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Why the Conservatives are stepping up the fight for equality in 2016 by Boni Sones

In his second and last term as leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron is putting down a marker to the political ground that was once the preserve of the Labour Party. The Equal Pay Act 1970, The Sex Discrimination Act 1975, The Race Relations Act 1976 and more recently the Civil Partnerships Act 2004 and the all-embracing Equality Act 2010 which repealed and replaced what went before, including the Conservatives Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which activists argued fell far short of their demands. In post war Britain it was the Labour Party who pushed the barriers back for women, ethnic minorities, disability and gay rights and could rightfully claim to be the party of equality.

The Gay Marriage Act of 2013, as controversial as it was for many Tory MPs and voters, showed how modern, some might say disparagingly cosmopolitan, Cameron was, but it put down a marker for a domestic legacy which when he leaves 10 Downing Street, (on or before May 2020), will be as progressive in its own way as Tony Blair's administration was. Indeed when Cameron made his acceptance speech in May 2010, he embraced that progressive Blairite agenda by admitting that after three successive Labour governments Britain was now a nation more "open" at home and more "compassionate" abroad. In December 2005 when he won the Party's leadership election Cameron had spoken of his desire to end the "scandalous under representation of women in the Conservative party".

Standing firmly behind Cameron and his march onto the Labour Ground of equality has been a group of MPs, drawn from across the party, representing cosmopolitan and rural constituencies, men as well as women, and from both the most recent intake of 2010 and 2015 MPs to those who came into the Commons twenty-five years ago. A family man with four children, two of whom are daughters, Conservative MPs talk about how Cameron cares about equality because he wants his daughters to share in equal opportunities.

We asked five Conservative MPs, two former Secretaries of State, two Chairs of influential Select Committees, and two Ministers, to tell us what they had achieved for equality, and what steps they next wanted to see the Party take to ensure women and men are equal. In these interviews, which will be kept by the History of Parliament Trust, Bernard Jenkin MP, Caroline Spelman MP, Maria Miller MP, Margot James MP, and Caroline Dinenage MP spoke about how their party and the Commons needs to undergo further radical change if it is to ensure Westminster has an equal number of women and men MPs after the next General Election.

All spoke sincerely of their commitment to feminism, which even a decade ago was a brave admission for a Tory to make, man or woman, and all supported the equality agenda, both the need to close the pay gap and to get more women onto boards, a campaign the Party claims success on. All wanted to make Westminster a more attractive career for women (and men) by tackling the late night sittings, the unpredictability of the hours, and even the need for some MPs to be there at all when they are sick or on maternity leave. There was support for electronic voting. Jenkin, a feminist married to the formidable Anne, now a Baroness and who ten years ago co-founded with others including the Home Secretary, Theresa May MP, the under acclaimed Women2Win campaign, would even like to see legislation to ensure all parties have 50/50 representation after the next General Election.

The marker for Cameron's equality legacy has been placed firmly in the ground and a long way out, going beyond previously well-intentioned but also ineffective all-party Inquiries on improving the gender balance in Parliament - such as the Speaker's Conference, chaired by The Speaker, John Bercow MP, with the veteran Labour MP Anne Begg as Vice-Chair, which preceded the 2010 General Election. It was credited with creating much hot air and debate with supportive speeches from the Party leaders themselves but little visible change.

Jenkin's radical approach would in truth be hard to achieve given the degree of controversy all-women shortlists provoked in the Labour party, and still does let alone the Conservatives who have in the main (with the exception of May and perhaps a few others), always rejected positive discrimination. It is significant that Jenkin feels empowered to make such a daring suggestion now, even with boundary changes on the horizon leading to a reduction of the number of MPs in the Commons from 650 to 600 at the next Election.

