1. Introduction

Access to British political institutions is dominated by the political parties. Not only do parties control nomination at all levels of government, they also control appointments to the House of Lords and to the various decision making agencies, commissions and committees that design, implement and deliver public policy. This means that effective feminist and other women’s movement activism on the issue of women’s political representation has been action either within the main political parties or directed at the parties most often via other established organisations that operate within or in close association with the political class such as Trade Unions, government agencies or think tanks.

Compared to other old democracies, especially those from Western Europe, women’s representation has remained exceptionally low at Westminster. However, as this chapter will show there are considerable variations among the major political parties as well as between Westminster and the devolved political institutions in Scotland and Wales.

The core argument of this chapter is that internal party politics mobilised by party women explains decisions to increase the position of women in elected office. The critical actors were and are mainly women leaders in different parts of party organisations who have taken advantage of opportunities provided by processes of party modernisation to insert their claim. Party crises and subsequent reforms are an important part of the story as are changes in gender roles whereby whole scale shifts in attitudes made women’s votes available to parties and made voters responsive to women candidates. However progress was not and is not straightforward. Moreover such progress as there has been is neither uniform across parties nor fully established in parliament and other legislatures.

This chapter will analyse the history of women’s entrance into British politics separately for two major parties, Labour and Conservatives as well as the Liberal Democratic Party. It will be shown that even if the sequences of change have been somewhat similar, the trajectory differs greatly with substantive changes in the Conservative party emerging two decades after those in the Labour party. No contagion effect can be traced in the British case (Matland & Studler 1996).
2. Historical Overview

Women over 30 years of age obtained the right to vote and those over 21 the right to stand as candidates in 1918, following long and sometimes violent suffrage campaigns. The anomaly between voting and candidate ages was not corrected until women were given the right to vote on the same terms as men in 1928. In the case of Jennie Lee (who was to become a Minister in Harold Wilson’s first government) that meant that she was nominated to stand as parliamentary before she was entitled to vote.

Following the suffrage although there were numerous campaigns on issues of social policy such as child care, education and health in which women including many former suffragists were active, there was relatively little mobilisation to ensure that women were nominated for winnable seats. Hence only a handful of women were elected before 1945 and it took until 1997 for women to break through the 10 per cent threshold. Until the 1980s no political party was much interested in the political representation of women. The issue then came firmly onto the agenda for two reasons. First, the nature of party competition changed when the new Social Democratic Party was founded. Second, Women’s Liberation Movement feminists entered the Labour party and mobilised to secure representation. The Social Democratic Party soon merged with the Liberal Party to become the Liberal Democrats, and its interest in the representation of women faded. However the movement of women within the Labour party grew and began a process that established strict quotas of women throughout the party.

At the various levels of the UK political system we find different institutional configurations and patterns of women’s representation. Each reflects specific mobilisations and resistances. There is therefore significant variation from Westminster patterns at ‘lower’ levels of the system. The devolved systems of Scotland and Wales are cases in point. Since its establishment in 1998 the Scottish parliament has been characterised by an unbroken period of large minority of women as women Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) have ranged from 33 to 39 per cent of the total of 129 seats. Wales meanwhile has enjoyed gender balance in its assembly, women members have varied from 40 to 50 per cent of the 60 Assembly Members (AMs.) It is noteworthy that both devolved legislatures have equality committees but Westminster does not (although one is currently being mooted by
Labour women MPs.) However direct comparisons between Wales, Scotland and Westminster are tricky as the devolved regions have different party systems from that in England and nationalists play an important part in Scotland which in May 2011 elected a majority of Scottish nationalists. There is very little support for the Conservative party in either Scotland or Wales. Both legislatures are elected by Mixed Member systems while Westminster is elected by a plurality first past the post system which is distinctly not proportional. In short the UK features a number of different electoral systems each of which offers different strategic opportunities for women’s advocates and may be associated with a different party system from the Westminster model.

Figure 1 Electoral Systems in the UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Where used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plurality Majority</td>
<td>First Past the Post</td>
<td>House of Commons&lt;br&gt;Local elections in England and Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alternative Vote (Supplementary Vote*)</td>
<td>Mayor of London and all other elected mayors in England and Wales where there are more than two candidates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportional Representation</td>
<td>Single Transferrable Vote</td>
<td>Local and European Parliament Elections in Northern Ireland&lt;br&gt;Northern Ireland Assembly&lt;br&gt;Local elections in Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Party Block Vote</td>
<td>European Parliament Elections (except Northern Ireland)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Mixed Member Proportional</td>
<td>Scottish Parliament&lt;br&gt;Welsh Assembly&lt;br&gt;London Assembly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Supplementary vote is a variation of the alternative vote that differs from it in that the alternative vote typically allows for many rounds of counting

It is difficult to speak of a take-off phase of women’s political representation in the UK. Much of the limited progress on women’s political representation has been recent and is very much work in progress as considerable movement has been evident in recent years. In terms of numbers the match between the plurality systems of
Westminster (22 %) is a striking vindication of the literature that says majoritarian systems return fewer women, while the proportional systems of the European Parliament (33%) Scotland (36%) Wales (42%) and London Assembly (32%) are striking examples of the greater capacity of some proportional electoral systems to elect women. (The Northern Ireland figures suggest that STV however does not help as women are 16.8 % of the Assembly at Stormont.) Each experienced differences in performance by party, with, in general, Labour performing better than other parties.

2.1 Westminster

At Westminster MPs are elected in a first past the post system for which candidacy is controlled by the major parties. Each party has its own nomination procedures but there are clear similarities. The three main parties all maintain approved lists of aspirant candidates and each has a selection procedure that involves shortlisting, that is the selection of a small number of applicants (normally between 3 and 6) by local members and activists from the approved list to go forward to the next round. In recent elections the Conservatives have experimented with primaries partly in order to reduce the power of local members. Generally policies to increase women’s representation are based in rules about approved lists and shortlists but all the major parties are considering the extended use of primaries in future selections. Figure 2 shows the development of women’s representation at Westminster. The figures shows the marked differences between the major political parties.

