



WORKING PAPERS

**Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in
Parliaments: the UK Case**

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Maces are used the world over to signify authority. They're a slight improvement on the club, and humans parade them about – especially in the House of Commons – to prove we're no longer cavemen.

Oona King (2007: 130)

Oona King's wry observation captures some of the issues, themes, and dynamics our project will explore. It touches on real, tangible *objects*, the symbols of power and authority, and who gets to design them, possess them, and touch them. Her reference to "improvements" highlights the interplay of tradition and modernisation in Parliament, and hints at how (some) old things get reconfigured, and for what reasons and with what degree of resistance. "Parade" conjures up the image of a performance or spectacle and also draws our attention to the spaces in which such performances occur. And, of course, gender and race are here too in the notion of 'cavemen.' This image reminds us of the way men have excluded women from particular domains and activities (hunting, law-making, governing...), and the feminist worries that women must 'ape' men to be successful once they have forced their way into those male bastions. The image of the 'caveman' also invokes the colonialist distinction between 'civilised' and 'savage' or 'primitive' societies and cultures, a contrast invoked with astonishing frequency in the anthropological and sociological literatures. That parliaments (and their occupants) are saturated with ceremonies and rituals with moral and political implications is more than confirmed by these two short sentences.

This working paper has three parts. In the first part, I briefly describe and summarise seven bodies of literature that I believe bear on and contribute to a better understanding of gendered and raced ceremonies and rituals in parliament (hereafter GCRP for short). I have focussed on research and writing about the UK Parliament. In the second part, I look at the way the notion of 'ritual' has been debated and taken up by academics. This section mainly serves to indicate the difficulties involved in trying to settle on definitions of ritual and its cognates. In the third part, I articulate the directions my thoughts are heading at this early stage in the project.

I. Literature Review

As I began reading for this project, it seemed to me that the existing literature could be organised into seven categories. Of course, many particular items do not fit neatly into one category, some categories are more unwieldy and heterogeneous than others, and I realise these categorisations may be controversial. I do not claim that the literatures I have identified exhaust the research and writing relevant to our project. But I have found it helpful to conceptualise them this way for the time being. I try to characterise each literature in a general way, and discuss how it might bear on and inform our project, before describing in more detail one or two texts that I take to be representative of the category.

1. The UK Parliament and its functions and procedures

This category subdivides into two main types: (1) descriptive-informative texts, sometimes akin to manuals or handbooks, that attempt to familiarise readers with the organisation, functions, and procedures of Parliament; and (2) ‘official’ texts including those issued by the House of Commons Library and Information Office (e.g. ‘Factsheets’ and Research Papers).¹ These are texts that exist mainly to give MPs and their staff, Parliamentary staff, students of British or comparative government, and the general public a handle on this exceedingly complex and multi-faceted institution.

With some exceptions (discussed below), this literature provides description and explanation, rather than evaluation or prescription. It adopts an institutionalist perspective; when particular individuals are discussed, it is typically to illuminate some broader or more general point about the way Parliament works, such as rare disruptions to the normally regimented daily timetable. Consequently, this literature implicitly tends to project or reinforce images of the coherence, seriousness and authority of parliament and its systems, rather than its idiosyncrasies, absurdities or shortcomings. These texts are

¹ Even though they are also official publications of the House of Commons, I include reports from the House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation (1998; 2004) (House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation 1998, 2004) in the Political Science category below because they form an important part of a wider debate amongst politicians, academics, journalists and civil society about the current status and future of parliament.

useful as guides to what are regarded by (some) parliamentary experts, staff, and politicians as key features of UK parliamentary life. They help to identify and locate specific practices, customs and rituals in a wider historical or institutional context.

