



Factsheet M₄ Members Series

Revised November 2009

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House of Commons Information Office

Women in the House of Commons

This factsheet provides details of women MPs currently sitting in the House of Commons and of women in Government posts. It also gives a history of the campaigns to give women the vote and to allow them to stand as candidates for election. The history of parliamentary representation by women is also examined.

This factsheet is available on the internet at:
http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/factsheets.cfm

November 2009
FS No.M₄ Ed 3.7
ISSN 0144-4689

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Women sitting in the House of Commons

At the General Election of May 2005 128 women were elected as Members of Parliament, the highest number ever with one in five MPs now a woman, since that time due to by-election results that number has reduced to 126. Of these MPs, 94 are Labour, 18 Conservative, 9 Liberal Democrat, 1 Democratic Unionist, 1 Sinn Fein, 1 Ulster Unionist, 1 Independent Labour and 1 Deputy Speaker.

Of the 119 new Members elected to Parliament for the first time in 2005, 38 were women. These comprised 26 Labour, 6 Liberal Democrat and 6 Conservative Members. 29 women Members from the 2001 Parliament were either defeated or did not stand for re-election.

There are currently 4 women in the Cabinet (3 MPs and 1 Peer), 4 also attend Cabinet meetings (3 MPs and 1 Peer) and there are 32 women in Ministerial posts (25 MPs and 7 Peers).

The longest continuing serving female MP was Barbara Castle who was elected in 1945 for Blackburn and retired in 1979. The longest serving female MP was Irene Ward who was elected in 1931 for Wallsend but later defeated in the 1945 General Election. She was re-elected in 1950 for Tynemouth and retired in 1974. Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody recently had the longest unbroken service as a female MP, having been elected in 1974 (she was also a Member between 1966 and 1970) and serving until her death in April 2008. Harriet Harman is currently the longest continuously serving female MP having been elected in the Peckham by-election in 1982. Margaret Beckett is currently the longest serving female MP having first been elected in 1974 for Lincoln but was later defeated in the 1979 General Election. However, she was elected in the 1983 General Election for Derby South. Jo Swinson was the youngest female MP elected in 2005 at the age of 25. The current youngest female MP is Chloe Smith having been elected in the Norwich North by-election in July 2009. The youngest female MP elected was Bernadette Devlin who was 21 years when she won the Mid-Ulster by-election in 1969. Angela and Maria Eagle, who were both elected in 1997, were the first twin sisters to serve as MP's.

Since 1918 a total of 4,670 Members have been elected to the House of Commons. Of these 292(6%) have been women (see Appendix B) and 4,378 (94%) men. Countess Constance Markievicz, elected in 1918, refused to take her seat as has Michelle Gildernew who was elected in 2001. 187 (64%) of the women have been Labour MPs if this is defined by party of first election. Altogether, 29 women (24 MPs and 5 Peers) have held Cabinet positions (see Appendix C).

Women's right to vote

The fight for women's suffrage began in earnest during the second half of the nineteenth century, though it is generally recognised that the campaign for the freedom and equality of women had been founded a century earlier by Mary Wollstonecraft; her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792.

The first debate in the House of Commons on women's suffrage was initiated by John Stuart Mill, a great advocate of the cause, and held on 20 May 1867. From then on, attempts to pass legislation on the subject were made during almost every parliamentary session, but without success, although a few bills did pass the second reading stage. A variety of arguments were used at the time by opposing groups, for example, if women were given the vote, logically they could not be prevented from becoming Members of Parliament. Another was that those who had to obey the law should have a say in its making. A further view was that if women's interests were the same as men's they could be expected to vote the same way. The converse argument to this was also made, that women's interests were different, and so they should be directly represented in parliament.

Although achievement of the campaigners' aims was still many years away at this stage, a small advance was made in 1869, when the franchise for municipal elections was extended to women ratepayers.

Of the many groups and societies formed to promote the cause of women's suffrage, the best known is probably the Women's Social and Political Union, founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, who had been campaigning amongst working women in Manchester. In 1905 it was decided that the methods of persuasion which had been employed until that time were achieving little, and campaigners embarked upon a course of more militant action, which resulted in repeated arrests and imprisonments.

