‘The Best of Times, the Worst of Times’:
Women as Executive Leaders in Anglo-American Political Development

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Abstract

In political development, two types of time – linear and cyclical – affect the prospects of female executives in Anglo-American systems. Linear, historical time has generally concentrated power in the executive, making it increasingly difficult for most women to meet masculinist expectations and norms of leadership. Presidentialization of the executive reflects and facilitates this trend. Cyclical, political time affects both style and substance: It can fuel fluctuations in the gendered nature of leadership and generate regime change. In the late 20th century, political time produced the neo-liberal regime that obstructed executives who tried to advance the interests of women as a group, although the 21st century signals the start of a shift that could create a new regime more favorable to feminist policies and feminalist leadership. To understand the obstacles and opportunities female executives encounter in Anglo nations requires a two-tier historical analysis of their place in political development. This paper examines the impact of two types of time on women as prime ministers and cabinet ministers in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Employing mainly qualitative analysis, this research relies on a variety of sources including parliamentary records, public opinion polls, news accounts, political memoirs, and elite interviews.
“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” Charles Dickens declares at the start of his classic novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. That famous statement could be invoked by the women’s movement and women as executive leaders today. It alludes to the disparity in opportunity for two groups that coexist, and it might apply to gender now as it did to class in Dickens’s day. More relevant to this research, his simple statement points to a paradox in political development: A single moment can constitute both the best and the worst of times.

In political development, two types of time – linear and cyclical – affect the prospects of women as executives in Anglo-American systems. Linear, historical time has generally concentrated power in the executive, making it increasingly difficult for most women to meet masculinist expectations and norms of leadership. Presidentialization of the executive reflects and facilitates this trend. Cyclical, political time affects both style and substance: It can fuel fluctuations in the gendered nature of leadership and generate regime change. In the late 20th century, political time produced the neo-liberal regime that obstructed executives who tried to advance the interests of women as a group, although the 21st century signals the start of a shift that could create a new regime more favorable to feminist policies and feminalist leadership. To understand the obstacles and opportunities female executives encounter in Anglo nations requires a two-tier historical analysis of their place in political development. This paper examines the impact of two types of time on women as prime ministers and cabinet ministers in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom.¹

Political development closely connects Anglo nations, and as a result they follow roughly the same trajectories in both types of time. In particular, a “Britonnic network” has linked women’s movements across the Atlantic and the Pacific (Belich 2001: 167), and the success of those movements has helped propel women into positions of executive leadership. To examine their leadership in the context of political development, this research employs mainly qualitative analysis, using a variety of sources including parliamentary records, public opinion polls, news accounts, political memoirs, and elite interviews. The experiences of female executives indicate how political development can alter the gendered nature of Anglo institutions and ideology with significant implications for the leadership of both women and men.

**Introduction**

By the twenty-first century, executive leadership had assumed a central role in the politics and policy making of Anglo systems, even in New Zealand despite its steps to stem the growth of executive authority through electoral reform. National “chief executives” have acquired a capacity to set the agenda that usually supercedes that of other political actors in cabinet, the parties, and the legislature. Moreover, executive leaders loom large in the public imagination and consciousness of citizens, who tend to look especially to the president or prime minister for solutions to the nation’s
fundamental problems. To advance their interests, movements or groups need access to influence the president or prime minister and opportunities to occupy the executive itself.

Despite the centrality of executive leadership – or perhaps because of it – few women have become political executives in Anglo-American systems. Only two Anglo nations have elected women as prime ministers: Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom (1979-1990) and Helen Clark in New Zealand (1999-2008). Two other women became prime minister but then failed to win a general election: Kim Campbell in Canada (1993) and Jenny Shipley in New Zealand (1997-1999). In recent decades, many more women have moved into cabinet posts, but most of their records reflect limited success. Once in positions of executive leadership, very few women have managed to achieve their central policy goals, especially when they have tried to benefit women as a group. To understand the challenges female executives encounter, consider first the gendered nature of Anglo institutions and ideology and then how time can alter it.

The legal foundation and political structure of most Anglo systems pose distinct challenges for women because their adversarial institutional arrangements tend to generate “masculinist” expectations and norms of executive leadership. Masculinism denotes the preference given to conventional masculine attributes such as strength, determination, and decisiveness (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995). To facilitate programmatic change, adversarial systems concentrate power in the executive, and to ensure accountability, they rely on combat between two major political parties. In the combative environment of adversarial parliaments, party leaders – especially prime ministers and cabinet ministers – usually need to demonstrate that they are tough enough for the job.

Liberalism constitutes the dominant ideology of Anglo nations, and it also proves predominantly masculinist (DiStefano 1991). In classical theory, liberalism embraces the concept of a disembodied, genderless individual. Among other things, that makes it difficult for women to seek redress under the law for the concrete ways that their experiences differ from those of men. In nations where liberalism dominates, feminist leaders who become executives are likely to be liberal feminists, and so the liberal ideological framework limits the degree of change they seek to engender even in the best of times (Tong 1998).

On the other hand, Anglo institutions and ideology also include aspects of governance that could be construed as “feminalist.” The conceptual counterpart of masculinism, feminalism favors conventional attributes associated with women such as cooperation, conciliation, and consensus building. Even with adversarial arrangements, Anglo institutions usually operate with a high degree of consensus, and debate takes place within a constitutional context of mutually agreed-upon principles. To secure individual rights, classic liberal theorists promoted a political order that would generate consensus and require compromise or conciliation for the sake of stability. (Feminist theorists have observed that liberal feminism tends to make radical feminism invisible, but in general liberalism intends to marginalize radical threats to the regime [Locke 2002]). Yet another aspect of classic liberalism favors feminalism: As a philosophy, it
emphasizes individual freedom, but its assumptions about the value of freedom depend on the existence of equal rights. Even in classic liberal theory, the collective concerns of civil society determine the range and reach of rights. If Anglo institutions and ideology contain both masculinist and feminalist elements, then the gendered nature of governance will shift at different junctures in political development. As a result, time itself becomes gendered, although development generates types of time that can fail to move simultaneously in the same gender-specific direction.

Linear, historical time has tended to magnify the masculinism of the executive. The increased concentration of power in the executive has produced at least some degree of presidentialization in parliamentary systems and the politicization of presidential ones. In theory, a female executive could seize the opportunities inherent in the position of a presidentialized premier and use them to set a feminist agenda. It would be much more difficult for her to adopt a feminalist style of leadership and still satisfy the linear, historical demands of executive. Cyclical, political time creates fluctuations in the gendered nature of leadership expectations and norms, but when the two types of time collide, women prove more likely than men are to get caught in the collision.

In recent decades, cyclical, political time has also shaped the substance of public policy in gender-specific ways, producing negative consequences for most women. Just as the modern women’s movement crested, the wave of neo-liberal change washed away many of its gains. Neo-liberals rolled back the state and revived nineteenth century free-market principles, exacerbating some of the most masculinist aspects of liberal ideology. By shifting the liberal agenda from equality to equity (fairness and impartiality), it reinforced the masculinist bias of classic liberal theory. In some but not all Anglo nations, neoliberals also advocated social conservatism, encouraging a return to traditional family values and roles. No matter the manifestation, neoliberalism required severe cuts in social programs, dismantled feminist policy machinery within the state, and attacked women’s groups as “special interests” with the effect of marginalizing them (Bashevkin 1998, Sawer 2007, Grey and Sawer 2008.)

More directly relevant to this research, neoliberalism affected the women who remained in or continued to gain executive office. Budgetary constraints made it difficult for female executives to promote new social and economic programs – or even preserve existing ones. As a result, the neo-liberal cycle of political time imposed limits on the ambition and creativity of feminists in positions of executive leadership, though that might be starting to change. A new political cycle could open windows of opportunity for women in general and for the female leaders who wish to advance their interests.

I. Women as Prime Ministers in Two Types of Time

In Anglo systems, female prime ministers generally fall along the same trajectory in linear, historical time, but individual leaders take office at different moments in political time. The cycle of political time includes stages of regime construction, maintenance, and degeneration, and these stages help shape the scope of leadership
opportunities (Skowronek 2006). Leaders have the greatest latitude at constructive or reconstitutive moments; then they struggle to maintain the regime as its support diminishes, until finally they face few options as they preside over the regime’s degeneration and demise. The combined leadership of female prime ministers spans three decades – from 1979 until 2008 – a period that tends to witness increased executive authority with the phenomenon of presidentialization in linear time and includes the full cycle of the neo-liberal regime in political time. Only four cases prevent producing any definitive findings or conclusions, but their experience does suggest how the two types of time can affect the character and consequences of women as prime ministers.

