

**SPEECH BY RT HON CAROLINE FLINT MP  
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**A Woman's Place is in the House**

May I begin by saying: *Takk for invitasjonen her.*

You may be pleased to know that will be my first and last attempt at Norwegian today.

Thank you to Professor Wold; to the British Politics Society, to the University of Oslo, for hosting today's lecture; and for everyone who has come to take part.

You will have noticed that the British political establishment have only been talking about one thing for the last two years. Brexit.

We must also have broken the record for the amount of times Norway and the EEA have been mentioned in the Houses of Parliament.

So it is something of a relief to talk about the battle for women to get the vote in the United Kingdom and how it transformed politics.

Although if there are any questions about you know what - I'm happy to take them.

"A Woman's Place is in the House" refers to my Parliament, sometimes referred to as the Mother of Parliaments.

In my younger campaigning days we used the slogan 'women make policy not tea'.

As I have got older I have sometimes come to feel that we will only have true equality when women can be as mediocre (as average) as some of the men.

Much has changed since the first British women got the vote in 1918 and since I first became politically active in 1979.

Our representation has increased, sadly not as much as in Norway.

There have been major advances in equality legislation and the role of women in wider society. But inequality persists in pay, gender job segregation, the sharing of housework and childcare let alone the extent still of violence against women.

In this 21st Century, my daughter has rights I didn't at her age.

But social media and online forums have enabled new ways to discriminate, intimidate and undermine women.

Harassment has always existed but it's gone viral.

Research of abuse to politicians has clearly shown that women MPs are trolled and threatened more so than their male colleagues.

It is only just over two years ago that my colleague Jo Cox was murdered by an extreme right wing male constituent who spent much of his time on the internet in an echo chamber of hate.

Who knows yet what impact this will have on encouraging future generations of women to stand for Parliament.

The early campaigners for women's suffrage also faced abuse and physical threats.

Winning the right to vote and to be representatives was a battle hard fought.

It has been so amazing over the last 21 years to meet women in my Don Valley constituency who told me the stories of their grandma or mother who campaigned for the vote.

2018 marks 100 years since the first women achieved the vote in Britain but also the centenary of the end of World War 1.

That war made an impact on the social fabric of Britain in more ways than one.

The women suffrage campaigners laid down their placards and stopped their protests in support of the war effort.

Women took on work in those war years that was unheard of and it became clear that political reform would follow.

Eighty-six years before in 1832 the first petition recorded, requesting votes for women was made.

Emmeline Pankhurst is better known, but this year a long overdue statue to celebrate Millicent Garrett-Fawcett was unveiled in Parliament Square to stand alongside 11 other statues, all of which were men.

Millicent headed up the more peaceful suffragists compared to Emmeline Pankhurst's militant suffragettes, but was perhaps more influential.

In 1867, she was present in the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons, aged 19, when a liberal MP John Stuart Mill introduced an amendment to the 1867 Representation of the People Bill, stating: 'man' was to become 'person', if only the male MPs were willing to vote for it.

They were not.

This clearly had an impact on Millicent as two months later, she attended the first meeting of the National Society for Women's Suffrage and joined its executive committee.

She was still campaigning 50 years later when The Representation of the People Act passed in June 1917,

containing the first ever women's suffrage clause , which came into force in 1918.

Now we talk about the 'first women' because only those over 30, who were a registered property owner (or married to a registered property owner) and not subject to any legal incapacity, or if they were graduates voting in a University constituency; only those women could vote.

In the same Act, all men over the age of 21 received the vote for the first time, meaning all working class men gained the vote but not working class women.

The age restriction was deliberate. Parliament's male MPs were worried that women would outnumber voting men, following our war losses.

It would take another ten years for all women to be able to vote on an equal basis with men.

Fawcett certainly met and encouraged your own Gina Krog who returned from the UK to begin a long campaign for women's votes in Norway. To get a hearing and attention she penned newspaper articles and letters using male pseudonyms to disguise her gender.

But she was not alone in breaking through barriers. Gina's sister Cecilie was the first woman to gain entry to this University in 1882; two years before all women gained a right to attend university.

