

FABIAN SOCIETY

MSS
HQ
1593
B87

Quotas now:

women in the Labour Party

*Rachel Brooks, Angela Eagle,
Clare Short*



FABIAN



Quotas now: women in the Labour Party

Introduction	1
1 The exclusion of women	2
2 Arguments for change	6
3 Learning from experience	11
4 Changing the party	15
5 Quotas for candidates	20
Recommendations	24

Rachel Brooks is the London representative on the NEC Women's Committee. She is currently Vice-Chair of the Haringey Local Government Committee. She works as a Senior Researcher with the GMB.

Angela Eagle is a trade union representative on the NEC Women's Committee. She is Secretary of Peckham CLP and works as Parliamentary Liaison Officer with COHSE.

Clare Short is MP for Birmingham Ladywood. She is a member of the Labour Party NEC and chair of the NEC Women's Committee.

The authors would like to thank the following people for their information and advice: Mark Crail, Kim Dewdney, Tess Gill, Kathy Jones, Vicky Phillips, Anita Pollack and Anna Marie Smith.



MSS
HQ
1593
B87

This pamphlet, like all publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective view of the Society, but only the views of the author. The responsibility of the Society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the labour movement.

Design: Tony Garrett
September 1990

ISBN 7163 0541 0

ISSN 0307 7523

Printed by The College Hill Press Limited (TU), London & Worthing.

Published by The Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth St, London SW1H 9BN

Introduction

Women are very poorly represented at all levels of the Labour Party, particularly at the top.

Why then, when the principle of equality is at the very centre of socialism, has the Labour Party failed so dismally to practice what it preaches? Many familiar reasons have been advanced to explain this low level of participation. Women still tend to bear the greatest burden of family responsibilities and are subject to discrimination resulting all too often in low self esteem and lack of self confidence. These are just some of the familiar causes.

The proposed solutions are also familiar. Childcare facilities should be provided for those who want to participate in party activities. The party should be more welcoming and less formal. More encouragement and training should be provided for women. All of this would be beneficial but it is not sufficient to solve the problem. The factors which prevent women's involvement are structural and there is a growing realisation that the solution must be structural too.

The Party recognised this in 1989 when conference overwhelmingly carried Composite 54 on women's representation. It accepted that the introduction of quotas throughout the party structure was the only way of ensuring that women would finally take their rightful place alongside their male colleagues at all levels. The issue which now faces the National Executive Committee NEC and the party itself is how best to implement this policy decision quickly and efficiently.



1

The exclusion of women

Currently only 6 of the 28 members of Labour's National Executive Committee are women. Five of them occupy the reserved seats which were created for women when the Women's Labour League was incorporated into the Party in 1918 at a time when the Suffragette movement was powerful.

Thus, in 1990, 72 years after the Women's Section was created the party can only manage to elect one woman in the CLP section and none at all in the trade union section of its ruling body. The position in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) is equally dismal. The party currently has 23 women Labour MPS, 10% of the total. Parliament itself now contains 43 women members out of a total of 650, 6.6% of the total. The 1987 election was the first in which the 5% barrier had been breached. Since women were first allowed to sit in the House with the passage of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act in 1918 only 139 have ever been elected. There have been only 35 women appointed as ministers this century, 14 of them at Cabinet rank. (The almost total absence of women from the political stage is the most striking feature of these statistics.)

Consistently low numbers of women have stood as candidates for Labour and indeed for all parties in parliamentary elections throughout the century. For example, in 1929, the first general election to be held on an equal franchise, 30 women candidates stood for Labour and 69 overall. 9 Labour women were elected out of a total of 14 women MPs. By 1983, 77 women stood for Labour out of a total of 255 for all parties. 10 Labour women were elected out of a total of 23 women, only 1 more than the figure achieved 54 years previously. In 1983, the Conservatives achieved the same level of women's representation as they managed in 1931. There is no more tangible indication of women's precarious hold on public office than this. There is also little sign of a significant and improving trend in these figures, merely an oscillation around a low single figure percentage.



Moreover, the progress of decade can be wiped out with a bad election result, which suggests that women tend to be clustered in vulnerable marginal seats.

At local government level the figures are only slightly better. The Redcliffe Maude report of 1967 recorded the fact that only 12% of local councillors of all parties were women. By 1973, 12.7% of Labour's elected candidates were women, rising to 14.7% in 1974. Thus the rates of women's representation at local level are double those at national level but they are scarcely a cause for celebration.

In Europe, the party's record is similar to that at local government level. In the 1989 European elections, 15% of the UK's MEPs were women, which puts the UK on a par with Spain and well behind Denmark (38%), Luxembourg (33%) and Germany (31%).

There is no breakdown by gender of Labour's total membership figures. This has not been known for certain since the abolition of the "his" and "her" membership cards (blue and pink!) in 1962 though it is estimated that approximately 40% of party members are women. Figures on the rate of recruitment of women members using the new national membership scheme are currently running at 30% of the total. Once all current members have been assimilated into the national scheme it will once more be possible to assess the size of the women's membership. It will then be easier to monitor the progress made in improving women's representation from its current low base.

In mitigation it might be said that the Labour Party is merely reflecting the society in which it operates. This is certainly true, to the extent that society effectively excludes women from positions of power and influence on the same systematic basis as the Party does.

"Women at the Top", the recent report by the Hansard Society, provided many sobering examples of society's manifest failure to tap the talents and experiences of over half of its population. For example, in 1989 a mere 4% of the judiciary were women and in the civil service only 4% of those at under secretary level or above were women. The same pattern is repeated, though not quite to that extreme degree, in every walk of life.

