

# **WOMEN AT THE TOP 2011**

## **Politics and public life in the UK**



**Hansard Society Parliamentary  
Briefing Paper**

**International Women's Day Debate  
Thursday 10 March 2011**



# Contents

	Page
The 2010 General Election Results: Selection and Election	1
Scotland and Wales: Beacons of International Progress	2
A Representative Democracy?	3
Impact of the Parliamentary and Constitutional Reform Agenda	5
(1) Reduction in the size of the House of Commons to 600 for 2015	
(2) A reformed House of Lords	
(3) Elected mayors	
The Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation	6
Women's Attitudes to Politics	8
Changing Numbers, Changing Politics?	9

This briefing paper was prepared by the Parliament and Government Research Programme at the Hansard Society.

It sets out background information and statistics on women in politics and public life in the UK which we hope will interest and inform Members of Parliament in advance of the International Women's Day backbench business debate on UN Women and the associated amendment proposing the establishment of a parliamentary gender and equalities audit committee.

For further information contact:

**Dr Ruth Fox or Matt Korris,**  
Hansard Society  
40-43 Chancery Lane  
London, WC2A 1JA  
T: 0207 438 1222  
[parliamentprogramme@hansard.lse.ac.uk](mailto:parliamentprogramme@hansard.lse.ac.uk)  
[www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk)

*See our website for other publications including:.....*

*Has Devolution Delivered For Women? (2010)*

*Making Better Law: Reform of the Legislative Process from Policy to Act (2010)*

*Audit of Political Engagement 7 (2010)*

*The Reform Challenge. Perspectives on Parliament: Past, Present & Future (2010)*

*What's Trust Got to Do With It? Public Trust in and Expectations of Politicians and Parliament (2010)*

*Subscribe to **Parliamentary Affairs**, our quarterly journal about Parliament and representative politics at a reduced rate as a member of the Hansard Society.*

*See [www.hansardsociety.org.uk/themes/hansard/forms/membership.aspx](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/themes/hansard/forms/membership.aspx)*

# Women at the Top: politics and public life in 2011

## THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS: SELECTION AND ELECTION

Twenty years ago the Hansard Society's independent Women at the Top Commission, chaired by Baroness Howe of Idlicote, concluded that the parlous state of women's political representation in Britain was 'wholly unacceptable in a modern democracy'.<sup>1</sup> In the years since little has changed at Westminster: women MPs still comprise less than a quarter of the House of Commons.

The number of women MPs rose to 142 (21.9%) following the May 2010 general election and constitutes the highest number ever elected. But this is still only 2.5% more women MPs than in the last Parliament and just under 4% more than won seats in the breakthrough year in 1997 (when 18.2% of the House of Commons were women). **At this rate of 4% growth in 14 years it will be another century before parity of representation is secured.**

In the Inter-Parliamentary Union Women

in National Parliaments list the UK is now ranked **joint 53<sup>rd</sup> in the world for female representation.**<sup>2</sup> And in the European Parliament **33% of our MEPs are women putting us 18<sup>th</sup> out of 27 countries.**<sup>3</sup>

The 142 women MPs elected in May 2010 constituted 14 more than those elected in 2005. Conservative women MPs more than doubled from 17 in 2005 to 48 in 2010 (16% of the party). But despite the special measures deployed in selections (A-List etc.), women constitute only 22%

## WOMEN AND THE ELECTION TELEVISION DEBATES

There were no women during the TV leaders' debates – the interviewing journalists were all male and there were just a few women on the advisory panels drawing up the question plan for each debate.

More damning, however, were the nine BBC Daily Politics show debates held during the course of the campaign. Of the 29 participants in those debates just two were women – Harriet Harman and Lynne Featherstone – in the final debate on trust in politics.

of the new intake of Conservative MPs.

