

Electoral  
 Reform  
 Society

## Contents

UK News	p1-3
International News	p3-4
Events & Publications	p5-6
Getting Involved	p6



## Women's breakthrough at the next general election 'impossible'

Research released on 2 July, the 80th anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act, shows that despite widespread efforts by all the parties the number of female MPs will stagnate at around 1997 levels following the next general election. As the country marks eighty years since universal suffrage, analysis of parliamentary candidates has revealed that the parties have not done enough to ensure that an

increase in women MPs is even a possibility.

Our research shows that eight decades on from the 'Flapper Vote' and women are still being passed over by local parties when they choose candidates for winnable seats. It also shows that if the Conservatives increase their share of the vote at the next election, as is expected, the number of women MPs will at best remain the same – and most likely fall.

While the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives look set to improve their own parties' gender balance, the likely loss of a number of marginal seats currently held by female Labour MPs would offset any gains in the overall representation on women in the House.

A detailed outline of our research can be found here on the [ERS website](#).



# 2 July celebrations

2 July is a landmark date in the women’s movement calendar, particularly with this year being the 80th anniversary of the event that finally granted women voting rights on the same terms as men. So whilst our research makes for uncomfortable reading, this day is also one to celebrate. After all, we wouldn’t have had such formidable characters such as Margaret Thatcher, Gwyneth Dunwoody or Shirley Williams, if it hadn’t been for the changes that were introduced in 1918 and 1928.

And celebrate we did!

Dressed in 1920s ‘flapper’ clothing, staff and friends of the Electoral Reform Society descended on Westminster to demonstrate for greater women’s representation. Joining us on Old Palace Yard were a number of MPs from across the board, both male and female, who also feel that more needs to be done to increase the number of women in the House of Commons. Together, we made sure that this day was one to be remembered!

For more photos of the event, please go to: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/electoralreformsociety>



# NASUWT conference highlights that ‘One in Five’ is not enough

On 5th June the teachers’ union NASUWT, in collaboration with the Government Equalities Office and supported by the Fawcett Society and Women’s Parliamentary Radio, held a one-day national conference on women’s participation in the political process. Amongst the speakers present at the event were Barbara Follett MP, Deputy Minister for Women and Equality, Katherine Rake from the Fawcett Society and Theresa May MP for the Conservatives.

The conference discussed whether women’s representation matters, what the particular issues are for BAME women and what role both education and economic power play with regards to women’s access to political power.

The 2008: Women and the Vote campaign, of which the Electoral Reform Society is an active member of, was also present at the event, organising one of the stalls.



# Gemma Garrett or the ‘Miss Great Britain’ candidate

At first I was not going to comment on Gemma Garrett’s decision to stand as a candidate at the recent by-election in Crewe and Nantwich. I just couldn’t take her seriously! But when her recently founded ‘Miss Great Britain’ party decided to put up two candidates for the Henley by-election, and when Gemma also decided to stand again, this time against David Davis, I thought her efforts deserved at least some discussion.

For all those, who are unaware of who Gemma Garrett is, all you really need to know in this context is that she is our current ‘Miss Great Britain’ who has decided to stand for election to become the next MP for Crewe and Nantwich, and this time around for Haltemprice and Howden. She recently founded the Miss Great Britain Party and her aim is to make politics “sexy, not sleazy”. She campaigns on a platform of “beauty, Britishness and a fair deal for working women”.

I have no problem per se with a ‘Miss Great Britain’ standing as a candidate. Why not? Having good looks does not mean that you are not interested in politics, nor does it mean that you have no brains and that you wouldn’t make a good MP. However, what I do have a problem with is her pseudo-serious approach and her belief that such trivial things as what a politician looks like or chooses to wear matters. Perhaps I am taking her too seriously, but I somehow feel that by taking this rather post-feminist stand on the issue of ‘beauty’ she plays into the hands of traditional gender stereotypes, something that women have been fighting against for decades.

