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

Welsh Women MPs: Exploring Their Absence

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Between 1918 and the end of the 1990s, Wales had only four women members of Parliament. This article concentrates largely on that period, exploring who these women were, and why there were so few of them. It analyses the backgrounds and careers of Megan Lloyd George, Eirene White and Dorothy Rees, the first three women to be elected, arguing that two of them were aided into their positions by their exclusive social connections and family backgrounds. These features were seen by their political parties and local associations as important in order to override concerns about their sex. Local associations were important because they always had a significant say over who was selected as a parliamentary candidate. This article will argue that many of these associations, from across the political spectrum, actively sought male candidates to stand for Parliament. Even women, who made up the core of voluntary teams at the local level, held conservative views about who should represent them at Westminster. This was relevant in areas dominated by heavy industry and the masculine culture it engendered, as well as other parts of the nation. This article reflects on the broader, under-studied theme of cultural conservatism in Welsh history. To demonstrate the long-term persistence of this theme, it outlines the mixed reaction from the mid-1980s to Ann Clwyd, the fourth woman to be elected an MP in Wales and the first candidate to ever stand in a south Wales valleys seat. The article then covers how more women slowly entered parliament, mainly via the mechanisms of all-women shortlists after 1997 despite a great deal of resistance to them, again at the local level. Finally, the record of the National Assembly for Wales, and the European Parliament, with its many more women members, are contrasted with the record of Westminster.

Introduction

Before the general election of 1997, only four women had been members of Parliament for seats in Wales. The first, Megan Lloyd George, sat as a Liberal for Anglesey from 1929 to 1951, and then as the Labour member for Carmarthen from 1957 to 1966. Eirene White held the marginal seat of East Flintshire for twenty years from 1950 to 1970, whilst Dorothy Rees held the Barry seat briefly between the general elections of 1950 and 1951. Both were Labour MPs. Finally, Ann Clwyd, also standing for Labour, became the first woman to represent one of south Wales's industrial valleys constituencies, winning Cynon Valley in a by-election in 1984 and holding it until 2019. This figure of four women MPs before 1997 compared unfavourably to the rest of the United Kingdom. If the average British distribution of female MPs was taken into account, Wales should have had twice as many women MPs as it had by the mid-1990s (Evans and Jones, 2000: 237). This article seeks to explore why this was the case. It will argue that figures like Lloyd George and White overcame concerns about their sex by the fact that they were well-connected individuals from influential families. It will also explore how most women from all political parties, including those who won seats, were usually given marginal or hopeless contests to fight. The fact that these first four women did not have children is also significant. All these factors point towards an important, and understudied, theme in the Welsh political history of this period, which is the latent but persistent social and cultural conservatism that marked out much of Welsh society, including its political associations. This included the Labour Party, which has been dominant in Wales for the last 100 years. As local parties had significant control over who was chosen as a parliamentary candidate, it is important to examine how these groups often reflected either the masculine structures of Welsh industrial society, or the broader conservative nature of other parts of the nation in the twentieth century. The article will also use the significantly greater representation of Welsh women in the European Parliament and, in particular, what was then called the National Assembly for Wales to argue that Westminster, with its traditions and history, has long been perceived as a much more male space.

Different strands of history have downplayed or sidelined a discussion about the absence of women MPs in Wales. This includes some of the seminal and most commonly-cited works on the modern nation, which don't even include all the Welsh women MPs in their indexes (Morgan, 1981; Davies, 2007; Johnes, 2012). There are several important reasons for this lack of attention. The first is that the broad field of Welsh women's history is still relatively young. Its genesis was a memorable article from 1981, in which Deidre Beddoe posed a now oft-quoted question, asking what an alien would think if she were to arrive in Wales and read the entire canon of Welsh history. The alien, Beddoe argued, would wonder how the Welsh procreated, so absent were women from the narrative (1981: 32). Since that 1981 piece, Beddoe (2000) and other historians, notably Angela V. John (1991) and Ursula Masson (2010), have boldly taken up the task of redressing the historiographical imbalance. John's edited collection of essays *Our Mothers' Land* (1991) focused on a range of topics, such as women's periodicals or their engagement with the temperance movement. A companion volume, *Our Sisters' Land*, used interdisciplinary approaches to reveal a fuller picture of women's lives in Wales (Aaron et al., 1994). These works were strong on social history but, within this relatively new discipline, 'politics has tended to lag behind' (Beddoe, 2004: 333).

Understandably, many studies or references to women MPs, both from Wales and throughout Britain more broadly, concentrate on notable or even outstanding MPs, chronicling their achievements, often against the odds (Davin, 1988: 61; Blaxill and Beelen, 2016: 415). Honeyball's 2015 book on Parliamentary Pioneers, for example, chronicles the careers of women Labour MPs from 1918 to 1945, concentrating on subjects such as policy development and how women experienced the House of Commons once they were elected (Honeyball, 2015). Biographical studies of some of the most famous women throughout Britain tend to take this approach, noting what impact women had on the formulation of policy, their experiences of being a member of the House of Commons, and how the media reacted to them (see, for example, Beers, 2013). Of course, most attention has been paid to the first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who is often portrayed as someone who

distanced herself from the women's movement, and yet deliberately portrayed herself as a 'domestic feminist' (see Green, 2006: 15; Beers, 2012: 118; Moore, 2013: xiv). In this small body of literature on women MPs, even the more well-known Welsh women appear quite briefly. Although Megan Lloyd George was a famous name, her career as a life-long backbencher tends to receive merely a passing comment.

On the other end of the spectrum, the grass-roots of political parties are important as subjects in their own rights. They matter because local associations have historically had significant autonomy in selecting their prospective parliamentary candidates and this becomes important when exploring the absence of women in the higher echelons of Welsh political life. Most studies only make brief references to the topic, however, focusing instead on the cultural life of these associations. Recent scholarship, which draws examples from Wales, includes fascinating insights into topics such as how working-class women 'performed a political self' in the inter-war years (Ward, 2019: 30–31). In general, most work on the enfranchisement of women focuses on examples of those who made a mark and how, with increasing autonomy, they influenced political reforms and legislative change (Breitenbach and Thane, 2010: 8–9). Less is written about how local associations, including women, held other women back and restricted their opportunities, which inevitably includes a wider analysis of the social, cultural and economic circumstances of any given area and time period. This article will use Wales as a case study to discuss the matter in more depth, offering suggestions as to why the number of female parliamentary candidates after 1918, outlined in **Table 1**, was so low.

In doing so, it draws upon an analysis by Krista Cowman, whose *Women in British Politics* (2010) touched upon some of the reasons why women struggled to be selected for seats, including the attitudes of selection panels and the costs that women encountered when fighting elections, particularly before the Second World War. The closest any author has got to an exploration of the absence of women MPs specifically in Wales came when Deidre Beddoe gave the 2004 Welsh Political Archive lecture on the topic. In it, she suggested that 'the main obstacle throughout the whole period from 1918 to the present day in women getting elected to parliament is

Table 1: Number of women candidates standing in general elections in Wales.

