

THE YELLOW G

THE MYSTERY OF THE DISAPPEARANCE

After women became eligible to stand for election to Parliament in 1918, the first woman Liberal MP was elected in 1921. Yet only six women ever sat as Liberal MPs, and half of them won only one election, half were elected at by-elections, and all but one were directly related to Liberal leaders.

Between 1951 and 1986 there were no Liberal women MPs at all.

Matt Cole considers the record, and examines the factors which made it so difficult to get women Liberals elected.

THE 1950 Liberal manifesto boasted proudly that 'the part played by women in the councils of the Liberal Party is shown by our unanimous adoption of a programme for women drawn up by women Liberals.'¹ Certainly, the two main parties at that time gave a lower profile to women's status as an issue, and Liberal policy demanding equal pay entitled the party to regard its proposals as, in one reviewer's assessment, 'more Radical than the Labour Party's.'² These proposals were, as the manifesto acknowledged, in part the result of the efforts of an almost unbroken line of female representation on the Liberal benches in the Commons for three decades at that point. Despite the dramatic decline in the MPs' overall numbers, the group had included a woman in every Parliament since 1918.

Yet within eighteen months of the 1950 election there were no women Liberal MPs; nor were there to be for another ten general elections and thirty-five years. Whilst the two main parties made faltering progress

in promoting women into Parliament and government, the Liberal Party managed to do so again only two years before its own disappearance in the merger of 1988. The reasons for this striking famine are in some ways a familiar story from the experience of other parties; but there is a dimension to the causes which is distinctively Liberal, and which persists today.

Women Liberal MPs

Only six women ever sat as Liberal MPs, and they had an unusual profile: half of them won only one election, half were elected at by-elections, and all but one were directly related to established Liberal leaders.

The 1920s saw a relative glut of women Liberal MPs: Margaret Wintringham won Louth at a by-election in September 1921 caused by the death of her husband Tom,³ and was joined at the 1923 election by Lady Vera Terrington, wife of a Liberal peer, who won Wycombe. Both were defeated in the rout of 1924, but later in that Parliament the St Ives by-election was won by Hilda Runciman, who held

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BEARING LIBERAL WOMEN MPs

the seat from 1928–29, when her husband Walter took it over. At that election, the daughter of the party leader, Megan Lloyd George, became the sole Liberal woman in the Commons, which she remained, holding Anglesey, until 1951.

Women in all the parties at this time often fulfilled the role of ‘keeping seats warm’ for husbands, or ‘inheriting’ them upon the latter’s death or elevation to the Lords.⁴ At any rate, Liberal women reaching the Commons required not only the usual determination and skill of a parliamentary aspirant, but also powerful political contacts: both of Megan Lloyd George’s parents were active in her support during the fierce nomination contest for Anglesey, her mother addressing public meetings, and her father going as far as to tell some of the supporters of her rival Ellis W. Roberts that ‘if E.W.R. behaves decently I will do my best to help him to find a constituency to fight.’⁵ As the success of Liberals of both sexes waned in subsequent years, such contacts became no guarantee of promotion to the Commons.

It was not until May 1986 that another woman joined the Liberal benches, when local councillor Elizabeth Shields won the Ryedale by-election. She lost the seat in 1987, but Ray Michie won Argyll & Bute to become the last woman to win a parliamentary election on a Liberal ticket. Michie was the daughter of Lord John Bannerman, candidate at five parliamentary elections and near-victor of the Inverness by-election of 1954, and as a young woman she had been the ‘warm-up’ speaker at public meetings during his campaigns.⁶

During the locust years of female representation, there were of course Liberal hopefuls who struggled hard and even came close: Violet Bonham Carter missed Colne Valley in 1951 by over 2,000 votes despite a straight fight with Labour and a personal endorsement from Churchill; Nancy Seear fought six contests between 1951 and 1970, including Truro and Rochdale, but never secured as much as a fifth of the vote; and in the same two decades Manuela Sykes, who appeared in a 1955 party political

broadcast with Jeremy Thorpe, fought Finchley, Falmouth and three times at Ipswich, including a by-election, but came third every time. Better results came for Heather Harvey, who fought five contests in the 1950s, securing an impressive second place at the Southend West by-election of 1959, which she retained at the general election of the same year. Closest of all was Claire Brooks’s bid for Skipton, which she contested three times in the 1970s, losing by only 590 votes in October 1974.

These were isolated exceptions, however. Their very rarity throws into sharp relief the failure of the party to integrate women into its upper ranks as early as might have been wished. Even when the party had some women MPs, very few others were missing election by small margins, and so women’s places on the Liberal benches had always been vulnerable. The reasons for this can be assessed in three broad ways: structural and organisational factors, the process of candidate selection, and issues particular to the Liberal Party.

Only six women ever sat as Liberal MPs, and they had an unusual profile.

