

WOMEN IN POLITICS

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Hazel Blears MP - Secretary of State for
Communities and Local Government

I have a big interest in politics, I always have done and I probably always will do. But there's just one thing, I'm female, but will that really make a difference?

Many leading female figures are shifting the balance quickly. This is one of many issues, which goes beyond the boundaries of party politics. With just 1 in 5 MPs being women, there is clearly a big problem of under-representation.

Some solutions could come through the means of positive discrimination, such as women-only lists.

I asked three of the most prominent women in British politics for their thoughts on this subject:

Is it more difficult for women to have a career in politics?

Hazel Blears: "I think we've come a long way since the days when a woman MP was seen as an oddity. It is more common now for women to get onto parliamentary selection short-lists, but there is still some prejudice towards women MPs. A big issue

is still class – if you come from a poor background with no family connections to politics, it can be really hard to get on. Parliament is still full of people who come from political families, or who know each other from student days at Oxford or Cambridge. There still aren't many working class people at the top of politics, and there should be!"

Should there be more women in Parliament?

Theresa May: "We do need more women in Parliament. There are a number of reasons why there are not more women in Parliament. Men tend to be more ready to believe they would make good MPs and to come forward at an early age, getting political experience so they are able to start the process leading to winning a seat, in their early twenties. Women tend to feel they need to wait to get other experience first and often although they think about trying to do the job they wait for someone to tell them they would be good at it before applying. Some women are

also put off by the ya-booo politics they see in Parliament."

Is politics just a man's game?

Jo Swinson: "No, politics deals with serious issues that affect people's everyday lives, and women are just as able as men to contribute to political debate and represent constituents well. In many ways the "softer" skills associated with women of negotiation, empathy and team working are invaluable in politics. Some of the debates in the House of Commons can look like something from a school playground, but away from the set piece Parliamentary theatre of Prime Minister's Questions, a great deal of rational, reasonable debate takes place in Parliament, not least in the Select Committees."

Are women perceived as less capable than men, when it comes to politics?

Hazel Blears: "No, I don't think



Theresa May MP - Conservative Shadow Leader of the House of Commons



Jo Swinson MP - Liberal Democrat Shadow Foreign Affairs spokesperson

so. My political heroine is a fiery redhead called Barbara Castle. She was a Labour Government Minister in the 1960s and 1970s, and she was more than a match for the men. These days, women in politics are judged more for what they can do, not their gender."

Is being a woman a help or a hindrance?

Theresa May: "I believe being a woman is a help. After all it's reckoned that having a woman standing adds 4% to turnout in a seat at a general election. And the skills we have - e.g. listening skills, inter-personal skills - are more relevant to the job today when it is as much about constituency work as about work in Westminster."

What does being a woman in Parliament bring to the table?

Jo Swinson: "Women have a different set of life experiences

to men. Having a good mix of both genders is important, as is a mix of ethnic backgrounds, age, profession or occupation prior to being an MP, sexual orientation etc - in short, Parliament should reflect the society it represents, and when it does it will be more likely to be in touch with people's concerns, and make better decisions."

It is evident that being a woman in Parliament can have its advantages. They bring something different and unique, which can be an asset to Parliament.

Only a wide range of MPs can accurately represent their constituents, and this includes women.

I feel that we are going in the right direction, and hope that at the next UK General Election we will have more female MPs and more in high profile positions. And it doesn't just have to be Parliament; women should be encouraged to take part in local democracy and charities, so they can really make a difference.

Did you know?

In 1945, there were just twenty-four female MPs in the UK. Today the number has gone up to 125 out of a total 645, which is 19.4%.

Today the world regional average of women parliamentarians is 16%. Pacific countries have the lowest average by region of 3.1%. Scandinavian countries -- Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden -- have the highest representation of women in Parliament, around 41% on average.

Countries ranked above the UK in the world league include Afghanistan, Australia, Rwanda, Belarus, Pakistan, New Zealand and 27 other European states.