

WOMEN AND PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS

*Does Size Matter? Critical Mass and Women MPs in
the New Zealand House of Representatives*

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**Paper for the 51st Political Studies Association Conference
10-12 April 2001, Manchester, United Kingdom**

Abstract

It is often claimed that women will only impact upon political decisions once they achieve a critical mass within legislative bodies. This paper outlines the expectations in existing critical mass literature and tests these using the New Zealand House of Representatives as a case study. What the New Zealand case highlighted was the number of complexities that are ignored in critical mass literature and the likelihood that different critical masses are necessary dependent on the outcome sought.

The critical numbers and the critical expectations

*I don't think that we will have really made a difference until we have enough women going into politics to form a critical mass. Margaret Shields, former MP, 1993.*¹

Critical mass is an idea that has moved from sociology to political science and into popular usage over the last 30 years. As Drude Dahlerup notes the concept itself is borrowed from nuclear physics, where it refers to the quantity needed to start a chain reaction, an irreversible take-off into a new situation or process.² Critical mass is based on the belief that the form of a public body will shape the processes and policies of that organisation. In political science literature the concept of critical mass infers that the election of an adequate number of female politicians will result in governance more responsive to women. But the existing literature fails to provide specifics on how changing the proportions of men and women will alter power relations within the political arena. For the most part, discussions of critical mass involve speculation about what might happen if women won the necessary numbers in legislatures:

If the trend continues, quotas will soon produce a quantum leap in women's political power. For the first time, women will form a "critical mass" of legislators in many countries, able to set new agendas and perhaps create new styles of leadership.³

Critical mass is more a theoretical and popular expectation than a demonstrated effect. But there are common figures and expectations identifiable in existing literature.

The origins of the critical mass proportions used in political science literature can be traced to the work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (either directly or through the 1988 work of Drude Dahlerup), though the sociologist did not use the phrase critical mass. Kanter pointed to four sets of proportions in her 1976 exploration of the token behaviour in Fortune 500 company:

Uniform groups have only one kind of person, one significant social type . . . *Skewed* groups are those in which there is a larger preponderance of one type over another, up to a ratio of perhaps 85:15. . . . Next, *titled* groups begin to move toward less extreme distributions and less exaggerated effects. In this situation, with a ratio of perhaps 65:35, dominants are just a majority and tokens a minority. . . . Finally, at a typological ratio of about 60:50 down to 50:50, the group becomes *balanced*.⁴

The other common features in critical mass literature are that women will impact upon the political agenda, political culture, and public policy once they reach critical mass in the political

arena. For example, Drude Dahlerup set out six changes expected when women achieved critical mass including changes in the 'political discourse'; changes in the 'social climate of political life'; and changes 'of policy'.⁵ Kanter expected changes to culture and behaviour once the composition of a group altered.⁶ In her study of the impact of women on parliament, Pippa Norris looked for changes in political attitudes, policy priorities, and legislative styles and roles.⁷ These three expectations of changes to political agenda, political culture and policy decisions provide the areas to be tested in this paper, while Kanter's proportions were taken as the critical figures to test. If critical mass is a viable concept, then any gender differences in the agenda, culture, and policies of the New Zealand parliament should accelerate once the number of women MPs reaches critical mass.

While it was impossible to isolate the effects of the relative number of women in parliament from the effects of all other changes that took place in society, I felt it was appropriate to carry out an historical investigation of increased female representation in the New Zealand House of Representatives. One variable that was identified in the close analysis of parliamentary debates was the impact of political party influence upon Members of Parliament. This was possible because parliament is headed by both of New Zealand's major parties, Labour and National, during the 25 years scrutinised. (National was at the helm from 1975 to 1981; Labour was in government from 1981 to 1990; National took back government benches in 1991 until 1999 when it was defeated by a Labour/Alliance coalition.)

Most often critical mass expectations have been tested using surveys of politicians. This raises questions about the way perceptions of gender roles and behaviour colour survey answers. This paper focuses on archival records to test the impact of increased numbers of women politicians on policy processes and outcomes in New Zealand over a 25-year period. A content analysis was carried out on selected Hansard Parliamentary Debates from 1975 to 1999.⁸ During this time the proportion of women in the New Zealand House of Representatives rose from 4 per cent to 29 per cent. To test the critical figures and assertions, I looked for any correlation between rising numbers of women in the House of Representatives and changes in political culture, the political agenda, and public policy decisions during the 25 years scrutinised.