General election	Labour	Conservative	Liberal/ Lib Dems	Plaid Cymru	Others	Total	Total elected
1918	1					1	
1922	1	2				3	
1923			1			1	
1924		1				1	
1929		1	2 (1)			3	1
1931	1	1	1 (1)			3	1
1935		2	1 (1)			3	1
1945	1		1 (1)	1		3	1
1950	2 (2)		1 (1)		1	4	3
1951	3 (1)		1			4	1
1955	2 (1)	1		1	1	5	1
1959	3 (2)	1			1	5	2
1964	2 (2)	2		1	1	6	2
1966	2 (2)		1		1	4	2
1970	1	2	1			4	
1974 Feb			3	2		5	
1974 Oct		1	4	1		6	
1979		1	2	1	3	7	
1983	2	1	3	6	1	13	
1987	3 (1)		5	9	2	19	1
1992	4 (1)	2	8	7	4	25	1
1997	5 (4)	4	10	7	11	39	4

Source: Figures taken from Evans and Jones (2000) and cross referenced with Rees (2005). Candidates who won are in brackets.

the selection process by constituency parties' (Beddoe, 2004: 337). However, a short talk that covered nearly 100 years of history could hardly go into much detail and the lecture deployed a broad-brushstroke approach to the subject. This current article, therefore, seeks to expand upon Beddoe's analysis, to revise it in some cases, and to build upon her conclusions.

To do so, it will provide a broad overview of a long period, utilising the documented thoughts and feelings of the women who were elected, their campaigning literature, as well as documents from the local associations who selected the women as prospective candidates. Newspaper sources will be used throughout to gauge what kind of reaction the local and national press gave to female politicians such as Megan Lloyd George. In the process, the article will open up a discussion about the often-downplayed social attitudes present in a lot of Welsh society, and how this was reflected in its wider political culture during much of the past century. Whilst focusing primarily on the four key women who held office before 1997, the article will also explore how the tectonic plates of Welsh politics shifted after that period, including in the post-devolution era. Although many more women became members of the National Assembly for Wales, this could not have happened without controversial policies of 'positive action', primarily through 'twinning'. The fact that this was contentious within groups like local political associations is also significant for the wider analysis and it will be particularly focused on in this article.

Megan Lloyd George and Welsh politics before the Second World War

Ten years after Lady Astor became the first female Member of Parliament to take her seat, Megan Lloyd George was elected as Liberal MP for the seat of Anglesey, in north west Wales. She was one of 21 women to take a seat at Westminster between 1919 and 1931. (Turner, 2019: 45, 46). However, like many of those other women who were victorious at elections in this period, seven of whom inherited their husbands' seats, Lloyd George was anything but a 'normal' political woman (Cowman, 2010: 120). She was part of one of the great political dynasties, being the daughter of the 'Welsh Wizard' and former First World War Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, who held the Caernarfon Boroughs seat (also in north west Wales) from 1890 to 1945. Her mother was Lady Margaret Lloyd George, a prominent figure in her own right as a philanthropist and one of Britain's first female magistrates.¹ Megan was

¹ See the Magistrates Association website article, '100 years of women magistrates', available at <https://www.magistrates-association.org.uk/About-Magistrates/History-of-the-magistracy/100-Years-of-Women-Magistrates> (Last accessed 28 October 2020).

also the sister of Gwilym, who was the Liberal National MP for the Welsh seat of Pembrokeshire from 1929 until 1950, and later for Newcastle North from 1951 until 1957, during which time Gwilym became Home Secretary in the governments of Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden (Thomas, 2005: 188).

Megan certainly owed a lot to the fact that she grew up in numbers 11 and 10 Downing Street, where she soaked up the political atmosphere. In the words of one historian, she was 'baptised into the maelstrom of politics from infancy' (Price, 1983: 9). This is hardly an exaggeration. Born in 1902, she would have been fully conscious of her father's role as Prime Minister from 1916 during the First World War, one of the most dramatic moments in British history. She even acted as her father's hostess at the Paris Peace Conference (Morgan, 2004). It was 'a unique political apprenticeship' (Price, 1983: 9). As many authors have noted, both father and daughter forged a very close relationship with one another. He lavished attention on her, whilst she doted on him (Price, 1983: 7, 59; Jones, 1992: 112). In a further sign that she was both the daughter of a former Prime Minister, and highly unusual for a Welsh woman of the period, by her twenties she had travelled around the world to places including the USA and India (Morgan, 2004).

Importantly, Megan's connections also meant that her revered father was able to influence Megan's nomination as the Liberal candidate for the Anglesey seat in advance of the 1929 general election. This is not to argue, however, that Megan did not have political appeal in her own right. She had a strong personality and an ability to communicate. She was able to utilise her youth and her sex to her advantage by stressing that she was able to connect with a wide range of voters (Jones, 1991: 74). Although she pitched herself as a representative of 'New Liberalism' and as someone not only capable of capturing the votes of newly enfranchised women, but as being part of the 'new voters' herself, it is widely thought that her parents used their fame to try and influence the outcome of the selection in order to ensure that she was chosen ('Women Liberals on the Wireless', *The Times*, 14 May 1929; Price, 1983: 17). David had written to his wife before the selection meeting, noting how 'we must do our best for the fascinating little monkey' (Jones, 1992: 114). Claims of unfair practice and calls for an investigation into the selection procedure followed

Megan's nomination in 1928 (Jones, 1992: 114). In winning Anglesey, Megan joined her father on the benches of the House of Commons, meaning that David Lloyd George became the first person to have both a son and a daughter sitting alongside him in the Chamber (Morgan, 1981: 275; Jones, 1992: 121; Jones, 1991: 81). Several historians have concluded that this association with male figures gave MPs such as Megan Lloyd George a 'halo effect', allowing them to present themselves as available replacements or alternatives to tried-and-tested men, and Megan's association with her father probably fits this description to some extent (Cowman, 2010: 120). In fact, the *London Evening Standard's* cartoonist David Low even went as far as to draw all three Lloyd Georges crouched down, peering assertively over the benches of the House of Commons, 'ready to spring to the attack *as one Welshman*' (Low, 1929). The association would continue. Over twenty years later, one Liberal newsheet listed the stars of the Party accompanied by a one-line explanation of who they were. Most were described as things like 'one of the wittiest orators in the country', or 'a leading authority on agriculture'; Megan, however, was still the 'famous daughter of Lloyd George' ('Names for a Liberal government', February 1950, newsheet unknown: North Hendon Special).

In-keeping with many other women MPs from this period, Megan Lloyd George often concentrated on 'women's needs'. It was the subject of her first broadcast for the BBC (Jones, 1991: 83). Alongside Nancy Astor, she campaigned for equal treatment for working and unemployed women (Price, 1983: 23). She later addressed a large gathering of the Countrywomen of Britain at the Royal Albert Hall on the issue of food production, saying 'it is the roast beef of old England that has made you what you are' ('Housewives demand: Clean up food handling, 29 April 1948, *Daily Graphic*). But she was also conscious of her sex and of women's representation in the House of Commons, commenting in 1938 that the 'strictly private' notice on the women's room in Parliament was 'put there just as much to keep [women] in as to keep others out' ('Nicknames in House of Commons', 23 November 1938, *The Times*). Such statements, however, did not make her representative of women more broadly, and her presence as an elected MP in Wales masks how difficult it was for others to break through into comparable positions. For twenty-one years, until 1950, she was the only female Welsh MP, with four other women trying, and failing, to get elected.

