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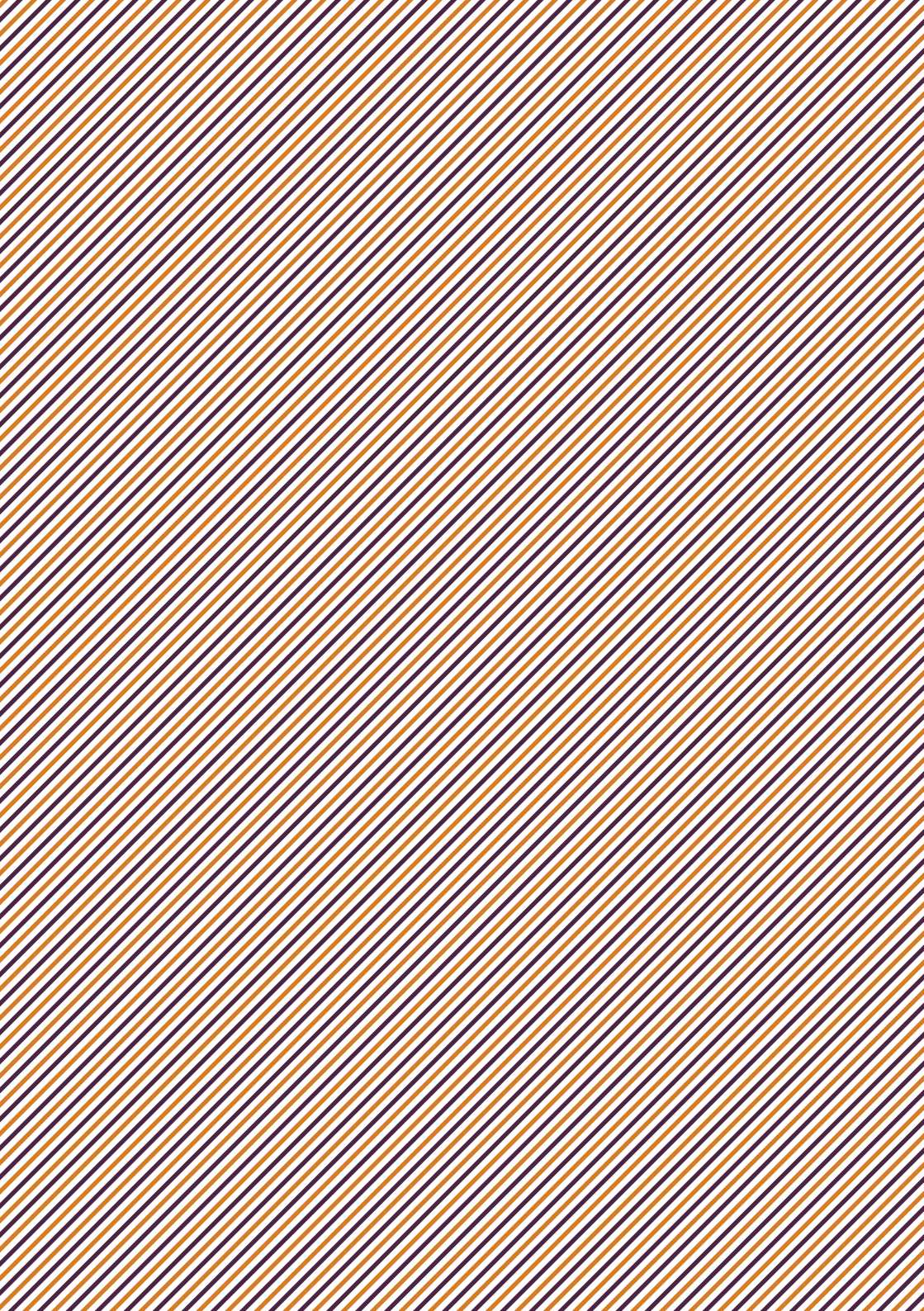


WOMEN IN WESTMINSTER

Predicting the number
of female MPs

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INTRODUCTION

It has been a long, slow journey towards fair representation of women in Parliament, and there is still plenty of distance to go. Whether we look at MPs, Peers or members of the Cabinet, in all cases fewer than one in four are female¹. Almost 100 years after the first woman was elected to Parliament, that clearly is not good enough. Our Parliament fundamentally fails to reflect the people it is there to represent.