Figure 2 about here

At the General Election of May 2010 143 women, 22 per cent of the total, were elected as Members of Parliament, the highest number ever with one in five MPs now a woman. Of these MPs, 49 were Conservative; 7 Liberal Democrats; 81 Labour; 1 Green Party; 1 Scottish National Party; 1 Social Democrat & Labour Party; 1 Sinn Fein; 1 Alliance and 1 Independent. Of the three main parties, Labour has the highest proportion of women MPs, 31%; the Conservatives have 16% and Liberal Democrats 12%. No party has gender balance and only Labour has a significant minority of women. The male monopoly of the House of Commons did not break until 1997 when a small minority of women were elected. Prior to 1997 the percentage of women MPs was below 10 per cent and until 1987 it was below 5 per cent. (Figure 2)
Figure 2 indicates stagnation in all the parties until 1987 when the number of Labour women MPs doubled. The Conservative ‘take off’ came only in 2010 while the Liberal Democrats continue to stagnate. Thus this chapter tells three party stories.

3. Labour Party

There are three periods of Labour women’s representation at Westminster: male monopoly and small and large minorities of women.

*Male monopoly 1918-1992*

The Labour Party is a mass-branch party that was founded by Trade Unions, cooperative and socialist societies of various kinds and based on both federal and individual membership. In practice the structure and ethos of the party were similar to that of the industrial trade unions that dominated it, an ethos that according to Sarah Perrigo (1996) privileged traditional masculinity. The Trade Unions held much of the power in this configuration and to this day are major funders of the party. For many years individual members in party branches had little power in a highly formalised and ritualised politics that required long apprenticeships, rulebook knowledge, Trade Union backing and support and a variety of probably non transferrable meeting skills. This culture was hostile to incomers and uncomfortable for women who often had little direct experience of organised politics. Cockburn wrote in 1987 about how the certainties of traditional Labour culture depended upon the possibility to ‘inhabit a culture that brings together the umbrella of masculine identity, of male fraternity: work, working class allegiance, trade union membership and Labour party affiliation.’ (Cockburn 1987) These three certainties were all to disappear in the coming decades. (Lovenduski and Randall1993; Perrigo 1996) However, as a federation of traditional organisations with limited provision for individual members, the Labour party provided few direct points of purchase for women who sought to alter its masculinist institutional norms. To be effective feminist activists had to operate through several different parts of the federation at once. Moreover the barriers of traditional norms were compounded by the necessity to work through Trade Unions many of which did not themselves become gender sensitive until the end of the 1980s. Each organisational sector of the party constituted an organisational barrier. Because the Labour party was founded to represent the working class via the Trade Unions, struggles that could not or did not invoke discourses of class inequality, were and to
some extent still are routinely dismissed (often by middle class men) as a distraction from the real issues. This phenomenon is all too evident in the struggle to win support for women’s representation in elected office.

Prior to 1992 the proportion of Labour women MPs was below 10 per cent and was often less than 5 per cent of the total number of Labour MPs. Women candidates were typically nominated (if at all) for unwinnable seats and their fortunes tended to follow the fortunes of the party. When the party did well the proportion of women MPs rose. A women’s organisation was founded in 1906 and admitted to the party in 1909. Until 1997 the women’s organisation paralleled the party organisation with separate sections for each branch and constituency. Its role was to draw attention to problems of special significance to women but its powers were limited, indeed its annual conference could not guarantee agenda status, which was routinely refused, at the party conference (Hills 1981, 18.)

Although there were reserved seats for women at all levels within the party organisation) the women who filled them were not selected by the women’s sections. Instead they were chosen by party leaders and the Trade Unions and few women were ever elected to non-reserved seats. (Russell 2005) Nevertheless there were issues on which party women mobilised effectively and signs of change became apparent during the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1970 which saw considerable mobilisation of women in the Trade Unions, perhaps because it was possible to frame the issue in terms of class equality. Around that time a debate ensued about abolishing the women’s sections and the reserved seats because they trivialised and marginalised women members. However arguments were made that without such spaces women would be even more marginalised. (Hills 1981)

After the 1970s the number of women candidates increased, rising each year thereafter. But only in the 1980s did there begin an effective mobilisation for women’s representation. In 1979 the proportion of women MPs dropped to 11 and in 1983 it dropped further to 10, precipitating outrage amongst women in the party, who mobilised in various ways. Most observers believe that the rising influence of women was accelerated by the movement of British feminists from the Women’s Liberation Movement into the Labour party in the 1980s as they realised how destructive the Thatcher regime was to women’s interests, broadly conceived.
Five developments in the 1980s contributed to changes in the political status of party women. These were the entry of feminists into mainly urban party branches, the rise of local authority women’s committees which gave party feminists an additional and high profile political base for most of the decade, the change in the nature of employment and therefore of trade union constituencies, a shift in the demands of party women from requests for integration to demands for representation within and for the party and the realisation that women voters were put off by the Labour party. (Lovenduski and Randall 1993)

By the early 80s demands for women’s representation were being put on the agenda of party meetings and conferences by feminists who organised inside the party. The party was fractured by serious political divisions that were expressed in continuous factional struggles between the left and the right wings. Claimants such as the Women’s Action Campaign and the Campaign for Labour Democracy were strongly associated with the left of the party and it was widely perceived that if met, their demands would strengthen the left. Despite nominal support for the greater representation of women across the party, demands for compulsory targets of women first emerged as a demand from the left, (along with such measures as compulsory annual reselection of MPs) framed as part of the demand for internal democracy. Hence the opposition of the right was guaranteed. Demands for affirmative action and particularly for the inclusion of at least one woman on the shortlist from which constituency parties selected their candidate were put to each annual party conference from 1982 to the end of the decade. At first they were opposed by the party’s National Executive Committee (NEC) and by Trade Union delegates. Over time however the pattern changed. Campaigners organised in party constituencies and also in the Trade Unions which in these years were setting up or revitalising women’s sections. A crucial element of the eventually successful campaigns was a package of demands to require quotas of women inside party organisations.