Robert Rogers and Rhodri Walters's (2006) *How Parliament Works* (6th Edition) is a leading example of the first type of text because it is up-to-date, comprehensive, and accessible (for the most part). It articulates what I would characterise as a small-c conservative perspective on Westminster, by which I mean an outlook that is sympathetic to the preservation of rituals and customs and practices, and somewhat unsympathetic to attempts to modernise or reform parliament. The first tendency is suggested, for example, by their encyclopaedic attention to the minutiae of Parliament; no one who didn't love it would invest such effort into mastering every aspect and inch of it. By contrast, their lack of sympathy for parliamentary modernisers is suggested by their account of attempts to implement new timetables, which has yielded a hodgepodge timetable (146-8). They also do not appear to support movements for greater descriptive representation, and seem to reject claims that Parliament is not substantively representative (30-33). Power is frequently discussed, but not in a Foucauldian way. This book suggests or presupposes that the concept of power is exhausted by 'power to' (who holds what powers to do what) and 'power over' (formal, statutory, or conventional divisions and allocations of power). See also Griffith and Ryle (1997), which like Rogers and Walters's book, has seen many editions or re-printings and is considered a classic; Field (2002) for an illustrated history of Britain's parliament and the Palace of Westminster; and of course Erskine May, 22nd ed. (1997).

A slightly different take on how parliament works is offered by Paul Flynn in his widely cited *Commons Knowledge: How to be a backbencher* (1997). Flynn's book is a tongue-in-cheek handbook for MPs about all aspects of parliamentary life, with sections on topics such as 'how to survive standing committees,' 'how to stay married/single,' and 'how to ask effective questions.' There are a few mentions of women and gay MPs and their special challenges (e.g. not enough loos; pitfalls of dress; openness about sexuality), but in general, Flynn does not suggest that there are two paths – masculine and feminine – to being a successful backbencher. He makes more of national differences (between Welsh, English, Scottish and Irish) than of sexual differences in the lives of MPs. Unlike

the previous texts, such books offer both detailed description and evaluation, opinion, and prescription. See also Radice et al. (1987), and Rosenblatt (2006).

The House of Commons Information Office publishes a series of ‘factsheets’ about the House of Commons and its work. There are currently 64 factsheets constituting four different series: procedure, legislation, members, and general. A particularly relevant one for our purposes is General Series factsheet G7, ‘Some Traditions and Customs of the House of Commons’ (2004). As the author(s) acknowledges on the first page, this factsheet is a bit of a grab-bag of information about practices which excite people’s curiosity people (though it is unclear if this means mainly members or the general public). Topics covered include forms of address, being called to speak, prayers, debate style and etiquette, dress, snuff, dogs, strangers, and modernisation committee reports. While not exactly a defense of Chambers debates, I would say that the description here puts a gloss on them, downplaying the bullying and harassment that women MPs talk about (e.g. this factsheet discusses unparliamentary language but not unparliamentary gestures (e.g. ‘melons’)) and seems to romanticise the Chamber’s atmosphere. For a list of the current factsheets, visit: http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/factsheets.cfm. See also Thorne (1971, 1980) for descriptions of House of Commons procedure, the history of the mace, and official dress of officers of the House.

2. Diaries, autobiographies and biographies of parliamentarians

The UK supports a thriving industry of political biography and autobiography that constitutes an unofficial, invaluable, and entertaining record of GCRP and its evolution. These emphasise putting across the personal and political story of individual politicians. While rarely the deliberate object of study in these texts, parliamentary ceremonies and rituals invariably crop up in the diaries and memoirs of parliamentarians because they infuse their daily life and work. It was while reading texts from this category that I formed the impression that *parliamentary etiquette* should perhaps be a distinct focus of analysis since all new MPs discuss their terror of breaching mysterious and unknown House rules of etiquette, and their consternation about this frequently seems to overshadow their reactions to more formal parliamentary rituals.

We can distinguish self-authored diaries and autobiographies from official and unofficial biographies. The former is a mixed bag of texts, with some, such as Alan Clark's (1993), composed of what he vows are uncensored diary entries, and others, such as Oona King's, combining diary entries with commentary and analysis informed by hindsight. They are generally chronological, rather than thematic or conceptual; they are personal and descriptive, rather than overtly political or prescriptive. They usually contain photographs of the author from infancy to political maturity, in settings ranging from the mundane to the heroic. They are often preoccupied with issues of hierarchy, status, responsibility, and accountability – who has gotten which job and who has messed up. Insights emerge about the relative ease or difficulty about combining a parliamentary career with family life.