Structural factors

Some accounts of women's under-representation focus upon the impact of political organisations, and their tendency to favour male progress towards Parliament. Liberal commentators in particular bemoan the effect of the first-past-the-post electoral system in encouraging local associations to seek a 'safe', unexceptional candidate to fight a single-member constituency, so as to avoid the risk of provoking doubt in the minds of any number of the electorate. This was the explanation in the Women's Liberal Federation Annual Report of 1983 for the disappointing absence of women from the enlarged parliamentary party, and PR was seen as the solution in a joint Alliance policy proposal of 1986.⁷ In 1987, Elizabeth Sidney, a former Women's Liberal Federation President who had fought the election, argued afterwards that the system 'is unfair to smaller parties and to 'unusual' candidates (such as women) ... so to get into Parliament as an Alliance woman candidate was an achievement indeed.' She went on to ask: 'given the handicaps presented by our electoral system, is it especially risky for the Alliance to field women?' Though she answered 'no', because there was no evidence that women candidates deterred voters, Sidney felt that selection meetings might not always be so sanguine.⁸ This tendency is recognised outside Liberal circles, too, and Elizabeth Vallance's study of women's under-representation recognised the electoral system as a barrier to women's selection, if not election.⁹

If this factor contributed to women's exclusion, it cannot have been to any greater degree than was the case in other parties. Such evidence as there is suggests that selection committees were increasingly aware of the potential for a female candidate to add to the base Liberal vote, rather than jeopardise it,

and since outright victory was not a realistic prospect in most constituencies, the threat to it must have been commensurately peripheral as a consideration.

During the 1980s, increasing attention was drawn to the role of internal party organisations and sub-groups such as trade unions, clubs and youth and councillors' wings, as well as basic local party branches. It was through these, it was argued, that men developed networks of contacts allowing them to hear of upcoming nominations, establish a reputation and credibility with activists in the selection process, and build up a CV likely to impress selection meetings. 'Women cannot rely', wrote Karen Hunt, 'on the 'old school tie' or brotherly sponsorship in the way that men now take for granted.'¹⁰

This also seems less likely to act as an explanation for Liberal women's under-representation than for that of other parties, simply because these organisations for most of this period were too patchy and weak to function as a career ladder for future MPs. Between the end of the Second World War and the Orpington by-election, when the networks of future candidates were being woven, the number of divisional Associations affiliating to the LPO fell as low as 71, and never rose above 420, or just over two-thirds of parliamentary constituencies. The average number of affiliated Associations during 1945–62 is, at 338, a little over half of the total possible.¹¹ Some of those paying an affiliation fee led a largely nominal existence, and fewer than fifty fought every general election throughout this period. As for other 'recognised units' of the party, the number of councillors was at an all-time low, and affiliates to the National Union of Liberal Clubs halved in number, many closing altogether.¹²

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student wings of the party could bring an aspirant to the attention of the leadership, and Tommy Nudds, Secretary of the Liberal Central Association, certainly regarded university Liberal societies as a nursery for candidates.¹³ The Liberals regularly fielded more candidates in their twenties than the main parties, and in the general elections of the 1950s, between 5 and 15 per cent of Liberal candidates were former or current officers of the party's youth and student wings. At least six of the thirteen MPs in the 1974–79 Parliament were former national Young Liberal Executive Members or Presidents of their respective university Liberal Clubs, and others such as Malcolm Bruce and Michael Meadowcroft later rose in the same way. Any difficulties women experienced joining or rising in these organisations – by being a minority of undergraduates at the time, for example – would have made future candidature for the Liberals less likely.

This, however, must be set against the fact that one of the strongest organisations within the Liberal Party during its darker days was the Women's Liberal Federation. By the 1950s, there was a WLF organisation in every Federation, and in most Associations – indeed, it was a feature of weak and restarting Associations during this period that they turned very quickly to their WLF for support. Nationally, the WLF held an annual Council hundreds strong, and maintained links with Liberals in Parliament by co-opting to its Executive the wives of new MPs whenever possible. The WLF submitted resolutions to Assembly and maintained ex-officio positions on dozens of bodies within and outside the party. Unlike other elements of the party, the WLF remained in good financial health, and employed staff, throughout this period. This should, in fact, have been a promising networking

ladder for aspirant female candidates. Its weakness was not organisational, but strategic.

The WLF undoubtedly saw promoting female candidates as one of its functions, and at each general election it offered resources in the form of training, leaflets or cash donations to Liberal women fighting seats. Lady Denman gave £400 to support women candidates in rural constituencies in 1945, and in 1955 the WLF Executive offered a three-figure sum to be divided up amongst women candidates. In later elections this support came in kind: literature in 1966, 1979 and 1987, and a candidates' briefing in October 1974. Women candidates were always listed in Annual Reports, and good performances such as Heather Harvey's 'fine achievement' of January 1959 noted.¹⁴ There was also an ongoing programme of preparation for campaigning, including the annual award of the Baerlein Cup for branches' political work such as holding public meetings, and the Mary Philpott Cup endowed

