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Parity for the party – before 2033

By Vera Baird QC

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Parity for the party – before 2033

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It is excellent that Gordon Brown has announced that the Sex Discrimination (Elections) Act will be extended beyond its 2015 sunset clause to 2030. This will be a provision of the Equality Bill, which I will be taking through the Commons. However, even with this extension, if Labour continues along its current candidate selection trajectory we will not achieve gender parity in the House of Commons until the year 2033.¹

Undoubtedly this will be a cause to celebrate: but today, in 2008, we should lament not just the fact that it will take so long, but that we will risk political damage by neglecting faster progress in the meantime. The party's aggressive target of 40% of the PLP after the next general election seems a long way off.

However, there is a concern that some in the Labour party think that all women shortlists (AWS) for parliamentary selections, introduced by the Labour party to boost women's representation in parliament, are something only to be considered when we are in the political ascendancy; something to be ditched when times are difficult. They are a luxury only to be occasionally indulged – so goes this misguided thought process.

Labour victories in 1997 and 2001 owed the size of Labour majorities to women's votes, who voted for Labour more readily than men. Women's swing to Labour in 1997 was higher than men's (11% vs 9%)². And, by 2005, women were more likely to vote Labour than men were³. The majority Labour currently enjoys would have been in the mid 90s if just women had voted. On the other hand, a wholly

male electorate would have given us a precarious 23.⁴

So, very clearly, an important part of winning for Labour at the next General Election will be convincing women that we are on their side. AWS is the only reason that 95 out of 350 Labour MPs are women and 77% of the total number of women in the House of Commons are Labour. This is owed largely to the 1997 quantum leap in which 35 Labour women out of 38 selected via AWS were elected, with 101 Labour women MPs in total, 65 of them new to parliament.

Since 1997, emboldened and driven by the new female presence in the PLP, Labour in government has accelerated the advancement towards equality for UK women. The minimum wage which lifted millions, the majority of them women, from poverty; maternity leave alleviating the impact on employment for mothers and sowing the seeds of more flexible working has been introduced; new rights for carers and better pensions; better childcare; Sure Start – the list is truly an impressive one.

Until 1997 we had all-party parliamentary groups on whisky and beer, but none on domestic violence. This was promptly rectified by Labour's new intake of women. So all women shortlists changed not only the Labour party but also parliament in a progressive and cross-party way. This influence has resulted now in a fully worked-out cross governmental policy that is making conviction for domestic assault virtually a given, so that it is much more likely that the incidence of this appalling crime can start to diminish. A clear example of how Labour's use of AWS has changed parliament and the country for the better.⁵

The link is that our triumphant list of achievements would have been less likely without the impact of Labour's women MPs: their presence and advocacy have brought to the top of the agenda issues previously marginalised. Policy areas like

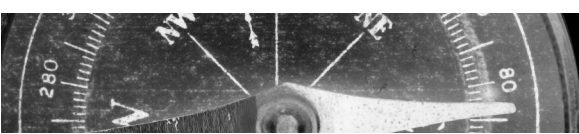
childcare and maternity leave are issues which affect us all. It has taken AWS to balance Labour's social policy, which would have been quite different without the influx of women in 1997. This in itself would have been unthinkable without our radical policy on all women shortlists.

In terms of approaching parliamentary gender parity, we have seen progress in countries such as Rwanda where a quota system in the new constitution following their awful genocide mandated for at least 30% of political posts to be held by women. There are now 48.8% women in the Rwandan chamber of deputies, following 15 women candidates also winning in seats with open candidates.

Norway, too, has increased the number of women in its parliament, in their case via voluntary quota systems utilised by political parties. The Storting (National Assembly) now has around 38% women. Labour has had even stronger success in Wales, where the Assembly - thanks to Labour's positive action - now approaches gender parity. Surely we can emulate such progress internationally and within the UK in our national parliament?

In fact, we have instead slipped back somewhat in the House of Commons. There are now fewer female Labour MPs than before the 2005 general election. Moreover AWS seems to lack the support that should, by now, be firmly entrenched throughout the party. It has certainly not been employed as often as it might have been, especially in recent selections. Its use appears to have been timid in marginal seats.

It is true that in our recent by-elections we have selected two excellent women – Tamsin Dunwoody and Margaret Curran – without using AWS. This is to be applauded. But there remain parts of the country where we need to do more to get more women involved at local level and at parliamentary level. In Redcar and Cleveland council, there is gender parity in



both the Labour group and our Labour cabinet. This puts paid to the notion proffered by some in the north east: we would like more women candidates, but they don't have the interest. Interest can be soon doused by sexism and the durability of boys' networks.

The Labour party is committed to increasing women's representation in parliament. It must remain for the NEC and for local parties to decide when and where AWS is used. But given the positive affect of AWS in the past and its dynamite effect in Parliament, we do have to insist on the truism that AWS is an electoral asset and not a disadvantage, as is having female candidates whenever possible.⁶

For Labour to be as strong as it might, it needs the proportion of women in the PLP and of our candidates to be as close to 50% as possible. In one study, 91% of parliamentary candidates suggested that more could be done to achieve more gender balance in parliament. 76% of women agree, as do 63% of men.⁷

Labour is the only party that has ever taken a firm position on this topic. It is this boldness which has similarly won us three successive general election victories.

For the Tories' offer on equal representation is weak. Whatever modernising pretensions Cameron may have had, these seem to have retreated in the face of resistance from the associations (see the ill-fated A-list). And, some eye-catching selections aside, it seems clear that after the next election, the Tories in parliament will be overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly male. Masters of indecision, gesture politics and the 'light touch', they have made noises about better gender representation but refuse to take action. That they have only 17 women out of 190 MPs, with a smattering of new candidates on the way will surprise no one on the Left. The Liberal Democrats are also

unrepresentative: they have only 9 female MPs.

So, it is up to Labour to change institutions, change systems and change attitudes. This is what Labour is all about: renewing Britain and making it fairer; And Britain will not be truly fair until the House of Commons is properly representative. Greater use of AWS can achieve that – hopefully even before 2033.

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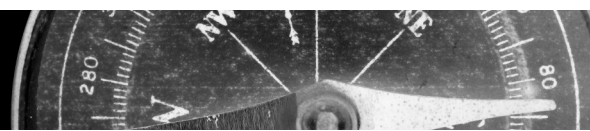
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³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

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⁶http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Women_MPs_increase_turnout.pdf



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