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# The Substantive Representation of Women: The Case of the Reduction of VAT on Sanitary Products<sup>1</sup>

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We knew Gordon Brown was a crowd pleaser, but did we know that he was a closet feminist? The Chancellor has put it about that he will use next month's budget to scrap VAT on what has been euphemistically termed 'feminine hygiene products' . . . It is a fair guess that Mr Brown did not hatch his ploy to woo women voters entirely unaided. The backbench MP Christine McCafferty has campaigned to get rid of this regressive tax. Forceful female ministers in the Treasury have maintained a subtle pressure . . .  
(*Scotsman*, 28.2.00)

THE Government's press release which accompanied the 2000 Budget announced a tax cut that 'dare not speak its name' (*Guardian*, 22.3.00): VAT on sanitary products would be reduced from 17.5% to 5% from 1 January 2001.<sup>2</sup> According to the Paymaster General Dawn Primarolo, within whose remit the policy fell, the reduction showed 'the government's willingness to listen to the views and concerns of women' and demonstrated that it would 'work towards equality in the tax system, the workplace and in society'. It was a shame then, that the 'Women's Chancellor' chose not to make the announcement in his Budget speech;<sup>3</sup> nonetheless a phalanx of Labour's women MPs thanked Gordon Brown at a reception at No.11 Downing Street (*Guardian*, 10.4.01).

The change in Government policy was surprising. Its position had apparently been made clear in Primarolo's answer to a written question in 1997 (and reiterated 2 years later) when she stated that 'it is not possible to single out sanitary protection for special treatment' (*Hansard*, 18.6.97). At the time of the budget the media highlighted the actions of Labour women, in particular, backbench MP Christine McCafferty, who had tabled three widely supported early day motions (EDMs) calling for sanitary products to be zero-rated,<sup>4</sup> and women ministers in the Treasury.<sup>5</sup> It looked as though this was prima facie case of women representatives acting for women.<sup>6</sup>

The substantive representation of women is usually understood in terms of its relationship with women's descriptive representation. This is based on a simple premise: once present in politics women representatives will voice women's concerns and transform the political agenda.<sup>7</sup> This premise is, in turn, based on an assumption that in gendered societies women and men have different experiences which cause women to

be more concerned than men with ‘women’s concerns’ (those ‘issues that bear on women’ for either ‘biological’ or ‘social’ reasons).<sup>8</sup>

When phrased in simple terms this reasoning can appear reductive: the likelihood of women representatives effecting the substantive representation of women becomes theorised as a simple function of their number; when women constitute a ‘critical mass’, usually defined as somewhere between 15% and 30%, politics is feminised. Yet, in practice, this relationship is far from straightforward.<sup>9</sup> Although there is long-established evidence of attitudinal difference between women and men representatives, as well as more recent evidence of behavioural difference,<sup>10</sup> particularly in respect of women’s concerns,<sup>11</sup> the differences women make in politics are widely recognised to be contingent and mediated rather than a simple reflection of their number.<sup>12</sup> As the extant literature reveals, an increase in the numbers of women present may, in practice, achieve little or no feminised change. Women representatives’ gender identity (the extent to which they identify with women and whether this is in a feminist or anti-feminist direction), party identity (at least in political systems where party cohesion is strong), along with their legislative roles (as members of the government, for example) and the nature and norms of the political environments in which they act, are all intervening factors.<sup>13</sup>

With the likelihood of women representatives acting for women apparently dependent upon a multiplicity of factors, gender and politics scholars might do better by investigating not *when* women make a difference but *how* women’s substantive representation occurs.<sup>14</sup> This change in emphasis shifts the focus away from trying to determine the percentage of women that constitutes critical mass or identifying all the possible variables that mediate the impact of numbers. In contrast, an account of a specific policy change would provide a full description and account of the activities, relationships and dynamics through which the substantive representation of women occurred in that particular instance.

In the case of the reduction of VAT on sanitary products, the analysis must show how the issue was put onto the parliamentary agenda and what actions engendered the policy change. This would reveal, in turn, the role played by Labour’s women MPs in the formulation of the policy, whether the critical actors were individual women backbenchers or women ministers and whether they acted independently or collectively. Moreover, and in recognition that feminist policy formation is highly complex, the role of women representatives is considered alongside other possible actors including Labour’s gender machinery, women’s groups in civil society, wider ‘feminist advocacy coalitions’ and non-feminist allies in government.<sup>15</sup> The identity and impact of other possible actors also needs to be established.

This article provides thick description of the Labour Government’s decision to reduce VAT on sanitary products in the 2000 Budget. The first part of the article analyses Chris McCafferty’s EDM campaign. It

considers whether this was an occasion where Labour's women MPs feminised the parliamentary agenda by disproportionately signing 'women's' EDMs'.<sup>16</sup> The second part considers whether McCafferty's EDM campaign was the critical factor in explaining the Chancellor's decision to reduce VAT on sanitary products—thereby feminising legislation. The analysis suggests that, in this case, Labour's women MPs really did make the difference and substantively represent women. Moreover, even though she was supported by many of her women colleagues and by Dawn Primarolo, a woman Minister in the Treasury, it was the actions of an individual woman MP, Christine McCafferty, that was the trigger that made the Chancellor Gordon Brown agree to reduce the VAT on sanitary products in the 2000 Budget. Other possible actors were either absent or played bit parts.