The report also demonstrated that although women were becoming involved in the labour market in increasing numbers, a "glass ceiling" of discrimination and inflexibility was keeping them clustered in the lower status less influential jobs.

"Women at the Top" has identified the fact that indirect discrimination has persisted in Britain despite the fact that the Sex Discrimination Act outlawed it in all but a few cases. The legislation makes clear that an intent to discriminate against women by employers does not have to be proved. To

1
establish the fact that discrimination exists, all that is required is a worse record of employment and promotion for women than for men.

Indirect discrimination is generally caused by recruitment practices and promotion structures that exclude women. The Labour Party's structure is increasingly being recognised as an example of this. For instance, Labour's normal practice of holding early evening meetings with a lack of childcare, often in pubs, effectively prevents the involvement of many women members who would otherwise attend. Since a record of activist involvement is essential if a member is to be elected to office in the Party or selected as a candidate for election, this mode of operation can be regarded as discriminatory. As it was the Labour Party which put this legislation on the statute book, it is reasonable that the Party should take steps to comply with its requirements.

Labour's record on women's participation may only mirror society at large but that is no excuse for the current lack of progress in this increasingly vital area. As a socialist party which believes in equality, Labour should be achieving more in its own structures than the society it hopes to change when it is in power.

The electoral imperative

Labour's lack of progress on achieving equality for women creates a credibility gap which has damaged it in the eyes of the voters. As the recent Fabian Pamphlet by Patricia Hewitt and Deborah Mattinson revealed, research on women voters by the Shadow Communications Agency prior to the Euro elections in 1989 provided some interesting results. It was widely noticed that the party closed the gender gap in the 1987 election. Labour had a particularly good lead amongst women under 25, which had grown to 35% by April 1990. However, recent opinion poll leads have disguised the opening up of another gender gap, especially amongst women aged between 35-55. In April, Labour had a 25.4% lead amongst men but only a 21.6% lead amongst women at the height of its recent popularity in the polls.

These results confirm that the party cannot afford to be complacent about women's votes. The Shadow Communications Agency polling showed that women identify strongly with Labour's social agenda and are more likely than men to reject "Thatcherite" values. Yet, they regard Labour as the most "male" party and assume that many of its progressive policies designed to improve women's lives are actually Tory ones. Most disturbingly, this includes the party's proposals to create a women's ministry, which is very popular indeed but attributed to the Tories. It is also apparent that Mrs Thatcher's prominent position in her party serves to foster the impression amongst all voters that the Tories have more women MPs than Labour. It is noteworthy that commit-

ments to increase the numbers of women MPs in Parliament are popular with voters of both sexes.

The Party's successful European election campaign was assisted by this knowledge and further qualitative work, which demonstrated more awareness of and support for Europe's social agenda amongst women. The party made a concerted effort to ensure that women were prominent at its press conferences and in its campaigning literature.

The legal and political imperative

Britain already has legislation on the statute book which outlaws sex discrimination, and was enacted by a Labour Government. Britain has also ratified two UN treaties, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. These treaties forbid discrimination against women and seek to guarantee their political rights to involvement in society on equal terms with men.

Moreover, Britain's membership of the European Community has forced the current Government to introduce laws seeking to establish equal pay for work of equal value.

There are also political benefits to be gained by acting to empower women. Women are still exploited in society. At work they earn less than men and often experience discrimination which prevents them progressing to positions of power and influence. At home they still take on the majority of the caring roles required to enable society to function, usually unpaid and unsupported, often at the expense of their own ambitions and needs. Their absence from the political scene often means that their concerns are inadequately reflected in the political discourse much less provided for. Empowering women in our society and our party will end this imbalance and lead to a fairer and more equal society, the aim of every socialist.

Thus, there exists both for Labour as a socialist party and for Britain as a democratic society the philosophical commitment to equality for women. It is about time that Labour finally began to translate that fine rhetoric into reality. The only point now at issue should be how.

2

Arguments for change

The last decade has seen the emergence of demographic factors which offer women a once in a generation chance to change society for their benefit. Labour must ensure that it is the party that facilitates that change.

Following the depression of 1980-82, there has been an overall increase in employment of nearly 3 million. Virtually all of these jobs have been taken by women, 60% of them entailing full time work. This significant trend is set to continue throughout the 1990s. Current forecasts are that the labour force will continue to grow by approximately 1 million by the end of the decade. A full 90% of this increase is expected to be accounted for by women. By the year 2001, 45% of the labour force will be women (9.6 million).

Alongside this sharp increase in the numbers of women who work must be put the forecast decline in young people entering the labour market in the 1990s as a result of the falling birthrate in the 1970s.

This means that employers will have to make the jobs they offer convenient and attractive to women if they wish to meet their employment requirements in the next decade. As the trade union movement has been quick to recognise, the tight labour market conditions now developing, offer the opportunity to negotiate favourable terms and conditions up to and including increased wages. (Despite 20 years of sex discrimination legislation, women's pay as a proportion of men's has remained virtually unchanged at 72%).

Consequently, the participation rates of women in the labour force will continue to rise (estimates suggest to 75% by 2000) and women will have more economic power. Inevitably, their concerns will come more easily on to the political agenda. Issues such as child care facilities and employment protection for part time workers will become increasingly important. Any political party which is slow to realise this is likely to pay a heavy price at the ballot box.

The present women's organisation has been a feature of the party structure since 1918 when a new constitution was agreed. Women's Sections were created when the Women's Labour League, a strong and independent pro-Labour organisation was fully incorporated into the Party. The new structure was recognition of the important work the League had done.

