



House of Commons

Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)

Final Report

Report, together with formal minutes

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 6 January 2010*

HC 239-I

Published on 11 January 2010
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£0.00.
(Not to be sold separately from HC239-II)

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 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: Professor Sarah Childs (University of Bristol), Lorraine Gradwell MBE (Chief Executive, Breakthrough UK), Professor Shमित Saggat (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.

Contents

Report	<i>Page</i>
Foreword	3
Conclusions and recommendations	5
1 The case for widening representation	17
Justice	17
Effectiveness	18
Enhanced legitimacy	19
2 Citizenship and engagement	22
The failure of party politics	22
The apathy myth	23
Improvements in education	24
What is 'Citizenship'?	24
Beyond school	25
What can Parliament do?	27
3 The importance of political parties	30
What is a political party?	30
What are political parties for?	30
The decline in party membership	31
Consequences of the decline in local party membership	33
The importance of local political activism	33
Membership, income and activism	34
Open recruitment	35
4 What is an MP, and how do you become one?	38
5 Selection processes and barriers to selection	45
Selection processes	45
Barriers to selection	45
Supply-side barriers	46
Demand-side barriers	48
Equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees	50
Equality guarantees in UK law	52
Quotas for women	52
A case for compulsory quotas?	53
Objections to quotas	55
2010 and beyond	56
All-BME shortlists	58
Primaries	58
Future progress	59
Targets and monitoring	59
Targets	61

6 Tackling supply-side barriers	63
Barriers to access for disabled people	63
An untapped pool of talent	64
Changing the culture: assumptions about disabled people	64
Changing the culture: the need for more disabled role models	65
Physical and practical barriers	66
Local Government	66
Political parties: central initiatives and local reality	68
The costs of candidacy	71
Financial resources	71
The specific costs of candidacy for disabled people	74
Time off work for campaigning	75
Personal costs	76
Building confidence	77
Internships	78
Mentoring	79
Unacceptable conduct in campaigning	80
7 Parliament: changing the culture of an institution	82
Support for families	82
Maternity leave	84
Statutory maternity cover and MPs	86
Childcare	87
Pairing	88
Sitting hours	88
Other cultural barriers	92
Civil Partnerships	92
A shortage of information	92
Parliament, disability and the law	93
Attitudes to mental illness and the disqualification of MPs	99
Aggression in Parliamentary culture	101
Media coverage of Parliament	102
Personal attacks	103
Actions of Members	105
8 Conclusion	106
Formal Minutes	108
Witnesses	109
List of written evidence	111
List of Reports from the Conference	112



The Speaker

Speaker's House Westminster London SW1A 0AA

FOREWORD

This publication is an important event in the history of the House.

A Speaker's Conference happens but rarely. This Conference is only the sixth to have taken place in the modern history of Parliament, and is the first since 1978. A Speaker's Conference is designed to bring together Members from all parts of the House of Commons and all parts of the United Kingdom and is generally reserved to address constitutional issues of particular significance or sensitivity which require a cross-party solution.

The background against which this Conference has conducted its work is sombre. Many citizens feel themselves to be distant from Parliament and the wider democratic process. There are many reasons for this, including the issue of Members' expenses which has seriously diminished the House's reputation. I am glad that the House is now beginning to address that very serious problem.

Other things need to be done if the standing of Parliament in public life is to be restored. One of those is to make sure that the House reflects much more closely the diverse society in which we live. Parliament can do its work effectively only if its Members are in tune with the experiences of the people they represent. At present, Members of Parliament are for the most part white, male, middle-aged and middle class.

That is why the House formally and unanimously agreed in November 2008 to establish this Speaker's Conference. The House asked the Conference to look into the reasons why women, members of the black and minority ethnic communities and disabled people are under-represented in the House of Commons, and to recommend ways in which the situation can be improved. The Conference also agreed to consider issues relating to the representation of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities.

Following the agreement of the House, the former Speaker, the Rt Hon Michael J Martin, initiated the Conference. I have been very glad to continue its work. The Conference, and especially the Vice-Chair, Anne Begg, have worked imaginatively to reach beyond those already engaged with politics to make contact with people whose voices might not otherwise be heard. This has enabled them to gather a wide range of views to inform the recommendations in this report.

This is a report which goes to the heart of the House's future. I commend it to you.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. In England, the Department for Children Schools and Families should work with headteachers and with Ofsted to ensure that the importance of citizenship is better understood and the subject is taught with quality and appropriate breadth. In the devolved administrations, the equivalent authorities should consider a similar approach in the relevant curriculum areas. (Paragraph 36)
2. The Government should ensure greater and more consistent access to youth and community citizenship engagement programmes. The Government should also consider what more it can do to support organisations which are, directly or indirectly, promoting active citizenship and political literacy. (Paragraph 38)
3. Public sector organisations should encourage the development of the next generation of leaders by appointing members of under-represented groups to supernumerary positions on boards and other bodies. This should be aimed at enabling people to gain the skills and experience they need to equip them to take up positions of influence. (Paragraph 44)
4. We warmly welcome the increased priority the House is giving to its education and outreach activities, and we are impressed by the work that is being produced. It is vital that citizens know more about the way Parliament and its Members work. But we believe that there should also be a firm focus on providing the public with information needed to promote wider representation, without reference to any one party. The objectives of the Parliamentary Education Service, therefore, should in future include helping to encourage a wider range of people to become candidates for election to Parliament. (Paragraph 49)
5. Support should be developed for Members to help them to promote political agency and active citizenship in their constituencies. (Paragraph 50)
6. We believe that all publicly-funded organisations, especially local bodies, should create opportunities for people who are interested to learn how to become more active citizens. (Paragraph 51)
7. Political parties are the mechanism by which people of any background can be actively involved in the tasks of shaping policy and deciding how society should be governed. While they are not perfect organisations they are essential for the effective functioning of our democracy. Without the support of political parties it would be difficult for individual Members of Parliament, as legislators and/or as members of the Executive, to organise themselves effectively for the task of promoting the national interest—including by challenge to the Government, where that is necessary and appropriate—and ensuring that proposed new laws are proportionate, effective and accurately drafted. (Paragraph 55)
8. The extent to which political parties are the subject of both contempt and general public indifference should be a cause of concern to all who are interested in how our country is run. We acknowledge that the recent disclosures about Members' allowances and some Members' expenses claims have been extremely damaging, but

a general dwindling of attachment to political parties—going wider than the decline in formal membership—has been apparent over more than 40 years. (Paragraph 59)

9. It is important to the future of our democracy that political parties are able to continue to function. As Nan Sloane, Centre for Women and Democracy, put it, “The democratic process we have may not be a perfect way of governing ourselves but it is better than most of the other ones that there are out there and it is very dangerous to have that undermined.” In this context it is clear that the effective functioning of political parties is very much in the public interest. (Paragraph 60)
10. It is in the interests of any political party which wishes to achieve, and sustain, a period in government that it should foster local activism and seek to build up social capital and trust. Active, healthy and accessible local political parties will also play a vital role in identifying and nurturing a greater diversity of MPs for the future. (Paragraph 64)
11. The Government should consult on the introduction of a scheme enabling local political parties to apply for funding linked to their receipts from member subscriptions. The scheme should be administered by a suitable independent body and the details of all funding allocations made should be published. Local political parties should also expect to make some account of the way in which they use the funding to support the development of social capital. This consultation should take place in the first session of the 2010 Parliament. (Paragraph 74)
12. Each national party needs to develop a systematic plan of action to support the development of local parties. As part of this plan parties should draw up a checklist of actions which will promote diversity (such as meeting in accessible venues) and might also offer practical support and incentives to local parties which adopt measures on the checklist. (Paragraph 77)
13. We recommend that all political parties appoint national and/or regional community champions for women, and people from BME and LGBT communities, and disabled people. The champions’ remit should include supporting individuals from those communities in finding and sustaining a suitable role within the party. Consideration should also be given to formalising strategies for talent spotting within parties and within the wider community. (Paragraph 79)
14. A description of the main functions of a Member of Parliament should be drawn up, agreed between the parties and published. The description should not remove the scope for MPs to approach the job of representing their constituency in various ways; it should contain general principles and main objectives and tasks, rather than highly detailed prescriptions. Greater transparency about the terms and conditions under which MPs work has been achieved since the mid-1990s but the process has not been completed; nor has it been matched by a clearer explanation of the role of Members. More is needed. This information should be consolidated, published (on the internet and in hard copy) and made widely available to the general public. (Paragraph 87)
15. It is important to ensure that there is no single route into politics which is accessible only to a privileged few. The routes by which future Members come into Parliament

should be monitored and information published by the political parties. (Paragraph 102)

16. There would be value in the parties being more open about both the qualities, and the experience, they consider to be desirable for a prospective parliamentary candidate. If it becomes clear that certain types of experience—such as a spell as a party employee or as an MP's researcher—are preferred, the parties should consider how those experiences can be made more accessible. (Paragraph 103)
17. Greater diversity in our elected representatives will be achieved only when the culture of our political parties has been changed. This change in our political parties should be driven by the changes we see in wider society, which requires and demands greater diversity in all representative organisations and bodies. Party leaders can help to challenge stereotypes of an effective Member, or Minister, by ensuring that MPs from all backgrounds and communities are able to demonstrate their skills in positions of prominence, either within Government or within the party. (Paragraph 104)
18. Behaviour at selection panels which discriminates against candidates on grounds of their sex, background or personal circumstances can never be justified. (Paragraph 112)
19. Political parties should make diversity awareness training, advice and support available to party members involved in candidate selections. (Paragraph 116)
20. In practice all-women shortlist selections have been carried out by UK local parties in exactly the same way as traditional or 'open' selections, in every respect other than the formal requirement that all the candidates are women. We were told that the role of the all-women shortlist is solely to reduce the discretion available to local party selection committees to demonstrate bias in favour of men. (Paragraph 138)
21. If the number of women MPs in the House of Commons falls at the 2010 election it will make more pressing the need for all the main parties to be assertive in their equality policies. (Paragraph 143)
22. We welcome the progress which each of the main parties has made over recent years towards ensuring that its local selection procedures are more professional and objective than they have been in the past. Yet the fact that, in most cases, it remains more difficult for a candidate who does not fit the "white, male, middle-class" norm to be selected, particularly if the seat is considered by their party to be winnable, means that the case for equality of representation has not yet been won. It is essential that the leadership of each of the political parties—large and small—continues to make this case in discussion with their members and activists, and also takes the measures necessary to secure progress. (Paragraph 146)
23. We fully support the proposed extension of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to enable the use of all-women shortlists until 2030. Equivalent enabling legislation should now be enacted to allow political parties, if they so choose, to use all-BME shortlists. Like the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates)

Act 2002 such provision should be time-limited and should be subject to review prior to 2030. (Paragraph 149)

24. Candidate selections for the following general election will begin, for some parties, within the first twelve to eighteen months of the 2010 Parliament. These selections will be equally important for securing cultural change within parties and within the House of Commons. In this context we particularly welcome the indications from the opposition party leaders that they are open-minded on the matter of equality guarantees. If the political parties fail to make significant progress on women's representation 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. (Paragraph 156)

25. We welcome the openness of all three main party leaders—Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP and Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP—to the principle of publishing monitoring data in relation to candidate selections. This is an important indication of the commitment of all three main parties to the promotion of fairer representation in Parliament. We recommend that all political parties registered under part 2 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 should be required to publish details of their candidate selections online every six months, on 31 March and 31 October, setting out, for each potential candidate at each stage of the selection process, the following information:

- (a) the administrative region in which the selection took place;
- (b) the method by which the candidate was selected;
- (c) whether the party:
 - (i) currently holds the seat for which the candidate was selected; or
 - (ii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of less than 5% of the votes cast; or
 - (iii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of more than five per cent but less than ten per cent of the votes cast;
- (d) the sex of the candidate;
- (e) the ethnicity of the candidate; and
- (f) whether the candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person.

The reports might also include the following information:

- (a) where a candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person, the nature of the impairment;
- (b) where a candidate is willing to state his or her sexual orientation, the sexual orientation of the candidate;

- (c) the age of the candidate;
 - (d) the occupation of the candidate at the time of selection; and
 - (e) the highest level of the candidate's educational attainment. (Paragraph 160)
26. Following the 2010 general election all political parties represented at Westminster should publish a statement setting out the current proportion of their Parliamentary party which is: female; from a BME community; and/or identifies as a disabled person. The statement should also set out what proportion of the Parliamentary party the national party would like to see appearing in each of these categories in December 2015 and December 2020. This statement should be published by December 2010. In December 2015 and December 2020 the parties should publish further statements setting out what progress they have made towards just representation within the parliamentary party, compared to the 2010 baseline and the percentage of each group within the UK population as a whole. These reports should also include an evaluation of the mechanisms the parties have used to secure progress. (Paragraph 165)
 27. We recommend that the Government should find time for a debate on the implementation of the Speaker's Conference's recommendations and progress towards just representation in the House of Commons in 2010, 2012, and every two years thereafter to 2022. We also recommend that the House of Commons should provide access from a dedicated page on the Parliament website to all published statements and reports by each party represented at Westminster on their Parliamentary party representation and candidate selections, alongside links to the reports from the Speaker's Conference. (Paragraph 166)
 28. We believe scarce cash-limited Access to Work funds—intended for use by individuals—should not be used by councils to fund core legal requirements—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. (Paragraph 188)
 29. We do not doubt that party leaders are sincere when they say that they want better access for disabled people. We recognise that they may be finding it difficult to make sure their policies are carried out at a local level where it matters. Nevertheless the shortage of funds must not be an excuse for local parties failing to make proper arrangements for disabled people to play their part in politics. (Paragraph 199)
 30. We believe that all political parties should make it easier for disabled people to play a full part in party activities, initially by setting out a clear policy on access. At 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 BSL interpretation or speech-to-text technology is available at major events. (Paragraph 201)
 31. But there also needs to be a realistic policy for local parties, encouraging co-operation and making the best of the limited money available. The ideas and practical suggestions set out in the guide and handbook produced by the Labour

Party Disabled Members' Group would form a good basis for this policy, for all political parties. (Paragraph 202)

32. All political parties should place a ceiling upon the expenses which candidates can incur during any single selection process. (Paragraph 212)
33. We support the suggestion of a Democracy Diversity Fund which could be drawn upon by local political parties to support the work of developing talented individuals from under-represented groups and also to provide bursaries to individuals who would otherwise be unable to sustain the costs of candidacy. There must be strong controls in place to make sure the money is not abused and therefore the scheme's effectiveness and propriety should be regularly evaluated by the Electoral Commission, in reports which should be laid before the House at least once every Parliament. The Electoral Commission should consult the Equality and Human Rights Commission when evaluating the scheme. (Paragraph 214)
34. There is overwhelming evidence that shortage of money and the necessity of additional expenditure to support disabled people through candidacy, make finance a particularly significant barrier to elected office for disabled people. Disabled people should be able to fight for parliamentary seats without having to face the complicated financial barriers that confront them at present. This is not a question of political advantage, but a simple matter of achieving just representation. (Paragraph 220)
35. We therefore believe that the Government should urgently consider, as part of the Democracy Diversity Fund, a ring-fenced scheme to support disabled parliamentary candidates. This scheme for disabled candidates should use as its model the Access to Public Life Fund which has been proposed by Scope. The scheme should be devised and operated by the Department for Work and Pensions, and should be administered in the same way as the Access to Work scheme. (Paragraph 221)
36. A measure which could help to reduce the burden on candidates would be for the Government to legislate to give approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees the right to request a reasonable amount of unpaid leave during working hours and/or a right to work flexibly for the purposes of campaigning. This would also, symbolically, recognise that the action of standing for election, whether or not the candidate is successful, is an essential part of our democratic process and of public benefit. (Paragraph 223)
37. The Government should legislate to enable approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees to take unpaid leave, rather than resigning their employment, for the period from the dissolution of Parliament to election day (Paragraph 224)
38. We recognise that, in the first instance, making such leave unpaid protects employers from any suggestion that they may be improperly financing a political campaign. In the long term we would like the Government to move to a position where candidates are entitled to receive a grant from the state equivalent to the minimum wage for the period sometimes known as the short campaign. (Paragraph 224)

39. Each central political party should consider drawing up statements of expectation setting out the role, and the reasonable demands which may be made, of both prospective parliamentary candidates and local party associations in different types of seat. (Paragraph 229)
40. 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. (Paragraph 230)
41. Regional or central party officials should also consider whether further training support might be beneficial to candidates who have limited experience of formal management, team building and leadership roles. (Paragraph 231)
42. We believe it should be possible for each Parliamentary party to maintain a list of individuals from under-represented groups, perhaps nominated by stakeholder organisations, who might by this means be notified of internships and temporary vacancies arising in Members' offices. All reasonable adjustment costs for the successful applicant should be funded for the duration of the appointment. We invite the political parties to work with stakeholder organisations to establish how this can best be done. (Paragraph 237)
43. We believe that there is scope for the development of a UK-wide scheme similar to the Step Up Cymru mentoring scheme, but with a strong Westminster element. This could bring together elected members at all levels of government to provide opportunities for people from under-represented groups to find out about their work. The initial aim might be to encourage involvement in community groups, but it should also give encouragement to those who might wish to become candidates for elected office at local and national level or be appointed to a public body. (Paragraph 241)
44. The parties should each draw up a formal code of conduct for campaigning. This should make clear that campaigning is unacceptable where it seeks to undermine a candidate by reference to his or her family life, racial background, sexual orientation, health status or disability. These codes of conduct should be in place in time for the 2010 general election. (Paragraph 244)
45. The inflexibility of Parliament's working practices (which are partly institutional and partly the result of the way that the political parties work), together with the increasingly heavy workload of constituency demands, combine to create a lifestyle which is detrimental to Members with caring responsibilities, both for children and other dependents. (Paragraph 249)
46. In recent months there has been a push at Westminster to change many of the ways in which the House of Commons operates. The ultimate outcome of the various reviews and inquiries which are being conducted ought to be a revitalised House with much clearer rules, better accountability and, possibly, greater independence. If such changes are considered and implemented effectively they should benefit us all. There is, however, an opportunity within these changes also to make the House of Commons a more flexible, humane and responsible institution which, while it

requires greater probity of those within it, also takes greater account of the circumstances in which each individual works. (Paragraph 251)

47. A diverse workforce for Parliament is not an aspiration but an imperative. It is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families and/or other caring responsibilities is maintained and supported. This must be kept in mind by all who are engaged in the current process of Commons reform. (Paragraph 253)
48. Maternity, paternity and caring leave is an issue which all three main parliamentary parties have as yet failed to take fully seriously. (Paragraph 263)
49. Each Parliamentary party should draw up a formal statement of policy on maternity, paternity and caring leave. This should set out clearly the minimum level of support which an individual requesting leave may expect from his or her party, and the steps which the individual should take to arrange a period of leave. Such statements should be agreed by party leaders, and published on party websites and in the party whip, by the end of 2010. (Paragraph 264)
50. The Government has recently indicated its intention to give the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) the responsibility for setting salaries and pensions, with effect from 2011-12. We invite IPSA to consider the development of formal maternity, paternity and caring leave arrangements for MPs which are as closely equivalent to the general public sector provision as possible. In the mean time we would ask the Senior Salaries Review Body to look into the matter and to report in 2010. (Paragraph 268)
51. We have said that it is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families is supported. It is likely that at the 2010 general election a number of younger Members, who have young children, will enter the House of Commons for the first time. We welcome the recent announcement of plans for a nursery facility within the Parliamentary estate and urge the House service to implement the proposal as soon as possible. This facility should be open to Members and staff. (Paragraph 270)
52. Decisions on childcare are a matter of personal choice and for many MPs their arrangements will be essential to their ability to carry out their parliamentary duties. Parents will choose to have their children looked after in their homes (in the constituency and/or in London) by other family members, by nannies or registered childminders, or in a nursery or crèche. All of these choices are equally valid and should be equally respected by the parliamentary authorities. We recommend that a scheme be considered to allow Members to take a proportion of their salary in the form of childcare vouchers. (Paragraph 271)
53. It would be better if Members' requests for caring or sickness leave were less subject to the state of relations between the parties and the turn of events. We believe that greater transparency about the organisation of pairing would help. We therefore recommend that the business managers for each Parliamentary party should regularly brief their Members about the process of pairing, the requests they have

received for pairing and whether or not it has been possible to agree to those requests. (Paragraph 274)

54. The sitting hours of the House should again be reviewed, and voted upon by the House, early in the new Parliament. Ideally, sitting time for the main chamber should be brought in line with what is considered to be normal business hours. Respecting the difficulty of achieving this, given the multiplicity of other duties inside and outside the Palace of Westminster carried out by Members, we recommend a substantial further development of deferred voting in order to facilitate a more family friendly approach to sitting arrangements and unscheduled (unprogrammed) votes. Further consideration should be given to modern methods of voting to facilitate a more efficient and practical use of time, in line with other legislatures. (Paragraph 286)
55. We hope that the House service will review, and draw up new guidelines to clarify, the circumstances in which a child under the age of one may accompany his or her MP parent within restricted areas of the House of Commons. (Paragraph 288)
56. We think it is important that Members who wish to undertake civil marriages and civil partnerships should have the same rights as Members undertaking Christian marriage rites to hold their ceremonies within the Palace of Westminster. 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. (Paragraph 290)
57. It is important for the House to obtain much better information about the percentages of Members who belong to under-represented groups, and to know more about their experiences of politics and of the House. We believe that the arguments in favour of regular, sensitive and appropriate monitoring of the situation are convincing. The House should consider how this might be done. One approach would be for the House's occupational health department to ask Members to complete confidential questionnaires about their experience of any illness or impairment while attending the Department for screening/self referral or disability assessment. The anonymised questionnaires could be collated and analysed by the department and the analysis fed back to the appropriate committee annually. The survey might also secure similar information about the racial origin and, if possible and appropriate, the sexual orientation of Members. (Paragraph 293)
58. We recommend that there should be a regular survey (at least once every five years) of public attitudes to Parliament and its composition, and in particular of the impact of the measures taken following this report. This should test whether greater diversity among MPs is bringing greater public approval and acceptance of the work of the House, and should be carried out by an independent body such as the Hansard Society. (Paragraph 295)
59. We welcome the range of effective measures which have been taken by the authorities in both Houses in recent years to meet the needs of disabled Members. Parliament responds well, in the vast majority of cases, to specific requests for assistance. However, there is still a largely unfair impression among some people that the House of Commons does not welcome disabled Members. The House needs to

put this right. We recommend that the House should explicitly accept its responsibility to provide the support needed to enable disabled Members to do their job. In particular, the Parliamentary ICT service (PICT) should designate an experienced liaison officer to provide customised advice and support to maximise access to computing and other communications technology for disabled Members who require it. The passage into law of the Equality Bill currently before Parliament will be a good opportunity for the House authorities to announce publicly how committed they are to supporting disabled Members. The House should therefore make an early policy statement that it will apply fully the principles of the Equality Bill on reasonable adjustment and discrimination. This should cover both areas where the House is required to act within the law and those where it is not so required. (Paragraph 310)

