

**Gendered Institutional Change:
The Case of the Women and Equalities Committee in the UK Parliament**

Chloe Challender (House of Commons) and Sarah Childs (University of Bristol)
s.childs@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract prepared for the
*Gender, Institutions and Change:
Feminist Institutionalism after 10 years*
April 2017

Abstract

The Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) was recently adjudged the only unambiguous indicator of gender sensitivity in the UK's lower House. Yet the WEC was only created following the 2015 general election, and is currently only a temporary provision. Change at Westminster is not easy especially when reforms are 'effective', that is, when they affect the relationship between the executive and the legislature in the latter's favour, as with the WEC. This paper offers an explicitly feminist intuitionist account of the establishment of the WEC and reflects critically on what this case - an explicitly gendered effective reform - adds to the traditional literature on institutional and parliamentary change. Its authors are respectively a clerk of the House of Commons and a Professor of Politics and Gender who had been the adviser to the Women in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group (WIP APPG) which had recommended the establishment of a WEC in its 2014 report. The analysis presented here contends that there was, as the traditional literature suggests, a 'ripe' moment of opportunity in UK parliamentary politics in 2015 in the run up to the general election, and one that was explicitly gendered. In this context, the feminist/gender conscious agency of three sets of actors was critical in seeing the WEC established: (i) women Members of Parliament from across the House; (ii) supportive officials and clerks within the administration; and (iii) campaigners and allies outside the House. Prepared to expend the necessary political and personal capital these actors were able to create the linkages between themselves and those - mostly male - actors within the House, most importantly the Leader of the House, who ultimately had the power to establish the Committee. In this instance, they were persuadable of the WEC's merit. Despite some lingering institutional resistance, this acceptance likely reflected the fact that creating the WEC filled an (obvious to feminists) gap in the structure of Departmental Select Committees (DSC). Whilst the Minister for Women and Equalities had like other Ministers a parliamentary 'Question Time' there was no DSC holding her to account; it might also have been a 'soft' response to leftist-feminist criticism of the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition on behalf of an incoming Conservative majority government.