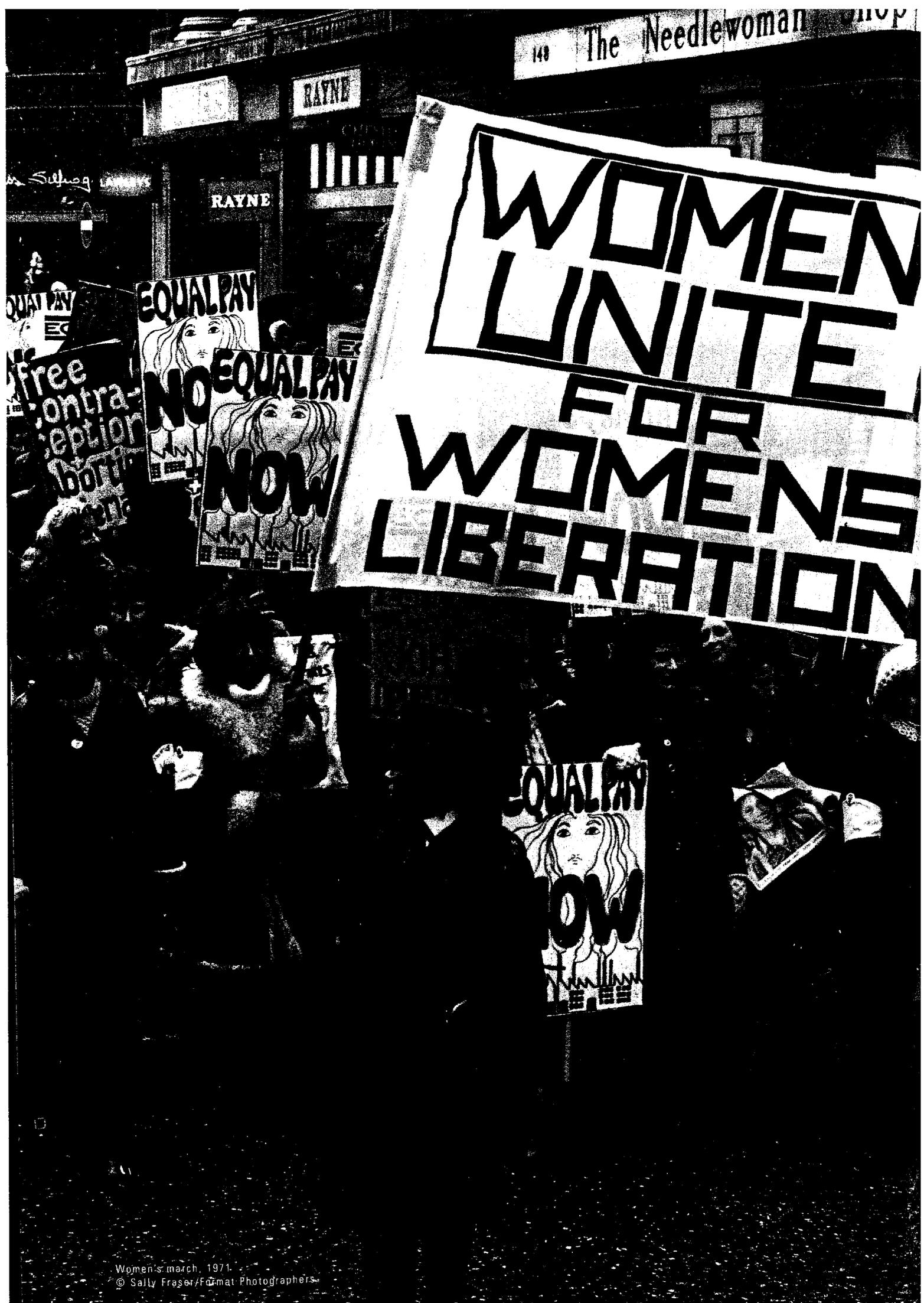


W o m e n ' s   p o l i t i c a l  
p a r t i c i p a t i o n   i n   t h e   U K



140 The Needlewoman Shop

RAYNE

RAYNE

EQUAL PAY

NO EQUAL PAY

NOW

WOMEN UNITE FOR WOMENS LIBERATION

Free Contraception Abortion

EQUAL PAY

NOW

Women's march, 1971.  
© Sally Fraser/Format Photographers

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## Summary

Women have traditionally been under-represented in UK political institutions. Although women won the right to vote in 1918 they remained fewer than one in ten members of parliament until 1997.

Since 1997 significant improvements have been made. The number of women in parliament has roughly doubled, and new institutions have been established with high proportions of women members. These new institutions have also set out to operate in different ways, using new policy-making processes which are more inclusive of women and their concerns. Political parties are making greater efforts to ensure that women are represented, and in one part of the UK a women's party has been formed.

Although there remains a long way to go, the UK provides a useful case study of a country in transition. Women's representation is increasing and a new political culture may be developing. There is much debate currently about the difference that women representatives will make.

The UK is also a case study of some of the obstacles preventing greater women's representation, and how they may be overcome. Long traditions, and the design of political institutions, mean that the barriers to women's participation have been particularly high. Recent changes have been helped by institutional reform, but have resulted primarily from 'positive action' adopted by political parties, following sustained campaigns by women activists. These positive action systems, which have rigidly required selection of women candidates, have been controversial. But they have proven to be effective, and their results in terms of women's representation have been widely welcomed.

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## C u r r e n t   d e v e l o p m e n t s   a n d   i s s u e s

In recent years the issue of women's representation and participation in politics has been a recurrent one in the UK. There has been a number of significant developments which have changed the landscape, and future controversies seem likely. The UK is in a period of transition, and provides many potentially interesting lessons for other political systems.

The first significant change was the election of 120 women MPs which came with Labour's landslide election victory in 1997. This doubled the number of women in parliament (although the number of women in the House of Commons was still fewer than one in five). In particular the election of 101 Labour women MPs was widely celebrated. Labour had tried hard to attract women voters, through its attitude to both representation and policy, and succeeded in closing the 'gender gap' in voting behaviour whereby women's votes have tended to favour the Conservatives.

Next came the establishment of new devolved institutions, as part of Labour's programme for government. A new parliament was established in Scotland, and assemblies were created in Wales and Northern Ireland. These were areas of the UK where the level of women's representation at Westminster and in local government had historically been low. Yet in Scotland and Wales (though not in Northern Ireland) the proportion of women elected to the new institutions exceeded thirty-five per cent. This represented a clear break from Britain's record, with the levels of women's representation in the parliament and assembly closer to that seen in leading countries such as Norway and Sweden.

As well as increased representation, new structures have been put in place at both UK and devolved level to build women's perspectives into policy-making. Tony Blair honoured Labour's policy commitment to appoint a Minister for Women in the cabinet (although this minister also had other duties) and a new Women's Unit\* was created in the Cabinet Office. Government's mechanisms for consulting with women have been reformed, and there has been more attempt to seek the views of individual women. A policy of 'mainstreaming' gender equality through all of the government's work has been formally adopted.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland a different approach has been taken. Promotion of equal opportunities has been built into all the new institutions, but this has been through a general equalities approach which also considers, for example, race and disability issues. The Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly both have equalities committees which aim to ensure that these objectives are adhered to. Consultation is central to all of these arrangements, and there have been attempts to improve consultation with women. Considerable effort has also been made to ensure the culture of the new institutions is different from that at Westminster. One aspect of this has come through the proportional electoral systems, which give no party an overall majority. But the institutions have also adopted more 'normal' working hours, different legislative arrangements, and are attempting to be more transparent and open through the use of new technologies.

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\* At the time of going to press, the unit's title had been changed to Women and Equality Unit. All further references to the unit use the former title.



The conference of women parliamentarians, which began with an address by US Senator Hillary Clinton, in the Scottish Parliament building in Edinburgh © David Cheskin/The Press Association

The changes which have taken place raise a number of questions, and point to possible future developments. One difficulty concerns the means which political parties may use to boost women's representation. The improvements which have been made have been largely because of 'positive action' mechanisms used by the parties to guarantee seats for women. However, there have been legal challenges to these measures on the basis that they are discriminatory against men. The most effective measure used for elections to Westminster (all-women shortlists) has been ruled unlawful. Despite the hopes that a 'critical mass' of women at Westminster had been reached in 1997, and that the number of women MPs would continue to rise, numbers fell at the 2001 general election for the first time in more than twenty years. The political parties, for fear of legal challenge, had not put effective positive action

mechanisms in place. In autumn 2000 the Labour Party started to say that it was prepared to change the law to enable positive action to be used, and there is now a commitment from government to do this. Such a change could prove to be highly significant.

Another controversy has arisen over the difference which women representatives have made. The new women MPs in particular have been criticised by the media for not making a sufficient impact on the culture of politics and the government's policies. These allegations are hotly contested by the women themselves. One disappointment has been the lack of change to the adversarial nature of Westminster politics and the sitting hours of the House of Commons, where MPs are frequently detained until the early hours of the morning. Now that this pattern has been rejected by the new

devolved institutions there are possibilities that new methods will be imported in the coming years. However, the media, long immersed in the Westminster culture themselves, have been somewhat critical of the new institutions' working practices.

Media attention has also focused on the work of the Ministers for Women. The first Minister for Women came under criticism when she, in her role as Social Security Secretary, cut welfare benefits to single parents. The news that her deputy was not being paid a ministerial salary attracted criticism for creating the impression that women could be relied on to work for lower wages than men. Both ministers were replaced at the first cabinet reshuffle. The new Minister for Women, Margaret Jay, quickly sparked controversy by saying that she was not a feminist. The work of the Women's Unit has also been criticised, with some alleging that it is incorrect to focus on women when men can also be disadvantaged – for example, boys have been shown to underperform in school. There were therefore suggestions that the Women's Unit would be closed down after the general election

and replaced by a more general equalities unit, though in practice this did not happen. Women's organisations argued strongly that there was still a need for a unit dedicated to promoting gender equality. Women continue to suffer multiple disadvantages including being lower paid, taking most of the family caring responsibilities, being more likely to be poor in old age and remaining under-represented in senior jobs and in public life.

Changing the Women's Unit into a more general equalities unit would have brought the UK government into line with the arrangements in the devolved institutions. There have been some criticisms – particularly in Northern Ireland – that these arrangements result in women's concerns being subordinated to other issues such as race or religion. It is really too early to judge how these arrangements are working as the institutions are so new and their elected members are still adjusting to their roles. However, the creation of new levels of government in the UK offers many opportunities for policy-learning between institutions, and it seems likely that new developments will continue for some time to come.

A suffragette is led away by police, 1914  
© The Press Association

## B a c k g r o u n d : w o m e n ' s h i s t o r i c a l u n d e r - r e p r e s e n t a t i o n

Joni Lovenduski

Since 1990 the United Nations has accepted that the minimum proportion of women representatives necessary for a legislature to be representative of women is thirty per cent. Thirty per cent is considered to be the 'critical mass' of women in a decision-making institution if their presence is both to make a difference to its outputs, practices and culture and ensure that the representation of women is normalised and will continue.

