

# Resistance to all-women shortlists in South Wales has a complex set of causes beyond gender politics, but that doesn't make it right

By The Author

The decision by the Labour Party to use an all-women shortlist to select its candidate to replace Ann Clywd MP in Cynon Valley has been opposed by local party members. **Richard Berry** finds echoes of a similar controversy in the Welsh valleys ahead of the 2005 election, where local voters defied the party's wishes in favour of a male candidate.



The Constituency Labour Party (CLP) in Cynon Valley has declared its fierce opposition to the imposition of an all-women shortlist for its selection of a candidate to replace retiring local MP Ann Clywd. While it is hard to know what ordinary members feel about the issue, let alone voters, local party officials are [refusing to cooperate](#) with the selection process.

Labour has been here before. The party introduced the policy of all-women shortlists in 1993 to boost female representation in the House of Commons. Despite [initial opposition](#) from within the party and a [legal challenge](#) in 1996, there has been little disquiet about the policy in recent years. All-women shortlists have had a [significant effect](#) on the gender balance of Parliament, although women still comprise only one in five MPs.

The most notorious instance of opposition to all-women shortlists came ahead of the 2005 general election also occurred South Wales, in the Blaenau Gwent constituency. When Labour MP Llew Smith announced his retirement, the party decided a woman must be selected as his replacement.

At the time this was the fifth safest Labour seat in the country, where the party had won with a majority of over 19,000 in 2001. It had an important role in Labour history, too, having previously been held by party leader Michael Foot and by Nye Bevan, revered as the founding father of the NHS. But Labour lost the seat in 2005 when Maggie Jones, the candidate selected via the all-women shortlist, was defeated by the former Labour

member Peter Law.

It would be wrong to interpret these events solely as an instance of gender politics, determined by views on positive discrimination or the representation of women. Dai Davies, one of the leaders of the rebellion and later MP for Blaenau Gwent, [explained it like this](#):

*We were never against women in politics. We were against the way this was manipulated and used against the local people. Although they told us we had to have a single gender shortlist, in the seat where Ed Balls stood it was open. That really put the nail in the coffin.*

When we look more closely at the story of Blaenau Gwent, it is clear that several other factors were at play, not least discontent with the national Labour government and the ambitions of its protagonists.

Peter Law was already a prominent politician. He was the Welsh Assembly Member for Blaenau Gwent and formerly a Minister in the Welsh Government. He had, however, become disaffected from Welsh party leadership. He lost his ministerial role when Labour was forced into coalition with the Liberal Democrats. He then openly opposed the party in 2003 by standing for the post of Deputy Presiding Officer in the Assembly, despite the fact this would have made Labour a minority party; the post is a non-voting one, and Labour held exactly 50% of the seats.

One plausible interpretation of events in Blaenau Gwent is that Law saw a long-awaited chance to gain a Westminster seat taken away from him when the party imposed an all-women shortlist. The fact that this measure was designed to boost female representation was not strong enough to overcome the force of that personal ambition. And Law achieved his ambition: he stood as an independent and won the election convincingly. Sadly, Law died in 2006, just a year after taking up his seat.

But it is also clear that the fight over Blaenau Gwent's all-women shortlist tapped into much deeper political concerns. Law may have sought to exploit these concerns for electoral gain, but it is undeniable he was also personally motivated by them. This was a time when the popularity of the Tony Blair's government had dwindled: from winning 43% of the vote at the 1997 general election, it would go on to win just 35% in 2005. Privatisation of public services, the ongoing decline of manufacturing industry and the war in Iraq were all issues that caused disquiet in Labour's heartland areas, not least in South Wales. This combined with resentment at the internal politics of the party, with the leadership seen as heavy-handed and distant from the membership.

The all-women shortlist, arguably, was not perceived as a method of increasing the number of female MPs, but as a way for an out-of-touch and unpopular government to deny their party members the right to choose the candidate. In particular, and this is why Dai Davies' reference to Ed Balls is so important, it was seen as a way for the leadership to keep politically awkward candidates – which Law certainly was – out of office. The woman who benefited from the all-women shortlist, Maggie Jones, certainly had insider status with the party leadership. She had been the national Chair of the Labour Party; in fact she was given a peerage soon after the 2005 election.

Subsequent events give credence to this interpretation. Despite Law's death, his allies continued to oppose the Labour Party. Dai Davies had been Law's agent, and stood successfully in the by-election to replace him in 2006, inflicting another defeat on Labour. Law's wife Trish won his Welsh Assembly seat. Together, they formed a new political party, [People's Voice](#). Although short-lived, it is notable that this party at one time held seats in Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and in local government. Its success even spread beyond Blaenau Gwent, as the party also won seats on nearby Torfaen Council.

What are the lessons that can be applied to the current dispute in Cynon Valley? The first is that we cannot necessarily assume that it is evidence of opposition to the policy of all-women shortlists. Cynon Valley has, after all, had a female MP for thirty years. Regardless of the precise causes, however, it is an unfortunate fact that sometimes local opposition will have to be overridden. If a political party wants to increase its female representation then the use of all-women shortlists seems to be a practical necessity.

The second lesson, conversely, is that decisions over where to use all-women shortlists, and where not, should come after a transparent process using fair and consistent criteria. There has been [criticism](#) that Labour does not

do this at present, with one proposal that seats should [be selected randomly](#). Certainly, the selection of [Stephen Kinnock](#) for another South Wales seat from an open shortlist is probably a factor in the Cynon Valley rebellion.

Third, the resurrection of the same dispute almost ten years after Blaenau Gwent should give a spur to the efforts to introduce primary elections for choosing parliamentary candidates. We don't know enough at present about what the effect of primaries would be on the gender balance of Parliament. Evidence suggests that male candidates fare no better than women in elections: it may well be that primary elections could deliver a more even gender balance without the use of all-women shortlists.

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*Note: This post represents the views of the author and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before responding.*

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