**Margaret Thatcher (1979-90)**

Time alone did not make Margaret Thatcher prime minister, but both types of time invited her leadership – and she made the most of her times. By 1979, linear, historical time had been increasing the scope of executive authority and its independent exercise, and presidentialization was already well underway. At this particular reconstitutive moment, political time magnified the masculinism of the executive in linear time, and it opened the opportunity to usher in a new public philosophy whose substance also proved to be highly masculinist. Revealing the reciprocal relationship between time and leadership, Thatcher seized these opportunities and facilitated these developments.

When British voters elected Thatcher’s Conservative party in 1979, they wanted strong prime ministerial leadership – a preference that reflected the historical trend of increased independence of (and dependence on) the executive but one that also responded to the moment in political time. At that juncture in political development, the electorate was looking for leadership capable of compensating for the loss of empire and reversing the fortunes of a declining economy. Thatcher and her party provided a sharp contrast to her opponents in Labour, who were wounded by internecine warfare and identified with the discredited Keynesian Welfare State (KWS) regime.

Thatcher responded to the call for strong leadership by adopting and advocating an approach she described as “conviction politics.” A highly masculinist style, conviction politics requires the leader to articulate principles and then promote them by crushing opponents. Shunning any attempts to build consensus or conciliate, Thatcher attacked those who advocate consensus as dithering and indecisive, trying to “satisfy people holding no particular views about anything” (Thatcher 1995, 148-150). She even derided her intra-party opponents – “one-nation Tories” – as effete or “wet,” as in naïve little boys wet behind the ears. While she mocked and diminished her opponents by attributing feminine qualities to them, her own conviction-style leadership enabled her to meet the masculinist expectations of executive leadership in the combative environment of the British adversarial system. By appearing tough, firm, and determined, Thatcher showed how women who practice conviction politics can convey the leadership attributes that linear, historical time requires and her own political time rewarded.
Once in office, her style also proved to be distinctly presidential as she went over the heads of her cabinet ministers and preferred to rely on private advisors at 10 Downing Street. (She liked to say she was the only man in cabinet, although she was also willing to invoke female images – queen or housewife – when it suited her purpose [Webster 1990].) Indeed, she had a pronounced tendency to take an independent stance and go public with it – at home and abroad. Polls show her leadership style helped her build and maintain public support, and throughout most of her premiership, the style of her leadership mattered even more than the substance of her ideology.4

At a moment in political time ripe for the neo-liberal revolution, Thatcher also advanced her ideology in terms that emphasized its masculine features and extolled its masculine virtues. According to Thatcher, rolling back the state would benefit members of society by encouraging rugged individualism, and the expansion of the free market would fuel the fierce competition necessary to produce prosperity. By contrast, the vast corporate state had made individuals dependent and weak, and those who wished to maintain social programs were not compassionate and caring as they alleged, but “whimpering and whining” for help. Harking back to the Victorian era, Thatcher suggested that it is the role of women to practice womanly virtues in the private sphere of the home. Meanwhile, she projected the manliness of her ideas into the international arena, where she took a tough approach to defeating those whom she deemed the enemies of individual freedom. During the Falklands war, the prime minister with a preference for Victorian values became the embodiment of the heroine of the Victorian era, the ancient Queen Boadicea, the woman warrior who valiantly fought to fend off Roman conquerors (Warner 1987, 49-51). Even earlier, Thatcher had joined forces with US President Ronald Reagan in his battle against the Evil Empire, and her fierce anti-communism led her to acquire the title of Iron Lady. The substance as well as the style proved to be in sync with the masculinist moment in which she came to power.

At this point, political development clearly linked Anglo-American nations – in style and substance and both types of time. The call for strong leadership echoed across the Atlantic and the Pacific, producing “strong men” as national executives in the UK, the US, and Australia (Little 1988) – as well as Canada. Neoliberalism swept across most post-industrial democracies, but it had a more profound impact in Anglo nations where liberal individualism had already established deep roots. Most relevant here, the UK’s first and only female prime minister managed to meet the masculinism of her times by practicing a distinctly masculinist style of leadership and rejecting anything feminist or feminalist.

Political time does not stand still, however, and its progress eventually limited the leadership of Thatcher. When her tenure came to an end, her critics focused on her tough, aggressive style as the source of her demise (though her government’s unpopular poll tax and her resistance to the European Union provided immediate catalysts). One of her ministers summed up the change in time when he recalled “I always entertained the hope that Boadicea would become Florence Nightingale” and declared “That’s what we need now – Florence Nightingale” (Personal interview, John Biffen, July 2, 1990). In 1990 Thatcher’s own private consultants became alarmed when their polls showed the public
wanted more “caring” in government, and Thatcher fell well below her rivals on measures of “caring” and “compassion.” The very same feminalist features of leadership that Thatcher once disparaged as signs of feminine weakness were becoming popular in political time – though it remained unclear how female leaders would fare when the two types of time conflict.

*Kim Campbell (1993)*

Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell confronted the challenge of that collision in the 1990s. Linear, historical time continued to require a strong, independent executive, but political time generated new public expectations and altered leadership norms. In Canada, the electorate had grown tired of the tough tactics of its prime minister, Brian Mulroney. Moreover, his Progressive Conservatives (PC) – the party primarily responsible for the neo-liberal regime – slid into a state of rapid degeneration and stood on the verge of disintegration. As a result, when Campbell followed Mulroney, she inherited severely circumscribed leadership opportunities. The two types of time and the conflict between them posed leadership challenges for Campbell that Thatcher (for most of her premiership) had managed to escape.

Until 1993 and the demise of the Progressive Conservatives, Canada had a strong, two-party adversarial system with highly masculinist norms and expectations of executive leadership. As a neo-liberal reformer, Mulroney proved more pragmatic than some of his Anglo counterparts, but he was a tough, independent leader in a Conservative party that greatly admired strong leadership. (Arguably, parties are also gender-specific: Right-of-center parties tend to be more hierarchical and masculinist and left-of-center parties more egalitarian and feminalist.) Many of the problems Campbell encountered came from her own party whose elite disdained her feminist inclinations and feminalist style. Linear time – and the historic Conservative party (Canada’s oldest) – required that she perform as manfully as Mulroney, even though political time had made Mulroney and his party extremely unpopular.

Despite their unpopularity, by 1993 a neo-liberal consensus had emerged, the two major parties had converged, and executive leadership required regime maintenance. To a great extent, Campbell faced the same challenge as her Anglo counterparts US President George Herbert Walker Bush and British Prime Minister John Major. They needed to offer a softer style and moderate policies, thereby creating distance from their predecessors without denouncing their own parties or the neo-liberal policies they produced. These “kinder, gentler” times (to borrow a phrase coined by Bush) might be considered more feminalist – favoring traditional feminine attributes and thereby enhancing the prospects for a female leader. Yet in political times that call for conciliation, moderation, and maintaining consensus, traditional Anglo adversarial arrangements can continue to have highly masculinist expectations of executive leadership.
To a great extent, Campbell dealt with the dilemma by pursuing the same electoral strategy Major and Bush adopted. All of them avoided taking precise policy positions and issued mainly ambiguous, equivocal statements. Admittedly, their critics alleged that both Bush and Major lacked vision, and Campbell might have created the same impression during her 1993 campaign. Instead, as a woman, Campbell’s evasions conveyed incompetence and ignorance, and her vague statements raised doubts about her abilities. Before the general election and at the time of her selection, the popular press observed, “She has proven herself to be a highly intelligent, innovative politician who is certain of her opinions and unafraid of controversy” [Maclean’s, June 21, 1993]). A former university lecturer in political science, critics initially accused her of intellectual elitism. Nevertheless, when Campbell adopted the electoral strategy of her male counterparts, her public image went from egghead to airhead – and the media magnified the metamorphosis.

Campbell also failed to fulfill expectations of the executive when she adopted a distinctly feminist style of leadership. True to the egalitarian spirit of feminism, as prime minister she promised to practice “the politics of inclusion,” a phrase she frequently used as Justice Minister (Campbell 1996, 266). During her brief tenure as prime minister, she held cabinet meetings more frequently than her predecessor had, and she organized a national conference to consult provincial premiers. Rather than win praise for practicing participatory leadership, she appeared weak and unable to make decisions on her own. In addition, when she rejected attempts by media consultants to revamp her image, her refusal to be stage-managed made her seem naïve. As a feminist, Campbell wanted to defy stereotypes, not reinforce them, but she repeatedly ran up against the historical masculinist norms that persist even when political time shifts.