At national level, in 1990, only four Western European countries had such a critical mass and the UK was not among them. By 2000 a further three Western European countries passed the thirty per cent threshold. The UK was still not among them. However, at sub-national level, the newly established Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were set up with at least a critical mass of women members. In the UK Parliament and the

Northern Ireland Assembly, among the UK contingent in the European Parliament and on most local authorities, there is still not a critical mass of women. This mixed pattern is comparatively common; it suggests a system in transition, one in which change will continue. Most observers believe that this is the case in the UK.

To assess that prediction it is necessary to consider the sources and dynamics of the changes that have already taken place. In this chapter we seek to consider why women's representation in UK political institutions has been low until recent years, and why this matters. In doing so we examine some of the features of these institutions and the factors influencing the selection of women candidates.



Edward Heath with thirteen of the fifteen newly elected Conservative women MPs outside the House of Commons, June 1970  
© Hulton Archive

## Political representation

The political representation of a group is most commonly understood as the presence of members of the group in the formal institutions of politics. The theory, at its simplest, is that representatives act for the groups they represent. However, in the UK, as elsewhere, most representatives act for many different groups and most also attempt to transcend group interests to act for the nation or community that the institution serves. For example, a woman MP will act for her political party, her constituency, her region, her nation and her race. She will also seek to balance different viewpoints within an overall understanding of the 'national' interest. The multi-dimensional nature of representation complicates arguments for women's representation.

It is only feminist advocates who have given first priority to sex equality in political representation. Such advocates draw on the principles of democratic representation and intervene in party politics to make claims for equality between men and women. When women struggled to win the right to vote they imagined that with it would come women's representation – an expectation that was not met. Until 1997 UK women were less than ten per cent of members of the House of Commons (MPs), and until 1983 were fewer than five per cent of MPs. The pattern of under-representation persisted despite women's growing achievements in education, work and other areas of public life and despite growing numbers of qualified women seeking political office. Inevitably UK women began to mobilise to seek political equality. By the end of the 1970s equality of representation was part of the women's agenda. By the end of the 1980s a widespread movement for political equality had emerged. By the end of the 1990s such demands appeared to be inescapable as growing numbers of women entered active politics. As well as pressure from feminist advocates, activity in support of equality of women's representation was also supported by international actors: the United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe.

But why is equality of women's representation important? At the heart of this question is the issue of whether women need women to represent them. Until fairly recently it was thought that women were perfectly adequately represented by male heads of household and the notion that women had different interests from their families was controversial. However, as social patterns have changed it has become easier to agree that women have rights as citizens that entitle them to participation in government. This 'claim of right' has been an important feature of women's mobilisation in the UK. It is supported by three other important arguments – the justice, pragmatic and difference arguments.

The powerful *justice* argument states that it is unfair for men to monopolise representation. But use of the justice argument invites competition with other groups such as ethnic minorities or disabled people who also claim equality. The *pragmatic* argument contends that women have experiences and interests that political parties must address by supporting more women politicians if they are to achieve and maintain power (and, in particular, to win women's votes). The *difference* argument contends that bringing more women into elected office will change the nature of public institutions. In other words, that women will change politics for the better.

Such arguments are common to a number of countries. However, because they are made in varying political circumstances, they take on different forms and emphases, and particularly reflect different arrangements for political representation. Pragmatic and justice issues are intertwined, most apparent in the interplay of party, electoral and institutional structures. Difference issues are in play throughout the system but most visible in legislative assemblies.

## UK representative institutions and the party system

The United Kingdom is a 'unitary' state, but it consists of three nations – England, Scotland and Wales – and the province of Northern Ireland. Representation is built into the political system so that most of the principal decision-making positions are filled either *directly* or *indirectly* through a system of electoral competition. Until 1997 the form of election to the UK's institutions was fairly *uniform*, but significant constitutional changes introduced by the Labour government mean that this is no longer the case.

The central institution of the state is the UK Parliament at Westminster, comprising two chambers: the House of Commons and House of Lords. The leader of the majority party in the elected House of Commons becomes Prime Minister and forms a cabinet government from their party. The cabinet makes major decisions; the details are worked out in the civil service where legislation and other policy documents are drafted.

The upper chamber, the House of Lords, has until recently been formed from a majority of hereditary peers and a minority of appointed or 'life' peers. This system has recently been changed to a largely appointed house and may be further reformed to include some element of election.

For the purposes of election to the House of Commons the country is divided into roughly equal constituencies based on population. Each constituency then elects one Member of Parliament. In this single-member constituency system (commonly known as 'first past the post') the winning candidate is the one who gains the greatest number of votes in the locality. This means that the proportion of seats a party wins in the House of Commons is not necessarily proportional to the number of votes it wins nationally, since the chamber instead consists of those members who have won individual local contests. In the UK system of local government, councillors are elected using a similar system and, until 1999, the same system was used for election of the UK's contingent in the European Parliament.



A policeman watching Mrs Blann carrying her son, as she goes to vote at the North Croydon by-election, 1948  
© Hulton Archive

The 1997 government changed the system of voting for the European elections to a more proportional system, and has discussed changing the system for the House of Commons. More importantly, since 1997 the government has established a series of devolved institutions, most notably in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In these historically distinct areas new elected assemblies now have responsibility for implementation of a wide range of policy areas. Each institution is elected by a more proportional mechanism than that used at Westminster. The Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly use an 'additional member system', whereby some members are elected for local constituencies and others from regional party lists which are used to ensure proportionality. In Northern Ireland the 'single transferable vote' system is used, with larger constituencies each represented by several members. These institutions have brought a new style to UK politics, not just because the national parliament has handed over responsibility for some policy areas, but also because the executives in all

three institutions are formed by a coalition of parties since no one party holds a majority of seats.

Political representation in all the UK's institutions is channelled through a party system, with almost all elected representatives having been nominated by one of the major political parties. The UK has typically been thought to be a two-party system, reflecting social divisions. In fact there have always been many more than two parties, but the electoral system for the House of Commons has worked to marginalise 'third parties' at Westminster. In the early part of the twentieth century the Labour Party attracted the majority of working class votes and the Conservative Party won the support of most of the middle classes. Often class and territorial divisions reinforced each other, hence Conservatives gained most of their support in the south of the country while Labour was strongest in the north of England, Scotland and Wales. Throughout the twentieth century there was always a centre party which, with the growth of the Labour Party, gained fewer votes. This party is now called

Table 1: Main parties in the UK party system

<p><b>Britain-wide parties (England, Scotland and Wales only)</b>            Labour Party – centre left party            Conservative Party – centre right party            Liberal Democrat – centre party            Green Party (not represented in House of Commons)            UK Independence Party (UKIP) – anti-European (not represented in House of Commons)</p>
<p><b>Scottish parties</b>            Scottish National Party (SNP)</p>
<p><b>Welsh parties</b>            Plaid Cymru – Welsh nationalist party</p>
<p><b>Northern Irish parties</b>            Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)            Progressive Unionist Party (PUP)            UK Unionist Party (UKU)            Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)            Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)            Sinn Fein            Alliance Party            Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC)</p>

the Liberal Democrats. In the 1960s nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, which sought greater autonomy for these parts of the UK, began to win seats in the UK Parliament. These parties are now strongly represented in the devolved assemblies.

Religious effects, the legacy of partition and chronic civil strife generated a different set of political parties in Northern Ireland. Politics is dominated by a collection of parties that identify themselves as being on one or other side of a historic sectarian divide. There are several 'unionist' parties, winning most of their support from Protestants, who wish Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, and two main parties largely supported by Catholics (the nationalist SDLP and republican Sinn Fein) who would prefer Northern Ireland to be joined to the rest of Ireland. There are also some small 'cross-community' parties, including a new women's party which is described in the next chapter.

## Political recruitment

In theory this system allows for equality of women's representation. But in practice it has often been unwelcoming to women who remain under-represented in political institutions. So why are women under-represented? It is useful to understand this pattern of under-representation in terms of demand and supply. The process of political recruitment is analogous to a market in which the *supply* of candidates consists of those who come forward to be nominated by their political parties and *demand* is determined by the characteristics that political parties seek in their candidates. Both the *supply* of and *demand* for women politicians are affected by various barriers and obstacles. The most significant barriers are constitutional/systemic, political and social.



Prime Minister Tony Blair meets with his cabinet in Downing Street, Westminster, central London  
© Sean Dempsey/The Press Association

#### Constitutional obstacles

In constitutional terms UK institutions have traditionally had a high threshold of representation compared to other representative democracies. The Westminster system of single-member constituencies is known to be associated with low levels of women's representation. In the UK individual local parties are responsible for picking their candidates, so there is not necessarily an overview taken by the party of the number of men and women selected. Likewise, individual electors are only presented with one candidate from each party and cannot easily judge a party on the basis of its record of selecting women.

Women are typically better represented in proportional electoral systems. The existence of party lists provides an incentive for parties to nominate a balanced slate of candidates. Such electoral systems are also likely to lead to coalition governments in which victories are won at the margins, thus sharpening competition for votes and increasing incentives for parties to compete for women's support.

This obstacle, therefore, has always applied to the House of Commons, and to UK local government. The creation of new assemblies with different electoral systems breaks down some of the barriers (although the majority of candidates in these assemblies still represent single-member constituencies). The fact that representation of women among party candidates becomes more explicit in such systems, along with added electoral competition between parties, potentially boosts the demand for women candidates. If women see that the barriers are reduced, more women may put themselves forward, so boosting supply.

#### Political obstacles

The combination of the electoral system with party government greatly reduces the options available to those seeking political office. Voters make choices between parties and rarely decide their vote on the basis of individuals. Thus, in practice, the only channel of entry to elected office is through one of the political parties that can secure seats.

UK political parties are notoriously inhospitable to women. The majority of individuals in positions of power within parties have been, and remain, men and culturally these organisations have tended to be excessively masculine. Candidate selection processes have been devised with men in mind, and have been especially difficult for women to negotiate. When local parties select their candidates for public office, maleness appears to be an implicit qualification. Party characteristics and procedures therefore distort both the supply of women coming forward and also the demand for women among selectors. The positive action measures adopted during the 1990s and described in the next chapter were necessary correctives to that distortion.

It is the Westminster system with its high threshold of representation that is least hospitable to women. Those who campaigned to equalise women's and men's representation in the 1970s faced this system. Labour and Conservative parties dominate the House of Commons, hence Labour and Conservative parties are responsible for the low levels of women's representation there. Those seeking to improve women's representation were required to deal with a well-established system where political parties prioritised other social divisions which characterised the lives of both women and men (such as class, race, ethnicity, locality, physical ability, age and sexuality). Such social divisions are always present and come into play whenever a group claims the right to be represented.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the party system in an analysis of women's political representation. But the high threshold of representation at Westminster discouraged the formation of a women's party. Women's advocates therefore had to campaign inside the parties to secure equal representation. The new constitutional arrangements have changed this situation. The new institutions created new vacancies, with lower electoral thresholds and greater party competition. The political parties continue to control

nominations, but the more proportional electoral systems make it easier for smaller parties to compete. This increased the demand for women candidates in Scotland and Wales and the established parties have begun to select more women. In Northern Ireland, where this has not happened, a women's organisation (the Northern Ireland Women's' Coalition) has achieved representation for its candidates.