The outbreak of the First World War brought about a truce whilst campaigners devoted themselves to the war effort. However, the subject came to the fore again in 1916 when it became obvious that the movement of military personnel had rendered the electoral register quite out of date. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, as President of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and acknowledged leader of the constitutional movement, secured a concession from the then Prime Minister, Henry Asquith, that the matter should be considered once more. A conference on electoral reform, chaired by the Speaker, was set up. In February 1917 this conference recommended a limited measure of women's suffrage. The recommendations were duly enacted in the *Representation of the People Act 1918* (Royal Assent, 6 February 1918), which gave the vote to women over thirty years of age.

Equalisation of voting age

In 1928, the voting age for women was lowered to 21 years, the same as for men, by the *Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act* (Royal Assent, 2 July 1928). This removed the anomaly which had stood since 1918, that, in theory at least, a woman could be elected as a Member of Parliament up to nine years before she was allowed to vote in parliamentary elections.

Women as Members of Parliament

After the lengthy struggles to achieve this degree of suffrage for women, it was a matter of some surprise to the campaigners that legislation to make women eligible (at the age of 21) for nomination and election to the House of Commons was passed later in 1918. With a General Election looming, it was acknowledged that the law was ambiguous and women were already being chosen as parliamentary candidates. On 23 October 1918, the House of Commons passed a motion (by 274 votes to 25) proposed by Herbert Samuel "that . . . it is desirable that a Bill should be passed forthwith making women eligible as Members of Parliament". Accordingly, the *Parliament (Qualification of Women) Bill* was introduced by Lord Robert Cecil, a Government Minister, on 31 October. It was passed, almost without opposition, within three weeks and received Royal Assent on 21 November, the day that Parliament was dissolved, some three weeks before the General Election.

Election of the first women Members

At the 1918 General Election, out of a total of 1,623 candidates, only 17 were women. Most had been active campaigners in the suffrage movement, including Christabel Pankhurst, daughter of the founder of the Women's Social and Political Union. It was felt that she, along with several other candidates, stood a reasonable chance of success but she was defeated by 775 votes although she polled more votes than any of the other women candidates.

In fact, the only successful candidate had taken no part in the campaign and was never to take her seat. Countess Constance Markievicz, of Anglo-Irish background and married to a Polish Count had

contested the election from her cell in Holloway Prison. She was being held under suspicion of conspiring with Germany during the war (although there is no evidence that she did so) having earlier been released under an amnesty from a life sentence for her part in the Irish Easter Rising. In common with other Sinn Féin members, she did not take her seat (the St Patrick's division of Dublin) in protest against Britain's policy on Ireland.

Although the women candidates who had stood at the 1918 election were prominent in the suffrage movement or dedicated political activists, it was ironic that the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons had never campaigned for women's rights.

American-born Viscountess Astor was elected for the Sutton division of Plymouth on 15 November 1919 at a by-election caused by her husband's accession to the peerage on the death of his father. She was a character of considerable wit and charm who soon took up the interests of women and children and, in particular, those problems related to the abuse of alcohol. In her maiden speech, on 24 February 1920, on this very subject, she concluded by saying: "I do not want you to look on your lady Member as a fanatic or lunatic. I am simply trying to speak for hundreds of women and children throughout the country who cannot speak for themselves." In 1923, the *Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons under Eighteen) Act*, introduced by Lady Astor, became the first Act to result from a bill introduced by a backbench woman Member of Parliament. (Appendix D lists all subsequent Acts to date).

The first three women Members of Parliament to take the oath were all elected for seats which had been held by their husbands. Lady Astor (Conservative) was joined in the House of Commons in 1921 by Margaret Wintringham (Liberal), who was returned for the marginal constituency of Louth even though, as a mark of respect to her dead husband, she had not spoken in public throughout her campaign.

In 1923, Mabel Hilton Philipson who, as Mabel Russell, had been a well-known musical comedy actress took over as the Conservative Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed after her husband (a National Liberal) had been unseated because of the fraudulent practices of his agent.

The first Labour woman MP to be elected was Arabella Susan Lawrence, returned for East Ham, North on 7 December 1923, but the first female Labour MP to take the oath was Dorothea Jewson, on 9 January 1924. The third Labour woman to be elected in December 1923 was Margaret Bondfield (see Ministers, below).

