



House of Commons

Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)

Extended Summary

Ordered by the House of Commons

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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 Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/speakersconference.

A list of Reports of the Conference in the 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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Extended Summary

The case for widening representation

In the twenty-first century the UK's society is increasingly diverse, but the composition of the House of Commons does not reflect that society. Women, people from black and ethnic minority (BME) communities, openly disabled people and people who are openly lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual (LGBT) are not represented in Parliament in the same proportions that appear in wider society. We call these groups "under-represented groups".

Our Conference was set up by the House of Commons. The House asked us to look into the reasons why some groups are under-represented. We were also asked to find ways in which people in these groups might be better supported if they would like to put themselves forward as candidates for Parliament.

There are many reasons why Parliament has been slow to reflect wider social changes: particular seats may only be contested seriously every ten or even twenty years. Individuals from under-represented groups who have tried to enter Parliament have experienced harassment, discrimination and barriers related to their situations, for example low incomes and/or caring responsibilities.

Justice

Justice requires that there should be a place within the House of Commons for all sections of society. There would also be benefits for both Parliament and wider society if the House of Commons represented the diversity of people's lives in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age and social class.

A more diverse House of Commons would make better decisions and solve problems more effectively, because it would be able to draw upon a wider range of experiences and insights when examining the Government's actions and its proposals for new laws.

Enhanced legitimacy

At present, few people think that Members of Parliament understand, or share, the life experiences of the people they

represent (their constituents). Building and restoring public faith in Parliament is of crucial importance to the future of our democracy. Making Parliament more diverse is one way to restore a dialogue between Parliament and those whom it represents.

Citizenship and engagement

In recent years there has been a marked decline in the number of people voting at elections. Many people feel disengaged from party politics. In spite of this, a substantial number of people are interested in becoming more politically active, if it is made possible for them to be so. People told us that they recognised the importance of Parliament's work and they wanted to know how they could contribute to it.

Improvements in education

Changes to the teaching of politics in schools could increase understanding of the formal political process. We have asked the Government to work with headteachers and the schools inspectorate, Ofsted, to ensure that the teaching of politics in citizenship classes is done effectively. We have also invited the authorities in the devolved administrations to consider a similar approach in the relevant curriculum areas.

There is also a demand from adults for information on how to participate effectively in society. In the past this information would have been passed on through churches, trades unions or adult education colleges, but these organisations no longer have as strong a role in communities as they did in the past. We have asked the Government to do more to support youth and community citizenship engagement programmes. We have asked it to consider giving support to organisations such as housing associations and third sector organisations which help to educate adults about citizenship.

The importance of political parties

Political parties are not perfect organisations but they are essential for our democracy to work effectively. Without the support of political parties it would be difficult for individual Members of Parliament to organise themselves effectively for the work of ensuring that the

Government's proposed new laws are proportionate, effective and accurately drafted.

The membership of all the main political parties represented at Westminster is falling. Since political parties are so important, we think that this is a significant cause for concern.

Research has shown that political parties are most effective in government if they have strong local parties and a broad base of active supporters. Therefore we think that it is in the interests of our political parties to work hard to develop their local parties and associations. Active and accessible local parties will be important if people from under-represented groups are to get involved, to develop their skills and to be supported on the path to becoming an MP.

Membership, income and activism

It is important that political parties are able to get out onto the streets, and knock on doors. Direct contact between local party activists and the wider public has a key role to play in challenging the current perception of corruption and self-interest. Without such action, parties may find it increasingly difficult to get good candidates to stand at either local or national elections.

Most local political parties have very little money. This limits their ability to produce mailings and to encourage and organise members to help with leafleting, canvassing and the development of party policy.

A report by Alexandra Runswick has argued that small grants should be made available to local political parties to encourage them to seek new members, and to help them involve people more actively in the work of the local party. We have suggested that the Government might make available to local parties a small fixed rate grant (perhaps set at £10 per local party member). Local parties would have to earn this money, and account for how they spend it. We have asked the Government to consult on the introduction of such a scheme in the first session of the 2010 Parliament.