60. We also recommend that the House should provide to each Member information on all the facilities and assistance available for disabled Members, which should be given wide publicity amongst disabled people and updated regularly. We also urge the parties to make this information widely known among their own members, to give potential parliamentary candidates confidence that support will be provided. We would also encourage the authorities in the House of Lords similarly to consider what further steps can be taken to improve the situation for disabled peers. In general we believe that any recommendations made by the occupational health service about the facilities and assistance which should be made available for disabled Members should be accepted by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. (Paragraph 311)
61. We see benefits in the idea of a ring-fenced fund to assist disabled Members to make reasonable adjustments to help them serve their constituents. This might fund better access to constituency offices or the provision of BSL interpreters for surgeries, and would be of particular assistance to newly-elected disabled MPs. We recommend that the new Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority includes provision for this in its allowances scheme, and we expect IPSA and the House authorities to work closely together on the provision of services and allowances to disabled MPs, and to devise a scheme which provides the help that is needed. (Paragraph 313)
62. We believe that the House and its Members would benefit from having a small in-house team on the model of the National Assembly for Wales Equalities Team, responsible for monitoring how the House is doing on all equalities issues and also for planning provision for disabled Members, staff and visitors. The team would have responsibility both for internal and external work to promote greater diversity and equality. It should also liaise with IPSA. (Paragraph 315)
63. The law on disqualification from Membership 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 s141 of the Mental Health Act 1983 for cases of physical illness. We have received substantial evidence from a number of sources, both expert and lay, to suggest that s141 wrongly implies that mental illness is in some way fundamentally different in its effects from physical illness. Yet 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. (Paragraph 325)

64. We believe that s141 of the 1983 Mental Health Act is unnecessary and damaging. It embodies attitudes which stigmatise and sap the confidence of people with mental illness. Section 141 should be repealed as soon as practicable. (Paragraph 327)
65. We recognise, however, that some provision may be needed to protect the legitimate interests of constituents and the House in circumstances where a Member is physically or mentally incapacitated to the extent that he or she is entirely unable to fulfil their duties for an extended period. We recommend that the House should invite an appropriate select committee to undertake an inquiry into this issue, consider whether new legislation or other measures may be needed, and make recommendations to the House and to Government as appropriate. (Paragraph 328)
66. We recommend that an information pack and supporting guidance on the House's occupational health services should be sent to all Members of Parliament immediately after each General Election (Paragraph 329)
67. That there is a lack of balance in media coverage of Parliament between 'set piece' debates in the Chamber and the less heated discussion in other settings. Correcting the balance would benefit Parliament in several ways. Greater reporting of constructive committee hearings and events outside the main Chamber would:
 - increase public understanding of the breadth of Parliamentary activity and the work of backbenchers;
 - clearly demonstrate that there is more to the work and culture of the Commons, and of individual Members, than barracking, shouting and trying to get one over on the other side; and could
 - re-engage those members of the public who find the presentation of debates and questions in the Chamber tiresome and off-putting. (Paragraph 332)
68. The House of Commons Media and Communications Service should identify new approaches in both old and new media which would bring the more measured and less heated elements of the House's work to a wider audience. We urge Members to take the opportunities thus offered to present the work of the House in a more constructive light. (Paragraph 335)
69. The House service should make training available to Members for communication through the internet. (Paragraph 337)
70. We, like the Commission on Candidate Selection before us, would wish to see an end to strident, hostile and intrusive reporting of politicians' private lives which is destructive not only of those individuals but also of their families, relationships, and of the democratic process itself. (Paragraph 343)
71. We acknowledge that Members as well as outside commentators have been known to abuse other Members, of their own and other parties. Such behaviour among colleagues would not be considered acceptable in most professions and brings the

profession of Parliamentarian into disrepute. Members should treat their colleagues, across all parties, with courtesy. (Paragraph 344)

1 The case for widening representation

2. In the twenty-first century the UK's society is increasingly diverse. Women constitute 52% of the population. Approximately one in thirteen people comes from a black or minority ethnic (BME) community.¹ The experience of disability is widely shared, with one in five people in Great Britain acknowledging some sort of impairment.² It is estimated that six to nine per cent of the population is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered.³

3. These facts would not be obvious to anyone looking at the UK's representative body, the House of Commons. The current composition of the Commons does not reflect society. Eighty per cent of MPs are men. One in 43 MPs comes from a black or minority ethnic community. Only a handful of Members identify themselves as disabled. Currently, only 2 out of 646 MPs are under the age of 30. There is only one out lesbian in the membership of the Commons and the Lords combined. There has never been an Asian woman MP. If these things do not seem strange, they should.

4. There are many reasons why Parliament has been slow to reflect wider social changes: the population within Parliament is only renewed every four to five years; incumbency—the likelihood that a Member, having won a seat, will retain it for one or more further elections—means that particular seats may only be seriously contested every ten or even twenty years. There are, however, also less palatable reasons. Individuals from under-represented groups who have tried to enter Parliament have experienced harassment and discrimination. Women still shoulder a greater burden of caring responsibilities than men. Disabled people and people from BME communities are more likely than the majority population to live on low incomes. These factors make it harder for individuals in these groups to compete effectively.

Justice

5. Justice requires that there should be a place within the House of Commons for individuals from all sections of society. If anyone is prevented from standing for Parliament by reason of their gender, background, sexual orientation or a perceived disability, this is an injustice. The democratic right to stand for Parliament “exists separately from any debate about the intellectual and behavioural merits of [individuals] as parliamentarians.”⁴ This principle—that Parliament should be more diverse—has been accepted by the leadership of all the main political parties.⁵

6. While justice is the primary case for widening Parliamentary representation, there would also be real benefits for both Parliament and wider society if the House of Commons were to be made more fully representative. As we stated in our previous reports we believe that

1 www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=273

2 http://www.odi.gov.uk/docs/res/factsheets/Factsheet_CivicParticipation.rtf

3 Ev 80 (References in the format Ev 123 refer to the volume of evidence published as HC 167-I (Session 2008-09); references in the format SC123 refer to the volume of evidence to be published as HC 239-III)

4 Ev 59

5 Qq434, 447, 460

there are, in all, three arguments for widening representation in the House of Commons: in addition to **justice**, there are arguments relating to **effectiveness** and **enhanced legitimacy**. We believe that a more representative House of Commons would be a more effective and legitimate legislature.

Effectiveness

7. Our democracy is arranged in such a way that the geographical differences of our country are reflected in the House of Commons: the United Kingdom is divided into 646 constituencies whose Members represent urban, rural or coastal communities, areas with different population densities supported by varying traditional and light industries. This geographical distribution creates a measure of diversity in the House of Commons since the interests and life experiences of these different communities can differ widely; it is not sufficient, however, to capture the full richness and variety of life experience which a socially diverse Parliament would bring. A socially diverse House of Commons would not only represent people by constituency but also reflect the diversity of people's lives in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age and social class.⁶

8. We were told that a more diverse House of Commons would make better decisions⁷ and solve problems more effectively, because it would be able to draw upon a wider range of experiences and insights:

[There] is a problem, not because of unfairness or lack of balance but because we miss out on the input from the rich nature of the cultures that make up this country. The problems and challenges that the government faces today are not being solved by the best resource available, the totality of the perspectives of the diverse British public.⁸

9. There is evidence that when the representation of women and other currently under-represented groups increases, the content and style of politics change. Research by the Hansard Society and the Fawcett Society has highlighted the noticeable changes in the House since an increased number of women MPs was elected in 1997.⁹ The development of policy and legislation on social issues such as the minimum wage, sex discrimination, childcare and domestic violence is now much higher on the agenda.¹⁰ MPs also report that the culture, style and attitude of the House of Commons has begun to shift towards being less confrontational and aggressive since more women were elected.¹¹

6 Ev 188

7 Ev 188

8 Ev 48

9 Ev 217; Ev 58-63

10 Ibid; Sarah Childs, Joni Lovenduski and Rosie Campbell, *Women at the Top 2005: Changing Numbers, Changing Politics?* (Hansard Society 2005) pp 89-90, 97

11 Ev 216-219; [*Women at the Top 2005*], pp 89-90

Enhanced legitimacy

10. We recognise that not everyone accepts the case for addressing under-representation of certain groups. A minority of those who sent us statements of evidence considered that our investigations betrayed a “false understanding” of the nature of political representation:

No sexually-defined group, racial, religious or ethnic minority, or physically disadvantaged interest has any ‘right’ to a certain quota of MPs. What an individual member of any of these groups has a right to is to elect an MP, and to expect that that MP will further her or his interests in the House of Commons.¹²

11. It is absolutely right that an MP should represent all his or her constituents regardless of their background, personal circumstances or political allegiance. Every good MP recognises this obligation and will do the best they can to meet their constituents’ needs. Yet, although individual 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 the legislature as a whole—perhaps through MPs’ ignorance, inattention or a collective failure of the imagination—overlooks the needs and concerns of specific groups. In these circumstances its decisions and actions may be considered less legitimate than they would otherwise be. Enabling individuals from different groups to be seen and heard in the House, by contrast, should enhance the legitimacy of the House’s decisions.

12. There is an urgent need to assert the authority and importance of our democratic process. In July 2009 we reported the extent of the slump in public trust which had followed disclosures about Members’ allowances and the expenses claims of a number of MPs:

Data taken from the British Election Study survey for May 2009 indicates that when participants were asked to rate their trust in the political parties on a scale of 0 to 10, 85.8% gave a rating between 0 and 5; 91.6% gave a rating between 0 and 5 for their trust in politicians. Nearly a quarter (23.8%) said they had no trust at all in political parties and nearly a third (30.7%) said they had no trust at all in politicians. This contrasts with the ratings which participants gave to their trust in people in general: 37% gave a rating between 0 and 5 and only 2.2% said that they had no trust in people at all.¹³

13. There is a widespread perception that MPs, and Parliament itself, are divorced from reality. There is little sense that Members understand, or share, the life experiences of their constituents. Restoring public faith in Parliament is of crucial importance to the future of our democracy. Ensuring a diverse representation within Parliament is one way to rebuild trust and restore a dialogue between Parliament and those whom it represents.

14. The House of Commons exists to formulate and review the laws which govern our society. It should challenge Government and test the effective delivery of policy. It can do these things most effectively if the people who make up the House have the widest possible

12 Ev 1

13 Speaker’s Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) Interim Report HC 167-I (2008-09), paragraph 10

experience of the outcomes of policy; and, people are more likely to have faith in our democratic system if they see their own life experience is reflected in Parliament and brought to bear on the process of scrutiny. A woman who had stood for selection as a parliamentary candidate noted that her experience as a mother of young children probably gave her a better understanding of the Government's current frontline services than many MPs would ordinarily have.¹⁴ A parent's insight into our health, education and welfare services is just one of many perspectives which should be better represented in the House.

Our remit

15. The Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) was set up, with the support of the whole House of Commons, in November 2008. The House asked us formally 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; and [where appropriate...] to consider other associated matters".¹⁵ Recognising the very difficult issue of stigma which may attach to an individual's declaration of his or her sexual orientation, we decided that we should add the experience of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community to our remit. Other factors, perhaps particularly the issue of income, clearly impact upon the experience of a number of under-represented groups and we discuss these as they arise.

16. We began our work at the end of January 2009 under the leadership of the then Speaker, Rt. Hon. Michael J. Martin MP. In the following six months we consulted, and heard the views and evidence of, a wide range of individuals and organisations. We received more than 100 written statements of views. We held a number of formal hearings at Parliament in Westminster, but we also carried out a large number of informal meetings in London and around the country. We heard, for example, from young participants in the UpRising scheme at Bethnal Green, East London, and debated the issues with representatives of communities in Manchester, Cheltenham, Leeds and at the National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff. We held bilateral discussions with colleagues from the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly whose own experience, and progress in promoting equality, provides important lessons. We received valuable evidence from the Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party, Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, the Leader of the Conservative Party, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP, and the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP. Our online forum prompted some interesting lines of inquiry, and ideas. We are unable, here, to name everyone who has contributed to the consultation process but we are extremely grateful to them all for their time and effort.

17. We owe special thanks to our Specialist Advisers Professor Sarah Childs, Lorraine Gradwell MBE, Professor Shamit Saggarr and Professor Paul Whiteley for their enthusiastic advice and support. We are grateful to Professor Philip Cowley and Professor Haleh Afshar OBE who shared their research and contributed to seminars for us. The research support

14 Posting by winkywen on Conference forum <http://forums.parliament.uk/speakers-conference/index.php?read,1,118,128#msg-128>

15 HC Deb, 12 November 2008, col 912

provided by staff of the Journal Office, the Legal Services Office and the House of Commons Library, particularly the Parliament and Constitution Unit, has been invaluable.

18. We are, of course, mindful that people will read and respond to our report in the context of the disclosure of Members' allowances and expense claims, which in 2009 so damaged the reputation of Members and of the House alike. Our recommendations are intended to contribute to the long-term work of rebuilding the House of Commons and making it the efficient, effective and credible legislature it ought to be.

2 Citizenship and engagement

“It is no good having positive action or anything like that unless you are getting the right people interested in the first place”.¹⁶

19. We were asked to find ways to ensure that the opportunity to become an MP is equally available to everyone, regardless of their background, identity or personal circumstances. Before someone can take up this opportunity, however, they will have to know that it is there, and that it is relevant to them. They will need to have engaged, in some degree, with the process by which political parties develop their policies to improve society, work to communicate those ideas to others and seek public support to put those ideas into practice.

20. In recent years there has been a marked decline in the number of people voting at elections. In 1950, 84% of people voted at the first fully peace time election after the Second World War. Electoral participation then declined gradually until 1997, when the turnout was 72%. Since then, the decline has become precipitous with only 59% voting in 2001 and 61% voting in 2005.¹⁷

21. We could say that this decline has happened because people are simply no longer interested in participating in politics. Yet the same period has seen the rise of successful single issue campaigns which can involve millions of people, such as the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign of 2005. Politics itself is not turning people off. Disengagement relates more specifically to party politics, and the system which puts one party into power while other parties call them to account.

The failure of party politics

22. The Hansard Society has been measuring political engagement in the UK every year since 2002. Its most recent audit, published in April 2009, offers some suggestions as to why electoral politics is failing to prompt people’s participation.

23. The Hansard Society found that:

- People feel that as individuals they have little or no influence over national decisions (85%);
- People feel ignored by decision-makers (29%); and
- People who feel ignored by decision-makers are more reluctant to become involved.¹⁸

24. Similarly, the Citizenship Foundation, an organisation which works with young people in schools and communities, wrote to us of a loss of faith “in our formal political structures, [and] trust in our politicians to deliver”.¹⁹ It is important not only for the recruitment of

16 Q32 (Fay Mansell)

17 Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart and Paul Whiteley, ‘Performance Politics and the British Voter’ (Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 8

18 Audit of Political Engagement 6 p39

19 Citizenship Foundation 1.x, 6.1 SC35, Ev 93

good MPs but also for our society as a whole that the loss of faith in our formal political structures is reversed.

The apathy myth

25. Long-term social changes have reduced people's involvement in their immediate communities, and their availability to participate in community activities. A "declining democratic tradition within families and communities" has been accentuated by a decline in what the Citizenship Foundation calls 'bridging institutions': institutions such as trade unions and churches, which created links between civil society and civic politics, are no longer as influential as once they were.²⁰

26. In spite of these developments, a substantial number of people are interested in becoming more politically active if it is made possible for them to do so. Although the Hansard Society's 2009 survey found that 85% of people felt they had no personal influence over decisions, 43% of the same group—nearly half—said they would like to have some influence. 42% of young people thought that joining a political party helped to make someone a good citizen.²¹ While MPs as a group may be held in low esteem, more than half of the people surveyed thought that contacting a political representative was an effective way to become involved (53%).²²

27. According to the Citizenship Foundation, the main reasons why people are not becoming involved in decision-making are:

- Lack of time;
- Lack of trust; and
- Lack of the "knowledge, skills and confidence" to make the political process work for them.²³

28. Our discussions in Manchester, Cheltenham and Leeds supported this evidence. Activists told us that in their communities the general level of political awareness was low. Some people felt alienated from national politics because of their experience of issues such as foxhunting, the war in Iraq or perceived prejudice in Parliament and Government against disabled people.²⁴ A number expressed concerns about the disclosures on Members' allowances and expenses, which were unfolding as we travelled: these were seen to discredit both current politicians and the wider democratic process. Many people felt distaste for the national political parties, and said that it was difficult to tell the different parties apart. Yet people said that they recognised the importance of Parliament's work and they wanted to know how they could contribute to it.

20 Ev 91

21 Ev 91

22 Audit of Political Engagement p44

23 Ev 90

24 Ev 182

29. Throughout our inquiry we have asked the people who have written to us, and the people we have met, what they think needs to be done to make the political process work better. One of the most frequent responses we have received has been that people need a better education about politics, and better access to information about politics and the political parties.

Improvements in education

30. Changes to the teaching of politics in schools could increase understanding of the formal political process (political literacy). Members of the Youth Parliament said that there was not enough about politics in the school curriculum, and that politics education failed to show “how politics is for everyone”.²⁵ While many of us receive regular invitations to talk to students about our work we sense that some head teachers are concerned that inviting a politician into school might lead to accusations of party bias. Yet without a basic understanding of how the political parties and the electoral system work, and what Parliament and Government are there to do, people are unlikely to see any good reason why they should vote or be more actively involved in the democratic process.

31. The Fabian Women's Network said that education should build “the knowledge needed to participate in society, developing the interest and the reasons to take part”.²⁶ The part of the national curriculum which is concerned with teaching about participation in society is called citizenship. Citizenship became a statutory subject for schools in 2002. A revised citizenship programme was taught for the first time in 2008.

What is 'Citizenship'?

32. The Citizenship Foundation told us that 'citizenship' is

the effective, informed engagement of individuals in their communities and in broader society around issues relating to the public domain. ... [people] need to know about politics, law, economics, the functioning of communities and social groups and their rights and responsibilities in terms of these communities and groups. And they need to feel confident in applying this knowledge, which requires a 'toolkit' of citizenship skills: investigating, communicating, participating, negotiating, taking responsible action.²⁷

The Association of Citizenship Teachers told us that citizenship education in schools is designed

“to build students' sense of political agency. A sense of political agency is your belief that you can effect political change in your school, your community and the wider world. This could be as simple as a willingness to email your MP or raise an issue in

25 Ev 33

26 Ev 67

27 Ev 91

school council, or it could be a more complex and significant commitment, such as campaigning to improve a local park or lobbying to lower the voting age”.²⁸

Effective citizenship was about empowering individuals “to drive change in whatever setting they are working in”.²⁹

33. We were told that the best way to build students’ sense of political agency was for schools to give students a greater say in the content of their learning, and “to create opportunities for students to effect change in the world around them”.³⁰ It was suggested that lessons should be based upon the experience of the community: students should be encouraged to participate in school and local youth councils, organise social enterprise programmes and hold mock elections.³¹

34. The Association of Citizenship Teachers told us, however, that there was also an urgent need for school heads to take citizenship more seriously, and for more specialist citizenship teachers to be trained. A recent study had found that more than half of citizenship teachers (55%) had received no formal training in the subject. Tony Breslin of the Citizenship Foundation said that this would not be tolerated in any other subject in our schools.³² Money was provided in the Government’s Budget for 2009, but slow progress has been made since then in activating the citizenship programme for 14 to 16 year olds and the work on active citizenship and volunteering for 16 to 19 year olds.

35. In 2006–07 the Education and Skills Committee reported its “expectation that all secondary schools should have a fully trained citizenship teacher in post”. We endorse this recommendation. Schools will gain confidence in their ability to teach citizenship only if they have a better understanding of the subject, and access to specialist citizenship teachers. We recognise that citizenship is not taught under that heading throughout the UK.

36. In England, the Department for Children Schools and Families should work with headteachers and with Ofsted to ensure that the importance of citizenship is better understood and the subject is taught with quality and appropriate breadth. In the devolved administrations, the equivalent authorities should consider a similar approach in the relevant curriculum areas.

Beyond school

37. Since ‘citizenship’ only became a statutory subject in the national curriculum in 2002, most of the adult population has not had access to it.³³ There is also a demand within the wider adult population for information on how to participate effectively in society, and drive change. In the past this information would commonly have been passed on through churches, trades unions or institutes of adult education—the ‘bridging institutions’ referred

28 Ev 89

29 Ev 93

30 Ev 89

31 Ev 92

32 Q140

33 Ev 91

to by the Citizenship Foundation.³⁴ These organisations were part of many people's daily lives, but in recent years the percentage of the population which will have regular contact with them has generally fallen. The organisations which have taken their place in some cases are housing associations, co-operatives and community groups: organisations where the development of citizenship skills is a beneficial side-effect of the organisation's main work. In other cases, organisations such as Girlguiding UK, the Citizenship Foundation and the UpRising programme have directly focused upon developing active citizens. Valuable initiatives run by bodies such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes and the YWCA help individuals to develop the skills and confidence they need to take action in their communities. Most of these organisations are however small scale compared to the previously substantial 'bridging institutions': they are less visible to the general population and they may be hampered by lack of resources or expertise.

38. The Government should ensure greater and more consistent access to youth and community citizenship engagement programmes.³⁵ The Government should also consider what more it can do to support organisations which are, directly or indirectly, promoting active citizenship and political literacy.

39. Following the National Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, all those seeking naturalisation have to undertake a course in basic citizenship and the basics of the English language. We recognise that this has increased both the awareness and knowledge of those who have come from outside the country and the necessity of reflecting in adult learning the potential for increasing citizenship understanding and literacy in the population as a whole. Logic would lead us to believe that this should be given greater attention in the development of adult learning programmes.

