

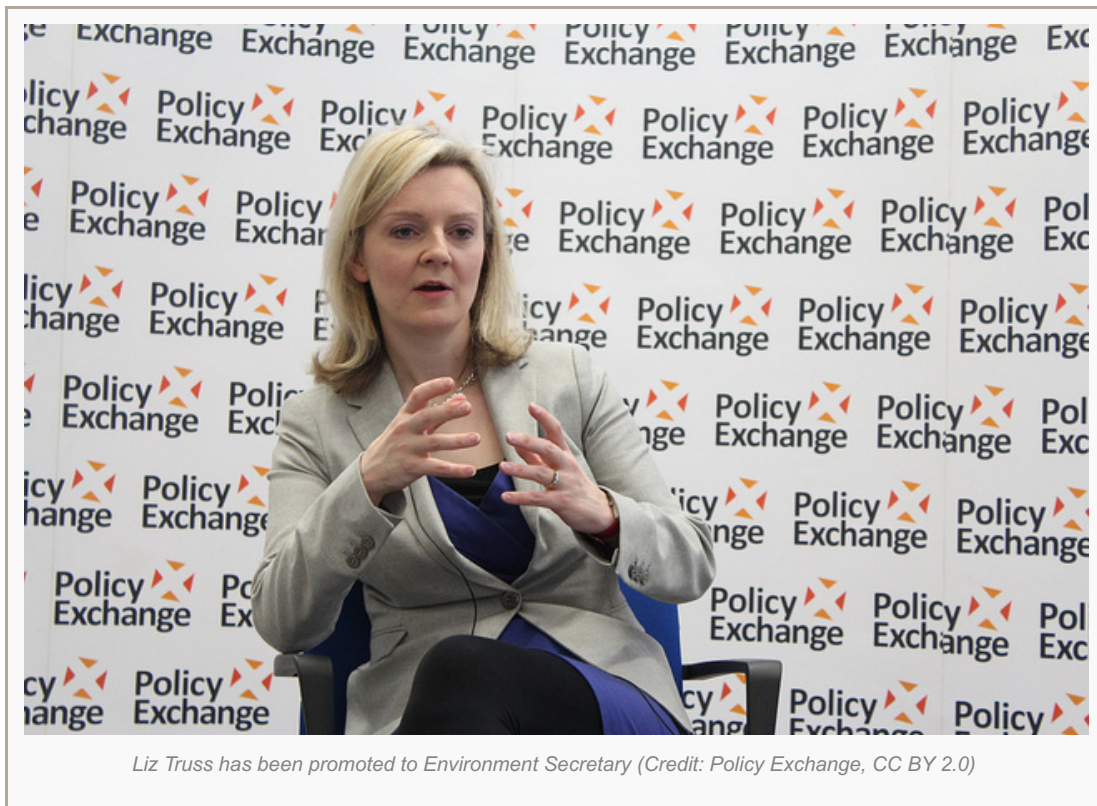
Despite the reshuffle, we are still a long way from a 50:50 gender balanced Parliament

democraticaudit.com/2014/07/22/we-need-to-double-the-amount-of-female-mps-if-we-are-to-achieve-a-5050-gender-balanced-parliament/

By Democratic Audit UK

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*Much has been made of the addition of a number of extra women to the Cabinet following David Cameron's recent ministerial reshuffle. But despite the headlines, the UK still lags terribly behind other countries in terms of the levels of women in Parliament. **Frances Scott**, who is [campaigning for a 50:50 balance in Parliament](#), argues that a debate in Parliament on the issue would be a decent starting point.*



Liz Truss has been promoted to Environment Secretary (Credit: Policy Exchange, CC BY 2.0)

So the cabinet now has a few extra women. This 'reshuffle' is great but does not change the fact that 77% of MPs are men. Parliament is still and always has been overwhelmingly male. Take a real look at the figures behind women at Westminster and the notion of democracy.

