'Wags', 'Wives' and 'Mothers'... But what about Women Politicians?

BY ROSIE CAMPBELL AND SARAH CHILDS

ABSTRACT

The UK general election of 2010 should have been a critical one for women. But it was not to be. Despite all of the main political parties claiming to want more women MPs the increase in their number relative to the 2005 Parliament was just 2.5%. Women remain under-represented numerically in the House of Commons, constituting less than one-quarter of all MPs. The election campaign was largely women free too, as women married to politicians gained more attention than women politicians. Moreover, and despite enhanced inter-party competition over the women's vote—or rather, and more accurately, the votes of middle income mothers, otherwise known as the 'mumsnet' vote—women's issues and perspectives were marginalised from the campaign proper.

2010 should have been a critical election for women; all the main parties were publicly committed to selecting greater numbers of women MPs. On the policy front, Labour was confident of its legislative record on women's concerns and if the Liberal Democrats had had the most women friendly manifesto in 2005, the Conservatives looked to have successfully played the politics of 'catch up', with a host of new policies for women this time around. Portends looked good one year out, at least in terms of policy, if less so in respect of political recruitment. With all seeking the women's vote, the parties were keen to compete over maternity pay, flexible working and the gender pay

Cartoon by Jacky Flemming®
gap. Six months prior it still looked like 2010 would be an explicitly feminised election, albeit now a ‘Mumsnet’ one, with the parties and the media focused on women as mothers. But the 2010 short campaign eclipsed even this: not only did the party leaders and their wives trump women politicians, who were all but absent from the TV screens and newspapers, but family and work/life balance issues, despite being a significant part of each of the three manifestos, got lost as the campaign became reduced to leaders’ personalities. Sure, the election saw an unprecedented number of women elected—142—but this was only a tiny increase—just 14 more women—on 2005, and significant party differences in women’s representation remain in Labour’s favour. And then, when the negotiations to form a coalition government began, the leaders’ lieutenants were all male. The message of 2010 was clear, high politics is the realm of men; it was left to women politicians and political journalists to lament their marginalisation—and even this generated a backlash.¹

**The long and short campaigns: women as mothers**

The 2010 general election was all set to be the ‘mumsnet election’: it would be decided at the School gate. Ubiquitous in the long campaign, newspapers, the TV and the internet heralded the importance of middle income mothers—43 articles making a direct reference to mumsnet after its first use in 2009 (Times, 17 November 2009).² And Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg all participated—at their own requests—in web-chats on the Mumsnet website,³ as all three parties sought to capture women voters who are more likely to be undecided in their vote choice than men. In the words of Labour’s election campaign coordinator, Douglas Alexander: ‘Labour needs to win back middle-income female voters with children in marginal seats’ (Guardian, 19 February 2010).

Across the three main parties’ manifestos it was, indeed, as mothers (and parents) that women were mostly frequently represented. There were, unlike the 1990s manifestos, no women’s sections, although both Labour and the Conservatives had designated women’s web-pages.⁴ On these, however, much of the policy was, again mostly about, and for, families.⁵ All parties did make pledges on women and development, not least in prioritising women’s health and education⁶ and all addressed violence against women: more rape crisis centres with longer term funding, and action to address trafficking (Conservative); maintaining the DNA database and expanding services (Labour); more diverse elected police authorities, and permitting buses to drop off mid-stop (Liberal Democrat). Labour also had unique policies on teenage pregnancy, lap-dancing clubs,⁷ political representation at Westminster, the ending of male primacy in the Royal Family and equality opportunities. The Liberal Democrats advocated citizen’s
pensions and confirmed their support for the Human Rights Act. The Conservatives sought single-sex hospital accommodation; more free votes for conscience issues; and the recognition of marriage and civil partnerships in the tax system.