40. The UK Youth Parliament told us that there are various Government strategies relating to citizenship and participation, but they are not well connected.³⁶ If people are lucky enough to have access to a citizenship programme, either through school or through an organisation such as the Youth Parliament, the system tends to fail at the point where participants want to put their skills into practice. It is difficult for people to gain access to the formal structures for decision-making. Youth organisations told us that:

we have a huge amount of young people who are excited and want to do something and there is nothing they can do because there is no space on boards, in Parliament, in PCTs as advisors, for them to act on what they have learnt.³⁷

41. Representatives of youth organisations had ambitious visions for what a properly joined-up strategy on participation could achieve. They wanted to see programmes developed which, first of all, would provide tailored support to the individual young person in the form of mentoring, chances to campaign on an issue of particular interest to them, and opportunities to meet current decision-makers.³⁸ Secondly, programmes should enable

34 Ev 91

35 Ev 94

36 Ev 32

37 Q110

38 Q108

young people to take up active roles in their community through local government, public bodies, business or the voluntary sector. Omar Salem gave us an example:

a young person might be very passionate ... about obesity in young people ... so they might get involved in their PCT and their council. Through that they will come into contact with political parties and see how political parties wield influence over individual issues. That is a link into ... why you want to get involved in a political party because you might think you want your council to spend its budget around preventative health differently, change the way the Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities ... are structured.³⁹

42. Participating in this way would broaden the young person's horizons, build their confidence and possibly lead them to more active participation in the future. Louise Pulford of the UpRising programme described what was needed as a "climbing frame" of different public sector organisations in which individuals could take on roles such as governor or councillor, "jump from bit to bit to bit and eventually ... get to the top";⁴⁰ the types of organisations which would make up this climbing frame included Parliament, local authorities, quangos, the BBC, the police, primary care trusts and housing associations.⁴¹

43. We were told that it is important that any capacity-building programme of this type works across many different institutions rather than just one. Having a number of different organisations involved would enable participants to build social networks and gather experience of different positions of influence as they developed their leadership skills. These networks and experiences are particularly important for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, or under-represented groups, enabling them to gain credibility and compete with their more affluent or well-connected peers.⁴²

44. With this in mind, **public sector organisations should encourage the development of the next generation of leaders by appointing members of under-represented groups to supernumerary positions on boards and other bodies. This should be aimed at enabling people to gain the skills and experience they need to equip them to take up positions of influence.**

What can Parliament do?

45. In recent years Parliament as an institution has recognised the role it can play in educating the general public about its work. Parliament interacts with the public in three main ways:

- through its website, www.parliament.uk;
- through guided tours of the Palace of Westminster; and

39 Q114

40 Q110

41 Ev 95

42 Ev 95

- through its information, education and outreach services.

46. In 2008 more than 90,000 people chose to follow a guided tour of the Palace of Westminster. Parliament's guided tours have been criticised for emphasising the history of the building and the detail of ceremonies such as the State Opening of Parliament when they should spend more time explaining what MPs do to examine Government's actions and to represent their constituents.⁴³

47. Since 2003 the content of the guided tours has been formalised, and there is now a standard script which all tour guides are expected to follow. This has a core of information which must be included and additional information which the guide may add depending upon the needs, interests and abilities of the visiting group. Victor Launert, the Visitor Services Manager, agreed that it can be hard to balance the content of the tour between the historic elements which first attract visitors, and "the message which Parliament wishes to convey to them with regard to its current workings and significance."⁴⁴ We were assured that "The three principal areas of an MP's work—legislation, scrutiny and representation—are covered [in the script], along with mentions of their work for the constituency and on committees, as well as the procedures of the House ... and the rights of constituents to lobby Members."⁴⁵ Aileen Walker, Director of Public Information, told us that a survey of visitors to Parliament in 2008 found that the majority of visitors to Parliament had "more interest in politics and in the parliamentary processes", and understood more about the work of MPs, at the end of their visit than they had at the beginning".⁴⁶ We are pleased that the new standard script for visitor tours of Parliament is proving effective.

48. Staff from the Public Information Directorate also told us that the House service had recently made education and outreach a high priority. Dedicated teaching facilities are being built at Westminster which from 2013 will enable the Education Service to welcome 100,000 learners to Parliament each year. A transport subsidy scheme has been piloted to encourage schools outside London and the South East to visit Parliament. Tom O'Leary, head of the Education Service, told us that this experiment had almost doubled the number of school visits to Westminster from 'Zone B' areas such as the Midlands, from 29% of the total to 58%.⁴⁷ A team of outreach officers has been appointed, many of whose staff are based in the English administrative regions. These staff train teachers, run workshops and support schools and other organisations in their interaction with Parliament.

49. We warmly welcome the increased priority the House is giving to its education and outreach activities, and we are impressed by the work that is being produced. It is vital that citizens know more about the way Parliament and its Members work. But we believe that there should also be a firm focus on providing the public with information needed to promote wider representation, without reference to any one party. The objectives of the Parliamentary Education Service, therefore, should in future include

43 Ev 68

44 Ev 76

45 Ev 76

46 Qq147-148

47 Q144

helping to encourage a wider range of people to become candidates for election to Parliament.

50. We were told that we also, as individual Members of Parliament, could do more to promote the concepts of political agency and effective citizenship.⁴⁸ **Support should be developed for Members to help them to promote political agency and active citizenship in their constituencies.**

51. However, Members cannot produce a culture of active citizenship on their own. There is an important role for public bodies to play in encouraging involvement. Therefore, **we believe that all publicly-funded organisations, especially local bodies, should create opportunities for people who are interested to learn how to become more active citizens.**⁴⁹

48 Ev 89

49 See para 239 below for a description of Step Up Cymru, which provides such opportunities at all levels of government in Wales

3 The importance of political parties

what has happened now ... is a perception that political parties are somehow not in the public interest, and that has seeped into the whole of the way society is.⁵⁰

52. For many of us, interest in politics begins with a personal interest or a local concern such as post office closure. The example given by Omar Salem (see paragraph 40 above) shows how such a personal or local issue can prompt someone to make the connection between the issue and the power of political parties to effect change. While citizen engagement is a social benefit which can be effected non-politically, as a Conference we want to see people joining political parties: without political parties our representative democracy would not work, and parties are essential to the recruitment of people to serve in public office.

What is a political party?

53. At its simplest, a political party is an organisation which allows like-minded people to work together to promote certain ideas and achieve certain goals. The co-operation and collaboration of people with different experiences, skills, knowledge and views within a political party is what enables that party to develop policies across the whole range of concerns which the national interest requires.

What are political parties for?

54. The functions of a political party were described by the Houghton Committee⁵¹ in 1976. This committee said that political parties:

- Aggregat[e] the many and diverse interests in society into reasonably clear political programmes;
- Simplify [...] electoral choices for citizens;
- Provid[e] coherence to Parliamentary parties thereby facilitating government;
- Select [...] candidates for election to Parliament and other bodies;
- Enabl[e] ordinary citizens to participate in the policy-making process; and
- Help to provide a broad political education.

55. Other functions of political parties which have been described are:

- A political party acts as a brand: because it is associated with certain values, ideas or actions the public in general should know, in broad terms, what people who associate themselves with that brand stand for;

50 Q39

51 The Committee on Financial Aid to Political Parties (the Houghton Committee) reported in August 1976 (Cm 6601)

- By seeking to appeal to a wide range of voters political parties are able to act as a counterweight to special interest groups which could otherwise seek to manipulate government to their own benefit; and
- Parties can help citizens “who are on the losing side in elections and policy debates to accept defeat”. They do this by encouraging an understanding that while their party may lose now, it may win on another occasion: this keeps politics “non-violent”.⁵²

56. We can say, in summary, that **political parties are the mechanism by which people of any background can be actively involved in the tasks of shaping policy and deciding how society should be governed. While they are not perfect organisations they are essential for the effective functioning of our democracy. Without the support of political parties it would be difficult for individual Members of Parliament, as legislators and/or as members of the Executive, to organise themselves effectively for the task of promoting the national interest—including by challenge to the Government, where that is necessary and appropriate—and ensuring that proposed new laws are proportionate, effective and accurately drafted.**

The decline in party membership

57. Yet the membership of all the main political parties represented at Westminster is falling. Between 2001 and 2003 overall membership of the main parties fell by 14%. The small scale of party membership has been demonstrated by the figure that there are now two members of the RSPB for every member of a political party in the UK.⁵³ A similar decline is apparently occurring in other democracies in Europe as well.⁵⁴

58. The decline in membership has knock-on effects for the understanding of politics in wider society: Dame Jane Roberts, Councillors Commission, told us that

something like 1.5% of the electorate is a member of a political party so increasingly people know fewer people who are a member of a political party. It becomes something very distant, something very remote and something that other people do and I think that is a real danger ... that the political class becomes so divorced and distanced from the rest of the population.⁵⁵

59. **The extent to which political parties are the subject of both contempt and general public indifference should be a cause of concern to all who are interested in how our country is run. We acknowledge that the recent disclosures about Members' allowances and some Members' expenses claims have been extremely damaging, but a general dwindling of attachment to political parties—going wider than the decline in formal membership—has been apparent over more than 40 years. This trend is shown in the**

52 Paul Whiteley, 'Where have all the members gone? The dynamics of party membership in Britain', Parliamentary Affairs 2008 (Oxford University Press/The Hansard Society) pp 250-251

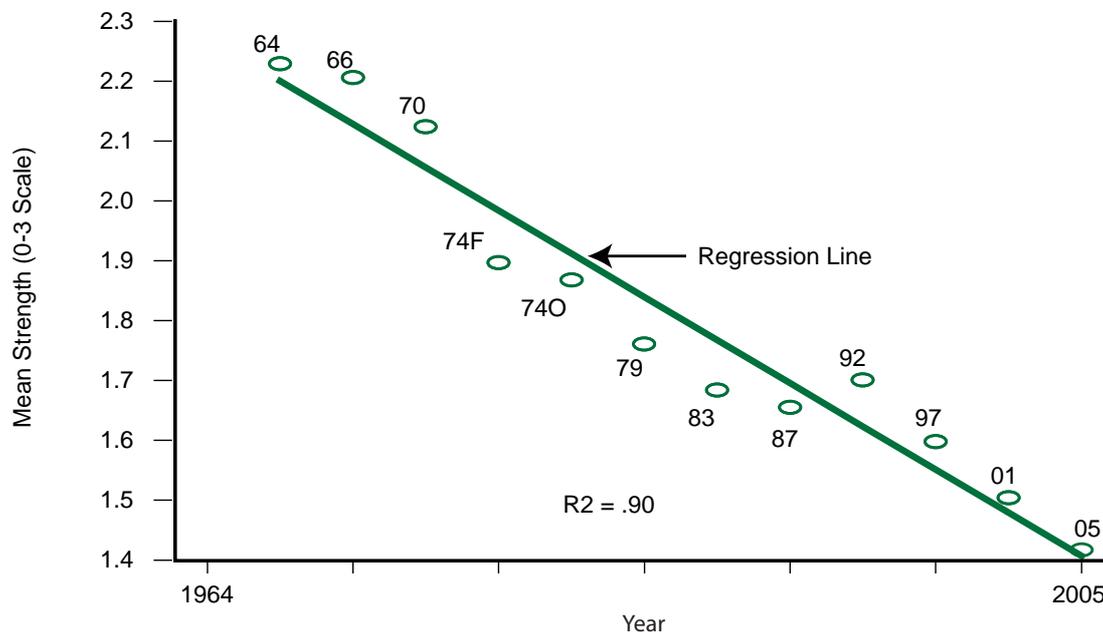
53 Q116

54 Paul Whiteley, 'Where have all the members gone? The dynamics of party membership in Britain', Parliamentary Affairs 2008 (Oxford University Press/The Hansard Society) p 242

55 Q174

graph below, which shows the extent to which individuals have identified with British political parties since 1964.⁵⁶

Trend in strength of party identification in Britain, 1964-2005



Source: 1964–2005 BES post-election surveys.

60. The graph shows the strength of identification over time in terms of the average scores on this scale. The average strength of identification was 2.2 in 1964 and 1.4 in 2005: the closeness of all the marked points on the graph to the central regression line—which is a straight line travelling from the top left hand corner of the graph to the bottom right hand corner of the graph—illustrates that the decline in identification has been continuous and steady throughout the period.

61. **It is important to the future of our democracy that political parties are able to continue to function. As Nan Sloane, Centre for Women and Democracy, put it,**

The democratic process we have may not be a perfect way of governing ourselves but it is better than most of the other ones that there are out there and it is very dangerous to have that undermined.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The graph uses data drawn from the British Election Study, which carries out surveys after every general election. In every election study since the first one in 1964, respondents have been asked if they identify with a political party and if they do they are subsequently asked how much they identify with it. The response categories to this latter question are:

Very Strong = 3

Fairly strong = 2

Not very strong = 1

Not at all strong or no identification = 0

⁵⁷ Q352

In this context it is clear that the effective functioning of political parties is very much in the public interest.

62. If political parties are to survive in the face of a growing distaste for organised politics they will have to do one of two things:

- Either, they will have to become increasingly driven from the centre; or
- They will have to make real efforts to rekindle local interest in local parties and expand their voluntary base.

63. Analysis of political party models suggests that highly centralised political parties have powerful leaders but their local members and activists have little influence over the party's direction. When such a party also receives substantial public subsidies it does not need to recruit local members who can contribute financially to support the party's work. It could be argued that if a party can afford to employ professionals in its key positions the role of local members becomes less important; but a recent study of 36 countries has shown that where a party lacks connections with local communities—either through direct membership or 'partisanship' in the wider electorate—its effectiveness and credibility in government will be diminished.⁵⁸

64. Therefore it would appear that **it is in the interests of any political party which wishes to achieve, and sustain, a period in government that it should foster local activism and seek to build up social capital and trust. Active, healthy and accessible local political parties will also play a vital role in identifying and nurturing a greater diversity of MPs for the future.**

Consequences of the decline in local party membership

65. The decline in membership of political parties across the board means that local parties lack both activists and income. Without these resources local parties may no longer be able to support election campaigns across entire constituencies. In some cases, they may not even be able to find enough candidates to stand at every election, particularly in local elections.⁵⁹ This is damaging to our democracy since elections which are not properly contested deny the voter a real choice, and the opportunity to compare the skills and experience of different individuals. The absence of a visible party presence in many areas tends to reinforce perceptions that the political parties nationally are irrelevant, or not listening.

The importance of local political activism

66. In 2004 a report by Alexandra Runswick argued that the engagement of local parties with the electorate is important because:

58 Paul Whiteley, *Where have all the members gone? The dynamics of party membership in Britain*, Parliamentary Affairs 2008, OUP/the Hansard Society

59 Ev 139

- personal canvassing by local parties meets “the electorate’s basic desire to meet the people from the party they are being asked to vote for”: this, she argues, leads to greater responsiveness and greater medium to long-term loyalty than canvassing by post or by national advertising;
- a strategic campaign of reaching out to the community would enable parties to address their lack of diversity. Local parties will need to recruit, mentor and develop the skills of people from under-represented groups if those people are to be future council or parliamentary candidates and give the electorate a greater choice; and
- personal canvassing “forces both the electorate and members of political parties to ... see each other as fellow citizens”, and provides a corrective to the cynicism of much media coverage of politics.

67. Looking back to the ‘sleaze’ allegations which were prevalent prior to the 1997 general election Runswick writes that

“the perception of corruption [might] well have died down had the majority of the electorate had an alternative perception to counter it with—an alternative gained possibly from meeting a normal party activist on their doorstep and talking about common interests and concerns. But parties at the moment lack the person power to speak to the electorate and to counter ill feeling.”⁶⁰

Her point is just as relevant today.

Membership, income and activism

68. Local party membership, income and activism are very closely linked. One of the major problems for all the political parties today is that people simply will not join, or donate money to, a system which they believe to be discredited. The reputation of all party activity, local as well as national, is likely to have been adversely affected by the current loss of trust in politics and politicians. The self-confidence of party activists must have taken a knock. Without proper resources political parties are unable to get out onto the streets, and knock on doors, to challenge the perception of corruption and self-interest. If those perceptions are not countered people become even less likely to want to participate.

69. This narrative describes a downwards spiral which needs to be corrected. If it is not corrected, parties may find it increasingly difficult to get good candidates to stand at either local or national elections.

70. The Runswick report notes also that many local political parties have only a basic web presence, and few if any paid staff. This severely limits their ability to produce mailings and to encourage and organise members to be active participants through leafleting, canvassing and policy debates.

71. A research report for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 2002 surveyed sixteen local constituency parties. While the richest local party in the survey had an income in excess of

£130,000, ten of the parties had an income under £10,000 a year. Of these, four had an income less than £5,000 and six an income of less than £1,000.⁶¹ The accompanying analysis comments that £1,000 a year is barely enough to print campaign leaflets, let alone rent an office or employ a member of staff to maintain a website, manage local campaigns and work on party recruitment, retention and talent-spotting.

72. If local parties are to improve their campaigning they will need greater resources both in terms of volunteers and income. A suggestion proffered by the research is that a low level of state funding be offered to local, rather than national, parties to support their renewal. Researchers asked those participating in the local party survey what would be their preferred options for the method of such funding: their clear preference was for the state to provide locally retained matching funding, based on the number of membership fees and small donations paid within each local party. Under this proposal the parties would still have to work for the money and the funding would remain proportionate to the level of local support; but the offer of matched funding would provide an incentive for local parties to canvass local opinion, to engage in dialogue about policy and actively to seek to recruit and retain new members. Our own estimate of the cost to the Government of such action, based on current membership levels for the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, is approximately £13 million per year.

73. We recognise the formal restraints on Government spending and the fact that each political party sets different membership subscriptions. Rather than matched funding, therefore, we advocate consideration of a fixed rate grant: set at £10 per local party member the cost to the Government would initially be about £5 million per year. While we recognise that there is little appetite at present for giving more money to political parties we would argue that giving small amounts of money to individual local parties is a slightly different matter from giving large subsidies to central parties. We also stress that any such funding should be well-regulated, the money should be earned and its use accounted-for.

74. The Government should consult on the introduction of a scheme enabling local political parties to apply for funding linked to their receipts from member subscriptions. The scheme should be administered by a suitable independent body and the details of all funding allocations made should be published. Local political parties should also expect to make some account of the way in which they use the funding to support the development of social capital. This consultation should take place in the first session of the 2010 Parliament.

Open recruitment

75. Dame Jane Roberts of the Councillors Commission told us that she found local parties “notoriously unenthusiastic ... about reaching out” beyond the party’s existing membership. She felt, however, that it was not as difficult as might be imagined for local parties to recruit new members—provided there was a well-developed local engagement strategy in place.⁶² We believe that as part of a local engagement strategy each local party

61 An analysis of the health of local political parties in 2003, Peter Facey and Emily Robinson, printed with Life Support for Local Parties, Alexandra Runswick, p15

62 Q157

should consider what steps it can take to encourage people from under-represented groups to take part.

76. Operation Black Vote noted anecdotal evidence which suggests that many new joiners leave their political party after a year because they find it “boring”: the organisation says that this can be more damaging to faith in our democracy than a failure to recruit members in the first place. The following points have been suggested for political parties to consider:

- local parties should look at where they hold their meetings: meetings should be in venues which are accessible to disabled people and are not intimidating.⁶³
- local parties should try to hold their meetings at times when individuals with caring responsibilities are better able to attend.⁶⁴
- parties should seek to minimise their formal procedure and look to increase the number of social events held, debates and talks. Debates and talks could sometimes be held with guest speakers from outside the party.
- local parties should be ready to listen to the opinions of new joiners, and less swift to condemn people as “troublesome” when they ask difficult questions.
- local parties should be ready to offer new joiners specific roles in campaigning, canvassing or managing party communications.⁶⁵

77. While lack of income will be a concern for many organisers of local political parties, Operation Black Vote notes that there can also be cultural resistance to a programme of open recruitment. It says that clear leadership from the national parties will be necessary, to assert the benefits of widening membership, until local parties are genuinely changed. **Each national party needs to develop a systematic plan of action to support the development of local parties. As part of this plan parties should draw up a checklist of actions which will promote diversity (such as meeting in accessible venues) and might also offer practical support and incentives to local parties which adopt measures on the checklist:** such incentives might, for example, include professional assistance with campaign strategy, website design and maintenance, or the offer of guest speakers for a particular event.

78. Witnesses from both the BME and LGBT communities told us that they also looked to the political parties to demonstrate their openness by appointing national, regional and local advocates, or champions, who would be able to express the value which the party derived from association with their communities. They further recommended that the parties employ professional ‘headhunters’, or talent spotters, who could identify talented individuals within local parties and support them in finding the best role for their skills.

79. We recommend that all political parties appoint national and/or regional community champions for women, and people from BME and LGBT communities, and disabled people. The champions’ remit should include supporting individuals from

63 Ev 6

64 Ev 217

65 Ev 6

those communities in finding and sustaining a suitable role within the party. Consideration should also be given to formalising strategies for talent spotting within parties and within the wider community.

80. In the remainder of our report we look more closely at the specific problems which may face individuals who seek to become a Parliamentary candidate.

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

81. An MP has a number of responsibilities. The main ones are:

- as a legislator, debating, making and reviewing laws and government policy within Parliament; and
- as an advocate for the constituency he or she represents. The MP can speak for the interests and concerns of constituents in Parliamentary debates and, if appropriate, intercede with Ministers on their behalf. The MP can speak either on behalf of the constituency as a whole, or to help individual constituents who are in difficulty (an MP represents all their constituents, whether or not the individual voted for them). Within the constituency an MP and his or her staff will seek to support individual constituents by getting information for them or working to resolve a problem.

82. In addition some MPs will:

- Take on an additional role as a Government Minister;
- Take on a formal role within Parliament, supporting the Speaker by chairing committees or debates; or
- Have a formal role to play within their political party, for example, being a spokesperson, co-ordinating a campaign or advising the party leadership on a particular area of policy.

83. 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. He or she can press for changes which will increase the community's wellbeing and prosperity. An MP has the authority to bring different people and agencies together to address an awkward problem. When someone has to take on 'the system'—perhaps to secure the right care package for a relative, or to correct a miscarriage of justice—an MP can often support them and help them through. 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.

84. It is important to recognise that a Member's responsibilities rest jointly and concurrently at Westminster and in the constituency. It is a modern requirement of the job that a Member has an office in both places and 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. Hence it is important to recognise that both Westminster and their constituency are places of work for MPs.

A job description

85. There is no formally accepted job description for the work of an MP, although there have been various attempts to define the range of tasks an MP carries out.⁶⁶ We have been told, and we recognise, that the lack of transparency about what an MP does is not helpful to the public's understanding of Parliament. It is also a barrier to the aspirations of those who have not participated extensively in electoral politics. It can lead to misunderstanding and unrealistic expectations on the part of voters in the constituency and members of political parties.