Over the years the women's organisation has played an important role, something it continues to do. It often provides a vital first contact point for potential women members or existing members who wish to get active. It gives women the chance to meet together to discuss their priorities and provides a collective voice for women in the party at local, regional and national level.

However, the women's organisation has not guaranteed women fair representation at all levels of the party simply because this was never its function. What it has done and should continue to do is to involve and represent women collectively in policy formulation. This function cannot be fulfilled by individual women elected to party positions, however great their numbers. The women's organisation and quotas are therefore complementary. Together they will ensure that women are able to participate in the Party on an equal basis.

The failure of exhortation

There are two basic strategies which can be pursued: exhortation and structural change. Exhortation consists of passing resolutions supporting equality and encouraging women to come forward, of offering special training, education and advice. The structural approach consists of instituting a system of quotas throughout the party, backed up by rule changes which ensure their enforcement. The two approaches are by no means incompatible. Indeed the institution of quotas should always be accompanied by exhortation.

The history of the Party's attempts to empower women within its own structures consists, to date, almost entirely of the exhortation strategy. This strategy has failed. This is because exhortation assumes that women can choose to become involved in politics but that somehow they never exercise that choice in any significant numbers. This assumption completely fails to recognise the institutionalised discrimination that women face. It expects them to be able to make themselves available in structures designed to accommodate men when the majority of them find this practically impossible. It also fails to take into account the prejudice and discrimination inherent in existing Party structures and indeed amongst some male party activists.

Labour has long expressed its disappointment at the sparse numbers of women coming forward to contest elections on its behalf. NEC reports dating from 1928 demonstrate that there was concern about this deficiency even then. After every General Election since 1970 the General Secretary has issued letters to all affiliated organisations and the CLPs regretting the low numbers of women candidates both selected and elected and urging them to support more women. These appeals have had no noticeable effect on the outcome of the subsequent round of parliamentary selections. This is despite the pleas of the NEC which have become increasingly insistent through the years.

2

Whilst there has been a fairly steady level of concern on the NEC about the lack of progress for women, there has equally been a failure to tackle the real causes. This is partly because the NEC until very recently failed to develop an analysis explaining why this phenomenon should be so persistent. It is one thing to admit that the exclusion of women is undesirable and urge them to participate, quite another to analyse why they do not and create the conditions which will give them a meaningful chance to become involved.

This failure to examine the cause of women's under representation is nowhere more evident than in the 1974 document "Women Candidates in the Labour Party". The introduction exonerated the Party structure from any blame for the under representation. Instead, it chose to proclaim that the "organisation and traditions of society at large" were the real culprits. In order to deal with the under representation of women, an analysis of discrimination, both direct and indirect is essential. The NEC were clearly not prepared to countenance this in 1974 and the document therefore could only suggest exhortation as a way forward. The result was a total lack of progress.

The move to structural change

The first sign that the Labour Party was willing to switch tactics towards the structural change approach came with the final achievement of the "one woman on every shortlist" requirement as recently as 1988. However, it should be remembered that even this modest change was carried against the express wishes of the NEC. Significantly, it was won because most major trade unions, increasingly gearing themselves to deal with women's representation in their own structures, swung behind it. In the event, this change, unsupported by other strategies, has proved too modest to have any impact.

Whilst it was a welcome development which has given women candidates useful experience which they might otherwise not have received, it does not ensure that women are given the space to occupy responsible positions throughout the Party structure. It was not a radical enough solution because it offered no prospect of involving large numbers of women at every level of the Party.

Thus, at 1989 annual conference, the Party effectively adopted the structural change strategy when it carried by a two thirds majority Composite 54. This accepted in principle that quotas were the way forward and called on the NEC to present proposals to 1990 conference to achieve "on a realistic but rapid timescale:

- Quotas for the CLP and trade union section of the NEC.
- A minimum quota of 40% women members on all Party committees and local Party delegations.

- A minimum quota for the Shadow Cabinet.

The PLP has now adopted a system of electing the Shadow Cabinet which ensures that a minimum of three places will be occupied by women. This immediately resulted in a threefold increase in women's representation in the 1989 elections, progress which is to be welcomed. Labour must now press ahead with the implementation of quotas throughout the Party in order to maintain the political initiative.

Will quotas work?

Quotas are a proven mechanism for guaranteeing fair representation for women. They tackle the problems of under representation at all levels of the Party simultaneously. They also give a clear signal to women, both inside and outside the Party, that Labour is at last serious about solving the problem and anxious to empower women in its ranks. This will not go un-noticed by either voters or potential women activists.

Women, who often have a limited amount of time to devote to voluntary activities, will be more likely to join and become involved in a Party seen as increasingly "woman friendly", because they will not feel it is a waste of their time and effort. The often hostile and intimidating reception women receive when they attend their first Party meetings will improve as more women become involved and men become more used to their involvement. As a strategy for creating equality, quotas have the great advantage of being cumulative in their beneficial effect. The more women become involved, the more the overwhelmingly male culture of the Party will be transformed and the more women will be attracted to the Party.

Any long established organisation gets into habits that harden into traditions and changing them can be very difficult even with a great deal of goodwill. Quotas provide a mechanism which ensures change because they allow an opportunity to dispense with the standard operating procedures current in the organisation and sweep away the rigidities which result from them. The success of the SDP in involving women in its newly created structure reinforces the truth of this insight. They were able to create entirely new operating procedures with the aim of involving more women specifically in mind. It worked.

