Written submission from the Conservative Women’s Organisation (CWO) (WHC0035)

Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 Election

“Political empowerment is far less likely to be simply the result of quotas - in fact, arguably, such arrangements, by providing a quicker route to political involvement to some women might undermine progress towards political engagement for all women.”

Baroness D’Souza, 20 November 2013, Open Lecture – Parliament Week

The Conservative Women’s Organisation (CWO) does not believe in All Women Shortlists or quotas, so rather than positive discrimination, the CWO believes that more needs to be done to encourage women to initially consider standing for all levels of public office through a pro-active pipeline.

The CWO pipeline is as follows:

- CWO Forums
- CWO Development
- Candidate Support

CWO FORUMS

The CWO pipeline starts with forums - usually panel sessions - that discuss issues that are important to women. These are open to women and men of any political persuasion (and none) and are integrally linked to CWO Development.

Forums are held around the country, organised by the Chair of our national forums committee and by our Regional Chairmen. The national forums are usually held in the Palace of Westminster, with at least a minister or Secretary of State on the panel, along with NGOs, academics, experts and local government staff.

Forums are the perfect start to the pipeline as the vast majority of women first get involved with politics through an interest in a single issue. Our forum subjects are wide-ranging and have included mental health, sexual exploitation, women returning to work, young women voters and women on the frontline.

We talk to women before and after the event and encourage and advise any who may be interested in becoming more political active.

CWO PIPELINE

At the 2015 General Election there were 20 new Conservative women MPs: 56% of these came through the CWO pipeline and CWO Development.

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1 https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/education-programmes/universities-programme/university-teaching-resources/towards-political-engagement-for-women/
CWO DEVELOPMENT

The CWO Development programme was founded in 2010 by the-then national CWO Chairman, Pauline Lucas MBE, and is designed to find, develop, mentor and encourage women who wish to be involved in public life, whether as elected representatives or otherwise. Primarily aimed at women with little or no political experience, it prepares women to present themselves by giving them greater confidence and political knowledge.

By establishing a structured programme of this kind, it has reduced the need for the Conservative Party to contrive systems that give special consideration to the selection of women.

The Development programme teaches transferable skills, which are useful in both their political and professional lives: Whether it’s teaching someone how to make a speech, personal branding, interviews, campaign communications, or increasing confidence.

CANDIDATE SUPPORT

The CWO works closely with Women2Win, which was founded in 2005 by Baroness Jenkin of Kennington and Rt Hon Theresa May MP, to support the Conservative Party’s commitment to select more women to fight winnable seats and elect more Conservative women to Parliament.

Both organisations fundraise to support candidates financially during elections, but, more importantly, give advice, help, on-going training and mentoring opportunities while candidates are looking for a seat and after finding one.

As the CWO is a nationwide network of Conservative Party members, this allows us to call on members (usually local councillors) to help women needing more information about a seat.

TESTIMONIALS

DR TANIA MATHIAS, MP FOR TWICKENHAM (ELECTED IN 2015)

“I owe so much to the CWO. They helped me from my earliest days before I became a local councillor and well before I was elected as MP for Twickenham. The best part of CWO is having friends who have been with me on the journey from council candidate, to councillor; then from Parliamentary Assessment Board, candidate through to MP. The CWO proves that the Conservative Party truly welcomes and supports women in politics.”

PIPELINE RESULTS

Of the women who attended Development workshops in the last Parliament, 44% of them went on to become candidates, of which 94% became MPs.
REBECCA POW, MP FOR TAUNTON DEANE (ELECTED IN 2015)

“The support of the CWO gave me the confidence to pursue getting onto the candidates list, something I may not have had the courage to do otherwise. I attended a couple of workshops, which offered invaluable guidance on topics including USPs, finances and social media. It was also incredibly helpful to have contacts that I could phone for advice on a range of issues relating to becoming a candidate and ultimately succeeding in my election campaign. I have much to thank the CWO for.”

HEIDI ALLEN, MP FOR SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE (ELECTED IN 2015)

“As I started on my journey to try and become an MP, the CWO were my first point of contact. They were supportive, welcoming, no question was too daft and they made me feel that I could do it. I came across the CWO simply by Googling. When you are trying to find out the who-and-the-how of becoming an MP, it’s all rather elusive. I remember coming across the CWO website and thinking: ‘At last! So that’s where I start!’ I attended a couple of training courses on taking your first steps into a role in public life. It felt like a safe environment within which to make mistakes and fine tune my approach.”

CANDIDATE SELECTION

Much work has been done by both the Party, the CWO and Women2Win to encourage associations to look more closely at women candidates. Association selection panels used to be male-dominated, with few women candidates to select, but this has changed substantially. The same proportion of women on the approved candidates list are now becoming candidates.

This change happened remarkably quickly (over a single decade) and the vast majority of selection panels and association members no longer see differences between male and female candidates. There is always work to be done but the change has been organic and not forced, which has helped the process.

In one constituency, all names and gender-identifiers were removed from applications, with the result of a shortlist of all women. For the 2015 election, the Conservative Party had 12 all-women shortlists and 2 all-male.

BOUNDARY REVIEW

As the review is not publishing final changes before the submission date, we are unable to be precise, however, we believe that the Conservative Party may lose 1 or 2 women MPs due to the changes. This is taking into account possible retirements.
SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

As the same proportion of women on the approved candidates list are now becoming candidates, the issue has quickly moved from associations selecting women candidates to women applying to get onto the approved candidates list.

Less women apply, primarily, because men tend to decide for themselves to stand for public office, whereas women tend to need to be asked whether they have considered it. This skews the process - and pipeline - towards men. No political party can simply wait for women to contact them to show an interest and must actively find them.

This in itself is a massive task and something that each individual party should not have to do alone. Just as there is public information about health, tax returns, etc. the Government should fund information about the benefits of standing for public office, while giving grants to organisations that actively encourage more people to stand from minority groups - and women.

There needs to be more positive programming around women in public life: Programmes such as the “fly-on-the-wall” documentary following the independent Kent Police & Crime Commissioner, Ann Barnes, discouraged any number of women to consider themselves in a similar role.

There also needs to be wider, public condemnation of the everyday sexism shown by the media and on social media.

Perhaps one of the better adverts for women in politics is a woman Prime Minister - and we have high hopes that Mrs May will continue to encourage more women to stand for public life at all levels.

September 2016

ABOUT THE CWO

The CWO is the grassroots network that provides support and focus for women members of the UK Conservative Party. It reaches out to women in all parts of the community and campaigns on issues of particular concern to women both nationally and internationally. Over recent years, the CWO’s primary focus has been to encourage women to be more politically active and to get elected at all levels.

The National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations’ Central Women's Advisory Committee (CWAC) was founded in 1919, although not affiliated to the Conservative Party until 1928. Its roots go back to the Grand Ladies Council of the Primrose League of 1885. It changed its name to the Women's National Advisory Committee (WNAC) in 1951 and again to the Conservative Women's National Committee (CWNC) in April 1982. It changed to its current title in April 2007.

By the early 1990s the CWO had more than a quarter of a million members and became the largest women's political organisation in the Western world.