



House of Commons
Speaker's Conference (on
Parliamentary Representation)

**Responses to the
Speaker's Conference
(on Parliamentary
Representation): Final
Report of Session
2009–10**

**First Special Report of Session
2009–10**

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Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)

On 12 November 2008 the House of Commons agreed to establish a new committee, to be chaired by the Speaker and known as the Speaker's Conference.

The Conference has been asked to: "Consider, and make recommendations for rectifying, the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large". It may also consider other associated matters.

The Speaker's Conference has until the end of the Parliament to conduct its inquiries.

Current membership

Under the leadership of the Speaker, Rt Hon John Bercow MP, the membership of the Conference is:

Miss Anne Begg MP (*Labour, Aberdeen South*) (Vice-Chairman)
Ms Diane Abbott MP (*Labour, Hackney North & Stoke Newington*)
Mr David Blunkett MP (*Labour, Sheffield, Brightside*)
Angela Browning MP (*Conservative, Tiverton & Honiton*)
Mr Ronnie Campbell MP (*Labour, Blyth Valley*)
Mrs Ann Cryer MP (*Labour, Keighley*)
Mr Parmjit Dhanda MP (*Labour, Gloucester*)
Andrew George MP (*Liberal Democrats, St Ives*)
Miss Julie Kirkbride MP (*Conservative, Bromsgrove*)
Dr William McCrea MP (*Democratic Unionist, South Antrim*)
David Maclean MP (*Conservative, Penrith & The Border*)
Fiona Mactaggart MP (*Labour, Slough*)
Mr Khalid Mahmood MP (*Labour, Birmingham, Perry Barr*)
Anne Main MP (*Conservative, St Albans*)
Jo Swinson MP (*Liberal Democrat, East Dunbartonshire*)
Mrs Betty Williams MP (*Labour, Conwy*)

Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Speaker's Conference are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Conference (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/speakersconference

A list of Reports of the Conference in the present Parliament is at the back of this volume.

Conference staff

The current staff of the Conference are Mrs Elizabeth Hunt (Joint Secretary), Mr Paul Zimmermann (Joint Secretary), Mr Philip Aylett (Adviser), Ms Laura Kibby (Media Officer), Miss Emma Sawyer (Senior Committee Assistant) and Mr Ian Blair (Committee Assistant).

Specialist Advisers

The following were appointed as Specialist Advisers to the Conference: Professor Sarah Childs (University of Bristol), Lorraine Gradwell MBE (Chief Executive, Breakthrough UK), Professor Shamit Saggar (University of Sussex) and Professor Paul Whiteley (University of Essex).

Contacts

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First Special Report

The Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) published interim reports on 15 July 2009 and 25 November 2009, and its Final Report on 11 January 2010. A response from the Senior Salaries Review Body was received in the form of a memorandum dated 4 March 2010. A response from the Director of Facilities, House of Lords was received in the form of a memorandum dated 5 March 2010. Responses from the House of Commons Management Board, the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats were received in the form of memoranda dated 8 March 2010. They are published as Appendices to this report, together with letters from the Government Equalities Office, dated 5 March 2010 and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, dated 8 March 2010.

Appendix 1: House of Commons Management Board's response

The Management Board is pleased to update the Speaker's Conference on action taken by the House Service in relation to its recommendations.

The Management Board is committed to increasing diversity in the House Service and to providing an excellent service to all Members. It is keen to respond positively to the Conference's report. However, as the Conference will appreciate, many of its recommendations are for the House itself to determine. The House Service will respond readily to whatever changes are agreed to by the House, whether before the end of this Parliament or in the next.

Attached is a response to each of the recommendations which are directed at the House Administration.

Recommendation 4

We warmly welcome the increased priority the House is giving to its education and outreach activities, and we are impressed by the work that is being produced. It is vital that citizens know more about the way Parliament and its Members work. But we believe that there should also be a firm focus on providing the public with information needed to promote wider representation, without reference to any one party. The objectives of the Parliamentary Education Service, therefore, should in future include helping to encourage a wider range of people to become candidates for election to Parliament. (Paragraph 49)

Response

School children visiting Westminster reflect a cross-section of society, and thus represent a powerful opportunity to encourage broader engagement with Parliament. It is not an objective of Parliament's Education Service (or the Parliamentary Outreach service) explicitly to encourage people to stand as candidates, but rather to explain the party system and the representational role in the context of effective engagement with parliamentary processes.

Recommendation 5

Support should be developed for Members to help them to promote political agency and active citizenship in their constituencies. (Paragraph 50)

Response

Staff in Parliament's public information services are preparing a set of resources to support Members in their work with schools and community groups. This will be available early in the new Parliament.

Recommendation 14

A description of the main functions of a Member of Parliament should be drawn up, agreed between the parties and published. The description should not remove the scope for MPs to approach the job of representing their constituency in various ways; it should contain general principles and main objectives and tasks, rather than highly detailed prescriptions. Greater transparency about the terms and conditions under which MPs work has been achieved since the mid-1990s but the process has not been completed; nor has it been matched by a clearer explanation of the role of Members. More is needed. This information should be consolidated, published (on the internet and in hard copy) and made widely available to the general public. (Paragraph 87)

Response

There is broad agreement on the functions of an MP (as set out, for example, in the 2007 report of the Modernisation Committee on the role of the backbencher¹) but how the job should be carried out is essentially a matter for each Member of the House.

Meanwhile, the House Service is active in communicating the role of MPs to the public. For example, the House of Commons Information Office publishes the leaflet "You and your MP" in 16 languages, and the Education Service has recently launched an online game "MP for a week" to engage 11–14 year olds in what it is like to be an MP.

¹ Select Committee on *Modernisation of the House of Commons, Revitalising the Chamber: the role of a backbench Member*, First Report, Session 2006–07, HC337, para 10.

Recommendation 27

We recommend that the Government should find time for a debate on the implementation of the Speaker's Conference's recommendations and progress towards just representation in the House of Commons in 2010, 2012, and every two years thereafter to 2022. We also recommend that the House of Commons should provide access from a dedicated page on the Parliament website to all published statements and reports by each party represented at Westminster on their Parliamentary party representation and candidate selections, alongside links to the reports from the Speaker's Conference. (Paragraph 166)

Response

The Parliament website will have a new area about the Speaker's Conference's recommendations and progress, which will link to all published statements and reports by each party on their parliamentary party representation and candidate selections. This will also link through to reports from the Speaker's conference.²

The Equality Bill contains provisions concerning the publication of information about the diversity of candidates. The Parliament website will provide links to any information published under these provisions.

Recommendation 43

We believe that there is scope for the development of a UK-wide scheme similar to the Step Up Cymru mentoring scheme, but with a strong Westminster element. This could bring together elected members at all levels of government to provide opportunities for people from under-represented groups to find out about their work. The initial aim might be to encourage involvement in community groups, but it should also give encouragement to those who might wish to become candidates for elected office at local and national level or be appointed to a public body. (Paragraph 241)

Response

The House Service encourages staff of the House to participate in the National Mentoring Consortium which focuses on finding, training and supporting mentors for ethnic minority undergraduates. If the House wished to set up a scheme at Westminster, similar to the Step Up Cymru scheme, the Diversity team would be ready to support it, for example by arranging mentoring skills training and offering seminars/workshops for the mentees.

Recommendation 47

A diverse workforce for Parliament is not an aspiration but an imperative. It is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families and/or other caring responsibilities is maintained and supported. This must be kept in mind by all who are engaged in the current process of Commons reform. (Paragraph 253)

² Available at http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/principal/speaker/speakers_conference.cfm

Response

The House Service is committed to increasing the diversity of our workforce, as set out in the recently published House Equality Scheme.

Recommendation 51

We have said that it is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families is supported. It is likely that at the 2010 general election a number of younger Members, who have young children, will enter the House of Commons for the first time. We welcome the recent announcement of plans for a nursery facility within the Parliamentary estate and urge the House service to implement the proposal as soon as possible. This facility should be open to Members and staff. (Paragraph 270)

Response

The Commission has agreed that a nursery facility for children of Members, Members' staff and House staff should be established in 1 Parliament Street and begin operating in September 2010, catering for up to 40 children, aged 0–5 years. Subject to the approval of the relevant regulatory bodies and to the interest of suitable providers, this timetable is expected to be achieved.

In addition, the Family Room, which is situated in the Lower Waiting Hall, has recently been refurbished to make it a more suitable area for children to spend time while waiting for their parent(s).

Recommendation 54

The sitting hours of the House should again be reviewed, and voted upon by the House, early in the new Parliament. Ideally, sitting time for the main chamber should be brought in line with what is considered to be normal business hours. Respecting the difficulty of achieving this, given the multiplicity of other duties inside and outside the Palace of Westminster carried out by Members, we recommend a substantial further development of deferred voting in order to facilitate a more family friendly approach to sitting arrangements and unscheduled (unprogrammed) votes. Further consideration should be given to modern methods of voting to facilitate a more efficient and practical use of time, in line with other legislatures. (Paragraph 286)

Response

These are matters which the House may wish to consider in the next Parliament.

Recommendation 55

We hope that the House service will review, and draw up new guidelines to clarify, the circumstances in which a child under the age of one may accompany his or her MP parent within restricted areas of the House of Commons. (Paragraph 288)

Response

The House Service is reviewing the practice in other Parliaments, with the intention of giving advice on this matter to Member Committees in the next Parliament.

Recommendation 56

We think it is important that Members who wish to undertake civil marriages and civil partnerships should have the same rights as Members undertaking Christian marriage rites to hold their ceremonies within the Palace of Westminster. The House service should take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that such civil ceremonies can take place within the Palace of Westminster from 2010. (Paragraph 290)

Response

The House of Commons was granted a Civil Marriage and Partnership licence on 11 February 2010. The licence will run for three years and allows ceremonies to be held in the Jubilee Room and the Members' Dining Room. The first is to be held on 27 March 2010.

Recommendation 57

It is important for the House to obtain much better information about the percentages of Members who belong to under-represented groups, and to know more about their experiences of politics and of the House. We believe that the arguments in favour of regular, sensitive and appropriate monitoring of the situation are convincing. The House should consider how this might be done. One approach would be for the House's occupational health department to ask Members to complete confidential questionnaires about their experience of any illness or impairment while attending the Department for screening/self referral or disability assessment. The anonymised questionnaires could be collated and analysed by the department and the analysis fed back to the appropriate committee annually. The survey might also secure similar information about the racial origin and, if possible and appropriate, the sexual orientation of Members. (Paragraph 293)

Response

The House Service will explore with Member Committees in the next Parliament how such information could best be obtained.

Recommendation 58

We recommend that there should be a regular survey (at least once every five years) of public attitudes to Parliament and its composition, and in particular of the impact of the measures taken following this report. This should test whether greater diversity among MPs is bringing greater public approval and acceptance of the work of the House, and should be carried out by an independent body such as the Hansard Society. (Paragraph 295)

Response

The House, together with the Ministry of Justice, already provides financial support to the annual Audit of Political Engagement run by the Hansard Society. We will continue to support and help develop this survey as a means of tracking public attitudes to Parliament.

Recommendation 59

We welcome the range of effective measures which have been taken by the authorities in both Houses in recent years to meet the needs of disabled Members. Parliament responds well, in the vast majority of cases, to specific requests for assistance. However, there is still a largely unfair impression among some people that the House of Commons does not welcome disabled Members. The House needs to put this right. We recommend that the House should explicitly accept its responsibility to provide the support needed to enable disabled Members to do their job. In particular, the Parliamentary ICT service (PICT) should designate an experienced liaison officer to provide customised advice and support to maximise access to computing and other communications technology for disabled Members who require it. The passage into law of the Equality Bill currently before Parliament will be a good opportunity for the House authorities to announce publicly how committed they are to supporting disabled Members. The House should therefore make an early policy statement that it will apply fully the principles of the Equality Bill on reasonable adjustment and discrimination. This should cover both areas where the House is required to act within the law and those where it is not so required. (Paragraph 310)

Response

The House Service is committed to supporting Members with disabilities in carrying out their duties.