To be fair to her, not all her policy suggestions are bad, and some could even be considered ‘progressive’. ‘Ensuring that all necessarily incurred child care costs are fully tax deductible’ seems like a good idea to me, as does ‘a better deal for mothers who take time off to work to have children’. **What is a shame, however, is that such important issues are then mentioned in the same breath as the idea that the real empowerment of women lies in voting for beauty.**

Gemma Garrett does not intend to do any harm. However, without wanting to, she does – to both women’s equality and politics. Her candidacy not only ridicules the business of politics at a time when we need serious politicians more than ever, it also reinforces the status quo in terms of women’s position in

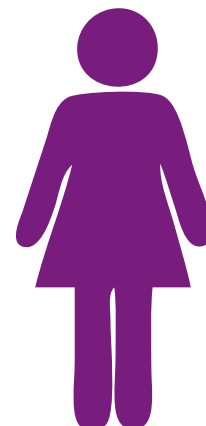
society. Unlike the Monster Raving Looney Party, which is clearly meant to mock our political system, the 'Miss Great Britain' Party blurs the boundaries between fun and serious politics. Perhaps this is a sign that we now have entered the phase of post-feminism as well as post-politics; and I am not sure I like it.

For further information, or to make up your own mind, please visit Gemma Garrett's [website](#).

*\*The opinion expressed in this article is not the official view of the Society but the position of the author Beatrice Barleon.*

## Katherine Rake awarded an OBE

The Society would also like to use this opportunity to extend its congratulations to Katherine Rake, the Director of the Fawcett Society, who has recently been awarded an OBE for her services for equal opportunities. Fawcett has been on the forefront of the debate for many decades and continues to do excellent work. The honour is well-deserved. Congratulations!



## INTERNATIONAL NEWS

# Clinton loses primary race but opens doors for other women



On 3 June Barack Obama won the Democratic presidential nomination and is now certain to face John McCain in the forthcoming general election. Hillary Clinton conceded her defeat to Obama, vowing that the party would be united. She had faced mounting criticism for her refusal to drop out when it started to become apparent that she was unlikely to win. It is also thought that her campaign was in debt of \$20 million, with \$11 million coming from Clinton's own savings.

In the face of such negative press it would be easy to dismiss the

Clinton campaign as ill-judged, badly managed and a threat to the Democratic Party's chances. This would be a huge shame, however, as it is important to remember that Hillary Clinton made history by being the second woman to have ever won a presidential primary in the US. The campaign was fought with vigour and determination; from the outset she appeared to be a natural choice of candidate. Whilst she lost the race, she has undoubtedly opened doors for other women to contend for presidency. Already commentators are looking at which woman could be next to stand for selection with the Times asking 'If not Hillary, who will be the first female president?'

While Hillary's campaign received a large amount of attention and created a media furore she has started the process towards making a woman president being a normal part of politics. Paul Harris wrote in The Observer that 'it has often been forgotten how remarkable Clinton's achievement was in breaking down the 'glass ceiling' of US politics'. Stateside Arianna Huffington has commented that 'the greatest triumph of Clinton's campaign -- a complete triumph -- is the example she has set for the next generation.'

## Women's representation in Nepal

Nepal's April elections significantly increased the number of female representatives in the country. The assembly now has 191 women, a 27 percent increase from the number of women returned in 2004. This means the target of 33 percent women stipulated in the temporary constitution has been met. Women were most successful in the proportional representation part of the ballot where they won 161 seats across four parties; an additional 30 were won through first past the post.

As well as benefiting from a partly proportional system, Nepalese women have received greater inclusion from political parties. The Communist Party of Nepal (the Maoists) has been particularly instrumental in increasing the number of female candidates. Many of the new Maoist women come from unconventional backgrounds, widening political participation to lower caste women and the working classes. Some have had direct involvement with the country's past political strife. Women within the Maoist party have mobilised



themselves and shown that their experiences mean they have developed leadership capabilities; a dramatic change for a largely patriarchal society.

However, Nepal is still politically unstable which could potentially jeopardise this change towards greater gender equality. Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala has so far refused to leave his post to make way for the new government. His party the centrist Nepali Congress appear reluctant to hand over so much decision making power to the Maoists. Other parties are also concerned about the Maoists exerting power due to their history of violent action and extreme ideas.

Securing a stable government within the next month will be vital in insuring the newly elected women take their seats. The government's first priority will be to create a new constitution, female politicians, women's campaigning and ethnic minority groups hope this will legally cement increased diversity into Nepalese politics.

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## India discusses Single Transferable Vote

India is widely known and celebrated as the world's largest democracy with a potential electorate of more than 670 million people. Despite boasting one of Asia's first female Prime Ministers, women remain significantly under-represented; currently only 1 in 10 MPs in the country is a woman.

