

# Women at the Top

Politics and public life in the UK



Hansard Society briefing paper

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HANSARD  
SOCIETY

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# Parliament after the 2010 general 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 (22%) at the May 2010 general election** and constitutes the highest number ever elected. But this was 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 growth – 4% every 13 years – it will be another century before parity of representation is secured.

Since the general election a further three women have taken seats in the House of Commons following (i) the delayed election in Thirsk and Malton (after the UKIP candidate died during the general election campaign) (ii) the Oldham and Saddleworth by-election and (iii) the Feltham and Heston by-election. **The total number of women currently in the House of Commons is therefore 145.**

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In the Inter-Parliamentary Union Women in National Parliaments list the UK is now ranked joint 49th in the world for female representation.<sup>2</sup>

The 142 women 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 constituted only 22% 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

<sup>1</sup> Hansard Society (1990), *The Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Women at the Top* (London: Hansard Society), p.4.  
<sup>2</sup> Women in National Parliaments World Classification: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (as at 30 November 2011).

key observations about the parties' respective performances:<sup>3</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.'

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### Women and the 2010 televised election debates

There were of course no women on the platform during the televised party leaders' debates.

The three interviewing journalists were also 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. There were thus no women politicians involved in the debates about crime, health, education etc.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

# The devolved legislatures

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

## SCOTLAND AND WALES<sup>4</sup>

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.

Election results for women in Scotland and Wales: 1999-2011*								
	1999		2003		2007		2011	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Scottish Parliament</b>	48	37.2%	51	39.5%	43	33.3%	45	34.9%
<b>National Assembly for Wales</b>	24	40.0%	30	50.0%	28	46.7%	25	41.7%

\* Source: Scottish Parliament, [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB\\_11-29.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB_11-29.pdf); National Assembly for Wales, [http://www.assemblywales.org/abthome/about\\_us-commission\\_assembly\\_administration/abt-assembly-elections-2/abt-nafw-election-results.htm](http://www.assemblywales.org/abthome/about_us-commission_assembly_administration/abt-assembly-elections-2/abt-nafw-election-results.htm)

In the 2011 elections the situation declined still further in Wales when just 25 women won seats in the Assembly. At 41.7% of the total number of Members this represents a

4 See R. Fox & J. McMillan (2010), *Has Devolution Delivered For Women?* (London: Hansard Society).

significant decline from the historic breakthrough in 2003 and is only marginally better than the results achieved at the first election in 1999.

In Scotland the results for women were better than feared largely because of the performance of the SNP which confounded all expectations. The number of female members rose from 43 to 45 or 34.9% of the total number of seats in the Parliament. Again, however, the number is still well below that achieved in 2003.

The electoral success of women in Scotland and Wales in 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 both nations was a decline in the number of women AMs and MSPs.

## NORTHERN IRELAND<sup>5</sup>

In May 2011 20 women were elected to the Assembly – 18.5% of the total seats. This represented an increase of just two women on the number elected in 2007.

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Sinn Fein leads the way with eight female members, constituting 27.6% of its total number of seats. The Alliance Party has two women members (25%), and the Social Democratic and Labour Party three women members (21.4%). The unionist parties lag some way behind: the Democratic Unionist Party now has five female members (13.2%) and the Ulster Unionist Party two (12.5%). The latter, however, had no women members in the last Assembly and the DUP has increased its female representation by 60%.

18 constituencies each elect six representatives to Stormont. Of these seats, five have no female MLA at present.

# Local government

Collection of data on the gender of councillors is patchy – there is no formal system for monitoring the diversity of either local election candidates or local councillors.

