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Women and the Vote receptions hit the Party Conferences

No political year is ever complete without the party conference season. And the same was true this year, in particular for the organisations behind the 2008: Women and the Vote campaign.

As announced in the last women's newsletter, the 2008: Women and the Vote campaign was represented at the Liberal Democrats, Labour, and Conservative Party conferences holding a reception at each of these events. And with speakers ranging from Lynne Featherstone at the Liberal Democrats to Dawn Butler and Barbara Follett at Labour as well as Theresa May and Katherine Rake at the Conservative Party event, one could have anticipated that nothing much could go wrong.

But not even the most experienced conference goer could have expected the welcome that the campaign received. A number of excellent speakers provided the audience with

a window into their own experiences in Parliament as well insights into further developments within their own parties. While Lynne Featherstone, Dawn Butler and Barbara Follett all outlined their journeys into Parliament and politics more generally, offering a personal account of their motivations and the difficulties they first encountered upon entering the House of Commons, Theresa May gave an overview of what the Conservative Party have and look to achieve in terms of diversity, which was both encouraging and insightful.

Although each speech was in many ways different, the basic message of all of them was the same: while we can and should be celebrating 90 years of women's suffrage, there is still much more that needs to be done before we can truly say that we have the diverse and representative Parliament that a society like the UK both needs and deserves.



Liberal Democrats launch 'Diversity Engagement Group'



Fitting in with the theme of the 2008: Women and the Vote reception was the launch of the 'Diversity Engagement Group' led by Vince Cable. The group was established on the back of a internal report by Liberal Democrat National Diversity Adviser Issan Ghazni titled 'Barriers to Benefits' and will monitor the progress of the party towards increased diversity.

The report recommends amongst other things that a diversity fund and equality impact assessment is set up, and more regional and national targets for candidate selection are set to help increase diversity.

Dawn Butler, first Black female MP to become Minister

In September this year Dawn Butler made history as the first ever Black female MP to be promoted to a ministerial position. Following the departure of Siobhain McDonagh, Ms Butler was made Assistant Whip on 12th September, just two weeks before the start of Black History Month 2008. The Electoral Reform Society wishes her all the best in her new position.

Government and Party Frontbench reshuffles

The latest round of reshuffles has made a modest impact on the number of women in front line politics.

The number of women in the cabinet is now 5 out of 23. Female ministers entitled to attend cabinet push the figures up to 10 out of 33.

The proportion of women attending cabinet has dropped from a high point of 39% at the beginning of 2008 to the current level of 30%

On the opposition benches Conservatives now have 6 women in a team of 29, the Liberal Democrats 4 out of 27.

Following the move of Barbara Follett to the DCMS, Maria Eagle assumes her former role as Under-Secretary for Women & Equalities, assisting Harriet Harman who remains as Minister for Women.

For a detailed outline of the changes, please go to the following websites: [Dods](#) and [BBC](#), or visit the [parliamentary website](#), from which the information above was derived.



INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Rwandans make history

Rwanda's history has for many years been one of violence and civil war. However, it seems that the country has, despite its past or perhaps because of it, progressed further and faster than any other country in the world when it comes to the political representation of women. In fact, Rwanda has once more made history.

Following the second set of parliamentary elections since the unrest in the 1990s, which took place mid-September this year, Rwanda has re-affirmed its position as the country leading the world league table in terms of female representation.

In fact, it is now the only and first internationally recognised country in the world to have a majority of female Parliamentarians, with 56.3 percent of its Parliament being women, or 45 out of 80.

According to the All Africa news wire 25 of these women were voted in through the quota system, which reserves 30 percent of all parliamentary seats for women, young people and the disabled. However, women took also a further 20 seats from the general list, which elects its representatives via a proportional representation system.

While Rwanda is leading the table in terms of women's representation, followed closely by Sweden, Finland

and Argentina, the UK still lags far behind in 59th position behind countries such as Spain, Mozambique and Afghanistan.

Election season - Slovenia, Austria and Lithuania go to the polls

September and October this year were busy months for general elections. First, there was Slovenia, then Austria and then most recently Lithuania, all deciding on who should be running their country for the years to come. This article will look at these elections from a gender perspective.

Slovenia

Slovenia went to the polls on 21st September. Historically, women have been underrepresented at all levels of government since 1990 and the change to a multi-party system. In the National Assembly the proportion of women has fluctuated between a low of 7.8 percent in the 1996 to a high of 13.3 percent in 2000. Women are also largely absent from Slovenia's most important offices and positions of influence. Only one female minister was appointed to the Cabinet in 2004 despite a declared ambition by the Prime Minister to appoint more women.

