The government of the United Kingdom: the Women's National Commission¹

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Introduction

There have been two significant stages in the creation of national machineries for women within government in the United Kingdom. The first phase was in the 1960s and 1970s, when anti-discrimination and equal pay legislation was accompanied by the creation of the Equal Opportunities Commissions (EOC) in England, Scotland and Wales, and the UK-wide Women's National Commission (WNC). The governments of the 1980s and 1990s established a Minister for Women and a Cabinet Committee on Women, and gradual integration into the European Union (EU) has entailed the absorption of a considerable amount of regulation favourable to women. However, the second significant phase in the creation of the national machinery only came after the 1997 general election, when the new Labour government established a Minister for Women at Cabinet level, supported by a more junior Minister for Women and a Women's Unit (WU).²

Political background

The mainstream of UK politics, parties and government since the 1960s has been characterized by a reluctance to engage directly with gender (let alone feminist) issues. Both of the major parties (Conservative and Labour) as well as the third party (Liberal and more recently Liberal Democrat) have tended towards a liberal approach: an assumption that

the adoption of policies which outlaw discrimination and open up access will eventually achieve a broad measure of equality across all socio-economic cleavages.

The 1960s was a period of relative optimism and prosperity in the UK. A post-Second World War politics of consensus between the parties was still in place and politicians responded to social change with a raft of liberal legislation: relaxing control on divorce, contraception, abortion, homosexuality and prostitution. This was also the period in which the UK attempted a corporatist approach to economic and industrial policy making.

Corporatism was a short-lived experiment in the UK which was largely abandoned in the 1970s as the oil crises translated into economic instability and industrial unrest. However, while it was in place a number of institutions were created for consultation between government, business and labour. Specific consideration of women's role in the economy did not figure large in the concerns of any of the three partners; nevertheless the WNC was founded in 1969 as a non-departmental public body with a small budget and the brief of bringing the informed opinion of women to bear on government policy. Its foundation was seen in terms of preparing for the forthcoming sex discrimination and equal pay legislation, and in keeping with United Nations (UN) policies, particularly the approaching the UN International Year of Women.³

The background to this and the changing role of the WNC within the present Labour government are the subject of the following sections.

The 1997 Labour government

The establishment of the Ministers for Women and the WU by the incoming Labour government in 1997 marked not only a new phase in gender policy making, but also a new approach. By creating a Women's Unit and placing it alongside the WNC, the government made a commitment to mainstreaming gender equality. The WU was part of a new experiment in the creation of cross-cutting Units (along with the Social Exclusion Unit) forming a central element

in what is referred to as 'joined-up government': ensuring that government policies address the whole problem rather than parts of it. Thus gender equality was entrenched as a component of joined-up government (Veitch, 1999).

Gender policy background

The period of change from the 1960s to the 1970s in the UK has been well documented (Coote and Campbell, 1987; Rowbotham, 1990). Whether driven by the women's movement or by economic imperative, free contraception and abortion (if not on demand, at least without too much argument) were made available through the National Health Service in 1967; the WNC was established in 1969 under a remit 'to ensure by all possible means that the informed opinions of women are given their due weight in the deliberations of government' (see note 1); anti-discrimination and equal pay legislation was implemented in 1974; and the EOC was created at the same time to oversee the implementation of the Act, albeit with a reactive rather than proactive brief.

In the thirty years between the start of this process and the in-coming 1997 Labour government, women's lives in the UK changed considerably, although the extent to which such change was encouraged and supported by central government remains a topic for debate (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993). The sex discrimination and equal pay laws have been roundly criticized as weak tools which place an onus on the victim to press her case; the EOC, despite producing valuable and useful research, is not a campaigning body and lacks both the authority and the resources to initiate action. Individual women and women's pressure groups have found the EU and EU legislation to be stronger sources of support and justice, although the process of taking a claim through both national and international courts is a lengthy one. The EU position on equal pay for work of equal value, for example, went some way to plug the loopholes in the UK equal pay legislation, and EU regulation of the pay and conditions of part-time workers will (when it is fully implemented) compensate women for their disproportionate participation in part-time work in the UK.