#### Social obstacles

Women experience three main social obstacles to becoming politicians. First, they have fewer of the resources needed to enter politics. Women are poorer than men and are less likely to be employed

in occupations that are supportive of political activism. Second, various lifestyle constraints mean women have less time for politics. Family and other caring responsibilities are typically undertaken by women, reducing the time available for other activities. Third, the men who established them have evolved the political style in UK parties and elected assemblies. This style is particularly adversarial, reflecting traditional male preferences. It acts to exclude all outsiders, making them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. It especially excludes women. Such constraints affect supply, inhibiting women who might otherwise come forward. Fewer women than men have tried to become elected politicians in the UK.



Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott speaking during Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons  
© The Press Association

## Women's mobilisation and political action

Women have long shared equal membership rights with men in the UK political parties. The integration of women into party membership came as a result of women winning the right to vote in 1918.

Table 2 shows the proportion of women members in the main political parties. This demonstrates that women continue to make up a minority of members of the three major UK-wide parties. Surveys suggest that women's representation in some of the smaller Northern Irish parties, and Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties is higher, but these figures may be less reliable. Party membership figures, however, do not tell the whole story. For example a study of the Labour Party in the early 1990s showed that while twenty-eight per cent of male members were very active, this was mirrored by only nineteen per cent of women members.<sup>1</sup> This obviously compounded the fact that women were already under-represented among the party's membership.

Women have sought to counter the male dominance of parties through creation of separate political associations either within the parties or allied to

them. The Primrose League, an organisation associated with the Conservative Party, became the first major UK political organisation to admit women in 1883. The Women's Labour League was formed in 1906. These women's organisations were fully integrated in 1918, although in the Conservative Party men's and women's branches continued to meet separately until 1945. Today, all the main parties retain women's organisations, with most having some form of women's national committee, holding annual conferences for women members, and having a network of local women's organisations in the constituencies. These organisations may be used by women to debate policy issues of particular interest, to network and campaign with women in the community, or to offer support to women members seeking elected office. In all the parties, women's organisations have been vocal in pressing for improved women's representation in public life.

Women's relationships with the parties have developed in diverse ways. While women were traditionally under-represented inside the Labour Party, they were long the bedrock of both Conservative Party membership and electoral support. This phenomenon can be traced back to the Primrose League and the party's strong association with 'family values'.<sup>2,3</sup> However,

Table 2: Women's membership of political parties

Party	Year	% women members
Labour	2000	40
Conservative	1992	49
Liberal Democrat	1997	45
Scottish National Party	1996	48
Plaid Cymru	1995	50
UUP	1996	42
SDLP	1996	47
Sinn Fein	1996	33
DUP	1996	60
Alliance	1996	50

Source: Labour Party; Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson (1994); Seyd and Whiteley (2002); SNP; Plaid Cymru; Galligan, Ward and Wilford (1999).

Conservative women today are poorly represented in public office. Originally the Conservatives were the first party to adopt an internal 'quota' system to guarantee women's representation. From 1927 this specified that local constituencies must send at least one woman delegate to the party's annual conference, out of their delegation of four. In this same year, women made up thirty-six per cent of conference delegates, and have continued to be well represented to this day.<sup>4</sup> However, the Conservatives have since developed a hostility to quota systems and no such mechanisms are now in place at any level of the party.

In the 1980s and 1990s it was the Labour Party that embraced quotas. The party was increasingly concerned about its lack of political support among women, who saw it as overly masculine. The party was also influenced by feminist members who demanded radical action to change its culture. Quotas were therefore introduced by the party conference in 1989 as a means of improving women's representation throughout its internal structures. For example, at local branch level there are four officer positions – chair, vice-chair, secretary and treasurer – and the new rules required that at least two of these posts must be held by women. If suitable women could not be found the positions were to be left vacant. Similar arrangements were introduced at constituency and regional level, while the number of women on the National Executive was to be gradually increased. In an echo of the Conservative Party's previous policy, quotas were also imposed on constituency and trade union delegations to the annual conference. These changes have had remarkable effects. Whereas a survey in the 1970s estimated that eighty-six per cent of Labour Party conference delegates were men, recent conferences have included more female than male delegates. Likewise the National Executive now includes more women than men. At local level there was little difficulty (as some had predicted) in getting women to fill positions, and the make-up of the party has thus significantly changed since the early 1990s.

As demonstrated in the next chapter, the adoption of quotas by the Labour Party was influential in improving women's representation in elected office. Initially these quotas did not apply to the selection process for members seeking to become, for example, MPs or councillors. But continuing demands for action, coupled by the presence of more women activists in the party, gradually resulted in change. In other parties internal change has been slower. For example Sinn Fein and the SDLP in Northern Ireland both have a quota of forty per cent women for their executives. These limited systems have not changed party culture sufficiently to result in a breakthrough in women's representation in elected office, as has happened in the Labour Party.

By the early 1990s there was thus considerable pressure for women's representation in elected office to be improved. Women's organisations in all the parties had long called for this to happen. However, decades of their support for women, through measures such as training and confidence building, had not reaped visible results. These initiatives had successfully increased the supply of potential women candidates, but parties continued to select men. As the next chapter describes, women's mobilisation in some parties led to adoption of measures which would *require* selectors to pick women, so forcing demand to increase. Combined with the establishment of new institutions, this finally accelerated the feminisation of British politics. In some of the new institutions it is likely that the critical mass of women members, and the institutional changes that have accompanied their entry, will drive a strong and perhaps irreversible trend toward equality of women's representation. However at Westminster, and in Northern Ireland, critical mass has yet to be reached.



Left to right: Tessa Jowell, Patricia Hewitt and Barbara Follett chair a debate  
at the Labour Party Conference, 2000 © Chris Ison/The Press Assoc

## W o m e n ' s   r e p r e s e n t a t i o n i n   e l e c t e d   o f f i c e   t o d a y

Meg Russell

Women's representation in political office has increased substantially in many of Britain's institutions in recent years, although this pattern of representation remains uneven. Where progress has been made this has been far from accidental. It has been the result of a sustained campaign by women inside and outside political parties, culminating in the adoption by political parties of various 'positive action' measures ('quotas') to guarantee women's selection as candidates. Where this form of action has not been taken, women's representation remains low.

A complex range of factors has led to the dramatic developments of recent years. It is worth examining and seeking to understand these factors, in order to see how change may develop in the future in the UK and overseas. In this chapter we examine women's numerical representation in different democratic forums and discuss how and why the recent changes have come about.

*Note:* In Tables 3 to 11, most of those elected are representatives of political parties. Party names are given in Table 1.

### UK Parliament

Women were first legally entitled to sit in the House of Commons when they won the vote, in 1918. The first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons was Nancy Astor (Conservative) in 1919. Since then there has been a slow and faltering increase in the number of women MPs, with significant increases only occurring in the last three general elections.

The figures for women's representation in the House of Commons since 1945 are given in Table 3. This shows that there have been dramatic increases in recent years, particularly in 1997. However, despite this increase women still remain fewer than one in five MPs in the UK. This leaves the country ranking thirty-third in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's table of women in national parliaments – considerably behind countries such as Sweden (forty-three per cent), Denmark (thirty-seven per cent), the Netherlands (thirty-six per cent), New Zealand (thirty-one per cent), South Africa (thirty per cent) or Argentina (twenty-six per cent).

Table 4 breaks down the current membership of both parliamentary chambers in more detail by political party. In the upper chamber, the House of Lords, women's representation has been historically lower. Until 1958 the chamber was composed almost entirely of hereditary peers, who had inherited their titles, and all of whom were men. Only in 1958, when a new class of appointed 'life peer' was added, were women entitled to join the House. In 1963 women hereditary peers were admitted, although the majority of these peers were still men, as titles passed mostly through the male line. In 1999 the government removed the right of most hereditary peers to sit in the chamber, leaving a chamber which is largely appointed. This resulted in a doubling of the proportion of women in the chamber, from 8.4 per cent to 16.7 per cent. However, the proportion of women remains lower than that in the House of Commons, and the majority of appointments continue to be given to men.

### Explaining the changes

Throughout the last decades, all the major political parties have made efforts to improve women's representation in elected office. However, as Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate, it is the Labour Party which has had the greatest success. In 1992 and 1997 in particular, the sizeable increase in the number of women in the House of Commons was largely due to the large increase in the number of Labour women MPs. In these same years the number of Conservative and Liberal Democrat women stayed

relatively stable. There is also an important territorial dimension, reflecting the different cultures throughout the UK. In particular it is notable that for thirty years from 1970 none of the Northern Irish parties had any women representatives at all (although three women were added in 2001). Women's representation also remains considerably poorer in Scotland (at fifteen per cent) and Wales (at ten per cent) than it is in England (at nineteen per cent).

Table 3: Women in the House of Commons 1945-97

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat*	Other	Total women	% total MPs
1945	1	21	1	1	23	3.8
1950	6	14	1	0	21	3.4
1951	6	11	0	0	17	2.7
1955	10	14	0	0	24	3.8
1959	12	13	0	0	25	4.0
1964	11	18	0	0	29	4.6
1966	7	19	0	0	26	4.1
1970	15	10	0	1	26	4.1
1974 (February)	9	13	0	1	23	3.6
1974 (October)	7	18	0	2	27	4.3
1979	8	11	0	0	19	3.0
1983	13	10	0	0	23	3.5
1987	17	21	2	1	41	6.3
1992	20	37	2	1	60	9.2
1997	13	101	3	3	120	18.2
2001	14	95	5	4	118	17.9

\*Liberal Democrats, Liberals or other centre party.

Source: Norris and Lovenduski 1993, updated with recent figures.

Table 4: Women's representation in both Houses of Parliament

Party	House of Commons (June 2001)				House of Lords (February 2001)			
	Men	Women	Total	% women	Men	Women	Total	% women
Labour	316	95	413	23.0	156	43	199	21.6
Conservative	152	14	166	8.4	196	33	229	14.4
Liberal Democrat	47	5	52	9.6	48	14	62	22.6
JUP	5	1	6	16.7	0	0	0	–
SNP	4	1	5	20.0	0	0	0	–
Plaid Cymru	4	0	4	0.0	0	0	0	–
SDLP	4	0	4	0.0	0	0	0	–
DUP	4	1	5	20.0	0	0	0	–
Sinn Fein	3	1	4	25.0	0	0	0	–
Speaker	1	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	–
Independent/other*	1	0	1	0.0	178	19	197	9.6
Total	541	118	659	18.2	576	111	687	16.7

\* In the House of Lords the large 'crossbench' group is comprised largely of independents, but also includes some members affiliated to the minor parties, which are not formally recognised in the House.

Until 1997 none of the efforts made by the parties brought about a significant breakthrough. Despite the existence of women's organisations within the parties, encouragement and training for women and stated objectives by parties to increase women's representation, local parties continued to select men. The Labour Party did the most to promote women but, until 1997, progress was relatively slow. Labour applied quotas for women in local, regional and national party office from 1990 onwards, but these stopped short of requiring women to be selected for public offices such as councillor or MP. Instead it was hoped that internal party reform, and improved training for women, would deliver the required increases. In 1988 a group of women members formed the Labour Women's Network, which sought to provide

women with training and information to help them win selection as parliamentary candidates. The first 'positive action' rule for candidate selection was adopted in 1988. This required that the shortlist drawn up by each constituency party when selecting its parliamentary candidate must include at least one woman. However, while these measures resulted in an increase in the number of well-qualified women seeking selection, most of these women did not go on to be chosen. In 1992 the number of Labour women elected was only thirty-seven (representing fourteen per cent of Labour MPs). Although the proportion of women Conservative MPs – at six per cent – was far lower, this fell short of Labour's desired objective and meant the party's image was still overwhelmingly male.

