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Tweets (And More) Of The Week: Board Gender Quotas

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This week France's National Assembly passed a bill that would force the nation's largest companies to devote at least 40% of board positions to women. By most accounts, the bill is likely to be signed into law later this year. This seems like a propitious moment for *femmes d'affaires*, with France on the verge of being the largest country thus far to impose quotas to break the boardroom boys' club--Norway and Spain also have quotas.

But are government-mandated quotas the right idea? Is it Big Daddy economic interventionism or an effective way to impose gender parity? We brought these questions to the [ForbesWoman community on LinkedIn](#).

Sue Galke, CEO of Successworks, a presentation skills firm based in Portland, Ore., says, "It is a good idea. It will speed up the process of getting qualified women into power positions and their input will reap solid rewards. ... Since we have not yet broken the glass ceiling after all these years of the feminist movement, things might need a nudge. It's kind of like joining the guys in their golf foursome--the only way you're going to be included is if the golf pro forces them to do it."

"I have to laugh at the example you used," says **Leslie Knight**, a management consultant from Tulsa, Okla., and owner of Knight Performance Management. "I worked in two very male dominated industries (oil and IT). The difference in my career is that I chose to learn to play golf so I could participate in company sponsored events and the weekly after work nine holes. I went where the good old boy network was going to be. My career did well and I still enjoy golf. The point is I chose. I made an active decision to get beyond the typical woman's social network. I knew it was in the best interest of my career to do so. It's not about how athletic you are. It's about the exposure you create for yourself by being around them."

Knight is anti-quota, but is willing to hear the other side. "I'm open to having my mind changed about quotas ... but there has to be a sound, logical reason," she says. "So far, all that has been presented is the emotional argument 'There's not enough women on the boards. We need a way to seat more women.' We'll get there through hard work, just like the men. The question is: What choices are you going to make for your career that will lead to the boardroom? "

Patricia Lenkov, an executive recruiter who specializes in board recruiting in the greater New York area, is also pro-women board directors but anti-quota. To explain, she points to the low numbers of qualified female executives. "Quite simply, to become a board director, one must already have achieved some sort of senior leadership position. ... we must first determine how to train, motivate and promote more women leaders." For this, she says we should reexamine education and training of girls to prepare them for future executive positions and, eventually, board appointment.

Knight argues that it is within the rights of every business owner to determine that correct mix of people. "Gender diversity may increase profitability," she says, "but it is up to the owner/board to make that determination. ... What good is a quota to a business owner if it pushes them to take a less desirable candidate to avoid government or feminist scrutiny?"

Irish life and business coach **Martine Brennan** shares a personal story about a quota experience in London in the 1980s: "The Borough I was working in had a quota for members of Designated Ethnic Minority Groups and Women. I qualified because I am Irish and a woman. I would never have gotten my position as Deputy Coordinator of the agency but for this. The agency had a tradition of only employing British, white males! I later discovered that I had been employed not merely because of my credentials and because I am an Irish woman but because it meant the agency could avoid employing a black person. So my question is ... is the quota situation a swings and roundabout one?" In other words, Brennan is asking, does a quota that aims to help one group end up disenfranchising another?

Alessandra Dipaola, a London-based sales and marketing director for Marley Building Materials, breaks down the debate in three key questions. In order: Are more diverse boards good for business and therefore desirable? If diverse boards are good for business, how do we go about achieving them? (Dipaola offers three solutions: organic culture change, voluntary

self-regulation or government-mandated quotas.) And finally, would introducing quotas lead to discrimination against the most qualified candidates? (Dipaola's answers to the first and third question are yes and no, respectively.)

"I don't know much about the way U.S. companies work," says **Sabine Osmanovic**, president of the Business and Professional Women Club in Wuerzburg, Germany. "Maybe they are ahead of the Germans in some way. In my country we still have a long way to go and quotas can make it a bit easier for us to set our foot into the door." Osmanovic adds, "We don't want presents. We are working hard to get the jobs we would like to have. But sometimes the glass ceiling is too thick and there is now way to break through. That's the reason why I am pro quotas."

Readers, share your views on gender quotas. Do they promote equality or are they antidemocratic and patronizing? Where do you stand in the debate?

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