

Total Politics

The need for gender balance in politics

by Helen Grant / 11 Apr 2011

Helen Grant MP looks at the vital part female politicians play in creating a strong parliamentary body, and as role models for the future



Helen Grant

Our dominant political parties have long accepted the need for better female representation in Westminster although how to achieve that goal remains a matter of ongoing debate. But what is it that women bring to the political table?

I am a fervent advocate of gender balance but this issue should not be confused with arguments about equality. It is a matter of optimising performance, using the attributes of both sexes, working together, to arrive at the best policies and decisions.

Gender balance in politics provides more rounded opinions, better decisions and lower risk

The theory that members of the different sexes have diametrically different communication styles, emotional needs and personal values has long been a moot point in Western culture. Some have said the differences are so striking that we may as well be from different planets, memorably reflected by the title of John Gray's 1992 book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. The trick is to identify contrasting and complimentary differences within people and then create a team environment for maximising opportunity and minimising risk.

That is not to say that all men and all women exhibit the same traits to the same degree or that gender related skills are mutually exclusive. In my experience, however, there are some basic examples that I think ring true for many of us.

For example; men are often calm when under pressure, and can be very spontaneous. Women are great multi-taskers, and are good at finishing and completing tasks. In confrontational situations where a man is likely to be combative, a woman is as likely to attempt a conciliatory approach.

These differences can lead to equally effective approaches to problem solving and decision making. Whether we are dealing with an imminent threat to national security, or negotiating a deal with the EU, both skill sets are vital and complimentary. It must follow that a well selected gender balanced team will be better equipped to manage, understand and solve the many challenges and decisions political groups have to handle in the Commons, the Lords and in Government.

A healthy democracy should reflect the nation it purports to represent. On its most basic level, diversity in parliament must surely strive to mirror the fact that 51 per cent of the population female.

The effect of the individual as a role model can be profound. The more balanced our political landscape becomes, the more pronounced will be the positive effect of female political role models on the aspirations of others across our social strata. Success breeds success and improvements in the lower echelons will inevitably exert vertical pressure on the system.

In this country and throughout most of the world women are, typically, the main homemakers and carers. An increase in female representation would undoubtedly lead to improvements in the understanding of the needs of families, and those for whom they care, resulting in better and more effective policy in this area.

Furthermore, I believe fundamentally that the family unit is one of the keystones of a healthy and stable society. The processes of Parliament are well known to be unfriendly to those MPs who have families. The changes imposed by the IPSA last year in terms of living accommodation and the related costs have exacerbated the problem to such a degree that family homemakers are being discriminated out of the Parliamentary system. An increase in female representation would help to counter this unhealthy trend immeasurably.

Women purportedly account for 80 per cent of consumer purchasing decisions in many countries. To make prudent consumer related policy requires female input if Parliament is to accurately reflect the needs of the public at large.

Lord Davies of Abersoch has recently published his report on gender balance within British Boards where presently only 12 per cent of FTSE 100 board members are female.

In my opinion he's got it just about right, seeking to accelerate glacial rates of change without causing global warming. Recommendations include voluntary targets to raise the number of female directors in Britain's biggest companies, while not ruling out quotas.

I cannot stomach the thought of enforced quotas and I believe our politicians should help the country avoid this, leading by example to achieve balanced gender representation in Westminster. This would shine a light for our companies and professions to follow suit and also create multiple paths for succession. We must sustain a balanced pool of talent for tomorrow particularly in our legislature, where we desperately need more people with skills beyond the walls of Westminster.

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