Revisiting Jewson and Mason: The Politics of Gender Equality in UK Local Government in a Cold Climate

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This paper revisits Jewson and Mason's seminal theoretical framework on liberal and radical approaches to equal opportunity policy and practice by applying it to our research on the implementation of the Gender Equality Duty in UK local government. Conducted at the height of Thatcherism, Jewson and Mason's research offers a useful platform for assessing equality initiatives in local government during periods of political hostility to equality underpinned by cuts to public services, which in more recent time is ascribed to austerity. Drawing on qualitative research in five case study local authorities, this paper assesses strategies for protecting and promoting gender equality practices and policies in the face of change within public services. We analyse three types of politics of equality (political philosophy, organizational politics and party politics) that feature in Jewson and Mason's analysis. In line with recent feminist research, our data indicate that equality specialists continue to use both liberal and radical discourses in instrumental ways to promote equality and resist change as described by Jewson and Mason, but these were more clearly framed within business case arguments influenced by the modernization agenda of the 1990s. Our data indicate that even business case arguments have been unable to protect equality initiatives from the 2010 coalition government's austerity and cuts agenda.

Introduction

In 1986 Nick Jewson and David Mason published their seminal article 'The theory and practice of equal opportunities policies: liberal and radical approaches' in *The Sociological Review*. Their analysis of the different discourses used to both promote and obstruct equality in UK organizations first raised the radical/liberal distinction between equality policy and practice. The article has since been widely cited and has particularly stimulated further feminist debate on the politics of equality.

Jewson and Mason's article considers the politics of equality from three main perspectives. Firstly, there is a political philosophy discourse on the nature of radical and liberal approaches to equality of opportunity that frame the paper and which have been extensively cited since. Secondly, there is an empirical exploration of the organizational politics that seeks to use liberal and radical discourses to either advance or to block efforts to put equality into practice. This aspect of their paper particularly emphasizes how power in organizations, almost entirely held by senior white, male managers, officers and elected leaders, manifests itself in resistance to equality, although they do not specifically address the gender politics that surrounds the implementation of policy, particularly, equality policy, in organizations. Lastly, the timing of their research at the height of Thatcherism and the location of one of their case studies in UK local government meant that party politics could not be escaped. In the

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UK responsibility for the provision of many public services is devolved to local government whilst decisions about overall budget levels remain with central government. Local government elected leaders do not necessarily, and in fact often do not, belong to the same political party as politicians leading central government. Jewson and Mason's research highlighted the difficulty of resisting political hostility to equality underpinned by an economic policy premised on cuts to public services, which has particular resonance in the current economic climate of austerity. Although both periods of recession had gendered impacts, there were differences in political approaches in the UK that are explored in the theoretical and empirical contribution in the paper. Furthermore, although the neoliberal attacks on public services in the 1980s and 1990s were initially specific to the UK, they have been emulated to different degrees in most welfare states and have been a key feature globally in response to the recession in the mid 2000s (Conley *et al.*, 2011; Walby, 2015).

This paper revisits Jewson and Mason's seminal theoretical framework along with some of the influential feminist research that critiqued and built upon it by applying it to our research on the implementation of the Gender Equality Duty (GED) in local government in a similarly difficult economic and political context. The purpose of the paper is to re-examine the now familiar theoretical dichotomies of radical and liberal approaches to equality raised by Jewson and Mason in the light of more recent developments in gender equality legislation in Britain. By the end of the 1990s the slowed progress on equality and concerns about embedded institutional discrimination in the UK, coupled with a more receptive political and economic context, prompted a new approach to how public authorities are regulated. The GED, hailed as the most important advance in women's equality in Great Britain since the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (EOC, 2006), was part of this new approach. It is important to note that much of the research on equality in local government, including Jewson and Mason's work, has focused on employment. However, women's equality also depends on the provision of government-funded public services that not only provide a major source of work for women but crucially allows them to engage in the public sphere more broadly. Services provided by local authorities are important to changing gender relations because state-funded public services free women from unpaid care in the family, provide substantial opportunities for paid caring work and provide safer environments for women to live in (Conley and Page, 2015). The GED was designed to promote equality in public authorities in relation to both employment and service delivery, thus recognizing the centrality of both for women's equality.