The most important development over this period was the Labour Party's adoption of a more radical positive action system of 'all women shortlists' for the 1997 election. This helped cause the dramatic increase from thirty-seven to 101 Labour women MPs (the adoption and operation of this policy is shown in the box on page 21). At the same time, the number of women representing other parties in parliament dropped. This was partly as a result of the Conservatives losing seats, and partly because the Liberal Democrats, who more than doubled their number of MPs, had selected very few women. Neither of these parties had used any kind of positive action system.

At the 2001 election the number of women MPs decreased, for the first time since 1979. The simple explanation for this was that no party used an effective positive action system. One reason is that parties were concerned that strict quota systems could run into the same legal difficulties which had affected all-women shortlists (see box). The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats did not adopt quotas, despite their poor records and pressure from some activists. For example, after the 1997 election the new Conservative Party leader, William Hague, proposed there should be a twenty-five per

cent quota for selection of parliamentary candidates. However, this was rejected by members of his party. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats tried various systems such as training for women, training for activists in equal opportunities selection, and 'shadowing' or 'mentoring' schemes for women prospective candidates with existing women MPs. However, progress was poor, with the number of Conservative women MPs remaining unchanged after the election and the number of Liberal Democrat women MPs increasing by only one. In the Labour Party the same level of hostility to quota systems did not exist; however the use of all-women shortlists had been ruled out. The party also hoped that its twenty-four per cent women MPs would be a 'critical mass' and that party members would now select women without the level of coercion used in 1997. Local parties were required to draw up shortlists that were 50/50 male/female. However, this had little effect and most retiring Labour MPs were replaced by men, resulting in a drop in the number of Labour women. Following this disappointment, positive action is back on the agenda in all the political parties, and likely to be adopted again for the next elections in 2005-06.



Prime Minister Tony Blair surrounded by his 101 women MPs at Westminster, 7 May 1997  
© Michael Crabtree/The Press Association

## All-women shortlists in the Labour Party

Following electoral defeat in 1992, the Labour Party decided to adopt a rigid policy to ensure that women's representation was improved among its MPs. This policy was agreed by the party's 1993 annual conference, and was in use until 1996.

A number of factors influenced this decision, including:

### *Pressure from feminist activists within the party*

During the 1980s, many feminists became active in the party, and new women's organisations were created with radical agendas.

### *The success of quotas in other socialist parties worldwide*

These women pointed to the success of quotas in improving women's parliamentary representation in countries such as Norway, Sweden and South Africa. The Labour Party is a member of the Socialist International, which comprises socialist and social democratic parties worldwide. Many of its 'sister' parties had adopted quotas. In the 1980s the Socialist International Women became very active in promoting the use of quotas among member parties, and this influenced some Labour women. (It was, however, more difficult to design a mechanism suitable for the UK, due to the single-member constituency system.)

### *Electoral factors*

The change which most influenced the leadership of the party was the desire to win women's votes. Many had thought the party would win the 1992 election. Polling showed that if women had voted Labour in the same proportion as men, Labour, rather than the Conservatives, would have formed the government. Research also showed that Labour was seen as the most male-dominated of the parties, despite the fact that it actually had more women MPs than the Conservatives. Women in the party argued that radical action was necessary in order to select more women candidates, change the party's image, and thus win votes. This argument was influential.

### *The growing influence of women in the party*

Changes in the labour market in the 1980s, with a move from manufacturing to services and full-time to part-time work, led the trade unions to want to target women in the workplace. The unions, which were affiliated to the Labour Party, thus reformed their internal structures and some introduced quotas on their decision-making bodies. This example, and other pressures, led to the party's adoption of internal quotas for women (see chapter 2). Once quotas were in use for the party's internal organisation it became easier to achieve changes in selection procedures. When the time came to make the decision, there were more women on the party's National Executive Committee and half the constituency delegates to the annual conference were women. Women also held half the officer positions in local parties which were required to implement the change. This entire package of reform, as well as the party's electoral difficulties, were probably necessary for delivering the change.

*continued . . .*

The mechanism adopted by the party worked in the following way. In half the seats where Labour MPs would retire in 1997, and half the seats the party hoped to win from other parties, local members would be required to select their candidate from an all-women shortlist. (The other half of these seats, and seats which were not 'winnable' would be open to both women and men.) The all-women shortlist seats were decided on a regional basis, at meetings attended by constituency representatives. Where possible the decision about where all-women shortlists were to be used would be reached by consensus.

This policy was highly successful. In total thirty-five women were selected by constituencies from all-women shortlists. Partly due to Labour's 'landslide' victory, a further twenty-five women who were selected through the usual process and five through the intervention of the national party) also went on to win seats in 1997. In total, sixty-five new women Labour MPs were elected, bringing the party's total of women in parliament to a historic 101.

The all-women shortlist policy was not, however, universally popular. Although it was passed by the party's annual conference, the vote was close, and the policy retained many opponents. It was also deeply controversial in the media, with sections of the right-wing press regularly attacking the policy and encouraging dissent.

In 1995, two male party members took the Labour Party to court, claiming that the process was discriminatory. They argued that they had been excluded from seeking selection in certain constituencies purely on the basis of their gender, and that this was contrary to the Sex Discrimination Act (an Act passed in 1975, primarily to protect women from discrimination in the labour market, but which could also be used to protect men). There was an explicit exclusion in the Act for political parties, which allowed them to operate their traditional women's organisations. Labour argued that this protected them against challenges to the candidate selection procedure. However, the court found against the party, and in January 1996 ruled that the exclusion of men from certain selection contests was unlawful, on the basis that selection of candidates was covered by the employment provisions of the Act, rather than the exemption for political parties.

This caused a great deal of controversy. The Labour Party dropped all-women shortlists after the ruling (which actually made little impact since most candidates had already been selected). No formal appeal was made, although a later ruling in the Employment Appeal Tribunal in 1999 effectively confirmed the decision. All-women shortlists are thus currently unlawful. The government is, however, now committed to changing the law to bring the UK into line with other countries in Europe - where candidate selection is considered as a political or constitutional matter, rather than an employment matter. In the meantime, legal uncertainties have meant that positive action to promote women's representation has not been as widespread as it might otherwise have been.

## Local government

Women remain significantly under-represented in local government, although the proportion of women councillors is higher than the proportion of women MPs. The figures are shown in Table 5.

As in the House of Commons, there are particularly low numbers of women representatives in Scotland, Wales and – above all – Northern Ireland. To date, no positive action measures have been used by the parties to encourage women to stand for local office. Positions as local councillor are generally less hard fought for than other elected positions and parties sometimes find it difficult to find enough people who want to stand for office. However, the relatively low number of women councillors has knock-on effects throughout the system, as a councillor is often assumed to be holding other office as well, such as being an MP.

## The devolved assemblies

After Labour won power in 1997, legislation was enacted to create devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Creation of a Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were long-standing Labour policy commitments and were achieved in 1999. The establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998 was part of the Belfast Agreement, reached following all-party

peace talks in Northern Ireland. The high women's representation in the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales (though not in the Northern Ireland Assembly) has been very widely noted and celebrated, and is shown in Tables 6 to 8. This is all the more remarkable because of the traditionally low representation of women in elected office in these parts of the UK.

Why is women's representation so high in Scotland and Wales, and low in Northern Ireland?

It is the establishment of the new devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which has offered the greatest opportunity to increase women's representation in recent years. Because these were new institutions there were no incumbent candidates or established traditions, and there was thus an opportunity for women to seize. The design of the new institutions also offered an opportunity for women to be involved from the start in establishing bodies which would be hospitable to their needs.

Table 5: Numbers of men and women local councillors

	Year	Women	Men	Total	% women
England	1997	5,614	14,591	20,205	27.8
Scotland	1999	276	946	1,222	22.6
Wales	1997	259	1,013	1,272	20.4
Northern Ireland	2000	91	582	673	15.6

Source: Local Government Management Board; Scottish Local Government Information Unit; Association of Local Authorities in Northern Ireland.

Table 6: Women's representation in the Welsh Assembly, 1999 election

Party	Constituency seats		List seats		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Seats	% women
Labour	12	15	1	0	28	53.6
Conservative	1	0	8	0	9	0.0
Liberal Democrat	1	2	2	1	6	50.0
Plaid Cymru	8	1	4	4	17	29.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>38.3</b>

Source: Russell 2000.

Table 7: Women's representation in the Scottish Parliament, 1999 election

Party	Constituency seats		List seats		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Seats	% women
Labour	28	25	1	2	56	48.2
Conservative	0	0	15	3	18	16.7
Liberal Democrat	10	2	5	0	17	11.8
SNP	5	2	15	13	35	42.9
Green	0	0	1	0	1	0.0
Scottish Socialist	0	0	1	0	1	0.0
Independent	1	0	0	0	1	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>36.4</b>

Source: Russell 2000.

Table 8: Women's representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly, 1998 election

Party	Men	Women	Total	% women
UUP	26	2	28	7.1
SDLP	21	3	24	12.5
DUP	19	1	20	5.0
Sinn Fein	13	5	18	27.8
Alliance	5	1	6	16.7
Independent	3	0	3	0.0
NIWC	0	2	2	100.0
PUP	2	0	2	0.0
UKU	5	0	5	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>13.0</b>

Source: Northern Ireland Assembly web site.

## Planning the Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Parliament had been carefully planned for over a long period. Labour had proposed the establishment of a parliament in 1979, but a referendum on the subject had failed. Pressure grew during the 1980s from Scottish campaigners, and various bodies involving the political parties and civil society groups drew up proposals. In 1989 the Campaign for a Scottish Parliament published *A Claim of Right for Scotland*, and that same year a Constitutional Convention was established. The aspiration of Scots devolutionists was to create a 'new politics', closer to the people and with a different culture to that at Westminster. By 1990, when the first report of the Convention was published, pressure from women activists had led to the principle of equal representation for women in the Parliament being firmly established. This was reiterated by the publication of the *Woman's Claim of Right* in 1991 by a collection of women's groups, proposing an end to the 'pub culture' of politics. After considerable debate Labour and the Liberal Democrats signed an 'electoral agreement' in 1995, committing both parties to 'select and field an equal number of male and female candidates ... [and] ensure that these candidates are equally distributed with a view to the winnability of seats'.<sup>5</sup> The Consultative Steering Group, established by Labour after the 1997 election to advise on the design of the parliament, built on the earlier work and proposed an open and accessible parliament, embracing principles of wide consultation and equal opportunities.



Jack McConnell (*centre*) shakes hands with acting First Minister Jim Wallace after being voted in as First Minister for Scotland at the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh © David Cheskin/The Press Association

The Northern Ireland Assembly was established first, and in very different circumstances to the other assemblies. It resulted from peace talks in Northern Ireland, which has long been riven by sectarian conflict and violence. In this situation there are numerous reasons for women to find themselves excluded from public life. The machismo and militaristic rhetoric of Northern Irish politics, and its adversarial and divided nature, has been unattractive to many women. In addition gender differences 'tend to be perceived as a distraction by political parties determined to be perceived as unwavering adherents of their respective nationalist agendas'.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, women's representation in Northern Ireland is poor. From 1970 to 2001 none of its eighteen MPs was a woman, and it has the lowest proportion of women councillors in the UK. Previous Northern Irish assemblies also had poor women's representation. For example the seventy-eight-seat assembly of 1982-86 had only four women members (5.1 per cent).

