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Why are so few women in the House of Commons actively interested in defence ?

And what difference would it make - to UK defence policy, the Armed Forces, and to their political careers - if they were?

According to Vacher Dod's parliamentary profiles, nine out of 125 female MPs - just over 7% - named defence as a political interest.

Of their 534 male counterparts, 94 (just over 17.5%) did.

Theyworkforyou.com analyses MPs' interests based on the number of written parliamentary questions put by them to each government department since 2001. By this calculation, defence does not figure for five of the nine women MPs who have named it in Vacher Dods – although to be fair, many of them are regular attenders at U K Defence Forum briefings.

Westminster Hall debates, which any MP may apply for, give a unique opportunity to raise practically any subject. Since 2001, five of the nine have made no contributions to defence-themed debates there. Three have initiated debates and made substantial contributions to others.

The annual defence in The World debates in the main Commons Chamber continue the pattern. Men dominate numerically. A few women do speak; passionate, closely argued, thoroughly briefed - and then over to the men again.

Women have sat on the Defence Select Committee, and served with distinction; but there seems to be a rule of: One at a time!

Why does this matter? And who or what is keeping the women quiescent ?

Defence policy is pretty hard science. It is not a sport for the dilettante. It is multi-disciplinary, embracing history, geography, international relations, engineering, anthropology - for starters. It is underpinned by vast philosophies and doctrine, driven by quantum technological advances yet inescapably dependent on the humblest foot soldier. The Armed Forces' responsibilities encompass large scale armed conflict, peacekeeping missions, domestic ceremonial, civil emergency, counter-terrorism, and now considerations of the fallout of future environmental crises.

A lot of homework. All that hardware, all those numbers. The blitz of ballistics and logistics. The complexity of funding, the long haul of procurement projects. Insider rituals, language, traditions; fetishism of uniform, nerdspeak of acronyms. The British military can seem a very

closed world.

Despite the recent accelerated intake of servicewomen, (women in the UK regular forces make up almost 12% of officers and nearly 9% of other ranks; the percentage has doubled in the last generation) the Services are run at the highest levels almost exclusively by men. The 2008 Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) annual report on women in top jobs identified the Services as having the lowest proportion of women in senior ranks - 0.4%

This is all going to change.

The participation of women in armies en masse should not be confused with the totemic female war leader, where public life meets myth. Boudicca was no ordinary citizeness, but a king's widow, avenger of their violated daughters. Dio described her as possessed of greater intelligence than often belongs to women, with a harsh voice and piercing glare. The Maid of Orleans was set apart by her virgin martyrdom and by the sanction of God the Father. She was, at every station of her ecstatic journey, only following orders. Elizabeth I, another celebrated virgin, identified herself at Tilbury, not as a weak and feeble woman, but as having the heart and stomach of a king.

In the assumption of leadership, these women have irradiated themselves in a bleached and blameless asexuality. They have had to suspend, or transcend, being women. The Amazons sacrificed a breast. Mrs Thatcher, Finchley housewife turned Falklands Britannia, was happy to exchange her female flesh for Iron.

Men fight as men, an ultimate expression of innate qualities; women have had to become something other. The female mascot-leader does not challenge, but underlines, the role of women in war as prizes, not protagonists. And the use of rape as a weapon of war is so ancient and so universal, so recently used in wars so near to home, that a deep atavistic wariness might be at work, preventing women from feeling comfortable around the military. In 2005, the Equal Opportunities Commission was so concerned about the increasing level of harassment reported to it by servicewomen that it launched a formal investigation. Does this reflect a parallel unease that male soldiers feel about women invading their territory ?

The great modern mass exception to the taboo is the combat role of women in the Soviet Union 1941-45. (Their corpses discovered on the battlefield appalled the Germans, whose official ideology saw Aryan women confined to kinder, kirke und kirche, and who, unlike the Russians, kept female prisoners of war in military brothels.)

This is partly the result of Bolshevik reconceptualising of the social role of women; but mostly, Soviet forces deployed women because, very rapidly, they had to. Brothers and sisters, began Uncle Joe, in his first radio broadcast following the 1941 invasion: Listen to us, brothers and sisters! exhorted Radio Moscow', followed by practical instructions for the partisans on how to destroy transport, handle machine guns, stage ambushes and shoot down planes with infantry weapons.

In Britain the enemy is not yet at the gates. But demography is.

There is a crisis in recruitment and retention; which places further strain on an organisation committed for an uncertain term to two bloody and controversial conflicts; which leads to further haemorrhaging of trained personnel and graver difficulties in finding replacements.

The Ministry of defence (who else speaks so relentlessly of manning, man years, manpower?) has identified 25 pinch-point trades in the Navy, 33 in the 'Army and 31 in the RAF. Around half of these impinge directly on operations. And since 2003 the numbers have risen.

The traditional rank and file on which recruiters have relied is shrinking, tertiary education expands and competition with rival employers intensifies. Birthrate declines, while women steadily increase their overall percentage of the workforce. As recruiters trawl wider and more cannily, the trades which women are permitted to fill may also expand. The role of Reservists has already been recast to provide extra operational and structural strength, and to fill those urgent requirements for specialist trades. There's evidence that female response to some initial targeted campaigns is running as high as 25%.

In evidence to the defence Select Committee this year, Professor Strachan of Oxford University observed: [The Armed Forces] are still looking to recruit in the traditional pools rather than thinking how they adapt...to fit into where the pool of potential recruits now is".