Political biographies are also a mixed bag, with the most important variable perhaps being whether the author is a fan or critic of their subject, or attempts to be neutral. Biographies tend to be more systematic than autobiographies, aiming to chart a parliamentarian's life from year to year, and frequently imposing thematic constructs on that life. In terms of giving a picture of GCRP, both autobiographies and biographies are obviously partial and piecemeal accounts. They are also not just about parliament; events and routines and practices associated with the constituency are at least as prominent as time spent in the Westminster village. They provide anecdotal and sometimes vivid evidence of gendered and raced experiences of parliament and politics in general.

3. Books and texts of interviews with parliamentarians

Falling somewhere in between these first two categories is a body of literature that engages the work and life experiences of parliamentarians. Rather than focussing on the building or the institution and its functions, and rather than focussing on individual politicians, this literature tries to relate the experiences and observations of many MPs and Peers to their surroundings, and vice versa. These texts consist mainly of parliamentarians' verbatim quotations, interspersed with some commentary and analysis by the author, and are usually loosely organised into themes. The 1997 election of more than 100 new women MPs seems to have triggered a spike in such publications, many of which interview only women MPs and Peers (see, for example, Sones et al., (2005),

McDougall (1997), Childs et al., (2005), and Rosenblatt (2006). Some authors in this category explicitly adopt a feminist approach while others do not. This body of literature is informative, semi-scholarly, empirical research that deals with C&R obliquely or incidentally. I take it that some of our research outputs might resemble texts from this category since, to my knowledge, no narratives of MPs' experiences specifically of GCRP exist.

Linda McDougall's *Westminster Women* (1997) is a non-scholarly book focusing on the lives and experiences of women elected in 1997. The author is a long-time MP's wife. It has 11 thematic chapters covering topics from the childhood political ambitions to the preoccupation by the media, MPs and others with the women's appearance, to work-life balance issues of keeping partners and children happy, to the scope for cross-party women's alliances. The author seems to have had fairly exceptional access to the women (compare with Puwar (1997)). Normative and theoretical issues such as representation and power are alluded to, but rarely taken up directly.

4. Sociological and anthropological classics relevant to C&R

Authors writing specifically on ceremony and ritual in politics (see, for example, Crewe and Müller (2006); Kürti (2006); Lukes (1977)) tend to identify a set of key sociological and anthropological texts as foundational texts that help to define the field. There may not be much that unites these texts apart from their status as widely-cited 'classics'. They include: Gluckman (1965); Edelman (1964); Swartz et al ([1966] 2006), and Leach ([1954] 1970). As I've only dipped into this literature so far, I think that any attempt to make broad generalisations about it would be premature. However, I have found discussions by Edmund Leach ([1954] 1970, 1968)) to be helpful as at least a partial guide to the debates, and I am sympathetic to his arguments about how one should approach research on rituals.

Leach (1968) argues that the fundamental distinction for social scientists who study ritual has been between the sacred and the profane, with ritual belonging to the first. Religion and ritual substantially or fully overlap. He asserts that theorists are following Durkheim in this: they are distinguishing "social actions into major classes – namely religious rites which are *sacred* and technical acts which are *profane*" (11). But,

he suggests, people encounter problems with what to do about magic, with some writers such as Malinowski grouping it with the sacred, and others such as Mauss with the profane. This yields two sub-categorizations: magico-religious (sacred) versus the technical (profane); or religious (sacred) and magico-technical (profane) (11). But the “assumption remains that somehow sacred and profane situations are distinct as wholes. Ritual is then a word used to describe the social actions which occur in sacred situations” (11). Leach rejects this whole approach because he believes the two categories are inextricably mixed in people’s actions: “with every kind of technical action... there is always the element which is functionally essential, and another element which is simply the local custom; an aesthetic frill” (12). Thus, he argues, “actions fall into place on a continuous scale. At one extreme we have actions which are entirely profane, entirely functional, technique pure and simple; at the other end we have actions which are entirely sacred, strictly aesthetic, technically non-functional. Between these two extremes we have the great majority of social actions...” (12-13). I am with him on the preference for a spectrum or continuum approach to ritual/non-ritual actions and behaviour, rather than discrete categories.

