



Critical Mass: The Impact and Future of Female Representation in the National Assembly for Wales

John Osmond

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Cover

The 28 women currently in the National Assembly for Wales – from the top, left to right:

Angela Burns, Conservative AM for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire; **Ann Jones**, Labour AM for Vale of Clwyd; **Bethan Jenkins**, Plaid AM for South Wales West; **Christine Chapham**, Labour AM for Cynon Valley; **Edwina Hart**, Labour AM for Gower; **Eleanor Burnham**, Liberal Democrat AM for North Wales; **Ein Jones**, Plaid AM for Ceredigion; **Gwenda Thomas**, Labour AM for Neath; **Helen Mary Jones**, Plaid AM for Llanelli; **Irene James**, Labour AM for Islwyn; **Jane Davidson**, Labour AM for Pontypridd; **Jane Hutt**, Labour AM for the Vale of Glamorgan; **Janet Ryder**, Plaid AM for North Wales; **Janice Gregory**, Labour AM for Ogmores; **Jenny Randerson**, Liberal Democrat AM for Cardiff Central; **Jocelyn Davies**, Plaid AM for South Wales East; **Joyce Watson**, Labour AM for Mid and West Wales; **Karen Sinclair**, Labour AM for Clwyd South; **Kirsty Williams**, Liberal Democrat AM for Brecon and Radnor; **Leanne Wood**, Plaid AM for South Wales Central; **Lesley Griffiths**, Labour AM for Wrexham; **Lorraine Barrett**, Labour AM for Cardiff South and Penarth; **Lynne Neagle**, Labour AM for Torfaen; **Nerys Evans**, Plaid AM for Mid and West Wales; **Rosemary Butler**, AM for Newport West; **Sandy Mewies**, Labour AM for Delyn; **Trish Law**, Independent AM for Blaenau Gwent; **Val Lloyd**, Labour AM for Swansea East.

Contents

3	Introduction
4	Process
5	Impact
8	Positive Action
8	Welsh Labour
9	Plaid Cymru
11	Outlook for the 2011 National Assembly Election
11	Welsh Liberal Democrats
11	Welsh Conservative Party
13	Welsh Labour
14	Plaid Cymru
15	Sustaining Critical Mass
18	Notes

Introduction

This paper assesses the impact of the National Assembly's achievement in attaining gender balance in its membership and asks how sustainable it will be in future.

Reflecting its legal framework to consider *equality of opportunity* in all its business, the Assembly has become a world leader in its representation of women. Since the third elections in May 2007, women have constituted 47 per cent of Assembly Members and 40 per cent of the Assembly Government's Cabinet. In the 2003 elections 50 per cent of members returned were women, building on 40 per cent in the first 1999 election.

Gender balance in the Cabinet was achieved for the first time in 2000, prompting First Minister Rhodri Morgan to remark, "*This is a small step for the Welsh Cabinet but it's a giant leap for Welsh womankind.*"¹ And in a speech to the Assembly in October 2001, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair said, "*Nearly half of the Assembly and a majority of the Cabinet are women—a level that puts virtually every other parliament in the world to shame.*"² Following the 2003 elections Rhodri Morgan added:

*"We understand that it is the only legislature in the world that is perfectly balanced between men and women. We should note that. It is a message that should ring around the world. We are proud of that fact, we have every right to be proud of it, and the people of Wales have every right to be proud of having set that new world record."*³

While there has been considerable success in achieving and maintaining a large measure of gender balance in the National Assembly this position is far from secure. This is because the gains occurred solely because in the run-up to the first elections to the Assembly in 1999 Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru made strenuous efforts at positive action in their candidate selection procedures to ensure that women were chosen for winnable seats.

There are signs that these efforts are weakening and are unlikely to be sustained in the future. Indeed, the trend is for a reduction in female AMs in the National Assembly. Following the May 2011 Assembly election, the proportion of female AMs could fall from around the 50 per cent that was achieved in the first three elections to nearer 30 per cent. This is perilously close to the critical mass of female membership generally regarded as needed in organisations to ensure that their culture is reasonably feminised.⁴

Process

Gender balance in the National Assembly did not come about by accident. During the first decade of devolution the two largest parties – Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru – used measures to ensure that female candidates were given priority or encouraged to stand for office. On the other hand neither the Welsh Conservatives nor the Welsh Liberal Democrats took any special measures. As a consequence the favorable representation of women in the Assembly has almost entirely been because of the actions of Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru.

