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**'AN UNCONVENTIONAL MP': NANCY ASTOR, PUBLIC WOMEN AND GENDERED POLITICAL CULTURE**

# A Matter of Public Interest: Press Coverage of the Outfits of Women MPs 1918–1930

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This paper considers media coverage of the clothes chosen by early women MPs. Opening with the very recent case of public outrage sparked by the dress choice of Labour MP Tracy Brabin, it suggests that a disproportionate attention to what women wear in Parliament rather than what they do there is a longstanding phenomenon. Looking at examples from the 1920s, the first decade of women MPs, it demonstrates how political women have consistently been described in terms of their appearance much more than their policies. The article considers the extent to which a tendency to present women MPs as a unified group added to this, and the challenges of agreeing on a suitable feminine parliamentary dress code as well as a landmark legal case which viewed their dress as a matter of legitimate public interest.

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On 3 February 2020, the Labour MP Tracy Brabin rose from the front of the opposition benches in the U.K. Parliament to ask an urgent question about press freedom. Brabin, who had come straight to the house from an earlier public engagement and photo shoot with representatives of the UK music industry, was wearing a short-sleeved off-cut black dress. Less obvious to those watching the television coverage of Parliament was that she was also wearing a plaster-cast, having recently broken her ankle, so was unsteady on her feet. As she leant onto the despatch box for support her dress slipped, uncovering her right shoulder. This 'wardrobe malfunction' prompted no reaction or reprimand from the Speaker (the official arbitrator of Parliamentary standards of dress) but was nevertheless met with outrage on social media (*Daily Mail* 2020). In a defiant post on social media platform Twitter later the same day, Brabin summarised the worst of the insults she had received, stating:

I can confirm I'm not  
A slag  
Hungover  
A tart  
About to breastfeed  
A slapper  
Drunk  
Just been banged over a wheelie bin

Brabin followed this up with a televised interview on *BBC Breakfast* in which she condemned reaction to her appearances as 'another case of everyday sexism' (BBC, 2020). The reaction to her appearance, and her defence of it, sparked a fierce media debate in which Brabin's choice of clothes – and the her right to make this choice – were dissected at length (*The Guardian*, 2020; T. Petter, 2020; Holt, 2020; Malone, 2020). Many commentators continued to find the dress unsuitable; others were more willing to share Brabin's concern at the double standards facing women in public life. Claire Cohen, women's editor for the *Daily Telegraph*, expressed her worries over the potential impact such pejorative coverage might have on the 'record

220 female MPs... many in their twenties and thirties' who were elected to Parliament in December 2019. 'Imagine now being such a young woman, eight weeks into a new job, and seeing a senior female colleague shamed for what she's wearing' (Cohen, 2020). Cohen was just one of a number of commentators to connect the potential impact of the criticism of Brabin's clothing to a recent study carried out by Girlguiding UK in 2019, which found that 41% of the girls it surveyed would not want to put themselves into leadership positions because 'there's too much focus on their looks and not what they do' (Girlguiding, 2019). To draw attention to this, Brabin put the dress up for auction on ebay, and donated the proceeds (slightly in excess of £20,000) to Girlguiding.

While many of those discussing this incident were shocked at some of the crudely classed or more overtly sexualised responses to Brabin's choice, Cohen observed that they merely served to demonstrate a simple point. A century after the first woman was elected to Parliament, Women MPs were still subject to different rules from men when it came to clothing, and men's fashion *faux pas* were more likely to be ignored or interpreted as a positive statement (e.g., rebel, individualist) than those by women. Cohen's suspicion is supported by feminist scholarship into the differential portrayals of female and male politicians. Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Karen Ross undertook a series of in-depth interviews with twenty-eight women Labour and Conservative MPs in 1996 which found that 'most women politicians believed that their outward appearance is the focus of considerably more media attention than befalls their male colleagues', a suspicion that their broader analysis of the media confirmed (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Rosk, 1996: 108). Much of this emphasis comes through print media – and more recently social media – where visual differences in male and female politicians are emphasized in order to problematize women's presence, suggesting they are 'outsiders within' (Adock, 2010: 146). In the predominantly male space of Westminster, women MPs can be subject to what Nirmal Puwar has defined as 'super-exposure' with 'how they style their bodies' through dress assuming 'immense importance', a standard not applied to their male colleagues. (Puwar, 2004: 76). Emma Crewe's more recent anthropological investigation into parliamentary work at Westminster similarly found that 'the media

report frequently on women MPs' appearance but male MPs' political achievements... If women MPs are plain or badly dressed then they are assumed to be bitter; if they are beautiful they must be dim and if well-dressed then frivolous' (Crewe, 2015: 174). In this context it is easy to see that the storm around Brabin's appearance is just one in a long line of examples where women politicians have been described purely in terms of their appearance, and most usually in critical tones. Shirley Williams, one of Labour's most successful women politicians during the 1970s, had little interest in clothes so was frequently described as a 'bag lady' by commentators; Conservative MP Priscilla Tweedsmuir was called a 'glamour girl' (Sreberny and van Zoonen, 2000: 87). And, when Theresa May stepped down as Britain's second woman Prime Minister in July 2019, the *London Evening Standard* marked the event with a retrospective feature that made no mention of her political achievements or the challenges of Brexit, but on her 'most fashion forward moments', summarising her political career through a series of photographs of various outfits (Street, 2019). Such pieces, set alongside the frequent media use of epithets such as 'Blair's Babes' and 'Cameron's Cuties' to describe women MPs collectively do little to challenge the overall impression of them as lacking in individuality or having nothing meriting comment beyond the way they look.