86. There needs also to be more clarity about the employment status of MPs. An MP is held to be self-employed for tax and other legal reasons. He or she receives a salary from the state and directly employs his or her own office staff. The employment status of an MP is not widely understood, yet it impacts upon certain of the concerns which we have heard, such as the question of whether, and if so, how, Members should be provided with maternity leave. We shall discuss this in chapter 7 of the report.

87. A description of the main functions of a Member of Parliament should be drawn up, agreed between the parties and published. The description should not remove the scope for MPs to approach the job of representing their constituency in various ways; it should contain general principles and main objectives and tasks, rather than highly detailed prescriptions. Greater transparency about the terms and conditions under which MPs work has been achieved since the mid-1990s but the process has not been completed; nor has it been matched by a clearer explanation of the role of Members. More is needed. This information should be consolidated, published (on the internet and in hard copy) and made widely available to the general public.

Being a candidate

88. Many of the people we met in Manchester, Cheltenham and Leeds told us that there should also be greater clarity and wider knowledge about how someone would become an MP.

89. The process of becoming an MP has several stages, and political parties play an essential role in almost every case. An individual who is interested in or willing to stand for election as a Member of Parliament representing a political party must first join, and be selected as the official candidate (the Prospective Parliamentary Candidate) for, a local branch of a political party. The parties then provide campaigning support for the chosen candidates at a general election or, where relevant, at a by-election. All local people who are registered to vote may vote for one of the candidates on polling day. When the votes are counted, the candidate who has been given the most votes becomes the local MP. A Member of Parliament can only participate in Parliamentary debates and hearings, however, once they have sworn or affirmed their allegiance to the Crown.

66 See for example Appendix 1 of Report No. 38 from the Review Body on Senior Salaries, Cm 3330-II (HMSO, 1996)

The Ideal Candidate—What do political parties look for?

90. In recent years all of the main political parties have sought to make their selection procedures more objective and professional. Part of this process has been to list formally the competencies which benefit MPs. Some of these competencies are skills which every MP will need individually; others are skills which are needed within the wider group of MPs if they are to work together effectively to form a Government or to call Government to account. While each of the parties looks for slightly different things, when these are put together the overall list includes but is not limited to (in no particular order):

- Communication skills: being able to communicate effectively; being able to communicate a message to an audience in different ways;
- Campaigning: being able to plan and carry out an effective campaign;
- Leadership: being able to lead a team of people and work collaboratively with people and organisations from a wide range of backgrounds and communities;
- Management skills: being able to manage staff, budgets, premises and other resources; being able to manage time and the requirements of working in two places and in two offices (in the constituency and Westminster);
- Representing people and problem solving: being able to take up a problem on behalf of another person, finding out the options for solving the problem, working with the person and keeping them informed;
- Strategic thinking: being able to plan an effective course of action;
- Judgement;
- Resilience;
- Values and knowledge: being able to provide a record of experience in, or commitment to, the political party and/or the community; and
- Life experience: being able to provide evidence of experience outside the political party (for example in voluntary organisations, in the public sector, in a caring role, in paid employment); demonstrating how this experience helps to prepare the candidate for being an MP.⁶⁷

Motivation

91. Motivation is also highly important. People who stand for election do so, we were told, “because they want to ‘serve their community’, they want to make a difference”.⁶⁸ These motivations are far more frequently expressed by MPs than ideas such as an interest in politics for its own sake, or a desire for power. Some people, like independent MP Dr Richard Taylor, are drawn into politics because of a single issue such as a campaign for a

67 SC94, 98

68 Q178

local hospital, while others may get involved because of an event or series of events. Research into the backgrounds of local councillors, which we believe also broadly reflects the experience of Members of Parliament, indicates that a key factor for many people in deciding to stand for election is whether they have been asked to do so.⁶⁹ Women councillors in particular were likely to give as their reason for involvement that they had been asked.⁷⁰

92. We believe passionately in the value of an MP's work, and consider ourselves fortunate that we have had the opportunity to serve as Members. Yet there are many more people who have the essential qualities and capabilities required of an MP but who have been denied this opportunity; or, who have been unable to pursue an opportunity which should have been open to them. In many cases this lost or denied opportunity will relate in some way to the fact that the person is a woman, or disabled, or comes from a minority ethnic community; that they are young, working class or living on a low income; that they are an open member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered communities; or they are a mental health service user. None of these factors has an automatic impact upon a person's ability to do a job, but they can still create barriers to the person's success in life in general and in politics in particular.

The Reality of Candidacy

93. The reality of candidacy often seems very different from the ideals and aspirations we have just discussed. In particular, selection processes and the culture of parties can make it harder—or mean it is perceived to be harder—for people from diverse backgrounds to become candidates. The choice of prospective parliamentary candidates rests with the local political parties. Various arguments were put to us as to the reasons why local parties predominantly select white, male, apparently able-bodied, middle-class candidates. These arguments included:

- That there are not enough candidates from other groups (for example women, disabled people) coming forward to enable nationally proportionate selections, meaning the local parties have little choice;
- 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.

69 Ev 24; Ev 55–57

70 Ev 22

94. We have received a number of submissions rejecting the idea that there are not enough women interested in becoming candidates. We were told that the tendency for people to choose people who are like themselves has also declined since the 1950s. The perpetuation of the stereotype of an MP may still be an issue. We consider in our chapter on selection processes (see Chapter 5) how such bias—whether or not it is intended—can be removed.

Looking like Ministers

95. It was suggested to us that in certain cases ambitious local parties may not simply select a candidate on whether they 'look like' a Member of Parliament but also on whether they 'look like' a potential Minister. We put this suggestion to Peter Riddell, Chair of the Hansard Society. He told us that "it is always difficult to predict at the time of selection" which candidates will progress to the highest levels in a political party, but agreed that this might be a consideration for some local parties.⁷¹ This raises the question of what a Minister looks like: while much improved compared to Governments pre-1997, at present the Government remains significantly white and male. If local parties do try to choose likely Ministers in that way, the parties will simply replicate the current ministerial team and ensure that more of the same are elected.

96. When we asked the party leaders about representation in the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet, the Prime Minister pointed out to us that in addition to full cabinet members there are women and members of BME communities "who sit at the Cabinet table who do not necessarily hold a full departmental responsibility";⁷² while we acknowledge the value of these arrangements both for the Cabinet and for the Members concerned, it is regrettable that such appointments do not bring greater public status or visible responsibility. The Women Liberal Democrats regretted that women MPs are not more prominent, even visible, in the wider political arena and in the media.⁷³ Mr Cameron told us that the Conservative Party had "only two" MPs from a BME background, both of whom "are Shadow Ministers, but both were elected at the last election." Mr Cameron said that he had set a target for a third of Ministers in a future Conservative administration to be women by the end of the five-year term.⁷⁴

A narrower path into politics?

97. Concerns have been expressed for some time about increasing specialisation and narrowing of the route to Westminster. There is some evidence to suggest that aspirant MPs who take a particular career path are more likely to be successful in getting selected and elected than potential candidates who take other routes.

98. Historically many MPs would join the House after working in one or more different trades or professions, with perhaps some union or local party involvement and gradually progressing to the point where standing for Parliament was a logical next step.

71 Q228

72 Q440

73 Ev 64

74 Q459

99. More recently a trend can be seen which suggests that a small but growing number of new entrants to the House of Commons are 'career politicians' who have shaped their careers over years specifically to maximise their chances of entering Parliament. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the optimum career path for a 'career politician' today would include perhaps experience as a local councillor, a spell spent working as a paid employee for a political party as a researcher or adviser and/or a spell spent working for an MP. Education also plays a part. The Equality and Human Rights Commission presented us with striking evidence to indicate that having a degree from a Russell Group university was likely to increase a candidate's chances.⁷⁵

100. This apparent trend in candidates' backgrounds, away from an emphasis on broad life experience acquired outside politics and towards a greater focus on a restricted range of political roles, presents two challenges. Firstly, although 'career politicians' who have deliberately pursued a pre-parliamentary career of the type described may have acquired valuable 'parliamentary' skills in public speaking, negotiating, researching and analysing information, they may lack some of the experience and expertise which life as (for example) a teacher, a miner, an entrepreneur or farmer may provide. Such experience can bring useful insights into the way policy translates into practice and is important to the effective scrutiny of Government policy and legislation. Secondly, there is a risk that if parties have a strong but unspoken preference for candidates who have followed a particular, narrowly defined career path, this effectively and unfairly closes the gates against all but a lucky—or privileged—few.

101. We asked senior representatives of each of the parties whether they recognised the existence of such a narrow career 'path into politics'. John Maples MP, speaking for the Conservative Party, recognised the existence of a 'professionalised' route into Parliament but told us that while he "would certainly be very worried if [he] felt the whole of our intake was coming through that route ... looking at the numbers it seems it is about ten or 12%, and that is probably fine".⁷⁶ Ray Collins, General Secretary of the Labour Party, suggested that monitoring could help to determine the extent of this trend but noted also that organisations such as the trade unions still had a role to play in providing an alternative route into politics for some individuals, particularly those who might not have ready access to social networks at Westminster.⁷⁷ These networks can be powerful and can exclude. We have seen that "being asked" to be a candidate is sometimes an important starting point for a political career. We were told that if you are a woman, or from a black and minority ethnic community, you are less likely to be asked.⁷⁸ It seems probable that the same holds true for other under-represented groups.

75 The EHRC told us that about 72% of the House of Commons was university educated and about half the House (46%) attended one of the 20 'Russell Group' Universities. Within the 2005 intake of new Members of Parliament 89% were university educated. In the House as a whole, 27% of Members attended either the University of Oxford or Cambridge. Within the 2005 intake of new Members this percentage rises to 29%.

The Russell Group is an association of 20 major research-intensive universities of the United Kingdom. They are the universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Imperial College London, King's College London, Leeds, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Queen's University Belfast, Oxford, Sheffield, Southampton, University College London and Warwick.

76 Q252

77 Q252

78 Q157

102. **It is important to ensure that there is no single route into politics which is accessible only to a privileged few.** We recently sought to amend the Equality Bill in order to create a mechanism for monitoring the socio-economic backgrounds and occupations of future candidates; unfortunately, there was insufficient time for our proposal to be debated. We nonetheless continue to believe that **the routes by which future Members come into Parliament should be monitored and information published by the political parties.** (For further discussion of our proposed amendment see paragraphs 160-161).

103. **There would be value in the parties being more open about both the qualities, and the experience, they consider to be desirable for a prospective parliamentary candidate. If it becomes clear that certain types of experience—such as a spell as a party employee or as an MP's researcher—are preferred, the parties should consider how those experiences can be made more accessible.**

104. But whatever new processes are put in place, **greater diversity in our elected representatives will be achieved only when the culture of our political parties has been changed. This change in our political parties should be driven by the changes we see in wider society, which requires and demands greater diversity in all representative organisations and bodies. Party leaders can help to challenge stereotypes of an effective Member, or Minister, by ensuring that MPs from all backgrounds and communities are able to demonstrate their skills in positions of prominence, either within Government or within the party.**

105. In the following chapter we consider in greater detail:

- the barriers which obstruct the success of individuals from under-represented groups;
- the selection processes used by the main political parties; and
- ways in which the selection processes might be improved.

5 Selection processes and barriers to selection

106. There are a number of reasons why individuals from under-represented groups find it harder to become MPs. Research has shown that in most cases a number of different socio-economic, political and cultural factors will combine to create a barrier to individual success.

107. If someone wishes to represent their community in Parliament, and be an MP, being selected as a local political party's official candidate (prospective parliamentary candidate, or PPC) is a virtual necessity. The formal selection process which is operated by local parties is, therefore, the first key campaign which an aspiring candidate must successfully negotiate on the road to becoming an MP. Comparatively few women, disabled people, and people from a BME and/or LGBT background are endorsed as PPCs.

Selection processes

108. Each of the political parties has its own specific selection procedures. Some parties offer local constituencies a choice of procedures, while other parties carry out all selections by a single procedure. The most common features, and types, of party selection process are:

- An initial assessment of an individual's skills and competencies before the party will approve the person as suitable to be considered as a potential MP;
- Application to a constituency by job application form or CV;
- 'Long-listing' and 'short-listing';
- Presentation to, and interview by, a meeting of the local party;
- Selection by all-women shortlist;
- A 'primary' process—either closed (for party members only); open (for any interested person to attend) or full postal (opportunity extended to all local voters);
- Interview and assessment by a panel of local party members or local community representatives.

Barriers to selection

109. 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

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

- **Cost:** we received a variety of cost estimates from official and unofficial sources ranging from less than £1,000 for the formal costs of attending selection panels up to £42,000, once loss of earnings and residential costs linked to the campaign are taken into account, for the total cost of competing for selection and subsequent election over an electoral cycle.⁷⁹ We were reminded by the Hansard Society that financial barriers impact on women more greatly than men due to the gender pay gap, the fact that women are more likely to work in lower paid sectors of the economy, and also because they are more likely to have caring responsibilities towards children or other relatives.⁸⁰ The TUC highlighted further that BME communities and disabled people are also on average amongst the least well-off sections of society.⁸¹
- **Social class** was another factor that was identified by Unison, and others, as being crucial in relation to under-representation.⁸² In particular, individuals from working class backgrounds were viewed as less likely to have access to the financial resources, networks and training that is available to others.
- **Cultural factors** may combine with financial and other difficulties to create multiple barriers for some individuals. For example, the National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group told us 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;⁸³ the Fatima Women’s Network similarly identified a need for BME women to have “a very high level of courage” to face down such social pressures.⁸⁴
- **Time pressures:** the Fabian Society told us that “the time demands—campaigning across the country to show keenness—demand a professional job, and make little allowance for family commitments”.⁸⁵ The Women Liberal Democrats noted that none of the party’s female MPs have childcare responsibilities and called for more support for mothers who are seeking to stand for election.⁸⁶ The Youth Parliament called for lessons to be learned from the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales,

79 Ev 27

80 Ev 58

81 Ev 18

82 Ev 41, Ev 68

83 Ev 102

84 Ev 109

85 Ev 118

86 Ev 64

where crèche facilities are available and there is an emphasis on family-friendly working hours.⁸⁷

- **Lack of support:** many witnesses added that under-represented groups are less likely to have access to the networks, training, role models and support that are essential for aspiring MPs.⁸⁸ This, in turn can lead to
- **Lack of confidence:** research carried out by the National Federation of Women's Institutes revealed that lack of confidence was the main reason given by women who said that they would not stand for public office. The General Secretary of the Labour Party, Ray Collins, stated that people from under-represented groups are also more likely to under-value their own skills.⁸⁹
- **Lack of aspiration:** individuals from under-represented groups, who currently see few role models in the House of Commons, may see more disadvantages than advantages in the prospect of a parliamentary career. We were told that polls of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities demonstrated a "legacy of expectation of discrimination"⁹⁰; similarly it was reported that "a lot of people from minorities can't see themselves getting anywhere with politics so they don't want to give up their jobs to pursue it".⁹¹
- **Parliamentary culture:** we were told that the confrontational style of "yah-boo" politics which is strongly associated with the House of Commons is particularly off-putting to many women.⁹² We also received testimony that the sitting hours of the House are problematic for the parents of young children; they would also be difficult for those caring for other dependents.⁹³

111. In many cases, these issues will combine to form multiple barriers or disincentives to a person who is considering putting themselves forward as a potential parliamentary candidate. The Equality and Diversity Forum referred to the problem of "multiple discrimination" for individuals who face a range of barriers due to being, for example, gay and Asian or working class and black. The Fabian Society called for more to be done to gain a better understanding of these challenges:

more attention is needed to [determine] how chances are distributed within the group of aspiring BME candidates and women candidates, and the importance of how class, gender, race and disability interact.⁹⁴

Strategies to address supply-side barriers, including the specific barriers experienced by disabled people, are considered in the chapter below.

87 Ev 102

88 Ev 95, Ev 96

89 Q245

90 Q355

91 Ev 31

92 Ev 200

93 Ev 197, Ev 222

94 Ev 116

Demand-side barriers

112. In recent years the demand-side has been viewed by academics and organisations such as the Fawcett Society as the greater problem to be overcome. The Fawcett Society expressed concern that “direct and indirect discriminatory practices by the political parties are going unchecked”.⁹⁵ the people who choose candidates, the “selectorates”, in general appear reluctant to appoint individuals from under-represented groups, and the bias against them strengthens where a seat is considered by the party to be “winnable”. We received considerable evidence to suggest that local selectorates, thinkingly or unthinkingly, still tend to prefer the candidate who meets the ‘white male, middle-aged, middle-class’ norm.⁹⁶ At the 2005 general election this tendency contributed to a situation where “the electorate were faced with an all male candidate list in 300 of 646 constituencies as none of the major political parties had fielded a woman.”⁹⁷ We have not seen an equivalent analysis for other under-represented groups in 2005, but it would appear likely that the incidence of non-representation for people from the BME and LGBT communities and for disabled people would be higher still.

Direct discrimination

113. On some occasions there is clear and direct hostility to a candidate on grounds of their gender, background or personal circumstances. Research carried out in 2002 about the experiences of women candidates at selections reported

numerous examples of discrimination including:

- Being told that the constituency was “not ready for a woman”;
- Questions about family responsibilities being asked of women but not men during selection;
- Women candidates being criticised for behaviour or circumstances, for example being too young, going for selection in several seats at once, not being local, when their male counterparts were not criticised in the same way;
- Sexual harassment by party activists, including members of selection committees;
- The existence of ‘favoured sons’—candidates who benefited from high levels of support from the party nationally, or regionally and/or from key donors and supporters (including trade unions in the Labour Party). These candidates are rarely women;
- Corruption in the selection process including CVs being ‘lost’, some candidates being given greater access to local membership lists and so on, again this benefited male candidates;

95 Ev 218

96 Q352

97 Ev 216

- Open hostility to the idea of women in public life from some party members.⁹⁸

Similar points were listed for us by BAME Labour about the experiences of potential candidates from black and minority ethnic communities, and there are clear records of homosexual candidates being asked repeatedly about their reasons for not being married.⁹⁹

Behaviour at selection panels which discriminates against candidates on grounds of their sex, background or personal circumstances can never be justified.

Indirect discrimination

114. Local parties are not businesses or professional organisations which recruit staff all the time: we were reminded that, particularly where a local party has had the same MP in Parliament for many years,

local party members may have no experience of selecting a candidate (or indeed much experience of any recruitment). Their model of a successful MP will be based on the previous incumbent (usually male) and perhaps unsurprisingly they select someone similar, only younger.¹⁰⁰

Discrimination in such cases is indirect, even inadvertent. The decision to fall back on 'more of the same' may also reflect a belief 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 and is therefore a more risky choice.¹⁰¹

115. The grading criteria used by selection panels can also be a source of indirect discrimination. For example, selectors may set great store by a candidate's previous political activity. The Electoral Reform Society, among others, noted that female or BME candidates may be more likely to have gained comparable skills through being active within the community, but that selectors can fail to place sufficient emphasis on the value of this experience.¹⁰² Overall, the Fatima Women's Network concluded that women and minorities "need to perform well above the average to justify their being selected".¹⁰³

116. While the point is not often discussed openly the political parties themselves recognise the "inbuilt tendency within [local political parties] to choose white men".¹⁰⁴ All of the main political parties have taken steps to deal with the more blatant types of discrimination listed at paragraph 112 above: it is now common for local selection committee chairmen, or entire selection committees, to be required to attend diversity awareness training. Party officials and candidates told us that certain questions, for example about family responsibilities, are no longer allowed at hustings and CVs or application forms must be

98 Ev 72

99 Ev 147; Ev 82

100 Ev 72

101 Ev 169

102 Ev 173

103 Ev 108

104 Q447

submitted without photographs or family details. The Liberal Democrats take the further step of requiring selection committees to be “constructed to reflect the electorate in the constituency in terms of geography, gender, ethnicity and age”, thus reducing the likelihood that a selection decision will be influenced by prejudiced assumptions about individuals from a particular group or community.¹⁰⁵ These are welcome developments: the use of diversity awareness training is particularly important as anecdotal evidence suggests that in some cases similar types of direct discrimination remain, although at a much lower level. **Political parties should make diversity awareness training, advice and support available to party members involved in candidate selections.**

117. The parties have worked to challenge unthinking stereotypes and inadvertent discrimination through such training, and by encouraging local parties to think in a more structured way about the qualities and skills they want in a candidate. Yet training in itself does not bring a change in culture, and in some cases there remains significant resistance to the idea of a candidate who is not a white, middle-class man. Scope described this to us as a

significant disconnect between the policy of ‘central parties’ and the practice applied on the ground by local parties ... This is not to imply that local organisations deliberately discriminate against individuals ... but is a reflection of the conditions under which they operate.

Scope recommended that

an increasingly strategic approach is required from central parties [which is...] less concerned with the production of policy papers and more concerned with working alongside local parties to ensure the development of practices that are consistent with the ideology developed centrally.¹⁰⁶

Equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees

118. Professor Joni Lovenduski, a leading academic in the field of women and politics, divides strategies for promoting equality into three different types called equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees:

- **Equality rhetoric** is the action of parties and of party leaders in publicly talking about the importance of fair and just representation and encouraging candidates from under-represented groups to come forward;
- **Equality promotion** is the action of parties to support potential candidates from under-represented groups by, for example, giving them training or financial support and also by increasing the diversity awareness of selectorates;
- **Equality guarantees** “make a particular social characteristic a necessary qualification” for office, for example through all-women shortlists, ‘zipping’ at European elections and reserved places for BME/disabled/LGBT representatives on party groups and

105 SC74, Ev 226

106 Ev 29

committees. Guarantees artificially create a demand for individuals with that social characteristic and can thus force the pace of change.¹⁰⁷

The table below shows how the equality strategies operated by the three largest political parties in the House of Commons (discussed above) fall into these categories:

	Equality Rhetoric	Equality Promotion	Equality Guarantee
Labour	√	Includes Emily's List (gender fund); Bernie's List (BME fund); Dorothy's List (LGBT fund); mentoring	Passing of Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002; All-women shortlists operated in some constituencies
Conservatives	√	Review of selection processes; Women2win; mentoring; the 'A'-list; promotion of diversity awareness by senior party members	X
Liberal Democrats	√	Campaign for Gender Balance; Party target agreed at conference; diversity awareness training for all selection panels	X

119. From the table it can be seen that the only party thus far to have used an equality guarantee at Westminster, as opposed to softer equality promotion measures, is the Labour Party. The Labour Party's decision to adopt an equality guarantee through all-women shortlists is supported by the doubling of women's representation from one eighth to just over one quarter of the parliamentary party (26%) which occurred at the 1997 General Election. This compares with the Liberal Democrats who, without all-women shortlists, have increased women's representation in their parliamentary party to 16% of MPs; and the Conservatives, where women's representation has since 2001 'flatlined' at 9%.