The results for the three elections so far held for the National Assembly – in 1999, 2003, and 2007 – are shown in the tables below. The high point followed the May 2003 elections when 63 per cent of Labour AMs and 50 per cent of Plaid Cymru AMs were female. However, in 2007 these proportions fell to 61.5 per cent and 46.7 per cent respectively.

Female candidates and winning AMs in 1999 election

Political party	Constituency candidates	Regional list candidates	Constituencies won	List seats won
Welsh Labour	20	11	16	0
Plaid Cymru	8	14	2	4
Welsh Conservatives	12	18	0	0
Welsh Lib Dems	13	20	2	1
Independents/others	1	0	0	0
Total	54	63	20	5

Female candidates and winning AMs in 2003 election

Political party	Constituency candidates	Regional list candidates	Constituencies won	List seats won
Welsh Labour	23	24	19	0
Plaid Cymru	8	18	1	5
Welsh Conservatives	8	8	0	2
Welsh Lib Dems	13	11	2	1
Independents/others	9	45	0	0
Total	61	106	22	8

Female candidates and winning AMs in 2007 election

Political party	Constituency candidates	Regional list candidates	Constituencies won	List seats won
Welsh Labour	24	10	15	1
Plaid Cymru	9	10	2	5
Welsh Conservatives	10	4	1	0
Welsh Lib Dems	11	13	2	1
Independents/others	2	14	1	0
Total	56	51	21	7

Impact

A study on the impact of the enhanced female representation on the political culture of the National Assembly, carried out by researchers at Swansea and Warwick Universities, published in January 2009, found two main consequences:

- An effect on the way politics is done and the policy issues that are prioritised.
- Greater engagement with civil society organisations.⁵

The study comprised interviews with 31 AMs from all four parties as well as two independents. The aim was to achieve a mix of views, both from across the parties and from men and women. A later article, based on the study, reported a male Labour AM as commenting:

“Certainly compared with the House of Commons, that is very different, very different. The House of Commons is incredibly male dominated, often openly misogynistic by some of the attitudes you’ll get, some of the male MPs, and I think the air of the Assembly is very different but to what extent it’s down to the greater gender balance or having gender balance or just because the way the Assembly works, it is a new institution, very explicitly being designed to be inclusive, it is very difficult to decide...”⁶

A male Plaid Cymru AM added:

“I think that one of the interesting things is that there is only one – well in the old building as it was, before the new chamber was opened – there was only one place in the Assembly that sold alcohol, for example, and that was comparatively limited. And there is one other place now in the new Senedd, but only two places in the entire building that sell alcohol. When one thinks about Westminster, which is more like some kind of club for men, and that element is very obvious in it ... women see the Assembly as a place to do their work, to carry out work, and then leave. And I think ... that creates an ethos, creates an atmosphere, which is directed much more towards carrying out work, and for the institution to be an institution that carries out work.”⁷

Another study analysed the 327 plenary debates held during the National Assembly’s first term, between 1999 and 2003. It found that women members had a qualitative impact on the subjects discussed. Approximately half of all debates included a discussion of ‘women’s issues’ and references to equality. Unsurprisingly, the research revealed that women members had a greater propensity than male AMs to initiate debate on ‘women’s issues’.⁸

AMs agreed that women had an impact on the type of policy issues that were debated. As a female Liberal Democrat AM put it, the strength of women’s representation had:

“...changed the topics of debate. I would say there has been much more emphasis on, family issues, and probably on health and community issues as a result of there being so many women...”

but I think that the interesting thing is, when you have got now 31 women, you are in a situation where, women pop up everywhere. The Economic Development Committee, which was very male dominated in the first Assembly, became majority female at the beginning of the second Assembly. So really the influence is spread over every aspect, and really the only thing that remains untouched by women is when the four leaders meet, because they are still all men.”⁹

When the Assembly was established, ‘family friendly’ working hours were formalised in Standing Orders. This was the result of the significant input of feminists and women’s organisations into the processes around the Assembly’s creation, especially the National Assembly Advisory Group established by the then Secretary of State for Wales Ron Davies, following the referendum in 1997.¹⁰ The ‘family friendly’ working environment has been sustained despite opposition by some AMs, especially those who do not live in and around Cardiff. Indeed, when male party leaders and business managers attempted to undermine the commitment, a rebellion by women AMs ensured the policy remained intact. The following account, from a woman Plaid Cymru AM, demonstrates how she and women from other parties in the Assembly were prepared to unite around this issue, even when it meant going against their Group’s wishes:

