



New Conservative Party leader Theresa May leaves 10 Downing Street | Oli Scarff/ AFP via Getty

Theresa May: Female, but not feminist

Getting to the top is hard. But doing politics differently will be the incoming PM's real challenge. By SOPHIE WALKER

LONDON — Theresa May starts her new job as Britain’s prime minister from atop piles of headlines ruminating the significance of her sex. For weeks, we have teetered on the brink of having a really interesting debate about doing politics differently, only to be drawn back to discuss her shoes and her lack of children. This is the reality of being a woman in politics. But it does not have to be.

It really matters to have political representatives that look like you. For women to see other women in positions of power is significant — no matter where on the political spectrum you sit. But for a woman’s power to be truly consequential, she must wield it with an understanding of how it will effect the lives of other women. And it is important to remember that not all women leaders are feminists.

The Women’s Equality Party — the United Kingdom’s newest political party, which I lead — exploded into life a year ago out of deep frustration at the glacial pace of change. Old parties were hampered by competing priorities, and equality for women had fallen off their to-do lists. We wanted to put it back there and make sure it did not also fall off their value structures and their visions of society. Just as the Labour Party all but erased the phrase “working-class” from its 1945 manifesto in order to appeal to the whole nation — as a party for all people — so women’s equality has been made into a political footnote, a women’s manifesto or low-grade ministerial portfolios. Women’s equality has not survived the emergence of the catch-all party.

We have worked over the past year to put equality for women back at the top of the political agenda by creating an electoral force to challenge other parties, who will only bend if their share of the vote is threatened. Anyone doubting the impact a small political party can have need only look at the Brexit referendum to see what can be achieved. Our policies promote equal education, equal pay, an end to violence against women, shared parenting and caregiving, and equal representation in politics, business and the media.

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None of those issues were considered by the other parties ahead of the referendum. The impact of leaving the European Union on women was barely considered. The post-Brexit continuation of maternity rights, part-time workers' rights and protection from sexual harassment at work? Not explored. The impact shifting exchange rates could have on the cost of living for women — who are less likely to be in work, more likely to have caring responsibilities, and more likely to be making economic decisions about household expenditures? We brought this up, but we didn't hear anything back. What about the impact of trade tariffs on the public purse, on the money we have for public services on which women disproportionately rely? What will happen to funding for women's organizations battling to support survivors of domestic and sexual violence as that epidemic of violence swells? Silence.

May now has an opportunity to answer all these questions. Unfortunately, her track record raises others as well. As home secretary, May introduced laws on coercive control and demanded an inquiry into the treatment of domestic violence victims by police. But she also presided over the indefinite detention of pregnant women at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, where claims of sexual violence by guards against inmates have gone unanswered. Also unanswered: the fact that the government in which she has worked presided over a brutal austerity plan that has hit women hardest.

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Let's see May respond by building an economy that services society, by building a budget that reduces inequalities rather than increasing them. Let's see a female prime minister invest in childcare as a motor of economic growth. What a feminist revolution that would be! Let's see an immigration system that has equality and justice at its heart. Let's see a prime minister who understands that when you lift the barriers of inequality for women, you lift them for everyone else. Let's see a prime minister who responds to the rise of the Women's Equality Party. Politics should not be homogeneous, as it has been for so long presented, to the detriment of our political system and the disenfranchisement of millions. It is about gender, class, race and all of the areas where those experiences intersect.

This week, Labour's Angela Eagle launched her leadership bid in front of a pink Union Jack. But though she spoke about being a strong woman, she presented no new policies upon which to build a strong campaign for women's equality. Similarly, Theresa May has been photographed wearing a t-shirt that says "This is what a feminist looks like." We have lacked real female political leadership for so long that we have come to rely on tropes and symbols to signal a position.

These shortcuts aren't enough. It's time to put in the real, detailed, work. Our party is rising to the challenge. Let the others do the same.

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