There is not one history of the suffrage movement. Millicent Fawcett was the wife of an MP and had direct access to the Prime Minister of the day and other influential men.

Pankhurst was different. Emmeline grew up in a household of radical middle class parents involved in politics. Indeed, her mother was from the Isle of Man, a self-governing British

crown dependency which granted women the vote in national elections in 1881.

Pankhurst formed the Women's Social and Political Union and her suffragettes led protests and direct action that we have heard so much about: chaining themselves to the railings of Buckingham Palace, or hiding in Parliament on the night of the census to claim residency. They attacked property, including an attempt to blow up the Chancellor David Lloyd George's home.

The result was imprisonment, hunger strikes and force feeding as well as death. The most famous being that of Emily Wilding Davison who stepped out in front of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby. There has been much discussion about whether she intended to lose her life that day. But a return rail ticket found in her purse suggests not. She just wanted to stop the race and return home alive and well.

In my own town, the Doncaster Women's Social and Political Union's leader Lina Lambert appeared in court in Leeds in October 1908, having caused disturbances during a visit by Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith.

Refusing to be "bound over" which means a promise to keep the peace she and the women with her were sent to jail for five days.

In 1913, Lilian Lenton (and these were working class women) pleaded guilty to trying to blow up Westfield House, a prominent building in Doncaster.

She was jailed and released after going on hunger strike. Several Doncaster suffragettes were jailed on multiple occasions and went on the run from the police.

What does "on the run" mean? These women became outlaws because of a law, commonly known as the Cat and Mouse Act.

The Government were worried about women dying on hunger strike, so they passed a law to allow for temporary release, until their health recovered.

At this point, they were meant to continue their prison sentence; but instead, the women went on the run.

Millicent Fawcett lived to see the Equal Franchise Act 1928 come into effect giving women the same suffrage rights as men. She died in 1929.

Emmeline Pankhurst never did.

But within two years of her death in 1928, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin unveiled a statue of her in the park next to Parliament.

In 1918, the Act also allowed women to stand for Parliament. Only sixteen women did so, and the only one elected was an Irish Republican revolutionary, Constance Markeveicz, who took part in the Easter Uprising of 1916, a failed revolt to remove the British from Ireland.

She did not recognise the British State, and refused to take up her seat. To this day Sinn Fein MPs elected in Northern Ireland refuse to take up their seats in Westminster.

In that same election, Emmeline Pankhurst's daughter Christabel stood for the Women's Party and lost by just 775 votes.

Indeed, the first women to take their seats elected were widows of MPs, who took their husband's seats in by-elections in 1919 and 1921.

In 1918, my party, the Labour Party was only twelve years old, but its leader Keir Hardie supported women's suffrage and the suffragettes gave Labour support in the 1918 general election.

Labour's first women MPs were elected in 1923.

I want to mention one woman who was one of those MPs, whose story is remarkable: Margaret Bondfield.

Born in 1873, she was the youngest of eleven children in a small lace-making town in England's rural south west.

At fourteen, she left home to visit relatives and was offered an apprenticeship in a draper's shop which sold cloth. She became friends with a women's rights activist and moved to London to live with her brother.

By the age of 21, she was elected to office in the Shop Workers' Union. By 25, she was an Assistant Secretary of her union and noticed in political circles. By 1910 she was an advisor to the Liberal Government. And by 1918 a Labour candidate.

At her third attempt she was elected to Parliament in 1923, and by 1924 she was the first ever woman to become a Government Minister.

After losing her seat, she regained a seat in Parliament and in 1929, she became the first ever woman to serve in the Cabinet, as Minister for Labour.

A plaque in her honour in her home town of Chard, reads: "Shop worker, Christian, Socialist, Trades Unionist, she devoted her life to improving the lot of the downtrodden".

It is a sadness to me that, despite being active in the Labour Party since 1979, I knew little of Margaret Bondfield until about 10 years ago.

She was a ground-breaking and exceptional woman but so often the stories of women, especially working class women, are not told and retold, however remarkable.

Bondfield was the first woman Cabinet Minister but, I have to say, women's representation moved at a sluggish pace.

1922 just one woman was elected.

In 1923, it was just six.

