

# Women MPs bullied and abused in Commons

Level 3 | Advanced

## 1 Key Vocabulary

Fill the gaps using these key words from the text:

oversee	put-down	resign	espouse
wiggle (vb)	mockery	outlaw (vb)	promotion

1. If you \_\_\_\_\_ a cause, you support it actively.
2. If you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you move it rapidly from side to side.
3. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a critical remark intended to make another person feel bad.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ is the process of ridiculing the actions of other people.
5. If you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you supervise it on an official basis.
6. If you \_\_\_\_\_ from a job or a position, you quit that job or position.
7. If something is \_\_\_\_\_ it is prohibited.
8. If you get a \_\_\_\_\_, you get a better job or position within an organisation.

## 2 What do you know?

1. What is the name of the lower chamber of the British Parliament?
2. What are British members of parliament usually known as?
3. What are the three main parties in the British Parliament?
4. What is another word for Conservative?
5. Who are or were the 'Blair babes'?
6. Who chairs the debates in the British Parliament?

Now look in the text and check your answers.

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Jackie Ashley

The most comprehensive survey of female MPs ever conducted has revealed the reactionary attitudes to women held by many MPs in the British Parliament. Based on interviews with 83 current and recent MPs, it contains some frank comments about certain male MPs making sexist remarks and gestures as women try to speak in the Commons.

The study, *Whose Secretary Are You, Minister?* was overseen by Professor Joni Lovenduski of Birkbeck College, London, and Margaret Moran MP. They gathered more than 100 hours of taped interviews, to be placed in the British Library.

When Gillian Shephard arrived in the House of Commons as a new Tory MP in 1987 she was confused to find herself and her fellow women MPs being called Betty. "There was a Conservative MP who called us all Betty," she recalls, "and when I said, 'Look, you know my name isn't Betty', he said, 'Ah, but you're all the same, so I call you all Betty, it's easier'."

Barbara Follett says: "I remember some Conservatives whenever a Labour woman got up to speak taking their breasts - their imaginary breasts - in their hands and wiggle them and say 'melons' as we spoke." When scores of female MPs - 120 in all - arrived in the Commons in 1997, Labour's Claire Curtis-Thomas assumed that the red ribbons tied to coat hangers were for Aids day, only to be told they were for members to hang up their swords.

Another new MP, Yvette Cooper, found it hard to persuade Commons officials that she was not a researcher or secretary. Jackie Ballard, a Liberal Democrat who left parliament at the last election, cites a leading Tory MP who kept up a stream of remarks just out of hearing of the Speaker, "maybe about someone's legs or someone being a lesbian . . . if he worked for me he'd probably be sacked". The same MP is reported as announcing, while drunk in the chamber, that he'd like to "make love to" a nearby woman.

The interviews show how even after the arrival of the "Blair babes", female MPs were expected to stick to "women's issues", such as health and education. Several complain of the put-downs they experienced

when stepping on to traditionally male territory. When Labour's Dari Taylor resigned from the defence select committee - one of only two women on it - the chairman, Bruce George, stood up and said: "Well, I have to make this announcement: one down, one to go."

The hostility from some male MPs was astonishing. Even those who publicly espoused equality were furious to see women getting promotion. One current member of the cabinet was asked, when she was promoted: "Oh, you've had a very fast rise, who have you been sleeping with?" Male MPs and officials seemed reluctant to accept the new Labour women, many of them in their 30s and 40s. Some simply could not believe that youngish women could be members of parliament.

Many female MPs say the introduction of "family friendly" hours have improved things, undermining the old male drinking culture. But it isn't perfect yet. Sarah Teather, the new Liberal Democrat MP, says: "Lots of people say it's like an old boys' club. I've always said, to me it feels rather more like a teenage public school\* -- you know, a public school full of teenage boys."

Worse than all the sexism and the mockery, women MPs are angry that their achievements are not recognised. They insist that they have brought a new feminised agenda to Westminster politics, in particular, the rise of childcare to the top of the domestic agenda. Many other policies are cited too. Marion Roe, a Tory MP, is proud of her bill outlawing female circumcision in 1985 -- "when I did that, nobody knew what female circumcision was". Ruth Kelly cites parental leave, while Teresa Gorman says bluntly: "I put menopause on the map."

