

Women in politics

Parliament's president Jerzy Buzek is spearheading calls for electoral quotas to improve women's participation in politics. **Martin Banks** reports

It started on 9 March 1911 in just a handful of European countries and observed by a few thousand people. But, last week, the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day was commemorated by millions and with events all round the world, including a high-profile conference in parliament around the theme "women in politics". In an opening address, the institution's president Jerzy Buzek said that while much progress had been achieved in gender equality over the past century "much more still needs to be done".

Buzek himself said he had set an example as president, with 54 per cent of his cabinet being women, including his chief of staff. But he warned that society was still "plagued by lack of equality and justice" for women. Calling for electoral quotas at

national and European level, the Polish MEP said he hoped that by the time of the next European elections in three years "at least" 50 per cent of MEPs will be female.

His demand for quotas was endorsed by another keynote speaker, former Irish president Mary Robinson, who said there can be "significant change in relatively short periods. "I have witnessed the transformative impact of women's empowerment in two countries, Rwanda and Liberia, and I welcome the fact that, today, a growing number of women hold positions of political authority around the world," she said. She added, "But for countless millions of women and girls, there is little that we can celebrate. The situations they find themselves in are truly intolerable."

When it comes to women's political empowerment in EU countries, Robinson said there has been "steady progress" over the decades in equal treatment legislation, with landmark cases of the European Court of Justice and national courts, and initiatives by parliament itself. And yet, she pointed out, women's participation at the political level in Europe is still faltering. "Clearly, the traditional barriers remain strong enough to deter or defeat women candidates." Reasons for this, she suggested, include a lack of adequate financial resources, disproportionate family obligations, lack of confidence in a predominantly male culture, and a preference of many women to serve in civil society organisations where the culture is more friendly and gender sensitive.

Robinson asked, "Are we in Europe prepared to really tackle these and other barriers over a 10-year transformative period? Are countries prepared to introduce national quotas for local and parliamentary elections for a decade to correct the existing imbalance? Are the EU and national governments prepared to provide financial resources to train and resource women candidates at local, national and EU level?"

Ex-MEP and French government minister Nicole Fontaine, one of only two female presidents in parliament's history, said that while there had been "significant" progress, she asked, "Why was it that, when I was elected president in 1999, it had been 20 years since the last woman president?" Fontaine, 23 years an MEP, urged parliament to be the "vigilant custodian" of gender equality issues, but warned, "parliament cannot act alone and that is why national governments must



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mobilise efforts to ensure we have greater female participation in politics.”

However, Nikki Sinclair, an independent MEP, who was among those in the main chamber for the event, said she “strongly disagreed” with Buzek and Robinson on the need for quotas. “I believe all forms of discrimination to be wrong, as even positive discrimination creates victims. Women need barriers to their progress to be removed, and issues such as the need for improved childcare facilities, particularly in certain member states, need to be addressed. “The ideal person for the role of MEP is the one who is best qualified for the job, regardless of gender. That is real equality.”

According to Brigitte Triems, president of the European Women’s Lobby (EWL), “the slow progress on equality represents a democratic deficit and undermines an EU that promotes human rights and democracy as its central values.” She said the EU “can and must take concrete action to change this,” pointing out that in 2009 the EWL launched a campaign demanding binding measures for parity of democracy in all EU institutions. The “50/50” campaign attracted the backing

of thousands of prominent supporters from the European and national levels but she said the EWL “is still waiting for these signatories to deliver on their commitment”.

“It is obvious that years of declarations and minor actions have not achieved the necessary change. To challenge the current structures of decision-making, we need to adopt decisive and multi-dimensional measures. These must include targets and minimum standards for the representation of women, changes in political party structures and selection systems, but also socioeconomic support and measures for reconciling work and private life.” ★

- Ten countries in the EU have over 27 per cent proportion of women in the lower house of parliament;
- They are led by Sweden at 45 per cent;
- The majority are below 23 per cent and two countries are down to less than 10 per cent of women members;
- Sixty per cent of the European parliament’s staff are women;
- More than half of its employees who require ‘expert knowledge’ are female;
- 35.2 per cent of MEPs are women, just over a third. The average in national parliaments is 24 per cent;
- Forty per cent of the ‘top-ranking’ parliamentary posts, including committee chairs, quaestors and bureau members, are filled by women;
- Worldwide, only three per cent of major company boards are chaired by a woman.

Gender equality: a driving force for economic development in the Oslo Region

The Oslo region is one of the most competitive regions in Norway. The work to promote gender equality has been an ongoing effort over the last 40 years – this has given results in terms of high birth rates, high participation rate of women in the labor market and sustainable economic growth.

Gender equality concerns democracy, equal opportunities and participation, but it is also a tool to develop smart, innovative and sustainable economic growth. An increasing body of evidence shows that companies and countries that practice gender diversity show high scores on a number of economic performance indicators.

On 8th March, the Norwegian policy on gender equality – from gender quotation in company board rooms to extensive parental leave schemes – will be presented and discussed by speakers with hands-on-experience from recent developments from governments and business, and by the European Women’s Lobby.

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Gender equality:
A driving force for
economic development

Norway House
Rue Aichemède, 17 - Brussels

Moderator	Petter Sarlien, Counselor for Anti-Discrimination and Gender Equality, Norwegian Mission to the EU
14:30 - 14:45:	Introduction to the seminar Oda Heien Sletnes, Ambassador of Norway to the EU, and Signe Astrid Engli, Director of the Oslo Region European Office
14:45 - 15:15:	Challenges for Gender Equality in Europe Anna Elomäki, Policy officer social, employment, and economic affairs, European Women’s Lobby
15:15 - 15:45:	Why Norway does well on the World Economic Forum ranking on gender equality Arni Hole, Director General, Ministry of Children and Equality, Norway
15:45 - 16:15:	Female Future – Mobilising Talents Into Top Management Positions and Boardrooms Nina Soll, project leader, Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises (NHO), Norway
16:15 - 16:30:	Coffee break
16:30 - 17:00:	Equality and Diversity as business case Speaker to be confirmed
17:00 - 18:00:	Panel debate: Prospects for the immediate future
18:00 - 20:00:	Reception

Tuesday 8th March, 14:30-18:00. Reception from 18:00-20:00
Norway House, Rue Aichemède 17, Brussels - Metro: Schuman
Register by 1st March by sending an email to:
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