This year's elections were no different, despite this being the first time parties had to adhere to a legal quota obliging them to put at least 25 percent of female candidates on their lists (this quota will increase to 35 percent in the future). Again, only a 13.3 percent of all Assembly Members are women, putting Slovenia in 85th position on the world league table and about 5 percent below the world average.

There are a number of obstacles to greater involvement of women in politics in Slovenia. These include the small size of the legislature, unfavourable electoral laws and parties' reluctance to adopt measures to promote women or help them to enter politics, as well as a lack of awareness and support for women entering politics.

In addition, the particular electoral system Slovenia uses also has an impact. Despite the proportional allocation of seats - something that normally counts in favour of women - Slovenian ballot papers resemble those used under FPTP, in that electors can only vote for single candidates and not party lists. This gives the parties huge influence over candidate choice, with districts being divided into winnable and un-winnable ones, as happens in the UK.

Placing women candidates in unwinnable seats not only ensures that they fail to win at the district

level, but also reduces their chance of gaining access to Parliament through national compensation seats. This is because their electoral performance directly influences their place on the national list. A poor performance means that women are pushed to the bottom of the party list and into electoral oblivion

Austria

Next up was Austria, with elections having been held on 28th September. With the press having concentrated on the rise of the far right in this year's *Nationalrat* elections, it is interesting to understand what these political changes have meant for the number of female Parliamentarians in the *Nationalrat*.

Overall, 48 of Austria's Parliamentarians are now women, 10 less than following the elections in 2006. Leading the way in terms of women's representation is the Green Party with 45 percent of its elected Parliamentarians being women, followed by the Social Democrats (SPÖ) with 36.8 percent, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) with 19.6 percent and the FPÖ with 17.6 percent. Lagging clearly behind is the BZÖ who only 2 female elected Members out of 21 altogether, presenting the dominant contributor to the fall of the number of women in the Austrian Parliament.

As the figures outlined above may still slightly change over the next month and will only be confirmed on 28th October 2008 when the Parliament is being sworn in, we will look at Austria in more detail again in our next newsletter. It is interesting to note that the particularities of the Austrian electoral system allow for small changes in the make-up of Parliament up until the announcement of Government as *Abgeordnete* promoted to Government are normally replaced by MPs on the so-called waiting list. Currently, there are 10 potential candidates on the waiting list, 5 from the SPÖ, and 5 from the ÖVP. 6 out of the 10 are women.

Lithuania

Last but not least, Lithuania went to the polls on 12th October, deciding on the future of their 141-member strong Parliament. Lithuania uses a semi-proportional mixed-member system, also called 'Parallel system' electing 70 Members of Parliament by proportional representation from a nation-wide list and the rest directly on the constituency level by First-Past-the Post. The latter candidates need at least 50 percent of the vote in their particular constituency to be counted as elected. If no candidate receives more than half of the votes in the first round, the two candidates with the most votes will stand again in a second round. During the elections on 12th October only 4 of the constituency candidates were elected, with the rest facing a second round of elections on 26th October. Final results will therefore be announced by the end of October.

Before these latest elections, Lithuania came 43rd in the world league table on women's representation. Lithuania's new position in the world league table remains to be seen and is dependent on the second round of elections on 26th October.

New Zealand celebrates 115 years of women's suffrage

One hundred and fifteen years ago, New Zealand became the first country to extend suffrage to all women. Kate Sheppard, the leader of the suffrage struggle, collected over 31,000 signatures during a seven year campaign for the enfranchisement of women, which was presented to Parliament in 1893. White Camellia Day, or Suffrage Day, was celebrated once again this year on September 19th; those who supported the 1893 Electoral Bill were presented with a white camellia to wear in their buttonholes, and the flower came to

symbolize women's suffrage in New Zealand.

Nelly Perryman, The White Ribbon editor, captured the importance of the struggle 25 years after in the following words: "We, the mothers of the present, need to impress upon our children's minds how women of the past wrestled and fought, suffered and wept, prayed and believed, agonised and won for them the freedom they enjoy today."

Tzipi Livni to lead Kadima Party

On Thursday 18th September, Tzipi Livni, previously Foreign Minister of Israel's ruling Kadima Party emerged as the winner of a close race between Shaul Mofaz and herself for the role of leader of the party. Her election follows the departure of Ehud Olmert, who the media claim was plagued by corruption allegations.

Ms Livni is now entrusted with the task to form a coalition Government within 42 days of election. Should she succeed, this will make her Israel's second ever female Prime Minister. Should she fail, the country will hold a general election putting her position in question.

Most recent reports show that Ms Livni may be one step closer to being announced leader of the Government as Israel's Labour party seems to have agreed to form a coalition.

