

“French Exception” or France-New Zealand Connection? Media Representations of Women in High Political Office in France and New Zealand (Aubry, Clark, Shipley).

Key words: Helen Clark, Jenny Shipley, Martine Aubry, women in politics, media representations, French politics, New Zealand politics.

Politicians are dependent on the media for communicating their political messages and for creating their public images. As Foucault has argued, discourse is not simply the vehicle that represents hierarchies of domination: language is where domination and resistance are sited. Texts incorporate the power/knowledge that one seeks to grasp. This means that media representations of women politicians are of singular importance for the symbolic workings of power. (Foucault 1970).

My paper asks whether the “French exception” continues to hold in contemporary representations of women politicians. I define the “French exception” firstly as a unique, traditional, and strongly differential relation between a man and a woman and their respective roles, and secondly, as the strong Republican and universalist tradition of singleness and indivisibility of the nation that has traditionally functioned to make women in politics deviant or “out of place.” Or, given the recent successes of parity democracy in France (the constitutional acceptance of the principle of equal representation for women and men in all elective assemblies in 1999), is a new place being conceived for women in politics? A comparison with contemporary media representations of women in high political office in another Western democracy, New Zealand, where “exceptions” have also emerged on the political scene in the form of two women prime ministers, provides some comparative insights.

From the earliest representations, women in high office in France have been constructed as out of their place. When Blum appointed Cécile Brunshvicg to the office of first woman minister in France in 1936, observes Joy Cooper, journalists expressed surprise that suffragists like Brunshvicg could be “real women looking like everyone else” and not “a-sexual hybrid

creatures in male garb.” (Cooper 1996). This first Ph D study of Brunschvicg traces other media reactions of Brunschvicg’s time. In the newspaper, *Vendredi*, the journalist Andrée Viollis spoke with empathy of Brunschvicg’s energy, her dignity, her clear voice imposing itself in all the congresses, her rigorous logic, and the exactitude of her information that “make her a good man of politics.”¹ In *Dimanche-Illustré*, Henriette Sauret pushed Brunschvicg’s credentials as a mother and observed that, like Brunschvicg, women must bring a “maternal” quality to meetings.² Even although the female journalists are generally sympathetic to the presence of a woman politician, they too have internalized the common understanding of what it means in their time to be a woman (maternal) and what it means to be a politician (virile or paternal). In a less positive representation, but drawing on the same implicit doxa of essentialist gender difference, the nomination of three women in the Blum cabinet is described by the rightwing *Action Française* (this time by a male journalist) as *légèreté*, a replacement of masculine political seriousness by a feminine “frivolity.” These examples reveal the contradictory parameters set for Cécile Brunschvicg’s political action. This minister needed both to adhere to the common knowledge of her time on women’s proper roles and to correspond in some way to the implicit understanding of the masculine quality of serious and legitimate power.

Other press reactions confirm the normative masculine system in which Brunschvicg like other women in politics could only be aberrant — needing to draw legitimacy from her well-known humanist husband or from the “prince,” the leader of the Popular Front government, Léon Blum, to whom this woman who had not fought her way through the ranks of a party must owe her appointment. Alternatively, authority might derive from her ability to perform her duties like a man, or, exceptionally, from her status as mother of sons (and daughters) of the nation. What seems most particularly to be excluded from the political domain is the sexual female body. In an extreme and particularly obnoxious example dated 1941, the journalist Jean Théroigne uses the sexual female body to make what is simultaneously an anti-feminist, anti-semitic, and anti-Popular Front attack on this “under-ministeress.”³ “But who can tell how many secrets of state were gathered and passed on by this Madam. The dying Republic appears to have wanted to give itself a female under-ministeress in its own image, softness, flabbiness, intrigue, affairs etc., a hundred kilos of fat.”⁴

The metaphors in this diatribe from Vichy France aim at the parliamentary regime itself, personified here by the deviant female “sub-ministeress.” But, the disqualification of Brunschvicg as a political representative, is grounded in the illegitimacy of the female body in politics. The disqualification of the Popular Front parliamentary system is then effected by its feminization. Brunschvicg is attacked through her female sexuality (portrayed as venal, and predatory); and through the concept of traditional feminine duplicity (as, Messalina-like, she extorts state secrets from men). Stereotypical assumptions about women, Jews, and the proper gender of power appeal to the prejudices of a collective subconscious, as Jane Freedman points out. More than fifty years later, the journalist Elisabeth Schemla’s biography of the first woman prime minister in France, Edith Cresson, will argue that Cresson’s image was destroyed by the media who presented the woman politician as a sexualized body drawing her power from the prince, Mitterrand — the slinky panther rubbing around the legs of Mitterrand the frog in the nightly satirical *Bébête Show*. (Schemla 1993).

