Beyond Gender? A New Minister for a Transformative Post-Lisbon Agenda

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The Economist started its January 2010 issue with a controversial topic: gender inequality before and after the financial crisis. The issue highlights women's economic and laboral empowerment over the past decades as the achievement of a social revolution. This 'revolution' is, however, a paradoxical one because whilst gender equality has increased, gender achievement in work is still not matched with equality in pay and furthermore, equality has a long way to go for women to have an equitable share of political power. Here, by political power I mean the possibility for only few women to manage large companies and political life. Reflecting on the European Commission's reports on Equal Opportunities, in the European Union, women account for 32% of all managerial positions (only 5% in the UK), with only 10% members of Boards and 3% CEOs[1].

It is against this landscape of disparity and paradoxical gains and losses that Lady Catherine Ashton becomes the first High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy for the European Union after the Liston Treaty. The importance of Lady Ashton in becoming one of the few women to be visible at the political level of decision making should not be underestimated.

Gender inequality is not only about women reaching new highs and having some representation 'at the top'. Equally, it is not only about having power or earning equal pay. Gender equality is about the kinds of executive power that women hold in the public sphere, and in having that capacity.

In this respect, Lady Ashton is not new to attaining this kind of visibility – previously holding executive positions and directorships in business as well as in politics. The issue with visibility is not about being 'chosen' or 'seen' per se, but much more crucially, it is about timing. It is about 'when' women achieve and 'when' women are given visibility in political spheres. Lady Ashton's choice could have not been timelier and more adequate because whilst gender representation may not feel always like an issue, it is a poignant one even within the confines of Brussels where there is always a more 'felt' push for gender equality than in other social and political areas.

Indeed, amongst the first comments by British journalists on her appointment was that she was a relatively 'unknown' person, in other words, a less visible political person. Commentators on her role have avoided the 'gender' issue; focusing instead on her political 'labour' and national identity as 'British'. It is then not surprising that one of her first mission statements was precisely to divorce herself from the possibility that she may be seen as a 'British' voice per se within the EU whilst remaining true to her national and Labour interests, and to do this through references to gender. This kind of 'presentation of the self' is something all Brussels politicians have to do at some moment or other, in her case, however, she had to do this from the very start, as if to placate any suspicions. It is quite poignant that politicians have to spend so much of their energy working out strategies of political definition and survival.

In looking at her skills and abilities, the press has commented on her capacities for negotiation and her outstanding career achievements. Indeed, she is making women visible as diplomats. She is not the first woman to have taken this role of diplomacy (see Hillary Clinton, for example), however where she is distinctively different, and a genuine asset to current European politics is in her skills as she has shown from the very start; to speak in a clear 'Brussels' voice. I will argue that the EU dimensions of what Walby (2004) calls the EU 'gender regime' require an

understanding of what constitute the visibility of discourses about gender in EU discursive practice –as political practice-. As such, the words chosen by Lady Aston reveal quite the complex picture behind her appointment one that can not be reduced, as the press has suggested, to mere British politics.

The 'quiet diplomacy' style she has pledged in her first words after taking office is more suited and advantageous to British politics than it first may seem. In using 'quiet diplomacy' she has the effect to downplay her 'UK voice' and to turn the UK into a more subtle and 'quiet' presence in Europe, a suitable strategy to underplay the emphasis the press has put on her on being an 'extension of the British Government'. In her first messages, she clearly speaks in the 'tone' of Brussels rather than in the tone of British politics. Underplaying national tones in favour of EU ones is one of the well known strategies of the Brussels voice, and I admire her understanding of how to represent such complex voices and languages in European politics. Of course, the distinctive Brussels voice is also part of a Brussels rhetoric to which we are accustomed, rhetoric that of generating consensual talk leading to 'slow' acting when it comes to devolve power downwards(Brittan 2009:20). EU politics is underpinned by a particular cultural intensity of having to reach political consensus and devolution. This will be the particular case of Lady Ashton's period of governance which will be, one can only speculate, riddled with negotiations on federalism and European integration and the fluctuation of the debates on economic and environmental crisis.

It is indeed quite a surprise to see how her appointment has been played 'down' in terms of gender. It has been left to her, to be the one that has precisely highlighted she is the 'first woman' in many areas (First female British Trade Commissioner),and now the first woman as High Representative.

One could argue that organising EU politics, and by default, dealing with gender balance within EU politics is done from within the particular EU strategy that has become a modern form of politics: what I call 'high-impact consensus approach', one where carefully voiced EU-style diplomacy aims at compensating the always unavoidable pull of voices in different 27 directions and diminished permissive consensus politics (see Zielonka 2009:35). Brussels needed to choose a female high representative, if only as discursive practice to 'show' that it is 'doing' what says it should be doing regarding gender representation and equality.

The Swedish EU presidency, the ministers of which I met in Stockholm earlier this year, has some of the best gender balance structures already in place in Europe, both in terms of visibility of women and access to power by women, not as a matter of 'addressing' gender equality but as a matter of having made a 'timely' (and I insist that the 'time' in which gender visibility occur is as important as the actual visibility of gender itself) social and political effort in normalising gender equality as both, a social and political condition. Having witnessed the importance of gender equality in politics put 'in play' in Sweden to great effect it is perhaps no surprise that more of this is not true of other EU member states. However, the appointment of Baroness Ashton is another move in this direction and one that should be welcomed as such.

The fact that Lady Ashton is the first EU female High Representative, and that this has been underplayed in the media in favour of her nationality is a significant (political) statement by the British media, not of EU politics. Lady Ashton's political and personal biography is made up of many elements of identity: political affiliation as identity, national affiliation as identity, class and background as identity, gender as identity, and so on. The focus on her national identity rather than her significant capacities as a female politician and diplomat is a mark of the times.

Contemporary social discourses are relegating the need to keep fighting for gender equality, mistakenly thinking that perhaps 'addressing' gender is the same as 'normalising' gender politics. There is still a large normalised male dominant discourse about gender in politics that underplays gender in favour of overplaying other identity aspects. The important issue here for EU politics after Lisbon is that gender is one of the very ambitious agendas that existed prior to Lisbon and one that has (and needs to have) a decisive role in terms of social equality throughout Europe, especially in times of crisis. The *transformation agenda* currently predicated in Barrosos's statements is one that requires that all previous strands of the Lisbon agenda –including gender- are either discarded or reassessed anew (a lengthy transformative process for economically slow periods). This lengthy reassessment, especially where gender in politics is concerned, will fall into Lady Ashton's period of governance.

Lady Ashton has shown a strong sense of awareness of her role and position within EU politics vis-a-vis British politics. Her skills and abilities, much commented on as they have been, may have gone underappreciated by the media and commentators alike. There are several things that makes a new ambassador successful at the early stages of her or his job. One is the capacity to understand and deal with the 'unsaid' and tacit agreements that make most of ambassadorial practice. The other is to be able to have a sense of empathy, a sense of understanding political otherness and different points of view. Acquiring political empathy, however, is not an easy task. Perhaps here a deep seated personal understanding of gender, like Lady Aston's, appears to manifest rather than an emphasis on 'Britishness'. This is a most valuable asset to have in order to acquire the necessary political empathy to work successfully within the complexity of the EU's consensual approach to politics.

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