Wellington sticks with STV

The results are in! This September, Wellington, New Zealand, conducted a poll in which registered voters were able to decide to either stick with their current electoral system for local elections, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) or return to the system used before its introduction, First Past the Post (FPP). STV won with 50.46% of the votes. The Wellington City Council will now continue to use STV for at least the 2010 and 2013 elections of

the mayor, councillors, and community board members, by which time the system should be established enough to be able to demonstrate its benefits to voters and democracy.

Before STV was introduced in 2004, the number of female councillors in Wellington stood at 42 percent. This number was reduced to 36 percent following the first STV elections. However, it seems that with the new system having had time to settle in, the benefits to women in particular are being felt. At the last elections in 2007, the number of women councillors has risen to 57 percent (Local Authority Statistics, The Department of Internal Affairs, New Zealand).



Electoral Reform Society workshop at the STUC Women's Conference

The Electoral Reform Society will be present at this year's STUC Women's Conference on 17th & 18th November 2008 in Perth, Scotland. The Society will be running a stall on both days as well as organise a workshop on 17th November from 2pm – 3.30pm. The workshop will discuss women's representation in local Government following the first ever STV elections in Scotland and provide some information on how women can make the new system work for them.

For further information about the STUC Women's Conference, please go to the STUC [website](#).

'Empowered to vote: Political empowerment for ethnic minority women'

Thursday 23rd October,
Deaf Cultural Centre,
Birmingham B16 8SZ

In honour of Black History Month, Fawcett will be holding free events bringing politics to ethnic minority women. If you are an ethnic minority woman not yet registered to vote come along to:

- Hear inspiring talks by ethnic minority women political activists
- Speak to local Councillors about their role
- Explore the relevance of politics to you
- Learn how Birmingham City Council & the Greater London Authority works
- Find out who to contact on issues that affect you

Confirmed speakers include:

Birmingham councillors Salma Yaqoob & Paulette Hamilton, Shaista Gohir, Muslim Women's Network, Narmada Thiranagama, TUC, Cllr Anjana Patel, Harrow London and many others.

You can download flyers for the events using the links on the right. To register to attend or for more information email events@fawcettsociety.org.uk or tel 0207 253 2598.

'Sex and Power' Report

"A snail could crawl the entire length of the Great Wall of China in 212 years, just slightly longer than the 200 years it will take women to be equally represented in Parliament," reports the Equality and Human Rights Commission in its fifth annual publication, Sex and Power, that measures women's involvement in positions of power and influence.

The report frequently alludes to "a snail's progress" in order to symbolize the slow (and in some cases, stalled) progression of women in top positions. The 2008 index indicates

that while women's representation in 8 categories of the top 25 posts have increased, 5 categories have remained unchanged since the 2007 index, and 12 categories have seen a decrease in the number of women. Even at the heart of government, women MPs at Westminster currently only represent 19.3% out of all MPs.

Compared to the previous year's prediction (40 years), the index now indicates that it will take 15 years longer for women to achieve equal status at senior levels of employment. Nicola Brewer, Chief Executive of the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated, "We always speak of a glass ceiling. These figures reveal that in some cases it appears to be made of reinforced concrete."

Indeed, it is time to throw away the old chisel; jackhammers were invented for a reason.

For a copy of the full report, please go to the Equality and Human Rights Commission [website](#).



Don't miss out!

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

Make a difference in your community, become a Councillor!

We want to encourage more women, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds to get involved in being local councillors.


To find out more come and hear from Baroness Uddin, Chair of the Government's Taskforce and Taskforce Member Councillor Salma Yaqoob about how to get into public life. Workshop facilitators: Councillors Karen Hamilton and Paulette Hamilton.

This FREE event will be held on Friday 17 October 2008, 18.00 – 20.30 at Second City Suite, 100 Sherlock Street, Birmingham B5 6LT. Followed by a networking reception.

To register your interest please visit the following website:

livegroup.co.uk/BAME

For more information visit www.equalities.gov.uk
Telephone enquiries: 020 7944 0615

 Government
Equalities Office
Putting equality at the heart of government

2008 WOMEN + THE VOTE

The 2008: Women and the Vote campaign, of which the Electoral Reform Society is an active partner, is still on-going and it needs your support more than ever!

Visit www.womenandthevote.com and show your support by signing up to our statement!

And if you want to be even more involved, why not become a member?

Membership of the Society entitles you to our quarterly newsletter The Voter, the opportunity to receive Representation, our journal on all things electoral, as well as the prospect to become an elected member of our Council.

For further information, please go to:
www.electoral-reform.org.uk/join