Although 33% of seats in local Municipal bodies are reserved for women calls for gender quotas for the Lower House, the Lok Sabha, have been met with strong criticism. The Indian's Women's Movement has continuously raised the issue but has so far been unsuccessful in gaining support.

Recently the Observer Research Foundation and the University of Madras held a round table discussion on the possibilities of change to a more proportional electoral system. The Single Transferable Vote (STV) was suggested as a means of resolving the continued under-representation of women whilst simultaneously giving a voice to the many different minority groups. There are often many candidates for a single seat in India, sometimes around 100. Under the current First-Past-The-Post system many votes are wasted and a candidate can win on a very small percentage of the vote.

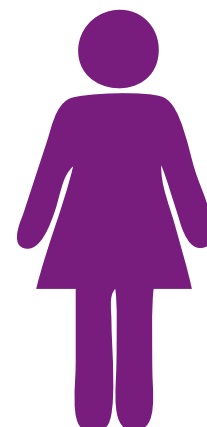
If single-member constituencies were abandoned in favour of STV the political parties would be encouraged to appeal to the different groups among their supporters including women and ethnic minorities, as well as a wider audience within the constituency. This, in combination with the political will by the parties and other groups seeking representation to select a greater diversity of candidates, is likely to put more women's names on the ballot paper. The proportional system would then ensure votes for female candidates were not wasted. Calls for change to a proportional system are less likely to be met with the type of criticism and backlash that the demands for quotas were given, however, it remains to be seen whether the argument for STV will generate support from within the Indian government.

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## Nigeria: Women to Submit Memo to Political Reform Committee

Nigeria's, Gender Electoral and Constitution Memoranda Committee recently presented a memoranda to the electoral reform committee under

Justice Muhammadu Lawal Uwais The committee recommends the amendment of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 and the Electoral Act 2006 in order to make it gender sensitive in language, structure and content. It also recommended that a new subsection should be inserted to provide a 35% affirmative action for women. It is hoped that this would address historical imbalances and injustices against women. This would include adopting the quota system in appointive positions. Other recommendations made by the committee include the replacement of the provision for the Federal Character Commission with an Equal Opportunity Commission so that beside geography and ethnicity, gender and disability are reflected in representation.



## New report on women leaders in local government

The Centre for Women and Democracy has now published Part Two of their study of 'Leadership and Gender in Local Government in England'. The report includes an update of the position with council leaders and chief executives, and adds deputy leaders. The Executive Summary is available from their [website](#). But just to whet your appetite, here are a few headline figures:

- 59 (15.7 percent) out of 375 council leaders are women. In 2006/7 13.4% (50) of council leaders were women.
- There is only one woman leading a London borough, and 2 leading metropolitan authorities. Women are most likely to lead unitary councils.
- Women are most likely to lead authorities in the East of England, and least likely to in London and Yorkshire & the Humber.
- 20.1 percent of deputy leaders are women.
- There are 6 more women chief executives now than there were in 2006/7 – meaning that the percentage has risen from 19 percent to 20 percent.
- There is still only one female directly elected mayor (out of 13). 4 deputy mayors are women.

The full report contains much more detail – some of it surprising and some predictable – but all demonstrating that women are seriously under-represented at senior leadership levels in local government.

## Festival of Politics 2008

The 2008: Women and the Vote campaign will be present at this year's Festival of Politics in Edinburgh. Beatrice Barleon, the spokesperson of the campaign, will

be speaking at the session named after the campaign.

The event will take place on 21st August, 12.30pm, Committee Room 1 at the Scottish Parliament. For further information about the Festival of Politics and to book tickets, please go to: [www.festivalofpolitics.org.uk](http://www.festivalofpolitics.org.uk)

## Women in Power: A Guide to Women Members of the European Parliament



What drives and enables women to become politicians is revealed in a new guide compiled by Mary Honeyball MEP detailing the career paths, ages, pictures and lifestyle choices of every woman who is a member of the European Parliament.

Women in Power is the first book to simply list all the elected female representatives in a Parliament, compare gender representation by party and country, and find out whether there is a 'typical' female MEP.

Comparisons across all the women listed showed that Ms Average MEP is white, single, aged 52 and has never had children. She holds a postgraduate degree in a science related subject and has worked in various scientific posts prior to her election.