It is worth examining why this was the case, especially as many women were becoming more active in local associational politics. Labour women, for example, engaged in organising campaigns on issues like pithead baths in the coal-mining and industrial areas of Wales in the first decades of the twentieth century. Figures like Grace Schofield organised house-to-house campaigns on the matter, and this was taken up with vigour by the Women's Organiser Elizabeth Andrews in the early 1920s. It was eventually adopted as a policy by key trade unions and the Labour Party (Evans and Jones, 2000: 217–218). Labour in particular introduced women to the idea that politics affected them and their families, and if they wanted to change their lives they had a practical opportunity to do so (Newman, 2010: 31). The work of Stephanie Ward (2019) and Lowri Newman (2010) demonstrated how some women threw themselves into the political world and its campaigns with gusto, developing social bonds with other women, as well as political experiences, in the process.

Important as this is, such activities did not necessarily affect change in male-dominated local associations. Women's activities were not always reflected in the general make-up of Labour associations, particularly in the strongholds of the Rhondda and Aberdare Valleys, or in Merthyr Tydfil (Evans and Jones, 2000: 218). In fact, the Women's Labour League, which existed before the First World War, was criticised in the *South Wales Worker* as being dominated by middle-class women, whilst Independent Labour Party business was conducted 'almost with total disregard to the existence of women'. Elizabeth Andrews found that women who had not been part of communities involved in industrial struggle tended to be 'shy' about actively engaging in Labour politics (Evans and Jones, 2000: 221). Whilst this would change gradually over time, it would also remain a feature of Labour associations for decades, and undoubtedly impeded women's progress into the role of prospective parliamentary candidate. Whilst women in theory faced a Labour Party committed to sexual equality, there was often a wide gulf between theory and reality (Cowman, 2010: 121–122). The world of heavy industry and its related disputes automatically took on a male character, and the politics that sought to represent these conflicts inevitably mirrored it to some extent. As Davin argued, 'Women [were]...members of the working-class, engaged in and affected by its struggles, if sometimes excluded from its organisations' (Davin, 1998: 63). It could even be argued that Wales and

its culture impeded women more than it did in other parts of the country. Whereas Scotland (which admittedly had more parliamentary constituencies) had returned eight women to Westminster between 1918 and 1939, the comparable figure for Wales was one. A telling fact is that some ambitious Welsh women in the inter-war period left to fight seats outside Wales. One was Emily Phipps, a Swansea headmistress, who stood for the Labour Party in Chelsea in 1918, a seat that was much more liberal and cosmopolitan than anything in or around Swansea would have been (Beddoe, 2004: 338–339).

Women and Politics in post-1945 Wales

It wasn't until 1950 that more women become MPs in Wales, when two women were elected. One was Eirene White. She became the Labour MP for East Flintshire and held the seat for 20 years until her retirement in 1970. After being elected, she held many key posts, including roles in the Colonial Office and the Welsh Office. She also became the first woman to be minister of state at the Foreign Office in 1967 (Lewis, 2008). In many respects, White's background and upbringing resembled Megan Lloyd George's. Her father had been a respected academic and then a key civil servant to David Lloyd George and four subsequent Prime Ministers, in the role of Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet (England, 2004). When she went up to Oxford it was to read the 'politicians' degree' of Politics, Philosophy and Economics. Her twenty-first birthday was organised by none other than Nancy Astor (England, 2004; Lewis, 2008). Although White spent much of her time as a young woman working with unemployed people, and for charities, she was also another of those rare women from that period who travelled extensively abroad, including a stint in the United States where she worked unpaid (England, 2004). Before entering Parliament, White was a journalist working in the exclusive parliamentary lobby, and one of only four women to be a lobby correspondent at the time (Jones, 1 October 1947, 'The Peg That Saves Your Bacon', *Manchester Evening News*; Jones, 2003: 145). Politics was therefore a core part of her life from the beginning, and this surely determined the kind of career that she undertook. Her wider social connections also demonstrated this point. When she had been the candidate for the seat of Flintshire (which was abolished shortly afterwards) in 1945, White received fascinating letters from the

playwright George Bernard Shaw, proving the kind of highly unusual connections she had forged even by that relatively early moment in life, via her parents who were good friends of the Shaws. Fascinatingly, Shaw wrote to White about his belief in the House of Commons being made up of 'the representation of men and women in equal numbers' (Jones, 2003: 137).

It was these kinds of backgrounds and connections that ensured White was selected both by the Labour Party's hierarchy and her local association. The influential Huw T. Edwards, the Transport and General Workers Union leader in the area, was initially sceptical about whether the constituency was ready for a female candidate. What apparently won him around to the idea of selecting White was her profile as the Oxford-educated daughter of a notable father (Evans and Jones 2000: 228). Indeed, White herself ended up stressing her Oxford education and work in journalism when she first stood for election in 1950 (Johnes, 2012: 53). Her campaign manager in the seat had worried that her sex would count against her, and consequently went to some lengths to produce campaign literature that addressed the issue head-on. One of her election leaflets showed an imaginary dialogue box between two voters: the one who raises doubts about having a women MP is answered by another who stresses White's Oxford education, journalistic experience and work for the film industry (quoted in Evans and Jones, 2000: 229).

The other women to be elected a Labour MP from Wales in the same year as White was a different kind of person. She was Dorothy Rees and a much less privileged woman, who sat for the south Wales constituency of Barry. Rees entered parliament through a local route, in the way that many men became MPs, especially for the Labour Party. She was a teacher, who was active in her trade union (Jones, 2011). She also married a sea pilot which gave her an important personal connection with the docks and port of the constituency that were vital to its economic health (Evans and Jones, 2000: 229). She was elected to the local borough council as only the second woman to have ever been a county councillor in Glamorgan, where she served with distinction. She then became the Agent (the key Party worker and organiser) for the Barry seat that she eventually went on to win as a candidate (Williams, 2004; Stead, 1984: 456). Although her time as an MP in the 1950–51 parliament was limited,

Rees demonstrated real promise. In Westminster, she was made the Parliamentary Private Secretary to Edith Summerskill, the Minister of National Insurance (Stead, 1984: 456). In her constituency, she was proactive and conscious of the role she could play as a member of Parliament. Her 1951 election leaflet was headed 'YOUR personal servant at Westminster', underneath which was a drawing of the seat, with quotations surrounding it from local people.² In it, they praised her for helping them with problems relating to their personal circumstances. People thanked her for advising them on installing a telephone at their farm, for the role she played in the building of a new factory, and for help in finding local people work at the docks.³ Rees's talents, and the fact that she had been an MP, meant that her career after Parliament was a long and successful one. This included membership of many public bodies and positions on boards of governors (Jones, 2001). However, because her parliamentary career was so short she has been almost airbrushed from history.