The time frame selected was too wide to allow scrutiny of all debates and decisions made in the New Zealand House of Representatives, so this paper focuses on discussions of child care and parental leave. These debates were chosen for a number of reasons. First, it is clear that parental

leave and child care are of concern to New Zealand women, as women as a group continue to carry out most of the care giving in New Zealand (and world-wide). Second, child care and parental leave are feminist issues, as the lack of support for parents restricts life options for women. Third, the topics of child care and parental leave were chosen as previous studies of legislative behaviour indicated that women politicians would be more involved in these debates, than in other more traditionally ‘masculine issues.’

The concentration on ‘women’s issues’ opens this paper up to allegations of relegating women in politics to traditional realms. Vicky Randall bemoans ‘the tendency to relegate them [women] to those field considered to be a logical extension of traditional feminine concerns . . .’.⁹ Such allegations miss the underlying theoretical base of critical mass literature, which proposes that differential treatment of men and women in society results in different interests for each gender and that such differences that require representation in the political arena. The linking of identity and ideas is something critical mass theory has in common with theorists such as Anne Phillips and Iris Marion Young who debate the need for a ‘politics of presence’ in decision-making bodies. Critical mass literature has often ignored this link with theoretical discussions on the impact of identity on decision-making. While critical mass is not a prescription for action but a description of why groups lack influence over public decision-making, if proven significant the concept could provide evidence of the threshold levels needed to ensure adequate political representation of currently underrepresented groups.

Voicing women’s views?

*I have witnessed some very good, strong advocacy coming from some women in the New Zealand parliament . . . because they are women they are able to do much more justice to some of these issues. Deborah Morris, former MP, 1999.*¹⁰

If existing expectations in literature on critical mass and minority representation are accurate, then ‘women’s issues’ will receive greater attention in the political arena when women reach adequate levels within parliament. An examination of New Zealand parliamentary discussions of child care and parental leave showed clear gender differences in the involvement in the debates, differences which became more marked during the 25 years scrutinised. From 1975 to 1980, at a time when women occupied less than 5 per cent of parliamentary seats, male MPs were responsible for 32 of the 50 incidences of discussion of child care and parental leave. During the next six years male MPs were responsible for 17 of the 26 incidences in which the ‘women’s issues’ were discussed. The dominance of men between 1981 and 1986 came at a time when

women occupied between 8.7 and 12.5 per cent of all seats in the New Zealand House of Representatives. From the middle of the time frame analysed there was a marked change in the gender balance of debates of child care and parental leave. Between 14.4 and 16.5 per cent of New Zealand's parliamentary seats were occupied by women from 1987 to 1992. During this time women politicians were responsible for 50 of the 75 incidences of discussion of child care and parental leave. During the next seven years, the two 'women's issues' were mentioned 75 times in the House, with female MPs responsible for 59 of these incidences. In this last period, from 1993 to 1999, women occupied between 21.2 and 29.2 per cent of parliamentary seats. Even when the incidences of debate by Ministers of the Crown were discounted due to their obligation to speak in parliamentary debates, the trend was still for increased involvement by women MPs after 1987.

Women politicians were also more responsible for advocacy of child care and parental leave in New Zealand parliamentary debates than male MPs. From 1975 female MPs prompted discussion on the 'women's issues' on average twice as often as their male counterparts. From 1994 to 1999 only women started discussions on parental leave and child care. The change in dominance of the New Zealand debates of child care and parental leave fits critical mass expectations that any gender gaps in involvement in debates will accelerate once women reach adequate numbers.

No one female politician was responsible for all incidences of discussion of child care and parental leave in the New Zealand House of Representatives between 1975 and 1999. This discounts any claims that the rise in female involvement in child care and parental leave debates was due to the actions of critical individuals. Neither was there any significant correlation between political party and levels of involvement in the New Zealand parliamentary debates of child care and parental leave. MPs from both major political parties, National and Labour, were equally likely to talk about the 'women's issues' under scrutiny throughout the 25 year time frame. Party affiliations and ideologies were more evident in policy attitudes; something discussed later in this paper.