The House of Commons published its first Equality Scheme in January this year. The Scheme, which has been approved by the Commission, contains an extensive action plan, with a number of actions to help enable Members and staff to do their jobs, improving accessibility and facilities and offering advice for reasonable adjustments to be made in offices, work stations etc.

Under the Equality Bill, public bodies will be required to continue to assess the impact of what they do through equality impact assessments and resulting action planning. Under the Equality Scheme, the House is about to introduce these assessments.

PICT already provides users of the Parliamentary network who have disabilities with equipment and training based on the recommendations of Occupational Health. PICT has identified a senior manager who will lead on this subject and liaise directly with Members and others, including Occupational Health and suppliers of ICT products as necessary. Awareness training with an emphasis on IT will be identified and delivered to our staff.

Recommendation 60

We also recommend that the House should provide to each Member information on all the facilities and assistance available for disabled Members, which should be given wide publicity amongst disabled people and updated regularly. We also urge the parties to make this information widely known among their own members, to give potential parliamentary candidates confidence that support will be provided. We would also encourage the authorities in the House of Lords similarly to consider what further steps can be taken to improve the situation for disabled peers. In general we believe that any recommendations made by the occupational health service about the facilities and assistance which should be made available for disabled Members should be accepted by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. (Paragraph 311)

Response

Work is under way—in co-operation with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority—to produce a leaflet on facilities for disabled Members. This will be made available after the General Election, and will be published on the internet.

Recommendation 61

We see benefits in the idea of a ring-fenced fund to assist disabled Members to make reasonable adjustments to help them serve their constituents. This might fund better access to constituency offices or the provision of BSL interpreters for surgeries, and would be of particular assistance to newly-elected disabled MPs. We recommend that the new Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority includes provision for this in its allowances scheme, and we expect IPSA and the House authorities to work closely together on the provision of services and allowances to disabled MPs, and to devise a scheme which provides the help that is needed. (Paragraph 313)

Response

The House Service is discussing with IPSA how we can work together to ensure that disabled Members are properly supported.

Recommendation 62

We believe that the House and its Members would benefit from having a small in-house team on the model of the National Assembly for Wales Equalities Team, responsible for monitoring how the House is doing on all equalities issues and also for planning provision for disabled Members, staff and visitors. The team would have responsibility both for internal and external work to promote greater diversity and equality. It should also liaise with IPSA. (Paragraph 315)

Response

The House of Commons Service currently has a Diversity Team which provides advice and support to staff on a range of issues in respect of equality, diversity and inclusion.

This includes diversity casework, policy work, managing various outreach activities, monitoring the diversity of House staff and implementing the actions of the House Equality Scheme. The team would welcome the opportunity to extend its services to Members and have more of an external focus, but this would require additional resources, and—given our commitment to reduce the costs of the House Administration—will need to compete for funding against other priorities.

Recommendation 64

We believe that s141 of the 1983 Mental Health Act is unnecessary and damaging. It embodies attitudes which stigmatise and sap the confidence of people with mental illness. Section 141 should be repealed as soon as practicable. (Paragraph 327)

Response

We note that an amendment to this effect was tabled to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill in Committee but was not reached.

Recommendation 65

We recognise, however, that some provision may be needed to protect the legitimate interests of constituents and the House in circumstances where a Member is physically or mentally incapacitated to the extent that he or she is entirely unable to fulfil their duties for an extended period. We recommend that the House should invite an appropriate select committee to undertake an inquiry into this issue, consider whether new legislation or other measures may be needed, and make recommendations to the House and to Government as appropriate. (Paragraph 328)

Response

This is a matter for the House.

Recommendation 66

We recommend that an information pack and supporting guidance on the House's occupational health services should be sent to all Members of Parliament immediately after each General Election (Paragraph 329)

Response

Work is under way to ensure that timely information on the House's Safety, Health and Wellbeing Service will be made available to Members after the General Election.

Recommendation 68

The House of Commons Media and Communications Service should identify new approaches in both old and new media which would bring the more measured and less heated elements of the House's work to a wider audience. We urge Members to take the

opportunities thus offered to present the work of the House in a more constructive light. (Paragraph 335)

Response

The House of Commons Media and Communications Service (MCS) has six staff who work for select committees, and part of their role is to bring the scrutiny work of these committees to a wider audience. Most select committee reports—and many evidence sessions—are now actively promoted to national print and broadcast media, and in trade, consumer and local/regional media, and MCS has strong links with a wide range of journalists in all sectors.

Most reports are run as news stories on www.parliament.uk, along with about a dozen evidence sessions in a typical sitting week.

A working group has recently been set up to develop draft guidance for committees on the use of social media, to be available for consideration by the Liaison Committee early in the next Parliament. Twitter, Flickr and YouTube are already used by some committees to publicise their work and encourage public engagement and online forums are increasingly being used for evidence gathering by committees.

A new post has been created specifically to extend our coverage beyond just news, and to bring the work, role and history of the House, and the day to day working lives of MPs, to a wider audience via more features and factual programming. In addition to this new strand of work, priorities for the next year include:

- Exploring opportunities to promote the work of select committees through social media, where appropriate;
- Providing media and communications support to the Outreach team, publicising their initiatives primarily through local and regional media;
- Promoting and explaining the work of Public Bill Committees;
- Considering further ways to enhance public understanding of: the House's scrutiny role and the distinction between Government and Parliament; what MPs really do; the impact of decisions made in Parliament on the day to day life of individuals and communities.

It is hoped that some of this work will also support recommendation 67 (redressing lack of balance in media coverage of Parliament).

Recommendation 69

The House service should make training available to Members for communication through the internet. (Paragraph 337)

Response

This will be considered as part of broader discussions on the funding, by the House and IPSA, of training for Members and their staff.

Appendix 2: The Director of Facilities, House of Lords' response

Further to the very interesting and helpful report of the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, I thought it would be useful if I wrote to outline what we are doing to aid disabled members of the House of Lords.

There are a variety of small adjustments taking place in a range of locations such as the addition of stair nosings, new handrails and ancillary items on doors as well as the enabling of fire evacuation lifts for wheelchair users. There has also been a survey of light fittings and an upgrade is in progress. Formal listed building consent is awaited for a new handrail at Lord Speaker's entrance and the extension of the handrail to the Peers' Gallery. Projects for the coming year include improving door opening pressures, fitting of further handrails and numerous improvements to WCs including replacing most taps with lever mixer taps.

In respect of procedure in the Chamber, I can report that one deaf member uses a palantype which provides a written version of actual speeches in the Chamber; a blind member uses a Braille reader; and another member has permission for another member to finish her speech (and for this to be properly reflected in Hansard as her speech—<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200910/ldhansrd/text/100201-0003.htm>). I am also working with a voice recognition specialist to investigate whether “VR in reverse” is possible—i.e. for the software to finish a member's speech in their voice should they become unable to do so due to a medical condition.

Finally, I am very pleased to report good progress in the development of Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) for all our members with disabilities.

Appendix 3: Senior Salaries Review Body's response

Recommendation

The Government has recently indicated its intention to give the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) the responsibility for setting salaries and

pensions, with effect from 2011–12. We invite IPSA to consider the development of formal maternity, paternity and caring leave arrangements for MPs which are as closely equivalent to the general public sector provision as possible. In the mean time we would ask the Senior Salaries Review Body to look into the matter and to report in 2010. (Paragraph 268)

Response

Under the terms of the House of Commons Resolution on Members’ Salaries (No. 2), the SSRB conducts a review of Members’ salaries in the first year of each new Parliament. The SSRB’s current terms of reference provide for it to advise on pay, pensions and allowances of Members of Parliament. Unless those terms of reference are changed, the SSRB has no remit to advise on other aspects of the conditions of service of Members of Parliament such as leave for any purpose. These are determined by the House itself. There appears to be no legal impediment to Members of Parliament taking maternity, paternity or caring leave if they wish to do so.

Appendix 4: The Labour Party’s response

Recommendations 7–10

Political parties are the mechanism by which people of any background can be actively involved in the tasks of shaping policy and deciding how society should be governed. While they are not perfect organisations they are essential for the effective functioning of our democracy. Without the support of political parties it would be difficult for individual Members of Parliament, as legislators and/or as members of the Executive, to organise themselves effectively for the task of promoting the national interest—including by challenge to the Government, where that is necessary and appropriate—and ensuring that proposed new laws are proportionate, effective and accurately drafted. (Paragraph 55)

The extent to which political parties are the subject of both contempt and general public indifference should be a cause of concern to all who are interested in how our country is run. We acknowledge that the recent disclosures about Members’ allowances and some Members’ expenses claims have been extremely damaging, but a general dwindling of attachment to political parties—going wider than the decline in formal membership—has been apparent over more than 40 years. (Paragraph 59)

It is important to the future of our democracy that political parties are able to continue to function. As Nan Sloane, Centre for Women and Democracy, put it, “The democratic process we have may not be a perfect way of governing ourselves but it is better than most of the other ones that there are out there and it is very dangerous to have that undermined.” In this context it is clear that the effective functioning of political parties is very much in the public interest. (Paragraph 60)

It is in the interests of any political party which wishes to achieve, and sustain, a period in government that it should foster local activism and seek to build up social capital and trust. Active, healthy and accessible local political parties will also play a vital role in identifying and nurturing a greater diversity of MPs for the future. (Paragraph 64)

Response

We are pleased that the Conference has recognised the importance of political parties to the health of our democracy. Political parties are the main vehicles for political representation and accountability in this country, and as such are the main vehicles by which equality in Parliament will be achieved.

If the body politic is to be representative and relevant, then it follows that political parties must be too. The Labour Party recognised this some decades ago, and has sought to improve its structures and processes from the grassroots up, to build a party that is inclusive, accountable, and looks like those it seeks to represent.

Though it has not always been an easy path down which to travel, the Party has made great strides forward. Yet there is still more to do, and we would be delighted to work with the government, the Speaker's Conference, other parties and the House Authorities in addressing these important issues.

Recommendation 11

The Government should consult on the introduction of a scheme enabling local political parties to apply for funding linked to their receipts from member subscriptions. The scheme should be administered by a suitable independent body and the details of all funding allocations made should be published. Local political parties should also expect to make some account of the way in which they use the funding to support the development of social capital. This consultation should take place in the first session of the 2010 Parliament. (Paragraph 74)

Response

Political parties are essential to the health of our democracy, and must be resourced effectively if they are to properly fulfil this role. Active and vibrant local parties in all parts of the country will clearly be of benefit to our communities and develop social capital within them. Any decision to link public funding of political parties to membership subscriptions is, of course, a matter for government. We have recently experimented with providing financial incentives—in the form of additional campaign materials—to local Labour parties based on their level of engagement with the community, and found it to be extremely effective. We would be happy to participate in any consultation on how such a scheme would work in practice.

Recommendation 12

Each national party needs to develop a systematic plan of action to support the development of local parties. As part of this plan parties should draw up a checklist of actions which will promote diversity (such as meeting in accessible venues) and might also

offer practical support and incentives to local parties which adopt measures on the checklist. (Paragraph 77)

Response

We are committed to making the Labour Party accessible to its members at every level, from local party meetings to national conferences. Working closely with the Labour Party Disabled Members Group, we have developed an accessibility guide which has been sent to all local parties to make them aware of their responsibility to conduct their business in a way that reflects our collective commitment to involving people with different accessibility needs. Similarly, we have recently developed a pack for local parties outlining measures they should take to make their meetings and activities accessible to younger members. We also provide a Women's Officer handbook to those elected as Women's Officers in local parties which outlines their role and provides practical advice for both recruiting and involving women members. We will look to work with the relevant national groups—BAME Labour and LGBT Labour to develop similar guides to ensure that both BAME and LGBT members play as full and active a role as possible.