This article will explore the historic origins of this discrepancy to show that unequal media treatment of women politicians is far from a recent phenomenon. Focussing on the first decade of women in Parliament, from 1918 to the election of 1929, it will explain how public fascination with the novelty of a very small number of women MPs helped, from their first election campaigns, to make dress an accepted focus of press coverage – and how this approach was even established in law. National newspapers, especially those 'popular' press titles that made use of photojournalism such as the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror* and *Graphic*, were keen to present the new women MPs to their readers in articles often accompanied by a number of portrait photographs. As the examples discussed here will show, equally important in spreading impressions of newly elected women were the numerous local newspapers across Britain, many of which made use of syndicated

articles published simultaneously across titles that ensured that their readers were kept abreast of exactly what the new women MPs in London were wearing. There was little distinction in this decade in the tone of coverage between national or local papers with a different political stance. The majority of popular titles leaned towards the Conservative Party at election time anyway (Bingham, 2013), and while articles that considered women MPs collectively could sometimes divide them into party camps, the novelty of their presence encouraged a forensic attention to appearance irrespective of party. Press media discussion of women MPs as a group was more likely to appear in features or gossip columns, and was distinct from the specific appeals that papers made to educate and enthuse women voters throughout the 1920s (Bingham, 2013). While some women MPs attempted to challenge or circumnavigate the tone of coverage in a number of ways, the majority were unable to develop successful channels of opposition. Hence elements of Brabin's recent media portrayals suggest that while their presence at Westminster is no longer considered as remarkable, little has changed for women MPs in this respect in the century following their arrival in Parliament.

An undue interest in women MPs' clothing predates the election of the first women MPs by almost a decade. The question of what women might choose to wear to Parliament if they were to be elected had preoccupied many anxious Westminster men during discussions of whether women should have the right to vote or stand for Parliament. In one enfranchisement debate in 1913, the Liberal Unionist MP Rowland Hunt queried whether or not women's dress would distract or even hamper male MPs should they ever reach the chamber, stating that:

There are obvious disadvantages about having women in Parliament. I do not know what is going to be done about their hats. Are they going to wear hats or not going to wear hats? If you ordered them not to wear hats, you might be absolutely certain that they would insist in wearing them. How is a poor little man to get on with a couple of women wearing enormous hats in front of him? (*Votes for Women*, 1913: 401).

Hunt's preoccupation with women's clothing remained very much to the fore among interested observers as the possibility of women becoming MPs came closer. This was evident in one of the earliest articles to cover a women candidate. In March 1918, barely a month after the Representation of the People Act gave some women the Parliamentary vote, Sir Swire Smith, Liberal MP for Keighley, suffered a fatal heart attack, triggering a by-election. Nina Boyle, formerly of the militant suffrage organisation the Women's Freedom League, and now representing the non-party women's organisation The Voter's Council, announced her intention to stand for the seat. Her decision was seen as a test case to determine whether women now had the right to stand as MPs as well as to vote for them. Although Boyle was ruled out on a technicality, the returning officer raised no objection to her sex and legislation quickly followed which settled the matter once and for all. As a historic first attempt, Boyle's campaign drew much media attention in which her appearance received as much attention as her politics. A typical example was one of the earliest pieces in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, a weekly publication known both for its progressive campaigning pieces which included *inter alia* W.T. Stead's 'Maiden Tribute' expose of sexual trafficking, which remained an important touchstone for suffrage campaigns around this issue (Delap and Di Cenzo, 2013). The *Gazette* stopped short of presenting Boyle as a feminist pioneer, portraying her as 'a quiet little woman, with earnest grey eyes, clad in a dark serge costume and blue velours [sic] hat' (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 1918: 5). Thus from the outset it was clear that media coverage of women candidates would consider that their choice of outfit would be a matter of interest to their readers and as valid a line of questioning than any concerned with why they may be putting themselves forward, their previous political experience or the party platform on which they may be standing.

One explanation for the fascination with women MPs' appearance was the extremely visible difference that their presence made to the gendering of Parliament. Prior to 1918 and the advent of women voters and candidates, Westminster was explicitly male territory. This point was well made at the height of the militant suffrage campaign by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which ran a number of