There has, however, been support for change. Research in 1996 showed that sixty-two per cent of women and fifty per cent of men in Northern Ireland wanted more women representatives in national office. Forty-five per cent of women and

thirty-two per cent of men believed that 'things would improve if there were more women in politics'.<sup>7</sup> The elections to the peace talks and the subsequent assembly offered an opportunity for this change to take place, but the opportunity was not taken up. When it was agreed to hold the talks, and hold elections to select representatives, women in Northern Ireland feared that they would be excluded, as usual, from the process. Some women's groups proposed that the electoral process for the talks should be designed to ensure women's representation. However, this was not done. It was in these circumstances that the UK's only women's party, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (see box below) was formed. Initially the Coalition provided the only women's voices at the talks. They now represent two of the fourteen women members in the assembly. Despite their presence, the established parties have largely failed to take up the challenge of improving women's representation. When the elections to the Assembly were held in 1998, the largest party (the UUP) stood only four women candidates (8.3 per cent) and elected only two (7.1 per cent). The figures for the assembly are given in Table 8.

## Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was formed in 1996 in order to contest elections to the all-party peace talks. When no mechanism was adopted to ensure women's representation at the talks, women from the women's movement decided to organise themselves into a separate 'coalition' to contest the elections. The coalition was 'a determinedly cross-community organisation',<sup>8</sup> representing neither Catholic nor Protestant interests. Although it had been in existence for only a few weeks, the NIWC polled one per cent of the vote at the elections, making it one of the ten parties invited to the talks. At the start the two NIWC representatives were the only women around the talks table, apart from the UK government minister, Mo Mowlam. The NIWC was also one of only three parties which claimed 'cross community' support.

At the talks the NIWC argued for principles of inclusion, equality and human rights. It supported wide community involvement in governance and pressed for a 'civic forum' to sit alongside a new Northern Ireland Assembly. The Belfast Agreement, which came out of the talks and proposed the assembly, contained a commitment to 'the right of women to a full and equal political participation' and to 'the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity'. This is in part thanks to the work of the NIWC.

The NIWC went on to contest elections to the new assembly, and won two seats. It has also won council seats and contested (unsuccessfully) the 1997 and 2001 general elections. The coalition has raised women up the agenda in Northern Ireland, and put pressure on other parties to increase women's representation. However, its existence has not been uncontroversial, and it has come under attack from women in the established parties, especially when it has contested seats against these women.



Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition April 2001 – Monica McWilliams, leader of the Women's Coalition, with some of the party's candidates © Mirror Syndication International

The context for elections in Scotland and Wales was very different. The remarkable achievements in these elections were sparked initially by women in Scotland, who managed to influence the design of the institution from an early stage (see box on page 25). A particular victory was the electoral agreement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats committing both parties to selecting fifty per cent women in winnable seats.

This commitment was made before the legal ruling against all-women shortlists, and had created an expectation in Scotland. Following the ruling, the parties found it difficult to see how the pledge could be kept – there was considerable pressure not to use positive action, for fear of legal challenge. But it was also difficult to back out. By the time the referendum to create the parliament was held, the Labour women in Scotland had already devised a positive action system and lobbied the party to adopt it. They won the argument in their party for a number of reasons. First, women's representation would be symbolic of the 'new politics' which the party sought to create, and without quotas this was unlikely to be achieved. Second, Labour's National Executive Committee was now fifty per cent female, and there were also many supportive women ministers. Third, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition had been formed, and there were rumours in London that reneging on Labour's promise would result in a women's party being created in Scotland. For all of these reasons the policy was agreed.

So it was again Labour which took the most radical action in Scotland to ensure the selection of women to the new parliament. Although there was a proportional electoral system, with some candidates selected in constituencies and others from party lists, Labour knew that it was most likely to win seats in the constituencies. The party adopted a policy of 'twinning' constituencies for the purposes of selection, so that pairs of neighbouring seats each had to select one man and one woman. Women thus made up half of Labour's candidates, and went on to become forty-eight per cent of

Labour MSPs. Women Liberal Democrats were less successful. Despite the party's commitment to the electoral agreement, successive attempts to move a positive action system were voted down by its Scottish conference. Opponents of positive action argued that there was a danger the party would end up in court. But without a positive action system, just twelve per cent of Liberal Democrat members elected were women. The Conservatives also used no positive action system and have seventeed per cent women MSPs. The Scottish National Party on the other hand, which has a good record of women's representation at Westminster, selected a large number of women candidates. This was partially influenced by the need to compete with Labour, who had selected women in half of its seats, and made women's representation an important symbol of 'new politics'. The SNP won many seats on the lists and was able to use these to balance representation, resulting in forty-three per cent women MSPs (see Table 7).

In Wales, there was initially less pressure from women than there was in Scotland. The area had a poor record of women's representation in public life – only four of Wales' forty MPs are women (three of these resulting from all-women shortlist selections in 1997) and it also has a low proportion of women councillors in UK terms. But in creating the assembly, Labour again wanted to build something with a new culture, rather than a body which reflected the traditional elderly, male image of Welsh local government. The original Labour Party Wales proposal was for an assembly with two members – one woman and one man – representing each constituency. However, this proposal was dropped in favour of a smaller assembly elected by a proportional system. For a while it seemed that Labour would drop its commitment to equal representation, but the desire by the national party for a new culture (and the fear of ridicule by the other parties if it failed) resulted in moves to adopt twinning, on the Scottish model. This was narrowly agreed by the Welsh party under heavy pressure from central office. After this, there was pressure for other parties to follow suit.

Labour's twinning system achieved over fifty per cent female assembly members. The Welsh nationalist party, *Plaid Cymru*, which had never elected a single woman MP, was mounting a strong electoral challenge to Labour in the assembly. It adopted a mechanism to ensure that it, too, had a good share of women candidates. This decision was influenced by the presence of the deputy director of the Welsh Equal Opportunities Commission (Helen Mary Jones, now an assembly member) on the party's executive. The party used the proportional representation system to its advantage and adopted a rule that all lists would be headed by women, helping counter the fact that most constituencies had selected men. Its group is twenty-nine per cent female. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats used no formal positive action system. The former has no women members in the assembly, although the latter succeeded in electing three women assembly members out of six.

Once again, therefore, it can be seen that it was those parties that adopted positive action measures which were largely responsible for the good representation of women in the Scottish Parliament

and National Assembly for Wales. In contrast, in the Northern Ireland Assembly, no party has used such a mechanism and the action of the NIWC alone was not enough to secure a critical mass of women. The legal uncertainties following the all-women shortlists decision held the parties back to some extent. This gave some parties – notably the Liberal Democrats in Scotland – a justification for not taking action to guarantee seats for women. The Labour Party was threatened with legal action over its twinning policy, although this did not in the end materialise. The status in UK law of systems such as twinning which guarantee equal numbers of seats to women and men remains unclear.

### European Parliament

As well as electing members of UK domestic institutions, the UK also has representation alongside other countries in the European Parliament. The most recent elections to the parliament were held in 1999 and the proportion of women elected by political party for the UK is shown in Table 9. The figures for the previous election, in 1994, are also shown. This demonstrates that there has been a



First Secretary of the Welsh Assembly Alun Michael speaks to the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff, on the day of the first formal session of the recently elected Assembly © Barry Batchelor/The Press Association

notable increase in the number of UK women MEPs (Members of the European Parliament). Despite this, however, the UK still ranks only eleventh in terms of women's representation in the parliament, with the highest representation being enjoyed by Sweden, at fifty per cent.

Why did women's representation in Europe rise in 1999?

The main reason for the improvement in women's representation at the last European Parliament elections was the change in the electoral system, from one based on single-member constituencies to one based on regional party lists. This had two knock-on effects. First, the Liberal Democrats adopted an effective positive action mechanism for these elections. Second, other parties became more conscious of the need to field women candidates in each region.

The change to a more proportional electoral system resulted in the smaller parties gaining seats in 1999, mostly at the expense of Labour. The change thus offered an opportunity to increase the number of

women representatives, particularly among the smaller parties. The Liberal Democrats seized this opportunity, and introduced a policy of 'zipping', whereby the party alternated male and female names on each regional list. Liberal Democrat representation increased from two to ten MEPs, half of whom are women. The decision to introduce this mechanism was taken by the national party conference in 1997, and was influenced by the party's poor representation of women at the recent general election. Despite this improvement positive action has remained controversial within the party, as is shown the poor progress in the Scottish Parliament.

None of the other parties used a formal positive action system for these elections. However, the Labour Party also increased its representation from twenty-one per cent to thirty-eight per cent women MEPs. This was achieved by the central party allocating candidates to electoral lists and informally seeking to ensure gender balance. This was controversial at the time among some activists, who resented having the choice of candidates taken away from them.

Table 9: UK women's representation in the European Parliament

Party	1994 elections				1999 elections			
	Men	Women	Total	% women	Men	Women	Total	% women
Labour	49	13	62	21.0	18	11	29	37.9
Conservative	16	2	18	11.1	33	3	36	8.3
Liberal Democrat	2	0	2	0.0	5	5	10	50.0
UKIP	0	0	0	—	3	0	3	0.0
SNP	1	1	2	50.0	2	0	2	0.0
Plaid Cymru	0	0	0	—	1	1	2	50.0
Green	0	0	0	—	0	2	2	100.0
SDLP	1	0	1	0.0	1	0	1	0.0
DUP	1	0	1	0.0	1	0	1	0.0
UUP	1	0	1	0.0	1	0	1	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>18.4</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>25.3</b>

Source: European Commission.

## Positions of power within assemblies and executives

The proportion of women elected to an assembly or parliament may not tell the whole story about women's access to power within these institutions. It is also necessary to look at women's distribution within executive (ministerial) positions, and within the power structures in the assembly itself. This gives a rather gloomier picture of women's representation within the UK.

The election of the Labour government in 1997 brought a large influx of new women MPs. But although twenty-four per cent of Labour members were women, the majority of these women had no parliamentary experience and were not immediately considered for ministerial office. Previously, the highest number of women in any cabinet had been two. Tony Blair's first cabinet included five women and, in June 2001, this was increased to seven. Until recently, principal departments like the Treasury, Foreign Office, Home Office, Health, Social Security, Education and Employment, were all

headed by men, although this is now beginning to change. All political party leaders in the UK are men, although the UK famously had a (Conservative) woman Prime Minister from 1979 to 1992.