Starting with the big one: 32.2 million women live and work in the UK. They account for around 52% of the population. Like men, women have wide variety of expertise and experience. They make a major contribution to GDP working in paid and unpaid employment. Like men, they are a large diverse group incorporating many minorities. They may be black, white, Asian, Christian, Muslim, atheist, able, disabled, parents, non-parents, gay, straight and sometimes a combination of these.

However, since 1914 there have only been 369 female MPs. 503 men currently sit in the House of Commons with 4719 having had seats since 1914, accounting for 93% of MPs in that time. The men at Westminster used to refer to the women as "rattlesnakes" and Winston Churchill said to Lady Astor "We hoped to freeze you out. When you entered the House of Commons I felt like a woman had entered my bathroom and I'd nothing to protect myself with except a sponge."

The best election for women was in 1997, the number of women MPs doubled from 60 to 120, 18% of the total.

Now, there are 503 men and 147 women sitting in the House of Commons. A ratio of 77:23. Internationally, the UK ranks 74th*. On this basis the UK does not really look like a world leader.

Looking to the future. At the current rate, on the basis of the last three elections with an average of 8 extra women MPs a time, it will take over 100 years to achieve a balanced Parliament of around 50:50 men and women. The facts and figures speak for themselves, Parliament is, always has been and (for some time) will remain predominantly male. Does this make it the best?

Women have a wide range of talents and abilities. They account for 50% of graduates and 60% of the law graduates in the UK. Their life experience is different and complementary to that of men. Statistically women are half the nations 'human resource' capital. Parliament is losing out if we do not tap in to this potential, apart from the fact that it might be alienating 50% of the electorate. One or two extra feminine faces in the cabinet does not represent gender equality or realise women's collective potential.

To achieve a ratio of 50:50 men:women, a true reflection of life, 178 extra women MPs are needed. As is normal, most of these 325 women MPs would be sitting on the back benches influencing policy.

For Parliament to reflect society the number of women MPs needs to more than double. If there were 60 extra women MPs after each of the next three elections (as happened in the 1997) then by 2025 we would have a 50:50 Parliament. This might seem like a sizeable problem but from a population of 32 million it should be possible to find 178 women! It amounts to 1 in 100,000. Clearly an active recruitment campaign needs to commence.

Maybe Parliamentary working environment, policy and procedures also need to be improved and up-dated. This issue has recently been addressed in the report 'Improving Parliament' which was published last week by the All Party Parliamentary Group, Women in Parliament, chaired by Mary Mcleod MP. The recommendations made would improve things for all politicians, both men and women.

However, Ruth Fox the Director and Head of Research at the Hansard Society is concerned and has said "Securing equal representation through the voluntary action of political parties is not working" She and others have suggested that this issue is too important to leave to parties and that there is a case for constitutionalising equal representation.

Parliament needs to decide upon a way forward to ensure that it is both the best and most representative institution that it can be. Vince Cable has asked boards to include more women, we at 50:50 Parliament call upon government to do the same. Like business, it should be drawing upon women's experience and expertise. We would like this issue to be properly addressed and all the alternative solutions discussed, ranging from 'keep calm and carry on' to 'constitutional change', which is what Ruth Fox from Hansard and other eminent politicians and political commentators have suggested is required. See www.5050parliament.co.uk for more information about the alternatives.

50:50 Parliament is an on-line Petition, asking Party Leaders to have a serious debate about gender inequality in the House of Commons and to come up with solutions to this historic problem. Please take action and sign [here](#). Every signature counts! For the petition to be successful we need at least 100,000 signatures. The Improving Parliament report also recommends a debate. 50:50 Parliament's slogans are "we need the best of both", "one way or another", "sooner rather than later". As two famous women have said: "Women are the world's most underused resource" Hillary Clinton and Emmeline Pankhurst "Deeds not Words". Winston Churchill did concede that "To improve is to change." and change is needed. 50:50 Parliament asks "What is the plan? How can Parliament be 50:50 like life, drawing upon the best of both?" Please share our apolitical aspiration and [sign our petition](#) to ask for a debate about this democratic imperative. See the link at www.5050Parliament.co.uk.

Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/1ksdpsJ>

Frances Scott is the Founder of **50:50 Parliament**