It is the very “femininity” of Cresson’s smile, “new look,” and “charm” — consistently represented as her greatest asset — that condemns her. Even at the popular beginning of Cresson’s mandate as prime minister in 1991, observes Jane Freedman, the rightwing *Le Figaro* spoke of the feminine specialty of “the art of appearance” (“l’art de paraître”) in contrast to “the art of government” (“l’art de gouverner”).⁵ This focus on appearance over substance was still present six years later, when Elisabeth Guigou took over as the first woman *Garde des Sceaux* and Justice Minister before the TV cameras in Jospin’s dramatically feminized government. The furious outgoing conservative minister made the comment that Guigou might have the looks, but “we’ll see” what substance there is! Freedman describes a photo of Yvette Roudy Socialist Minister for Women’s Rights published in *France Soir Magazine* illustrating the “absolute media obsession with the body of every female representative.”⁶ Roudy is figured by a pool on the Ivory Coast in a bikini in a photo captioned “One of the Rights of Women. Relaxation.” Freedman concludes that many political women are caught in a vicious circle, their appearance is focused on, praised or critiqued and so they must take care of their appearance.

Freedman’s study presents two photographs of Cresson. In one Cresson is shown sitting on a settee in a low-cut, sleeveless dress smiling from behind a large bowl of roses. The small caption under the photo reads, quite incongruously, as Freedman observes: “a huge task awaits our

European parliamentarians.”⁷ A reader of this sexualized image, writes Freedman, would not imagine he/she was looking at the new Minister of European Affairs. A second photo, shows an attractive Cresson about to embrace a smiling Rocard. “Visualizing deviance,” according to a central principle of journalism, claims Freedman, this image too is somewhat ironic in its caption, “La passation des pouvoirs” (The Transfer of Power).⁸

Most French political women have been accused either of seeking stardom or of insufficiently attending to the media, of using seductiveness or of icy distance. Many of the leftwing women ministers of the Mitterrandian Socialist governments in particular, Martine Aubry, Edith Cresson, Yvette Roudy, Ségolène Royal, Elisabeth Guigou, Catherine Trautmann have been characterized as distant, cold, steely, or even icy; that is, as lacking in warm femininity. (Adler 1993). But again, they are all also qualified as the opposite, as passionaria or furies (or “mad cow” as a variant in the case of Ségolène Royal) when they defend a cause or clause.⁹ Simone Veil is berated for the “intolerable” situation of the state as a mother (Veil) telling us what to do. In fact, women politicians are accused of being either too little or too much a woman - of being, too manipulated by the prince or too independent, too emotional or too frigid, too political or too honest and committed, too maternal or insufficiently maternal.

Masculine qualities of authoritarianism, stubbornness or combativeness (“battante,” “têtue”) have also been used by the media to disqualify powerful women. Leading women politicians are criticized for being both too feminine and not feminine enough. This has been the lot of Edith Cresson, Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meier, Indira Gandhi, and more recently Elisabeth Guigou, Martine Aubry and Helen Clark. There is a danger that the women internalize such representations and come to see themselves as having a “deficit” as a female.

Both right and left wing women are caught in the no-win situation of being deviant in politics either as queens of hearts (“dames de coeur”) or as masculine iron ladies/ women of steel (“dames de fer”). Such phrases circulate through the journalism of the last two decades in France constituting a form of intertextuality, one article influencing another. *Le Monde* used “a woman of heart” to describe Michèle Barzach,¹⁰ only to be challenged by *Libération*; “Might the woman of heart conceal an iron lady?”¹¹

Female success in politics, then, as Freedman demonstrates, still most often produces the media impulse to visualize deviance. Less directly misogynistic than in the past, media attention is still likely to involve unconscious disavowal. This often takes the form of the right to foreground or censure the appearance or behavior of unfeminine or too feminine women ministers. In France, it has most particularly taken the form of identifying the hand of the prince/father on the crowned female head. Although Cresson had a strong political background, the press generally presented her nomination to the office of prime minister as a publicity stunt on Mitterrand's part, a "rabbit pulled out of the hat," and "le fait du prince"¹²

Are Representations in France Changing?

Prime Minister Jospin's reshuffling of portfolios among women was met by accusations of "reverse discrimination" and of putting a woman without knowledge of the law in power in order to better control the Ministry himself. The nature of the government from 1997 (cohabitation of a Socialist prime minister and an RPR or rightist President) and the stakes of the presidential and legislative elections of 2002 (the presidency itself), introduced a factor of competition. Jospin's staging of his confidence in the distinctive capabilities of women was in competition for votes with President Chirac's discourse on modernizing democracy. Aided by such political contingencies, the present period of progress in female political representation in France (which reached 11% in 2001) might appear to be changing media representations and the way these are read.

In fact, with the voting of parity democracy in 1999, the traditional "exception française appears to have given way to a very different French exceptionalism."¹³ A country committed to an ideology of Republican universality, indivisibility, unity and unwilling to accept what is seen as an American-style system of quotas or affirmative action (*discrimination positive*) or interest-group politics has promulgated a law to promote the equal representation of women and men in all political assemblies.¹⁴

This paper is interested in whether the acceptance of the parity principle in France has brought about changes in media representations of political women. The parity debate in the French press

had itself turned somewhat problematically on the “cat-fights” generated by the polarization between feminist “universalists” (Badinter) and feminist “differentialists” and, more generally, on the question of the positive and negative “differences” that might be made by women’s participation in politics. A comparison of the media representations of the women who were number one and number two in the New Zealand and French governments respectively at the beginning of the new millennium — Helen Clark and Martine Aubry — offers a perspective on the extent to which the parity debate has modified the old French “exceptions.”¹⁵