Table 10 shows the situation in all four executives within the UK. In Scotland the situation mirrors that in the UK government, whereas in Wales the majority of cabinet ministers are women. However, even in Wales all the party leaders and economic spokespeople are men, a pattern echoed in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Brid Rogers, a minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, has remarked that: 'When they were giving out ministerial portfolios at the Assembly, the two women were given the two that nobody else wanted.'<sup>9</sup>

A similar situation applies in the committees of the various assemblies, where most of the chairs are held by men. In the House of Commons the situation is very poor, with women holding only 6.1 per cent of select committee chairs. In the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly representation is better, but in the Northern Ireland Assembly there

Table 10: Women in ministerial office, February 2001

	Men	Women	Total	% women
UK government	16	7	23	30
Scottish Executive	16	6	22	27
Welsh Executive	4	5	9	56
Northern Ireland Executive	8	2	10	20

Table 11: Committee chairs in assembly/parliament, February 2001

	Men	Women	Total	% women
House of Commons (Select Committees)	31	2	33	6.1
Scottish Parliament	12	5	17	29.4
Welsh Assembly	8	5	13	38.5
Northern Ireland Assembly	10	0	10	0.0

Source: House of Commons, Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly web sites.

are no women in these positions. In addition the most powerful Northern Irish committee (Finance and Personnel) is all male.<sup>10</sup>

This demonstrates that figures on women's representation within an assembly do not tell the whole story. For women to gain real influence they also need to be represented within positions of power inside assemblies. This is an important consideration when evaluating the difference which women representatives make – an issue that is discussed in chapter 4.

### Conclusions and future prospects

To summarise, there has been significant progress in recent years towards improved women's representation in UK politics, although there is still further to go. In particular women remain under-represented in both chambers of the UK Parliament and in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and in positions of power within most assemblies.

Access to elected office is in practice controlled by the parties, and some parties have done more than others to promote women's representation. Labour has gone furthest, with the Liberal Democrats taking action for Europe and the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales taking action for the new assemblies. Lagging furthest behind are the Conservatives and the Northern Irish parties.

Without doubt, the main reason that women's representation has improved has been the adoption by parties of positive action (or 'quota') systems for selection of candidates. It was a long and difficult struggle within political parties to get these systems adopted, and they remain controversial today. A variety of factors helped get the political parties to agree these mechanisms. They include:

- Women party activists and organised women's groups in parties – which have lobbied for change. These have been most successful in the Labour Party, but exist within all the main political parties. At times the support of one or two principal women in leadership positions made an important difference.
- Examples from overseas – women activists have used the fact that the UK is lagging behind internationally to put pressure on parties. Quota systems, such as zipping, have been copied directly from parties in other countries.
- Internal quotas within the Labour Party – which resulted in more women in positions of power in the party hierarchy who were able to influence the decisions on candidate selection procedures.
- The desire to change political cultures – this helps explain the adoption of quotas within the Labour Party, and later the determination among most parties to include more women in the new devolved institutions.
- Electoral competition between the parties – was very important. Labour adopted all-women shortlists in order to improve its appeal to women, and feared it would lose out to the other parties if it did not select sufficient women. Once Labour had taken action, the other parties were keen to keep up in order that they did not lose out.
- The adoption of new electoral systems – has also been important, largely through increasing this electoral competition between the parties. However some parties (Liberal Democrats in Europe; SNP and Plaid Cymru for devolved assemblies) have also been able to use electoral lists to increase women's representation.

■ Central party control of selection procedures – local parties have often been reluctant to select women candidates, and quota systems have been pressed on them by party leaders and central offices. This is particularly the case in the Labour Party, where control is more centralised than in some other parties. It has been noted elsewhere that central control of selection procedures can be a factor in ensuring women are selected.<sup>11</sup>

In addition it is worth noting some factors which have had a more negative influence on the ability to select women:

■ Legal uncertainties – following the all-women shortlist decision some parties have been reluctant to risk using positive action. There are now plans for the law to be changed in the UK, so that these systems are made explicitly legal. Until this happens it will be hard to improve women's representation in the House of Commons, where the only mechanism which has worked effectively is all-women shortlists. Labour has promised to change the law and women will want this change to be put into practice rapidly by the new government.

■ Hostility to positive action – some parties, notably the Conservatives, remain hostile to using the kind of rigid quota systems which have delivered success for Labour. The Liberal Democrats are also divided on the issue, with many members believing that positive action is fundamentally 'illiberal'. Both parties have continued to pursue less formal approaches, such as training and mentoring for women, but these have shown few results. Following the poor results of the 2001 election there will be pressure to change. Even in the Conservative Party some see women's representation being important to the electoral renewal of the party, as it was for Labour in the 1990s and this may yet lead to the adoption of positive action.



Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt sits with children and staff of a nursery school on the day the government announced new legal standards to help parents work more flexibly © Johnny Green/The Press Association

The audience at the Women's Institute annual conference before Prime Minister Tony Blair delivers a speech in Wembley, London © Peter Jordan/The Press Association

## W o m e n   a n d   p o l i t i c s : m a k i n g   a   d i f f e r e n c e ?

Meg Russell and Mary-Ann Stephenson

Although women have historically been under-represented in elected office, and remain under-represented in UK national institutions, they have long influenced the political process. In recent decades there has been increasing interest by political parties in attracting women's votes, and by governments in responding to women's policy concerns. The establishment of the new devolved institutions has allowed new experiments in consultation with women, and the influx of women elected members has raised expectations about a change to the culture of politics. In this chapter we examine the influences which women have had on politics and how these are likely to change as a result of recent developments.

### Women's voting behaviour and the 'gender gap'

Women over thirty first won the vote in the UK in 1918. In 1928 this was extended to women on the same terms as men -being eligible to vote at age 21. Although initially less likely to vote, from the late 1970s onwards, women were more likely to cast their vote than men. This, combined with the fact that women form over half of those eligible to vote, meant that by 1997, 1.9 million more women than men voted.

From the start political parties in the UK were concerned about what effect the new woman voter would have on the political scene. Would all women vote the same way? Would women vote the same way as their husbands? What policies would be most effective in attracting women's votes?

Modern methods of polling began after the Second World War. Since 1945 pollsters have recorded a difference in men and women's voting patterns. This difference has come to be known as the 'gender gap'. Historically women's votes have favoured the Conservative Party, with women being more likely than men to vote Conservative, and less likely than men to vote Labour. Women are not a single group, and there are class, regional and ethnic differences between the voting patterns of different groups of women. However, the gender gap exists across almost all of these groups.

The only exception to this is age. While women as a group have been more likely to vote Conservative than men, younger women have been more likely than men to vote Labour, and less likely to vote Conservative. In fact it is more accurate to talk about a 'gender/generation gap'. The overall gender gap remains because there are more older women in the population than younger women, and older women are more likely to vote.

Several explanations have been given for the shift in women's voting patterns across generations. It may be that women become more conservative as they get older, suggesting the effect is one of age, rather than generation. Alternatively, the changes in women's lives over the past fifty years, with more women in paid work, may be causing a generational shift in women's voting patterns. In the United States and a number of other European countries the gender gap has tended to favour parties of the left. The gender generation gap may be the sign that the UK is moving towards this pattern.

Research by the Fawcett Society and others has shown that women are less trustful of politics and politicians than men. A 1993 MORI poll suggested that young women in particular had a cynical attitude to politics believing that 'politics is all talk and no action', 'political meetings are boring', 'politics is dominated by men' and 'people go into politics only for themselves'. Perhaps because of this, women are less loyal to political parties than men. They are more likely than men to switch support between parties, and more likely to say they are undecided how to vote. For example, in March 1997, six weeks before a general election, thirty-one per cent of women and twenty-five per cent of men remained undecided about which party they were going to support.

During the 1990s, awareness of the importance of women's votes grew. The Labour Party recognised that winning women's votes would be the key to electoral success. Analysis showed that if women had voted in the same way as men there would have been an unbroken period of Labour government from 1945 to 1979. Instead Labour was in power for only half of this time. Research by Labour showed that women saw the party as male dominated, and out of touch with their concerns. These discoveries were very influential in Labour's attempts to change its image by adopting more female candidates. Following its 1997 defeat, the Conservative Party also started to become concerned about retaining women's votes. Consequently discussions on how to increase the number of women Conservative MPs have started to take place.

Table 12: Vote by gender 1945–1997

	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat		Gender gap*
	% men	% women	% men	% women	% men	% women	
1945	35	43	51	45	11	12	-14
1950	41	45	46	43	13	12	-7
1951	46	54	51	42	3	4	-17
1955	47	55	51	42	2	3	-17
1959	45	51	48	43	7	6	-11
1964	40	43	47	47	12	10	-4
1966	36	41	54	51	9	8	-8
1970	43	48	48	42	7	8	-11
1974	37	39	42	40	18	21	-3
1974	35	37	45	40	16	20	-8
1979	45	49	38	38	15	13	-3
1983	46	45	30	28	23	26	-2
1987	44	44	31	31	24	23	-1
1992	46	48	37	34	17	18	-6
1997	29	31	53	51	18	19	-4

\* Calculated as the proportion of women voting Conservative minus the proportion of women voting Labour, subtracted from the proportion of men voting Conservative minus the proportion of men voting Labour.

Source: Gallup Polls 1945–59; British Election Survey 1964–97.

The need to win women's votes has focused attention on the issues that women are more likely to prioritise. Women in the UK earn less than men, are more likely to work part time and more likely to be poor in old age. They still take the main responsibility for looking after children or elderly relatives. As a result of their caring responsibilities, women are more likely than men to have direct contact with the health service and education system, when they take their children to and from school, or to the doctor. Because of this, women are more likely to say that the health and education systems are a priority for them. Women are also more likely to prioritise child care, the right to work part-time, and the right to take parental leave, as these policies help them balance their paid work with their caring responsibilities. If the parties wish to win women's votes they may therefore focus more attention on these issues.

### Consulting women and women's organisations

The effectiveness of women's participation, and the ability of government to meet women's needs, depends on the extent to which policy-makers listen to women. The importance of consulting with women has been recognised by the UK government for at least thirty years. Most recently the new institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have sought to establish a new style of policy-making, with more effective consultation mechanisms. Throughout the last century women have formed numerous kinds of political and campaigning organisations, and been active in other voluntary and community organisations. There have therefore been particular attempts to consult with women in these organisations.

Since 1969 the specific route through which UK government has consulted with women has been the Women's National Commission (see box below). Some government departments also contact women's organisations directly to ask them to respond to consultation documents. In addition, since 1997 the government's Women's Unit has sought to consult individual women to evaluate the issues of most concern to them. In 1998 the Unit started a 'Listening to Women' exercise, which included a series of public meetings around the country. There was also a postcard campaign, with cards distributed through supermarkets and other public places, asking about women's top concerns. Approximately 30,000 postcards were returned, with the top issue highlighted by women being the need for better balance between work and family life.

## Women's voluntary organisations

Women in the UK have long been active in the voluntary sector, and there is a tradition of organisations formed to specifically address women's interests. Although women are now better represented in political institutions and in other organisations such as trade unions, there are many hundreds of organisations at national, regional and local level which exist to support women's interests. Some of these date back to the start of the twentieth century, and some have as many women members as the largest political parties. In areas where women have traditionally felt excluded from the political parties – in particular Northern Ireland – their involvement in voluntary sector and community organisations has been particularly strong.

It is difficult to quantify how many women are involved in these organisations, and some of the traditional organisations have suffered declining membership in recent years. However, new organisations – often with quite specialist interests – are always being formed. Organisations may exist to campaign on issues of interest to women, to provide services to women or to allow women to network and carry out joint activities. Some are overtly feminist and others simply seek to operate within the status quo. Most will seek to engage on some level with the policy-making process and influence political decisions. Consultation with these organisations may therefore be important to government hearing women's views.