**Small Minority of Women 1992-1997**

In 1992 the number of Labour women MPs nearly doubled from 21 to 37. Shortly thereafter the party adopted a system of quotas of women for its winnable parliamentary seats. After 1992 women gradually became better established in the party. Thatcher’s second electoral victory in 1987 was a landslide and a watershed for the Labour party, marking a determination to modernise that provided opportunities
for advocates of women’s representation. Although, with the possible exception of John Smith, leader briefly after 1992, the modernising Labour leaders were not that interested in women’s representation and were uneasy about positive action, the process itself was important to women’s representation. Change, when it came, was part of a wider overhaul. The subsequent integration of women was in part a product of opportunities provided by restructuring that aimed to make the party electable and which was eventually responsive to wider social change. Essentially women’s advocates were able to influence changes in the rules so they operated better in women’s favour. For example, a number of key moments and decisions were especially illuminating of the agency of party women and of the interplay between different parts of the party such as the establishment of the position of opposition spokesperson on women’s rights in 1983, the decision to require that women be represented with at least 40 per cent at all levels of the party in 1989, the ‘One Member One Vote’ decision in 1993, the adoption of the policy of all women shortlists in 1993, its subsequent abandonment in 1995 and eventual replacement after 2002 and the struggle to convince the New Labour leadership that women’s votes could be available to the party throughout the 1990s.

*All Women’s Short Lists.*

Although advocates were excited by the use of quotas in sister parties in the Socialist International (Short 1996), the constituency based system of election and candidate selection posed considerable tactical and legal problems. The nomination of parliamentary candidates takes place within parties and is jealously guarded by party constituencies who resent any interference from the centre. Each constituency selects only one candidate for Westminster elections, hence increasing the number of women candidates is perceived as a zero sum game. The quota mechanisms that work in party list or other proportional systems are not suitable here. Therefore a bespoke mechanism to secure women’s nomination for winnable seats had to be devised and it proved to be awkward, conspicuous and controversial. All women shortlists treat the issue of central interference in who the party selects by restricting the pool from which they can select. For it to work some constituencies must agree to select their candidates from a list of women.
It took some time to reach agreement and doing so was something of a process. It began with measures to ensure that a certain number of women were on shortlists (starting with one woman where a woman had been proposed.) The results were disappointing and gradually supporters of women’s representation began to realise that some compulsion would be necessary. Despite the return of the highest ever proportion of women MPs in the 1992 election, women’s advocates were disappointed. Only two of Labour’s retiring MPs were replaced by women and most of the newly elected women were in marginal seats, hence electorally vulnerable. (Russell 2005, 111).

Moreover, against poll predictions of victory, Labour lost the election creating an environment of great caution in the party leadership. Advocates drew on new academic and public opinion research to argue that the gender gap in voting and party support had reopened (Stephenson 1998), a claim that was disputed by election specialists but proved very useful in internal party arguments. (Lovenduski 1998) Shadow women’s Minister Clare Short consulted specialists on gender politics and polices via a seminar she convened in the House of Commons in the mid-1990s. In addition, in conjunction with the party women’s officer Deborah Lincoln and other leading women activists set up a working group called ‘winning words’ to gather analyse and proselytise among the party leadership data that not only showed that women’s votes were available to the party but also to make suggestions on how to secure those votes. The group was attended by leading Labour women including future MP and Minister Patricia Hewitt and pollster Deborah Mattinson, Liz Lloyd who was a member of Tony Blair’s staff, as well as notables such as the publisher Carmen Cahlil. Most important the group was attended and its findings were utilised by New Labour pollster Phillip Gould, a friend of Mattinson’s. When she succeeded Clare Short as shadow women’s minister Tessa Jowell continued the initiative. By the time of the 1997 election campaign its meetings were attended by Labour women MPs and candidates who would play a part in the governments after 1997 including especially Harriet Harman, Hilary Armstrong and Margaret Hodge all of whom were prominent members of Labour governments after 1997.

Meanwhile, in 1993, in the wake of a complex set of internal party alliances in which trade union women and women officials supported by party leader John Smith
proved decisive, (Russell 2005, Lovenduski 1997) the party agreed to the introduction of all women shortlists in the selections for the coming election. The measure was quickly implemented using a system based around regional meetings of constituency officials (half of whom by now were women) who decided which seats would be all women shortlists. Once agreed the new rules remained controversial both outside the party where the press were vituperative in their opposition. The Daily Mail ran a ‘quota watch’ column in which women selected under the rule were ridiculed. Two disgruntled male would be candidates contested the rule successfully at an industrial tribunal (Jepson v Dyas Eliot 1995), forcing the party to rescind it. But most selections were in place by then. A record 101 (24 % of the total) labour women were elected in the Labour landslide of 1997.

Thus change occurred on several fronts and was a slow process of acquiring and mobilising resources and constructing alliances especially with women Trade Unionists to bring about a succession of changes in party structures and policies on women. What is clear is that the three certainties of masculinity so vividly described by Cockburn in the mid-1980s were already under threat. In 1979 9.5 million men and 3.9 million women were members of Trade Unions; by 1992 there were 5.5 million men and 3.6 million women evidence of a rebalancing of the sexes in a declining Labour movement. In retrospect the process appears to have been relentless. First women secured guaranteed positions on internal party bodies at all levels, a tactic which was mirrored in the trade unions. Then they used these positions to bring about changes in candidate selection procedures led to the adoption of quotas and major increases in the selection of women candidates for winnable seats.