Media Representations of Women Prime Ministers in New Zealand

Like France, New Zealand has recently lived the experience of a first woman prime minister. Unlike France, it has not put legislation in place to encourage female representation although the national psyche registers pride in being the first country to give women the vote. In this relatively new culture with the egalitarian traditions of a pioneering ex-colony and a form of gender equality brought about by shared work on the farm, female earthiness, and an outdoors ethos of self-reliance, feminine “difference” as a strongly differential relation between a man and a woman has been less central than in France. Geneviève Fraisse argues that classic French Republican theory excluded women from full citizenship because: “True equality between the sexes would result in friendship replacing love and would destroy sexual relations.” (Fraisse 1995, 80).¹⁶ In a rather more unisex New Zealand context, such classical Republican theory and its fear of confusion between the sexes would appear quite alien. The image of the New Zealand woman, predominantly of British origin, is closer to the strong, equal and independent and not explicitly feminine woman of Scandinavia, or of Finland, where a well educated working mother, a woman neutral for gender (without a sexual body) can be argued to constitute the norm. The “force” or overall importance of gender difference and the sanctions around the infringement of gender norms is weaker in New Zealand and the “scope”¹⁷ of things gendered (tasks, body language, voice, life-styles, resources) may well be narrower than in France.¹⁸

What emerges from contemporary press articles in New Zealand that discuss the history of women at the top is the historical recollection that, traditionally, clever or successful women would most often be single. Such single career women included matrons, headmistresses, and later, politicians. These women are most often imaged as bookish, mannish, or matriarchal in the

Mabel Howard (or Margaret Thatcher) nanny-rule-of-iron tradition. Attractive women would be married and therefore would not be career women. Feminism has shown how women have internalized such culturally determined understandings - of what women politicians or public women would be like. The doxa may have functioned in some cases as a self-fulfilling prophecy in earlier New Zealand politics with the mannish and the matriarchal as common models. In any event, previous New Zealand elections had elicited very negative representations of women – not so dissimilar to the images that characterized French women in politics. Helen Clark, for example, had been advised to smile more and to have her teeth fixed.

Jenny Shipley became the first woman prime minister of New Zealand in November 1997 after a leadership coup within the conservative National Party. At the head of a conservative coalition government elected under a new political system of proportional representation (MMP), she followed monetarist policies based on free market principles and internationalization in a government stressing the efficiencies of user-pay policies and privatization, Mrs Shipley attempted to dismantle New Zealand's once strong social protection systems. Her honeymoon period and her hosting of the all male APEC leaders was generally presented by the press as successful. The image of this “handsome” woman, middle class mother of two, familiarly referred to as “Jenny” or as “The Ship” was maternal rather than sexual. In fact, part of her success depended on this form of feminine difference in an electorate looking for something different in politics.

The national press nonetheless circulated extensive comment on Mrs. Shipley's appearance — her purring voice, fashionable new spectacle frames, stylish power suits in bold colors, trademark modern jewelry, and new hair styles. Her critics insisted on a “bossy” (authoritarian) manner, on her coldness and “cruel mouth.” Victoria Main (*The Daily News*, 28 June 1999, 6) combines both the feminine warmth for which Mrs. Shipley came to be known through media representations and masculine overconfidence. Main claims that “on a good day her warm personality could give her the edge over Labour's more reserved leader” but goes on to note that Mrs. Shipley's “penchant for cockiness got the better of her just as she was doing well.”

The electoral campaign of November 1999 was won by the leader of the Opposition Helen Clark, a former lecturer in political science from the University of Auckland, with twenty years political experience. She became the first elected woman prime minister in an election that thus pitted not male and female but two different female lifestyles and sets of social and economic policies against one another. Only the Scandinavian countries have previously experienced such a situation. In “Shipley, Clark aid change to sexist attitudes” (*The Waikato Times*, 1 March 1999, 2), visiting American professor of psychology, Hilary Lips, whose research has demonstrated that unconsciously disqualifying attitudes to powerful women from both women and men prevail generally, summed up the campaign with the following statement: “They have very different styles so the message is you can’t expect anything particular when you get a woman in that role.” The fact the two main parties were headed by women meant there was “less focus on their gender.” But, influential male political commentators such as radio personality, Brian Edwards, expressed the opposite view that with two women leading the main parties, television was shifting its emphasis away from issues in favor of personalities.