Finally, while she was criticized for her ambiguity and apparent uncertainty, Campbell also got into trouble when she articulated precise positions, especially when those positions reflected her feminism. She continued to advocate many neo-liberal policies and emphasize the importance of “fiscal responsibility,” but she was a feminist who believed the state should play a positive role in setting social policy. As Justice Minister, she had assigned top priority to women’s issues, especially abortion (which had just been decriminalized in 1988), gun control, and violence against women. She also convened a symposium on “women, law, and the administration of justice” in 1991, but later her own government rejected her proposals to reform the judicial system, because they would constitute “special treatment” for women. Feminalist moments in political time do not necessarily fuel feminist reform, especially when they occur in the midst of maintaining the neo-liberal regime.

The PCs suffered a devastating loss in 1993: With only two seats remaining, the party lost its official status in the House of Commons. It won roughly the same percentage of the vote that it had secured in the opinion polls when Mulroney resigned, but the party blamed Campbell for their demise and forced her to resign. While any PC leader could have lost that election, the character of Campbell’s campaign highlights the obstacles inherent in the conflicting demands of masculinist linear time and feminalist political time. Her experience also provides hints that it proves considerably more
difficult for a woman to adopt a feminalist style at any time within traditional adversarial Anglo systems.

**Jenny Shipley (1997-99)**

In 1996 New Zealanders tried to break with Anglo traditions and reverse the linear, historical trend of increased executive authority by adopting mixed member proportional (MMP) representation (with both constituency-based and party-list MPs). For most of the twentieth century, New Zealand had practiced the purest form of adversarial, Westminster politics – with a first-past-the-post (FPP) electoral system and a single-chamber parliament. Under that system, the nation witnessed extreme neo-liberal restructuring as it went from one of the most state-controlled economies to an open, unregulated market. To slow down the pace of change, electoral reformers tried to shift authority from the executive to the legislature – in this case, from cabinet to the House of Representatives. In theory, with MMP, governments would enact only very moderate, incremental change, and prime ministers who lead coalition governments would need to mediate among diverse interests, balance conflicting demands, and facilitate interpersonal relations. If reformers had succeeded, they would have managed to transform the linear, historical trend that rewards masculinist leadership into one that favors a feminalist approach.

Institutional change that favors feminalist leadership tends to narrow the scope of executive authority, as the brief tenure of Jenny Shipley’s premiership indicates. Shipley became New Zealand’s first woman prime minister in November 1997 when she successfully launched a coup to replace James Bolger, leader of the National party and prime minister since 1990. Asked about her initial goals, Shipley replied, “It was of course to try and achieve as much as we could under the new constraints of MMP… [Maintaining the coalition] in itself was a demanding requirement on both my leadership and on the goals” (Personal interview, April 29, 2003). The following July, Shipley’s coalition government lost its majority when an MP from New Zealand First, the coalition partner, became an independent and voted against the government. The next month, the coalition collapsed, and from then until the November 1999 election, she led a minority National government. To pursue legislation or win votes of confidence, the government depended on the support of non-government MPs, and Shipley confronted an increasingly assertive House. Designed to restrict executive authority, initially MMP appeared to work all too well.

During this period, Shipley insisted an adversarial atmosphere continued to characterize the House (a view her successor Helen Clark also expressed), but the times called for conciliatory, not confrontational, leadership. As Shipley explained:

> The adversarial nature of [parliament] is still there. And if you go and observe the New Zealand parliament, it’s still very vicious. What it did was require consensus-building skills. And having chaired a minority government for two years, I had to work with people who were not a
permanent part of the government. And so as a leader it’s much more demanding on your time.

At this point, an adversarial environment required a feminalist approach to leadership, a requirement that MMP did not create but made even more essential.

As in other Anglo nations, the moment in political time favored feminalism as it called for regime maintenance, not bold initiatives. Shipley recalled, “I think there was reform fatigue. [People were asking] ‘Do we always have to change? Does New Zealand always have to change?’ And indeed most of the changes we needed to make were completed by the late part of the 1990s.” In contrast to other Anglo systems, in New Zealand the Labour party initiated the neo-liberal reforms in the 1980s, and Labour’s main rival the conservative National party quickly endorsed them. By the 1990s, a neo-liberal consensus had emerged, but some aspects of the agenda were becoming controversial and contentious with the public. In response, both Labour and National started to advocate more moderate policies.

At this unique juncture in political development, when both linear and cyclical time favored feminalism, two women led the two largest parties in the 1999 election. An editorial writer for the New Zealand Herald captured the gendered nature of the contest when he observed, “Women will not be alone in looking forward to a more feminine style of debate (emphasis added)” (November 2, 1999). New Zealand voters wanted compassion and caring, not bold initiatives – a requirement both women “naturally” seemed able to fill. As one journalist put it, “[T]his election is about caring, not daring. It will not be the case of who dares wins, because none of the parties likely to win seats has any daring policies at all that they’ve announced to date” (North & South: Election 1999 Special Issue, September 1999). Labour promised change as its campaign theme – “a kinder, softer New Zealand” as Shipley put it – but it offered few concrete proposals. Throughout the campaign, both Shipley and Labour Leader Clark delivered vague, equivocal statements about their parties’ policies, and yet they escaped the harsh treatment Campbell received in Canada.

When National won only thirty one percent of the votes, its worst record in history, the results might have shaken Shipley’s status, but she continued as party leader for two more years. Although Labour initiated neo-liberal restructuring, National had been in government since 1990, and the party took more of the blame for its negative consequences. Clark replaced Shipley as prime minister after Labour won the highest percentage of the vote (almost forty two percent).

The feminalist nature of the two types of time provides one of many factors that facilitated the election of a female prime minister, and its independent influence is difficult to assess. Two female candidates leading the two largest parties leveled the gender playing field: Being a woman mattered much less than it generally does when a woman competes with a man. (The media focused less on gender in 1999 than they had in 1996 when Clark campaigned as the only female leader.) Moreover, New Zealand had already achieved higher representation of women in parliament than any other Anglo
country, and it was the only one to make the top-ten list worldwide. While not the only or an isolated factor, the feminalism of the times probably helped boost the representation and leadership of women throughout government. For a brief period after the 1999 election, women held all the top posts – prime minister, opposition leader, attorney general, governor general, and chief justice. A unique point in the political development of any Anglo nation, the 1999 election rendered the only moment when linear and cyclical times favored a feminalist approach to leadership. Nevertheless, the moment that favored a feminalist approach to leadership – with its circumscribed authority – would not last long, as Clark demonstrated during her three terms as prime minister.

Helen Clark (1999-2008)

Clark’s place in political development makes her a transitional figure. In linear, historical time, while she skillfully worked within the new MMP system, she also found ways to circumvent its constraints and exercise independent executive authority. By doing so, she put prime ministerial leadership back on the track that rewards masculinist attributes in the executive. In cyclical, political time, Clark led at a point when neoliberalism was waning, and she shifted the direction of public policy – though she stopped short of constructing a new regime. Opportunities to facilitate change existed in both types of time, but they were much greater in linear than cyclical time.

When Clark became prime minister, political time continued to require regime maintenance, and at first, she declared she only wanted to halt neo-liberal change, not reverse it. She had remained in the Labour party when its 4th government initiated the neo-liberal agenda, and as prime minister she initially promised to maintain the public philosophy of her predecessors. In particular, she refused to renounce “Rogernomics,” a term that derives its name from Finance Minister Roger Douglas, the man who carried out New Zealand’s version of Reaganomics or Thatcherism. At the start of her first government, she continued to emphasize “the need to be a responsible fiscal manager,” and when she described her goals, she explained, “We’ve set modest objectives that are achievable. They’re not flipping the society back to pre-1984, but they’re about moving forward in ways more familiar in Europe under [recent] social democratic governments” (quoted in Time International, August 14, 2000). Strategically situating her party in the middle of the ideological spectrum, she initially endorsed the centrist approach of US President William Clinton and British PM Tony Blair known as the Third Way.

Yet Clark always differed from these men in the value she placed on social and economic policies that affect women. She is a self-described feminist who first became involved in politics as a student activist in the women’s movement. In an interview during her second government, she rendered a feminist analysis of her government’s achievements. As she explained, their social and economic programs served to benefit women more than men, “because women in the end have a greater reliance on an active state than men do.” And she offered several reasons for their reliance:
Because they tend to be in the low-income groups that are more likely to access the health system when they are sick. Because they’ve got the care of children. They’re more likely to be caring for elderly, poor relatives, and the state support system is important to them. Public housing is more important than it is to male-headed households. Fair labor laws are more important because they tend to be more vulnerable in a free market situation… Important programs in the public superannuation scheme, which more women are totally dependent on for income in retirement.