At every general election there is an opportunity to make progress in redressing this imbalance. Parties field an entire slate of candidates, and have the opportunity to bring a greater number of women into the Commons. Since 1997 however, that progress has been painfully slow. That year, the number of female MPs doubled to 120 from the 60 elected in 1992. But in 2001, it went down to 118, and since then has only crept up to the current figure of 148 – not much more than a fifth of all MPs.

Now, two months out from the 2015 general election, we wanted to gain a measure of what we can expect of the next Parliament in terms of female representation. Have the parties taken the opportunity afforded by a general election to increase the number of women standing in winnable seats? How much further is there to go before there is equal representation of women in Parliament? And what barriers are still in women's way?

This report sets out our projections of the number of women in the next Parliament. Our key findings are:

- **192 women MPs** are likely to be elected in May 2015 (up from 148 now), representing 29.5% of the Commons. This is 6.6% up

¹ MPs 22.8%; Peers 23.5%; Cabinet 22.7%. See Sex and Power 2014, Counting Women In, available at: www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Sex-and-Power-2014.pdf

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- from the current 22.8% proportion of women
 - The UK could move from **56th to 36th** in the world rankings for female parliamentary representation
 - **The Greens, SNP and Labour** outperform other parties in terms of female candidates
 - Our **First Past the Post voting system is a major barrier to growth in women's representation in Parliament**; 'seat-blocking' incumbent male MPs continue to act as a brake on increased female representation, due to the prevalence of unchallenged 'safe seats'

There is, then, cause for some celebration. An increase of 44 women MPs is certainly an improvement on the parties' performances in 2010. And a 6.6% increase is a considerable advance on the previous three general election cycles. If that pace were to continue, there could be gender parity by 2030.

But the celebration is a muted one. Women would still only make up 29.5% of the Commons – a long way from the 51% which would signal a truly fair representation of women. We would still be missing out on the talents of a large proportion of British society, and failing to reflect the diversity and different experiences of the country.

This report also demonstrates the fact that our broken, archaic voting system is one of the chief obstacles to greater progress in this area. All of the parties are selecting more women in winnable seats than they used to, but change is slow because of the vast number of safe seats held by incumbents. These 'seat-blockers' are holding back further growth in female representation.

The Electoral Reform Society is a member of the Counting Women In coalition, which campaigns for fair representation of women in our politics². Counting Women In has a wide range of recommendations for improving women's representation. Parties should increase the number of female candidates in winnable seats; the media should seek to cover political issues in a way which does not demean the role of women; and everyone involved in politics should ensure that women and men have an equal footing in

2 The Counting Women In partners are the Centre for Women and Democracy, the Electoral Reform Society, the Fawcett Society, the Hansard Society and Unlock Democracy. More information at www.countingwomenin.org

campaigns, debates and other political events³.

The Electoral Reform Society's own analysis leads us to offer two additional recommendations. These are:

- **A more proportional voting system for general elections.** First Past the Post (FPTP) is the world's worst system for achieving gender balance. As parties evaluate their progress towards equal representation, they should make an honest assessment of the implications of continued use of FPTP for achieving equality.
- **An increased role for non-members in party activity.** For political parties to survive they must reach out beyond the 1% of the population who are fee-paying party members and bring the wider public into their campaigns. As part of this process of 'opening up'⁴, parties should take every possible opportunity

3 See *Sex and Power 2014*, Counting Women In, available at: www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Sex-and-Power-2014.pdf

4 See *Open Up*, Electoral Reform Society, December 2015

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to involve female supporters from the earliest stage. Mentoring and other practical support should be offered. And parties with fast-rising membership should take special advantage of the opportunities this gives to provide pathways for new female members to progress through the party and put themselves forward for selection and election at all levels.

