

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

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By far the most striking image of the last week was the widely published photograph of the new Spanish Defence Minister inspecting the troops. Visibly pregnant, she is regarding the soldiers with a slightly amused expression, very different to the type of 'Boys with Toys' attitude many of her male counterparts display. Certainly makes a change from Willie O'Dea!

Defence Minister Carme Chacon is just one of the nine new members of Government appointed by re-elected Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero. For the first time, women outnumber men in his 17-strong Cabinet, and this fact made news across the world.

Yet what is truly remarkable is that it has taken so long. Long after women have caught up with men at rates of participation in third level education, entry to the professions, and the workplace generally, the political sphere remains a male-dominated space.

While this is true of political systems in many countries, Ireland has a particularly poor record. A small number of individual women (most of them called Mary!) do hold high political office in Ireland today - but to think that this means there is no longer any gender discrimination in politics is to ignore the reality that women are seriously under-represented at every political level.

At no time in our history has the proportion of women TDs exceeded 14 per cent. In 2007, only 22 women were elected out of 166 Deputies, constituting 13 per cent of the total. The Seanad, albeit with a more restricted franchise, has a better gender ratio than the Dail; 13 women were elected in 2007, out of a total of 60 Senators (nearly 22 per cent). However, at this rate, the National Women's Council has estimated that it will take 370 years for the percentage of women in the Dáil to reach 50 per cent!

By international standards, Ireland's performance is shockingly bad, ranking in joint 87th position with Barbados and Jamaica, out of 188 countries listed by descending order of the percentage of women in the lower or single house (source: Inter-Parliamentary Union www.ipu.org). Our percentage rate is lower than the international average (18%), the European average (21%), and the Asian average (17%). Most surprisingly, the Irish rate is even lower than the average for sub-Saharan Africa (17%).

There are various different causes for this significant under-representation of women in Irish politics, and pioneering research in this area has been undertaken by Dr.

Yvonne Galligan, Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics at Queen's University Belfast.

In particular, political party selection procedures have been identified as the single most important obstacle to women's political participation. It has been suggested that few women are selected as party candidates, partly because of the 'old boy network' or gendered culture that prevails in most parties; but also because women are more likely than men to have child caring responsibilities; they have less access to the resources necessary to run successful election campaigns; and they often lack the sheer confidence of their male colleagues, so are less likely to put themselves forward for election.

But these causes can be tackled, and change can happen, as it did in Spain last week. All that is required is the political will to bring women forward. In other countries, individual political parties have taken on this challenge to great effect. In the Nordic countries, for example, the average participation rate for women politicians is 41 per cent. This achievement was brought about by the adoption of voluntary quotas within political parties, stipulating that at least 40 per cent of their candidates for election had to be women. In Denmark, temporary quotas were even ended in 1996, following a significant improvement in the political representation of women. Since then, women's representation rates have stayed high, showing how the culture has changed through the use of voluntary quotas.

New Labour in Britain, similarly, adopted a selection method adapted from the Scandinavian model, prior to the 1997 General Election. This was based on a 'twinning' mechanism, which paired two constituencies so that in one, candidates were selected without any specific regard to gender, whereas in the other, a women-only shortlist applied. This ensured that out of the two constituencies paired, at least one would select a woman candidate. The twinning mechanism greatly increased the number of women Labour MPs elected in 1997 - rather flippantly, they were collectively referred to as 'Blair's Babes'!

The mechanism was later facilitated legally by the passing of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which protects women-only shortlists from potential discrimination claims, but does not oblige political parties to introduce this method of candidate selection.

There is no reason why the New Labour model could not be adapted and used in Ireland to similar effect. Indeed, there are obvious benefits for all the political parties in adopting such a mechanism. Experience elsewhere shows that positive action measures are likely to prove effective in increasing women's representation, and in increasing a party's share of the vote overall, if adopted with enthusiasm by the party leadership and membership. The introduction of such policies would also make a significant contribution to creating a culture of gender equality in Ireland, so we do not always have to march in step with Willie O'Dea.