120. As at 6 January 2010, the state of the selection processes relating to the balance between men and women in the three main parties, so far as we have been able to discern, is shown in the table below.

As at 06-01-2010	Retiring men	Women selected	Men selected	Awaiting selection	Retiring women	Women selected	Men selected	Awaiting selection
Labour	56	24 (43%)	21 (38%)	11 (20%)	18	10 (56%)	4 (22%)	4 (22%)
Conservative	30	6 (20%)	19 (63%)	5 (17%)	5	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)
Liberal Democrat	7	4 (57%)	3 (43%)	-	-	-	-	1 (notional seat)

107 *Women at the Top* 2005, p 25

Equality guarantees in UK law

121. At present, political parties can adopt voluntary measures that allow positive discrimination in favour of women under the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002. This can include measures such as all-women shortlists that amount, in practice, to a type of self-imposed quota. The legislative power for parties to use all-women shortlists is currently due to expire in 2015 but may be extended until 2030 under the Equality Bill, which is currently passing through Parliament.

122. There is no comparable power enabling political parties to discriminate positively in favour of aspiring candidates from other under-represented groups, including those who are disabled, or from BME or LGBT communities. Similarly, there is no legal basis on which political parties can be compelled to adopt quotas that ensure their candidates or MPs more closely reflect the broader make-up of society. The Equality Bill currently before Parliament would, however, give political parties the choice to create selection groups which gave greater weight to under-represented groups, while not permitting fully exclusive shortlists for disabled people or people from BME or LGBT communities.¹⁰⁸

Quotas for women

123. Quotas are used in many countries to tackle the global problem of women's political under-representation. A review called The Quota Project has found quotas in use in 97 out of 189 countries reviewed.¹⁰⁹ This research identified three main types of quota:

- **Constitutional quotas**—these require a specific percentage of women to be members of the legislature under the country's constitution. There are currently 15 countries using constitutional quotas, mostly outside Europe and often in countries with newly written constitutions. Examples include Rwanda, Serbia, Kenya, Iraq and Argentina;
- **Electoral quotas**—require a specific percentage of women either to be selected as candidates or to be elected as members of the legislature under the country's electoral legislation (rather than its constitution). There are 44 countries with mandatory electoral quotas. Examples include Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, Sudan and Pakistan;
- **Party quotas**—these permit political parties voluntarily to impose some form of positive action or quota. There are 69 countries that make use of party quotas, including Italy, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

124. Westminster's position "almost at the bottom of the league table of modern democracies" on issues of equality was commented upon as early as 1990.¹¹⁰ The United Kingdom currently ranks 69th in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's league table for its overall percentage of female MPs, who make-up around 1 in 5 (19.5%) of the total Commons membership. This percentage compares unfavourably with the best performing

¹⁰⁸ Equality Bill, Clause 101, [Bill 5 (2009-10)] (Bill as amended in Committee)

¹⁰⁹ The Quota Project was created by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and researched by the International IDEA and the University of Stockholm

¹¹⁰ *Women at the Top* 2005

nations: Rwanda (56.3%); Sweden (47%); Cuba (43.2%); Finland (41.5%); the Netherlands (41.3%); Argentina (40%); and Denmark (38%).

125. There is substantial evidence linking the use of quotas to increased diversity. We were told by the Centre for Women and Democracy that quotas of some kind are currently used in 83% of countries in which women comprise 30% or more of the national legislature's lower house. Quotas are used by 69% of those European political parties that have achieved, or are close to achieving, 30% women within their parliamentary delegations.

126. Thirty-five women were selected through all-women shortlists (AWS)—a form of quota—for Labour at the 1997 general election. They were not used by Labour in the 2001 election, as a consequence of a legal challenge, but following the passing of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act in 2002 AWS was used in 30 constituencies for Labour in 2005. This action contributed to a significant jump in the number of women elected for the Labour Party. In 1997, when AWS was first used, the number rose from 37 to 101 (from 13.7% to 24.2% of the Parliamentary party). In 2001, when AWS was not used, the number fell to 95 (23.1%). When AWS was re-introduced in 2005 the number rose again to 98 (27.5%): the majority of Labour MPs first elected in 2005 were women.¹¹¹

127. The Labour Party believes its use of all-women shortlists to be a “crucial” factor behind the rise in number of female Labour MPs from 9.1% of the party's total in 1987, to 27.5% in 2005. The Prime Minister stated that the “under-representation of women historically, we have found, can only be addressed by all-women shortlists.”¹¹² The party's General Secretary, Mr Collins, similarly stated:

My wish is that we can build a much stronger consensus across the parties about the need for specific actions, and certainly I would hope that all-women shortlists would be one action that would be accepted across the board because it produces results.¹¹³

A case for compulsory quotas?

128. The crux of the debate on quotas is whether to make them compulsory, particularly since there has, as yet, been little objection to the proposed extension of the voluntary powers that were made available by the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002.

129. There are a small number of countries that have been successful in increasing diversity without relying upon compulsory quotas. These include Finland (where women's representation stands at 41.5%) and also Denmark (38%), which abandoned quotas in 1996. The Centre for Women and Democracy accepted that quotas are not a “panacea” but maintained that high female representation in Scandinavia is not a direct precedent. In particular, Scandinavian culture was viewed as being more open to women becoming politicians as demonstrated by the historically high level of female representation and the associated expectation of the public, who offer the final sanction of failing to vote for a party that does not have representative candidates.

¹¹¹ *Women at the Top 2005* pp 28, 36.

¹¹² Q443

¹¹³ Q243

130. A number of people told us that compulsory quotas would be the quickest and most effective way to redress the imbalance in women's under-representation. For instance the Director of the Centre for Women and Democracy, Nan Sloane, called for a mandatory quota system to be built temporarily into our electoral law and reviewed after each general election to consider whether it remains necessary:

You have to make a basic choice about whether you are going to have an optional or a compulsory system ... Whilst we would not say that a party quota [i.e. optional] system cannot work, because clearly it can, it can only work if all the parties engage in it and accept it and at the moment that is not the case.

131. The consultant and campaigner, Lesley Abdela, is representative of those people who view compulsory quotas as a necessary last resort when progress is otherwise slow:

Back in 1980, I was totally opposed to any form of quotas, but after some years working on the issue of women's participation in politics in the UK and overseas I became convinced that training, lobbying and similar activities on their own are helpful but are not enough. Progress is too slow. I have seen that in country after country in Europe, Africa, Asia, and it has been documented elsewhere that other actions without some form of quota will not succeed.

132. The Chair of the Hansard Society, Peter Riddell, did not accept that compulsory quotas were appropriate in a pluralistic democracy. The Hansard Society's report, *Women at the Top 2005*, however, recommended that 'Government should consider introducing prescriptive rather than permissive legislation' since even with a widespread adoption of voluntary quotas "there will be only limited and incremental change and ... this is unacceptable."¹¹⁴

133. The Centre for Women and Democracy added that the Westminster Parliament is now so far behind similar legislatures that progress will be impossible unless all parties are made equally responsible for achieving results. The point was made bluntly by Lesley Abdela:

It is like waiting for fish to grow feet. More generations of excellent women will come and go, as they have over the last 90 years.¹¹⁵

134. Designing an effective mandatory quota system is important. The mandatory systems in Belgium and France have both been criticised for failing either to provide sufficiently tough sanctions against parties that do not meet the quotas or to require that women be selected specifically in winnable (rather than unwinnable) seats. The Women's National Commission warned us:

Quotas required by law are not always successful. If the law does not specify where on the list women should be placed or how winnable a seat they should be selected for [then] parties may select women for unwinnable seats or keep them in low positions on a party list. Where the consequences of failing to abide by the law are

114 p 98, *Women at the Top 2005*

115 Ev 202

low (for example a modest fine) parties are less likely to co-operate than where they are high (for example a party's list being declared invalid).¹¹⁶

135. The electoral law of Spain was drawn to our attention as one possible model that could be followed. Specifically, Spanish law places a duty on political parties to select 40% female candidates, 40% male candidates and a mix of either gender for the remaining 20%. Any list that does not comply with these requirements will not be accepted by the Spanish Electoral Commission. While the electoral system operating in Spain is not directly comparable to the electoral system in the United Kingdom, this model (of a 40:40:20 quota) offers greater flexibility to political parties than the rigid 50:50 quota operated in countries such as France and Belgium.

Objections to quotas

136. Witnesses who opposed the introduction of quotas primarily objected for reasons of principle rather than on practical grounds. For instance, Fay Mansell of the National Federation of Womens' Institutes cited the perception that restricting or manipulating a shortlist could prevent a proper consideration of candidates' merits, to the detriment of the successful candidate and the constituency:

“I do not think any of us would want to be a token woman and I do not think it would be fair to foist a token woman or token anybody on the electorate.”¹¹⁷

137. This “tokenism” objection has found favour among sections of the press, some current female MPs and also some of those active within political parties.

138. A further key objection was raised by the Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party, John Maples MP, who opposed compulsory quotas due to concerns that they restricted the freedom of the local party to choose the candidate who is best suited to represent the area.

139. While some people see quotas as a way for central parties to short-circuit the recruitment process and deny local party members a choice of candidates, **in practice all-women shortlist selections have been carried out by UK local parties in exactly the same way as traditional or ‘open’ selections, in every respect other than the formal requirement that all the candidates are women. We were told that the role of the all-women shortlist is solely**

to reduce the discretion available to local party selection committees to demonstrate bias in favour of men.¹¹⁸

140. We have previously quoted the statistic that, in 2005, “the electorate were faced with an all male candidate list in 300 of 646 constituencies as none of the major political parties had fielded a woman.”¹¹⁹ In those contests, voters were not given any opportunity to compare the merits of a woman candidate with those of men. Selective shortlists can be

116 Ev 74

117 Q13

118 Ev 86

119 Ev 216 (see paragraph 111 above)

useful where they open up different choices and comparisons for the electorate and electorate. The Hansard Society also believed that anyone would be “hard pressed” to know which women MPs currently in the House of Commons were selected on the basis of All-Women shortlists¹²⁰, which arguably undercuts the proposition that women selected through such measures may be lacking in merit.

2010 and beyond

141. The willingness of all three main party leaders to give evidence to our inquiry is a significant indication that the case for just representation has moved up the political agenda in recent years. Each of the leaders expressed their personal commitment to increased diversity in the House of Commons and assured us that under their leadership the parties would do more to enable candidates from under-represented groups to come forward for election.¹²¹

142. We had, however, been warned that after the progress of the last 12 years the 2010 election may prove a setback for equality of representation overall in the House of Commons. This is because women's representation is very heavily weighted towards one party (the Labour Party) and if, as many opinion polls predict, there is a re-balancing of power between the different parties in 2010 more women MPs may lose their seats than will be newly elected across all three main parties to make up their numbers. It is unlikely that the number of women MPs overall will increase substantially; it may even fall.¹²² While there is some reason to hope that the current very small number of BME MPs will increase, the number of disabled MPs and openly-LGBT Members is also unlikely to rise substantially after 2010.

143. **If the number of women MPs in the House of Commons falls at the 2010 election it will make more pressing the need for all the main parties to be assertive in their equality policies.** While each party has clearly adopted equality rhetoric—which is welcome, and important—equality promotion across the parties remains uneven and each of the parties remains wary of equality guarantees in some degree. The Prime Minister, while affirming the success of all-women shortlists for women's representation in the Labour Party, would not commit to all-black and minority ethnic shortlists, stating that “how we get to that aim [of greater representation for under-represented groups] of course is going to be different in different cases and bound to be so”.¹²³ Mr Cameron acknowledged the difficult balancing act which the party leaders can face when trying to promote positive action, saying “if you just totally try and dictate, then you will not take the party with you”.¹²⁴ Mr Clegg said that the Liberal Democrats “are not a sect where the leader says this and it happens across the country ... neutering local democracy ... is a tempting shortcut but I do not think it would work.”¹²⁵

120 Ev 62

121 Q434; Q447

122 Q333

123 Q443

124 Q449

125 Q466

144. Within our political system the freedom of local parties to choose their own candidate for Westminster is a jealously-guarded privilege: it is fair to say that the selection of a candidate is their one real power. The leadership of each of the parties has had to acknowledge this and build support for their equality policies through the mechanisms provided by each party's culture. The argument for all-women shortlists was, we were told, hard-fought at the Labour Party's conference in 1993 and following that national endorsement has been implemented carefully, in negotiation with local and regional party officials, and on a limited basis. Within the Conservative Party's "quite decentralised" culture¹²⁶ the leadership's approach has been largely negotiated constituency by constituency: as selections arise constituencies may be offered a choice of different processes—for example, a selection from the 'A-list' or a gender-balanced shortlist—and a representative from the central party will meet constituency members "to talk them through some of the issues ... and explain that the issue of diversity is important for the party as a whole."¹²⁷ In the Liberal Democrats' similarly "decentralised grass roots culture"¹²⁸, we were told, the combination of nationally agreed targets and a reformed selection process is working effectively towards the initial goal of getting women candidates selected for target seats.

145. We recognise that equality guarantees do not sit easily within some political party cultures. Yet, to date, the all-women shortlist has been the only mechanism to have produced a significant step-change in representation in the House of Commons in a relatively short period of time. We were therefore interested to hear from Mr Cameron that between January and the general election in 2010 he intended to use his party's 'by-election procedure' to secure all-women shortlists from the Conservative A-List in some constituencies.¹²⁹ This short-term measure was considered as a booster for women candidates because "there are many very, very good women on [the] priority list of candidates who have not yet been selected".¹³⁰ We were also encouraged to hear from Mr Clegg that while he did not wish to take more prescriptive action for the present, he was "not theologically opposed to it", if the party's current policies in this area proved ineffective.¹³¹

146. We welcome the progress which each of the main parties has made over recent years towards ensuring that its local selection procedures are more professional and objective than they have been in the past. Yet the fact that, in most cases, it remains more difficult for a candidate who does not fit the "white, male, middle-class" norm to be selected, particularly if the seat is considered by their party to be winnable, means that the case for equality of representation has not yet been won. It is essential that the leadership of each of the political parties—large and small—continues to make this case

126 Q447

127 Q451

128 Q466

129 Under the by-election procedure, where a seat becomes vacant only shortly before an election is expected the selection process can be speeded up by the provision of a shortlist of potential candidates to the local Conservative Association by the central party.

130 Q447

131 Q464

in discussion with their members and activists, and also takes the measures necessary to secure progress.

All-BME shortlists

147. The use of all-BME shortlists is controversial. There are questions of definition, and how the eligibility of a person to stand on an all-BME shortlist can be determined. Concerns have also been expressed that the use of all-BME shortlists could lead people to believe either that a community can only be represented effectively by one of its own members or, equally, that BME candidates should only stand in constituencies where a BME community is in the majority. Such beliefs would undermine the fundamental principle that an MP represents all his or her constituents regardless of their identity, background or political allegiance.

148. Nonetheless we note that all-women shortlists were, and to an extent remain, controversial yet have had positive effects overall. We believe that similar enabling legislation could be created to allow all-BME shortlists to be used, if and when political parties judge that their use would be reasonable, in order to achieve greater parity of representation for BME communities in the House of Commons.

149. We fully support the proposed extension of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to enable the use of all-women shortlists until 2030. Equivalent enabling legislation should now be enacted to allow political parties, if they so choose, to use all-BME shortlists. Like the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 such provision should be time-limited and should be subject to review prior to 2030.

Primaries

150. There has been much interest in the Conservatives' recent use of American-style primaries for the selection of some of their candidates. Primaries open up the selection of a prospective parliamentary candidate to any interested local voter, regardless of their political allegiance.

151. We found opinions divided as to whether primaries would support the promotion of diversity. Some people we spoke to thought that the general public might have more flexible ideas than a selectorate about what makes a good MP; for this group, primaries represented an effective way to challenge preconceptions and, sometimes, to dilute bias. Others feared that candidates from under-represented groups, perhaps particularly disabled candidates, would find it more difficult to overcome prejudice in a large general meeting than they would to challenge the doubts of a selectorate which, by the time of the final selection, they might know rather well.

152. David Cameron told us that, in fact, he "[did] not think they [primaries] are necessarily the most effective weapon for making sure we have more women in Parliament, more disabled people in Parliament, or people of black and minority ethnic backgrounds. I think the primary is a very good weapon to fight a slightly different battle, which is: are we

doing things that are opening up politics to people who had not previously considered it; are we involving people more in the political process...?"¹³²

153. The turnout for the full postal primaries which have taken place—in Totnes (25%)¹³³ and in Gosport (17.8%)¹³⁴—suggests that primaries may be helpful as a means to promote citizen engagement, particularly in ‘safe seats’ where voters may feel that their vote has little influence over the final outcome at a general election. It is, however, too soon to tell whether primaries will enable, or stand in the way of, the selection of a broader spectrum of parliamentary candidates.

Future progress

154. All three party leaders told us that they believed that their parties would make progress towards a fairer representation of society in the 2010 election; while this progress would not be enough to create a parity of women or BME MPs, let alone disabled or openly-LGBT MPs, it was clear that the leaders looked towards a situation where “the whole process will become easier, because it will become self-reinforcing”.¹³⁵

155. It may, however, be misconceived to think that a degree of success will automatically lead to greater results in the future. It could, instead, lead to complacency among grassroots members unless they have a genuine conviction of the arguments for justice. It may prove harder to move from 30% to 40% in women’s representation—and correspondingly for other groups—than it is to get from, say, 9% to 30%.

156. There is also the question about how long it takes to make such progress. The parties are currently closely focused upon the election due in 2010; yet, whether their performance in 2010 proves to be good or bad for diversity, there should be a longer-term trajectory for the parties’ policies on equality. **Candidate selections for the following general election will begin, for some parties, within the first twelve to eighteen months of the 2010 Parliament.**¹³⁶ **These selections will be equally important for securing cultural change within parties and within the House of Commons. In this context we particularly welcome the indications from the opposition party leaders that they are open-minded on the matter of equality guarantees. If the political parties fail to make significant progress on women’s representation 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.**

Targets and monitoring

157. We have been told that formal monitoring can help to increase the speed of change, particularly where monitoring reports are published.

132 Q448

133 http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/michaelcrick/2009/08/big_turnout_in_totnes_primary.html

134 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8394458.stm

135 Q458

136 Q465

158. Since 2001 the Trades Union Congress has, every two years, published an equality audit. This monitors the diversity of trade union membership, the composition of elected bodies and trade unions, and the impact of diversity upon the unions' "campaigning priorities [and] negotiating and bargaining agenda".¹³⁷ Sarah Veale of the TUC told us that these audits have enabled the unions to "really drill-down into who is doing what, where, what background they are from, how did they get there, what obstacles stand in the way of people from different backgrounds getting in".¹³⁸ We were told that individual results which had been seen from the monitoring process over the past eight years included:

- a focus upon diversity awareness and education of members on the aims of positive action;
- the increased use of reserved seats for members from under-represented groups on representative bodies;
- greater participation by women and black members; and
- the election of more women and BME members to official positions.

159. Sarah Veale believed the discipline of publication had the benefit of pushing an organisation to act upon the issues of concern:

if it is not going to do that [audit], ... it has got justification for not doing things to make a difference¹³⁹

160. In our first and second interim reports we set out the importance of monitoring: we have recommended that the parties publish monitoring data on the diversity of their candidate selections, in a common format which will enable each party's performance to be compared with the others and with comparable parties throughout the world.¹⁴⁰ Following our second interim report we tabled amendments to the Equality Bill which, if enacted, would have provided a statutory framework for the publication of such reports. Unfortunately, although our amendments were selected for consideration by the House, there was not enough time for them to be debated before the Equality Bill was sent to the House of Lords. The Solicitor General wrote to us that the Government is "committed to tabling an amendment [in the House of Lords] to make this a legal requirement".¹⁴¹ We welcome this assurance.

161. As we have previously stated, **we welcome the openness of all three main party leaders—Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP and Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP—to the principle of publishing monitoring data in relation to candidate selections. This is an important indication of the commitment of all three main parties to the promotion of fairer representation in Parliament. We recommend that all**

137 Ev 19

138 Q76

139 Q76

140 Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) Interim Report, Session 2008-09, HC 167-I

Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) Second Interim Report, Session 2009-10, HC 63-I

141 SC114

political parties registered under part 2 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 should be required to publish details of their candidate selections online every six months, on 31 March and 31 October, setting out, for each potential candidate at each stage of the selection process, the following information:

- (a) the administrative region in which the selection took place;
- (b) the method by which the candidate was selected;
- (c) whether the party:
 - (i) currently holds the seat for which the candidate was selected; or
 - (ii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of less than 5% of the votes cast; or
 - (iii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of more than five per cent but less than ten per cent of the votes cast;
- (d) the sex of the candidate;
- (e) the ethnicity of the candidate; and
- (f) whether the candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person.

The reports might also include the following information:

- (a) where a candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person, the nature of the impairment;
- (b) where a candidate is willing to state his or her sexual orientation, the sexual orientation of the candidate;
- (c) the age of the candidate;
- (d) the occupation of the candidate at the time of selection; and
- (e) the highest level of the candidate's educational attainment.

162. Publishing this information would enable everyone to see what numbers of candidates are coming forward from different groups for selection. It would also allow analysts to work out how successful potential candidates from different groups are, in being selected for winnable seats; and whether there are particular points in the process at which different groups tend to fall out of the competition.

Targets

163. While monitoring in itself can help to ensure progress, it can be even more powerful when combined with targets. Gordon Brown told us that “on a like for like basis” he expected the number of women Labour MPs in Parliament “to rise to between 120 and 140 after the next election”. David Cameron said that his current target is for 30% of Conservative MPs to be women after the 2010 election, but he wished to take progress “one election at a time”;¹⁴² the Liberal Democrats told us that their current target was “for at least

40% of [their] new MPs and at least 25% of [their] total MPs to be women” after the 2010 general election”¹⁴³ but Nick Clegg did not give a formal target for either 2015 or 2020.¹⁴⁴

164. It has become fashionable to criticise target-setting in public services. But we believe that sensible and realistic targets can have a galvanising effect when big strides have to be made urgently towards important goals. Better representation for under-represented groups is clearly one such case. It is clear from our evidence that none of the major parties has, to date, set out either what its long-term goals are for achieving fair representation, or the milestones by which it will measure its progress. At present there are short-term goals for women’s representation but no targets for the representation of disabled people or people from BME or LGBT communities.

