**Women first entered the House of Commons as MPs after the Parliament Act of 1918. Professor Caitríona Beaumont examines the role of women in changing the political landscape in the UK, and the impacts they have made in positively transforming the lives of others.**

It is no exaggeration to claim that the opening up of the House of Commons to women MPs from 1918 transformed British politics. Despite the fact that female representatives remain a minority within the UK Parliament (following the 2019 general election there are 220, making up a record 34% of seats in the Commons), women MPs have succeeded in making the voices of women heard at the very heart of political and public life. On 6 March 2020 the names of 100 women killed by men in 2019 were read out in Parliament to mark International Women’s Day. Would that have happened without female MPs sitting in Parliament? Would it have been possible for the 2020 Domestic Abuse Bill to pass through Parliament?

Looking back on the contributions of women of all parties who have served in the Commons since 1918 it is abundantly clear that female MPs have done much to improve the everyday lives of British women. Rachel Reeves MP writes that this is a story about how they have ‘advanced the rights of women’ in a whole range of ways including fighting for equal pay, the guardianship of children, reproductive rights, access to childcare, child benefits and maternity leave. Reeves declares that ‘having women in Parliament … has got onto the statute book crucial legislation that has transformed the lives and opportunities of women’.[[1]](https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/women-in-parliament-1918-2020#footnote1)

**Women in a men's House**

The doors of Parliament were prised open to allow women in following the enactment of the 1918 Parliament (Qualification) of Women Act. This reform was introduced nine months after the extension of the parliamentary vote to women over 30 who met the required property qualifications. The Act allowed women aged 21 and above to stand as candidates in general elections. In that year’s December election 17 female candidates stood and Constance Markievicz, representing the Irish republican party, Sinn Féin, became the first woman elected to the British Parliament. As a republican she refused to take the oath of allegiance to the king and so declined to take up her seat.[[2]](https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/women-in-parliament-1918-2020#footnote2)

***Constance Markievicz: A biography***

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Just under a year later, following a by-election in November 1919, Nancy Astor won her place in history as the first woman to enter the House of Commons.

**Lady Astor's Fight from *The New Illustrated*, marking the entry of the first female MP into the House of Commons**

This edition of *The New Illustrated* celebrates wealthy American-born heiress Nancy Astor becoming the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons in 1919.

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Representing the Unionist (now Conservative Party) seat in Plymouth Sutton, previously held by her husband, Astor was initially seen as an unlikely supporter of women’s rights. Despite not having participated in the campaign for the women’s vote, she quickly won the support of former suffrage campaigners and proved herself to be, in her own words, ‘an ardent feminist’.[[3]](https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/women-in-parliament-1918-2020#footnote3)

For nearly two years Astor was the only woman in Parliament, working alongside some 650 male MPs, many of whom were not at all happy to have a woman invade this traditionally male space. Some refused to acknowledge or speak to her, apart from shouting at her when she asked questions from the floor of the Commons. In a 1956 interview for BBC Radio’s *Woman’s Hour*, Astor recalled Winston Churchill telling her that her arrival in Parliament made him feel ‘like a woman had entered my bathroom and I had nothing to protect myself with except a sponge’.

Churchill, like other male MPs, had to get used to being ‘exposed’ in front of women. In 1921 the Liberal MP Margaret Wintringham joined Astor in Parliament and the two became great friends. Just like Astor, Wintringham benefitted from her involvement in national women’s organisations, for example the rural Women’s Institutes, the National Council of Women and the Townswomen’s Guilds. These extra-parliamentary connections were crucial in providing solidarity and support for female MPs working in a hostile environment. Of the 38 women MPs elected before 1945, many were active in wider female networks. They include: Megan Lloyd George (Liberal), Eleanor Rathbone (Independent), Edith Picton-Turbervill (Labour), Mavis Tate (Conservative), Florence Horsbrugh (Conservative), Thelma Cazalet-Keir (Conservative) and Irene Ward (Conservative).

