

CHAIR

May I thank the Prime Minister for her fine speech,³⁹ and invite the Leader of the Opposition to give his reply.

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The plan proposed by the Government side⁴⁰ is undemocratic, unnecessary and counter-productive.⁴¹ It is undemocratic because it denies choice to voters; it is unnecessary because the problems it is trying to address can be better dealt with in other ways; it is counter-productive because it will actually make the problems it is trying to address worse.⁴²

I will be showing how the proposed measure undermines the principle that voters can choose their own MPs; how the aim of encouraging greater participation by women in politics can be better achieved otherwise; and how the proposed measure will actually diminish the respect in which women in politics are held. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition will point to the dangers of 'mega-constituencies',⁴³ to the sexism implicit in the Government's proposal, and to its inadequacy as a measure for tackling inequality and prejudice.⁴⁴

First, though, to some rebuttal.⁴⁵

The Prime Minister claims firstly that women are discouraged from entering politics because of its domination by men. That might come as news to Arlene Foster, Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May, who have recently been, or still are, the leaders of the Northern Irish, Scottish and British governments respectively.⁴⁶

(CHAIR knocks for one minute)

It is an assertion that would also have been met with bafflement by Margaret Thatcher, who was not discouraged, at a time when the number of women MPs was far lower⁴⁷, from becoming our first woman Prime Minister in 1979. It is, moreover, seriously patronising and not a little sexist; is she suggesting that women are incapable of making

39 Don't let this praise go to your head. It's traditional for the Chair to praise all the speeches, just as a matter of courtesy. It would be quite inappropriate, though, for the Chair to give any kind of feedback on any speeches or suggest that one is better than another; that is the job of the Judge.

40 It's conventional in BP to refer to the Proposition as 'the Government', and the Opposition as 'the Opposition'.

41 Fine use of tricolon, also nicely signposting the Leader of the Opposition's case.

42 Expanding on the tricolon, amplifying the headline words. Gradually expanding your case is a very effective way of introducing it and fixing it in your audience's mind.

43 This shows that the Leader / Deputy Leader of the Opposition have been working and thinking fast, listening carefully to the Prime Minister's speech, perhaps passing notes to each other (talking during someone else's speech is not allowed). They are responding rapidly to the mechanism proposed by the Prime Minister. Alternatively, they may have anticipated this as a possible mechanism and planned for it during their prep time.

Also note the clever use of language in 'mega-constituencies'. Just as the Prime Minister's use of 'equal representation' made her measure look natural and fair, this neologism (invented word) makes the proposed larger constituencies sound overwhelming and scary.

(Here is a good example of how changing the language can change the debate. In the late 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government decided they wanted to change the system of local taxation from one where only home owners paid tax to one where everyone who lived in an area paid tax to run its services. They called this the 'community charge'. 'Community' sounds friendly and collaborative, implying everyone has a stake in the area; 'charge' suggests money paid for something in return. Their opponents, though, started calling it the 'poll tax'. 'Poll' implied you wouldn't be allowed to vote if you didn't pay it, and therefore as if democracy had gone from being a right to something you had to pay for; 'tax' sounded like 'taxing', implying something unpleasant and burdensome. The name 'poll tax' stuck, and did much to turn people against the measure. The poll tax's unpopularity played a large part in Margaret Thatcher being overthrown as Prime Minister in 1990; her successor, John Major, scrapped the tax soon after. Words matter!)

44 As with the Prime Minister, the job of the Leader of the Opposition is to signpost not only his arguments but his partner's.

45 Rebuttal is essential in every speech bar the first one.

46 Another handy snippet of political general knowledge. Keep a notebook to write this sort of thing down in; you never know when it might come in handy. As hard copy resources (unlike internet research) are allowed in short prep debates, you can take your notebook with you to debates.

47 You would, however, have to be a seriously hardcore political nerd to know the number of women MPs in 1979 (it's 19 [3%]; I looked it up), so 'far lower' is near enough to make the point and vague enough to be not inaccurate.

their own way in politics without having all obstacles removed for them?⁴⁸

Second,⁴⁹ she claims that women are somehow nicer people, more collaborative and less confrontational, and that this will lead to better decision making. This is, once again, patronising and sexist, attributing particular qualities to particular genders.⁵⁰ Moreover, the very confrontationalism she criticises can be a great strength, and one deployed to great effect by women; Margaret Thatcher⁵¹ became one of the most dynamic and effective Prime Ministers in our history precisely because she was not afraid to confront her opponents.

Thirdly, she claims that only a 50% female Parliament can deal with issues that concern women. This is a very dangerous argument, that only people affected by issues can satisfactorily legislate on them. Should we be flooding Parliament with teachers before we vote on an education bill? With soldiers before we agree the defence budget? With owners of pit bull terriers before we vote on a law against dangerous dogs? MPs are elected to represent all their constituents, and can be voted out if they do not; ghettoising⁵² our politics in this way is very divisive.

GOVERNMENT WHIP

On a point of information.⁵³

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

Yes please.

GOVERNMENT WHIP

There is a fundamental difference between making Parliament representative of shifting interest groups and making it representative of humanity.^{54, 55}

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

My point still stands. To undermine the principle of Parliament representing all the people is to undermine the basis of parliamentary democracy.⁵⁶

Now to my first point. The fundamental principle of

48 This is the nub of any 'quotas' debate, in fact the point of clash (see Chapter 3). Is injustice best dealt with by collective action (the Government's case) or by individual agency (the Opposition's case)? Most of the subsidiary arguments stem from this fundamental clash.

49 Good to use numbers to itemise your argument in this way.

50 The Deputy Leader of the Opposition has already attacked the Prime Minister on this weak point, but there is no harm in reinforcing the attack, for tidy covering of all the points as much as anything else.

51 Useful to know who Margaret Thatcher was and what she was like.

52 Another example of the emotive use of language. 'Ghettoising' implicitly invokes 'ghettos', the areas of cities to which Jews were confined by the Nazis. Mentioning Hitler or the Nazis in a debate (unless the debate is specifically about the Nazis) is usually the mark of a loser, but as this is only an implicit hint the Leader of the Opposition can get away with it.

53 Making a POI at this stage is effectively rebutting rebuttal. This is (providing you're in unprotected time) perfectly acceptable, and in fact makes the debate more dynamic and fast moving.

54 The Government Whip has successfully (and very concisely) pointed out that the Leader of the Opposition is guilty of Logical Fallacy #11, the slippery slope, by suggesting that ensuring equal representation for a group that comprises 50% of people will inevitably lead to equal representation for much smaller groups, even though this has never been suggested by the Government. The Leader of the Opposition's use of humour with his reference to pit bull terriers now comes back to undermine him by making his extrapolation even more absurd.

Ending with the word 'humanity' adds to the emotional impact of this intervention, as it includes everyone present (even more than the Prime Minister's earlier reference to 'the British people') and because it has connotations of kindness (showing someone 'humanity' means treating them with kindness).

55 Notice how it's the Government Whip, the last speaker on the Government side, who makes this POI. She seems to be supporting the Prime Minister against attack, though she is in fact competing against the Prime Minister and her Deputy in the debate. Of course, the Prime Minister could have made this intervention herself, but she wasn't quite quick enough off the mark, so it's down to the Government Whip to get the credit from the judge for making this intervention on her behalf, while the Prime Minister loses face by not spotting the fallacy in time. One of the paradoxes of BP debating is that you can appear to be supporting someone while actually undermining them. Sooner or later you will realise that this happens quite a lot in life.

56 The Leader of the Opposition does not really rebut this POI, but simply reiterates his position, so I think we can say that the Government Whip has won this exchange.