It is certainly true that the Labour Party currently has its fair share of the rigidities born of well established organisations. For example the NEC is currently urging CLPs to adopt all women shortlists, particularly in those seats which have retiring Labour MPs. With the bulk of the safe seats now selected, there has only been one all woman shortlist throughout the country and that was in a marginal. This is extremely frustrating for those in the Party working for change but it should be seen for what it is, an example of the inability of

an old system to change. Even with the best will in the world, and the widespread recognition which now exists throughout the Labour movement that women must be given a voice, the practical results have been disappointing. It is only by reforming the outmoded systems in the party with the goal of quickly increasing women's representation in mind, that change will be achieved.

Changing the selection system.

Many of those who criticise the current admittedly Byzantine and cumbersome system of parliamentary selection go on to reason that the switch to one member one vote (OMOV), proposed by the NEC and widely expected to be endorsed by 1990 Conference, will be the solution to female under representation. It is true that a bad system can actually have a negative effect by discriminating against women. The current electoral college system has made it even harder for women to become candidates by requiring the hopefuls to attend very large numbers of nomination and selection meetings. This requirement entails more expense and is more time consuming than many women can allow for.

By the end of July 1990, 408 seats had been selected, including most of the safest. Only 65 women have been successful, including the sitting Labour women MPs. This is 33 short of the final total in 1987, and is yet another extremely disappointing result at a time in the electoral cycle when Labour should be gaining large numbers of seats at the forthcoming General Election. Thus a golden opportunity to seize the initiative and make a real bid for women's political allegiance has been squandered by the lack of a mechanism to guarantee women fair representation.

However, previous experience strongly suggests that the expectations raised by some of the advocates of the OMOV solution will be disappointed in the absence of a shift to quotas. Even if the move to OMOV were to result in an improvement, a big assumption, the likely timescale would be so long that the political opportunities which suggest the necessity for rapid action would be squandered or even handed to a grateful Tory Party.

Learning from experience

3

Quotas have already been introduced by at least 16 socialist parties in other countries and a number of British trade unions have used other forms of positive action.

Table 1 shows the current level of women's representation in the single or lower parliamentary chamber of each country in the European Community, plus Sweden and Norway. It also shows some of the history of women's representation in each country. There are striking differences between women's representation in different countries. It is interesting to note that although only one country, Norway, had a woman parliamentary representative before the United Kingdom, Britain is almost at the bottom of the current table, and its rate of increase between 1975 and 1988 is one of the lowest.

Table 1: Women's representation in the single or lower chamber of national parliaments

Country	Women given the right to stand	First woman in parliament	Increase in women's representation 1975-88 (%)	Women as % of total at Jan 1990
SWEDEN	1920	1921	9.6%	38%
NORWAY	1907	1911	18.9%	34%
DENMARK	1915	1918	13.4%	31%
NETHERLANDS	1917	1918	10.7%	25%
W GERMANY	1919	1919	9.8%	16%
ITALY	1945	1946	9.0%	13%
SPAIN	1931	1931	?	13%
LUXEMBOURG	1919	1919	9.5%	13%
PORTUGAL	1931	1934	-0.4%	10%
BELGIUM	1921	1921	1.9%	9%
IRELAND	1918	?	5.6%	8%
UN KINGDOM	1918	1918	2.1%	7%
FRANCE	1944	1944	4.8%	6%
GREECE	1952	1952	2.3%	5%

Sources: European Parliament Session Document A 2-169/88 on women in decision-making centres 2.8.88; European Parliament Information Note on women MPs in the European Community parliaments 29.1.90; Inter-Parliamentary Union report on "Participation of Women in Political Life and in the Decision-Making Process" 1.4.88.

The three countries with the highest women's representation all have socialist parties which have introduced quotas. The socialist parties in most of the countries higher than the United Kingdom in table 1 now have quotas, although in some cases these have been brought in too recently to influence the 1990 figures. Table 2 is a list of socialist parties in other countries which already have quotas.

Table 2: Level of quotas in other socialist parties

Canada (New Democratic Party)	50%
Norway (Norwegian Labour Party)	40%
Denmark (Social Democratic Party)	40%
Germany (SPD)	40%
Sweden (Swedish Social Democratic Party)	37%
Finland (Social Democratic Party of Finland)	37%
Switzerland (Socialist Party)	30%
Spain (Spanish Socialist Workers Party)	25%
Austria (Socialist Party of Austria)	25%
Portugal (Socialist Party)	25%
Belgium (Belgian French Socialist Party)	25%
Belgium (Belgian Flemish Socialist Party)	20%
France (Socialist Party)	20%*
Italy (Italian Socialist Party)	20%
Israel (Labour Party)	20%
Israel (Mapam)	20%

* Principle of 30% quota agreed in March 1990.

The Norwegian Labour Party was one of the first parties to bring in quotas, and it did so without a phasing in period. The Party agreed to the principle of quotas in 1981 and changed its rules to require a 40 per cent quota in 1983. Women now make up 43 per cent of both the Party's central governing body and the Labour Party National Council. In the 1985 parliamentary elections, the Norwegian Labour Party increased its proportion of women representatives from 33 per cent to 42 per cent. The Party believes that quotas were the most important factor in achieving this. Following the 1987 local government (Commune) elections 35 per cent of Labour councillors are women. 44 per cent of cabinet ministers in Gro Harlem Brundtland's government were women. The Norwegian Labour Party reports that there have been no problems in finding qualified women candidates for the various offices and positions.

By contrast, the German SPD have phased in their parliamentary quota, requiring that 25 per cent of SPD seats be filled by women by 1990 and 40 per cent by 1998.