Later, Leach authored the entry for ‘ritual’ for the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1968), and expands on some of the points made above. He suggests that lay people have tended to use the terms ‘rite,’ ‘ceremony,’ and ‘custom’ interchangeably, and that all of these refer to actions that cannot be justified by a ‘rational’ means-to-ends type of explanation (1968: 521). On the other hand, he suggests that social scientists *do* distinguish these terms and associate ritual with religious performance, “while ceremony and custom become residual categories for the description of secular activities” (521). However, he argues that anthropologists were unsatisfied with this typology when they tried to apply them to “exotic societies” and so began to multiply the analytic concepts. But, as he argued earlier, there is no agreement amongst scholars about the appropriate terms to use and to what actions they apply. Leach concludes that while all the leading figures (Durkheim, Harrison, Radcliffe-Brown, Mauss) “started out with the assumption that every social action belongs unambiguously to one or the other of two readily distinguishable categories” each “ends up by demonstrating that no such discrimination is possible – that all ‘sacred things’ are also,

under certain conditions, ‘profane things,’ and vice versa” (522). And these are only the debates about the terms themselves! In addition, there are ongoing debates about the *role, meaning, and functions of ritual*, however that term is cut and sliced (see Leach 1968: 523-26, and I say more about this in section 2 below).

5. Government/Political science/Political theory/Parliamentary Studies

I mean to include in this category both mainstream or ‘malestream’ and feminist research. This is the home of debates about many of the concepts and topics that underpin our project, including: democracy; representation; power; the state; citizenship, nationalism and belonging; gender and politics; elections; law-making; and political behaviour. Apart from a common interest in politics broadly defined, it is difficult to characterise this literature as a whole, since, like the previous category, it is cross-cut by different theoretical approaches, assumptions, and aims. Since it would be impossible to do justice to any of the relevant on-going debates here, I will simply draw attention to what may serve as a core debate from which many other broader discussions radiate.

This debate concerns the reform and modernisation of Westminster. Participants include academics, parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and experts, journalists, and civil society groups. In a series of inquiries, commissions, on-going House of Commons Modernisation Committee reports, and academic research, a number of themes and trends are explored: the extent and causes of public disengagement and apathy; the role(s) of Parliament; and the ideal of representation. Important contributions include Kelso (2006); PSA (2007); The Power Inquiry (2006); the Electoral Commission/Hansard Society annual audits of political engagement (2005, 2004, 2006, 2007); contributions to Giddings, ed. (2005); House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation reports (1998, 2004); and the Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy (Puttnam Commission) report (2005). I say more about this debate in the last section of the paper.

6. Gender studies/Cultural studies/Race and ethnicity studies

In an undoubtedly reductive way, I have thrown together in this category texts authored by members of the academy who in some sense regard themselves as writing against the

mainstream in their discipline(s). These texts may issue from a number of ‘core’ disciplines such as political science, sociology, geography, and anthropology, but often attempt to be inter- or multi-disciplinary, and indeed, have often succeeded insofar as they are read in all these departments. As for the ‘sociological and anthropological classics’ category above, these texts are authored by academics for an assumed audience that is also mostly academic. But these are typically more recent. They are generally theoretical (and include queer, anti-racist, post-colonial and critical theory), normative, and interpretative. They have formed something of an alternative canon of their own over the last two or three decades. (Foucault, Butler, Spivak, Pateman, Bhabha, Mohanty, Gilroy, Yuval-Davis...)

7. My seventh category is **Research methods**, but apart from a very illuminating article by Nirmal Puwar (1997), I haven’t yet read anything from this literature specifically in light of this project. Puwar relates how many of the women MPs she interviewed during her fieldwork in 1995 and 1996 were being bombarded by requests for interviews about being women MPs. As a result, many of them were bored, uninterested, hostile or some combination of all three. This is why I think it’s important to emphasise, in the way our project is represented to respondents, that we are interested in *gendered and raced dynamics*, not women per se. But I have no idea if such an emphasis will make a difference in terms of access, and will be interested to hear what colleagues think about these issues.

