

TOKENISM IS NOT ENOUGH

The Liberal Democrats are attempting positive discrimination in candidate selection. Simon Titley argues that the real issue is political disengagement, not gender balance

Wouldn't it be nice if our elected institutions genuinely represented a cross-section of society?

Besides gender balance and equitable representation for ethnic minorities, there would be representative samples based on a carefully assembled matrix of class background, age groups, geography, education, profession, sexual orientation and disability.

Except that it is unlikely to happen. Participating in politics has never been 'normal' and is becoming less so. It is not simply that the number of participants is declining. The people who continue to participate are more unusual (in both senses of the term). They are not representative in the sense of being typical.

MPs increasingly are professional politicians. They go straight from university to a job as an MP's research assistant, then spend a few years as a lobbyist before getting selected. They are the sort of MPs whom veteran political columnist Alan Watkins always describes as never having had a "proper job".

The extent to which politicians and their electorates inhabit different worlds can be judged by the following outburst. A few days after the 2001 general election, the defeated Liberal Democrat MP Jackie Ballard wrote an article in the Independent headlined "What a politician really thinks about her ungrateful voters."

She didn't pull her punches: "The voters expect us [the politicians] to solve all their problems for them. They expect the council to do something about noisy neighbours, to mend all the potholes, to provide them with a house if they need one, to detect child abuse from five miles away (when the people next door haven't noticed anything amiss) and to dispose of their rubbish regularly without polluting the air with incinerators or using valuable land space. But they don't want to pay council tax. They want the government to lock up criminals but not to put a bail hostel or prison anywhere near them. They don't want to get asthma or to have their house flooded but they must drive their car 200 metres down the road. They don't want to have to wait a long time for a hospital operation and they want their children to have a good education. They don't mind other people paying higher taxes, but they don't want to themselves. They want their politicians to be 'normal' people who they can relate to, but they also want them to work 100 hours a week and be available any time of the day or night to sort out their problems."

People no longer regard politicians of any party – or either sex – as 'representative' in any meaningful sense. They are seen as a race apart and politics is widely viewed as an alien pursuit. Most people would not become politically active unless asylum-seeking paedophiles were dumping nuclear waste at the bottom of their back gardens.

I was therefore interested to read Ros Scott's arguments ('Opportunity is not enough', *Liberator* 289), in which she made a case for positive discrimination and dismissed her opponents as sticklers for 'procedures'.

Ros complains of women being held back in politics but it was not clear what she thinks the barriers now are. The situation is by no means perfect but never have more doors been held open – and never have so few people been killed in the rush. All parties are now desperately short of volunteers. Arms are twisted to persuade people to run for the council. Constituency executive positions are filled uncontested. The average age of party members continues to increase, while electoral turnouts are in freefall. The old joke that the country is run by the people who turn up was never truer.

My scepticism about the party's 'gender balance' strategy was confirmed in October, when Candidates Committee chair Brian Orrell reported in *Liberal Democrat News* that no women had applied to fight the Isle of Wight. This, remember, is one of the party's most winnable target seats, located in the south of England where most of the party's members live. Given the party's rules about balanced shortlists, the selection was re-advertised. The Candidates Committee also went to the trouble of inviting women approved candidates to apply but none would do so. In the end, the Isle of Wight constituency association went ahead with an all-male shortlist.

This experience suggests that the problem is not about selection but is further upstream. Yes, there are fewer women candidates and MPs than men. But this problem exists in the wider context of political disengagement.

There are two issues for the party. One is the strategy of the Liberal Democrats' Gender Balance Task Force and the party's attempts at positive discrimination. The other is the broader question of why, when fewer people are engaged in politics, disengagement appears even stronger among women.