*The Guardian Weekly* 2004-12-10, page 11

\* *Note: In the UK, so-called 'public' schools are not public at all. They are private schools for the children of rich parents.*

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## 3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer in each case:

- Which statement best reflects the main idea of the text?
  - All British male MPs have a negative attitude to female MPs.
  - Many British male MPs have a negative attitude to female MPs.
  - A few British male MPs have a negative attitude to female MPs.
- What, in particular, seems to make male MPs angry?
  - Women MPs getting special treatment.
  - Women MPs getting promotion.
  - Women MPs getting equal pay.
- What, in particular, makes women MPs angry?
  - The sexism of their male colleagues.
  - The fact that their achievements are not recognised.
  - The fact that the House of Commons is full of old-fashioned practices.
- What, according to some female MPs, does the House of Commons feel like?
  - A teenage public school.
  - A gentleman's club.
  - The British Library.

## 4 Vocabulary development - collocations

Find the verbs that collocate with these nouns or noun phrases:

- to \_\_\_\_\_ a survey
- to \_\_\_\_\_ an attitude or a view
- to \_\_\_\_\_ promotion
- to \_\_\_\_\_ an achievement
- to \_\_\_\_\_ a remark
- to \_\_\_\_\_ a put-down
- to \_\_\_\_\_ an announcement
- to \_\_\_\_\_ something on the map

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## 5 Vocabulary development - adjectives

Find the adjectives in the text that mean:

- |   |                        |
|---|------------------------|
| 1. complete                                   | 2. resistant to change |
| 3. extremely surprising                       | 4. very angry          |
| 5. unwilling                                  | 6. open and honest     |
| 7. showing prejudice against the opposite sex | 8. honoured            |

## 6 Grammar focus - gerund and infinitive

Look at these examples from the text:

... as women try to speak ....

... I remember them taking ...

Both 'try' and 'remember' can be followed by either the gerund or the infinitive but with a different meaning.

To *try to do* something means 'to attempt', while to *try doing* something means 'to experiment'.

To *remember to do* something means not to forget to do it, while to *remember doing* something means to recall the action later.

Fill the gaps with either the gerund or the infinitive of the verbs in brackets.

- Several women MPs remember male MPs \_\_\_\_\_ sexist gestures. [MAKE]
- There was a lot of noise when they tried \_\_\_\_\_. [SPEAK]
- It's the election next week. I must remember \_\_\_\_\_. [VOTE]
- All the women MPs remember \_\_\_\_\_ the House of Commons for the first time. [ENTER]
- During the debates they tried \_\_\_\_\_ the comments but without success. [IGNORE]
- Try \_\_\_\_\_ your coat off if you're hot, but don't hang it on that hook. It's reserved for swords. [TAKE]

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## 7 Discussion

How does this compare with the situation in your country?

Do you have women MPs?

Are there more male or female MPs?

Do you think positive discrimination to try to attract more female MPs is a good thing?

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## KEY

### 1 Key Words

- |            |           |             |              |
|------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|
| 1. espouse | 2. wiggle | 3. put-down | 4. mockery   |
| 5. oversee | 6. resign | 7. outlawed | 8. promotion |

### 2 What do you know?

- |   |                |
|---|----------------|
| 1. House of Commons                       | 2. MPs         |
| 3. Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat | 4. Tory        |
| 5. Young female Labour MPs                | 6. The Speaker |

### 3 Comprehension Check

1. b; 2. b; 3. b; 4. a

### 4 Vocabulary Development 1 Collocations

- |            |               |         |              |
|------------|---------------|---------|--------------|
| 1. conduct | 2. hold       | 3. get  | 4. recognise |
| 5. make    | 6. experience | 7. make | 8. put       |

### 5 Adjectives

- |                  |                |                |            |
|------------------|----------------|----------------|------------|
| 1. comprehensive | 2. reactionary | 3. astonishing | 4. furious |
| 5. reluctant     | 6. frank       | 7. sexist      | 8. proud   |

### 6 Grammar Focus

- |             |              |            |
|-------------|--------------|------------|
| 1. making   | 2. to speak  | 3. to vote |
| 4. entering | 5. to ignore | 6. taking  |