2. Definitions of Ceremony and Ritual

Emma Crewe and Marion Müller (2006) argue that political science has tended to ignore the subject of ceremony and rituals. They suggest a number of reasons it has been neglected by political scientists, and more specifically, why scholars of parliament have neglected it. One explanation is that ceremony and ritual are regarded as cultural rather than political subjects (Crewe and Müller 2006: 1). Another is that “the term ‘ritualisation’ ... conjures a negative image of a political situation in which flexibility and innovation are suppressed” (2006: 2), although it is hard to see why this perception amongst political scientists – if true – should repel rather than attract them to the subject.

A third explanation is confusion and misunderstanding over terms and their meanings: whereas social scientists may use the term ‘rituals’ to refer to both elevated and mundane practices and procedures, parliamentarians themselves tend to “either laugh or switch off when a researcher reveals that they are interested in their rituals” because they assume this includes only special occasions such as state ceremonies (2006: 17). Related to this point, Müller (2006) suggests that the self-perception of agents in a secular state such as France precludes their identifying their work as ritualistic. She reports a “paradoxical, and sometimes puzzling, refusal to admit to the existence of parliamentary rituals” amongst her parliamentary respondents. The puzzle dissolves “when it is acknowledged that the rejection of the religious does not automatically imply the absence of holiness or sacredness” (2006: 184).

Being new to the subject, I was at first sceptical that political science was so void of research about political ritual as Crewe and Müller made out, and wondered if representing the discipline this way was more an attempt to highlight the novelty of their own research. However, after more reading around and checking the indexes of standard undergraduate texts for politics, I tend to agree with them about the lacunae if not all the explanations offered for it. One upshot of the discipline’s indifference to the subject is that, to my knowledge, it has not yet produced widely used (or even widely discussed) definitions or typologies of political ceremonies and rituals. Individually, however, academics and parliamentary officials have produced lists, descriptions and analyses of ceremonies and rituals that are at least useful starting points.

Abélès (1988) suggests that political rituals are characterized by:

- Dramatization – the acting out of performances that mobilise public support
- A dualistic dimension of high formality (events are carefully scripted) and high emotion expected of/exhibited by participants
- Artificiality
- A presupposition of solidarity
- Division of time and repetition
- An awareness amongst participants that rituals are moments out of time, out of the ordinary flow of things
- Religiosity (even in France, the official secularism is betrayed by Mitterrand’s behaviour in certain rituals, wherein he assumes the aura of a priest, according to Abélès)
- A contribution to the construction of the legitimacy of politicians

However, he does not say if these elements are together necessary and sufficient to qualify an action or performance as ritual.

Müller (2006) defines ‘parliamentary rituals’ as “procedures, or ways of organising social behaviour, that are necessary for conducting parliamentary business as much as they convey meaning both to parliamentary insiders and to the public outside the institution. In this respect parliamentary rituals are communication devices between representatives and the represented people” (2006: 185). She examines the UK, France, Germany, USA and European parliaments’ practices of oath-taking. She argues that, for each parliament, this ritual can be located in a four-celled matrix with two axes: immanent to transcendent, which refers to whether the oath invokes other-worldly powers or beings or not; and civil to military. In addition to locating the ritual in this way, she also assesses whether the oath-taking ceremony is integrative or not. It is not if and when some parliamentarians refuse to take the oath (and are therefore barred from taking up their political mandate) for nationalistic or other reasons.

Notwithstanding the declared interest of political scientists in both routine/daily and ‘special occasion’ rituals in parliament, it strikes me that quite a few authors nevertheless end up writing mostly or exclusively about the latter.² Crewe and Müller argue that “parliamentary debates – discussing policy or making laws – are ritualised events as well” (2006: 17). But Müller’s analysis in the same book focuses on comparing five parliaments’ rituals of oath-taking for new parliamentarians (2006). Alastair Mann (2006) describes the state openings of Scottish parliaments, which are moments of great spectacle and ceremony. Marianne Tremaine and Su Olssen (2003) describe new parliamentarians’ maiden speeches – another ritual which can probably be placed toward the ‘special occasion’ end of the spectrum rather than the ‘routine’. László Kürti’s (2006) article describes a range of practices and changes to the post-socialist Hungarian parliament, including what I am here calling ‘routine’ rituals. But he also devotes a substantial portion to the controversy over where to place the Holy Crown, an important national and religious symbol. Marc Abélès (1988) describes two political rituals

