Fair Play South West\(^1\) is the women's equality network of the south west of England, covering the counties of Gloucestershire, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall, Dorset and Wiltshire and the unitary authorities within them. It is made up of individuals and organisations that share a commitment to promoting gender equality and eliminating gender-based discrimination and disadvantage wherever it may exist, and by all available means. Our vision is economic and social equality for women.

Our SW Women's Manifesto\(^2\) was produced in wide consultation with our members and includes the following calls for action in respect of women’s power:

- **17. Continuance and extension to all Parties of all women shortlists for parliamentary candidates.**
- **22. Regulations should require that the hours of meetings and the work of political bodies, quangos and boards are set to encourage a diversity of attendance, including for carers, people with disabilities, the elderly, and people with timed commitments such as the employed or students. The promotion of flexible and/or part-time working at senior levels should be encouraged within organisations, especially by those already working at senior levels.**

Of the 55 MPs within the South West only 11 (20%) are women. A large majority of the MPs are Conservative (51, 92.7%) of whom only 8 (15.7%) are women. Of the 4 Labour MPs 3 (75%) are women. It is noteworthy that the Labour Party has a policy of positive action in selecting candidates for election, including in winnable seats. We believe this policy should be extended to all political parties.

The picture is slightly better at local level, with over 30% women Councillors in several top tier Authorities (up to 41.4% in Labour led Bristol City), so the issues seem greater at national level. There is some anecdotal evidence from our members that women find the prospect of becoming an MP in the UK Parliament singularly unappealing. The impression they have from the public face of the work of Parliament is that the atmosphere is macho, the debates are verbose and sterile, the structures and procedures are arcane and without reason. The good work that MPs do directly on behalf of constituents goes largely unsung and the scrutiny of Select Committees appears often to be inconsequential. There is clearly an image problem which may or may not reflect reality.

Add to that the difficulties associated with the long unsocial hours, the fact that business has to be conducted in person in London and that the working environment

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\(^1\) [www.fairplaysouthwest.org.uk](http://www.fairplaysouthwest.org.uk)

is not child friendly and it is not surprising that it is difficult for many women to contemplate standing for election. Many of these issues are similar to those which make the gender pay gap so difficult to eliminate and require similar solutions.\(^3\)

This means that women’s voices are not being heard in the ‘corridors of power’ and that the needs of their female electorates may not be addressed. Research demonstrates that a particular percentage of women in decision-making positions will tip the balance in terms of decision-making and the representation of women generally. We support the 50/50 campaign.\(^4\)

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