A full list of all women Members of the House of Commons since 1918 is given in Appendix B¹.

Women Ministers

The first woman to hold ministerial office was Margaret Bondfield (Labour) who, in January 1924 after Baldwin's resignation and the formation of Ramsay MacDonald's Government, was appointed Under Secretary in the Ministry of Labour. Miss Bondfield lost her seat at the General Election later that year but was returned again at a by-election in 1926. On 7 June 1929 she was appointed Minister of Labour; the first woman member of the Cabinet and also the first British woman politician to be admitted to the Privy Council. She held this position until her parliamentary career came to an end in 1931 when she was defeated and Labour lost the General Election. A list of all those women Members of the House of Commons who have held ministerial office since Miss Bondfield is given in Appendix C.

¹ Available from the Parliament website (www.parliament.uk) or from the House of Commons Information Office on request.

Women Legislators

The first Act to have been sponsored through by Houses of Parliament by a female MP and female Peer was the *Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960*. Mrs Margaret Thatcher introduced a Private Members' Bill in the House of Commons to extend the rights of the Public and the Press to be present at meetings of local authorities and other public bodies. The Second reading of the Bill took place on 5th February 1960 and Margaret Thatcher made her maiden speech. The Bill successfully passed its Commons stages and was passed to the Lords. It was then sponsored by Baroness Elliot who was the first peeress to speak in the House of Lords in 1958 following the creation of life peers with the passing of the *Life Peerages Act 1958*. The Bill successfully completed its Lords stages and received Royal Assent on 27 October 1960.

Woman Prime Minister

The Conservative victory at the 1979 General Election brought about another "first" when the Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher became the first British woman Prime Minister having led the Conservative Party since February 1975. However, at the same time, the 1979 election returned the lowest number of women MPs for nearly thirty years. Only one other woman held Cabinet office during the time that Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. This was Baroness Young, who was Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords in 1982-83.

Margaret Thatcher went on to become the longest serving Prime Minister of the 20th century, serving for 11 years, 209 days. Only four Prime Ministers in history have served for a longer period.

Woman Speaker

The first, and so far only, woman Speaker was Rt Hon Betty Boothroyd (Labour). She was elected as Speaker by the House of Commons on 27 April 1992, following the first contested election since 1971 (see also Factsheet M2). She was addressed as "Madam Speaker". Miss Boothroyd retired as Speaker, and as a Member of Parliament, in 2000.

Miss Boothroyd had previously served as Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker since 1987, in which capacity she had become the second woman to occupy the Speaker's Chair. The first woman to do so was the Rt Hon Betty Harvie Anderson (Conservative), who was appointed Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means on 2 July 1970. She took the Chair later on the same day, during the debate on the Queen's Speech, when she was addressed as "Mr Deputy Speaker".

Committees

Although women MPs had been active in various committees, it was not until the beginning of the 1946-47 session that Mrs Florence Paton (Labour) became the first woman to be nominated by the Speaker to the Chairmen's Panel of Members to act as temporary chairmen of committees of the whole House and chairmen of standing committees. In the former capacity, Mrs Paton became, on 31 May 1948, the first woman to preside over the whole House, during a supply day debate on Scottish civil aviation estimates. She did not, however, sit in the Speaker's Chair, but at the Table, as is the case when the House is in committee.

Recent Developments in Women's Representation

The General Election of 1 May 1997 saw a record number of women candidates elected, 120 women candidates were returned. A record number of women candidates stood for election, due, in part, to

the Labour Party adopting a policy of women-only shortlists, whereby a proportion of local parties were required to shortlist only women candidates for selection. The mechanism was applied in half the 'winnable' seats in 1993-96. This Labour Party policy was withdrawn in 1996 when an employment tribunal found that it was in breach of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975*.

Since then uncertainty about the legal position made it difficult for parties to develop policies on selection procedures aimed at introducing more women MPs into Parliament. Some limited policies to promote women candidates by Labour, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru on balanced short lists were introduced for the 2001 General Election. The Labour Party was the only political party to use all-female shortlists in the 2005 General Election.

