

Electoral
 Reform
 Society

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LOCAL ELECTIONS SPECIAL



A change in the political landscape?

On 1st May metropolitan, unitary and district councils in England (outside London) as well as all Welsh local authorities held elections to determine who should represent them at the local level. While it had been anticipated that Labour would be doing badly, it seems nobody had expected things would turn out quite so disastrously for the Government.

Overall Labour has lost over 300 council seats, and not only in swing areas, but also in some of what had previously been Labour heartland. The main beneficiaries of their loss were the Conservatives, who not only gained 257 seats but also the control of 12 more councils than they had previously been running. Also gaining from Labour's losses were the Liberal Democrats, who could be seen to take over 1 council and gain 33 seats. Out of all the councils going to elections this year, the Conservatives are now in control of 65, whilst Labour has 18 and the Liberal Democrats 12.

Women's experience of the elections

The FPTP system used for local elections in England and Wales continued to make it difficult for women to break into local politics. Although there are proportionally more women in local councils than in the UK Parliament, which uses the same system, the figure is still very low. And worst, it isn't really getting any better. Women before the 2008 local elections made up 30.5 percent of all councillors in England. Following the 1st May elections, only 860 out of 1,953 councillors elected in England this year are women, or 30.6 percent. Although this only provides us with a partial picture of the current make-up of local councillors, it provides us with



a clear indication as to where we are heading – namely stagnation.

Similarly to the elections taking place on the national level, the First-Past-the-Post system used for local elections favours incumbents, on this occasion councillors, and encourages parties to select candidates that resemble most closely what has always worked. The notion of ‘safe seats’, which makes it possible for parties to allocate winnable seats to whoever they deem to be most suitable, combined with an understanding that what has traditionally produced results will also work in the future, makes it almost impossible for candidates who differ from the norm to break into local politics.

The Electoral Reform Society will produce a report of the recent local elections focusing on the issue of diversity in local councils. The report is expected some time in early autumn. In addition you can also find further information on the gender-make up of local councils following the 2008 elections from the [Centre for Women and Democracy website](#).

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Wrong winners, excessive majorities and unpopular ward winners

Apart from women, parties more generally also suffer from the inbuilt unfairness of the First-Past-the-Post system. Looking at the results in more detail, this year’s local elections were no exception – there were wrong winners, excessive majorities as well as a number of unpopular ward winners.

In Harlow, for example, the Labour party won 27.1 percent of the votes but no seats, while in Oxford the Conservatives are also not going to be represented on the new council,

despite having won 20.2 percent of the votes. And while the people of Southampton clearly wanted the Liberal Democrats to be part of the newly elected council, even with 19.1 percent of the votes overall this is not to be.

Excessive majorities and unpopular ward winners are also an issue. In Rotherham, for example, Labour won two thirds of the seats with a mere 36.2 percent of the votes, whilst in Tamworth the Conservatives managed to fill 90 percent of the seats with 49.5 percent of the vote. But it doesn’t stop there. What about the areas where a party with only a small percentage of the votes managed to win a seat? One just needs to look at the example of Maltby ward in Rotherham where the BNP took the seat with 23.1 percent of the votes, against the wish of the majority of the voters.

As experience has proven, using First-Past-the-Post for local elections creates more problems than some claim the system can solve, not merely for parties but for our democracy in general. It tends to produce abnormalities and perpetuates a form of democracy where some votes count more than others. By changing the local electoral system to a more proportional one, as they have in Scotland, much of these inbuilt problems would disappear. It’s quite simple, and if reason is what our society is built on, then changing how we vote for our representatives should really be a no-brainer.

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The Mayoral and London Assembly elections

Local councils around England and Wales were not the only ones put under scrutiny on 1st May this year. Another elected body facing a reshuffle was the regional body of the London Assembly. 45 percent of Londoners turned out to vote,

8 percent more than in previous elections, and whilst one reason surely was the run-off between Boris Johnson and Ken Livingstone for the office of Mayor, there are other factors that have contributed to this increase in voters’ interest.

