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DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Making Politics Work for Women – Changing the Way we Vote

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by Beatrice Barleon

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Making Politics Work for Women – Changing the Way we Vote

by Beatrice Barleon¹

Vera Baird MP is absolutely right when she argues, in her recent Compass Think-Piece entitled “Parity for the Party – Before 2033”, that “Britain will not be truly fair until the House of Commons is properly representative”.²

Labour should be congratulated for recognising the importance of making greater progress towards equal representation for women, and for its willingness to take bold steps prior to its election in 1997 to advance this objective. However, All Women Shortlists (AWS) are at best a necessary expedient for a political system beset by structural inequalities. As effective as AWS may have been as a palliative measure, they cannot be regarded as a fundamental cure. Necessary structural change is inevitably complex, and requires action at many levels. A quick look at the 6 ‘asks’ put forward by the Women and the Vote campaign gives a sense of the variety of possible considerations.

However, by anticipating that AWS will need to be with us for the foreseeable future, Baird is also tacitly accepting the continuation of a First Past the Post electoral system that completely fails to ensure that the MPs are broadly representative of the views expressed at the ballot box. Sadly, Labour’s failure to fulfil its manifesto promise to hold a referendum on the voting system has meant that voters have been denied the opportunity to significantly extend choice in the electoral process, and open up the space for parties to field a more diverse range of candidates.

Why should a different electoral system lead to better representation of women or other groups? The answers are not just

in the mechanics of voting systems, but also in the type of politics they create. In a representative democracy such as ours the electoral system is the filter by which the will of the people is translated into power. Which electoral system a society chooses to use, the manner in which it chooses to filter votes into seats and political power, speaks volumes about the nature of politics in that society. First Past the Post was developed for a patriarchal empire; entrenched as it was in late 19th Century Britain.³

It reflected a time when the male head of the household was deemed able to speak for all under him, and a notable local dignitary could speak for a constituency as a whole. First Past the Post takes the heterogeneity of votes cast in a constituency, and simply discards the multitude that do not adhere to the most popular viewpoint. The winner takes all.

Today, women and minority groups of all kinds rightly reject the idea that a white man can better articulate their interests than they could themselves. Few men would now assert that women should not have a voice distinct from their husbands. Yet we retain an electoral system where the voices of even a marginalised majority go unheard. Naturally an electoral system is not inherently sexist. Had the history of the United Kingdom been, instead, one of a deeply matriarchal society - where only the female heir could inherit and we had had only one male Prime Minister – then we would be bemoaning the lack of men in politics. The point about First Past the Post is that it inhibits change, and entrenches the status-quo.

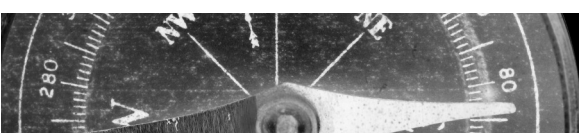
Parties need an almost gravity-defying amount of political will to succeed with gender equality when they only get to choose one candidate per constituency and when the amount of constituencies they actually have any chance of winning has been further curtailed by the electoral map that First Past the Post creates. Voters have little opportunity to dislodge a significant number of male MPs in the House of Commons at any single General

Election, for the obvious reason that many represent constituencies where their party has a comfortable majority. These men enjoy the protection of their effective monopoly status in the House of Commons, since only in the most extreme cases would they be replaced by female candidates from opposition parties or following de-selection from within.

This effect is greatly retarding the chances of reaching gender parity in the next 20 years, since it severely restricts the number of new vacancies for which AWS may be employed. As Australian academic Marian Sawer has observed, a majoritarian electoral system like First Past the Post could therefore be considered ‘a form of indirect discrimination against women in public life’.

The more openings there are for new people to enter formal politics, the more opportunities there are also for women. A move towards proportional representation in multi-member constituencies would both significantly increase the geographical spread of areas where voters can elect new MPs into parliament, and also allow women to be selected to stand as Labour MPs alongside existing incumbents.

Clearly, the extent to which parties capitalise on the greater opportunities such a system offers would depend on the degree of political will and a parallel commitment to address the other social and cultural barriers to women’s advancement in public life. Nevertheless, whilst Labour was right to introduce AWS whilst in opposition, it is now essential that it does not accept as sacrosanct an electoral system that reinforces privilege. If we are to reach parity of gender representation, we cannot afford to let any such significant structural barriers to electing more women into parliament remain in place.

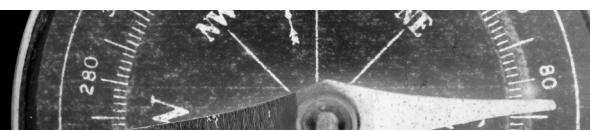


References

¹ To contact Beatrice email
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² Vera Baird MP, "Parity for the Party –
Before 2033", Compass think-piece,
<http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/compass/documents/CTP4IBairdParity.pdf>, p. 2

³ Although multi-member seats for the
university constituencies were retained until
well into the 20th Century.



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and develop the ideas for a more equal
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