Compiling a picture of a typical female MEP reveals much about

the barriers and obstructions that could be preventing more women becoming MEPs or politicians in Europe.

Like most political institutions across the world, women remain underrepresented in the European Parliament. Only 246 out of 785 MEPs are women – just 31 per cent, but this is still higher than the UK Parliament where women MPs make up 19.8 per cent of the total.

Commenting on the number of women in the European Parliament author of Women in Power Mary Honeyball MEP for London, and Labour spokesperson for women's rights in Europe said:

"One theory I would offer for more women being in the European Parliament than in member states' national parliaments, is the differing style of European politics. Westminster is much more adversarial than the European Parliament.

"In Europe agreements are built on cooperation and discussion. This tends to be more appealing to women than the confrontational and often aggressive nature of the House of Commons.

"But despite this less aggressive style of policy making, women are still vastly underrepresented in the European Parliament. I hope that this guide will shed light on some of the reasons why and push forward for an end to gender based discrimination in European and national parliaments."

In her foreword in Women in Power Rt Hon Harriet Harman, Minister for Women said:

"I believe Women in Power is the first publication of its kind in Britain. Nowhere else is there a directory devoted solely to women.

"This guide to women MEPs provides a useful insight into why women enter politics and provides data we can use to encourage more women candidates."

## Lesley Abdela on how to encourage greater women's representation in Westminster

A recent production by Women's Parliamentary Radio, sponsored by the Electoral Reform Society, sees women's rights campaigner and Vice President of the Electoral Reform Society, Lesley Abdela examine Britain's place in the world when it comes to gender representation.

Lesley Abdela told Women's Parliamentary Radio: "I'm convinced that Britain needs both a proportional voting system and quotas to achieve change here.

"Rwanda and Sweden have the highest number of women in their parliaments of anywhere in the World. When you look at the 20 countries that have at least 30 per cent women in their parliaments they all have some form of Proportional Representation and all have some form of quota system as well. The only two exceptions are Scotland and Wales, because there were no incumbents when they set up their parliament and assembly, they were able to introduce a system of twinning with men and women paired off equally. "

However Lesley said a so called First-Past-the-Post voting system could not achieve this:

"It is almost impossible with FPTP to have a quota system. Originally I was very much opposed to quotas, but now I realise that you need to have some type of quota to break through. I think you need a gender balanced quota system to achieve this, where, there are the same percentage of men and women, rather than so called "quota queens" with just quotas for women. If the quotas are balanced equally between men and women they are fighting on the same terms and have the same credibility."

Lesley has worked in over 30 countries advising on gender and democratic development. Apart from being Vice-President of the Electoral Reform Society she is a partner in the consultancy "Shevolution" and Chief Executive of Project Parity.

In 1980 Lesley co-founded the 300 group to get more women into the UK parliament and has received a UK woman of Europe award. She writes and broadcasts on the subject of women in politics.

She had just returned from six months in Nepal, which is coming out of 12 years of conflict and is about to become a Republic. Again, Lesley said, they were putting Britain to shame:

"There is now an agreement that there should be at least one third women in the constituent assembly in Nepal, their parliament, but there is going to be a higher percentage of women in their legislature than in Britain."

To listen to the interview, please go to: [www.wpradio.org.uk](http://www.wpradio.org.uk)

**Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Women**  
**Your local council needs you!**

Local councillors play a vital role in their local communities and you can play your part by getting involved. The Government wants to encourage and support more women from ethnic minority backgrounds to take part in public life.

To register or find out more at our Awareness Day where Baroness Uddin, local councillor Dr Anwara Ali and other women in public life will share their experiences and talk about the positive benefits of public service.

**This FREE event is being held on 23 July 2008, 10.00 – 14.00 at Rich Mix Cultural Foundation, 35 – 47 Bethnal Green Road, London E1 6LA.**

To register email the enclosed RSVP form to [womencouncillorstaskforce@geo.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:womencouncillorstaskforce@geo.gsi.gov.uk) with your name and contact details. Wheelchair access. Child care costs reimbursed.

For immediate enquiries please contact:  
Anna Banton on telephone 0207 944 0627

 Government Equalities Office  
Leading equality in decisions of government

## GET INVOLVED



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](http://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](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/join)