The key manifesto battleground was women’s work/life balance and other measures to help families. There was wide agreement across the 2010 manifestos that women suffer from a gender pay gap and that government has a role in preventing and ameliorating this. Ditto flexible working—now a cross-party ‘good’. Greater flexibility in maternity and paternity leave and pay were also supported by all three parties. Inter-party differences were not, crucially, always in the direction one might expect—in Labour and/or the Liberal Democrats’ favour. Pay audits were to be voluntary (Labour); mandatory for companies found guilty of sex discrimination (Conservative); or limited to those larger than 100 employees (Liberal Democrat). The transfer of maternity/paternity leave/pay was set at six months (Labour); whenever parents choose (Liberal Democrat and, apparently, the Conservatives, who elsewhere state after 14 weeks); and paid leave might be for 18 months (a Liberal Democrat aspiration) or 12 months (Labour’s aspiration). The right to request flexible working was for parents with children aged 16 (Labour), or 18 (Conservative), for older people, i.e., grandparents (all three), for all those in the public sector and in time, and subject to business consultation, for all (Conservative).

Party differences were evident too regarding who provides support and services and who should be in receipt of them, as Table 1 outlines. Of particular note is the contrast between Labour’s universalism (Sure Start and the £4 ‘toddler tax credit’, for example), and Conservative selective benefits (Sure Start targets poor and needy families; tax credits are for those with incomes <50K). The Conservatives also seek diversity in providers of childcare services.

The final notable policy difference relates to the marriage tax break—a policy that is best described as ‘Cameron’s baby’. Labour was critical of the Conservatives apparent privileging of marriage: their pledge to recognise marriage in the tax system was considered ‘divisive’ and ‘unfair’ and likely to ‘stigmatise’ children with unmarried parents. The Conservative counter charge contends that Labour had penalised couples by making them better off by living apart. The issue garnered significant media coverage during the long campaign. If the Tory manifesto maintained it would send an important signal that we value couples and the commitment that people make when they get married; the tax break was decried by Harriet Harman as ‘back to basics with an open-necked shirt and converse trainers’; a policy thought up by a group of ‘Mad Men’ (à la US hit TV show). It did not look to have played out well with some women, providing the Conservative front bencher, David Willetts, with prolonged discomfort during an
Women Politicians?

1. Manifesto pledges for families, by party

Labour

Policies

- Expansion of free nursery places for two year olds and 15 h a week of flexible free nursery education for three and four year olds
- New national under-fives service
- "One-stop shops" open to all families
- Expand number of free early learning places for disadvantaged two year olds
- Long-term goal of universal free childcare for two year olds, more flexibility over hours/days
- Retain childcare vouchers
- Raise childcare standards by a more qualified workforce
- Greater diversity in providers of Sure Start Children's Centres
- Toddler tax credit of £4 a week from 2012...to all parents of young children (whether stay home or not)
- Where parents, especially mothers, want to stay at home or work part-time we will do more to help families with younger children
- Reform Job Centre Plus to provide extra help to lone parents, with childcare, training and support to find family-friendly work
- Require those with children aged three to take steps to prepare for work and actively to seek employment once their youngest child is seven years old
- Ensure that work always pays for hard-working lone parents
- Greater support for maternity services

Conservative

Support families in the tax and benefits system
- End couples penalty
- Tax credits no longer justified for households earning more than £50K
- Freeze council tax
- Free nursery care with a diverse range of providers
- Stable, long-term funding for relationship support; increase the use of mediation
- Sure start [taken] back to its original purpose of early intervention for the neediest families
- 4, 200 Sure Start health visitors
- Newly created Early Years support team
- Help reverse the commercialisation of childhood
- End closure of local maternity hospitals