The general trend of policy during the long period of Conservative government was based on a strong liberal position of choice and freedom: all citizens would benefit from the conditions of free choice; special treatment of any sort smacked of privilege and undermined liberty. Women, like men, would benefit from the freedom to make economic choices in an expanding economy, unencumbered by excessive taxation. Despite some high-profile initiatives, notably Greenham Common and the Miners' Wives, the 1980s was not a happy decade for the women's movement.

The women's movement had sprung up in the UK in the 1960s alongside parallel movements in the United States of America and other European countries (Bouchier, 1993). Driven by the realization that legal provision did not guarantee social, political and economic equality, the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s aimed to change public consciousness and women's *de facto* position. By the 1980s certain measures had been achieved and in the process an awareness of the complexity of gender politics had evolved. On the one hand, there were challenges to the notion that 'sisterhood is universal' from groups of women who considered themselves marginalized in the women's movement as well as in the wider society; on the other, there was a shift on the part of some women away from the intentionally outsider ethos of the social movement into mainstream politics of parties and government (Coote and Patullo, 1990; Lovenduski and Randall, 1993).

From the late 1970s some women with a background in the women's movement took their concerns into political parties in the UK. Neither parties nor government were particularly hospitable (Loach, 1985). This is described in Loretta Loach's 1985 article in *Spare Rib*, in which she quotes Ann Petifor, founder of the Women's Action Group within the Labour Party, as saying, 'It is the resistance of labour men to the empowering of women of their own class which can only be described as brutal. We've struggled for six years along these lines; we've struggled to get more women into Parliament and each year the resistance from men gets worse and more frightening and women are damaged more and more by it' (1985:18). Similarly, in a 1986 article Sarah Perrigo described the discomfort she had experienced in the Leeds Labour Party. This generated tensions

between women who had moved into the mainstream and those who pursued the autonomous route (Roelofs, 1989). Similar responses are documented in Australia and Scandinavian countries (Dominelli and Jonasdottir, 1988; Eisenstein, 1990; Lovenduski and Randall, 1993). In the UK the pursuit of women's interests remained alive in the unlikely space provided by local government (Campbell, 1984). While the Conservative Party dominated Westminster, the demoralized Labour Party focused on local government and used this as an arena in which to develop alternative policies and approaches (Gyford, 1985; Goss, 1988). Now largely written out of Labour Party history, what was referred to at the time as the 'New Urban Left' generated an approach which has been quietly adopted by the present government. A number of Labour-led local authorities adopted a novel system of creating new committees, each with a cross-departmental brief, to ensure that the interests of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people were taken into account in all decisions reached by mainstream committees.

The present mechanisms for gender equality in the Cabinet Office are (possibly unwittingly) heir to the innovations made by local government women's committees of the 1980s and 1990s. These included adopting a three-pronged approach to gender equality: supporting women's initiatives in the community; establishing equal opportunities practices within local authority employment; and ensuring that the broad range of local government policies addressed women's specific concerns and perspectives. Importantly, women's committees drew on outside expertise, and made themselves accountable to the community, through the mechanism of co-option: women from local women's organizations were co-opted on to the committees (Stokes, 1998).

In the post-1997 Government, while the new WU was given responsibility for policy coordination, promoting long-term institutional change within government, acting as a taskforce within government and undertaking research projects, its responsibilities did not include community involvement (Veitch, 1999). However, the WNC already possessed a remit to bring the informed opinions of women to bear on policy making.

The WNC: history

From its creation until 1998 the WNC was a membership organization. It comprised member organizations serviced by civil servants. There were fifty member organizations and thirty-five associate member organizations, and the role of the civil servants was to present to government the views of the members. The Commission itself was composed of 'fifty women elected or appointed by national organizations with a large and active membership of women' (Cabinet Office, 1998:3). Member organizations, which included the women's sections of the major political parties, trades unions, religious groups, professional bodies and business women's organizations, provided the individual women who comprised the Commission and thus it was their interests which directed the Commission's activities. Associate member organizations were kept in touch with WNC business through regular bulletins, consultation exercises, conferences and seminars.