Local participation

People suggested to us various ways in which local political parties could encourage under-represented groups to take part:

local parties should hold their meetings in venues which are accessible to disabled people and are not intimidating;

local parties should try to hold their meetings at times when people with caring responsibilities find it easier to attend;

local parties should try to minimise their formal procedure and look to increase the number of social events held, debates and talks;

local parties should be ready to listen to the opinions of new joiners, and to try to answer difficult questions; and

local parties should be ready to offer new joiners specific roles in campaigning, canvassing or managing party communications.

We have asked each national political party to draw up an action plan to support the development of local parties. We have asked the parties to make clear what actions they want local parties to take to promote diversity, and to offer incentives to local parties which take on this challenge.

We have asked all the political parties to appoint community champions for women, and people from BME and LGBT communities, and disabled people. We have asked them to consider the development of formal strategies for talent spotting within parties and within the wider community.

What is an MP, and how do you become one?

A good MP will make a positive difference to the community he or she represents. An MP can express the concerns of their community to Parliament and ensure people's experiences are recorded and understood. An MP will bring their knowledge and understanding of their constituents' lives, concerns and interests, as well as their own life experience, to bear on their work.

It is a modern requirement of the MP's job that a Member has an office both at the House of Commons in Westminster and in the constituency. There is a strong public expectation that when not required at Westminster Members will actively participate in the life of the constituency, including at weekends.

A job description

There is no formally accepted job description for the work of an MP. We think that the lack of transparency about what an MP does is not helpful. We have recommended that a description of the main functions of a Member of Parliament should be drawn up, agreed between the political parties and published. We have also said that information about the terms and conditions under which MPs work needs to be drawn together and published.

Being a candidate

Each political party looks for candidates who have a range of skills. These can include:

being able to communicate effectively,

being able to plan and campaign effectively;

being able to work with people and organisations from a wide range of backgrounds;

being able to manage staff, budgets and time;

being able to solve problems; and,

having evidence of experience outside the political party which would help the person to be an effective MP.

The Reality of Candidacy

The choice of prospective parliamentary candidates rests with the local political parties. We heard a number of arguments about the reasons why local parties tend to select white, male, apparently non-disabled, middle-class candidates. These included:

That there are not enough candidates from other groups (for example women, disabled people) coming forward;

People will naturally choose people who appear to be like themselves;

Where there is strong competition for a seat, a party will choose whichever candidate it thinks has the best chance of winning; but,

If a party considers a seat to be 'safe' (one they are very likely to win) it will tend to choose someone who 'looks like' an MP: if most

MPs are white males, this approach would lead to more white males being selected; and

Parties will tend to choose someone whom they think will appeal to voters in the constituency.

A narrower path into politics?

We have heard concerns that people who wish to become an MP increasingly have to follow a particular career path in order to achieve their goal. People who have followed this path tend to have a degree from a leading university. They may have worked for the political party previously, either as a local councillor or as a paid researcher or adviser to the political party or to an MP.

We think it is important that there is no single route into politics which is accessible only to a privileged few. We have recommended that the routes by which future MPs come into Parliament should be monitored, and information about their career paths should be published. We have also suggested that political party leaders should challenge stereotypes of what makes an effective MP or Minister: they should do this by ensuring that MPs from all backgrounds and communities are able to demonstrate their skills in important roles, either within Government or within their party.

Barriers to selection

In broad terms, it can be helpful to think about two types of reason why people from under-represented groups are not more successful in being selected as parliamentary candidates.

supply-side barriers can deter people from these groups from putting themselves forward to be selected; and

demand-side barriers can stop people from under-represented groups being selected once they have put themselves forward.

For any individual a combination of both supply-side and demand-side factors may affect his or her decision as to whether to stand.

Supply side barriers

“Supply-side” barriers are those which might prevent an individual from coming forward for selection. The main barriers to supply are:

The cost of standing for election:

Social class;

Barriers relating to disability;

Cultural factors. For example, we were told that women from BME communities, who are more likely to be on low incomes than some other candidates, can also face sexual discrimination and cultural prejudice within their own community if they put themselves forward for election;

Time pressures make it difficult for women or men with caring responsibilities to campaign for election, or to take on the long hours which a career in the House of Commons currently entails.

Lack of support leading to lack of confidence;

Lack of aspiration: and

The culture of Parliament.