The research utilised a 'mixed method' approach. The data consist of quantitative data documenting the signing of EDMs in the 1997 Parliament; qualitative interviews with key MPs and Ministers;<sup>17</sup> in-person and telephone interviews, email and written correspondence with special advisers and civil servants; telephone interviews and email with actors in relevant women's civil society groups and other civil society and public sector actors; telephone interviews with spokespeople from ASDA and the Co-op supermarkets;<sup>18</sup> a postal questionnaire of MPs who signed at least one of the VAT Sanitary Product EDMs;<sup>19</sup> qualitative interviews with women lobby journalists who reported the VAT sanitary products campaign and/or budget announcement; and an analysis of contemporaneous documentary data.<sup>20</sup>

### *McCafferty's early day motions campaign*

Christine McCafferty first tabled an EDM calling for the removal of VAT from sanitary products on the 22 January 1998 (EDM 683 97/98). She re-tabled the EDM in the following two parliamentary sessions (EDM 380 98/99, 2 March 1999 and EDM 89 99/00, 24 November 1999).<sup>21</sup> The EDM stated:

That this House believes that sanitary products should be classed in the category of 'essential to the family budget', just as food, children's clothing and books already are, and that, like such products, they should be classed as VAT-free under the EC Sixth Directive; notes that Britain currently has one of Europe's highest rates of VAT on sanitary products and that 15 million British women spend in excess of 300 million a year on products that are necessary to personal hygiene; further notes that removing VAT from sanitary products would only cost the Treasury one penny a year for every woman in the country using them; calls on the Government to reduce the VAT on sanitary products to the EU minimum of five per cent; and ask the Government to support a change in the European law so that such products can be zero-rated.

The first point to make is straightforward and incontrovertible: the VAT sanitary products EDMs were tabled by a woman MP first elected

in 1997. However, EDMs are tabled for a variety of reasons—to highlight personal interests; garner favourable publicity; to establish the opinion of the House; and to support or criticise a party leader—and so it cannot be assumed that McCafferty’s EDMs constitute a straightforward reflection of her concern with VAT on sanitary products.<sup>22</sup> Neither can it be concluded that had she not tabled her EDMs other MPs—male or female—might have done so.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, whilst it is one of the achievements of which she is now most proud, removing VAT on sanitary products had not been one of McCafferty’s lifelong ambitions—she had not been active on this issue prior to her election to the House (*Guardian*, 10.4.01). It is the case, however, that McCafferty’s pre-parliamentary career had included management of a well-woman centre and that the issue had also been discussed at various Labour women’s conferences.<sup>24</sup>

The key to McCafferty’s decision to ‘run’ with the issue appears to be her participation in the Parliamentary Labour Party’s (PLP) women’s group. Reducing VAT on sanitary products was one of the long-standing injustices on their ‘shopping list’ discussed in the early months of the 1997 Parliament.<sup>25</sup> A head of steam was built up over the issue which the women perceived to be an achievable policy goal. By picking a ‘small’ but symbolic issue, they believed they could lean on the Chancellor. Reducing the VAT was, in the women’s view, a ‘safe’ issue—relatively cost free in financial terms and unlikely to face orchestrated opposition. There might have been an element of mischief involved, with the women feeling that the issue would embarrass Brown into action. Some of the women had also come to the realisation that they had nothing to lose—whatever issue they campaigned on, they would be on the receiving end of unfair media criticism.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, McCafferty’s EDMs needed to garner a substantial number of signatures—an EDM with only a handful of signatures barely registers on the parliamentary weathervane. With little cost or effort involved in signing an EDM, MPs are free to sign those they agree with. But despite the fact that EDMs remain current for the whole of the parliamentary session, ensuring ample opportunity for all backbenchers to sign, only a handful of EDMs receive more than 200 signatures in any parliamentary session.

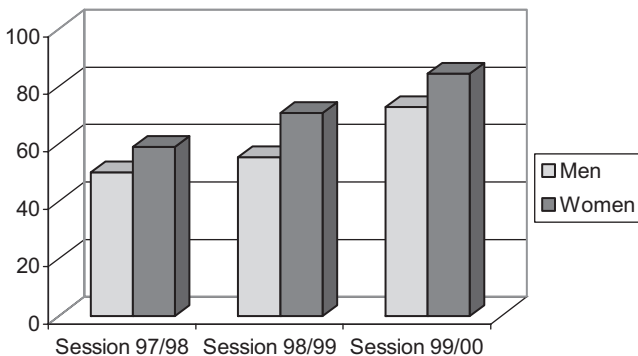
McCafferty’s work would be cut out, but hers was an organised campaign. McCafferty’s efforts were not about just mobilising women—she was ‘going to try and get [the] support of every woman MP!’<sup>27</sup> She drew on her wider parliamentary networks:<sup>28</sup> senior MPs, those who were not considered to be terribly interested in women’s concerns and MPs from the other parties were all accosted in the division lobbies and had their office doors knocked upon. On the second and third tabling, a pro-forma was sent out (in 1999/2000 via the parliamentary intranet),<sup>29</sup> unless informed otherwise it would be assumed that MPs continued to support the EDM.<sup>30</sup>

