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## 90 years since women cast their first vote

On 14th December this year marked 90 years since the first women participated in national elections, and the 90th anniversary of the first woman ever elected to Parliament.

Countess Markievicz, representing Sinn Fein, refused to take her seat in the Commons following the election. It was to be another year until the British Parliament would have its first ever sitting female Member of Parliament - Lady Nancy Astor.

Since 'The Coupon Election' of 1918 some 4000 MPs have graced the green benches - a little under 300 of

them women. And today only 1 in 5 of our MPs is female.

There is clearly much more that still needs to be done to improve women's political equality. The 2008: Women and the Vote campaign, of which the Electoral Reform Society is an active member of, has highlighted this issue throughout the year and will continue to raise awareness of the political under-representation of women throughout 2009.

For further information about the campaign, please go to [www.womenandthevote.com](http://www.womenandthevote.com)



# Welsh Liberal Democrats elect first ever female Leader

Ever since veteran deputy leader Jenny Randerson and rising star Kirsty Williams announced that they would be entering into a leadership contest to replace Mike German as the leader of the Liberal Democrats in the Senedd, it was clear that the Welsh Liberal Democrats would elect their first ever female leader in history.

Winning the competition with 59.9 percent of the vote on 8th December, Kirsty Williams congratulated the party by saying that they 'broke the mould [...] by electing a woman'. Ms Williams will now be the second ever leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats, with Mike German having led the party since the first Assembly elections in 1999.

Our congratulations go out to Kirsty Williams for winning this very important election!

## Speaker's Conference: your views wanted

Since the House of Commons agreed to establish a Speaker's Conference to "consider and make recommendations for rectifying the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large; and may agree to consider other associated matters" on 12th November 2008, the Speaker has announced the 17 members who will be sitting on this committee.

They are: **Anne Begg** as the Vice-Chair of the group, **Diane Abbott**, **John Bercow**, **David Blunkett**, **Angela Browning**, **Ronnie Campbell**, **Ann Cryer**, **Parmjit Dhanda**, **Andrew George**, **Julie Kirkbride**, **William McCrea**, **David Maclean**, **Fiona Mactaggart**, **Anne Main**, **Jo Swinson** and **Betty Williams**.

In addition, the Speaker is now also calling for views and information on a number of questions. The Electoral Reform Society believes that this is an important inquiry and will be putting forward its own evidence. Creating a new and better political culture will be difficult with our winner-takes-all voting system - a system that sustains the ya-boo politics that alienates the very people we need to involve. The Speaker's Conference therefore needs to consider changing the system we use to elect our MPs if we are to have a parliament that better reflects society. If you feel strongly about this issue, why don't you put forward your own ideas? Below is explained how you can contribute:

- Are problems caused by the unbalanced representation in the House of Commons of different groups in society?
- If so, what are those problems? Is there a relationship between these levels of representation and voter attitudes to Parliament?
- What are the reasons why more women, people from ethnic minorities and disabled people do not become members of Parliament:
  - Why don't more from these groups consider standing for election? Or, if they do,
  - Why aren't more of them selected? Or, if they are,
  - Why aren't more of them elected?
- What are the problems and practical difficulties encountered – at any point in the process of selection and election – by members of these underrepresented groups who are looking to become MPs?
- What actions could be taken by the Government to address disparities in representation?
- What actions have been, or could be, taken by political parties, campaigning groups and others to address disparities in representation?
- What actions have been taken elsewhere in the UK and overseas, and by whom, to address similar concerns? And
- How can the success of such actions be measured?

**Organisations as well as members of the public are now invited to put forward written statements by 26th January 2009.**

### Each statement should:

- a) be no more than 3,000 words in length, though annexes may be attached;
- b) begin with a short summary in bullet point form, (which may, if you wish, take the total word count above 3,000)
- c) have numbered paragraphs; and
- d) be in Word format (no later than 2003)

A copy of the submission should, if possible, be sent by e-mail to [spconference@parliament.uk](mailto:spconference@parliament.uk).

An additional paper copy should be sent to:

**The Joint Secretaries, the Speaker's Conference, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London, SW1P 3JA.**

The Conference will normally, though not always, choose to make public the written statements which it receives, by publishing them on the internet (where they will be searchable), by printing or by making them available through the Parliamentary Archives. If there is any information you believe to be sensitive you should highlight it and explain what harm you believe would result from its disclosure. The Conference will take this into account in deciding whether to publish or further disclose the statement.

It would be helpful, for Data Protection purposes, if individuals submitting written statements should send their contact details separately in a covering letter.

You should be aware that there may be circumstances in which the House of Commons will be required to communicate information to third parties on request, in order to comply with its obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Please supply a postal address so a copy of the Conference's report can be sent to you upon publication.

A guide for written statements to Select Committees may be found on the [parliamentary website](#):

For further information about the Speaker's Conference, please visit the [parliamentary homepage](#)



## Egyptian Government promises better deal for women

According to The Hindu (23 November 2008) and Womensphere, Egypt's President Mubarak recently outlined his support for increasing the number of women representatives in the Egyptian Parliament. Egypt comes currently in 134th position according to the IPU league table with less than 2 percent of its representatives being female. To combat this under-representation, Mr. Mubarak promised that he would reserve two seats per province for women, and it is understood that he wants to see the figure of female Parliamentarians rise to at least 56 out of 454. However, Nehad Aboul-Qomsan of the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights argues that reserved seats alone will not make the difference. She believes that what Egypt needs is "a system where proportional representation and real competition exist[s]". Then, she argues "we could benefit from the new seats for women".

