

Westminster can learn a lot about gender equality by looking at Welsh and Scottish levels of political representation

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*Discrimination and under-representation of women is still overt and visible in politics. **Diana Silvia Stirbu** argues that progress on the gender equality agenda doesn't come easily, but it is possible through a combination of structural, political and cultural factors. Westminster can learn a lot from the successes in the Welsh National Assembly and Scottish Parliament.*



The assumption that today's British society provides a level playfield for men and women is shared by many young women who genuinely cannot relate to the idea of gender inequality; at least not in the early stages of their life. But gender inequality still exists at all levels of our society; more covert today than let's say a century ago. It hits women later in their lives, when they have to compromise between family and careers and hit an insurmountable glass ceiling in their professional lives.

Politics is one area where discrimination and under-representation of women are still very much as overt and visible as ever. The House of Commons today is only 22 per cent women; roughly one in four local councillors are women – despite women representing more than 50 percent of the UK population. Sexism in politics is not a thing of the past either, when none else than the British prime minister puts an opposition woman MP in 'her place' with a 'humorous remark': 'Calm down dear, calm down'. Is this what politics is all about, or is there more to it than what we see on prime minister's question time? Where would young women, aspiring for a career in politics, have to look in order to find some inspiration and encouragement? This piece deliberately looks beyond Westminster and investigates advancements on the gender representation agenda in Scotland and Wales.

The Scottish parliament and the national assembly for Wales were designed to differ from the Westminster parliament. In 1997, when devolution plans were drafted for Scotland and Wales, the buzz-words on everyone's lips were: 'new politics'. The gender dimension of this new politics found a solid ground in the new rhetoric of better representativeness and inclusiveness, which, alongside accountability and closeness to the people featured as devolution's main *mantra* in 1997.

The 1999 elections produced impressively gender balanced results: a healthy 37.2 per cent women representation in Scotland, and 40 per cent in Wales. In 2003 we saw an increase to 39.5 per cent in Scotland, and 50 per cent in Wales, whereas 2007 brought the first minor decline in numbers (33.3 per cent in Scotland and 46.7 per cent in Wales). Wales was in fact the first country to break through the 50 per cent barrier in 2006, when, following the by-election in Blaenau Gwent, the national assembly's gender composition was 31 women to 29 men! It is astonishing to think that women representation never fell below 40 per cent in the national assembly, and under 30 per cent in the Scottish Parliament!

The fundamental question we ask here is whether the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales hold the key to more balanced gender representation or not. How did these numbers come about anyway? And how sustainable are they in the long run?

The electoral 'triumph' of women post 1997 in Westminster, but more so in Scotland and Wales, is not down to chance but to a combination of political will, structural factors and strong activism from

'strategic women' within political parties. Political will rested mainly with the Labour Party's commitment to use 'all women shortlists' in the 1997 UK general elections. In similar fashion in 1999 in Wales, Labour and Plaid Cymru used 'twinning' (pairing up constituencies –one man, one woman candidate) and 'zipping' of candidates (women on the top and third place on regional lists).

Structural factors, such as the design of the electoral system also helped: the PR element of the additional member system used in Scotland and Wales arguably favoured women's chances. Beyond political will and constitutional devices, the strong activism of women within political parties was also important. In Scotland, the Scottish Constitutional Convention provided a platform for leading feminists and activists (i.e. Alice Brown, Wendy Alexander etc) to put gender equality on the political agenda. In Wales, women activists (such as Val Feld, Jane Hutt, Christine Chapman or Helen Mary Jones) also campaigned strongly within their own political parties (Labour and Plaid).

The question of sustainability is multi-faceted and goes beyond whether or not the numbers game can keep up in the long term. Evidence from the 2011 elections in Wales and Scotland shows a mixed picture. On the one hand, it was evident that Labour and Plaid gradually stepped back from affirmative action, raising fears of a dramatic fall-back in the number of women elected. However, the elections results were not as bad as predicted: the gender composition is now 43.3 per cent women in the national assembly (a decline of 4 per cent from 2007), and 36.5 per cent women in the Scottish parliament (a slight increase from 2007). On the 'positive side', we note the better performance of parties traditionally reluctant to employ affirmative action. Moreover, notably, two of the main political parties in Wales now have women as leaders (Kirsty Williams for Liberal Democrats and more recently, Leanne Wood leader of Plaid Cymru).

Nonetheless, the tough lesson that Scotland and Wales teach us is that, despite a decade of progressive approach to gender equality, success and best practice did not permeate the other aspects of public life. In Wales for instance, the Equality and Human Rights Commission report [Who Runs Wales 2011](#) drew a gloomy picture, counting only 2 female chief executives in the top 50 firms in Wales, only 2 female editors at the newspapers surveyed, and only one in ten assembly government sponsored bodies are run by female chief executives. Only the national assembly stood out, not only for its record in the number of women elected, and their high profile with the institution (female Presiding Officer, women chairing important committees), but also for its gender balance at administrative and managerial level (women chief executive and deputy chief executive for instance).

Hence, the message from the devolved legislatures is mixed. First, progress on the gender equality agenda doesn't come easily, but it is possible. A combination of structural, political and cultural factors is required to achieve any substantial progress. Women activism, political will, affirmative action measures, and the electoral system, are all crucial aspects but not sole ingredients for success.

Secondly, we have to accept that the nature of the 'job' (assembly member or member of the Scottish parliament) is slightly different in Wales and Scotland from Westminster, making it more attractive for women. This is down to institutional features: less of a macho environment, a consideration to balancing family and working life (the national assembly has operated family friendly working hours since its inception), no tolerance to sexist language and behaviour, and, more importantly, a significant presence of other women. By no means do we claim here that tribal politics doesn't happen in Wales and Scotland, but there certainly hasn't been any 'calm down dear, calm down' on the floors of the *Holyrood* or the *Senedd*.

Finally, there is no room for complacency, nor for assumptions such as that once 'critical mass' in parliaments is achieved we can all assume gender battle has been won! Translating best practice from politics into other areas of public life is a big hurdle. Acknowledging best practice, as well and learning from experience across the UK and internationally is probably something that both politicians and women activists should embark on as gate-keepers for the gender equality agenda.

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