events in Caxton Hall, a large venue close to the Palace of Westminster. These showcase occasions culminated in deputations of women approaching Parliament and sparring with the police. There were always large numbers of arrests, giving much publicity to the Union's militant tactics. The physical space of Parliament was targeted as a key locus of power from which women were completely excluded unless invited as observers by men (Pankhurst, 1987: 75; Cowman, 2007a: 124–9). The Union's chosen name for these meetings – 'Women's Parliament' – drew attention to the gender of the Westminster Parliament which was, by implication and composition if not by name, a 'Men's Parliament'. Inside Parliament, women's access to the House of Commons was carefully controlled and restricted to the Ladies' Gallery set high above the Speaker's Chair and screened off from the view of MPs by an open metal trellis work, only removed after women won the vote (Vote 100, 2018: 35–6). The arrival in the 1920s of a small number of women MPs (only twenty-one in total and never more than fourteen sitting together in Parliaments composed of six hundred and fifteen MPs) made little difference to the overall gendering of most Parliamentary space. As historian Brian Harrison explains, these earliest women MPs were in many senses 'women in a men's house', subverting centuries of masculinity by the simple fact of their presence, but not in a position to significantly change the dominant culture (Harrison, 1986). Outside of the debating chamber, women's impact was contained through efforts to restrict their access to the Palace of Westminster and for many years they were excluded from many of the social spaces like the smoking rooms or dining rooms where much unofficial parliamentary business was conducted. Their only dedicated space was the small Lady Members' Room, swiftly provided in the wake of Nancy Astor's election, its name drawing attention to the strangeness of MPs who were not male. Few other concessions were made; although MPs frequently had to go straight from the House to formal work-related functions there was no dressing room until Edith Picton-Turbervill demanded one in 1931 (Cowman, 2010, 124).

In the debating chamber, however, there was no gender segregation, so the small numbers of women who took their seats – one in 1919, then two, then eight, falling back to four and finally fourteen in 1929 – stood out among the men who outnumbered

them by about fifty to one. Charles Sims' iconic portrait 'The Introduction of Nancy Astor as the first Woman Member of Parliament', now in Plymouth art gallery, shows Astor on her first day as a slight, lone woman flanked by her sponsors David Lloyd George and Arthur Balfour, against a backdrop of parliamentary benches full of men. Astor had opted for a sober choice of outfit as the portrait shows, but it still attracted many column inches in the press. The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* described her as 'becomingly dressed in a plain black tailor-made costume, and a close-fitting velvet toque. The roll-collar of her white silk blouse with V-shaped neck, overhung her coat collar. The only jewellery she displayed were her wedding ring and a gold wristlet watch' (1919, 5). '[S]he looked', declared the *Dundee Courier*, 'the picture of vigorous British womanhood' (1919, 8). Margaret Wintringham, the second woman to be elected, followed Astor's lead in preferring dark colours which soon came to be seen as the 'women MPs... Parliamentary uniform of black and white' (*Western Mail*, 1924a, 6). The sartorial choices of Lloyd George and Balfour – formal black morning dress but hatless – passed without discussion.

Dressing 'becomingly' was an important political statement for many early women MPs who were anxious not to be criticised as unfeminine. During the height of the suffrage campaign it had been common for militant and constitutional suffragists alike to be attacked on the grounds of their supposedly unwomanly conduct and appearance. Comic postcards caricatured them as mannish, ugly and undomesticated, often in unflattering tweed suits with heavy boots. These were challenged through suffrage organisations' own propaganda which provided more idealised portraits of suffragettes in conventionally beautiful or domestic poses intended to suggest that political activity was not unsexing (Cowman, 2007b). Astor's careful choice of costume was thus designed to present a non-threatening form of femininity which was neither too sexualised nor too masculine, and which would at the same time be sufficiently quiet to deflect attention away from her clothes and not see them as a distraction.

This was not entirely successful. Although media coverage of Astor's clothing was overwhelmingly approbatory, her male colleagues' outfits were never subject to the same level of discussion. The tendency for political reporting of the activities of

women MPs to focus at least part of any article on what they were wearing grew in line with the numbers of women candidates. In the run up to the General Election of December 1920, the *Graphic* ran a three-page article with portraits of twenty-two of the women candidates. Under the heading 'Women who want to be MPs – Will they Brighten St Stephens?' journalist Charles Spiers devoted half of the piece to discussing their dress and their politics – but mainly their dress. He lamented that the few women elected to date had so far failed to 'assail that grey pre-eminence of man' in Westminster through their sober choice of costume, adding that:

If they [the new candidates] all affect the rather plain-cut coats and skirts in black, or sombre colours to which Lady Astor and Mrs. Wintringham are devoted, then the pre-eminence will remain grey. But it is to be hoped that at least some of our new women MPs may take the view that there is no reason why women in Parliament should follow the example of the men who are there and dress like undertakers... (Spiers, 1922).

Spiers then highlighted a number of examples of candidates who he hoped might 'brighten' the debating chamber if elected, including 'Mrs Pollard Smith (Brixton) charmingly gowned in a pink dress with white shoes and stockings' and 'Mrs Battersby Jones (Brighton) delightfully attired in blue and gold'. Although the feature then offered a brief discussion of a small number of candidates' experience, noting examples of 'some national and municipal service' and 'some service for the women and children of the nation', this discussion came way after the discourse on their appearance which, coupled with the two subsequent pages of portraits, was clearly intended to be the most important factor in their candidacies and the thing that would be of most interest to readers (Speirs, 1922: 17–19).