Demand-side barriers

In recent years the demand-side has been seen as the greater problem to be overcome. On some occasions there is clear and direct hostility to a candidate on grounds of their gender, background or personal circumstances. Behaviour at selection panels which discriminates against candidates on grounds of their sex, background or personal circumstances can never be justified.

Indirect discrimination

In other cases, people from under-represented groups may experience indirect discrimination. This may happen when a local party believes that a candidate who is a woman, or from an ethnic minority background, or disabled, or an open member of the LGBT communities is, in consequence of those factors, more likely to lose votes in the wider constituency and is therefore a more risky choice.

Diversity awareness training can help local party members to think about which characteristics of a person matter to their effectiveness as a potential MP, and which characteristics do not matter to their effectiveness. We have encouraged the political parties to make diversity awareness training more widely available to party members who help to select candidates for Parliament.

Equality guarantees

All of the leaders of the main political parties at Westminster have spoken about the importance of diversity in politics. It is very important that party leaders continue to argue for equality, and to make the case within their parties for increasing the representation of under-represented groups at Westminster.

Political parties can take certain steps to ensure local parties select a more diverse range of candidates for Parliament. These measures are sometimes called equality guarantees. To date, the only party to have used an equality guarantee at Westminster is the Labour party. The Labour party has used a type of guarantee, called an all-women shortlist, in some constituencies. The use of all-women shortlists by the Labour party helped it to double women's representation from one eighth to just over one quarter of its parliamentary party at the 1997 General Election. Political parties are authorised to use such measures through an Act of Parliament. This Act of Parliament is currently due to expire in 2015 but may be extended until 2030 under the Equality Bill, which is currently passing through Parliament.

Quotas for women

More than half the UK population is female. The number of women MPs, however, is around 1 in 5 (19.5%) of the total Commons membership. This means women's representation in the UK is poorer than women's representation in many other countries including: Rwanda (56.3%); Sweden (47%); Cuba (43.2%) and Denmark (38%).

A case for compulsory quotas?

Many people are uncomfortable with the idea that a local party's choice of its parliamentary candidate might be controlled in some way. An all-women shortlist restricts a local party's choices because it stops the party membership from considering any men for the position of prospective parliamentary candidate. To date, however, the Labour party's use of all-women shortlists has been the only measure to change the representation of women at Westminster substantially, and quickly. We have recommended that if the political parties do not see an increase in the representation of women in the House of Commons 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.

We have also recommended that legislation should be passed to make it possible for political parties to use shortlists which only include members of black and minority ethnic communities, if they think it is right to do so.

Monitoring

In our earlier reports we said that it was important for the political parties to monitor the diversity of their candidate selections. It is also important that the results of this monitoring should be published by each party and that the results should be published in a common format so that each party's performance can be compared with the performance of others.

We tabled amendments to the Equality Bill which could have provided a framework for the publication of monitoring reports by the political parties. Unfortunately there was not enough time for our amendments to be debated in the House of Commons. The Government has promised to bring forward equivalent amendments for consideration by the House of Lords. We have welcomed the fact that the leaders of the three main political parties in the House of Commons—the Prime Minister, David Cameron and Nick Clegg—each told us that they were happy to publish monitoring data.

Targets

We think that it would be helpful for each political party to set out clearly its long-term goals for achieving fair representation, and the milestones by which it will measure its progress. We have recommended that each political party should publish targets for the representation of women, people from BME communities and disabled people within its Parliamentary party in December 2010 and December 2015. We want these targets to be published by 2010. We also want the progress of the political parties to be reviewed in a debate in the House of Commons in 2010, 2012 and then every two years to 2022.

Barriers to access for disabled people

We heard a great deal about the barriers which face people who have experienced injury, illness or disability who wish to take part in politics. The best way to support the independence and inclusion of disabled people lies in tackling the barriers that society puts in their way. This is known as the “social model” of disability.

Local political parties tend to assume that disabled people would find it difficult to get elected. They believe the public would not vote for someone they knew was disabled. This is known as ‘referred prejudice’. Disabled people themselves often feel that they will find it hard to make an impression. However there is no evidence that disabled people are less likely to be elected than others, once they get through the selection process.