It has been suggested that there are six categories of women's organisation: <sup>13</sup>

### **1 Traditional, long-established, mass membership organisations, for example:**

- The Mother's Union – with 140,000 members and strong links to the Church of England
- The National Federation of Women's Institutes – founded in 1915 to voice the concerns of rural women, with 8,000 local institutes and seventy county federations
- Townswomen's Guild – founded in 1928 to help women in towns take advantage of the new right to vote, it now has around 80,000 members.

### **2 Established organisations providing a service for young women, for example:**

- The Guide Association
- The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

### **3 Newer organisations providing a service for women, for example:**

- Maternity Alliance – supporting pregnant women, babies and their families
- Rape crisis centres – for women suffering sexual violence and rape
- Women's Aid – support services for women suffering domestic violence.

*continued . . .*

#### **4 Professional women's organisations, for example:**

- Women in Medicine
- Business and Professional Women UK
- Association of Women Barristers
- Women in Science and Engineering.

#### **5 Black and ethnic minority women's groups, for example:**

- Southall Black Sisters
- South Sudan Women's Concern.

#### **6 Pressure or campaigning groups, for example:**

- The 300 Group – campaigning for more women in parliament
- The Women's Environmental Network
- The Fawcett Society – which campaigns for equality between women and men.

Funding is a perpetual problem for most women's organisations in the UK. The government does not provide direct core funding for these organisations, although those providing services may get project funding from government or their local authority.

### **Gender 'mainstreaming' in decision-making**

At both UK and devolved government level there have been attempts over recent years to build women's concerns into policy-making at an early stage. The UK government retains machinery that is specifically designed to consider policy from the gender equality perspective. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland equality machinery is more general, covering issues such as race, religion, disability and sexuality, as well as gender.

Since the early 1990s equality 'mainstreaming' has been regarded by many agencies as the most effective strategy for bringing about equality between the sexes. In its ideal form it is applied to all areas of policy- and decision-making. The Scottish Executive's definition of mainstreaming is:

*Mainstreaming equality is the systematic integration of an equality perspective into the everyday work of government, involving policy-makers across all government departments, as well as equality specialists and external partners.*

#### **Scottish Executive Equality Strategy**

The department within national government with responsibility for women is the Women's Unit, within the Cabinet Office. This unit was established by the new Labour government following the 1997 election. Although this was seen as a new departure – and the Conservative opposition has said it will abolish the Unit if it returns to power – the existence of such arrangements is not wholly new: there was previously a Sex Equality Branch, first in the Home Office and then in the Department for Education and Employment (now the Department for Education and Skills). In the past, Conservative governments had done little to publicise these arrangements, and most people were unaware of their existence.

In 2001 the Women's Unit was headed by two Ministers for Women, both of whom shared this role with other ministerial responsibilities. There is also a cabinet sub-committee on women which brings together the Ministers for Women with ministers from most other government departments. These arrangements also build on previous structures - the first minister with specific responsibility for women's issues was appointed by the Conservative government in 1990, and a ministerial group on women's issues was established in 1986. The new Women's Unit, and a higher profile Minister for Women in the cabinet, were a principal part of Labour's commitment to 'deliver for women'.

The Women's Unit does not initiate policy, but is responsible for working with other departments to ensure that policy takes account of the needs of

women. It has also carried out consultation exercises with women and produced detailed research reports. Some of these, such as the report on women's income over a lifetime (which revealed that the gender pay gap cost the average woman just under a quarter of a million pounds) have been praised by women's organisations.

Alongside the Home Office (which has responsibility for racial equality) and the Department for Education and Skills (which has responsibility for disability), the Women's Unit has produced guidelines for all departments on equalities mainstreaming. However some women's organisations have been critical of the continued failure to mainstream gender across all departments. There is no systematic checking of equalities mainstreaming in the UK Parliament, however, as there is in the new Scottish Parliament.

## The Equal Opportunities Commission

The Equal Opportunities Commission is one of three commissions that exist at UK level (excluding Northern Ireland) to monitor equalities issues. It was established in 1976 under the Sex Discrimination Act, with a focus on gender equality. The other parallel commissions are the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and the Disability Rights Commission (DRC). The Equal Opportunities Commission has three main aims:

- working to end sex discrimination
- promoting equal opportunities for women and men
- reviewing and suggesting improvements to the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts.

The EOC carries out research, publishes reports on equality issues in the UK and runs public education campaigns. An important part of its work is taking cases under the two sex equality Acts (the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act) on behalf of individual women. The Commission's work is overseen and funded by the government's Department for Education and Skills, but it has limited resources - receiving less funding, for example, than the CRE.

The devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were established with a firm commitment to equalities. In Northern Ireland the commitment to equal opportunities was central to the Belfast Agreement, which agreed the establishment of the new assembly. This was primarily due to the tensions within Catholic and Protestant populations. However, equality, particularly gender equality, was also a principle for which the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition argued hard. The National Assembly for Wales likewise has a statutory duty to exercise its functions with regard to equality. In Scotland, the Consultative Steering Group proposed that 'recognising the need to promote equal opportunities for all' should be one of the four main principles guiding its operation.<sup>14</sup>

Both the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, unlike the Westminster Parliament, have Equal Opportunities Committees. Both Executives have Equalities Units. These act as watchdogs on the policy-making process, seeking to ensure that it is sufficiently inclusive and that equality issues are 'mainstreamed'. The Scottish machinery is more powerful – the Executive is required to attach a statement to all Bills, stating their equality impact, and the committee seeks to consider the equalities implications of all Bills. The Equality Unit published an Equality Strategy for Scotland in 2000.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly, which has far fewer women among its members, the establishment of an equality committee was rejected by the two largest parties. Instead the First Ministers' Department has an Equality Unit, which is overseen by the committee in the assembly supervising that whole department. A survey of women assembly members uncovered fears that equalities would be 'buried' within these arrangements.<sup>15</sup>

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of these new arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There have been some concerns raised by women about the establishment of general equalities machinery, at the cost of losing an

explicit focus on gender. This is particularly the case in Northern Ireland, where the primary concern is with equality between religious groups. It has been suggested that the Welsh arrangements are more of a 'paper exercise', while mainstreaming in Northern Ireland remains impossible until women's representation is improved.<sup>16</sup> The Scottish arrangements, rooted in years of preparation, may therefore prove to be the most successful.

### Do women politicians make a difference?

An obvious question to ask, given the extent of change in the UK in recent years, is whether the influx of women into political life has made a difference to either the culture of politics or to policy outcomes. This is a controversial question, and also very difficult to answer.

The image of 101 Labour women MPs standing with Tony Blair was a very powerful one after the 1997 election. It became symbolic of the change and modernisation which the Labour Party had promised. However, this left women MPs open to criticism on the occasions when the government disappointed people, as it almost inevitably did.

The most controversial episode came early in the first parliament, when the government abolished the benefit premium paid to lone parents (who are mainly women). This measure was introduced by the Secretary of State for Social Security, Harriet Harman, who was also the Minister for Women. This in itself led to controversy. However, press attention began to focus on how the new women MPs would respond. While their election had been celebrated in the press the women MPs had been dubbed 'Blair's babes', a denigrating term which both sexualised the women and presented them as in thrall to their charismatic leader. When few of the new women voted against the change in benefit rules (as few new male MPs did) they began to be criticised for being too docile, and not defending women's interests.

Criticism has continued from some quarters, and it has been noted that women MPs vote against the party leadership in parliament less often than their male colleagues. However, the women retort that this is because such rebellions are not a constructive way of getting policy changed. One backbencher from the 1997 intake published a pamphlet in which she argued that women MPs seek to work behind the scenes to influence ministers' views, and that many women had led parliamentary initiatives which would be directly beneficial to women.<sup>17</sup> Proponents of this view would argue that there is much in Labour's policy which has been directed at women and their families, including the introduction of a national minimum wage, tax credits for low-income families with children, tax credits for child care, improved child care facilities, and increased pensions for the poorest pensioners. Some of these policies are likely to have been boosted by pressure from women MPs, but of course this is hard to quantify.

Although there was a large influx of women, most of the 1997 entrants still remain relatively junior, and the bigger difference may occur as they work their way through the system to ministerial office and other positions of power. This was just beginning to happen after the 2001 election. As one woman MP has observed: 'We came in as lowly backbenchers – you can't just walk in and expect to run the show. There seemed an expectation that we should storm the palace and run gender up the flagpole. It doesn't work like that.'<sup>18</sup> In evaluating the women's success it is also important to bear in mind that the UK media remains male dominated and that female and male politicians are judged by different criteria.<sup>19</sup>

Because of their shorter existence, it is even less easy to say what women's impact has been on the new devolved institutions. One notable feature has

been the new assemblies' meeting hours, which are far more similar to a normal workplace than those at Westminster. This was an important part of their design, which was advocated by women as a means of attracting women members. Although these arrangements have come under pressure, they have survived. The equalities machinery in the new institutions was discussed in the previous section, and it is notable that this is weaker in the Northern Ireland Assembly where there are fewer women members.

Women members of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly also say that the culture of their institutions is far less formal and aggressive than that at Westminster. Women have greater success at getting issues on to the agenda, because they are so well represented among the governing parties.<sup>20</sup> The Scottish Parliament, for example, has taken a high-profile initiative against domestic violence, while the Welsh Assembly had a debate to mark International Women's Day. The press, however, pays little attention to these developments, and has been critical of some of the non-traditional aspects of the new institutions' work. While it is too early to quantify the impact of Scottish and Welsh women's presence, this has clearly contributed to a very different environment from that in Northern Ireland, where women assembly members complain of hostility from their male colleagues.<sup>21</sup> The poor experience of these women contrasts starkly with the view of Welsh Assembly member Val Feld, who says: 'The experience in Wales, in my view, demonstrates that the case for equal representation is at the heart of genuine democracy because the inclusion and participation of women can change the agenda as well as the nature and outcome of political debate.'<sup>22</sup>



RAF Greenham Common airbase 1982, the site of continuous women's peace protests from 1981 until 1991  
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## References

Access to some of these publications will be found via the web sites listed on page 50.

<sup>1</sup> **Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley (1992)**. *Labour's Grassroots*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> **Beatrix Campbell (1987)**. *The Iron Ladies: Why do Women Vote Tory?*, London: Virago.

Important and engaging book about women's relationship with the Conservative Party, looking at why more women than men have traditionally voted Conservative and have formed the core of the party's activists, while being poorly represented in public office. Covers the story from the early twentieth century to the first years under the party's famous woman leader, Margaret Thatcher.

<sup>3</sup> **G. E. Maguire (1998)**. *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874-1997*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Looks at the activity of women in the Conservative Party throughout its history, including the Primrose League, the party's women's organisation, and women's influence on policy. Covers much of the same ground as Beatrix Campbell, but is more up-to-date.

<sup>4</sup> See reference 3.

<sup>5</sup> **Scottish Constitutional Convention (1995)**. *Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right*, Edinburgh: Scottish Constitutional Convention.

Document setting out the principles for the Scottish Parliament. These included establishing a 'truly representative' parliament. Includes the text of the electoral agreement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats to field equal numbers of male and female candidates.

<sup>6</sup> **Rick Wilford, Yvonne Galligan and Eilis Ward (eds) (1999)**. *Contesting Politics: Women in Ireland, North and South*, Oxford: Westview Press.

This collection includes papers on women in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Bronagh Hinds of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition writes on 'Women Working for Peace in Northern Ireland' and Wilford and Galligan look at the Northern Irish party system and women's limited involvement.