On its first outing the EDM received 174 signatures, rising to 188 on its second and 247 on its third and final outing (constituting the 38th, 31st and 6th most signed motions in the their parliamentary sessions, of a total of 1,955, 1,154 and 1,403 EDMs, respectively). MPs from all parties signed the EDMs, although most signers were Labour (constituting 78%, 80% and 82% of all MPs who signed in 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000, respectively).<sup>31</sup>

While support for McCafferty's EDMs came from both male and female Labour MPs, there are some sex differences. The first time the EDM was tabled 116 Labour MPs signed: 86 men and 30 women. But as a percentage of the PLP more women than men signed: 59% of women compared to 50% of men.<sup>32</sup> In 1998/99 the total number of Labour signatures increased by 13% to 131. This time 71% of Labour women (36) compared to 55% of Labour men (95) signed. In 1999/2000 the total number of Labour signers again increased, by 27% to 168. At this stage, 84% of women (43) compared with 73% of men (125) had signed (Figure 1)

If observable and measurable sex differences in the behaviour of women and men MPs is to be regarded as proof of the substantive representation of women, then the analysis of Labour's MPs' signing of the three VAT sanitary products EDMs provides mixed evidence. The observed sex differences are significant at the 5% level in 1998/99 ( $p=0.050$  Chi-squared) and at the 10% level in 1999/2000 ( $p=0.090$  Chi-squared) although not significant in 1997/98.<sup>33</sup> However, sex differences are not the *only* measure of the difference women make.<sup>34</sup> It is possible that women's presence and actions causes men to become more concerned with women's concerns and so any historic sex differences will narrow or disappear. In line with this, the similar percentages of women and men MPs signing the first VAT sanitary products EDM and the emergence of significant sex differences at the EDM's second outing

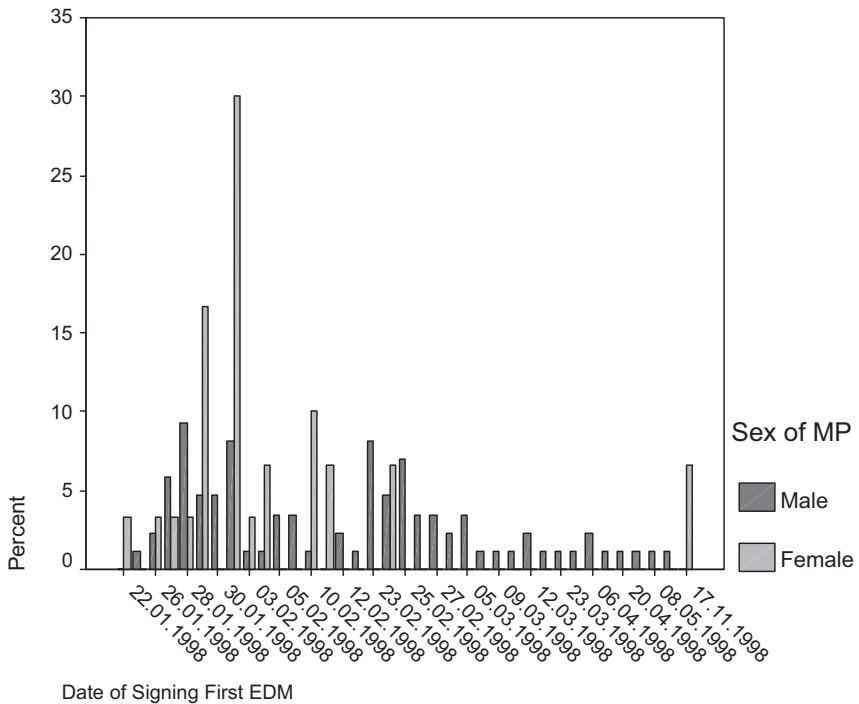
1. Percentage of Labour MPs Signing the Three Identical VAT Sanitary Products Early Day Motions