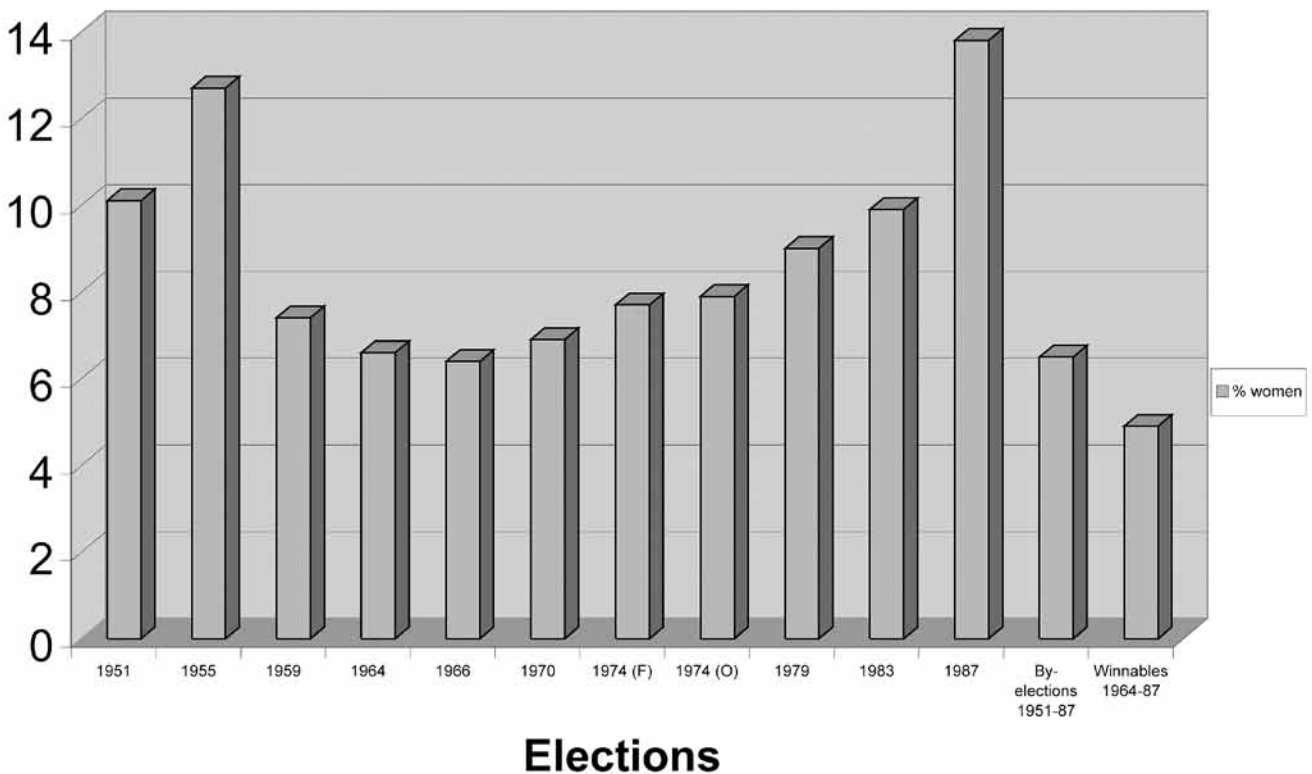
in the 1950s for individual public speaking, as well as the establishment between 1945 and 1950 of 'commando' teams to canvass women in shopping queues and outside schools. Doreen Gorsky, WLF President from 1951–52, had fought four parliamentary elections in the previous six years, and claimed that 'the reason I did not lose my deposits was the daytime support I had from WLA members so that I could campaign to maximum effect the whole day as well as in the evenings.'¹⁵

But these were sporadic and second-order activities. Policy-making and campaigning were not the chief priorities of the WLF: publication sales, for example, raised only £22 of the organisation's near-£2,000 income in 1952–53.¹⁶ It was recognised in the announcement of its winner in 1957 that 'there are always fewer entries for the cup for political work than for the others'¹⁷ (and it was won more than once by the same WLF branch). The WLF's main focus was on voter, not elite,

recruitment, and on fundraising for all types of party work. The WLF Executive only discussed the number of female candidates at election time – and then as a retrospective report rather than a systematic analysis or plan of action. When deciding to give financial support to women candidates in 1955, the Executive had no firm idea how many there would be only weeks before polling day. In 1979, the WLF President even felt obliged to write to women candidates encouraging them to participate in the organisation.¹⁸ When Elizabeth Shields finally arrived in Parliament seven years later, the by-election campaign had been her first contact with the WLF.¹⁹ The WLF wanted women Liberal MPs, but like women's sections in the main parties, it was more of an aspiration – and at times a forlorn, even cursory one – than a strategic objective.

Structural factors, then, gave women no more difficulty in the search to be Liberal MPs than to be a woman MP of any party.

Women as a percentage of Liberal candidates



Candidate selection

The next way of explaining low proportions of women MPs is to examine the number put up for election (see Figure 1). If a party is reluctant to field women candidates, it cannot be surprised if few reach Parliament.

No party gave women anything like an equal statistical chance of reaching the Commons to their male counterparts, but the Liberals did better than the others most of the time. Both Elizabeth Vallance and Nesta Wyn Ellis were prepared to accept that a 'supply' problem – the limited number of women coming forward for nomination – was part of the explanation, and as in other parties overall female participation was low.²⁰ However, though it never reached as many as one in six candidates, the proportion of Liberal candidates who were women was larger than that of all candidates at every general election from 1945 to 1979, and the proportion of Conservative candidates who were women never matched that of the Liberals or their successors. Labour, too, put up fewer female candidates than the Liberals until the 1980s. Being 8.5 per cent of candidates at general elections after the loss of Megan Lloyd George in 1951, women should proportionately have enjoyed nine or ten of the 111 Liberal victories at those elections: but in fact they won only one.