On the surface, there were few similarities between Rees and Eirene White. One significant thing about their political careers, however, was that both were given marginal seats to fight: White fought well to hold hers for 20 years – just – while Rees lost Barry in 1951, when she was defeated by a Conservative who tenaciously hung onto the seat for the next thirty-eight years. Barry, with its prominent docks and port, but also with areas covering the rural Vale of Glamorgan and the suburbs north of Cardiff, was a varied kind of constituency not automatically conducive to a Labour candidate (Williams, 2004). In White's case, East Flintshire included quite a lot of heavy industry mixed in with swathes of rural areas. The steel industry there was a particularly strong economic driver, and White often had to pick around the politics of this carefully, including answering calls from opponents on whether she thought the industry should be nationalised or not ('Nationalisation', 27 June 1958, letter, *Flintshire County Herald*). During the general election of 1959, when this was a particularly hot topic, White's majority was reduced to just 75 votes in a straight

² Richard Burton Archive, Swansea University (RBA), SC/119, Dorothy Rees election address, Barry constituency, 1951.

³ RBA, SC/119, Dorothy Rees election address, Barry constituency, 1951.

fight with a Conservative candidate (James and Thomas, 1981: 166). Her career could have been cut short before it got into full swing.

This in itself is revealing, and it contributes to an explanation of the lack of women MPs in Wales. When women were selected to fight for a seat in this period they were almost always chosen for hopeless contests, or for seats that it was unlikely they would hold. Contemporaries ascribed this to the fact that such seats would not only be difficult to win but that they would also be a struggle to hold on to, therefore giving little long-term employment security to those who won them. Therefore, such constituencies were 'not wanted by men'.⁴ Dorothy Rees might have been a more 'normal' woman, in that she had been a school teacher, had not come from a privileged background, and was married, but she was chosen for a hard fight in Barry that her male predecessor as MP had thought not worth the effort. At least in Labour's case, the central Party in Wales, and some local associations, could be talked into accepting women – albeit women such as White who were often well-educated and well-connected. The Conservative Party on the other hand was less receptive. In White's East Flintshire seat, the Conservative Association concluded that a woman would not be suitable to stand at all due to the industrial nature of parts of the constituency. They even thought they might gain an advantage over Labour by not having a women candidate. At one meeting, the chairman of the Tory Association remarked, 'We need someone who can talk to the working man!', admitting, at least, that he was not best placed for such a role, either.⁵ This was an attitude displayed across the board, with many other potentially winnable seats deliberately reserved for male Conservative candidates.⁶ A good case study that helps demonstrate this is that of Pamela Thomas, a barrister who was on the candidate's list in Wales for most of the 1960s. She was clearly very talented and capable, having been trusted by the Conservatives to fight the Swansea East by-election for them in 1963, although the seat was hopeless. Even though she fought these strong campaigns in Wales she was

⁴ Mass Observation, Housing 1938–1948, 3305.

⁵ Conservative Party Archive (CPA), Conservative Central Office (CCO) 1/7/516, G. Summers to J.P.L. Thomas, 19 October 1948.

⁶ CPA, CCO 1/7/516, Summers to J.P.L. Thomas, 19 October 1948.

also sidelined from certain (more winnable) seats because she was a woman, and therefore deemed unsuitable for places like semi-industrial Newport, where the local association actively thought a man would be more suited for the job.⁷ When Thomas fought the 1963 by-election, the Party's Agent for the Wales and Monmouthshire Area complained vociferously that the press were treating her as 'a somewhat quaint, eccentric character, obviously unsuited to [an] industrial town'.⁸ Fear of what the press would say about Thomas in the more winnable area of Newport may have been a factor in dissuading the local association from even giving her a chance to audition for the candidate role. It was easier, and more common, for the Tories to give such women completely hopeless seats to fight, because those contests were of no consequence. This was even the case for some very well-connected women, like Revel Guest, who tackled the same Labour stronghold of Swansea East in 1955 (Rees, 2005: 117). Her grandfather and father had both been MPs for Welsh seats and despite dozens of attempts to get selected elsewhere, this one fruitless contest was the only seat that she fought (Jardine, 7 June 2011, 'My Perfect Weekend: Revel Guest', *Daily Telegraph*).

However, much of this was in-keeping with the attitudes about political women that were common at the time within all political parties. Women had a very particular – and important – role to play in post-Second World War politics. As the parties became more professionalised after 1945, women's sections (like the Conservatives' Primrose League) were officially incorporated into party structures and deliberate recruitment drives were undertaken so that women could play a greater role as fundraisers and door-knockers for their parties. Discussion has often centred on how valuable or not this role was, especially as the radio and television became more common in political campaigning after the 1950s (Harrison, 2009: 330). But there is little doubt that women played a significant role in advertising their respective parties, airing key messages to the general public, and raising crucial funds to keep the local political machine ticking over (Ramsden, 1995: 115; Ball, 1994; Chaney,

⁷ CPA, CCO 1/14/540, Howard Davies to Paul Bryan, 3 January 1962.

⁸ CPA, CCO 500/18/66, Howard Davies to the COO, 30 March 1963.

Mackay and McAllister, 2007: 70). There were 12,814 members of Labour's Women's Section in Wales in 1947, who helped organise the kinds of fetes and carnivals that often had enough 'life and energy to mark society with Labour's presence' (Evans and Jones, 2000: 221). These numbers were not evenly spread around the country, but it meant that women gathered in large numbers in certain constituencies. There were over 1,000 Labour women in the Barry seat in the early 1950s, for example (Evans and Jones, 2000: 306). However, Labour associations after the war, as in the inter-war period, often reflected the 'essentially masculine' cloth-cap, trade-union and heavy industry culture of their seats, which could hinder women developing their own politics or political identity, even if their social scenes flourished (Ward, 2019: 35; Black and Brooke, 1997: 423; Evans and Jones, 2000: 225; Lovenduski and Norris, 1996: 14). Importantly, Labour's long interest in the issue of class and the workplace, and an ideology that stressed producers not consumers, tended to sideline a discussion of sex (Black and Brooke, 1997: 424, 428–429). Between 1950 and 1970, 42 percent of the Party's membership in Britain was female, and this did not take into consideration affiliated trade union membership, which would have been overwhelmingly male (Black and Brooke, 1997: 432).

In contrast, it was the Conservative Party that was particularly good at engaging with women after the Second World War, bringing them into its organisational structures in huge numbers (Lovenduski, Norris and Burness, 1994: 611; Maguire, 1998). There were 6,000 Conservative women members of the Barry Association alone in the early 1950s, compared to the 1,000 figure for Labour – something that prompted the historian John Ramsden to note how remarkable this was (Ramsden, 1995: 112).⁹ At the same time, there were 2,450 female Conservative members (and 350 male) in Swansea West's Association and these kinds of numbers were similar in many other seats where the Tories either had MPs or a reasonably strong showing.¹⁰ On the surface, it is striking that such a large body of women sat in contrast to such a small tally of female members of Parliament or even candidates, as outlined in **Table 1**.

