

Speaker's Lecture Series 2018

Women & British Politics: Where Next? Women in Westminster – Advancing to the Third Phase

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Check against delivery

I'm delighted to have been invited to give this lecture. It is a real honour. In the day to day hurley burley of Westminster and constituency life it's good to be asked to do a "lecture" as it makes you step back and think longer term, backwards and forwards. And that's what I've done, thinking about the massive progress women have made in British politics, how on earth we managed to do that, but also to face up to how far we still are from equality and what we have to do to get there.

The past 100 years have seen nothing less than a transformation in our legal rights, in our role in the home and the family, our involvement in the world of work and our participation in politics. It's been a social, economic, political and personal revolution. So, first, a massive pat on the back for women. This didn't just come down with the rainfall. But this wasn't a natural process of evolution. We had to fight for it. So, first, a massive pat on the back for us as women.

We have gone from a situation where a woman was defined solely by her marital status in a household headed by a man - either the daughter in her father's household, the wife in her husband's household or, perish the thought, a spinster.

For the married woman, her primary role would be in the home, supporting him and in particular caring for children and older relatives. Many women did work outside the home but their employment was regarded as for "pin money". Most professions were barred to women and though women were allowed to stand for parliament the percentage of women MPs remained stuck at 3%. Women were wholly absent from the public policy decisions which affected their lives.

We are now in a situation where women, and most men, believe that women are equal with men, not inferior or subordinate to them, that marriage should be a partnership of equals, that women should be treated equally at work and should have an equal say in decision-making.

But just because there's broad agreement now on the principle of women's entitlement to equality, that shouldn't blind us to the fact that this progress did not happen by amiable agreement. Far from it. It came from a hard fight over decades by women working together in the Women's Movement which gathered force in the 1960's, 70s and 80s. Those women who fought against oppressive laws and attitudes of men, against patriarchy and male violence and for equality at work were not listened to by a respectful and responsible establishment. Far from it. Obstacles were thrown in their path. They were vilified as subversive, dangerous or, worst of all, unnatural.

Women arguing for childcare were "harming children" by encouraging their mothers to go out to work. Women setting up refuges for women fleeing domestic violence were "undermining the family", fermenting the notion that a woman could leave her husband. Women arguing for equal pay were "undermining men at work" by challenging the notion that he, as the breadwinner, was entitled to the "family wage". So while we should be gratified by how far we've come, we should never be grateful. It was a fight. And we were only ever fighting for what should always have been ours - our right to equality.

We have learnt many lessons from this decades long fight.

- *Change is possible.

- *it needs resilience and persistence.

- *Change is never accepted with equanimity by those who hold power.

- *There will be backlash which is often very personal and threatening in nature.

- *It is not possible to make change as a woman acting alone. It is the solidarity of women working together which has forced progress.

- *Women have not progressed by having a few inspirational leaders but by working together.

- *Change, no matter how well argued for and justified takes years to achieve.

- *Don't stand around waiting to be popular. Women who propose change will be criticised as awkward, aggressive and abnormal.

- *But women sticking their neck out for change will always have the support of millions of women who, like them, rail against unfairness and face discrimination in their own lives.

Now, not only have attitudes changed but there are women working and making progress in every field of endeavour. Women in engineering, in law, on the shop floor and in the board room. Women in the arts and the sciences. Women are now 32% of MPs. But though women have pushed their way into what were hitherto men only spheres, we are as yet not on equal terms. We're there - but we're still in a minority and that needs to change as numbers matter.

Though gratified by how far we have progressed we should be realistic about how much more still needs to change before equality becomes a reality. And we should never be diverted. First it was "don't rock the boat", then "you're right, you've won, you've made so much progress so you need to stop going on about it now". Then "women have made so much progress it's now elitist to go on about women. You should be tackling inequality on class/race/disability."

And ultimately women will stop campaigning for equality and demanding change. But not until the job's done! And that is not yet.

Tough action to tackle pay gap

Women are still discriminated against in terms of pay. We need further progress on that. When the gender pay gap reporting provisions of the Equality Act 2010 came into effect in April this year no one could carry on denying the extent to which women remain unequal in the world of work. It was clear that 8 out of 10 employers still pay their men more than their women. That this is the case in all sectors including those such as retail which would not exist without women's work. It is the case in trade unions the organisations who are pledged to fight for equality for their women members still do not pay their own staff equally. Unite, our biggest union pays their men employees 30% more than their women and the teachers union, NASUWT pays their men 40% more than their women. The situation is even starker when it comes to the payment of bonuses. In Facebook UK the men get bonuses which are 60% higher than the women.

It is vital that now, workplace by workplace the pay gap is now exposed. The pay transparency provisions were designed to do 4 things

- *empower women employees
- *galvanise managers
- *spur trade unions
- *and arm government

Most women always knew that pay's unequal but if they raise it were fobbed off, told they're imagining it or - worse still - labelled a trouble-maker. By exposing the facts in each workplace women are empowered to demand change. It robs employers of the ability to block change by denying the existence of the pay gap. It strips away the secrecy on which discrimination thrives. Women employees will be able to see if their managers are, year on year, making progress to tackle the pay gap and at what rate. They will be able to compare their own organisation's progress year on year and compare it with other similar employers.