The reason for this lies in the nature of the seats contested by women, and this can be tested by examination of candidate composition in the seats which offered the more attractive prospects – the 'winnables'. It is, admittedly, difficult to establish an undisputable list of 'winnable' Liberal target seats, partly because of understandable party secrecy, and partly because of the idiosyncratic circumstances in which Liberal victories came about, related to local conditions and personalities rather than national swings

more than in other parties. Elizabeth Sidney, despite being Deputy Chair of the candidates' committee, was unable to say which had been Liberal target seats in 1987.²¹ Moreover, the total numbers of Liberal candidates, let alone MPs, during this period are so restricted that any apparent patterns amongst the data must be treated with greater caution than might be the case with similar statistics about the main parties.

Nonetheless, we can say that of the 66 Liberal runners-up in seats contested at general elections in the 1950s, only three were women, and only one of these – Violet Bonham Carter in the unusual circumstances of the Colne Valley pact of 1951 – came close to victory, losing by 4.4 per cent (the others lost by margins of 24 per cent and 25 per cent). From 1964 to 1987, an analysis of the 82 seats in which Liberals had come second by 10 per cent or less of the vote at the previous contest shows that only four – under 5 per cent – were fought by women. A fifth female candidate, Laura Grimond, fought the Liberal-held seat of Aberdeenshire West when sitting Member James Davidson retired in 1970; but she was unfortunate to fight a popular opponent – a high-profile Colonel in the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders – at a time of weakness for the party.²² The inverse relationship of electoral prospects to female candidature can be seen as a general pattern over time, too: the female proportion of Liberal candidates was at its height during the party's electoral nadir in the mid-1950s, whereas Vallance noted that as Liberal hopes of gaining seats rose in the mid-1970s, the number of women selected and approved for selection as candidates actually fell.²³

Why were the Liberals less willing to put forward female candidates in winnable seats? There is some evidence

of explicit prejudice against women prior to the Second World War, which meant that women Liberals seeking election or nomination faced pressures and expectations unknown to their male rivals. Vera Ter-rington sued the *Daily Express* unsuccessfully for a 1923 article focusing on her glamorous lifestyle, and entitled 'Aim if elected – furs and pearls';²⁴ Megan Lloyd George's campaign for nomination in Anglesey was almost derailed by another *Express* article alleging scandalously that she had taken part in a 'pyjama bottle party'. This time the *Express* withdrew its claims, but at the Anglesey selection meeting, one of Lloyd George's rivals warned the Association that 'the first farmer in the world had tenure conditionally, and when the condition was violated, he was turned out of the Garden of Eden. It was owing to a woman. Let me tell you she was a young woman too.'²⁵

Frances Josephy, who fought all six general elections from 1929 to 1951, lost the chance to fight the 1934 Basingstoke by-election, though she had been the candidate in 1931, because of unsubstantiated rumours of 'loose morals' and her role in the divorce proceedings of the local Association Chairman. Exploited by the Conservatives, the rumours continued until a retraction was forced – but only after the 1935 election, at which Josephy fought Devizes. Josephy complained in her private correspondence of the difficulty women found in securing nominations, and though she had stood for Cambridge City in 1950 and 1951, was rejected by Cambridge County Association in 1959 even though their only other possible nominee had joined the Conservatives. In the end, Cambridge County Liberals 'regretfully' did not fight the 1959 election at all.²⁶

Some other activists hinted that conscious opposition to female candidature persisted

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after 1945: Lesley Abdela thought it likely that it was stronger at regional level than in any other party, but Elizabeth Shields denied any experience of hostility to women in selection processes, and recent research has suggested that the Liberal Democrats have a relatively strong culture of opposition to overt discrimination.²⁷ More significant is the inhibiting impact upon women aspirants' hopes of the unspoken stereotype of an ideal candidate in the minds of selectors. In all parties, the search for a candidate with the 'right' characteristics can often lead away, unnecessarily, from the selection of women. In the Conservatives this meant preference for public school products with high-flying professional or business careers; in Labour, trade union activism or experience in local government. Even those women possessed of these characteristics could then fall foul of the suspicion that they were not attentive enough to their traditional role: one quaint reflection of this dilemma was the approach of Jean Henderson, Liberal candidate for Barnet in 1945 who was a rising barrister. Her leaflet appealing to women to 'vote for one of yourselves! Vote for the woman candidate!' was nonetheless addressed 'Fellow housewives'.²⁸

The 'ideal' type of Liberal selections is difficult to ascertain, partly because the competition to be a candidate was less intense. However, in 1950, 475 candidates were put into the field, in one Liberal candidate's assessment 'often without enquiries, interviews, or selection procedure of any kind; many were quite unsuitable on any view and a few were positively bizarre'.²⁹ This led to concern in the party over candidate quality, and limited length of service to the party became by the 1960s one reason for Headquarters withholding endorsement.³⁰ Those successful at general elections were disproportionately

public school educated, and had often earned a local reputation by long service to voluntary bodies outside the party. Most importantly, they relied perhaps more than candidates in other parties upon sacrifices made by their families, willingness to fight (apparently) unwinnable contests, and sometimes on substantial personal resources.

These were characteristics it would be more difficult for most women to acquire than their male rivals, and in the Liberal Party the doubtful nature of a parliamentary career made them doubly necessary. For the full explanation of the disappearance of Liberal women MPs, however, we must look elsewhere.