As a publicly funded body representing sectional interests the WNC was, and is, close to unique. However, its (in effect) ownership by fifty organizations limited its remit. By the 1990s it was little known outside of its membership and (when considered at all) generally regarded as a conservative, somewhat marginal body. It had a tendency towards consensus seeking that meant that consensus-sensitive issues were likely to be dropped, thus avoiding conflict but also avoiding engagement with important issues. This form of organization was neither as open, nor as democratic, as might be expected of an organization established to reflect the informed opinion of women in the community, yet many of its member organizations were opposed to change.

New Labour and women

The 1997 Labour government came into power with a large electoral swing, a hefty majority of seats and a new generation of politicians, including an unprecedented number of

women. Eighteen years in the political wilderness ensured that many of the Members of Parliament (MPs) in the new governing party were under fifty (some under thirty) and new to office; the size of the swing meant that some candidates who had not dreamed of being elected were (one stunned new MP noted on election night that he would have to resign from his job the following day); the abandoned women-only shortlist system and the size of the swing put nearly twice as many female MPs into Parliament than ever before.⁴

During the period of Opposition the Labour Party had, among other things, made commitments on gender equality. These included the notion of a Minister for Women (unfortunately announced in a pamphlet fronted by a white, suited, professional-looking woman wearing a wedding ring) and the document *Governing for Equality*, which contained a commitment to strengthen the WNC. A number of the new female MPs had come into Parliament from a background in local government, including experience with women's committees; those MPs that had come via women-only shortlists had a particular knowledge and concern for measures to enable women. The *image* of the party was woman friendly: less individualistic than the Conservatives, less men-in-smoke-filled-rooms than Old Labour. The change in image was partly because of the men who were there (younger, more gender aware) and partly because from the late 1970s women who were active on women's issues had been moving into the party (Perrigo, 1986). Moreover, the government had inherited from its predecessor obligations to the policies adopted at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing.

The new government's immediate response to the plethora of issues confronting it was not to act, but to refer problems to committees and commissions for consideration and to create the national machinery. The post of Minister for Women became Cabinet level and the post of Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women was created; the WU was created to support the Minister for Women, but rather than re-allocate powers or create a new mechanism for consultation with external women's organizations, the WNC was to be reformed. Both the WU and the WNC were initially in the Department of Social

Security: the new WU placed there to serve the then Minister for Women, Harriet Harman.

The WNC: process of change

A formal review of the WNC was launched in September 1997 and concluded in July 1998.⁵ The terms of reference of the review were 'to examine the objectives, membership and the funding of the WNC in the light of the Government's need to ensure that there is an effective, independent channel of communication between women's organizations and Government for the twenty-first century. To assess costs and benefits. To develop, if appropriate, options for change'.

There were two parts to the review: the government's review and the WNC's own review. According to the government's Review Document:

following the general election in 1997, the Prime Minister appointed two Ministers for Women. The mission of the Ministers for Women and their Women's Unit was to *'ensure that all women are treated equally with men and that their needs and concerns are properly understood and addressed by government'*. The Ministers for Women set themselves six priorities, including:

- opening up a new dialogue with women and building a bond of trust between women and the government;
- bringing women into the mainstream of government policy-making.

The review of the WNC drew together these two proposals. (Cabinet Office, 1998:3).

The Government Review concluded that the WNC was a necessary and desirable organization, but that it should change. First, its membership should be opened up and expanded. Second, its independence should be protected and enhanced. Third, it should be more active, flexible, influential and acquire a higher public profile.

The WNC's own Review (derived from consultation between member organizations) made recommendations about the expansion of membership, to take account of the increased numbers of women's organizations springing up

in the aftermath of the UN Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, and organizational reform to take account of both devolution in the UK and membership of the EU; the Review also made recommendations about the WNC's mode of operation and relations with government. From the Review Document it appears that agreement was reached, by and large, between the government and WNC, with the notable exception of the WNC's suggestion that 'consideration should be given to the time and cost to members who take an active role in the WNC. Members should be able to give time and expertise to the WNC without having to consider the financial implications' (Cabinet Office, 1998:17). The rejection of these suggestions suggests that the government's commitment to using the expertise of women's organizations did not extend to paying for it; no small oversight in the light of the apparently ineradicable 25 per cent difference between the average male and female hourly wage.

