



House of Commons

Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)

Second Interim Report

Report, together with formal minutes

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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: Dr Sarah Childs (University of Bristol), Lorraine Gradwell MBE (Chief Executive, Breakthrough UK), Professor Shamit Saggarr (University of Sussex) and Professor Paul Whiteley (University of Essex).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Joint Secretaries of the Speaker's Conference, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 0654; the Conference's email address is spconference@parliament.uk

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Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Nearly all Members of Parliament are elected to the House of Commons on a party ticket. This makes the political parties, effectively, the gatekeepers to the House of Commons. It means that if the House of Commons is to become more representative the political parties will, in large part, have to be the agents of change.
2. When the leaders of the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, the Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP and Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP, gave evidence to us on 20th October 2009 they each agreed that the diversity of representation within their parties was neither what it should be, nor what they wanted it to be. We welcome this important acknowledgement.
3. Each of the parties monitors its progress on candidate selections internally. The fact that this information is not collected and placed in the public domain, however, means that there is no public accountability; unless the performance of the different parties can be compared with each other (and with the performance of parties throughout the world) there is likely to be insufficient pressure for the political parties to pursue the cultural change which is needed from them before we can have a House of Commons “fit for the 21st century”.
4. The leaders of the three main parties also gave us their agreement in principle to publish future reports on the results of candidate selections.
5. We shall table a draft new clause to the Equality Bill which, if enacted, would require registered political parties to report every six months, according to specified criteria, on the diversity of their candidate selections; and to publish those reports online. We hope that this proposal will have the support of the House.

Introduction

1. The Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) was established by the House of Commons in November 2008. We were asked to examine the reasons why women, people from BME (black and minority ethnic) backgrounds and disabled people are under-represented in the House of Commons, and to recommend ways in which barriers to their representation can be removed. We have also agreed to look at issues relating to representation of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual) community.

2. In our first interim report we noted that there are three reasons why we should seek to make the House of Commons more representative of the society we live in. These are:

- **Justice:** the representative body of our society should have a place within it for all sections of society;
- **Effectiveness:** the House of Commons will work most effectively if it holds within its membership the same diversity of life experiences as is present in wider society; and
- **Enhanced legitimacy:** although MPs work hard to represent the breadth and depth of their constituents' concerns and experiences, the absence of a wide cross-section of society in the House of Commons means that it can appear to disregard the needs and concerns of specific groups. As a result its decisions and actions may be considered less legitimate than they would otherwise be.

The role of political parties

3. **Nearly all Members of Parliament are elected to the House of Commons on a party ticket. This makes the political parties, effectively, the gatekeepers to the House of Commons. It means that if the House of Commons is to become more representative the political parties will, in large part, have to be the agents of change.**

4. The record of the political parties in promoting diversity of representation is uneven. Each of the main parties has taken steps to make its selection procedures more objective and professional and to reduce the incidence of openly discriminatory practices such as asking women applicants whether they plan to have children, or unmarried men whether there was anything in their past "that might cause the party embarrassment".¹ We are told that, increasingly, women and people from BME backgrounds, if not disabled people or open members of the LGBT communities, are putting themselves forward for selection in sufficient numbers to make a difference.² Yet the fact remains that at present the House of Commons continues to be largely white, male, middle-aged and middle-class: people from under-represented groups who are putting themselves forward for selection are still proportionately less likely to be selected, or to be selected for a seat the party thinks it can win, than their counterparts.

¹ Ev 82

² *Women at the Top 2005: changing faces, changing politics?* The Hansard Society, 2005 p 26; Ev 3

5. **When the leaders of the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, the Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP and Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP, gave evidence to us on 20th October they each agreed that the diversity of representation within their parties was neither what it should be, nor what they wanted it to be.³ We welcome this important acknowledgement from the party leaders. We also note the Prime Minister's request that the House authorities investigate whether civil partnerships could be celebrated on the Parliamentary estate.”⁴**

Performance monitoring

6. Working to create real change, we were told, entails “not just a stated commitment but a proactive approach, involving transparency, accountability and monitoring of both progress made and difficulties encountered.”⁵ Similarly, Trevor Phillips said that:

