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GOVERNMENT PUBLISHES REVIEW OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

On Thursday 24 January the Ministry of Justice published their review of the new voting systems used in the UK since 1997. This publication had been a manifesto commitment since 2001, and drew heavily on the ten previous reports written by various bodies since 1997, including the ERS's Britain's Experience of Electoral Systems. The Government announced that this review would 'inform the ongoing debate' on electoral systems. However, there is a question over whether the Government now has an interest in fostering any meaningful debate on voting reform at all.

The issue of diversity

One of the topics tackled by the Government Review was the issue of 'social representativeness' or diversity. The report states that "[o]n the criteria of social representation, the newly introduced voting systems have improved the situation of women, although Labour's positive action policies have also been an important contributory factor. There has been very little improvement in the representation of BME groups across all voting systems and it is clear that for both ethnic and gender representation, party behaviour in terms of selecting candidates is more critical than the voting system alone." The report therefore clearly states that PR has in fact helped, although everyone would concede that it is not the only factor involved.

ERS RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNMENT REVIEW

The Society believes that the review is, in the main, a fair and detailed treatment of the issues around electoral systems and demolishes some of the arguments most cherished by opponents of electoral reform. It is no longer possible, without contradicting the government's research findings, to argue that PR leads to unstable government; that PR does not give people more choice and more power to elect; that PR is too confusing for voters; or that STV destroys the relationship between representative and constituent. It also provides support, although carefully phrased, for arguments favoured by reformers. The report concludes at one section that 'one of the main benefits of PR, and in particular STV, is that voters have a greater degree of choice in elections and a greater chance of their vote counting in terms of who gets elected.'

With regards to the discussion on diversity, the Society concurs with the thinking that electoral systems alone will not increase the political representation of women or ethnic minority groups. Indeed, the Society has argued on numerous occasions that party culture remains a visible barrier to both women and ethnic minority candidates in elections. However, theory as well as practice also concur in that multi-member wards, the norm under STV, are more conducive to improving diversity and will lead to parties being encouraged to put up more than just one candidate for election. While a different electoral system alone will not remove all the barriers to women's political representation, a PR system will help remove one important stumbling block to political equality.

For a copy of the full review, please go to: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/voting-systems-review-full.pdf>.

To see ERS's full response click [here](#).

BROWN'S FIRST CABINET RESHUFFLE SEES MORE WOMEN PROMOTED TO CABINET

Following Peter Hain's resignation over undeclared donations towards the end of last month, Gordon Brown oversaw his first Cabinet reshuffle since coming to power in June 2007.



The change saw Yvette Cooper promoted to full Cabinet rank as the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Housing, which had been her responsibility so far and in which role she had attended Cabinet, is now Caroline Flint's responsibility. This brings the number of women attending Cabinet to twelve out of thirty.

CONSERVATIVE REPORT ON 'WOMEN IN THE WORLD TODAY' – BUT WHAT ABOUT WOMEN IN POLITICS?

On 14 February 2008 the Conservative Women's Policy Group published their report entitled 'Women in the World Today'. The paper analyses the opportunities and challenges that women in the world face today and hopes to inform future Conservative policy in this area.

The report touches on a number of topics ranging from 'Women in the workplace' to 'Women in their communities', 'Vulnerable women', 'Women and ethnicity' and 'The role of women in international development' covering many areas of great importance to the UK's female population. Interestingly, however, the paper lacks any mention of the challenges and barriers faced by women in the political world in the UK. With women still being grossly under-represented in both chambers of Parliament, and women still in the minority in Local Government, this clearly presents a glaring gap.

For a copy of the report, please visit: http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=142337



2008: WOMEN AND THE VOTE – UPDATE

On 6th February the Electoral Reform Society, Engender, the Centre for Women and Democracy, Fawcett, the Hansard Society, Women's Parliamentary Radio and Unlock Democracy launched the campaign 2008: Women and the Vote with an Electoral Reform Society event at Westminster and an evening reception organised by the Fawcett Society.



www.womenandthevote.com

UK NEWS

So far the campaign has proven a huge success. MPs and Lords have already signed up in large numbers, Early Day Motions have been circulated in support, both in the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament and the press has also got wind of the significance of the year 2008.

It is now our priority to make this momentum last throughout the year and beyond. To keep up to date with what is happening and where, please visit the campaign website www.womenandthevote.com for further information.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

THE US PRIMARIES AN ANALYSIS



In May 2007, the Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics (CAWP) published an article in their Occasional Paper Series, entitled *Gender and Executive Activism: Will the United States Elect a Female President in 2008?* In the wake of 'Super Tuesday', a look back at law professor Paula A. Monopoli's predictions makes for interesting reading.