Women in unions

Demographic changes and the destruction of much of traditional manufacturing industry have already made it imperative for British trade unions to attract more women members and encourage them to become active. Unions have responded in a variety of ways, including recruitment campaigns aimed specifically at women, special training courses for women activists, and the creation of women's committees and conferences and women's officer posts at national, regional and local level. Nine out of the ten unions with the largest female membership have a national women's or equality officer.

The existence of women's officers and equality structures in unions has given a far more powerful voice to women members with the result that issues important to women are increasingly being taken up in bargaining. Childcare, maternity pay and cervical cancer screening are all now regular items on the bargaining agenda and unions are giving increasing priority to raising the pay of those on the lowest grades and negotiating better rights for part-time and temporary workers, the vast majority of whom are women.

A growing number of unions are realising that women must also be brought into elected positions of power within their structures, and that positive action is needed to counteract the historical bias against women's involvement. NUPE introduced reserved seats on its executive as early as 1975, and other unions have now followed suit. Table 3 shows major unions which have introduced reserved seats.

Table 3: Unions with reserved seats

Union	Women as % of membership	Women on national executive	Reserved seats on executive
COHSE	79%	11 out of 26 (39%)	Currently under review
GMB	34%	15 out of 51 (29%)	10
MSF	19%	6 out of 36 (17%)	4
NUPE	75%	12 out of 26 (46%)	5*

* Women are only allowed to serve two terms in the reserved seats on the NUPE National Executive. The aim of this is to encourage them to stand in open seats once they have gained experience of serving on the Executive.

At its 1989 Congress the TUC agreed to double the number of women's reserved seats on the General Council from six to 12. There are now 15 women out of 53 on the General Council (28%) compared with 32 per cent in the TUC's membership. The 1990 TUC Women's Conference passed a resolution calling for the introduction of quotas or targets for women's representation to be

included in the TUC Women's Action Programme. The resolution stated that if targets were set and did not yield the necessary results, compulsory quotas should be brought in.

Similar moves are taking place elsewhere in Europe. Italy's major trade union centre, the CGIL, introduced a quota for women on its executive committee in 1989, and a number of individual unions in different countries have introduced quotas or reserved seats. In general, women's membership of unions in Europe is increasing.

Lessons to be learnt

The first, and perhaps the most obvious lesson is that it is possible to introduce quotas or reserved seats, building on the existing structures within an organisation. Of course, modifications have to be made to rules and procedures, but no major problems have been reported in the technical implementation of such positive action.

Nor is there evidence of a major backlash from men in any of the parties or unions described above. Perhaps that is because there has generally been no difficulty in finding able women to fill the positions which have been opened to them. Indeed, in some cases, positive action has encouraged even more women to come forward. In the GMB for instance, there had only ever been three women executive members in the union's 100 year history. In the first election to include reserved seats, three women were elected in open seats, as well as the 10 in reserved seats.

However, quotas must be enforced if they are to be effective. The successful call to establish a 30 per cent quota, made by the women's organisation of the French Parti Socialiste, was accompanied by bitterness that the previous 20 per cent quota had not been fully implemented, with the result that women had not made the gains originally intended.

The experience of socialist parties which have introduced quotas indicates that once a certain level of women's participation has been established, more women are encouraged to come forward, because they are no longer isolated pioneers, but are a normal part of the party's life.

Changing the party

4

Following the resolution on the principle of quotas passed by the 1989 Labour Party Conference, the NEC conducted a consultation throughout the Party on a wide range of options for increasing the representation of women.

The preliminary results of this consultation were considered by the 1990 Labour Women's Conference, which also conducted a ballot on each of the options. Most of the options were passed by an overwhelming majority, a fact which is particularly significant because the Labour Women's Conference now operates an electoral college which gives the trade unions 50 per cent of the vote, with 45 per cent for local Party representatives and 5 per cent for socialist societies. It is clear therefore that these proposals commanded strong support from all sections of the Party.

Proposition	For	Against
The introduction of a 50% quota in the trade union and constituency sections of the NEC with the retention of the women's section.	61%	21%
Trade unions should be required to represent women on their delegations to Annual Conference at least in proportion to the percentage of women in membership.	77%	5%
Delegations from the CLP to other local party bodies should achieve a balance of representation between men and women.	79%	4%
That in the case of all the above situations, consideration be given to leaving unfilled vacancies on committees when the quota is not achieved.	67%	15%
That trade unions set a quota of at least 40% for their parliamentary panel.	76%	18%
That Labour draws up a phased programme over the next 10 years or three general elections that at least half of the PLP should be women.	70%	6%

The consultation on increasing women's representation took place at the same time as reviews of the Party's policy-making process and parliamentary selection procedures. A further review of local Party structures is now planned.

The introduction of quotas will therefore not mean simply grafting a quota onto existing committees. In some cases new bodies will be created which will embody quotas from the outset. In many ways this will be an advantage. It is always easier to apply quotas to a new body which can be designed from the start to incorporate them. This approach also lessens resistance because it means that male incumbents will not directly be replaced by women. However, in almost all cases quotas can be implemented in existing structures, providing the necessary commitment exists.

The principles

It is important that the introduction of quotas does not just mean more women at the highest levels of the Party, essential though this is. There are too few women GC delegates and councillors as well as too few women NEC members and MPs. The first direct contact for new members and potential supporters is usually with the local Party. The image and reality of local Parties is therefore as important as that of the national Party. That means Labour needs more local women activists.