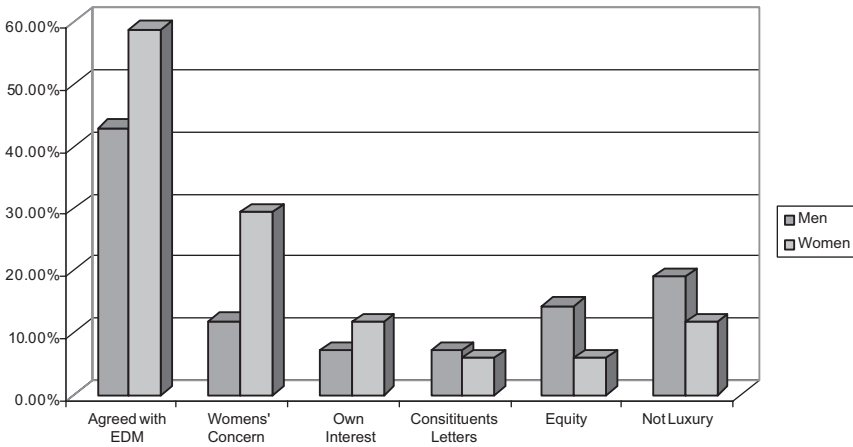
might be explained by Labour's women collectively mobilising for its second tabling. This could then have had the contagion effect of mobilising Labour's men to sign to a greater extent on the EDM's third outing, thereby reducing the sex differences to the 10% level. Unfortunately it is not easy to test whether such an effect was operating here because of McCafferty's use of the pro-forma on the EDM's second and third outing.<sup>35</sup> One feature that can be discerned, however, is the timing of MPs' signing. Analysis of EDM 683 1997/98 reveals that the women were quicker to support McCafferty's motion.<sup>36</sup> Within a month, all but two of the women MPs (28) had signed; for men their signing was more drawn out (Figure 2).<sup>37</sup>

Notwithstanding the overwhelming support that her VAT sanitary products EDMs received, it is not necessarily the case that McCafferty's efforts to mobilise parliamentary support were critical. From the postal survey, it seems that in most cases MPs simply cannot remember whether McCafferty contacted them, although her efforts are captured through the letters of support from 19 MPs (from all parties) following their receipt of her pro-forma. When asked in the survey why they had signed the VAT EDMs sex differences were apparent (Figure 3).<sup>38</sup> The most popular reason for signing was simply agreement with the EDM (59% of the women

2. The Signing of Early Day Motion (EDM) 683 97/98 by Sex



## 3. Reasons for Signing the VAT Early Day Motions (EDMs) by Sex



compared to 43% of men),<sup>39</sup> but almost 30% of the women said they signed the EDM because it was a ‘women’s concern’ compared to just under 12% of the men. The men preferred to talk in terms of equity or by calling attention to the fact that sanitary products are not ‘luxury items’.

### *Writing on the Wall: the effectiveness or otherwise of the EDM campaign*

With McCafferty’s EDM campaign successful in putting the issue on the parliamentary agenda, the question remains, to what effect? Considered parliamentary graffiti<sup>40</sup> the impact of an individual EDM is often said to be limited. At the same time, well-supported EDMs—and the VAT EDMs were well supported—are also said to influence government.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps, just as one new Labour woman MP claimed, it is obvious that McCafferty’s campaign worked because the Government ultimately acted in accordance with it.<sup>42</sup> However, there was no observable action following the first EDM, despite the fact that the Prime Minister and Ministers keep their ‘eyes’ on EDMs.<sup>43</sup> As a consequence, and in addition to re-tabling the EDMs, McCafferty raised the issue directly with the Prime Minister, Tony Blair and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.<sup>44</sup> Though confident that both men supported her position, McCafferty was not clear what action, if any, either man would take.<sup>45</sup>

McCafferty also sought popular and media support for her campaign.<sup>46</sup> There was a photo-call outside Parliament in March 1998 against a backdrop of an advertising lorry. Furthermore, in the run up to the 2000 Budget, McCafferty was interviewed on BBC’s *Woman’s Hour* (the flagship BBC radio programme for women). On this she implied that the reduction would be made in the forthcoming budget—something she did not as yet know.



McCafferty's campaign was not part of a wider feminist advocacy coalition working together in an organised fashion either within or outside Parliament: neither the Women's Ministers, Women's Unit, nor women active in feminist civil society participated in the campaign. It is the case that McCafferty had written correspondence with the Women's Ministers. Joan Ruddock (Minister for Women 1997–98)<sup>47</sup> had sympathy with McCafferty's EDMs but noted that other items 'fall into a similar category' and was concerned that retailers might not be able to cope with differential rates of tax. Neither Baroness Jay nor Tessa Jowell (Women Ministers from 1998–2001) campaigned or lobbied for the reduction.<sup>48</sup> The EDMs passed Jay, sitting in the House of Lords, by.<sup>49</sup> Labour's gender machinery similarly played no role. Despite good working relations, and in an apparent failure of 'joined-up' government, the Women's Unit had nothing to do with the decision.<sup>50</sup>

Two prominent women's civil society groups active in politics, in recent years—the Fawcett Society and the Women's Budget Group—were similarly non-players. Even though both are 'insider groups' neither was active on this issue; nor did they organise or lobby around McCafferty's parliamentary or public campaigns (although this begs the question why McCafferty did not seek them out either).<sup>51</sup> The Women's National Commission—the official, independent, advisory body giving the views of women to the Government—was similarly not active on this issue.

Neither were two supermarkets which had campaigned on this issue key in influencing either McCafferty or the Government to act. While both ASDA's and the Co-op's campaigns pre-dated McCafferty's, there is no evidence that either caused her to table her EDMs.<sup>52</sup> Nor did the supermarkets set out to have a relationship with the MP—for ASDA it was merely a 'happy coincidence'.<sup>53</sup> ASDA did, however, provide McCafferty with 'facts and figures' and publicity material—including an advertising lorry—with which she might garner wider media coverage.<sup>54</sup> Both supermarkets also lobbied the Treasury, with the Co-op writing to Brown in July 1998.<sup>55</sup> But once McCafferty had taken the issue up ASDA did little further lobbying—they assumed that her 'behind the scenes' activity within Parliament would be more productive.

