

‘House of Lords Reform- a once in a generation opportunity to increase women’s presence and voice’

Counting Women In

The Centre for Women and Democracy, the Electoral Reform Society, the Fawcett Society and The Hansard Society have formed the *Counting Women In* (CWI) campaign to address the lack of women in politics. We believe the under representation of women in Westminster, the devolved assemblies, and town halls around the UK represents a democratic deficit that undermines the legitimacy of decisions made in these chambers. Together, we will be fighting to ensure women have an equal presence and voice within our democratic system.

An opportunity for equality

The House of Lords Reform Bill provides an opportunity to bring about a step change in women’s political representation and address the democratic deficit of the current gender imbalance in the House of Lords. CWI will be seeking measures within the House of Lords Reform Bill to this end.

The UK is now trailing in international league tables on women’s access to positions of political power. At present just 22% of the Lords are women. A new, reformed Chamber must be representative of the population as a whole and be equally informed by the experiences and expertise of women and men. Government also has a legal duty to assess how measures for reform could promote equality between men and women and tackle discrimination. As we move towards reform of the Lords, the representation of women must be at the heart of the agenda.

Changing the system

If reform of membership of the House of Lords is implemented there are several options which could be adopted to ensure it is more representative in future.

Proportional Representation (PR) systems provide a fairer system of electoral representation, with political parties receiving seats in proportion to their electoral strength. Academic research classifies PR as a *facilitator* rather than a *guarantor* of better female representation, as no voting system in and of itself can guarantee gender parity in political life. While PR as a system has greater potential than other voting systems to improve women’s representation and diversity, this can only be guaranteed in conjunction with additional positive action measures.

Where progress has been made in delivering more women into positions of power – both in the UK and internationally - the driver for this has been the implementation of positive actions measures, such as quotas, All-Women-shortlists, zipping or twinning shortlists such that women and men are equally represented, or reserved seats for women in appointment-only systems.

Positive action measures need not be implemented on a permanent basis. Instead they can be time-limited and regularly re-evaluated to gauge their utility and necessity.

Given the longstanding dominance of men within politics, positive action measures can provide a boost to the change already in process.

Positive action measures could be built into the legislation in different ways depending on the reform model that is finally adopted.

In relation to the elected element of a reformed Upper House, positive action measures should be integrated into the electoral system, requiring parties to proactively cast their net wider to ensure the selection of equal numbers of women and men.

In the event that a proportion of peers are appointed rather than elected, the Appointment Commission should be statutorily required to ensure the appointment of equal numbers of women and men.

The *Counting Women In* campaign recommends that:

- Reform of the House of Lords offers a once in a generation opportunity to increase the presence and voice of women in the Upper House;
- A PR model has greater potential than other voting systems to improve women's representation and diversity, but this can only be guaranteed in conjunction with additional positive action measures;
- The legislation should require the political parties to ensure the selection of equal numbers of women and men as candidates for election to the new Upper House;
- The Appointment Commission should be statutorily required to appoint equal numbers of women and men as peers in a reformed, hybrid House of Lords;
- Consideration should be given to the effect that the right of ministerial appointment and the allocation of 12 ex officio seats for Church of England Bishops – currently reserved seats for men – will have on equality and diversity of representation in a reformed Chamber.