

In the representation of women in political life, the UK continues to be outperformed by other democracies

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*In the [2012 audit](#) of UK democracy, **Stuart Wilks-Heeg**, **Andrew Blick**, and **Stephen Crone** considered how women were represented in public life. They found increased participation of women in government, although more recently progress has gone in reverse. Movement towards greater gender equality in the make-up of the House of Commons has also been slow. Among the civil service and public bodies, female representation in senior posts has improved, although the UK continues to fall behind other countries.*



Women remain under-represented in British politics. Credit: Haykirstin (CC BY-NC 2.0)

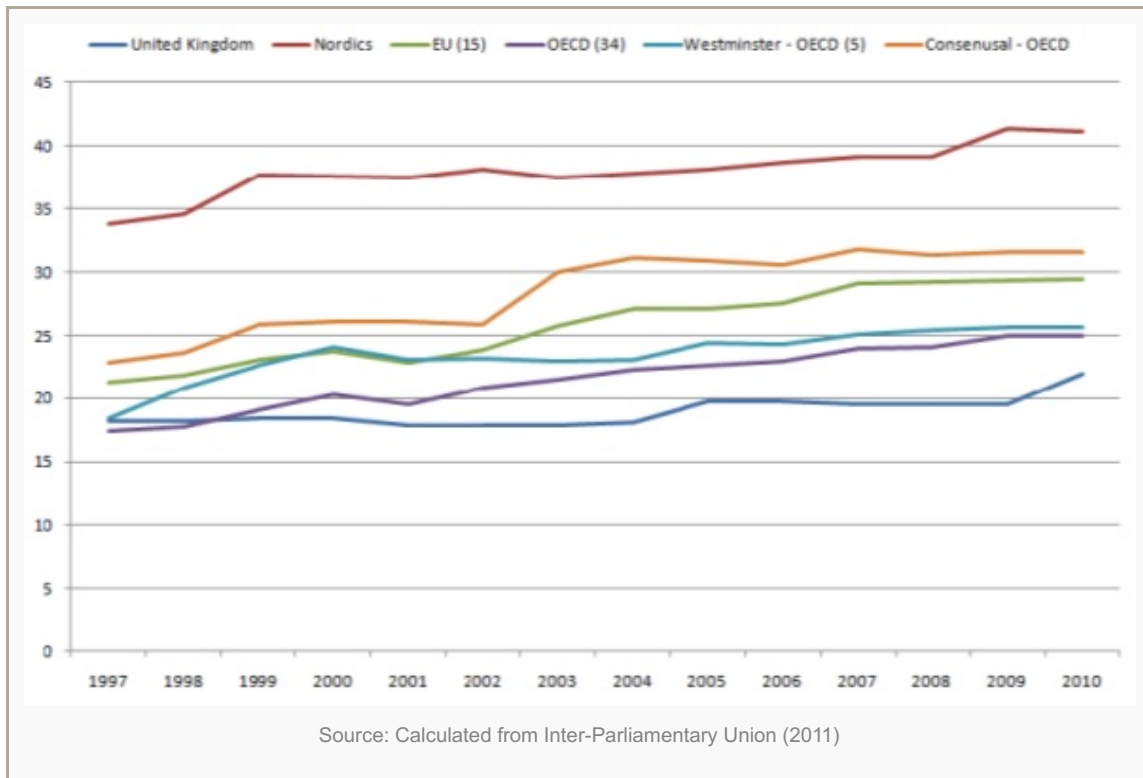
House of Commons

British MPs remain overwhelmingly male, and progress towards gender equality has been painfully slow. Following the 2010 general election, 22 per cent of MPs are female. While this represents an all-time record for the proportion of women MPs the observation in our 2002 Audit that “a partial breakthrough in 1997 has not been built on” remains an accurate summary of the situation. Women accounted for less than five per cent of MPs until 1987, before rising sharply to nine per cent in 1992 and 18 per cent in 1997.