French women in politics have observed that marital status and children are required attributes for female success. In New Zealand, Shipley’s campaign advertisement, “I am a politician, but I am a mum as well” provided the press with a central contrast between the two female personalities. In a conservative article entitled “Clark v Shipley — the mother of all battles,” (*Sunday Star Times* 7 November 1999, 2), Rosemary McLeod drew on “the lurking animosity between the childless woman and the mother” to introduce a metaphor of battle between women’s roles.¹⁹ According to McLeod, although Helen Clark was accused of “sniping at Jenny Shipley’s mumsy image” and of “sniffing that she had long since given up being irritated” at Shipley’s maternal trump card, Clark was indeed irritated and saw motherhood “as highly relevant to the election campaign, life, the whole dam thing.”²⁰ Nonetheless, Clark’s actual words to the effect that not having children was her decision and not relevant to the campaign are paraphrased. And in the *Evening Post* she is again reported as saying that each leader’s lifestyle describes a different female state and does no more than allow voters to use yet another standard against which to judge two competent women. Yet Clark was sufficiently aware of the stakes of the mothering debate to register a statement on the need to work for the “children” of the nation in her campaign speech. Early criticism of Ms Clark took form, then, most particularly in the

contexts of the comparison of different ways of being a women. Again, when the secondary teachers became embroiled in an industrial dispute with the Labour government in 2002 and many school classes were cancelled, Clark could be targeted by the criticism that she was not a mother and could not understand the position of parents

The marital status/ children requirement also gives rise to the “husband question.” When Léon Brunschvicg was presented in the French press in the late thirties, his deviant position in relation to his wife’s eminent status as the first woman Minister was seen not only as difficult but also as emasculating. The husband question defined by almost all the French women politicians in their autobiographical writing as the lack of any established place for political husbands as opposed to the place of honor for supportive political wives, also arises in a number of press texts in New Zealand. The comment by one reporter that Mrs Shipley’s husband, Burton, constituted her “kitchen cabinet” is double-edged. As is a discussion just before the election by Helen Bain who compares the status of the Clark and Shipley couples in an article entitled “Seeking a Spouse with Nouse” (*The Dominion*, 13 November 1999, 19). Peter Davis, “also known as Mr. Helen Clark” is described as a university medical sociologist preferring to keep a lower profile than the ubiquitous Mr. Shipley and “rarely seen at political functions with his Labour leader wife.” Peter Davis’s physical appearance is remarked on — “bearded, spectacled and typically academic in his dress” and he is then summed up (somewhat dismissively) as “a thoroughly pleasant chap.” Burton Shipley, who had “not put a foot wrong as New Zealand’s first gentleman ... perfect as Clinton’s golf partner and handling sheep shearing with aplomb, to the applause of APEC leaders’ spouses” is characterized by a physical description, by his profession, and by his masculine attraction. “[A] former basket-ball player, a huge bear of a man ... an inordinate number of women express urges to cuddle him... Mr. Shipley works as a bank manager and has also been a farmer (fifth generation).” The real deviance of this political husband whose masculine seduction can be read either ironically or positively, is held back for the concluding and punch lines. Mr. Shipley is “the main caregiver to the two Shipley children, Anna and Ben. Scones are a specialty.” In the context of the overall characterization of Burton Shipley, however, this “deviance” or gender-role inversion is not wholly negative. Although the representations of Mr. Clark and Mr. Shipley bring many of the stock gender stereotypes to the surface and the deviance of the male roles is clear, the supportive roles attributed to them can

also be read as having a positive side.²¹ After the 1999 election, Victoria Bain writes in *The Dominion* (10 April 2000) that Mrs. Shipley, now Leader of the Opposition, had benefited as Prime minister “from the media’s love affair with husband Burton, recognized as a great political asset.” In this gender trait reversal, it is once again Burton’s image, not Jenny’s that is sexualized and rendered an object of curiosity in Bain’s text. Despite the gender confusion in the portraits presenting the first gentleman as “a great bear of a man” and “sheepshearer” (masculine) and a caregiver (feminine), the “love affair” Bain speaks of is affirming.²² Bain’s gender role inversions appear very conscious and may well signal not only the increasing awareness of the gender question but the incipient acceptance of, or interest in, gender-bending, or confusion of roles on the part of her readers.

New Zealand media representations, then, continue to draw on traditional gender role expectations and to visualize different kinds of deviance in order to draw in the reading public.) The media responded most generally to the political leaders presentation of their platforms for the 2002 elections (on TV 3 Friday 5th July) by observing that Helen Clark was “dowdy” in a brown suit and the presentation was hardly entertaining. But despite the journalists confusion between information on policies and “infotainment,” increasingly these representations include gender-role reversal that can be read as positive, or at the least, read both ways. The hour long televised debate by the main party leaders on 27 October 1999 was foreshadowed by Mathew Brockett in *The Dominion* (“The mud pool”, 27 October 1999, 11) with the bellicose and gender-bending metaphor of “Jenny Shipley and Helen Clark wrestling in mud.” In the unsigned “Contrasting home lives of the party leaders” (*The Evening Post*, 20 April, 1999, 4), the journalist again used a traditionally masculine metaphor of battle to describe the campaign debates between the two women, observing that “the gloves came off in the opening rounds.” The text concludes by evoking a contest of appearance : “Neither is likely to descend to sniping at the others choice of makeup, hair stylist or dress sense, but others will.” In *The Dominion*, Helen Bain quotes Labour leader president Bob Harvey: “We’re interested in a male country, which we are, in seeing two women battle it out – the two Xena princesses. That’s what its about.”²³ The evident gender-role deviance in such metaphors of combat is again not necessarily open only to a negative reading in a country where competitive female sport, particularly netball, is beginning to play a national role and where Xena, the warrior princess, played by a New

Zealand actress, is a new folk hero(ine). In fact, in the televised debates and media appearances, including “a head to head” debate between Mrs Shipley and Ms. Clark on 24 November, both women carefully avoided anything that might have been seen with glee by some as fulfilling the predictions of “cat fight” or “mud-pool” wrestling or a personality struggle in the form of mother-versus-non-mother.