The Party also needs to widen the total pool of women who are involved. It particularly needs more working-class women and those who are black or from other ethnic minorities. Local quotas will help ensure that the women who are elected nationally represent the widest possible range of experience.

The quota which is set should be a minimum, which is as easy as possible to exceed over time. The way in which the election is conducted is crucial in this. There are at least two suitable options. The first is the one now employed in Shadow Cabinet elections. All the seats are elected in a single election, but every elector has to vote for a set number of women (in this case three) for their ballot paper to be valid. In the last shadow cabinet elections four women were elected.

The second is again to have a single election, and to set a minimum number of women who will be elected. For instance, if there are ten people to be elected, a minimum quota of four women could be set. The four top women will automatically be elected even if they are not among the ten people with the highest votes. Of course, if more than four women appear in the top ten, they will be elected in the normal way. This method shows the support for individual women more clearly than that used for Shadow Cabinet elections.

One of the first questions asked about quotas is "What happens if not enough women come forward?" This should not be a problem. Other organisations which have brought in quotas or reserved seats have found no difficulty in filling them. There are many well-qualified women already active in the Party, and the introduction of quotas should further increase the numbers.

However, it is very important to establish the principle that if no woman comes forward, the seat is left vacant. If this is not the case quotas will have no force because there will be no sanction for not meeting the quota. It will be all too easy to simply elect a man instead. Such a situation would be little better than the exhortation to encourage women to participate which has failed so dismally to give women fair representation in the past.

The practicalities

As described above, a quota has already been introduced for the Shadow Cabinet, and last year Margaret Beckett, Ann Clywd and Joan Lestor were elected to join Jo Richardson, quadrupling women's representation. It is too early to tell whether the quota will lead to a further increase in women's representation in the future.

While last year's election was an encouraging start, the position should be monitored to see whether the low quota which was brought in (a minimum of three votes out of 18) is sufficient.

The 1990 Labour Party Conference will consider an NEC proposal to introduce quotas for women in the trade union and constituency sections of the NEC, in addition to retaining the five seats in the women's section. The aim is to phase in the quotas to give women a minimum representation of 40 per cent (12 seats out of 29) by 1995/96. No changes will take place before the General Election.

This move will at least double the number of women on the NEC and ensure that they are represented in both major sections. It will considerably strengthen women's voice on the Party's supreme decision-making body between conferences. It is important however that this and other changes at national level are mirrored at local level, for the reasons described above.

Policy making fora

The NEC will also be asking Conference to agree in principle a new method of national policy-making. Again, no changes will be implemented until after the next election. A major feature of the proposed new structure is a National Policy Forum which will be made up of the NEC and representatives of regions, the Parliamentary Labour Party, MEPs, local government, national affiliated organisations, ethnic minority members, youth and student members and the women's organisation.

If Conference agrees to this proposal, a quota for women will operate in all groups represented on the forum, in addition to direct representation for the women's organisation. This is expected to ensure that a minimum of 40 per cent of the members of the forum are women.

The proportion of women delegates attending Annual Conference is far too low. This underrepresents the number of women who are individual or affiliated members of the Labour Party. It also creates a male-dominated atmosphere and sends out the damaging message to television viewers that Labour is an overwhelmingly male party. As yet, no proposals have come from the NEC on ensuring that women are more fairly represented at Conference. The consultation on women's representation in the Party offered a number of options to help achieve this.

The responses to the consultation, and the decisions of this year's Labour Women's Conference, show a clear way forward on delegations from affiliated organisations. There was overwhelming support for requiring trade union delegations to reflect the proportion of women in each union's affiliated membership, and for each socialist society and cooperative organisation to ensure that at least half its delegation is women. Significantly this support was reflected in the votes of trade unions and other affiliated organisation as well of those of local women's organisations.

There is also widespread agreement with the proposition that men and women should be equally represented amongst constituency delegates. However, this is more difficult to implement because most CLPs only send one delegate each year. Two suggestions have been put forward. The first is to double the number of delegates and stipulate that at least one must be a woman. The drawback of this option is that it would be expensive for both the national Party and local parties. There is a fear that the woman delegate would be seen as a second delegate and as most local parties are short of money they would only send the man.

The second suggestion is to require CLPs to send a woman one year and a man the next. This would not mean extra expenditure, but it is rather inflexible. Parties often like to send a delegate with a particular interest in the motion being put forward. At the moment however, it is the best option available.

Regional and local parties

In many ways, regional Party structures mirror those of the national Party, and similar considerations apply for introducing quotas. There are two points of difference which are worth highlighting. The first is a positive one. Each CLP sends several delegates to the appropriate regional conference. Quotas would therefore be easy to apply to all sections of these conferences and there is no reason why this could not be introduced immediately as there seems to be agreement on the principle.

The second difference is that some regional executives have geographical representation for executive members on the constituency section. This gener-

2

ally means one representative for each area. It is not possible to apply a quota to this system as it stands, and such regions would be understandably reluctant to lose the local contact which this form of election allows. This point needs to be looked at in more detail in each of the regions concerned. It may be possible to reduce the number of geographical areas and require each to elect a man and a woman. Alternatively women executive members could be elected by the whole region to achieve 40 per cent overall representation for women, although this would not encourage the election of women in the main constituency section.

Following the review of national policy-making structures, the NEC has agreed to conduct a review of local party organisation. The question of women's representation in local parties will be considered as part of this review. This is a sensible approach, because the underrepresentation of women is only one of the problems with the way local parties are currently organised. Changing other aspects of local party structures may also help to encourage women's participation. However, it is essential that the issue of local quotas does not get lost. The review should treat the ease of applying quotas as an important criterion in considering current structures and proposing alternatives. It is for instance impossible to introduce quotas for CLP officers and for Executive Committees at the moment. Officers are elected in a series of separate elections and Executive Committees are made up of one representative from each branch and section, as well as the officers and a pool of trade union delegates.