Almost Large Minority

Shortly after the 1997 election arrangements were made for devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales. In Scotland included women’s advocates demanded equal representation. The demand was effective in the Labour party which promised to implement it. The subsequent 1999 mixed member proportional elections included quota arrangements that were undoubtedly eased by the absence of any incumbents. The Welsh Assembly comprised 40 per cent women the Scottish parliament 39 per cent. The positive public reaction undoubtedly softened elite opinion at Westminster. Nevertheless, party leaders mindful of the legal constraints,
opted for 50/50 shortlists for the 2001 general election. The policy failed. Only 1 in 5 new candidates were women and the absence of an effective rule to secure their nominations for party and winnable seats was thought by campaigners, experts and women leaders to be the reason that the number of women in the Parliamentary party fell. By this time almost all of Labour’s women MPs and many men were convinced of the need for quotas arguing that only compulsion would change the gender equilibrium of the party. An important document produced by Meg Russell outlined the legal constraints at least some of which were a matter of EU employment law. (Russell 2000.) Legal opinion confirmed that the Amsterdam Treaty removed such constraints and the political leadership agreed to support equality guarantees. A change in the law was promised in the 2001 manifesto. Accordingly the Sex Discrimination Electoral Candidates Act which gave parties the legal right to use positive action in cases of underrepresentation was passed unopposed in 2002. Labour made use of these provisions and from then on the policy required all women shortlists in 50 per cent of all seats where an incumbent retired and in 100 per cent of all late retirements. As table 1 shows, the measure was effective, though less so it seems when the party lost an election. The policy ensured that the proportion of women MPs in the party group rose in the electoral defeat of 2010. ii

Table 1 All Women Shortlists: Number of Labour women nominated and elected as MPs on all - women shortlists 1997 – 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010&quot;&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominated</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>No all women shortlists</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Institutional rules and norms

Positions in the party organisation are subject to gender balance principles that were not only defended but extended to the leadership at the 2011 annual conference. Cabinet membership is by decision of the Prime Minister. Between 1997 and 2010 women were about 18 -22 % of the Cabinet. After the 2010 general election Ed Milliband’s shadow cabinetiv – which following Labour party rules for periods of opposition and first incoming government prior to 2011 - was elected by the party and included a quota of 6 places for women. In fact 10 women were appointed. (38 per cent). In 2011 the party the party’s annual conference, its supreme decision making body, voted at Leader Ed Milliband’s behest to put membership of the shadow cabinet
in the gift of the party leader. Milliband accordingly appointed a new shadow cabinet of 23 members including 11 (48%) women.

There is some evidence of change in Labour party norms, though what it has changed to is something of a puzzle. On one hand the Labour party is the political home of left feminism in the UK. On the other is the history of patriarchal certainty and traditional masculinity. While in 1987 the ethos of the Labour party in respect of women was unchanged from its foundation (Perrigo 1996) by 2000 changes in the Trade Unions were affecting the party. The roles of the Trade Unions are complex, they have been since the early 20th century sites of campaigns to improve women’s rights and they are historically responsible for huge improvements in women’s pay and working conditions. But they resisted demands for the representation of women until they themselves were feminised.

The current provision for selecting women candidates is stronger than it has ever been despite some evidence of the supply of women candidates running down in the 2010 election. (See Mullin 2010) Only one woman candidate (Dianne Abbott) stood in the closely fought 2010 Labour leadership election. The other candidates were all Oxbridge educated male ‘40 somethings’ in smart suits. The winner, Ed Milliband forgot to appeal to women at the start of his campaign, an oversight that was quickly corrected, apparently by his women supporters, but nevertheless was the subject of press comment. However women and women’s issues were prominent in the campaign hustings and according to some analyses women were responsible for his election. No woman has ever been elected to the leadership of the Labour Party. Two deputy party leaders acted as leader when the position was vacant, Margaret Beckett in the summer of 1994 and Harriet Harman in the summer of 2010. Internally however women are a significant presence. The battles described above were fiercely fought and were a major preoccupation of those involved who saw them as a key element of party modernisation. However the modernising leaders – Kinnock and Blair were rarely more than rhetorically supportive. Tony Blair was uneasy about positive action because he believed it to be a vote loser. Once convinced it was not he quietly dropped his opposition. (Campbell, Alastair 2011) When we read the accounts of the major players in the modernisation of the Labour party – Blair, Brown, Mandelson, there is almost no reference to the struggles over women’s representation. They simply were not on the radar of the key players. However the 2010 leadership
contenders all made bids for party women’s votes. This may have been the result of younger more feminist men coming into contention and standing against a (albeit unlikely) women candidate. However there were good pragmatic reasons for making an appeal to women. The Alternative Vote electoral system for the Labour leadership and deputy leadership is conducted from an electoral college that becomes more unpredictable as the number of contenders increases. Previously in 2008 Harriet Harman, who was not the favourite, won the deputy leadership against five male candidates in the final round of the count. Knowing the circumstances and the arithmetic were similar, the six leadership candidates in 2010 studied the 2008 vote very closely and acted accordingly. Women in the party questioned them closely on their policies on women’s issues. The candidates ensured that women were prominent in their campaigning teams. In short, there was an evident competitive bid for the women’s vote, perhaps a portent that change in the party’s institutional norms is well established.

4. Conservatives

*Male monopoly 1835-2010*

The 2010 general election more than doubled the number of Conservative women MPs to 49 who were 16 per cent of the parliamentary party, up from 17 women (8.5%) in 2005. Despite their earlier establishment as a party, their continued electoral success and their long association with women members and voters they have a poor record on women’s representation. Effective mobilisation to elect more Conservative women MPs is relatively recent. Yet the Conservative woman has often been described as the party’s ‘secret weapon’(Campbell 1987.)