Liberal Democrat

- Protect existing childcare support arrangements until the nation's finances can support a longer term solution
- Move to 20 hour free childcare for every child, from the age of 18 months
- Introduce a Default Contact Arrangement—dividing child's time between their two parents in the event of family breakdown, if there is no threat to the safety of the child
- Regulating airbrushing in adverts
- End the closure of local maternity hospitals

interview for Mumsnet (Feb 2010) and forcing Theresa May to publicly state her support for the policy (May 2010). And the policy appears, at least to some women, as a tax on the abandoned wife and first family—the 'golden hello' to the younger model: '...we can't all
be smiley Daves and Sams. There is little in a tax benefit that makes a single woman in my position—middle-aged wife abandoned for a much younger woman.' (woman commentator, Spectator on line). J.K. Rowling—perhaps the UK's most well-known ex-single mother—took umbrage too, accusing David Cameron of being completely 'ignorant of' single parent poverty. She asked, given the emphasis on the symbolism of the tax recognition, whether it would have been 'more cost-effective, more personal, to send all lower income married people flowers?' (Times, 14 April 2010).

The new—and welcome—emphasis by all three main parties on the family/work nexus arguably reflects British society in which women are more likely to work than ever before, irrespective of whether this is out of personal choice or necessity; it is also acknowledgement of the needs of the UK economy. The Conservatives' new found focus reflects efforts to modernise its women's policy under the political leadership of May, as shadow spokeswoman for Women and Equality (Guardian, 29 April 2010). Their manifesto—addressing issues that were notably absent from its 2005 manifesto—no longer stands out compared with the other two. Collectively, the parties' approach, even whilst mostly leaving non-mothers and elderly women on the margins, might be politically astute, given Labour's past success in capturing middle income mothers' votes; it may also be a good thing that the parties are talking to parents, in the sense that responsibility for families is constituted as both a women's and a men's concern. Yet, and key to any substantive judgement between the three parties offerings to women at the 2010 general election, is acknowledgement that none of the parties, in either their main or web manifestos, address the Fawcet Society's—the UK's leading women's equality civil society group—question of how the current economic situation, and each of the parties' policies on tax and spending, will affect women.

Gender and voting in the 2010 British General Election

With no gender gap in voter turnout—women are as likely as men to vote—and given what is known about gender and voting behaviour in the UK, there is a rationale behind parties targeting middle- and high-income mothers. Historically women's voting patterns tended to favour the Conservative party—the traditional gender gap. In 1997 the Labour party won the votes of more women born since 1945 than men; although the reverse was true amongst older women and men—a gender generation gap. One potential explanation for this was that New Labour had secured the support of the middle- and high-income mothers. In 2010 all parties explicitly wanted these votes and, unlike in the US, they have the ideological space to compete for women's vote on this terrain. A focus on Mumsnetters, accordingly, looks logical: for Labour, in terms of trying to maintain its advantage amongst these women; for the
Conservatives, in trying to win them back, conceiving them as natural Conservative supporters; and for the Liberal Democrats, who argue this is their territory too.

This close to the election, analysis of women and men's voting is limited to early released data. On the basis of the British Election Study's continuous monitoring survey, Figures 1 and 2 provide an overview of men and women's self-reported vote intentions prior to the short campaign. In this there was little difference in the way men and women responded to the long campaign. Women were more likely than men to say that they did not know who to vote for, and men were slightly more likely than women to say that they intended to vote for one of the smaller parties or for the Labour party. These trends are in keeping with the wider literature and do not suggest that women have realigned themselves to the Labour party at an aggregate level—which would be necessary to establish the presence of a UK modern gender gap (that is, where women are more likely than men to vote for left of centre parties) (Figure 2).

BES data collected during the short campaign (after 6 April) shows a small traditional gender gap with 39.7% of women and 35.1% of men stating that they intended to vote Conservative but there was little sex difference in support for the other two main parties, with approximately 28% of men and 27% women intending to vote Labour, and

Figure 1. Vote intention for the three main parties. Source: British Election Study CMS.
2. Vote intention by sex and childcare responsibility (BES campaign study)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caring responsibilities for children under 15</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Vote intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Labour (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not carer*</td>
<td></td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: BES campaign study. *The difference between the sexes is significant at the 0.00 level, chi square test, N = 9941.

