

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN SCOTLAND: PROGRESS SINCE 1992

Alice Brown

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to summarise the progress that has been made since the general election in 1992 in taking forward the issue of women's representation in formal political structures.

First, however, it is worth recalling the mood prior to the 1992 general election. Optimism was high among those who wished to see the establishment of a parliament in Scotland. In anticipation that a new parliament was a real possibility, women activists began to develop their own vision of what that parliament should look like. Their vision was of a 'new house' which would be run on fundamentally different lines from Westminster and which was much more open and accessible to women and others who have been denied access to political office. At this time plans were also being made to launch the women's campaigning and research group Engender as a membership organisation; one of the key objectives of the new group was to open a Women's Centre which would be located near the new

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Scottish parliament. The idea was that such a centre would be an ideal meeting place for women which could operate as a forum for liaison and dialogue between women in Scotland and the women who were elected to the new Scottish parliament.

One particular proposal, initially put forward by the women in the STUC Women's Committee, and later adopted as official STUC and Scottish Labour Party policy, was that the first Scottish parliament should have equal representation of men and women. This was to be achieved by electing both a man and a woman for each parliamentary seat - the 50:50 option. Given the return of the Conservative government to power at the general election in 1992, immediate hopes of a Scottish parliament were disappointed. However, this did not mean that the campaign or the plans were shelved. In answering the question 'what has happened since 1992', I want to cover five main areas - the level of women's political activity; the electoral picture; explanations for the low level of women's representation; reasons for representation becoming a key issue for women in Scotland; and finally ways in which the campaign can be taken forward.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY

For those of us, some 74%, who supported parties other than the Conservatives, it is painful to recall the morning after the 1992 general election. People found it hard to believe that they were to experience another four of five years of the implementation of policies in Scotland for which they had not voted. Margaret MacIntosh described the male reaction to this disenfranchisement in the following terms: 'As Scottish men are now aware, even a strong and articulate voice can simply be ignored if the system itself is not democratic.' (Engender 1992). While those men in Scotland, who were not supporters of the Conservative Party, complained about the 'democratic deficit' women could argue that they suffered a 'double democratic deficit' on the grounds that they too had not supported the Conservatives but in addition were grossly under-represented as MPs in the House of Commons.

The despondency of many men was not matched by most of the women activists. Is this because women are more used to a long agenda when waiting for change? At a recall of a Conference held just prior to the election, women activists came together to decide how to keep the issue of women's representation high on the political agenda. It was decided to form a Women's Co-ordination Group to bring together representatives from

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different women's groups in Scotland in a broad coalition to improve the position of women in all areas of decision-making. The group has been successful in co-ordinating a number of campaigns, in supporting Engender in the production of the **Gender Audits**, in producing a Scottish women's report for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 and in facilitating meetings between women in the different political parties in Scotland.

It was also decided at the recall conference that women should work to keep the aim of equal representation on the agenda of their political parties, trade unions and local authorities and should find opportunities to raise awareness within their individual workplaces, organisations and communities. There is evidence that they have been successful in this regard. One specific example has been the formation of the Women's Caucus by some women in the Scottish Labour Party with the aim of campaigning for increased representation of women at all levels of the party.

Women have also been active in other political organisations involved in the broader campaign for constitutional change including Scotland United, Common Cause, Democracy for Scotland and the Coalition for Scottish Democracy. It is interesting to note that the new Scottish Civil Assembly which held its first meeting in March 1995 has asked the constituent organisations to send an equal number of men and women representatives to meetings of the Assembly. It is highly unlikely that this policy would have emerged without the efforts of women activists.

Finally, women have continued their involvement in the Scottish Constitutional Convention. When the Convention established the Scottish Constitutional Commission in 1993 to make recommendations on the new electoral system for the Scottish parliament which would take into account gender balance and the representation of ethnic minority groups, women's groups and individual women played their part in contributing to the evidence considered by the Commission. They were to be disappointed, however, when the Commission issued its report to the Convention in 1994 (Scottish Constitutional Commission 1994). The Commission proposed an Additional Member System (AMS) for elections based on a parliament of 112 members with a target of 40% plus for the representation of women. Although other positive measures to encourage and facilitate the participation of more women in parliament were recommended - including hours and meeting times more compatible with a life outside politics, and better facilities, care and travel allowances - the target option proposed was

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interpreted as a poor substitute by those women who supported 50:50 representation enshrined in the constitution.

