

## Women and Politics – a personal view

I am very sorry not to be with you this evening – unfortunately my duties as a Cabinet Member mean that I am attending the parish council summit meeting.

First of all I would like to say that I have not found my route in to local politics in any way impeded by my gender. At all stages I have been supported by my party and my association to take an active role to serve my community and county.

The deficit of female councillors is, however, noticeable and I would welcome more women as candidates. Principally though I would like to see the best people taking on the task of being a councillor – individuals who have the time, passion and commitment to work hard and support the delivery of services to Herefordshire. The work of a Councillor is not very glamorous and it is very often a thankless task but it is worthwhile.

I would be interested to know how many women present at this meeting tonight have put themselves forward as candidates. If you haven't then why haven't you? There are a multiplicity of wider societal norms, pressure, expectations and limitations that hold us back – leading to self selection – I doubt if men feel such levels of doubt – we may not feel that we have sufficient qualifications or that we are in some way not 'good enough' or we wait to be asked. Consider yourselves asked. It would be great to have more candidates who are women so please, step up and put yourself forward.

It was suggested in a recent council meeting that the deficit of women on cabinet might be addressed by including women from opposition parties. I would have to say that the reason that I am on cabinet is not because I am a woman but because I am a member of the majority administration and therefore part of the pool of councillors from which the Leader assembles his cabinet and he thought I would be a good choice. If you want to be on cabinet being a member of the majority administration would be a pre-requisite or democracy would have taken a bit of a strange turn. Having said that, there are many other roles for women councillors who are not on cabinet, the three scrutiny committees, the planning committee, audit and governance, performance challenge sessions, full council and so forth; there are plenty of ways to feed into the process and make a difference. The part of my work that I find the most rewarding though is being an advocate for my ward and this is something that all councillors can do equally.

In Herefordshire there are 53 Councillors of whom 16 are women so there are more than twice as many men as there are women. Women chair two out of the three scrutiny committees (there are 5 committees in total and the chairmanship is in the gift of the Leader of the Council), of the 16 women members there are 5 that do not do any committee work (one of these because she is unaligned and all of them are from opposition groups) – which is down to the decision taking within the groups and the availability of the individual. Of the 37 men there are 5 that do not do committee work (one is because he is unaligned, two are Independents, one Conservative and one from It's Our County). Do not imagine that these Councillors are all desperate to be asked to serve on a committee – they are, for the most part, Councillors with other outside interests, family commitments and employment that make it impossible to give their time. It is interesting to note that, proportionately, twice as many women than men who have been elected have not had the time to serve on a committee. In all honesty, if you don't have time to serve on a committee you will have no hope at Cabinet Member level where I can find myself doing 14 hour days.

I went to my first Tory party conference this year and looking over the programme of events I note that there were fringe meetings on a variety of subjects including renewables, climate change, plastic pollution, BAME and 'class' barriers, the circular economy, conservation, home building and a number of meetings on the challenge of engaging more women with politics. There is an effort to reach out, the overall theme of the conference was 'opportunity' and this means for you too – it is a core belief of the Prime Minister who is, of course, a woman. The second woman who has made it to the top of the party, along with the leader of the Scottish Conservative party, the leader of the House of Commons and the Leader of the House of Lords.

I am not saying that there isn't more to do but you can do your bit and feed into the wider picture, be the agent of change and make it happen by doing it.

Go girls.