The percentage of women Labour MPs rose to 31% (81 MPs) despite the party losing 17 women MPs and sustaining heavy seat losses overall. The party continues to have more women MPs than all the other parties combined. The Liberal Democrats lost three women MPs and now have only seven female MPs (12%).

Professor Sarah Childs and Dr Rosie Campbell in their chapter on women in the Britain Votes 2010 special edition of the Hansard Society's *Parliamentary Affairs* journal noted four key observations about the parties' respective performances:<sup>4</sup>

- (1) 'Labour and the Conservatives selected more women candidates overall in 2010 than they did in 2005 whilst the Liberal Democrats selected fewer women in both absolute and percentage terms.'
- (2) 'The only party whose overall percentage of women candidates matched or exceeded its percentage of women MPs was the Labour Party at 31% of MPs and 30% of candidates – the other parties have smaller percentages of women MPs than they did candidates, suggesting that their

women were less likely to win than their male equivalents.'

- (3) 'Distribution by seat safety shows that Labour was alone in distributing women candidates disproportionately in its held seats – 30% compared to 15% for the Conservatives and 19% for the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives in contrast placed most of its women candidates (30%) in its unwinnable seats but unexpectedly benefited from six seat gains in this category.'
- (4) 'In the retirement seats, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats selected women in more than half of them. But the Conservatives selected women in just 26% of seats where the sitting Conservative MP was retiring – a missed opportunity for the party.'

### SCOTLAND & WALES: BEACONS OF INTERNATIONAL PROGRESS <sup>5</sup>

Of all the ideas that underpinned the campaign for devolution, one of the most energising was the vision of new legislatures in which women might at last be fairly represented. A new institution, established with a firm commitment to the principle of equality, would see women benefit from a 'blank slate'

Election Results for Women: 1999-2007 <sup>6</sup>						
	1999		2003		2007	
	No. of women	% of women	No. of women	% of women	No. of women	% of women
Scottish Parliament	48	37.2%	51	39.5%	43	33.3%
National Assembly for Wales	24	40%	30	50%	28	46.7%

approach, the absence of incumbency, a different culture to that found at Westminster, and an alternative electoral system.

In Scotland in 1999, 48 women were elected to Holyrood, delivering at a stroke twice as many female politicians as had ever sat for Scottish seats in Westminster. Four years later women constituted 40% of the Parliament. In 2003 the National Assembly for Wales made history as the first legislature in the world with fully equal representation when it broke through the 50% barrier.

But since that peak in 2003 the position of Scotland and Wales as international beacons of progress for women's representation has been in decline. At the 2007 election, the proportion of women in the Scottish Parliament fell to 33%, below the 'critical mass' level of 35% that is thought to have a decisive effect on organisational culture. In Wales too there was a drop in the number of female

representatives to 46.7% – 28 out of the 60 Assembly seats.

With the fourth term elections just weeks away there is little hope that this decline in the number of women members will be reversed. A combination of the parties' candidate selection policies coupled with their anticipated electoral performance, plus the retirement of a number of first-generation incumbents all point to a likely further decline to below 30% in both Edinburgh and Cardiff after 5 May.

**The electoral success of women in 1999 and 2003 did not happen by accident: it was a direct result of the positive action measures that Labour in particular introduced to increase its number of women candidates in winnable seats.** So when other parties declined to adopt similar measures it meant that an unintended consequence of the electoral shift away from Labour after 2003 in Scotland and Wales was a decline in the number of women MSPs.

And because of candidate selection patterns, only a resurgent Labour performance in May is likely to slow that decline.

A significant challenge is that fewer women are now putting themselves forward for political office at either local or national level. The root of the problem lies in the way politics is conducted and why this makes a political career at Westminster or elsewhere increasingly unattractive to many women. The problem is with politics and parties NOT with women. Cultural change is vital if more women are to be attracted to political careers in the future.