The outfits of women moving into other previously male arenas in the 1920s received less scrutiny. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act which passed into law in December 1919 made it possible for women to become magistrates and jurors and to enter previously closed professions such as architecture and law, and is seen by many historians as the first in a series of important legal changes that resulted from the

Equal Franchise Act (Thane, 2003). Some of these were practised away from public view in private offices, leaving little scope for public interest stories about women's dress. Others such as the law had an identified uniform which was swiftly adapted to accommodate women practitioners. There was a level of press interest around these new 'firsts' for women (Morgan, 2017: 701). Dress did receive some comment, but this was short-lived. A piece in the *Daily Express* in March 1920 suggested that women eligible for jury service had been 'seriously considering' the question and concurred that they 'must wear simple and inconspicuous clothes, and that nothing in the shape of sensational dress should be allowed to distract the attention of the court' (1920b, 7). Reports of the first court appearance of Ada Summers, Britain's first woman magistrate, ignored her dress altogether or simply noted that she 'was attired in black' (*Daily Express*, 1920a: 5). While Ann Logan found that the hat question continued to preoccupy women magistrates until the 1960s, her research suggests that this was 'more a mark of class' than of gender by this point, and that early women magistrates wore hats in line with social norms (Logan, 2002: 193–4). There was also some immediate criticism of press attention to women magistrates' and jurors' clothing. Mrs Adrian Ross, in the *Daily Mirror*, observed that a trial report in another unnamed paper where 'Several of the ladies of the jury came in different hats... did not go on to say that various gentlemen of the jury wore different ties' (Ross, 1921: 5). Most reports of women's new legal roles centred on what qualities, positive or negative, they might bring to the judicial system. This coverage was also quite balanced. While some in the legal profession feared a 'feminist invasion' that could lead to women barristers demanding all-female juries (Morgan, 2017: 700), Helena Normanton, a solicitor who became one of the first woman barristers, applauded the fact that women would no longer have to 'to appear in court unsupported by their sisters and in a very real sense not to be tried by their peers' (Normanton, 1920: 5).

The differential tone of press discussion of women's legal and political firsts may in part be explained by the numbers involved. The judicial system required three Justices of the Peace to sit together, meaning that women would always make up at least a third of any bench they sat on, and while juries could in theory contain eleven men to one woman, analysis of their composition suggests that although

there were regional variations with some areas tending to look for a fifty-percent gender balance, no jury was entirely comprised of women (Morgan, 2017). The next General Election of 1923 saw thirty-four women candidates, the largest number to date, but almost 1,500 men. The *Graphic* ran a similar portrait article on the women candidates, but this time with no accompanying text. Elsewhere in the media coverage of this election the question of how the candidates might dress for Parliament if victorious was given more prominence through an interview that Lady Terrington, the Liberal candidate for Wycombe, gave to the *Daily Express* (*Daily Express*, 1924a). Proprietor Lord Beaverbrook had been a strong supporter of the Conservative Party under Balfour but had less time for his successor, Baldwin, so had positioned The *Express* as independent for this election, urging his readers to 'vote not for a Party but for the Empire' against Baldwin's developing trade policy (1923b: 8). Terrington, fighting the seat for the second time against a Unionist incumbent, might have expected the paper's support, but Wycombe was not among the many seats where the *Express* offered voters specific advice. Instead, in a piece on the paper's front page on 3 December 1923, three days before the election, readers were provided with an in-depth analysis of Terrington's views on dress. Beneath the headline 'Best Dressed Woman MP', Terrington was shown wearing a deep v-cut dress accessorised with a flowing turban and carrying two small lap dogs, one under each arm. The article credited her with saying that if elected she would 'wear my best clothes... put on my ospreys and my fur coat and my pearls. I do not believe in a woman politician wearing a dull little frock with a Quakerish collar...' (1923a: 1).

Unsurprisingly, when Terrington finally arrived at Westminster, her Parliamentary clothing was heavily scrutinised, with several articles adding descriptions of her jewellery and accessories. In a piece introducing 'The new faces' of women MPs to its readers, the *Daily Mail* noted how she was '35 years of age, 25 in looks... has an unerring taste in dress...' (1923: 9). She made her first appearance in the House 'attired in becoming black silk, with old gold embroidery on the sleeves' but 'also wore a rope of pearls' and a small black hat trimmed with white (*Scotsman*, 1924a: 9; *Northern Whig*, 1924: 6; *Aberdeen Press and Journal* 1924: 5). Within a week of taking her seat she had achieved a 'reputation... as the most decorative MP in the

House' dressed in 'black... embellished with a kind of pink and silver embroidery while her hat, though still black, was much more in the nature of what is called a "creation.'" (*Western Daily Press*, 1924b: 6). Further press coverage of Terrington's parliamentary activities during the year that she sat in the House continued to focus on her appearance, her hats and jewellery and her tendency to wear different dresses each day.

Terrington herself was dismayed at the tone and content of the original article. Soon after it appeared she launched a libel action against the *Daily Express*. By the time this came to court in November 1924 she was no longer an MP, having lost her seat in the election of the previous month. In court she denied having said many of the things that were attributed to her, complaining that 'it implied that she was a vain, frivolous and extravagant woman, unfitted to be a member of Parliament' (*Daily Express*, 1924b: 1). She was supported in her version of events by her secretary Elaine Macey who claimed to have been present for much of the interview but said that she had no recollection of ospreys or pearls being mentioned. Mrs Charlotte Burghes, the journalist who had conducted the interview and written the piece, and was described as a 'skilled interviewer' to the court, stood by the story she had written, stating that she particularly remembered Terrington mentioning the osprey as 'a marvellous apparition was conjured up in her mind' when it was mentioned (*Daily Express*, 1924b: 7).