This year’s London Assembly elections were the third of their kind and real efforts were made by political parties, the media and civil society organisations to explain how the different systems work and how people can make the most of their votes. What we are seeing is the benefits of this education and attention. And it is this education that has helped Londoners realise the greater choice they have. The increased turnout is therefore axiomatic of how Londoners feel about their vote. Their vote finally matters.

8 out of the 25 Assembly Members are women 2 down on the previous Assembly. Notably, 5 out of the 8 female members were voted in through the proportional element of the Mixed-Member System, reinforcing the argument that proportional systems tend to encourage a more diverse elected body than First-Past-the-Post.

OTHER UK NEWS

Gwyneth Dunwoody MP dies aged 77

The longest-serving female MP the Hon Gwyneth Dunwoody died at the age of 77 . She was a celebrated backbencher, renowned for being honest and outspoken. In her lengthy political career she had been MP for Crewe and Nantwich, a member of the European Parliament and Chair of the Transport Select Committee of the House of Commons. MPs from across the House of Commons expressed their sadness at the news sending their condolences to her family. Gordon Brown speaking at

Prime Ministers questions described her as ‘a great parliamentarian’ who will be ‘greatly missed’.

Crewe and Nantwich by-elections

On 22nd May, Crewe and Nantwich elected their new MP in a by-election following Gwynneth Dunwoody’s death. Standing as candidates were Tamsin Dunwoody-Kneafsey, Gwynneth’s daughter, for Labour, Elizabeth Shenton for the Liberal Democrats, and Edward Timpson for the Conservatives as well as candidates for the Green Party, UKIP, English Democrats and a couple of Independent candidates and candidates for smaller parties.

Despite the fact that the constituency had been under a Labour leadership for the last 34 years, Crewe & Nantwich declared a Conservative win when the results were announced early morning of 23rd May. Labour lost over 18 percent of the votes received by Gwynneth Dunwoody in 2005, with the Conservatives the recipients of an almost 17 percent swing. Some of the votes also went to smaller parties, which had not put up any candidates in the previous general elections.

The result comes as further blow to the Labour party who has already been suffering from a changing political landscape in the local elections beginning of May.

Harman becomes first Labour woman to answer PMQs

Harriet Harman made history on 2nd April by becoming the first Labour woman to answer Prime Ministers questions. She faced William Hague

who took little time to point out that Labour had accomplished this 30 years after the Conservatives (Margaret Thatcher first answered PMQs in 1979). Harman responded to Hague’s attack by asking the Conservatives why Theresa May, the Shadow Leader of the House of Commons, was not representing the opposition, despite the fact that it is the current Parliamentary convention that the deputy Prime Minister or Senior Shadow Cabinet member takes PMQs in the absence of the Prime Minister. ‘Why are you asking the questions today?’ Harman sniped ‘You are not the shadow leader of the house ... is this the situation in the modern Conservative party, that women should be seen, but not heard?’. This adversarial style of jibes and jokes often detracts from some important issues; however, in this instance both Hague and Harman have a point. Labour has been slow to get women to the heart of government, and the Conservatives have failed to modernise in favour of women. Harman answering PMQs is a positive step towards gender parity in politics, taking the UK closer to a time when women can take senior political responsibilities without creating an unusual newsworthy event.

Meet the UK’s first female Asian Lord Mayor

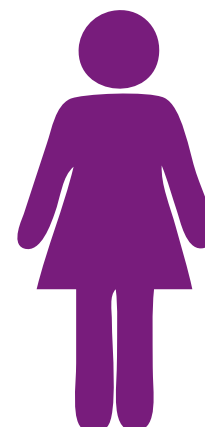
Asian men and women have been elected to become councillors for many years, and indeed elected Mayors of local authorities. However, on 15th May it was the first time in British history that an Asian woman was announced a Lord Mayor. The occasion took place in Leicester, where Manjoola Sood will be holding this post for 1 year. It is hoped that Ms Sood will set a precedent for more ethnic minority women to come forward to participate in the UK’s political life.