With the reduction in VAT costing the Treasury £35 million in lost revenue the decision to reduce VAT on sanitary products rested ultimately with the Chancellor: if Brown (or his advisers) had said 'we shouldn't have done it, we wouldn't have'. On the face of it there appears to have been some kind of Damascene conversion in the Treasury early in 2000. A couple of newspaper reports close to the Budget implied that the Treasury would act: 'senior Treasury sources confirmed last night that the Chancellor was looking at a cut' (*Independent*, 27.2.00; *Scotsman*, 28.2.00; *Herald*, 1.3.00). But behind the closed doors of No.11 there is a slightly different story.

The question of reducing VAT on sanitary products appears to have been first raised in the aftermath of the 1997 general election and considered



for Labour's first budget (June 1997). A 'paper' was called in by the Chancellor's office.<sup>56</sup> However, the civil service advised the Government to stick with the orthodoxy of 'flat rates' and 'single bases'<sup>57</sup> and was troubled by the difficulty in distinguishing between products which constitute necessities rather than luxuries, and are essential rather than non-essential. They were worried too about ensuring that the savings would be passed onto the consumer and very concerned about 'me too claims': razors, shaving cream and lawnmowers (according to UK civil servants all used disproportionately by men). The lack of a widely supported public campaign for the reduction was also noted. As such, it was decided that the VAT rates on sanitary products would remain untouched.

So, what had changed by 2000? While Brown may have had instrumental reasons for acting—such as winning the support of Labour women MPs and women voters—it seems that the Chancellor was reacting directly to McCafferty's campaign.<sup>58</sup> With no evidence of discussions occurring between Blair and Brown or between their respective special advisers, there is no indication that Brown's decision was influenced by pressure from No. 10.<sup>59</sup> Neither is there evidence that lobbying from individual MPs or the supermarkets was extensive or influential.<sup>60</sup> The immediate trigger that translated Brown's general support for a principle into a policy with a guaranteed place in the 2000 Budget appears to be McCafferty's interview on *Woman's Hour*. According to a Treasury source, one of Brown's special advisers, on hearing the interview, discussed the issue with the Chancellor and it was agreed that the reduction would be made forthwith.<sup>61</sup> Despite continued civil service concerns—and these remained strongly worded—Primarolo took the issue off her shelf, dusted it down and finalised the detail.

The reduction of VAT on sanitary products has been described by a Treasury insider as an issue whose 'time had come'. Had there 'been a different group of people and different events', they added, 'it might not have happened'. Though this language hides the sex of the individuals critical in bringing about the policy change, the key actors initiating the policy were women—even if the Chancellor, whose final agreement was necessary for the policy to be implemented, was a man.

This policy change constitutes a clear example of Labour's women MPs making a difference. In this case it was the actions of an individual backbench Labour woman MP that created the context in which the Government acted. Christine McCafferty, a woman first elected in 1997, tabled three EDMs and mobilised support over a 3-year period; support which was particularly forthcoming from other Labour's women MPs individually and as members of the PLP's women's group. McCafferty also took the issue to the heart of government, raising it with both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. Her actions also influenced the Treasury minister Dawn Primarolo. And while the Chancellor's

office had been the source of the first paper on the reduction of VAT on sanitary products—indicating initial government support—the question of civil service obstacles and timing remained to be addressed. In this respect, McCafferty's decision to undertake an interview on BBC's *Woman's Hour* appears to have been the critical act: it turned reducing VAT on sanitary products into a budget commitment.

Reducing the VAT on sanitary products shows that, at least on some issues and on some occasions, women representatives can make a difference and feminise legislation. There are, nonetheless, a few questions left begging: why, in particular, did McCafferty and Primarolo not act more closely together? Had they done so, and especially if they had also created an alliance with the Women Ministers and/or women's civil society groups, then the reduction might have come about sooner. This failure to act in consort (even if they were psychologically supported by each other's efforts) might in part be a reflection of the Treasury's 'distance' from other departments and backbench MPs. However, it is certainly the case that it reflected McCafferty's newness. Had she begun her EDM campaign further into her parliamentary career, McCafferty would have been more confident and less inhibited in talking to a woman minister about her campaign. Equally, had she been a more experienced and known MP, especially one with an established record of voicing and acting on women's concerns, then McCafferty might well have been brought on board by a woman minister trying to attract support for particular women friendly policies, even if that minister was in the Treasury.