25% of men and women intending to vote Liberal Democrat. Turning to the 'Mumsnet' phenomena Table 2 shows there is no statistically significant difference in the vote intention of men and women who are carers for children aged under 15 (a surrogate for parenthood). This suggests that Labour might well have lost its recent electoral advantage amongst mothers, as all the main parties compete over women's issues and offered policies 'for mothers'.
Table 3 looks at the relationship between age, sex and vote intention and confirms a traditional gender gap amongst older voters—with women aged between 45 and 74 more likely to report an intention to vote Conservative than men. However, among the under 45s women are not more likely to support the Conservatives than men but neither are they significantly more likely to report an intention to vote Labour or Liberal Democrat—which would be necessary for a modern gender gap.

Should the lack of difference between women and men voters, and between mothers and everyone else be supported by the post-election British Election Study face-to-face survey then it would invite two readings. The first is that gender is not a crucial factor in vote intention at the 2010 general election. The second is that the parties, and particularly the Conservative party’s, attempts to attract back women voters has undermined Labour’s recent advantage amongst younger women and middle- and high-income mothers. It is too soon to call unquestionably but if further data backs this story up then it might well be that 2010 should be viewed as a success for the Conservatives in winning back these women voters.
A few more women MPs but an unfulfilled promise

Eighteen months out from the election it was not looking good for women's descriptive representation. With opinion polls forecasting a clear Conservative victory, the attendant swing against Labour was likely to see an overall decline in the number of women MPs. If this reflected the historic asymmetry in Labour's favour, most notable since 1997, it also reflected the failure of the Conservatives, as the main opposition party, to select sufficient women in its winnable and vacant held seats. The parliamentary expenses scandal of summer 2009 significantly changed the prospects as many more MPs retired from Westminster than was usual—nearly 150. This 'freed' up precisely those seats that will, all other things being equal, return a party's selected candidate to Parliament. If women were selected in equal numbers in these, then a party might just achieve sex parity amongst its newly elected MPs, and a larger increase in the numbers of women MPs overall. Unfortunately this did not happen.

The key to understanding the patterns of women's political recruitment in 2010 is party demand. This is not to say that there should not be concern about the overall numbers and diversity of women seeking parliamentary selection (supply). However, immediate and significant improvement in the sex composition at Westminster requires translating parties' aspirant women candidates into candidates selected for a party's held and winnable seats. Of the three main equality strategies available to political parties—equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees—the most efficient is the latter. Measures that 'facilitate' or 'encourage' or 'expect' the greater selection of women, or rules that set a minimum quota at the nominating or short-listing stages simply cannot require an increase in the number or proportion of particular parliamentarians; they do not make a particular social characteristic a necessary qualification for office.

All Women Shortlists (AWS) remained central to Labour's candidate selection strategy for 2010, as in 1997 and 2005, and were used in more than half of the party's retirement seats. The Party again sought their voluntary adoption although it was more conscious this time of the need to manage central-local relations. Some antipathy remained, but to little public effect (Times, 8 May 2009). Given that Liberal Democrats overwhelmingly perceive their problem as one of insufficient supply, their efforts focused mostly on encouraging more women to seek selection. The key equality promotion measure was a sex short-listing rule: shortlists of three or four must require at least one applicant of each sex; shortlists of five, at least two. The Conservatives have, since 2005, implemented a series of reforms to their selection procedures. The central plank of the first set of reforms was the creation of a priority ('A') list of candidates (50% would be female). The second reforms strongly advocated the use of primaries and in their
absence, that Local Associations’ Executive Committees, not the members at large, would make the final decision. The third set permitted Local Associations to choose from the full list of approved candidates with a 50% sex quota at each stage. Primaries were again pushed. The fourth reforms involved six candidates ideally going before a Special General Meeting or Open Primary. ‘By-Election’ rules—a choice of three candidates—would kick in from January 2010.

To much surprise, Cameron’s deposition to the Speaker’s Conference included a further provision: ‘some’ of these would be AWS. In practice, neither was. And in any case, Conservative AWS—had there been any—would not have constituted equality guarantees. Rather, in a particular seat the ‘best’ three candidates would simply have been women, happenstance.