“There was a move back in the middle of the first Assembly to extend the Assembly’s working hours until 7 o’clock. And it was one of those issues that was discussed in all the political groups, but it was the men from Westminster who were taking the lead on making the decisions, and we ended up with this proposed change to standing orders. In the end I looked at it and thought ‘we can’t do this’. Because if we are sitting until 7 o’clock, our staff are going to be here until 9, you know, the people who are doing the record of proceedings and things like that, the organisations that come and lobby us between 5.30 and 7 are going to have to be here until 9.30 or they are not going to come at all. And so, against my Group’s will, I said ‘I am not going to stand for this and I am going to speak against it and vote against it’. As I stood up to do that and suddenly across the Chamber you had a, it was like ‘No, I’m Spartacus’, including women from within my own Group. You had women from all over the place and we accepted that this was logical and this was moving us towards being a proper parliament and then suddenly we thought ‘no, it’s not’... And before we knew where we were, what had been a cross-party agreement that kind of slipped through under the radar, fell apart in the face of the concerted group of women. And what I think is important is a concerted group of feminist women saying no, and it was defeated and the men in grey suits have never tried to bring it back again... This is not about me and my working patterns, because I don’t stop work until 9 o’clock at night. This is about the working patterns of the women who make the tea. I am not having it.”¹¹

Summing up their overall findings from the study the authors concluded:

“Our preliminary findings suggest that the National Assembly for Wales is characterised by a different political style and political culture from that of Westminster and that it is, to a certain extent, feminised. It is also a style which was consciously developed in opposition to the adversarial political style of Westminster as a means of establishing a distinctly Welsh way of

*doing politics. The idea of adversarial politics, however, as well as being associated with Westminster, was also understood as necessary in order to develop an effective opposition to the Welsh Assembly Government. In this sense an adversarial politics was seen as healthy, although most AMs distanced themselves from the aggressive, macho posturing which is often associated with the notion of adversarial politics. Notwithstanding these different meanings of consensual and adversarial politics in the Welsh context, most AMs felt that the presence of a high proportion of women AMs had an effect both on the policy agenda and on the style of interactions between politicians, both cross-party and within-party. There was a view that women tended to do politics differently from men, a difference that was sometimes described as more consensual than adversarial. But alongside this there was a recognition that there was no essential link between gender and political style; interviewees pointed to women who adopted masculine modes of behaviour and men who adopted more feminine ways of working. This suggests that the political culture of the National Assembly is more feminised than that of Westminster and that, as a consequence, there is less pressure on AMs, women and men, to adopt an aggressive and macho form of masculinity."*¹²

Positive Action

To a large extent the combination of first-past-the-post elections for the 40 constituencies and the Additional Member top-up proportional vote for the 20 List seats defined how Labour and Plaid Cymru had to implement policies to increase women Assembly Members. An important point to bear in mind is that parties that win constituencies in a region are much less likely to win further regional seats. Because of Welsh Labour's electoral dominance, especially in the industrial south-east of Wales, its interventions have taken place primarily on the constituency front. On the other hand, Plaid Cymru's interventions have focused on the Regional Lists, where it has won many of its seats.

Welsh Labour

During the first election Welsh Labour followed a radical and unprecedented 'twinning policy', meaning that constituencies were paired and would choose a male and female Assembly candidate, with the constituencies deciding between themselves which candidate to choose to stand. Fifteen women were elected out of 28 AMs in this way - later 16 women following Delyth Evans's substitution for Alun Michael.¹³

Although the policy was effective in bringing female representatives into the Assembly there was a good deal of unhappiness about the policy's imposition on local party structures.¹⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, given the anguish generated by the first policy, Welsh Labour adopted a new policy for 2003. From the sixteen seats seeking new candidates, six were required by the party executive to nominate all-women shortlists. The use of restricted shortlists had previously been advocated but the proposal was found to be in breach of employment law. Following amendments to statute the system was re-adopted for the 2007 Assembly elections.

Initially the Labour Party asked constituency parties to volunteer to host an all-women shortlist. However, only one seat responded, Montgomery. Five further seats were therefore required by the National Executive to follow suit, giving three seats to women from among the eight most competitive contests and a further three from the eight less competitive constituencies. Consequently, in Delyn, Llanelli, Monmouth, Ceredigion, Brecon and Radnor and Montgomery, Labour nominated female candidates together with the existing 14 female Labour AMs seeking re-election.

