

Women and the British General Election 2010: The Ongoing Under-representation of Women

Written by Sarah Childs

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SARAH CHILDS, MAY 26 2010

A historically unprecedented 142 women MPs were elected on May 6th. Of these, 81 are Labour, 48 Conservative, 7 Liberal Democrat, 1 SNP, 1 Green and 4 representing parties in Northern Ireland. The election also saw the first Muslim women MPs; the first Black and first 'out' lesbian Conservative women MPs; and the first Green party MP was a woman too. The UK Parliament meets the European regional average, and beats the world average of 19.1 percent. Yet, at less than one quarter of the House of Commons, the UK ranks joint 52nd in the global league table, behind countries as diverse as Rwanda (56%); Sweden (46%); South Africa (45%), Argentina (39%) and Portugal (27%). The overall increase in the numbers of women MPs at Westminster since 2005 is also tiny – a net gain of only 2.5 percent. And this was, crucially, at an election when all the main parties were publicly committed to selecting greater numbers of women MPs and where the opportunity to do so was enhanced when many more MPs than usual stood down following the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009.

For those seeking the fair representation of women at Westminster, the 2010 election is an opportunity missed. So, what went wrong? There is no one single explanation for why women are numerically under-represented in parliament. Countries which are more egalitarian and secular, and where women have been able to vote for a long period of time, are likely to see higher numbers of women MPs. Where women work in the professions from which MPs are recruited, it is likely that there will be greater numbers of women MPs. And where the state takes greater responsibility for the work which women at home – through the provision of childcare, for example – women's participation is likely to be enhanced yet further. Political factors matter too: more proportional electoral systems are associated with higher numbers of women; parties on the left of the political spectrum and where women are amongst a party's leadership team are also likely to have more MPs. If a party sees electoral benefits in having significant levels of women voters then it will probably have higher numbers of women representatives too. Finally, political parties' selection rules play a key role; well designed and implemented quotas ensuring more women candidates in winnable seats make a big difference. Much of the above augurs well for British women. However, for Westminster the question of 'who our representatives are' is mostly one of 'whom our political parties select'. Debates at this point usually polarize into 'supply' and 'demand' side explanations. Supply arguments hold that too few women present themselves as prospective party candidates; demand that it is political parties who prevent women from becoming candidates. Evidence over the last few general elections favour demand arguments. All of the parties have enough women seeking selection to select women for at least half of their held and/or winnable seats. For the main two parties we are probably talking about identifying just over 50 women.

For this election, all the main parties were publicly committed to increase the diversity of their MPs and some had expended considerable political capital on introducing and implementing a range of measures to that end. All the parties encouraged women to come forward and helped them become candidates, not least through training and mentoring. The third party, the Liberal Democrats also had a sex-quota at the short-listing stage of selection. The Conservatives introduced a series of reforms, including the creation of a priority list of candidates, the A list, of which 50 percent would be female, the greater use of primaries, and a 50:50 sex quota at the short-listing stage. All of these measures increased the chances that more women would come before those who choose parliamentary candidates. But both parties rejected the logic of stronger measures: no doubt because of party ideology – not least ideas of merit – and local party autonomy. In contrast, the Labour party adopted 'equality guarantees' – measures designed

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to *require* that women are selected. As in 1997 and 2005, in 2010 it used All Women Shortlists.

So what difference did it all make? The numbers of Liberal Democrat women declined from 9 to 7 as the swing went against them; the Labour party fell by 17, falling from 98 to 81; only the Conservatives increased their number – more than doubling to 48, from 17. The number and percentage of Conservative women MPs however continues to compare unfavourably with the Parliamentary Labour Party (48 Conservative women MPs vs 81 Labour women MPs; some 16 percent Labour compared to 31 percent Conservative). And in those critical retirement seats the percentage of women selected by the Tories was only 26 percent compared to Labour's 53 percent. At an election where Labour lost nearly 100 seats, its use of all women shortlists saw it increase the percentage of its women MPs, to a high of 31% from 28%. With no party nearing 50 percent women MPs all parties, but some more than others, need to enhance their efforts and, more importantly, deliver. All parties and not just Labour should make use of the extension of the Sex Discrimination (election candidates) Act that permits permissive quotas; Parliament should, furthermore, consider the introduction of prescriptive quotas to ensure that women's descriptive representation in the UK Parliament improves; at less than one quarter of the House of Commons, it remains far from parity.

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