The WNC was to continue as a non-departmental public body and expand its membership to include more organizations and even individuals. It would adopt a stronger process of operational planning and acquire press/publicity and research/information officers to raise its profile. Its central organizing committee would change in structure, becoming more representative and proactive. The general thrust of the Review and the measures adopted were that the WNC should become more active, more engaged with a wider (and expanding) range of women's organizations, and have more access to government as a legitimate representative of women's interests in policy making. Both the WNC and the WU moved to the Cabinet Office when the Women's brief was transferred to Baroness Jay, since she was the Leader of the House of Lords and a member of the Privy Council. Cabinet Office is the corporate headquarters of the British civil service; thus the WU and WNC moved to the heart of government.

The WNC: structure

The WNC is wholly (although not generously) funded by government. As a non-departmental public body it is

independent of government discipline and possesses considerable freedom, within the limitations of its remit and resources. Goals and strategy are directed by the WNC Chair, Baroness Christine Crawley, and a Steering Group of fifteen, whose appointment is governed by the Nolan Committee rules.⁶ A clear goal of the regeneration of the WNC was to ensure that the new Steering Group would be made up of women who possessed gender expertise as well as board-level skills and could be seen to represent a constituency of women.

The WNC is staffed by civil servants 'on loan' from their home departments. Nuts-and-bolts issues such as budgets and staffing are managed by the civil service, while strategic direction is internal. Thus Susan Atkins, Director of the WU, is line manager to Janet Veitch, Director of the WNC, but with regard to strategic direction the civil servants are responsible to the Chair of the Steering Group of the WNC, at present Baroness Crawley. The WNC liaises with the WU, and through it with the Ministers for Women. It also liaises with both individual MPs and other government departments.

The new WNC is no longer tied into the interests of fifty women's organizations. Instead of a fixed number of members and associates it now has a growing number of partners (over two hundred at the end of 2000), including both large national organizations and small local ones (of particular importance since it is arguably the smaller organizations which require the information gathered and distributed by the WNC most, as well as the administrative resources that it can provide). This has facilitated the selection of a Steering Group of women who better meet the criteria of expertise, skills and representativeness, including at present the Director of the Fawcett Society (which conducts research and lobbies for women's increased participation in politics), the former Chair of the EOC in Northern Ireland, and the Chief Executive of the Family Planning Association. Partner organizations nominate a specific individual as the contact with the WNC and commit to a 'contract' whereby they agree to contribute to the information base and activities of the Commission rather than passively receiving briefings. The present Director recognizes that the WNC is the voice of its partners, but also regards itself as facilitating and coordinating the development of individual

organizations and links between them as well as with government.

The independence of the WNC from the discipline of a government department and its integration with women's groups are its strengths; these therefore require protection. Its relations with the WU and the Ministers for Women pose questions about potential conflicts of interest. While the WU is part of the Cabinet Office, the WNC, despite being in residence, is not. The WNC is not just free to express independent views, but is *expected* to do so. Relations between the two bodies are intended to be complementary but contain the potential for conflict. At present relations are smooth, but this appears to be due to that most unpredictable element in politics — personalities — as much as to policies. The Labour government, having set these mechanisms in place, remains broadly in favour of their operations. The Director of the WU is supportive of the NGO agenda. The Director of the WNC, having moved there from the WU, is familiar with the personalities and the remit of both organizations.

The WNC: policies and projects

The Steering Group approved a set of priorities for the WNC at its meeting in January 2000: the pay gap between women and men; the need to redesign work and welfare systems around the shapes of women's lives; establishing secure funding for women's refuge services; establishing a Parliamentary Committee on Equality; raising women's representation in decision making; and women's health and education issues (*WNC News*, 2000:1). These will shape the plans which the WNC presents to the government, exchanges between partners and discussions with the Ministers for Women. This is in addition to the responsibility for coordinating comments on the Beijing Process from women's organizations. This dates back to the 1995 Conference and has entailed annual responses; it was also concerned with input to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (Beijing +5), the meeting at which the progress of each participating nation was assessed.⁷

The activities of the WNC go in two directions: collecting and disseminating information among partners and facilitating their development through conferences and seminars; and briefing and informing MPs, which may include bringing in experts from partner organizations to speak to MPs. It is also taking on specific projects, either alone or in conjunction with the EOC or WU, for which its integration with women's organizations is both a resource and a mark of legitimacy. Recent projects include 'Future Female: A 21st Century Gender Perspective', and 'Women 2000', a report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the UK (WNC, 1999).

The WNC receives copies of all consultation documents circulating in government and decides which to pass among partners for comment. Partners receive monthly newsletters which keep them up to date with parliamentary matters, relevant consultation documents, details of meetings and campaigns, and advertisements for public appointments. Partners are expected to express views on consultation documents and to pass on other relevant information. The WNC is able to reflect the views of the partners back to the government. This enables government to respond to informed opinion on its policies and may give advance warning on a controversial issue. One of the most disruptive issues in the early stages of this government (that occurred prior to the reconstitution of the WNC) was a change to the benefit system that was widely interpreted as a reduction in benefit to some lone parents. The WNC passed a resolution condemning the change and the then Chair, Valerie Evans, appeared on television condemning the change. Arguably, if the government had possessed the sort of information that the WNC now aims to provide, it might have altered its path.

The WNC: partners and government

The WNC believes that the present government is willing to listen to arguments on behalf of women's interests, although partners think that it could do more for women. Recent analysis of the Chancellor's decisions on taxation

and welfare benefits, for example, show that the system is tending towards benefiting children. This supports the general contention that the government, and in particular the Chancellor, is sympathetic to a gender agenda.

An active partner in the WNC, which provides a good example of how the organization can work with its members and how those members can work with the government, is the Women's Budget Group (WBG). The WNC supports this think-tank of academics and activists by providing a place to meet and administrative services for meetings. It also helps to organize meetings and arranges meetings with the Treasury. The WBG is able to bring information provided by partner organizations to bear on economic policy and the Treasury appears to be open to this source of information. According to the report *Women 2000*, '[s]ince the election of the Labour Government in 1997 the Treasury has actively consulted the WBG as part of the Government's policy of mainstreaming gender issues' (WNC, 1999:14). The WBG is recommending to the government the establishment of a Parliamentary Committee on Equality that would, among other things, oversee government work on gendering the Budget. It also recommends the publication by government of an annual budget for women that would include an analysis of expenditure on women and men as well as taking account of women's unpaid contribution to the economy (WNC, 1999:16).

Women 2000

Women 2000 is a good example of what the unusual positioning of the WNC enables it to do. The Beijing Conference of 1995 produced a Platform for Action on Women that all signatories, of which the UK was one, were obliged to pursue. In the follow-up to Beijing, and in preparation for Beijing +5, in June 2000 a questionnaire was sent to governments by the UN in order to assess the implementation of the Platform for Action. The UK government responded to the questionnaire. At this time the WNC put the government's responses out to partner organizations for their comments, and from these produced *Women 2000*. *Women 2000*

is more than a summary of government responses and the reaction of women's organizations to those responses: in its second and third sections it considers and makes recommendations with regard to key financial and institutional mechanisms and reports in detail on progress against all the Critical Areas of Concern of the Platform for Action.

Each of the twelve Critical Areas of Concern of the Platform (Women and Poverty, Education and Training of Women, Women and Health, Violence against Women, Women and Armed Conflict, Women and the Economy, Women in Power and Decision Making, Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women, Human Rights of Women, Women and the Media, Women and the Environment and the Girl Child) is addressed twice in *Women 2000*. In the first section, the Platform for Action demands on the government are placed against the UK government response and the reaction from the women from partner organizations who responded through the WNC. For example, under the heading 'Violence':

What the PfA says governments must do:

- make sure women feel safe to report violence;
- provide well funded refuges;
- fund local campaigns against violence;
- train police, doctors, and judges to understand the effects of violence on women;
- support women's groups in stopping female genital mutilation;
- encourage the media to examine the effect of the images of women which they publish, and how this encourages violence.

