

SPRING CONFERENCE 06

When David Cameron was elected leader last November, the first thing he said was that the face of the party had to change. He was embarrassed by the lack of diversity on the green benches around him. We just don't look like the country we aspire to govern.

I have worked in both the public and the private sectors. Companies like Barclays and bodies such as schools and the police have positive action programmes to encourage women and people from black and minority ethnic groups into senior management. These programmes are not about special favours, but they are about creating a more level playing field and a wider opportunity for all.

David has instigated similar measures to do the same for our party in parliament. We need to change in order to reflect the aspirations of those groups who were so under represented at a senior level in our party at the last election.

That change is already underway. In my role as party vice chairman for women I am supporting the work of the Conservative Women's Organisation and also that of the new group set up to encourage more Conservative women into public life, Women 2 Win. Women 2 Win was set up by Theresa May and her colleagues last November. Already it has 800 women on its database, all of these women were Conservative inclined, but they were not all fully joined members when they first made contact.

We need to draw our members from a more diverse group of people, not just because we need to change our image, although we do, but because we need to access a broader life experience, and this is especially important for policy development.

But there is another thing. And being in Manchester reminds me. We are near the birthplace of the campaign to "Save the Labour Party". The campaign represents traditional Labour members, and ex Labour members who, after nine years of government by their own party, are thoroughly alienated and disillusioned. They feel their party has been hijacked by people who don't share their principles and beliefs and feel that they are no longer welcome in their own home.

Ladies and gentlemen we must not and we need not go down that path. The change that we espouse is about people, about priorities, about tone and the way we communicate. In changing the way we communicate we are challenging the very basis of political discourse in our country. What it is not about is changing our underlying Conservative principles and beliefs.

Hence I am optimistic that we will bring people with us through this change process. In the Conservative party we all understand the importance of attracting new people to our cause. But we welcome them as well as, not instead of, the people who have served this party so well over many years.

Margot James

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