Drawing on qualitative research in five case study local authorities, our paper assesses change and continuity in the influence of the three types of politics of equality that feature in Jewson and Mason's (1986) analysis. Our findings indicate that all three types of politics continue to be influential in equality work in local government. Equality advisors in each of our case study authorities skilfully used both radical and liberal discourses supplemented by the emergence of 'business case' arguments to cajole and encourage their less enthusiastic colleagues to implement the GED. However, as Jewson and Mason's article and numerous research papers since then have indicated, local government is inherently politically contested. Public services are most often the first casualties of government financial austerity and for most of the past 30 years, British central government has applied funding pressure that has inevitably impacted on gender equality either through persistent pay inequality, the loss of women's jobs or the loss of services on which women depend. Resisting attacks on equality has therefore been a longstanding and sometimes demoralizing project for feminists in UK local government. The GED offered hope of a way forward but political tensions remain and our paper considers how these have manifested in relation to the GED and why the early hopes for a new approach have been difficult to realize.

Liberal and radical approaches revisited

Although Jewson and Mason include race and gender equality in their study, they do not examine the specific characteristics of different equality strands. The mainstay of their article is the theoretical distinction between liberal and radical approaches to equality. In Jewson and Mason's model, liberal and radical approaches to equality map roughly on to political positions. Liberal approaches are

compatible with the neoliberal political agenda. This approach is typified by the concept of creating a level playing field where failures to achieve equality are the result of social barriers or market 'imperfections' that block individuals from career advancement, or from accessing services. Intervention is seen as necessary only to remove barriers that might obstruct free and fair competition that will allow the best person for the job to emerge. In this respect the liberal approach is considered to be process driven, ensuring fair and transparent procedures. The liberal approach to equality is dominant in the UK, underpinning much of the legislation and government social policy (Cockburn, 1991; Webb, 1997). In comparison, Jewson and Mason (1986) consider that radical approaches have a greater affinity with 'Marxism, feminism or "black power"' (p. 315). The argument here is that gender inequality is integral to capitalism and that competition will always produce the winners and losers that create the class system upon which capitalism and patriarchy feed. Jewson and Mason broaden the meaning of politics by stating:

> Politicization implies that decisions within an enterprise or institution are not made according to technical or bureaucratic criteria of rationality but rather in terms of the prosecution of a struggle for power and influence on the part of specific subordinate groups. Decision making is not guided primarily by procedural detail, historical precedent or legal technicalities. Instead it is interpreted as an opportunity to advance the sectional interests of the oppressed. (pp. 319–20)

Radical approaches therefore consider equality policies to be successful only when they result in more equal outcomes, but this is likely to be achieved only when power imbalances are challenged and negotiated. How these negotiations occurred between holders of power, equality officers and feminist activists is central to the research reported on in this paper. It should be noted that radical feminism does not equate directly to Jewson and Mason's conceptualization of a radical approach to equal opportunities. Cockburn (1991, p. 18) makes a distinction between liberal, socialist and radical feminism but argues 'that most feminisms are a little bit of each' (1991, p. 28). In some ways this echoes Jewson and Mason's findings that, in practice, the distinction between liberal and radical approaches is often blurred.

In Jewson and Mason's research, a party political split is most clearly observed in practice in their case study of a local authority where council members (the elected cadre) affiliated with the Conservative Party were more likely to endorse and advance a liberal approach and members affiliated to the Labour Party, supported by the trade unions, favoured an approach that more typified the radical model. Interestingly, Jewson and Mason found that some council officers (the professional, paid cadre) were more likely to favour the liberal, process-driven approach and block radical, outcome-focused policies. Their empirical work, however, established how, in order to further equality in local government, liberal discourses would often be adopted by those seeking to move the equality agenda forward to open the door for more radical practices: 'In other words a radical policy may masquerade as a liberal one' (p. 323). This strategy also worked in the other direction and Jewson and Mason provide the example of supporters of the liberal approach using outcome-based arguments to justify both liberal and radical procedures: 'Thus it is common for liberals to justify the fairness of procedures by reference to an actual or expected increase in the representativeness of black people and women in the workforce' (p. 324).

Another issue raised by Jewson and Mason's paper was the perception of radicals by liberals as overzealous in their need to apportion blame: 'This may take the form of public confessions of past misdemeanours, the resocialization of the ideologically unsound or the exemplary punishment of incorrigible transgressors' (p. 326). Radicals, on the other hand, viewed the actions that prompted this response, mandatory sexism and racism awareness training for senior managers, as consciousness-raising. Jewson and Mason argue that the tensions between these different perceptions increased the mistrust between liberal and radical organizational actors. Ultimately mistrust manifested itself in resentment by liberal advocates of equality policies formed by remote specialist teams that seemed to push them into practices that they did not agree with. Similarly, operational managers often considered the requirements of equality policies conflicted with or detracted from their service

delivery responsibilities. The response was a parallel feeling by radicals that opponents of their policies were happy with the *status quo* and had limited interest in working towards equality.