165. Following the 2010 general election all political parties represented at Westminster should publish a statement setting out the current proportion of their Parliamentary party which is: female; from a BME community; and/or identifies as a disabled person. The statement should also set out what proportion of the Parliamentary party the national party would like to see appearing in each of these categories in December 2015 and December 2020. This statement should be published by December 2010. In December 2015 and December 2020 the parties should publish further statements setting out what progress they have made towards just representation within the parliamentary party, compared to the 2010 baseline and the percentage of each group within the UK population as a whole. These reports should also include an evaluation of the mechanisms the parties have used to secure progress.

166. Further scrutiny within the House of Commons will help to secure accountability for the parties’ performance on diversity. Our Conference, unfortunately, will be unable to lead on any review since it will come to an end at the dissolution of the 2005 Parliament. **We recommend that the Government should find time for a debate on the implementation of the Speaker’s Conference’s recommendations and progress towards just representation in the House of Commons in 2010, 2012, and every two years thereafter to 2022. We also recommend that the House of Commons should provide access from a dedicated page on the Parliament website to all published statements and reports by each party represented at Westminster on their Parliamentary party representation and candidate selections, alongside links to the reports from the Speaker’s Conference.**

143 SC98

144 Q469

6 Tackling supply-side barriers

Barriers to access for disabled people

167. 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. In this section we discuss these barriers and what might be done to reduce and even remove them.

168. When we talk about injury, illness and disability we mean a wide range of impairments, including:

- long-term illnesses or serious injury;
- impairments that affect mobility;
- impairments that affect the senses, such as blindness or deafness;
- communications impairments such as stammering;
- mental health impairments; and
- learning disabilities.

169. We do not believe in what has been described as the “medical model” for thinking about disability, which considers that the key obstacles encountered by disabled people in everyday life are posed by the welfare or medical situations of those individuals. In recent years many of the traditional assumptions about the lives and capabilities of disabled people have been challenged. The impact of impairments varies considerably from person to person, but disabled people make adjustments, for example successfully overcoming the impact of fluctuations in energy levels by skilfully managing their workload. Today there is general agreement that 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 sometimes known as the “social model” for thinking about disability: it has been accepted as the basis for government policy, and is the basis for several of our recommendations in this chapter and the next.

170. This point was made very well in the 2005 report of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit on life chances for disabled people.¹⁴⁵ This summarised the barriers they face as:

- barriers caused by people's attitudes;
- physical barriers such as the design of the built environment;
- barriers resulting from policy design and delivery which fail to take disabled people into account; and
- barriers linked to lack of empowerment, as a result of which disabled people are often not listened to, consulted or involved.

¹⁴⁵ Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, *Improving Life Chances for Disabled People*, January 2005

171. The report concludes that:

The cumulative effect of these barriers is to marginalise disabled people from the mainstream of society and the economy. Removal of these barriers is key to empowering disabled people, and giving them the opportunity to exercise their responsibilities as citizens—in the home, in the community and in the workplace.¹⁴⁶

The Strategy Unit identifies four major areas of life for disabled people where particular barriers still need to be overcome: independent living, early years and family support, transition to adulthood, and employment. The navigation of complex modern society and public services can be a challenge for anybody; the added barriers which confront disabled people can severely limit and compromise their life chances. The “structural” barriers that, from the early years, shape society’s and disabled people’s own expectations deter far too many disabled people from even beginning to consider a life in politics.

An untapped pool of talent

172. Because of these barriers there is “a significant untapped pool of talent”¹⁴⁷ among disabled people. This applies as much to politics as to other aspects of life. For one thing, the number of disabled MPs does not reflect the proportion of the population that has an impairment.

173. At a local level the figures for elected offices are better, but they are still disappointing. While there is a fairly high proportion of disabled local councillors—in 2007 disabled councillors made up 13.3% of the total—many of them appear to have age-related conditions which may well have developed years after first election; the Councillors Commission said that ‘younger disabled councillors are notably absent from most council chambers.’¹⁴⁸

174. Public bodies offer an alternative option for people who want to get involved in public life. Being appointed to, and serving on, a public body can help people to learn the skills needed to run for and achieve elected office, including public speaking. While service on a public body is a valuable contribution in itself, for disabled people as well as others public appointments can be a good way of taking the first step towards elected office. Yet the Cabinet Office calculates that only 5% of all public appointments are held by disabled people—a clear under-representation.¹⁴⁹

Changing the culture: assumptions about disabled people

175. Disabled people can find their life chances restricted by public attitudes towards them. The general public often wrongly assumes that people with impairments are not able to perform in the workplace as well as others, or indeed to play a full part in life generally. There can be an assumption “that disabled people are passive ... which can result in a lack

146 Ibid.

147 Ev 7

148 *Representing the future—The report of the Councillors Commission*—December 2007, p. 13

149 http://www.equalities.gov.uk/media/press_releases/harman_action_to_improve_div.aspx

of self-belief".¹⁵⁰ John Knight of Leonard Cheshire Disability described the “bumps”—obstacles that can corrode the confidence of disabled people :

[disabled people] generally live against a backdrop of having to get over that bump, and it can be a small bump or a big bump, depending on who you are talking to, of people not actually seeing our abilities before they see our disabilities. That can be terribly corrosive and depressing in terms of how we see ourselves and what we strive for.¹⁵¹

176. One outcome of this lack of confidence, at least for those with a condition that is not always obvious to others, is said to be the temptation for people to “hide” their disability. Leys Geddes of the British Stammering Association said that:

the problem with stammering is that the condition is extremely variable ... Because you are not quite sure how it is, or how it is going to be, it is easier to hide it. ... because if you expose the disability, it diminishes you in the eyes of others.¹⁵²

We were told that there were “a number of deaf and hard of hearing people in Parliament, and in politics, but they are not particularly open about it, perhaps because they feel they cannot be.”¹⁵³

177. We heard about ‘referred prejudice’: this is the tendency of parties to assume that disabled people would find it difficult to get elected, for instance, because there is perceived to be public reluctance to vote for them.¹⁵⁴ 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. In fact in some cases an apparent negative—such as a disabled person’s reliance from time to time on assistance from family and friends—can become a positive when treated by the selectorate as evidence that a person is able to build a team to get things done.

Changing the culture: the need for more disabled role models

178. Lack of self-confidence would be a big obstacle to progress in most careers. But self-confidence is especially important for success in public life, and above all in politics. Those who have overcome the obstacles are aware of the size of the task. They include one of our witnesses, Chris Holmes, who lost his sight at 14, and became both a highly successful swimmer in the Paralympics and a Commissioner for the Disability Rights Commission. He has personal experience of political parties—particularly the Conservatives—and of the selection process. He told us that, despite his success, he believed there were plenty of barriers in the way of ambitious disabled people:

I do not think any of us should be surprised that there are not many disabled people in Parliament, in the sense that if you look at the boardrooms, senior civil service or

150 Ev 150

151 Q298

152 Q301

153 Q297

154 Ev 10

any part of society, there are not that many disabled people at the top level of anything.¹⁵⁵

179. The shortage of disabled people at the top means there is a lack of disabled role models in most parts of public and political life. The Labour Party Disabled Members' Group (LPDMG) was encouraged by the success of the paralympians, and called for similar role models to come forward in public office.¹⁵⁶ The election of substantial numbers of disabled MPs was something that the Equality and Human Rights Commission saw as very important:

The danger of being identified purely by one characteristic is a pressure that a lot of members from under-represented groups face. As constituency MPs and individuals with their own interests and passions it is clear many members are unhappy to be labelled; the gay MP, the MP who is a young mum, the MP who uses a wheelchair or the black woman MP. The solution to this is clearly to reach critical mass across Parliament so these characteristics aren't unique.¹⁵⁷

Physical and practical barriers

180. Attitudes are crucially important because they influence how other barriers are tackled. Many of the biggest barriers for disabled people are physical and practical. Disability discrimination legislation requires "reasonable adjustments" to be made for disabled people in many aspects of life in the UK, in private, public and the third sectors, and the number of bodies subject to the law has been expanded in recent years. A number of existing regulators and public bodies have to take account of access and inclusion in their work. There is, for instance, the role assigned to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to take the lead in bearing down on discrimination. In order to do this, EHRC has regulatory responsibilities of its own and must provide, for example, reliable advice and guidance on how to comply with the disability laws on access and discrimination.

181. But many physical and other practical barriers to access for disabled people still exist, right across the country, in all sectors. Buildings are not always adapted for wheelchair users. Braille versions of documents are not always readily available. While the law has been widened and strengthened, the experiences of disabled people do not always appear to have improved proportionately. Our evidence suggests that this is certainly the case in respect of the practical provision made by national and local government, and Parliament, for meeting the needs of disabled people.

Local Government

182. We found that many disabled people are deterred from any sort of involvement in politics or public life by problems at the most local level, with their councils. Local

155 Q297

156 Ev 105

157 Ev 135

authorities play an important role along the pathway to politics, but they do not always make it easy for disabled people to get involved.

183. Local councils and other “public authorities” were explicitly brought into the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, which initiated the Disability Equality Duty and states that

It is unlawful for a public authority to discriminate against a disabled person in carrying out its functions.¹⁵⁸

The Act goes on to say that

it is the duty of the authority to take such steps as it is reasonable, in all the circumstances of the case, for it to have to take

to make sure that its premises do not place

a disabled person who is a member of the authority at a substantial disadvantage, in comparison with members of the authority who are not disabled persons, in connection with his carrying-out of official business.¹⁵⁹

So councils have a double responsibility to provide the right environment for disabled people, both as public bodies who have to obey the general law on discrimination and reasonable adjustment, and specifically towards their elected members.

184. According to several of our witnesses, local authorities do not always do what is required of them. The Labour Party Disabled Members' Group (LPDMG) for instance told the Conference:

Many local government offices and officers are not fully aware of their obligation to ensure the office of being a Councillor is fully "accessible" in the real sense of the word. Under the legislation there should be procedures ready for all types of access to information and offices, buildings and all amenities accessible but there seldom is.¹⁶⁰

185. The Councillors Commission, reporting in 2007, said that some local authorities were failing to make sure that practical help for disabled councillors—such things as sign language interpretation at official meetings, induction loop systems and accessible meeting rooms—was available and publicised. They said that few authorities had appointed officers responsible for making sure help was in place.¹⁶¹ We also heard that disabled people can find it difficult to negotiate public transport to attend meetings.

186. Our own experience of Speaker's Conference meetings held in local authority premises was generally good. For example, buildings in Manchester, Leeds and Cheltenham were well adapted for wheelchair users and facilities for signing were generally available. We found all the support we needed from council officers. However, it is clear

¹⁵⁸ Disability Discrimination Act 2005 s 21 B

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* s 15 C

¹⁶⁰ Ev 105

¹⁶¹ *Representing the future—The report of the Councillors Commission—December 2007*, p. 90

that not all councils match the best, either in providing good public access or in helping disabled councillors do their job.

187. Funding provided through the Access to Work scheme is a possible source of financial support for councillors but Scope, the disability charity, told us that some authorities failed to make use of it. They said that it was not really certain that “the scheme is available to sitting Councillors as it currently seems to operate on a council by council basis with some Councillors receiving support while others are denied [such support]”.¹⁶²

188. We also believe that this issue brings up an important principle. The responsibility for making adjustments to buildings lies with the organisation for which or in which they work. **We believe scarce cash-limited Access to Work funds—intended for use by individuals—should not be used by councils to fund core legal requirements—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

189. As we have noted, political parties are key to involvement in political life. Very few people get into Parliament, or onto their local council, without support from one party or another. But we found that disabled people who want to get involved in political parties find a number of barriers in their way. Some witnesses suggested that political parties were not working hard enough to make politics more accessible for disabled people. For instance, Liz Sayce, Chief Executive of RADAR, told us she believed that “there has been less positive action, less specific work, by political parties on disability than there has been in relation to race and gender.”¹⁶³

190. This is despite explicit legal duties aimed at ensuring that political parties and other groups remove barriers and encourage disabled people to become involved. In the 2005 Disability Discrimination Act there are sections prohibiting “associations of persons” with more than 25 people from discriminating against disabled people. Political parties are considered to be associations for this purpose. The law is clear; there should be no discrimination against disabled people who want to take part in politics.¹⁶⁴

191. Chris Holmes said he was concerned at the lack of practical support from the parties for blind and partially-sighted people who wanted to play a part in politics, or even to understand political issues as informed citizens. He noted that in the 2009 European elections in the UK:

only the Green Party offered the option of a Braille manifesto. The Conservatives had audio files for their manifesto on their website, but other than that, for a blind person, if they wanted to engage in politics, see what the parties are offering, ... [it

162 SC106

163 Q13

164 Disability Discrimination Act 2005 s 21 F

was] incredibly difficult at that stage, purely through very, very simple and straightforward barriers which would be very easy to overcome.¹⁶⁵

192. It would be unfair, however, to suggest that political parties are not trying to tackle the barriers to access for disabled people. Party headquarters are aware of the need to increase access, and Abigail Lock of Scope was able to praise the work that some of the central party organisations have been doing to increase access for disabled people.¹⁶⁶

193. In many ways the main issue is not the policy laid down by party headquarters. The key to fair chances for disabled people in political life is access to local party meetings and events. The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 applies to all private clubs and other associations with more than 25 members—meaning that many if not all local branches of parties have to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people. These legal requirements are not intended to be burdensome for small branches; the Government has stated clearly that associations “will only ever be required to do what is reasonable and may take into account factors like the resources of the club.”¹⁶⁷

194. The Labour Party Disabled Members' Group (LPDMG) has produced a guide and an associated handbook which are intended to help constituency parties understand their legal duties to avoid discrimination and make adjustments, and to underline the general need to use and promote best practice; the guide and handbook were endorsed by the Party at national level.¹⁶⁸ These publications contain a range of suggestions covering physical access arrangements, communications issues such as signage and the availability of induction loops for people who use a hearing aid.

195. Despite backing from senior people in the central party, the LPDMG General Secretary, Janet Kirk, believed that the recommendations in the guide were not always implemented by local Labour parties. She told us: “I go round the constituencies advocating this and asking them to use it, [the LPDMG guide] ... but unfortunately, I do not think it is used as much as it should be, and although the Labour Party have made it a policy document, they do not seem very keen on actually impacting it, and actually making sure that constituencies are adhering to it.”¹⁶⁹

196. Our evidence suggested that this difference between central and local attitudes was not confined to the Labour Party. Abigail Lock of Scope said that there was often a divide between the access policies announced by central parties and the approach taken by some local party bodies:

“there is a real disconnect that often exists between ... the central party, and their work promoting diversity, and what is actually going on on the ground, when disabled people are going for selection and election ... We had [a case of] a wheelchair user who was told, because you could not go out door knocking, you

165 Q297

166 Q305

167 Department for Work and Pensions, *The Disability Discrimination Act: Fact sheet 3: Private Clubs 2005*

168 *Improving accessibility: A Handbook for Local Parties*. Labour Party Disabled Members' Group

169 Q327

could not possibly be a candidate. The parties often are putting off disabled people right from the first stage.”¹⁷⁰

Although the financial demands of the legislation are modest, it is understandable that local parties would prefer to spend their limited money on campaigning. It is hardly surprising that, as the Labour Party Disabled Members' Group told us, “many disabled people are so used to not having their access needs met that they don't even ask”.¹⁷¹

197. It is therefore fortunate that good organisation can overcome some of the financial problems. The LPDMG handbook for instance contains a number of ideas which could help, if taken up by the parties, including branches joining together to buy a shared induction loop for small meetings. The handbook suggests that branches who use premises that are not their own might consider “informing the owners of the venue of their obligations under the DDA”; in almost all cases local parties will meet in premises which must by law make reasonable adjustments already. It also suggests that room bookings should be changed if the original venues are not suitable for wheelchair use—a way perhaps of using the power of the purse to encourage better access.

198. Scope, which has carried out detailed survey work on disability and participation with each of the three largest Westminster parties, urged that all parties should have “a more strategic approach to disability policy” for their central party organisations, but should also recognise “the pragmatic nature of local party politics”. This would mean, we believe, better central planning to provide the materials and facilities needed by disabled people—such as campaign documents produced in Braille and in language that is more understandable and accessible for all. It would also mean better guidance on access to meetings for local parties, bearing in mind the inevitable shortage of cash. LPDMG suggested to us that the principles contained in their guide

should be undertaken by all political parties ... thus ensuring that any disabled member of the public who wants to involve themselves in politics by attending their parties' meetings or organisations can be assured that they will be able to enter and be fully involved from the start.¹⁷²

199. We do not doubt that party leaders are sincere when they say that they want better access for disabled people. We recognise that they may be finding it difficult to make sure their policies are carried out at a local level where it matters. Nevertheless the shortage of funds must not be an excuse for local parties failing to make proper arrangements for disabled people to play their part in politics.

200. In our interim report we recommended the appointment for each party of “a named party officer responsible for supporting the access requirements of disabled candidates.”¹⁷³ We now urge the parties to take the next step.

170 Q299

171 Ev 105

172 Ev 105

173 Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) Interim Report, Session 2008–09 (HC 167-I), para 22

201. We believe that all political parties should make it easier for disabled people to play a full part in party activities, initially by setting out a clear policy on access. At 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 BSL interpretation or speech-to-text technology is available at major events.

202. But there also needs to be a realistic policy for local parties, encouraging co-operation and making the best of the limited money available. The ideas and practical suggestions set out in the guide and handbook produced by the Labour Party Disabled Members' Group would form a good basis for this policy, for all political parties.

The costs of candidacy

203. We heard a great deal of evidence about the high cost of parliamentary candidacy, and the problems this poses for groups that are currently under-represented. There are different classes of costs relating to parliamentary candidacy. Initially there are costs relating specifically to the task of being selected by a local constituency to stand as their official candidate (prospective parliamentary candidate, or PPC). Once selected, there are the further costs of campaigning at a by-election or general election for the support of the wider electorate. These are costs which are recognised by the parties and by outside bodies such as the Electoral Commission as being required by the electoral process. In addition, however, for most candidates there will be the cost of sustaining and building a candidacy between selection and the formal start of the election campaign. This period can last several years and the costs to the candidate, both in financial and personal terms, can be considerable.

Financial resources

204. The formal costs for someone who is seeking to be selected as a parliamentary candidate seem relatively small. The Scottish National Party said that “potential candidates are only charged a nominal £10 for the assessment procedure, and ... many candidates will spend under £100 in total”.¹⁷⁴ The Ulster Unionist Party said that the cost was “minimal”,¹⁷⁵ while the Liberal Democrats told us the average selection cost for Liberal Democrat candidates is £178.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, the official costs of campaigning for a general election are considered to be relatively low, partly because the political parties may offer support in certain circumstances.

205. While the reports of the parties themselves suggest candidacy is largely inexpensive, a survey of Conservative candidates in 2006 estimated the cost of candidacy to the individual at £41,550 over an electoral cycle (from the start of a Parliament to its dissolution, normally a period of 4 to 5 years). Candidates we spoke to ourselves thought that this was a reasonable calculation for the costs arising through the process. Individual candidates told

174 Ev 224

175 Ev 230

176 Ev 227

us that they estimated their expenses at approximately £10,000 per year which, over a four or five-year electoral cycle, would come to roughly the same amount.

206. The difference between the official and unofficial accounts of candidate expenditure reflects the highly variable and often hidden financial demands which may arise for any candidate. In addition to the relatively small costs which may be involved in attending formal selection panels and meetings, expenses can include:

- Party membership fees;
- Whether the candidate has to travel a long distance between the constituency and their home, and how often that journey is made;
- How easy it is to travel around the constituency (by bike, on foot, by bus or by car);
- Whether the candidate has to find somewhere to stay in the constituency, away from home;
- Whether the candidate has to pay for childcare or other caring cover while away from home;
- Whether the candidate feels that they have to move themselves and their family into the constituency; and
- The ways in which the candidate seeks to communicate with the electorate (for example, by personal visits, by telephone canvassing, direct mail or, reportedly, by DVD).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that candidates still feel obliged to contribute to local and national party fundraising, for example by attending functions, buying raffle tickets, etc.

207. In addition to actual expenditure a significant part of the total may be the cost of lost income, if the candidate has to take unpaid leave from work, reduce their working hours or even give up their job in order to spend time in the constituency.

208. Much of the expenditure above is not formally required for a candidate to be selected by a constituency. In practice, however, the competitive nature of the selection process and the expectations of constituency parties mean that candidates who wish to succeed have to invest considerable time and money in order to make their case. For example, one candidate told us that she took four months leave of absence from her job in order to live in the constituency and get to know the local 'electorate'. In that four months she met every member of the local party (which numbered more than 200 members) between three and seven times to discuss their concerns. We have heard of several cases where a potential candidate has felt that they had to move themselves and their family to a constituency in order to demonstrate their commitment.

209. 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. People in this position will simply lack the resources to make frequent trips to a far-off constituency. Anyone with caring

responsibilities is likely to find it difficult to travel away from home on a regular basis and it can be equally difficult to move and resettle an entire household.

210. The candidates we spoke to insisted that they accepted these costs, and believed that the goal of becoming an MP was worth the expense. Many of them however noted that they were relatively fortunate in having a supportive family, a reasonable income and/or a job which enabled them to work around the constituency's demands. Concern was expressed that the costs would deter others who did not have that support, particularly if they were faced with contesting a series of elections over many years, to build a reputation, before being successful. We have heard anecdotal reports of candidates accruing significant debts and being forced to give up the contest because they simply could not afford to go on.

211. The party leaders told us of their concerns on this issue. The Prime Minister, speaking as Leader of the Labour Party, told us that he recognised candidacy was “more difficult for people who have family responsibilities” and he was “sure that [his] party was trying to deal with these issues.” David Cameron MP, the Leader of the Conservative Party, agreed that the cost of candidacy “is a problem and if anything it is getting a bit worse” although like the Prime Minister he believed that local candidates would not experience such severe financial demands as those who had to travel away from their homes and families. Nick Clegg, the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, acknowledged the “personal financial costs” but also spoke of the time costs which affect candidates: these are discussed further in paragraphs 221–230 below.