Historically the Conservative party accommodated women. There was provision for their presence at all levels of the party organisation, a principle put in place in 1928 and deviated from only occasionally thereafter. Exceptionally William Hague, the party leader from 1997 to 2001 undertook a party reorganisation in which the Conservative Women’s Organisation (CWO) was downgraded, but this ran into some resistance and proved of brief duration. Women’s fortunes improved under David Cameron’s leadership which began in 2005. Cameron understood that a more feminised profile would help the party to shed the ‘nasty’ image that had been one of its problems following Margaret Thatcher’s leadership which lasted from 1975 to 1992 and included 10 years as the UK’s first and only woman Prime Minister.
Over the years commentators have frequently remarked that Conservative women were the backbone of the party – the loyal volunteers who were at least half the membership, who kept the local branches going, did the daily work of the party and saw to its image in the community through various social activities. (Campbell 1987; Childs 2008; Lovenduski and Norris and Burness 1994; Maguire 1998.) But the tradition of activism at local level did not result in parliamentary office for women. Although the CWO included the promotion of women for elected office in its aims, it did not publicly challenge the party’s poor record until recently. Indeed there were few such challenges. An exception was Emma Nicholson who was Vice Chairman (sic!) of the party in charge of the selection of parliamentary candidates between 1983 and 1987. Nicholson, who later defected to the Liberal Democrats, was vociferous in her advocacy of the need for the party to select more women candidates and a tireless encourager of women to come forward. In the 1990s Lady Seccombe, the vice chairman in charge of women was well known for her efforts to encourage women to become candidates. The episodic nature of such efforts was symptomatic of a parliamentary party in which women were absent.

When Margaret Thatcher became party leader in 1975 fewer than 3 per cent of Conservative MPs were women. By the time she left office in 1990 the figure had risen only slightly to 4.5 per cent. During her time in office she never appointed a single elected woman to her cabinet. While women’s concerns were not neglected – there was a ministerial group on women’s issues from 1986 on, no one thought that women needed to lead such policy. Mrs. Thatcher was not a supporter of women, not a sister and certainly not a feminist. Nor were most of her party. The women’s brief and women’s issues were disdained. Her legacy to Conservative and indeed all UK women was symbolic rather than descriptive This became apparent when John Major succeeded her in December 1990. Major’s first cabinet contained no women. This attracted a great deal of media and public criticism in response to which he added responsibility for women’s issues to the portfolio of Angela Rumbold, a Minister at the Home Office. Rumbold shared Thatcher’s contempt for the notion of women’s presence and made her distaste known, telling the press that the term ‘Minister for Women’ was their invention. ‘Your profession has dumped that on me. My responsibility is prisons.’ (Lovenduski and Randall 1993, 162 ) But by this time there were public expectations that at least one cabinet position should go to a woman. After he was returned to office in the 1992 election John Major put two women in his
cabinet and continued the ‘Minister for Women’ assignment until 1997 although it was sometimes held by a man.

While there is some anecdotal evidence of her inspirational effect on young Conservative women, there is no systematic polling evidence to suggest that the symbolic effect of Margaret Thatcher’s tenure empowered women in the sense of encouraging them to put themselves forward as candidates. Yet Labour party private research at the end of the 1980s revealed that the general public were under the mistaken impression that there were more women on the Conservative than the Labour benches. During her 15 years as Party leader and her ten years near the centre of the world stage her carefully dressed, coiffed, shod, accessorized and made up feminine image was broadcast daily, a constant reminder that the head of state was a woman.

In general Conservative women bought into the argument that party selection was a matter of merit and that in the fullness of time as they became more qualified there would be more women in elected office. That the scales were beginning to fall from at least some eyes was evident in a few public skirmishes over the issue in the 1990s. An example is Fiona Buxton’s 1998 Bow Group pamphlet ‘Equal Balance’ which put the case for increasing the number of women MPs. In her interviews with party women conducted in 1988 she found considerable evidence of sexism, a discrimination that was intertwined with ageism.

Inevitably the CWO began to challenge the party’s record. Protest became more evident after 2001 and by 2005 some Conservative women were going public. Women2Win was a ginger group established by prominent Conservative women which aimed to press women’s representation issues during the 2005 party leadership campaign. It was resolute in its goal to see more Conservative women MPs. (Childs 2008, 51-53) At the same time the CWO was experiencing an upsurge of interest and the Conservative Women’s Forum was founded. This organisational activity was new, it marked a shift and a new determination to see change. In some respects the change carried echoes of the rumblings in the Labour party two decades earlier. The party was in crisis, had been voted out of office in 1997 and could not find its way back. It was ripe for modernisation and reform, offering an opportunity to insert claims for women’s representation.

When David Cameron was elected leader in 2005 he introduced a range of new candidate selection procedures that were designed to bring new people
into the party and into prominence within the party and secure his own support. Cameron’s challenge was to turn his ailing and divided party more toward the political centre in order to make it electable. He needed to mobilise constituencies that had been overlooked by previous leaders who were still influential in the party. The push for more women became associated with Cameron’s leadership.

After 2005 therefore the Conservative party moved on a stage in its strategies to select women, adding equality promotion to its previously rather thin repertoire of ineffective equality rhetoric. The exhortations to nominate more women that were made by Major led to only minimal improvement in women’s seat share. Although the party did nominate more women candidates, they did not do so for winnable seats. As late as the 2005 general election 79 per cent of women candidates but only 59 per cent of male candidates stood in unwinnable seats. (Childs 2008, Table 3.4)

