

# A reshuffle for women? Welcome, but underwhelming

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7/17/2014

*Has David Cameron succeeded in making his cabinet more diverse and representative of the population?*

**Claire Annesley** and **Francesca Gains** argue that the prime minister still has much more to do to if he is to improve the representation of women. They suggest that Cameron should make sure more women are selected for winnable Conservative seats and reinstate and resource a dedicated women and equalities policy machinery.



David Cameron's July reshuffle was widely billed as one for women. This was the prime minister's opportunity to demonstrate once and for all that he does not have a [problem with women](#). It was also his chance to deliver on his [2008 pledge](#) that by the end of the next parliament 1/3 of his government would consist of women. It was also an opportunity for him to present a more diverse and representative face to the public ahead of next year's general election. On the day, the [appointments and promotions](#) of some talented women were very welcome, but the overall picture and impact remains underwhelming. David Cameron still has much more to do to if he is to improve the representation of women.



With Nicky Morgan and Liz Truss promoted to Education Secretary and Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs respectively as full cabinet members, the reshuffle means five of 22 full cabinet posts are now held by women. While undoubtedly excellent appointments, they cannot really be billed as progress since it merely takes the cabinet back to the level of female representation of October 2011. The prime minister will be keen to flag three additional women who now attend cabinet: Esther McVey, Baroness Stowell and Baroness Warsi and the five further women who have been either promoted (Anna Soubry) or appointed (Claire Perry, Priti Patel, Amber Rudd and Penny Mordaunt) across the junior ranks of government.

But do these changes in personnel mean that the prime minister met his 1/3 pledge? It depends what you look at. Women's representation across all levels of government is still just 22 per cent, well below his stated goal. If we home in on cabinet, the share of women is at 23 per cent. However, if we only count the Conservative ministerial posts then women's representation in cabinet is as high as 29 per cent (i.e. five of 17 Conservative full cabinet ministers). It is also worth noting that today there are just three spending government departments with no female representation in the form of a female minister, minister of state, or parliamentary undersecretary of state (Scotland, Justice and Cabinet Office). [Back in 2010 it was nine](#).

Has Cameron succeeded in making his cabinet more diverse and representative of the population? As noted, this reshuffle marginally improves the gender balance of the cabinet, though not to match women's 52 per cent share of the UK population, and it has been widely noted that now two of the five cabinet members (Morgan and Truss) are mothers. But, overall, the cabinet – including those who attend but cannot vote – [remains overwhelmingly](#) White (98 per cent), male (76 per cent), private school educated (44 per cent) and Oxbridge-educated (59 per cent) and not at all a representative image of the UK electorate.

There is still a lot that the prime minister needs to do to truly represent and improve the lives of women. Despite Cameron's undoubted commitment to bring more women into politics and into power, the latest reshuffle [will not automatically compensate](#) for the lack of women in parliament, on the government benches, or for the loss of a dedicated policy capacity to advise ministers on the impact of policy on women's lives. We don't want the prime minister to think that, with this reshuffle, his job is done. So here's a short to-do list for the prime minister:

1. Make sure more women are selected for winnable Conservative seats.

The appointment of four women government and two as assistant government whips has left the Conservative

backbenches even more woefully unrepresentative. This is problematic partly because it exposes Cameron's 'pipeline problem': who will form the next generation of junior ministers? The Conservative Party's latest selection information shows that just 34 per cent of the 93 candidates selected to stand in next year's election are women. As most safe seat selections have gone to men, any improvement in the ratio of women MPs is likely to come from the Labour benches where over 50 per cent of safe seat selections have gone to women.

The lack of Conservative backbench women is also problematic because although women in government are necessary to achieve change, a strong parliamentary presence of women MPs is vital to act as a touchstone. Women MPs in parliament act as a weathervane alerting Ministers to policies which are ill thought through or detrimental, such as the ill-judged proposal to increase child care ratios. Without this touchstone, ministers can lack nuance in seeking to finalise their policy offer.

The Conservatives have started talking about the possibility of using all women shortlists for candidate selection to boost women's representation in parliament. We would urge David Cameron to take lead on implementing this sooner rather than later in order to help him fulfill his 1/3 pledge at a later date.

## 2. Reinstate and resource a dedicated women and equalities policy machinery.

As we have argued before, presenting a more representative face to the electorate is just one dimension to targeting women's votes. Since 2010 the Women and Equalities Minister has been acting alone without the support of a dedicated and resourced gender policy machinery. In 2010 the Government Equalities Unit's budget was cut by 38%, the Women's National Commission was disbanded and over the past four years the use of equalities legislation to review policy proposals has been downgraded. The combination of budget cuts and the failure of the Coalition to conduct gender impact assessments of Government policy has led to decisions which have had a devastating impact on many women's lives: cuts in income, job losses, and depleted public services.

A fully resourced and integrated equality machinery would significantly help Cameron and his team to get the policies right for women and we would urge David Cameron to reinstate this as a matter of urgency.

*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. Featured image credit: [Thierry Ehrmann](#)*

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