

WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT:
Making a difference since 1918

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**FOREWORD BY RT. HON JOHN BERCOW MP,
SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS**

The long campaign to give women the vote was finally successful in 1918 at the end of the First World War. But what happened next?

This booklet from the Commons Library shows how women MPs made a difference both to Parliament and to the everyday life of women in the United Kingdom. The 2010 Speaker's Conference showed the continuing importance of promoting a House of Commons more representative of its electors. To set the lives of remarkable female pioneers in context, we should remember that since 1918 there have been fewer women MPs in total – 369 – than there are men currently sitting in the House of Commons.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Bercow', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rt. Hon John Bercow MP
Speaker

Women in Parliament

HISTORY

After a long campaign, women first were able to vote in parliamentary elections in 1918. This was restricted to qualifying women over 30. Separate legislation was quickly passed later that year to allow women to stand for the Commons.

WHO CAN VOTE AND BE AN MP?

Representation of the People Act 1918
gave the vote to women aged 30 and above

Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918
allowed women over 21 to stand as an MP

Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928
extended women's voting age to 21 years

Representation of the People Act 1969
extended the voting age to those aged 18 and over

Electoral Administration Act 2006
reduced the age for candidacy to 18

Of the 1,623 candidates for the 1918 general election, only 17 were women. Not one of the prominent suffragette campaigners was elected. The only successful candidate and first woman MP was Countess Markievicz. She took no active part herself in the election campaign for her seat, St. Patrick's division of Dublin, as she was being held in

Holloway Prison following her arrest with a number of other Irish Nationalists earlier in 1918. As she stood for the Irish Republican Party, Sinn Féin, she did not take her seat at Westminster. Countess Markievicz was later the first female member of the Irish Dáil convened in 1919.

The first woman to take her seat in the Commons was Viscountess Nancy Astor. She was elected at a by-election in November 1919, for the Plymouth seat previously held by her husband. He could no longer be an MP when he inherited a peerage. In fact, the next two women to take their seats were also elected for seats previously held by their husbands (Margaret Wintringham, September 1921 and Mabel Philipson, May 1923).

The voting age was equalised for men and women in 1928 by the Equal Franchise Act. Just 10 years after women first gained the vote, the legislation was relatively uncontroversial with only 10 MPs voting against the Bill.

WOMEN MPs SINCE 1918

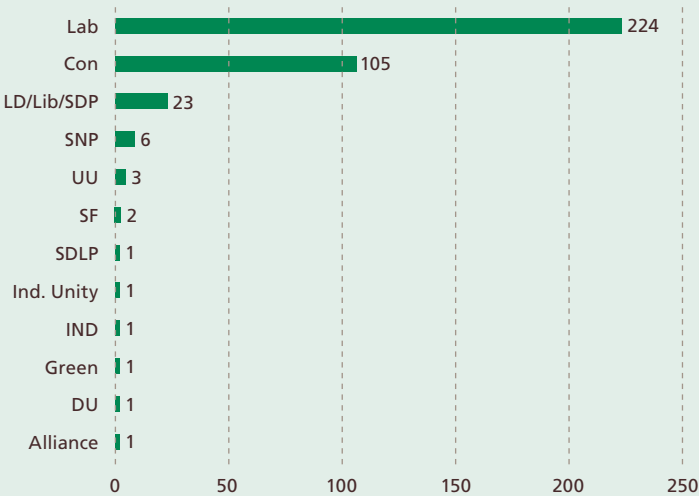
- There have been 369 women elected to Parliament since 1918, two of whom were Sinn Féin MPs who never sat in the Commons.
- 35% of all the women MPs since 1918 were first elected in the last 20 years.

MPs SINCE 1918 BY GENDER



- Of the 369 women elected since 1918, 61% were first elected for Labour, 28% for Conservative and 6% for the Liberal Democrats (and predecessor parties).
- 54 (15%) of these 369 women first entered Parliament at a by-election.

