

David Cameron's 'Problem' with Women: Representing Women in the Coalition Government

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Introduction

PRIME MINISTER David Cameron appears to have a 'problem' with women. There have been a series of women-unfriendly policy gaffes—think scrapping rape anonymity, clawing back child benefit and accelerating the equalisation of the pension age. Independent analysis of government deficit reduction measures produced by organisations including the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Women's Budget Group and the Fawcett Society consistently show that government decisions are disproportionately hitting women. And leaked documents from the Number Ten Policy Unit indicated concern in government that a range of polls show that women are significantly more negative about the government than men.¹ The women 'problem' has become so significant that Cameron has deemed it necessary to appoint a special advisor on women and, in February 2012, Laura Trott was confirmed as the person who would help Cameron to turn the tide and get policies right for women. This is, we argue, a huge burden of responsibility to fall on the shoulders of one woman. Women are not, after all, a homogenous group and gender equality policy is notoriously hard to get onto the policy agenda.²

Under New Labour, notable progress towards gender equality was made both in terms of the representation of women and in respect of policy outcomes which promote a more equal distribution of power and resources between men and women. This achievement was never down to one person, but the result of a commitment to promoting better representation of women in Parliament and government. There is, of course, no clear or automatic link between female representatives and policy outcomes which promote

gender equality, but many New Labour policy makers were committed feminists, and their capacity to achieve their goals was enhanced by an investment in gender equality infrastructure and resources such as the Women and Equality Unit, gender mainstreaming tools and gender equality legislation.³ The combination of women's presence and gender equality infrastructure, it seems, improved the range of gender equality issues reaching the political agenda and the strengthened resources helped gender equality advocates pushing through their priorities.

In opposition David Cameron showed a similar sensitivity towards the need to attract women's votes and engender politics. There were the highly visible campaigns to support female 'A' list parliamentary candidates and a commitment that one-third of his cabinet members would be women. The party even claimed that it would be the most 'family friendly' government ever. There are committed feminists in the government; indeed Theresa May has worn the 'This is what a Feminist Looks Like' t-shirt as part of the Fawcett Society campaign.

So what accounts for this disjuncture between pre-electoral aspiration and the coalition's experience of representing women? Drawing on our previous work on the gendered 'disposition' of the United Kingdom core executive,⁴ we assess here the gendered credentials of the coalition executive in terms of recruitment, roles, resources and relationships. We argue that the coalition government's problem with women stems from: the lack of women across government; the dismantling of and disregard for the gender equality infrastructure which support gender equality advocates seeking to make a difference for women; and women's exclusion from the powerful forums that run

Table 1: Female members of government by party and source, March 2012

Coalition member	Female ministers (N)	Female ministers (%)	Of which MPs (N)	Of which Lords (N)	Female junior ministers (N)	Female junior ministers (%)	Of which MPs (N)	Of which Lords (N)	Total female members of government (N)	Total female members of government (%)
Conservative	5/20	25.0	4/5	1/5	6/60	10.0	4/6	2/6	11/80	13.75
Liberal Democrat	0/5	0.0	0/0	0/0	2/12	16.6	2/2	0/2	2/17	11.76
Government total	5/25	20.0	4/5	1/5	8/72	11.1	6/8	2/8	13/97	13.4

Source: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/list-government-departments-and-ministers>

the coalition. With this in mind, there is little prospect that a lone policy advisor for women will help Cameron solve his 'problem' with women.

Recruiting women to the coalition government: too few, and too thinly spread

Despite Cameron's 2008 pledge that he would, by the end of his first term, give a third of ministerial jobs in a Conservative government to women,⁵ he has so far managed just 20 per cent, or five ministers in a cabinet of 25. He initially appointed four women to his cabinet (Theresa May, Home Office and Equalities Minister; Caroline Spelman, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Cheryl Gillan, Wales Office; and Baroness Warsi, Minister without Portfolio) and a fifth was promoted to cabinet following Liam Fox's resignation in October 2011 (Justine Greening, Transport).