The main factor constraining or facilitating the election of female candidates since 1922 has been the proportion of female candidates selected to stand. From 1979-92, more women were selected as candidates, but there was only a limited impact on the number of seats won by female candidates, because most of these selections were in seats which the parties had little prospect of winning. The sharp rise in the selection and election of female candidates in 1997 was accounted for overwhelmingly by the growth in the number of female Labour MPs, arising from the party's policy (adopted in 1993) of reserving a proportion of winnable seats for female candidates via 'all-women short lists'.

This lack of progress in increasing female representation in the Commons has left the UK lagging further and further behind comparable democracies. As Figure One shows, the doubling of female representation in the Commons in 1997 had served to bring the UK in line with the OECD average, and within touching distance of the EU average. However, the stagnation in the number of female MPs in the UK after 1997 prompted the gap to widen once more. By the late 2000s, the proportion of elected female parliamentarians in the UK was five percentage points below the OECD average, ten percentage points below the EU average and a full 20 percentage points adrift from the average for the Nordic countries.

Figure One: Proportion of MPs who are female, UK and comparators, 1997-2010



Executive

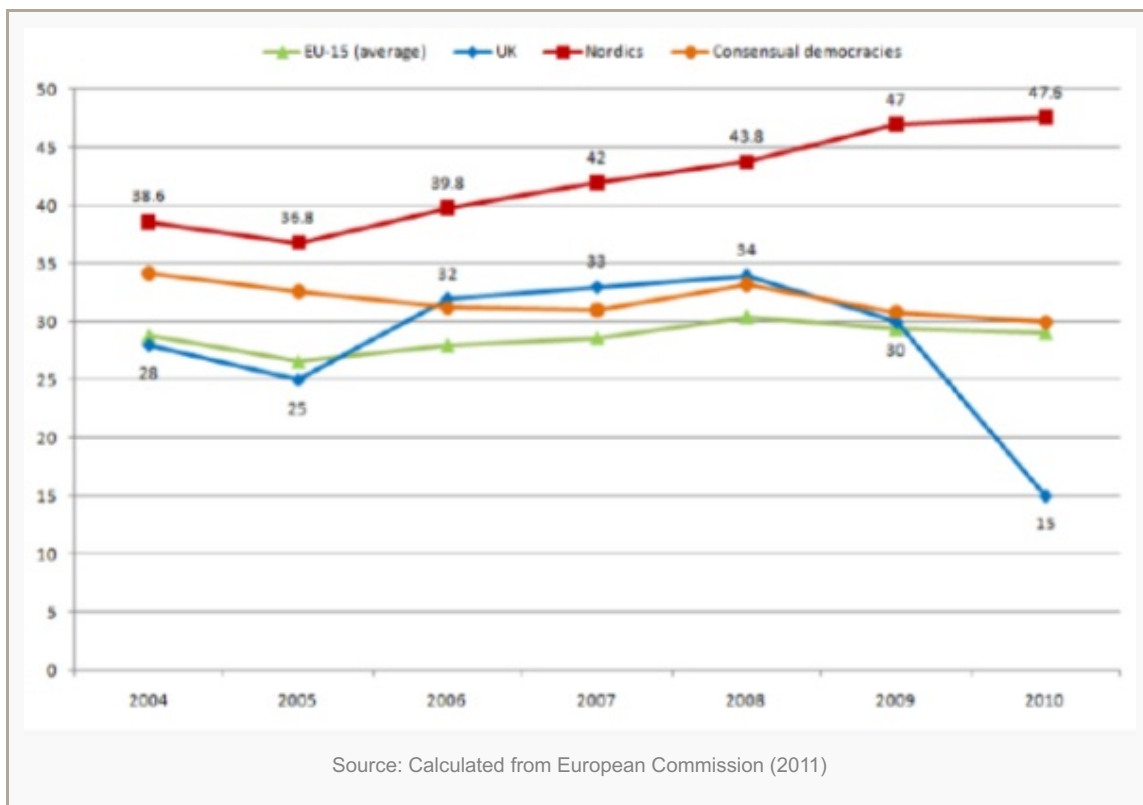
Representation of women in the executive, comprising both appointments to ministerial office generally, and to the Cabinet specifically, was boosted significantly under New Labour. Prior to Tony Blair's first premiership, a total of only 40 female MPs had ever held any ministerial office; by the start of Blair's third term the figure had doubled to 80, with women typically holding around one-third of all government posts throughout the Blair years. This pattern was replicated in relation to the cabinet. Until 1997, men had tended to outnumber women in cabinet by a ratio of 9:1. Under Blair, however, the proportion of Cabinet posts held by women remained consistently between one fifth and one third – although there was to be no female Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary or Chancellor of the Exchequer in any of Blair's Cabinets. Women continued to feature prominently in government under Gordon Brown, including the appointment of Jacqui Smith as Home Secretary in 2007, until the resignation of three women from Cabinet positions, Smith included, at the height of the MPs' expenses crisis in summer 2009. Female representation in Cabinet fell from 32 to 17 per cent as a consequence, although women continued to make up around one-third of all government ministers during Brown's tenure. However, following the formation of the coalition government in May 2010, female representation has clearly taken a step backwards. The appointment of four women to Cabinet has maintained the proportion of women in cabinet at about one-sixth, but the number of ministerial posts held by women has also dropped to less than 20 per cent for the first time since the mid-1990s.