⁹ CPA, CCO 1/8/528, Barry Basic Report, 21 February 1951.

¹⁰ CPA, CCO 1/7/521, Cardiff West Basic Report, 1949.

This is particularly noteworthy in the Conservative Party, which managed to attract a huge number of women to its cause and yet, until 2019, had never had a woman from their party elected as an MP in Wales. As in all parties, however, the work and the social aspect of being part of a political association did not make women passive cogs in some patriarchal machine. As we saw with Elizabeth Andrews, Labour women could be responsible for putting key issues onto a party's agenda. In the case of some Conservative women, associational work often provided opportunities for political and social leadership on the local level, or a way of expressing strongly-held political beliefs (Blaxland, 2019).

Despite this, political associations in Wales still reflected, to varying degrees, relatively socially conservative attitudes towards gender and women in the political sphere. This was especially the case when it came to issues such as parliamentary representation. Many wives of candidates, who were themselves inherently political, firmly believed that they were performing as important a public service by supporting their husband rather than directly entering the fray themselves. As one Conservative candidate's wife in Wales wrote in the late 1950s, her duty was to be her husband's 'staunchest supporter, his most enthusiastic worker, his permanent organiser' ('When they fight, their womenfolk are with them – shoulder to shoulder', 29 September 1959, *Western Mail*). These qualities were meant in an entirely positive way. Indeed, for the first two decades after the Second World War, women as voters were clearly attracted to broadly conservative rhetoric with parties targeting them as consumers, managers of the household and mothers. There is no doubt that some women took a generally reactionary standpoint on the matter of their political representation, with many holding the view that men made better politicians (Black and Brooke, 1997: 422). If anything, the post-war period witnessed governments trying to avoid a return to the 'bad days' of the 1930s depression, which had affected large areas of Wales particularly severely. In doing so, traditional ideas of male employment, particularly in places like the industrial valleys of south Wales, were part of this strategy. There was even talk of how 'no woman should be given a job in the Valley until all the men have work' (Beddoe, 2000: 136).

This is a feature of Welsh society that has often been sidelined in history books, which tend to emphasise the radical edge to Wales. The historian Martin Johnes touches upon this diversity in his far-reaching survey of Wales since 1939, but only in passing (2012: 359). Few other authors focus on this latent social and cultural conservatism. It is important to recognise such wider trends, because it helps to understand the kinds of prevailing attitudes that fed into the absence of women MPs, with an abundance of supporting evidence. When a political researcher toured north Wales in the mid-1950s, for example, she was taken aback by the ‘unanimous, enthusiastic clapping’ in favour of capital punishment at associational meetings she went to: ‘I don’t think there was a single abolitionist’.¹¹ In the mid-1960s, polls amongst Conservative Party members in one seat found ‘almost 100 per cent backing for the return of corporal punishment’ (‘Return corporal punishment say Denbigh voters’, 29 March 1966, *Liverpool Daily Post*). Cheers and applause met the Conservative candidate in Cardiff North in 1966, when he vowed to ‘work for the reintroduction of capital punishment’ (‘Box pledge on hanging lauded’, 10 March 1966, *Western Mail*).

This might explain another feature that united the three women who became MPs in Wales before the 1970s, which was that they were all childless. Lloyd George never married but had several intense love affairs. White and Rees both outlived their husbands, to whom they appear to have been very happily married, but neither had children (England, 2004; Williams, 2004). This extended outwards into other political roles too, including the constituency’s Agent. Women were often selected for this role on the basis that they possessed the feminine ‘gift... of administration’.¹² However, almost all female Agents in the decades before the 1970s, like parliamentary candidates, were young, unmarried, and usually working in unwinnable seats (‘Women as Party Agents’, 22 February 1950, *Western Mail*; Blaxland, 2019). This provides more evidence to suggest that Wales was especially conservative on matters of sex and gender when compared to other parts of Britain

¹¹ CPA, CCO, 2/4/14, Katherine Elliot report on Area Tour, 22 February 1956.

¹² CPA, CCO, 1/11/515, Conway Basic Report, 1 August 1956.

where being childless was not a disqualification to becoming an MP before or after the Second World War. Indeed, it became increasingly common in the 1950s and 1960s (Cowman, 2010: 127). Most famously, Mrs Thatcher was the mother of young twins when she was selected for her Finchley seat in advance of the 1959 general election. Edith Summerskill had a daughter, whilst other women members had several children, including Cynthia Mosely (three) and Lady Noel-Buxton (six) (Honeyball, 2015: xxiii). It might simply be a coincidence that those women elected in Wales happened to be childless. There is no clear-cut evidence to suggest that being a mother was especially frowned upon by selection panels in Wales, but there is enough of a pattern to suggest that it possibly played a role. As we have seen, it would have been compatible with other attitudes that were common in the period.

Hence, attitudes towards women in politics in Wales by the 1970s had not changed a great deal since the end of the war. The only other woman who was (re)-elected from Wales in the period, aside from Eirene White and Dorothy Rees, was Megan Lloyd George. After she lost Anglesey in 1951 she was adopted as the Labour candidate for the seat of Carmarthen, in south west Wales, in advance of its 1957 by-election. She had defected to Labour in the mid-1950s. Despite little personal connection to the Carmarthen seat, she nonetheless won and became an MP again after a six-year break from the House of Commons. Again, it was name-recognition and her status that resulted in her return, despite being gently mocked in the press for joining a party that complained about privilege whilst being the daughter of David Lloyd George ('Under the Cloak of Privilege', 27 April 1955, *Daily Mirror*). Whilst Carmarthen, like Megan's former constituency of Anglesey, had rural features, the former also had more of an industrial base. Megan Lloyd George was also no longer as free to be independent after she became an MP for a party seriously anticipating office. Unlike being a Liberal member, where the party had no serious prospect of leading a government, an eccentric or outlandish statement from an opposition back-bencher would have been scrutinised much more by the press, and frowned upon by an increasingly sophisticated Labour Party machine ('Women as Party Agents', 22 February 1950, *Western Mail*). Although terminally ill with cancer

and unable to campaign, she was the Labour candidate for the 1966 election. She won the seat, but died shortly afterwards. Her passing spurred on the by-election that resulted in the first Plaid Cymru MP, Gwynfor Evans, which marked the beginning of a significant change in Welsh political life (Evans, 2008: 260).

