

# Progress for women?

## Will Cameron's frontbench pledge on gender anger male MPs?

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The next general election will deliver a huge number of new MPs to Westminster. Over 100 MPs have so far announced their intention to stand down at the next election and current polling suggests that the Conservatives are likely to sweep to power with a healthy majority.

Gordon Brown said at conference earlier this week that the Conservatives would bring only half the number of women to parliament that the Labour party currently has. He was not far wrong. Even given the introduction of the Conservative's A list, which acted to catapult a large number of women into their target seats, they are only likely to bring around 65 women to the Westminster benches; the Labour government currently have 98.

However, this is a huge step forward for a party that the Fawcett Society predicted would only manage gender parity by 2309. Estimates for the Labour party returning women to Westminster are not far behind despite the chances that their numbers of MPs will take a dramatic hit. Even if the Conservatives gain a majority of 80, the Labour party should be able to return around 50 women to Westminster.

With the Liberals contributing further to the numbers of women in parliament, women's representation should not fall much below the current figures. This is a fairly impressive feat, and the potential for growing numbers of women in parliament would not have existed without the Conservative's coming to the realisation that they needed to adopt a policy of positive discrimination.

David Cameron has also pledged that by the end of his first parliament a third of his cabinet will be female. This was a bold move and whilst it shows the Conservative's commitment to increasing gender equality, it is possible to level a fair amount of criticism on the statement. At present the Conservatives only have 17 women in parliament and it is unlikely that all of these women will end up on the front benches. For Cameron's pledge to be fulfilled, it will be necessary to for some of those women MPs newly elected in 2010 to rapidly ascend the ladder. This is likely to cause anger; particularly from the men in the party who have loyally served on the backbenches whilst the party is in opposition and see women being promoted ahead of them in order to fulfil the pledge.

That is not to say that the women will not get there of their own merits, but whilst women are constantly battling to make their case that they have gained a promotion due to their talents, rather than their gender, Cameron's pledge may only further the problems that women face. Comments by some members of parliament that women are only on the front benches because they are women, rather than because they are capable, are likely to be rife. Chloe Smith is already being tipped for great things, and you can bet that if a man had won Norwich North, the same attention would not be being paid.

At the moment however all we can do is wait to see how many Labour women MPs will find themselves without a seat and how many will be returned to parliament; how many women the Conservatives can bring to the table and if the pool of talent is strong enough to make Cameron's pledge a reality.

**Rebecca Lury is a member of the Fleishman Hillard public affairs team**