

## EDITORIAL: WOMEN IN POLITICS

*Alice Brown*

A recent headline in the Guardian newspaper stated 'Britain holds poor record for women in public life' and the author went on to demonstrate that, in terms of the percentage of women in national parliamentary assemblies, Britain ranks 10th out of the 12 European Community countries. This is hardly news to most women in Scotland who are only too aware of their exclusion from formal arenas of power. If the reporter had pursued his investigations he would have discovered that women in Scotland fare even worse than women in England in terms of political representation. For example, although the representation level of women in the House of Commons stands at just under 9 per cent for the UK as a whole, this rate falls to only 7 per cent for Scotland where just 5 women were elected to represent Scottish parliamentary constituencies from a total of 72 seats at the general election in 1992. A brief examination of the position of women in other public arenas mirrors this poor representation in Parliament. A **Gender Audit** published by **Engender**, the new campaign and research organisation for women in Scotland, draws attention to the fact that Scotland's first woman judge was appointed in 1992 (on a temporary basis), 30 years after the first woman judge in England and Wales; a pilot survey of twelve top Scottish businesses revealed only one company with a woman on the Board of Directors; excluding Children's Panels women have less than 20% representation on public bodies; only 3% of headteachers in Scottish secondary schools are women; and there are no women editors or depute editors in the Scottish national press. By way of contrast women are grossly over-represented in low grade, low paid, insecure jobs, and many more women than men live in poverty in Scotland. This is a dismal record for a country which often prides itself on its egalitarian and democratic culture and values, and reflects another example of the cultural contradictions referred to in Lindsay Paterson's editorial in the last issue of **Scottish Affairs**.

However, if one were to conclude from these statistics on women's representation in politics that women in Scotland are not political then this would be a serious misinterpretation of the role which women do play in Scottish society and politics. Women in Scotland are active in political

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parties, women's organisations, trade unions, local government, and many other societies and groups. What they are denied is access to the powerful posts within these organisations - apart, that is, those posts and organisations which are exclusively designed for women. It is worth noting here that this Journal is unique, as a publication not aimed exclusively at a feminist readership, in having equal representation of men and women on the editorial and advisory teams.

To state, and indeed re-state as I often do in different forums, the poor representation of women in Scottish public life is to risk the charge of 'monitoring bleakness' referred to by Sally Brown in her article in this issue. I agree with Professor Brown that, particularly with regard to research, we should not be confined to collecting data and describing the poor position of women, but that we need to go beyond the role of prophets of doom to reach a better understanding of why the position is so slow to change, and to develop our ideas about the types of changes we seek for the future. But before illustrating ways in which women in Scotland have moved forward in the ways advocated by Sally Brown, it is worth examining the wider political role which 'facts' can play. For example in the 1980s a 'popular' view developed, fuelled by articles in the media, that the position of women in modern society had improved dramatically, and that as a result the demands of the feminist movement have been achieved. Indeed some went so far as to state that 'feminism is dead' and to write the epitaph of the women's movement. Advocates of such a view reminded us that we had a woman Prime Minister, that we have legislation to protect women against sexual discrimination and unequal pay, that the government has given support to Opportunity 2000 - a scheme designed to assist women in advancing their careers - and that many firms in the public and private sector have equal opportunities policies. While acknowledging that the role of women and men in society has changed in response to economic, political and other social forces, and that career opportunities and material benefits for *some* women have improved, we should bear in mind that the position of other women has in many ways deteriorated. One way of demonstrating the real position of women, and to counter the 'myths' which are often promulgated, is to produce (and reproduce where necessary) the data and 'hard' evidence. Also there is a crucial role for monitoring in order that equal opportunities policies move beyond pious statements of policy intention with no mechanism for policy implementation. There is evidence also that women themselves find data useful politically in arguing and demonstrating the case for change within organisations and their workplaces.

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Returning to the example of women's representation in politics, the case for change is illustrated only too well by the evidence. The year 1993 represents the 75th anniversary of women's suffrage and the right to stand for parliamentary election, yet, in 1993, as stated above, there are only 5 women MPs representing Scottish seats. What makes this record more indefensible is that, unlike most other European countries where the representation level for women has risen steadily since the end of the second world war, the position for women in Scotland has not improved over the years. At the general elections in 1959 and 1964, 5 women were elected - the same as in 1993 - and during the period 1979-1982 there was only 1 woman MP in Scotland. These figures demonstrate that the case for a fundamental shift in the balance of power is unanswerable.

Politically active women in Scotland are not complacent about this denial of equal participation in formal politics, and there is evidence to suggest that they are growing impatient with the status quo. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps it was the wider debate about the government of Scotland, concern about the 'democratic deficit', and demands for constitutional change and electoral reform which provided the political space for women's representation to be debated, and helped push the issue up the political agenda. Women in different political parties and organisations responded to the possibility of the establishment of a new Scottish parliament by campaigning for more equal representation, and by developing ideas on how a new parliament in Scotland could be more participatory and responsive to the needs of the people of Scotland. Through the forums of conferences, round-table discussions and the Scottish Constitutional Convention, women activists began to debate and plan the composition and workings of the new parliament. For example, to encourage the participation of more women, emphasis was placed on organising the timing of parliament to coincide with domestic responsibilities, and the provision of caring allowances to make the involvement of carers possible. Improved representation for some women within a Scottish parliament was not viewed as an end in itself, but as the means by which the whole process of political decision-making could be changed, the agenda and style of politics could be altered, and policies of relevance to women could be implemented.

It may have been expected that the result of the general election in 1992 would put an end to these aspirations. This has not been the case. Women activists within political parties are continuing their pressure for reform; women are involved in the different campaign groups for constitutional change which were formed after the general election; and women in local government, trade unions, women's organisations, and other civic bodies are

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keeping the debate alive. One example of this co-operation between different women activists is the establishment of the Women's Co-ordination Group with representatives from the main women's groups in Scotland and individual women. The group has been successful in co-ordinating their efforts in the campaign for improving the position of women in all aspects of Scottish society and political life.

The demands of women have not been entirely ignored by the Conservative government in Scotland. In February 1993 the Scottish Office announced that just under half of the places on the newly established self-governing Hospital Trusts were to be taken up by women; and in April the Scottish Office invited representatives from women's organisations to discuss their different perspectives on the role of women in Scottish society. There is considerable scepticism amongst women as to the significance of these developments. Indeed some see the government's response as a cynical exercise in appointing Conservative women to newly formed quangos, while claiming to be meeting women's demands in Scotland for better representation on public bodies. It is interesting, however, that the government considers there is a need to make some response, however limited and politically motivated.

The position of women in Scottish politics is not going to improve over night. On the contrary it could deteriorate if the government's proposals to re-structure local government proceed. Although the representation of women in local government (an average of 22% in the District Councils and 17% in the Regions) is better than the level of representation in the House of Commons, there is concern that the estimated one-third reduction in the number of councillors will fall disproportionately on women. Women are also all too aware that many of their male colleagues who are willing to march and fight for the democratic right of Scots to have their own Scottish parliament are just as capable of denying the democratic rights of women within their workplaces, political organisations and any new parliament. But just like demands for constitutional change, the demand from women for the right to play an equal part in determining their future will not evaporate. The struggle to change the face of Scottish politics to include women is alive and well.

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