Managers who want to make progress on the pay gap now have the measurements. They can set targets and judge - and pay - managers based on the progress they make in narrowing the gap. The CBI supports equal pay. They should be actively following that up.

The unions back equal pay. And tackling unequal pay is a way of tackling low pay since women are the majority of the low paid. Now with the extent of the pay gap laid bare Trade Unions need to push it right up the pay bargaining agenda, negotiating targets and holding employers to account. And at the same time they must urgently address their own pay gaps.

But it's not just for women, management and unions - it's also for government. It has been a public policy objective for successive governments to narrow the pay gap and now government can see its extent there's no excuses. They should set targets for each government department. And across the public sector. Levelling up costs. But austerity is over so they should get on with it now.

They should gear up the machinery to tackle it in the private sector. So, I'd want to see the Equality and Human Rights Commission crawl all over the pay gap information - the government would need to reverse the cuts they've imposed on the EHRC and give them more resources, The EHRC should set targets for progress for different sectors, for different organisations. I'd want to see the government give the EHRC clear new powers to levy fines if those targets are not met. It was never going to be good enough for the government to show women the extent to which they are underpaid - they need to do something about it.

A percentage of GNI for refuges - like international development

We need further progress on tackling domestic violence - which is underlined by the excellent report of the Home Affairs Select Committee - and in particular the scourge of domestic homicide. There has, rightly, been a big focus - not least in my own constituency of Camberwell and Peckham - on the lives of young men lost to gang violence. In London out of the 101 homicides this year, 22 were gang-related and 21 were linked to domestic abuse. The spotlight is rightly shone on gang violence but the loss of women's lives at the hands of the men they live with is not remarked on. As if it's just something that has always happened and will keep on happening. But it isn't. We need a major drive on prevention. Domestic homicide rarely happens out of the blue. Public services and agencies need the focus and resources to respond to the warning signs.

And we need properly funded refuge provision. Funding of domestic violence refuges is precarious. It's a fiercely independent sector - and rightly so. That doesn't mean it should struggle for funds. But it always has done. Even when we were in government and there was much more funding in the system - for councils, for voluntary organisations as well as in benefits and central government programmes - refuges still lived from hand to mouth, never able to plan beyond the next year. We've got a Domestic Abuse Bill coming up. We should do for refuges what we've done for international development and in that bill set a legal obligation on the government to spend a % of GNI every year on refuges. It would be a drop in the ocean of the public finances but stability for a vital service.

More women MPs and on equal terms with men

We need to ensure that women are not only in parliament in equal numbers but that we are, as MPs, sharing power on equal terms. We need that to be able to deliver the progressive change that women in our country needs.

At the outset of the women's movement, the push to increase the number of women MPs was predominately a left of centre political endeavour. As feminists, we made our political home in the Labour Party, which we saw as the party of women and equality. And indeed when it came to 1997 our policy of women-only shortlists for selection in constituencies which we expected to win delivered over 100 Labour women MPs and changed not only the face of parliament but also what was seen as the political agenda. So demands for childcare and for the tackling of domestic violence advanced onto the political agenda but they are still not mainstream.

As we press for further progress and draw on our experience, we recognise that new times bring new issues and offer new opportunities but also bring new challenges.

Protecting our democracy from attacks on women MPs

In the age of the internet, social media offers great opportunities for women to campaign together. A woman at home with a baby can talk to women all around the country. Women assaulted in the film industry in the USA can mobilise support from women all around the world. But social media is also a new vehicle for misogynists organising against women, intent on threatening and abusing women who have the temerity to venture into public life.

In the past when we were subjected to threats, we were reluctant to complain. We were trying to prove that women could be in politics and feared that if we complained we'd be seen as weak, only concerned about ourselves, not about our constituents. And anyway we had no confidence that our concerns would be taken seriously.

But threats to women MPs are not because we are weak and they are not just unwarranted attacks on individuals. Nor are they an expression of free speech. They are an attack on our democracy. Voters are entitled to elect whoever they want. Once that person has been elected they should be able to get on with their job without let our hindrance.

I think there is still a reluctance among MPs (men as well as women) to reveal the full extent of the abuse and threats they - and their family - are subjected to. I think it's even more prevalent than we realise. I think this is the sort of thing which could best be addressed by a Speaker's Conference to consider how we draw the line against harassment of our political representatives and protect our democracy.

New opportunities for cross-party working

Women's engagement in Parliament has had two phases so far and I think we're on to our third. First a handful of Labour women sustained by women outside parliament. Second, a critical mass of Labour women in parliament working together. And the question is whether we can now make progress with the third phase - women in parliament working across party.

