

## **A Woman's Place is in the House?**

It was standing room only last Wednesday, the second time that Sapphire Partners, The Prince's Trust Women's Leadership Group and Withers had come together to organise a thought-provoking event on the position of women in the workplace. This debate, on the role of women in British politics, was lively: while there was predictable agreement that there are, at 19 per cent, too few women in Parliament (not to mention positions of power within it) there was disagreement on what to do about it between the party spokeswomen and the highly engaged audience. The topic was timely as Harriet Harman MP had stood in earlier that day for Gordon Brown at Prime Minister's question time. If you attended the event, we hope that you enjoyed it. We are eager for your feedback on follow-up events and speakers you would suggest. If however, you were unable to join us, we thought you would be interested in a summary of the main views that emerged from the evening.

The speakers and panel were, regardless of party politics, inspirational and compelling, with Maria Eagle representing the Labour Party, Jo Swinson, the Liberal Democrats and Theresa May the Conservative Party. Maria Eagle emphasised that, although the 1997 election saw an extensive intake of women, the issue of women in politics still presents a real and ongoing challenge and it is important that women's participation in politics is a core part of the focus of all parties. Although there was controversy about the merits of all-women shortlists, Maria regards it as a mechanism that works. Other ways of promoting women's participation in politics are mentoring and networking.

Jo Swinson focused on answering the question of why only 6% of Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament are female and concluded that possible reasons include incumbency, the high cost and time of engaging in parliament (not helped by training weekends and conferences) and women's lack of confidence in relation to entering politics, possibly exacerbated by school girls being exposed to messages that imply politics is not for them. Although some women, like Jo herself, take on a part-time job to compensate for the costs, the gender wage gap of 17% exposes women to a further barrier to entering politics.

Theresa May argued that more objectivity is essential in the selection processes to ensure that candidates should be assessed on competence. The competencies required by an MP include conviction, leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills. She acknowledged that women may be put off from entering politics as the disadvantages appear to outweigh the benefits and feels that it is vital to have positive role models convincing women that it is a worthwhile job and can make a real difference to people's lives.

Esther Rantzen spoke from her perspective as an independent candidate, now encountering the challenge and excitement of the experience. Her main advice was to "have the confidence to dare to fail".

The Q&A was lively, made all the more so by moderator Carole Stone. Key issues debated included:

- All-women shortlists - the speakers and audience were divided on their impact.
- The reasons holding women back - is it prejudice or do women just not want a role in politics?
- How to get men more engaged in promoting women in politics?
- How to measure the competence and impact of an MP.

The good news is that we have come a long way since 1918 when women were first eligible to be elected. However, the events' participants recognised that there is still a long way to go to in order to achieve equal representation in politics. The UK is currently ranked 68<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of our representation of women in parliament which is unacceptable given our liberal society and the calibre of available female talent. In common with the private sector, women are needed in all forums of decision-making and at all levels of parliament.