The Conservatives like to point to their history to flag up their right to be proud of their achievements with women. The only female Prime Minister of Britain, Margaret Thatcher, was elected in 1979 and the first women MP to take up her seat, was the Conservative Lady Astor in a by-election in 1919. Nancy Astor was by all accounts a very independent woman who took over her husband's seat and campaigned for women's

rights. Thatcher, love her or loath her, has created not just a legacy but an historical movement of her very own - to be Thatcherite is to be pro-monetarism, pro-privatisation and pro-labour union reform. But as Jenkin says Thatcher was not necessarily pro-women and definitely not in favour of positive discrimination of any kind.

Jenkin said: "There is a consensus that these subjects can be discussed now, compared with when they were taboo subjects under say Margaret Thatcher, who couldn't understand why there had to be any positive action for women, she never got round that. "

Labour's landmark change of 1997 leading to the election of 101 women MPs - thanks to that controversial adoption of all-women shortlists - has been matched by a gradual slow climb in numbers by the Conservatives from 13 in 97 to 68 now, yet still just 21 per cent of its MPs. The Liberal Democrats, who have always rejected positive discrimination, now have none. However by a slight tweaking of who can attend Cabinet Cameron has met his 30 per cent target for women, while Labour has a gender balance in its shadow cabinet, but still not in the major Offices of State. The Commons now has 191 women MPs of all parties – 29 per cent. (Labour has 99 now, as the number of its MPs fell back too).

When he first took up his seat in the House of Commons in 1992, Jenkin admits, it was well, "laddish" with just 60 women, 9.2 per cent. As others have commented, it was more like a boys' boarding school.

Jenkin said: "We need to start talking about what legislation there should be (for all parties). There is no Parliament in the World that has created equal representation without some form of positive action across the Board and that should not be a taboo subject. "

The wind of equality is blowing in the right direction and Jenkin is one of a number of male MPs who now act as "agents of change" for the Party. His wife Anne's grandmother was the only Conservative woman MP elected in 1945, and her father as a Liberal MP introduced the first women's suffrage bill in 1907.

Another significant marker was put down by Maria Miller MP, who as Chair of the newly formed All-Party Women and Equalities Select Committee, recently attracted some negative headlines for its progressive support for transgender issues including abuse on Twitter, surprisingly some of this she says from feminists.

Miller said: "On transgender, some of the most difficult twitter I have had to deal with has been from feminist organisations, so these things don't fall neatly across Party lines. When I was dealing with the Equal Marriage Act I found that respect of other people's views goes an awful long way and I found the same with Transgender issues too, but I have no respect for those who incite violence or hatred of which unfortunately there has been some."

Dinenage also has a new role in government, which some might call enlightened:" This combination of role in education and justice where I am a Minister has never been done before. If you take the work we are doing on the Transgender inquiry into prisons, and women in the criminal justice system and women in prisons, there is a massive cross over between the two government departments. "

James supports her colleagues and as a gay woman was a leading activist lobbying for the Gay Marriage Act: "I agree with Bernard it should be fifty per cent representation but even if we could get to a third, it would still allow us to tackle some of the cultural impediments. It is about numbers. We need to have a culture that gets the most out of women and I don't think we are here yet on the cultural side there is a lot more work to be done."

The last word goes to Spelman now a veteran of Westminster politics and an early supporter of equality issues: "There is a clear majority in favour of this modernising agenda. David Cameron provided leadership on these issues; he is a classic young modern father, facing all the challenges of the juggling that has to go on, and bringing that personal knowledge, including very personal knowledge of coping with disability within the family and his son into our Parliament. We need to extend the experiment on electronic voting for MPs who are too sick to attend or who are on maternity leave. We need some compassionate leave arrangement to allow both sexes to participate in the life of this Parliament."

The interviews were conducted by Linda Fairbrother, Deborah McGurran and Boni Sones, supported by Dr Paul Seaward, Director History of Parliament Trust.

Here we let all five tell you what Westminster was like, what they have achieved for equality and what measures they want to see the Conservatives introduce next.

Bernard Jenkin MP:

Bernard Jenkin is the MP for Harwich and North Essex and has been an MP since 1992. He currently chairs the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee. He was Vice Chairman of the Conservative Party, and had responsibility for candidates until 7 November 2006.