(Personal interview, April 14, 2003)

Clark continued to mention the achievements that she believed “made a difference to women,” including boosting minimum wages, strengthening labor laws, introducing paid parental leave, and appointing a new Employment Equity Commissioner on the Human Rights Commission. Despite her initial modest aspirations, Clark renationalized some industries, recentralized the public sector, and reinstated “a kinder welfare state,” efforts that indicate she came to “consciously eschew the triangulation strategies” of Blair and Clinton (Simms 2008). Her own remarks suggest that her feminism motivated her to move public policy away from neoliberalism and toward greater state involvement.

At the same time, however, while Clark explained that she wanted to do even more in education, health, and housing, she declared she remained constrained by economic factors. As she put it:

[W]e see ourselves as a government of steady improvement. We spend as we can. We’re quite fiscally conservative. We don’t like deficits, and New Zealand’s had to struggle out of them. We had a history of big deficits in a poor economic situation. And we don’t go around cutting people’s taxes. We get the revenue in and we spend it on the things we think are most important.

Her emphasis on “fiscal responsibility” stifled her social agenda and kept her within the confines of neo-liberal thinking. In terms of time, Clark appears trapped between the end of one regime cycle and the transition to a new one, able to achieve only as much as political time would permit. Unable or unwilling to articulate a new public philosophy, Clark failed to construct a new regime – though she labored to lay the foundations for one in the future.

Initially, linear, historical time also seemed the same for Clark as for Shipley, more conducive to feminalist leadership in a context of circumscribed authority. For her first government, Clark managed to reach a coalition agreement with the Alliance, while convincing the Greens and New Zealand First to support her government on votes of confidence. To make matters even more challenging, the Alliance leader Jim Anderton had previously left the Labour party in opposition to its neo-liberal policies, and the relationship between Clark and Anderton had been extremely tense before they formed a government together. Nevertheless, they established a good working relationship, and when she formed her third government following the 2005 election, he provided the
critical support she needed. (By then a Progressive, Anderton was the only member of her inner cabinet outside the Labour party.) In between, she managed to negotiate a complicated agreement with the other parties in order to sustain her minority government after the 2002 election. Throughout her tenure as prime minister, she governed effectively within the MMP system – successfully mediating among interests and maintaining consensus. Yet ultimately she succeeded only by circumventing many institutional constraints (new and old) and exercising independent executive authority.

When interviewed, Clark emphasized the opportunities rather than the obstacles inherent in her position, and she downplayed the constraints of MMP. According to Clark, cabinet continued to meet weekly and the meetings consumed much of her time, but it failed to limit her leadership. She explained that managing her own party in cabinet and caucus became easier because MMP had made the Labour party more ideologically cohesive. Moreover, while the Labour caucus technically chooses ministers, by the second government Clark alleged she could recommend ministers and the caucus would quickly comply with her choice – an indication that she proved able to parlay poll results into greater party influence. Furthermore, after 2005, her government no longer observed cabinet solidarity. Clark’s old inter-party adversary Shipley described what she saw as the decline of cabinet and recalled:

In fact one of the characteristics of the government of the 1990s was that if you went out on the street and asked who was in government, they’d be able to quote senior ministers just like that [snap of fingers]. If you go down on the street now and ask how many people they know in the current government – if you choose ten people – you won’t find any who can quote a senior minister.

The notoriety of finance ministers in the 1980s and 90s (as well as Shipley’s own record and reputation as Social Services Minister) seem to support the view that cabinet’s place in the political order changed under Clark. Rather than rely on cabinet, Clark preferred to use her own advisors for policy expertise and political advice.

Clark also insisted that parliament posed few obstacles to her leadership. Like Shipley, Clark believed parliament continued to operate with an adversarial atmosphere, and she explained that norms had not altered with institutional change. Unlike Shipley, however, Clark saw advantages in being able to command a working, multi-party majority against multiple opponents arrayed as the opposition. Asked specifically whether MMP had created a more assertive, perhaps even unruly House, Clark quickly responded “That’s not true [laugh]. Well, it’s what you make of that…[T]he whole way you run this job is entirely fashioned by personality and style.” More significant and revealing, Clark insisted that “actually parliament as a forum is less and less important than it ever was.” And she explained why:

What’s happened I think is that the parliamentary systems are transforming themselves into presidential systems. We’re the head of government as prime minister just as the American president is the head of
government. So there are certain functions that go with being the head of government – and sitting around parliament for hours isn’t one of them.

Clark continued by discussing her time spent “out and about at public functions” and dealing with the press. With her cadre of consultants and private pollsters, she preferred to go public with policies rather than promote them in parliament, avoiding the legislative arena as US presidents are inclined to do.

The presidentialization that Clark describes contradicts reformers’ intentions and scholars’ predictions when New Zealand adopted MMP (Jackson 2001; James 2001). Paradoxically, electoral reform has fueled presidentialization, shifting power from cabinet to the prime minister rather than from cabinet to the House. Arguably, the strength of cabinet government in the old Westminster-style system served to thwart presidentialization in the 1980s and early 1990s. Furthermore, altered institutional norms failed to follow electoral reform, and parliament continued to function as an adversarial assembly. Presidentialization combined with adversarial arrangements greatly expands the scope of executive authority. MMP might have slowed the pace of presidentialization – when New Zealand is compared with its Anglo counterparts rather than with its own past – but it has not prevented it.

II. Women as Cabinet Ministers in Two Types of Time

In contrast to prime ministers who can sometimes shape and affect the pace of political development, cabinet ministers prove more vulnerable to masculinist macro trends. Where it has occurred, presidentialization has provided a significant aspect of linear, historical time that severely circumscribes the authority of female ministers. At the same time, the dominant ideology of the neo-liberal regime has restricted female ministers with feminist agendas. For ministers who wish to advance the interests of women as a group, both types of time have colluded to constrain their influence.

**Linear, Historical Time: The Consequences of Presidentialization**

For several decades, social scientists, political journalists, and politicians have been documenting and debating the creeping centralization and concentration of authority in the executive. Initially considered “prime ministerial” government (Crossman 1972), more recently the phenomenon has evolved into the presidentialization of parliamentary systems (Foley 1993 and 2000, Poguntke and Webb 2005). In the US, observers first detected the development of the “administrative presidency” (Nathan 1983) and then its politicization (Moe 1985, Dickinson 2005). Whether parliamentary or presidential, this linear, historical trend traces the increasing tendency of chief executives to go their own way by relying on their personal staff and circumventing the institutions of the legislature, parties, and cabinet. Furthermore, within this development the individual prime minister or president has moved to center stage, adding an element of personalization (Campbell 1998). Several factors fuel presidentialization, including the
erosion of social cleavages, the decline of political parties, the internationalization of politics, growth of the state, and changes in mass communications (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Other factors can halt or even temporarily reverse the trend, including political circumstances and the personal preferences of the prime minister (Rhodes 2005 and 2007). Despite debate about the degree and dimensions of presidentialization, most scholars agree that when it occurs, it diminishes the authority of cabinet ministers.

Presidentialization effectively limits all ministers, but it has hit women harder than men. Female ministers usually lack the personal clout to compensate for the loss of cabinet’s institutional integrity. Moreover, presidentialization has occurred when and where women were starting to increase their representation in cabinet. In this case, one aspect of linear, historical time limited another – as presidentialization put an end to the leadership momentum of the women’s movement in its efforts to increase the impact of women as cabinet ministers.

The British Presidency and “Blair’s Babes”

While the extent of presidentialization varies among Anglo nations, British Labour governments under Prime Minister Blair dramatically demonstrate how the phenomenon can erode the institutional integrity of cabinet and restrict the influence of individual ministers. Governments in the UK had few female ministers until Labour won the 1997 general election. In opposition, the Labour party had taken several affirmative steps to increase the representation of women, adopting women-only short lists for parliamentary candidates and reserving at least three spots in the shadow cabinet. When Labour won the election, the party required Prime Minister Blair to bring members of the shadow cabinet into government. The new female ministers were among the 101 Labour women who won seats – and whom the *Times* (of London) immediately dubbed “Blair’s Babes.” That derisive description rendered an early indication of their subsequent dependence on the prime minister and diminished stature as cabinet ministers.