Ever since the coalition was formed, Cameron has faced strong criticism, from outside and inside government (for example, from Liberal Democrat junior minister Lynne Featherstone⁶) for the under-representation of women in his government. As Prime Minister, Cameron has the full freedom to choose his own ministers. At the same time, it might be argued that Cameron's capacity to meet his 33 per cent target was constrained by two not insignificant factors: the small size of his ministerial supply pool and his need to form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats.

United Kingdom ministers are predominantly recruited from the House of Commons and the size of Cameron's eligibility pool for female ministers is relatively small (Table 1): there are just 49 female Conservative MPs

(15.6 per cent of all Conservative MPs) and just seven Liberal Democrat MPs are women (12.2 per cent of all Liberal Democrat MPs). In total, Cameron had just 56 women to choose from, compared to 363 men. Ministers can be (but are less commonly) recruited from the House of Lords as well and there the proportion of women on the government benches is higher: 18 per cent of Conservative Peers are women as are 30 per cent of Liberal Democrat Peers. Four of the female Ministers selected by Cameron to join his cabinet are from the Commons; just one—Baroness Warsi—is from the Lords.

Some credit can be given to the Prime Minister. It is a noteworthy achievement that Cameron managed to recruit so many women into government given the appalling record of the coalition parties at nominating, selecting and electing women MPs. Women are better represented in the cabinet compared with their descriptive representation in the Commons (Table 2). While women make up 15.4 per cent of female MPs from the coalition parties, they comprise 20 per cent of cabinet ministers. In this sense, Prime Minister patronage has clearly been important in promoting women to the coalition cabinet. The reshuffle following the right-winger Fox's resignation led to calls from the right of the party for a replacement minister from that 'faction', but, sensing the pressure to improve his women-friendly credentials, Cameron firmly resisted factional demands, bringing in another woman—Justine Greening—into his cabinet instead.

The second major constraint to Cameron's freedom to appoint ministers was the need to form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats and include five ministerial nominations from the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. Important to note is that none of the five Liberal Democrat ministers in the

Table 2: Female presence in the government feeder institutions (percentages)

Coalition member	Women Commons MPs (2010)	Women Lords (December 2011)
Conservatives	15.6	18
Liberal Democrats	12.2	30
Coalition parties total	15.4	–

Sources: http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/pathways_to_politics.pdf and <http://www.parliament.uk/about/faqs/house-of-lords-faqs/lords-members/>

coalition is a woman. In this sense, Cameron's ability to reach his 33 per cent target is significantly constrained by his coalition partner's ministerial nominations. He has control over just twenty ministerial posts, curtailing his ability to deliver a more balanced ministerial team of 33 per cent women.

The consequence of front-loading Conservative women to his cabinet means, however, that Cameron is left with a significant shortage of women in the rest of government. Just six of 60 Conservative junior ministers are women (10 per cent) and there are just two female Liberal Democrats with government jobs from a total of twelve (16.6 per cent). This creates two problems. First, there is a weak pipeline of future female ministers, which is important if further reshuffles are required. Second, it means that women are extremely thinly spread across government. The total number of women in the coalition government is just thirteen (compared to 31 under the last Brown Government⁷). Of the nineteen 'spending departments' (which excludes the Offices of the Leaders of the Commons and Lords, Law Officers, Whips Office and Church Commissioners), over half of govern-

ment departments contain no women whatsoever. As Figure 1 illustrates, nine of the nineteen spending government departments (including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Justice, Defence, Energy and Climate Change, International Development, Culture Media and Sport, the Northern Ireland and Scotland Offices and the Cabinet Office) have neither a female minister nor a female minister of state nor a female parliamentary under-secretary of state. Other offices of state, including the Offices of the Leader of the Lords and Commons and the Law Officers, are also entirely male in their composition. In contrast, in just two departments—the Home Office and the Department for Transport—are there more than just one woman.

