



# RESEARCH NOTE

Number 47, May 1996–97  
ISSN 1328-8016

## Women in the UK General Election 1997

### Introduction

The issue of candidate selection and increasing the number of women as candidates has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, particularly by parties of the left. For the British Labour Party, this desire led to the adoption of a policy of affirmative action for women candidates through the introduction of women-only short lists. Within the Australian Labor Party, a formal quota was also introduced in 1994 which aims to have women hold 35 per cent of Labor seats in both State and Federal Parliaments by 2002.

This research note looks at the impact of the British quota system on the representation of women in the British Parliament in an effort to identify the potential impact of such a system on women's representation in the Australian Parliament.

### The British Labour Party's Quota Policy

Affirmative action policies within the British Labour Party have been adopted gradually. A Party Charter concerning women's political equality was accepted in 1983. Then in 1987, conference delegates passed the compulsory short listing rule for women: if a woman is

nominated for preselection in a constituency, at least one woman must be on the final short list. The National Executive Council also has several different quotas in place, including five reserved places for women and, within the parliamentary party, four votes must be cast for women in elections for the shadow cabinet.<sup>1</sup>

By 1990, the Party had endorsed the aim of having 40 per cent women in the Labour Caucus by the year 2000 and, to achieve this, decided in 1993 to allow all-women short lists in 50 per cent of winnable seats and 'inheritor' seats in which a Labour MP retires. The official party line on these lists—fair representation of the female electorate—was of particular importance as Labour had consistently polled lower amongst women than men. In 1992, at least, this may have contributed to their election loss.<sup>2</sup>

### Looking at the Numbers

659 seats were contested at the recent British election. Despite this large number, opportunities for candidate selection are generally restricted to the number of members retiring and the number of marginal seats won or lost, which is itself dependent on the swing.

Table 1 shows the increase in the number of Labour women candidates in Britain over the last fifteen years. This period corresponds with Labour's commitment to increasing the number of women within its party structures.

While the percentage of Labour candidates who are women has only risen by three percentage points since 1992, the percentage of women who stood and won has increased by a substantial 37 percentage points. In 1992, most of the women candidates were selected for unwinnable seats, in direct contrast to the 1997 election.

On average, around 29 Labour MPs retire at general election time. If women were to be appointed to half of these 'inheritor' seats for the 1997 election, then approximately 15 women would have been selected. It was estimated that approximately 73 winnable seats existed, so if women were selected in 50 per cent of these, via women-only short lists, there would have been 36 Labour women in 'strong challenger' positions. Thus, it was predicted that women-only short lists would guarantee approximately 51 probable women MPs for the 1997 election.<sup>3</sup> The quota system was stopped as a result of a court challenge, so only 35 women

**Table 1: Labour Women and General Elections in UK**

	No. women candidates	% women candidates	No. women who won	% women who won	No. women in Caucus	% women in Caucus	% swing to Labour
1997	158/659	24	101/158	64	101/419	24	10
1992	138/651	21	37/138	27	37/271	14	3.6
1987	92/650	14	21/92	23	21/229	9	3.3
1983	78/650	12	10/78	13	10/209	5	-9.4

were actually selected for these targeted seats through women-only short lists.<sup>4</sup> However, these 35, along with an additional 29 new Labour women, were elected to Parliament. When combined with the 37 returned incumbent Labour women, the representation of Labour women in the UK Parliament increased from 37 in 1992 to 101 in 1997. This figure surpassed the figure of 80 Labour women MPs predicted by analysts based on the possibility of a strong swing to Labour.<sup>5</sup> The 10 per cent swing was considerably higher than expected, with the average swing to Labour between 1983 and 1992 being only around 3.5.

If we look at the proportion of women MPs overall (see Table 2), it is apparent that women's representation has doubled from 9 per cent to 18 per cent since 1992. This represents considerable progress, and while female representation in the UK still lags behind many of its European counterparts, this is largely because the UK does not have a proportional representation electoral system.<sup>6</sup> However, women are better represented in the House of Commons compared with 15.5 per cent female representation in the House of Representatives here (which does not have proportional representation either).

	No.	%
1997	120	18
1992	60	9.2
1987	41	6.3
1983	23	3.5

Data from P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, *Gender and Party Politics*, Sage, London, 1993: 44-47 and 1997 UK election figures.

The percentage of women in the new Labour Cabinet is 23 per cent (5 out of 22)<sup>7</sup> which closely reflects the 24 per cent of women in

the Labour Government. In Australia, 12.5 per cent of Cabinet Ministers are women, while women make up 19 per cent of the Coalition Government.

## Conclusion

The quota system adopted by the British Labour Party has now been disallowed. In 1995, the Party was taken to court by a member who claimed sex discrimination because he had not been allowed to stand for selection. While the British *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* exempts political parties from its requirements, it does not permit discrimination between women and men in awarding a professional qualification. Because selection as a parliamentary candidate leads to the possibility of becoming an MP which is a profession, women-only short lists were ruled unlawful.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, women-only short lists did have the desired effect of substantially increasing women's representation in the British Parliament. While there can be no doubt that a swing to Labour of 10 per cent enhanced the increase in women's representation, it could be argued that, without the placement of women in 35 of the 73 or so winnable seats through the women-only short list system, the figure of 101 Labour women might have been only 66. Because women have been elected in both safe and marginal seats if Labour returns in five years time with a reduced percentage of the vote, the number of women in the Labour caucus should remain at a minimum of 72.

Political parties in Australia are also exempt from the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cwlth) since they are considered to be voluntary bodies. However, political parties may pursue affirmative action policies or quotas if they are intended to achieve equal outcomes between men and women.<sup>9</sup> Thus, adopting

a quota system to permanently increase the percentage of women in Parliament, as opposed to relying solely on large swings, may prove a useful means in providing women with political equality and fair representation.

1. P. Norris, 'Labour Party Quotas for Women', in D. Broughton, D. Farrell, D. Denver & C. Rallings, *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1994*, Frank Cass, London, 1995: 167.
2. J. Squires, 'Quotas for Women: Fair Representation?' *Parliamentary Affairs*, 49 (1), 1996: 73.
3. Norris, op. cit. 175.
4. Meg Russell, British Labour Party National Women's Officer, Personal Communication, 13 May 1997.
5. Norris, loc. cit.
6. For comparative figures see 'Women in the Parliaments of the World: 1997', Research Note No. 41.
7. This figure does not include junior Ministers.
8. C. Short, 'Women and the Labour Party', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 49 (1), 1996: 21.
9. Section 33, *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cwlth).

**Jennifer Curtin**  
**Politics and Public Administration**  
**Group**  
**Information and Research**  
**Services**

Phone: 06 277242623  
 Fax: 06 277242407

*Views expressed in this Research Note are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Information and Research Services and are not to be attributed to the Department of the Parliamentary Library. Research Notes provide concise analytical briefings on issues of interest to Senators and Members. As such they may not canvass all of the key issues.*

© Commonwealth of Australia