The ‘good news’ story of the 2010 general election for women—the return of an historically unprecedented number of women MPs, up 14 on the 128 in 2005—is more apparent than real. To be sure, Westminster is now 21.9% female; the Conservatives more than doubled their number—from 17 in 2005 to 48 women in 2010; and the percentage of Labour women MPs increased at a general election where they lost a large number of MPs, to a high of 31%. There were also a number of women’s ‘firsts’: the first Muslim women MPs (three Labour); the first BME and first ‘out’ Lesbian Conservative women MPs; and the first Green party MP was a woman too. In Northern Ireland, women MPs represent Sinn Fein, the SDLP, the Alliance party as well as one Independent. Nevertheless, the overall increase in the numbers of women is very small—a net gain of only 2.5%. The Observer’s claim for a ‘dramatic increase over the past few decades’, whilst factually accurate should invite scorn: the post-war average until the mid-1980s was roughly 4%, but the increase from 1997 to 2010 is from 120 to 142 women MPs, a difference of just 4 percentage points (from 18 to 22%).

At the Executive level, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition Cabinet includes just four women (17%, and the same number as Brown’s last Cabinet), all Conservative. May’s appointment as the second woman Home Secretary is the high point, and Sayeeda Warsi sits as the first Muslim woman Cabinet Minister, albeit from the Lords. In total there are just 14 women of 95 government ministers (15%).

The 2010 general election results have, then, to be regarded as a missed opportunity—this was, in short, no breakthrough election. And this is despite 2010 constituting a favourable moment: all the parties were publicly committed to increase the diversity of representation and some had expended considerable political capital on introducing and implementing measures to that end and there were, as noted above, many more party-held vacant seats. The swing against Labour saw a decline of 17 Labour women MPs, including the ex-Home Secretary Jacqui Smith and the then Solicitor General Vera Baird. The Liberal Democrats’ worse than expected result saw their number decline, from
10 to 7, and the exit of two senior MPs, Susan Kramer and Sandra Gidley. The Liberal Democrat male MP, Evan Harris, one of the House’s most vocal pro-choice champions, also lost his seat. Conservative efforts fell short of their expectation of some 60 women—which prevents agreement with the Telegraph (10 May 2010) that the party had made ‘huge strides’; and some high profile ‘A-list’ women candidates, such as Philippa Stroud and Joanne Cash, failed to be elected. The number and percentage of Conservative women MPs continues to compare unfavourably with the Parliamentary Labour Party (48 versus 81 women MPs and 16% compared to 31%). At an election where it gained nearly 100 seats, women constitute less than 20% of all Conservative MPs and only 22% of its newly elected ones. In contrast, at a general election where it lost nearly 100 seats Labour actually increased the percentage of its women MPs and it continues to have more women MPs than all the other parties added together.

The reason for the ongoing inter-party asymmetry in the 2010 Parliament lies, as it has before, in the different attitudes towards, and adoption of, measures designed to increase the selection of women for seats where a party has a good chance of winning. The three tables show the selection of women candidates, with regard to the ‘safety’ of the seat in 2005 (Table 4) and 2010 (Table 5), and in terms of the 2010 ‘retirement’ seats (Table 6). Four main observations stand out: (1) Labour and the Conservatives selected more women candidates overall in 2010 than they did in 2005 whilst the Liberal Democrats selected fewer women in both absolute and percentage terms; (2) the only party whose overall percentage of women candidates matches or exceeds its percentage of women MPs is the Labour party, at 31% MPs and 30% candidates—the other parties have smaller percentages of women MPs than they do candidates, suggesting that their women were less likely to win than their male equivalents; (3) the distribution by seat safety shows that Labour was alone in distributing women candidates disproportionately in its held seats—30% compared to 15% for the Conservatives and 19% for the Liberal Democrats. (Note that Labour was expecting a swing against it at the election.) The Conservatives, in contrast, placed most of its women candidates in percentage terms (30%) in its unwinnable seats. They unexpectedly benefited from six gains in this seat category. The Liberal Democrat party placed more women candidates in seats they expected to gain, yet too many of these failed to translate into MPs on the night; and (4) looking at the retirement seats, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats (on smaller numbers) selected women in more than half of the retirement seats. The percentage for the Conservative party was just 26%—this was the Tories missed opportunity.