The literature of the coalition formation records that the Liberal Democrats opted for a strategy of spreading their allocation of ministers across departments rather than concentrating them in a smaller number of departments. This, it is argued, has had a detrimental impact on their capacity to make effective policy change.⁸ We would argue that this analogy works differently for gender and that in fact it is important to have a presence of women across departments. To cite Helen

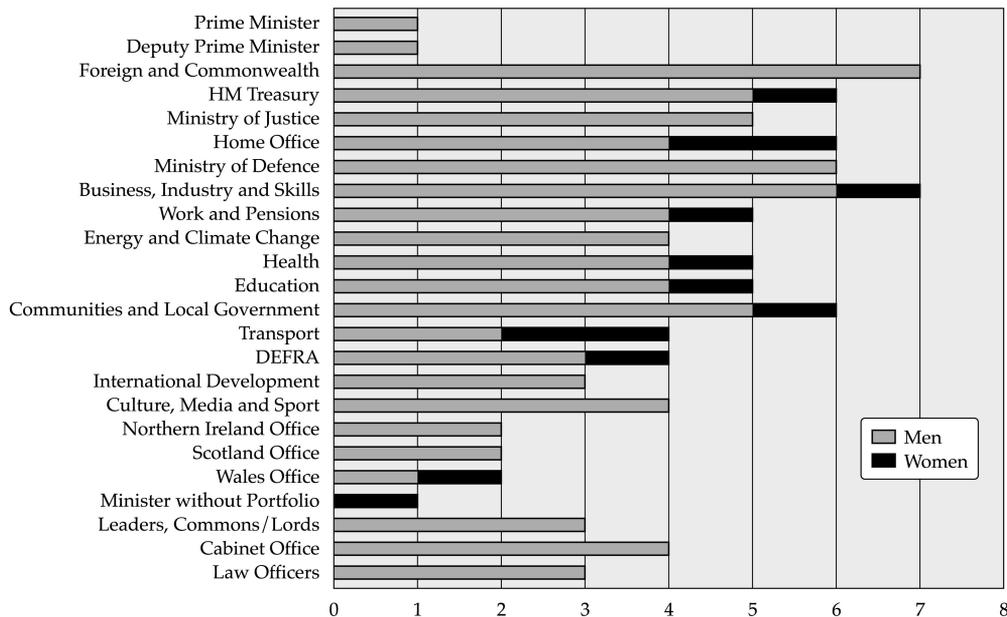


Figure 1: Government departments and their ministers by gender, March 2012
 Source: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/her-majestys-government/>.

Ghosh, Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, 'you need a range of perspectives and a range of experiences at the top'.⁹ There is a presence of women in the cabinet, but elsewhere in government it is thin. Of course counting women is not enough. Rather, it is as important to look at their roles, their resources and how easily they can access the powerful networks and relationships that make decisions. Only then do we get a sense of their power relative to their male counterparts, and their capacity to make change for women or gender equality.

Roles and resources: the gendered allocation of ministerial portfolios

We have argued elsewhere that to understand the gendered distribution of power in government, it is important to look at how ministerial portfolios are allocated. We noted that historically few women have held one of the four key ministries of state (Prime Minister, HM Treasury, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Home Office) and that in many instances female ministers tend to be given 'housekeeping' roles such as Leader of the House rather than the full prestige and resources of spending departments.¹⁰

In terms of resources, it is significant to note that four of five female ministers have spending portfolios. While Baroness Warsi is Minister without Portfolio and is unpaid, May, Spelman, Gillan and Greening are in charge of the Home Office, Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the Wales Office and the Department for Transport, respectively. They have the resources that accompany a spending department, which they can exchange to make a difference.

It is also significant to note that one female minister, Theresa May, is in charge of one of the four key, but also notoriously demanding, offices of state, the Home Office, *and* she holds the additional portfolio of Minister for Women and Equalities. Moreover, the Home Office is one of just two government departments with more than one female member of government: Lynne Featherstone is May's parliamentary under-secretary and Minister for Equalities. This combination of resources gives May significant potential to act for women.

We wonder whether, in an era of spending cuts and in the new context of a coalition government, it might be worth reassessing which portfolios carry prestige and resources. It might not be so lucrative to be in charge of a large spending department when department budgets are being slashed and, in a coalition government, housekeeping roles might have more strategic significance than in a single party government. We note that three of the four female ministers with spending portfolios experienced higher than average cuts to their resource base when the government first came to office—the Wales Office fared comparatively well.¹¹ And further cuts came in the October 2010 Spending Review from which only Education, Health and International Development were exempt.

What is more, although the government launched a new Equalities Strategy in 2010, this initiative masks a rapid dismantling of resources developed by the last administration to support the equality policy capacity within government and the work of the Women's Minister, now Equalities Minister. Since June 2010, the budget of the Government Equalities Office has been significantly cut, the Women's National Commission has been scrapped, and the remit and resources of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission have been downgraded. The new Inter-Ministerial Group on Equalities, chaired by Theresa May, has twelve members but includes just four women. Finally, while May's ministerial capacity is potentially bolstered by the presence of a second feminist minister (the Liberal Democrat Lynne Featherstone), according to Robert Hazell's study of the coalition Featherstone is 'marginalised' by May.¹² The dismantling of the equalities infrastructure clearly diminishes May's capacity to act for women. This lack of capacity we argue is exacerbated by the fact that she, and all other female ministers, are excluded from the core networks and informal relationships which control coalition decision making.

Relationships: The Prime Minister, the Chancellor and 'the Quad'

In our previous work on gender and the core executive, we identified that it is essential for

feminist ministers to have access to the Prime Minister and Chancellor for getting women-friendly policy outcomes. The Prime Minister controls the policy agenda and the Chancellor the purse-strings, so it is imperative to get their support.

Much has been speculated and written about Cameron's attitude to women. Indeed, the whole premise of this article is that he has a 'problem' with understanding women's issues and the importance of gender equality. While, as we noted above, the Prime Minister has done reasonably well to recruit women to the Conservative portfolios, his 'calm down dear' comment to Angela Eagle in the House of Commons further fuels accusations that he is 'sexist' and has a 'patronising and outdated attitude to women'.¹³

The relationship between feminist advocates and the Treasury are equally problematic. In a letter dated 9 June 2010, Theresa May, in her capacity as Equalities Minister, reminded the Chancellor George Osborne of 'the importance of considering the impact of reductions in public expenditure on different groups when identifying how Departmental savings can be achieved' and of 'the legal requirement to additionally consider how women, disabled people and ethnic minorities are affected'.¹⁴ The Treasury had failed to produce an equality impact assessment of the June 2010 Emergency Budget (which led to a legal challenge in the High Court by the Fawcett Society) and the adequacy of subsequent impact assessments (for instance, that provided for the October 2010 Spending Review) have been formally called into question by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.¹⁵ May's failure to get the Treasury to meet its obligations with regards the Equalities Duty is a function, we argue, not just of her lack of resources, but also of her marginalisation from the key decision-making networks which govern the coalition.

In a coalition government, the Prime Minister-Chancellor power base inevitably widens. Two cabinet committees were established following the formation of coalition to manage coalition relations and secure its success: the Coalition Committee and the Coalition Operations and Strategic Planning Group (COSPG). No women are present on these committees.¹⁶ An analysis of the workings of the coalition by Hazell found that almost all

business is conducted in informal forums, restricted to a few key figures. The two most important are: Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister bilaterals; and the group known as the 'Quad', comprising Cameron, Nick Clegg, George Osborne and Danny Alexander. The next level identified by Hazell are Oliver Letwin and Danny Alexander and then meetings between the Prime Minister's and Deputy Prime Minister's top advisors and top officials.¹⁷ Again, women are absent from these powerful, closed informal forums.