In moving the case, Lady Terrington's representative, Sir E. Hulme Williams, emphasized the political rather than the personal implications of the piece, suggesting that in his view its publication three days before the election 'was intended to affect her chances' at the polls. The defence team countered that the actual result of the election – when Lady Terrington won the seat by roughly 1,700 votes, 6,000 more than she had polled at her first attempt in 1922 – may in part have been connected to the publicity from the article, and that consequently there had been no injury. Terrington herself seemed most upset by the accusation that she would wear osprey. This, she explained, had led to her being 'flooded with correspondence... from people objecting to the wearing of osprey' whereas in reality she was 'particularly kind to animals and did not wear ospreys' (*Daily Express*, 1924b: 7). This may well have been

true. Terrington had made little impact on the business of Parliament, and barely spoke in the chamber but she had intervened in a debate over the British Empire Exhibition to condemn the animal cruelty involved in rodeo performances. However, her case was undermined when another interview mentioning her pearls – this time in *Ladies Field and Fashion* with evidence that Terrington had signed off the original copy – was produced for the court. Although the defence was careful to state that Terrington had not lied, it was strongly suggested that she had felt rather differently about her words when she saw them in print and was attempting to redress after the event.

The judgement in this case had wider implications for the way that the press approached women MPs. In summing up for the defence, Sir Edward Marshall Hall told the jury that Terrington had ‘not suffered a farthing’s worth of damage’ from the article which ‘was not libel but a perfectly bona fide comment.’ Lord Dorling, the judge, went further. In his summary, he stated to the jury that his decision was that ‘this is a matter of public interest.’ He continued:

I do not decide that any question regarding clothes is a matter of public interest... Here it is not merely a question of the sort of clothing Lady Terrington chooses to wear. She was standing for Parliament and all I mean to decide is that the kind of clothes which a lady MP should wear in Parliament and not outside is a matter of public interest (*Daily Express*, 1924c: 6).

The jury found in favour of the *Daily Express*, agreeing with the judge that what clothes a women MP might decide to wear in Parliament was a public rather than a private matter. This judgement made it difficult for women MPs to counter trivialising press coverage given that this approach had now been deemed as being in the public interest.

The judgement against Lady Terrington in the *Daily Express* libel trial further legitimised what was becoming an established trope of dwelling on appearances when reporting on the activities of women MPs. This emphasis was amplified by a tendency of contemporary observers to group all political women together,

regardless of their party or political interests. A collectivising approach to women candidates emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Representation of the People Act in February 1918. At this point, according to the veteran feminist Ray Strachey, ‘the House of Commons discovered that every Bill... had a “woman’s side”, and the Party whips began eagerly to ask “what the women thought”’ (Strachey, 1928: 367). Political parties reacted similarly, all convinced that women formed a homogenous special interest group who would not divide along other lines and that there was a collective ‘women’s vote’ to be captured (Cowman, 2015: section 3, 374–385). Press coverage of early women MPs is suggestive of the same attitude with group coverage and references to ‘the women candidates’ despite the fact that they were clearly standing on different political platforms with individual approaches to policy. Putting potential and actual women MPs together and comparing their appearances rather than their policies suggested that they were a distinct group, and quite different from male MPs, who were not presented as united through their sex. Photojournalism and film reinforced this message. Shortly after Margaret Wintringham’s election, she and Nancy Astor posed together on the House of Commons terrace for a photograph for *Life* magazine, providing the first collective image of women MPs, despite the fact that they were representing different political parties. When the general election of December 1923 returned eight women to Westminster, the highest number to date, British Pathé sent a camera crew to the terrace of the Palace of Westminster to capture them together. The resulting photographs and newsreel of ‘the women MPs’ established a tradition that has lasted for the first century of women in Parliament. There were some variations. In 1929, for example, when the first election after Universal Suffrage returned fourteen women MPs, a separate photograph was released of the nine Labour representatives together, followed by a picture of the twelve Conservative women returned in 1931. Elsewhere, pictures of cross-party groups of women remained popular for several decades, culminating in the widely-reproduced photograph of serving women MPs taken to mark the centenary of the Representation of the People Act in February 2018.

Grouping women MPs or candidates together encouraged journalists to engage in comparative descriptions of their clothing choices. These often began at election

time, with overview features such as the *Graphic* piece cited above. When the first Labour Party women arrived at Westminster in 1924 there was a slight shift in the tone of collective articles, with clothing used as a shorthand to convey the political differences between individual women MPs. Journalists were convinced of the interest of physical descriptions, particularly to women readers (e.g., *Lancashire Evening Post* 1924: 4). Shortly after Parliament opened the *Daily Mail* ran a piece on 'The Eight Women MPs: Personalities and Clothes' by a 'Woman Correspondent'. The article is typical in its tone and content of similar pieces that appeared after each new election, so is worth exploring at length. It began with the statement that on seeing the eight women in the chamber together, the writer was 'struck by their individual differences as clearly marked in their clothes' before describing the outfits of each of them in detail. Unsurprisingly, given the *Mail's* strong Conservative stance, the piece started with a detailed description of the Conservative women; 'Lady Astor... in her usual black coat and skirt and white silk shirt with the collar turned well back. On her head her usual hat, upturned with velvet and having a kind of perky air.' Mrs Philipson was in 'her usual things, a black frock, black cloak with what we call a bolster collar and a hat of the mushroom persuasion, the little brim partly veiled' along with 'white kid gloves' which added to her 'quaint, almost Quakerish air.' The Duchess of Atholl was 'black frocked and hatted also' with a 'black frock cut away just at the base of the throat' with 'long loose sleeves, and floating panels at either side – an undistinguished garment, which somehow managed effectively to extinguish a distinguished personality.'