Recommendation 13

We recommend that all political parties appoint national and/or regional community champions for women, and people from BME and LGBT communities, and disabled people. The champions' remit should include supporting individuals from those communities in finding and sustaining a suitable role within the party. Consideration should also be given to formalising strategies for talent spotting within parties and within the wider community. (Paragraph 79)

Response

The Labour Party currently supports a range of organisations operating both nationally and regionally to represent people from the diverse range of backgrounds who are active within the Party, and to increase participation amongst these groups. These include the Labour Women's Network, LGBT Labour, BAME Labour and the Labour Party Disabled Members Group. These groups play a particularly important role in talent-spotting and supporting members through mentoring and other means. We welcome any suggestions from the Speaker's Conference as to how we can formalise and improve these mechanisms.

The executives of local Labour Parties must contain officers representing women, BAME members and young members, and we employ quotas at every level of the Party to ensure that all committees are gender-balanced. This ensures that at every level there are women championing diversity, and we will look at new mechanisms to similarly support and encourage champions from other diverse groups.

Recommendation 14

A description of the main functions of a Member of Parliament should be drawn up, agreed between the parties and published. The description should not remove the scope for

MPs to approach the job of representing their constituency in various ways; it should contain general principles and main objectives and tasks, rather than highly detailed prescriptions. Greater transparency about the terms and conditions under which MPs work has been achieved since the mid-1990s but the process has not been completed; nor has it been matched by a clearer explanation of the role of Members. More is needed. This information should be consolidated, published (on the internet and in hard copy) and made widely available to the general public. (Paragraph 87)

Response

The Labour Party already publishes a Job Description for Members of Parliament and this is readily available to members on our website. We sent a copy of this to the Speaker's Conference at an earlier date. The job description and accompanying person specification are designed to highlight that many different backgrounds and experiences can be relevant to the role of MP, beyond those of local council leader and parliamentary researcher/SPAD. We are particularly keen to stress the relevance of experience such as juggling work and caring responsibilities; voluntary work; and trade union activism. We would be happy to work with the Conference and other parties on a more general job description accessible to members of the public.

Recommendation 15

It is important to ensure that there is no single route into politics which is accessible only to a privileged few. The routes by which future Members come into Parliament should be monitored and information published by the political parties. (Paragraph 102)

Response

We absolutely agree with the Conference's conclusion that many different backgrounds provide relevant experience to the job of MP. The Labour Party was founded to give working people a voice in Parliament, and we are proud of our record in opening up the House to people of diverse backgrounds. Currently the Parliamentary Labour Party numbers in its ranks former miners, transport workers, trade union officials, and many who worked in our public services. We have begun monitoring the professional background of our PPCs, and will look to improve this in the next parliament.

Recommendation 16

There would be value in the parties being more open about both the qualities, and the experience, they consider to be desirable for a prospective parliamentary candidate. If it becomes clear that certain types of experience—such as a spell as a party employee or as an MP's researcher—are preferred, the parties should consider how those experiences can be made more accessible. (Paragraph 103)

Response

The Labour Party's job description and person specification for MPs is freely available to members on our website. This clearly states the qualities and experiences we consider

desirable in a prospective parliamentary candidate. We stress that many different types of experience are relevant, and think we are a more diverse parliamentary party, with a wider range of expertise because of it.

Whilst knowledge of Parliament and party structures is useful for an aspiring MP, so too are other forms of experience, such as knowledge of local government, local campaigns and community activism. Our affiliated trade unions, who participate fully in our selections process, provide many opportunities for non-professional candidates, who nonetheless have extremely relevant experience for Parliament to draw upon.

We accept that internships and posts as MP's researchers are many young people's first experience of the political process, and some may go on to become MPs. It is important that every member has an equal opportunity to take up such positions, and we will work with the PLP to ensure this is the case.

Recommendation 17

Greater diversity in our elected representatives will be achieved only when the culture of our political parties has been changed. This change in our political parties should be driven by the changes we see in wider society, which requires and demands greater diversity in all representative organisations and bodies. Party leaders can help to challenge stereotypes of an effective Member, or Minister, by ensuring that MPs from all backgrounds and communities are able to demonstrate their skills in positions of prominence, either within Government or within the party. (Paragraph 104)

Response

We agree that role-models for under-represented groups are important to breaking down perceptions and stereotypes.

We are proud to have had the:

first Black MPs (Bernie Grant and Diane Abbott);

first Muslim MP (Mohammad Sarwar);

first Asian Minister in the Commons (Keith Vaz);

first Black Cabinet Minister (Paul Boateng);

first Asian and Muslim minister to attend Cabinet (Sadiq Khan);

first black Leader of the Lords (Baroness Amos);

first Black, and female Attorney General (Patricia Scotland);

first Black female Minister in the Commons (Dawn Butler).

Recommendation 18

Behaviour at selection panels which discriminates against candidates on grounds of their sex, background or personal circumstances can never be justified. (Paragraph 112)

Response

The Labour Party's rule book specifically prohibits such behaviour and where it can be proven, would take strong action against any individual found to have engaged in such behaviour.

Recommendation 19

Political parties should make diversity awareness training, advice and support available to party members involved in candidate selections. (Paragraph 116)

Response

The importance of diversity as a core value of the Labour Party is highlighted throughout the guidance provided to CLP procedure secretaries when conducting a selection. We run special selections training for ethnic minority candidates and women, and we are looking to extend that to LGBT and disabled candidates.

Furthermore, groups such as Labour Women's Network, BAME Labour, Dorothy's List, and the Labour Party Disabled Members' Group have provided training and guidance to local parties. Affiliated organisations, such as trade unions, have also provided their own training to under-represented groups within their own organisations who wish to be Labour Party parliamentary candidates.

Recommendation 20

In practice all-women shortlist selections have been carried out by UK local parties in exactly the same way as traditional or 'open' selections, in every respect other than the formal requirement that all the candidates are women. We were told that the role of the all-women shortlist is solely to reduce the discretion available to local party selection committees to demonstrate bias in favour of men. (Paragraph 138)

Response

The Labour Party changed the law to permit political parties to use positive action to address the shameful under-representation of women in the House of Commons. Our Conference's subsequent adoption of All-Women Shortlists had immediate and dramatic results. Women's representation in the PLP rose from 14% in 1992 to 24% in 1997 when we used All-Women Shortlists. After they were declared illegal, at the next election (2001) the number of women in the PLP fell. Once we changed the law to once again permit All-Women Shortlists, our number of women MPs rose once again, to 28% in 2005. This year (as at March 2010) 57% of candidates selected in Labour-held seats are women.

We have never used All-Women Shortlists in a vacuum, but alongside other measures such as training, mentoring, quotas on shortlists, etc. However, it is our belief that All-Women Shortlists are a temporary necessity in order to counter discrimination until such time as the House is more balanced in composition and the political culture has changed to one in which people are accustomed to seeing women in positions of power and influence.

It is important to reiterate that the decision to adopt All-Women Shortlists was taken by our Conference, reflecting the views of the majority of our members, rather than imposed from above. We have since worked hard to maintain and build support for that policy, and to maintain a dialogue with members who disagree, especially where controversial decisions have been taken. It will never be a policy with which every member agrees, and as such it is important to continually argue the case for it, specifically that its continuation is a democratic imperative.

There is no doubt that All-Women Shortlists have been the decisive factor in the improvements that we have made to our levels of women's representation, and we are disappointed that other political parties have not followed our lead. There has never been a country in the world that has significantly increased its levels of women's representation without the use of positive action mechanisms to address discrimination.

Recommendation 21

If the number of women MPs in the House of Commons falls at the 2010 election it will make more pressing the need for all the main parties to be assertive in their equality policies. (Paragraph 143)

Response

We are very hopeful, given the progress that we have made in our selections this parliament, that the number of women in Parliament will not fall, but rather increase. However, whether the number of women MPs rises or falls, as long as women remain so shamefully under-represented in the House, the need for all main parties to be assertive in their equality policies will remain pressing for a considerable time to come.

Recommendation 22

We welcome the progress which each of the main parties has made over recent years towards ensuring that its local selection procedures are more professional and objective than they have been in the past. Yet the fact that, in most cases, it remains more difficult for a candidate who does not fit the "white, male, middle-class" norm to be selected, particularly if the seat is considered by their party to be winnable, means that the case for equality of representation has not yet been won. It is essential that the leadership of each of the political parties—large and small—continues to make this case in discussion with their members and activists, and also takes the measures necessary to secure progress. (Paragraph 146)

Response

We dispute the premise that it is easier for “white, male, middle-class” candidates to be selected by the Labour Party in Labour-held seats. Whilst this might have been true in the past, since the Labour government passed the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 and we reintroduced All-Women Shortlists, some in our party have argued that the opposite is true!

The reality is that we have sought to strike a balance between taking the necessary action to improve women’s representation in our Party, whilst maintaining opportunities for the many talented men in our ranks who aspire to be MPs. We believe this is a balance we are maintaining well: in 2005, in Labour-held seats, 70% selected women; as of March 2010, in Labour-held seats, 57% have selected women.

We have also selected Black and Asian candidates in some of our safest seats, and whilst we acknowledge that there is a lot more to do, these are problems we recognise and are intent upon addressing.

Recommendation 23

We fully support the proposed extension of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to enable the use of all-women shortlists until 2030. Equivalent enabling legislation should now be enacted to allow political parties, if they so choose, to use all-BME shortlists. Like the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 such provision should be time-limited and should be subject to review prior to 2030. (Paragraph 149)

Response

We are pleased that the government proposes to extend the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, and that the Conference recognises the value of this move. We hope that other political parties will follow our lead and introduce All-Women Shortlists as the swiftest and most effective means of addressing the under-representation of women.

We also recognise the under-representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic MPs, and agree that much more needs to be done to address this. We presently use quotas when drawing up shortlists for selections to ensure those shortlists are reflective of the wider community. This ensures that women and BAME candidates are included on shortlists, even where an open selection is taking place. This ensures that there is always at least one BAME candidate on every shortlist (where an All-Women Shortlist is being used, there must be at least one BAME woman candidate). We are pleased that we have selected BAME candidates in some of our safest seats, including some excellent BAME women candidates.

However, whilst we think more needs to be done, there is no consensus amongst our BAME activists, nor the wider BAME community, that all-BAME shortlists are the best way to address this under-representation.

Recommendation 24

Candidate selections for the following general election will begin, for some parties, within the first twelve to eighteen months of the 2010 Parliament. These selections will be equally important for securing cultural change within parties and within the House of Commons. In this context we particularly welcome the indications from the opposition party leaders that they are open-minded on the matter of equality guarantees. If the political parties fail to make significant progress on women's representation at the 2010 general election, Parliament should give serious consideration to the introduction of prescriptive quotas, ensuring that all political parties adopt some form of equality guarantee in time for the following general election. (Paragraph 156)

Response

We are confident that at our current rate of selections, we will make significant progress on women's representation at the 2010 general election.

Nonetheless, the Labour Party is not opposed to quotas in principle. We use them in the Party to ensure women's representation at every level, from Constituency Committees, to Annual Conference, to the National Executive Committee. We also used a variation on quotas: 'twinning' when selecting seats for the newly-established Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament.

However, imposing quotas on a long-established Parliament, under the First-Past-the-Post electoral system, presents practical problems, and would likely encounter public opposition. The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act provides political parties with every opportunity to take steps to address under-representation. We would encourage all political parties to take full advantage of the Act's provisions. If all political parties had taken the same steps we have since 1997, there would be substantially more women in Parliament today.

