

Working Toward Female Representation in the UK Parliament

Written by Lynne Featherstone

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/03/01/working-toward-female-representation-in-the-uk-parliament/>

LYNNE FEATHERSTONE, MAR 1 2012

Women have changed the face of the UK parliament in recent years and shown they are a real force to be reckoned with. Great strides have been made in shaking up the once all male greyness of the House of Commons, and we now have the most diverse parliament ever. However, despite progress, it is still nowhere near reflecting the percentage of women in the country – and that is before we even start to talk about other aspects of diversity such as ethnicity, class or disability.

It is in everyone's interests to have a parliament that is made up of the best people for the job, who represent the diversity that exists in our communities – and who bring the benefits of a diverse set of experiences.

We do not just elect individuals, we elect people to be members of a team and, just as in sport, good teams need to be more than simply the sum of their parts. Good teams need variety and diversity.

We all suffer if that is missing. We end up with worse decision-making if parliament is made up of a monochrome slice of uniformity. It is about strength as much as equality – to put it simply, a balanced parliament is a better one.

All political parties have important roles to play in making parliament fully representative, something noted by the Speaker of the House of Commons in his 2010 report. A parliamentary debate was recently held to mark the second anniversary of this and it was heart-warming to see cross-party support for improving diversity.

It was agreed that we need a good mix of MPs to best respond to the wide range of issues we deal with, on anything from rape to the needs of soldiers' families. There were differences of opinion on the best way to achieve this and each party has to find their own solutions to the shared problem – but we are all working hard to improve our representative equality.

Some of the report's recommendations have already been introduced. We have extended until 2030 the right for political parties to use all female shortlists if they wish to. The Equality Act also allows political parties to address inequality in the representation of other people elected into political office.

Despite progress, there is still much to do – to tell the world a balanced parliament is stronger, and to identify barriers that can put women off coming forward. We are working with the political parties and the House Authorities to encourage women to seek election. Parliament's working practices also need to recognise the diverse needs of its members, especially women.

A recent report by the Institute for Government highlighted the important role of political parties in promoting diversity. They found it is vital to make the selection process more transparent and make it easier for people to understand how to become an MP. Many women just need to be asked to encourage them to stand for election, and all parties have a role to play in providing mentoring, information and support.

Progress IS being made. But as ever in politics – as it should be in a democracy – what matters is not only what the

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system permits or what politicians want, but what the public demands.

I would encourage any woman who has an interest in politics to get involved – and if you know someone inspirational, why not encourage them to stand? We need the best people possible running our country and for too long many talented women have slipped through the net. I'd like to see more women taking an active part in society as a whole, and as more get involved in public life the scales will start to shift towards a better balance of the sexes in parliament.

Working to create a more equal parliament is just one of the things the coalition government is doing to make a real difference to women's lives — we are protecting the vulnerable, removing barriers to career progression and creating more opportunities. I recognise the vital contribution women have to make and we are helping them achieve their full potential, whether in politics or business, and leading the way to a better and more balanced Britain.

Lynne Featherstone is the parliamentary under secretary of state for equalities and criminal information. You can follow her on Twitter @LFeatherstone.