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1997-99) Mo Mowlam was one of many ministers who expressed the frustration she felt within Blair’s cabinet, even as she reflected on her success outside it. According to Mowlam, a feminalist approach to management had enhanced her ability to negotiate among the conflicting parties in Northern Ireland. As she recalled, “I think [being a woman] made a difference because I was used to listening. Men don’t listen well. And I was used to accommodating…It’s natural [for women]” (Personal interview, July 14, 2004; see also Mowlam 2002). By contrast to the atmosphere she nurtured in the negotiations, cabinet provided a distinctly different environment in which a single man dominated.

While Mowlam joined the other women who believed “the cabinet was not functioning as cabinet government should,” she also expressed her regret that the prime minister’s presidential style prevented women from making their unique contribution. She explained:
I mean I can give you the line that Tony is sympathetic to women. You know what the line is, but he doesn’t listen to anybody [in cabinet] but Gordon Brown. And Gordon Brown is even worse. I don’t think any of them actually fundamentally thinks they need women there. And they do. I think women are better politicians. They’re better conciliators. So I think there are a lot of advantages women bring to politics, but [the men] don’t necessarily benefit from them…My views are quite jaundiced because I think they use us for window dressing, and they haven’t actually accepted us as bone fide women MPs.

Mowlam’s experience led her to acquire that jaundiced view. After she successfully concluded the agreement that produced the Good Friday Peace Accord in 1998, Blair sacked her and put his personal friend Peter Mandelson in the post. In her memoirs, she recalled the distinctly gendered “whispering campaign” conducted against her at the time. Like many other ministers, she described how the Number 10 press machine enables prime ministers to quell opposition and discredit opponents – within their own government.

Among the women in Blair’s governments, Secretary of State for International Development (1997-2003) Clare Short proved to be the staunchest, most outspoken critic of his leadership. As she described it, “Tony doesn’t run a cabinet of equals… [He’s] a very, very great centralizer and dominator.” Moreover, Short extended her critique beyond the prime minister’s personal style. She understood fully the implications of presidentialization for women in cabinet when she recalled:

It wasn’t just the women who were being excluded, but as women took their place in parliament, took their place in cabinet, power moved. I don’t think it’s cause and effect, but it does have consequences for women. You have your own departments, but now I think you’ve got this overruling of departments on some questions by Number 10 and all these clever young people he employs (emphasis added) (Personal interview, July 8, 2004).

Instead of cabinet ministers, “little groups in Number 10 decide on policy initiatives that [the prime minister] thinks will triangulate well,” and Short added, “It is notable that the inner group have no women in them.” By the time women arrived at the cabinet room, power had moved to 10 Downing Street, a club that remained reserved for men.

The shift in power has had wider, more profound consequences for the constitution, according to Short. When Blair decided to go to war in Iraq, she resigned and in her resignation speech, she warned parliament that the UK had achieved the worst of two worlds. Presidential leadership with a large parliamentary majority had produced excessive concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister (Hansard, May 12, 2003). Among the negative consequences of Blair’s presidential style, Short also emphasized that the prime minister’s ability to go his own way led him to overlook the
expertise and advice of departments as well as cabinet ministers. While acknowledging that this development had started before 1997, Short added:

But it’s leapt under Blair. Obviously I wasn’t in the Thatcher cabinet, but I listen to civil servants. Even then, there was more attention to the proprieties, you know, of cabinet government. The meetings were longer. [Pause] We have this prestigious committee for big foreign policy questions, chaired by the prime minister, and all the big ministers plus heads of the intelligence agencies plus the chief of the defense staff, and it never met. I mean it’s shocking. And everything was so informal. It leads to bad decisions.

According to Short’s assessment, the course of linear, historical time has produced a perilous period in politics, and the British prime minister’s independent decision to go to war in Iraq provides “the most spectacular example” of the dangers.

An “Honest Broker” in the Politicized Presidency

On the other side of the Atlantic, critics of the US president’s decision to attack Iraq have rendered a similar critique, although in that case they call the culprit politicization rather than presidentialization. In the politicized presidency, chief executives trust their own staff in the White House more than the professional, permanent bureaucracy. Several accounts document how President George W. Bush and a few close associates (including only one cabinet member, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld) planned the war while circumventing conventional channels, bypassing bureaucratic expertise, and excluding a cabinet member as significant as Secretary of State Colin Powell (Woodward 2004). As National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice should have played a central role; yet she increasingly moved to the margins of the inner circle – from 9/11 to the decision to invade Iraq.

At the start, Rice appeared to have a close relationship with Bush, and unlike Blair, the US president had some prominent women among his personal staff (though only Rice ever played a serious policy role). The sole woman among the foreign policy players inside the White House also seems to have been the only one who expressed doubts about the decision to go to war. By most accounts, Rice’s voice as an “honest broker” gradually weakened until she fell silent (Burke 2005). While anyone in that lonely position might have done the same, it must have been especially challenging for the only woman to take a softer stance and still struggle to be heard by the president’s men. After the decision to go to war, the president moved her out of the White House and over to the State Department. The mass media celebrated the symbolic significance of her appointment as the first black woman to become Secretary of State, but Rice’s step outside the White House and into cabinet constituted a step down from her previous proximity to the president.
Different Degrees and Dimensions of Presidentialization

The chief executive has become increasingly dominant and personalized in Canada as well as in the UK and the US, although some distinctive features of each system affect the consequences. The US system of separate institutions often creates divided government: In theory that should check executive authority, though in practice divided government rarely matters (Mayhew 2005). More significant, federalism in the US, Canada, and Australia can impede presidentialization. Effective opposition occasionally comes from the provinces, states, and territories where the concentration of power in the executive occurs again at the sub-national level. Yet even studies that consider the importance of federalism tend to conclude that presidentialization facilitates the concentration of power at the national level in the prime minister’s control of the party, parliament, and cabinet (Poguntke and Webb eds. 2005, chapter 9: 199, 217).

By contrast to those Anglo systems, a greater degree of institutional integrity remains in the Australian (Weller 2007) as well as the Irish cabinet – and in the latter, women ministers (though few) have benefited as a result. In particular, during his years as Taoiseach (prime minister), Bertie Ahern adopted a somewhat feminalist approach to leadership. While encouraging women in politics and government generally, Ahern also engaged the participation of his ministers and appeared to welcome their input. In doing so, he took advantage of the increasing personalization of his position in the already highly personalist political culture of Ireland (Galligan 1998: 3). He also demonstrated how a prime minister’s personal style or preferences can affect the pace of presidentialization in linear, historical time.

Furthermore, Ireland has had coalition governments since 1989, and the distribution of portfolios constitutes a significant part of coalition negotiations. As a result, a great deal of debate and conflict continues to occur in cabinet, and it rarely renders a rubber stamp for the Taoiseach (Connolly 2005). Cabinet meets weekly and the Taoiseach presides over the meetings as a chairman of the board. At least one female cabinet member expressed shock at the experience of women in Blair’s cabinet. As Education Minister, Mary Hanafin referred to Ahern and exclaimed, “The Taoiseach would never do that,” and she added, “I mean he’s very conscious of trying to promote women” (Personal interview, June 24, 2005). In her view, inter-party rivalry also overrides the gender dynamic that characterizes much of the boysy behavior in cabinet elsewhere. As Hanafin speculated, “I think insofar as there’s a dynamic in a coalition, it’s between parties. I just wonder if you had a cabinet meeting all of the one party, would gender play a greater difference?” Perhaps gender difference dissipates when inter-party competition prevails. In any event, the case of Ireland indicates that when and where a government’s survival requires the continuing cooperation of coalition partners, cabinet remains an important decision-making body, constraining the ability of a prime minister to go his – or her – own way.

Even the UK provides an instance when the political environment appeared to halt presidentialization. A contrast to the masculinist, domineering approach of Blair, his predecessor John Major proved unable to practice the model of prime ministerial
dominance or adopt a presidential style of leadership. Unlike Blair or Thatcher, Major presided over a weak government whose survival depended on Unionist support. Without large parliamentary majorities, prime ministers might need to resume the role of first among equals and restore cabinet collective decision making – at least temporarily.

Finally, even when and where female ministers fall victim to presidentialization, they express satisfaction and a sense of achievement in their capacity as executive leaders of their own departments. Across political systems and across policy areas, all the female cabinet members interviewed conveyed their enormous respect for the talent and dedication of civil servants. This is somewhat surprising, because (male) politicians tend to blame bureaucrats for their failure to execute policies. Female ministers appear to appreciate the professionalism of civil servants and often contrast it to the behavior of men in cabinet. Unfortunately, as Short’s comments indicate, women as cabinet ministers also express concern that presidents or prime ministers frequently disparage civil servants’ skills and bypass their departments’ expertise. Whether women discuss their relationship to the prime minister or president, the dynamics of cabinet, or the nature of their departments, most of them point to the increasing presidentialization of their political systems. As long as that trend continues in linear, historical time, women will gain the most influence only when they become prime ministers or presidents themselves.