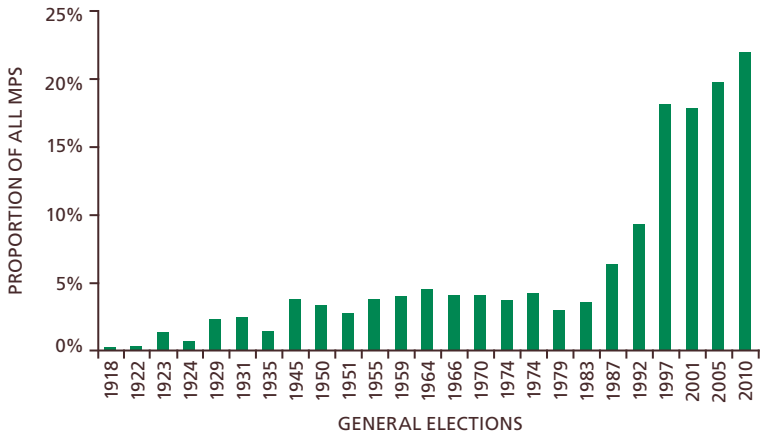
WOMEN MPs SINCE 1918 BY PARTY



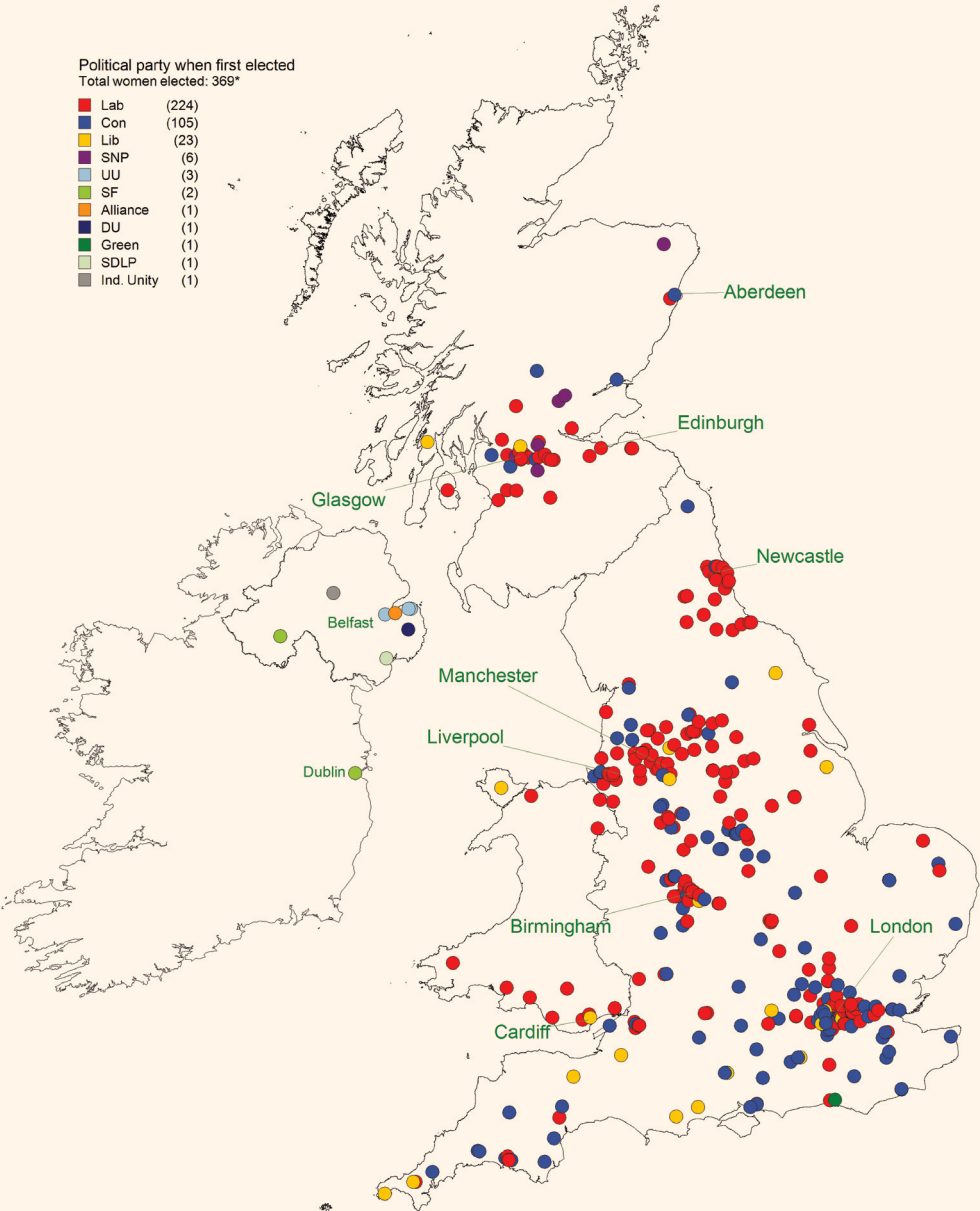
In the years following 1918 the number of women Members of Parliament grew slowly, reaching 15 in 1931. 24 were elected in the 1945 general election and the number did not vary markedly for another fifty years. In 1992 the number rose to 60 and then doubled to 120 at the 1997 general

election. This was at least in part due to the combination of the Labour landslide and the impact of all women shortlists. Since then the number has risen less dramatically to 143 in 2010. As a result of by-elections the number of women MPs is now 147, 23 per cent of the total.