While the involvement of women MPs in New Zealand parliamentary debates on child care and parental leave rose after 1988, there were fluctuations in the incidences of debate. During 1988, 1989, and 1990 there was a flurry of activity on child care and parental leave. Then from 1991 to 1997 the incidences of debate on the two issues dropped. The increased involvement of women

MPs in the debates of the late 1980s might have in part been due to the team spirit espoused by the Labour Party women:

Hon. HELEN CLARK (Minister of Housing) . . . Today , women Government members have put up a full team to talk about Government policy on women's affairs, and I shall continue in that spirit . . . ¹¹

Ann Fraser (East Cape) . . . There are 14 women members of parliament, of whom 11 are Government members. It is very easy for the Government's women members to make up a team to speak in the Wednesday afternoon debate. ¹²

The high incidences of discussion of child care and parental leave in parliament from 1988 to 1990 and the espousal of team spirit were made at a point when women occupied 19.3 per cent of the Labour Government caucus. From late 1990, when women occupied only 11.9 per cent of the new National Government caucus, there was a drop in the incidences of debate of the two 'women's issues'. The difference in active debate by women MPs during these times indicated that for women MPs to impact upon the political agenda it is likely that a critical mass is needed at each level of parliament, not just in the legislature as a whole. This finding corroborates the conclusions of Sue Thomas in her study of United State legislators. Thomas found women in United States legislatures were more likely to introduce and pass distinctive legislation in situations in which they find support, for example when there are increased numbers or women's legislative caucuses.¹³

Another implicit critical mass expectation centred on the political agenda is that 'women's issues' receive only marginal attention in parliamentary debates while women are numerically underrepresented. The absence of debates of child care and parental leave in 1983 and 1985 was limited evidence that the issues were marginalised in the New Zealand House of Representative debates. But it was changes in the placement of the two 'women's issues' during parliamentary debates that provided evidence that child care and parental leave received more mainstream attention during the 25 years scrutinised. Between 1975 and 1987 the only major discussions of the topics were found in the debates of the Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Act 1980. All other incidences of discussion were found in parliamentary question time between 1975 and 1987. After 1988 references to parental leave and child care were found in 27 different debates on bills ranging from the State Sector Bill 1988, the Transport Amendment Bill 1992, to the Social Security Amendment Bill of 1998. The topics were also present in general debates in 1988, 1989, 1994, and 1995 and in question time in many of the latter years under scrutiny.

Changes in the debates of child care and parental leave in the New Zealand House of Representatives fits critical mass expectations that a rise in female representation will affect the parliamentary agenda. After 1988 women politicians were more involved in debates of child care and parental leave and the two topics received more mainstream parliamentary attention. These changes came at a time when women occupied over 14.4 per cent of the New Zealand House of Representatives. But changes to the parliamentary agenda are only some of the differences expected to be evident as women reach a critical mass in the political arena.

A man's world?

The main block to being a woman in Parliament is not being one of the boys; not being in the networks they operate; not hanging round the same quarters as they do. Helen Clark, Labour MP, 1986.¹⁴

Critical mass literature also implies that aggressive 'masculine' behaviour will shape parliamentary processes and debating styles, while men dominate legislatures numerically. The debates on child care and parental leave from 1975 to 1999 were scrutinised for gender differences in behaviour in the New Zealand House of Representatives and changes in any such conduct during the 25 year time frame. Parliamentary debates encapsulate only a small part of the parliamentary culture, but are the public face of the culture of the House of Representatives and most readily examined.

There was evidence of gendered differences in behaviour during parliamentary debates of child care and parental leave from 1975 to 1999. On the whole New Zealand's women MPs made less personal attacks during debates than their male colleagues did. Male MPs' share of personal attacks was higher than their share of the debates on child care and parental leave in 11 of the years under scrutiny. Female MPs' share of personal remarks was greater than their involvement in debates on the 'women's issues' in only four of the 25 years scrutinised. The number of personal attacks made during the debates of child care and parental leave between 1975 and 1999 ranged from none to 26 a year. The most active use of personal attacks came in the years following 1988.