Figure Two shows that the highest proportion of female representation among government ministers as a whole was in 2008 (34 per cent). As the graph indicates, during the mid-2000s, the proportion of ministerial posts held by

women in the UK was in line with the average for both the EU-15 and for the consensual democracies. Representation of women in UK government from 2004-08 was also at about the same level as the Westminster democracies. Indeed, as figure two shows by 2006, the argument could reasonably have been made that the UK was beginning to approach the levels of female representation in government typical of the Nordic countries. Having lagged behind most other democracies for decades, the UK's record of realising relatively high levels of female participation in government by the mid-2000s was therefore of genuine significance.

However, the dramatic falls in female participation in the executive after 2009 meant that the proportion of all UK ministerial posts held by women, has dropped to half the EU-15 average by 2010. Even more telling was the 30 percentage point gap between the UK and the Nordic countries in 2010. By the end of the 2000s, the Nordic countries had achieved broad gender parity in government positions, with changes of government resulting in no discernible shift in the proportion of women in government. In the UK, by contrast, the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 saw female representation across all ministerial positions fall from 30 per cent to 15 per cent.

Figure Two: Proportion of senior ministerial posts (Cabinet or equivalent) held by women, UK compared to EU15 and Nordic average, 2004-10



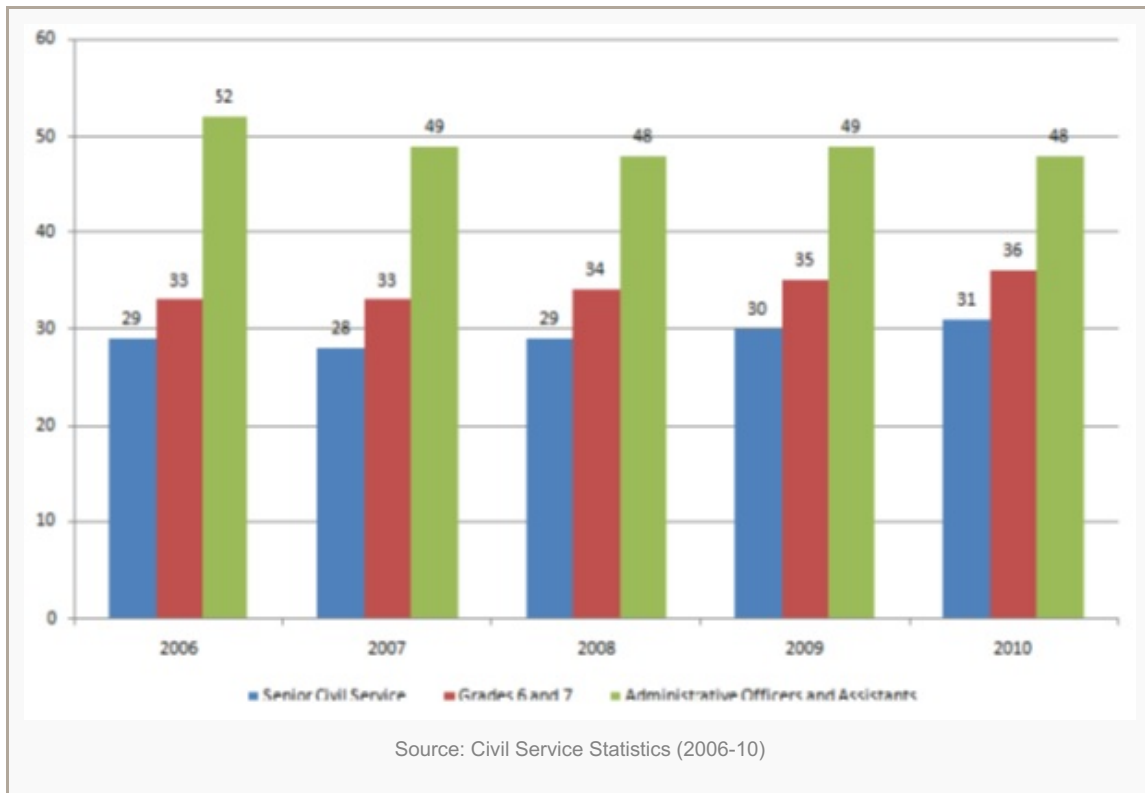
The civil service and public bodies

In our 2002 Audit, we noted that women occupied just 17.2 per cent of senior civil service posts in 1999, although this figure represented a significant improvement compared to 1984, when a mere 5.9 per cent of these positions were held by women. We also noted the striking contrast with more junior roles, with women making up 62.5 per cent of staff at the administrative