In the 1980's, when I was first an MP one of only 10 Labour women (in total there were 22 women) there just weren't enough of us to make an impact just working together. As a feminist I couldn't have survived in the hostile male-dominated world of Westminster without the explicit and vocal support of the Women's Movement backing campaigns for childcare, against domestic violence and for more women in parliament. Then, after the huge leap forward from the All-Women Shortlists with over 100 Labour women we were able to be a critical mass, a real force for change in parliament. But there was not a body of feminists on the Tory side for us to work with. For a start, there were hardly any women on the Tory side, and those who were there were certainly not feminist. I was used to being in combat with Tory women and certainly not in collaboration with them.

But there's been a big change. The success of feminist ideas has meant that there are now not only more women on the Tory benches but that many of them are avowed feminists. They have been brought up by women who espoused the notion of equality for women. Many of them are what I describe as the "daughters of the women's movement".

And the 2015 election brought in 20 SNP women. They were doctors, lawyers, journalists and with many of them being new to politics had less instinctive acceptance of the traditional divisions between parties in the Commons. And they are feminists. From Wales, we see Liz Saville Roberts and from the Greens we have Caroline Lucas. From Northern Ireland we have Emma Little Pengelly and Sylvia Hermon.

The big question is, now that we are here, in numbers, on all sides and with a common philosophy can we notwithstanding our party loyalties and division between the parties, work across parties on issues of concern to women. I'm confident that we can. I've already experienced this first hand working with Maria Miller, Jo Swinson and Hannah Bardell to get maternity leave for women MPs. Collaborative cross-party working between women is cemented under Maria's leadership on the cross party Select Committee on Women and Equality.

We have already seen it on the work that Stella Creasy has led on extending abortion rights to women in Northern Ireland. Maria and Andrea Leadsom are working with Valerie Vaz, Dawn Butler and Jess Phillips to rid parliament of sexual harassment.

As "Mother of the House", I'm working seamlessly with Andrea Leadsom, Penny Mordaunt on our conference which will bring women MPs from 100 parliaments together in Westminster. If you'd have told me even 10 years ago that I'd have women allies in the SNP, the DUP, in the deputy leader of the Libdems and in the Tory Cabinet I'd wouldn't have believed it. But that is now the case and in a parliament where loyalty within parties is now unprecedentedly fragmented, the 209 women in parliament have the potential - where we can identify issues of common concern - to work together as a truly coherent force to push further change for women.

But as we forge new cross-party alliances, we can't forget about the progress we still need to make in our own parties. Though now 45% of Labour's MPs and half our shadow cabinet are women, we can't rest on our laurels. We still have male dominance in the leadership of the Labour Party. We have a male leader and deputy and men lead the party in Wales and in Scotland. We have never had a woman Labour Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister. That is an embarrassment for a party which espouses equality - particularly when the Conservative party have managed not just one but 2 women leaders and Prime Ministers. The next leader of the Labour Party simply must be a woman and there are many brilliant and committed women in parliament for the party to choose from. There are many brilliant and committed men in the PLP too - and one of them can be deputy.

New allies for women in parliament - men MPs

There is new opportunity in the changing attitudes of men. The attitude that women should be subordinate to men and should stay at home to look after the children is, mercifully, far less prevalent. We have a new generation of men who have been brought up by mothers who believe in women's equality, mothers who have gone out to work. These men are "sons of the women's movement" who, in turn, support their wives as they go out to work and believe they should play an equal part in the home. We now have that generation of "sons of the women's movement" in parliament and we see, for the first time a cohort of men MPs for whom it is second nature to back up and speak up on causes led by women.

The global sisterhood

The women's movement has always been internationalist in outlook and we are in solidarity with our sisters around the world who have the same commitment to equality, who face the same obstacles as us and often many more. We must strengthen those links and that solidarity as we all make progress.

And that, with the support of Mr Speaker, and Penny Mordant and Andrea Leadsom, is exactly what we will be doing next month in the House of Commons Chamber. Women have fought their way into nearly every parliament in the world. But even when they get there they are still pioneers in a man's world. And they're not satisfied just to get in, they want to exercise power on equal terms with men. On 8th next month we will have women MPs from over 100 parliaments round the world coming to meet in our Commons chamber. We're all trying to work out what's the best way to tackle domestic violence and unequal pay. We're all trying to work out how to deal with sexual harassment outside and inside politics. And how you sort things to ensure women MPs who are pregnant can still cast their vote in parliament. And we'll admire each other and learn from each other and form bonds to work together in the future. And think how amazing the green benches of the Commons will look when instead of men in grey suits its women from all over the world.

Conclusion

As we mark the centenary of the first British women winning the right to vote and stand for parliament, we still face many of the old battles and also some new ones. But

*we are emboldened by the progress we have already made.

*We have new allies and opportunities.

*We have new global networks.

The women's movement has been one of the most successful movements for change in modern times. We have won the battle of ideas. Now we must win the battle for the reality of the change.