A 'valleys' MP and the politics of 1980s Wales

Change was evident in other areas as well. Building on trends in the 1950s and early 1960s, where female participation rates in the workforce had grown significantly, the late 1960s and 1970s were a turning point for women in Britain. Many more became economically active as they entered the workplace. The rise of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) from the late 1960s was also an important historical moment. To some extent this began to change the culture in political parties, particularly in some Labour parties, where visibly assertive women became more prominent (Black and Brooke, 1997: 443). They helped secure funding for causes including rape crisis shelters and Women's Aid groups (Cowman, 2010: 148–149). By the 1980s, the Labour Party was becoming much more sympathetic to the original demands of the WLM, incorporating its demands on things like equal pay, equal opportunities, more nurseries and free contraception into its policy positions (Black and Brooke, 1997: 424). But, as ever, there existed a real disconnect between what the Party's top level leaders thought and how its local associations behaved. Ultimately, the politics of organisations like WLM only had a limited reach. Even though it was Welsh women who created the anti-nuclear weapons peace camp at Greenham Common in the early 1980s, for example, the women's movement on the whole was relatively underdeveloped in many parts of the nation (Chaney, 2010: 190; Evans and Jones, 2000: 232). This was illustrated by the fact that women selected for Welsh seats continued to have to overcome extra difficulties. In 1983, two promising figures, Betty Williams and Jane Hutt, were both selected as Labour candidates for Welsh seats that they had no realistic chance of winning. Williams fought Caernarfon, which was a Plaid Cymru stronghold by this point, and Hutt fought Cardiff North, which was one of, if not the, safest Conservative seat in Wales at the time (Evans and Jones, 2000: 232). When Hutt was campaigning in Cardiff North she could not even

attend some of her own campaign meetings because they were held in men-only clubs.¹³

In a similar way to the WLM, the miners' strike of 1984/85 both enhanced and limited the position of political women in the industrial Labour-stronghold areas of Wales. On one hand, for many working-class women in particular this was a crucial turning point: a moment from which the image of the politicised woman, forged into the popular imagination by many factors including the recent film *Pride* (2014), emerged. For some, the 1984–85 miners' strike was their first – and rather intense – taste of a previously very masculine world of politics, picket-lines, strikes, and even nation-wide tours to support and speak with others in a similar position. There was much talk during the strike of a genuinely changed position of women in the historically conservative areas of Labour support (Evans and Jones, 2000: 232). Siân James, who was portrayed as a key character in *Pride*, perhaps typifies this. She was a miner's wife who would eventually become the Labour MP for Swansea East in 2005. But on the other hand, the industrial strife of the 1970s and 1980s in some respects reinforced the gendered aspect to politics, where organisations like the National Union of Mineworkers was still a distinctly male outfit. When some coalfield communities allied with the LGBT groups that *Pride* depicted, it was, as one historian argued, 'women who were the most important figures in forging and sustaining [this] alliance...[the miners] attention was, ultimately, on the industrial struggle' (Leeworthy, 2018: 486). Under the surface, gender divides were still stark.

Indeed, the mid-1980s remained a period where parts of Welsh society exhibited very traditional attitudes on these matters. Contemporaries noted that Wales was especially conservative and 'lag[ged] behind other parts of Britain' (Johnes, 2012: 347). One steelworker's wife, for example, told a social scientist that she would happily give up her own job 'like a shot' if it meant saving her husband's. She commented, 'It's hard on any man to be out of work' (Harris, 1987: 137). Those working in heavy industry expressed their attitude towards sex and gender quite explicitly. In the words of one coal miner from this period, 'you don't have to snivel

¹³ Round-table discussion with Sian James, Christine Chapman, Daryl Leeworthy and Sam Blaxland, A Century of Women MPs conference, Portcullis House, Westminster, 7 September 2018.

up to anyone. You are a man, working with men' (Johnes, 2012: 349). The persistence of religion in parts of Wales may go some way towards explaining this. Three quarters of the population supported the principle of re-introducing capital punishment, whilst a similar amount thought pornography was 'too available' (Johnes, 2012: 359). Perhaps another symbol of Wales' social conservatism compared to other parts of the UK came in its response to the question of Britain's membership of the European Community in 1975. Although Wales voted heavily to stay in, 65 percent of people did so, compared with 69 percent in England (Johnes, 2012: 293).

It was with this backdrop of increased radicalisation on the one hand, and a persistent conservatism on the other, that the first woman to represent an industrial south Wales valleys seat was elected. Ann Clwyd won Cynon Valley in the 1984 by-election, which took place during the strike. There can be no doubt that the wider context and politics of the WLM and the way in which women were involving themselves in the politics of the strike would have helped her, but she also ran up against many of the types of barriers chronicled above. Clwyd would later write:

Each valley had its superstitions, women and birds being the two most unpopular omens. Just seeing a woman on the way to work was enough to make some miners turn pale and go home for the day. So, in the 1970s, miners and their sons found it difficult to accept women working outside the home, let alone accepting them as their equals. As one big-hearted trade union man said to me: "There's only one thing wrong with you – you're a woman" (Clwyd, 2017: 5).

It is perhaps odd to hear an MP talk about her constituents in such a way, and perhaps some of these characteristics have been exaggerated for effect, but it does at least speak to the rigid gendered way in which many working-class people in this period thought about politics and about their new MP. As Clwyd also noted, this was not just confined to working men and miners: 'The women were not much better. Back in my early working days...I would knock on doors to ask people their opinions on the political issues of the day. Invariably the women would say: "come back tonight, love, when my husband's in"' (Clwyd 2017: 5–6). Describing what you needed to be

selected as a candidate, she commented, 'the hide of a rhinoceros, and...a lot of luck' (Clwyd, 2017: 81).

Hence, Clwyd was not only the first woman to win a 'valleys' seat: she was the first ever candidate to stand there for any party. As two historians have rightly noted, 'it was not news for a Labour candidate to win in Cynon Valley, but that a woman was selected was lightning striking the ground' (Evans and Jones, 2000: 233). Her election was undoubtedly an important breakthrough for women politicians in Wales. But it should not be overstated too wildly. Firstly, although not a member of the elite in the way that Megan Lloyd George and Eirene White had been before her, Clwyd had a wider profile as a member of the European Parliament, and a journalist. It is also intriguing that she was from north Wales. For Clwyd, the fact that she was not from the Cynon Valley or surrounding region was probably a disadvantage (Clwyd, 2017: 83). Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that candidates in Wales were at a disadvantage if they did not have ties with a local area ('Labour out to win back lost votes', 14 February 1974, *Western Mail*). Once selected as candidates, most would begin campaigns by stressing the importance of local needs and concerns.¹⁴ Whether being from the area was an advantage or not, it is still significant that when Clwyd was chosen, she was not a grass-roots figure who had spent decades striving for the local Labour movement. She threw herself into the politics of the miners' strike when she campaigned in the by-election, but her roots and experiences were grounded in the politics of north Wales, in journalism, and in another political legislature. It is also important to note that Clwyd had to wait for a by-election to have this opportunity. With rock-solid seats, many of Labour's old-guard MPs stayed in post long after normal retirement age, and several in this period died in office. The sluggish turnover of MPs in a significant block of the nation's constituencies helped compound the fact that women found it difficult to break through.

¹⁴ Denbigh Record Office, DD/DM/80/22, news scrapbook: 'Denbigh MP and neglected areas of North Wales', undated.