² An exception is Marc Abélès (2006), who describes and analyses French National Assembly chamber and committee debates on two bills.

performed by French President Mitterrand: a trip to his former department to inaugurate a train station and to decorate various locals; and an annual pilgrimage with his family (and, later, journalists) to a prehistoric site where he was sheltered during WWII. The first ritual is interesting in that while it probably counts as routine for the president, it is anything but for the locals who participate in or witness it. The pilgrimage seems easily placed towards the ‘special occasion’ end of the spectrum.

It’s not a mistake to discuss special occasions. Their attraction is obvious and most people are fascinated by them. But I take it that our project is interested in the whole spectrum. We are interested in breaking down some of those taken-for-granted distinctions that Müller alludes to; in pointing out the ritualistic aspects of procedure to show how debates, committee meetings, and the like qualify as ritual, and what are the implications of that. To the extent that all these things are true, then I think we find ourselves in agreement with Steven Lukes’s views on the contemporary study of ritual.

Lukes’s (1977) essay has five parts. The first part discusses various definitions of ritual available in the literature, and, not finding any satisfactory, Lukes offers his own: “rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance” (1977: 54). Like Leach, he objects to many theorists’ discrete, dichotomous categories which simplistically contrast ritualistic behaviour with rational behaviour. The second part sets out how Durkheim theorised that rituals promote value consensus and social integration. Durkheim argued that ‘modern’ societies lack ritual and are therefore socially pathological. According to Lukes, others objected to Durkheim’s view of modern societies, though not to his overall theory of rituals, so a body of literature emerged that tried to identify rituals in modern societies and to assess their contribution to value consensus and social cohesion. This constitutes the third part of the essay. Lukes rehearses the theory and arguments of ‘neo-Durkheimians’ Edward Shils and Michael Young (1953) on the British Coronation and the monarchy; Lloyd Warner (1959, 1962) on Memorial Days and similar holidays in the US; Robert Bellah’s (1968) discussion of ‘civil religion’ in America; and Sidney Verba’s (1965) analysis of the assassination of JFK. Lukes criticises all of these works on a number of grounds. One of them is that the authors run together a number of distinct claims about the role of ritual: it

is an index or evidence of pre-existing value integration; it is an expression of such integration; it is a mechanism for bringing about such integration; and it itself constitutes integration (62-67). Lukes argues that the neo-Durkheimians presuppose what needs to be established: that societies *are* in fact holding together, and what role – if any – value consensus plays in that. He points to societies which lack value consensus but appear to hold together, perhaps for economic reasons (e.g. Northern Ireland), arguing that ‘value consensus is not merely insufficient to ensure social integration; it is not even necessary’ (64).

The final section sets out his suggestions for a better way of examining ritual in contemporary societies. Lukes argues for an approach to rituals that embraces a wider range of activities than the neo-Durkheimians selected. His examples are (following Arnold (1962)) judicial systems and (following Crossman (1963)) the “activities of legislatures, such as debates, question-periods, committee investigations, and so on” (1977: 71). He also argues for an approach that is suspicious about value consensus and social integration, and instead adopts an attitude that political rituals are at least as likely to condition people to hierarchy and their place within it. Lukes writes,

Once we see matters this way, we are in a position to ask various questions about political rituals which the neo-Durkheimians notably fail to ask – questions such as the following: Who (that is, which social groups) have prescribed their performance and specified the rules which govern them? Who (which social groups) specify the objects of thought and feeling they symbolise – specifically, certain forms of social relationship and activity – as of special significance? Who exactly holds them to be specially significant, and significant in what ways? In the interests of which social groups does the acceptance of these ways of seeing operate? And what forms of social relationship and activity are in consequence ignored as of less or no significance? Under what conditions are political rituals most effective in getting participants and observers to internalise the political paradigms they represent? How are such rituals used strategically by different groups, exerting or seeking power in society? (68-69).

