet selected
Caerphilly	Ron Davies	Not yet selected
Fife Central	Henry McLeish	Man
Dundee East	John McAllion	Not yet selected
East Lothian	John Home-Robertson	Woman
Edinburgh Leith	Malcolm Chisholm	Man
Falkirk West	Dennis Canavan	Man
Glasgow Anniesland	Donald Dewar	Not yet selected
Strathkelvin & Bearsden	Sam Galbraith	Not yet selected
Wrexham	John Marek	Man
Aberavon	John Morris	Man
Rhondda	Alun Rogers	Man
Glasgow Cathcart	John Maxton	Not yet selected
Midlothian	Eric Clarke	Man
Ashton-under-Lyne	Robert Sheldon	Man
Leigh	Lawrence Cunliffe	Not yet selected
Brent East	Ken Livingstone	Not yet selected
Workington	Dale Campbell-Savours	Not yet selected
Bassetlaw	Joe Ashton	Man
Birmingham Perry Bar	Jeff Rooker	Not yet selected
Chesterfield	Tony Benn	Not yet selected
Leominster	Peter Temple-Morris	Not yet selected
Leeds South	John Gunnell	Not yet selected
Sheffield Heeley	Bill Michie	Man
Greenock & Port Glasgow	Norman Godman	Man
Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney	Ted Rowlands	Not yet selected

5. Strengthening the connection between Labour and women

The Labour Party has made significant organisational changes to ensure that women are better represented within the Party. There is currently a woman in the post of General Secretary, and both the NEC and National Policy Forum have an equal number of places for men and women. At conference, delegations from Constituency Labour Parties must be made up of equal numbers of men and women, and each trade union delegation must reflect the number of women in that union. This is a dramatic change from the days when Labour Party Conference was a meeting of men listening to men.

However, there is still much that could be done structurally to improve matters. To ensure that power is shared between men and women at the highest level of the party, the leadership team should consist of three posts instead of the current two. This would comprise a leader and two deputies, with one of the three required to be a woman.

More informally, Labour women in a number of roles can act as an important bridge between the Party and women. For instance, the increased number of women MPs clearly provides a focus for women activists within their local party. An example is provided by Candy Atherton MP. She was selected from an all-woman shortlist in the Cornish constituency of Falmouth and Camborne. Some of the older men in the local party were antagonistic to the selection procedure, which meant that she had to look to new members, and in particular to women, to be the backbone of her campaign. In the end, she had a woman agent and a core of women activists with a fresh approach to campaigning; she brought Labour from third place to win the seat from Sebastian Coe, the well-known Tory MP.

The bitterness in some local constituencies where there have been all-woman shortlists has faded away as the women get on with the job. For example, when it came to re-selection for the next General Election, Candy Atherton was re-nominated with only three votes against.

There is also further scope for assisting women Ministers to build links with party members. This was easier in opposition, because Ministers now have onerous governmental responsibilities, along with their constituency and, often, family responsibilities. Nonetheless, ways need to be found for women Ministers to build their links with women in the party. This would encourage party members and help to build a base for women Ministers. To achieve this, they should speak at the major regional party events and be regular and important attendees at policy forums, both regionally and nationally.

A new group of leading Labour women exists amongst the MSPs and AMs. However, they are engaged in developing a new democratic framework and are therefore extremely hard-pressed. Similarly, there is a strong team of energetic women, many with a great deal of experience, in the House of Lords. Many are Ministers, but some would be keen to offer their skills, experience and commitment. The NEC should establish a regular twice-yearly conference for women MSPs, AMs and women Labour members of the Greater London Assembly to create stronger, supportive links between them and the women in Westminster.

Local government is an important aspect of our democracy and key to delivering many of the policies that directly affect women, such as childcare and care of the elderly. Yet, women remain under-represented in local government. Harriet Harman's report in April 2000, *The Democratic Deficit*, found that only one in five local councillors are women. This is unacceptable and all Labour groups should be required to set targets for increasing women's representation, as well as identifying the particular barriers to women on their council. There is also a strong case for re-launching the Network of Women Councillors.