The most elected in any Parliament before 1945 was 13.

1945 was the great breakthrough for my party and for women's representation. 24 women elected of which 21 were Labour. In 18 of the 20 general elections since, the last being 2017, Labour elected more women than every other party combined.

The problem was that by 1992, the total had reached just 60 from all parties of which Labour was 37. Hardly a victory for equal representation.

In 1997, when I was first elected, Britain underwent a political gender revolution.

Politics was energised by a new Labour government which swept in with a massive majority, after nearly two decades of Conservative rule, but the most visible change was the arrival of large numbers of newly-elected women.

The UK parliament is elected seat by seat, with one candidate elected in each.

There is no proportional representation. Therefore, there is no national or regional list system for political parties to manipulate women's representation.

In 1994, Labour made a bold decision to have women only selection in half of the target seats we hoped to gain. This meant that only women candidates could be considered.

When the election came in 1997, Labour won with a landslide, gaining 179 extra seats, winning all of those seats and many beyond. A huge windfall of extra MPs.

The other major change was to allow every local member the chance to vote in the selection of their candidate, where previously it had been decided by the much smaller local party committee.

My selection was an open one but being able to canvass and call on every member was key to my success in the selection. Don Valley, built on coal and rail, MPs had always come from the mineworkers union and all except one had been Labour MPs. But I was the first woman.

This was the first time all members could take part in a vote to choose their candidate, so I set off with a map, a highlighter and a list of members to meet as many as I could.

The 101 Labour women transformed our politics. Until that election, parliament had been a largely male preserve which distorted public policy.

I am proud to have been elected and part of the 418 strong Parliamentary Labour Group of which 101 were women in 1997.

Previous Labour Governments had done some tremendous things: brought in equal pay and equality legislation but we still had a welfare state based around male living and working

patterns, with many children and pensioners, especially women, who had not worked long enough to build up a pension, forced to live in poverty.

Our economy was hampered by skills shortages and many women of working age were trapped at home by a lack of childcare.

Little was being done about a preventable cause of death among women – domestic violence.

Having been a childcare campaigner before entering Parliament I was keen to continue and formed a cross-party group, known as All Party Parliamentary Groups, to focus on childcare policy.

It was a first.

Of 400 APPGs, which included groups on football, cricket, beer and caravans, there were none on childcare.

When we surveyed staff and MPs to assess demand for childcare support, the press ran stories that we were going to turn Parliament's shooting gallery into a nursery.

I did not know there even was a shooting gallery in the House of Commons.

So I visited it to find a dark tunnel like room with no natural light; it was not a place suitable for animals, let alone a children's nursery.

The media trivialised the impact of these 'terrible women'.

There was an outcry when it was announced the House of Commons barbers, would become a unisex salon.

But the huge surge in women's representation led to a different political and policy agenda but also the way the House of Commons was run.

This was an institution run by men, serving men, (with a fair number of aristocrats among them), so it was crying out for modernisation.

The hours were based on lawyers working at the law courts in the morning before a good lunch and Parliament sitting from two-thirty in the afternoon.

The session would finish at ten with the option to continue until the early hours which it often did – sometimes through the night if enough opposition members could use some arcane parliamentary rule. When Labour passed our Minimum Wage Act the debate went all night and into the next day.

Some liked the pub or Gentleman's Club atmosphere that these hours encouraged.

My colleague Laura Moffatt, the MP for Crawley, had an office next door to mine.

When it got too late we bedded down in our offices with our sleeping bags waiting for the votes.

Women led the charge to change the hours. Nine to five, Monday to Friday wouldn't work for MPs like myself who live in constituencies too far for a daily commute.

But the hours today are far more civilised and provide some compromise to meet the needs of 650 MPs with different constituency, home and family demands.

The Government's small majority has led to some big arguments, and support for MPs on maternity, paternity leave or seriously ill to be able to vote by proxy. Unheard of in 1997.

Soon we may get voting by proxy for MPs on maternity or parental leave.

But getting more women elected as MPs was a means to an end not an end in itself.

Important though it is to have a parliament that looks more like the country it represents.