## ENGLAND

Research suggests that in 2010, 30.6% of local authority councillors in England were women. The proportion of female councillors has risen since 1997 when it was 27.8% but the rate of improvement has stalled in recent years.<sup>6</sup>

The Centre for Women and Democracy has recently undertaken a study of candidates and results in 2,308 wards in 100 local authorities in the 5 May 2011 elections. This research shows that Labour increased its number of women councillors by 152; the number of Liberal Democrats fell by 111 and the number of Conservative women fell by 19.<sup>7</sup>

Taking into account the performance of the smaller parties and independents, there was a net increase of just 20 female councillors across all 100 councils. 30.4% of candidates in 2011 were women (a marginal decrease on the 30.9% of women candidates in these seats in 2007).<sup>8</sup>

33.3% of Liberal Democrat candidates were women, 31.7% were Labour and 29.1% were Conservative. Across the 100 councils, 33.7% of councillors elected for the Liberal Democrats were women, 32.5% of Labour councillors, and 28.7% of Conservatives.<sup>9</sup>

Across the 2,308 wards, there were 318 (14%) in which none of the three main parties fielded a female candidate. But there were only 22 wards (1%) where all of the candidates were women.<sup>10</sup>

It is estimated that women constitute 13.2% of council leaders – down from just over 16% in 2004-05.<sup>11</sup> 26% of portfolio-holders are women there is a marked difference in the types of responsibility held by female councillors compared to their male counterparts. They are more likely to hold the Community (25%), Education (24%) and Health (23%) portfolios, and

6 K. Evans & H. Aston (2011), *National Census of Local Authority Councillors 2010* (Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research), p.5.  
 7 N. Sloane (2011), *Representative Democracy? Women in the 2011 Local Government Elections in England* (Leeds: Centre for Women and Democracy), p. 5  
 8 *Ibid.*  
 9 *Ibid.*  
 10 *Ibid.*, p.3-4.  
 11 Equality and Human Rights Commission (2011), *Sex and Power 2011*, p.4.

least likely to hold Planning (3%), Finance (4%) or Economic Development (7%).<sup>12</sup>

## SCOTLAND

In 2007 there was a dramatic drop in the number of women candidates at the local level. This was particularly disappointing given that the proportional STV system was introduced for the local elections in part to try and make local government more representative. In 2003, 27.7% of candidates in Scottish local elections were women but by 2007 this had declined to 22.5%. However, the drop in the number of candidates resulted in only a very slight decline in the number of women councillors elected—from 269 (21.8%) to 263 (21.6%).<sup>13</sup>

There are, however, interesting disparities between the parties in terms of their record in getting women elected at the local level. The Liberal Democrats, who have the lowest percentage of female MSPs, have the largest number of female councillors: 33% of their representatives are women. The SNP has also had an increasing number of women elected at the local level. In contrast, Labour, which has done most to secure higher levels of female representation at the national level has declining levels of female councillors.

## 8 WALES

The number of women elected to serve at the local council level in Wales was just 22% in 1999 and rose only marginally to 25% at the 2008 elections.<sup>14</sup>

The distribution of women in local government across Wales varies considerably. Following the 2008 elections, 37% of councillors in Cardiff were women, 31% in Swansea, and 30% in the Vale of Glamorgan. But women constituted only 9.5% of the councillors in Blaenau Gwent, 5% in Anglesey and 3% in Merthyr Tydfil.<sup>15</sup> Overall, gender parity in the National Assembly has thus far had only a limited effect on wider Welsh society.

## MAYORS

There are currently 13 elected Mayors in England, of whom two are women (15%). In May 2011, 21% of candidates in the five mayoral elections contested were women. However, 34% of the members of mayoral cabinets are women compared to 26% in local authorities with a leader or cabinet model.<sup>16</sup>

## GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY

32% of members elected to the GLA in 2008 were women.

12 N. Sloane (2011), *Unintended Consequences: The Impact of the Government's Legislative Programme on Women in Public Roles* (Leeds: Centre for Women and Democracy), p.25.

13 R. Fox & J. McMillan (2010), *Has Devolution Delivered For Women?* (London: Hansard Society), p.19.

14 *Ibid.*, p.20.

15 BBC News, 'Women transform Welsh politics', 30 January 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/7859373.stm>

16 N. Sloane (2011), *Unintended Consequences: The Impact of the Government's Legislative Programme on Women in Public Roles*, (Leeds: Centre for Women and Democracy), p.25.

# Governing by numbers...

## CABINET GOVERNMENT

There are only five women ministers currently 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.