The need for more disabled role models

There is a lack of disabled role models in most parts of public and political life. There are still many physical and other practical barriers for disabled people, right across the country and in all sectors, who wish to access national and local government, and Parliament.

We found that local authorities, which play an important role along the pathway to politics, do not always make it easy for disabled people to get involved. This is despite clear duties under disability discrimination legislation. We believe that scarce cash-limited Access to Work funds—intended for use by individuals—should not be used by councils to fund their duties under the law, such as action to make reasonable adjustments to buildings. Making such adjustments is a key part of being a good employer and complying with the law.

Political parties: central initiatives and local reality

The key to fair chances for disabled people in political life is access to local party meetings and events. We found that disabled people who want to get involved in political parties find a number of barriers in their way. This is, again, in spite of the fact that political parties and other groups are required by law to remove barriers and encourage disabled people to become involved.

We have stated that all political parties should make it easier for disabled people to play a full part in party activities. The law requires them to do so. The national parties should do this, first, by setting out a clear policy on access. At the 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 British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation or speech-to-text technology is available at major events.

The national parties should also help local parties to do more to support disabled people's involvement. The national parties could encourage neighbouring local parties to co-operate and make the best use of the limited money they have available. The Labour Party Disabled Members' Group has produced guidance on sensible and cost-effective steps which local parties can take. We think that this guidance could be used across all political parties.

The costs of candidacy

In theory it does not cost someone much to become a parliamentary candidate. There are, however, hidden costs which in some cases can make the process of standing for election extremely expensive.

We were told that many candidates have to take unpaid leave from work, reduce their working hours or even give up their job in order to spend time in the constituency. Many people from under-represented groups will be disadvantaged by these demands. Women, people from BME communities and disabled people are more likely to be in low paid employment, in receipt of benefits such as Incapacity Benefit or without any income. This would also be true of working-class men. We have said that all political parties should place a ceiling on the expenses a candidate can incur during a single selection process.

Several people suggested to us that a fund, called by one witness a "Democracy Diversity Fund", should be set up to support local political parties in developing the skills of talented people from under-represented groups. Part of this fund could be used to provide bursaries to candidates who can "show that they are strongly committed but would struggle with the economic costs".

The specific costs of candidacy for disabled people

We heard that disabled people face particularly high financial barriers. This is because they are more likely to be in low paid employment or in receipt of benefits and because they would have to finance reasonable adjustments such as appropriate transport, or BSL interpretation. We have recommended that part of the proposed Democracy Diversity Fund should be ring-fenced to provide support to disabled candidates for Parliament.

Measures to support candidates

We have also suggested that the Government might enable all prospective parliamentary candidates to request a small amount of unpaid leave, or a flexible working package, from their employers so that they can spend time campaigning. Candidates should also be allowed to take unpaid leave rather than resigning from their jobs in the few weeks immediately before an election.

In the long term we would like the Government to provide a grant from the state, equivalent to the minimum wage, to candidates for the few weeks before an election (the period sometimes known as the short campaign).

We have suggested to the political parties that 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.

Many people from under-represented groups lack the confidence to put themselves forward for election. Many of them would benefit simply from becoming active members of a local political party, but others would find a more structured process helpful.

Internships are offered by many Members. These may be based in Westminster or in constituency offices. Internships provide useful experience, but the number available at any one time is limited, they may not be widely advertised and they are often unpaid. We think that the political parties should develop schemes to allow interested individuals to register with them, in order to receive information about vacancies arising. We think that this would make it easier for people to find out about, and apply for, internships. We have also

said that reasonable adjustments, where required, should be paid for throughout any internship.

Mentoring provides a less intense, more flexible route to confidence building particularly for those, for instance, who have caring responsibilities or who are in work. We believe that there is scope for a new national mentoring scheme to support people who might wish to offer themselves for elected office or membership of public bodies.

Unacceptable conduct in campaigning

Campaigning should focus upon party policies, and the effectiveness of different candidates. In some cases, however, activists and candidates mount personal attacks on specific candidates by commenting on, for example, their family life, their racial background, their sexual orientation or their state of health. Such behaviour and such comments are completely unacceptable. We have recommended that the political parties should each draw up a formal code of conduct for campaigning. We have asked them to make clear that campaigning is unacceptable where it seeks to undermine a candidate by reference to their family life, racial background, sexual orientation, health status or disability. We have asked them to have these codes of conduct in place in time for the 2010 general election.

Parliament: changing the culture of an institution

What impact does an MP's job have on their family?

An MP has two roles. At Westminster the MP is a legislator, who helps to make laws and to make sure that the Government is working properly and effectively. The MP is also an adviser and advocate in the constituency, who helps to give people a voice. People expect a lot from their MP. MPs often have to deal with heavy workloads and they often work into the evening and during the weekend. This makes it difficult for Members to spend regular time with their partners and families either during the week or at weekends. This is a particular concern both to Members and to potential candidates who are parents of young children.

Some MPs make their family home in the constituency. This means that in many cases children will not see one of their parents at all between Monday morning and Thursday evening. Others keep their family home in London, to make the best of any chances for family time during the working week. For many MPs the effort to find family time either during the week or at weekends means moving the whole family between London and the constituency on a regular basis.

In the past year a number of changes have been suggested, or made, to the ways in which the House of Commons operates. If the changes which are being made to the House and to Members' conditions worsen the impact of an MP's job upon the family, it will become harder for many parents to decide that they want to be an MP. But it is very important that there are MPs who are parents. This is because parents—including single parents and parents of young children—often have direct current experience of how our education, health and support services are working. This knowledge helps the House of Commons effectively to challenge the Government upon its performance in leading, managing and financing these services.

Maternity leave

There is currently no provision for MPs to take maternity leave. It is difficult to arrange maternity leave for MPs because a Member of Parliament is appointed directly by his or her constituents to vote on their behalf in Parliament. A Member's vote cannot formally be transferred to any other person except by the Member's resignation from office or by a general election.

MPs are also not currently entitled to Statutory Maternity Leave. This is because MPs are considered to be self-employed, and maternity leave is only available to women who are employed by someone else. It is up to the political parties to arrange support for their Members who have caring responsibilities. This responsibility is carried out by the party whips (the business managers), who have to ensure enough Members are present in the House, and on official groups and committees, for decisions to be made.

We found that the party whips were generally supportive of Members' needs for caring leave. Yet the fact that the parties all operated on a 'case by case' basis led us to believe that maternity, paternity and caring leave is an issue which all three main parliamentary parties have as yet failed to take fully seriously. We

have asked each Parliamentary party to draw up a formal statement of policy on maternity, paternity and caring leave. We want these statements to be agreed by party leaders, and published, by the end of 2010.

We have also asked the Senior Salaries Review Body and, when appropriate, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, to consider the introduction of formal maternity, paternity and caring leave arrangements for MPs.

Childcare

We have welcomed indications that a nursery is to be provided within the Parliamentary estate. We also believe that decisions on childcare arrangements should remain a matter of personal choice, and those choices should be respected. We anticipate that many Members would like to arrange childcare close to the family home. We have therefore recommended that a scheme should be considered to allow Members to take a proportion of their salary in the form of childcare vouchers.

Sitting hours

At present, debates are normally held in the House of Commons Chamber until 10.00 pm on Mondays and Tuesdays, until 7.00 pm on Wednesdays and until 6.00 pm on Thursdays. Votes taken at the end of debates mean that Members are frequently unable to leave Parliament until an hour after this time each day.

The consequence of this working pattern for Members with families is that children regularly go three days without seeing the Member who is their parent after the walk to school each day, simply because of late night votes.

The House of Commons has recently reviewed its working hours, but it has proved difficult to find a pattern of working which suits everyone. It was suggested to us that the House might defer votes (divisions) occurring in the late afternoon and early evening on certain days, and make those decisions later. If this were done, the 'running whip'—that is, the requirement by the parties that their Members remain close to the voting lobbies throughout a day's sitting, in case votes are called—could be suspended for an agreed period. This would allow Members of all parties who have family in London to return home and spend some time with their children at

teatime or bedtime before returning to Parliament to vote. We have looked at the business which was conducted at Monday and Tuesday sittings of the House in 2007–08 and 2008–09 and have found that votes were called between 4pm and 8 pm on only half of those sitting days.