It was at this stage that women in the Women's Co-ordination Group met with women in the two main parties in the Convention - the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats - to see if they could find a way forward on the gender issue. Although both political parties accepted the principle of equal representation, they were divided on how this objective should be achieved. Labour's policy is to use an AMS electoral system incorporating a statutory obligation on political parties to put forward a 50:50 ratio of female and male candidates, while the Liberal Democrats advocate the Single Transferable Vote electoral system and are totally opposed to a statutory obligation on parties. Building on the consensus between them that a Scottish parliament should have procedures and ways of working which are radically different from the Westminster model, and which encourage wider participation of all members of Scottish society, the party women sought a solution to their differences. It was recognised by all those involved that a new parliament would provide a historic and unique opportunity for women to play a full and equal part in Scottish political life. Further, it was recognised also that it was necessary to begin with equal representation on the grounds that it would be difficult to reform the new institution once it was well established and parliamentary seats were occupied.

The outcome of these discussions was the proposed Electoral Contract which it was agreed should be put to the 1995 conferences of the two political parties. On the understanding that the Contract would pertain only to the first elections of the Scottish parliament, the following text was agreed:

The electoral contract constitutes a formal agreement between the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats to accept the principle that there should be an equal number of men and women members of the first Scottish parliament. In order to achieve this aim, the parties agree and commit themselves to:

- select and field an equal number of male and female candidates for election;
- ensure that these candidates are fairly distributed;
- use an Additional Member System (AMS) for elections;
- ensure that the size of the Scottish Parliament is large enough to facilitate effective democratic government.

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Versions of the contract were debated by the two party conferences in March and April 1995, and finally ratified in November 1995. This development marks a significant step forward in reaching agreement on the mechanisms for achieving gender equality (Brown 1995a).

As has been illustrated, therefore, women activists in Scotland have continued to work towards the establishment of a parliament which has an equal number of female and male MSPs from 'Day One'.

ELECTORAL PICTURE

The following tables provide up-to-date information on the level of women's representation at local, central and European government levels. Table 1 lists the names and constituencies of the women representing Scottish parliamentary seats, and table 2 covers the 1992 general election and the position following by-elections. Table 3 shows the level of women's representation in the 1992 District Elections. Figures for the 1994 Regional Council elections are provided in table 4. The elections for the European parliament were also held in 1994 and the Scottish figures are presented in table 5. Table 6 provides the results of the elections for the shadow local authorities held in April 1995.

It will be seen from these tables that there are now 7 women representing Scottish constituencies at Westminster - a record number of women and a rate of representation at just under 10%. However, the number of women MEPs dropped from 2 to 1, a fall which was against the trend in all other countries in the European Union with the exception of Portugal.

It is the elections to the new shadow local authorities which provoked considerable attention in 1995, particularly as the next local elections will not take place until 1999. To some extent these elections were identified by women activists as a 'test' for the future elections to a Scottish parliament and a way of judging the voluntary approach. For example, it was Scottish Labour Party policy that all local authorities should have a target of 30 per cent women's representation. The results showed little change in the level of women's representation with an overall rate of just over 22% - around half a per cent higher than the 1992 District Elections. Examination of the figures shows considerable variation in the representation of women in different councils from 6% in Midlothian to 48% in South Ayrshire, and variation in the practice of the different political parties. (A detailed breakdown of the

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local election results can be obtained from the Scottish Local Government Information Unit, 50 Wellington Street, Glasgow, G2 6HJ.)

The election results illustrate clearly that women have a long way to go before they can enjoy equal representation in formal political arenas.

