

two MPs with completely different points of view, how can they speak with one voice on behalf of their constituents? Having one Labour and one Conservative MP would be like having two Prime Ministers; no one would know where they stood.⁹⁴

Now to my second point. The Government claims to be fighting sexism with its proposal. However, its proposal is in fact itself deeply sexist. Why? It is the political equivalent of men holding open doors for women; of men giving up seats on trains to able bodied women; of men insisting on paying for dinner on a date with a woman. These customs, now rightly seen as anachronistic and patronising, are predicated on the notion that women are somehow 'weaker' than men, and that they need help and support from men. The Government's proposal does the same thing. It implies that women can only reach positions of power if they are given a helping hand. In doing so, it paradoxically disempowers them, as it sends a message to young women seeking a career in politics that (despite the evidence of the two women Prime Ministers already elected) they can only reach the top with 'help'; moreover, women MPs elected in this way will never shake off the perception that 'they only got the job because they were a woman'.⁹⁵ Better by far to have a level playing field; then whatever goals women achieve will be due to their own talent and determination. The Deputy Prime Minister cites the achievement of the England women's football team; would that achievement not have been diminished if the game had been made easier for them by making the opposition's goal larger and theirs smaller?⁹⁶

Finally, this measure claims to address the lack of representation of women in politics. But why should the underrepresentation of women take priority? What about the underrepresentation of black and ethnic minorities in Parliament? Or the underrepresentation of working class people? Although this measure would have the outcome that 50% of MPs would be women, it is highly likely that those women would be predominantly white and middle class. Already it is the case that more women than men go to university, but that black and ethnic minority people and people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are greatly underrepresented at university, a far more serious problem. The Government's measure would replicate this problem in Parliament; black and ethnic minority and working class people would feel even more excluded seeing one group given special treatment while their needs are ignored. Inequality in society must be tackled in all its aspects if we are to have a truly representative parliament.

94 This isn't a very good response to the POI. It uses a poor analogy; MPs are not like Prime Ministers, because their job is not to govern their constituents but to represent them, and this is better done if they represent a wider range of opinion. More importantly, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition fails to respond to the central point in the POI, that though the workload has been doubled for MPs, so have the number of MPs; this reveals a fundamental weakness in her argument.

95 Expanding here on the central 'anti-quota' argument, that quotas undermine the achievement of those they seek to benefit.

96 A quick thinking and witty analogy that makes another of the key 'anti-quota' arguments; that quotas aren't fair, that they are a kind of cheating.

MEMBER OF THE GOVERNMENT

On a point of information.

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

Yes please.

(CHAIR gives the knock for four minutes.)⁹⁷

MEMBER OF THE GOVERNMENT

We agree wholeheartedly that black and ethnic minority and working class people are underrepresented in politics, and would support measures to give them more access. However this debate is not about those groups; it is about equal representation for women, and that is what we are discussing. That said, a side benefit of our measure is that it would make it easier to introduce similar measures for those groups.

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

My point was that equal representation for women in Parliament is not the highest priority; other groups are more disadvantaged.⁹⁸

So, to sum up my arguments. The Government's measure is a bad idea for three reasons. It will fracture the valuable connection between MPs and their constituents; it is patronising and demeaning to women; and it is addressing the wrong problem. For all these reasons, it is ill advised, would do more harm than good, and should be opposed.^{99, 100}

CHAIR

I thank the Deputy Leader of the Opposition for her fine speech and call on the Member of the Government to make her speech.

MEMBER OF THE GOVERNMENT

Thank you, Madam Chair.

My colleagues, the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, have outlined the practicalities and the benefits of making 50% of MPs female very eloquently and clearly, and have shown how this measure will make Parliament both more representative and more effective. I will be explaining in more detail the benefits that this measure will bring in practice at a local, national and international level.¹⁰¹

First, though, I would like to respond to the Deputy Leader of the

97 Even though we're into protected time here, the Member of the Government can still make her POI provided it began in non-protected time.

98 The Member of the Government undoubtedly wins this exchange. She points out very clearly that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition is guilty of Logical Fallacy #6, Introducing Irrelevant Issues, otherwise known as 'whataboutery' (see Chapter 7, Big Fat Fallacies). Even if she hadn't, the speaker would lose points for using this bad argument. The speaker then makes matters worse for herself by not rebutting the POI, but rather simply repeating her initial, badly argued point.

99 Good clear summary.

100 This is a mixed speech for the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. It is well structured and organised, and it makes very effectively the main 'anti-quota' arguments of unfairness and the diminishing of the achievement of those benefited. However, she fails almost completely to respond to the two POIs made to her, and also one of her arguments (introducing the irrelevant issue of other minority groups) is fundamentally flawed.

101 Even though the Member of the Government and the Government Whip are competing against the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, they have to at least appear to support them. This is part of their role, and they will lose points if they do not fulfil it. They must accept the definition of the motion and the mechanism offered by the Government. However, it is the task of the Member of the Government (and the Member of the Opposition) to extend the arguments by finding a new angle. The Member of the Government does that here by focusing on wider benefits the Government measure will bring.