We have recommended that the sitting hours of the House should again be reviewed, and voted upon by the House, early in the new Parliament. We think that, ideally, sitting times for the main chamber should be brought in line with what are considered to be normal business hours. Since there are difficulties in achieving this we have also recommended a substantial further development of deferred voting in order to facilitate a more family-friendly approach to sitting arrangements and unscheduled (unprogrammed) votes.

Civil Partnerships

The Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, said that lesbian and gay MPs should be permitted to celebrate civil partnerships within the Palace of Westminster. We recognise that this would send a significant message of inclusion to the LGBT community. We have recommended that 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.

Surveys

We currently have very little information about how many Members consider themselves to be from black and minority ethnic communities, or from LGBT communities, or about the extent to which Members experience impairment. However, it seems clear that all these groups are under-represented. If numbers in these groups were better known, and their experiences better understood, the House might understand better what it should do to encourage people from under-represented groups to come forward. We have asked the House service to carry out a confidential survey of MPs once each Parliament. We want the House service to use the results of this survey to produce a summary report on MPs' experiences of disability and long term health conditions. The survey might also secure similar information about the racial background and sexual orientation of Members.

We said that Parliament would be more effective, and might be better trusted, if it included a wider representation of groups in society. We also think that it would be helpful to monitor whether changes in the diversity of the House have any effect on public trust. We have recommended that there should be an independent survey (at least once every five years) of public attitudes to Parliament. This should look at the public's views on diversity in Parliament, and in particular at the effectiveness of the measures taken following this report.

Parliament, disability and the law

There have been two major Acts aimed at making life better for disabled people in recent years—the Disability Discrimination Acts of 1995 and 2005. Parts of this legislation apply to Parliament. Responsibility for coordinating the House's policy in this area lies with Corporate Diversity, a team of three people based in the Department of Resources.

The House is not required by law to make “reasonable” adjustments in, or to provide access to, parts of the Estate which are not open to the public. Both Houses of Parliament are excluded from the definition of a ‘public authority’ for the purposes of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. While Parliament makes laws, an important principle of the constitution says that some laws do not apply to it as they apply to other public bodies. If disability discrimination law applied to Parliament, the courts could find themselves called upon to question the actions of one or both Houses. This could be viewed as the courts interfering in Parliament's work.

The House has worked hard voluntarily to implement the Disability Discrimination Acts. There have been a substantial number of improvements in facilities for disabled people in Parliament in recent years. The House authorities also provide assistance for disabled MPs, aimed at making reasonable adjustments to the working conditions and equipment of Members with particular needs because of disability. This assistance covers necessary additional continuing costs and can take the form of additional staff, necessary equipment or help with travel. The introduction of this scheme and other improvements are welcome.

Parts of the Parliamentary estate are hundreds of years old. Some parts of Parliament are difficult for people with mobility problems to get around. The layout of the Commons Chamber, with its rigid

seating, is unhelpful to wheelchair users. When mobility problems are temporary (though sometimes long-term), Members sometimes find it difficult to persuade the business managers (the whips) that suitable accommodation should be provided. Facilities for people with other impairments are developing but the design of the buildings still presents difficulties. Facilities for individuals using larger wheelchairs are still inadequate and some signage needs to be improved.

Although it is unfair, the impression is sometimes given that Parliament is not an easy place for disabled people to work. The perception may not be the same as the reality, but when disabled people come to consider becoming a candidate, the perception is extremely important.

Above all, we see 'reasonable' adjustments for disabled Members as a right, not a privilege. We have stated that the House should openly and clearly accept its responsibility to provide the support needed to enable disabled Members to do their job. It should do this by publishing a formal statement of the support to which disabled Members of Parliament are entitled from the House of Commons.

Parliament already publishes a clear and helpful booklet of information for "Members of both Houses and pass holders escorting visitors with disabilities". Something similar could be produced to cover other aspects of the working lives of Members. It is important that disabled Members, and every potential disabled candidate, should have all the information they need.

Funding can be a problem for disabled MPs, as it is for disabled candidates. The current discussions about parliamentary allowances should take account of the need to reduce the barriers to disabled people who wish to become MPs. There should also be better provision made to assist disabled MPs to serve their constituents well, for instance through provision of BSL interpreters for surgeries. The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) is to take over responsibility for the determination and payment of allowances from the House and decisions about reforms to the level of funding for disability assistance will be for the new authority. We have asked the new Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to take this up.