High profile resistance to the policy crystallised first in the 2005 UK General Election in the Blaenau Gwent constituency. The constituency party unanimously voted against any attempts to bring in a women-only shortlist when the MP Llew Smith stood down. The resignations of Swansea East MP, Donald Anderson, and Llew Smith threw the Labour party into an internal dispute. Labour's Welsh Executive told Blaenau Gwent and Swansea East constituency parties that they had to select from women-only shortlists. Meanwhile a third similarly placed constituency, Bridgend, was allowed to choose from a mixed gender shortlist, prompting speculation that this was to allow Cardiff Council leader Russell Goodway to stand.

Protests were loudest from Blaenau Gwent, which included a petition of 2,000 signatures and threats from the constituency's retiring MP Llew Smith, its Assembly Member Peter Law and officers of the local party that Blaenau Gwent members would not take part in any selection process with a women-only shortlist. They added that if a candidate was imposed by the Welsh executive they would not work or campaign with her. The Welsh Labour party responded to this threat by saying that "if they refuse to co-operate we will organise the selections centrally."

The dispute was not solely about the all-female shortlists but about the autonomy of the local party against New Labour 'encroachment' at UK level. As Llew Smith put it: *"Nobody is concerned whether my successor is a man or a woman. What constituents are concerned about is that the local Labour Party should have the right to choose who their candidate should be... I find the whole thing totally unacceptable."*¹⁵

Peter Law left the party over the issue and stood as an independent in the 2005 general election when he defeated the Labour candidate with a large majority. Earlier he had attacked Labour's persistence in pursuing all-women shortlists elsewhere, for example in Newport East:

*"Here is another example of a constituency being forced to select a candidate by means of an undemocratic all-women short list. My understanding is that members of the Newport East party decided they wanted to have an open selection, but were overruled by the Welsh executive. Jessica Morden has been one of the main movers in the campaign to impose all-women shortlists, and now she is trying to benefit from the policy herself."*¹⁶

Peter Law died in April 2006, causing two by-elections the following June – one for his Assembly seat and the other for his Westminster seat. Both were won by successor Independent candidates, Law's former agent Dai Davies for the Westminster seat and his wife Trish Law for the Assembly seat. As a result of her victory, there was a majority of 31 women in the Assembly chamber until the end of the second Assembly term in 2007.

Plaid Cymru

Plaid Cymru's positive action in favour of women candidates has centred on the regional lists. In 1999, the lead name on each Plaid Cymru list was female with the gender of the candidates thereafter alternating. In 2003 Plaid Cymru changed the practice. As in 1999, the lead name on each Plaid Cymru list was female. However, instead of alternating genders on the list, where the lead woman was also a candidate in a target seat with a high probability of election, the second name listed would also be a woman.

At the time Plaid Cymru experienced internal arguments over this approach, especially in north Wales. Dafydd Wigley, the former party leader who had decided to stand down from his constituency seat of Caernarfon, announced he was considering standing for the number two slot on the party's north Wales Regional List. However, he backed away following internal party pressure. Given that he could only win if the party lost one of their three constituency seats in the northern List region, this may have been

portrayed by party opponents as a choice between Dafydd Wigley as a Plaid List candidate, or his successor as party leader, Ieuan Wyn Jones in his Ynys Mon constituency. This was not a choice Plaid wished to offer.

By 2007 the position of the party had changed again. This followed the 2006 Wales Act which prevented first-past-the-post candidates also offering themselves for the List. As a result the party reverted to zipping, that is allowing for a male candidate being given second place on the List, according to the number of votes cast. At this election Dafydd Wigley decided to stand for selection for the List, winning the number two place in north Wales. Although he would have been placed first on the List under a pure Single Transferable Vote (STV) proportional system, because of the prior preference of having a woman as first on the List Janet Ryder was reselected to fill the first list place.

The election returned Janet Ryder but not Dafydd Wigley. In the aftermath some Plaid Cymru activists called for Ryder to stand down and allow Wigley to take her place. For example, Nicholas Morgan, who ran a Plaid Cymru-supporting website said:

"The fact that Plaid got such a strong vote in the north was in no small part down to Wigley. In truth, without Dafydd Wigley, Janet Ryder would be an ex-AM today. Plaid can't afford to leave such a popular politician at home gardening. Janet's a good, solid AM but Wigley has star quality. If Plaid want to win in 2011 it needs a charismatic leader who'll be able to milk every single possible Plaid vote. It needs someone who can appeal to floating Tory and Labour voters and can bring gravitas to the job. Plaid needs someone who looks like a leader."¹⁷

Dafydd Wigley eschewed any connection with the comments, declaring: "I have neither sanctioned nor condoned any such suggestion and I condemn the proposition without reservation." And he added:

"The gender balance in the Assembly has been very good. It should be something that becomes natural and normal without the built-in provision of regional lists at some point in time. I believe the time has come for all the parties to look at how they use the regional list to ensure those with disabilities have been given the helping hand."¹⁸

Outlook for the 2011 National Assembly election

Welsh Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrat Group in the Assembly currently includes three women amongst its six AMs. However, this balance was achieved more by chance than conscious decision. For the forthcoming 2011 Assembly election, the Liberal Democrats require at least one third of those selected for any constituency shortlists to be women, but thereafter nomination is on 'merit', however that is defined. The Liberal Democrat regional lists are selected separately and nomination is by a postal ballot of members within the respective list area.

The Welsh Liberal Democrat annual conference has rejected proposals for all-women shortlists for target seats at either Cardiff Bay or Westminster. Nevertheless the party's new, female, leader in the Assembly, Kirsty Williams, has come out in favour of all-women shortlists. The party's chief executive, Joanne Foster, said:

*"Philosophically the party wants equal treatment for women, not special treatment. Our aim is equality of opportunity, and we try to create an environment within the party which is friendly to women. We will be establishing a Diversity Fund for members to contribute to and which will be available to assist women and people from ethnic minorities in becoming more active in the party. At the UK federal level Nick Clegg has indicated that if the party has failed to make progress on improved gender balance in our representation at Westminster within two electoral cycles we will need to revisit the question and I imagine the same would apply to us with the Assembly in Wales."*⁹

Welsh Conservative Party

The Welsh Conservative Party has no formal mechanism to ensure gender balance. Instead, it instructs local parties to nominate purely on merit. Nomination to the Conservative regional lists is solely from candidates who have already been adopted to fight seats, with the all-important rank order being determined at a hustings meeting in front of party delegates.

Despite the party's campaign to encourage more women to stand for selection for the Assembly elections, men were chosen in most of the party's target seats in 2007. For example, seats such as Cardiff North, Clwyd West, and the Vale of Glamorgan were fought by male candidates. An indication of the difficulty women have in gaining selection for winnable seats occurred in February 2006 when Laura Ann Jones, then an Assembly List Member for Mid and West Wales lost out to Nick Ramsay for the nomination for the safe seat of Monmouth.

On the other hand, in a surprise result Angela Burns was elected in Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire, winning by 0.3 per cent of the vote in a closely fought contest with both Labour and Plaid Cymru. However, she was the constituency party's

second choice as candidate. First selected in February 2006 was Carmarthenshire county councillor John Jenkins who resigned in a row over homophobic comments made on a website.

Meanwhile, a number of other female Conservative hopefuls who missed out in Conservative List selections included businesswoman Janet Finch-Saunders, placed at number three on the North Wales list, and housing manager Victoria Green, 35, who was number three on the South Wales Central list. Laura Anne Jones was placed second on the South-East Wales List but failed to get elected. At the time Shadow Welsh Secretary Cheryl Gillan commented, "*I want to see more women coming through, but we are not going to gerrymander the system - as Labour has done with all-women shortlists - to achieve that. That is not a road the party intends to follow.*"²⁰

To encourage more women to come forward the party launched Women2Win in July 2009. The organisation is seeking out the brightest and best women Conservatives in Wales to make the party more representative of Welsh society. Women2Win aims to encourage, train and mentor interested women, as well as convince local Conservative associations of the benefits of putting their trust in women candidates. Future meetings to be held around Wales will include introductions to politics and seminars on getting selected and public speaking. According to the party similar meetings across England have led to the introduction of more than 150 new women to active Conservative politics, including ethnic minority teachers, anti-poverty campaigners and businesswomen. Furthermore, the party has implied that for the next general election local parties will be expected to pick candidates from David Cameron's "A-list" of 100 candidates to fight winnable seats. Use of the 100-strong list is expected to boost the number of female and ethnic minority Conservative MPs - though constituencies are under no compulsion to comply.

As for the 2011 Assembly election Welsh leader Nick Bourne has indicated a determination to select more women in winnable seats. As he put it, writing on his blog in July 2009:

*"It is a matter of great regret to me that over three Assembly terms only three out of the 19 Welsh Conservative AMs have been women... The imbalance in our representation in the Senedd cannot go on, otherwise as a party we will rightly be open to criticism of a boys-only club, a white, male preserve which can only reflect a certain section of society no matter how good the policies and no matter how well-intentioned."*²¹

Bourne advocated:

- The establishment of a priority list of candidates for target seats, with specific emphasis on getting more women and people from ethnic minorities into winnable positions. This list will be drawn up from approved candidates by the Welsh Conservatives' board of management.
- Local associations in target seats to ensure at least half of those candidates put forward for final selection are women or from an ethnic minority background.