Recommendation 25

We welcome the openness of all three main party leaders—Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP and Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP—to the principle of publishing monitoring data in relation to candidate selections. This is an important indication of the commitment of all three main parties to the promotion of fairer representation in Parliament. We recommend that all political parties registered under part 2 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 should be required to publish details of their candidate selections online every six months, on 31 March and 31 October, setting out, for each potential candidate at each stage of the selection process, the following information:

- (a) the administrative region in which the selection took place;
- (b) the method by which the candidate was selected;
- (c) whether the party:
 - (i) currently holds the seat for which the candidate was selected; or

(ii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of less than 5% of the votes cast; or

(iii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of more than five per cent but less than ten per cent of the votes cast;

(d) the sex of the candidate;

(e) the ethnicity of the candidate; and

(f) whether the candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person.

The reports might also include the following information:

(a) where a candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person, the nature of the impairment;

(b) where a candidate is willing to state his or her sexual orientation, the sexual orientation of the candidate;

(c) the age of the candidate;

(d) the occupation of the candidate at the time of selection; and

(e) the highest level of the candidate's educational attainment. (Paragraph 160)

Response

Monitoring provides extremely valuable information in determining the extent of under-representation, and the pace of progress to address it, and we are pleased that the Conference recognises its importance.

We have monitored candidates by region, selection method, gender, and race for some years, as the Conference will have seen from the extensive data we provided. More recently we have begun monitoring disability, age, and occupation, and will look to improve this monitoring in the next Parliament. On sexual orientation, we have taken guidance from LGBT Labour, who provide us with the names of MPs and candidates who have advised them they are willing to openly state their sexual orientation. Given the sensitivities involved, we would prefer to continue with this approach. We are happy to add educational attainment to the list of factors we monitor.

As far as publishing this data, we are happy in principle, but would want to work with the Conference to ensure that candidates could not be identified from data given to us in confidence, and to ensure that data protection regulations are not breached.

We also believe that such an exercise, whilst valuable, should not place too onerous a burden on the parties' financial resources and staff time. Some seats receive hundreds, if not thousands, of applicants, most of whom are swiftly eliminated at the long-listing stage of a selection as not having met the person specification. To monitor all of these candidates, at every stage of the process would be onerous and do little to meet our shared objectives. Similarly, we anticipate that there are easier ways to establish a seat's marginality than complex calculations involving majorities and percentages. However,

we anticipate that these are minor difficulties and look forward to working with the Conference in resolving them.

Recommendation 26

Following the 2010 general election all political parties represented at Westminster should publish a statement setting out the current proportion of their Parliamentary party which is: female; from a BME community; and/or identifies as a disabled person. The statement should also set out what proportion of the Parliamentary party the national party would like to see appearing in each of these categories in December 2015 and December 2020. This statement should be published by December 2010. In December 2015 and December 2020 the parties should publish further statements setting out what progress they have made towards just representation within the parliamentary party, compared to the 2010 baseline and the percentage of each group within the UK population as a whole. These reports should also include an evaluation of the mechanisms the parties have used to secure progress. (Paragraph 165)

Response

We believe targets are important benchmarks against which to measure progress and provide an incentive to faster, more effective action. We would be happy to publish and evaluate our progress on a cross-party basis such as that described.

Paragraphs 28

We do not doubt that party leaders are sincere when they say that they want better access for disabled people. We recognise that they may be finding it difficult to make sure their policies are carried out at a local level where it matters. Nevertheless the shortage of funds must not be an excuse for local parties failing to make proper arrangements for disabled people to play their part in politics. (Paragraph 199)

Response

We agree that access is essential in ensuring that disabled people play a full role in public life. Whilst resources are always constrained in local parties, they also have the benefit of being relatively flexible in their arrangements. We have therefore worked closely with the Labour Party Disabled Members Group to develop an accessibility guide which has been sent to all local parties to make them aware of their responsibility to hold fully accessible meetings and conduct their business in a way which reflects their commitment to involving people with different accessibility needs.

However, we accept that there is more work to be done to ensure that local parties are fully complying with our accessibility guidelines, and we will look at developing processes through our Regional Offices to ensure that all local party officers are fully up-to-date with accessibility guidelines.

Recommendation 30

We believe that all political parties should make it easier for disabled people to play a full part in party activities, initially by setting out a clear policy on access. At national level, this would mean for instance making sure that campaign documents are produced in Braille and other formats, that websites are easy to use for people with sight impairments, and that BSL interpretation or speech-to-text technology is available at major events. (Paragraph 201)

Response

We produce an accessibility guide for disabled members that clearly sets out our policy on accessibility. We also provide BSL at all major events. Our website is designed to be accessible to disabled members, and we invite feedback as to how we can improve on this. Whilst we would find it prohibitively expensive to produce all campaign literature and party documents in Braille, we promote the fact that we are happy to produce documents in alternative formats on a case by case basis, such as for blind delegates at Annual Conference. We constantly solicit feedback as to what more we can be doing in this area, and would be willing to consider any further suggestions the Conference might have.

Recommendation 31

But there also needs to be a realistic policy for local parties, encouraging co-operation and making the best of the limited money available. The ideas and practical suggestions set out in the guide and handbook produced by the Labour Party Disabled Members' Group would form a good basis for this policy, for all political parties. (Paragraph 202)

Response

We are pleased that the Conference recognises the good work of the Labour Party Disabled Members' Group, and their efforts to support the Party in promoting accessible and inclusive local CLPs.

Recommendation 32

All political parties should place a ceiling upon the expenses which candidates can incur during any single selection process. (Paragraph 212)

Response

We did not recognise some of the large sums, running into the thousands, that were cited during evidence to the Speaker's Conference as the costs involved in running for Parliamentary selection. Indeed, in the Labour Party we have found that candidates who have spent large sums on leaflets and other campaign materials have found it to be counter-productive.

However, we do accept that lack of resources should never be a barrier to selection. Several internal groups, including Emily's List, Bernie's List, Dorothy's List and our

affiliated trade unions, provide financial support to aspirant candidates, and we will look to see how that level of support can be improved to reach all candidates who are in financial or practical difficulty in selection campaigns.

Recommendation 34

There is overwhelming evidence that shortage of money and the necessity of additional expenditure to support disabled people through candidacy, make finance a particularly significant barrier to elected office for disabled people. Disabled people should be able to fight for parliamentary seats without having to face the complicated financial barriers that confront them at present. This is not a question of political advantage, but a simple matter of achieving just representation. (Paragraph 220)

Response

We entirely agree that lack of money should not be a barrier to those wanting to be MPs, and as detailed above, there are numerous internal Labour Party organisations which provide assistance to those in financial need. However, we are not complacent, and recognise there may be those whose particular needs may mean money is still a problem. We look forward to working with the Speaker's Conference to consider and consult on the various ways additional financial support for such candidates might be obtained.

Recommendation 35

We therefore believe that the Government should urgently consider, as part of the Democracy Diversity Fund, a ring-fenced scheme to support disabled parliamentary candidates. This scheme for disabled candidates should use as its model the Access to Public Life Fund which has been proposed by Scope. The scheme should be devised and operated by the Department for Work and Pensions, and should be administered in the same way as the Access to Work scheme. (Paragraph 221)

Response

We recognise that those with disabilities may have additional mobility and other needs that necessitate additional expenditure. We are happy to consult with the government, Speaker's Conference, and other parties on the best way to address this.

Recommendations 36–38

A measure which could help to reduce the burden on candidates would be for the Government to legislate to give approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees the right to request a reasonable amount of unpaid leave during working hours and/or a right to work flexibly for the purposes of campaigning. This would also, symbolically, recognise that the action of standing for election, whether or not the candidate is successful, is an essential part of our democratic process and of public benefit. (Paragraph 223)

The Government should legislate to enable approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees to take unpaid leave, rather than resigning their employment, for the period from the dissolution of Parliament to election day (Paragraph 224)

We recognise that, in the first instance, making such leave unpaid protects employers from any suggestion that they may be improperly financing a political campaign. In the long term we would like the Government to move to a position where candidates are entitled to receive a grant from the state equivalent to the minimum wage for the period sometimes known as the short campaign. (Paragraph 224)

Response

We recognise that some candidates may experience a lack of understanding from their employer that might make it difficult for them to participate properly in selection contests. We are happy to consult with the government, Speaker’s Conference, and other parties on the best way to address this.

Recommendation 39

Each central political party should consider drawing up statements of expectation setting out the role, and the reasonable demands which may be made, of both prospective parliamentary candidates and local party associations in different types of seat. (Paragraph 229)

Response

We already produce a job description and person specification for parliamentary candidates that outlines the role of MP and some of the demands it entails. We will consult with our relevant stakeholders and look to drawing up a formal statement of expectation for both candidates and local parties after the 2010 election.

Recommendation 40

First-time candidates, in particular, would benefit from the establishment of formal mentoring schemes and/or ‘buddy systems’ which can provide pastoral support and independent advice on issues arising within the constituency. (Paragraph 230)

Response

We strongly believe that mentoring schemes offer first-time candidates (and even those just considering putting themselves forward for selection) a hugely valuable insight and support mechanism. We have launched a formal mentoring scheme for women candidates—Winning with Women’—which is co-ordinated by the Women’s PLP (the group of Labour women MPs). This scheme ensures that every woman candidate is offered a woman mentor in the PLP who can help them with both practical advice and pastoral support. We recently extended this scheme, working with the Labour Women’s Network, to link women who are keen to put themselves forward for selection with women MPs who can provide them with support and advice about the selection process. We also work with the Youth and Student sections of our Party to ensure that

young women members who are keen to gain experience or find out more about what public life entails are offered a mentor relevant to the section of public life they are considering—be that Westminster, Local Government or the devolved governments.

The regional groupings of MPs within the PLP also oversee a mechanism through which new MPs are supported by longer-standing MPs from the same region, helping to introduce new members to Parliamentary life and processes.

We believe the opportunities provided by the mentoring schemes we already have in place would be beneficial to other under-represented groups within the Party, and we will look at ways to extend the systems currently operating to that end.

Recommendation 41

Regional or central party officials should also consider whether further training support might be beneficial to candidates who have limited experience of formal management, team building and leadership roles. (Paragraph 231)

Response

We currently hold a series of training events for parliamentary candidates, designed to prepare them with the skills needed for public life, including media training and public speaking. This training is part of a national programme, but candidate training also takes place at a regional level throughout the selections cycle. We regularly consult candidates on their training needs, and we will consult new MPs entering the next Parliament on whether additional training would have been helpful to them, so as to inform our next cycle of training events for new candidates.

Recommendation 42

We believe it should be possible for each Parliamentary party to maintain a list of individuals from under-represented groups, perhaps nominated by stakeholder organisations, who might by this means be notified of internships and temporary vacancies arising in Members' offices. All reasonable adjustment costs for the successful applicant should be funded for the duration of the appointment. We invite the political parties to work with stakeholder organisations to establish how this can best be done. (Paragraph 237)

Response

We are keen to develop systems that will enable party members keen to gain experience in a political office the opportunity to do so through an internship. Currently an informal system is in place through the Youth and Student Sections, but we appreciate the need to widen this opportunity to other sections. We find that arrangements and systems for other under-represented groups are very informal, and are co-ordinated through the relevant group. For example LGBT Labour would assist an LGBT member who wanted to gain some direct experience by helping them to arrange an internship with one of our LGBT MPs. We recognise that these informal systems need to be tightened and formalised to ensure that everyone who wishes to access such

opportunities is able to. We welcome any recommendations that the Speaker's Conference can provide as to how to do this most effectively.