WOMEN MPs, 1918-2010



WOMEN ELECTED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, BY PARTY OF FIRST ELECTION 1918–2013



* Includes Eleanor Rathbone (independent) elected for the Combined English Universities in 1929

PUTTING WOMEN ON THE MAP

Women have been more likely to be MPs in towns and cities than in rural constituencies. This at least partly reflects the tendency for Labour seats to be in urban areas and the high number of women Labour MPs, compared with other parties. But women MPs have tended to cluster in constituencies in some of the UK's biggest cities – London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Glasgow. Birmingham Edgbaston has had both Labour and Conservative women MPs continuously since 1953.

Other parts of the UK have had relatively few women. Only 14 women MPs have ever represented constituencies in Wales. There are parts of the UK which have never had a woman MP in one of their constituencies – the North of Scotland, the Borders, Cumbria and parts of Dorset and Hampshire are yet to have a woman MP.

LONGEST SERVICE

Gwyneth Dunwoody was (and remains) the longest serving woman MP, both in terms of total service (38.3 years) and continuous service (34.1 years). Previously Barbara Castle had served continuously for 33.8 years. Irene Ward had broken service totalling 37.7 years.

Among current female Members, Harriet Harman has the longest continuous service (31 years to date). She was elected at a by-election in October 1982 for Peckham. However, Margaret Beckett has the longest total service (35 years to date). She was first elected in October 1974 but lost her seat in 1979. She was elected again in 1983 and has served continuously since then.

SHORTEST SERVICE

Ruth Dalton served just 92 days as the MP for Durham, Bishop Auckland in 1929. Her husband had been elected as an MP for the then marginal Peckham constituency in 1924 and he had already been selected as the Labour candidate for the safe seat of Bishop Auckland when the sitting MP died. The constituency Labour Party therefore needed a candidate who would agree to stand down at the next general election. Ruth Dalton was chosen because she could be relied on to resign in favour of her husband. In doing so she set the record as the shortest serving woman MP and allowed her husband to be elected there at the 1929 general election.

MILESTONES FOR WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT

- 1918 -

First woman elected to the House of Commons was Countess Markievicz

- 1919 -

First woman to sit in the House of Commons was Lady Astor

- 1958 -

Baroness Wootton of Abinger was the first woman to receive letters patent as a life peer in the Lords

- 1970 -

Betty Harvie Anderson was the first woman Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons

- 1992 -

**Betty Boothroyd was the first woman Speaker of the House of Commons
Marion Roe was the first woman chair of a departmental select committee**

- 2006 -

Baroness Hayman became the First Lord Speaker of the House of Lords

- 2008 -

Gwyneth Dunwoody died in service. She is the longest serving woman MP with 38 years in parliament.

“I am a feminist, a 100 per cent feminist, who has been working for the large part of my life in trying to secure equality of citizenship between men and women” – Eleanor Rathbone, HC Deb 20 March 1941 c369

PROFILES OF SELECTED WOMEN MPs

ELLEN WILKINSON (1891–1947) was best known for her high profile work on behalf of her unemployed constituents in the North East town of Jarrow. The Jarrow March of 1936 culminated in a petition delivered personally to Parliament. She successfully introduced a Private Member’s Bill, the Hire Purchase Act 1938, the first legislation to protect those who bought high-cost goods on credit. As Minister of Education in the 1945 Labour government, Wilkinson’s main achievement was the implementation of the raising of the school-leaving age from 14 to 15.

ELEANOR RATHBONE (1872–1946) was elected as an Independent MP for the Combined English Universities seat in 1929. Her major achievement is often seen as the Family Allowances Act 1945, a system of direct payments to mothers to improve the care of children. Her background was as a suffragist and she used her position as an independent to campaign both for policies for women such as the Inheritance (Family Provision) Act 1938 and also for broader concerns such as human rights.



Eleanor Rathbone
by Julian Barrow, after an original by Sir James Gunn in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 4133) 1998, oil painting
WOA 4391 © National Portrait Gallery

MARION PHILLIPS (1881–1932) was born in Australia but came to study at the LSE in London in 1904 and became active in women’s campaigns about the vote and improving wages and conditions. Her campaign to improve the lives of working-class wives brought a quarter of a million housewives into the Labour movement. This led to the development of health clinics and school meals and other family policies. She became the first Chief Women’s Officer of the Labour Party in 1918. In 1929 she was elected in a double member constituency in Sunderland. She was the first Jewish woman MP. She lost her seat in 1931.