This May will be a boost for equality in Parliament, with more women elected than ever. But to ensure this trend continues, we will have to deal with the barriers to progress. With trust in politics at rock bottom and people feeling increasingly separated from what happens within the Palace of Westminster, we cannot wait decades for a 50:50 Parliament.

MAKING PROGRESS?

Our model for predicting the number of women in the next House of Commons is based on current opinion polling and takes into account the gender of each likely winner, with all but five of these having been selected by the political parties at the time of writing¹. On that basis, we project that the number of women in the next Parliament will rise to 192 from the current 148. That would be an increase of 44 on the status quo following a number of by-elections in this Parliament, and an increase of 48 on the 2010 result.

Based on that projection, the UK would increase its female representation in the lower house from 22.8% to 29.4%. This would mean the UK would jump 20 places in the world rankings for female representation, up from 56th to 36th, all other things being equal (see *Table 1*). The figure would also put the UK over four points ahead of the OSCE² member country average of 25.2%, according to International Parliamentary Union figures³.

A rise to 29.5% female representation would be an increase of 7.4% since 2010 (and 6.6% up on the status quo). This would be a considerable improvement on previous election cycles. From 2005 to 2010, there was a rise of just 2%.

If our projection is correct, this significant improvement could at least partly be put down to growing concerns among the public as well as civil society organisations about the UK's poor performance

- 1 The projection uses a uniform swing model based upon the latest academic projection from Stephen Fisher of Oxford University (available at <http://electionsetc.com/>). In each seat the national change in the vote for each party, compared to 2010, is added or subtracted from each of its candidates' scores for our 2015 projection. Based on the winning candidate's gender, the model then projects a final percentage of women in Parliament. For Scotland and Wales separate swings were created to take into account the different party systems
- 2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- 3 This figure includes Nordic countries. See www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm

on female representation. The political parties have, to some extent at least, responded to these concerns, as can be seen through the below analysis of different parties' performances on selecting women candidates (*see Chapter 2*). But even after this effort, and

TABLE 1: WORLD RANKINGS FOR FEMALE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION⁴

| | | |
|------|----------------------------------|-------|
| 1st | Rwanda | 63.8% |
| 2nd | Bolivia | 53.1% |
| 3rd | Andorra | 50.0% |
| ... | ... | ... |
| 34th | Burundi | 30.5% |
| = | Switzerland | 30.5% |
| 35th | Nepal | 29.5% |
| 36th | UK (ERS projection for May 2015) | 29.5% |
| 37th | Trinidad and Tobago | 28.6% |
| 38th | Luxembourg | 28.3% |
| 39th | Ethiopia | 27.8% |
| 40th | Afghanistan | 27.7% |
| ... | ... | ... |
| 55th | Kyrgyzstan | 23.3% |
| 56th | UK (March 2015) | 22.8% |
| 57th | Israel | 22.5% |
| 58th | Peru | 22.3% |

despite the fact that this would be an unusually progressive election cycle, we would still be talking about a House of Commons where fewer than one in three MPs are women.

Regional variations

As can be seen from Table 2 below, there are likely to be significant regional variations in terms of female representation after May.

The East of England performs worst, with less than a fifth of MPs

⁴ Based on number of female representatives in the lower house where there are two legislative chambers, or the only house where there is one. See ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm

TABLE 2: OUR 2015 PROJECTION BY ENGLISH REGION

| Region | Men | Women | Not selected | % Women |
|----------------------|-----|-------|--------------|---------|
| East of England | 46 | 11 | 1 | 18.97 |
| East Midlands | 31 | 15 | 0 | 32.61 |
| London | 44 | 28 | 1 | 38.36 |
| North East | 17 | 12 | 0 | 41.38 |
| North West | 44 | 31 | 0 | 41.33 |
| South East | 62 | 21 | 1 | 25.00 |
| South West | 42 | 13 | 0 | 23.64 |
| West Midlands | 43 | 16 | 0 | 27.12 |
| Yorkshire and Humber | 39 | 14 | 1 | 25.93 |

elected in May expected to be women. This compares unfavourably with the North East and North West, where over 41% of likely winners are female.