Prospects for the future enhancement of women’s descriptive representation at Westminster look, on the basis of the 2010 results, to point to the necessity for the wider adoption of equality guarantees.
## Women candidates and MPs by type of seat 2005 (men)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats won 2001</th>
<th>Winnable 5%</th>
<th>Winnable 10%</th>
<th>Unwinnable</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Candidates</td>
<td>MPs</td>
<td>Candidates</td>
<td>MPs</td>
<td>Candidates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>115 (288)</td>
<td>98 (237)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>14 (150) 9%</td>
<td>14 (146)</td>
<td>4 (26)</td>
<td>1 (17)</td>
<td>7 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>4 (46)</td>
<td>4 (41)</td>
<td>2 (7)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>5 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seats won 2005</td>
<td>Winnable 5%</td>
<td>Winnable 10%</td>
<td>Unwinnable</td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Candidates</td>
<td>MPs</td>
<td>Candidates</td>
<td>MPs</td>
<td>Candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>118 (231)</td>
<td>80 (175)</td>
<td>20 (12)</td>
<td>0 (1) 0%</td>
<td>5 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>27 (181)</td>
<td>26 (179)</td>
<td>12 (32)</td>
<td>9 (25) 27%</td>
<td>12 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>12 (50) 19%</td>
<td>4 (45)</td>
<td>7 (9)</td>
<td>1 (1) 44%</td>
<td>3 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parliamentary Affairs
The Equality Act 2010 permits their use until 2030. Given their established effectiveness since 1997 there is every reason for Labour to continue using AWS until sex parity in the PLP is secured; with women constituting less than 20% of its parliamentary party the Conservatives must not be tempted to walk away from further reforms to its selection procedures—any future commitment to AWS should be stronger than ‘happenstance’; and finally, following the decline in the number of women candidates and MPs in 2010, a series of poor returns for women over the last few elections, and Nick Clegg’s rhetorical commitment to increasing women’s presence, not least at the Speaker’s Conference, the Liberal Democrats must revisit the debate about AWS—a debate which has caused deep internal divisions and has prevented the party addressing the issue in an objective manner.23

One of the Speaker’s Conference recommendations is, moreover, for Parliament to consider prescriptive rather than permissive quotas should the parties ‘fail to make significant progress’ at the 2010 general election.24 No such progress was made in 2010. But in the absence of a Labour Government that looks most unlikely unless and until the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats embrace the logic of equality guarantees.25 In the meantime, other Speaker’s Conference recommendations should ensure that all parties’ selection measures and outcomes are reported to Parliament and are made available to the public. Party activists and civil society groups can and should mobilise around these and, in so doing, contest interpretations of merit that critics hold against AWS and equality guarantees in general.

**Conclusion**

The 2010 general election was a largely unfulfilled promise for both dimensions of feminisation: the integration of women and the integration of women’s concerns. To be sure, women voters, or rather, the UK’s mothers were much sought after creatures at the 2010 general election. The main parties proffered them considerable wares—a smorgasboard of issues relating to women’s work/life balance. Yet it is unlikely that many voters, male or female, actually read the party manifestos. Those watching the news or reading the newspapers would instead have seen a presidential electoral campaign with policies for