Table 1

Scottish Women MPs as at 1995

Party	Name	Constituency
Labour	Irene Adams	Paisley North
Labour	Maria Fyfe	Glasgow Maryhill
Labour	Helen Liddell	Monklands East *
Labour	Rachel Squire	Dunfermline West
Liberal Democrats	Ray Michie	Argyll and Bute
SNP	Roseanna Cunningham	Perth and Kinross **
SNP	Margaret Ewing	Moray

* *By-election in 1994 following the death of Labour leader, John Smith*

** *By-election in 1995 following the death of Nicholas Fairbairn (Con)*

Table 2

Elected Women MPs in House of Commons

Party	1987 General Election	1992 General Election	1995 *	
			UK	Scotland
Conservative	17	20	20	0
Labour	21	37	39	4
Liberal Democrats	2	2	2	1
Others (SNP)	1	1	2	2

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Total	41 (6.7%)	60 (9.2%)	63 (9.7%)	7 (9.7%)
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* *Following by-elections*

Table 3

**Scottish District Elections 1992
Percentage of Women Candidates and Elected Councillors by Political Party**

Political Party	Candidates	Elected Councillors
Labour	23	21
Liberal Democrats	36	29
Conservative	31	26
SNP	26	20
Independent/Other	25	19
Total	27	22

Table 4

**Scottish Regional/Islands Elections 1994
Percentage of Women Candidates and Elected Councillors by Political Party**

Political Party	Candidates	Elected Councillors
Labour	20	16
Liberal Democrats	29	23

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Conservative	24	23
SNP	19	18
Independent/Other	20	16
Total	22	17

Table 5

**European Elections in Scotland 1994
Number of Women Candidates and Elected MEPs by Political Party**

Political Party	Candidates	Elected MEPs
Labour	0	0
Liberal Democrats	2	0
Conservative	0	0
SNP	2	1
Green	3	0
Others	3	0
Total	10	1

Table 6

**Elections for Shadow Unitary Authorities in Scotland 1995
Percentage of Women Candidates and Elected Councillors by Political Party**

Political Party	Candidates	Elected Councillors
Labour	27	24
Liberal Democrats	33	29
Conservative	26	27
SNP	24	20
Independent/Other	18	13

Total	26	22
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WHY HAS WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION REMAINED SO LOW?

The under-representation of women in government in Scotland and the slowness of change has prompted the search for explanations and solutions. Unfortunately there is no straightforward explanation and, therefore, no easy solution. The reasons which contribute to the low representation of women are varied and inter-related in complex ways. In providing a summary of the key explanations often advanced, Vicky Randall (1987) distinguishes between what she describes as 'supply' and 'demand' factors. The supply side relates to the main factors which determine the availability of women politicians, such as the socialisation of women into traditional roles of wife and mother and situational constraints such as the responsibility for children. The demand side consists of the political and institutional factors which govern the recruitment of female politicians, including the internal rules of political parties, bias in selection of candidates and the electoral system itself. While the separation of supply and demand is a conceptually useful distinction, as Randall acknowledges, they are not always mutually interdependent. Thus, the interplay between the two needs to be understood. For example, women may not make themselves 'available' as candidates because they expect discrimination at the recruitment level.

In summarising the literature on women's political participation, Monique Leijenaar and Evelyn Mahon (1992) argue that the empirical research in western European democracies has revealed that there is no significant gender gap in turnout figures for elections; there is no significant gender difference in voting preferences; and in countries where the option is available there are indications that women voters vote more often for women candidates. Further, although the number of women in parliaments has gradually increased, there is still a worldwide under-representation of women in political bodies. They divide the key explanations for this under-representation into two categories, namely 'individual characteristics' and 'institutional factors'. The individual characteristics include the educational level and professional experience of women candidates, as well as the ability to control the allotment of one's time. The other broad category of

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institutional factors could include the organisation of society, the political system, selection procedures and criteria, barriers such as lack of appropriate childcare, and other impediments placed on women as a result of their disadvantaged position in the labour market.

The most comprehensive summary of the potential reasons for the poor recruitment of women and others at political elite level can be found in the work of Norris and Lovenduski (1994). The main focus of this study is a questionnaire survey of the candidates for the British general election in 1992 and a survey of party members, supplemented by a survey of applicants who failed to become candidates and some interviews with MPs, prospective parliamentary candidates and applicants. The study covers the perspectives of gender, race and class in political recruitment. The authors also place their understanding of political recruitment in Britain within a wider cross-national context, and draw on evidence comparing the recruitment to the lower house of national legislatures in twenty-five established liberal democracies. They analyse the influences on participation and recruitment at three different levels. The first level, or 'systematic factors', relates to the broad context in which recruitment of political candidates takes place in a country, and includes the legal system, electoral system, party system and structure of opportunities. The second context in which recruitment takes place involves 'political party factors', such as party organisation, rules and ideology. The third influence on selection is 'individual recruitment factors'. In line with Randall's (1987) categories, the latter includes factors determining the supply of candidates, for example the resources and motivation of aspirants; and the demand factors such as the attitudes and practices of 'gatekeepers'.