Recommendation 44

The parties should each draw up a formal code of conduct for campaigning. This should make clear that campaigning is unacceptable where it seeks to undermine a candidate by reference to his or her family life, racial background, sexual orientation, health status or disability. These codes of conduct should be in place in time for the 2010 general election. (Paragraph 244)

Response

We are happy to enter a cross-party formal code of conduct for campaigning. There is no place for discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, health status or disability in any election campaign.

Recommendations 45–48

The inflexibility of Parliament's working practices (which are partly institutional and partly the result of the way that the political parties work), together with the increasingly heavy workload of constituency demands, combine to create a lifestyle which is detrimental to Members with caring responsibilities, both for children and other dependents. (Paragraph 249)

In recent months there has been a push at Westminster to change many of the ways in which the House of Commons operates. The ultimate outcome of the various reviews and inquiries which are being conducted ought to be a revitalised House with much clearer rules, better accountability and, possibly, greater independence. If such changes are considered and implemented effectively they should benefit us all. There is, however, an opportunity within these changes also to make the House of Commons a more flexible, humane and responsible institution which, while it requires greater probity of those within it, also takes greater account of the circumstances in which each individual works. (Paragraph 251)

A diverse workforce for Parliament is not an aspiration but an imperative. It is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families and/or other caring responsibilities is maintained and supported. This must be kept in mind by all who are engaged in the current process of Commons reform. (Paragraph 253)

Maternity, paternity and caring leave is an issue which all three main parliamentary parties have as yet failed to take fully seriously. (Paragraph 263)

Response

As a Party we are extremely proud of our record in this area. Labour extended paid maternity leave to 39 weeks, which has now been increased to £123.06 a week. New mothers now have the right to 9 months paid maternity leave and up to a year in total. We have extended parental leave so that fathers have a right to paid paternity leave for

the first time. New fathers now have the right to two weeks paid time off when their baby is born. Labour also introduced the right to request flexible working for parents of disabled children, and has extended this to cover carers of adults.

We introduced the rights for parents of young children to request flexible working from their employer—and from April 2009 we extended this to parents of all children up to 16, benefiting around 4.5 million parents. In addition, all parents and carers now have the right to time off to deal with unexpected problems such as family illness.

However, we recognise the need to ensure that MPs feel able to take up these rights just as other UK citizens are, and are willing to work with the House Authorities, other parties and the Speaker's Conference to address any existing problems.

Recommendation 49

Each Parliamentary party should draw up a formal statement of policy on maternity, paternity and caring leave. This should set out clearly the minimum level of support which an individual requesting leave may expect from his or her party, and the steps which the individual should take to arrange a period of leave. Such statements should be agreed by party leaders, and published on party websites and in the party whip, by the end of 2010. (Paragraph 264)

Response

The PLP does not presently hold formal policy in this area, though every effort is made to accommodate the individual needs of Members of Parliament. In part this is due to the unique employment status of a Member of Parliament.

With regards to authorised absence from the Government Whip on maternity, paternity or other caring leave—this is agreed with individual members. These are informal, flexible agreements that suit the needs of the individual Member. We have sought and received very positive feedback from the Members concerned on how these arrangements operate in practice.

Recommendation 53–54

It would be better if Members' requests for caring or sickness leave were less subject to the state of relations between the parties and the turn of events. We believe that greater transparency about the organisation of pairing would help. We therefore recommend that the business managers for each Parliamentary party should regularly brief their Members about the process of pairing, the requests they have received for pairing and whether or not it has been possible to agree to those requests. (Paragraph 274)

The sitting hours of the House should again be reviewed, and voted upon by the House, early in the new Parliament. Ideally, sitting time for the main chamber should be brought in line with what is considered to be normal business hours. Respecting the difficulty of achieving this, given the multiplicity of other duties inside and outside the Palace of Westminster carried out by Members, we recommend a substantial further development of deferred voting in order to facilitate a more family friendly approach to sitting

arrangements and unscheduled (unprogrammed) votes. Further consideration should be given to modern methods of voting to facilitate a more efficient and practical use of time, in line with other legislatures. (Paragraph 286)

Response

We are proud of the modernisation of Parliament that has taken place since 1997, though we recognise there is more to do. We are happy to work with the Speaker's Conference, the House Authorities and other parties as to how best this can be achieved to ensure caring responsibilities are no barrier to a successful career in Parliament.

Recommendations 70–71

We, like the Commission on Candidate Selection before us, would wish to see an end to strident, hostile and intrusive reporting of politicians' private lives which is destructive not only of those individuals but also of their families, relationships, and of the democratic process itself. (Paragraph 343)

We acknowledge that Members as well as outside commentators have been known to abuse other Members, of their own and other parties. Such behaviour among colleagues would not be considered acceptable in most professions and brings the profession of Parliamentarian into disrepute. Members should treat their colleagues, across all parties, with courtesy. (Paragraph 344)

Response

We entirely agree that in a 21st century Parliament MPs should treat their opponents and their colleagues with respect, and discrimination should not be tolerated. Public trust in Parliament is low, and it is essential that it be restored as soon as possible. Having a Parliament that looks like the communities it represents is one way to reconnect with the electorate. We are proud that we have led the way upon this issue, but recognise that we can build on our successes and do very much more. We welcome any support the Speaker's Conference can give us in addressing inequality within our own ranks.

Appendix 5: The Conservative Party's response

Background

On 12 November 2008 the House of Commons agreed to establish a new committee, to be chaired by the Speaker and known as the Speaker's Conference.

The Conference was asked to: “Consider, and make recommendations for rectifying, the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large”. The Speaker’s Conference published its final report on 11 January 2010.

This note sets out the Conservative Party’s response to the recommendations. The numbering of the recommendations is as in the report.

In addition to the comments below there are a number of recommendations to which we would wish to return after the election and which can best be considered once the impact of the changes that have already been made to their selection procedures by parties is known following the result of the election.

Recommendations 1 and 2

We accept that there needs to be a greater consistency in the quality of citizenship courses in schools. Individual MPs also need to ensure that they do all they can to encourage a greater understanding of Parliament and the role of an MP in schools in their constituencies

In Government we would introduce a National Citizen Service which will provide a six week course for young people leaving school or college as a rites of passage programme into adulthood, which will include community service.

Recommendations 3–5

We congratulate the Parliamentary Education Service on the sterling work that they do, but recognise that many MPs are still not fully aware of the opportunities the Service offers.

We agree that the Education Service should do more to promote the value of the role of a Member of Parliament which in turn should help to encourage a wider range of people to consider standing. However, there has to be a clear separation between the role of Parliament and that of political parties in this and we consider that it is not up to Parliament to identify people who should be encouraged to stand.

We welcome the proposal to develop more support for MPs to promote active citizenship in their constituencies but before any action is taken more should be done to ensure MPs are aware of the support already available.

Recommendation 11

This recommendation goes beyond the remit of the Conference as it relates to the funding of political parties. This is an issue to which we will return after the election.

Recommendation 12

We already offer advice to local associations on ensuring that activities can be accessed by disabled people and people from BME communities.

Recommendation 13

In common with other parties we have a number of specialist bodies within the Party or allied to it which encourage political participation and activism among the groups identified above such as the Conservative Women's Organisation and women2win, the Conservative Disability Group and the Conservative Muslim Forum.

Recommendation 14

We are happy to work with other parties to draw up a list of the main functions of an MP. We have already made this information available in a number of publications and on our website. In addition, we are the only major political party to have drawn up a list of the competencies required to be an MP and to assess applicants to be on the Party's candidates' list against this list of competencies. The list was drawn up in conjunction with an occupational psychologist.

Recommendations 15–19

We question the value of monitoring routes into Parliament given that many people come into Parliament through a number of routes—e.g someone might have worked in Parliament, have been a councillor and have been active in their local political party so collating this information may not be very informative.

We do not value potential candidates on their experience but on their competencies. We have examples of candidates who have many years political experience and candidates who have had no political experience. It would be wrong to try to identify a set route into being a candidate.

We agree that stereotypes should be challenged. David Cameron has already made it his aspiration that 30% of his ministers should be women at the end of the first parliament of a Conservative Government. We already ensure that selection meetings are aware of the need not to discriminate against candidates on the issues referred to but will give further consideration to whether this can be improved after the election

Recommendations 20–23

We support the extension of the 2002 Act.

Recommendations 24–25

We support the reporting of selections on a regular basis but have concerns about publicly reporting the sexual orientation of candidates. We intend to work with Stonewall to identify a suitable process for monitoring sexual orientation of candidates for internal purposes along the lines of best business practice, but do not believe this information should be reported publicly

Recommendation 26

While it will of course be possible to make such a statement after the 2010 election, it should be noted that it is impossible to predict accurately the future make up of any parliamentary party because it depends not only on the actions of the party in relation to selections but also on the electorate. It is important to be realistic about what can and cannot be achieved by targets and quotas.

Recommendation 27

The recommendation calls on government to find time for a debate in 2010 and every two years thereafter to 2022 on the implementation of the recommendations in the Speaker's Conference report. Such a debate, as a General Debate, would now fall under the control of the Backbench Business Committee. We would certainly commend such a debate to that committee.

Recommendations 28–35

A Conservative government is committed to introducing an Access to Public Life Fund for disabled candidates as first proposed by Scope.

Recommendation 37

This recommendation has much to commend it, but it would need to be considered after the election in the context of the wider issue of employment legislation.

Recommendation 39

We support this proposal. We would not intend any such statement to detract from the ability of a candidate to undertake the role in the manner they best saw fit but there would be an advantage in setting out the reasonable expectations of what a candidate would do and thus of ensuring that the expectations of all parties involved—candidates and local parties—were consistent.

Recommendation 40

We already operate a mentoring scheme for candidates.

Recommendation 41

The Party already makes a number of training courses available to candidates and women2win provides further training for women candidates.

Recommendation 44

We agree with this proposal.

Recommendations 45–55

These raise a serious issue about the make-up of Parliament in the future and its impact on the need for policies within Parliament and the parties to cater for the needs of parents of young children and of pregnant MPs. As a party in Parliament this is already an issue we have discussed. As a party we are looking at drawing up a policy on maternity leave which can be applied generally, while recognising the different requirements that Members may have not least arising from the geographical spread of constituencies. Our policy, should we be in government, is to change maternity leave to flexible parental leave. This would have implications for male and female MPs which will require further discussion, and we will consider the issue of maternity and paternity leave in that context. We will also consider the proposal as it relates to caring leave.

Recommendation 56

We support this proposal.

Recommendation 57

We believe that there would be practical difficulties in collating information through the occupational health service not least because not all Members use this service in any given year or indeed in any parliamentary session.

Recommendation 62

The House published its Single Equality Scheme in January 2010 which explains how the House regularly collects data on staff ethnicity, disability status, age and gender. Any changes to this scheme would be a matter for the House of Commons Commission.

Recommendations 63–64.

We agree with the proposal to repeal Section 141 of the Mental Health Act indeed we have been pressing the Government to do this. We tabled a New Clause to the Equality Bill to end this discrimination against people with mental health illnesses and then tabled a new amendment to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill. On 26 January we secured a commitment to change from the Government during the 4th Committee Day of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill and have recently written to the Chairman of the Justice Committee, to ask them if they would be prepared to report on how to deal with MPs who are incapacitated (to treat physical and mental health issues in a consistent way).

Recommendation 66

We support this recommendation

Recommendations 67–68

These recommendations relate to a concern to see a greater balance in the reporting of Parliament, particularly to ensure coverage of the less heated debate that takes place in Select Committees and other committees. We are committed to strengthening Parliament

and supported the Wright Committee reforms on which the House recently voted. These will help to give Members greater control ownership of both the content of debates and—through an elected Procedure Committee—the procedure of the Chamber. We support a more collaborative approach to scheduling House business and hope this will both increase the ability of the House to hold the Executive to account and will lead to a less overtly confrontational style of politics.