### Table: Retirees and replacements at the 2010 general election, by main parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Retirements, all</th>
<th>Women retirements</th>
<th>Women replacements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>24 (23.5%)</td>
<td>52 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5 (13.1%)</td>
<td>10 (26.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (57.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>29 (19.4%)</td>
<td>67 (46.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
women and women politicians pushed to the sidelines. Harman and May, the two main parties leading women MPs were effectively silenced. The media’s emphasis on the three party leaders, and ‘all male preening’ (I0S, 9 May 2010) TV debates, of course left little space for any other politician, male or female in 2010, but women’s role in British politics became further marginalised by representations of the leaders’ wives—unelected women who had simply married political men. They were unsurprisingly and un-inspiringly dubbed the ‘Wags’. The almost continuous media coverage took two main forms: first, discussions of their fashion nous and secondly, and more substantively, evaluations of their contribution to their husbands’ election campaigns. We learnt, for example, that pregnant Samantha Cameron’s peeped toe wedge shoes were from Zara; Sarah Brown’s ‘double belt’ from Jigsaw; and Miriam Gonzalez Durantez’s trench coat a classic beige. We could go on, ad nauseam. As ciphers for their husbands, the sassy Mrs Cameron and wholesome Mrs Brown especially, were seen to signal that neither man was out of touch with the voters—either for reasons of class (Cameron) or personality failings (Gordon). Sure, both men were untidy and messy (Guardian, 28 April 2010), but this apparently made them normal husbands and, in any case, did not detract from being good potential Prime Ministers.

Amongst all this highly gendered copy, some feminist journalists were not backward in their criticism. ‘Implicit and patronising assumptions’ that women voters would be swayed by the leaders’ ‘loveableness’ were ridiculed: ‘always, at times, such as these, the female vote (the Mumsnet factor) is discussed as if it were pink, fluffy silly thing—with women needing to be courted, flattered and directed’ (Observer, 2 May 2010). Campaign strategies that explicitly courted mothers, but not fathers, and ignored the ‘one-fifth of women’ who do not have children was questioned— alongside criticism of the various monikers thought up by ‘male wonks who go red when a lady speaks’ (Guardian, 21 April 2010 and 7 April 2010; Observer, 9 May 2010). There were fears of a 2015 ‘leaders’ wives debate’ chaired by Myleen Klass (Guardian, 7 April 2010). Questions were raised for the future: what precisely does the public want from the spouse? What happens if one has a ‘mumsy appendage’ (Guardian 28 April 2010; Observer 11 April 2010) And where does all this leave the female aspirant leader? Are women perceived to be capable of performing well in the ‘televised combat’ that is the leadership election debate? (Observer, 9 May 2010).

Of course, women politicians were present, campaigning on the ground. And the general election did produce a Parliament that has more women MPs than the 2005 one. But the welcome increase to 142 must be seen as only a very small, and most importantly, an insufficient advance. Women MPs are far from parity and this was at an election where the parties expressed explicit motivation and had many more
opportunities—Cameron had made it central to his party’s modernisation. But only in the Labour party does women’s presence break through the 30% barrier. What this Westminster election proves, yet again, is the importance of all parties adopting equality guarantees, in addition to employing equality rhetoric and promotion. In 2010, just like in 1997 and 2005, Labour’s AWS efficiently delivered women MPs to the House. The other two parties have much more to do. Ensuring that none takes their eye off the ‘women’s descriptive representation’ ball remains an immediate political project. Despite claims that the coalition will hold for five years, there could well be a second general election before then; any reduction in the number of parliamentary seats, for which there are already legislative plans, will see sitting MPs fighting it out for selection and election. The outcome of these contests must not disproportionately affect women. If the debate over electoral reform widens then questions arise about the best PR system for women, and any particular measures that might be used to enhance women’s (s)election. It is also important that women succeed in government too. Cameron’s aspiration for one-third women in his Government requires monitoring.

