

Gender Parity in the UK's Legislative Bodies: A Desirable Goal?

Written by Janice Atkinson

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JANICE ATKINSON, JAN 17 2012

To answer this question, of course it is desirable; women make up over 50% of the population and in Britain female representation is rarely above 22% in the House of Commons. But how do we get there, if at all?

The British Labour Party and various campaign groups argue that quotas have to be imposed in the UK, and campaign for 50/50 male/female representation by 2020. The problem is that British women are not queuing up in vast numbers to be councillors, MPs or MEPs. So Labour has had to resort to all women shortlists (AWS) which, despite being an incredibly blunt tool, has only managed to achieve 33% female representation amongst Labour MPs. The UK Conservative Party, had they won all their target seats in 2010, would have had 30% female representation without AWS. Both parties have worked hard at attracting women to stand for election and supporting them through the selection and election process.

British Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron has expressed a desire for 30% of his cabinet to be women by the end of this Parliament. I would argue that those women should be there on merit, not as tokens to achieve an arbitrary target. Women are not stupid; they see through quotas. This week, his back-bencher Louise Mensch MP, announced that she did not want to be a minister as the life of a cabinet minister is not compatible with being a mother of three young children. She is being honest about her ability to be able to do the job given her circumstances.

I know a female Secretary of State for the UK who admitted to me that she had made great sacrifices for her political career. We were mothers together at the school gate when she was being interviewed for Parliamentary seats and she spent days preparing for each interview and travelled hundreds of miles in search of selection. The local party selection committee told her that she had not only to move to the constituency which was a couple of hundred miles from Westminster, but to move her family too. It would have been better for her and her family had she been strong with the local party and said no. Because of that decision she never saw her family during the working week.

PM David Cameron may be considering a re-shuffle and there is considerable pressure on him to promote women to avoid looking out-of-touch and to re-connect with female voters. He must resist this urge and only appoint women on merit. Justine Greening, who was appointed as Economic Secretary to the Treasury and subsequently as Secretary of State for Transport, was a good example of this; since a professional background in business prepared her well for these posts. Let's have more women like her, Mr Cameron.

I recently attended a gender conference. One area for discussion was the extensive research undertaken by Labour insider, Deborah Mattinson from Britain Thinks, who asked women and men whether they thought quotas were a good idea. Deborah explained that the questions were deliberately loaded to try to influence a positive response. She said that consistently, no matter how they asked the question, men and women said no to quotas.

When she turned to the all-female audience – as ever with these 'wimmin' conferences, no male representation – she expected a collective outrage but didn't get one. She then went on to say that when she presented her findings to New Labour she was happy that they had decided to ignore what women thought and continued with their AWS and

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quotas in corporate boardrooms policies. I think this is astonishing.

The Left in the UK has often made the assumption that women represent women. They do not seem to understand that MPs are there to represent all of their constituents and should not be overly concerned with 'women's issues'. Male MPs do not distinguish a constituent or give them better service depending on their gender, why do we assume that women will favour some constituents over others?

Is there still a glass ceiling? Many women in business do not think there is. On a recent panel on BBC Radio 4, three accomplished women discussed quotas: Lucy Neville Rolfe, executive director of Tesco; Lorraine Hennessy, first female controller of BBC1; and Rachel Lomax, former deputy governor of the Bank of England. All believed that glass ceiling does not exist any longer, and all were opposed to tokenism and quotas. I believe this is the same in politics.

But critically, we need to understand why there isn't a groundswell of highly accomplished and talented women smashing their way to the top. The causes are complex and tied up in a web that has taken generations to knit – the education system, lack of female role models, the political and business world's lack of leadership and pipeline nurturing of females. In politics and business this is slowly changing. But not fast enough for some.

In politics and business there needs to be a policy of a good pipeline of candidates, leadership and mentoring programmes, targeted recruitment, and promotion prospects. Diversity is good for consumer businesses, as Tesco has recognised where there has been a 70% rise in female board representation. There is also empirical research to show that women on boards increase profits and the bottom line, but only in cases where quotas were not imposed. Good businesses are recognising this, as are many in politics.

The Left argue that if we could just achieve 50/50 representation by 2020 then all would be well. It will not. We cannot exclude men just because they have been running things for too long. We cannot discriminate. How could I tell my teenage sons that they are to be excluded from democracy and from career opportunities just because they are male, that since men have enjoyed advantages simply of being male for generations, it is now their turn to have a diminished chance to represent their country or do well in business?

Imagine a selection interview for a local Parliamentary candidate. "Hello Sir, ah, I see you're a man. Oh dear, we can't interview you because you're a man and we have our AWS. Yes, I can see you have been active in your community – a school governor no less, one of our well-regarded councillors and you're a teacher and a parent of two children. And in your spare time you find time to canvass and deliver leaflets for us and contribute to policy on education. Yes, splendid stuff. Sorry, but you're a man and we're after females for the next eight years". Quotas lead to inevitable underlying currents of tokenism and overt positive discrimination, and are more likely to perpetuate gender divisions rather than heal any rifts.

Furthermore, discussing quotas for women is an elitist concern. The average woman earning £26,000 per annum, working in the Vodafone shop with a couple of kids is only interested in who her direct boss is, not whether the global head of Vodafone is a woman and how many females are represented on that board. We have to worry about creating a critical mass pushing up from underneath.

I have tried recruiting my female friends and family into politics. I tell them we are looking for people like them – stay-at-home mums; business women; community workers; teachers; part-time workers and teenagers. They all look at me with horror. Not because they do not have strong political views, they do, but because they are happy with their lives, they do not see politics as a viable choice of job, and they do not want to work the unsocial hours. This final problem is not one that is easily changed because even if you reduce the hours in the House of Commons, there are party commitments which are generally evening and weekend meetings. Furthermore, many women do not want to expose their private lives to scrutiny and in some cases, reduce the family income. How many people want to travel on a wet and windy Tuesday evening in the middle of February to a selection meeting hundreds of miles away?

Whether it is business or politics, it is complex why women do not apply and I suggest we start looking at the barriers for entry – our education system, encouraging women through political and business pipelines and mentoring

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schemes. When I applied for Parliamentary selection I was mentored and encouraged by women MPs and was offered training courses on public speaking and presentation skills. The support system is there in politics without imposing quotas.

There is another thought on why we do not have equal political representation. Those who want to be politicians are of a particular type. We are highly driven, can argue our cause, we accept that to achieve we have to expose our family lives to public and media scrutiny, we accept verbal abuse and generally have thick skins. We trudge through mud and snow, rain and sleet to deliver our political messages, often on a Saturday morning or giving up our evenings. That life is a cost too high for most people.

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