There are some aspects of local party structure which could easily have quotas applied to them now, such as ward delegations to General Committees where one could require that at least half (or half minus one in the case of an uneven number) of delegates should be women. Also when a pool of delegates is elected to a Local Government Committee or District Labour Party either a quota could be applied to the pool, or the pool could be used if necessary to rectify an imbalance in the overall delegation from the CLP.

The NEC has made an important start on implementing the terms of the 1989 Conference resolution on quotas. The proposed representation for women on the NEC and National Policy Forum will have a very significant effect on women's involvement at a national level. However, as has been described above, many of the options laid out in the consultation paper, which received such strong support at the Labour Women's Conference, have not yet been addressed at all. If this is true of internal Party structures, it is even more the case when one turns to quotas for public representatives.

5

Quotas for candidates

The involvement of women in Parliament and local government will be the real yardstick by which the success of quotas will be measured. It is after all these areas, which offer the prospect of access to real power and influence, where resistance to change will be the greatest.

In what follows it will be assumed that the current voting system remains, as does the single member constituency. It is important that the case for fair representation of women is not confused with the case for proportional representation (PR) irrespective of the latter's merits. In any case PR systems do not have a much better record of ensuring that women are represented than our current electoral system. In the recent Eastern European elections, all conducted using PR systems, women have fared extremely badly with the exception of East Germany. In Rumania they hold just 3.5% of parliamentary seats, in Czechoslovakia 6% and in Hungary 7%.

Clearly, constitutional change may be designed to allow women to participate more effectively in the political life of a nation. Proposals circulating in Scotland for the creation of two member constituencies for the Scottish Parliament, each represented by one man and one woman, are an effective way of introducing a 50% quota overnight. Indeed, it may be that quotas ought to be established for the new regional assemblies and the new second chamber along the lines of the Scottish proposal. However, this chapter will concern itself primarily with the Labour Party's internal structures and not Britain's constitution.

Women only shortlists

However quotas are implemented, there will need to be women only shortlists in some Parliamentary seats to ensure that women are selected. It is vital that this includes seats in which the sitting MP is retiring to ensure that the larger female presence in the PLP cannot be decimated by a bad election result. This is the surest way of ensuring that more women are elected to Parliament to represent the Labour Party. This tactic allows the constituencies to shortlist

a range of women with different political views whilst becoming accustomed to regard women as potential MPs. To those who may object to this idea, it must be pointed out that the bulk of current selections involve all male shortlists and always have done.

This change will not take place by exhortation, as we have already seen. Despite the NEC's pleas, the current round of selections has featured only one all woman shortlist and none have taken place in vacant safe seats. The current rules are ineffective in this respect because they specify that those obtaining 25% of the nominations and the sitting candidates must be automatically shortlisted. This often effectively contradicts the NEC's wish to see all women shortlists. Thus, if progress is to be made, rule changes explicitly providing for all women shortlists would have to be in place before the next round of Parliamentary selections after 1992. There should also be provision made to strengthen them further if targets are not met.

The mechanism of quotas

It is clear that Labour needs a system which will select women as Parliamentary candidates in adequate numbers. There are various ways that this could be done. For example: quotas for women candidates would be set in each region for safe Labour, marginal and safe Tory seats. It is necessary to have separate quotas for these different categories of seats because otherwise women might all be concentrated in seats the Party was unlikely to win. Quotas for vacant safe seats and for marginal seats should initially be higher than the overall quota. This would counteract the fact that there will be a low turnover of existing MPs most of whom are male. In the case of marginal seats, the quota should be much higher, say 75%. This would give women greater experience as candidates, send powerful signals to the electorate about Labour's commitment to equality and have the added advantage of greatly increasing the numbers of women in the PLP in those elections that Labour won.

In setting the quota in each region, attention would have to be paid to the number of women Labour MPs who currently represented that region. For example, quotas in safe and marginal seats in Scotland and Wales would be higher than in some regions because each only sends one Labour woman to Westminster at the moment. Constituencies could initially be invited to opt for an all woman shortlist. If the number which did so was insufficient to meet the quota then some constituencies would then be required to have an all woman shortlist. These constituencies would have to be selected in a way which was not subject to internal lobbying. This could be done by selecting every second constituency from a list ranked in order of parliamentary majorities. Alternatively, the names of constituencies could be drawn randomly. This system could only be maintained if the NEC were willing to deal with a

5
worst case scenario where a CLP refused to select a woman if required. In that case, the NEC has the ultimate power to refuse to endorse the candidate and if necessary rerun the selection or impose a woman. There are plenty of precedents for NEC imposition.

Parliamentary panels currently, aspiring Parliamentary candidates have to go to very many meetings, firstly to seek nominations and then to acquire support in the electoral college. This is both time consuming and expensive and it discriminates against women and those who may not be mobile and have limited time to chase nominations. Therefore, there is a strong case for replacing the current nomination process with an application system much like the first stage of a job selection process. An aspiring candidate would have to send for and complete a form asking appropriate personal details, interests, relevant experience etc. This would be a standard document drawn up in accordance with equal opportunities practices.