Having dealt with the Conservative women, the writer moved on to those from other parties, making no distinction between the Liberal and Labour MPs. Mrs Wintringham was 'a calm, almost imperturbable figure in her usual black relieved by a big bunch of violets.' Margaret Bondfield is described as 'perhaps the strongest woman in the House' with 'a brown suit [that] showed the tiniest line of red at the cuffs and hinted at a red blouse beneath the coat.' Lady Terrington, usually described as the best-dressed of this group was 'very upright and most attractively dressed' in 'a three-piece model of black charmeuse, the little loose coat lined with lacquer red and bordered with gold over-braided in red to match... a little hat, a wide black

ribbon swathing the high crown, and coming to a bow under one side while the centre ornament was an upright buckle that just caught the lights as she moved her head'. Dorothy Jewson had a 'mole coloured cloth gown with... paisley silk collar and narrow trimmings' which the writer found 'unattractive', and Susan Lawrence 'a plain dark costume, the coat of which was just open enough to show the round-necked white blouse.' Aside from noting that Astor, Philipson and Atholl sat 'on the Government side', no mention was made of the women MP's party affiliations or political interests, and the discussion of their 'personalities' promised in the title was restricted to what the writer felt could be inferred by their costume. Differences in dress, the article seems to suggest, were what mattered, hence its conclusion:

It is said they are going to band themselves together on women's questions in the House, but as far as I could see, save for those actually next to each other, none turned to look at another woman... (*Daily Mail*, 1924: 9).

What they were wearing rather than what they were saying continued to form the focus of much of the coverage of this cohort of women MPs throughout the short life of the 1924 Parliament. Every detail, especially if it were slightly unusual, was widely relayed to readers across the country. Readers of the *Aberdeen Press* 'Notes for Women' column were informed that out of all of the women MPs, 'Miss Jewson thinks least about dress' favouring 'a woolly scarf, a velour hat calculated to stand wet weather, and serviceable low-heeled shoes'; Lady Astor has 'the shortest skirts' and Mrs Wintringham 'allows a long chain to brighten the sombreness of her black dress' (*Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 1924: 5). Descriptions of the three Labour women frequently implied that they were less well-presented than their counterparts. Various accounts of their first appearances in the House commented on their 'dresses that need not be described in the fashion columns' that were 'not such to enhance the brightness of the chamber' (*Hull Daily Mail*, 1924: 7; *Western Mail*, 18 January 1924b: 8). Colour was seen as being of particular significance. Although the article in the *Graphic* cited above had deprecated the first women MPs' penchant for sober dress, in reality any attempt to move away from monochrome would prompt several

critical column inches, as the rather bemused tone of this report from the *Sheffield Telegraph* suggests:

Women Members are breaking away from the convention of black or black and white dresses which Lady Astor laid down. Miss Bondfield and Miss Jewson have got as far as brown, Lady Terrington arrived today in a bright russet coloured tussore dress, and Mrs Hilton Philipson burst through all precedents by entering the House in a garden party dress of white with a big white hat rimmed with roses and with streamers of pink ribbon (1924: b).

When attempting to establish what may or may not have been appropriate to wear, it is worth noting that the early women MPs, especially those elected in the 1920s, were subject to the broader social conventions of the day with regard to their dress. These may have relaxed somewhat during the First World War in favour of shorter skirts, looser clothing and an end to tight corsets, but they had not vanished altogether. The power of convention in determining how women MPs should look can be seen most clearly in what became known as 'the hat question' (Reeves, 2019: 28). From the outset there was much discussion over whether or not women would wear hats in the chamber, and moreover whether or not they *ought* to do so. Hats remained an important part of all women's wardrobes in the 1920s. When Rowland Hunt voiced his anxiety about hats in the chamber in 1913 the fashion was for large 'picture hats' which frequently caused annoyance in theatres by obscuring the view of other audience members. By 1918 women's hat fashions had changed. Smaller, neater and more tightly-fitted models had replaced the large flamboyant Edwardian examples, but the matter of propriety remained, and it was expected that women would wear hats on formal occasions. In the context of Parliament, there was the added complication that men were expected to remove their hats when speaking (with one particular exception which will be discussed below). Prior to the first election with women candidates in October 1918 there was press speculation that a parliamentary rule would have to be laid down on suitable headgear for women MPs (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, 1918: 4). After Nancy Astor was elected, *The Times* suggested that 'she

will wear her hat in the House, as she would do in a church' but that 'she should remove it when she rises to speak, as male MPs are bound to do' (Reeves, 2019: 28). Other commentators took a different view and suggested that 'the hat rule should be modified' for women MPs as women's hats were generally more difficult to remove and replace than men's (*Daily Mirror*, 1918: 2).