BJ Key quote on history: “In 1992 it did feel like a boys’ school. There were no women in the Whips Office, there were a limited number of women ministers and a limited number of women colleagues. It made it a very laddish atmosphere and I can’t tell you how it has been transformed by the different generations of women who have come in particularly in 2010 and 2015. Who wouldn’t be a feminist! What feminism is about is according equal respect and equal rights to women and until we really have 50 per cent women in the Commons we really haven’t got a Parliament representative of the Country we live in, so if that makes me a feminist, I am a feminist. “

BJ Key quote on reform: “I did vote for the Same Sex Marriage Bill. No, all Conservative’s don’t support equality. The Conservative Party is quite a broad church, like the Labour Party, there is a very broad spectrum of opinion and of ages and educational outlooks. The success we have had in recent years is about men taking responsibility for the change not just the women, and David Cameron is the leading example of that. We must be prepared to talk about legislation for all parties, it is one thing to allow different parties to do different things, but it is going to take us ages to catch up with the Labour Party who are better represented with women, unless we do something. “

Caroline Spelman MP:

Caroline Spelman is the MP for Meriden in the West Midlands, she was first elected in 1997. She was also Chairman of the Conservative Party. From 2010 to 2012 she was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Within Westminster, she is a Church Estates Commissioner.

CS Key quote on history: “When I came into Parliament in 1997, the thing that shocked me was the treatment of the Labour women in the media at the time, this belittling term ‘Blair’s Babes’. A lot of the women who came in in 1997 were professional and older than Tony Blair, but the focus was on superficial things, what they were wearing, rather than what they had to say. As a professional coming from a male-dominated profession, Agriculture, I found this shocking. The overnight sittings were also shocking, I kept a sleeping bag rolled up in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet which I still have, but what a way to work, and we were exhausted the following day.”

CS Key quote on reform: “I was really most active in terms of reform as Party Chairman that is where you can influence the profile of a Party. So I urged the Candidates Committee of the Conservative Party to go and head hunt women because it is a fact that ten times as many men apply to be MPs as women and we need to proactively increase the number of women coming forward. I think that David Cameron’s decision to use 50/50 shortlists in 2010 was really important. It is definitely getting better, each successive intake more accurately reflects the changes taking place outside Parliament. A leader shapes the Party in its own image over time, but you do need a Party leader who will drive forward and there are still more issues to drive forward. I would like to see a bit more modern business practice, a bit more certainty over the hours that we work, so that we can plan for the responsibilities that we have in life.”

Maria Miller MP:

Maria Miller, has been the MP for Basingstoke since 2005. She is a former Secretary of State for Culture, and now Chair of the Women and Equalities Select Committee.

MM Key quote on history: “I joined the house in 2005, I had been a company director before that working in the advertising and marketing business for 20 years. This was a career change, and I was coming into a place that I thought I knew a lot about but realised I didn’t. It struck me how masculine Parliament was unlike any business I had worked in before. I found my children were immensely proud of being the only kid in the class who had a Mum who was an MP. That was a strong bond for us, that overwhelming pride, and I tried to include them in as much as possible but the logistics remain a problem. How do you ensure you have on call child care when you don’t have certainty over sitting hours, and when you are finishing? The strains it put on family life are considerable particularly if your family is

not in London, but mine were. I was hugely fortunate, I was not only Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport but I was the Women and Equalities Minister too. I worked with the other departments on some fundamental reforms that David Cameron led on which were around the modernisation of the workplace. The right to request flexible working being made available across the board, shared parental leave which was revolutionary, and things that really make an enormous difference to women's lives. We carried out the Davis review of women in the Boardroom and we have almost doubled the number of women in non-executive positions. We worked on the Olympic legacy and women's representation in sports as a result of the Olympics. There are still some huge gaps, and that is why I campaigned with Mary Macleod and others for a Women's Select Committee. "