212. None of the leaders had an answer to these problems. The Prime Minister reminded us of the creation of voluntary support schemes within the Labour Party: Emily's List, which provides financial and other support to women candidates; Dorothy's List, which provides support to LGBT candidates; and, most recently, Bernie's List, which supports candidates of BME origin. Emily's List provides grants to candidates to assist with specific campaigning needs such as leaflet production, telephone bills or dependent care. These grants are currently capped at £350 which, while helpful, still leaves the candidate potentially with many thousands of pounds to find. David Cameron said that the Conservative Party had helped individual candidates “on one or two occasions”.¹⁷⁷ The Liberal Democrats told us that the “relative lack of funds available to the Liberal Democrats means that candidates will tend to contribute more to their campaign costs than may be the case in other parties—especially if they are seeking to win.”¹⁷⁸ They also noted the potential significance of lost earnings but added that it was not possible to quantify the costs involved. **All political parties should place a ceiling upon the expenses which candidates can incur during any single selection process.**

213. Several witnesses suggested to us that a fund, called by one witness a “Democracy Diversity Fund”, should be established: this would be administered independently by the Electoral Commission and would support the parties in their identification, training, development and mentoring of talented individuals who might not otherwise be able to fulfil their potential as parliamentary candidates. Part of this fund could be used to provide bursaries to candidates who can “show that they are strongly committed but would

177 Q455

178 Ev 227

struggle with the economic costs”;¹⁷⁹ the amount given in this way to any political party over the course of an electoral cycle could be capped.

214. We support the suggestion of a Democracy Diversity Fund which could be drawn upon by local political parties to support the work of developing talented individuals from under-represented groups and also to provide bursaries to individuals who would otherwise be unable to sustain the costs of candidacy. There must be strong controls in place to make sure the money is not abused and therefore the scheme's effectiveness and propriety should be regularly evaluated by the Electoral Commission, in reports which should be laid before the House at least once every Parliament. The Electoral Commission should consult the Equality and Human Rights Commission when evaluating the scheme.

The specific costs of candidacy for disabled people

215. While candidates from under-represented groups generally need financial support, we heard a considerable amount of evidence that the financial barriers facing disabled candidates were particularly high and acted as a considerable deterrent. For example a deaf candidate may have to meet the costs of a British Sign Language Interpreter or a candidate with a mobility impairment may need to use more taxis than a non-disabled candidate.

216. There is also another side to this mismatch; the necessary extra spending has to be borne by candidates who are often poorer than other candidates. Disabled people, said the charity Leonard Cheshire Disability, were on average “twice as likely to live in poverty, twice as likely to be out of work and significantly less likely to go on to further and higher education.”¹⁸⁰ Equality 2025, a network of disabled people which advises the Government on how to achieve disability equality, noted another barrier to Parliament in the funding of social care. Because social care funding “packages” only operate in a single geographical area, many disabled people are unable to move around the country, which limits the area in which they can be candidates.¹⁸¹ While assistance to those in employment and to MPs can be provided through the Access to Work scheme, it is not available to candidates.

217. Scope has suggested that an “Access to Public Life Fund” should be established to level the playing field for disabled candidates. This would help to meet the cost of reasonable adjustments during campaigns and would operate in the same way (and using the same offices) as the Access to Work scheme. Candidates could apply directly to the fund for assistance with, for example, help with the costs of employing a BSL interpreter during the selection processes, and support with the extra costs of travel or accommodation, for example the extra cost of taking a taxi rather than a bus, or staying in an accessible hotel room rather than at a party member's house. It would be funded from public money and guidance on who should be eligible would be drawn up by the Department for Work and Pensions, the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and the Electoral Commission.¹⁸²

179 Ev 124

180 Ev 181

181 Ev 149

182 SC106

218. Scope has provided a detailed explanation of how the scheme might work setting out, for example, case studies, including how paying for additional transport and accommodation costs might help a candidate. Scope accepts that useful data on disability is in short supply, but calculates that “an initial fund of £500,000 [should] be made available over two years, with take-up monitored to provide a more robust data set that can be used to determine future levels of funding.”¹⁸³

219. Scope itself raises some questions about the idea of the Fund, saying that it should be used to “level the playing field between disabled and non-disabled candidates” and not to provide “unfair political advantage”.¹⁸⁴ There would have to be agreed rules on how the fund would be divided between the parties and what would happen with independent candidates. But such questions should not be an excuse for inaction.

220. There is overwhelming evidence that shortage of money and the necessity of additional expenditure to support disabled people through candidacy, make finance a particularly significant barrier to elected office for disabled people. Disabled people should be able to fight for parliamentary seats without having to face the complicated financial barriers that confront them at present. This is not a question of political advantage, but a simple matter of achieving just representation.

221. We therefore believe that the Government should urgently consider, as part of the Democracy Diversity Fund, a ring-fenced scheme to support disabled parliamentary candidates. This scheme for disabled candidates should use as its model the Access to Public Life Fund which has been proposed by Scope. The scheme should be devised and operated by the Department for Work and Pensions, and should be administered in the same way as the Access to Work scheme.

Time off work for campaigning

222. We have discussed the need to ensure that there is no further narrowing of the paths to Parliament. In particular, Membership of the House must not become the sole preserve of those with a private income; there must be room for people with full-time jobs to campaign if they are selected.

223. A measure which could help to reduce the burden on candidates would be for the Government to legislate to give approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees the right to request a reasonable amount of unpaid leave during working hours and/or a right to work flexibly for the purposes of campaigning. Such provisions exist already under the Employment Rights Act 1996 for employees who undertake various forms of public service such as being a member of a local authority, a police authority or a prison monitoring board; some employees are also permitted time off for trade union duties under the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. Extending similar rights to approved prospective parliamentary candidates would affect only a relatively small number of individuals and businesses, but might be sufficient to protect candidates on low incomes from having to resign their posts completely. **This would also,**

183 Ibid

184 Ibid

symbolically, recognise that the action of standing for election, whether or not the candidate is successful, is an essential part of our democratic process and of public benefit.

224. Extending this measure further, **the Government should legislate to enable approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees to take unpaid leave, rather than resigning their employment, for the period from the dissolution of Parliament to election day** (this period is called the 'short campaign' in Electoral Commission documents). This again would affect only a small number of individuals and businesses, but might remove a barrier from those on low incomes who would find it difficult to stand for election if they had to abandon their source of income to do so. Sir John Rose, the Chief Executive of Rolls-Royce, told us that, as part of its drive for corporate social responsibility, the company had defined being a parliamentary candidate, or a parliamentary candidate's agent, as a civic duty. The company gives candidates on its staff up to two weeks paid leave immediately prior to the election, while agents may take up to three weeks unpaid leave immediately prior to the election. Other civic duties for which the company grants leave include service on certain public bodies, and service as a local councillor. In the three years since the company began to monitor the take-up of leave for civic duties in 2007 it has seen the number of staff requesting such leave—for service across the range of public duties—rise from 58 to 171.¹⁸⁵

225. **We recognise that, in the first instance, making such leave unpaid protects employers from any suggestion that they may be improperly financing a political campaign. In the long term we would like the Government to move to a position where candidates are entitled to receive a grant from the state equivalent to the minimum wage for the period sometimes known as the short campaign.**

Personal costs

226. Becoming a prospective parliamentary candidate can be hugely demanding on the individual. Once the selection campaign is won, local activists will frequently look to the new candidate to take on a leadership role within the constituency. This may involve living in the constituency or being present in the constituency throughout the week, attending meetings during the day and in the evening, carrying out administrative work at home and participating in party social events at the weekend. The candidate may feel under an obligation to make a substantial donation to local campaign finances, or to the general finances of the local party. The greater the expectation of the local party that the seat can be won, the higher its expectations of its candidate are likely to be.

227. The work of the PPC is essentially unpaid voluntary work, with the prospect—but no certainty—of their position becoming formalised at some future point if they were to win at the election. At the same time as seeking to meet the demands of the local party, the candidate may have to hold down a paid job in order to support themselves and their family. The candidate's partner and family also will have reasonable expectations of time and attention from the candidate. The candidate may not initially have a network of close friends in the constituency to whom they can turn for advice and support. Our attention

has been drawn to several cases where candidates, both male and female, have resigned their candidacies because of the strains which the combined pressures of work and the constituency placed upon their relationships with partners and children, particularly younger children.

228. In many such cases it is likely that the pressures placed upon the candidate by the constituency are unintended. Many activists are retired and the demands of the workplace and of young children are not at the forefront of their minds. As local parties are themselves voluntary organisations, individual activists may request assistance or support from the candidate without anyone formally managing or co-ordinating these demands. Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, which has carried out some research into these issues, described a failure of some local parties to appreciate that their candidates are “not campaign robots” but people with complex and demanding responsibilities to juggle.¹⁸⁶

229. It was suggested to us that some of these difficulties could be avoided by clarifying for both the candidate and the local party, at the point of selection, what demands upon the candidate would be appropriate, and what would not. These would vary depending upon the nature of the seat, and how ‘winnable’ the central party deemed it to be. We endorse the suggestion that **each central political party should consider drawing up statements of expectation setting out the role, and the reasonable demands which may be made, of both prospective parliamentary candidates and local party associations in different types of seat.** Like any professional job specification such a statement could be used at the local party level to specify campaign priorities and could be subject to regular review by an independent assessor.

230. We also believe 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.**

231. **Regional or central party officials should also consider whether further training support might be beneficial to candidates who have limited experience of formal management, team building and leadership roles.**

Building confidence

232. Many individuals in under-represented groups lack the confidence to put themselves forward as candidates. A number of witnesses suggested that an effective way of building individuals’ confidence is to provide them with training and increase their contact with current elected representatives. For many people, some element of this confidence-building experience can be gathered through joining, and being active within, a local political party. Some individuals, however, may benefit from a more structured, and intensive, process such as internship or mentoring.

Internships

233. Many Members of Parliament already make internships—an extended period of work experience—available in their Westminster and/or constituency offices, but access to these opportunities is limited.

234. The difficulties for people interested in accessing internships are:

- The number of opportunities available at any time is limited;
- They may not be widely advertised;
- Access may be restricted to a particular group, for example, university students; and
- They are frequently unpaid.

In consequence, the individuals who tend to benefit most from internships tend to be those who have existing contacts within Westminster (which enable them to find out about openings), those who can stay with family or friends within a reasonable travelling distance from Westminster (i.e. within London and the South East) and those who have sufficient financial backing to enable them to work and perhaps live in London, unpaid, for a number of weeks. Many of those with whom we are concerned live on low incomes and the cost of an internship is therefore a significant barrier.

235. Disabled groups in particular were keen to suggest to us that internships at Westminster should be made more widely available. They argued that creating opportunities for disabled people to act as interns would not only give those people valuable work experience and raise their expectations, but would demonstrate to the disabled community the importance of engaging with politics; it would also help to increase disability awareness amongst politicians and others within Westminster, and challenge their assumptions about what disabled people can achieve.¹⁸⁷

236. Evidence about the value of such specialised internship programmes was provided by Transport for London (TfL). TfL told us that different parts of its organisation offer internship programmes designed specifically to address under-representation of particular groups in its workforce, including those from BME backgrounds and disabled people. Two of its divisions, London Underground and Surface Transport, run programmes for unemployed disabled people which offer placements lasting between eight weeks and six months. Rather than creating specific roles for interns, the Surface Transport programme places disabled people in currently vacant positions within the organisation: after six months the intern can apply for the vacant post. TfL claims that its working environment is thus enhanced for all staff.¹⁸⁸ The use of vacant posts rather than additional roles is attractive, as it potentially gives the participant the benefit of a defined role as well as a salary. In order to make the use of vacant posts feasible, however, a participant would realistically have to commit to a fairly long period of work so that they could make an effective contribution.

187 Ev 233

188 SC87

237. Members of Parliament are individual employers of their own staff teams. Within these small teams vacancies can arise fairly frequently through resignation or extended leave such as maternity leave. **We believe it should be possible for each Parliamentary party to maintain a list of individuals from under-represented groups, perhaps nominated by stakeholder organisations, who might by this means be notified of internships and temporary vacancies arising in Members' offices. All reasonable adjustment costs for the successful applicant should be funded for the duration of the appointment. We invite the political parties to work with stakeholder organisations to establish how this can best be done.**

Mentoring

238. A further way to make the role of an MP less distant from other people is to use work shadowing, or mentoring, for those who aspire to be candidates. A mentoring programme, during which an individual meets and follows an MP for a fixed number of days over an extended period, may be a more suitable option than internship for many people, particularly those with caring responsibilities, or those who are in employment. Mentoring provides a less intensive experience than internship but, if sustained over a period such as two years,¹⁸⁹ can offer people the opportunity to learn a lot about public life, and, by building a relationship between an aspirant candidate and their mentor, do much to support the candidate and build their confidence. Witnesses including the National Federation of Women's Institutes told us that mentoring can be particularly beneficial to women, who are likely to lack confidence in their own abilities and who may, because of family commitments, have missed out on opportunities for formal training in the workplace.¹⁹⁰

239. Some witnesses said that there was a risk in concentrating mentoring and shadowing schemes exclusively on high-profile high achievers and on Parliament alone, because confidence had to be built up gradually, and small steps were important. Liz Sayce of RADAR called for publicity for

a range of role models at different points and levels in the system. Not everybody is going to think: oh, I could be a Secretary of State. But they might think: perhaps I could be a councillor. Then, once they are a councillor, they might think: actually, maybe I could be a local MP.

Any mentoring scheme should take into account the need to encourage involvement in public life at all levels, from local community organisations to Parliament itself. It should also ensure that people from under-represented groups gain experience of constituency activities, which form such an important part of a Member's work.

240. We heard from Operation Black Vote and the National Assembly for Wales about the success of shadowing/mentoring programmes which have been run in Cardiff and Westminster to promote participation from within the BME communities. For example, in 2007–08 Operation Black Vote (OBV) and the National Assembly for Wales ran a very

189 Ev 52

190 Ev 19

successful AM Shadowing Scheme which encouraged BME individuals to engage in the political process by shadowing Assembly Members (AM) from all the main political groups. The Assembly is now operating, along with the Welsh Local Government Association and other partners, a pilot mentoring/shadowing scheme for a wider range of under-represented groups. This scheme, called Step Up Cymru, involves both Assembly Members and local councillors mentoring people from under-represented groups and encouraging them to get involved in active citizenship, especially in their local communities. This seems a practical and measured approach and Step Up Cymru may well turn out to be a good model for something similar across the UK.

241. We believe that there is scope for the development of a UK-wide scheme similar to the Step Up Cymru mentoring scheme, but with a strong Westminster element. This could bring together elected members at all levels of government to provide opportunities for people from under-represented groups to find out about their work. The initial aim might be to encourage involvement in community groups, but it should also give encouragement to those who might wish to become candidates for elected office at local and national level or be appointed to a public body.

Unacceptable conduct in campaigning

242. Concerns were raised about negative personal campaigning in local areas. While campaigning should focus upon party policies, and the effectiveness of different candidates, we are aware that on occasions activists and candidates may 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. At the extreme, a local election candidate in London was jailed in 2007 for publicly accusing a competing candidate who was homosexual of being “a paedophile with a 16 year old boyfriend”.¹⁹¹ Derek Munn of Stonewall told us that “there have been instances of unacceptable homophobic behaviour by activists and candidates in all the political parties and we would not single anybody out”.¹⁹²

243. Such behaviour and such comments are completely unacceptable. The task of ensuring they do not happen is, unfortunately, extremely difficult. Where allegations are made very publicly, as in the 2007 case, or where they are made in writing, prosecutions may be mounted. Most cases, however, are more likely to hinge upon what is said on the doorstep, where there are few witnesses. In these other cases, the task of enforcement will rest mainly with the parties themselves.

244. This is an area where strong leadership will be needed from the parties, both nationally and locally. Candidates will have to join with the leaders to state unequivocally that they will not tolerate campaigning based on personal attacks. Derek Munn pointed out that at previous elections the parties have made such statements in relation to racist campaigns. **The parties should each draw up a formal code of conduct for campaigning. This should make clear that campaigning is unacceptable where it seeks to undermine a candidate by reference to his or her family life, racial background, sexual orientation,**

191 Ev 220

192 Q360

health status or disability. It is for each party to decide how it will respond to any breaches of the code. **These codes of conduct should be in place in time for the 2010 general election.**

7 Parliament: changing the culture of an institution

245. The culture and procedures of the House of Commons themselves deter some individuals from standing. In particular we heard concerns about:

- The inflexible and unwelcoming attitude of the House towards families as evidenced by the lack of childcare support, unsociable working hours and absence of formal policies on parental leave;
- Physical access and the availability of reasonable adjustments for disabled people;
- Attitudes which attach stigma to certain conditions or personal characteristics; and
- The confrontational and aggressive nature of Parliamentary debate.

Support for families

When an MP becomes a parent ... they face a very stark choice. Either their partners have to pick up the pieces, or they realise that they have to leave if they want to be sure of having a normal family life.¹⁹³

246. The work of an MP makes significant demands both on the individual and on their immediate family. For the eight to nine months of the year when the House of Commons is sitting Members are generally required to be present at Westminster from Monday lunchtime until late afternoon on Thursday. Most Members will then return to their constituencies where they will work on local issues through Friday and the weekend, making themselves available to help constituents at times when the constituents themselves are free. When the House is not sitting, most Members expect to spend their time working in the constituency unless they are formally taking leave.

247. The MP's dual roles, as a legislator at Westminster and as a representative in their constituency (acting as an adviser and advocate) involve both unpredictable workloads and significant unsocial hours. Members who are Ministers or Shadow Ministers will be expected to carry out significant additional travel to represent the Government or their party. These duties make it difficult for Members to spend regular time with their partners and families either during the week or at weekends. Informally we know that this is a particular concern both to Members and to potential candidates who are parents of young children.

248. Some MPs with children maintain their family home in the constituency. This means that children have a single, stable base but in many cases will not see one of their parents at all between Monday morning and Thursday evening. Others maintain their family home in London, to make the best of any opportunities for the child and parent to spend time together during the working week—although the current working hours of the House of

Commons mean that such time is likely to be found at breakfast only. For many MPs with families the effort to find family time either during the week or at weekends means moving the entire family between London and the constituency on a regular basis. This can be complicated, particularly where there is a small child who requires bulky and sometimes expensive equipment.

249. The inflexibility of Parliament's working practices (which are partly institutional and partly the result of the way that the political parties work), together with the increasingly heavy workload of constituency demands, combine to create a lifestyle which is detrimental to Members with caring responsibilities, both for children and other dependents. The decisions involved for Members seeking to manage a beneficial family life in the face of Parliament's and the constituency's demands are extremely difficult. We have been told informally that the lifestyle which a Parliamentary career imposes is a significant deterrent to many capable people who, in their 20s or 30s, decide either to abandon any thoughts of becoming an MP, or to postpone any plans for ten or more years until their children are relatively independent. We also recognise that if there is a deterrent for individuals who have a supportive partner the problems are even greater for individuals who are single parents.

250. We are not seeking to claim that the difficulties of Members with families are unique; there are of course many other professions (hospital medicine, the armed forces and the police being among them) which interfere with a 'normal' pattern of family life. What is different about the demands on an MP is the unique and

potentially unlimited demands on an MP's time and the fact that an MP's duties are rarely, if at all, circumscribed in terms of hours or duties, in the way that most jobs are, either legally or by convention.¹⁹⁴

An MP's job does not fit a conventional pattern either in the unique combination of demands and expectations placed upon the MP, or in its working hours or in its requirement to work on a weekly cycle in two places which, for many Members, are significantly distant from each other. Therefore it is important to create within the job's demands some space for family life.

251. In recent months there has been a push at Westminster to change many of the ways in which the House of Commons operates. The ultimate outcome of the various reviews and inquiries which are being conducted ought to be a revitalised House with much clearer rules, better accountability and, possibly, greater independence. If such changes are considered and implemented effectively they should benefit us all. There is, however, an opportunity within these changes also to make the House of Commons a more flexible, humane and responsible institution which, while it requires greater probity of those within it, also takes greater account of the circumstances in which each individual works.

252. The division of a Member's workload between Westminster and the constituency impacts substantively upon family life. This impact is not part of the job, but it is a direct

¹⁹⁴ *MPs' expenses and allowances*, Twelfth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life November 2009 Cm 7724 paragraph 2.8

consequence of the job, which has led some Members to choose not to seek re-election. If the changes made to the House and to Members' conditions worsen this impact, it will become harder for parents to commit to becoming an MP; yet if the House is to achieve greater credibility as a representative body it urgently needs to have a significant number of parents including single parents and parents of young children, people who have direct current experience of how our education, health and support services are working within it.

253. The same is true for those with other caring responsibilities. The current reviews of the House's practices and procedures are, like our own Conference, designed to secure a House which is more just and equitable and has greater legitimacy in speaking for the wider public. **A diverse workforce for Parliament is not an aspiration but an imperative. It is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families and/or other caring responsibilities is maintained and supported. This must be kept in mind by all who are engaged in the current process of Commons reform.**

254. We were told that women MPs with newly-born infants face a particular series of problems:

- There is no formal provision for MPs to take maternity leave;
- There are no formal procedures for proxy voting; and
- The rigidity of certain customs of the House, including sitting hours, also causes problems for MPs (male and female) with small children.

Maternity leave

255. Meg Hillier MP told us that "There is currently no provision for MPs to take maternity leave".¹⁹⁵ After having a baby she herself explored the options available so that she could spend time with the baby. She reported that the House authorities agreed to a limited number of variations on standard rules which made it easier for her staff to cover for her. These staff were also able to cover her absence from the constituency, to a degree, by taking on additional responsibilities for budgets, advice surgeries and correspondence.

256. She noted, however, that the "one responsibility that an MP cannot pass on to her staff is voting".¹⁹⁶ A Member of Parliament is appointed directly by his or her constituents to be their representative in Parliament and voting is one of the key ways in which this mandate is fulfilled. 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.

257. The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills confirmed that MPs are not currently entitled to Statutory Maternity Leave, since they are considered to be self-employed, and maternity leave is only available to women who are employed by someone else.¹⁹⁷ Such arrangements as there are to support Members who have caring

195 SC103

196 SC103

197 SC104

responsibilities are in the hands of the party whips (the business managers), who have to ensure sufficient Members are present in the House for decisions to be made, and arrange for their parties to be properly represented on all official groups and committees.

258. We therefore wrote to the whips of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties to inquire about the arrangements they have made to support parents and other carers.