Currently less than 1 percent of all councillors are women from an ethnic minority background.

Government announces BAME women’s councillors’ taskforce

On 19th May Harriet Harman in her role as the Minister for Women announced the launch of a year-long taskforce looking into what practical action is needed to help more black, Asian and minority ethnic women to become councillors. The ministerial statement accompanying the announcement of the taskforce outlined that the information gathered during this year will feed into the Government response to the Councillors Commission, which was published at the end of last year. It is also hoped that it will inform a Speaker’s Conference.

One of the recommendations of the Councillors Commission was to allow councils to choose whether they would like to trial the Single Transferable Vote system for local elections. The Electoral Reform Society believes that changing the current First-Past-the-Post system to a more proportional system combined with greater outreach work and voter education has the potential to support the Government’s aims.



Calls for more women MPs in Mauritius

There have been renewed calls for electoral reform in Mauritius. The country, often considered to be a successful democracy, has been slow to increase the number of female representatives. Only 17 per cent of MPs and 10 per cent of the cabinet are women, putting it considerably behind the 30 per cent target agreed by the Southern African Development Community (SADC). A patriarchal political culture and the first past the post system has been cited as the cause of women's under-representation in the country. There have been other issues created from the current Mauritian electoral system including a previous parliament where the opposition held no seats despite winning 40 per cent of the vote. The Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam has now raised the issue in Parliament, suggesting that gender quotas will be considered and that a consensus on electoral reform will be created. Although he advocated electoral reform in opposition he has been accused of failing to give the issue priority since being in power. It is not yet clear what system the government will propose in this new debate, it is hoped an improved system will be in place in time for the next election which is due in two years time.

Spain's new Cabinet – 'too pink' or 'just right'?

Following the recent elections, in which Zapatero's Socialist Party renewed its mandate to govern the country, Spain's Prime Minister made a decision of historical importance. On 16th April 2008, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero announced that 9 of his 17 strong Cabinet would

be women, with a heavily pregnant Carme Chacon becoming the new Spanish Defence Minister. The world was in awe, with some being envious and others rather spiteful. While Italy's Berlusconi announced that he thought that Spain's new Government was 'too pink', the UK media and politicians were intrigued how a country known for its 'macho' culture could suddenly overtake the UK in terms of equality.

Looking in more detail, however, into how it is possible that Spain now has more women in powerful political positions than the UK, it quickly becomes clear that it all not so surprising.

Spain now ranks 9th in the world in terms of women's representation in national legislatures and has had over 25 percent of female representatives for the last 2 consecutive elections and over 20 percent for the last 4. Since 1990, the country has managed to more than double its female membership in Parliament. This has provided Zapatero with a much greater pool of female talent to choose from than is currently available in the UK Parliament.

But how did he manage to attract more women in the first place? And what can we in the UK learn from Spain's experience?

First of all, Spain, or at least part of its political elite, has shown a strong political will to change the status quo. In 2007 the Government introduced the 'Principle of balanced Presence', a legal requirement on parties to have a minimum of 40 percent and a maximum of 60 percent of either sex among their candidates for general elections.

Secondly, Spain elects its representatives by proportional representation while we in the UK continue to elect our representatives through First-Past-the-Post. As touched upon in the paragraph on women's representation in the section on local elections above, our electoral system is proven to be the least favourable to women.

The lessons therefore are quite simple – we need a change in the way we vote for our MPs and a change in political culture. The men who currently run much of what is happening in politics in the UK need to realise that not having sufficient input from women into political decision-making not only matters to women, but society as a whole.

Kuwait's Parliament still proves impenetrable for women

Kuwait's women achieved a historical landmark when they were finally given the right to vote and be elected to Parliament 3 years ago. However, it seems that despite being legally entitled to stand as candidates, the still strongly patriarchal culture of the country continues to prove impenetrable to aspiring female Parliamentarians.