It is also possible that the reduction might have been made earlier had Primarolo—someone who believed, just like McCafferty, that VAT should never have been put on sanitary products—not taken the decision to stop working on the issue. Yet, this decision was taken within a constrained space: the process of trying to turn the proposal to reduce VAT into a workable policy had been like 'wading through treacle';<sup>62</sup> Primarolo was facing demands to work on other policy priorities that were felt to bring more immediate and significant benefits to women; and she lacked explicit instruction to act from Brown (or his advisers), which might have enabled her to bypass civil service objections. In such a context, Primarolo's focus (as well as that of Labour's 1998 and 1999 budgets) turned to childcare and social security benefits. It is possible—not least because of the speed in which the Chancellor and his advisers agreed to make the change and the short time it took for it to be ready following McCafferty's *Woman's Hour* interview—that a more explicit relationship with McCafferty, and Labour's women MPs more generally, would have enhanced Primarolo's position vis a vis those in the Treasury who were happy to leave VAT on sanitary products or had forgotten about the issue until McCafferty was heard on the radio.

Furthermore, while the absence of a wider feminist advocacy coalition in this instance may not have made much difference, where what

was a stake was a small, albeit symbolic, 'stand alone' policy (which itself may explain the lack of such a coalition), on or across other issues, especially where the government is less supportive than was the case here, the lack of an effective alliance might have had more negative consequences.

While single case studies cannot provide empirical generalisations they can offer new conceptual insights. What this case provides, over and above demonstrating the fact that Labour's women MPs were able to make a difference in terms of both the feminisation of the parliamentary agenda *and* legislation (something which their critics are yet to be fully persuaded of), is further evidence of the weakness of some of the concepts, approaches and methods used to examine the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation.

Most importantly, it demonstrates that critical mass, as an explanatory concept that simply counts the numbers of women present in a particular legislature in order to account for feminised change, is a limited, if not redundant, concept. Put simply, it fails to identify the multiple and complex determinants and configurations of feminist policy change. Not only is it overly focused upon women representatives, it fails to situate them within their political and gendered environments. In counting the women present, critical mass cannot distinguish between those women representatives seeking to act for women and those who do not and those who seek to act for women in a feminist direction. Likewise, there is no recognition that some women representatives will be differentially positioned within a particular legislature—as ordinary members, as members of the government or parliamentary bodies—and that some may be new and others long established. It seems likely that a time-lag effect will be at work: the feminisation of legislation, rather than the feminisation of the parliamentary agenda, may be more dependent upon the presence of women in the right places within the legislature (which are, of course, institution specific) and getting more women into these locations may take some time.

The case study examined here also points to the importance of thinking about the methods used to research the substantive representation of women; it highlights the dangers of seeing observable and measurable sex differences as the only proof. To be sure, there were some sex differences in the signing of McCafferty's EDMs but these were small and not consistently significant. Yet, deducing from these findings that the sex of our representatives does not matter would be mistaken. In this instance women representatives acted as individuals (as members of the legislature and the government), collectively, and in conjunction with men. Indeed, it is likely that because of the historic underrepresentation and marginalisation of women in our legislatures, the feminisation of legislation, as distinct from the feminisation of the parliamentary agenda, will be enhanced if supportive male representatives can be brought on board. The methods used by gender and politics

scholars must be informed by such insights: if sex differences are treated as the ‘holy grail’ it is likely that evidence of the substantive representation of women will be missed.