In seeking to explain how and why the recruitment process produces a legislative elite which does not reflect the diversity of British society, Norris and Lovenduski (1994, p. 247) conclude that 'the primary results from this study suggest that on balance supply-side factors are the most persuasive explanation for this social bias' and that 'adopted candidates usually reflect the pool of applicants who come forward'. To some extent, these findings counter the results of earlier research which locates one of the key explanations for the poor representation of women in the direct or indirect discrimination in the selection process of political parties, that is the demand side. The findings also sit somewhat at odds with the authors' three-dimension explanatory model of recruitment, and with their previous conclusions (Lovenduski and Norris, eds. 1993, p.329):

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the recruitment process can be seen as complex and multi-layered. Individual decisions by candidates and selectors operate within a particular party context. In turn, the ideology and organization of any party operates within a broader political system. While we can focus our attention on the political system, the party context, or the individual-level candidate and selector, any comprehensive explanation needs to take account of all three levels, and their complex interaction.

If influences on recruitment operate at three different levels - the systematic (macro level), the political party (meso level), and the individual recruitment (micro level), then the interrelationship between these different levels is likely to be complex. Also, given the three-dimensional nature of the potential barriers which may influence the recruitment of women candidates, single-factor explanations are unlikely to provide a full understanding. Similarly, in these circumstances, single-factor policy solutions will have limited results. Therefore, Norris and Lovenduski's conclusion that 'policy options directed at changing the resources and motivation of potential applicants ... will probably prove most effective' (1994, p.248) is open to question. As Randall noted in her earlier work, 'any satisfactory explanation of the dearth of women politicians must stress not simply women's availability but the way this is shaped by the character of modern politics' (1987, p. 144). Thus, if there is an insufficient number of women putting themselves forward as candidates, the potential reasons may indeed relate to a deficiency of resources or motivation, but not exclusively.

It should be remembered, of course, that Norris and Lovenduski's findings are based largely on a questionnaire survey of candidates and party members involved in the selection process. In that sense the candidates are already a 'successful' group of potential MPs in that they have overcome the many hurdles of selection. Their perspective is, therefore, one which is based on a group of people who have 'made it' through all the difficulties involved. But what about those who have put themselves forward and 'failed' or those who exclude themselves long before the selection process? The former are given some attention by Norris and Lovenduski but not the latter. It is the process of exclusion before the selection stage which needs to be explored in more detail. For example, when the Women's Issues Group of the Scottish Constitutional Convention consulted widely on the reasons for women's poor representation, the submissions received focused on the practical barriers faced by women, their lack of confidence and experience in operating in formal power structures, and their disenchantment with what they perceived as the aggressive nature and style of political debate at Westminster. The

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underlying assumption was also that 'women were ruled out of consideration a long way short of the selection meetings' (Levy 1992, p.66).

In the research I have conducted I have concentrated on interviewing women political activists in the political parties, trade unions and local government with a view to ascertaining their perceptions of the key reasons for the low participation Scottish women at the political elite level.

The women I spoke to did identify 'systematic' issues and referred to the negative effect of the first-past-the-post electoral system for women, their alienation from the adversarial party system, the career structures in politics based on 'conventional' routes to power which favour men, and the practical problems for women with care responsibilities of travelling to London and fitting in with the outdated hours and timings of parliamentary sittings.

At the party political level, women also perceived problems for their equal representation. Party organisation, rules, methods of selection and ideology all played a part in influencing the extent to which women felt able to participate in politics or were comfortable at doing so. Some women, particularly those in the Liberal Democrats and SNP, felt that their party was doing much more to encourage women, while women in the Labour Party were very critical of their party's progress in this regard.