- Mentoring and training for candidates, and also for local associations.
- For regional lists the first available vacancy should be a woman or ethnic minority candidate. Where there is no incumbent the top spot on the regional list should go to a woman or ethnic minority candidate.

Although these proposals fell short of advocating all-women shortlists, which Bourne stated would be an unjustifiable intrusion on the autonomy of local parties, he concluded:

*"We need to get serious about who we choose to represent us in the Assembly... We have allowed the other parties in the Assembly to steal a march on us in terms of the representation of women and people from ethnic minorities. I believe it's high time we played catch-up."*²²

The prospect of the Conservatives reversing their opposition to all-women shortlists in the run-up to the 2010 Westminster election was raised by David Cameron in evidence to a Speaker's conference in the House of Commons in October 2009. He said:

*"We need to make sure that the conversation we have within the Conservative Party and the conversation we have within Parliament is like the conversation that's going on in the rest of the country. It's my intention, if we continue as we are, that some of those shortlists will be all-women shortlists to help us boost the number of Conservative women MPs."*²³

However, Cameron's announcement immediately met with opposition from some grassroots activists who said the party leadership was centralising what they said should be a local decision. For example, Tim Montgomerie, editor of the Conservative Home website, described the announcement as *"an unacceptable departure from Conservative concepts of meritocracy and trusting people."*²⁴

Welsh Labour

There will inevitably be an erosion of Labour's gender balance in the Assembly following the 2011 election, since a number of existing female AMs who will not be standing have already been replaced by male candidates. In Cardiff South and Penarth the current AM Lorraine Barrett has been replaced by Vaughan Gething, and in Pontypridd Jane Davidson will be followed by Mick Antoniw. Islwyn AM Irene James, Swansea East AM Val Lloyd, and Clwyd South AM Karen Sinclair have also announced that they will be standing down at the next election but selection conferences to replace them have yet to be held.

Chris Roberts, General Secretary of the Welsh Labour Party, said all-women shortlists were not being used to replace sitting AMs because currently there were more women than men in the Assembly's Labour Group. *"We are aiming to achieve gender balance,"* he said. So far as List seats were concerned he said the party's policy was 'zipping', that is to say placing men and women alternately, with the lead position taken by whoever achieved most votes.²⁵

Plaid Cymru

During 2008 Plaid Cymru changed its method of ordering candidates on the Regional List, which will have the likely effect of reducing the number of its female AMs at the 2011 election.

Prior to the change, in the party STV vote for List candidates the woman who was top placed, when all the votes were counted among the women competing, automatically achieved the top position. The remaining places were allocated strictly in accordance with the results of the STV election. This meant that a woman or man could be placed second, depending on their ranking in the STV count.

Following the change, the person who achieves the highest number of votes will now be placed in top position, regardless of gender. Second position will then go to the person of the opposite sex who is highest placed in the STV system amongst that gender. Succeeding candidates will then be placed according to their STV ranking, regardless of gender.

At the same time the party is developing new procedures for admitting candidates on to its registered list and enhancing (greater) support and training for approved candidates. Other measures are being put in place to encourage women and people from ethnic minorities to become candidates, both for the constituencies and the List.

If the new ruling had been in place ahead of the 2007 election it would have resulted in the party's former leader Dafydd Wigley being elected in place of Janet Ryder AM, who would have been second on the List rather than first. Plaid Cymru's chairman, John Dixon, explained the reasons the party made the change in the following terms:

"We introduced positive discrimination for women on the List ahead of the first elections to the Assembly in order to boost female representation. For the first three elections this worked and we achieved gender balance, more or less. However, following the third election in 2007 members began to feel that it had never been our intention to give a long-term advantage to particular individuals and the time had come to adjust our system so that it gave a more equitable chance to candidates, regardless of gender. There was an additional consideration and this was that as the party became more successful electorally we would begin to win more constituency seats, with a consequence that in future we would be likely to have fewer List seats. This meant we now had to turn our attention to actions designed to boost female representation in the constituencies."²⁶

Sustaining Critical Mass

There can be no doubt that the relatively high proportion of women in the National Assembly has resulted in a feminisation of both the style and the tone of the institution in ways that have been generally welcomed. All the parties have indicated that they are in favour of this development. Even the Welsh Conservatives and Welsh Liberal Democrats, which do not have formal procedures aimed at positive discrimination, have put in place mechanisms aimed at encouraging greater female participation.