- 1 We would like to thank all those who agreed to participate in this research—the confidential nature of the interviews prevents us from thanking them by name. For a breakdown of our interviewees see endnote 20. We would also like to thank Emma Clarence, Kris Deschouwer and Robert Dover for their comments on an earlier draft and Middlesex University for a grant to Sarah Childs that funded the original EDM dataset.
- 2 The Treasury budget press release stated: ‘The UK has agreed with its European partners not to extend its zero-rates beyond those in place on 31 December 1975. Therefore, it is not possible to reduce the rate of VAT on sanitary products to zero’ (*Guardian*, 17.12.95; 17.3.98).
- 3 Labour women MPs knew in advance that Brown was not going to announce the reduction. This failure—despite pressure from women ministers in the Treasury—is often explained in gendered terms: that it either reflected his ‘unmarried’ state (he married in August 2000); the childish/masculinist norms of the House—‘any announcement would have been met with school boy ‘sniggering’’ (*Times*, 23.3.00); to protect his gravitas; or because of men’s general unwillingness to talk about menstruation (*Guardian*, 23.3.00). According to a Treasury source, it reflected historical precedent—in that small VAT issues are not normally discussed in the budget speech—and to avoid accusations of trivialising the issue and being tokenistic. Brown himself apparently wanted the women in his team to ‘take the credit’ for their hard work (*Guardian*, 22.3.00).
- 4 EDMs are a notice of a motion for which no date has been fixed for debate. By signing an EDM MPs demonstrate that they are publicly committed to the point of view articulated in the motion (S. Finer, H. Berrington; D. Bartholomew, *Backbench Opinion in the House of Commons 1955–9*, Pergamon, 1961, p. 9).
- 5 Dawn Primarolo was Financial Secretary (1997–99) and Paymaster General (1999–), Patricia Hewitt was Economic Secretary (1998–99) and Melanie Johnson was Economic Secretary (1999–2001).
- 6 S. Childs, *Women Representing Women*, Routledge, 2004.
- 7 See, for example, A. Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*, Clarendon Press; J. Mansbridge, ‘Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women’, *The Journal of Politics*, 1999.
- 8 C. Cockburn, ‘Strategies for Gender Democracy’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 1996, pp. 14–15; J. Lovenduski, ‘Gender Politics’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 1997.
- 9 See, for example, F. Mackay, *Love and Politics*, Continuum, 2004; J. Lovenduski and P. Norris, ‘Westminster Women’, *Political Studies*, 2003; K. Beckwith, ‘Number and Newness’, unpublished paper, 2003; M.L. Swers, *The Difference Women Make*, University of Chicago Press, 2002; D.T. Studlar and I. McAllister, ‘Does a Critical Mass Exist?’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 2002; D. Dodson, ‘The Impact of Women in Congress’, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 2001; B. Reingold, *Representing Women*, University of North Carolina Press, 2000; A. Mazur, *Theorizing Feminist Policy*, OUP, 2002.
- 10 S. Childs and J. Withey, ‘Women Representatives Acting for Women’, *Political Studies*, 2004; S.J. Carroll, *Women and American Politics*, OUP, 2003; M.L. Swers, *The Difference Women Make*, University of Chicago Press, 2002; B. Reingold, *Representing Women*, University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- 11 J. Lovenduski, ‘Gender Politics’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 1997, p. 719; P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, ‘Women Candidates for Parliament’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 1989; P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*, CUP, 1995; J. Lovenduski and P. Norris, ‘Westminster Women’, *Political Studies*, 2003.
- 12 J. Lovenduski and P. Norris, ‘Westminster Women’, *Political Studies*, 2003; K. Beckwith, ‘Number and Newness’, unpublished paper, 2003; S.J. Carroll, *Women and American Politics*, OUP, 2003; S.J. Carroll, *The Impact of Women in Public Office*, Indiana University Press, 2001; M.L. Swers, *The Difference Women Make*, University of Chicago Press, 2002; D.T. Studlar and I. McAllister, ‘Does a Critical Mass Exist?’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 2002; M. Considine and I.E. Deutchman, ‘Instituting Gender’, *Women and Politics*, 1996.
- 13 S. Childs, ‘The House Turned Upside Down,’ paper presented at the ‘Women and Westminster Compared Conference’, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, 2004.
- 14 S. Childs and M.L. Krook, ‘The Substantive Representation of Women: Rethinking Critical Mass’, paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, 2005.
- 15 A. Mazur, *Theorizing Feminist Policy*, OUP, pp. 191–5.

- 16 S. Childs and J. Withey, 'Women Representatives Acting for Women', *Political Studies*, 2004.
- 17 On the basis of interview guides, and by using probes, the interviews revealed key actors' accounts of how the new policy came about. As Considine and Deutchman note 'even the most guarded politician can be given the opportunity to provide frank, confidential information which would be withheld in a survey' ('Instituting Gender', *Women and Politics*, 1996, p. 6) demonstrating that for research such as this, in-depth interviews have an important advantage over surveys (J.B. Manheim and R.C. Rich, *Empirical Political Analysis*, Longman, 1995, p. 162; S. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, OUP, p. 19). It is acknowledged that the views of the interviewees were accepted as their account of events. Where interviewees held alternate or competing views, these were checked back with the original interviewee for further clarification.
- 18 The telephone interviews were more structured reflecting both time constraints and those of the medium itself.
- 19 Two hundred and two Labour MPs signed at least one of the VAT sanitary products EDMs. Sixty-one responded—a response rate of 30% which is acceptable, given the parliamentary activity being researched and the time frame. Of the whole survey (MPs from all political parties), 10% of respondents chose not to identify their name, sex and/or party.
- 20 Some 40 individuals/organisations provided material for this research. For reasons of anonymity they are not identified by name. Of the 16 substantive interviews, six were with MPs and ministers/ex-ministers, four with special advisors and/or civil servants (some of who also constitute women actors from feminist civil society groups), four were with women lobby journalists and two were with spokespeople from ASDA and Co-op supermarkets. A couple of the MPs and Ministers/ex-ministers were interviewed on more than one occasion.
- 21 A fourth motion, EDM 683A1 97/98 was proposed by John Wilkinson: 'leave out from 'to' to end and add 're-assert economic self-government for the United Kingdom and to do so in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's next Budget''. However, the subject of this motion fundamentally alters the content and is excluded from the analysis of the VAT sanitary product EDMs.
- 22 S. Finer, H. Berrington and D. Bartholomew, *Backbench Opinion in the House of Commons 1955–9*, Pergamon, 1961.
- 23 There appear to be no direct links between the Labour Party's prior commitment to the abolition of VAT on sanitary products (stated in the 1983 Labour Party manifesto) or the long tradition of MPs (of both sexes) asking parliamentary questions.
- 24 It is, moreover, a concern that registers on the consciousness of many (and diverse groups of) women. The claim that a petition of half-million signatures was handed to Margaret Thatcher has not been confirmed: A 'quick look' by staff at the House of Lords library found no record (Phone correspondence with House of Lords library, March 2004).
- 25 Labour woman MP.
- 26 S. Childs, *Women Representing Women*, Routledge, 2004.
- 27 A handwritten note on a fax dated 22 January 1998 (the exclamation mark is in the original).
- 28 There is a 'briefing' paper on sanitary protection written on All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health notepaper, dated February 2000.
- 29 This practice was outlawed after the second EDM.
- 30 An MP can add other MPs' names to an EDM but if they do so they are responsible for their actions and must have the authority of the named MPs. In 1999 a few MPs (Conservative and Labour) wrote to McCafferty reminding her of this ruling. In 2000, a number of MPs' signatures were held back to be added when the EDM was in danger of not being reprinted—a tactic that reflects the fact that after 2 weeks EDMs are only reprinted if new signatures have been added.
- 31 In contrast the Liberal Democrats constituted 15.5%, 14.9% and 13.0% and the Conservatives only 4%, 2.7% and 2.8% of all signers (1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000, respectively). These percentages include the signings of MPs who were not present for all four sessions of the 1997 Parliament as well as those who later moved into government. The Party make up of the 1997 Parliament was approximately 65% Labour, 25% Conservative and 7% Liberal Democrat.
- 32 To test whether they were more likely to sign these EDMs than their male colleagues, it is necessary to remove from the analysis those Labour MPs who were not 'free' to sign all of the EDMs, that is, MPs who were in government (including the unpaid junior role of Personal Private Secretaries) at any time in the 1997 Parliament and any MP who was not present for the whole Parliament. Labour's permanent backbench MPs in the 1997 Parliament total 223 MPs: 172 men and 51 women. In five cases (four women and one man) Labour MPs who had signed previous VAT sanitary products EDMs, but who had subsequently become members of the Government (including those appointed as PPSs) penned letters noting their regret that they could no longer sign the EDM.
- 33 When analysed collectively, the combined three EDMs demonstrate a sex difference in women's favour that was just outside of the 10% level ( $p=0.109$  Mann Whitney).

