

Inspiring women to elected office on #AskHerToStand Day 21 November 2023

This year is 50:50 Parliament's 10th anniversary. When Frances Scott started 50:50 back in 2013 only 23% of MPs were women. Now women occupy 76 more seats in the Commons, bringing the percentage up to 34%. To celebrate 50:50 and all our successes we will be having a special #AskHerToStand event in Parliament with a party afterwards. Invitations will be sent to everyone on our mailing list. So Join up at www.5050Parliament.co.uk.

The 21 November is #AskHerToStand day. 50:50 call upon everyone to encourage women to stand for elected office at either a local or national level. A major recruitment drive surrounding #AskHerToStand day during 2022 saw 208 women clicking on [#SignUpToStand](#) around this date. 50:50 Parliament is a charity working across the political spectrum to build a better more inclusive democracy. We now have over 3000 who have signed up to stand and our friendly network is working together with all the parties to help them progress in politics.

If the UK is to be considered a truly modern representative democracy we need more women in the corridors of power. Currently although women are a majority in life they are a minority on most elected bodies throughout the country. At Westminster and on most local councils there are still two times more men than women. This is not only a democratic deficit, it is a democratic disgrace. In the 2019 general election of the 650 seats in the Commons 220 were won by women with only 12 more women being elected. At this rate it will take until 2060 for women to gain rightful representation. I will be dead and my children will be old.

#AskHerToStand day marks the "Qualification of Women Act" which was passed on 21 November 1918. At 27 words, it is the shortest UK statute but is still a very significant piece of legislation for 51% of the population that are women. For the first time ever it gave women over 21 the right to stand for election as a Member of Parliament, meaning that they could finally participate in politics - not quite on equal terms with men but almost. A strange anomaly was that although women could stand for election aged 21 in order to vote in an election they had to be aged 30 and meet some minimum property regulations. It was not until 1928 that all women over 21 were able to vote and could really be involved in our democracy on the same

basis as men.

It is a sad fact that although the concept of democracy has been around for over 2000 years women have not been included. To quote Manon Tremblay:

"Historically, the very design of democracy and representation excluded women. In ancient Greece, cradle of the democratic experiment, democracy was rigorously exclusive: the citizen was male and born of Athenian parents. Theorists of the social contract and popular sovereignty [from 1558-1778]... at best ignored women, and at worst endorsed their confinement to the private and family spheres."

The UK became a democracy with the passing of the First Reform Act in 1832 which extended the vote to seven percent of men and redistributed house seats for better representation, but women's participation was not even considered.

Parliament and politics have been a male domain and systems that evolved favoured men. Women were expected to keep the home fires burning while male representatives spent time away engaging in debate, enjoying the delights of Westminster along with all the privileges that were part of a normal way of life for an influential man.

Although women have had the legislative right to stand for 105 years it has been hard for them to break into the system. The statistics reveal the sexism; since 1918 over 5000 MPs have been elected but fewer than 600 have been women. The lack of women in government is damaging for our daughters and for our sons. Men and women, women and men, should forge the future together in equal numbers. Representation shapes policy, building a better future and protecting the planet is a joint endeavor. There is plenty of evidence that diversity leads to better decision making and as Professor Joni Lovenduski explained at the Speaker conference in 2012:

"Evidence from more balanced legislatures than ours shows that as membership of women increases so does the sensitivity of male MPs to the range of women's concerns. So men can act for women, but they may be more likely to do so when there are more women around."

50:50 launched the #AskHerToStand day in Parliament in 2016. We had the support of MPs, men and women from across the political spectrum who recognised that more needs to be done to support and encourage women to take the plunge into politics. The event was hosted and chaired by Jess Phillips MP (Labour) with panel members including: Justine Greening MP (Conservative), then Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities; Caroline Lucas MP, Joint Leader of the Green Party; Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh MP (SNP); Tom Brake MP (Liberal Democrats); Will Quince MP (Conservative); Chris Elmore MP (Labour); and Stuart Donaldson MP (SNP). In addition, Sophie Walker (leader of the Women's Equality Party) and Marylyn Haines Evans (chair of Public Affairs at the Women's Institute) were also on the panel to show support for the campaign.

Every year since then 50:50 have celebrated #AskHerToStand day with support of the prime minister and all party leaders as well as many others including Helen Pankhurst, great grand daughter of the suffragette leader who said

"Women's fight for political equality is still on and we all need to work together for women to have rightful representation...We know that if women are asked and then encouraged to stand, many will start the journey to becoming a candidate. It may take a few times of asking but it's worth it! "

There is evidence that women do need more encouragement to put themselves forward. The reasons for this are many and varied but the reality cannot be ignored. So if we are to create a pipeline of talented women going for selection and on to elected office we need to keep asking them.

Parliament is slowly moving to become a more modern and inclusive workplace. One important development has been changes to the support given to MPs with caregiving responsibilities. Proxy voting is now possible for MPs on parental leave, meaning that MPs who have new-born or newly adopted children can still participate in parliamentary votes. In November 2019, Stella Creasy became the first MP to appoint a locum for her maternity cover. She has continued to campaign for MPs on parental leave to have all their duties in parliament covered during their absence, as is now the case for government ministers, according to the Ministerial and other

Maternity Allowances Act 2021.

There have been other changes, in 2005 and 2012, to the House of Commons' sitting hours. In the 1980s and 1990s, over 25% of sitting days would extend beyond midnight, but in the year following the 2017 election, this only happened three times. This makes working in parliament easier for those with caregiving responsibilities. Asking women to stand works both at a national and local level as these fantastic many women at Westminster say that being asked to stand is what put them on the path, such as Gillian Keegan MP and Sarah Olney MP and the quotes from women who are part of the 50:50 network show the power of #AskHerToStand:

"It was literally #AskHerToStand that gave me the push to become a parliamentary candidate. The encouragement and support has been overwhelming"

Anna Day Labour who went on to be elected as councillor for Slade Green and Northend on 5 May 2022.

"50:50 inspired me through their unrelenting work to ensure that women are represented at the table where policies and strategies are devised."

Shade Adoh Conservative elected as councillor for Buckinghamshire 6 May 2021

"Why am I standing for #GE2019 for the first time ever? Because I was inspired by 50:50 Parliament and their #AskHerToStand event in Cambridge. Thank you!"

Pippa Heylings Lib Dem elected as councillor South Cambridgeshire 3 May 2018.

"I was encouraged to stand in this [Scottish] election by a male politician in my party who has been such a huge source of support to me. Without his encouragement...I don't think I would have made the big leap."

Fatima Joji SNP elected as councillor Aberdeenshire 5 May 2022.

So our rallying cry on 21 November will be #AskHerToStand because together we can inspire women and build a better, more inclusive and representative

democracy.