The crux of her argument was that of the top four qualities valued by US voters—"self-confidence, assertiveness, compassion, and toughness"—three were seen as masculine traits. Prof. Monopoli also put forward her view that the political make-up of America, with executive power focused in the hands of a single individual, has itself led to a preference for a certain type of leader: decisive, energetic, and male.

There did appear to exist, however, a glimmer of hope for Hillary Clinton. Monopoli suggested that the well-documented war weariness of the American electorate, and a consequent desire for "a more compassionate government", might open the doors to a successful Clinton bid for the presidency.

Whilst Monopoli's predictions were well-reasoned, with the benefit of hindsight we can see that the central battle between Clinton and Barack Obama has been a much more complex affair. One reason is that Clinton does not fit into the traditional female mould. Of the aforementioned most-valued qualities in a president, Clinton's weakness has arguably been in the lone "feminine" quality: the ability to display warmth and compassion. The emotionally engaging Obama has enchanted a weary electorate with his promises of change and revitalisation. Thus, Hillary's glimmer of hope has instead played into the hands of her opponent.

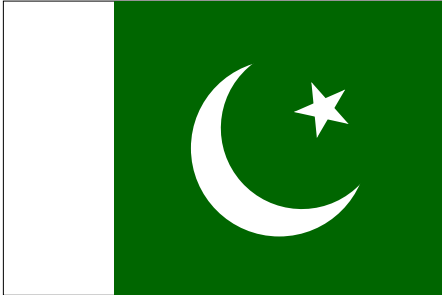
Whilst there is no doubt that American women have engaged with the present electoral process in impressive numbers, this has not always translated to improved prospects for the lone female

candidate. Indeed, as we reported last month, the Iowa caucus results showed 35% of women voting for Obama, against 30% for Clinton. More recently it was reported that white women had turned out heavily in favour of Clinton on Super Tuesday, but they alone cannot win her the race. Obama's great success has been to transcend the key social divides by attracting voters from every demographic.

If a broader conclusion is to be drawn from this US presidential race, it is that this type of battle between personalities is difficult to simplify along lines of gender or race or age; with only one position to fill, the presidency cannot equally represent the manifold identities present in American society. Perhaps Prof. Monopoli was right to identify America's model of government as the true barrier to female representation, rather than the much-cited conservative instincts of its electorate.

Paula A. Monopoli, 'Gender and Executive Activism: Will the United States Elect a Female President in 2008?' (Belfast, May 2007) can be downloaded here: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/research/Monopoli%20paper.pdf>

PAKISTAN'S LONG-AWAITED ELECTIONS



Following the disruptions caused by the fatal attack on Benazir Bhutto at the end of December last year, Pakistan defied expectations by holding its general election on 18th February 2008. Perhaps surprisingly, women fared comparatively well despite reports that women in some northern regions had avoided the polls for fear of militant attacks. According to the Election Commission of Pakistan, out of the 342 members of the National Assembly, seventy-five are now women, increasing the female presence by 4 and bringing the percentage of women in Pakistan's Parliament to 21.9 percent (a higher proportion than at Westminster).* The relative success of women candidates, however, needs some further explanation.

Pakistan is traditionally a male-dominated society with female literacy standing at 35 percent compared to 64 percent for men. However, having developed out of a relatively long history of positive discrimination, 60 seats in the National Assembly, the Lower House, are nowadays reserved for women. These, rather than being directly voted for, are proportionally distributed amongst all the parties gaining more than five percent of the votes. In addition, in this year's election, fifteen of the general seats, which are directly elected by the electorate, were also won by women with seven of these belonging to the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians, six to the Pakistan Muslim League-N, one to the Muttahida Qaumi Movement

and one Independent. Overall sixty-seven female candidates contested elections to the general seats with thirty-three standing as Independents.

The question is now how much difference these women will be able to make in the next governing period and whether their voices will be truly heard.

...
**Out of 272 constituencies 262 have now been announced, 6 are still awaited, 2 postponed and 2 have been terminated.*

THE CASE OF SAYED PERVEZ KAMBAKSH



The story of Sayed Pervez Kambaksh made headline news last month. The young Afghan was sentenced to death for reading and distributing a report which criticised the notion that the oppression of women was condoned by the Qur'an. Although the sentence was overturned following international pressure, his case shows that the fall of the Taliban has not precluded the possibility of severe human rights abuses in Afghanistan.