The gender-bending breakthrough is not, of course, the only reality of these representations which tend to hedge their bets between reinforcing doxa, that is, traditional public belief and expectations, and daring to affirm deviance as innovation. In the twenty-six randomly selected New Zealand press articles from the year 2000 that I examined, written for the most part by women journalists, all of the representations encountered in the French press showing the deviance of political women are present. Criticized as reserved or cold by the media in the past, Helen was now also put in the *pasionaria* or over-emotional category. Clark’s indignation over the \$5.2 million pay out for a newsreader dismissed from state owned Television NZ was written up as an exercise in “restrained fury.” (Elinore Wellwood, “The Power of one,” *The Press*, 4 March 2000, 4). Clark was accused of being “authoritarian” by opposition politician Bill English who claimed that “arrogance” would be her downfall. Ms Clark’s rational response — in this instance also reported — was that Mr. English was mistaking authoritative government for arrogance. Helen Clark’s brusque (non-feminine) manner is also alluded to. “Aides and colleagues have learnt the importance of picking the right moment and not being intimidated by her sometimes steely gaze.” Ms Clark’s press conferences are described as a somewhat “austere affair.” In “The Prime of Miss Helen Clark”, (Sunday Star Times, 12 March 2000, 3), Ruth Laugeson draws on the image of the spinster to write of the generally euphoric success of the first 100 days of a “leaderene” who was “elegant in icy blue.” In many of these representations, the too much/ too little (a woman) frame has not disappeared. The representation of the new situations is still shaped by the old tropes of gender-representation, including suspicion of the single or independent career woman. Yet, something in the general tone is different, opening up the possibility of a positive reading. In “Minister of everything keeps plenty of cooks in the kitchen” (*The Dominion*, 3 April 2000, 2), drawing on the domestic metaphors that delimit women’s spheres, Victoria Main combines a feminine metaphor of housekeeping with masculine rationality commending the fact that the mistress of the house “is always open to a well-reasoned

argument.” Traditionally negative epithets such as “authoritarian” or “steely” (if not “icy”) may lose some of their negative force in these contexts. Clark’s no-nonsense style, mountain climbing expeditions, her non-glamorous appearances, for example in the post America’s Cup victory parade in tee-shirt and cap, are recognized by the press as popular and seem to bring a measure of acceptance in media representations of the new and somewhat androgynous (neither masculine nor feminine) independent style she represents. The time has clearly passed when the very competent Marilyn Waring could not survive in the Cabinet because of her perceived difference/deviance which extended to public accusations of lesbianism. Clark’s high proportion of female cabinet members, despite a number of small scandals, have generally been represented by the press as no less competent as their male counterparts. Nor has the recent pre 2002 election label of “anarchic feminists” so curiously applied to Jeannette Fitzsimmon’s Green Party had a negative impact on its rising poll ratings.

The info-taining game of visualizing gender-role anomalies has not disappeared from New Zealand press articles but there is now also some analysis of these gender-role reversals. Bain notes the artificiality of the constraints that turned “the real-life Miss Clark ... a handsome woman who works out regularly but not the sort who has the time or inclination to devote to the frivolities of makeup or hairdo” into a campaign poster of an “airbrushed vision of loveliness, perfectly styled hair, immaculate makeup and widely believed to be digitally enhanced. ... Glam is not her natural style but glam is how she will be marketed.” Bain accuses the Labour Party of “bombarding voters this election with huge hoardings featuring this tantalizing new image.” In her analysis, violence is done implicitly to Clark’s integrity but Bain also recognizes this is a result of an age where campaigning for both sexes is inevitably dominated by television and the image and women’s appearance is still an issue. “The difference appearance can make was apparent in Parliament’s adjournment debate last month. Mrs. Shipley was radiant in a stunning new cobalt blue suit, while Miss Clark was drab in olive. Miss Clark’s speech was well focused, strong on content and confidently delivered but it was the visual impression left by Mrs. Shipley on the television news that was most striking.” Bain is suggesting that the media and the public are still very interested “in make-up and frocks” but also talking to the public about the constructed character of the symbolic of the female politician. In the final instance, the political commentators, in their turn quoted by the press, considered that voting histories, policies, and the

desire for change were more important than appearance in Ms Clark's victory in the election.