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*Ellen Cicely Wilkinson leading the Jarrow Marchers through
Cricklewood in London*, by Fox Photos Ltd, 31 October 1936,
© National Portrait Gallery, London

MARGARET BONDFIELD (1873–1953)

was the first woman Cabinet Minister, as Minister of Labour, and first Privy Counsellor, in the short-lived Labour Cabinet of 1929–1931. Her background was in trade unionism. She had to deal with the effects of the Great Depression and the challenging task of finding the funds to pay unemployment relief. Her term of office ended with the creation of the National Government in 1931 and in the subsequent general election of October 1931 she lost her seat.

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Margaret Grace Bondfield, by Walter Stoneman, 1930, © National Portrait Gallery, London

JENNIE LEE (1904–1988) was best known for her role in helping to found the Open University as Minister for the Arts in Harold Wilson's first administration in 1964. She was first elected in a by-election

in Lanarkshire in March 1929 aged 24, the youngest MP in the Commons at a point when she was below the voting age herself. She lost her seat in 1931 but was re-elected in 1945 for Cannock until she was defeated in the 1970 general election.

BARBARA CASTLE (1910–2002) was elected to Parliament in 1945, the youngest woman member, one of 24 female MPs. Castle saw herself as someone who wanted to implement left wing ideas and to encourage other women into politics. She wanted to prove to the male-dominated Labour Party that women candidates were not a liability. Castle was one of the key figures in the Harold Wilson-led Labour Party. She became the fourth woman to reach the rank of Cabinet Minister, in October 1964 as Minister for Overseas Development, and held Cabinet posts during Wilson's 1964–70 governments and 1974–76 administration. After Overseas Development, she became Minister of Transport (1965–68); Secretary of State for Employment and First Secretary of State (1968–70); and Secretary of State for Social Services (1974–76). Castle was responsible for some major legislation on issues affecting women, including child benefit and pensions.

BERNADETTE DEVLIN (1947–)

was elected at a by-election aged 21 in December 1969. She stood as an Independent Unity candidate for Mid Ulster. She received a nine-month prison

sentence while still an MP for public order offences in riots in Londonderry in August 1969. Denied an opportunity to speak in the statement on 31 January 1972 following the events of Bloody Sunday, she attacked the Home Secretary physically and verbally in the Chamber, accusing him of lying. Devlin lost her seat in the February 1974 general election, but continued to be a controversial figure in Irish republican politics.

WINNIE EWING (1929–) raised the profile of the SNP when she won the Hamilton by-election in 1967. She was the first female SNP MP. An eloquent lawyer, her election heralded a major focus on the process of devolution in the 1970s, which eventually came to fruition after 1997. She lost the seat in 1970, but was returned as an MP for a different constituency in February 1974 and was defeated again in 1979. From that date she served as an MEP for twenty years, before being elected to the newly established Scottish Parliament in 1999.

SHIRLEY WILLIAMS (1930–) was the fifth woman to hold office at Cabinet level, when appointed as Secretary of State for Prices and Consumer Protection in March 1974. She became Secretary of State for Education in 1976, overseeing the expansion of the comprehensive schools programme. She was one of four politicians to found the SDP in 1981 and the first to be elected for the new political party at a by-election that year in Crosby, Merseyside. She subsequently lost the seat in 1983

but remained prominent in the Liberal Democrats, formed as a merger between the Liberal Party and the SDP in 1988. She became a life peer in 1993 and served as Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords from 2001–2004.

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Shirley Vivien Teresa Brittain Williams, Baroness Williams of Crosby, by Walter Bird, 1966, © National Portrait Gallery, London

MARGARET THATCHER (1925–2013)

became the first woman Prime Minister in 1979. She served as Leader of the Opposition from 1975, and as Secretary of State for Education 1970–74. She was first elected in the 1959 general election for Finchley. As a backbencher she had introduced legislation on access to local authority meetings. Thatcher was the longest serving Prime Minister of the twentieth century. A landmark policy was council house sales. During the 20th century the state had encouraged local authorities to provide housing to meet a shortfall in supply and replace slum housing. The Housing Act 1980 gave council tenants a Right to Buy their home at a discount based on length of occupation. Since 1980 almost 2 million households have exercised their Right to Buy.

BETTY BOOTHROYD (1929–) was the first female Speaker of the House of Commons from 1992–2000. Although a member of the Labour National Consultative Committee by 1945, she struggled to be selected for a winnable seat. In 1973 Boothroyd became MP for West Bromwich at a by-election. She was on Labour's National Executive Committee from 1981–87 and became a deputy Speaker in 1987. She was elected Speaker in 1992 in a contested election. The previous two elections for Speakers were not contested. She served in the Commons until 2001 when she was made a peer.