In the world rankings, the UK Cabinet is a long way behind many of our European counterparts. In Finland 55% of the Cabinet are women, in Norway 47.6%, Sweden 45.8%, Spain 43.7%, Germany 37.5% and France 30%.<sup>17</sup>

Of the total 121 ministerial positions available (including Cabinet and unpaid posts) just 20 are held by women (17%).

Following the 2010 general election the machinery of government was reorganised. However, no women were appointed to the new Coalition Committee or the Coalition Operation and Strategic Planning Group.<sup>18</sup>

In the aftermath of the election, of 184 Cabinet Committee and Sub-Committee seats, just 32 were occupied by women ministers. There were no women at all on the Economic Affairs Committee, the Banking Reform Committee and the Public Expenditure Committee.<sup>19</sup>

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

33% of our European Parliament Members are women putting us 18th out of 27 countries.<sup>20</sup>

## HOUSE OF LORDS

There are 242 female Members of the House of Lords. Women constitute 30% of the Liberal Democrat group, 28% of the Labour Group, 20% of the Crossbenchers, and 18% of the Conservative Group.<sup>21</sup>

25% of peerages created between May 1997 and February 2011 are held by women. Of the 59 recommendations made by the Lords Appointment Commission, 21 (35.5%) have been

17 See Centre for Women and Democracy (June 2011), *Women Cabinet Ministers: International*, p.1.

18 See Cabinet Office (September 2010), *Cabinet Committee System*, <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/cabinet-committees-system.pdf>

19 *Ibid.*

20 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.

21 Parliament, <http://www.parliament.uk/about/faqs/house-of-lords-faqs/lords-members/>

women.<sup>22</sup>

## HOUSE OF COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEES

Of the 33 Committee Chairs represented on the Liaison Committee, just six (18%) are women.<sup>23</sup>

## CIVIL SERVICE

Women have made up more than half of all civil servants since 2001. In 2010 women constituted 53% of the civil service headcount.<sup>24</sup>

Women hold eight out of the top 16 departmental Permanent Secretary positions, including three of the top five spending departments. In total however, they control just over 34% of government spending.<sup>25</sup>

Of the 57 Non-Executive Directors appointed since May 2010 to the new Whitehall Boards, 23 (40%) are women. Two departments – the Department for Energy, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Defence – have no women Non-Executive Directors at all.<sup>26</sup>

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22 House of Lords Appointments Commission, <http://lordsappointments.independent.gov.uk/appointments-so-far.aspx>

23 Parliament, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/liaison-committee/membership/>

24 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).

25 J. Rutter, 'A Suitable Job For A Woman', Institute for Government blog, 21 December 2010, <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/1472/a-suitable-job-for-a-woman/>

26 S. Crone (June 2011), *Selfless, Objective and Accountable? Non-Executive Directors on Government Departmental Boards* (Democratic Audit), pp.3-9.

# 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.

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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>27</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>28</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?

## REFORM OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND HOUSE OF LORDS

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

Reform of the House of Lords also offers a once in a generation opportunity to increase the presence and voice of women in the Upper House.

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So 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 Hansard Society and other founding partners in the Counting Women In campaign coalition have recommended that the current draft Bill should be amended to require the political parties to ensure the selection of equal numbers of women and men as candidates for election to the new Upper House and the Appointments Commission should be statutorily required to appoint equal numbers of women and men in the event that a hybrid House is agreed.<sup>29</sup>

Consideration should also be given to the effect that the right of ministerial appointment and the allocation of 12 ex-officio seats for Church of England Bishops – currently reserved seats for men – will have on equality and diversity of representation in a reformed Chamber.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> The Counting Women In campaign coalition's founding partners are: The Centre for Women and Democracy, the Electoral Reform Society, the Fawcett Society, the Hansard Society and Unlock Democracy. <http://www.countingwomenin.org/>

# The Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation

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>30</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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

Among the key recommendations 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.

30 Hansard Society (1990), *The Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Women at the Top* (London: Hansard Society), p.4.  
 31 House of Commons, Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), *Final Report*, HC 239-I.  
 32 HM Government, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government*, 20 May 2010.

**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.

**14** **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. The Procedure Committee is currently holding an inquiry into the parliamentary calendar and sitting hours.

**As yet most of the Speakers Conference report has yet to be actioned.**