Astor, who adopted a black tricorne velvet hat as keystone of her 'parliamentary uniform' was not requested to remove it when she spoke. Margaret Wintringham followed her lead in wearing similarly small hats in the House as did Mabel Philipson. The first women to break with this recently established tradition of formal headgear were the first three Labour women MPs: Margaret Bondfield, Susan Lawrence and Dorothy Jewson. When they came into Parliament in 1924, all made their first appearance without hats (*Scotsman*, 1924b: 9; *Western Daily Mail*, 1924a: 6). While this attracted some press comment, it was presented as being part of their unconventional socialist politics and general lack of dress sense (*Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 9 January 1924: 1). Much more was made of the decision to forgo a hat by the Conservative MP Katherine, Duchess of Atholl who was elected at the same time and remained in Parliament until just before the Second World War. When she was sworn in January 1924 she wore 'a heavy fur cloak and black hat', but she was soon considering her choice in view of what Labour women were wearing (*Scotsman*, 1924b: 9; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 1924a). Speaking on 10<sup>th</sup> January at a celebratory dinner for women MPs hosted by the Women's Election Committee, she admitted that the 'one ambition' she had 'not yet divulged' was that she might 'find it possible to do my work in the House of Commons with my head uncovered. I am ready to obey the wishes and teaching of St Paul as I enter a divine building, but when I enter the House of Commons I am prepared only to recognise the authority of the Speaker and the rules of the House.' Atholl's confession prompted Nancy Astor to caution the new arrival about her own experience, believing that 'had I gone in without a hat it would have shocked most of the members as much as had Lady Godiva appeared.' Nonetheless, Atholl was prepared to take the risk (*Scotsman*, 1924b: 9). By the end of her first full week in Parliament she told the *Dundee Courier* that she had 'taken the liberty of going into the House without my hat... because I find it less tiring

when one is sitting for several hours... I find the atmosphere of the House rather warm and I have discarded my hat more as a preventive of headaches than anything else' (*Dundee Courier*, 1924: 4). Shortly after this, Lady Terrington made her own first appearance in the House without a hat; headgear, it would appear, had swiftly become optional, and while the choice of women MPs to leave hats behind may have attracted press attention, it went without comment in Parliament.

In this context, it was surprising when Ellen Wilkinson's decision to appear hatless in February 1924 caused some concern inside the House. Wilkinson was one of four women – and the only Labour Party member – to be returned to Parliament after the election of October 1924 reduced the number of women MPs by half. When she rose to ask a supplementary question at Question Time in February 1925, Col. Applin protested from the Government benches, asking the Speaker whether she was 'entitled to address the House [uncovered] in view of your ruling that ladies may address the House covered.' Applin was effectively suggesting that the decision to allow Astor and other women to keep their hats on in the chamber was effectively a ruling that they should be required to wear them. Although he had not been in a position to protest before, as he had himself just recently been elected (at the same election as Wilkinson), Applin must surely have been aware that by this stage even Conservative women would shed their hats in the chamber and that wearing them was a matter of personal choice rather than Parliamentary regulation. Whether his outrage was prompted by other aspects of Wilkinson's appearance (she had recently had her auburn hair shingled, much to the delight of many political columnists) or her politics (he was himself an ardent anti-feminist who later protested that women cabinet ministers would be unreliable if their children were sick) is uncertain, but Wilkinson's Labour colleagues suspected the latter, hissing 'snob' from the opposition benches. His intervention drew no rebuke for Ellen Wilkinson but prompted the Speaker to rule on the matter by stating that Miss Wilkinson was 'quite in order' (*Daily Herald*, 1925a: 1).

The Speaker's ruling did not completely settle the hat question, however. There was one particular procedural matter remaining. Parliamentary rules stated that in order to be more easily visible to the Speaker any Member wishing to raise a point of

order during a division was required to wear a hat when doing so. As the fashion for top hats died out among men, MPs would often keep a spare hat under the benches, and in later years (the rule was only finally abolished in 1998) a hat kept specially for the purposes would be passed along the benches (House of Commons Factsheet, N.d.). This led to some interesting challenges for women who opted to remain hatless, as divisions could be unpredictable. Ellen Wilkinson had just been called to speak in a debate in July 1925 when the motion was called meaning that a hat was required. Undaunted, Wilkinson snatched up the straw hat of her colleague Colonel Day, but struggled to fit it on top of her hair, causing much merriment among her fellow MPs (*Daily Herald*, 1924b: 2). A similar situation faced Susan Lawrence in February 1929 but, having no spare man's hat to hand, she settled the matter by placing her order paper over her head. This led to a further ruling by the speaker that in the case of lady members the requirement to have the head covered when raising a point of order during a division would not be enforced (House of Commons Debate, 9 February 1929).