The Rt. Hon. Betty Boothroyd, chosen Speaker in the year 1992 by Andrew T Festing 1994, oil painting WOA 3845 © Palace of Westminster

DIANE ABBOTT (1953–) was the first black woman to be elected to the House of Commons in 1987, for the constituency of Hackney North and Stoke Newington. She developed a reputation for speaking her own mind, and was a notable rebel against the Iraq war in 2003. After standing unsuccessfully for the Labour leadership in 2010, she was shadow minister for Public Health from 2010 to October 2013.

THERESA MAY (1956–) was first elected to the Commons in 1997 and became the first female Conservative Home Secretary in May 2010. She was also appointed to the position of Minister for Women and Equalities. As Home Secretary, May has become known for her decisive policies on anti-terrorism and police reform. Previously she had been the first female chair of Conservative Party in July 2002, where she reviewed selection policies for Conservative candidates.

CAROLINE LUCAS (1960–) and **NAOMI LONG (1971–)** were both first elected in 2010 and are both the only current MPs for their respective parties, the Green Party and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. Caroline Lucas previously served as an MEP for South East England from 1999 to 2010 and was leader of the Green Party from 2008 to 2012. Naomi Long was previously Lord Mayor of Belfast and member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. She defeated the leader of the Democratic Unionists at the general election.



Diane Abbott, MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington 1987
by Stuart Pearson Wright 2004, oil painting
WOA 6270 © Palace of Westminster

Women MPs making laws

This section has a dual focus. It looks at some of the ways in which women used their opportunity to bring forward legislation in Parliament and then uses some examples to show how legislation affects women in their daily lives.

HISTORY

After women MPs entered Parliament, legislative changes in part attributable to their presence led to more equal treatment of women in law and greater attention to the health and welfare of women and children. The range and focus of such legislation in the decade following the introduction of women MPs is striking. Much of this legislative activity began with Private Members' Bills. Private Members' Bills often dealt with major social and constitutional questions as a matter of course. For example, the Women's Emancipation Bill 1919 prompted the Government to bring forward its own Sex Disqualification (Removal) Bill, outlawing discrimination in appointments to professions such as law or accountancy or in the public sector. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 1922 raised the age that consent was no defence to a charge of indecent assault from 13 to 16 years and

in 1929 the law was changed so that the minimum age for marriage was equalised to 16 for both sexes. Previously it had been 14 for men and 12 for women. The Law of Property Act 1926 enabled married and single women to hold and dispose of their property and pensions for widows and orphans were introduced in 1924. The Bastardy Act 1923 enabled illegitimate children to be recognised as legitimate on the subsequent marriage of their parents.

Women also spoke on the major issues of the day, such as foreign policy and the Great Depression of the 1930s. After the Second World War, the growth of the welfare state meant that the Government took the lead in many social and economic issues affecting women. However, women MPs continued to shape legislation in the last decades of the 20th century, whether as individual Members or as part of the Government.





PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS

Women MPs have used the opportunity of Private Members' Bills to change the law, both to directly affect the lives of women and on broader issues.

THE PUBLIC BODIES (ADMISSION TO MEETINGS) ACT 1960

was introduced by the future Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, during her maiden speech on 11 February 1960. The Bill was altered at committee stage to give members of the public a right of admission to selected public meetings. The legislation remains in force, although considerably extended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985. The Bill was an important first step in improving transparency in local government.

PROHIBITION OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION ACT 1985

The Conservative MP, Marion Roe, sponsored a Private Members' Bill banning female genital mutilation (FGM) in 1985, arising from her interest in child protection. She was following in the footsteps of an early woman MP, the Duchess of Atholl, who spoke against the practice in the Commons on 11 December 1929, having formed an all party campaign group to outlaw FGM in Africa. More recently, Ann Clwyd promoted a further Private Members' Bill in 2003 which became the Female Genital Mutilation Act, replacing the 1985 legislation.



*The Rt. Hon Margaret Thatcher OM, MP, Prime Minister, by Henry Mee, 1992, oil painting
WOA 3634 © Palace of Westminster*

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MATRIMONIAL PROCEEDINGS ACT

1976 For many years, much of the violence which took place within the context of a relationship was considered to be a private matter rather than a crime. The Labour MP Jo Richardson piloted this Private Member's Bill to give women who suffered from domestic violence the right to apply for an injunction. The legislation was supported by Harold Wilson's Government. Although superseded by more comprehensive legislation, this was the first major law to recognise domestic violence as a crime.

GOVERNMENT BILLS INTRODUCED BY WOMEN

Women ministers have also created broader changes through legislation which have made an impact on daily life.

drink drive laws road deaths fell by 1,200, six times the forecast.