In addition, there is scope for drawing more women into local politics generally. For example, the National Childcare Strategy is being implemented at a local level, and people (mostly women) who care a great deal about this issue but have never been active in formal politics are getting involved. As a direct result of the Government's investment and leadership on an issue of key concern to women, people are actively engaging in childcare policy. National conferences on the issue regularly attract over 600 people. Childcare could therefore play a major role in rebuilding interest in local government and local politics, especially for women.

More could be done to bring together the women on the National Policy Forum, to discuss their key role as opinion leaders in the party. Similarly, the Party needs to be more supportive of the women who attend local and regional policy forums. In this way, the process can more explicitly generate policy which will appeal to women. By involving women in the party in this way, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over the resulting policy.

Another arena for involving women members is the annual Labour Women's Conference, held each June. That there is now effectively equal representation at national Labour Party Conference does not undermine the value of Women's Conference. However, it does mean that its role should change, to become a major platform to define Labour's aims for women. To do that, it needs to have a strong, over-arching theme which is distinct from the October conference.

Finally, priority should be given to making the Winning Women Task Force, established in April this year, a powerful force to promote and co-ordinate the work on women.

6. The Tories and women

The Tories have recognised that the loss of women's votes cost them the 1997 election. They are beginning their attempt to understand why this happened and to win back these votes. In his foreword to their pamphlet *Choices* (Conservative Party, March 2000), William Hague reminded his party:

'The Conservative Party has, for most of the last century, been the party that the greater number of women voters, of every background and from every situation in life, have chosen to represent them.'

The Tories' appeal to women arose from a number of factors, some negative about Labour and some positive about the Tories. These have been explored earlier in the pamphlet.

The Tories' political agenda on women always was, and remains, contradictory. On the one hand, as the party of the 'traditional' family, they espoused concern about the damage to children caused by mothers no longer staying at home as full-time mothers but instead going out to work. They also expressed concern about women's greater financial independence being partly to blame for the rising divorce rate. On the other hand the libertarian right of the Tory Party, rejecting the notion that the state should control people's private lives, was happy to see women choosing to go out to work – so long as they did not ask the state for any publicly-funded support, such as childcare.

For different reasons, neither the Tory traditional family lobby nor the libertarians would countenance either the public spending or regulation that would deliver the major investment in childcare that women want. Nor would they support the new framework of legal rights that women need to help change the patterns of work to make it easier to combine their work and their family responsibility.

The Tories' inability to recognise the change in families and in the workplace, and to respond with policies that match women's changed lives, remains today. They know that it is a problem, but their support for the 'traditional' family and their antipathy to regulation and to public spending prevent them from adopting the policies which women's lives need. Despite the signs that this is recognised, there is little sign of action:

'The Conservative Party has been left behind by changes in society. Women are now more economically independent than ever before. They are more personally independent. A party which still appears to hanker for the days of the subservient family women, and whose public face is almost exclusively male, is not going to attract votes.'

The Conservatives know that they need to bring more women into the Party's leadership. They are also aware that they suffer as a result of having so few women MPs – fewer than one in ten. This issue is particularly acute, given the significant increase in both the number and proportion of Labour's women MPs.

It has been conceded that 'there is some evidence that the Conservative Party discriminates against women.' (*Conservative Women*, Centre for Policy Studies, 1999). Yet the Tories have spent the last decade denouncing as 'politically correct' measures that Labour introduced to increase women's representation. The Tories will not be able to increase their own level of representation without specific positive discrimination measures. They remain opposed to such measures and will undoubtedly oppose any moves by Labour to make them lawful in political parties.

They have not even begun to make the changes that will be needed. In the meantime, Labour should develop a coherent and persistent attack on their policies, and this should be consistent across the Party. In particular, the case needs to be made that the Tories' policies on work and the family are old-fashioned. In addition, there needs to be a thorough and on-going analysis of all Tory policy documents and statements so that their failure to address women's concerns can be demonstrated.