Appendix 6: The Liberal Democrat Party's response

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Speaker's Conference final report. We recognise many of the conclusions and recommendations of the Conference as necessary steps towards creating a more representative Parliament.

This response refers to those conclusions and recommendations that are particularly relevant for political parties.

Political parties as playing a key role in increasing diversity

Recommendations

10. It is in the interests of any political party which wishes to achieve, and sustain, a period in government that it should foster local activism and seek to build up social capital and trust. Active, healthy and accessible local political parties will also play a vital role in identifying and nurturing a greater diversity of MPs for the future. (Paragraph 64)

11. The Government should consult on the introduction of a scheme enabling local political parties to apply for funding linked to their receipts from member subscriptions. The scheme should be administered by a suitable independent body and the details of all funding allocations made should be published. Local political parties should also expect to make some account of the way in which they use the funding to support the development of social capital. This consultation should take place in the first session of the 2010 Parliament. (Paragraph 74)

12. Each national party needs to develop a systematic plan of action to support the development of local parties. As part of this plan parties should draw up a checklist of actions which will promote diversity (such as meeting in accessible venues) and might also offer practical support and incentives to local parties which adopt measures on the checklist. (Paragraph 77)

Response

The Liberal Democrats are committed to ensuring that the Party represents the whole of Britain. We cannot claim to represent modern Britain until modern Britain is represented in us, and we need to work closely together throughout the Party to ensure that we achieve this.

The Party has taken major steps centrally to achieve this vital change. We have recently created a Diversity Engagement Group (DEG), which oversees the achievement of the Party's equality and diversity priorities. This group is supported by the National Diversity Unit, which provides central support and guidance in this area and is responsible for promoting diversity initiatives in the Party. These central initiatives form a strong and central framework for support. However, if we want our national and Parliamentary party to grow and develop in this area, then our state, regional and local party structures should play a fundamentally important role.

The Party's National Diversity Unit will shortly begin working with key stakeholders in each region to set objectives and develop plans of action to promote a more diverse membership base within the region. The Party will provide central support and guidance for this work, but regional parties will take ownership of these initiatives at a localised level. The process of developing and implementing these plans will start immediately after the General Election, and we anticipate that every region will have a plan underway by the end of 2010.

We fully support the recommendation for Government funding to be made available to local parties in order to help achieve objectives in this area.

Diversity Champions

Recommendation

13. We recommend that all political parties appoint national and/or regional community champions for women, and people from BME and LGBT communities, and disabled people. The champions' remit should include supporting individuals from those communities in finding and sustaining a suitable role within the party. Consideration should also be given to formalising strategies for talent spotting within parties and within the wider community. (Paragraph 79)

Response

Nick Clegg has written to all Regional Party Chairs to outline the national/regional strategy with regards to diversity and emphasise his commitment to this strategy. All regions have been requested to appoint Diversity Champions to regional executives, and many of these individuals are already in place—for example, 7 Diversity Champions have been appointed in London for each of the 7 equality strands identified in the Single Equality Bill.

Diversity Champions will be given training and full support through the Party's National Diversity Unit. These Champions will help to disseminate the information

through local parties, as well as supporting individuals from under-represented groups to find a role within the Party that is compatible with their skills and experience. They will work with returning officers and local parties during selection processes to attract and support applications from members of underrepresented groups. They will take on key responsibilities for implementing the action plan for diversity initiatives in each region, which will include formalised strategies for talent-spotting, mentoring schemes and targeted training events.

Talent-spotting is already encouraged and supported through key initiatives within the Party. The New Generation initiative provides development opportunities for ambitious Liberal Democrat members from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds, and currently supports 60 potential future representatives. The Campaign for Gender Balance provides training and mentoring to potential and current women candidates, which has resulted in considerable progress in the numbers of approved and selected women. MPs and other senior Party officials are also encouraged to proactively seek out talented individuals, and recommend them to get involved in these initiatives.

Access to politics

Recommendation

15. It is important to ensure that there is no single route into politics which is accessible only to a privileged few. The routes by which future Members come into Parliament should be monitored and information published by the political parties. (Paragraph 102)

Response

The Liberal Democrats are committed to ensuring that the ‘route’ into politics is as open and transparent as possible. When the approvals process was revised in 2008, we ensured that the process was fully accessible to those without a long history of political involvement. The time that people must have been a member of the Party was shortened to 9 months and the referencing system was changed to require just one reference from a Party officer and two from personal or professional referees. This process recognises and values a diverse range of experience and backgrounds, whilst ensuring that applicants have made an informed choice about standing for the Liberal Democrats.

We proactively reach out to those who don’t follow the ‘traditional’ route to politics. We already run ‘Inspiration Days’ for women who are interested in learning more about getting involved with the Party as candidates or otherwise. We intend to expand these days to target those from BAME backgrounds and disabled people throughout the country. The Party has also recently begun to run sessions on ‘planning your political career’, in order to help people from non-political backgrounds chart their own course through politics.

Although we recognise that systematic monitoring of the ‘routes’ by which MPs come to politics would be useful, we would emphasise the need for structured analysis of these figures in order for useful and positive recommendations to be drawn. Within the

Liberal Democrats, valuable partnerships have been built with external academics and organisations, who may be best placed to conduct research and analysis.

A working group has been established within the Party to ensure accessibility to voluntary and paid roles. This group has developed a series of best practice internal guidelines on internships, staff monitoring procedures and equality impact assessments for all departments within the organisation.

We acknowledge that the extent and nature of monitoring information required by political parties is currently being debated in the House of Lords as part of the Single Equality Bill, and we await the outcome of this with interest.

Desired qualities and experience for Parliamentary Candidates

Recommendation

16. There would be value in the parties being more open about both the qualities, and the experience, they consider to be desirable for a prospective parliamentary candidate. If it becomes clear that certain types of experience—such as a spell as a party employee or as an MP’s researcher—are preferred, the parties should consider how those experiences can be made more accessible. (Paragraph 103)

Response

The process by which Parliamentary Candidates are assessed was revised in 2008, following extensive consultation within the Party. An external expert in political leadership, Dr Jo Silvester, from City University London, was commissioned to design a competency based assessment process. This process is based around a competency framework which clearly indicates the qualities that the Party looks for in a Parliamentary Candidate. Potential applicants are given not only the headline competencies areas, but also a full chart of behavioral indicators to show how they will be assessed. To our knowledge, the Liberal Democrats are the only political party to make this level of detailed information available to potential applicants.

Assessors are fully trained in objectivity and fairness. They are trained to assess the applicant according to the competency framework rather than through their background or previous experience—assessors do not have access to any previous information about their education, age, gender, professional background, or ethnicity.

Local parties currently set their own selection criteria for potential candidates. However, the current rules state that these criteria must not discriminate against any particular group. In the next parliament, there are plans to ensure that all local Parties link all their selection criteria to the competency framework used in the new approvals system.

Visible diversity of elected representatives

Recommendation

17. Greater diversity in our elected representatives will be achieved only when the culture of our political parties has been changed. This change in our political parties should be driven by the changes we see in wider society, which requires and demands greater diversity in all representative organisations and bodies. Party leaders can help to challenge stereotypes of an effective Member, or Minister, by ensuring that MPs from all backgrounds and communities are able to demonstrate their skills in positions of prominence, either within Government or within the party. (Paragraph 104)

Response

The Liberal Democrats are already committed to the promotion and encouragement of MPs from diverse backgrounds and communities. This is also reflected in our appointments in the House of Lords. We want to see the widest promotion of talent and are committed to continuing this practice in the new Parliament.

We recognise the value of ministers/shadow ministers acting as role models, engaging with people from under-represented groups, and encouraging individuals to come forward as potential candidates.

Discriminatory behaviour by selection committees

Recommendations

18. Behaviour at selection panels which discriminates against candidates on grounds of their sex, background or personal circumstances can never be justified. (Paragraph 112)

19. Political parties should make diversity awareness training, advice and support available to party members involved in candidate selections. (Paragraph 116)

Response

Discriminatory behaviour at selection is not permitted under the rules of the Party. The Returning Officer is responsible for ensuring that questions asked at shortlisting interviews must not discriminate against any group of applicants such as women, applicants from a particular geographical area, ethnic background or disabled applicants.

The composition of the Selection Committee itself must also fairly reflect the membership of the constituency in terms of gender, geography, a balance between councillors and officers of the Local Party and those who are not, age, time in the party and ethnicity. Particular note must be taken of the presence of ethnic minority communities within the membership and if there is a significant proportion of said communities within the electorate but not the membership, then positive steps are taken to reflect this on the Selection Committee.

Diversity awareness training already forms an integral part of our training for selection committee members, and this will be reviewed and revised after the General Election. In Priority seats all members of the Selection Committee must have received the Party's official training in the operation of the selection process. In all other seats at least two people must be trained, one of which must be the Selection Committee chair. Returning Officers, who oversee the selection process and ensure rules are kept, also receive diversity awareness training.

Use of quotas/shortlists

Recommendations

21. If the number of women MPs in the House of Commons falls at the 2010 election it will make more pressing the need for all the main parties to be assertive in their equality policies. (Paragraph 143)

22. We welcome the progress which each of the main parties has made over recent years towards ensuring that its local selection procedures are more professional and objective than they have been in the past. Yet the fact that, in most cases, it remains more difficult for a candidate who does not fit the “white, male, middle-class” norm to be selected, particularly if the seat is considered by their party to be winnable, means that the case for equality of representation has not yet been won. It is essential that the leadership of each of the political parties—large and small—continues to make this case in discussion with their members and activists, and also takes the measures necessary to secure progress. (Paragraph 146)

23. We fully support the proposed extension of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to enable the use of all-women shortlists until 2030. Equivalent enabling legislation should now be enacted to allow political parties, if they so choose, to use all-BME shortlists. Like the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) Act 2002 such provision should be time-limited and should be subject to review prior to 2030. (Paragraph 149)

24. Candidate selections for the following general election will begin, for some parties, within the first twelve to eighteen months of the 2010 Parliament. These selections will be equally important for securing cultural change within parties and within the House of Commons. In this context we particularly welcome the indications from the opposition party leaders that they are open-minded on the matter of equality guarantees. If the political parties fail to make significant progress on women's representation at the 2010 general election, Parliament should give serious consideration to the introduction of prescriptive quotas, ensuring that all political parties adopt some form of equality guarantee in time for the following general election. (Paragraph 156)

Response

The Liberal Democrats support the legal right of political parties to use this legislation.

However, as quotas of any kind address the problem at the selection stage, they do not address the problem Liberal Democrats have identified within our own Party. Our

research shows that where a woman stands for selection in the Liberal Democrats, she is just as likely to be selected as a man. Half of our held seats where MPs are standing down have selected women. Attempting to impose temporary centralised measures upon our local parties, such as all-women shortlists, will therefore not solve the root causes of the problem. We need to concentrate our efforts on the approval stage, where we consistently have more men than women applying.

In 2001, the Liberal Democrat Conference debated proposals to improve the gender balance of the Parliamentary Party at Westminster. Plans for all-women shortlists were rejected on the basis that rather than sexism in selection being the main problem, the real barrier to equal representation was a lack of women coming forward for roles in politics at all levels.

The Campaign for Gender Balance was created to be proactive in seeking out, training, mentoring and providing practical support to potential women candidates. This approach has proved very successful in increasing the number of women candidates in the party and, significantly, those selected for winnable seats—a third of our most winnable Parliamentary seats now have women candidates, and half of the seats where Liberal Democrat MPs are standing down have women candidates.

Meanwhile, the selection rules of the Party state that shortlists of 3 or 4 applicants must have at least one applicant of each gender, and shortlists of 5 or more must have at least two applicants of each gender. This has gone some way to increasing the number of women who have been selected. However, due to the low numbers of women coming forward for approval and selection, there are many seats that are still forced to go ahead without a woman candidate.