These arguments have been well rehearsed, critiqued and substantially developed since Jewson and Mason (1986). Cockburn (1989) argued that liberal and radical distinctions were, on their own, insufficient to explain the politics of equality and added the equally influential concept of long and short agendas. Cockburn's short agenda approximates Jewson and Mason's liberal approach of removing barriers to opportunity. Her long agenda develops the central importance of outcome in the radical model by introducing the idea that a progressive, committed approach to equality should be socially transformative. Cockburn expressly locates the power for radical change within institutions which, given the premise on which the GED was based some 18 years later, was an early signpost of how social policy on equality might develop. However, what could or should be conceived as transformational has been constricted over the years, from the political vision of transformation envisaged by Cockburn to something that is far more modest.

In an analysis of gender equality in local government, Coyle (1989, p. 45) highlighted that, more than 10 years after the introduction of the main equality legislation based on a liberal approach, only 227 out of 554 local authorities had introduced equal opportunities policies. Mirroring Jewson and Mason's earlier findings Coyle notes that, even with such patchy uptake, a backlash against gender equality in employment had already started to take root, with the increasing number of women in senior positions being regarded as the outcome of positive discrimination. Coyle is less convinced than Jewson and Mason that party politics maps straightforwardly on to liberal and radical equality agendas. Although she argues that Labour-controlled councils had led the way in the development of equality policies, Coyle also notes that some sections of the Labour Party were ambivalent to equality outside of a socialist focus on class, particularly when defined by external independently organized women's groups, and some trade unions were wary of management or politically-led equality initiatives, particularly if they threatened gains made for male memberships (p. 47).

Writing at the onset of the privatization of public services under Thatcherism, Coyle notes 'This will mean that vast numbers of women currently in the employ of local authorities are threatened with redundancy and certainly with a significant loss of earnings and job security' (1989, p. 46). In doing so Coyle identifies how local government equality initiatives, even if embryonic, are thwarted if centrally imposed government policies and budgets are not women friendly. She further argues that both liberal and radical agendas are premised on economic growth which, when coupled with a voluntarist approach, as in the UK, inevitably makes them a first casualty of economic downturn. These are portentous conclusions that are particularly resonant in the political and economic climate of austerity more than two decades later.

More recent debates have moved away from an overtly political stance by shifting the focus from equality to diversity and from social justice to business case arguments (Noon, 2007). Business case arguments have been used to argue that an organization with a diverse workforce is better equipped to appeal to an increasingly diverse customer base, offering a competitive edge in tight markets and times of austerity for private sector organizations.

The application of these arguments to public services in times of austerity is less clear cut. Attracting more 'customers' to use local government public services is no guarantee against savage central government funding cuts in the name of austerity. Although the managing diversity approach is often portrayed as apolitical, if it is put in the context Jewson and Mason identified, it recasts equality from something that must be forced on managers to something that managers should have control of. In this sense managers need not feel threatened by diversity or see it as something that might prevent them achieving service efficiency (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). On the contrary, managing diversity and associated business case discourses offer another tool for pursuing hard targets without worrying too much about their actual equality impact and outcomes (Liff, 1996). Kettle (1998) provides a useful analysis of how business case arguments have been taken up by local authorities in relation to women's employment. Her argument is that, although adopting these arguments has yielded some pragmatic gains, they have done so by removing the threat of conflict, and feminism, from women's equality discourses.

Although a managing diversity discourse seems to be closer to the liberal end of the political spectrum identified by Jewson and Mason, its addition may have done nothing to reduce the blurred boundaries between different conceptualizations that they noted. A number of authors have identified that managing diversity and business case discourses may actually be used just as instrumentally by organizational actors as Jewson and Mason identified in relation to liberal and radical discourses (Kirton *et al.*, 2007; Lawrence, 2000; Meyerson and Scully, 1995). Page (2011, p. 324) notes how, in local government, service- and efficiency-focused arguments have facilitated the process of mainstreaming gender equality and in doing so have helped the transition of equality advisors from the 1980s caricature of 'thought police' to 'coach' by 'decoupling the content of gender equality change from the processual work of equality advisors and by building ownership of the issues, albeit slowly, in departments' (p. 326).