At the individual supply level, it was clear that women's traditional role in the family still acted as a practical and psychological barrier to their involvement in political life. It was said that women were predominantly seen as the 'home-makers' with men remaining the 'decision-makers', and that it was much more difficult for women to detach themselves from family responsibilities. As one woman put it: 'When they hand you the baby, they hand you the guilt'. However, there was an acknowledgement that children and the lack of childcare facilities were often used as a convenient excuse for not selecting women.

Second, unlike the findings from the Norris and Lovenduski survey, lack of resources was not one of the key barriers mentioned by the women interviewed. It should not be assumed necessarily that finance is, therefore, not an issue for women. Rather, it is perhaps at the later stage when they are seeking selection and election that the financial implications of standing as a candidate are experienced. It is interesting to note, however, that the financial assistance provided through Emily's List - the scheme headed by Barbara

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Follett which gives financial help to encourage women within the Labour Party to stand as candidates - has not found support in Scotland.

One factor which was of significance to women, however, was the importance of being asked to stand. Women seemed very reluctant to see themselves as candidates or to put themselves forward and often needed to be encouraged by other activists. Some of the women interviewed commented that it was men in their parties who had encouraged them to stand for positions within the party or as a local or parliamentary candidates.

On the individual demand side, in other words in the selection and recruitment process, some women identified other women as more biased against women candidates. This was especially true of women within the Conservative Party. In contrast, women in the Labour Party identified the problem as the unwillingness of men to share power. In the words, of one Labour women activists: 'No group gives up power willingly'. Given Labour's dominant position in Scotland within the first-past-the-post electoral system, the incumbency of sitting MPs creates considerable problems for women wishing to stand as candidates.

At the selection process itself, women in the Liberal Democrats and SNP were largely of the view that they had not experienced problems or discrimination on grounds of their sex. They did, however, see it as a problem for women in the Conservative Party on the basis of the traditional attitudes held by selectors, and for women in the Labour Party because of the male bias of the party in Scotland. One woman put the case very bluntly: 'Men in the Labour Party are such bullies'. There was some confirmation of these attitudes by women in both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Women in the Conservative Party acknowledged that their party policy on selecting women was improving, but still considered there was a long way to go before the attitudes of the local selectors reflected the change in policy. As one woman said: 'There is always the feeling of what is she doing here, this is a job for a man'. Another was told that she did not get selected for one seat because she was too small! The greatest discontent with the selection process is to be found among the women in the Labour Party. There is a considerable amount of frustration that excellent women are being denied access to parliamentary seats and powerful posts within the party. Women in the Labour Party were of the view that they have served in their branches, constituencies, elections and committees and have attended training sessions and worn the right suits - 'We have even tried being nice to them (men)' - yet they believe they are still being by-passed in favour of men.

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A factor which kept emerging during the interviews with the women activists was the existence of a political culture which was perceived to be hostile to women. It was said to operate at all levels - the systematic, the party political and the individual supply and demand level. It was considered that politics in Scotland (and elsewhere) is still dominated by a male culture and ethos where men are more comfortable in promoting people who resemble themselves and who they can 'trust' to behave in accordance with certain 'rules of the game'. Women are, as a result, reluctant to enter the game when they perceive the rules are loaded against them: 'No matter what you do you cannot compete on their terms. You cannot be a man, you lack the one essential qualification.' As another woman put it: 'It is like the masons - you could never get the right handle to get in'.

WHY HAVE WOMEN IN SCOTLAND DECIDED THAT REPRESENTATION IS A KEY ISSUE?

If women do feel excluded or unwelcome in the political arena, then why have they decided that equal representation is a key issue in Scotland in the 1990s? In feminist theory the division is often drawn between the liberal strategy of campaigning for equal representation within the political system and more radical demands made from outwith the system through women's autonomous political action. As Anne Phillips (1994, p.195) so succinctly comments: 'Until recently no feminist in her right mind would have thought that liberal democracy could deliver the goods.' She argues that the demand for equal representation was based on a double naivety that you could achieve significantly greater representation for women and that it would make any real difference even if you did achieve this aim. So why is it that women across different class, age and racial boundaries in Scotland, including women in the political parties, the trade unions, local government, women's groups, churches, business, law, education, health, etc, see equal representation as such an important issue?