MM Key quote on reform: "Progress on the Select Committee will be when we see the gender pay gap being reduced, when we see more women coming into Parliament. We have an ongoing roll in continuing to raise the bar as to what we should be expecting as a society, and the way in which we are scrutinising government policy, so I see this as a Select Committee that is here to stay. Having been involved in the passage of the Equal Marriage Act as Secretary of State, I know what controversy feels like. Transgender issues are hugely controversial but that is what Select Committees are there for. We are not just looking at the straight forward issues but those that are thought about more broadly in Society and in decades to come. Does the Party have a common view on these things? Consensus in any political Party on all of these things would be impossible, but we are bound together in our Party by a deep feeling about fairness and this is something we can build on. I would like to see a commitment to increasing the number of female MPs on the Conservative benches at the next Election, which will be a challenge given we have a reduction in the number of seats due to boundary changes. "

Margot James MP:

Margot James, has been the MP for Stourbridge since 2010. At the end of 2005, David Cameron appointed Margot to the position of Vice Chairman of the Conservative Party for women's issues, a position which she held until 2010. She was an "A" List candidate. She is now Assistant Government Whip with responsibility for Education and Equalities.

MJ Key quote on history: "The Commons had improved by 2010, and there were a huge number of new Conservative MPs in 2010 we were a majority. There were an awful lot of men finding their feet as well as women, although we were the minority, so I didn't find a sexist culture when I arrived. Nothing prepares you for Parliament, even a lot of prior knowledge of how Parliament works, and I found it an altogether better environment thanks to the women who had blazed the trail going back several decades."

MJ Key quote on reform: "Before I was elected in 2010, when I was Vice Chair of the Party for Women, one of the main things I worked on was trying to get a greater proportion of the issues that concerned women than men up to the forefront of the Conservatives manifesto in 2010. I certainly think you have to start with young women, and girls and in my constituency I founded the Aspiration Programme, it has reached 2,500 young people in a series of events over four years. I have also promoted an end to occupational segregation which is why women are so low paid. I served on the Business Select Committee and promoted women in business, and also on the Trade side, I led trade missions to developing markets and made sure I took a lot of women businesses on those missions of all ages and in all stages of life. I worked on the Gay Marriage Bill, which was very, very important to gay women, and we were led by the Prime Minister on that. We persuaded colleagues to get that legislation through, and it was very challenging but we got it through. I would like to spend this Parliament focusing on some of those barriers and removing them so that we can get the most out of the potential the newer MPs offer. I would like to see more women special advisors, and more women around the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, in their core inner circle teams because I think that there is more to Parliament than meets the eye. Some of those backroom changes would be a jolly good thing. "

Caroline Dinenage MP:

Caroline Dinenage who is the MP for Gosport, Stubbington, Lee-on-the-Solent and Hill Head, was elected in May 2010. In May 2015, Caroline was appointed to the dual roles of Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice, and Minister for Women and Equalities at the Department for Education working with Nicky Morgan the Secretary of State.

CD Key quote on history: "In 2010 we were all numb from the hellish experience of fighting a General Election but I felt very comforted when I came in. I had envisaged a very male-dominated environment, I

came from a manufacturing business that was a very male-dominated environment, where often I felt as a young person at a trade show like a stranger walking into the saloon. I remember being very impressed by the new intake of other female MPs and the variety of different backgrounds they came from.”

CD Key quote on reform: ”Some of the male MPs have really got behind the Men as agents of change for gender equality agenda. Coming from a business background I have always been very keen to see more girls going into business and enterprise. We have seen phenomenal results in the last few years, more women-led businesses than ever before, but there are still not enough. It is about how we attract the next generation of female MPs and it is about the image as female MPs that we give to others. Being an MP is not all about tub thumping speeches and the screaming and waving of our bits of paper around in the Commons, it is actually about the skill sets that women have in abundance, the ability to empathise and listen and the ability to multi task and get things done.”

End.