Another area of aggression analysed for gendered patterns was the use of interruptions. Interrupting another person reflects the speaker's position of power and dominance. Male MPs in New Zealand were more active than their female colleagues in their use of interruptions during discussions of child care and parental leave from 1975 to 1999. The number of interruptions

during debates of the 'women's issues' ranged from none a year to a high of 97 during 1988. Male MPs' share of interjections was higher than their share of the debates during 12 of the years scrutinised. Women MPs' share of interjections was higher than their percentage share of debates for only six of the years studied. There were other indicators of gender differences in the use of interruptions during parliamentary debates. Males in the New Zealand House of Representatives were responsible for all of the interruptions made during the debates of child care and parental leave in 1975, 1976, 1979, 1984 and 1986. Women were responsible for all of the interruptions in only one year - 1996. The highest number of interruptions made by men was 83 interjections during the debates of 1988. For women MPs the highest rate of interruptions was 35 made during discussions in 1995.

The concept of critical mass suggests that adequate numerical representation of women in a political body, coupled with the tendency of women to be less aggressive than their male colleagues, should result in a more civil parliament. The visible rise in aggression during New Zealand parliamentary debates runs contrary to this expectation. Parliament became more aggressive from 1975 to 1999, and women adopted more "masculine" behaviour during the time frame scrutinised. Total aggression was measured by calculating the number of lines of debate on child care and parental leave that were taken up by personal attacks, interjections and points of order and comparing this with the number of lines of discussion overall. Between 1975 and 1984 the percentage of the lines of debate taken up by aggressive behaviour varied between 1.92 and 4.6 per cents. From 1986 to 1999 aggression was as low as 0.49 per cent and as high as 13.42 per cent. The most aggressive years occurred in this latter part of the time frame scrutinised, with aggression rates of 8.7 per cent in 1986, 7.6 per cent in 1988, 7.14 per cent in 1993, and 13.42 per cent in 1999. As already noted, women became decidedly more hostile in the latter half of the time period scrutinised. Before 1987 women frequently made no personal attacks or interjections, and the most comments by women MPs were the five made in 1987. During the debates from 1988 to 1999 the number of personal attacks and interjections made by women politicians were in double figures for all but two of the years scrutinised. The most aggressive years for women politicians were 1990, 1993, and 1995.

The rise in interjections and personal attacks by MPs in the late 1980s and early 1990s was in part due to the sections of debate scrutinised. 1988 to 1991, and 1994 to 1995 involved general debates of bills in the New Zealand House of Representatives, a time that provided opportunity for interjections and personal attacks. However, the trend does point to more aggression in the

debates of the 1990s than in earlier years. Again it is important to note that the aggressive behaviour in parliamentary debates was not the preserve of critical individuals. In all 20 different women engaged in aggressive behavior in the New Zealand parliamentary debates of child care and parental leave, a significant number of the 57 different women who sat in the House of Representatives between 1975 and 1999.

Another cultural change implicit in critical mass literature is an expected drop in negative gender labeling once women reach adequate numerical strength. It is asserted that the more women there are present in legislatures, the more accepted women will be. This acceptance of female politicians will be detectable through a drop in open hostility. There was evidence of change in the gender labeling used during New Zealand parliamentary debates of child care and parental leave, however not all changes met critical mass expectations. During child care and parental leave debates from 1975 to 1999 there were 37 direct remarks made about the gender of politicians. Twenty-four of these comments were made about women politicians by their colleague, while only six comments were made about the gender of male MPs. Seven women made comments about their own gender. Not only was there a high incidence of gender labeling of women MPs, confirming the male as the norm in the New Zealand House of Representatives, there was also a disproportionate level of derogatory remarks regarding femaleness. In all nine derogatory remarks to do with gender were made during child care and parental leave debates from 1975 to 1999. Men made five derogatory comments about women in the House, two women politicians used disparaging gender comments about female colleagues, and two such remarks were made by men against men.

Scrutiny of New Zealand parliamentary debates on child care and parental leave also showed women MPs were more susceptible to general harassing remarks (ones which did not directly state the members gender) than their male counterparts. Female MPs were the subjects of 14 of the 17 harassing remarks found in debates of child care and parental leave. Only two of the harassing comments were made by women politicians, the rest came from male colleagues. Fourteen of these harassing remarks were made after 1987, a point at which women politicians held 14.4 per cent of the seats in the New Zealand House of Representatives.