Politics since 1997 and the National Assembly for Wales

Even after Ann Clwyd's success in Cynon Valley, Wales's record of electing women MPs was poor. Up to and including the general election in 1992, 166 women from the UK had become MPs. Only four of these represented Welsh constituencies (Evans and Jones, 2000: 236). Such a record, as the historian John Davies noted, was 'among the worst in Europe' (2007: 556). It was statistics like this that spurred the Labour Party, in particular, into action. Under the leadership of John Smith in the early 1990s, Labour became much more conscious of increasing its number of women MPs. It ended up doing so through the mechanism of all-women shortlists for certain constituencies. Hence, at the 1997 general election, the three new women elected as Labour MPs in Wales, Betty Williams, Julie Morgan and Jackie Lawrence, were the beneficiaries of this procedure in their constituencies (Evans and Jones, 2000: 235). All three were of a similar age (52, 52 and 49 respectively) and, perhaps in a sign of changing times, all had raised families before going into Parliament for the seats of Conwy, Cardiff North and Preseli Pembrokeshire (Evans and Jones, 2000: 235). When the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, assembled his large new cohort of female MPs for the 'Blair's Babes' photoshoot, Ann Clwyd noted how she felt uncomfortable about it, so turned her head away so that she could not be seen in the photo (Clwyd, 2017: 11). Julie Morgan apparently 'refused to go. She strongly disapproved of the Blair's Babes tag'. The term had originally been coined by the *Daily Mail* newspaper, but the fact that they were being used almost as props frustrated some of these women (Morgan, 2017: 113).

Once again, however, there is perhaps more to this than meets the eye. The three seats won by these new women MPs from Wales were not Labour strongholds. It was only the scale of Labour's victory in 1997 that helped capture what had been former Tory fortresses, especially in the case of leafy and suburban Cardiff North. The fact that all-women shortlists were introduced also demonstrates how the central party still had to cajole the Labour grass-roots supporters on the matter. In fact, some were openly hostile to the principle, and continued to display relatively conservative attitudes towards issues surrounding sex and gender. This reflected attitudes in

the Leeds Labour Party, which took legal action against an all-women shortlist that it thought had been imposed upon them (Beddoe, 2004: 342). Julie Morgan, for example, faced questions at her selection meeting (which was held in the pleasant ward of Rhiwbina) relating to whether she was married or not. When she confirmed that she was, the follow up question was: 'so where's your wedding ring?' (Morgan, 2007: 93).

In some Labour Party circles, concerns raised by all-women shortlists intensified. Fast-forward to 2005 and an almighty political upset was caused by the issue: Blaenau Gwent was one of Labour's safest constituencies in the whole of the UK at the time, and was especially symbolic as it was the former seat of Labour giants Aneurin Bevan and Michael Foot. When the incumbent MP Llew Smith stood down, an all-women shortlist was used to select a London lawyer, Maggie Jones, as the prospective Labour candidate. In opposition to this, Peter Law, the Labour Assembly Member for the seat and a former local Mayor, stood as an independent. The political battle was called 'a culture clash which pitches a determination by Labour to produce more women MPs against a community whose politics has historically been influenced by the male-dominated heavy-industries of coal mining and steel production' (G. Hurst, 6 December 2004, 'Women-only push hits Labour in Wales', *The Times*). Not only did this have echoes of so much of the history outlined in this article, the result itself was astonishing. Undoubtedly spurred on by his local connections and long-term presence in the seat, Law, as an independent, won 9,000 more votes than his Labour rival at the general election, in one of Labour's supposedly safest seats ('Stronghold falls', 6 May 2005, *The Times*). At his count, Law called the imposition of a woman candidate 'a bloody disgrace' (S. Lister, 'Stronghold for Labour stormed by local hero', 6 May 2005, *The Times*). A voter also wrote to *The Times* to commend Law on his victory and to say that 'we, the people, have told the Labour Party that the undemocratic and sexist engineering of candidate lists will not be tolerated' (S. Watkins, 'Letter: Democracy in Action', 7 May 2005, *The Times*). If evidence were needed that sections of the Labour Party, and its core vote, resisted some of the progressive reforms regarding selecting women, then this was it. Memories of the incident also lingered. When Law died a year after winning Blaenau Gwent, Labour put up a male candidate for the seat, Owen Smith, but he was defeated – narrowly

– by Law’s Agent, Dai Davies, who stood as an independent (S. Coates and G. Hurst, ‘Double defeat for Labour at hands of independents’, 30 June 2006, *The Times*).

Despite events in Blaenau Gwent, the 2005 general election witnessed more women being elected to Westminster from Wales. Three more Labour candidates were selected via all-women shortlists, with Madeleine Moon winning the seat of Bridgend and Nia Griffith winning Llanelli. Siân James, mentioned above, won Swansea East. She had been encouraged to stand through support networks set up by those women who had been elected from Wales in previous years. As she remembered, ‘we had training, we went to events, we talked about public speaking, we talked about how we could stand’.¹⁵ At the same time, Jenny Willott became one of four Liberal Democrat MPs, sitting for Cardiff Central (Chaney, Mackay and McAllister, 2007: 71). Before the 2019 general election, seven more women, mostly representing Labour, but one from the Liberal Democrats and one from Plaid Cymru, were elected. In some ways, their backgrounds were similar to women who had come before, but in other respects they were very different. They included former teachers, local councillors, trade union officials, charity workers, social workers, and constituency case workers (Rees, 2005). The 2019 general election witnessed the first ever women being elected in Wales for the Conservative Party, when three came along at once (‘General Election 2019: Meet Wales’ first female Tory MPs’, 13 December 2019, *BBC News*). This new influx of women has dramatically changed the look and the tone of Welsh political life, and even though men still dominate, there are now many more significant female voices in the mix, which are regularly heard in Parliament, through the print and broadcast media, or via campaigning tools like social media. Significantly, 33 percent of Welsh MPs are women, which is almost identical to the proportion of total women MPs in the House of Commons, the figure for which is 34 percent. (C. Watson, E. Uberoi and E. Kirk-Wade, ‘Women in Parliament and Government’, House of Commons Library briefing, 25 February 2020).

However, this overall record of women elected to Westminster still looks patchy, especially as it is thrown into shade by the performance of the relatively new National Assembly for Wales (known as the Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament

¹⁵ Round-table discussion, 7 September 2018.

since 2020). This was established in 1999, after a narrow 'yes' result in a referendum two years earlier. In advance of the first elections to this new body in 1999, the Labour Party adopted a 'twinning' policy for the selection of its candidates. This meant that adjacent constituencies of similar size and winnability drew up their shortlists in tandem, with one seat required to select a man, and the other a woman. The policy achieved its aim, with 15 women being elected, versus 13 men for Labour (Evans and Jones, 2000: 236). As Christine Chapman, elected to the Assembly in 1999, remembered, 'it was a very necessary process for getting more women elected...very few women would have got there under the 'traditional' methods'. In contrast to the male-dominated world of 'valleys' local government that she had experienced, it 'was like a breath of fresh air'.¹⁶ This did not mean it was universally popular, with some local associations resisting it on grounds that it undermined local democracy. In their eyes, the bigger of the two constituency parties 'selected not simply its own candidate but that of its weaker neighbour' as well (Evans and Jones, 2000: 236). Some women Assembly Members consequently experienced 'antagonism, hostility – even intimidation – from sections of the local party membership' (Chaney, 2010: 192). It was paid-up party members who actively resisted these changes, therefore, and not just sections of the voting public who might not have supported Labour anyway.