officer and administrative assistant level of the civil service. Almost uniquely among the data we present in this section, there has been genuine and sustained progress since our last Audit in realising greater gender equality in the civil service. By 2006, women comprised 28 per cent of the senior civil service, and the government was working towards a target, agreed as part of the 2004 spending review, of 37 per cent by 2008.

These targets also provided the basis for a ten-point plan adopted by the civil service. While the target set in 2004 has not been reached, the proportion of senior civil servants who are women has grown steadily to reach 31 per cent

in 2010, as Figure Three shows. Over the period from 2006-10, the proportion of female civil servants at grades six and seven of the civil service rose from 33 to 36 per cent. Meanwhile, gender parity has been achieved at lower grades, most notably among administrative officers and assistants, which previously contained a disproportional number of female civil servants. Despite the evidence of sustained progress, however, there is clearly some way to go if gender parity is to be achieved in the civil service or even, in the more immediate term, if the targets originally set for 2008 are to be met. Meanwhile, [comparative studies](#) of women in the civil service suggest that the UK ranks relatively poorly among EU member.

Figure Three: Women in the UK civil service, 2006-10



The full analysis of female representation in UK public life from the 2012 audit also covers the House of Lords, judiciary, devolved assemblies, local government and public boards – see sections 2.1.5 [Social representativeness of Parliament](#) and 3.2.3 [Women in political life](#).

[Stuart Wilks-Heeg](#), [Andrew Blick](#), and [Stephen Crone](#) are the authors of the 2012 Democratic Audit report.

This post is part of Democratic Audit's **Gender and Democracy** series, which examines the different ways in which men and women experience democracy in the UK and explores how to achieve greater equality. To read more posts in this series [click here](#).