The basic problem with the Gender Balance Task Force is that it is addressing the issue of women's representation

in isolation. If positive discrimination and tactics such as 'zipping' increase the proportion of women candidates, this must necessarily decrease the number of male candidates. Fair enough. But which men will make the sacrifice? Not the white, public school educated men who already predominate. It is more likely to be men from less privileged or ethnic minority backgrounds who are forced to give way.

I see little point in attaining a gender balance if all it achieves is to replace, say, ethnic minority men with privileged Home Counties women. There's the added risk that the party will regard this as a 'tick box' exercise and feel that no further action on its part is necessary. Political disengagement is becoming a major crisis and the Liberal Democrats can't afford token responses.

The broader question is whether many women care about politics in the first place. As in the film 'Field of Dreams', the Gender Balance Task Force can build it - but will they come? In a world in which fewer people are interested in or motivated by politics, why are women even less interested or motivated?

There are, I think, two basic reasons. First, women's preferred mode of discourse tends to be emotional and anecdotal, whereas the discourse of politics is necessarily rational and conceptual. Second, fewer women are motivated to participate because, whereas men tend to need intellectual pursuits and hobbies outside the world of home making, women tend not to.

A sexist or outmoded view? Sadly not. A poll of 5,000-plus teenage girls in this November's issue of CosmoGirl, reported in the Observer on 19th October, found that "their main ambition is to complete university and then return to the homestead... with 85 percent maintaining they would rather rely on their partner for financial support than be a successful independent woman."

The case for involving more women is not helped by those feminists who make a virtue of emotionalism. They have sought to exalt emotionalism over rationalism and, worse, have argued that emotionalism is the singular contribution women can make to politics. This is ironic, given that the case for involving more women in politics is rational rather than emotional. But it is also a dangerous development.

Last year, when the debate about 'naming and shaming' paedophiles was at its height, there was a panel discussion on BBC2 'Newsnight'. Each of the experts present, the police officer, the probation officer, the psychologist, explained how and why the public naming of paedophiles would make the problem worse because it would drive more offenders underground. Finally, the debate turned to the woman from the Portsmouth housing estate. Yes, she had heard all the arguments, but she still believed in 'naming and shaming' because it was what she 'felt' she wanted.

This is what happens when you exalt 'feelings' over rationality. Gut reactions prevail and play into the hands of unscrupulous right-wingers on issues such as Europe, asylum seekers and hanging.

This is why politics must ultimately be a rational exercise. Yes, many political issues arouse strong emotions and we must acknowledge the strength of those feelings. But the eventual political decisions, the reconciliation of competing interests and the allocation of scarce resources, need light rather than heat. When feminists stigmatise rationality and logic as some sort of male mental disorder, they do us all a disservice.

Any strategy designed to bring more women into politics makes no sense unless it is set in the context of the broader problem of political disengagement. That is not to say there is no case for positive discrimination or affirmative action, rather that these measures should be pursued only as an integral part of a coherent strategy for democratic re-engagement.

We don't just need more women in politics. We need more people. However, to re-engage people requires more imagination. Involving more people in politics is not just about standing for office. The party needs to work on a broader front.

For example, a big disincentive to greater participation is the 'long hours' culture. Like the Stakhanovite heroes of the Stalinist era, the Liberal Democrats prize MPs and councillors according to their volume of casework. But who in their right mind really wants to work an 80-hour week? If more women than men are turned off by this macho work ethic, it suggests they have more sense.

Beyond the world of representative institutions, in the wider polity, there is a need for generating more deliberative forms of involvement, where we could make better use of the internet. Creating these sorts of debate is a good way to draw more people in and shows that you can participate and still have a life.

Sadly, the various social advances of the post-war era, such as education and healthcare, were grasped mostly by the articulate middle classes and the disadvantaged were left behind. So it is with feminism.

I fear that the Gender Balance Task Force and the Liberal Democrats' token initiatives are really about the sharp elbows of the articulate middle classes. Without the wit or imagination to tackle the real problems, all the party will achieve is to give a leg-up to a few privileged white women.

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