The apparent rise in hostility toward women politicians from the late 1980s could be the result of several factors. Firstly, some of the early politeness toward women MPs could be due to social attitudes, with men not finding it gentlemanly to attack the 'fairer sex'. Secondly, the increased

personal attacks could be part of a backlash suffered as women's numbers rise in political institutions. Janice Yoder points out that theory and research on racial minorities suggest that 'numerical surges threaten the majority, who react with heightened levels of discriminatory behaviour in order to limit the power gains of the growing lower-status minority.'¹⁵

Not all gender labeling during New Zealand parliamentary debates of child care and parental leave was negative. As already noted, during the 25 years scrutinised seven women referred to their own gender, with six of these remarks made after 1988. From 1988 there was also a rise in politicians claiming to represent women as a group, with 13 of the 16 references that acknowledged women as a constituency made after 1988. Women politicians made all such comments after 1988.

SONJA DAVIES (Pencarrow) . . . I am proud to be part of a Government whose commitment to women is proved at each election as more of us enter the house.¹⁶

RUTH RICHARDSON (Selwyn) . . . The National Party will bring able women to the House who will join forces with my colleagues the member for Waipa and the member for Ashburton in ensuring that a National Government continues to be an effective champion for women.¹⁷

The positive slant on being a woman in the House of Representatives and representing women as a constituency, fits critical mass expectations that women will feel more comfortable to speak out as women once they reach adequate numbers in politics. The changes were noticeable from 1988, at a time when women occupied 14.4 per cent of the seats in the New Zealand parliament.

Policy for women?

*Women can only have an influence when they have the numbers. When you have the influence is when you have the votes. Dianne Yates, MP, 1999.*¹⁸

The final critical mass expectations tested in this paper centre on the assumption that there will be acceleration towards 'women-friendly' policy once there are adequate numbers of women politicians. For this I chose to look only at New Zealand's parental leave policies, as this topic was the subject of three parliamentary bills during the time frame scrutinised. There were changes to parental leave laws between 1975 and 1999, however even in 1999 the New Zealand parental leave legislation met neither feminist nor international standards for parental leave.

In 1999 New Zealand law provided for unpaid parental leave with guaranteed job retention for 12 months for the primary care-giver and two weeks for the secondary carer. The International

Labour Organisation's Convention 103: Maternity Protection Convention (1954) calls for a minimum of 12 weeks' paid leave, while the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981) binds states to introduce paid maternity leave. New Zealand has not ratified the ILO Convention 103, and while it has ratified CEDAW this has been done with reservations on maternity leave provisions. New Zealand parental leave law in 1999 also failed to meet demands of women's groups. For feminists, adequate paid parental leave is seen as essential for ensuring greater choices for women in society. 'Feminists assume that the liberation of women requires that the bearing and rearing of children must cease to be inevitable in women's lives.'¹⁹

As expected, debates on parental leave policy in the New Zealand House of Representatives between 1975 and 1999 divided most obviously along party lines. Politicians from parties on the right of the political spectrum, National and ACT MPs, were generally opposed to parental leave legislation and concerned about employer rights. In contrast, politicians from parties on the left of the spectrum, Labour and Alliance MPs, were more supportive of state intervention in employment contracts and the redistribution of income. But in 1979 and 1980 gender differences were detectable in the opinions of Members of Parliament on parental leave. In the debates of the 1980 Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Act all four of New Zealand's sitting female MPs (from both the National and Labour parties) threw their weight behind statutory leave provisions, while male politicians were divided on the issue. If critical mass literature is correct, the commitment of female MPs to policies that benefit women should increase as the women MPs reach critical mass in parliament. Overall there was no evidence of increased commitment to 'women-friendly' policy in New Zealand parliamentary debates of child care and parental leave from 1975 to 1999. In the discussions of the 1998 Paid Parental Leave Bill, four women politicians expressed opposition to the proposed paid leave provisions. All of these women were from the right of the political spectrum.

Two factors were likely to have been behind the opposition to paid parental leave by women politicians. Firstly, the 1998 Bill required the redistribution of income, a position inconsistent with free market ideologies. The second factor that resulted in opposition from women MPs to better parental leave provisions was the diversity of women in parliament in the late 1990s. In 1998 seven female MPs from five different political parties joined in the parental leave debates. This diversity may have made it more difficult to pass feminist policies into law.

There were some changes in parental leave policy during the 25 years scrutinised. The most obvious attitude change was the acceptance of leave provisions for both parents rather than mothers alone. The main criticism of the 1980 Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Act was that it enforced sex stereotypes by assuming women would stay at home as the primary care givers. Such criticisms came from women politicians. For example, Labour MP Ann Hercus stated:

To adopt the Bill would be against the concept, against the principle that parenting belongs to two parents, not just one – the woman – and if we adopt it we are unfortunately writing into law a stereotyped and retrograde myth.²⁰

Employee and women's groups were also critical of sex stereotyping in the Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Bill. Of the 60 submissions made to the Parliamentary Select Committee hearing the Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Bill, 51 recommended that the Bill provided for parental leave and employment protection. In its submission to the Select Committee the National Organisation for Women claimed the bill failed to recognise the male's share of responsibility for child rearing. Resistance to parental leave for both mothers and fathers, was most loudly voiced by National Party men who saw child care as the responsibility of women.

The concern about sex stereotypes were in part addressed with the introduction of the Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987, which legislated leave for both parents. The change from maternity leave to parental leave was made when women occupied 14.4 percent of the House of Representatives. However the issue of sex stereotypes reopened in 1998. Only mothers would be entitled to leave payments if the 1998 Paid Parental Leave Bill became law. Mothers could then choose whether to pass some money onto another caregiver. The focus of the 1998 Bill indicates that some New Zealand politicians and decision-makers in the political arena continued to see child care as 'women's work'.

Another change to parental leave policy debates in the New Zealand House of Representatives was the attitudes toward state provision of paid parental leave. Requests for payments to parents were made in the discussions of the Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Act 1980. However, in 1979 and 1980 female and male politicians across the political spectrum rejected payment for parental leave stating the timing was not right. A real change in the attitude of New Zealand MPs towards paid parental leave came in the late 1990s. At this time there was acceptance from the majority of MPs that paid parental leave should at least be debated and

claims from MPs on the left of the political spectrum that paid parental leave was an idea 'whose time had come'. The attitude change was also evident in the introduction of a Parental Tax Credit by the National Government in 1999. This targeted tax credit came into effect in October of 1999, and is worth \$150 per child for up to six weeks. However, the concession towards paid parental leave and the decision to send the Paid Parental Leave Bill to Select Committee hearings, were due to timing rather than the number of women in Parliament. A National Government lacking a majority in the House of Representatives had to make concessions on paid parental leave.

The fact that New Zealand parental leave legislation is lacking when held against international and feminist ideals, is not solely due to the low levels of female representation in parliament. The social conservatism of MPs impacted upon the progress of parental leave policy debates. Another force that acted against the passage of paid parental leave laws in New Zealand was the burgeoning of free-market influences. The close analysis of Hansard Parliamentary Debates also highlighted the influence of National Party MPs who were opposed to state interventionism in the labour market and were more socially conservative.

Mr R. F. H. MAXWELL (Taranaki [National]) . . . New Zealand has been to the forefront in matters such as women's emancipation and the introduction of parental leave legislation . . . but there is no need for it to be so far out in front that it creates problems for the country and particularly for the business and the people the Bill is supposed to help – that is, the people wanting jobs.²¹

The attitudes of National MPs could have been tied to the level of female representation, not within parliament as a whole, but within the National Party's parliamentary caucus. At best women occupied 7.5 per cent of the National Party parliamentary caucus in the 1980s, and it was not until 1996 that female representation in the party's parliamentary caucus exceeds Kanter's *skewed* level of 15 per cent.

While parental leave policy in New Zealand has kept step with societal reality, successive governments have made no real moves towards feminist ideals or international standards. Nor has the existing policy reality matched the requests of many female MPs and members of the public who had argued for more advanced parental leave policy since 1979. Public support for improved parental leave provisions were evident in the fact that a Parliamentary Select Committee received 84 submissions in favour of the Paid Parental Leave Bill and only 33 opposed to it. There were also 719 form letters sent to the Committee supporting the 1998 Bill.

It seems that the increased number of women in the New Zealand House of Representatives from 1975 and 1999 was insufficient on its own to radically alter the country's parental leave policies.

Does size matter?

