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A record number of Scottish women MPs elected – but that’s not saying much!

In an election that left the Scottish political landscape untouched, there was one story of change: a record number of Scottish women MPs have been elected. But, that’s not saying much – it adds up to a modest increase of only four. In total 13 women will take up their Scottish seats in Westminster compared with nine in 2005. Gains across the UK have been similarly modest with 142 women returned in the 2010 General Election (22%).

Dr Meryl Kenny, a political scientist at University of Edinburgh remarked, “Although there’s been some modest progress, and that is to be welcomed, we’re a long way short of parity or the levels of women’s representation in the Scottish parliament. Before we get too excited, it is worth noting that this result brings Westminster up to joint 50th in the world league tables on women’s representation – sharing a place with Eritrea, Latvia and Uzbekistan. ”

The issue of women’s under representation in politics has been back on the agenda of all the parties in recent years, driven in the main by UK Conservative party leader David Cameron’s vocal support for tackling the issue, and his determination to change the face of the party he inherited in 2005. The Conservatives nationally fielded 24 % women candidates this time round, up from 19% in the last General Election. In Scotland, the increase was particularly dramatic, from 8.6 % to 30.5 %. However the overall picture is less impressive: across the parties, the average percentage of women candidates fielded in the General Election rose only marginally from 20% to 21%. Again, in Scotland, the increase was more marked, from 18.4% to 24.6 % albeit relating to small numbers. Alone of the main political parties, the Liberal Democrats fielded fewer women in 2010 across the UK, including Scotland, than it did in 2005.

Focusing on the Scottish results: Labour women make up eleven of the thirteen with five sitting MPs joined by newcomers Pamela Nash (Airdrie and Shotts), Gemma Doyle (Dunbartonshire West), Fiona O’Donnell (East Lothian), Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East), Margaret Curran (Glasgow East), and Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudon). They are joined by one returning Liberal Democrat and

the new SNP member for Banff and Buchan, Eilidh Whiteford, successor to Alex Salmond.

Five of the six new women MPs were selected from all-women-shortlists. The Labour party was the only one to adopt quota-type equality measures and this is reflected in the overall results. Women are a third of the Scottish Labour contingent but only 9% of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and 16.7% of SNP members. The sole Scottish Conservative and Unionist elected was a man.

Less than one in four candidates selected by the four main Scottish parties were women (24.6%). The party breakdown is as follows: Scottish Labour 14 women out of 59 (23.7%); Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party 18 (30.5%); Scottish Liberal Democrats 10 (16.9%); and Scottish National Party 16 (27.1%). In contrast the Scottish Green party, which only contested 20 seats, fielded 12 women (60%).

As in the rest of the UK, the election saw unusually high levels of turn over as many sitting Scottish members of parliament retired or were deselected, several as a result of the Westminster Expenses scandal. On paper, this offered the opportunity to make considerable gains in terms of women's representation. However, despite some improvements in candidate figures and in numbers elected, overall it still falls short of equal representation.

Karen Dargo of Engender, said, "This is a wasted opportunity when so many sitting MPs were standing down. Although the number of women has risen, the performance of political parties North and South of the border has been underwhelming on this issue. A real commitment is needed, including the greater use of equality measures."

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Notes to Editors

Analysis provided by Dr Meryl Kenny and Dr Fiona Mackay, University of Edinburgh.

Table 1: Westminster elections: Scottish results by party and gender 2010

Party	Female	Male	Total	(% women)
Labour	11	30	41	35.5%
Conservative	0	1	1	0.0%
Liberal Democrat	1	10	11	9.0%
SNP	1	5	6	16.7%
<i>Total</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>59</i>	<i>22.0%</i>

Table 2: Westminster elections: Scottish results by party and gender 2005

Party	Female	Male	Total	(% women)
Labour	8	33	41	24.2%
Conservative	0	1	1	0.0%
Liberal Democrat	1	10	11	9.1%
SNP	0	6	6	0.0%
<i>Total¹</i>	9	50	59	15.3%

¹This total dropped to 8 Scottish women MPs (13.6%) after the death of Rachel Squire. Willie Rennie (SNP) won the 2006 by-election for this seat.

Table 3: Westminster elections 2010: Scottish candidates by party and gender

Party	Candidates		Total Candidates (% women)
	female	male	
Labour	14	45	59 (23.7%)
Conservative	18	41	59 (30.5%)
Liberal Democrat	10	49	59 (16.9%)
SNP	16	43	59 (27.1%)
<i>Total</i>	58	178	236 (24.6%)

Table 4: Westminster elections 2005: Scottish candidates by party and gender

Party	Candidates		Total Candidates (% women)
	female	male	
Labour	10	49	59 (16.9%)
Conservative	5	53	58 (8.6%)
Liberal Democrat	15	43	58 (25.8%)
SNP	13	46	59 (22%)
<i>Total</i>	43	191	236 (18.4%)