

150 years is too long to wait – we need a 50:50 gender balanced Parliament now

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*What prevents more women from becoming active in politics? One potential answer is the ultimately sexist attitudes that pervade Britain's political institutions, which Harriet Harman recently attempted to shed a light on. **Ruby Lott-Lavinga** argues that Harman's experience tells a worrying story about sexism in politics, and that kicking out the old boys club is a necessary component of bringing more women into the political picture.*



Harriet Harman (Credit: 10 Downing Street, CC BY NC ND 2.0)

At a recent speech in the Palace of Westminster on equality in politics, Harriet Harman tackled the sexism that she experienced as an MP, and Cabinet Minister under Gordon Brown, in particular she pointed to the fact that she was overlooked for promotion to Deputy Prime Minister, despite her successful bid to become Labour's Deputy Leader. Along with discussing how she felt she was treated differently in terms of her career trajectory, she explained how Parliament as a workplace was generally hostile to women's issues, and that she was encouraged to not 'bang on too much' about those issues closest to her heart. Harman, at this point the leading advocate for gender equality in the Cabinet, hit the nail on the head when she said;

"You don't have to openly oppose equality to perpetuate inequality,[...] all it takes is for those in positions of power to do nothing and the status quo prevails."

The extreme structural disadvantage that faces women today in entering into British politics continues to distress, with the current state of Parliament acting as a significant deterrent to genuine democratic representation, displaying an unrepresentative face to a diverse public. Whilst all minorities deserve significantly better representation in Parliament, we find ourselves under-representing not a minority but a majority: women. Historically, Parliament has

always eschewed women, and perhaps as a result it has been difficult to create positive social change and transferral of power. Since 1918, when the first female MP came to cabinet, there have been fewer female MPs in total than there are currently men in Parliament. It is a horrific fact, and is surely enough to turn many clever, persuasive and inspiring woman away from a career in politics.

There exists two connected misconceptions about women in politics: Either that men can represent women as well as women can themselves, or that if women were good enough then there would be more of them in Parliament. In order to believe the former, you have to trust that people in positions of power are willing to act on social change even if that means losing power themselves. It takes no genius to work out that this is simply not the case. Whilst there are clearly men working towards allowing a system less exclusive of women, there are obvious difficulties in attempting to persuade those who hold power to make their own lives marginally worse to help others. Why make the system more open to women if in the end, they may run against you in your constituency, or get reshuffled to a more prominent position over you? People in power are prone to hanging on to it.

As for the latter misconception, anybody who genuinely believes that men are somehow inherently 'better at politics' because of the percentage of them in Parliament can accurately be described as holding sexist attitudes, or at the very least altogether ignoring the idea of structural inequality. It is understandable that so few women opt for a career in politics when so few of their prospective colleagues have shared similar life experiences, such as pregnancy and motherhood. While some women do continue to be drawn towards political careers "the old boys' club" attitude that pervades PMQs and Parliament in general, with women being told to 'calm down dear' makes such a career path look fraught with risk.

Comments like Cameron's exhibit the kind of sexist, dismissive attitude that would be more at home in a different era, but sadly seems all-too-often to be alive and well. When a comment like that is met with a booming volley of laughter rather than a gasp of horror, it is little wonder that there are nowhere near enough women pushing to get through the door.

We need to create an atmosphere where the UK's top decision-making body makes decisions for the whole country, rather than systematically excluding 50% of it. Unsurprisingly, when a group is insufficiently represented (be it a certain gender, sexuality, ethnicity etc) those pieces of legislation which are aimed at supporting those groups all too often fail. As a result, said groups become further disenfranchised, and the group in power maintains their influence. Beyond a philosophical and moral preference for equality and equal representation, opening up the political sphere to a larger number of people is going to increase the quality of the politician. Greater competition means better candidates – but only when it's a fair game. Otherwise, those with an unfair advantage glide to victory, not the best.

This is what 50:50 Parliament – a campaign begun at the end of 2014 in the build up to the next general election in response to the shocking absence of women in Parliament – seeks to achieve. It is a campaign that does not simply seek to pliantly wait for equality while allowing the injustice of representation to occur whilst we wait around for a slow transferral of power. At the current pace of change, Parliament will be gender representative in around [150 years](#). If you don't want sit and wait either, [sign the petition](#), speak out when women aren't heard and don't stand for casual sexism that belittles women into feeling powerless and unsuited for politics. 150 years is too long a wait.

50:50 Parliament is an on-line Petition, asking Party Leaders to have a serious debate about gender inequality in the House of Commons and to come up with solutions to this historic problem. Please take action and sign [here](#). Please share our apolitical aspiration at www.5050Parliament.co.uk.

Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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