Distinctive Liberal factors

All of the factors mentioned above played some part in restricting of the number of women in all parties becoming MPs. But the particular shortage on the Liberal benches from the start of the 1950s to the end of the '80s was exacerbated by a combination of two factors not so significant – at any rate, not in combination – in the two main parties. These are the role of by-election selection processes, and the resistance of the party to more robust methods of positive discrimination.

It is significant that whilst Liberals were relatively unlikely to put up women for their more winnable seats at general elections, these contests were not the true 'plums' of aspirant Liberal MPs; for it was at by-elections that Liberal candidates had the best hope of success – and at these contests, women were similarly unlikely to be selected. Of the 39 Liberal MPs elected from the defeat of Megan Lloyd George to the merger of the Alliance parties, 16 first entered Parliament at a by-election. 41 per cent of Liberal MPs owed their success to a by-election, though by-elections were only 4.7 per cent of all the contests

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fought by Liberals during this period. The Liberal strike rate at by-elections was thus better than one in twelve; at general elections it was worse than one in 160. Ironically, in other parties, women had been by-election candidates, and winning ones, more often than at general elections.³¹ Yet women were only 12 of the 183 Liberal by-election candidates of this period. At 6.5 per cent, this proportion was below that of almost every general election of the period (only 1966, at 6.4 per cent, fell below). At the point where Liberals were most likely to be elected, they were least likely to be female. As if to prove the point, the first woman Liberal MP for 35 years was one of those few by-election candidates.

The reasons for this pattern are in part observable in the process of by-election candidate selections and campaigns. These often involved hasty recruitment of a candidate expected to be the subject of intense media interest. On the most promising occasions, this caused party leaders to intervene, sometimes parachuting in a well-known, even 'celebrity' candidate: hence former MP Frank Owen fought Hereford in 1955 and Mark Bonham Carter won Torrington in 1958; Grimond persuaded Ludovic Kennedy and William Douglas-Home, brother of the future Prime Minister, to take on Rochdale and Edinburgh South the same year; former Chief Whip Frank Byers contested Bolton East in 1961; and in the early 1970s Thorpe encouraged the candidatures of Cyril Smith and Clement Freud.³²

Even where no favoured son of the leadership was in the running, it was tempting to choose an experienced or at least confident candidate who could make maximum use of the opportunities for publicity which a by-election contest brings: this is reflected in the campaigns of Eric Lubbock at Orpington, David Steel, and Wallace Lawler

Women Liberal MPs 1921–88



Margaret Wintringham (1879–1955)

was educated at Keighley Girls' Grammar school and Bedford College. She went on to become a member of Grimsby Education Committee and one of the country's first women magistrates. When her husband Tom, Liberal MP for Louth, died in 1921, she won the subsequent by-election for the seat, thereby becoming the second woman in the Commons, as well as winning the general elections of 1922 and 1923. Wintringham was an activist for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and in Parliament campaigned for the equalisation of the age of enfranchisement, and for women's right to enter the Lords. She was defeated in 1924, but came within 500 votes of recapturing the seat in 1929. Her last parliamentary contest was as Liberal candidate for Aylesbury in 1935.

married Terrington was quoted as boasting that, if elected, 'I shall put on my ospreys and my fur coat and my pearls. Everyone here knows I live in a large house and keep men servants, and can afford a motor-car and a fur coat. Every woman would do the same if she could. It is sheer hypocrisy to pretend in public life that you have no nice things.' She sued the *Express* for presenting her as 'vain, frivolous, and extravagant' but the court ruled that Terrington had not suffered 'a farthing's worth of damage.' The episode did not prevent her capturing Wycombe on a swing of over 10 per cent to the Liberals, but after losing the following year, she abandoned politics, and shortly afterwards divorced Lord Terrington. After the Second World War she married again, to South African Max Lensveld.



Hilda Runciman (1869–1956)

was the daughter of James Stevenson MP and the wife of Walter Runciman MP. Educated at Girton College, Cambridge, her political apprenticeship was undertaken on Northumberland Education Committee; she also became a JP. She won the Tory–Liberal marginal of St Ives in the by-election of 1928, but at the following year's general election her husband took the Liberal nomination there whilst Hilda went to be defeated by only 152 votes at Tavistock. Out of favour with the Lloyd George leadership, she went with her husband into cooperation with the Conservatives via the National Liberals, and became a Viscountess when he was ennobled in 1937.



Lady Vera Terrington (1889–c.1956)

fought Wycombe in 1922, 1923 and 1924 and won only the second of these contests, but her career was colourful. In an interview with the *Daily Express*, the twice-



Megan Lloyd George (1902–66)

the daughter of Party Leader and former Prime Minister David Lloyd George, fought a tough nomination contest before winning Anglesey in 1929, becoming the first female MP in Wales. Her 22 years in the Commons amount to more than three times the experience of all the other women Liberal MPs together prior to the merger of 1988. She was President of the Women's Liberal Federation, founding President of the Parliament for Wales campaign, and in 1948 became Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Party. However, she had always been close to Labour, and when their candidate defeated her in 1951, she stood down as Liberal candidate for Anglesey, and left the party in 1955. Two years later, she took the Liberal seat of Carmarthen for Labour, and remained a Labour MP until her death.