Gender mainstreaming attained panacea proportions in the 1990s, possibly because it allowed a fusion between social justice and business case approaches to gender equality. Walby (2011) notes that gender mainstreaming is a process to promote gender equality but is also intended to improve the efficiency of mainstream policies. As such, she maintains, gender mainstreaming has an in-built assumption of compatibility between business interests and the equality agenda. Benschop and Verloo (2006) investigate how tensions between feminist transformational and liberal approaches could be worked in practice, by feminist researchers working in partnership with equality practitioners and organizational members in a civil service organization. They conclude that the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming is necessarily contingent on the discursive and relative power positioning of organizational members, and that this reality is masked by the assumption of compatibility between a feminist and business case for equality:

> While gender mainstreaming is positioned as participatory, invoking an image of co-operation between equal parties pursuing a dual agenda of business needs and feminist goals, we have seen how crucial power differences between the parties determine the outcome. (p. 31)

Eveline and Bacchi (2005) make the case for shifting the focus of research to the processes of gendering within the policy process. Examining gender mainstreaming in two different countries, they show how gender itself is a contested category and how different understandings of gender are attached to different reform approaches and may enable or inhibit the effectiveness of the strategy (p. 502). In a later study within Australian public services, they analyse a design for gender mainstreaming that enables critical reflection by key actors on how they are constructing gender within the policy process and how they might interrupt or transform the predominant narrative (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010).

These studies suggest that gender mainstreaming should be understood as a set of practices in an organizational field in which actors draw upon a range of contested discourses about gender. They clearly identify the organizational tensions inherent in maintaining a dialogue and forward trajectory for gender equality that is acceptable to dominant business case discourses but at the same time does not lose sight of structural change and transformational goals. They also highlight the vulnerability and often esoteric nature of the gender equality project, dependent as it often is on personalities, networks, lobbying and political manoeuvring. The following section considers a ground-breaking but short-lived legislative attempt to formalize and codify gender mainstreaming in British public services and, in doing so, provides a potentially powerful tool for gender equality practitioners and feminist activists to leverage equality policy and practice towards a more transformational agenda.

The Gender Equality Duty (GED) in Great Britain[1]

The GED, which came into effect in Great Britain in April 2007, was considered to be '[t]he biggest change in sex equality legislation in thirty years, since the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act itself' (EOC, 2006). In the Code of Practice developed by the Equal Opportunities Commission, the GED was billed as 'a form of legally enforceable "gender mainstreaming" — building gender equality into the core business thinking and processes of an organization' (EOC, 2006, pp. 7–8).

Unlike the majority of UK equality legislation, it was not underpinned by European Directives. The GED was the last of the three equality duties following the Race Equality Duty (RED) in 2001 and the Disability Equality Duty (DED) in 2006. The duties applied only to public authorities, including local government. The three separate duties were combined in the Equality Act 2010 which was expanded to include age, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religious belief, pregnancy and maternity to meet the requirements of article 13 of the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam and the resulting European Directives. Although shining through only a brief window of opportunity, the GED has had a considerable impact on the conceptualization and practice of gender equality in local government and public authorities more generally.

Prior to the GED, the sex discrimination legislation in the UK was retrospective, providing individual rights largely for workers who felt they had been discriminated against in their employment on the basis of their sex. The GED and the other public sector equality duties were quite different in their conceptualization in that they did not provide additional rights for individuals but rather placed responsibilities on public authorities to pursue equality. In this respect they were considered to be a positive, proactive approach to equality designed to directly change organizational behaviour rather than a rights-based approach that is dependent on discrimination having already taken place and which simply punishes transgressors without necessarily effecting wider change (Bell, 2010). The GED further widened the scope of the legislation to include the interests and representation of women and men as public service users as well as workers, which is an important step towards a more holistic view of the welfare state which underpins feminist theory (Conley and Page, 2015).

The GED placed a statutory duty on all public authorities 'to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment and to promote equality of opportunity between men and women' (EOC, 2006, p. 6). In practice, this approach is designed to ensure the mainstreaming of equality issues and to counter the past criticisms that equal opportunities were confined to politically driven initiatives by specialist advisors and senior management and were not 'owned' by the operational managers required to put them in place. In some respects this attempt to require integration of equalities promotion into management processes and practices addressed some of the issues articulated by Jewson and Mason that had been long identified by equalities bodies and activists: that the greatest block to putting equality policies into practice is often the disassociation between the levels at which equality policy is formed and where it needs to be operationalized.

