

Success at Edgbaston hits the wickets at Westminster: Why efforts to increase the number of women MPs seems to have been stumped.

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Edgbaston, best known for cricket, is politically interesting for two reasons – it was once the seat of the then Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, and this week, it is celebrating the fact it is the only UK constituency to have returned a female MP to Parliament for 60 consecutive years.



The significance of this 'achievement' is underlined by the fact that 77% of seats at Westminster are occupied by men. This means that the make-up of Parliament does not reflect the wider population, in a substantive or symbolic sense and thus questions are often asked about the representative capacity of our elected representatives. Worryingly, this lack of parity reinforces perceptions that consider women in positions of power to be an 'abnormal state of affairs'. In this sense, powerful women are assessed differently to men and often held to higher standards. Indeed, one only has to reflect on the experiences of Estelle Morris, who left government for the last time in 2005, to see that women are not permitted to fail in the way that men are.

A recent parliamentary report suggested that on an international level, the UK ranks 65 out of 190 for female representation and with reference to EU member states, its average of 33% places it 15th (average representation being 35%). Yet, a report by the 'Centre for Women in Democracy' this year suggests that the trend has been one of decline, particularly since 2010. Women make up less than a quarter of each House and of the 31 MPs entitled to attend cabinet, 26 are men. Of the parties, Labour boasts the greatest female representation at just over 30% while the Conservative and Liberal Democrats lag behind with 16 and 12.5% respectively.

Despite all three party leaders articulating a verbal commitment to increasing female representation, Labour is the only party to have introduced all-women short lists, though only in a proportion of constituencies (the NEC has agreed a goal of around 50%). Disappointingly, men have won almost all open selection contests and as a result dominate the winnable seats to be fought in 2015.

With the exception of the Northern Ireland Assembly which has only 10% female representation, the picture is slightly better outside the Westminster village. In Scotland, 35% of MSPs are women, while in Wales, women account for 40% of the Welsh Assembly.

Interestingly though, the evidence suggests that the voting public would prefer more female representatives. An IPSOS Mori report commissioned by the Government Equalities Office in 2010 suggested that nearly two-thirds of respondents felt women should be better represented in Parliament. Of course the issue is not simple and multiple solutions are required but a good start would be a set of serious, sustained and creative initiatives which seek to make female representation the norm: intuitively, a sensible aspiration given that women constitute 51% of the UK population.

Dr Karin Bottom, Lecturer in British Politics and Research Methods at the Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham.