

Jobs for the boys Westminster's macho culture of 'ignorance, self-interest and stereotype' must change

When I first entered parliament more than 18 months ago, it hit me how anachronistic and detached from reality the place is. Yes, it's beautiful - a site of great history and a powerful symbol of our democratic heritage. And as the only Green MP, I feel honoured to be here.

But it should be clear to anyone familiar with the unreformed nature of the House of Commons, where traditionalists cling to archaic language, deeply inefficient processes, and family-unfriendly working habits as though we had never reached the 21st century, that things need to change.

Perhaps the most damaging manifestation of this failure to move with the times is the male-dominated "old boys" culture that still pervades Westminster - to the detriment of women both inside and outside the parliamentary bubble.

Within this bizarre micro-climate, old-fashioned gender stereotypes are revived with alarming regularity, a public-schoolboy mentality hampers the quality of political debate, and men wield a disproportionate influence over the policy-making that affects us all.

One need look no further than David Cameron's brazen comments to MPs Angela Eagle and Nadine Dorries in the chamber earlier this year for clear evidence that sexism is still rife in the "mother of all parliaments".

Following his cringe-worthy appeal to Eagle to "calm down, dear" and faux concern over Dorries' "frustration" during Prime Minister's Questions - tellingly met with infantile giggles from MPs - all the prime minister could offer by way of patronising apology was that his words "just came out wrong".

Less well reported were the charming remarks made by the

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Caroline Lucas



chairman of the Scottish affairs committee, Ian Davidson, who threatened to give SNP MP Eilidh Whiteford "a doing" if details of a meeting reached the media.

In the real world, employers would look into bullying language and act. Yet neither the parliamentary authorities nor the Labour party intervened in this instance. Such language is not tolerated in normal workplaces - why should it be excused in the Commons?

It is lamentable too, in this day and age, that people still often pay more attention to the appearance of female politicians than the words coming out of their mouths. In a recent newspaper interview, I was described as "neat and well-spoken", wearing a "sensible grey outfit". Harmless enough, but it was an irrelevant detail that I doubt would have made it into a feature about Cameron or Ed Miliband - or indeed any of the male politicians who go about their business wearing even more "sensible" suits than mine.

Underlying all these issues is the underrepresentation of women in parliament. Men still outnumber women by five to one in Westminster, which proportionally puts us well below countries such as Afghanistan, Cuba and Sudan on female political representation.

Until we see movement on this front, ignorance, self-interest and stereotypes will remain serious obstacles to progress on crucial issues such as the pay gap between men and women, rights for temporary and part-time workers, childcare provision, and funding for rape crisis and domestic violence centres. And as it becomes increasingly clear that the coalition government's reckless austerity drive will hit women the hardest, change has never been more necessary.

Caroline Lucas, MP for Brighton Pavilion and leader of the Green party

From the blog
Sexist abuse
online

Several female writers thrust their heads above the parapet to talk about the sexist abuse they suffered online this week and Jane Martinson in the women's blog asked why **misogyny** appeared rampant. "If we ignore it because we don't want to be seen as pathetic, lacking in toughness (or lacking 'ball' in that no-not-very-sexist cliché), then we will have no part in the forming of this new online discourse," she wrote.

Some recommended ignoring the abuse and others suggested calling the police to deal with threats of physical harm. *JB10294* wrote: "Don't feed the trolls. In the odd case where it's persistent and obsessive then that's a different matter and perhaps worth police attention." Anonymity was the answer, said *century21girl*. "I used to post online with my own name and on here with a link in my profile to my own blog. Many men took this as an open invitation to email and attempt to set up nights out. Unbelievable."

Several people asked why the abuse hurled at men wasn't attracting the same level of debate. *snowcat3* wrote: "Virtually every article in Guardian Women is saturated with 'This affects men too'. It is pathetic, like a spoilt child jumping up and down because a few minutes it is not being given any attention." And *AlanaH* wrote: "haven't mentioned anything about X Factor. Or Downton Abbey ... or (shock horror) - men! Crikey, on a women's blog? Whodathoughtit?"

Others took up the point about the abuse of anyone seen as "different". *YouSirName* wrote: "Anyone identifying themselves as not male (or straight or whatever) 'stands out' even more than might ordinarily be felt to be the case. Trolls attack whatever sticks out."

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