Some women MPs did attempt to challenge the continued emphasis on their clothing, although none went so far as Terrington, possibly deterred by the implications of the judgement against her. Ellen Wilkinson's appearance drew an unprecedented degree of attention as a young, single working-class woman whose short hair and small physical frame led to her being 'branded as the House's token "modern girl."' (Beers, 2016: 162). Wilkinson's choice of a bright green, clinging dress for an early parliamentary appearance was widely discussed and was reported to have drawn 'murmurs of admiration' from other MPs, prompting Nancy Astor to take her aside and advise her, in 'a motherly fashion' to 'dress dull' and not 'excite an assembly already superheated' (Bartley, 2019: 92). Wilkinson initially took this advice, and reverted to black the next day, but it made little difference. As Stella Wolfe Murray, the first female lobby correspondent, noted in her report on Wilkinson's press coverage, 'once again... much printer's ink was poured out over a woman's dress' and reminded her readers that that 'it is the woman herself that matters rather than her covering.' Wolfe Murray went on to discuss the reporting of Wilkinson's

hatless appearance the following day when she was not wearing green, noting that 'hardly one paper reported the question Miss Wilkinson asked, which meant more to thousands of women than whether she asked it with her hat on or off' (Wolfe Murray, 1925: 4). This report offered a rare observer's critique of how women MPs were discussed in the press. Some now attempted to confront the issue themselves. As Wilkinson in particular continued to be discussed in terms of her appearance and referred to as the 'green goddess' or the 'shingled MP', she began to speak out against this coverage of herself and other women MPs (Hannam, 2009: 177). In December 1928, Lady Astor's clothes became the subject of press discussion after she deviated from her customary black and white and wore red to the House for the first time (she had come straight from a private engagement to support Margaret Bondfield's bill, which aimed to provide shoes for needy children). Wilkinson, who knew first-hand the risk of adopting bright colours, came to her defence, and told a number of reporters that it was 'high time the House of Commons got over its prejudice against women appearing in colours. Of course we do not want the women to make a fashion parade in the House, but all this fuss because a woman happens to turn up in a coloured frock is ridiculous' (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 1928: 7). Susan Lawrence also spoke out in support of Astor, noting that 'the clothes an MP wore was entirely his or her own affair' (*Staffordshire Sentinel*, 1928: 2). Wilkinson expanded her points in a longer interview for the *Yorkshire Evening Post* which just happened to be running a short series of autobiographical interviews with serving Yorkshire MPs that month. Here she said that she felt that 'she and her fellow women MPs have a legitimate grievance against the Press as a whole' because of the themes and tone of the coverage they received: 'You would think from the papers that the most important thing about women MPs is the dress that is worn. That attitude... is lowering the prestige of women Members and is not very creditable to the papers...' (*Yorkshire Evening Press*, 1928: 4).

Another young female Labour MP, Jennie Lee, found herself similarly subjected to high levels of media interest in her appearance, which she attempted to challenge. Lee was the youngest women MP, elected in a by-election at the age

of 25 at a point when women voters were still required to be 30. Lee's age, and the fact that she came in through a by-election which meant that she made a solo debut in the House, 'created a flutter of excitement' with 'the minutest details of her dress and deportment... discussed as if such details were affairs of State' (*Western Mail*, 1929: 6). The high level of press attention irritated Lee from the start as she 'simply could not understand why what I looked like, what I wore... had anything to do with the serious political purposes that engaged my working hours' (Lee, 1963: 99). Lee attempted to counter this in a different way from Wilkinson; rather than issuing direct rebuttals, she limited her contact with journalists and seldom gave interviews. According to one report in the *People*, which would later become a Labour-supporting paper but supported the Conservatives throughout the 1920s, this quickly gave Lee the reputation of 'the girl who won't talk', and who made journalists treat her with 'very special respect and reserve' – but not enough to stop the same paper classing her as 'the youngest and prettiest of our MPs', or other reports remarking on her penchant for brown, her 'remarkable eyes and eyebrows', or her bold move in introducing the cardigan suit to Parliament (*The People*, 1929: 10; *Staffordshire Sentinel*, 1930: 11; *Boston Guardian*, 1930: 11; *Babette*, 1930: 2).

These few attempts at public rebuttals did little to curb an excessive interest in the self-presentation of women MPs on the part of the media. This article has focussed on the first decade of women in Parliament, but it is clear from broader studies of their activities beyond the 1920s that any analysis of subsequent decades would provide similar results (Brookes, 1967; Valance, 1979). The (by now standard) forms of collective articles on women MPs, focussing on their attire and often accompanied by group photographs, continued to form a large proportion of the press coverage of their activities throughout the 1930s, alongside more casual references to their clothing in supposedly more political pieces. This concentration on appearance, both in terms of clothing but also extending to hairstyles and make-up choices, has remained a key aspect of how the media chooses to portray women politicians. From Nancy Astor's hat, to Margaret Thatcher's handbag, to Theresa May's kitten heels, a focus on clothing has continued to perpetuate the suggestion that women are an unusual presence in the political arena.

As the numbers of women in Parliament have increased – still slowly, given the number of elections that have taken place in the century since 1918, but in greater numbers since the advent of techniques such as all-women shortlists – studies of the media coverage that they receive have continued to show that there is still a disproportionate interest in their appearance over their politics (O'Neill, Savigny and Cann, 2016). While modern MPs are more likely to challenge this directly, their challenges appear to have little impact – indeed, some commentators suggest that things are getting worse for women MPs in terms of their media coverage (Mavin, Bryans and Cunningham, 2010). The rise of social media which facilitates instant and frequently anonymous comment (hence the 'pile on' experienced by Brabin with which this article opened) has added to pressures on public women. One analysis of critical social media in the 2017 General Election found that women MPs from all parties made up the 'top five list of most abuse received on twitter' (Dhrodia, 2018). Yet while the shift in platforms has undoubtedly made more overt abuse a more common phenomenon, this article has shown that unequal media treatment of women MPs has a much longer history.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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