The current situation with regards to both MPs and candidates is unacceptable, which is why the Party is focusing on putting additional resources into this. We anticipate that the strategies which are currently being implemented by the National Diversity Unit (as discussed previously) will bring about the change which we would like to see in time for the candidate selections following the General Election. Nick Clegg has stated that he will review the Party's policy on equality guarantees if the situation has not substantially improved within the Liberal Democrats after the next two elections.

Monitoring of selection data

Recommendation

25. We welcome the openness of all three main party leaders—Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP and Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP—to the principle of publishing monitoring data in relation to candidate selections. This is an important indication of the commitment of all three main parties to the promotion of fairer representation in Parliament. We recommend that all political parties registered under part 2 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 should be required to publish details of their candidate selections online every six months, on 31 March and 31 October, setting out, for each potential candidate at each stage of the selection process, the following information:

- (a) the administrative region in which the selection took place;
- (b) the method by which the candidate was selected;
- (c) whether the party:
 - (i) currently holds the seat for which the candidate was selected; or
 - (ii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of less than 5% of the votes cast; or
 - (iii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of more than five per cent but less than ten per cent of the votes cast;
- (d) the sex of the candidate;
- (e) the ethnicity of the candidate; and
- (f) whether the candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person.

The reports might also include the following information:

- (a) where a candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person, the nature of the impairment;
- (b) where a candidate is willing to state his or her sexual orientation, the sexual orientation of the candidate;
- (c) the age of the candidate;
- (d) the occupation of the candidate at the time of selection; and
- (e) the highest level of the candidate's educational attainment. (Paragraph 160)

Response

The Liberal Democrats proactively monitor diversity information for approved and selected candidates, and publishes this data publicly to Conference every six months. As Nick Clegg indicated in his submission to the Conference, the Party is happy to share this data and publish it alongside other political parties. Obviously this must conform to the current legal requirements of data protection.

Concerns may arise over the ability to identify individuals through this level of monitoring, and that would lead to issues regarding an individual's right to privacy and data protection law. We suggest that there should be an option for candidates to submit monitoring data to the Party for internal use, but opt out of having it published openly online.

The sensitivities in this area have already been highlighted within our own internal monitoring procedures. The current system within the Party asks if people are willing

for this information to be used for ‘communication’ purposes and/or for ‘media’ purposes. This seems to have been successful in ensuring that we gather the maximum amount of data whilst taking individual preferences into account.

As stated previously, we would emphasise the need for structured analysis to be conducted on this monitoring data. Within the Liberal Democrats, valuable partnerships have been built with external academics and organisations involved in this work, and these individuals may be better placed to conduct research and analysis. This kind of in-depth analysis will also give due consideration to the intersectionality of diversity strands, such as ethnicity and gender.

We acknowledge that the extent and nature of monitoring information required by political parties is currently being debated in the House of Lords as part of the Single Equality Bill, and we await the outcome of this debate.

Regular statements from political parties on progress

Recommendation

26. Following the 2010 general election all political parties represented at Westminster should publish a statement setting out the current proportion of their Parliamentary party which is: female; from a BME community; and/or identifies as a disabled person. The statement should also set out what proportion of the Parliamentary party the national party would like to see appearing in each of these categories in December 2015 and December 2020. This statement should be published by December 2010. In December 2015 and December 2020 the parties should publish further statements setting out what progress they have made towards just representation within the parliamentary party, compared to the 2010 baseline and the percentage of each group within the UK population as a whole. These reports should also include an evaluation of the mechanisms the parties have used to secure progress. (Paragraph 165)

Response

We will commit to publishing a statement following the 2010 General Election, stating the current proportion of our Parliamentary party which is female; from a BME community; and/or identifies as a disabled person (as far as our monitoring data shows).

Commitments concerning the Parliamentary Party are far more difficult for the Liberal Democrats because we have no ‘safe’ seats. However, we are committed to improving the situation with regards to our approved and selected candidates, particularly with regards to winnable seats. The Party Conference has previously set targets for the Campaign for Gender Balance for the numbers of women approved and the percentage of new women MPs, and the Campaign anticipates meeting these targets in 2010.

We are looking at additional reform at the approval stage in order to address the problems we have identified. The Party will produce a statement at the end of 2010 that outlines all the measures that will be taken in the next electoral cycle.

Access for disabled people

Recommendations

29. We do not doubt that party leaders are sincere when they say that they want better access for disabled people. We recognise that they may be finding it difficult to make sure their policies are carried out at a local level where it matters. Nevertheless the shortage of funds must not be an excuse for local parties failing to make proper arrangements for disabled people to play their part in politics. (Paragraph 199)

30. We believe that all political parties should make it easier for disabled people to play a full part in party activities, initially by setting out a clear policy on access. At national level, this would mean for instance making sure that campaign documents are produced in Braille and other formats, that websites are easy to use for people with sight impairments, and that BSL interpretation or speech-to-text technology is available at major events. (Paragraph 201)

31. But there also needs to be a realistic policy for local parties, encouraging cooperation and making the best of the limited money available. The ideas and practical suggestions set out in the guide and handbook produced by the Labour Party Disabled Members' Group would form a good basis for this policy, for all political parties. (Paragraph 202)

Response

The Party is committed to making all reasonable adjustments to make Party activities accessible for disabled people.

The Liberal Democrat Federal Conference is the forum where Liberal Democrat policy is debated and voted upon, and therefore it is vital that all members are able to attend and participate fully. The Conference Access Group (CAG) has worked hard to identify and tackle obstacles faced by conference-goers. Examples of ways that the Party has improved access include a wheelchair users' accommodation grant; full accessibility in the conference centre, conference hotel and fringe venues; participation for attendees with hearing impairments; assistance with neurological disorders; and accommodating a wide variety of food allergies and dietary requirements.

We have taken practical steps in other areas of the Party such as producing an audio version of the Liberal Democrat Policy Guide, and ensuring that the main Party website is compliant with W3C best practice criteria for accessibility.

The Party has conducted training sessions at Federal Conference on inclusive campaigning for disabled people, such as ensuring access to polling stations. We will also send the Scope booklet—'Whose Vote are You Missing?'—to all Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Candidates, to ensure that they have guidance on engaging with disabled voters and involving disabled people in their campaigns.

In terms of candidate approval, there is a proactive approach to making reasonable adjustments. The Head of the Candidates Office, Tamsin Hewett, is responsible for overseeing accessibility requirements for disabled applicants, and we have had excellent feedback from many disabled members who have been through the process. The Party's

selection rules also state that shortlisting interviews must be conducted at a suitable, neutral venue, which is accessible to and does not discriminate against any applicants with disabilities. Scope conducted a detailed gap analysis of the approval and selection process within the Party in August 2008.

Written guidance on best practice with regards to diversity is currently being developed for local parties, which will include advice on access for disabled people. We welcome the suggestion that the guide and handbook produced by the Labour Party Disabled Members' Group is shared as an example of good practice.

The Liberal Democrat Disability Association is currently undergoing an organisational review and we look forward to working with them in the future on many of these areas.

Costs of candidacy

Recommendations

32. All political parties should place a ceiling upon the expenses which candidates can incur during any single selection process. (Paragraph 212)

33. We support the suggestion of a Democracy Diversity Fund which could be drawn upon by local political parties to support the work of developing talented individuals from under-represented groups and also to provide bursaries to individuals who would otherwise be unable to sustain the costs of candidacy. There must be strong controls in place to make sure the money is not abused and therefore the scheme's effectiveness and propriety should be regularly evaluated by the Electoral Commission, in reports which should be laid before the House at least once every Parliament. The Electoral Commission should consult the Equality and Human Rights Commission when evaluating the scheme. (Paragraph 214)

35. We therefore believe that the Government should urgently consider, as part of the Democracy Diversity Fund, a ring-fenced scheme to support disabled parliamentary candidates. This scheme for disabled candidates should use as its model the Access to Public Life Fund which has been proposed by Scope. The scheme should be devised and operated by the Department for Work and Pensions, and should be administered in the same way as the Access to Work scheme. (Paragraph 221)

Response

The Party currently controls expenses incurred through selection processes by limiting the amount of literature that can be put out in any selection campaign, and the nature of expenses that can be incurred. This is strictly monitored by the Returning Officer and ensures that selections cannot be 'bought' by someone who has greater financial resources.

It is important to examine both direct and indirect costs incurred by different groups going for selections. For example, data provided by the British Representation Survey³

3 2005 British Representation Study—<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/polsoc/research/projects/british-representation-study>

indicates that women spend more during selection campaigns than men. However, when a control for being a parent of a child under 5 was included, the gender difference in spending was reduced dramatically. This suggests that childcare costs account for women's high selection expenses, and indicates a particular need to provide financial support for candidates with young children.

We strongly support the idea of an independently regulated Democracy Diversity Fund that would allow local parties to support the work of talented individuals from underrepresented groups, and provide bursaries for those who would otherwise be unable to stand.

We also support ring-fenced funding within this fund to specifically support disabled Parliamentary Candidates, in line with the proposals made by Scope.

Unpaid leave for candidates

Recommendations

36. A measure which could help to reduce the burden on candidates would be for the Government to legislate to give approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees the right to request a reasonable amount of unpaid leave during working hours and/or a right to work flexibly for the purposes of campaigning. This would also, symbolically, recognise that the action of standing for election, whether or not the candidate is successful, is an essential part of our democratic process and of public benefit. (Paragraph 223)

37. The Government should legislate to enable approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees to take unpaid leave, rather than resigning their employment, for the period from the dissolution of Parliament to election day. (Paragraph 224)

38. We recognise that, in the first instance, making such leave unpaid protects employers from any suggestion that they may be improperly financing a political campaign. In the long term we would like the Government to move to a position where candidates are entitled to receive a grant from the state equivalent to the minimum wage for the period sometimes known as the short campaign. (Paragraph 224)

Response

Research within the Party shows that our candidates put in an average of 20 hours a week, often on top of a full-time job. This is obviously a difficult balance for all candidates, but is extremely difficult for people with childcare responsibilities, or those on low incomes. Women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and disabled people are disproportionately likely to be affected by this.

It is vital that we begin to see candidacy as public service, not a hobby for people who can afford it. In order to make this change, it is necessary to take steps to ensure that it is a viable option for all regardless of situation or background

We agree that asking employers to give unpaid leave to candidates would recognise that the action of standing for election is an essential part of our democratic process and of public benefit.

Support and pastoral care for candidates

Recommendations

39. Each central political party should consider drawing up statements of expectation setting out the role, and the reasonable demands which may be made, of both prospective parliamentary candidates and local party associations in different types of seat. (Paragraph 229)

40. First-time candidates, in particular, would benefit from the establishment of formal mentoring schemes and/or 'buddy systems' which can provide pastoral support and independent advice on issues arising within the constituency. (Paragraph 230)

41. Regional or central party officials should also consider whether further training support might be beneficial to candidates who have limited experience of formal management, team building and leadership roles. (Paragraph 231)

Response

The Liberal Democrats have conducted research in this area, and agree that formalised support and pastoral care for candidates helps to create an open and diverse political culture.

In order to create this culture, the expectations of both the local Party and the candidate need to be openly agreed, in order to avoid misunderstandings and conflict. The recommendation for 'statements of expectation' and providing first-time candidates with formalised buddying arrangements, is among a range of recommendations which is currently being examined by a working group within the Party tasked with supporting candidates. We are hoping to have guidelines and actions on this by the end of 2010.

Formal mentoring and support is already provided for women by the Party's Campaign for Gender Balance, and BAME candidates now receive similar support through the recently established 'New Generation' initiative. Both these initiatives are administered centrally by the Diversity Unit but are working closely with the Regional Parties to conduct outreach throughout the country.