Those parties which poll strongly in the worst-performing regions – for example the Liberal Democrats in the South West, the Conservatives in the South East and Labour in Yorkshire & Humber – ought to bear this regional imbalance in mind. The South East, South West and East of England cannot be allowed to act as brakes on the increasing representation of women in Parliament. All parties ought to take action to bring regional representation of women up to the average.

Polling variations

The polling projection used for our headline prediction has Labour winning 31.5% of the vote, and the Conservatives 33.6%, as per current opinion polling. If Labour win 35% of the vote – a figure currently considered unlikely – and the Conservatives win 30%, female representation would go from the currently expected 29.4% to 31.7%, a minor variation. If the Conservatives secure 35% of the vote and Labour just 30%, the figure would decline by just over 1% to 28.2%. Women’s representation is therefore likely to increase in May by at least 5%, no matter what the result.

The overall figure is also affected by the Liberal Democrats’ performance. Were Lib Dem support to rise to 15% of the vote from the current 10.1% – enough to save 33 rather than 20 seats – the predicted percentage of overall female MPs elected would drop slightly to 29.1%.

So, even under a relatively wide range of polling scenarios, the number of women in the next Parliament is unlikely to vary greatly from our primary projection. In one sense this is positive news, as it means that in all scenarios female representation will increase in the upcoming Parliament. But in another sense it demonstrates the intransigence of the problem. Even if the parties which have selected more women were to perform better, the vast, immovable block of safe seats in the Commons – many of which are occupied by men (*see page 15 onwards*) – makes progress slow.

Next we take a closer look at how the parties differ in terms of their performance on selecting women to become MPs.

2

PARTY ON PARTY

The proportion of female candidates which parties choose for their General Election slates is essential to determining the final outcome. Crucially though, it is the proportion of women which parties put in winnable seats that makes the difference.

When it comes to candidates slated in this year's election, there is considerable variation between the parties. Based on an analysis of seven parties, the proportion of female candidates ranges from 13% to 37% (see Table 3).

TABLE 3: 2015 CANDIDATES BY PARTY⁵

| Party | Female candidates |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Green | 37% |
| SNP | 36% |
| Labour | 34% |
| Plaid Cymru | 26% |
| Conservatives | 25% |
| Liberal Democrats | 25% |
| UKIP | 13% |

The Greens (with the Scottish and England & Wales parties combined) have the highest level of female candidate representation, although as they are not expected to gain seats in May⁶ this will have little bearing on the overall number of women in the next Parliament.

The SNP's high number of female candidates will have little impact on overall female representation, as most of their dozens of seats will be taken off Labour, a party with a similar number of

5 Only English, Scottish and Welsh parties are listed

6 See *The Lottery Election* by Prof John Curtice, Electoral Reform Society, February 2015

female candidates.

Labour continues to outperform the other larger parties in terms of female candidates, while the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are both fielding female candidates at a rate ahead of the proportion of women elected in 2010.

Just 13% of UKIP's candidates are female. This is mirrored in their top ten target seats, where just one candidate is a woman.

Ultimately, however, the raw percentage of female candidates only tells a small part of the story. For overall female representation in Parliament to rise, women have to be selected by successful parties to contest winnable seats (*see page 14*).

Projection by party

Table 4 shows the breakdown by party of our projection for the next Parliament. While the Conservatives are projected to increase their female representation by 11, and Labour by 27, the Liberal Democrats are projected to have just one female MP. The SNP is expected to win a large clutch of seats, increasing their number of women MPs by 12.