<sup>7</sup> **Robert Miller, Rick Wilford and Freda Donoghue (1996)**. *Women and Political Participation in Northern Ireland*, Aldershot: Avebury.

Analysis of a research project which investigated women's various methods of political participation and their attitudes to the political process in Northern Ireland. A very detailed study, the chapters on women's and men's attitudes to the politicians and the political parties are particularly interesting.

<sup>8</sup> **Rick Wilford (1999)**. 'Women and Politics', in P. Mitchell and R. Wilford (eds), *Politics in Northern Ireland*, Oxford: Westview Press.

Looks at the history of women's involvement in Northern Irish politics and some more recent developments. Similar material to that in his book with Galligan and Ward (see reference 6).

<sup>9</sup> **Margaret Ward (2000)**. *The Northern Ireland Assembly: Assessing the Gender Deficit*, Belfast: Democratic Dialogue.

A short report looking at women's representation in the assembly, its committees and the executive. Includes details of a survey of women assembly members asking about their experience of the assembly and their views, with some negative conclusions.

<sup>10</sup> See reference 9.

<sup>11</sup> **Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (1995).** *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A detailed study of the selection process for the House of Commons, including an analysis of why women are often excluded from the process. Includes a useful comparative analysis of party recruitment procedures internationally.

<sup>12</sup> **Scottish Office (1998).** 'Shaping Scotland's Parliament', Report of the Consultative Steering Group.

The Consultative Steering Group was established by Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar in 1997 to advise on the design of the new Scottish Parliament. Its report set out principles by which it proposed that the new parliament be more open and inclusive than Westminster and its recommendations were largely accepted. Equal opportunities was a major principle.

<sup>13</sup> **Jane Grant (1999).** 'The use and abuse of power in the autonomous women's movement', in K. Atkinson, S. Oerton and G. Plain, *Feminisms on the Edge: Politics, Discourses and National Identities*, Cardiff Academic Press.

<sup>14</sup> See reference 12.

<sup>15</sup> See reference 9.

<sup>16</sup> **Fiona Beveridge, Sue Nott and Kylie Stephen (2000).** 'Mainstreaming and the engendering of policy making: a means to an end?', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 7:3, 385–405.

Provides an analysis of the rationale behind 'mainstreaming' as a means of achieving policies that better benefit women. Illustrates the approach with reference to the structures established in the UK since 1997, at national, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish levels.

<sup>17</sup> **Fiona Mactaggart (2000).** *Women in Parliament: Their Contribution to Labour's First 1000 Days*, London: Fabian Society.

Mactaggart is a Labour woman MP, first elected in 1997. Her pamphlet is a reaction against some of the negative conclusions drawn about the women MPs by the media and opposition politicians. She argues that women may not have fought loudly against certain government policies, but that this is because women 'do' politics in a different way. She says that private pressure on ministers from women MPs has led to important policy gains for women.

<sup>18</sup> **Anna Coote (ed.) (2000).** *New Gender Agenda: Why Women Still Want More*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), in partnership with the Fabian Society and the Fawcett Society.

An up-to-date selection of essays on women's demands for policy and procedural change in politics. Looks at why women's representation is important, how the new women MPs were received after 1997, the new gender equality machinery set up by the 1997 government and the arrangements in the new Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament.

<sup>19</sup> **Mary-Ann Stephenson (1998).** *The Glass Trapdoor: Women, Politics and the Media during the 1997 General Election*, London: Fawcett Society.

This book brings together three important reports published by the Fawcett Society in the approach to the 1997 election. One looks at the candidate selection process within the political parties, and another at women and the media, including media monitoring of women politicians and women's political priorities. The third looks in detail at the gender gap between women's and men's voting, and women's attitudes to politics.

<sup>20</sup> See reference 18.

<sup>21</sup> See reference 9.

<sup>22</sup> See reference 18.

## Further reading

**Rachel Brooks, Angela Eagle and Clare Short (1990).** *Quotas Now: Women in the Labour Party*, London: Fabian Society.

This pamphlet set out the arguments for introducing quotas in the Labour Party. Published in advance of the party's 1990 decision to adopt internal quotas, it set out a blueprint for these, and also proposed all-women shortlists, which were adopted by the party in 1993.

**Alice Brown (1998).** 'Deepening Democracy: Women and the Scottish Parliament', *Regional and Federal Studies*, vol. 8 no. 1.

Professor Alice Brown has been influential in the design of the Scottish Parliament, being on the Constitutional Commission and the Consultative Steering Group. Here she describes women's involvement in the campaign for a parliament, and how women's concerns were built into the agreements prior to 1998.

**Alice Brown (2000).** 'Designing the Scottish Parliament', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 53 no. 3.

Here Brown brings the story up to date, including the establishment of the parliament and the first elections. Considers whether the parliament has met the objectives of a new political culture.

**Sarah Childs (2002).** 'Hitting the Target: Are Labour Women MPs "Acting For" Women?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, January.

Interesting paper based on extensive interviews with Labour women MPs. It seeks to look behind the criticisms made in the media that women MPs have been ineffective in looking after women's interests, and finds that in many ways women approach politics differently and are influencing both culture and policy outcomes.

**Maria Eagle and Joni Lovenduski (1998).** *High Time or High Tide for Labour Women?*, London: Fabian Society.

The third in the series of influential pamphlets by the Labour-affiliated Fabian Society, aiming to promote women's representation in elected office. This pamphlet concluded that the election of 101 Labour women was almost entirely thanks to all-women shortlists, proposing that these should be retained. It also proposed the use of 'twinning' for selection of Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly candidates.

**Kate Fearon (1999).** *Women's Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition*, Belfast: The Blackstaff Press.

Fearon was a founder of the UK's only women's party, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. She tells the story of its establishment in 1996, its campaign for election to the all-party peace talks, and the operation of the talks themselves. The story ends with the elections to the new assembly in 1998.

**Becky Gill (1999).** *Winning Women: Lessons from Scotland and Wales*, London: Fawcett Society.

Gill interviewed women members of the new parliament and assembly, from all the parties, about their experiences of the selection process and about the culture of the new institutions. Also includes research with voters about their attitudes to the new institutions.

**Becky Gill (2000).** *Losing Out Locally: Women and Local Government*, London: Fawcett Society.

Investigates how and why women are under-represented as local councillors and proposes possible reforms.

**Patricia Hewitt and Deborah Mattinson (1987).** *Winning Women's Votes: The Key to Winning*, London: Fabian Society.

Influential early pamphlet that helped change the Labour Party's attitude towards quota systems. Labour had lost the 1987 general election and Hewitt and Mattinson emphasised women voters' role in that defeat. Research evidence showed that women voters held negative images of the party and saw it as male-dominated. Also that voters were not averse to women candidates and were more likely to see them as trustworthy.

**Tessa Keswick, Rosemary Pockley and Angela Guillaume (1999).** *Conservative Women*, London: Centre for Policy Studies.

Pamphlet written by three senior Conservative Party activists, proposing radical reform of party organisation and of candidate selection procedures. Also includes some history. May prove to be a catalyst, as Fabian pamphlets were to Labour in the early 1990s.

**Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris (eds) (1993).** *Gender and Party Politics*, London: Sage.

A collection of chapters on women and party politics in different countries. The introductory chapter on 'The Dynamics of Gender and Party', and the chapter by Lovenduski and Norris on the UK will be of particular interest. The latter looks at voting behaviour, party organisation and, particularly, candidate selection. Contains historical information but now somewhat outdated.

**Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris (eds) (1996).** *Women in Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A very interesting collection, though now a little out of date. Includes papers on the Labour Party by Clare Short and Perrigo, on Scotland by Brown, and on Northern Ireland by Wilford. Norris looks at the attitudes of women MPs and Lovenduski looks at some of the barriers in the British political system.

**Carmel Roulston (1999).** 'Inclusive Others: The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in the Peace Process', *Scottish Affairs*, no. 26.

A short paper which summarises the emergence and electoral success of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. A more succinct treatment than that provided by Kate Fearon.

**Meg Russell (2000).** *Women's Representation in UK Politics: What can be done within the Law?*, London: Constitution Unit.

This report looks at the legal situation in the UK concerning positive action by political parties in candidate selection. It proposes that a short electoral law could be used to make positive action explicitly legal, and that this would be consistent with European and human rights law. Also includes a summary of quota systems used by UK parties and other parties in Europe, and some comparative figures.

**Scottish Executive (2000).** *Equality Strategy: Working Together for Equality*, Edinburgh: Stationery Office.

The Scottish Executive's first equality strategy. Sets out its attitude to 'mainstreaming' and the new policy process.

**Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley (2002: forthcoming).** *Liberal Democrats*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Clare Short (1996).** 'Women and the Labour Party', in Lovenduski and Norris (see above).

A very important paper explaining the dynamics within the Labour Party which led to the adoption of quotas within the party organisation, and then the adoption of all-women shortlists. A frank account by Short, who was then chair of Labour's National Executive Women's Committee (responsible for the policy) and is now a cabinet minister.

**Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Jeremy Richardson (1994).** *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, Oxford: Clarendon.

## U s e f u l   w e b   s i t e s

### UK Parliament

Includes a list of women MPs and links to various research papers. The House of Commons Information Office Factsheet (no. 5) on the history of women in parliament is particularly useful.

[www.parliament.uk/](http://www.parliament.uk/)

### Scottish Parliament

[www.scottish.parliament.uk/](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/)

### National Assembly for Wales

[www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk)

### Northern Ireland Assembly

[www.ni-assembly.gov.uk/](http://www.ni-assembly.gov.uk/)

### Women and Equality Unit

(formerly the Women's Unit)

News from the UK Ministers for Women and about government policy for women. Includes access to publications. Also has an excellent set of links to other organisations.

[www.womens-unit.gov.uk/](http://www.womens-unit.gov.uk/)

### Women's National Commission

Includes access to on-line publications.

[www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/wnc/](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/wnc/)

### Equal Opportunities Commission

[www.eoc.org.uk/](http://www.eoc.org.uk/)

### Fawcett Society

Campaign group for women's equality; includes access to various publications.

[www.gn.apc.org/fawcett/home.html](http://www.gn.apc.org/fawcett/home.html)

### Scottish Executive

Includes access to the Equality Unit, Equality Strategy and Consultative Steering Group report 'Shaping Scotland's Parliament'.

[www.scotland.gov.uk/](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/)

### Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

Women's party in Northern Ireland.

[www.niwc.org/](http://www.niwc.org/)

### Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Oversees all forms of equality in Northern Ireland.

[www.equalityni.org/](http://www.equalityni.org/)

### Constitution Unit

Research centre with various publications and events relating to constitutional reform in the UK.

The 'constitutional update' section includes information on the latest developments.

[www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/)

### Democratic Dialogue

Northern Ireland-based think-tank which has published widely on Northern Irish politics and constitutional matters. Includes on-line access to their publications.

[www.democraticdialogue.org](http://www.democraticdialogue.org)

### Fabian Society

The Fabian Society has published many pamphlets influential in the debate on women's representation in the UK Labour Party.

[www.fabian-society.org.uk/](http://www.fabian-society.org.uk/)

### Inter-Parliamentary Union

Includes an up-to-date database of women's representation in parliaments worldwide, and links to publications.

[www.ipu.org/](http://www.ipu.org/)