In the New Zealand case there was evidence of increased feminisation of the political agenda at a time when the gender balance in the House of Representatives rose to almost reach Kanter's *skewed* ratio of 15:85. Female politicians were more actively involved in debates on child care and parental leave and spoke more proudly of their gender and their intent to represent women as a group once they reached 14.4 per cent of the seats in the New Zealand parliament. When women MPs occupied around 20 per cent of a political party's parliamentary caucus they commented on team spirit. It seems that in order to impact upon the New Zealand parliamentary agenda and the parts of the political culture centred on self-perception, size does matter. But party cleavages, a possible backlash from the male majority in parliament, and social conservatism meant that 29.2 per cent representation in the New Zealand parliament from 1996 was an insufficient proportion for women to significantly alter either the parliamentary culture or policy decisions. The number of men who had served in parliament for 12, 15, or even 18 years impacted upon the debates of child care and parental leave in parliament. As National MP Katherine O'Regan noted, the fact that older generation male MPs were being replaced by newer faces led to a change in attitudes towards women and women's issues.²² It was not only the attitude of long-standing MPs that hindered the impact of rising female numbers in the House. While women had made significant advancements since 1975 in terms of overall parliamentary representation in New Zealand, until the 1999 election the number of females in cabinet (the powerhouse for policy making) was marginal. Even in 1996, only one woman sat in cabinet. There was evidence that low proportions of women in Government ranks prevented women impacting on public policy.

For critical mass to be a viable concept it must take account of the impact of entrenched attitudes and positional power. These issues complicate attempts to gauge the impact of women in parliaments, but cannot be ignored. Even though there are difficulties in measuring the impact of women on the political arena, this should not stop attempts to look at the impact of women. Neither should we reject the importance of numerical strength in legislatures as this leaves the way clear for majority groups to argue against increased group representation. After all if critical acts are more important than numbers it could be argued that only one politician of any gender is necessary for ensuring women's needs are adequately represented

Critical mass is a concept that provides an explanation for why women (and other minorities) struggle to impact upon all areas of the political arena. But perhaps what we should talk about is different critical masses – dependent on what we wish to achieve through group representation. Reaching around 15 per cent representation in a political body overall allows a voice. It could take a far greater proportion of women throughout the different arms of legislatures to change policy outcomes and the political culture.

¹ *Making Policy . . . Not Tea*, A. Baysting, D. Campbell, and M. Dagg (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 154.

² D. Dahlerup, 'From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 11, No. 4, 1988, pp. 275-6.

³ J. Jacquette, 'Women in Power: From Tokenism to Critical Mass', *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1997, p. 34.

⁴ R. M. Kanter, 'Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women', *American Journal of Sociology* 82, 1976/5, p. 966.

⁵ D. Dahlerup, pp. 283-4.

⁶ Kanter, p. 966.

⁷ P. Norris, 'Women Politicians: Transforming Westminster?', *Parliamentary Affairs* 49, No. 1, 1996, pp. 93-101.

⁸ The close analysis of New Zealand Parliamentary Debates covered 35,000 lines of recorded debates from 1975 to 1999.

⁹ V. Randall, *Women and Politics: An International Perspective*, Second Edition, MacMillan Education, 1987, p. 112.

¹⁰ D. Morris, Personal Interview, Wellington, 1999.

¹¹ New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 488, 1988, p. 3643.

¹² New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 491, 1988, p. 5812

¹³ S. Thomas, 'The Impact of Women on State Legislative Policies.' *Journal of Politics* 53, No. 3, 1991, p. 974.

¹⁴ V. Myers, *Head and Shoulders*, Penguin Books, 1986, p. 166.

¹⁵ J. Yoder, 'Rethinking Tokenism: Looking Beyond Numbers', *Gender and Society* 5, 1991, pp. 178-92.

¹⁶ New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 488, 1988, p. 3646.

¹⁷ New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 509, 1990, p. 2832.

¹⁸ D. Yates, Personal Interview, Wellington, 1999.

¹⁹ S. Franzway, D. Court, and R. W. Connell, *Staking a Claim: Feminism, Bureaucracy and the State*, Allen and Unwin, 1989, p. 59.

²⁰ New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 427, 1979, p. 4461.

²¹ New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 481, p. 9529

²² K. O'Regan, Personal Interview, Wellington, 1999.