- 34 S. Childs, 'The House Turned Upside Down', paper presented at Women and Westminster Conference, Ottawa, 2004.
- 35 It is also the case that, with so many of Labour's women signing by 1999/2000, there were very few women left to sign the EDM for the first time; any 'new' signers were likely to be men.
- 36 The pro forma means this analysis can only be undertaken for this EDM.
- 37 It is possible, however, that this might reflect McCafferty's efforts to 'get [the] support of every woman MP' (See endnote 27).
- 38 It should be noted that this was a multiple response question although the majority of MPs gave only two reasons for signing.
- 39 When asked about EDMs in general, 40.5% of Labour's men respondents and 47.1% of Labour's women respondents said they signed EDMs because they agreed with them.
- 40 P. Flynn, *Commons Knowledge*, Seren, 1997.
- 41 R. Blackburn and A. Kennon, *Griffith and Ryle on Parliament, Functions, Practice and Procedures*, Sweet and Maxwell, 2003, p. 537; P. Flynn, *Commons Knowledge*, Seren, 1997, pp 47–9.
- 42 Interview with Labour woman MP first elected in 1997.
- 43 No. 10 source.
- 44 McCafferty also met European colleagues to lobby for zero-rating across the EU (*The Independent*, 5.3.00).
- 45 The meeting with Blair took place either in late 1999 or early 2000; the correspondence and meeting with Brown and Treasury ministers took place in March 1999 and February 2000.
- 46 Press releases were put out in 1999 and after the budget in 2000.
- 47 Ruddock was Parliamentary Under Secretary of State—a junior ministerial position. Harriet Harman was the Women's Minister in the Cabinet.
- 48 See S. Childs, *New Labour Women's MPs*, Routledge, 2004, chapter 9 for discussion of Labour's Women Ministers.
- 49 Neither were they in contact with the Treasury, either at the ministerial or special adviser level.
- 50 Women's Unit source.
- 51 At the time, Fawcett were active on women's representation in the Commons, women's poverty, violence against women and the criminal justice system. The Women's Budget Group were active on gendering of the tax system [eg. the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC)].
- 52 ASDA identified the issue through its customer listening groups and decided to campaign and to pay the VAT costs on its own brand sanitary products.
- 53 Although one of McCafferty's neighbours works for ASDA there is no evidence to challenge the interpretation that her campaign was independent of ASDA's.
- 54 ASDA admits that when they started their campaign they were not confident that the reduction would be made.
- 55 Co-op press release, 21.7.98.
- 56 The origin of this 'call' has not been confirmed. One insider suggests that it derived from the woman partner of one of Brown's advisory team.
- 57 Subsequent VAT reductions on other items (most notably fuel) leave the question why it was sanitary products that were left at the old rate until Labour's fourth budget. One woman MP said, she had never heard Brown talk about reducing VAT on sanitary products prior to the 2000 Budget.
- 58 *The Herald*, 1.3.00; *FT*, 22.3.00; *Guardian*, 23.3.00.
- 59 Sources from within both No. 10 and No. 11 agree on this point.
- 60 Treasury Sources.
- 61 This account came from a Treasury source close to Brown and was reaffirmed as likely to be a truthful account by a Ministerial source.
- 62 Treasury Source.