

Cameron's (and politics') 'woman problem' is not something to be 'managed' but to be solved

Rosie Campbell, Sarah Childs and Elizabeth Evans argue that political parties should get serious about solving the problem of under-representation of women in political positions of power. Rather than simply 'shuffling the pack', the government should actively aim for gender parity in cabinet.

A BBC reporter said during the day of the reshuffle that Cameron had 'managed' his woman problem. And in one sense he did. Having Warsi 'attend' Cabinet will likely be regarded by both critics of women and optimists as proof that the status quo has been preserved. And we fully expect that the percentage of women in the junior ranks to increase as the reshuffle is completed – how could it not, given that this House has 49 Conservative women MPs on the backbenches (though only seven LibDems)?

But Cameron's (and politics') 'woman problem' is not something to be 'managed' but to be solved. And it is not just about the numbers of women in the Cabinet; it is about women in Parliament, women voters, and gender equality (See Childs & Webb's *Sex, Gender and the Conservative Party*).

Cameron made tackling the "scandalous" under-representation of women one of his leadership promises, and declared that he wanted a third of ministerial appointments to be female. To achieve this requires radical intervention by the Prime Minister – leading his party.

We are told that no Conservative 2010 intake MPs have been appointed to Cabinet; and that, if, anything women are over-represented relative to their presence in the pre-2010 parliamentary Conservative party; apparently we – and the women politicians – must therefore bide our time...

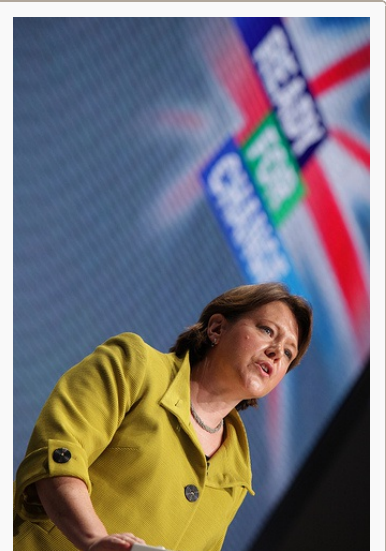
We disagree:

If a parliamentary party is too small a supply pool for Cabinet and Government (and we take issue with this in any case, especially when women in the Lords are taken into account) then make it bigger, and do so now. The Tories should reconsider All Women Shortlists (AWS), or at least re-establish the 'A' list with selection from it required. This would deliver women in 50 per cent of its vacant/winnable seats at the 2015 election (See [article](#) by Campbell and Childs). And why not appoint to the Lords women who can go straight into government?

Why must women's presence in the Cabinet only be proportionate to their presence in the Parliamentary party? Cameron and other leading Tories admit that the playing field isn't level – that women's merit has too often been overlooked. If women MPs have to be 'better' than the 'best man' for the job, then their swift appointment into government is meritocratic (See [Murray](#)).

And don't we need to raise questions about 'parliamentary experience'? Why does it appear to equal longevity? Pre-parliamentary experience should count for those who don't enter by the professional politician route. If 'they are good enough then they are old enough', as the football fans amongst you will appreciate.

Like Zapatero in Spain, Cameron could have sent a signal about his commitment to equality and appointed a parity Cabinet. Of course he has to manage coalition politics but it would have taken just 10



Maria Miller at Conservative Party Conference (Creative Commons NC/ND; Flickr/ConservativeParty)

or so current Conservative and Liberal Democrat women parliamentarians.

Cameron has four women already: May, Greening, Villiers and Miller. We could add back in Warsi. Why not appoint from amongst: Harriet Baldwin, Jane Ellison, Helen Grant, Andrea Leadsom, Margot James, Esther McVey, Nicky Morgan, Claire Perry, Amber Rudd, Anna Soubry, and Liz Truss. Or from the LibDems: Jo Swinson, and she's a 2005 intake. If for some reason none of these suit, Cameron could look to the Lords: Baronesses Browning, Jenkin, Morris, Wheatcroft, or on the LibDem benches, Baroness Kramer and Doocey.

For the sake of justice the presence of women's bodies matter but they are not all that matter. The issues that matter to women need to be fairly represented too. So it matters not just how many women, but which women with what ideas, and what kind of portfolios they get, and how much influence they have (issues we lack the space to discuss here – See Annesley and Gains forthcoming in *Political Quarterly*). The reshuffle has already raised the following concern: with [Theresa May](#) no longer Women's Minister, replaced by Maria Miller, the blogosphere has asked questions of the latter's equality credentials in respect of [abortion](#), [gay rights](#) and [disabilities](#). Therefore, it is time to hear from government ministers – women and men – about what they will do to ensure that Coalition enhances women's rights – political, economic, social and cultural.

It's long since time that political parties put serious effort into creating parity representation – 50 per cent women – rather than continuing to shuffle their biased packs.

Footnote: And what of the Liberal Democrats? If you only have seven women MPs...And some need to be fighting in their constituencies with tiny majorities; and some may wish to distance themselves from the Coalition; and some have rebelled; you don't have many left at all...

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the *British Politics and Policy* blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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