TABLE 4: WOMEN IN THE 2015 PARLIAMENT

| Party | No. female MPs in current Parliament (% of total) | No. female MPs, ERS projection 2015 (% of total) |
|---------------|--|---|
| Conservatives | 48 (16%) | 59 (20%) |
| Labour | 87 (34%) | 114 (41%) |
| Lib Dem | 7 (13%) | 1 (5%) |
| SNP | 1 (17%) | 13 (33%) |
| SDLP | 1 (33%) | 1 (33%) |
| Sinn Fein | 1 (20%) | 1 (20%) |
| Green | 1 (100%) | 1 (100%) |
| Plaid Cymru | 0 (0%) | 1 (33%) |
| Alliance | 1 (100%) | 0 (n/a) |
| Independent | 1 (100%) | 1 (100%) |
| UKIP | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Total | 148 | 192 |

To get a depiction of how seriously each party is taking boosting female representation, we should compare the percentage of overall

female candidates to those who are likely to go on to win. As can be seen in Tables 3 and 4, despite fielding women in a quarter of all seats, female Conservatives are only expected to make up 20% of the overall Parliamentary group. In contrast, Labour are fielding women in 34% of their seats – the same percentage as their current Parliamentary make-up – yet they are expected to make up 41% of the final intake. Where parties ‘place’ their female candidates is thus pivotal to the final result in terms of gender equality.

This is also represented by Table 5, which shows the proportion of women selected to fight Labour and Conservative target seats. This demonstrates a significant commitment by both parties, but particularly the Labour Party, to select women in seats which they hope to win. However, it should be noted that the best way of bringing women into Parliament is to select them in safe seats. The barriers to doing so under our broken voting system are explored in the next chapter.

TABLE 5: CANDIDATES IN MARGINAL SEATS, 2015

| | Conservative | | | Labour | | |
|------------------------|--------------|----|------------|--------|----|------------|
| | M | F | % women | M | F | % women |
| Top 50 targets | 34 | 16 | 32% | 24 | 26 | 52% |
| Top 100 targets | 70 | 29 | 29% | 46 | 54 | 54% |

3

THE INCUMBENCY EFFECT

One of the biggest barriers to change when it comes to women's representation is the 'incumbency effect'. Thanks to our broken electoral system, many seats are completely safe and unlikely to change hands. And many of these safe seats have been occupied by men for three, four or more election cycles, since before there was real progress on women's representation. Deselection of sitting MPs by constituency parties is relatively rare, which means a large proportion of Parliament is made up of men who have been there for quite some time. Moreover, the longer MPs hold their seats for, the less likely deselection becomes.

TABLE 6: WHEN 2015 CANDIDATES WERE FIRST ELECTED

| Year of election | Men | Women | % women |
|--------------------------------------|-----|-------|---------|
| Baseline (2015 candidate-incumbents) | 423 | 132 | 23.8 |
| 2010 or before | 410 | 126 | 23.5 |
| 2005 or before | 255 | 57 | 18.3 |
| 2001 or before | 175 | 30 | 14.6 |
| 1997 or before | 120 | 25 | 17.2 |
| 1992 or before | 59 | 8 | 11.9 |
| 1987 or before | 34 | 4 | 10.5 |
| 1983 or before | 21 | 2 | 8.7 |
| 1979 or before | 10 | 1 | 9.1 |
| 1974 or before | 4 | 1 | 20.0 |
| 1970 or before | 4 | 0 | 0 |

Seat-blockers

Table 6 shows that there are 555 MPs from the current Parliament who are standing again in 2015. Of these, 23.8% are women. But as we look further into history, we see that those who have stood for two, three, four or more terms are more and more likely to be male. Of those elected ten years ago or before and re-standing this year, just 18.3% are women. And of those who were first elected in 1987 or before and are standing again this year, just 10.5% are female.

This raises a key problem for increasing women's representation in the future – 'seat blocking' by male MPs. As Table 6 shows, women's representation generally declines the longer MPs have held their seats, as incumbents are overwhelmingly male. These male incumbents tend to be the occupants of safe seats, which are a feature of our archaic voting system.