A major result has been to ensure that, from the start, the National Assembly has avoided any charge of being 'institutionally' male dominated in ways that can be levelled, for example, against the House of Commons which has traditionally been a masculine place, with procedures that militate against female participation.

It is generally accepted in the literature on women's studies that a significant proportion of women need to be present in an organisation in order to ensure change, what might be termed critical mass.²⁷ This might be somewhere between 25 and 30 per cent. Plainly that percentage has been more than met by the proportion of women members in the National Assembly since its inception.

However, the trend now appears to be towards a reduction in female representation in the Assembly following the 2011 election, for at least the following reasons:

1. Two female Labour AMs – for Cardiff South and Penarth and Pontypridd – have stated they will not be contesting the election and have already been replaced by male candidates. Another three have announced that they will not be contesting their seats and selection contests to replace them are pending.
2. The Labour Party has ceased requiring all-women shortlists to choose new Assembly candidates since there are currently more Labour female than male AMs and its objective is to attain a 'gender balance' within the Labour Group rather than within the Assembly as a whole.
3. Plaid Cymru has changed its selection method for choosing List candidates which has the effect of giving men a greater opportunity for taking the lead List slots. This is likely to have the effect of replacing at least one female member with a male, in the North Wales List Region.
4. A number of key marginal constituency seats are all currently held by Labour female AMs. These are: the Vale of Glamorgan (majority 83); Vale of Clwyd (majority 92); Delyn (majority 510); Clwyd South (majority 1,119); Gower (majority 1,192); and Wrexham (majority 1,250). The challenging party in all these constituencies is the Welsh Conservatives and they are likely to adopt male candidates in at least half of the six seats.
5. Dependence on positive action to select female candidates in only two of the four parties, with a partial retreat from positive action in both of them.

In general terms all parties appear to be moving in the direction of 'incrementalism' to ensure continued representation of women in frontline Welsh politics. Certainly this has always been the case with the Welsh Conservatives and the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Meanwhile, both Labour and Plaid Cymru are to varying degrees watering down the positive action that has been the sole reason so far for the relatively high proportion of women AMs present in the National Assembly.

It seems inevitable, therefore, that the number of women in the National Assembly will fall by around eight following the 2011 election, from 28 (or 47 per cent) to 20, and possibly by an even greater number depending to a great extent on the electoral fortunes of the Labour Party. In the event of their dropping to 19 the percentage of women in the Assembly will fall to 33.3 per cent. This is very close to the critical mass it is generally agreed is necessary to ensure that the culture of an organisation remains reasonably feminised. If this trend were to continue in subsequent elections then the boasts of a number of leading politicians, made in the early years of devolution, that Wales was leading the world in achieving gender balance in its politics, will have been short-lived.

One way of counter-acting this trend which may be more sustainable than continuing to rely on 'positive action', would be for all the parties to examine more critically the basis on which they select candidates. This would address a default position in the current debate in which the choice confronting parties is seen as either selecting entirely on merit (Welsh Conservatives and Liberal Democrats), or on the basis of some deliberate gender adjustment (Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru).

A more middle ground position might be achieved by greater consideration being given to what is understood by 'merit' in candidate selection. The term tends to be used as though its meaning is readily understood and easy to establish and judge. In fact, in relation to the desirable qualities a candidate needs, 'merit' surely refers to a complex range of skills, abilities, and experiences. Individual candidates may possess some or all of those, and in varying degrees. When candidates are chosen 'on merit', a judgment is made on the range of qualities and experience they have, together with a weighing of their relative importance.

In addressing this question parties should consider how far what they judge to be 'merit' is in itself discriminatory. So, for example, most selection processes include a test of how well people can stand up and make a speech and respond robustly to questioning. But how well do selection procedures also test whether people can take part in meaningful debate and move towards agreement and consensus? The answer in most cases would be not to the same extent, if at all. Yet the first characteristic would generally be considered more 'masculine' in character, while the second more 'feminine'. This may be an over-simplistic generalisation, but it illustrates the potential for discrimination in selection procedures.

Similarly, and though again this may be a generalisation verging on a stereotype, there is a tendency amongst men to push themselves forward more than women. They tend to have a higher level of personal, rather than group, ambition. But, of course, by their very nature political selection processes respond to those who push themselves

forward. So it is little wonder that there are more male than female candidates. A conclusion from this discussion is that parties should think more in terms of identifying and developing talent according to a broader understanding of what the desirable qualities of our political representatives should be.