A certain mixing of both positive and negative gendered terms occurs in a number of the newspaper articles examined. Success is gauged by the astonishing buoyancy of the post election polls (43% in preferred prime minister rankings with support for Labour at over 50 % that will continue up to the next early elections in 2002). Sworn in at Government House in early December, Ms Clark had seemed "highly competent but flair-free and a little cold" writes Ruth Laugeson. But "the cautious former political science lecturer has become a gutsy political brawler with a strong streak of common sense ... Her harangues from the prime ministerial throne have established her as mistress of her domain. TVNZ has been whacked for extravagance and incompetence. ... police commissioner Peter Doone shown the door, and Nga Pui told firmly she won't come back to Waitangi until they sort out their family troubles" (over the issue of women being permitted to speak on the Maori marae).²⁴ Ruth Laugeson points to the decisiveness of action by Helen Clark and leaves the interpretation open — positive authoritative behaviour or negative authoritarian behavior. The term, "whacking" may be suspect for a woman politician recalling the metaphors used to characterise Margaret Thatcher as authoritarian and masculine or as severe nanny, but "confidence" appears affirming.²⁵ The journalist also interviews David Lange, former Labour prime minister, who speaks of the success of Clark's decisive action in non-gendered or unisex political terms, noting the effect of political "ordination" and the "new dimension and kick" given by success.

Representations of Martine Aubry. Does the old "French exception" still hold?

There is a strong parallel between the representations of leftwing Helen Clark in New Zealand and those of Socialist Martine Aubry in France in respect to the focus on authoritarianism or non-feminine appearance. However, in weekly public affairs journal, *Le Point*, in 1994, the political scientist, Alain Duhamel, portrayed this new star in the Socialist sky as combining masculine and feminine character traits. "No one is less inclined than she is to the politics of seduction. Not that she's without personal charm: she brings together quite successfully a dominating energy and an interesting intellectual approach with a certain hypersensitivity. Direct and attractive when she feels confident, recalcitrant and with hackles up when something attacks her, her rare honesty is undeniable."²⁶ Duhamel describes an almost "bellicose sincerity," and

adds a comment on Aubry's "taste for making decisions and effectiveness." The political scientist concludes that much as she is clearly the daughter of Jacques Delors, Martine owes her success to herself and not to the "prince." Duhamel's language suggests the beginning of a French acceptance of an independent female figure in politics. But, Duhamel was a co-author with Aubry of a *Little Dictionary to Combat the Far Right* and despite Aubry's continued following until the 2002 French elections that saw the return of a Rightist Chirac government and Aubry's own defeat in a Lille electorate, such a positive re-construction of the "French exception" is exceptional in the French media.

Martine Aubry's journalist biographers note that her leadership has been consistently labeled too "authoritarian" and that she was generally presented by the press in the mode of "tart school-marm." (Burel et Tatu 1997). Françoise Giroud may have been right when she claimed that Edith Cresson and Michèle Barzach did not survive because they were too seductive, too sexual, but Aubry's refusal to play the game of seduction was also presented as a problem. One journalist sniped at "a monk in skirts." Yet, austerity and refusal of gender stereotypes seem to have appeared to Aubry to be the safer track. "What interests me is action, not appearance" she retorted. Another interviewer-journalist quoted in her biography gives a representation of Aubry's physical appearance that, in the context of the valuing of women as a function of their "femininity" is less than flattering. "Tailored business suit, scarf, flat shoes, at forty-three, Martine Aubry is what is called a woman with a mind of her own" ("une femme carrée"). Other press descriptions from the period of her entry into government cited also generally attribute non-feminine qualities to this "superwoman" who possesses "authority," "moral intransigence," "frankness," "acerbic humor," and the "determination of a bulldozer."

Where Helen Clark's assertiveness is seen to have the potential to be a plus for this female politician, Martine Aubry's deviance in relation to the feminine norms is accorded little positive potential by the press. Another article in *Le Point* in 1996 presents something of a synthesis of the press representations of the "Aubry case."²⁷ Aubry is most particularly seen as her father's daughter; a top-down appointment in Edith Cresson's 1991 cabinet; a woman offered a job at the Elysée by Mitterrand when the government changed in 1993 and thus appointed by a prime minister or president without coming through the party ranks. Neither Shipley nor Clark are s

represented as “the daughter of...” or “the wife of...” although in the interest of the image of the couple before the election, Peter Davis made more frequent appearances by his wife’s side than in previous election campaigns.

In fact, an analysis of a feature article in *Le Point* of 25 June 1999 shows that all the old negative representations are still present. This article constructs a political woman close to the top in whom both masculine authoritarianism, intransigence, ambition and will to power and feminine seduction, emotionality, contradiction, cunning, charm, fascination, and the art of appearances are present as imperfections. “The Fiasco of the 35 hour Working Week” co-authored by Jean-François Jacquier and Marc Nexon, exhorts Martine to greater compromise and consultation.²⁸ No need however for increased consultation, they note, with the “copines” or “girlfriends” with whom she already meets for lunch once a month. Aubry is inevitably introduced as the “daughter of Jacques Delors,” As a “woman who understands business” (an *énarque* or graduate from the prestigious National School of Administration, and a technocrat), she has made herself the “favourite” (“*la coqueluche*”) in the 90s of the most significant French bosses (Péchiney, Moulinex, Crédit Lyonnais, BSN etc); Aubry is the “adopted daughter” of these powerful men. To this point, the *Le Point* article mainly recycles the representations brought together in the biography. But, as the authors continue their story, ten years later, in June 1999, “the bosses are all complaining ... The criticism of her authoritarian methods is growing” (54). “The ferocity with which the Minister of Employment and Social Solidarity is fighting to impose the 35 hour week on businesses that don’t want it” (54) makes her a *passionaria* and this “*passionaria* of the 35 hour week is being forced to back down.” Why so much “stubbornness”? ask the authors. The answer given is the “obsession with power” of this woman who “demanded” the Ministry of Finance when first invited to join the government and “held out” for the position of second in the government with a say in all major decisions. Since then, she has “invaded” the maximum amount of “territory” and everything “serves her ambition” – to become the next President. As she “contradicts” her earlier positions, hers is an “intransigent” ... “politics of appearances.” She is “cunning”; she draws the great of the political world into her net by her “undeniable charm” and her “fascination.” Surrounded by “slaves who adore her,” Aubry is also “mad,” unable to separate the trivial from the significant, her life absorbed totally by hard work with only a few hours out for a daughter, Clémentine (studying in the leading graduate School of Commerce,