### A REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

A more diverse Parliament, whose membership better reflects the society they serve, is essential for good policy-making and good governance. The presence of women in greater numbers within our political structures brings different experiences, perspectives and approaches to decision-making and policy formation. We only need to look to the male dominated boardrooms of banks to see the consequences of uniform thinking and experience. A representative democracy is neither truly representative nor democratic if the life of a majority of the population is reflected in

only a minority of members of our legislatures.

Despite the wishful thinking and warm words of the political parties **there is no evidence that success in numerical terms can be sustained without positive action: parity is a party choice.**

**Without special measures across all parties there will always be a risk of constant 'boom and bust' in women's representation.** But a backlash against positive action is now rife in all the parties. There remains a stubborn insistence that selection has to be 'on merit' as if no mediocre men had ever been selected in the past.

Across almost all areas of politics and public life the barriers to equality that the Women at the Top Commission identified in 1990 remain largely intact today to varying degrees:<sup>7</sup>

- Outmoded attitudes about the role of women;
- Direct and indirect discrimination;
- The absence of proper childcare provision;
- Inflexible structures for work and careers.

Discrimination, direct and overt, or indirect and disguised assumes many

forms:

- Subjective and informal selection procedures;
- Stereotyped assumptions about the ability, character, suitability and 'natural' role of women;
- The use of 'insider', word of mouth and old-boy networks;
- Unnecessary age bars;
- Excessive mobility requirements.

As the Commission concluded, 'To achieve promotion to senior jobs, women too often have to be better than men.'<sup>8</sup>

There has never been a genuine meritocracy in political selections: there has always been a preference for something within the system and there remains endemic positive discrimination towards men that has yet to be fully unpicked. What is needed is a wider-ranging debate within political parties and the wider country about what 'merit' in political terms means. What are the skills we want in our political leaders and who in our local communities – male and female – can best provide them?

## IMPACT OF THE PARLIAMENTARY AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM AGENDA

### (1) Reduction in the size of the House of Commons to 600 for 2015

Reducing the number of constituencies by 50 for the next election will likely have significant knock-on effects for women's representation in the next House of Commons. It will make it more difficult than usual for parties to prioritise the selection of women candidates in winnable seats and will therefore limit the

25% of peerages created since May 1997 have been women.<sup>9</sup>

Of the 57 recommendations made by the Lords Appointment Commission, 21 (37%) have been women – all of whom sit on the cross-benches.<sup>10</sup>

possibility of increasing the number of women MPs at the next election.

### (2) A reformed House of Lords

If the House of Lords is reformed what role will there be for women? For example, if members are elected for longer terms than MPs – e.g. 15 years – then it is essential that the selection and election system provides for fair representation right from the outset or we will be stuck with an unrepresentative chamber for many years to come.

The current House of Lords is overwhelmingly male – **only 20% of peers are women** – but in recent years the number of women has increased and women have occupied a number of strategically important leadership positions in the House.

Reform must improve the situation not set back progress. When the Lords reform proposals are published a key test will be whether the proposed system for a reformed upper house will deliver one that is truly representative.

### (3) Elected mayors

There are currently 12 elected mayors in England of which just two are women. The Coalition's *Programme for Government* promised to create directly elected mayors in the 12 largest English cities outside London, subject to confirmatory referendums.<sup>11</sup> This has now been enshrined in the current Localism Bill introduced to Parliament in December 2010. It provides that the leader of the local authority in each of those 12 cities will become a 'shadow mayor' later this year pending a confirmatory referendum of local people to be held in May 2012. At present of the 12 leaders of the local authorities concerned only one is a woman (Bristol). This would mean that only three out of a total of 25 mayors (12%) would be women.

### THE SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE ON PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION<sup>12</sup>

The Hansard Society's Women at the Top Commission was the first body to recommend the establishment of a

Speaker's Conference to 'consider the ways in which parliamentary and party practices and procedures place women at a real disadvantage'.<sup>13</sup>

Twenty years later the Speaker's Conference was finally set up and reported in 2010. It was the first Speaker's Conference to be established in three decades and all the main parties confirmed their support for its recommendations.