At the same time it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, even if such approaches were to take root, Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru are now joining with the other two parties in emphasising an 'incremental approach' to achieving equality. Yet in practice its gains have been demonstrated to be so slow as to be ineffective. As Rosie Campbell and Joni Lovenuski put it in an article in *Parliamentary Affairs* in 2005:

"In the incremental track to equality for women, small and gradual improvements to their position in politics, at work, and in their pay and benefits may lead, eventually, to parity between women and men. In this conceptualisation women are content to wait for equality through decades of gradual change until a new equilibrium between the sexes is achieved. The alternative fast track strategy uses affirmative action to jump-start the equality process by placing women in positions of power and authority, altering recruitment mechanisms accordingly. Throughout the world, the use of fast track strategies has increased in politics since the 1980s, and measures such as quotas have now been used in more than 90 countries. Britain is a puzzling case as it has the mechanisms for the fast track strategy, but its progress suggests it is firmly on an incremental track."

And the authors concluded:

"Despite slowly rising numbers of women representatives there is considerable evidence that, for many male leaders and strategists the presence of women is symbolic and women politicians are tokens. One answer to the question why Britain continues on the incremental track to women's representation is probably that their progress continues to be slowed by male resistance."²⁸

Notes

- 1 *The Guardian*, 23 February 2000.
- 2 Assembly Record, 30 October 2001.
- 3 *The Guardian*, 9 May 2003
- 4 See Paul Chaney, Fiona Mackay and Laura McAllister, *Women, politics and constitutional change: The First years of the National Assembly for Wales*, University of Wales Press, 2007.
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- 5 Nickie Charles, Charlotte Aull Davies and Stephanie Jones, *Gender and Political processes in the Context of Devolution*, ESRC, January 2009.
- 6 Nickie Charles, Charlotte Aull Davies and Stephanie Jones, *Transforming Masculinist Political Cultures? Doing Politics in New Political Institutions*, Sociological Research Online, Vol. 14, Issue 2/3, page 5, May 2009.
- 7 *Ibid.*, page 6
- 8 Paul Chaney, *Devolved Governance and the Substantive Representation of Women: The Second Term of the National Assembly for Wales, 2003-07*, Parliamentary Affairs, 2008.
- 9 Nickie Charles et. al. op. cit, page 10. Note that the position with the leadership has since changed with the election of a woman, Kirsty Williams AM, as leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrat Group in the Assembly with no positive action involved.
- 10 Teresa Rees, *Women and Work: Twenty-five Years of Gender Equality in Wales*, University of Wales Press, 1999.
- 11 Nickie Charles et. al. op. cit, page 12.
- 12 *Ibid.*, page 13.
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- 13 Alun Michael resigned as First Secretary following a vote of no confidence on 9 February 2000 and subsequently left the National Assembly to resume his career at Westminster. His place in the Assembly was automatically taken by Delyth Evans, as Labour's second preference on the List in Mid and West Wales.
- 14 See Kevin Morgan and Geoff Mungham, *The Making of the Welsh Assembly*, Seren, 2000, for a full account of Labour's travails in agreeing its twinning policy.
- 15 'Women-only list slated by departing MP', *Western Mail*, 24 November 2003.
- 16 *Western Mail*, 23 December 2004.
- 17 *Western Mail*, 11 May 2007 'Plaid AM told to stand down for Wigley'.
- 18 *Ibid.*
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- 19 Interview, 2 September 2009.
- 20 'Tories freeze out women candidates', *Western Mail*, 24 April 2006.
- 21 Nick Bourne, *Candidate Selection: redressing the balance*, Blogpost, 17 July 2009.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Western Mail*, 21 October 2009.
- 24 *Guardian*, 21 October 2009.
- 25 Interview, 3 September 2009. It is noteworthy that all-women shortlists are being drawn up in the Westminster constituencies of Clwyd South and the Vale of Glamorgan where the sitting (male) Labour MPs have announced they will not be contesting the next general election.
- 26 Interview, 4 September 2009.
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- 27 Dahlerup, D. 'The story of the theory of critical mass' in *Politics and Gender*, 2 (4):511-522, 2006. It should be noted, however, that others have disputed the influence of 'critical mass' theory in politics. See, for example, Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook, *The Substantive Representation of Women: Rethinking the 'Critical Mass' Debate*, Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2005.
- 28 Rosie Campbell and Joni Lovenuski, 'Winning Women's Votes? The Incremental Track to Equality', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 58, No 4, 2005.