“if we are actually going to address this issue then we should address it from a point of strength, knowing what the truth is ... it would be helpful for the political parties to understand, for example, what proportion of different ethnic groups are putting themselves forward, what proportion of women are putting themselves forward, because once you know that you can work out what is actually the problem.”⁶

7. **Each of the parties monitors its progress on candidate selections internally. The fact that this information is not collected and placed in the public domain, however, means that that there is no public accountability; unless the performance of the different parties can be compared with each other (and with the performance of parties throughout the world) there is likely to be insufficient pressure for the political parties to pursue the cultural change which is needed from them before we can have a House of Commons “fit for the 21st century”.⁷**

8. It was for this reason that in our first interim report we asked all of the political parties to report to us “by 12 October 2009 the result of selections by constituency giving the date of selection, the method of selection, the candidate's gender and the candidate's ethnicity and reporting in accordance with candidates' identifications of disability and sexual orientation”.⁸ We were pleased that four parties—the Labour party, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru—responded to this recommendation, sending us initial three months' data at the beginning of October. Recognising that parts of the information we had sought could be personally sensitive, and that the small sample size made it relatively easy to identify individuals within the reports, we published only parts of this information online.⁹

³ Qq 434, 447, 460

⁴ Q 434

⁵ Ev 17

⁶ Q 94

⁷ Q 434

⁸ *Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation): Interim Report*, Session 2008–09, HC 167-I, paragraph 22

⁹ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/memo/contents.htm>

9. The following week, **the leaders of the three main parties also gave us their agreement in principle to publish future reports on the results of candidate selections:** Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP said “You are absolutely right, unless people know what is happening, then the public opinion that is being shaped about this cannot put the pressure that is necessary on the parties”;¹⁰ Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP said that the Conservative party monitored “in terms of gender, BME candidates and those who register themselves as disabled” already and would be “very happy to publish” the data;¹¹ Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP told us that the Liberal Democrats already provided “very full reports” to its party Conference twice a year and “would be very happy to make that public”.¹² Accordingly, we have written to request two further monitoring reports from each of the main parties, to be delivered on 11 January and 15 March 2010, if Parliament is then still in session.

10. These reports will, we hope, provide a baseline for future accountability. The information we have published so far is not statistically significant, but each future report that is made will help to clarify where a particular approach is proving successful in tackling under-representation, and where difficulties remain. As there are problems across the parties on this issue of diversity, so there should be common benefits in sharing this information.

11. In the long term, however, a more formal mechanism for making these reports will be needed. Our Conference will cease to exist at the dissolution of the current Parliament and will not therefore be able to continue to act as monitor and publisher of the data.

The Equality Bill

12. Recent policy developments seek to encourage fairer representation. Part 7 of the Equality Bill, which is currently before the House, contains clauses which, if passed, would extend by another fifteen years (to 2030) the existing provision in law which allows political parties to use all-women shortlists. It would also enable political parties to take further steps “to reduce inequality in the party’s representation” through selection arrangements for elections to Westminster, to the European Parliament, to the Scottish Parliament, to the National Assembly for Wales and certain local government elections.¹³ These enabling provisions are another aspect of the solution to the problems of under-representation which all parties face and they should be supported by a regular supply of accurate and up-to-date information. We shall seek to propose a new clause to the Bill, which would formalise and build upon our existing agreement with the main political parties to report on diversity in candidate selection.

13. We shall table a draft new clause to the Equality Bill which, if enacted, would require registered political parties to report every six months, according to specified criteria, on the diversity of their candidate selections; and to publish those reports online.

¹⁰ Q 446

¹¹ Q 457

¹² Q 468

¹³ Equality Bill [As amended in Public Bill Committee] Bill 131 clause 101

14. The proposal we shall table does not follow precisely the pattern of reporting which we sought in our first interim report. To monitor progress properly requires data from all stages of the selection process, from the initial call for applicants to the final outcome. Otherwise we will only ever know about the individuals who are successful. Further, our experience of the initial party reports (discussed at paragraph 8 above) demonstrated for us the potential difficulties in disclosing parts of the information we had sought; we believe that the slightly different approach we shall set out in the draft new clause will be more effective in enabling relevant data to be gathered for the purposes of monitoring and accountability while providing better protection for the individual.