This would be regarded as an application to join a "panel" based either regionally or on a cluster of CLPs or indeed on any organising unit regarded as appropriate by the Party. The individual would of course be allowed to specify which seats in the "unit" they were willing to contest. Nominations from Party branches and affiliated organisations could be required prior to an application for the panel. There could then be a process by which an appropriately sized panel of potential candidates was chosen. This could be for an entire area or cluster in which case every CLP would need to be represented (by one man and one woman) on the committee, or again it could be based at CLP level. A quota of 40% would be applied to the panel and the decision would be taken with reference to the "job application" and perhaps with an interview. Once on the panel, individuals would be eligible for selection in the area covered by the panel (ie a whole region or a CLP etc).

Shortlisting could then be done by the CLP from panel members but incorporating certain requirements in the rules, for example if there is a vacant Labour seat and the quota has not been reached, there must be an all woman shortlist.

Retirement Age For MPs

The transition from a male dominated PLP to one which fairly represents women unavoidably involves women replacing men. This has to be done in a way which will command the largest degree of support possible throughout the Party. No plan of affirmative action works well if it is resented and resisted. One option would be the introduction of a retirement age for MPs, say 65-70, in tandem with guarantees of all women shortlists in those seats. All those who work are expected to retire. There seems to be no good reason why MPs

should be exempt from this requirement, especially as their job is often a very stressful and gruelling one.

A realistic transition period is essential to the success of any change. Change by consent and co operation is also preferable to more forceful methods. The Party must establish a rapid but realistic timetable for achieving its aims on women's representation.

This could be done either by phasing in quotas or by establishing detailed targets for the next round of Parliamentary selections and only proceeding to enforced quotas for the subsequent selection round if these targets were not met. This would give constituencies a further chance to select women before being given an absolute requirement to do so.

Quotas in the town halls

Quotas need to be applied to Labour's work in local government. In almost all cases councillors are elected in multi-member wards. This means that local Parties could simply be required to stand at least one woman in each ward. The Party is also unlikely to have to band seats according to how easy they are to win because, although Labour's vote varies in different years, seats in the same ward are broadly as easy or as difficult to win.

Moreover, in most areas of Britain there are annual council elections in which a third of council seats are fought. Labour is now committed to introducing annual elections throughout the country. This means that progress towards achieving quotas for women in local government could be very rapid. At each selection a ward would have to consider an all woman shortlist if it currently had Labour Councillors and none of them was a woman.

Conclusion

The Conservatives have set out to take the initiative on "family" issues in an explicit attempt to woo women voters. The announcement of measures such as tax relief on some childcare, the tightening of maintenance payments to children and proposals to outlaw rape in marriage are no co-incidence. Nor was Margaret Thatcher's decision to make Angela Rumbold Minister for Women.

Labour has an excellent opportunity of countering this Tory strategy if it acts quickly and decisively. However, women receive a contrary and confusing message from Labour: on the one hand, they regard it as the most male party, on the other they identify closely with its social concerns and general caring philosophy. They also credit the Tory Party with many Labour policy initiatives which they strongly support, such as the proposed ministry for women.

Recommendations

- Quotas must operate at all levels within the Labour Party. They should be set as a minimum which is as easy as possible to exceed over time. Vacancies should be left if not enough women come forward to fill the quota.
- The quota for the Shadow Cabinet should be maintained and monitored to see whether it is set sufficiently high.
- A quota of at least 40 per cent should be introduced on the NEC by setting quotas in the trade union and constituency sections, whilst retaining the women's section.
- A quota of at least 40 per cent should be introduced for the new National Policy Forum, with separate representation for the women's organisation.
- Quotas should be established on all delegations to Labour Party Conference.
- Quotas should apply at regional level in a similar way to the national quotas.
- The review of local Labour Party organisation should make recommendations for a comprehensive system of quotas at local level.
- There should be women only shortlists in some parliamentary seats, especially where the sitting MP is retiring.
- Rule changes explicitly providing for all women shortlists should be in place for the next round of parliamentary selections.
- Quotas for women candidates should be set in each region for safe Labour, marginal and safe Tory seats.
- To counteract the low turnover of existing (mostly male) MPs, quotas for vacant safe seats and marginals should be higher than the overall quota.
- The current nomination process should be replaced by an application process like the first stage of a job selection. Applicants would apply to be on a local panel from which candidates would be drawn.
- There should be retirement age for MPs (say 65-70) with all women shortlists in these seats.
- At local government level a ward should be required to consider an all women shortlist if it currently has Labour councillors none of whom are women.

Quotas Now

Quotas may be controversial but they are necessary if years of underrepresentation of women in the Labour Party at all levels are to be reversed, according to Rachel Brooks, Angela Eagle and Clare Short MP, Chair of the Labour Party NEC Women's Committee.

Thanks to indirect discrimination, exhortation and encouragement have failed to get women into positions of power, so the time has come for structural change and that means quotas. In any case, without more women in senior positions, the Labour Party will continue to present an insufficiently appealing face to women voters.

Pointing to the experience of fellow socialist parties in Europe, the authors call for:

- A quota of at least 40% women on the NEC, whilst retaining the women's section
- Quotas for women in each region for safe Labour and marginal parliamentary seats
- Women only shortlists in a number of seats where Labour MPs are retiring plus the introduction of a retirement age of 65 or 70 for Labour MPs
- Quotas and women only shortlists for council seats where women are underrepresented

The Fabian Society brings together those who wish to relate democratic socialism to practical plans for building a better society in a changing world. It is affiliated to the Labour Party, and anyone who is eligible for membership of the Labour Party can join; others may become associate members. For details of Fabian membership, publications and activities, write to: Simon Crine, General Secretary, Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth St, London SW1H 9BN.

£3.00