There has been a mixed response to the effectiveness of the equality duties (Bell, 2010; Conley and Page, 2010; Fredman, 2011). One of the key criticisms is that the duties led to a focus on procedural change, a 'tick box exercise', rather than resulting in improved outcomes for gender equality. Again these criticisms have some resonance with Jewson and Mason's analysis of how equality policy can become stifled by resentful or simply over-worked public sector managers charged with their execution or even used to legitimize the status quo. However, the major difficulties for the GED and the single public sector equality duties into which it was merged have been party political. In particular, the difficult passage of the Equality Act 2010 and the new public sector equality duty highlights the political nature of equality in public service delivery. This has been considerably accentuated by the emergence of the latest economic crisis and gendered austerity as the political response, which coincided with the move from a distinct gender equality duty to a single equality duty covering eight different strands in the Equality Act 2010.

Assessing continuity and change

It is clear from the preceding analysis that many of the challenges of putting gender equality into practice identified since the 1980s continue to shape debate and policy formation. However, although both periods of crisis involved extensive impact on public service delivery, there are key differences between the political responses in the 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s. The restructuring of public services that took place in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s largely involved the contracting out of directly

provided services to the private and voluntary sectors, with gendered consequences for the terms and conditions of women employed to deliver the services and for the quality of the services provided (Escott and Whitfield, 1995; Newman, 2002). The political response following the financial crisis of 2007, euphemistically called austerity, largely involved cutting public spending to the extent that local government budgets for in-house and contracted-out services were radically reduced. This has resulted in the further deterioration of terms and conditions of work and loss of jobs performed by women and drastically reduced services predominantly used by women (Fawcett Society, 2014; UNISON, 2014). Although public sector reform continued under the Labour government elected in 1997 under the aegis of modernization, there was, sandwiched between these two periods of crisis, a turning point in equality legislation that resulted in the enactment of the public sector equality duties and culminated in the passage of the Equality Act 2010.

Our research, which therefore spanned a crucial if somewhat contradictory and perplexing time for equality actors in local government, offers a useful platform to revisit the work of Jewson and Mason and others to assess continuity and change in the struggle for gender equality. The research reported on in this paper was carried out in five case study local authorities in England. Case study research provides in-depth, exploratory data from a small number of sources and is not intended for generalization (Yin, 1994). The purpose of the empirical research was to establish how different local authorities were implementing the GED, particularly since the legislation was novel in its proactive approach to equality and allowed for a great deal of variation. Each case study organization was selected for differences in geographical location and history, political administration, development of operational strategy for implementing equality policy, feminist organizing (Newman, 2002), and different stage of implementation of the GED. Three of the authorities were 'core cities', one was a rural county council and one was a London Borough Council. In each of the authorities reviews were taking place over the period of the research of the first 12 months of implementation of the GED. The equalities advisors leading on the implementation of the GED within each of the case study organizations were interviewed and all viewed the research as a timely opportunity for more in-depth discussion of the likely impact of a single equalities approach and have provided access to key personnel and documents to inform the research. Further interviews were conducted with service managers, HR managers, trade unions, service user groups, senior officers and elected members with responsibility for equality. Interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed using grounded theory methods of data coding. Interviews were supplemented with documentary data collection, largely from gender equality schemes required by the GED. The documentary data helped us to assess how far the views and experiences of the interviewees compared to written policy. As a final stage, we conducted interviews with key national policy advisors who were leaders in shaping new equalities legislation and policy drivers for the future. Approximately 60 interviews were conducted in total. Our data in this paper is organized to reflect the key issues raised by Jewson and Mason's original work and focuses on the views of those responsible for implementing the GED in our case study authorities.

The impact of the Gender Equality Duty

Our overall impression following our research was that the GED had made a noticeable impact on how our case study authorities operationalized equality. Despite the criticisms of the GED, we found that, whilst a tick box approach was undoubtedly a temptation, it was clear that the new legislation was viewed by equality officers and some committed managers as an opportunity and a tool to rejuvenate and support existing work on gender equality:

> I think it's [GED] helped raise awareness, absolutely, definitely yes I do, because I've worked in local government a long time and I've been part of equalities action groups and support groups in many different ways. It was almost seen as an add on in less recent times. I think that by raising awareness at every level, that truly does start to impact on daily services and the fact that we can

actually test and evidence what we do, it's not speculative, we can actually say this is what we've done, and that's really important. (Equality Officer 1, City 2)

I think also we've got a number of, particularly women, within this organization … who do look at things from a gender perspective. They would be doing that anyway, I think and I think it's fair to say that a lot of people who do that would be doing that anyway. But, the gender duty sort of gives them a little bit more power. (Equality Officer 2, City 2)

