

WOMEN'S CONFERENCE, Hillsborough Castle 13 November 2006

Peter Hain, MP Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

In the century since women won the vote, roles in society have changed enormously, despite the best endeavours of so-called 'New Men', continuing to be the mainstay in most homes, and making great strides in other areas which would have seemed fanciful to the suffragettes.

In most workplaces, in many boardrooms, even in the armed forces, women have rightfully established their place, though remain under-represented in most of them, especially at the highest levels. Women have made significant advances in the trade unions too – though, again, not enough.

Yet there is one area in which politicians could do more and should do more and that, of course, is in politics itself.

A newspaper ran a cartoon just after Margaret Thatcher was deposed as Prime Minister. A little boy was asking his mother: "Mum - Can a man be Prime Minister?" Of course what made it amusing was that it was turning the real world on its head. Despite Mrs Thatcher's 11 years in power, she remained – and remains – an isolated example of a woman reaching the very top of British politics.

Since her time, no woman has led a major political party in the UK or in Northern Ireland. And despite the surge in the number of women MPs elected in 1997, that figure, far from continuing to grow, has slipped back slightly.

Labour can be proud that our policy of selecting candidates from all-women shortlists for half of our winnable seats in 1997 resulted in the number of women at Westminster shooting up to 121. But we were building on a pathetically small base – before then, there were more MPs called John than there were women MPs.

Throughout the history of Northern Ireland women have played a significant role in social and economic development. But it is vital that this is true of politics too.

Women comprise more than 50 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland. Yet at the last Assembly elections only 17 per cent of MLAs were women: that is 18 out of 108. Compare that to the 50 per cent of women elected to the National Assembly of Wales and 42 per cent in the Scottish Parliament.

In local councils the situation is no better. Just 21 per cent of council seats in Northern Ireland are held by women. That is slightly less than the figures for Wales and Scotland and considerably less than England at nearly 30 per cent.

Those statistics disguise an even worse situation in some areas. The highest representation of women in councils is, in the greater Belfast area, 35 per cent, while the lowest is in rural areas such as Strabane, a mere 6 per cent.

So apart from the general problem of encouraging women generally to get involved in representative politics, there is a particular problem in rural areas.

A few more worrying statistics. From 1999-2005 the average figure for public appointments held by women was 33 per cent – a fall since 1998.

It isn't as if women are not wanted in politics. A recent Life and Times Survey in Northern Ireland showed that 75 per cent of both men and women agreed that women need to get involved in politics if problems that concern them are going to be solved.

The same survey reported that 55 per cent of men and women believe parties should be encouraged to put forward a proportion of women candidates. Perhaps not surprisingly, 57 per cent agreed that women MPs better represent women's issues than do male MPs.

The same proportion also agree that, in general, things would improve if there were more women in politics.

Yet this under-representation in politics continues at a time when issues affecting women, children and families, are more important, not just to this Government, but to all political parties – and, of course, to voters.

Achieving a better balance between work and family life, support for parents and carers, and pension reform, are rightly moving from being private family struggles to becoming central issues in public policy. Opinion polls reveal a significant difference in the way women and men feel about many of these issues.

A generation or two ago it was still possible for some politicians to talk disdainfully of "the women's vote" as being no more than following what their husbands were doing. Today it is accepted to be something very separate and very important to every political party and candidate. In blunt terms parties cannot win without the backing of women voters who no longer follow men's traditional voting patterns.

This means that politicians need to engage with women voters to ensure that our political priorities more closely reflect their concerns – the concerns after all over half of the voting population of Northern Ireland.

Today's conference must be a springboard for action, encouraging women to increase their participation in political and public life in NI.

Evidence from across Europe shows that increases in the number of women elected only occurred after changes within political parties themselves.

Having more women within party structures, reaching a gender balance, is critical to raising the number of women nominated and later elected.

After our success in 1997, Labour once again used all-women shortlists for winnable seats at last year's general election and this continued policy has resulted in the party having a significantly higher proportion of women MPs compared to the other parties - 27 per cent of Labour's MPs are women. And they know there are good opportunities for promotion within Government, too – 35 per cent of the Cabinet is female.

Having more women standing for office can increase the number of women who vote, so having more women standing for office in your party can increase the number who vote for your party. Women candidates in Great Britain have tended to outperform men.

But even when a party actively promotes female candidates, we know that many women are still reluctant to get involved in politics, and the reasons will be debated today.

What are the barriers? How do we remove them? And how do we encourage more women into political and public life? This is your challenge as political parties and as women and men who live in Northern Ireland.

We need to look at how women are recruited into public life. And how the problem of breaking into a male-dominated world can be overcome not just by a few exceptional and determined women but by many more.

We also need to look at what actions can be taken to encourage women to come into public life. The reforms to the working hours of the House of Commons, initiated by Robin Cook when he was Leader of the House, have made a difference.

It might have suited the old-fashioned male-dominated Commons to work every evening and often late into the early hours of the morning, but it wasn't family-friendly. The new hours have made a difference to any MP who wants to spend more time with their family – particularly benefiting women.

But has that message trickled down to the grassroots level of political parties? I suspect that it hasn't for many women. So we need to do more to explain it as well as working on other changes to the system which would benefit those who don't want politics to become an all-consuming passion. There is a world outside politics (or so I'm reliably told!).

So this conference is a rallying call for equality. In the coming weeks I will launch Northern Ireland's first ever gender equality strategy. It will establish a policy framework of high level objectives, one of which will ensure the active and equal participation of women and men at all levels of public and political life.

As we know, international evidence has shown that the only way to significantly increase the number of women in parliament is to use positive action measures, such as all-women shortlists and quotas.

The devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales are leading the way in ensuring that women are at the very heart of decision making.

In the first elections to those bodies, Labour used positive measures to ensure that women were well represented. As a result, women made up 37 per cent of Members of the Scottish Parliament and 41 per cent of Welsh Assembly Members.

Positive measures went on to increase the number of women in Scotland and Wales in the 2003 elections. I'm especially proud as a Welsh MP that Wales has the only legislature in the world with equal numbers of women and men. And there are more

women than men in the Welsh Assembly Government Cabinet, which also makes it unique.

I have invited speakers from Wales and Scotland to share their experiences with us – to show what worked for them

The restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland and the implementation of the Review of Public Administration represent a huge and unique opportunity to bring about gender balance in the new structures and to have inclusive representation from the seven new councils to Stormont.

I hope that sharing experience today will encourage and enable action, both individually and as political parties, to increase the numbers of women who stand as candidates.

In the past Northern Ireland became a watchword for religious bigotry, prejudice and discrimination. Gradually, painfully, the battle against such sectarianism is being won. Let Northern Ireland now push forward the frontiers for equal opportunities on gender so that women become the political leaders rather than the politically led.

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