*Cyclical, Political Time: The Constraints of the Neo-Liberal Regime*

In the waves of ideological change that have washed across the Atlantic and the Pacific, women have generally missed the boat. During the KWS regime, a few prominent women made it into cabinet and achieved some success. Frances Perkins in the US provides a shining example, and it is no accident that she led the way in advancing the interests of labor. The KWS tapped the labor movement for support and then institutionalized its interests. For the most part the KWS regime was already in a state of degeneration when the women’s movement gained momentum in the 1970s. In the next regime cycle, neoliberalism tapped the support of fiscal and social conservatives, while adopting policies designed to shut out (some might say shut down) the women’s movement. As a social movement or organized interest, feminists have lacked the opportunity to become an integral component of any regime in cyclical, political time.

Since the 1970s, the prevalence of the neo-liberal policy paradigm in the cabinet rooms of Anglo countries has created obstacles for women seeking to advance feminist causes or adopt feminalist approaches to leadership. Of course, it tended to create opportunities for female ministers who shared its ideological commitments – Thatcher as prime minister in the UK, or Jenny Shipley (Minister for Social Services and Minister for Women 1990-93) and Ruth Richardson (Minister of Finance 1990-93) in New Zealand. As cabinet ministers, Shipley and Richardson benefited from developments in both types of time, working in a pre-presidentialized system that gave great weight to their ministerial input and sharing the neo-liberal ideology of the regime. Their experience indicates that women who endorsed neoliberalism generally proved able to exercise more effective policy leadership as cabinet ministers than others. Yet neo-liberal women –
even when they considered themselves feminists\textsuperscript{15} – failed to forge a broader set of values and principles that serve the interests or enhance the status of women as a politically marginalized group.

In the neo-liberal era, most female ministers in Anglo systems have occupied posts that deal with domestic policies and programs. As women have traditionally dealt with the “domestic” in the home, heads of government have put them in charge of similar duties in cabinet. In particular, politicians, the press, and the public often consider subjects such as education, health, and welfare “women’s issues,” and polling data consistently show that women do care about these issues more than men do. In cabinet, many of these positions threaten to become identified as the “women’s posts” with reduced influence. Both the public and politicians increasingly view these posts as “feminine” – and to put it more accurately, they are feminalist as they favor attributes associated with women such as collectivism, caring, and compassion. As a Minister for Education in Ireland declared, “I can go to a European Council meeting now, and all the Education Ministers are women. It’s kind of a branding almost” (Personal interview, Mary Hanafin, June 24, 2005). In the case of female cabinet ministers in the neo-liberal regime, they have also been the areas that endured the most severe budget cuts or diminished rates of funding. As a consequence, the political costs of implementing the neo-liberal agenda have outweighed many benefits women might have derived from fitting into feminalist slots.

Neoliberalism and New Labour in the UK

In the UK, budget cuts in education started in the 1970s and continued until the twenty-first century. Ironically, Thatcher was the first woman Secretary of State for Education who was forced to endure the unpopularity of budget cuts. When the Conservative government decided that older elementary school children should no longer receive free milk, the popular press vilified “Thatcher the Milk Snatcher.” Despite her media image as mean and miserly, Thatcher generally sought to defend her department and its programs in the face of budget cuts. Her performance as Education Secretary provided few hints of the radical neo-liberal assault she would later level against the welfare state. To the public and the press at the time, what mattered more was the fact that a woman deprived the children of their milk. Several subsequent women ministers in charge of feminalist domestic policies such as education, health, and welfare would suffer similar fates.

Thatcherism lingered long after her premiership, and when Labour returned to government after eighteen years in opposition, its female ministers continued to endure the political costs of budget cuts. Predictably Prime Minister Blair initially placed all but one of the women in domestic posts. Indeed, the first time a British government included many female ministers, the prime minister put them in positions where they would encounter stringent fiscal constraints and substantial political controversy – as the case of Harriet Harman illustrates.
As Secretary of State for Social Security (1997-98), Harman was responsible for cutting benefits for single-parent households, a policy New Labour called the New Deal for Lone Parents, essentially a neo-liberal program that substituted workfare for welfare. Gender clearly colored much of the criticism directed at Harman. As she described the “flack” she got, she conveyed the tone of the attack when she recalled her critics’ comments that:

“You’re forcing mothers to work. You don’t value motherhood.” … It was a woman cutting women’s benefits. I mean if I had been a gray anonymous man, then I could have got away with it. But I was incredibly high profile (Personal interview, July 12, 2004).

The prime minister might have thought that a woman could more easily institute these cuts and soften their impact, but instead the media magnified the maternal role and Harman’s failure to fulfill it.

Admittedly, as part of the New Labour movement, Harman had supported the party’s commitment to maintain fiscal restraint. In its manifesto, Labour promised to adhere to the Conservative spending limits at least for the first two years in government. That electoral pledge helped to modernize party policy and proved successful at the polls, but it also placed the Minister for Social Security in a politically untenable position, conceivably the worst spot in the New Labour government. Harman explained:

I inherited a budget that was going down. So I had to stand in the dispatch box, newly elected as the new government and say, “Hello. We’re Labour. We’re here to cut your benefits.” Well you can imagine that was not very popular... [I]t caused absolute turmoil and uproar.

Harman believes the policy ultimately proved successful once she had “been sacked and [the government] started putting benefits up,” but to achieve that success, she sacrificed her personal influence and political stature to economic efficiency and the party’s electoral expediency.

Other women ministers in the New Labour government also struggled to succeed under the pressures of continued neo-liberal restructuring, and once again a female Education Minister suffered. A former teacher herself, Secretary of State for the Department of Education and Skills (2001-02) Estelle Morris tried to defend the interests of her department and clientele groups such as the teachers unions. According to her cabinet colleagues, she was popular with educators and their advocates but engaged in a tug of war with the prime minister and his staff. In addition, she was beset with business-like obstacles in managing a department with limited resources. The department failed to achieve standardized literacy and numeracy targets, became embroiled in controversy concerning the marking of A-level papers, and got stuck with delays vetting teachers for the new school year. Ultimately, the public will prove more likely to remember Morris’s resignation than her beleaguered tenure in office. During her resignation press conference, she broke down in tears and declared that she did not feel “up to the job,” as
she read from a script that the Number 10 Downing Street press office prepared. The popular press used her experience to confirm the worst stereotypes about women overwhelmed by serious work and unable to shoulder weighty responsibility.

Fiscal Constraints and Feminalist Ministerial Posts in Ireland

In Ireland during the period of economic reform in the 1980s, one woman minister Gemma Hussey successively occupied all three of the highly sensitive, feminalist posts: Minister of Education (1982-86), Minister for Social Welfare (1986-87), and Minister for Health (1987). For Ireland, the 1980s provided a period of social liberalism, but economic crisis – and fear of the International Monetary Fund’s intervention – forced the government to adopt stringent spending limits and budget cuts. Of course, the economic constraints meant that the first woman Education Minister would be responsible for implementing policies construed as harmful to children.

Hussey described getting her appointment as being “given a poisoned chalice,” the term women leaders frequently use to depict the sorry state of their selection. She continued:

Education was going to be – it was one of the big spending ministries – therefore, there were going to be problems. Because there were going to have to be cutbacks as there were going to have to be in health and social welfare. They were the big spending ministries and so the whole time we were in government, I was embroiled in endless public controversy…

*Because of the fiscal constraints, from day one I was thrown into the deep end... You go into the Dail everyday and you’re faced with the howling mobs – and the teachers unions, the parents associations. I was the villain, the number one villain for most of the time* (emphasis added) (Personal interview, June 7, 2005).

When Hussey needed to cut one of the teachers training colleges, she recalled, “You’d think that I had declared WW III. The reaction was so [pause], I was never off the front page, it seemed to me.” Inevitably (and to her dismay), the mass media compared Hussey with her nemesis Thatcher.