**Women’s voices and victories**

Despite being a minority in the House of Commons, women MPs have worked hard to introduce legislation of benefit to women, their families and to wider society. Astor and Wintringham played a pivotal role in the passing of the 1925 Equal Guardianship of Children Act, which for the first time gave mothers the right to be joint guardians of their children.

The passing of the 1945 Family Allowances Act (now known as Child Benefit), owes its existence to the long campaign waged by Eleanor Rathbone. Rathbone, with the support of women’s organisations and some MPs, including Edith Summerskill (Labour), Mavis Tate and Nancy Astor, succeeded in having the payment made directly to mothers. This was crucial if women were to have some financial independence within the family. In 1975 another woman MP, Barbara Castle (Labour), insisted that the new Child Benefit Act guaranteed payments be made directly to mothers.

Castle, as Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity, is best known for introducing the 1970 Equal Pay Act. The demand for equal pay united many women MPs at Westminster throughout the interwar years. Thelma Cazalet-Keir led the campaign for equal pay for teachers and civil servants throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Despite their party differences, in 1941 Nancy Astor and Edith Summerskill shared a platform in Trafalgar Square to demand that the government pay equal compensation to women and men for war injuries (the government scheme paid less to women).

Their demands were met, and this victory spurred them and others to campaign even more vigorously for equal pay. On 9 March 1954 four women MPs from different parties, Patricia Ford (Ulster Unionist), Irene Ward (Conservative), Edith Summerskill and Barbara Castle, jointly presented a petition of 80,000 signatures to Parliament demanding legislation to introduce equal pay.[[5]](https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/women-in-parliament-1918-2020#footnote5)

Their efforts proved successful and equal pay for women working in the public sector (i.e. state employees) was introduced on a gradual basis from 1954. It took another 16 years for Barbara Castle to push through the 1970 Equal Pay Act, which extended this principle to the private sector. Despite this triumph, 50 years later in 2020 women in the UK are still paid on average less than men (the gender pay gap). The 2010 Equality Act, guided through Parliament by MPs Harriet Harman (Labour) and Jo Swinson (Liberal Democrat), now requires employers to publish their gender pay gaps.

**Unfinished business: The fight goes on**

Since 1918 there have been two female Prime Ministers, Margaret Thatcher (Conservative, 1979–90) and Theresa May (Conservative, 2016–19). Women MPs have played key roles in government since Margaret Bondfield (Labour) became the first woman appointed to Cabinet (Minister of Labour, 1929–31). The first black woman, Diane Abbott (Labour), was elected to Parliament in 1987. However, women of colour continue to be significantly under-represented in the Commons.

**Photograph of Diane Abbott in 1979**

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Like Nancy Astor, women MPs continue to experience discrimination and harassment, both within and outside of Parliament. In the Commons women MPs are regularly criticised for their appearance or, for women MPs of colour in particular, mistaken for assistants and cleaners. In April 2017 Prime Minister David Cameron (Conservative) told Angela Eagle MP (Labour) to ‘calm down dear’ amid hoots of laughter from the Tory benches. Outside of Parliament women MPs regularly have to deal with more serious threats and abuse via social media.[[6]](https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/women-in-parliament-1918-2020#footnote6)

These challenges have not dimmed the willingness of women MPs to continue the fight for women’s rights. History shows us that female representation in Parliament has been crucial in enhancing the lives of women across the UK. So much has already been achieved, but there is unfinished business. Much more needs to be done in the years to come.

**Footnotes**

[1] Reeves, R, *Women of Westminster: The MPs Who Changed Politics* (2020), p. 2.

[2] Harrison, B, ‘Women in a men’s house: the women MPs, 1919-1945’, *The Historical Journal*, 29/3 (1986), pp. 623-54.

[3] BBC Radio Women’s Hour Interview with Nancy Astor, 1956

[4] Beaumont, C, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England*, 128-1964 (2013).

[5] https://ukvote100.org/2017/11/09/women-demand-equal-pay/

[6] Reeves, R, *Women of Westminster*, p. 227-243.