Influenced by the women across our party, reinforced by the new intake, we introduced a national childcare strategy; extended maternity leave and doubled maternity pay; paternity leave and pay was introduced for the first time; we established pension sharing upon divorce and our country's first national minimum wage – which overwhelmingly benefitted women.

Our policies from pensions, to welfare to healthcare were feminised to reflect the impact of women on this debate.

This was the first Government to have a Minister for Women with reach across every government department, and alongside more women in ministerial posts, more women were brought in as advisors to the Government.

More women work part-time in the UK economy, so the rights of part-time workers were strengthened; and the right to request flexible working was introduced. Low income workers had their pay enhanced by tax credits.

More women play the role of carer for elderly or disabled relatives, so carers received more support and the welfare system was more generous to those with disabilities.

New domestic violence legislation was enacted and greater support was provided for women victims of crime in the justice system.

Not only did the 1997 revolution transform the landscape for women; it also laid a challenge at the door of every party to diversify its intake, to prevent Labour being viewed as the party that exclusively spoke for women.

To a degree it worked. The Conservative benches are much more diverse than ever before. Under David Cameron, whilst they never achieved Labour numbers, the Conservatives brought into parliament more women MPs, and their first black women.

But we have a long way to go.

Since 1918 there have been 4,681 men elected to the UK Parliament. There have only been 491 women ever elected – less than one tenth of the total.

I am number 201.

Until December 2016, there had been fewer women MPs ever than there were men sitting in the House of Commons, at any one time.

Only in December 2016, when Dr Caroline Johnson won the Sleaford and North Hykeham by-election, she became the 455th woman to be elected as an MP. There were 455 male MPs in the House of Commons sitting at that time.

Today we have at least surpassed that - the total number of men sitting in Parliament is 442.

There are 208 women MPs - still only 32%.

46% of my party's MPs are women.

If every party achieved that representation, the Conservatives would have 146 women MPs, not the 67 they have today.

There would be 11 additional women from minor parties.

I would add one further impact of Labour's 1997 gender revolution. Our diversity and dominance of politics in those 13 years led to the Conservatives shaking off their innate conservatism on policy.

Having voted against. Under Cameron they accepted the idea of a minimum wage; of government support for childcare and parental leave; and adopted socially liberal ideas, such as gay rights and gay marriage, all of which they had previously resisted.

Britain's political axis shifted permanently.

But the battle for equal representation is far from over and we have some way to go to match Norway.

41% female representation in Norway following the 2017 General Election. Prime Minister Erna Solberg as Prime Minister leads a Cabinet with nine men and nine women.

Our Conservative Government, with just five women in a Cabinet of 23; YES a woman Prime Minister; but just 67 Conservative women out of 317.

Under Tony Blair, the number of women Cabinet Ministers rose to one third. Under Gordon Brown, there were five, topped up by women attending cabinet, a practice copied by Cameron and May.

Despite our greater numbers Labour has never elected a woman leader - which has to change in my lifetime.

In local government, just 32% of local councillors in England are women, even less in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Women make up just 17% of council leaders. All of the Mayors of our big cities and regional areas are men.

Women make up over half of the membership of trade unions but most are still led by men, but women are increasingly becoming the second in charge.

In the Think tanks that surround politics we find only 24% of their employees are women and men dominate the jobs working for MPs.

This extends to the parliamentary press lobby based in Parliament. It has improved in the last 20 years but often women journalists leave quicker due to the hours and lifestyle that comes with it. There are 153 male lobby journalists and 60 women.

Tackling inequality of power, began with scaling the walls of the fortress of our Parliament.

Without those great women: Fawcett, Pankhurst, Bondfield and many thousands of ordinary women, I might not be standing before you today.

But 1997 marked the next great change – it forced all parties to confront the challenge of getting more women elected as MPs.

In the devolved legislatures, gender equality is expected. We have women leading in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Questions are asked if women aren't on the frontbench, in cabinet, or in Number 10.

Politics can never go back to how it was.

But, we're not there yet.

AS DELIVERED

There's still a way to go to feminise our public policy and our body politic. We need more women at the grassroots, in local government, parliament and in political party leadership.

And somewhere out there is the woman who will become the first woman Labour Prime Minister.

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