SOCIAL SECURITY PENSIONS ACT

1975 As Secretary of State for Social Services in 1974, Castle entered into what she described as “two years of the most important social reforms since the Beveridge report”, her task being to “bring our concept of social security up to date”. An important part of this was to help women build up pension entitlement in their own right. Castle spoke of the need to recognise the changed status of women in society: “We must get away from Beveridge’s reliance on the dependency principle and provide that when women go out to work they shall share equal responsibilities and enjoy equal rights.”

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Barbara Anne Castle, Baroness Castle, by Walter Bird, 1964, © National Portrait Gallery, London

ROAD SAFETY ACT 1967 In the late 1960s the Minister of Transport, Barbara Castle promoted the Road Traffic Act 1967. Castle’s most enduring transport legacy was in the area of road safety where she introduced a ‘scientific’ approach to tackling accident and fatality rates. She oversaw the introduction of compulsory wearing of seatbelts and the drink drive limit (of 80mg/100ml of blood), to be enforced at the roadside using a breathalyser. In the first year following the introduction of the new

MILESTONES FOR WOMEN IN THE CABINET

- 1929 -

Margaret Bondfield (Labour) first Cabinet Minister as Minister of Labour

- 1945 -

Ellen Wilkinson (Labour) second Cabinet Minister as Minister of Education

- 1953 -

**Florence Horsburgh first Conservative Cabinet Minister
as Minister of Education**

- 1964 -

Barbara Castle first to hold successive posts in Cabinet

- 1979 -

Margaret Thatcher first Prime Minister

- 1997/98 -

Ann Taylor first Leader of the House and then first Chief Whip

- 2006 -

Margaret Beckett first Foreign Secretary

- 2007 -

Jacqui Smith first Home Secretary

The option to pay reduced-rate contributions, relying on their husband's contributions for a state pension, was abolished. Home Responsibilities Protection was introduced to protect the state pension entitlements of people with caring responsibilities.

In addition, a State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) was introduced to address the failure of the existing combination of a flat-rate state pension, and occupational pensions of sharply varying quality and limited coverage, to prevent many pensioners from having to rely on means-tested benefits. Castle's intention was to provide every worker, whether in or outside the state scheme, a guaranteed minimum pension on retirement. The earnings-related nature of the scheme meant that higher earnings would be reflected in higher entitlements. However, aspects of it were designed to protect people with periods of low or no earnings, including women with caring responsibilities. Entitlement would be based on earnings between set limits and only the best 20 years' earnings taken into account. Membership of the scheme could continue without the requirement to pay contributions during periods at home caring for children or disabled people.

The consensus around SERPS did not last. Reforms introduced in the mid-1980s to reduce its generosity – with the aim

of reducing costs and encouraging the development of private alternatives – included removing the 'best 20 years rule'. The changes rendered SERPS, in Castle's words, "a parody of our original scheme". Recent governments have followed Castle's lead in attempting to reform the state pension system to better reflect women's working lives. Reforms in the Pensions Act 2007 further improved coverage for carers, such that by 2025, 90% of women would be expected to reach State Pension age entitled to a full basic State Pension, the same proportion as men.

The introduction of the single-tier pension in 2016 is expected to mean more State Pension in the short to medium term for many people with significant periods of low earnings or gaps in employment, particularly women and carers. However, future pensioners will need to save for any additional pension. The extent to which they are able to do so will inevitably reflect earnings over working life, which tend to be lower for women.

NORTHERN IRELAND ACT 1998

Mo Mowlam, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, played a major role in the ending of direct rule in Northern Ireland, restoring a legislative Assembly and introducing a power-sharing executive there. Candidates for a new party, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, stood in the Assembly elections in 1998, gaining two seats. Although the number of women in the Assembly remains low in international terms, the end of the Troubles has enabled women to contribute to legislation affecting their daily lives.

EQUALITY ACT 2010

Harriet Harman, as Minister for Women and Equality introduced this legislation in April 2009 which was designed to harmonise existing law into a more coherent whole, as well as to extend the law in a number of areas. To aid understanding of the proposed legislation, the pages were interleaved with the explanatory notes facing the text of the relevant clause. The Government Equalities Office continues to develop equality policy.

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Mo Mowlam, by John Keane, 2001,
© National Portrait Gallery, London

Parliament: Making laws affecting women

From the 19th century onwards, legislation affecting women became more prominent. Until Parliament took action, the rights of women to act independently of their husbands was limited.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF

WIVES In 1870 and 1882 Parliament passed legislation to enable wives to own property in their own name. The legislation followed calls for reform from high earning women and others, and the publication in 1869 of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. Before these Acts, a wife could not own property. A husband became entitled not only to the property his wife owned before the marriage (although wealthy families often set up trusts to mitigate the effects of this rule), but also to her earnings and savings made after the marriage ceremony. In return, the husband had a duty to maintain his wife.