Under Cameron’s leadership the party sought to create an artificial demand for women candidates by manipulating the approved list, by altering the selection criteria to make women’s qualifications more plausible and by altering the selectorate to include groups thought to be more favourable to women than constituency members had been. The list strategy was innovative but it nevertheless fell into the same trap as Labour had, in simply requiring that women should be present on the list. The mechanism was known as the ‘A’ List, a priority list of 100 candidates that included 50 well qualified women and 50 well qualified men. Party seats with vacancies were expected to select from this list, an expectation that was further guided by 50/50 shortlist requirements. It was thought that, faced with qualified women, selectors who were by this time versed in equal opportunities selection methods, would select them. In addition primaries (both open and closed) were introduced where larger selectorates made decisions. According to Ashe et al 2011, primaries were thought to be less likely to work against women. But the Conservative party failed to go the whole way to All Women Shortlists or other forms of equality guarantees. It may never do so. The equality promotion rules were a source of considerable tension in the party which understood very well that Cameron expected the procedures to select Cameronites. Hence ‘A’ list candidates were criticised as unqualified, it was argued the women had replaced better qualified men. (Ashe et al 467) Moreover selection rules were circumvented or ignored in 89 constituencies which selected a local rather than a priority list candidate. This is
possible under Conservative selection rules where an exceptional local candidate was available. Some 86 per cent of these exceptional local candidates were men. (Cowley and Childs 2010) Here a discursive strategy of resistance was adopted by opponents to Cameron’s policies. A false competition between A list women and local men was created in order to disguise opposition to women per se. (Ash et. Al. 467.) The A list was shut down in 2007 in response to protests about it. At this time it was thought that most selections had already taken place and such work as could be done was complete. However the Parliamentary Expenses scandal of 2009 led to a large number of late retirements leaving vacant seats for which women could have been nominated. Indeed Cameron told the Speakers’ Conference on Parliamentary Representation in 2010 that through special rules for late selections (parties normally use by election rules for such selections) that he would implement All Women Shortlists. He did not do so. (Ashe et. al. 2011) However, women and men on the priority list fared well and women also did well in the primaries in comparison to their success at both selection and election in the rest of the party. (Ashe et.al. 469-470.)

Institutional norms

The tradition of loyalty and unity in the Conservative party made it difficult for researchers to identify the activities of women’s advocate. Only after the end of the 20th century was internal dissent made public. In The Iron Ladies (1987) author Bea Campbell argued, mainly using anecdotal evidence, that there was a duality in Conservative attitudes to women whereby on the one hand they stood for the values of the traditional and domestic women’s roles while on the other they relied on powerful and independent women who organised the party’s work. This argument seemed more intuitively obvious then when Margaret Thatcher was at the height of her powers. Thereafter women’s fortunes were limited and various studies showed considerable sexism in the party. Women who attempted to become candidates understood very well the obstacles they faced. Fawcett research conducted by the author and Laura Shepherd Robinson in 2001 and 2002 found much the same complaints about sexism that Buxton revealed after the previous election. (Shepherd-Robinson and Lovenduski 2002)

Small Minority of Women 2010 -
The House of Commons elected in 2010 included a large number of new entrants many of whom were women. Only three of the 49 women elected were appointed to cabinet positions, which also includes Baroness Warsi from the House of Lords, the first Conservative woman cabinet minister from a minority ethnic group. Early activity on women’s policy issues included a successful effort to block the Liberal Democrat demand to rescind anonymity provision for rape victims. However other policy initiatives removed rights and benefits in ways that affected women more than men. Under its red tape initiative the government considered repeal of the Equality Act of 2010 which enshrines a number of equality promotion measures aimed at women. LIFE, a prominent anti-choice group was appointed to the Government’s Sexual Health Forum while the pro-choice British Pregnancy Advisory Service was excluded.

Although in 2010 a record number of Conservative women were elected there is plenty of evidence that the party has not yet adapted to a more woman friendly culture. David Cameron’s treatment of Maria Eagle MP when he told her to ‘calm down dear’ after she questioned his arguments in Prime Ministers Questions in May 2011 attracted widespread press condemnation. Similarly when Kenneth Clark, Minister for Justice, opined that certain forms of rape were not serious there was an outcry. Both felt obliged to apologise and did so publicly. Cameron and Clark survive, they had their defenders. Most important, it did not at first occur to either of them that their behaviour was unacceptable.

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the future for Conservative Party women. On the one hand they are better mobilised to claim representation than ever before. On the other hand their current fortunes are tied to Cameron’s leadership which is not based on deep party support. Nor does it depend much on his attitudes to women. At the time of writing it is difficult to imagine a Conservative retreat on women. Nor can we be confident that the traditional institutional norms of the party are being replaced. The party has not agreed to guarantee women’s presence in parliament and government and it retreated from the relatively weak forms of positive action of Cameron’s A list strategy. Further retreat is not impossible as the Liberal Democrat experience shows.

5. Liberal Democrats
The Liberal Democrats were founded in a merger of the old Liberal Party and the short lived Social Democratic Party in 1988. Despite early and long association of Liberal party women with feminist claims, and innovative action by the now component Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Democrats do not do well when it comes to the election of women MPs. They face more obstacles that Labour or Conservatives having no safe seats and fewer resources. (Evans 2008) But there are other problems. In common with Labour and Conservative parties, internal women’s advocacy organisations operate in a context of left-right divisions. Another factor is the party obsession with obtaining state power. Although they are in some respects women friendly and ideologically predisposed in favour of equality goals they seem unable to take effective action. The bi annual policy making conference has repeatedly rejected calls for effective measures to support increased women’s political representation. To be fair it is also disadvantaged by the electoral system which means that its share of seats is significantly less proportional to its vote share than other parties. In such a context selectorates tend to play safe and this means nominating male candidates. Since 1988 the party complement of women MPs has fluctuated around the Male Monopoly/Small minority of women borderline. While women were 10 per cent of MPs in 1992, the figure dropped below 10 per cent in 1997 and 2001, rebounded to 16 per cent in 2005 and dropped to 12 per cent in 2010, see Figure 2.

Historically women liberals were caught between their support for suffrage and their party loyalty (Evans 2011) Today they are similarly torn on the issue of women’s political representation. In 2001 the party rejected the use of all women shortlists and, for Westminster elections it has relied on the dual list strategy of aiming to bring women onto its regionally based approved lists of candidates and requiring that selection shortlists are gender balanced. (Evans 2008, Ashe et. Al. 2011) However the party does have internal quotas requiring that the memberships of all internal party bodies are comprised of at least 30 per cent women, and it has used equality guarantees in the past in the form of zipping in the 1999 European Parliament elections.

