

### Women-only short lists

The Queen's Speech on June 20 contained the following promise (or threat, depending on your point of view): "My Government will prepare legislation to allow political parties to make positive moves to increase the representation of women in public life". This was a weasel way of informing the nation that Labour will amend the Sex Discrimination Act to permit constituency parties, when selecting a parliamentary candidate, to impose a women-only short list.

I here introduce Mr. Parmjit Dhanda, newly-elected Labour MP for the ancient English city of Gloucester, formerly the Roman city of Glevum. I respectfully salute Mr Dhanda for having achieved selection by his constituency Labour party.

Mr Dhanda was not selected from any politically correct ethnic-only shortlist. No restraint had been imposed on the freedom of choice of his constituency Labour party. They chose Mr Dhanda because they believed he was the best person to represent Gloucester in our nation's Parliament at Westminster. If under Labour's new proposals a women-only short list is imposed on that city where will Mr Dhanda be?

On June 27 Mr Dhanda made a graceful maiden speech in the debate on the Address. As protocol required, he mentioned his predecessor in the seat, Tessa Kingham. He carefully explained how, after a mere four years in Parliament as a so-called "Blair babe", Tessa became huffy and frustrated by "the pace of change or, as she would say, the slowness of change in institutions such as the House of Commons and some of the jousting that goes with it". The indignant Tessa poured out her resentful feelings to readers of *The Guardian*, not having learnt in four years that great British institutions can be resistant to the current itch for instant change.

Mr Dhanda shocked the House of Commons by reading out comments made by his local paper, *The Citizen*, when he was first selected as the Labour candidate.

"Labour can kiss goodbye to this seat. They might as well hand it over to the Conservatives now. The Labour Party in Gloucester has made the same mistake as the Tories in Cheltenham when they chose a black barrister as candidate and handed the seat to the Liberal Democrats. Mr. Dhanda could withdraw to allow another candidate to be adopted . . ."

**Hon. Members:** Shame.

**Mr. Dhanda:** I am not making this up, honestly. *The Citizen* said:

"Things were so much easier when candidates were picked by a handful of party elders in a smoke filled room rather than the whole party membership of between 400 and 500 people . . . Sad to say, many of the voters of Gloucestershire have yet to reach the advanced state of consciousness to accept a foreigner as their local MP."

The people of Gloucester proved that they are better than that, went on Mr Dhanda, and I stand here as the very proud Member of Parliament for Gloucester. "The people of Gloucester are its greatest asset, and I shall do my utmost to deliver for them a city that is fit for them - a modern, confident and dynamic city that is fit for the 21st century".

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The Gloucester Romans would have applauded, but now I come to the point. Mr Dhanda also said: "I very much welcome the part of the Queen's Speech that will enable more women to be elected to the House, and I hope that people from ethnic minority backgrounds will also be encouraged to stand". Clearly the estimable Mr Dhanda is missing the point. I will try to explain it, step by step. The Sex Discrimination Act is based upon the moral principle that it is wrong to discriminate against women because they are women, or against men because they are men. Sex (or gender as it is now often called) should make no difference when it comes to choosing someone for a particular position.

Being a moral principle, this admits of no exceptions. What is right is right in all situations, and what is wrong, wrong.

The theory that the membership of the House of Commons should exactly reflect the position in the country falls foul of the principle that an MP represents his or her constituents, and democracy demands that they have an unfettered choice.

If you allow an exception for women then logically you must allow an exception for all other under-represented groups. In no time at all we shall have disabled-only shortlists, old-age pensioner short lists (I would qualify for that), fattist, thinnest and dim-wittist shortlists. And also, as I have said, ethnic-minority shortlists.

What shall we do when these conflict? How shall we reconcile the right of a Mr Dhanda to demand an ethnic-only shortlist and the right of a Tessa Kingham to a women-only shortlist?

These puzzles arise from the simple fact that those who are in charge of our affairs will not think out the consequences of what they are about.

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