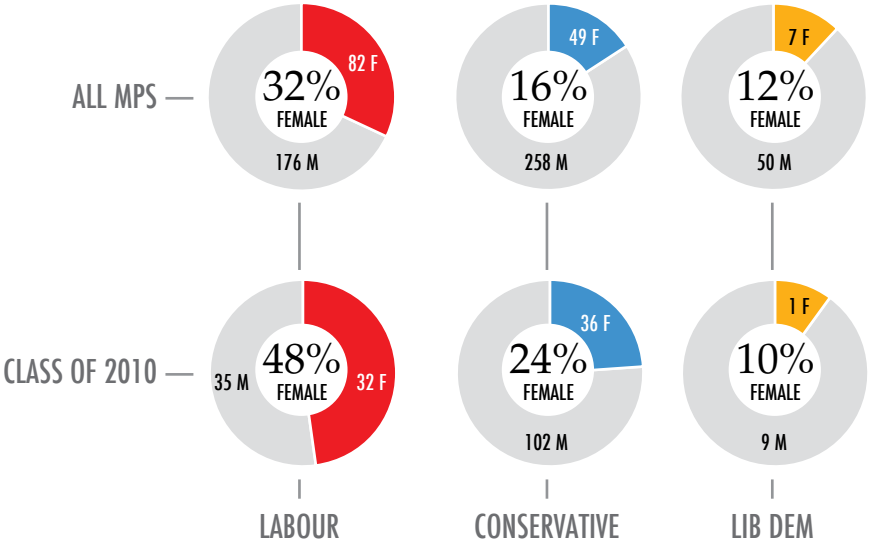
# Why Lib Dem women face electoral meltdown

Sunder Katwala
is General Secretary of the Fabian Society

Seema Malhotra
is Director of the Fabian Women's Network

## SINCE 1918 4719 MEN AND 355 WOMEN HAVE BEEN ELECTED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

## THE CURRENT HOUSE




## ELECTION 2015: WHY LIB DEM WOMEN FACE THE RISK OF BEING WIPED OUT

Though only 7 of the 57 Lib Dem MPs are women, they hold five of the party's dozen most vulnerable seats.

1 **Lorely Burt (Solihull) 0.3%, 175 votes**
2 **Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset) 0.6%, 269 votes**
3 Norwich South 0.7%
4 Bradford East 0.9%
5 **Tessa Munt (Wells), 1.4%, 800 votes**
6 St Austell 2.8%
7= **Sarah Teather (Brent South) 3.0%, 1345 votes**
7= Somerton 3.0%
9 St Ives 3.7%
10 Manchester West 4.1%
11 Burnley 4.3%
12 **Jo Swinson, 4.6% East Dunfermline, 2184 votes**

## OTHER LIB DEM WOMEN MPS

**Lynne Featherstone**
(Hornsey and Wood Green), 12.5%, 7875 votes

**Jenny Willott**
(Cardiff Central), 12.7%, 4576 votes

## THE LIB DEMS HAVE FAILED TO KEEP UP WITH THE OTHER PARTIES

The Lib Dem benches today – 7 women out of 57 MPs – are proportionately no less male dominated as in 1992 (two women out of twenty MPs) or 1935 (one woman out of ten MPs).

| TODAY | 1992 | 1935 |
|---|---|---|
| 7/57 | 2/20 | 1/10 |

## THE MAJORITIES OF ALL SEVEN WOMEN LIB DEM MPS PUT TOGETHER (17,224 VOTES) IS ONLY JUST GREATER THAN THAT OF NICK CLEGG IN SHEFFIELD HALLAM (15,284)

| | LIB DEM WOMEN | LIB DEM MEN |
|---|---|---|
| Number of MPs | 7 | 50 |
| Average majority | 2318 | 6214 |
| 12 most vulnerable seats | 5 | 7 |
| 20 safest seats | 0 | 20 |

The marginalisation of women in the 2010 election campaign, the total absence of women from the coalition negotiations, and the low numbers of women in the new cabinet has meant that every party is now stressing their desire to speed up progress towards gender equality in politics.

It sounds like the race to the 50-50 party has finally begun. Yet with boundary reforms and seat reductions, the risk is the race will be lost before the next election, with all three parties losing momentum and Lib Dem women MPs facing political annihilation.