Other parties also had a strong showing for women, with Plaid Cymru prioritising, or 'zipping', women candidates up regional lists (Chaney, 2010: 192). This meant that after the first Assembly election 42 percent of members were women. In the second Assembly, thirty women were elected in total, which meant that women formed exactly half of the 60 elected members in Cardiff Bay – hailed as a 'world record' for a legislative body, and a 'revolution' in Welsh politics (Charles, 2010: 1; Chaney, Mackay and McAllister, 2007: 71; Beddoe, 2004: 345). The electoral system used for the devolved parliaments also helped ensure a greater representation of women, with the constituency system balanced out by the regional party 'top-up' list. This

¹⁶ Round-table discussion, 7 September 2018.

gave parties more power in the management of candidate selection (Chaney, Mackay and McAllister, 2007: 71). This shift must have felt enormous to Jane Hutt, who was first elected as the Labour Assembly Member for the Vale of Glamorgan in 1999. From finding it difficult to go to some of her own campaign meetings in Cardiff North in the early 1980s, she was able to reflect, in 2007, at how 'over the past eight years women ministers have held nearly every portfolio [in the Welsh government] at different times' (Chaney, Mackay and McAllister, 2007: x).

Wales had quickly gone from one of the worst records of electing women politicians in Europe, to a world-leader, at least in terms of its new devolved parliament. It is worth examining why the National Assembly for Wales had such a dramatically different look in terms of women representatives, even in direct contrast to Westminster in the early 2000s, when only 18 percent of Wales' MPs were women (Chaney, 2010: 192). Pro-active policies from the Labour Party in particular is one clear reason for this. The fact that the institution was brand new also allowed for concerns about women members to be addressed directly. As one author noted about the new Scottish Parliament, it offered an opportunity for 'the conscious creation of a new political culture, one distinct from the practices of Westminster'. 'New politics' meant a new kind of politician (Henderson, 2005: 276, 278). This would sit in contrast to the supposedly off-putting, daunting, or implicitly masculine version of Westminster politics, both in the eyes of potential candidates and selection panels, and the voters. An analysis of the language used by members of Parliament revealed what many people might have suspected: that a 'masculinised and adversarial 'yah-boo'...culture' often predominates there (Blaxill and Beelen, 2016: 417). The same study also indicated that women brought different priorities, approaches and languages to debates, reinforcing the notion that a predominantly male chamber would have felt and sounded explicitly masculine, and perhaps off-putting (Blaxill and Beelen, 2016: 442).

There was, however, for part of this period, another legislature that is often overlooked in political histories of Wales: the European Parliament. The representation of both sexes there was much more equal, with the Conservative Party even selecting

a woman – Beata Brookes – who would successfully win the North Wales seat forty years before the Party had any female MPs. Joining her after the first election in 1979 was Labour’s Ann Clwyd. After that, women consistently represented Wales across the political parties in the European Parliament, including Glenys Kinnock, Eluned Morgan and Jackie Jones (Labour), Kay Swinburne (Conservatives) and Jill Evans (Plaid Cymru). Few of these women (Kinnock excepted) came from the kind of elite or well-connected backgrounds that MPs like Lloyd George or White came from, but this forces us to confront the fact, as argued by Deidre Beddoe, that all political parties have simply considered the European Parliament less important than Westminster (Beddoe, 2004: 341). Who was selected to sit there was considered of less consequence. Like the National Assembly for Wales, the lack of attention to goings on in Brussels and Strasbourg might have contributed to less established and conservative political cultures taking hold in the popular imagination. A way of illustrating this is the case of Beata Brookes, who held a seat in the European Parliament for ten years representing the Conservative Party, but, despite trying, failed to be selected for a Westminster seat on a number of occasions. This included one occasion where a high-profile court case overturned a decision to adopt her as the Party’s representative for the new Clwyd North West constituency in 1983. Sir Anthony Meyer won the nomination instead – the future ‘stalking horse’ (a figure who tests the weakness of a leader on behalf of other people, and not because of their own ambition) who would challenge Thatcher for the party leadership (Blaxland, 2017: 98–99).

Conclusion

When asking why something did not happen, the historian opens up endless possibilities and potential answers. No definitive conclusion can be drawn as to why the number of women MPs in Wales was historically so low. However, by observing what happened in local associations, and by comparing this with the broader social attitudes of Wales, it is possible to argue that long-prevailing small-‘c’ conservative attitudes to gender and to the matter of political representation helped to prevent women from having the opportunity to fight Wales’s winnable parliamentary seats

since 1918. Particularly in industrial or de-industrialising areas, long-held ideas about the nature of work and society meant that men were seen as natural choices to fight campaigns in the often aggressive and masculine atmosphere of the House of Commons. Even though ideas about women's rights changed in Wales as the post-war period moved on, many women themselves fully signed up to this traditional idea of political representation. This conservative nature of a significant part of Welsh society is important to acknowledge for several reasons, not least because it helps to explain why Wales had no women MPs for significant periods of the last 100 years when other parts of the United Kingdom did. It also allows us to think about Welsh politics more broadly. Labour has, for the best part of a century, been the nation's dominant party. Whilst we often associate it with socially progressive ideas and policies, this did not always reflect its core vote, or the people who made up its local associations. This remained as relevant in 2005 with revolts over all-women shortlists, as it was in the early years of Labour politics at the beginning of the twentieth century. Such perspectives also help to contextualise the high vote for Brexit in Labour-dominated parts of Wales, such as the de-industrialised valleys of south Wales.

It is also important because Welsh historiography has often emphasised the radical and progressive edge to the country's politics. The work that has long typified this is Smith and Francis's *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (1980). Such histories are vital contributions to our understanding of Wales and its culture, but they sometimes sidelined the less radical elements of everyday life. This article has sought to demonstrate one way in which we can dig a little deeper in this regard. However, it should also demonstrate that when it came to the issue of women MPs, sex was not the only category that selection panels and other groups took into consideration. Social class and status also mattered. Many of the women selected for seats before 1997, including those who won, overcame issues of their sex by explicitly stressing their fame, family connections, time spent in exclusive careers, or high-flying educational achievements. Advances have been made in this area since 1997, although it is only after the 2019 general election that Welsh women were represented in Westminster in the same ratios as women MPs from across the UK.

This strikes a contrast with the National Assembly for Wales, but those celebrating that fact also have to face up to the reality that most of the Welsh electorate seem to think that Westminster politics and general elections are still the most important aspect of politics in Wales. The turnout figures for the past three general elections in Wales have hovered around the mid- to high 60 percent mark, whereas the turnout figures for the last three Welsh Parliament elections have been in the low- to mid 40 percent range. The Westminster realm remains relatively male 100 years after women were able to take seats there, although there can be no doubt that we are currently witnessing a historic change in this regard.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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