In an interview, she explained that when she moved from education to social welfare, her situation went from bad to worse. As she put it, “[I] found myself suddenly transported to social welfare – about which I knew nothing and in a situation where the Minister for Finance was looking for a list of cuts. It was a nightmare. The social welfare brief was a nightmare” (Personal interview, June 7, 2005). Her diaries record her constant struggle to combat proposed cuts in each of her ministerial posts (Hussey 1990). While she managed to achieve some limited success, after a brief period at health, her tenure in cabinet concluded with the end of the coalition government she served.
By the twenty-first century, another woman Minister for Education Mary Hanafin, inherited a different fiscal environment. With the “instant acceptance of a woman being in a social policy area,” Hanafin could also reap the rewards that went with Ireland’s economic prosperity. Enthusiastically, she announced, “Obviously, when you’ve got money, it’s a good time to tackle things you’ve never tackled before, like special needs. [And] it’s a good time to focus on the disadvantaged as well – and pump more resources into it.” Less subject to the ideological limits of neoliberalism and more pragmatic, the Irish government at the start of the twenty-first century proved willing to spend more on social programs. In this instance, the early struggles of women ministers helped set the stage for success at a later date in development when the ideological climate started to change and economic opportunities expanded.

Fiscal Responsibility and Australia’s First Female Cabinet Minister (with Portfolio)

In Australia, Margaret Guilfoyle served successively as Minister of Education (1975), Minister of Social Security (1975-80), and Minister of Finance (1980-83) – and she expressed some of the same views as Harman and Hussey when she discussed her first two posts. Trained as an accountant and working in a Liberal government (the conservative major party), she was nonetheless a reluctant participant in the early cutbacks that presaged the neo-liberal revolution. According to Guilfoyle:

[T]he challenging part in my case [at Education and Social Security] was probably to maintain the system that was there and not have it reduced.… When we went in in ’75, there was a move that you had to, as the Prime Minister termed it always, “reign in expenditure.” And as my department was the largest spender, of course it was very vulnerable to cabinet decisions to change and to reduce (Personal interview, March 13, 2003).

Comparing social security to finance, Guilfoyle recalled, “It is a very different role. At the Social Security Department, you’d feel, you’d wake up every morning thinking, ‘Who hates us today?’” As she described her promotions, she observed the irony that “after being the biggest spending minister,” she “became the finance minister to stop all of the other spending.”

Guilfoyle found the transition from the feminalist posts to the masculinist one of finance relatively easy for some special reasons. Among other things, when Senator Guilfoyle moved to finance, she shared responsibilities with John Howard who was then the head of the Treasury and a member of the lower house. Being paired with Howard probably helped to dissipate doubts about the ability of a woman to handle the job. In addition, Australia avoided the most extreme cuts and declined to dismantle massive parts of the state that provide social services.
Female Ministers and Feminalist Issues: Social Policy and the Environment

Neo-liberal policies entailed more than just spending cuts, and other aspects of the agenda presented additional obstacles in some Anglo countries more than in others. Social conservatism constituted a significant part of the neo-liberal program in Australia, Canada, and the US. As the Australian Minister for Family and Community Services and as Minister for Women (2001-03), Senator Amanda Vanstone frequently found herself in the awkward position of releasing reports that would document the disproportionately harmful impact that ostensibly “family friendly” tax policies had on women (Summers 2003). When interviewed in 2003, Vanstone said less about her accomplishments in that post than what she had achieved earlier as Minister for Justice (1997-2001), a post outside cabinet (Personal interview, March 27, 2003). As the Canadian Minister for Justice and Attorney General (1990-93), Kim Campbell had to contend with competing social forces surrounding moral issues such as abortion and rape (Campbell 1996: chapter 9). In the US, Secretary for Health and Human Services (1993-1998) Donna Shalala drew fire from religious groups for advocating access to the abortion pill RU486. The large rural (and morally conservative) communities in these three countries might make them especially receptive to the religious right.

The US provides a somewhat distinctive case in other respects. The opposite of Australia which maintained a relatively large public sector, the US has always had a substantially smaller state to roll back. Perhaps for this reason, women who occupied positions dealing with education, health, and welfare suffered much less than many of their Anglo counterparts. At the same time, one controversial position did appear to become the woman’s post in the neo-liberal era: During deregulation, women administrators of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) were extremely unpopular – with either the public or the president. An eager participant in the Reagan revolution, from 1981 to 1983 Ann Burford gained notoriety in the press and the public by cutting the EPA’s budget by 200 million and slashing the staff by twenty three percent (before she slid into the Superfund scandal that forced her resignation). Twenty years later, former governor of New Jersey Christine Todd Whitman, as administrator of the EPA (2001-03), clashed repeatedly with the administration of President George W. Bush. When she resigned she gave personal reasons, but later she alleged that she refused to ease pollution controls as the administration wanted (Whitman 2005). The experience of these two very different women serves as a reminder that whether neo-liberal reforms provided opportunities or constraints depended on the particular woman and her political views - but female ministers with feminist agendas, even in feminalist posts, repeatedly ran into obstacles.

In all six countries, few women have occupied the highly masculinist cabinet positions pertaining to finance, justice, and foreign affairs. Masculinist norms and expectations have always pervaded these positions, but neoliberalism seemed to intensify and exaggerate the need for masculine virtues of strength, toughness, and hard-heartedness. Finance ministers in the neo-liberal era needed to make cold, calculating cuts in public expenditures, leaving little room for “bleeding hearts.” Justice Ministers had to convey their ability to maintain “law and order” more than ever, and even when a
woman managed to meet masculinist standards, the media might well mock her for her masculinity. (American readers will remember Attorney General Janet Reno’s character on Saturday Night Live.) In foreign affairs, the global status of the nation affects the degree of masculinity demanded of a minister, but neoliberalism in international politics has generally required a leader willing to fight fearlessly for freedom. Margaret Beckett became British foreign secretary for a brief period (2006-07), but she garnered criticism as too soft and subservient to Prime Minister Blair. Two female Secretaries of State in the US – Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice – had to walk a fine line between maintaining their femininity and meeting masculinist expectations. A third woman, former Senator Hillary Clinton, might benefit from her predecessors’ path-breaking efforts and the start of a new regime, though it is too early to tell. Predictably, presidents have placed these women at the Department of State, not Defense. Secretary of State has not necessarily been regendered, but the US view of diplomacy makes it somewhat feminalist in the field of international affairs. Still, whatever the gendered character of the position, the scope of the Secretary of State’s authority ultimately remains subject to the discretion of the president.

**Conclusion**

Between the two types of time, the linear, historical path in political development more consistently poses a challenge to female leaders as it continues to generate highly masculinist expectations of the executive in Anglo-American systems. Even with a few temporary pauses, the overall pattern of presidentialization persists, indicating that female presidents and prime ministers will need to adopt aggressive styles of executive leadership to meet masculinist norms. Of course, as the case of Prime Minister Clark suggests, such firm leadership can be feminist in substance without being feminalist in style. By contrast, the opportunities for female cabinet ministers to shape public policy will remain restricted as long as linear, historical time increases the concentration of power in the hands of presidents and prime ministers.

In terms of style, cyclical, political time permits feminalist and masculinist approaches to executive leadership, but the few cases that exist indicate that women struggle to succeed when the two types of time conflict. Most recently, in the 2008 presidential election Hillary Clinton tried to convince voters that she could meet the masculinist requirements of Anglo executive leadership, which the US magnifies by making the president commander-in-chief of a superpower. Clinton’s campaign emphasized her commanding capabilities, her “can do” spirit, and her extensive experience. When voters perceived her as cold and hard-hearted in the New Hampshire primary campaign, she responded by showing emotion – but her tearful remarks only appeared to expose her vulnerability and weakness as a woman. By contrast, Barack Obama’s campaign theme invited the disenfranchised to “join” and made a collectivist, consensus appeal that was essentially feminalist. Simply by virtue of being a man, Obama satisfied the masculinist requirements of the twenty-first century presidency, and as a result, he had greater room to maneuver and move in a direction in tune with feminalist political time. Following the failed masculinism of George W. Bush’s
administration, voters wanted a more feminalist approach to leadership, but it proved easier for a male than for a female candidate to deliver it.

Cyclical, political time alters the substance of public policy as well as the style of leadership, and Anglo systems now appear to be in the midst of a shift. Among the nations in this study, currently three have right-of-center governments and three have left-of-center governments, but they all tend to agree on the need for state action to respond to the global economic crisis. Whether this marks the end of the neo-liberal era and the start of a new regime is difficult to state with certainty – at least in part because leaders play a part in setting the pace of political time. (Regime cycles fail to follow a scientific formula.) To date, progressive leaders in the US and Australia (and perhaps the UK) have justified their actions and policies by emphasizing the necessity for state action rather than offering an alternative public philosophy. To construct a regime rather than render a temporary response requires a rationale for the new role of the state – and producing a public philosophy that transcends “neo-Keynesianism” opens opportunities for feminists and the women’s movement.