We have recommended that the House of Commons set up a small team, like the National Assembly for Wales Equalities Team, to plan

and monitor the House's work in promoting equality, both in relation to Members and in relation to the public.

Attitudes to mental illness and the disqualification of MPs

Society's response to those who experience mental illness can discourage such people from putting themselves forward as candidates for Parliament. We heard that section 141 of the Mental Health Act 1983 presents particular problems for this community. Section 141 provides that a Member could lose his or her seat in Parliament if detained under the Mental Health Act for a period of six months or more. The provision has never been used.

There are arguments both for and against section 141. It may be said that the reason for this law is not the illness itself but the detention of the Member by law, and the effects this detention may have upon the Member's ability to work for his or her constituents effectively.

On the other hand, the law is not consistent or logical in its treatment of various types of illness or disorder. If a Member suffers from serious physical illness—say a stroke—that can leave constituents effectively un-represented in much the same way as if a Member has a serious mental disorder. Yet there is no parallel provision to section 141 for cases of physical illness or impairment. Many people told us that section 141 wrongly suggests that mental illness is in some way fundamentally different in its effects from physical illness. The House, through its medical services, can provide care and assistance for those with mental illness, just as it can for those with physical illness.

We believe that section 141 of the 1983 Mental Health Act should be repealed as soon as practicable. There should be a review to examine whether alternative measures should be taken to protect the interests of constituents, and the House, when a Member becomes seriously physically or mentally ill.

Aggression in Parliamentary culture

Many people see Parliament as an aggressive place where people are often shouting and jeering at each other. This view of Parliament is said by many people to put them off the idea of becoming an MP.

In fact, most of the time the House of Commons is not aggressive in the way it may appear at Prime Minister's Questions.

We think that there is a lack of balance in media coverage of Parliament between 'set piece' debates in the Chamber and the less heated discussion which takes place in constructive committee hearings and events outside the main Chamber. We have recommended that the House of Commons Media and Communication Service should identify new approaches which would bring these parts of the House's work to a wider audience.

Personal attacks

People in politics are frequently criticised not for their performance but for some aspect of themselves. The fear of personal attacks is a major deterrent to people standing for office. It can seem that Members and candidates who come from under-represented groups are more likely to suffer such attacks.

Both disabled people and members of the LGBT communities told us of their deep concern over such attacks, which can result from prejudice. Women told us their concerns that, by putting themselves in the public eye as candidates, they might open up their partners and families to unwanted media attention and possible criticism.

The media is, quite properly, an independent force in our political system. But we think it is important to repeat the calls of others for an end to destructive reporting of politicians' private lives which damages families, relationships and the democratic process itself.

Conclusion

There are many practical steps which can be taken to support the development and candidacy of individuals who are women, or from black and ethnic minority communities or disabled people. We are optimistic about the future of politics in this country, provided these actions are taken. Greater transparency about the ways in which the political parties operate will have a key role to play. A movement to expand the local voluntary membership of all political parties could have a very significant effect upon public understanding of how politics works and why the work of Parliament matters.

If these actions are taken now it is possible that an MP standing in the Commons chamber in 2015 will begin to see a House which is

“fit for the 21st century”. Strong and clear leadership will be required: we welcome the commitment and consensus which the leaders of the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats have demonstrated in respect of the promotion of equality. We urge the parties, Parliament and Government to use this opportunity well.

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 6 January 2010

Members present:

Miss Anne Begg, in the Chair

Ms Diane Abbott

Fiona Mactaggart

Mr David Blunkett

Jo Swinson

Mrs Ann Cryer

Mrs Betty Williams

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

Ordered, That the Vice-Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 350 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Report of the 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.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report.

[Adjourned to a day and time to be fixed by the Vice-Chairman

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 of the Labour Party

Rt Hon David Cameron MP, Leader of the Conservative Party

Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Party

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

A further volume of evidence will be published as HC 239-III in January 2010.

List of Reports from the Conference

Session 2008–09

First Interim HC 167 - I
Report

Session 2009–10

Second Interim HC 63 - I
Report