Other Acts of Parliament have continued to amend the rights and responsibilities of husbands and wives. For example, statute now imposes mutual obligations of support on spouses, and, following a legal judgment in 1991, Parliament legislated in 1994 to make rape within a marriage a crime.

DIVORCE In 1923, Parliament passed an Act to allow women, like men, to petition for divorce on the ground of adultery alone. This followed pressure for reform from the feminist movement, and a commitment to achieve equal status for men and women by the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship. A previous Act of Parliament passed in 1857 had treated men and women differently: a wife (but not a husband) had to prove "aggravated adultery" meaning that she also had to prove an additional factor such as cruelty, two years' desertion or incest. Since then, of course, there have been further Acts of Parliament which have widened the grounds for divorce for both men and women. Two-thirds of divorces are now triggered by an application from the wife.

MARRIED WOMEN AND TAXATION

For most of the 20th century the tax system continued to treat a married woman's income and capital gains as part of her husband's, and taxed as such. Although

this state of affairs came in for increasing criticism by the 1970s, it was not until 1985 that the then Conservative Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, brought forward proposals for taxing each person as a separate individual.

Lawson's plans were delayed by public and parliamentary reaction, which led to the revision of the original proposals. It was not until March 1988 that he could announce that in future married couples would be taxed separately. Alongside a new single personal allowance for all taxpayers, husbands would be entitled to claim an extra 'married couples allowance'. Provision for this major reform was passed by Parliament that year, and the new system took effect from the 1990/91 tax year. Subsequently Parliament agreed certain changes to the married couples allowance – for example, allowing couples to share it or for a wife to claim it all – before the allowance was generally withdrawn from April 2000. It seems likely that independent taxation will remain a key feature of the UK's tax system. That said, there has been interest in having some type of tax allowance for married couples. In September 2013 the Prime Minister announced proposals to allow couples and civil partners to transfer part of their personal allowances in certain circumstances in 2015.

NATIONALITY LAW FOR WOMEN

Between 1870 and 1949, successive pieces of British nationality law did not allow British-born married women to have a nationality status independent of their husband's. The general principle, first established by the Naturalization Act 1870, was that upon marrying an 'alien', British women automatically lost their British subject status and also became aliens. Changes to nationality laws in 1914, 1918 and 1933 introduced some limited concessions, which enabled some women to retain or resume their British nationality in certain circumstances. However none of these had automatic effect. The British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914 enabled wives of men who ceased to be British subjects during the marriage to retain their British nationality by declaration. It also allowed British-born widows or divorcees who had lost their nationality through marriage to naturalize as a British citizen without meeting the full residency requirement. A 1918 amendment allowed British-born wives of enemy aliens to resume their British subject status at the Home Secretary's discretion. Lastly, the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1933 introduced retrospective provisions to ensure that women only automatically lost their British subject status upon marriage if they acquired their husband's nationality under that country's nationality laws, in order to ensure that they did not become stateless.

Among the women Labour MPs photographed here after the 1929 general election are the first woman cabinet minister (Margaret Bondfield), the future leader of the Jarrow marchers (Ellen Wilkinson) and one of the main promoters of the Open University (Jennie Lee).

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Women Labour MPs, by unknown photographer, 1929, © National Portrait Gallery, London

From Left to right:

Lady Cynthia Blanche Mosley (née Curzon (1898-1933)

Marion Phillips (1881-1932)

(Arabella) Susan Lawrence (1871-1947)

Edith Picton-Turbervill (1872-1960)

Margaret Grace Bondfield (1873-1953)

Ethel Benthem (1861-1931)

Ellen Cicely Wilkinson (1891-1947)

Mary Agnes Hamilton (née Adamson) (1882-1966)

Janet ('Jennie') Lee, Baroness Lee of Asheridge (1904-1988)

“When I stood up and asked questions affecting women and children, social and moral questions, I used to be shouted at for five or 10 minutes at a time. That was when they thought that I was rather a freak, a voice crying in the wilderness...[in] the 12 years before they [women] had the vote, there were only five measures passed dealing with women and with things affecting women and children. From 1918 onwards, we have had 20 Measures passed affecting women and children.” – Nancy Astor, HC Deb 29 March 1928 c1452-3



Nancy Astor, Parliamentary Archives, BRO/1

However, it was only after the British Nationality Act 1948 came into force on 1 January 1949 that the principle that marital status should affect a woman's nationality status was abandoned. This change had retrospective effect, thereby ensuring that married women benefited regardless of whether they were born before or after the Act came into force.