Equality impact assessments, as one of the key forms of demonstrating compliance with the legislation, have come under particular critical scrutiny, possibly because failure to do them has led to some leading cases of judicial review (Conley, 2012). Our research data indicated that there was some feeling that equality impact assessments had not been completed as thoroughly as they could have been by line managers. Jewson and Mason argued that poor engagement by line managers represented a limited commitment to equality and a form of resistance to what was perceived as coercion by radicals. This did not appear to be the case in the local authorities we researched. Rather, the feeling was that the exercise was a valuable but sometimes uncertain process because it was relatively new territory:

[T]he fact that people are doing impact assessments is fantastic. We started off with 100 services doing impact assessments and for an authority this big, that's actually a small number of services. Now we've got all the services, or most services and certainly all the directorates thinking about [EIAs]. That's a massive achievement. We do need to do work to improve the quality of them, but we have to celebrate those, because if not, people will just say — I can't do this, it's too big, we're never going to achieve this, so what's the point? (Equality Officer 1, City 1)

Our findings indicate that the GED was a powerful mechanism for engaging public service delivery teams to mainstream gender equality in their day-to-day work. However, the legislation on its own had not brought about this change. Equality officers in all of our case study authorities had reframed themselves as facilitators and coaches (Page, 2011) and in doing so had adopted a discourse and conceptualization of equality that was integral to service quality. The following sections examine these findings in more detail.

Equality and the 'business case' — the ascendancy of liberalism?

In analysing our data, like Jewson and Mason, we did not find it easy to distinguish between clear liberal and radical interpretations of equality. One of the most striking points to emerge was that, at all levels of local government, equality policy and practice had become subsumed into business case discourses. A high-ranking local government policy advisor made this point most starkly:

Well I think if you don't [embed gender equality benchmarking into the core business of the organization] you're stuffed really. (National policy advisor, Equalities Framework for Local Government)

This observation was confirmed during our interviews with equality actors in our case study authorities where our analysis identified that equality work was locked within a 'modernization' discourse that recasts public service delivery as a business.

The equality scheme itself is also firmly linked in with our business plan and our [City 1] strategic plan, which are then firmly linked in with our vision for [City 1]. (Equality Officer 1, City 1)

within the council we've got a number of priority outcomes which are linked to the council's business plan. For HR there are quite a few because our chief officer is accountable for those. What we need to do on a six monthly basis is complete these trackers, the dreaded trackers. The trackers really outline progress against each of our priority outcomes. (Human Resources Equality Lead, City 2)

In one of our case study authorities, the titles of equality officers had been changed to reflect the new emphasis on equality as part of the business strategy:

> We're just moving to a new model actually, which is a business partner model. So my job title going forward will be Organizational Development Business Partner … So the general remit of what we do is around development and performance management and so on and that includes service improvement and equality. (Equality Officer 2, City 2)

Part of the business case discourse was the conceptualization of equality as performance management of service quality and of service users as customers:

> We've worked really hard over the last few years to ensure that equality and diversity sits very much within performance improvement and service improvement teams. (Equality Officer 2, City 1)

> From the corporate performance team in particular, a lot of emphasis has gone on really understanding who your customers are. They are really drilling down, they are doing audits, we do audits on a local level on service plans to make sure it covers everything it needs to cover. They do corporate audits, they're going to be doing one on the HR service plan in my area. But a lot of emphasis really is on understanding who your customers are and who your potential customers are as well. Are there any customers that you're not attracting in? (Human Resources Equality Lead, City 1)

In this sense, the view of equality as something that might detract from service delivery, unless very tightly bounded in a business case argument, echoes Jewson and Mason's findings. It is tempting to associate the business case for equality with a neoliberal if not a liberal perspective on equality. It was clear from our research that equality had become locked into the bureaucracy of performance management. In our case study authorities it could be argued that the business case, because it was related to performance indicators and targets, was outcome-focused and therefore held some elements of radical discourses for equality. However, these outcomes are a far cry from what Cockburn (1989) had in mind for a transformative long agenda and probably fits more closely with a liberal 'managing diversity' perspective (Kirton and Greene, 2000; Miller, 1996)

However, it would not be accurate to describe the development of business case arguments as a complete capitulation to (neo)liberal discourse. Where equality actors expanded on using business case discourses, it was clear that, just as Jewson and Mason had described, their motivations were often instrumental, blurring the boundaries between liberal and radical categorizations of equality:

> At the end of the day, the moral argument should be sufficient, but often isn't. As soon as you start talking about inspections, whether it's housing inspections, whether it's Ofsted, whether it's adult social care inspections, whether it's CAA, it doesn't matter what inspection it is, as soon as you link something to an inspection, then people who may not have otherwise shown much interest … I think almost before we recognized how important inspections were as a hook. But I think it has definitely been a hook and it's definitely helped. (Equality Officer 2, City 1)