There is deep division in the party over the use of equality guarantees. All women shortlists for Westminster selections were rejected by the 2001 conference. Opponents to quotas mounted fierce objections to the measure in a bitter debate. They were supported by young women Liberal democrats dressed in skimpy pink t-shirts bearing the slogan ‘I am not a token woman.’ In 2002 the t-shirts were back as the
party voted to rescind its use of ‘zipping’ in European elections. (Lovenduski 2005, Evans 2008) Thus one of the key internal battles about increasing the number of women candidates was lost only a few years after it appeared to have been won. Although there is some support within the party for All Women Shortlists, the internal women’s organisations are cautious to the point of timidity about it.

There are three organisations to promote women. The Women Liberal Democrats is the main party women’s organisation. It aims to facilitate women’s presence and attention to their concerns throughout the party. The Campaign for Gender Balance was established in 2001 charged by the Federal Executive Committee with achieving a target of 40 per cent of women in the party’s Parliamentary group. A Diversity and Equality group specifically supports women and minority ethnic candidates. In Parliament there is a women and equality spokesperson and Liberal Democrat Lynne Featherstone MP is Undersecretary of State for Women and Equalities.

As a party which historically (as the Liberal Party) favoured the spread of voting rights and embraced rationality the Liberal Democrat responses to women’s claims for representation are something of a puzzle, one that is partly explained by a split between classical and social liberals who are ideologically divided over social intervention. (Lovenduski 2005) The party culture may also be an obstacle. Evans (2008) found evidence of sexism in selection processes and reports of a real difference between party members and the public to which the party appeals. Evans holds that potential Liberal Democrat voters are broadly supportive of equal representation for women, but not so the activists. She found evidence of institutional sexism in attitudes to candidates. Candidates were reportedly expected to conform to certain male stereotypes of a politician, a perception that selectors were looking for ‘balsy women’ and sometimes plain sexist abuse. ‘I’m not voting for you, you’re a bloody woman’. (Evans 2008, 599)

Recent studies of the promotion of women in the Liberal Democrats indicate progress depends on a small number of critical actors, a few advocates who keep the issue to the foreground.

‘Other Parties’
Normally a number of smaller parties elect MPs to the House of Commons (27 in 2010), almost all of which are for Northern Irish, Scottish or Welsh constituencies. However in 2010 the Green party elected their leader, Caroline Lucas as the first ever Green Westminster MP. Lucas won Brighton Pavilion, an English constituency. A former MEP, Lucas is known for her support for women’s equality and the party itself is relatively hospitable to women who are prominent among its activists and elected representatives. Thus, in 2011, 10 of 23 Green party councillors in Brighton were women, as were 5 of 15 on Norwich City Council, 1 of 2 London Assembly members and one of two UK MEPS.

On parties and policies

While some scholarly attention has been given to the internal sources of party policies on women’s political representation in the UK, relatively little attention has been paid to party policies on women’s concerns or issues.

In 2004 the Fawcett Society, the lead NGO on women’s political rights in the UK published a list of criteria for assessing party manifesto pledges on and to women. These were used by Sarah Childs to analyse party promises to women in 2005, and later to examine Conservative Manifesto pledges between 1992 and 2005. Finally she did a comparative study of party manifestos in the 2010 elections. (Childs 2005; 2008; 2010, Campbell and Childs 2010.) Her accounts track both change and continuity and similarity and difference in the way that the major UK parties constitute their electorates and treat women.

Such efforts to identify and attract women voters mark a post war high point in party addresses to women voters. The manifesto analyses give a good indication of how the parties regard their potential to attract the support of women voters. Their silences are as interesting as their contents. For example one of the most important and effective Labour party policies in terms of equal pay was the Minimum Wage Act but the policy was not ‘marketed’ in terms of its impact on women. Similarly public expenditure cuts following the 2008 financial crisis impacted much more on women than men but no party promised to protect women from this disadvantage. (Annesley 2010; Stephenson 2011, Women’s Budget Group, Guardian 21 May 2011)

Here we are dealing with considerable complexity. In their reanalysis of the results of the RNGs policy data Stetson and Mazur found that women’s movements fared better in terms of policy outcomes when certain configurations of
Left party power, women in parliament, and women’s movements were present (although none of these components were either necessary or sufficient to a feminist outcome.) In the UK, clear changes are evident in political representation policy. The main party of the left has so far returned more women to parliament and some of those women have acted for women, a finding that concurs with developments elsewhere (Lovenduski and Guadagnini 2010.) It is possible to trace changes in representation policy in the Labour party through to government and to policy changes such as the Sex Discrimination (Candidates) Act of 2002.

*Women as leaders*

To summarise, historically women have not been well represented in leadership positions. The UK has had only one woman Prime Minister, and two women have acted as Labour Party leaders for short periods. One woman,. Betty Boothroyd, has been Speaker of the House of Commons. Until the early 1990s women were not routinely appointed to the cabinet. Between 1997 and 2010 there were from 4 to 6 women in the cabinet and by the end of that period women had held the powerful and prestigious positions of Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary. Moreover there were women junior ministers in most of the departments of state, as pool of eligibles for high office. However no woman has yet been appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer. The 2010 government saw a reduction in the number of women MPs who were appointed to the cabinet and of women junior ministers but Prime Minister David Cameron promised he would appoint ‘more’ women to key positions though it remains to be seen how he will select them as the pool of eligible women from the coalition parties in Parliament is relatively small.

| Table 2 Women leaders at Westminster |
| ATTACHED |

Conclusions

The short conclusion to be drawn from comparing the strategies of the three parties to increase women’s representation is that only equality guarantees in the form of All Women Shortlists deliver substantial progress. There are striking similarities of resistances in each party and equally striking evidence that parties failed to learn from each other, did not read the writing on the wall. Each began by selecting more women but only for unwinnable seats. As protests were raised, each then attempted to meet demand for increases by using weak strategies that is by introducing requirements to increase the proportion of women on both approved lists and
shortlists but not selected candidates. Each of the three main parties went through a similar sequence of events, but different trajectories and today they still have remarkably different levels of representation for women. Women candidates’ success rates in the two large parties are still considerably lower than that of male candidates.