HEC). The effectiveness of Aubry's political work is systematically attacked through her lack of duty to her daughter and family. The article does concede that Aubry has major popular support and that the next stage in her ascending career, becoming mayor of Lille, this time by democratic election, seems "inevitable."

The old "French exception" is clearly still at work in this press article, used to demonstrate the illegitimacy of Aubry's significant role in politics (any legitimacy coming from the father and the political or business princes), her unfeminine neglect of family role and her masculine ambition. In *Le Point* of 15 June 2001,²⁹ the same journalist, Marc Nexon co-authors a further article with Carl Meeus entitled "Guigou: These skeletons that Aubry has left in the cupboards" in which he implies the development of rivalry and discontents between the two former "copines" (girlfriends) since the time of the ceremony of the "passation des pouvoirs" (transfer of power with a kiss) between a "cold and hitchcockian" Elisabeth Guigou "relieved" to leave the justice ministry and "erase the memory of her failed reform," and a tearfully warm Martine Aubry, full of praise for her successor. But Aubry, it is stated, left her "girlfriend" a number of "time-bombs" — the 35 hour week, pensions, youth employment, health insurance — that she had omitted to adequately finance. Guigou is then presented as depressed by her personal defeat in the municipal elections in Avignon, as inflexible and hard ("cassante"), yet paradoxically as procrastinating and ineffective given the poisoned reform-gifts and lessons left by "la maîtresse Aubry" [school marm Aubry]. In the following article,³⁰ Ségolène Royal, associate minister for the Family is also berated for her lack of fiscal good sense in committing "unavailable" money to a new paternity allowance giving two weeks additional paid leave to fathers to encourage them to share child-raising responsibilities.

Aubry nonetheless remained very consistently at the top of the popularity polls from the time she entered the Jospin government. Her policies have been generally recognized by the public as working for greater social justice, social democracy, and fiscal responsibility. Political attack comes predominantly by way of her gender and gender-role priorities and takes the form of the old gender doxa. The truths of Martine Aubry's political life as they are presented in media representations, like the truths of Helen Clark's politics, are clearly filtered by both the political agenda and the gendered contexts of the journalist. The journalist is in turn more or less

consciously influenced by the symbolic order that organizes his/her language and his/her readers' understandings. The attitudes of political journalists (and therefore the expectations of their readers) in France and New Zealand however appear somewhat different. The French exception which requires femininity in women and adherence to the universal (the masculine) in politics appears to be still operating at the most influential levels in the media to disqualify women or their policies.

The representations of Helen Clark that we have examined are being framed by a symbolic order of the masculinity of power still very much in place, but these are articulated, interrogated and even inverted by the media. It may be that the history of settlement in New Zealand where strength was valued in women helpmeets in breaking the land has had an influence on the present greater receptivity of the media to forms of gender equality. Against the backdrop of female movement through a number of glass ceilings, what emerges in the sampling of New Zealand media representations, is a still deviant but acceptable androgynous figure that allows masculine and feminine qualities to exist together, permitting incipient "confusion" or mixing of gender roles and gender power.

Despite the "French exception" of parity and its affirming of the need for political life to contain equal numbers of men and women as in everyday living, despite the parity ideal of a universal that includes the feminine, our sample of media representations of Martine Aubry in 2001 suggests the continuing existence of the traditional "French exception" – the ideal of a (public) man and a (non-public) woman.

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Notes

¹ Cooper 1996, 170. My translation

² Cooper 1996, 170. My translation

³ Cooper 1996 quotes Jean Théroigne in *Au Pilon*, 2 octobre 1941. My translation.

⁴ Cooper 1996, 194. My translation.

⁵ *Le Figaro*, 21 mai 1991. Quoted in Freedman. 1992, 88.

⁶ *France Soir Magazine*, 29 mai 1982. Photograph C in Freedman 1992, following 41. My translation.

⁷ *Libération*, 25 mai 1989. Photo B in Freedman 1992, following p. 41. My translation.

⁸ *Libération*, 17 mai 1991. Photo A in Freedman 1996, following p. 41. My translation.

⁹ Also used of Dominique Voynet in *Libération*, 5 June 1997. Cited by Jane Freedman, “Fin de siècle Feminism. The Mouvement pour la parité.» In Chadwick, Kay and Timothy Unwin. 2000.