One does not need accept a straightforward link between women’s descriptive and substantive representation (‘being’ a woman and ‘acting for’ women) to hold expectations that the 2010 women MPs might, in some way, re-gender politics. Evidence from the 1997 to 2005 Parliaments is highly suggestive; Labour’s women MPs and Ministers pushed women’s concerns up the political agenda. For feminists the end of the New Labour government—and the exit of some key feminist women MPs associated with acting for women—will be worrying (Guardian, 7 May 2010). Yet, the Conservatives come into government, alongside the Liberal Democrats, with their most detailed and thorough manifesto commitments for women and there is suggestive evidence that the party is more favourably disposed to acting for women, with key women MPs like May, the author of many of its policies for women in the Cabinet and retaining her responsibility for Women and Equalities. Yet, the coalition negotiations and programme do not necessarily augur well. Commitments to flexible working, shared parental leave and the gender pay gap remain, and are complemented with commitments to promote gender equality on company boards. However, on sexual violence the funding of new rape crisis centres looks less secure—a shift in language from delivery to consideration. Finally, and despite the Liberal Democrats being allowed to abstain in any parliamentary vote, the Conservatives have retained their policy of recognising marriage and civil partnerships in the tax system, which they could—had they wanted to—given up. The extent to which, and how, women’s concerns are addressed in the coming months and years remains, admitted, to be seen. In this immediate post-election period what can be concluded is that, whilst, from the
election of Cameron as leader of the Conservative party in 2005 to the start of the short campaign, it seemed as though the 2010 British general election might turn out to be a critical gender election, in the end, it was not to be.

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*Permission granted by the artist.

1 See Janet Street Porter, Independent on Sunday, 9 May 2010; Catherine Bennett, Observer, 9 May 2010; Guardian, 6 April 2010.
2 Mumsnetters are deemed well-educated, middle-class mothers (Mumsnet cofounder, Justine Roberts).
3 Mumsnet cofounder, Carrie Longton.
5 The Fawcett Society sought the parties' positions on the economy, work/family life, crime and justice, democracy and political reform; attitudes to media and culture; equality and human rights.
6 The Liberal Democrats spoke of women's equal rights; Labour supported the UN Women's Agency.
7 Stated in terms of the impact on neighborhoods not women.
8 NB, Conservative MPs are less pro-choice P. Cowley and Smart, 'Party Rules OK', Parliamentary Affairs, 63, 2010, 173–81.
9 Labour and Liberal Democrats agree that childcare provision should be expanded; Labour specifically targets lone parents with policies to support them back into work.
10 S. Childs and P. Webb, Gender and the Conservative Party, Palgrave, forthcoming. The Conservatives 'women's webpage, at only half a page long belies detailed policy work.
13 R. Campbell, Gender and the Vote in Britain, 2006, ECPUR Press.
14 The British Election Study 2010, funded by the ESRC, is run by Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart and Paul Whiteley (http://www.bes2010-10.org). The CMS is an innovative monthly electronic poll, conducted by YouGov, of approximately 1000 respondents. The pooled data set (July 2008 to March 2010) contains some 26 655 respondents (weighted data).
15 Women's greater representation in the 'don't know' category is common in political surveys and is usually partially related to their relatively lower levels of interest in party politics (R. Campbell and K. Winters, 'Understanding Men and Women's Political Interest', JESP, 2008, 18, pp. 53–74.
16 R. Campbell, Gender and Vote in Great Britain, ECPUR, 2006.
18 The narrowing of the political class to graduate, professional politicians has been widely noted.
20 Op cit, with emphasis added.
22 Baird lost on a swing of 23% reflecting the closure of a steel works in her constituency; Smith was embattled in the expenses scandal.
23 Gaby Hinsliff, Grazia April 2010.
24 Andrew Rawnsley, admittedly, does not gender his comment that no party will elect a leader without considering how well they will fare in such a contest.
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27 Winnable seats are where the party came second in 2001 and the majority was less than 5 and 10%.
28 This excludes ex-Conservative Andrew Pelling MP who re-stood as an independent. Labour’s Clare Short and Bob W zeros are included; Conservatives Quentin Davies, Derek Conway and Bob Spink are included.
29 Four labour seats were abolished.
31 House of Commons, Speaker’s Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), HC239-1, 2010, TSO.