Conclusion

Cameron's 'problem with women' is deep-rooted, beginning with the startlingly poor levels of representation in government. The core executive is where power and resources lie to make a difference, and yet elected women are noticeably absent from all tiers of decision making. What is more, the coalition's ability to recruit more women into government is severely hampered by still appalling levels of representation in the House of Commons—acutely so on the Liberal Democrat benches. The four cabinet ministers with spending portfolios preside over departments which face high spending cuts, and the resources and infrastructure available to build gender equality policy capacity across government has been, as we have shown, severely depleted.

To cap it all, there is also evidence that women are absent from the crucial networks required to oil the policy-making wheels of government. The formal committees and informal forums designed to weld the coalition together appear to actively undermine the exercise of a strong voice for women. Cameron's 'problem' is deep-seated and systemic, and not one that a lone policy advisor on women can fix. Instead, we argue the coalition initiatives to turn around the falling approval ratings for the government among women require a more securely embedded approach towards representing women in government. We argue that the achievement of better policy outcomes for women will require concerted action to overcome the difficulties with recruitment, resources and relationships outlined above.

To address recruitment, the coalition parties will have to follow Labour's lead and take

action to improve the supply chain and increase the pool of female ministerial hopefuls in the House of Commons. This will prove a tall order given that both parties are reluctant to intervene in local party selection procedures.¹⁸ In fact, the prospect of a reduction of the number of parliamentary seats at the next election is likely to make the pool of potential female ministers even smaller as the numbers of female MPs is likely to suffer due to the incumbency effect as existing MPs compete for fewer larger constituencies.¹⁹ The leaders will need to look to the House of Lords as the other feeder institution to identify potential ministerial talent. If the Prime Minister's industry adviser can argue that there should be quotas for FTSE boards, why can quotas not be applied for parliamentary seats or ministerial positions? Without this, women's representation in government will remain difficult to achieve.

The resources available to female actors in government need to be improved by consolidating appointments within departments and avoiding the current situation where over half the spending departments lack the presence of a single woman. The information available to decision makers in government on the impact of policy reform on women must also be improved. There is a legal requirement to examine policy interventions for their impact on gender (and other equalities strands). This information should be on the agenda of cabinet committees and policy infrastructure routinely and enforced by the Government Equalities Office. Women must be part of the key cabinet and coalition committees and forums, both formal and informal, and a more robust replacement for the Women's National Commission must be found.

In concluding, we argue that achieving better levels of representation in government is vital on both 'justice' and 'substantive' grounds.²⁰ It should be a given that half the population has equal representation in the corridors of power. And on 'substantive' grounds it is essential to get a range of perspectives and experiences in government where decisions are made. Better representation in government might not alter the ideological decision to roll back state spending and consequently put thousands of female employees out of work, but at least if women were better represented in government the

coalition partners might understand why their approval ratings are plummeting. Without a stronger voice for women in government, policy outcomes for women will continue to reflect inadequate, unrepresentative decision making and Cameron's coalition government will continue to have its 'problem' with women.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/sep/13/government-plan-win-back-women>
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- 4 C. Annesley and F. Gains, 'The core executive: gender power and change', *Political Studies*, vol. 58, no. 5, 2010, pp. 909–29.
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- 9 Cited in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/mar/03/civil-service-glass-ceiling-equality-bronwyn-hill>
- 10 Annesley and Gains, 'The core executive'.
- 11 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/may/24/coalition-government-public-finance#data>
- 12 Hazell, 'Inside story', p. 5.
- 13 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13211577>
- 14 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/interactive/2010/aug/03/theresa-may-letter-chancellor-cuts>
- 15 See C. Annesley, 'Campaigning against the cuts: gender equality movements in tough times', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 1, 2012, pp. 19–23.

- 16 http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Cabinet_Committee_Membership_Lists_15_12_11.pdf
- 17 Hazell, 'Inside Story', pp. 4–5.

- 18 C. Durose et al., *Pathways to Politics*, London, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011.
- 19 See F. Mackay in this issue.
- 20 J. Lovenduski, *Feminizing Politics*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005.