What our Government has done and is doing:

- has developed the very first national strategy on violence against women;
- has made female genital mutilation illegal;
- has allocated £250 million to crime prevention;
- is funding awareness campaigns;
- has provided guidance to the police and to housing officials on helping women who have reported violence;
- is building up a database of local domestic violence services.

What women are saying to us:

- two women a week are murdered by their partners in this country: there must be secure core funding for refuge support services, help-lines, and counselling, so that services are available all over the country, and not just in some places; and are not dependent on Lottery funding;

- a legal duty on local councils to re-house women who leave their homes because of violence;
- better conviction rates for rape;
- a strong effort to stop female genital mutilation where it is still practised, and prosecute those who carry it out;
- the laws which can force mothers to allow violent and abusive fathers visiting rights to their children, who are often very afraid of them, must be changed;
- special protection from the police for refuge services and refuge workers.

In the third section the comments from partner organizations are presented under the same headings in the form of a summary of all that has been undertaken by government and non-governmental organizations, and recommendations for further development. In this section the consideration of violence runs to six pages, giving a general overview of the occurrence of violence and sexual abuse in the UK and then detailing the coordinated multi-agency approach at all levels of government to combating violence, as developed by the Women's Aid Federation, England in 1998. The report notes steps that have been taken and makes a range of far-reaching recommendations for changes in policy and legislation.

The document constitutes a valuable resource for organizations mobilizing around particular issues since it gives the position of the Platform for Action, government response, and both comments and recommendations from a range of women's organizations, which thereby possess legitimacy. It is an effective source of pressure on government but also a powerful tool *for* government, since it provides the legitimacy of 'the informed opinions of women' should government want to pursue any of the recommended courses of action.

The WNC and the partners

Part of the legitimacy of the WNC derives from the broad range of its partners; however, the question arises as to what extent there can be a shared point of view among such divergent groups. Are the Union of Catholic Mothers, Stonewall (a gay rights group) and the Women's Engineering

Society ever likely to share an opinion? This is a common problem of representation and perhaps something of a red herring. There is no single, coherent women's viewpoint; the entire trajectory of feminism since the 1970s has demonstrated the range of women's perspectives. In an organization such as the WNC it is unlikely that all partner organizations will be interested in making a case on all issues; those organizations that do participate at a particular time may share a broad perspective while differing on details, or may differ radically. The role of the WNC, like that of the Trades Union Congress or Confederation of British Industry, is to present those views to government in their complexity, whether as a single report with the different opinions weighted, or as majority and minority reports. It is then up to the government to work with the range of women's concerns, rather than to simplify the issues.

The approach of the WNC is, in the broadest and most general sense, feminist. This is evident in its focus on strategic gender needs rather than practical gender needs. Focusing on strategy means taking the long view, and having some vision with regard to the sort of society being aimed at. Satisfying the criteria of strategic gender needs is more likely to entail changing the society in the direction of gender fairness than satisfying practical gender needs.

Conclusion

With all advisory organizations, the most difficult and most important question is always whether or not they wield effective influence. The WNC is no exception. WNC officers maintain that MPs take up issues that are presented to them and respond to the briefings and information passed on to them. In *Women 2000* the WBG quotes two instances of success: 'modifications to the new Working Families Tax Credit, allowing households a choice in who claims the tax credit; and the insistence on the importance of independent taxation may have been a factor in influencing the decision not to tax child benefit' (WNC, 1999:15). In her discussion paper, *Institutional Mechanisms for Women within the UK Government*, Janet Veitch comments, 'There are mixed

views on how effective these mechanisms are . . . There is a degree of consensus that the mechanisms are important and worthwhile' (Veitch, 1999:6).