> What we are trying to do in some way is trying to link into the customer service side, so to try and … when there is antagonism to equality, there's not much antagonism to customer focus and customer insight and the new customer service excellence that replaces charter mark that the council is fully signed up to have a whole section on customer insight. That really is about knowing the different needs of your customers and there's a lot of equality stuff within that. So we are aligning ourselves to that and I think that gets the message across without people thinking it's those equality people again! (Equality Officer 1, City 2)

There was recognition that skilful navigation between discourses and political priorities was required to steer equality work through changes in the political landscape of local authorities. During the time we were conducting our research, a number of the case study authorities changed from Labour to

Liberal Democrat political control. Political change was most often accompanied by a change in the conceptualization of equality and how it could be achieved:

> So we've moved from equalities outcomes to equalities opportunity … It's made it more difficult, I certainly sense, in trying to put a [gender equality] scheme together. We've moved from — you cannot talk about any narrowing of the gap, anything around neighbourhoods or that kind of level, it's very much about the individual and individual equality and having individual equality of opportunity and that is the language and that is the kind of tone in which we are working. So we are having to move things around and change the language of things to fit in with the new administration. (Equality Officer 1, City 3)

Even where political control had not changed, there was a clear understanding that approaches to equality were very much influenced by different political ideologies of how or if the local state should provide services:

> I guess speaking to a colleague from another local authority with a different political make-up, she said they were looking at doing some work similar to what we're doing here and the political response was, that's interventionist and we don't want to be doing that. (Services Manager — Equality Lead, London Borough)

Whilst it was clear that equality actors could work within a business case discourse although attempting to pursue equality of outcome, it was equally clear that language or behaviour associated with past, overtly radical, approaches must be avoided at all costs:

> the team as a whole has moved from that confrontational stance to the supportive stance. It's moved away from having a reputation of policing and being politically correct to a reputation of actually being a professional service that will support you in terms of making sure that you are credible when you go for inspections. (Equality Officer 1, City 1)

In this sense the radical approach, or a stereotypical version of it, was stigmatized in the same way that Jewson and Mason identified in the 1980s. The difference in our case study authorities was that advocates of a radical approach were no longer a visible challenge to liberal or business case discourses.

Politics, austerity and equality — oil on water?

Since Jewson and Mason (1986), researchers have noted that much of the political discourse surrounding equality is focused on its impact on organizational and economic efficiency. In the 1980s, writers such as Cockburn and Coyle highlighted how the greatest opponent in the battle for gender equality in local government was a political discourse that framed equality as a 'barrier to business'. These arguments come to the fore in times of economic crisis and have been used to challenge the continuance of the legislation. Attempts to circumvent this opposition have taken the form of discourses that attempt to minimize or at least blur the gaps between liberal and radical positions. In managing diversity discourses this is taken one step further by arguing that business success is indeed dependent on at least valuing difference. Although our research took place on the brink of the current economic crisis and before the election of the coalition government, budgetary constraint had been built into the fabric of public service delivery since the 1980s. It was clear that the perceived legitimacy of equality actors rested on their ability to navigate between different political discourses and to demonstrate 'value added'. Even this was not always successful, and in some cases the very existence of equality as a tangible part of policy structures was under threat:

> You've come at quite an interesting time really, because we don't really know where it's going to go. Now I don't know what's been said politically. I don't know … they started off saying that they weren't going to have any equalities department at all, but I think now they've got in and they realize they've got to do some … the Lib Dems have got to do some management of it, I think they're

recognizing there is a need, clearly because they are going to be measured against things, but it's how robust that is, is what we need to wait and see and what that means. The difficulty is, the effects of it could be quite long-term rather than short-term change. (Equality Officer 3, City 2)

I mean the reorganization of equality initially seemed to be a bad thing from our perspective as a team and we were involved in lots of discussions. It's not all been agreed yet anyway … We will still continue to work on equality, I think you need to be careful how you write this up really, because we've got some very supportive senior managers. Our new assistant chief exec, for example, is keen to go for the equality framework. She's also keen to do more work around gender issues, which we feel we've not been doing as much of over recent times. But the way that the new administration want to do it is to not have a corporate team of equality people, which in some senses goes against … I mean, it is quite full of contradictions. (Equality Officer 1, City 2)

Once our fieldwork was completed, we attempted to keep in touch with our contacts in some of the local authorities. This has proved quite difficult because in three of our five case studies a distinct equalities team no longer exists. In City 2 the largest equality team has been disbanded. Personnel have been dispersed throughout the organization, with no specific equalities brief, while a single senior level corporate equalities advisor remains. In contrast, the equality team in City 4 remains, and works closely with an independent feminist organization, which they have funded to produce a report and conference on how women in the city are affected by cuts in services. This city has succeeded in achieving the highest equality standard as measured by the Equality Framework, a national benchmarking standard. The interdependence of external vociferous feminist organization and internal equalities advisors enabled an essential alliance of internal and external actors to mobilize the requirement to pay due regard to gender impact.