At this juncture in Anglo political development, feminists could play an integral role in shaping the substance of public policy and the style of politics in a new regime. If the women’s movement has been in “abeyance,” this would be a good time to find ways to “flourish” in the current political environment (Grey and Sawer 2008). Now that feminalist policy arenas such as health, education, and welfare have once again become priorities, feminist political thought could inform programmatic change by injecting traditional feminist values of social justice and collective welfare into a new public philosophy. Feminists might also promote their commitment to grassroots participation, active citizenship, and elite accountability to counter (or at least slow down) the increasingly centralization of authority. Together with many more female government ministers today, the women’s movement might expand the public imagination to acknowledge the ability of women to fulfill the highest expectations of the executive in linear, historical time, while allowing them to adapt to the changing demands of cyclical, political time. That might not render a far, far better thing than has ever been done, but it could ensure that the best of times is yet to come.
Notes

1 This paper is part of a larger research project for a book on women as executive leaders in Anglo-American systems. Some of the research used here has been published elsewhere, although aspects of the argument have evolved since those publications. For a preliminary overview of women as presidents, prime ministers, and cabinet ministers, see “Women Leaders and Executive Politics: Engendering Change in Anglo-American Nations” (Sykes 2008a). For more extensive treatment of cabinet ministers, see “Incomplete Empowerment: Female Cabinet Ministers in Anglo-American Systems” (Sykes 2009). Finally, for a brief discussion of the effect of time on the 2008 US presidential election, see “Gender in the 2008 Presidential Election” (Sykes 2008b).

2 It might be helpful to explain some of the definitions and distinctions commonly used in gender studies that appear in this paper. Masculinism privileges attributes associated with men, whereas feminalism prefers traits associated with women. Feminalism also assumes female agency and includes women’s own preferences in its construction. It differs from feminine, a concept constructed by men, which treats women as inferior to men and masculinity. Finally, feminism is a meta ideology that, among other aims, seeks to enhance women’s power and achieve equality between women and men. See Duerst-Lahti 2002.

3 For an extensive analysis of conviction-style leadership that compares Thatcher with other British prime ministers and US presidents, see Sykes 2000.

4 Throughout the 1980s, an overwhelming majority of the public admired Thatcher for her leadership qualities, even when they opposed some of her specific policies. From 1980 through 1990, Thatcher consistently ranked above other leaders as “a capable leader” and “good in a crisis.” When Gallup asked voters to choose statements that describe particular leaders, Thatcher led the list of strong leadership qualities, including “you know where he/she stands on issues” and the leader “says what he/she believes.” From 1985 through 1989, voters described their prime minister as “determined,” “tough,” and one who “sticks to principles” far more frequently than they attributed these qualities to any of her opponents. Throughout her leadership, voters also viewed Thatcher as “most likely to get things done” and “most likely to improve Britain’s standing abroad” (Gallup and MORI opinion polls, 1979-90). The image she conveyed as a conviction-style leader seems to have supplied a critical source of her public support for most of her tenure as prime minister.

5 By staying in office until his party’s prospects proved beyond repair, Mulroney essentially “handed the poisoned chalice” to Campbell. Some men among the Conservative party elite hoped the novelty of a woman prime minister might reverse the party’s fortunes, but those same men kept her from making an appeal to women as a group or cultivating their support (Campbell 1996, 289). Several factors facilitated the party’s demise: Some pertain to political time – the unpopularity of Mulroney personally as well as his government’s Goods and Services Tax (GST), while other factors stand outside the cycle of time such as the growth of regional parties that stole much of the PC base.

6 Reporters focused on her failure to articulate specific policies and saw every gaffe as an indication of her limited knowledge and low aptitude. In one instance when pressed for details about her government’s social policies, Campbell quickly replied that a general
election was no time “to get involved in a debate on very, very serious issues” (quoted in The Record, September 24, 1993). Later she explained she meant it is difficult to plan the details of policies during a short, heated campaign, but the sound bite sent the message that she was either unable or unwilling to consider issues important. Liberal leader Jean Cretien escaped such scrutiny even though he failed to provide any bold new plans. Indeed, he would go on to maintain the neo-liberal regime established by his opponents. The media might well have held Campbell to higher standard of specificity than men must meet as she insists in memoirs (Campbell 1996, 268). Admittedly, Campbell’s personal qualities also made media management difficult, including her limited national experience and her deliberate desire to change political discourse by being more honest and direct.

7 As a rule, where executive power is circumscribed, women are more likely to become prime minister – and vice versa (Jalalzai 2008).

8 New Zealanders offer several explanations for the success of women in their government, but few of the traditional reasons withstand close scrutiny. For example, New Zealand was the first to permit women to vote in 1893, but it did not allow women to stand as candidates until the same time as other Anglo nations. (Several states also granted suffrage to women in the US as early as New Zealand did.) Moreover, the pioneering culture of New Zealand fails to explain the prominence of women in politics as that culture characterized much of North America as well. Finally, the opportunities women gained in the baby boom generation are the same as in other Anglo nations. What did matter are the nation’s small size and minor global status, a women’s movement more cohesive that many of its Anglo counterparts, and the efforts of feminists working within the Labour party. Given the fluctuations in the representation of women, those seeking explanations might also consider the gendered nature of the times – although the independent effect of time is difficult to assess as it can constitute both cause and effect.

9 According to Clark, party management had become easier “Because what happened with MMP is that we shed all the extremes. You will find people that used to be with Labour sitting in the New Zealand First party, the ACT party, the Green party, the United Future party. I mean all the edges went.” (Personal interview, April 14, 2003).

10 Clark insisted, “It’s as adversarial as it ever was. Well, you’ve still got a government and an opposition. And the government may be made up of more than one party, and the opposition is certainly made up of more than one party, but it’s still an adversarial parliament. In countries with long histories of proportional representation, that’s not the case, but in our parliament we still sit as the government facing the opposition…it’s very adversarial.”

11 In theory, the US cabinet is distinctive because its members serve primarily ‘at the pleasure of the president’ and lack independent political stature, whereas the prime minister is supposed to be only ‘first among equals.’ In practice, however, the erosion of cabinet’s decision-making authority and the tendency of prime ministers to go their own way in parliamentary systems now make it more reasonable and fruitful to compare the US cabinet with its Anglo counterparts.

12 While the women-only short lists encountered resistance from the constituency parties, reserving spaces for women in the shadow cabinet sparked opposition from men in the parliamentary Labour party (PLP). One proponent of the “positive discrimination” recalled “the hysteria” generated by the rule that three of the twenty seats must go to
women, and she explained: “Anybody would think it was like the death of a first born. It was so controversial and the hatred for the people who were advancing this argument was absolutely profound” (Personal interview, Harriet Harman, July 12, 2004). Female ministers entered the cabinet when and where many male colleagues already resented their presence.

13 Several women attributed their achievements to their feminalist management style, which they described as open, engaging, and accommodating. For example, Clare Short recalled, “I think that in my old department the whole management style of the organization changed in this broad, inclusive, energizing way. Now that I think is a woman thing. That’s what I expect more women in politics to create – those kinds of changes right through the system. And you do see some of that in different places when women break through – a more human style of management and so on, more inclusive” (Personal interview, July 8, 2004).

14 In other Anglo systems, regardless of their post, most women describe the atmosphere within the cabinet room as distinctly masculinist. Female ministers use words such as “boysy” and “blokey” to characterize cabinet conversations. While admitting they must scramble to stay in the “scrum,” female ministers also tend to dismiss or joke about the implications. Many believe that discussions in cabinet meetings matter very little – when compared to the significance of decision making among presidents or prime ministers and their personal staffs.

15 Both Shipley and Richardson declared themselves “strong feminists,” while they emphasized how neo-liberal ideals informed their politics and guided their goals. Shipley recalled, “When I was Women’s Minister, you know I had every bleeding heart telling me what we should be doing for women, usually patronizing them and making them dependent. Or reinforcing their dependence on either their family or the state or whatever... I made it very clear that... if we were spending any money, it was to provide them with ladders – so they could both develop skills and then grow their own success” (Personal interview, April 29, 2003). Richardson agreed and explained, “My creed from day one has been around the celebration of liberty in all of its forms, and I have sought in my private and political life to pursue policies that would basically enhance and promote liberty” (Personal interview, April 25, 2003; see also Richardson 1995).

16 Nevertheless, neo-liberal restructuring did rearrange or dismantle much of the Australian femocrats’ policy machinery. See Sawer, 2007.
References