Elizabeth Shields (1928–)

joined the Liberal Party in 1964 and was first invited to fight a parliamentary election in

October 1974 when her husband fought Clackmannan and she was encouraged to seek the nomination in an adjoining seat. She put the idea aside until after the election, but became a councillor in 1980, whilst working as a schoolteacher in Yorkshire. She fought Howden in 1979, Ryedale in 1983, and was the successful candidate in the Ryedale by-election of 1986, when at the height of Thatcherism and against an unpopular Conservative candidate, she achieved a swing of 19 per cent against the Tories in a high-profile contest. A year later, the Conservatives changed their candidate and retrieved the seat. Shields continues to serve as a councillor in Yorkshire, but looks upon her time in Parliament as 'the best year of my life.'



Ray Michie (1934–2008)

was the daughter of Lord John Bannerman, a mainstay of the post-war Scottish Liberal Party at whose election rallies she spoke as a teenager. Before she won Argyll & Bute in 1987, she served as Chairman of the local Association, Vice-Chairman of the Scottish Liberal Party, a member of the Alliance Commission on Constitutional Reform, and had fought the seat three times, moving from fourth to first place. She retained the seat until 2001, when she became Baroness Michie of Gallanach. On her death last year, tributes to her came from across the political spectrum; Charles Kennedy said 'We have all lost a true friend of principle and of people.'

in Birmingham Ladywood. Elizabeth Shields felt it was significant that she was one of the few by-election candidates who had already been confirmed as PPC for the coming general election, so that no opportunity existed for leadership intervention at Ryedale. She also valued the support she received in the campaign from Cyril Smith, and noted the favourable press coverage which his intervention brought to it.³³ Liberal by-election candidates were expected by party leaders, journalists and activists to be like the general election 'safe' stereotype writ large, and this made selection of women even less likely.

The quickest solution to the shortage of women MPs, then, would have been to ensure that more women candidates represented the party at by-elections. The strategy of using all-women shortlists for winnable seats – known as providing 'equality guarantees' by advocates such as Joni Lovenduski³⁴ – was the Labour Party's route to its dramatic increase in women MPs during the 1990s. Guarantees of minimum numbers of women on shortlists had been adopted in the constitution of the SDP in 1981: amongst Liberals, however, these approaches met objections to any interference with the liberal democratic principles of free choice and meritocracy, as well as the traditional attachment to the autonomy of local Associations.

Any suggestion of 'special treatment' for women has run against the grain of certain elements of the party, not least some of its leading female members. Violet Bonham Carter set the tone, declaring herself 'anti-feminist', and explaining that women's representation was so poor because 'no woman of alpha quality has so far appeared on the political scene ... I have never seen a woman who could be PM, Foreign Secretary or Chancellor of the Exchequer.'

She even remarked that she would rather be a member of an all-male than an all-female club because of the better atmosphere.³⁵ Her successor as the highest-profile Liberal woman, Nancy Seear, researched women's disadvantage in the labour market, and supported the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act, but was also critical of feminism, and was quoted as saying 'I'm very cross when I am typecast with "women"'.³⁶

The resistance of some Liberals to feminism rather than female candidates was confirmed by Lesley Abdela, a candidate in 1979: she quoted Linda Siegle, candidate for Devizes in 1987, who had been given 0 out of 10 for content in an 'amazingly feminist' selection speech, and was told by a West Country regional agent that 'I shouldn't display my feminist views.' Siegle argued that 'David Steel could never understand what we women were on about. Attitudes of the old Liberal leadership have been very detrimental to the advancement of women.'³⁷ Abdela herself, who later went on to form the all-party 300 Group to press for a larger number of women candidates, had already lobbied from within the WLF for a higher profile for women at Assembly and in party broadcasts, for the training of party officials and a formal monitoring process to eliminate discrimination, and for a Leader's letter to Associations 'asking them to search for at least one woman in their constituency party who would be a suitable future candidate and encourage her to apply to get on the party list of approved candidates.' She set the problem out in clear terms in the party's *First Report on the Status of Women* in July 1984:

The fact is that there has not been a [Liberal] woman member of Parliament for over 30 years. In order to improve this

state of affairs we need to have more women candidates and to see some of them selected to fight seats that they may have a chance of winning.³⁸

Nesta Wyn Ellis, a candidate at both by-elections and general elections, also approved specific provisions to include women on shortlists, and believed this was being encouraged by the leadership in the 1970s.³⁹ A joint Alliance report of 1986 recommended equivalence in the creation of male and female peers, and setting targets for equal appointments to public bodies, and the same year's Assembly called for a minimum of one man and one woman on every parliamentary shortlist.⁴⁰

These measures were not implemented, however, and Abdela found little enthusiasm for them even within the WLF. In 1986, the WLF Political Action Committee met with Councillor Claire Jackson, a training officer from party HQ who stated that 'her top priority was to train women to be PPCs, and therefore get more women MPs.' Jackson was challenged as to why she envisaged women needed special training, and had to explain that 'women were at a disadvantage in a predominantly male environment, and the fact that the party has only one, recently elected, woman MP speaks for itself.' Jackson countered by asking what proportion of the party's female members were in the WLF.⁴¹

A particularly robust expression of this scepticism about separate treatment for women was given by Sir Cyril Smith in 1989. When asked on the BBC's *Question Time* what he thought of Mrs Thatcher's failure to promote women such as Lynda Chalker to the Cabinet, and Labour's contrasting decision that all ballot papers for the Shadow Cabinet not including at least four votes for female candidates would be declared invalid,

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he conceded that Chalker was 'a very able lass', but expressed exasperation at the calls for the automatic representation of women:

It makes me sick, actually ... I mean, where are we dragging party politics to when we get to this sort of level of rubbish? Presumably the reason that there's no women in Mrs Thatcher's Cabinet is that she's of the opinion that there were no women who ought to be promoted to the Cabinet over and above the men that she's promoted.