To return for a moment to those Vachers profiles, and the declarations of interests: A quick headcount of women MPs listing an interest in Equalities gives a total of 17. There is no coincidence with those women listing defence. And the men? A woeful seven. Again - no overlap with those male MPs professing an interest in defence.

Why are these topics seen as mutually exclusive ?

In 1997 we elected an administration with two unprecedented characteristics; A record number of female MPs, due in part to the Labour Party's introduction of all-women candidate shortlists; and a government in which no single individual had any Service record. The cause and effect of these factors on subsequent UK deployments, and the changes to defence policy following the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, are worth pondering.

Now that the Conservative Party has adopted its own Women2Win campaign group, and the Liberal Democrats' have their Campaign for Gender Balance, we can reasonably expect the trend towards more women MPs to continue, whoever is in power.

If the overall level of female MP interest in defence does not improve, we will be dealing with entire parliaments many of whose members have deselected themselves from informed involvement in an area of vital national importance, at a time when the proportion of women under arms is likely to increase; when women as a percentage of the Armed Forces already exceeds the percentage of female MPs who say they are interested in defence; and when the Government proposes granting Parliament the right to approve deployment of the armed forces.

In the past year, the Military Covenant, compensation packages, post-traumatic stress disorder, the conduct and timing of inquests, access to medical services, ex-servicemen in prisons,

homelessness, the strains on family life of too many deployments too often - welfare issues - have caught the media's, and the public's, attention. These are all part of defence policy; these are all of an immediate human interest to voters; and welfare issues are seen as a traditional female specialism.

It is marvellous, and most welcome, that MPs turn out to cheer at homecoming parades, and doff their metaphorical hats once a year at the obelisks for the fallen.

What is really critical to the future of the UK military, and to the well-being of its people, is a pool of parliamentary talent of the widest composition and the most rigorous and sustained commitment to it.

There are, quietly, and a little raggedly, inroads.

We have had female PPSs at the Ministry of Defence. Baroness Symons has served as Minister for Defence Procurement. One of the junior Defence Ministers, and Government spokesperson in the Lords, is Baroness Taylor. No particular fanfare attends these appointments; they might, if asked to comment on their positions, respond with that classic New Labour phrase that they are simply getting on with the job in hand.

The Armed Forces Parliamentary scheme exists to give parliamentarians a taste of Service life; something tangible, arguably worth a ton of theory and paperwork; the camaraderie of contact with Service personnel, the feel and smells and frequently the fun of handling equipment, physical exertion, sanctioned joyrides in fast machines.

Groups of graduates and postgraduates of the Scheme often comprise, not just a lone female presence, but three, four, something approaching parity of numbers in making up the team.

Unfortunately, a glance at the tables of participants in the Scheme shows a falling-off of women graduates in the last four or so years, after a mini-boom. In the first ten years after the 1997 General Election, 17% of basic levels graduates were women MPs (14 of 82).. Proportionally, Labour was best represented (18% of 55) and the Conservatives least with 9% of 32. Of 40 participants at all levels in 2008, 12.5% of 40 are female parliamentarians.

Speaking in March this year at a Scheme graduation ceremony, then Veterans Minister Derek Twigg said:

"I expect your appreciation and admiration for the men and women of the British Armed Forces is now higher than it was this time last year. At every level, those who defend this nation are an inspiration. They go into harm's way to keep us from harm's way. They are a credit to this nation, their Services and their families.

"They deserve, therefore, a parliament that understands them – a parliament that truly serves their best interests. At the same time, we need to know the right way to utilise their significant resources and abilities. Your comprehension and stewardship, plus your ability to properly utilise the Armed Forces as a force for good in the world are increasingly important. With the debate on Parliamentary approval for the deployment of troops, your knowledge could well

become even more valuable.

He went on : "The Scheme is evolving. Some of you were the first to go through a new initial introductory package for Phase One at the defence Academy...we are exploring how we can make this more interactive. Those of you from Level Three will have been to a one day brief at the MoD to gain a little insight into higher management issues....Some of you here have recently returned from Iraq...and Afghanistan."

As the Scheme innovates and gives deliberate consideration to how to offer a more comprehensive and valuable experience, why, at the same time, is the number of female graduates dropping?

In the same speech, Twigg also observed that:

"I am sure you will agree with me that your place on this Scheme is not to provide ammunition for party politics or information for the press. Those who exploit their time in theatre for such purposes do earn the respect of those they claim to be representing."

Nor, one might add, is it fitting that it be appropriated for the grinding of axes of any kind. It's simply an opportunity. And, reportedly, a very good time.

The whole debate leads, potentially, to the boggy ground of probably unanswerable questions; personal inclination versus collective responsibility, societal norms, nature versus nurture, the culpability of the boys club-culture in keeping the women out. A quick, brisk, practical, pragmatic approach by female MPs might break the stalemate. Pick up a book, put down a question. Sign up, speak up, join in. It's a new world. It might not be what you expected.

In 2004, as Minister for Women, Patricia Hewitt said:

"...We remain concerned about the lack of girls going into non-traditional areas of work, such as engineering and technology.... the Equal Opportunities Commission is now undertaking a general formal investigation to see how women and men continue to end up in these traditional gender roles and to probe some of the barriers to change."

There will never be consensus on quite what equality implies, or what women's issues constitute; but if women are going to sit alongside the men on the green benches and raise their voices in sending their sisters and brothers to war, they had better extend their range beyond whether we should, and consider whether we can, for how long, and at what cost.