Seat blocking is just one way in which First Past the Post (FPTP) hinders fair representation of women. Here are several other reasons why:

1. Small single-member constituencies increase the likelihood of the same party building up a base to guarantee re-election, often holding seats for decades with the same (often male) representative. Larger multi-member constituencies would increase the likelihood that more women would be able to win seats.
2. Because FPTP restricts a constituency's choice of candidates, representation of minorities and women suffers from 'most broadly acceptable candidate syndrome', where the 'safest' looking candidate is the most likely to be offered a chance to stand for election. Less 'traditional' candidates lose out.
3. Analysis of electoral systems around the world shows that women do much better under proportional systems than under FPTP. According to UN Women estimations, countries with FPTP which lack quotas will not reach the UN's 40% threshold of women in public office until near to the end of this century⁷.
4. The increased influence of smaller parties often puts pressure on the larger parties to become more diverse and representative.

So one of the big barriers to getting equal representation of women

7 See <http://www.unwomenuk.org/un-women/strategic-goal-3/>

is the continued use of FPTP for general elections. Until this changes, progress on women's representation will continue to be slow.

Another way of demonstrating the incumbency effect is to look at the proportion of women selected in the safest seats for the Conservatives and Labour.

TABLE 7: CANDIDATES IN SAFE SEATS, 2015

| | Conservative | | | Labour | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|----|------------|--------|----|------------|
| | M | F | % women | M | F | % women |
| Top 50 safest | 38 | 11 | 22% | 33 | 17 | 34% |
| Top 100 safest | 80 | 19 | 19% | 63 | 36 | 36% |

These are the seats which would guarantee larger numbers of women for both parties, if high percentages of women were selected to fight them. But while Labour has more women selected for safe seats than the Conservatives, neither party is anywhere near selecting 50% women for these seats. The incumbency effect, whereby (often male) MPs occupy safe seats for long periods of time, prevents more rapid change.

There is also a marked difference between the proportion of women selected to contest safe seats (*see Table 7*) against the proportion of women selected to contest marginal seats (*see Table 5, page 14*). Parties have made an effort to select women to fight for marginal seats, and it is important that women are given fair representation in these winnable contests. But the much harder task of selecting women in safe seats, where so many incumbents act as 'seat blockers', is still yet to be tackled.

Proportional representation would not be a silver bullet, but it would open up many of those safe seats to real contest for the first time in decades. If it were combined with parties reaching out beyond their traditional membership and making an effort to attract a wider pool of participants, with a renewed focus on supporting women into office, we could start to see a real breakthrough.

CONCLUSION

There are many reasons why people are increasingly alienated from formal politics, but the make-up of Parliament has a large role to play in that sense of disillusionment. The fact that barely one in five MPs are women is not lost on the electorate – it makes it hard to see the Commons as a representative body, when it looks so little like the people it is there to represent.

We cannot afford to be left lagging behind on the fundamental issue of women's representation. Even after the progress suggested by our analysis, we would still have a House of Commons that is 70% male. The message this sends to young women around the country is one that we should be doing all we can to change.

To get the best Parliament possible – to stir it up, to introduce new perspectives and to add some much-needed dynamism in a chamber ripe for reform – we need to be drawing upon the whole population, not excluding the half that are women. Both on principle, and for faith to be restored in politics, women need to have a fair voice in Parliament. We cannot wait decades longer for equality.

It is a positive development that women's representation in Parliament looks set to increase in May, due to most of the major parties fielding a higher percentage of female candidates. But at best, we are looking at fewer than a third of our MPs being women after the next general election – and it could be less, depending on how the polls change between now and May.

Whatever happens, we will not be world leaders when it comes to female representation in Parliament this May. That is partly because the incumbency effect will hold back female representation, with a majority of long-term incumbents being male. Our electoral system must be changed so that safe seats are a thing of the past. And parties must be ready to open up to a wider audience, providing increased support for women who want to stand for public

office. These reforms would go a long way to speeding up progress on women's representation.

While the expected increase in female representation this May is to be welcomed, we will still be a long way off a 50:50 Parliament. Removing the various blocks on progress that exist can ensure that 30% will not become a new 'glass ceiling'.

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