## Martine Aubry elected first woman leader of the Socialist Party

It was a close race with only 102 votes more being cast for Martine Aubry than for Ségolène Royal, but it was the former who now will go down in history as the first woman to head one of the main political parties in France<sup>1</sup>. Her victory comes amongst a bitter leadership contest that is understood to have divided the party into two camps. However, similarly to the situation in Wales, it was always going to produce a female leader.

<sup>1</sup> While the main party of the right (UMP) has had a woman chair in the past, this was at a time when the president was from that party putting the chair effectively into second position.

<sup>2</sup> Romania's electoral law dictates that both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate are elected at the same time. 18 seats in the Chamber of Deputies are reserved for ethnic minority groups.

## Romania goes to the polls

On 30th November Romanians went to the polls voting for who should be governing them over the next 4 years. Winning most seats in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate<sup>1</sup> was Romania's Liberal Democratic Party with 115 seats in the former and 51 seats in the latter. Following closely was the currently incumbent coalition of the Social Democratic and Conservative Parties with 114 seats between them in the lower and 49 seats in the upper house. In addition, the National Liberal Party and the Democratic Union of Hungarians won between them 87 seats and 37 seats. Voter turnout was the worst since democratic elections were introduced in 1989, with less than 40 percent of Romanians casting their vote.

Before the elections, Romania came in 107th position on the IPU league table in terms of women's representation in the lower house with 9.4 percent of the Deputies being women. Following the most recent elections, there are 38 women out of 334, or 11.4 percent. The Liberal Democratic Party now has 11.3 percent female Deputies, the Social Democrat Party and Conservative Party coalition has 12.3 percent, with the rest of the parties now having 12.6 percent of female Deputies in their ranks. The Senate now has 5.8 percent female Senators, down from 10.2 percent following the last elections in 2004.

Romania until recently used a closed list PR system to elect its representatives. At the beginning of this year this was changed to a mixed-member proportional system for both houses. While Romania officially is a democracy, corruption, patronage and clientelism levels remain deeply embedded in society.



## Winter edition of the Women's National Commission Newsletter

Please [click here](#) for the most recent version of the Women's National Commission Newsletter discussing topics such as Women in Public Life and Violence Against Women and also includes information about the BAME Councillors Taskforce.

## 'Fairness Doesn't Happen by Chance - Fabian Society New Year Conference

Saturday, 17th January 2009, Imperial College London

The Fabian Society will be holding a one day policy conference on December 17th on the future of the equalities agenda. The Conference will

look at developing an effective public argument for a more equal society, and will engage and challenge key decision-makers and opinion formers to achieve this in order to mobilise the resources and support needed to make faster progress.

Confirmed speakers include Harriet Harman MP (Minister for Equality), Trevor Phillips (EHRC Chair), Sarah Veale (TUC), Simon Fanshawe (broadcaster and journalist), Nick

Johnson (Institute for Community Cohesion), Peter Kellner (You Gov), Polly Toynbee (the Guardian), Patrick Diamond (EHRC), and Linda Bellos (Diversity Solutions). For more information and tickets, please go to the [Fabian Society website](#).

The Electoral Reform Society will be having a stall at the conference and looks forward to seeing you on the day!



**Don't miss out!**  
**Make a difference in your community**

Interested in local issues? Have you got the commitment and drive to make change and champion issues in your area?

Local councillors play a vital role in their communities and we want to encourage more women, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds, to get involved.

Find out more about how you can get involved. Hear from inspirational women like Yvonne Jardine from the Government's Taskforce, Baroness Gale, Women's National Commission (Commissioner for Wales) and others about how they got involved in public life.

**This FREE event is being held on Friday 12 December 2008 from 10.00am - 2.00pm at the Guildhall, George Hall, South Road, Swansea, SA1 4PE**

To register please go to: [www.livegroup.co.uk/BAME](http://www.livegroup.co.uk/BAME)  
or: telephone 020 8481 3375  
Email: [BAME@livegroup.co.uk](mailto:BAME@livegroup.co.uk)

More information from: [www.equalities.gov.uk](http://www.equalities.gov.uk)



Government Equalities Office  
Putting equality at the heart of government

BAME Councillors Taskforce event – Islington

## GET INVOLVED



1) 2008 is almost coming to an end, and so is the first part of the 2008: Women and the Vote campaign. It is now the time to make sure that you have shown your support for the campaign and signed the pledge on the website!

If you have only just found out about this campaign and would have liked to be more involved, then don't despair! The 2008: Women and the Vote campaign will continue in the next year simply amending its name to 'Women and the Vote'. Under this umbrella the organizations involved in this campaign, amongst them the Electoral Reform Society, will continue to press for change.

So, look out – there is more to come!

2) Have a look at the questions asked by the Speaker's Conference (see above) and put your views forward! The Electoral Reform Society will also be responding to this consultation. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch by either email [women@electoral-reform.org.uk](mailto:women@electoral-reform.org.uk) or by phone (020 72028600)!