Labour has the strongest record and currently 32 per cent of the Parliamentary Labour Party are women. Prompted by the Lead for Women grass roots campaign, Ed Miliband declared his commitment to a 50-50 party of equal voice and power at every level. With 16 per cent of current Conservative MPs being women, their highest proportion ever, David Cameron can point to more progress than his predecessors but acknowledges the need to do more.

The Lib Dems, lagging behind in third place, hope to catch up. However, their election strategy for gender was disastrous – numbers of women MPs dropped from nine to seven. They also have no ethnic minority MPs. Having previously rejected positive action, including in 1998 when Baroness Williams called for an end to the Commons 'Old Boys' Network' and warned "we will not get more women involved just by providing more training and education", this year the party's Spring Conference passed an a 'priority candidates' list – an A list. This will do no harm and perhaps some good. But the debate showed the party has not appreciated how great a risk there is that Lib Dem women will face meltdown at the next election, or how the coalition's own reforms have cut off their real chance to make any progress by 2015.

New Fabian Society/Fabian Women's Network research shows that the Lib Dems would need to take urgent steps to avoid a collapse in gender balance, which would leave the party's Commons benches in 2015 even more male-dominated than the Liberal benches of the 1930s.

The meltdown threat arises from a toxic triple cocktail:

1. Firstly, political unpopularity. Having lost more than half of their support since the general election, the Lib Dems are preparing a defensive campaign, hoping to regain support and defend Lib Dem held seats. Even selecting many more women candidates to take on Tory and Labour MPs is unlikely to return as many MPs next time around.
2. Secondly, coalition populism. The Lib Dems have inadvertently scored an own goal on gender by supporting a smaller House of Commons. Shrinking the House to 600 will see the smallest new intake in any post-war election, slowing down progress since new intakes have a better gender balance than the whole House. Typically, around 60 to 80 MPs stand down at the end of a Parliament while up to 590 defend their seats. This time, many retirees will be replaced not by new hopefuls but MPs seeking a new berth after constituency mergers. The Lib Dems would have expected to select six or seven new candidates to replace retiring MPs; this will probably now fall to two or three – even if all current seats were deemed winnable.
3. Thirdly, the legacy of past selection patterns. Five of the Lib Dem women MPs are amongst the party's dozen most vulnerable seats. They are proportionately more electorally vulnerable than their male counterparts. The party's twenty safest seats are all held by men. This long-standing pattern is not unique to this Parliament. The causes are complex: chance, informal hierarchies of power, the sociology of political recruitment and electoral geography. Professional women Lib Dems have tended to fight southern marginals; there is only one woman among 11 Scots Lib Dem MPs, again holding the most vulnerable seat.

## If the current polls were even half right, not a single Lib Dem woman MP would survive

Lib Dem party strategists would be over the moon if they held four out of five seats at the next election. If an early election were held (under current boundaries) that would mean a parliamentary party of 43 men and two women, a drop from 13 per cent to 4.5 per cent of the party's MPs – half their presence in the 1930s. But if the current polls were even half right, not a single Lib Dem woman MP would survive.

The problem could get even worse if any Lib Dem women lose out in the boundaries scramble. The leadership will need to work out how to pragmatically protect them and perhaps encourage another retirement or two. Or might the party even, exceptionally, consider dropping its opposition to all women shortlists for the two or three constituencies where it will replace a sitting MP? More likely, it may seek to achieve a similar result by ensuring there are strong women in the field, and informal pressure highlighting the gender gap problem.

But such tinkering will merely limit the damage unless the Lib Dems respond to new boundaries by reopening every selection, with the aim that women candidates should contest a quarter of the party's 20 most defendable seats, rather than none of them. This might mean Sir Ming Campbell or Charles Kennedy swapping their safe seats with a colleague to defend a marginal. If this seems too difficult or painful, the party should admit it's willing to run the risk of only electing men in 2015.

The smaller Commons will also slow down Labour and Tory progress, though both parties hope to gain seats. Labour should adopt an all women shortlist in any winnable seat being defended by a woman MP from another party, within the current strategy to select women in 50 per cent of all winnable seats. The message would be that voting Labour could not reduce the number of women in parliament. No other party could claim this.

Some may worry about the impact on voter choice. This seems a weak argument. There were already 11 constituencies in 2010 where all three major parties selected a woman. And who spoke up about voter choice, or even noticed, the 267 constituencies where all three major party candidates were men? Political equality is a pre-requisite for, not just a consequence of, social equality. The gender challenge at the next election will test the commitment of the three parties to fairness in an unprecedented way. ■