SEX DISCRIMINATION The first equal opportunities statute enacted by Parliament was the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. The Act made it illegal for women to be denied access to a range of professions on the basis of their sex or marriage, including the legal profession and parts of the civil service.

The most significant period in the history of sex discrimination law was the 1970s, during which Parliament enacted the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, which formed the foundations of modern gender equality law. The post-war period had seen an increase in female participation in the labour market, and organised action by female sewing-machinists at the Ford factory in Dagenham during the late 1960s led to industrial action that put pressure on Parliament to prohibit gender pay discrimination. Additionally, it was expected at the time that the UK would soon accede to the European Economic Community, which would have required it, per Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome 1957, to “maintain the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work”.

The Equal Pay Act 1970 came into force on 29 December 1975. It gave employees the right to the same contractual pay and benefits as a person of the opposite sex in the same employment. It achieved this via section 1 of the Act which inserted into contracts of employment an ‘equality clause’. This provided that, where a woman is “employed on like work with a man in the same employment”, their terms would be equalised. The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 went considerably further. It prohibited sex

discrimination against both women and men in the areas of employment, education, the provision of goods, facilities and services and in the disposal or management of premises. The Act, for the first time, provided a right to claim compensation for unlawful sex discrimination. It also established the Equal Opportunities Commission – the forerunner to the current Equality and Human Rights Commission – which had a duty to promote equality of opportunity between men and women.

The Equality Act 2010 largely adopted the model in the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts for prohibiting discrimination extending its reach beyond gender.

CHILD BENEFIT By 1974 both Labour and the Conservatives were committed to introducing a new benefit for families with children but the task fell to Barbara Castle, as the new Secretary of State for Social Services, to push through the necessary legislation for what was to become Child Benefit. The Child Benefit Bill was introduced on 28 April 1975, but only after Castle had agreed postponement of the start date for the new scheme to April 1977. At Second Reading, she explained that it achieved “a long overdue merger between child tax allowances and family

allowances into a new universal, non-means tested, tax-free cash benefit for all children, including the first, payable to the mother.” The Bill received Royal Assent in August 1975, but the Child Benefit scheme itself was to have a more difficult birth.

Barbara Castle returned to the backbenches in April 1976, following her dismissal by the new Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, believing that the only main issue still to be resolved was a rate for the new benefit. However, almost immediately, forces within the Cabinet moved to undermine the plans, and on 25 May the Government announced that the introduction of Child Benefit would be postponed indefinitely, on the grounds that the “wallet to purse” transfer as a result of the abolition of child tax allowances would have put “excessive strain” on the Government’s pay policies. Castle and others questioned the extent of trade union opposition to the new scheme, but it could have been abandoned altogether were it not for the publication of an article in *New Society* on 17 June giving details of leaked Cabinet minutes on the meetings which had led up to the decision. The minutes – which have been described as revealing “some rather dirty dealing” within the Cabinet – gave new impetus to those campaigning to save the Child Benefit scheme. In the furore that followed the Government was forced

into retreat, and by September had agreed a compromise plan whereby Child Benefit would be fully phased in by 1979. While the campaign to force the Government to fulfil its commitment to introduce Child Benefit involved many different actors, Barbara Castle played a pivotal role, using her influence as a member of the TUC/Labour Party Liaison Committee, the NEC, and as a focus for backbench support.

Child Benefit became, and remains, a totemic part of the welfare state. As successive governments including the present one have discovered, attempts to reform Child Benefit, or to question the principles upon which it was based, can provoke strong reactions.

Current Developments

The Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation reported in March 2010. It examined means to increase the number of female MPs, as well as other under-represented groups in the House of Commons.

The power of parties to use all-women shortlists had been introduced in the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 as a time limited measure until 2015. The Equality Act 2010 extended this until 2030, a change which the Conference endorsed.

143 of the 650 MPs elected in the 2010 General Election were women, the highest number and proportion (22 per cent) ever. 81 of these women were Labour MPs, 49 Conservative and 7 Liberal Democrat. Of the three main parties, 31 per cent of Labour's elected MPs at the 2010 General Election were women; the Conservatives had 16 per cent and Liberal Democrats 12 per cent.

Women from ethnic minorities have been particularly under-represented among MPs. Prior to 2010 there had only been two black women MPs. The 2010 General Election saw the first Asian women MPs elected. There are currently ten minority ethnic women MPs, eight Labour and two Conservative.

By-elections since 2010 have resulted in five male Labour MPs being replaced by women and one Conservative woman MP being replaced by a man – the current total of 147 women is 23 per cent of all MPs.