Legislation

The *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002* received Royal Assent on 26 February 2002. It amended the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* and the *Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976* that outlawed sexual discrimination, to enable political parties to take positive action to reduce inequality in the numbers of men and women, though it does not require parties to do this if they do not wish to. The legislation resolved the issues raised by the findings of the employment tribunal in the case of Labour's women only short lists. However, the Act is scheduled to run out in 2015 but the Government's new Equality Bill laid before Parliament on 24th April 2009 will be used to extend women only shortlists for political parties beyond 2015. It is worth noting that methods of positive action to redress inequalities between men and women are in use in many EU countries, though the question of the selection of party candidates as an employment issue has not been tested by the EU.

Appendix A

Women Members elected at General Elections: 1918-2005

Election date	Con	Lab	Lib (b)	SDP	Other	Speaker	Total	% of all MPs
14 Dec 1918	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	0.1%
15 Dec 1922	1	-	1	-	-	-	2	0.3%
6 Dec 1923	3	3	2	-	-	-	8	1.3%
29 Oct 1924	3	1	-	-	-	-	4	0.7%
30 May 1929	3	9	1	-	1	-	14	2.3%
27 Oct 1931	13	-	1	-	1	-	15	2.4%
14 Nov 1935	6	1	1	-	1	-	9	1.5%
5 Jul 1945	1	21	1	-	1	-	24	3.8%
23 Feb 1950	6	14	1	-	-	-	21	3.4%
25 Oct 1951	6	11	-	-	-	-	17	2.7%
26 May 1955	10	14	-	-	-	-	24	3.8%
8 Oct 1959	12	13	-	-	-	-	25	4.0%
15 Oct 1964	11	18	-	-	-	-	29	4.6%
31 Mar 1966	7	19	-	-	-	-	26	4.1%
18 Jun 1970	15	10	-	-	1	-	26	4.1%
28 Feb 1974	9	13	-	-	1	-	23	3.6%
10 Oct 1974	7	18	-	-	2	-	27	4.3%
3 May 1979	8	11	-	-	-	-	19	3.0%
9 Jun 1983	13	10	-	-	-	-	23	3.5%
11 Jun 1987	17	21	1	1	1	-	41	6.3%
9 Apr 1992	20	37	2	-	1	-	60	9.2%
1 May 1997	13	101	3	-	2	1	120	18.2%
7 Jun 2001	14	95	5	-	4	-	118	17.9%
5 May 2005	17	98	10	-	3	-	128	19.8%

Notes: (a) By-elections not included in above list, see Appendix B

(b) Liberal Democrat from 1992

Appendix B: Women MPs 1918 to date

Appendix C: Women MPs who have held ministerial office

Appendix D: Successful Bills introduced by backbench women MPs

Appendices B-D are not printed with this paper but are available from the Parliament Website at:

http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/factsheets/mo4.cfm

or on request from the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272.

Further reading

Abdela, Lesley *Women with X Appeal: woman politicians in Britain today* (Optima, 1989)

Brookes, Pamela *Women at Westminster: an account of women in the British Parliament 1918-66* (Peter Davies, 1967)

Colquhoun, Maureen A *Woman in the House* (Scan Book, 1980)

Coote, Anna and Pattullo, Polly *Power and Prejudice: women & politics* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990)

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Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, Joni *Political Recruitment: gender, race and class in the British parliament* (CUP, 1995)

Phillips, Melanie *The Divided House: Women at Westminster* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980)

Rallings, Colin and Thrasher, Michael *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006* (Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2007)

Stephenson, Mary-Ann *The Best Man for the Job?: the selection of women parliamentary candidates* (Fawcett Society, 1997)

Stephenson, Mary-Ann *The Glass Trapdoor: women, politics and the media during the 1997 General Election* (Fawcett Society, 1998)

Urquhart, Diane *Women in Ulster Politics 1890-1940* (Irish Academic Press, 2000)

Vallance, Elizabeth *Women in the House: a study of women Members of Parliament* (Athlone Press, 1979)

Useful websites

Fawcett Society: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/>

Women and Equality Unit: <http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/>

Equal Opportunities Commission: <http://www.eoc.org.uk>

Inter-Parliamentary Union: <http://www.ipu.org>

The Women's National Commission: <http://www.thewnc.org.uk/>

The Constitution Unit: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/>

Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/>

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House of Lords Information Office
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