As part of the civil service the WNC and its officers are bound by conventions of secrecy and therefore cannot broadcast their successes or failures. Confidential advice reflecting the opinions of women's organizations is provided to ministers, MPs and government. If information or advice is ignored, no one outside of government is any the wiser; if it is accepted, only an unusually humble government minister would give credit to an advisory body for a smart piece of policy design. There is a fine line between overt lobbying and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring and as a governmental body the WNC's remit is to collect and present the views of women, not to take a position or to promote those views. On the other hand, if government does not take account of the information and advice it is offered, the partner organizations have the data for themselves with which to mobilize external pressure on government.

The WNC has changed rapidly. Although the changes are to the advantage of both the organization and the promotion of women's opinions, there is a concern that the large number of new partners may not work efficiently at the outset because many of them will not know how to use the organization. It has tended to work very much on a personal level, with contacts in various organizations knowing each other and people in the WNC offices; this may change as a result of sheer numbers. Not all partners will be active, at least not on all issues. The efficacy of the networked organization will be constrained if contacts keep information to themselves; therefore some analysis will be required of both levels of participation and the penetration of ideas and information beyond the named contact in each partner organization.

The WNC operates at national and international levels, formally and informally. The experience of local government women's committees illuminated certain characteristics of cross-departmental bodies, which the WNC confirms. Formal placement in the wider organization matters, as do resources and the status of personnel, but these are overshadowed by informal factors. Support from significant figures in government matters, the access of personnel to

influential people and important forums matters. These intangible facilities are invisible to the observer or researcher and in assessing the efficacy of an organization compound the problem already presented by civil service secrecy. At present the informal factors appear to be working for the WNC, but it is not hard to imagine that a change of government or even personnel could disrupt this. For this reason, if no other, stronger institutional support for gender equality is required. Therefore the WNC is 'calling for a select committee on equality to be set up, to complement the work of the Cabinet Committee and to scrutinize all legislation to ensure it is "mainstreamed". We would like to see a Public Service Agreement which dealt specifically with equality to ensure that all Departments set and meet equality targets' (Veitch, 1999:6).

The WNC is well placed within government and, at present, well supported by significant figures. Its new structure enhances its legitimacy as a voice for women in policy making and particularly with regard to the Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (Beijing +5). It is making the right sort of moves, but its efficacy will only become apparent in the longer term as the policies of this government translate into action. The real test will be whether its central position becomes entrenched and lasts beyond the 1997 government.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Janet Veitch and Vicky Andreasson at the Women's National Commission for their valuable information and useful discussion. I hope I have not misrepresented their positions.
- 2 There had been a nominal post of Minister for Women under previous (Conservative) governments, but this responsibility had been held jointly with other posts and had never been given any real weight.
- 3 Thanks to Kath Davies of Engender and the Scottish Joint Action Group, partner groups in the WNC, for the information used here. The WNC does not figure in the Cabinet Diaries of the time, nor in the memoirs of Harold Wilson, then Prime Minister. It may owe its genesis to either Richard Crossman, who was responsible for the Department of Health and Social Security at the time, or to Barbara Castle, who had responsibility for equal pay.

- 4 For a period prior to the 1997 election the Labour Party operated a women-only shortlist system for the selection of candidates for safe seats. This was contested by two male Labour Party members and found to be in breach of sex discrimination law. Although the ruling is flawed (the position of MPs is not, after all, a job) Labour did not appeal. Constituencies could choose to reselect where a candidate had come from a women-only shortlist, but few chose to do so. The measure, although short lived, resulted in a far higher proportion of women candidates running for safe seats (and winning them) than usual.
- 5 The Government Review Group was made up of Joan Ruddock, MP; Minister for Women (Chair), Baroness Gould of Potternewton; and Anna Coote, Special Adviser to the Right Honourable Harriet Harman, Minister for Women; supported by WU officials.
- 6 Nolan refers to a government committee and report that laid down guidelines for transparency and accountability in the conduct of government, including the members of the governing bodies of public organizations.
- 7 Kath Davies of Engender and the Scottish Joint Action Group provided information on this.