15. Our proposal is a modest one. It requires comparatively little effort from the parties, who already gather much of this data. It builds on an existing consensus, which recognises that greater transparency and accountability can help to support and justify the priority which is given to the issue of fair representation. It may help, over time, to secure a House of Commons which is more effective, more representative of our society and in which the public feels better able to place its confidence. **We hope that this proposal will have the support of the House.**

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 24 November 2009

Members present:

Miss Anne Begg, in the Chair

Miss Julie Kirkbride
Fiona Mactaggart

Jo Swinson
Mrs Betty Williams

Draft Report (Second Interim Report), proposed by the Vice-Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 15 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Interim Report of the Speaker's Conference to the House.

Ordered, That the Vice-Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 1 December at 10.00 am

Witnesses

Transcripts of the following oral evidence sessions can be found on the Conference's website www.parliament.uk/speakersconference

Tuesday 20 January 2009

Simon Woolley, Operation Black Vote

Liz Sayce, RADAR

Fay Mansell, National Federation of Women's Institutes

Tuesday 3 March 2009

Peter Facey and **Alexandra Runswick**, Unlock Democracy

Sarah Veale and **Narmada Thiranagama**, Trades Union Congress

Trevor Phillips, Equality and Human Rights Commission

Tuesday 10 March 2009

Andy Hamflett, UK Youth Parliament

Louise Pulford and **Omar Salem**, The Young Foundation

Tony Breslin and **Ade Sofola**, Citizenship Foundation

Chris Waller, Association of Citizenship Teaching

Tom O'Leary and **Aileen Walker**, House of Commons

Tuesday 31 March 2009

Baroness Uddin of Bethnal Green, Black and Minority Ethnic Women Councillors Taskforce

Helene Reardon-Bond, Government Equalities Office

Dame Jane Roberts, Councillors Commission

Councillor Anjana Patel, London Councils

Tuesday 21 April 2009

Janet Gaymer CBE QC, Commissioner for Public Appointments

Lewis Baston, Electoral Reform Society

Peter Riddell and **Dr Ruth Fox**, Hansard Society

Ray Collins and **Catherine Speight**, Labour Party

Rt Hon Theresa May MP and **John Maples MP**, Conservative Party

Lord Rennard MBE, Liberal Democrats

Monday 8 June 2009

Lorraine Barrett AM, **Bethan Jenkins AM** and **Claire Clancy**, National Assembly for Wales

Martin Eaglestone, **Sïan Davies** and **Sara Pickard**, Mencap Cymru

Liz Morgan, Stonewall Wales

Lyn Richards, **Eunice Chipachni** and **Anita Davies**, National Federation of Women's Institutes

Tuesday 16 June 2009

Alastair Campbell

Paul Corry, Rethink

Dr Anthony Zigmond, Royal College of Psychiatrists

Tuesday 23 June 2009

John Knight, Leonard Cheshire Disability

Abigail Lock, Scope

Chris Holmes MBE

Agnes Hctor, RNID

Leys Geddes, British Stammering Association

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton

Janet Kirk and **Nick Russell**, Labour Party Disabled Members Group

Tuesday 30 June 2009

Nan Sloane and **Laura Wigan**, Centre for Women and Democracy

Derek Munn, Stonewall

Tuesday 7 July 2009

Paul Martin and **Sian Payne**, Lesbian and Gay Foundation

Simon Fanshawe

Vicky Booth, Campaign for Gender Balance

Tuesday 14 July 2009

Sunder Katwala, Fabian Society

Peter Wardle, Electoral Commission

Professor Justin Fisher

Tuesday 20 October 2009

Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP, Prime Minister and Leader, Labour Party

Rt Hon David Cameron MP, Leader, Conservative Party

Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP, Leader, Liberal Democrats

List of written evidence

The Conference published a volume of evidence on 27 May 2009. This can be found on the Conference's website www.parliament.uk/speakersconference

List of Reports from the Conference during the current Parliament

Session 2008–09

First Interim Report HC 167 - I