Smith dismissed the women joining the Kinnock front bench following Labour's rule change – including Margaret Beckett, Ann Clwyd and Clare Short – saying: 'let's have it clear: they've gone to the front bench because the party's changed the rules and insisted that women be elected. ... In other words, they're not there because Mr Kinnock wanted them there. They're there because the rules have been changed.'³²

Both Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy expressed approval of more effective procedures to guarantee female participation in selection, but proposals to bring in quotas were rejected at the 2001 Liberal Democrat conference after a debate in which an organised party of young women opposed to the measures came to the podium in turn wearing pink T-shirts bearing the slogan 'I am not a token woman'.

As a recent Hansard Society report by Lovenduski, Sarah Childs and Rosie Campbell concludes, 'the issue of equality guarantees publicly divides the party.'³³ Selection rules now require a minimum of each sex within shortlists of a given size – assuming the appropriate number of each sex have applied – and there is a Gender Balance Task Force (now Campaign for

There is a point at which a choice has to be made between swift improvement in numbers of women in Parliament, and the principle of uniform, open procedure of selection ... the party was not prepared to sacrifice the latter to achieve the former.

Gender Balance) carrying on the sort of monitoring Lesley Abdela was calling for twenty years ago. 'Yet', Childs notes, 'while there is clear support for positive discrimination among some of the women in the party, especially the older women, and the party leadership, this is countered, particularly by young women.'³⁴ In this, those young women reflect an established tradition within Liberalism which has dismissed the quick route to increased women's representation for generations.

Conclusion

The record of the Liberal Democrats in getting women into Parliament has changed since 1987, with ten female MPs, including two first elected at by-elections. Yet even after the doubling of the parliamentary party in 1997, Colin Pilkington could write of candidate selection that 'the Liberal Democrats have always been more favourably inclined towards women, although it is not necessarily an attitude that has borne fruit.'³⁵ The under-representation of women in the Commons is a feature of all parties, and for largely the same combination of reasons: a shortage of supply of candidates for reasons of women's social role and identity; and resistance to selecting women either for conscious prejudice or unwillingness to modify presumptions about the profile of a 'good' candidate.

The Liberal Party's record was particularly unrepresentative during the period from the 1950s to the 1980s because of features distinctive to it: it had very few MPs at all, and in by-elections, their best opportunities to add women to that number, they were most unlikely to put female candidates forward. The mechanism which might have reversed this trend – some form of positive discrimination – was unacceptable to parts of the

party, and remains so. There is a point at which a choice has to be made between swift improvement in numbers of women in Parliament, and the principle of uniform, open procedure of selection. It is in itself neither a recommendation nor a criticism that, even under difficult circumstances, the party was not prepared to sacrifice the latter to achieve the former. It is, however, an explanation of that low number, and a reflection of the party's approach – an approach that will continue to provoke debate.

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- 1 'Our policy for women', *No Easy Way: Britain's problems and the Liberal answers*, Liberal manifesto, 1950.
- 2 Jones, M., *A Radical Life: the biography of Megan Lloyd George* (London: Hutchinson, 1991), p. 207.
- 3 See Iles, L., and Ingham, R., 'The First Woman Liberal MP', *Journal of Liberal History* 36 (2002), pp. 19–21.
- 4 On this, see Phillips, M., *The Divided House: Women at Westminster* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), pp. 44–45; Vallance, E., *Women in the House: a study of women Members of Parliament* (London: Athlone Press, 1979), p. 29, though Vallance stresses that this should not be taken as an indication of the weak quality of such MPs. Hilda Runciman, for example, was one of the first female magistrates and a Cambridge history graduate.
- 5 Morgan, K.O. (ed.), *Lloyd George Family Letters 1885–1936* (Cardiff and London: University of Wales and OUP, 1973), pp. 207–9.
- 6 Sanderson-Nash, E., 'Ray Michie MP' in Brack, D. (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (London: Politico's, 1998), pp. 259–60.
- 7 *Freedom and Choice for Women* (Hebden Bridge: Hebden Royd

