



**Fawcett Society Response to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee - Submission on Voting and Parliamentary Reform Proposals
September 2010**

The committee has requested views on the government proposals to:

- Hold a referendum on using AV at general elections
- Reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600 through boundary changes
- Establish fixed term parliaments of 5 years

These will be enacted through several pieces of legislation, including the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill.

Summary

- Given that the committee chair is interested in ‘the widest number of people giving their views’ it seems particularly poignant that no mention of the lack of diversity among MPs was made in his appeal for public views on political reform. At present the views and experiences of women are under-represented in parliament, partly due to their low numbers. Given present discussion of political reform is imbued with a rhetoric of fairness – why not tackle the under-representation of women as part of the government’s agenda?
- The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill is a key plank of this reform, yet it at present fails to address the major democratic deficit that is women’s under-representation in parliament. We propose scrutiny of how the government’s proposed measures could progress or regress women’s representation and highlight options for amendments to the Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill by which to increase women’s representation in parliament.
- The current process of political reform is a once in a generation opportunity to improve representation of women. The committee seeks feedback on the government proposals to hold a referendum on the use of AV at general elections, reduce the size of the House of Commons through boundary change, and establish fixed-term parliaments. These are all proposals and processes which require attentiveness to their potential impact on the number of female MPs.

Context

1. Public dissatisfaction with the conduct of politicians in recent years, coupled with a general election campaign that was male-dominated and lacked any positive

portrayal of female politicians, has fostered a demand for reform. Women make up just 22% of MPs, despite being over 50% of the population. The UK trails behind 57 other countries with a higher percentage of female MPs. A just and effective democracy should involve and reflect the needs of the entire population. Women pay the same taxes as men yet barely a fifth of the legislature are women – meaning they don't have a fair and proportionate say in how policy is made and managed. At the present rate of change (just 2% at the last election) it will take tens if not hundreds of years to achieve parity between women and men in parliament. This issue is a major democratic deficit and should be at the heart of debate. Government also has a legal duty to assess how these measures it is proposing could promote equality between men and women and tackle discrimination.

2. Fawcett is extremely disappointed that in addition to the Bill's lack of reference to sex or gender, the scrutinizing committee itself makes no mention of the under-representation of women in both houses in its appeal for responses. Given the extreme nature of the deficit of female political representatives, it is imperative that any attempt to reform the political system addresses this issue directly.

3. In responding to these proposals we suggest specific amendments to the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill as well as broader issues around democratic reform which have been neglected:

a) Why has there not been adequate time given to the scrutiny of the implications of proposed reforms for the number of women in parliament, or opportunities to improve this?

Without proper scrutiny a new electoral system (or boundary changes) could reduce rather than improve the number of women in parliament. This would reduce rather than increase the fairness of our political system and make it less democratic. A switch to AV from FPTP will not necessarily mean increased political representation of women without additional positive actions measures, such as reserved seats for women or party mechanisms to ensure equal political representation of women.

b) Page 8 of the bill includes factors which boundary commissions may consider in their working. **We propose this is amended to include the likely impact on the number of male and female candidates and MPs.** The process of boundary change, together with the reduction of seats, has the potential to affect the number of women in parliament. For example, if established MPs lose their seats through the reduction of MPs (from 650 to 600) it could increase pressure on the selection of candidates for winnable seats. This is likely to reduce the opportunity to increase the number of new female MPs, and indeed could squeeze out newer or lesser known back-benchers as established (predominantly male) names take precedence. To address this, the bill must include measures to assess the impact of all reform processes and policies on the number of women in parliament.

c) Page 17 of the bill outlines the role of the electoral commission in promoting awareness of the referendum and encouraging participation. **We propose that the link between electoral systems and the gender balance of parliament should be examined and discussed publicly – as something the general public have a right to be informed of before participating in the referendum.** All electoral systems contain inherent biases which can affect the selection process, and contribute to the representativeness of parliament. They may also offer particular opportunities to introduce positive action measures to improve the balance of male and female MPs. There must be full and open discussion of these issues surrounding the referendum to enable the electorate to make a fully informed choice.

About the Fawcett Society

4. The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading campaign for women's equality and women's rights. Our vision is of a society where women, and our rights and

freedoms, are equally valued and respected and where we have equal power and influence in shaping our own lives and our wider world.

5. We trace our roots to Millicent Fawcett's and the suffragists' successful parliamentary campaign for women's right to vote. Since then we have continued to work with parliamentarians on a cross party and non partisan basis to progress equality between women and men at home, at work and in public life.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for more information on any of the issues above.

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