In ‘classic’ or official accounts of the British parliament, it seems uncommon for authors to expressly discuss how rituals have roots in or express social hierarchies between social groups marked by gender, ethnicity, or class. What they *do* note, for the UK, are the roots in relationships or struggles between nations or nation-states (such as the use of French phrases in some procedures and the refusal of MPs from Northern Ireland to swear an oath to the Queen), or accommodation of different religions through the use of the Qu’ran or Torah for oath-taking.

Official accounts are, arguably, oriented more towards procedures and customary practices than they are towards special occasions ceremonies. As mentioned in section 1, there is a House of Commons Factsheet (2004) on day-to-day traditions and customs. By contrast, there is no such factsheet for the state opening of parliament. There *is* information about this on the Parliamentary website, including a description designed for children (signified by particular fonts and cartoon graphics³) and a different page of text-only description presumably for adults.⁴ On the day that I browsed these sites, several of the hyper links for further information about terms mentioned in the children’s section for the State Opening of Parliament failed, as did a link to a leaflet with more information and pictures of the ceremony for adults. A House of Commons Select Committee on Modernisation report (2004) also focuses on day-to-day issues, such as the length of time allowed for speeches during debates, not on, for example, swearing in new members. These things may be indicative that those who are in charge of parliamentary communications attach more importance to daily procedures and traditions than they do to rarer or special ceremonies.

3. Thoughts & Directions

In this section, I indicate some of the directions my thoughts have taken during this initial phase. I suggest some debates from which I think our project departs, and to which it will also likely contribute. I am not committed at this point to any firm positions on any of these debates but mention them just to indicate what has captured my interest so far.

³ <http://www.explore.parliament.uk/Parliament.aspx?id=10208&glossary=true>

⁴ http://www.parliament.uk/faq/lords_stateopening.cfm

Mind the GAP: WID, WAD, GAD: These are acronyms for, respectively, Women in Development, Women and Development, and Gender and Development. Eva Rathgeber's influential article (1990) is widely credited (I think!) with identifying these three different models for the analysis of gender and the process of development. She called attention to whether development agencies were focusing on men, women, or gender relations, and the ways in which development efforts will be affected by the type of approach adopted. These dominant models have since proliferated, with some feminists arguing that WED (women, environment, and development) has emerged alongside and overlapping with WID, WAD, and GAD and others arguing for the recognition of up to as many as eight models (Sweet 2003)⁵.

The reason I bring this is up is I wonder if it makes sense to locate our own project in relation to similar dynamics within politics or parliamentary studies specifically. As I indicated in section 1, there was a flurry of books and articles (scholarly and popular) about women parliamentarians after the 1997 election. This literature is valuable in many ways. Feminists do not and should not apologise for their interest in women and their efforts to make women's voices heard. However, I also found myself getting tired of reading only about women's experiences and I began to feel like many of the questions put by academics and journalists to (often weary and wary) women parliamentarians needed to be put to men parliamentarians. At this stage, I feel I've read more than enough books about WIP and WAP (women in parliament, and women and parliament), and not enough about GAP (gender and parliament). We can't understand how a gendered parliament is created and maintained by talking only to women. The same, of course, goes for race and ethnicity. None of us wants to perpetuate the notion that only those with black or brown skins 'have' a 'race', so why is there a tendency only to ask BME parliamentarians about their ethnicity or culture? I take it that research on women, gender, politics, and parliament is undergoing a similar evolution (if it should be called that) as development studies has with WID, WAD and GAD. But my sense is that this hasn't been pursued hard enough (see Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995)) and I hope our project will contribute to changing that.

⁵ http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p107972_index.html

Related to this, I wondered how or if the debates around Carol Gilligan's (1982) famous theory of women's 'different voice' have played into research on parliamentary behaviour and gender differences. I am thinking particularly about Catherine MacKinnon's (1987) contention that what Gilligan had uncovered was not a distinctively *feminine* voice, but rather the voice of the powerless and dominated. In interviews with women parliamentarians, the atmosphere and conduct of members in the chamber often looms large, and women's distaste for it tends to be contrasted with men's putative enthusiasm or enjoyment. This seems too simplistic to me. How much is the chamber about the bullies and the bullied? This distinction may sometimes substantially overlap with male/female, but as plenty of interview research has revealed, women can be bullies too (some fingers point to Speaker Betty Boothroyd or Labour Chief Whip (2001-06) Hilary Armstrong) and some men will be at the receiving end.

