

Fawcett Submission to the Liberal Democrat Diversity and Political Reform Review

We have chosen to focus on a selection of the guideline consultation questions, in order to best reflect the issues we feel are most pressing, and our particular expertise.

What barriers are there in the way Parliament (and politics more generally) operates that make it difficult for people from under-represented groups to become and remain parliamentarians?

There are a host of structural barriers that prevent women from entering politics on an equal basis to their male counterparts. MPs work exceptionally long hours, with research finding an average working week of 71 hours. In addition to this, MPs must work in several locations (Westminster and their constituency), adding to the pressure on their time. As well as long working hours and commuting times, the arrangement of the House of Commons is outdated and inflexible. When Parliament is sitting, the hours are frequently 2.30pm to 10.30pm often with even later finishes. For women with caring responsibilities, the image of Parliament as family-unfriendly acts as a deterrent from entering politics and is connected to the lack of appeal of politics to women more broadly.

The recent Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation highlighted several problems with the workings of Parliament and their effects on women's representation. It noted the inflexible and unwelcoming attitude of the House of Commons towards work-life balance, shown in the lack of childcare support, unsociable working hours and absence of formal policies on parental leave. At present MPs do not have the same rights to flexible working as the rest of the population, meaning there is no formal provision for maternity leave, no procedures for proxy voting and no option to job-share on a temporary or permanent basis.

There are systems within Parliament which reinforce the negative notion that parliamentary politics is not for women. For example, the confrontational nature of Parliamentary debate and the notion of parliamentary politics as unconstructively antagonistic and adversarial deter many prospective politicians. Moreover, some issues such as economics and security are treated as exclusively male dominated spheres and are designated as legitimately political. The notion of Parliament as an old boys' network that relies on a system of socio-economic privilege and favouritism has also compounded difficulties to diversify Parliament.

Having a greater number of women in politics has the potential to improve the relevance and image of Parliament in the eyes of prospective female candidates (or indeed a younger generation of female activists and politicians). This in turn can feed the supply of female candidates for political opportunities. Similarly, making politics accessible to women means making sure it can take place within more flexible working hours. This is not to say politics should be undemanding, but it should be subject to the same work-life balance regulation as other public sector employment.

Reform recommendations

There are measures which can be taken to mediate the impact the current parliamentary system has on work-life balance and can increase women's representation in political life. Fawcett makes the following recommendations on the basis that change is vital if Parliament is to attract and retain the best diversity of candidates:

Explore the possibility of holding parliamentary sittings much closer to 9-5 hours. For example, both the Scottish Parliament and Welsh assembly hold sittings much closer to 9-5 hours.

Babies should not be barred from Westminster and crèche and other childcare facilities should be provided for MPs and Peers with young children. As recent coverage of the Italian MEP Licia Ronzulli showed, babies are not barred from the European Parliament (unlike Westminster) and a crèche is provided for MEPs with young children.

Examine the possibility of job sharing which could broaden the range of talented people who would consider taking on the job of MP. With adequate attention paid to ensuring good communication and collaboration between those sharing MP duties, this could minimise burnout of MPs due to the long, odd hours spread over several locations. It would also allow time for common caring responsibilities. This could arguably lead to improved performance and job satisfaction.

Introduce improved capacity for remote conferencing technologies in the House of Commons which could reduce time and money spent travelling. For example, if committees could meet without all members being in London it would allow MPs to spend more time in their constituency. The same could also work in principle for other meetings with colleagues, staff and officials in Westminster.

How are forthcoming political reforms such as boundary reviews, reductions in the number of seats, Lords reform and possible electoral reform likely to affect Parliamentary diversity?

The boundary review process, leading to the significant reduction of parliamentary seats, has the potential to impact negatively on the number of women (and other under-represented groups) in Parliament. For example, if established MPs lose their seats through the reduction of MPs 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.

The reform of the House of Lords has the potential to impact extremely positively on its diversity – if it includes legislative measures which will ensure the selection of a fair balance of male and female Lord. If reforms to the House of Lords do not include a mechanism for ensuring gender parity, whether it be to an elected or appointed House, current progress on increasing women's political representation risks stalling. Moreover, if Peers are elected or appointed for a significant duration (such as a ten year term), there are significant implications in terms of how representative the House will be for the foreseeable future.

Reform recommendations

That the Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill must impact assess all reform processes and policies in relation to the number of women in Parliament.

Reforms to the House of Lords must include external mechanisms for ensuring gender parity in the House to prevent progress on women's political representation from stalling.

What can Westminster learn from other Parliaments and Assemblies in the UK and abroad about attracting and retaining people from under-represented groups?

Within the UK, both the Welsh assembly and Scottish Parliament have impressive records when it comes to ensuring the representation of women in Parliament. At present the Welsh Assembly is 47% female and the Scottish Parliament 35%. This has been achieved, and importantly maintained, using several measures. Firstly, twinning and zipping measures have been implemented. Men and women are alternated on the electoral candidate lists so that parity is achieved in these

alternated on the electoral candidate lists so that parity is achieved in those selected from the list. Under the Scottish and Welsh electoral systems a proportion of representatives are elected from party lists. This means that if a party won a proportion of the vote for 20 candidates, the top 20 people on their list would be elected – 10 men and 10 women. To ensure the retention of female representatives, significant attention was paid to the working practices of the parliaments themselves. As well as meaning that the sitting hours of Parliament were standardised (to fit in with family or other caring responsibilities), this meant embedding a commitment to equality (and action to achieve this) into the structures of Parliament.

Internationally, it is notable that the vast majority of countries who have achieved over 30% female representatives have used some external mechanisms to overcome structural barriers to women's political representation, most notably forms of positive action. Belgium now has 43% women in its upper house where electoral candidate lists must contain an equal number of both sexes. Spain has legislated for reserved seats in both houses as part of electoral law. The 2007 Equality Law meant that party electoral lists must have a minimum 40% and maximum 60% of both sexes in each House.

Reform recommendations

Learning from international experiences of successfully increasing women's representation in political life, including implementing positive action measures in plans for political reform. Positive action has thus far seen the only dramatic increase in the number of female parliamentarians (in Westminster and regional governments). The utility of positive action measures to address the under-representation of women in politics can be clearly seen from looking at the Labour party's use of all-women shortlists.

What external mechanisms or practical changes could help overcome structural barriers to participation in parliamentary politics?

As the House of Lords undergoes reform there are several options to ensure it is more representative in future. Positive action measures for women can be built into the reform legislation in different ways. Positive action can be time-limited and regularly re-evaluated to gauge their utility and necessity. Raising the number of female candidates and MPs can help to stimulate the style, content and perception of politics – in turn feeding the re-balancing of the number of women and men in politics.

Reform recommendations

Fawcett makes the following recommendations on the basis that change is vital if Parliament is to attract and retain the best diversity of candidates:

Whether the House of Lords remains wholly or partially selected or elected, the proportion of female appointees should be mandated and places reserved in the House and this provision should be specified in legislation. This is an external mechanism that would overcome structural barriers to parliamentary politics as opposed to legislation that governs how parties chose to select their candidates.

Gender equality should be mainstreamed throughout the programme of political reform. This means ensuring diversity objectives are well planned and supported from the very beginning, including early consultation with all relevant stakeholders. Learning from successful gender mainstreaming experience in Scotland, key actions must take place within the gender mainstreaming programme, including thorough analysis of the impact on women of any policies plans and programmes (i.e. full Gender Equality Impact Assessments).

