

## The Prime Minister's snubs to female MPs are a symptom of the Conservative party's failure to 'feminise' politics.

*Leading up to the May 2010 general election the Conservative Party pledged to deliver policies to benefit women and promote women decision-making in the party itself. Yet the effect of government cuts on women and the continued dominance of males in the party's inner circle leads [Sarah Childs](#) and [Paul Webb](#) to question the party's, and the coalition government's commitment to gendered approaches to policy-making.*



David Cameron's belated apology for his parliamentary putdowns to two women MPs – Labour's Shadow chief secretary to the Treasury, [Angela Eagle](#) and his Conservative colleague [Nadine Dorries](#) – is to be welcomed. Having explicitly criticized '[Punch and Judy](#)' politics on becoming leader of the Conservative party, it might have been considered politically two-faced to have succumbed to – if not relished – the 'yah boo' 'willy-jousting' that is Prime Minister's Questions. Whilst Cameron claims not have meant to be sexist, women, and perhaps most importantly, those women voters the Party has lost in its first year in Government, might be more sceptical. In these circumstances an apology was the least that he could do.



As female political commentators in particular ruminated on his apology, a second criticism came to the fore: the Coalition stands accused of failing to see how its deficit reduction

[plans disproportionately and negatively affect women](#). Theresa May (Minister for Women and Equality as well as Home Secretary) apparently, but unsuccessfully, [warned the Treasury](#) that it must undertake a gender audit of its emergency budget back in 2010.

Labour's Yvette Cooper (Shadow Minister for Women), the [Fawcett Society and the Women's Budget Group](#) have all since produced figures to show that the fallout of Coalition cuts to public services, benefits, and public sector jobs have



overwhelmingly fallen on the UK's women. Whilst some might argue that this simply reflects women's greater use of, dependence upon, and employment by the welfare state, critics nonetheless question how a government can appear not to have noticed how its policies would fall heaviest on one sex. That is not quite 'all being in it together', they would contend.

Jump back to the 2010 General Election. Then, [the Conservative party manifesto](#) was highly competitive on the 'women's terrain', notwithstanding the leader's commitment to recognizing marriage in the tax system. The Conservatives offered policies on maternity and paternity leave, the gender pay gap, flexible working and violence against women, that had been absent from its previous electoral offerings. Having had to play the politics of 'catch up' on policies 'for women', the Tories had, under Cameron, witnessed a process of feminization: women's issues were more integrated into the Party and, arguably, reflected a liberally feminist take.

How then to explain the dissonance between the Conservative party in opposition and the party in government? It would be too simplistic to say that there was never any intention to deliver on these pledges. It would also be unfair to the many women (and some men) in the party who, often lacking sufficient resources, sought to ensure that the Conservatives adopted gendered perspectives. Is it simply the current economy? Are policies for women a luxury for good economic times? Some may well feel so; other Conservatives may have never fully signed up to feminized politics even in the 'good' times. Critics will maintain, however, that many Coalition cuts are explicitly gendered: for example, should weekly rubbish collection trump '[Sure Start](#)' maternity grants?

The question of women's presence in politics might be relevant here. [In \*Sex Gender and the Conservative Party: From Iron Ladies to Kitten Heels\*](#) we describe the efforts of leading women in the professional, voluntary and parliamentary party to transform the Conservatives. In the run up to the General Election

Theresa May, especially, championed women's issues. But we also note how the success of these efforts was often dependent upon high levels of personal commitment and good interpersonal relations both between the various individuals responsible for women's issues, and between them and the party leadership. Ultimately, we concluded that full integration into the party's decision making procedures was lacking and that the women were at some distance from the leaders' inner circle. Women's absence from the discussions establishing the Coalition was also noted; as was the likely reduced attention that May would have on this part of her brief, as her Home Secretary responsibilities undoubtedly took over.

What to do? In the short term, Cameron might need to take seriously the charge that the advisers and ministers closest to him 'don't get gender'. Accordingly, gender experts, both at the adviser and ministerial level, should be brought in. Yet it is also about the establishment of procedures and mechanisms to embed gendered perspectives within the Tory party – at the professional, parliamentary and voluntary level. Perhaps the Women's Minister warrants a Cabinet post all of its own, something Labour did not achieve? Where is the equivalent of the [Parliamentary Labour Party women's group](#), holding Ministers to account and helping set the Party's agenda? And will the Party ensure that at the next general election [its number of women MPs increases](#), and increases substantially?

Whilst there is no magic in numbers, Labour's greater number of women MPs were more able to ensure that women's issues were addressed across Parliament – in the Chamber, in Committees, and in backbench meetings. Admittedly, such suggestions may well sit uneasily with some in the Conservative party – reflecting, as they do, 'identity' politics. But with their eyes focused on the 2015 General Election, electoral opportunism might just suggest that the Party must take women and their issues more seriously. Cameron has already accepted that those who sit around the table affect the quality of decisions taken; now he must put into place measures to ensure that women's voices are not just heard, but included.