Feminising Parliaments and Institutional Power and Prestige: I see our project as being located at the intersection of three current debates. First, there is the effort to measure and assess the impact of women and feminist activism on UK politics. This debate asks whether women "make a difference to politics" and goes on to interrogate what assumptions are built into that question, and what indicators of impact should be considered. There are many contributors asking many pertinent (see, for example, Lovenduski (2005); Childs et al. (2005); Squires (2007); Waylen (2007); contributions to Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, eds. (1995)) but not necessarily any consensus on the answers.

The second debate, which overlaps in places with the first, concerns the current health and status of Britain's parliament specifically, and the health of Britain's democracy more generally. In terms of parliament, we are interested in a long-standing debate about the role and function of that institution in relation to the executive arm of government. There are many perspectives on this, with some people lining up to declare the decline and virtual death of parliament. In reply, others argue that the first group is either mistaken about the role of parliament and therefore they misdiagnose its current condition (see, for example, Griffith and Ryle 1997), or they are simply wrong in their assessment, and actually, parliament has never looked so good nor performed so well (e.g. Ryle (2005)). In terms of Britain's democracy more generally, most commentators appear to agree that public disengagement from and disillusionment with politics,

politicians, and parliament is a real and worrying contemporary phenomenon (see, for example, the Electoral Commission/Hansard Society annual audits of political engagement for 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). However, they disagree vehemently about the causes of disengagement and possible courses of action. A broader background to both of these are questions about the ‘decline of deference’ in western, post-industrial societies, and the implications of that for many of our central social and political institutions. The relevance of these debates to our project is obvious, particularly in discussions which take up problems in representation and communication between elected representatives and electorate.

The third debate concerns theoretical and empirical research about changes to the sex distribution in certain occupational spheres and associated changes in salary, power, and status. Some research shows that, as professions such as medicine and law feminise (i.e. as the proportion of women increases), the earnings, power, and status of the occupation declines. Other research findings reject or complicate this supposed pattern. (For some contributions, see Reskin and Roos (1990); Wright and Jacobs (1994); Chiu and Leicht (1999).)

For me, these separate but sometimes overlapping debates come together in a set of questions to which I think we can and should contribute answers. In some cases, I expect we’ll be tackling these or similar questions directly and deliberately, and in others, it is more a case that our answers will emerge implicitly and as a by-product of our findings. (In either case, of course, we need to try to be aware of the messages, overt or otherwise, that we communicate.)

- How much do we regard ourselves as trying to contribute to a project to rejuvenate parliament and restore or expand the average parliamentarian’s influence or relevance? To the extent that ceremonies and rituals are claimed by some to contribute to parliament’s decline or marginalisation, how much might focussing on them work against that objective?
- To what extent can or should we bracket the debates about the decline or not of Parliament? Is there room to say, ‘Notwithstanding Parliament’s current fortunes, it is a major institution that is not going anywhere for the foreseeable future, so it is worth simply uncovering and describing what goes on it’?

- If powerlessness characterises ‘the feminine,’ then could we say that in periods of relative powerlessness, parliament has been feminised or emasculated? Would historical accounts – e.g. diaries – reveal this sort of impression? There is that view that women are allowed into institutions at the moment when their importance, power, and prestige declines (or that women’s admittance contributes to the decline – not sure about the views about which way the causal arrow points here). Is this being discussed in the scholarly literature? Is it a coincidence that the reputation and influence of parliament has gone into the toilet (to use a graphic if impolite expression) just when women arrive in it in significant numbers?
- If power has evacuated Parliament and is only or more firmly installed in Whitehall than ever, we need to ask what roles women are playing here. Is Whitehall also being feminised (Lovenduski 2007; Squires 2007)? Would an affirmative answer to this question begin to dismantle the woman-powerlessness-inferiority nexus?

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