

# Women in parliament - the new suffragettes

Friday, 28 October 2005

by Boni Sones with Margaret Moran and Joni Lovenduski

Reviewed by Oona King for Progress

Have you ever wondered what Westminster is really like? What it feels like and tastes like from the inside? If so, regardless of your gender or politics, this is a book you have to read. Boni Sones succeeds in bringing Westminster to life, as well as shining a light on the traditionally male world of parliament, fashioned by 500 years of men-only shortlists. *Women in Parliament* deconstructs the 'Blair's babes' phenomena to give readers a real taste of what happened when the 1997 election doubled the number of women in parliament overnight. But, even after this huge increase in women, 82 per cent of MPs were still men. It is no wonder that women, a small minority of parliamentarians, weren't able to transform the Commons overnight. Yet they remained burdened with vast expectations.

Sones demonstrates that, notwithstanding their small powerbase, the 101 Labour women elected in 1997 eventually succeeded in 'transforming the Commons beyond recognition and [giving] a new direction to policymaking'. The journey to power in policy terms (witness the government's current priority of childcare and early-years provision) was riddled with setbacks and ridicule. Sexism was rampant and, even for someone who was there at the time, it is still shocking to remember the behaviour of older men in an institution that was 'halfway between a public school and a gentlemen's club'.

Jackie Ballard, formerly a Lib Dem MP, says that at Westminster 'behaviour falls way below the standards you would allow in any workplace, particularly in terms of sexist language and so on'. Dawn Primarolo adds that 'in any other workplace it would fall into one of two categories: bullying or harassment, and that's sexual harassment'. These women's views are echoed throughout the book, with examples that will make your hair stand on end. As one MP elected in 1997 said, explaining why she would not stand again, 'I got tired of the willy-jousting'.

The book's value for me is two fold. There is the fascinating insight it gives into parliament per se: in particular, a physical sense of the lay of the land and an emotional sense of what it's like to become an MP. It is hard to describe the first days and months for a new MP: lost, bombarded, electrified, frustrated, terrified, excited and, more often than not, clueless. Someone without a boss, yet with a 'whip'; someone without professional support, yet with status. As Virginia Bottomley puts it, the House of Commons 'is completely a place of sole operators'. It is extraordinary the degree to which you have no feedback, no management, no supervision.

Although it's not difficult to capture the majesty and importance of Westminster, it's far harder to capture the insanity of the place for a new MP, and this is what the book does so well. For example, one new MP was impressed to find that every member's coat hanger had a red Aids ribbon attached – only to discover that these red ribbons were for MPs to hang their swords on. And the sword ribbons are still there today – in 2005.

As well the insight the book gives into the day-to-day workings of parliament, its value also lies in its examination of the significance of the number of women elected in 1997. The significance is not that we constituted a critical mass. We didn't, and still don't. Rather, there were enough of us to say 'wait a second, British democracy is great, but some of what goes on here is sheer lunacy. Let's fast forward 100 years. Let's make some changes'. *Women in Parliament* is the first work to actually document this process, from the point of view of those involved, and to signpost some of the changes made. These changes don't just affect women, but affect our country and our democracy and, for that reason, they should be of interest to all.