However, despite the coalition government's broad-ranging and ambitious agenda of constitutional and parliamentary reform the recommendations outlined in the report have largely been ignored. Only one recommendation – with regard to disability not gender – featured in the coalition's *Programme for Government*.

Among the key recommendations relevant to women were:

- **Improved citizenship and political literacy education** in order to enhance knowledge and interest in politics and the democratic process. The report recommended that the government work with headteachers and with Ofsted to ensure that the importance of citizenship is better understood and

the subject is taught with quality and appropriate breadth. This is highly relevant in the context of the coalition's recently proposed changes to the national curriculum and the impact this may have on the teaching of citizenship education and political literacy in schools.

- If the political parties failed to make significant progress on women's representation at the 2010 general election, **Parliament should give serious consideration to the introduction of prescriptive quotas**, ensuring that all political parties adopt some form of equality guarantee in time for the following general election.
- **All political parties should appoint national and/or regional community champions for women** – their remit should include supporting individuals from those communities in finding and sustaining a suitable role within the party.
- **Every party registered under Part 2 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 should be required to publish details of their candidate selections online every six**

**months**, on 31 March and 31 October.

- **All political parties should publish a statement setting out the current proportion of their Parliamentary party which is female and what proportion of the Parliamentary party the national party would like them to be in December 2015 and December 2020.** On each of these dates the parties should publish further statements setting out what progress they have made towards just representation within the parliamentary party, compared to the 2010 baseline and the percentage of each group within the UK population as a whole. These reports should also include an evaluation of the mechanisms the parties have used to secure progress.
- **The Government should find time for a debate on the implementation of the Speaker's Conference's recommendations and progress towards just representation in the House of Commons in 2010, 2012, and every two years thereafter to 2022.**

- **Each Parliamentary party should draw up a formal statement of policy on maternity, paternity and caring leave.** This should set out clearly the minimum level of support which an individual requesting leave may expect from his or her party, and the steps which the individual should take to arrange a period of leave.
- **IPSA should consider the development of formal maternity, paternity and caring leave arrangements for MPs** which are as closely equivalent to the general public sector provision as possible.
- **The sitting hours of the House should again be reviewed,** and voted upon by the House, early in the new Parliament. Ideally, sitting time for the main chamber should be brought in line with what is considered to be normal business hours. It also proposed greater use of deferred voting in order to facilitate a more family friendly approach to sitting arrangements and unscheduled (unprogrammed) votes. Further consideration of modern methods of voting to facilitate a more efficient and

practical use of time, in line with other legislatures was also suggested.<sup>14</sup>

The Procedure Committee has recently announced a review of the parliamentary calendar and sitting times but most of the Speaker's Conference report has yet to be actioned.

### WOMEN'S ATTITUDES TO POLITICS

The Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement* provides the only annual health check on our democratic system. Based on a national opinion survey conducted each year, the study measures the 'political pulse' of the nation, providing a unique benchmark to gauge public opinion across Great Britain with regard to politics and the political process.

One area of analysis concerns the different attitudes to politics – in terms of knowledge and interest; action and participation; efficacy and satisfaction – exhibited by men and women.

The latest study – *Audit 8*, the 2011 report – which will be published in full on 30 March shows several interesting differences between the genders.<sup>15</sup>

- Men are more likely to take an

interest in politics: almost two thirds (63%) of men compared to half (53%) of women say they are interested in politics.

- Men also feel they know more about politics than women (62% of men compared to 43% of women), and about the UK Parliament: half of men (53%) in comparison to 35% of women feel they know at least a fair amount.
- However, as found in previous Audits, although men claim greater knowledge when this is measured against actual knowledge as tested in a set of true/false political quiz questions, then the gender knowledge gap is significantly smaller.<sup>16</sup>

For example, despite men saying they know more about politics, more women can correctly name their local MP; 40% of women in comparison to 36% of men were able to do so when tested.

