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Too few women? Read my lips: I don't care

No laws bar us from politics, so cut the squealing about there being only four female Cabinet ministers

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The phone rang: another periodical's editor wanting a why-oh-why rant about the dearth of women in the new Cabinet. Four out of 23 gives us a female percentage one-third that of Spain, half that of France and the Netherlands; in the EU only the Portuguese Cabinet has a smaller proportion of women.

Well, a girl likes to oblige and I come of a liberated generation, fists poised to smash the glass ceiling in the conservatory of life. But after a few seconds' thought I sadly replied: "Sorry. Just realised: I don't care." Feminist guilt flared and swiftly receded. There have been women in Cabinet and the great offices of state, there will be others. No law bars the door, there is no quota against us. Tokenism is anathema.

It is just that, surveying the talent at his disposal, David Cameron picked women only for the Home Office, Wales, Environment and Party chair. If I thought for a moment that he rejected numerous shining talents with a cry of "Ugh, girlies!", I would be the first to pull his hair and scream like Violet Elizabeth Bott. But I don't think so. This is a fascinating new coalition, a chance for rational, non-tribal government. It already has shown a willingness to compromise, eat humble pie and make startling appointments such as Labour's Frank Field as poverty czar.

My main feeling is a heartfelt wish that stirrers, gossips and malcontents would damn well leave it alone for a few months to see how it works; and that harrumpers on the Tory and Lib Dem fringes would shut up about their sacred principles and concentrate on immediate problems.

Nor is this the moment for gender politics. If you really want to play the PC game, you can claim that Baroness Warsi ticks four boxes: Asian, Muslim, female, former single mother. But it's a silly game anyway. While male and female have broadly different psychologies, these are not predictably distributed. I heard an indignation-meeting on *Woman's Hour* last week about there being no women on the party negotiating teams; but you can't deny that the deal did work. Moreover, some women negotiate like Genghis Khan — Mrs Thatcher springs to mind, crying: "Non!" Compared with her, Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg are true sisters, and I mean that kindly.

As for relying on women to bring gentle compassion to the rough world of politics, I refer you to Ann Widdecombe, erstwhile prisons minister and duffer-up of Michael Howard. Some men are thoughtful, tactful and appeasing; some women fierce and doctrinaire. You can't generalise.

Besides, the assumption that Parliament or Cabinet should fully "reflect the diversity of the electorate" is ridiculous. You work with what's there: and besides, there are plenty of prominent women who absolutely do not speak for me, and there are Muslims, ethnic minority members, gays and disabled people in public life whose views are anathema to many within their category. If a thoughtful and (I honestly believe) unbiased Prime Minister chooses more men than women right now, fine. The only important thing — whether in politics, science and engineering, media, churches or banks — is that doors should not be closed by law, that girls should be equally educated and encouraged to lead and to try non-traditional subjects, and that family life should be respected for both genders. With, of course, a reasonable recognition that biology hampers women more. For a while.

The irony of modern times is that in Britain, most of that has been in place for years. Law has gone as far as it should; even parliamentary hours were adjusted. Now we must wait for the culture to catch up. Culture is about personalities, feelings, lifestyles and images, none of which are any business of the government machine.

If public life is harder — hence rarer — for women, it is frankly less the fault of the hardware — the system — than of the software of public feeling, and media that feed it. Men suffer class gibes (Toff! Gorbals Mick!) but women get additional reams of tosh about yummy-mummies, cougars and battleaxes. They are bombarded with comment on their wardrobe and sexiness. Or indeed that of their aides: yesterday saw a "news" piece about the fact that the Home Secretary's political aide may have been a ("34-22-32") inspiration for a character in her sister's raunchy novel.

Oh, and when was the last time a male party chairman going into Downing Street was asked to hang his coat on the railings so that photographers could get a prettier shot of his suit? OK, the Warsi outfit was a pink salwar kameez, as rarely worn by Eric Pickles or Brian Mawhinney. But all the same the worry about offending the fashion police is a mainly female burden, and not one that law can put right, only culture. Admittedly, male politicians haven't helped by shoving highly groomed wives forward in the campaign, but that is not something to legislate about. A gentle jeer will do. Nyaaah!

The cultural inequality that makes too many women prefer to hide goes across many professions. When was the last time a male Olympic double-gold medallist was subjected to speculation about his "dirty" private life, as Rebecca Adlington was by the creepy Frankie Boyle? The caricaturing of females as objects or witches is an old and tiresome habit of insecure men and spiteful women, but even in this celebrity age it is eroding. I was told as a *Today* presenter in the Eighties that women were heard as one of five things: schoolmarm, giggler, vamp, mumsy or nag.

I doubt anyone would say that now, and when the current editor of that programme did express weird ideas about women he rightly met with jeers, and diminished his own reputation. This very article will attract sexist contumely on the message-board, and green-ink letters still bring me demented assumptions about the influence of ovaries on opinions, but these attitudes are ebbing. They really are.

Women will continue to reach Parliament, and to rise, if they have the ability and can cheerfully ignore the hectoring of dinosaur males and catty fashionistas. Others will fade: some such as Estelle Morris because they feel inadequate to the battle and honestly say so, others such as Jacqui Smith because they aren't up to it. A few, alas, may step down because exposure hurts. But politics has always culled weaklings. Some women will succeed, and numbers matter less than quality and policy. So no. I don't care. Sorry.

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