This was once more confirmed at this year's national elections on 17th May. Although 27 women had put themselves forward for election, none were elected to the 50-strong Parliament. Only one of the women had been endorsed by a party, but even then she was not awarded enough votes to take up a seat.

Kuwait elects its members by plurality vote. The post of the Chief of State (Amir) is hereditary and the Prime Minister is appointed by the monarch. The Amir has the power to dissolve the Parliament.

The EU and women

Margot Wallström, Vice-President of the European Commission and Chair of the Council of Women World Leaders ministerial initiative, recently launched a campaign to get a fair share of women into the top jobs in

Europe. She argues that although the European Parliament has around 30 percent of female MEPs, and 9 out of 27 European Commissioners are women, Europe's top jobs are still male dominated. Wallström, herself from Sweden, a country known for its high proportion of women in political office, argues that 'men

still choose men' in Europe and that something needs to change.

Her campaign comes at an interesting time. In 2009 all the member countries of Europe will vote for their new MEPs and at least 4 of the top posts in Europe's institutional machinery will be filled, amongst

it the post of the President of the Commission. Wallström is concerned that while trying to achieve the right geographical balance and working out which new and old member countries should get some of the posts, the issue of gender balance continues to be sidelined.

EVENTS & PUBLICATIONS

New study on Rwanda throws light on women's contribution to politics

The Hunt Alternatives Fund recently published a series of research papers analysing women's contribution to politics in Rwanda. The information portrayed in these papers should be of great interest to advocates of greater female political representation, as Rwanda with 48.8 percent of its Parliamentarians being female leads the world league table on female representation.

The research shows that since that women leaders drafted the only substantive bill to emerge from the legislative rather than the executive branch, a far-reaching law to combat gender-based violence; spearheaded efforts to eliminate discrimination and enhance human rights protections; and fostered cross-party and male-female collaboration through the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians and by involving men in efforts to craft legislation.

For access to these papers, please visit the Hunt Alternatives [website](#).

For further information and to book your place, please go to the NASUWT [website](#).

NASUWT – 'One in Five' Conference (5th June)

The 2008: Women and the Vote team will be having a stand NASUWT's 1 in 5 Conference on 5th June 2008. The event takes place at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference centre in London. The conference hopes to explore why women are still underrepresented in traditional decision making bodies in the UK and discuss strategies for increasing representation.

Confirmed speakers include Barbara Follett MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Equality, Theresa May MP, Shadow Minister for Women, Frances O'Grady, TUC Assistant General Secretary, Sian Berry, Green Party candidate for London Mayor, Professor Mary Davis, London Metropolitan University and Professor Gargi Bhattacharya, Aston University & Guardian Columnist.

Compass - 'Born Free & Equal' (14th June)

The Electoral Reform Society together with Make Votes Count and the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform will be holding a seminar at this year's Compass event 'Born Free & Equal, titled 'Whose Vote Counts? Democracy and Inequalities in the 21st Century'.

The event will take place on 14th June from 1.30pm – 2.45pm at the Institute of Education, Bedford Way, in London.

The event will be chaired by Jenette Arnold (London Assembly) and the speakers are Chuka Umunna (Compass, Labour PPC for Streatham), Yasmin Qureshi (Labour PPC, Bolton South East) and Professor Robin Blackburn from the University of Essex.

For further information about the conference, please go to the Compass [website](#).

GET INVOLVED

80th anniversary of universal suffrage

On 2nd July this year it will be the 80th anniversary of universal suffrage, the day that women in the UK were finally given equal

voting rights to men. This is a day for celebration as well as for reminding our Governments that much more still remains to be done until we can truly speak of equality in representation.

2nd July is a day to take action! So, why not write to your MP asking

them to support the 2008: Women and the Vote campaign, of which the Electoral Reform Society is an active member. You can find a list of which representatives have already signed up on the campaign [website](#).

Get involved! Show your support! Get others to support this cause!