- And greater reported levels of knowledge and interest do not lead to higher levels of participation among men: **the genders are almost equally likely to vote** –

## CHANGING NUMBERS, CHANGING POLITICS?

### CABINET GOVERNMENT

There are only four women ministers in the Cabinet (22%). David Cameron has pledged that a **third of his cabinet will be female** by the end of his first term in office.

The machinery of government has been reorganised but there are no women on the new Coalition Committee or the Coalition Operation & Strategic Planning Group.<sup>17</sup>

Of 184 Cabinet Committee and Sub-Committee seats, just 32 are occupied by women ministers.

There are no women at all on the Economic Affairs Committee, the Banking Reform Committee, and the Public Expenditure Committee.

### HOUSE OF COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEES

Of the 33 elected Chairs who are represented on the Liaison Committee six are women (18%) .

### WOMEN & THE CIVIL SERVICE

Women have made up more than half of all civil servants since 2001. In 2010 women constituted 53% of the civil service.<sup>18</sup>

Women currently hold eight out of the top 16 departmental Permanent Secretary positions.

Of the 31 Non Executive Directors of the new Whitehall Boards 13 (42%) are women.<sup>19</sup>

57% of men and 59% of women say they are certain to do so.

- But women are less satisfied with the present system of governing Britain; 71% feel the system needs improvement, compared to 57% of men. They are also less satisfied with the way that Parliament works than men; 30% of men are satisfied while only 24% of women are.
- Women are more likely to view local people working together in their community (30% to 22%) as having an impact on people's everyday lives than men.

## ENDNOTES

1. Hansard Society (1990), *The Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Women at the Top* (London: Hansard Society), p.4.
2. Women in National Parliaments World Classification: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (accessed 7 March 2011)
3. R. Cracknell, R. Groat & J. Marshall, *Women in Parliament and Government*, House of Commons Library Standard Note, SN/SG/1250, 30 June 2009, p.15.
4. See R. Campbell & S. Childs, 'Wags', 'Wives' and 'Mothers'.....But What About Women Politicians?' in A. Geddes & J. Tonge (Eds) (2010), *Britain Votes 2010*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.186.
5. See R. Fox & J. McMillan (2010), *Has Devolution Delivered For Women?*, (London: Hansard Society)
6. Scottish Parliament statistics, <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/corporate/anrep-accts/index.htm#sps>; National Assembly for Wales, 2007 Election results (updated), <http://www.assemblywales.org/07-069.pdf>
7. Hansard Society (1990), *The Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Women at the Top* (London: Hansard Society), pp.2-3.
8. *Ibid.*
9. L. Maer & A. Brocklehurst, *Peerage Creations Since 1997*, Parliament and Constitution Centre Standard Note, SN/PC/5867, 17 February 2011, p.4.
10. *Ibid.*
11. HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government*, 20 May 2010.
12. House of Commons, *Speaker's*

- Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)*, Final Report, HC 239-I.
13. Hansard Society (1990), *The Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Women at the Top* (London: Hansard Society), p.4.
  14. House of Commons, *Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)*, Final Report, HC 239-I.
  15. Hansard Society (2011), *Audit of Political Engagement 8*, (London: Hansard Society) (to be published 30 March 2011)
  16. Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 7*, (London: Hansard Society), p. 66.
  17. See Cabinet Office (September 2010), *Cabinet Committee System*, <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/cabinet-committees-system.pdf>
  18. Civil Service Statistics, Office of National Statistics: [www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/facts/statistics/index.aspx#](http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/facts/statistics/index.aspx#) (accessed 7 March 2011)
  19. UK leaders appointed to support Whitehall's transformation, 16 December 2010, [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/uk-leaders-appointed-support-whitehall's-transformation](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/uk-leaders-appointed-support-whitehall-s-transformation) (accessed 7 March 2011).