

Parliamentary Briefing: Back Bench Parliamentary Debate on Parliamentary Representation, 12 January 2012

Summary

Despite a number of women from across the political spectrum advocating women's interests, women remain largely excluded from positions of power within politics. Men outnumber women 4 to 1 in Westminster, only 5 of the 23 Cabinet posts are held by women, and only 17% of Government ministers are women. Women make up just a third of local councillors, and around 1 in 10 council leaders.

The absence of women from positions of power across the country comes at a watershed moment for women's equality. The number of women out of a job is now at a 23 year high – more than a million women are now unemployed; at the same time women are facing widening inequality as cuts to public services and benefits bite. Decisions that affect us all, such as balancing the nation's budget, are being made without women around the decision table.

Impact of political and constitutional reform

The cumulative effects of the reduction in number of parliamentary seats, proposed boundary changes and expected low numbers of retiring MPs at the next General Election, will be a predicted decrease in women's representation at the 2015 General Election.

The reduction of seats will make it more difficult for parties to prioritise the selection of women candidates in winnable seats. This limits the possibility of increasing the number of women MPs at the next election. If established MPs lose their seats through the reduction of seats (from 650 to 600) it could increase pressure on the selection of candidates for winnable seats. This is likely to reduce the opportunity to increase the number of new female MPs, and indeed could squeeze out newer or lesser known back-benchers as established (predominantly male) incumbents take precedence.

Recommendations:

Fawcett recommends that a robust gender impact assessment of proposed boundary changes is carried out to ensure that women are not disproportionately affected by reform plans.

In order to redress the current gender imbalance in political life, Fawcett recommends that political parties use direct intervention to proactively increase the selection and election at the next General Election in 2015. For example, direct intervention might include implementing mechanisms such as All Women Shortlists or an A list that prioritises female candidates.

If you're not at the table, you're on the menu

The representation gap between women and men in politics is stark and reflects the lack of women from diverse walks of life represented at the top tiers of decision making. Women's lack of political power is especially pertinent, given the gendered impact of current fiscal policy.

Fawcett's analysis shows that measures to reduce the deficit are hitting women with a triple jeopardy: cuts to their jobs, cuts to the benefits and services that they rely on more, and a growing likelihood that women will be the ones left 'filling the gaps' as state services are withdrawn. This means rising female unemployment, a widening of the pay gap, a reduction in vital support services, increased

female poverty and increasing numbers of women being forced out of the workplace. Fawcett's recent report '*Single Mothers, Singled Out*' shows that some women are worse off than others: single mothers are set to be hit hardest by tax and benefit changes to be introduced between 2010-15, where they can expect to lose 8.5 per cent of their net annual income by 2015 –more than a month's income each year.

The cumulative effects of the austerity measures, alongside drastic reforms to legal aid and an expected roll back on employment rights are resulting in a reduction in women's power and agency on personal, and public levels. Added to this, the abolition of the Women's National Commission means that there is no longer an official and independent advisory body giving the views of women to the government. At a time of potentially diminishing equality for women, women's power, presence and voice at the political level is ever more urgent.

Fawcett believes that women's voices and experiences are imperative to informing policy and decision making at the top. For example, in the recent Health and Social Care Bill debate, where women's access to abortion services and support was under threat, three in four votes on the amendment were cast by men. Fawcett believes in debates that particularly concern women's rights; women should be equally represented in order to articulate gendered dimensions to the debate.

Recommendations:

Fawcett recommends that the Government must lead the response, first and foremost by improving women's access to power and ensuring that Prime Minister David Cameron honours his commitment that by the end of his first Parliament, a third of all ministerial places are held by women.

Fawcett is concerned that with the abolition of the Women's National Commission, there is no longer an official and independent advisory body giving the views of women to the Government. Whilst Fawcett welcomes Government's response to the Strengthening Women's Voices consultation and, in particular, the establishment of the Women's Business Council, we are concerned with the focus being solely on women in business and would welcome action from Government to ensure that the voices and needs of other groups of women and women's organisations are equally heard.

Fawcett recommends that the Government adopts Fawcett's 'Life Raft for Women's Equality,' a series of key targeted and achievable policy measures that could be adopted by or at the 2012 budget to mitigate against some of the worst effects of current austerity measures on women's equality, which would also shore up and defend women's power and agency.

Culture of Parliament

The Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation highlighted several problems with the workings of Parliament such as the inflexible and unwelcoming attitude of the House of Commons towards work-life balance, shown in the lack of childcare support, unsociable working hours and absence of formal policies on parental leave. At present MPs do not have the same rights to flexible working as the rest of the population, meaning there is no formal provision for maternity leave, no procedures for proxy voting and no option to job-share on a temporary or permanent basis. By comparison the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh National Assembly, which both operate sitting hours much closer to 9-5, contain just over one third and two fifths female membership respectively. It is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families and/or other caring responsibilities is maintained and supported.

Recommendations:

Fawcett recommends that the Government confirm whether each political party has produced a formal statement of policy on maternity, paternity and caring leave as recommended by 2010 in the Speaker's Conference Report.

Fawcett supports the implementation of the Democracy Diversity Fund, as recommended in the Speaker's Conference 2010. The fund could be drawn upon by local political parties to support the work of developing talented individuals from under-represented groups and also to provide bursaries to individuals who would otherwise be unable to sustain the costs of candidacy.

About the Fawcett Society

The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading campaign for women's equality and women's rights. Our vision is of a society where women, and our rights and freedoms, are equally valued and respected and where we have equal power and influence in shaping our own lives and our wider world.

We trace our roots to Millicent Fawcett's and the suffragists' successful parliamentary campaign for women's right to vote. Since then we have continued to work with parliamentarians on a cross party and non partisan basis to progress equality between women and men at home, at work and in public life.

About Counting Women In

Counting Women In is a new coalition including the Fawcett Society, the Electoral Reform Society, Centre for Women and Democracy, Unlock Democracy and the Hansard Society.

Together we are aiming for 50/50 gender representation at all levels of national, local and devolved government. Together, we will fight to ensure women have an equal presence and voice within our democratic system.

Find out more at <http://countingwomenin.org/>

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