- Publications, 1986), p. 26.
- 8 Sidney, E., 'Invisible Woman', *New Democrat*, Vol. V, No. 3 (London: Letterhurst Press, 1987), pp. 30–31. The idea that women candidates are a liability was being dismissed out of hand by the 1960s (see Pulzer, P., *Political Representation and Elections in Britain* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 121) but the continued attachment of selection committees to this myth was comprehensively exposed in Rasmussen, J. S., 'Women's Role in Contemporary British Politics: Impediments to Parliamentary Candidature', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1983).
- 9 Vallance, E., op. cit. pp. 59–60.
- 10 Hunt, K., 'Women and Politics' in Jones, B. (ed.), *Political Issues in Britain Today* (Manchester: MUP, 1987), p. 187.
- 11 These figures were compiled from Annual Reports to Assembly, 1945–62. They include both recently lapsed and recently affiliated Associations, and so should be regarded as erring on the side of generosity.
- 12 Correspondence from Bernard Simpson, NULC Secretary, 18 August 2004.
- 13 Egan, M., 'Basil Wigoder' in Brack, D., (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, p. 379.
- 14 WLF Annual Reports 1945–87 and Executive minutes April 1955, 21 April 1966, 17 October 1974.
- 15 WLF Centenary leaflet, 1987. A copy is in the Henderson collection.
- 16 WLF Annual Report 1953 (Henderson papers Box 6/1).
- 17 *Liberal News* 24 May 1957. The WLF Executive heard on 7 December 1961 that the 'lowest ever' number of entries for the Mary Philpott Cup had been received. The other awards were the Gladstone Cup (for money-raising), the Wintringham Cup (liaison between a branch and HQ), the Wintringham Shield (membership increase), Pearce Cup (increase in a new branch) and the Silver Tea Pot (for social functions).
- 18 WLF Executive minutes, April 1955 and Special General Meeting minutes, 9 May 1979.
- 19 Interview with E. Shields, 9 Jan 2008.
- 20 Vallance, E., op. cit. p. 46; Ellis, N. W., *Dear Elector: the truth about MPs* (Coronet, 1974), p. 47.
- 21 Sidney, E., op. cit.
- 22 Grimond, J., *Memoirs* (Heinemann, 1979), p. 229.
- 23 Vallance, op. cit., p. 33.
- 24 The interview was with Charlotte Haldane. Details of the case are at <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/W/wtrington.htm>
- 25 Jones, M., op.cit., p. 75.
- 26 Josephy papers, archivist's summary and correspondence concerning 1935 election, notably W. W. Young and Sons & Ward, solicitors, to F. Josephy, reporting the apology by Mr Wentworth-Shields, 11 January 1936. At the time of examination, the collection was temporarily catalogued (temporary additional file 8), Cambridge County Liberal Association minutes 28 Feb 1959 and *Cambridgeshire Daily News* 16 Sept 1959.
- 27 Abdela, L., in *First Report on the Status of Women* (London: Liberal Party, 1984), p. 27; Shields, E., interview op. cit. Analysis of recent Liberal Democrat selections involving women can be seen in Shepherd-Robinson, L. and Lovenduski, J., *Women and Candidate Selection in British Political Parties* (Fawcett Society, 2002), pp. 33–40.
- 28 Henderson papers, 1945 election (Box 2/2).
- 29 Skelsy, P., 'The Selection of Parliamentary Candidates: the Liberal Party', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 30 (1959), p. 223–226. Skelsy's language assumes throughout that candidates are male.
- 30 Ellis, N. W., op. cit., p. 39.
- 31 Norris, P., *British By-elections* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 174. The SNP used by-elections to elect women in 1967 (Hamilton) and 1973 (Glasgow Govan).
- 32 On by-election procedures, see: Kennedy, L., *On My Way to the Club: An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1989), p. 245; Home, W. Douglas, *Mr Home pronounced Hume* (London: Collins, 1979), p. 98; Smith, C., *Big Cyril: the Autobiography of Cyril Smith* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977), p. 116; Freud, C., *Freud Ego* (London: BBC, 2001), p. 199. Thorpe did warn Freud that any explicit endorsement of the latter by the former in a nomination contest was likely to be counter-productive.
- 33 Shields, E., interview op. cit. and *A Year to Remember* (Dorchester: Liberal Democrat Publications, 1995), p. 21 and first plate.
- 34 See for example Childs, S., Lovenduski, J., and Campbell, R., *Women at the Top 2005: Changing Numbers, Changing Politics* (London: Hansard Society, 2005).
- 35 Pottle, M., (ed.), *Daring to Hope: the Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1946–69* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), pp. 346, 352 and 367. The entries are for 23 May 1968, 3 June 1948 and 28 August 1949 respectively. In June 1948 Bonham Carter had written an article for the *Sunday Times* expanding on these views.
- 36 Quoted in Seear's obituary in *The Independent*, April 1997; see also Egan, M., 'Nancy Seear', in Brack, D. (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, pp. 324–325.
- 37 Quoted in Abdela, L., *Women with X Appeal* (Optima, 1989), pp. 133–37.
- 38 Abdela (1984), op. cit.
- 39 Ellis, N. W., op. cit., p. 48.
- 40 *Freedom and Choice for Women*, op. cit.; on the Assembly, see Carter, A., *The Politics of Women's Rights* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 129.
- 41 WLF Political Action Committee minutes, 3 September 1986.
- 42 Smith, C., *Question Time* (BBC TV), 16 November 1989.
- 43 Childs et al., op. cit., pp. 34–36.
- 44 Childs, S., *New Labour's Women MPs: Women Representing Women* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 210–11.
- 45 Pilkington, C., *Issues in British Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 236. A more recent study of Liberal Democrat selection policy is: Evans, Elizabeth, 'Supply or Demand? Women Candidates in the Liberal Democrats', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* Vol 10 No 4 (Nov 2008).

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