Table 2 Election rates of women candidates in 2010 by party

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Con</th>
<th>Lab</th>
<th>Lib Dem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of women</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>134</td>
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<tr>
<td>candidates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No of women</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elected %</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. of men</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>candidates</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of men</td>
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<td>177</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>elected %</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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</tr>
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<td>of elected</td>
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<tr>
<td>women and men</td>
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</table>

Another commonality was that local party members used their autonomy to resist the imposition of non-local candidates, which, when such local candidates nearly always turned out to be men, many observers thought was designed to disguise their resistance to women candidates. At various times in all the parties policies were circumvented, sometimes by refusal to use the list, sometimes by nominating less qualified women candidates who had no chance of winning through. It also illustrates the lack of cross party cooperation by elected women, unsurprising perhaps in a country that historically has rarely had coalition governments. This is a reflection of the deeply entrenched party tribalism whereby party loyalty is the ‘gold standard’ of political behaviour, especially in the two larger parties. (Wright 2009) There is no tradition of trust across party boundaries and party discipline, often termed party loyalty, is a paramount principle. As recently as 2011 Labour women MPs declined to participate in a cross party parliamentary group, believing it would operate to the
benefit of other parties and to the detriment of Labour. So far, experience of coalition
government has not shifted party tribalism.

Party differences are embedded in histories and cultures that impact differently
on their attitudes to equality strategies. Whilst no party denies that equality is a
desirable goal, they differ in their hospitality to equality strategies. Thus all parties
first adopted equality rhetoric and later equality promotion, but only the Labour party
embraced equality guarantees. (Lovenduski 2005) Labour’s strategy stems not only
from mobilisations by party women but also from its historic commitments to political
equality. Its discourses and practices are, albeit after struggle, amenable to claims for
equality of representation. The Conservative Party on the other hand has historically
been pragmatic, adopting equality discourses late and largely for electoral reasons.
Finally the Liberal Democrats balance both positions making it almost impossible to
sustain a coherent strategy to promote the descriptive representation of women.

While male dominance may have been broken and one party has crossed the
threshold of large minority of women, voters and the press continue to visualise and
represent politics as a male activity. Despite the best efforts of campaigners, there is
no widespread public movement for parity of women’s representation. While the
majority of the population regard claims for women’s equality as legitimate, opinion
poll evidence indicates that many think such change has gone far enough and there
remains a substantial minority who wish to preserve women’s traditional roles while
others believe that equality of representation is inevitable and nothing needs to be
done to accelerate it. The quotas policy adopted by Labour is not popular, it finds
little support from a public that does not like politicians and in which women continue
to be much less interested in politics than are men.

Thus British women remain dependent on political parties for their political
representation. The fortunes of women in terms of both presence and policy in all the
assemblies, parliaments and councils are party dependent, party support is essential.
The long and painful march of women has taken place as parties themselves have
decayed. While there may be opportunities for feminist takeover of hollowed out
organisations, as advocates of the shrinking institutions hypothesis argue, such a
victory may well prove pyrrhic if political recruitment becomes fragmented and
candidate centred and breaks free of party control.
Bibliography


Table that will become a figure for male dominance book

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<th>Other</th>
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26
Table 2 Women in the UK Political Leadership

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<td>Labour 3 Men and 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Arthur Henderson’s three separate terms as 3 men)</td>
<td>Woman acting leader</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 Men</td>
<td>Conservatives 4 men and 0 women</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 Woman acting leader –</td>
<td>Liberal Democrats 5 Men</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Margaret Becket</td>
<td>TOTAL 12 Men and 1 woman acting leader</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conservatives (5 Men Bonar Law 2x, 0 women)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Men 1 Woman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Liberal Democrats 3 men (joint leadership in 1988)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL 25 men, 1 woman, 1 woman acting leader</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaker of the Lower House</td>
<td>7 men, 1 woman</td>
<td>1 woman and 2 men</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1 woman.</td>
<td>19 Men, 3 women (Departmental Select Committees)</td>
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<td>committees¹</td>
<td></td>
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<td>President</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<td>Prime Minister</td>
<td>1 woman , 11 men, 12 governments (Churchill and Wilson twice)</td>
<td>0 woman 3 (5 men) Blair three times</td>
<td>1 Man</td>
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<td>Cabinet Minister</td>
<td>(1 of 22 per government) 0 – 2 of 22 per government Total 10</td>
<td>4 – 6 of 22 (5 governments) Total 22 (HH twice)</td>
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<td>Minimum N and Maximum N and Totals</td>
<td>Number of women and total</td>
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¹ Departmental select committees only. Considerable reform of parliamentary committees in 1979 when departmental select committees established.
Throughout the process party and affiliated Trade Union women were key actors. As well as those already mentioned Joyce Gould, Jo Richardson, Janet Armstrong, Frances Morrell and Vicky Phillips were joined by Trade Union women including Angela Eagle, Maureen Rooney, Bernadette Hillon, Margaret Prosser and Anne Gibson. Their work attracted some support from senior male party officials including especially the already mentioned Larry Whitty and Peter Coleman.

The date beyond which an MP retirement is deemed late is normally decided by the National Executive Committee of the party which then takes over the management of the nominations from the constituency party and imposes a shortlist from which the candidate must be selected.

See Sarah Childs 2010 for a full account of All Women Shortlists developments in 2010.

The shadow cabinet is the cabinet of an opposition part.

Ed Milliband was a protégé of Harman’s and the components of his victory in the last round of the count were remarkably similar to hers.