- Re-launch and re-vitalize the Network of Labour Women Campaigners
 - Propose a 'Women's Manifesto' for the next election
 - Campaign to increase the number of women on the Conservative Party's Executive
 - Draw attention to the under-representation of women on the Lords
 - A campaign to increase the number of women in the House of Commons
- A better strategy is needed:
- Highlighting the achievements of our women MPs
 - Ending the 'glass ceiling' of all-male statistics
 - Campaigning for more women in senior and influential positions
 - A new 'Women's Manifesto' Task Force

6. Conclusion – talking to women

A great deal has already been done in delivering on Labour's pledges to women. The beginning of the National Childcare Strategy, the right to time off work to care for young children, as well as help for women provided by the National Minimum Wage and the Working Families Tax Credit, all make a significant difference to the lives of ordinary women. Labour needs to establish a list of these 'dividing line' issues, which demonstrates its recognition of women's changed lives and its record on delivering.

Similarly, higher profile needs to be given to the successes of Labour women in Parliament. Fiona Mactaggart's Fabian paper (*Women In Parliament: Their contribution to Labour's first 1000 days*, January 2000) was very important in challenging the backlash against women MPs.

But Labour also has to rethink how it talks to and about women. Macho language ('big guns', 'big hitters' and complaints that women in the party are 'shrill') convinces women Labour is not talking to them. All male platforms at conferences and meetings present the Party as though either it has no women or it believes they have nothing to say.

Finally, it is important to encourage internal debate within the PLP and the Party more generally on the role of women in party and Government. Although this may sometimes verge on the critical and be uncomfortable for the leadership, it is better to have a flourishing debate inside the party than one led by critics from outside.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Delivering what women want

- Continued emphasis on delivering Labour's manifesto pledges on health to cut waiting times and improve hospital services.
- Continued emphasis on delivering out manifesto pledges on education, particularly cutting class sizes in primary schools and improving standards in secondary schools.
- Higher priority for action to help women balancing their responsibilities for their children and their responsibilities at work.
- A new raft of policies to help the growing number of women who are combining work with responsibilities for caring for elderly relatives.

A Labour Party of and for women

- Change the law to allow all-women shortlists for parliamentary selection.
- NEC to use late retirements as an opportunity to select more women candidates.
- Establish and support a strong network of trade union women to help campaign on women. Though Labour's connection with a trade union movement perceived as male-dominated deterred women from voting for us, the work of the women in the trade union movement has always been important in Labour's traditional heartlands and must be built upon.
- Re-launch and re-vitalise the Network of Labour Women Councillors.
- Help build the links between Ministers who are women and the party.
- Create a forum for women MPs, MSPs, AMs and Greater London Assembly members.
- Draw on the experience of Labour women in the Lords.
- A renewed focus on the summer Women's Conference.

A better dialogue with women

- Highlighting the achievements of our women MPs.
- Ending macho language and all-male platforms.
- A leadership team of three, a leader and two deputies at least one of whom to be a woman.
- A powerful Winning Women Task Force.

A note about sources

As well as original qualitative research conducted amongst women 'swing voters', traditional Labour voters and Labour party members, the authors have referred to:

- Recent quantitative polling conducted by ICM and MORI.
- Qualitative and quantitative research conducted through the General Elections of 1987, 1992 and 1997.
- Qualitative and quantitative research conducted for the Labour Party's Winning Words project.
- Recent qualitative and quantitative research conducted for the Fawcett Society in Scotland and Wales.







FABIAN

SOCIETY

Winning for women

Labour in government has already achieved much for women, through initiatives such as the National Childcare Strategy, the Working Families Tax Credit and the National Minimum Wage. Significant steps have also been taken in improving the representation of women, both in Parliament and in the Government: Labour has a far higher proportion of women MPs than any other major party. And in 1997, Labour was able to narrow the so-called 'Gender Gap' which has traditionally meant that women are far less likely to vote Labour than men.

Yet there is still much to be done. Research by Harman and Mattinson has found evidence of growing disillusionment amongst women voters about key policy commitments in health and education. There is also a feeling that the promised new style of politics has failed to materialise. In particular, there is a view that women MPs are not being given the opportunity to shine.

This pamphlet argues that Labour can win for – and with – women. By giving priority to making tangible progress on the policies that matter to women and communicating more inclusively, Labour can convince women voters that it has their interests at heart. The authors also argue for changes to the way that candidates are selected and how women are represented within the structures of the Party. Above all, they argue that the Party needs to recognise that delivering for women is not only crucial to electoral success, but to fulfilling Labour's aims and values.

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