Ironically, representation of women in the Afghan legislature, at 27.3%, exceeds the 19.7% figure in our House of Commons. This illustrates the point that democracy must be understood as a series of processes working in unison. The attainment of higher levels of female representation, whilst commendable, is meaningless without commensurate rights in society. Kambaksh's case has highlighted the relationship between freedom of expression and gender equality in society.

BRUSSELS' GLASS CEILING



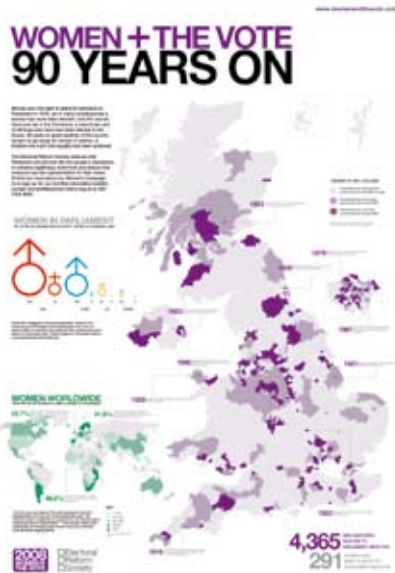
The European Commission is a central component of European government, the executive branch of the European Union, which not only proposes legislation but also oversees legislative implementation and the day-to-day running of the Union. Its members are appointed by the European Council with the approval of the European Parliament. It is among the newest constitutional developments in the world, but it seems that it still struggles with the issue of equality in the same way as the democracies making up its membership.

On 20 January, the now Vice-President of the European Commission Margot Wallström spoke out about the apparent glass ceiling within the European Commission, with the best jobs apparently still going to men. The Swede, quoted in the Times, argued that rather than being an accountable and open process, appointments seem to be made behind closed doors with men appointing men.

Taking a look at the European Commission since its existence, Ms Wallström's comments are not unfounded. So far none of the European Commission President's has been a woman – out of 11 altogether. In addition, only 2 of the 26 Presidents of the European Parliament have been female. Putting this into context, with 29.6 percent of European Commissioners being female and 30.2 percent of the European Parliament being women, the idea of a glass ceiling seems to ring true.

EVENTS & PUBLICATIONS

PUTTING WOMEN ON THE MAP



To mark the 90th anniversary of women first winning the right to stand for elections and be elected to Parliament, the Electoral Reform Society has produced a map outlining which areas of the UK have

so far and currently are represented by a female MP. The colour-coded poster clearly shows that many parts of the UK still remain no-go areas for women. The map also highlights the UK's comparatively low percentage of women in Parliament compared with countries such as Rwanda and Sweden.

If you would like to receive a copy of this poster, please send an email to beatrice.barleon@electoral-reform.org.uk.

CAPITALWOMAN 2008

The Electoral Reform Society will have a stand at this year's Capitalwoman event in London. The event takes place on 8 March 2008 at the Queen Elizabeth II Centre and Central Hall, Westminster. The event, which boasts a number of impressive speakers, for example the American activist Angela Davis, is free and you can still register to attend by visiting www.london.gov.uk/capitalwoman/.

DEMOCRACY DEBATE

The Centre for Women and Democracy is organising a day-long event on 5th April 2008 which will discuss how decisions about our communities, our services and our taxes are taken, about how we could improve the system, and about how you could influence it. The event is free (including lunch) and a report from it will be going to political parties, the government, and others.

To book your place, please go to: <http://www.cfwd.org.uk/events.html>

GET INVOLVED

2008: WOMEN AND THE VOTE

Sign up

You can now sign up to the campaign electronically! Go to <http://www.womenandthevote.com>, click on 'Sign Up' and take it from there.

Write to your MP

To mark this important year a number of MPs have put down an Early Day Motion. Early Day Motions are used to make other MPs aware of a particular issue, encourage parliamentary debate and allows MPs to show their support. So far over 100 MPs have already signed up.

Write to your MP asking him/ her to put their signature to either of the EDMs listed below. You can also check via this link whether your MP has already signed up.

<http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=34983&SESSION=891>

And for our Scottish supporters – there is also a motion circulating in the Scottish Parliament. Why not write to your MSP asking him/ her to sign up to that too? If we get enough MSPs supporting this, there is a good chance that this issue will be discussed in the Scottish Parliament.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/Apps2/business/motions/Default.aspx?motionid=13278>

JOIN THE ERS

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: <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/join.php>