A number of explanations can be advanced. The first is that what is happening in Scotland can be interpreted within the context of a broader movement among women in different countries throughout the world for a greater say in the decisions which impact on their daily lives. Second, it can be argued that the experience of so-called 'Thatcherism' and the negative impact of economic and social policies on women have shifted the debate and brought women from different perspectives closer together. The dichotomy between political participation in the system and autonomous

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action has become blurred as feminists have sought to build alliances in defending public services and campaigning for resources to protect the interests of women. Third, women have now gained valuable experience in working within the political parties and trade unions and through women's committees in local government. As a result more women consider themselves capable of standing for political office. Fourth, there is a real frustration at the ways of working and slow pace of change in the House of Commons. Fifth, there is a real distaste for the hostile, adversarial political ethos and culture which dominates political discourse and activity. Sixth, there is a strong belief that women have to be involved directly in making plans for change themselves, or otherwise they will be marginalised and excluded. And finally women have mobilised politically with the conviction that a Scottish parliament will be 'different' (Brown 1995b).

It is this vision of difference which has been important in bringing women together in the campaigns for a Scottish parliament (either devolved or independent) in a coalition of interests. With more women in parliament, it is believed that life will be better not just for women but for children and men in Scotland. Across the political party divide, women are of the view that a parliament with more equal representation will make better decisions, that the priorities of policies will change and that even the same policies will have different emphasis. The following quotes give a flavour of their views:

Women would push for different policies.

If women were in the forefront they would bring a different perspective to policies such as taxation and the Child Support Act.

We will have acceptable working hours and allowances for carers, women will demand commitment to the job, women will ask realistic questions and want value for money, there will be better relationships with constituents - what we will deliver for women as well as men is a completely better quality of life.

There is a strong perception among women activists that parliament is the poorer because of the absence of women. Women in Scotland, therefore, do not want power to dominate others, but in the words of Cynthia Cockburn they want power as 'capacity'. That is, capacity to change the lives of others for the better. One of the women activists stated: 'Power is too important to be left to the egos of men.'

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As I have outlined, women activists have continued the campaign for equal representation in the new Scottish parliament. There are a number of ways in which this can be done:

Local elections

There will be no local elections until 1999, but this does not mean that there is nothing to be achieved until then. For example, there is a role for women in lobbying the new councils and councillors in order to protect services and to articulate the needs of women in the community.

General election

The government has to call the next general election some time before May 1997. The selection for many of the seats is or has taken place in the political parties. The Labour Party's policy of all women shortlists in 50% of vacant seats has gained considerable media attention (Lovenduski 1994). Yet, given the slow turnover rate of sitting MPs at around 10% in any one election, the opportunity for women to be selected is not as great as is often thought, even under Labour's rules (Norris 1993). However, this is no reason for the campaign to slacken, and women also have a part to play in raising the awareness of male candidates and in working for policy change.

European elections

The next elections for the European parliament will be held in 1998, but given that there are just eight Scottish seats, little change is expected in women's representation at this level. Again, women can still play an active part through Women's Forum and other organisations which have direct links with the European Union.

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It is at this level that women have a historic and unique opportunity to 'change the face of Scottish politics' and to start on an equal basis from day one of the new Scottish parliament. How often in anyone's lifetime do they get the chance to plan and design a new legislature and to break the mould of the past? It is an opportunity that cannot be missed. However, it will not be easy as competition for seats will be tough and there is a real need for women to support the women who do decide to put themselves forward.

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There is also evidence of a 'backlash' among men who feel that they will now be disadvantaged. Much of the resistance is based on fear and reflects many of the comments made when women campaigned for the right to vote and stand for selection in the early part of the century. At that time men were concerned that women voters would have an impact on the 'rules of the game' and the existing power structures. As Anne Phillips (1994, p.204) says: 'Those who resist an increase in women's representation no doubt harbour similar fears, anticipating that the women elected will alter the game.' In a narrow sense, men have a right to be fearful because women want to do precisely that - they want to change the rules of the game and they want the parliament and politics of Scotland to be 'different'. But they want it to be different for the benefit of all - men as well as women.

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