¹⁰ *Le Monde*, 25 juin 1987. Quoted in Freedman 1992, 29.

¹¹ *Libération*, 20 septembre 1987.

¹² Freedman 1992, 87.

¹³ Bainbrigge 2001.

¹⁴ Parity is distinct in character from the reformist pragmatism that has marked progress for women’s representation in both Northern Europe and New Zealand. Parity advocates claim to go beyond the traditional essentialist differences that have trapped women in their separate and inferior spheres, seeing these differences as embedded in specific social and educational contexts. Many argue that such local differences should be incorporated within a re-conceptualized Universal framework. Parity in the feminist frame is seen to derive from a French democracy claiming to be universal from 1789 but shown to be non-representative and flawed. Parity may also be as much pragmatically grounded as it is philosophically grounded, constituting a form of “counter-power” in the Foucauldian sense and operating, as women’s historian, Geneviève Fraisse, has put it, as a Trojan horse. Fraisse herself refuses essentialism but argues for women’s distinctive historical relationship to the political world.

¹⁵ This article has been developed out of an in-depth diachronic study of the representation of French women in politics. (See Ramsay, 2002). The work on New Zealand political women is limited to a narrower synchronic study of newspaper articles.

¹⁶ Fraisse 1995. Cited by Freedman in « The Mouvement pour la parité. ». In Chadwick and Unwin 2000, 80.

¹⁷ These theoretical concepts for comparing gender arrangements across cultures were proposed by Britt-Marie Thuren in a paper entitled “On Force, scope and hierarchy: some gender theoretical concepts” read at the “Feminist Research Conference.” Bologna, 30 September 20,

¹⁸ In communities of Maori and Pacific Island women, notions of the group and the primacy of its survival still shape gender roles and require specific descriptions in which gender distinctions might have greater force and wider scope in a more pronounced hierarchy of power.

¹⁹ In “The mother of all battles,” (*Sunday Star Times*, 7 November 1999, 2), twisting traditional feminist arguments, Rosemary McLeod evokes a tradition in New Zealand of mainly childless women in public positions (matrons, headmistresses, a few doctors) “able to prove themselves exceptional without needing to be pretty.” She argues that childless women had enjoyed the privilege of intimacy with men on their own terms when most women merely had private lives. “They carped about equality with men but at least they didn’t have to be their flunkies.”

Approving of Mrs Shipley’s conservative identification with her role as mother of a family and of “women’s domestic experience as having some value in the wider world,” she nonetheless wonders in a subsequent article discussing Jenny Shipley’s heart problems in mid 2000, whether Shipley (read public women) was “regretting not having stayed home and made pikelets.”

²⁰ Rosemary McLeod. “Clark v Shipley — the mother of all battles.” *Sunday Star Times*, 7 November 1999, 2.

²¹ Victoria Bain's article goes on to sketch the portrait of the spouses of all the leaders of political parties, including both married and de facto woman partners in both traditional and reconstituted families. She insists that the difficulties of long hours and absences of the "spouse" are shared across different partnership status and across gender.

²² Victoria Bain. "Out in the cold and needing some media exposure." *The Dominion*, 10 April 2000, 2.

²³ Helen Bain. "Trying to look the part." *The Dominion*, 9 November 1999, 9.

²⁴ Ruth Laugeson. "The Prime of Miss Helen Clark." *Sunday Star Times*, 12 March 2000, 3.

²⁵ In "Beyond the Glass Ceiling," *Evening Post*, 24 May 2000, 19, Diana Dekker published a survey among powerful women on whether with a woman Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition and Chief Justice, "the glass ceiling had been shattered" and "whether women suffered on the way through." Political columnist and editor of *Grace magazine*, Linda Clark observed: "I think it's indulgent for professional women to moan about their lot. I'm sure sexism does exist. It does. But I'm not going to be stopped doing anything by anyone." Roseanne Meo, former chairwoman of Television New Zealand added: "My personal theory is that the difficult operating environment we had in the late 80s and early 90s meant we put the emphasis on the best- man-for-the-job regardless of gender and we stripped ourselves of the constraints in other countries." Meo is suggesting a possible New Zealand exception, a pragmatic, can-do, no-difference, New Zealand ethos of 'no victims here' and 'get on with the job without whining.' Dekker concludes that "guilt is not a big feeling at this stratospheric level any more than it is for men. I'll be late home, dear is as acceptable to a man who has stayed to watch, understand and benefit from the rise and rise of his wife as it is to an encouraging wife." However, women at the top of career structures are still outstanding because of their sex as well as their achievement.

²⁶ *Le Point* 1119, 26 February, 1994.

²⁷ François Bazin et Joseph Macé-Scaron. « Femmes Politiques.» *Le Point* 1236, 25 mai 1996, 62-6.

²⁸ Jean-François Jacquier and Marc Nexon. « Le fiasco des 35 heures. » *Le Point* 1997, 25 juin 1999, 5-62.

²⁹ *Le Point*, no. 1500, 15 June 2001, 80-86.

³⁰ *Le Point*, no. 1500, Philippe Manière. « Ségolène à contresens. » 15 June 2001, 86.