Training is also available in a range of skills specifically for underrepresented groups through the equality initiatives and at Federal Conferences.

Access to internships and temporary vacancies

Recommendation

42. We believe it should be possible for each Parliamentary party to maintain a list of individuals from under-represented groups, perhaps nominated by stakeholder organisations, who might by this means be notified of internships and temporary vacancies arising in Members' offices. All reasonable adjustment costs for the successful applicant should be funded for the duration of the appointment. We invite the political parties to work with stakeholder organisations to establish how this can best be done. (Paragraph 237)

Response

The Liberal Democrats believe that it is important to attract under-represented groups into Westminster politics. We have recently formulated best practice guidelines on internships and temporary vacancies, offering some simple but practical measures to encourage recruitment of parliamentary interns from a much more diverse pool of applicants than is currently the case.

We acknowledge that more could be done to proactively advertise these positions to under-represented groups, so these guidelines also list potential stakeholder organisations that we can work with on this. We would make all reasonable adjustments for successful applicants, as we would for any member of Party staff.

The Parliamentary Party are currently looking forward to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) bringing forward detailed proposals with regard to internships. Assuming that IPSA permits parliamentary internships to continue, and once we've established that our advice is compatible with IPSA's requirements, we will encourage our MPs to follow the party's guidelines.

Code of conduct for candidates

Recommendation

44. The parties should each draw up a formal code of conduct for campaigning. This should make clear that campaigning is unacceptable where it seeks to undermine a candidate by reference to his or her family life, racial background, sexual orientation, health status or disability. These codes of conduct should be in place in time for the 2010 general election. (Paragraph 244)

Response

The Liberal Democrats party constitution states that 'we reject all prejudice and discrimination based upon race, colour, religion, age, disability, sex or sexual orientation and oppose all forms of entrenched privilege and inequality'. Any Party member or staff member found acting in a manner contrary to this core value would face disciplinary action.

A code of conduct is also signed by all Parliamentary Candidates when they go through the approval process. The code of conduct includes the following points which apply here:

1. You must treat others with respect, and must not bully or intimidate any Party member, member of Party staff, member of Parliamentary staff, Party volunteer or member of the public.
2. You must act in such a way as to promote the values of the Liberal Democrats and must not act in a way that is contrary to the interests or values of the Party.

Failing to follow this code of conduct constitutes grounds for removal from the list of approved candidates.

Although we agree that a formal code of conduct for political campaigning would be a positive step, we feel that a standardised code should be developed across the political parties through an external body, such as the Electoral Commission. All parties would then be asked to sign up to common benchmarks in this area. We realise that there is not time to complete this kind of project prior to the 2010 General Election, but would call for this process to begin soon afterwards.

Flexible working and caring arrangements for MPs

Recommendations

48. Maternity, paternity and caring leave is an issue which all three main parliamentary parties have as yet failed to take fully seriously. (Paragraph 263)

49. Each Parliamentary party should draw up a formal statement of policy on maternity, paternity and caring leave. This should set out clearly the minimum level of support which an individual requesting leave may expect from his or her party, and the steps which the individual should take to arrange a period of leave. Such statements should be agreed by party leaders, and published on party websites and in the party whip, by the end of 2010. (Paragraph 264)

Response

The inflexibility of Parliament's working practices create a lifestyle which is detrimental to Members with caring responsibilities, both for children and other dependents. Nick Clegg has repeatedly emphasised his commitment for radical reform within Parliament, in order to create a more open, modern and accessible workplace. In order to ensure a diverse workforce for Parliament, we need to ensure that it is a place that welcomes the individual circumstances and demands of real life. We welcome these recommendations as an opportunity to create this, and recognise the steps that have been taken in other professional sectors in this area.

The Parliamentary Liberal Democrat Party (PLDP) takes the matter of maternity, parental and other caring leave for its MPs very seriously. Although as a Parliamentary Party we have not yet had a request for maternity leave, our policy would be to endeavour to match the statutory rights afforded to women in other professions. This

would also apply to paternity leave, which is something that many male MPs have taken, including our current party Leader.

In the event of maternity and paternity leave, The Liberal Democrats Whips Office will ensure that cover is provided for their parliamentary duties and that additional guidance and support is offered both to the individual and their staff. Some roles are delegated to colleagues or senior staff and we ensure that communication from the Whips Office is kept to real emergencies.

Many of our members at some time juggle attendance in the House with parental responsibilities; and we are mindful of the need for balancing parliamentary duties with family life. Caring leave is dealt with according to the individual circumstances and the request made.

In addition to maternity, parental and other caring duties, the PLDP also support and provide assistance to any colleague who find themselves needing time away from the House for personal medical reasons. However, under current House rules, if a Member is called away for any reason at short notice, they are all but prevented from being substituted on Public Bill Committees on which they serve. It might be useful for the House authorities to consider whether more flexibility could be given to members with caring or parental responsibilities to offer a substitute in these circumstances. We also value the right of MPs of different faiths to take leave on the basis of religious beliefs and holidays.

In the event of a future Liberal Democrat administration, we would first hope to extend the statutory right to maternity, paternity and other caring leave to all MPs and would seek to bring forward a motion to the House. This legislation would equally apply to Ministers, as obviously they remain Members of this House.

Recommendation

51. We have said that it is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families is supported. It is likely that at the 2010 general election a number of younger Members, who have young children, will enter the House of Commons for the first time. We welcome the recent announcement of plans for a nursery facility within the Parliamentary estate and urge the House service to implement the proposal as soon as possible. This facility should be open to Members and staff. (Paragraph 270)

Response

Many of our members at some time juggle attendance in the House with parental responsibilities; and we are mindful of the need for balancing parliamentary duties with family life. We welcome the announcement of a crèche in Parliament, which is something that the Liberal Democrats have repeatedly called for in the past.

The Liberal Democrats have also said that in Government we would create Ministerial job-shares for those who seek to balance work commitments with a home life; this would therefore allow Ministers a greater flexibility in making arrangements for

parental and other caring leave. We would also seek to provide cover and support to a Minister on leave by ensuring that other Ministers and Private Parliamentary Secretaries from the same department were able to assist with parliamentary duties, supported by the relevant civil servants from that department.

To assist Ministers with parental and other caring duties, they would be permitted to work from home on days during which they do not have parliamentary responsibilities and are not needed for key votes. With advances in telecommunication technologies, it is reasonable to believe that Ministers would be able to manage their workload and home responsibilities satisfactorily.

We believe that there may also be an opportunity to explore potentially more radical reform. Flexible working practices have been instrumental in reducing female attrition in business and the professions and we would like to see serious consideration of extending these practices within politics. A recent survey⁴ found that while a majority of women with young children want to work, only 12% want to do so full-time. This suggests that opening up a non-full time career path for Parliamentarians could be an effective mechanism for attracting and retaining more women in politics. Constituents and Parliament itself would benefit from the wider range of life experience which women juggling work and family could bring into the House of Commons.

Recommendation

53. It would be better if Members' requests for caring or sickness leave were less subject to the state of relations between the parties and the turn of events. We believe that greater transparency about the organisation of pairing would help. We therefore recommend that the business managers for each Parliamentary party should regularly brief their Members about the process of pairing, the requests they have received for pairing and whether or not it has been possible to agree to those requests. (Paragraph 274)

Response

The culture in each of the parliamentary parties is different and is affected by various factors such as size, whether they are in Government or opposition, and historical organisation. As a party we are very open about pairing arrangements and all Members are aware about how we organise pairing. As a smaller opposition party we ensure that all pairs are formalised and recorded by both ourselves and the Government. We insist on names to avoid duplication or doubt. We deal the same way with other parties if required.

There are different approaches to pairing. We do not regard the old system of established pairs, requiring mutual absence regardless of circumstance, as democratically healthy.

However, depending on the political will of other political parties, there is scope for improving the existing ad-hoc arrangements where pairs are arranged quite often on the day of votes. Reassuringly there seems to be an instinct for a less brutalist approach

to pairing than has existed in the past and a willingness to co-operate. Whether that will survive a close election result remains to be seen.

We will continue to be as pragmatic as we can, attempting to fulfill all those requests that are necessary to relieve colleagues suffering from ill-health or with caring and other commitments.

Recommendation

54. The sitting hours of the House should again be reviewed, and voted upon by the House, early in the new Parliament. Ideally, sitting time for the main chamber should be brought in line with what is considered to be normal business hours. Respecting the difficulty of achieving this, given the multiplicity of other duties inside and outside the Palace of Westminster carried out by Members, we recommend a substantial further development of deferred voting in order to facilitate a more family friendly approach to sitting arrangements and unscheduled (unprogrammed) votes. Further consideration should be given to modern methods of voting to facilitate a more efficient and practical use of time, in line with other legislatures. (Paragraph 286)

Response

We are supportive of a reconsideration of the sitting hours, deferred voting and more modern methods of voting as is suggested. We have consistently argued that greater and more varied use of mornings and Westminster Hall should be considered to ensure Parliament is both attractive to candidates from a wider range of backgrounds as well as conducting its business more efficiently.

Civil Partnerships in Palace of Westminster

Recommendation

56. We think it is important that Members who wish to undertake civil marriages and civil partnerships should have the same rights as Members undertaking Christian marriage rites to hold their ceremonies within the Palace of Westminster. The House service should take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that such civil ceremonies can take place within the Palace of Westminster from 2010. (Paragraph 290)

Response

We fully support the right of Members who wish to undertake civil marriages and civil partnerships to hold their ceremonies within the Palace of Westminster.

Appendix 7: HM Government's response

The Government is grateful for the comprehensive and detailed examination the Conference has made of the political and Parliamentary landscape and welcomes this landmark report. The Government's response covers both UK policy and policy which applies in England only.

The Government will be responding formally to the Speaker's Conference by means of a Command Paper (Cm 7824).

The Command Paper will be published on 10 March 2010.

Appendix 8: IPSA's response

Thank you for providing us with the report of your inquiry into increasing the diversity of representation in Parliament. The timing of the publication of your report was particularly helpful for us as it coincided with the launch of our consultation on a new scheme of expenses for Members of Parliament. You will have seen that one of the principles set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which we allude to in our consultation paper, is that arrangements for expenses "should be flexible enough to take account of the diverse working patterns and demands placed upon individual MPs, and should not unduly deter representation from all sections of society."

We take that principle very seriously, so the Conference's report is of great assistance to us in that clearly a great deal of work has been done in assessing what impact a scheme of expenses can have on the diversity of representation of MPs. We are also grateful to the members of the Conference for making themselves available for what has been a very helpful series of meetings and discussions; our scheme will without doubt be shaped by what we learnt from discussions with yourselves.

As I know you understand, we are not yet in the position to respond to your detailed recommendations—the great majority of which are of course not for IPSA in any event. We have concluded our consultation on the new expenses scheme, and are now in the throes of working through the responses so that we can report on the outcome of that consultation (and of course produce the new scheme itself). Our intention is to treat the Speaker's Conference report as a contribution to that consultation exercise and include a consideration of your recommendations in our report on the consultation. We will also be producing an Equality Impact Assessment which will be greatly informed by your report.

This would most likely be concerned primarily with your recommendations in the area of disability, where it is within IPSA's power to deliver what has been recommended, and not with other issues raised such as maternity and paternity leave or childcare vouchers—all of which are things IPSA would subsequently consider if we are granted the power to

determine MPs' salaries and pension arrangements, as is envisaged in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill which is currently before Parliament.

Ultimately, your report makes clear that the task of increasing diversity of representation is primarily a task for political parties and the House of Commons as an institution—and of course the electorate. But we are entirely alive to the dangers of creating further barriers to entry into Parliament, and we will strive to avoid doing so as we finalise our new scheme.