Neoliberal political rhetoric has intensified in the UK since the 2010 general election, re-invoking a need for fiscal austerity based on the withdrawal of public spending that eclipses Thatcherism. The public sector equality duties have proved to be something of a fly in the ointment with numerous legal challenges using the duties being launched both against the government and local authorities on the basis that cuts to public spending and hence public services are having a disproportionate impact on the groups protected by the duties (Conley, 2012). It is in this context that the Home Secretary and Equalities Minister, Teresa May announced in 2012 that the review of the public sector equality duty would be brought forward under the 'Red Tape Challenge' with the implied threat that it could be removed from the statute books completely. The political rhetoric has returned to the position prevalent in the 1980s that equality legislation is a barrier to business. Interestingly, the criticisms of frustrated activists concerned about the liberal focus on procedural 'tick box' issues in the GED and other public sector equality duties have been somewhat hijacked by a government seeking to weaken the public sector equality duties even further because, it could be argued, of their usefulness to stakeholder groups seeking to hold public authorities to account. One consequence could have been that the momentum for gender equality created by the GED was swept away by economic and social policy that has a hugely disproportionate, negative impact on women.[2] Indeed, this is the crux of the challenge faced by feminist activists in the UK in the battle against austerity. A concerted effort by equality activists from a range of backgrounds succeeded in staving off the threat of the Red Tape Challenge at least until 2016, when the Duty will have been in place for five years.[3] The cost is that progressive change sought for equality at the beginning of the millennium has given way to a battle to save rather than build upon what has been achieved, perhaps even more clearly illustrating the continuum between liberal and radical approaches to equality.

Conclusions

To conclude, we return to the three political perspectives highlighted in Jewson and Mason's (1986) conceptual framework. Although the interplay between political philosophy, organizational politics and party politics are still clearly evident in relation to gender equality in local government, our data establishes that the business discourse and agenda introduced by the modernization of public

services in the 1990s has been taken up by equalities practitioners, and provided a way of attempting to embed gender equality within core organizational processes. Similar to Coyle (1989), our data demonstrate that business, liberal and radical discourses, while conceptually distinct, do not always map on to political purpose or conviction. Despite the reduction in status and power of equality officers, change was driven by key actors' skilful mobilization of a predominant organization discourse in order to achieve results. However, the turbulent political conditions within local government that seem almost always to translate into a change in the equality climate mediate against even modest attempts at a 'long agenda'. In three of our five case studies, adopting a business case approach did not protect equality teams following the election of a less supportive political leadership. One outcome of this might be that the radical case for gender equality and a continuity of purpose might need to be held by independent feminist organizations and equality bodies.

The GED provided a legal instrument that enabled key actors both inside and outside of local government to use liberal and business discourses and to work towards gender equality. However, codifying gender equality and gender mainstreaming could not and did not make the GED's implementation apolitical. On the contrary, in the current climate of austerity, the contested politics of equality has intensified and the limitations of the business case for equality, as a political philosophy and equality strategy, have been very clearly exposed. The 'Red Tape Challenge' repositioned equality as an obstruction, rather than an enabler, of business value in much the same way that Jewson and Mason identified radical perspectives were viewed in the 1980s. The critique that the equality duty has become a tick box exercise is a good example of how Jewson and Mason saw liberal and radical arguments as sometimes interchangeable. The critique was originally used by radicals against what they saw as an obsession with procedural elements of the duty in an attempt to encourage strengthening the focus on outcomes. The critique was hijacked by the coalition government who used it to claim that the duty is failing and should be 'reviewed' under the 'Red Tape Challenge'. An alternative view is that the GED, and more latterly the public sector equality duty, were weakened by the reversion to undiluted liberal perspectives on equality because they stand between the government and its cuts agenda. A return to a progressive approach to gender equality in public services in the UK will hinge on a commitment to develop and hone the principles that underpinned the GED regardless of economic and political pressures to do otherwise.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. Northern Ireland has separate legislation contained in the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
2. See, for example, publications from the Women's Budget Group at http://www.wbg.org.uk/
3. See http://www.redtapechallenge.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/in-the-public-sector/comment-page-1/#comments

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