259. The Secretary to the Parliamentary Labour Party, Martin O'Donovan, wrote to us that "the PLP does not hold formal policy in this area as such ... authorised absence from the Government Whip on maternity, paternity or other caring leave—is agreed with individual members. These are informal, flexible agreements that suit the needs of the individual Member. It is evident that these arrangements work in the feedback that we have received from Members."¹⁹⁸

260. Rt. Hon. Patrick McLoughlin MP, Chief Whip for the Conservative Party, told us that "We do not have an official policy on this as we regard Members of Parliament to be autonomous ... I believe that we are very sympathetic to all ... needs and all that we would do in the case of a close vote is to inform and ask whether the Member would be available for voting." He added that "Looking forward to the next Parliament, the Conservatives ... have taken significant steps to increase the number of female candidates. We also expect the Parliamentary party to have a younger profile and therefore I am confident that we will ... ensure that all requests will be sympathetically looked at".¹⁹⁹

261. Paul Burstow MP, Liberal Democrat Chief Whip, told us that "arrangements for maternity, paternal and other caring leave for our MPs are made bespoke in discussion with the Chief Whip"; he noted that in practice the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party has never received a request for maternity leave "but our policy would be to endeavour to match the statutory rights afforded to women in other professions". Paternity leave, which is much shorter, had been taken by Liberal Democrat MPs including the party leader Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP.

262. Mr Burstow explained that in cases where paternity leave has been taken "the Whips' Office has ensured that cover for Parliamentary duties is arranged and that additional guidance and assistance is provided for their staff ... we try to ensure that communication from the Whips Office is kept to real emergencies." Similar arrangements were in place for Members requiring other caring leave: "arrangements are normally discussed informally and formalised later."²⁰⁰

263. We find these comments interesting and, on the whole, supportive. Yet we believe that **maternity, paternity and caring leave is an issue which all three main parliamentary parties have as yet failed to take fully seriously.** Women, and particularly women of child-bearing age, have been absent from the House until fairly recently. If arrangements are made on a "bespoke" and "flexible" basis we believe this is largely because no one has thought it worth the effort of negotiating a more formal arrangement. Yet, as the

198 SC105

199 SC111

200 SC108

Conservative Chief Whip points out, changes in the age and gender profile of the parliamentary parties are likely to increase the pressure for formal policies to be declared. We also believe that the development of formal policies, to address the various roles of Members as carers might encourage a wider range of individuals with caring responsibilities to consider a future in Parliament.

264. Each Parliamentary party should draw up a formal statement of policy on maternity, paternity and caring leave. This should set out clearly the minimum level of support which an individual requesting leave may expect from his or her party, and the steps which the individual should take to arrange a period of leave. Such statements should be agreed by party leaders, and published on party websites and in the party whip, by the end of 2010.

Statutory maternity cover and MPs

265. Meg Hillier MP drew to our attention the fact that MPs are not entitled to statutory maternity cover, nor to any grant or allowance which would enable the MP to employ additional administrative support during the critical period. She considered that this position was anomalous, given that the House of Commons would provide substitute administrative cover if one of her own staff were to take maternity leave.²⁰¹

266. The reason for this state of affairs is that MPs are held to be self-employed and like other self-employed people have no entitlement; their staff are employees, and are thus entitled to the same conditions of employment as any other employee. Paul Burstow MP, the Chief Whip of the Liberal Democrats, told us that any future Liberal Democrat Government would look to extend statutory maternity leave to MPs. This is a very welcome aspiration.

267. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills explained that an individual taking statutory maternity leave and claiming statutory maternity pay may not also work during the period of formal leave, except on ten days allowed for 'keeping in touch' and career development.²⁰² All Members who are members of Parliamentary parties are subject to their party's whip: the business managers may insist that the Member is present for certain votes, and the comments we received from the party whips indicated that, while they seek to be sympathetic to requests for caring leave, they reserve their right to call on Members in an 'emergency'. The extent to which such 'emergencies' (votes where the numbers will be very close between the different parties) occur will vary considerably depending upon the balance of the parties in the House, and the pressures of external events. While there are arrangements for proxy voting these arrangements require the Member to be present in the House of Commons even if they do not go to the voting lobbies. It would be difficult therefore for a Member to claim statutory maternity pay when she does not have any certainty about when, or how often, she might be required to attend the House of Commons.

²⁰¹ The House voted on 30 April 2009 that Members' staff should be centrally employed by the House; the Commission then reported on 27 October that Members should remain the employer. The House has yet to consider the Commission report.

²⁰² SC104

268. This factor, together with the unusual employment status of MPs, makes it difficult to see how statutory maternity leave and pay could be applied to MPs. Nonetheless, the urgent need to normalise the House of Commons as a workplace for parents provides a strong argument for tackling the problem. **The Government has recently indicated its intention to give the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) the responsibility for setting salaries and pensions²⁰³, with effect from 2011-12. We invite IPSA to consider the development of formal maternity, paternity and caring leave arrangements for MPs which are as closely equivalent to the general public sector provision as possible. In the mean time we would ask the Senior Salaries Review Body to look into the matter and to report in 2010.**

Childcare

269. The Administration Committee, following a request from the House of Commons Commission, has recently looked into the level of demand among Members for childcare support. The Committee's recommendations are being considered by the House of Commons Commission. Any increase in the facilities in the House of Commons for Members' families will be an improvement, and we therefore hope that the Administration Committee's recommendations will mark a significant step forward in providing practical and responsive support for Members' families.

270. **We have said that it is essential to the House's credibility that the participation of Members who have young families is supported. It is likely that at the 2010 general election a number of younger Members, who have young children, will enter the House of Commons for the first time. We welcome the recent announcement of plans for a nursery facility within the Parliamentary estate and urge the House service to implement the proposal as soon as possible. This facility should be open to Members and staff.**

271. **Decisions on childcare are a matter of personal choice and for many MPs their arrangements will be essential to their ability to carry out their parliamentary duties. Parents will choose to have their children looked after in their homes (in the constituency and/or in London) by other family members, by nannies or registered childminders, or in a nursery or crèche. All of these choices are equally valid and should be equally respected by the parliamentary authorities. We agree with Meg Hillier that many parents will not wish to bring their small children into Parliament on a regular basis but will instead wish to have their child cared for, for the most part, close to the family home. The Liberal Democrat Chief Whip told us that a future Liberal Democrat administration would also seek to create a childcare voucher scheme for Members to run alongside the existing scheme for House staff. We recommend that a scheme be considered to allow Members to take a proportion of their salary in the form of childcare vouchers.**

²⁰³ HC Deb 10 Dec 2009: Column 35WS

Pairing

272. An informal arrangement known as 'pairing' operates to enable Members to absent themselves from votes. The arrangement, which is managed by the Party whips, ensures that the numbers of Members unavailable to vote on either side of the House are balanced. In this way the votes both for and against any proposal are reduced by one, ensuring that a single individual's absence cannot impact disproportionately on the progress of business.

273. Pairing arrangements are used to cover Members' absence from the House, either on official business such as a select committee visit or for family, personal or constituency reasons. Members find the arrangements extremely valuable. They depend, however, on the nature of relationships between the political parties and on the size of the governing party's majority. The Government Whips, as business managers, are much less likely to agree to pairing if they expect to win the House's support for a proposal by only a handful of votes.

274. While we recognise the business reasons why pairing must be negotiable, we consider that **it would be better if Members' requests for caring or sickness leave were less subject to the state of relations between the parties and the turn of events. We believe that greater transparency about the organisation of pairing would help. We therefore recommend that the business managers for each Parliamentary party should regularly brief their Members about the process of pairing, the requests they have received for pairing and whether or not it has been possible to agree to those requests.**

Sitting hours

275. The current sitting hours of the House of Commons Chamber are:

- a) Monday: 2.30 until the conclusion of main business (normally 10.00pm);
- b) Tuesday: 2.30 until the conclusion of main business (normally 10.00pm);
- c) Wednesday: 11.30 am until the conclusion of main business (normally 7.00 pm);
- d) Thursday: 10.30 am until the conclusion of main business (normally 6.00pm).²⁰⁴

While the main business will normally end at, or close to, the scheduled time additional time will be required for the House to vote formally on certain questions: this can often add between 30 minutes and an hour to the working day. There will also be a significant number of occasions in each Parliamentary session when the House has to sit after the normal end of the working day in order to discuss particular questions in detail: these will normally be questions on the detail of a bill which must be settled before the bill can be enacted (become law). On 13 Fridays each session the House sits additionally from 9.30 am to 2.30 pm to consider proposals for legislation which have been prepared by backbench Members (Private Members' Bills). Debates take place in the Commons' second chamber,

²⁰⁴ Standing Order No. 9. The times given here do not include the final half hour of each day which is allocated for backbench Members' debates.

Westminster Hall, from 9.30 am to 2pm on Tuesdays, from 9.30 am to 11.30 am and from 2.30 pm until 5pm on Wednesdays and from 2.30 to 5.30 pm on Thursdays.²⁰⁵

276. Many Members are also required to attend sittings of select committees or public bill committees which take place outside the sitting hours for the Chamber, beginning at or after 9.00 am. Agreed absences from the House must be negotiated with the party whips whose first priority is to manage the progress of business in the House: a pastoral role, while recognised by the Whips, is a secondary consideration.

277. The consequence of this working pattern for Members with families is that even a Member's children who live in London can expect, routinely, to go "three days without seeing [the Member who is a parent] after the walk to school each day ... simply because of late night votes."²⁰⁶

278. Kitty Ussher MP wrote to us to make the case for a change in the House's sitting hours:

The core working hours of parliament should be changed to 9am to 4.30pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, followed by voting as normal. There would be no loss to the number of hours of parliamentary time (7.5 hours per day): the hours would just [be] brought forward. Given that the standard two votes, for example on a second or third reading debate, tend to take around half an hour, then this would give a reasonable working assumption that whipped activity would usually finish around 5pm.

Since the extended school day runs from 8am to 6pm this means that MP parents with children nearby could feasibly expect to be able to do the school run, and see their children in the evenings, on three out of five days each week yet still spend as much time in the main chamber of parliament as they currently do.

MP parents with children in constituencies outside London would probably not be affected by the changes as parliament can theoretically sit until 6pm on a Thursday at present. And of course there is no reason why whipped business cannot finish earlier on a Thursday as is often the case currently.

In a stand-off situation, for example if the two houses of parliament cannot agree on an issue at the end of the session, there is no reason why the day cannot be extended as a one-off. But sitting beyond 4.30pm should only occur in circumstances that are clearly understood to be exceptional.²⁰⁷

279. Issues around the sitting hours of the House have been considered relatively recently. The Modernisation Committee in Session 2004–05 recommended making permanent a sitting pattern which would see the House sit at 2.30 pm on Mondays, at 11.30 am on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and at 10.30 am on Thursdays. These suggestions were only partially implemented by the House, with the result that on Tuesdays as on Mondays the

205 SO No. 10

206 SC103

207 SC93

House now sits at 2.30 pm. The commentary in the Modernisation Committee's report helpfully sets out the problems which have always made changes to the House's sitting hours difficult to negotiate:

"6. It is clear from debates in the House, the responses to the Procedure Committee's questionnaire and the submissions we have received, that many, if not most Members feel strongly about the issue of sitting hours. It is equally clear that there is no strong consensus of opinion on which of the many possible options for change should be pursued. ...

7. The initial impetus for the change in hours came from a widespread feeling that it was wrong in principle for Parliament to be legislating at 10 p.m. or later and that sitting late contributed neither to the quality of the debates nor to the esteem in which the House was held. But Members would be less than human if these points of principle were not interwoven with many other considerations, such as how the hours could be made to fit in with their constituency work, with their family life and with patterns of travel between home, constituency and Westminster. These considerations, however, affected Members in a host of different ways, depending not only on whether they had a family and where they lived, but also on their approach to the work of a Member of Parliament. The same considerations often weighed on both sides of an argument. While some Members welcomed the family-friendly nature of the new hours, others pointed out that it was no improvement for those with family homes in constituencies away from the London area. While some thought the new hours made better use of the Parliamentary day, others complained that they created congestion in committees and kept them away from their offices during normal office hours. Some Members argued that the new hours appear more normal to constituents, whereas others emphasised the special nature of the House's business and the consequent need sometimes to adopt unusual working practices. To compound matters, some Members who originally opposed the changes now support them, and vice versa."²⁰⁸

280. It is unlikely that these arguments will have changed substantially in the space of the current Parliament. We therefore note also that Kitty Ussher suggests a compromise option which, we believe, has not previously been considered by the House. Under this option, an agreement might be reached to defer divisions occurring in the late afternoon and early evening on certain days. If this were done, the 'running whip'—that is, the formal requirement by the parties that their Members remain close to the Chamber throughout a day's sitting, in case votes are called—could be suspended for an agreed period. This would allow Members of all parties with family in London to return home and spend some time with their children at teatime or bedtime before returning to Parliament to vote. Divisions deferred under such an agreement could either be deferred to 12.30 pm on the next Wednesday the House sits (the current procedure for deciding questions which are deferred having been called at the close of daily business)²⁰⁹ or, if it should be considered more appropriate, could be deferred from early in the sitting day to the conclusion of business on the same sitting day.

²⁰⁸ Modernisation Committee, First Report of Session (2004-05), Sitting Hours, HC 88 paragraphs 6-7

²⁰⁹ SO No. 41A

281. Kitty Ussher's proposal presents some problems: while it is relatively easy to defer divisions on certain types of business—such as the introduction of backbench Members' '10-Minute Rule' bills—it would be impractical to defer divisions on occasions when detailed amendments to Government bills are being considered. This is because discussion on one part of a bill may depend upon what has previously been agreed about another part of the bill.

282. Nonetheless we believe that there is merit in considering Kitty Ussher's proposal in greater detail. 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.²¹⁰

283. It is likely that some whipping arrangements were in place for many of the days on which votes were not called until the later evening. The business on these days was, in the main, the initial consideration (second reading) of bills. Second reading debates normally last for an entire Parliamentary day: therefore an agreement to defer afternoon divisions on these days would have had no impact on the progress of business. It could, however, have given those Members not directly involved in the debate greater flexibility either to spend time with their families, or to work with constituents, according to their chosen pattern of work. Even on those days when votes were called between 4pm and 8pm, there were decisions taken (for example, on opposition motions or motions to approve European Union documents) which could have been deferred at least until the close of business that same evening.

284. Deferring afternoon divisions and suspending the whip on certain days is not a full answer to the difficulties faced by Members with young families but it would be a step in the right direction. We also believe that it might be of assistance to official Commons committees which sit at the same time as the Chamber, and to Members who would value the certainty of time uninterrupted by divisions, to conduct meetings with constituents.

285. We recognise that there has been some progress in addressing the issue of sitting hours. Developments such as programming have helped to make parliamentary business more efficient, but there is a need to go further.

286. The sitting hours of the House should again be reviewed, and voted upon by the House, early in the new Parliament. Ideally, sitting time for the main chamber should be brought in line with what is considered to be normal business hours. Respecting the difficulty of achieving this, given the multiplicity of other duties inside and outside the Palace of Westminster carried out by Members, we recommend a substantial further development of deferred voting in order to facilitate a more family friendly approach to sitting arrangements and unscheduled (unprogrammed) votes. Further consideration should be given to modern methods of voting to facilitate a more efficient and practical use of time, in line with other legislatures.

²¹⁰ On sitting Tuesdays in session 2008–09 divisions were called before 8pm on 54% of days. On sitting Mondays in both sessions and on sitting Tuesdays in session 2007–08 divisions were called before 8pm on less than 50% of days.

Other cultural barriers

287. The customs and working practices of the House of Commons more generally can appear unwelcoming towards Members' families. While Meg Hillier noted that House staff had made administrative changes which enabled her staff to provide maternity cover for her, she reported that on an occasion when she had been forced to bring her young baby in to work both she and the child had been made to feel unwelcome by Commons staff.²¹¹ It is also forbidden for anyone other than a Member—including a baby—to enter the lobbies during a vote. These rulings make it very difficult for an MP who is also a new mother to carry out either role as she might wish to do so. As an MP she cannot transfer her vote to another person; and if as a mother she wishes to follow World Health Organisation guidelines and have a baby who is exclusively breastfed until six months old, this preference creates another duty upon her which only she can fulfil.

288. The House's record on addressing such difficulties, once they are highlighted, is reasonably good and therefore **we hope that the House service will review, and draw up new guidelines to clarify, the circumstances in which a child under the age of one may accompany his or her MP parent within restricted areas of the House of Commons.**

Civil Partnerships

289. The House of Commons can appear unwelcoming to people other than new parents. We were interested to hear the suggestion from the Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, that lesbian and gay MPs should be permitted to celebrate civil partnerships within the Palace of Westminster in the same way that heterosexual MPs are permitted to celebrate marriages within the Palace Chapel.²¹²

290. We recognise that this affirmation of Members' civil partnerships would send a significant message of inclusion to the LGBT community. **We think it is important that Members who wish to undertake civil marriages and civil partnerships should have the same rights as Members undertaking Christian marriage rites to hold their ceremonies within the Palace of Westminster. 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.**

A shortage of information

291. Little is known about the composition of the House in terms of Members' sexual orientation, racial background or the extent to which Members experience impairment. However, it seems clear that all these groups are under-represented. For example, working from the figure of 11 million people in the UK with some form of impairment, a representative House of Commons would perhaps include about 130 disabled MPs. Even if one used a more restricted definition, to include only those with major impairments, you would expect 10%—about 65. We do not believe that the numbers in the Commons are anywhere near 65, let alone 130. Without a significantly larger number of openly disabled

211 SC103

212 Q434

MPs there is the risk that, as RADAR put it, disabled people will continue to be seen as “the passive recipients of public services and public policy” instead of, as they should be, “part of the solution and leadership.”²¹³

292. If numbers in these groups were better known, and experiences better understood, the House would have a better understanding of what it should do to encourage people from under-represented groups to come forward. A strictly confidential and anonymous survey would provide greater transparency and understanding and promote greater openness. The result could be the emergence of more role models and a boost to confidence among those considering standing for Parliament.

293. It is important for the House to obtain much better information about the percentages of Members who belong to under-represented groups, and to know more about their experiences of politics and of the House. We believe that the arguments in favour of regular, sensitive and appropriate monitoring of the situation are convincing. The House should consider how this might be done. One approach would be for the House’s occupational health department to ask Members to complete confidential questionnaires about their experience of any illness or impairment while attending the Department for screening/self referral or disability assessment. The anonymised questionnaires could be collated and analysed by the department and the analysis fed back to the appropriate committee annually. The survey might also secure similar information about the racial origin and, if possible and appropriate, the sexual orientation of Members.

294. Accurate information about public attitudes to Parliament is also hard to find. We said in Chapter 1 that Parliament’s legitimacy and effectiveness will be enhanced if firm action is taken to increase the diversity of MPs. The measures recommended in our reports will help achieve that goal, but there must be regular and rigorous monitoring of progress. Similar though not identical work is carried out already: the Hansard Society’s annual Audit of Political Engagement is one major survey which covers closely related issues.

295. We recommend that there should be a regular survey (at least once every five years) of public attitudes to Parliament and its composition, and in particular of the impact of the measures taken following this report. This should test whether greater diversity among MPs is bringing greater public approval and acceptance of the work of the House, and should be carried out by an independent body such as the Hansard Society.

Parliament, disability and the law

296. There have been three major Acts aimed at making life better for disabled people in recent years: the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, the Disability Rights Commission Act 1999 which amended the 1995 Act, and the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Parts of this legislation apply to Parliament—for instance some parts of the 1995 Act.²¹⁴ Section 19 of that Act states that a provider of services must not discriminate against a disabled person

213 Ev 8

214 Disability Discrimination Act 1995 Section 65

in refusing to provide any service which he provides, or is prepared to provide, to members of the public. The requirement on employers to make “reasonable” adjustments also applies to Parliament—as an employer. When the House allows public access to areas such as Central Lobby and areas where members of the public are invited, such as the dining rooms, it is providing a service to the public and its work is subject to the 1995 Act. As an employer, the House must also make reasonable adjustments under section 6 of the 1995 Act, if the premises or arrangements place a disabled employee at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with a non-disabled person. 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. There is a Single Equality Scheme which concentrates mainly on the House’s work as an employer and a provider of services for visitors.

297. But the legal duty only extends to employment and to services which are provided to members of the public. The House does not employ Members or their staff. Both Houses of Parliament are excluded from the definition of a ‘public authority’ for the purposes of the Disability Discrimination Act of 2005 which prohibits such authorities from showing discrimination in carrying out their functions.

298. The reason for this mixed picture is that 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. This is the long-standing principle that the courts should not interfere with the activity of Parliament in making law. The Clerk of the House of Commons and the Clerk of the Parliaments sent a Memorandum to a Committee looking at the draft Disability Discrimination Bill in 2004. The Memorandum talked about the possibility of clauses in the Bill requiring Parliament to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination and harassment and to promote equality of opportunity. The Memorandum said:

If [the clauses from the Bill] were applied to Parliament, court proceedings might be instituted which would require the courts to examine the rules, proceedings and procedures of the two Houses in order to assess allegations of discrimination against disabled persons, or to examine the extent to which Parliament had complied with its duties ... in the course of its proceedings ... If the courts were to entertain cases of that nature there would be a constitutional revolution—interference by the judiciary in the core business of Parliament.²¹⁵

299. The Memorandum also noted some more practical problems: “If [this law] were applied directly to the two Houses there would be potential for considerable disruption to parliamentary proceedings if, for example, a sign interpreter was for some reason unavailable when a deaf person wished to follow proceedings in the public gallery of a chamber or committee room. This might cause particular problems for committees meeting at short notice or taking evidence away from Westminster.”²¹⁶

300. We see the difficulties caused by such demands. No doubt it will take time for the practical—and financial – obstacles to be overcome. But progress can be made. This is

²¹⁵ Joint Committee on the Draft Disability Discrimination Bill, 2003-04 Report, Volume II HL 82-II/HC 35-II: *Memorandum from the Clerk of the House of Commons and the Clerk of the Parliaments* (DDB 100)

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

something the Clerks of both Houses accepted in the 2004 Memorandum mentioned above, saying:

We recognise, ... that the two Houses should take reasonable and proportionate steps to enable disabled Members, witnesses and others to take part in their proceedings without suffering discrimination. In our view, the two Houses can achieve this, as effectively as if the legislation were in terms applied to them, by applying [the sections on discrimination and equality of opportunity] by analogy.²¹⁷

301. The House has worked hard and with some success to apply the law in its work, and has gone further. There have been a substantial number of improvements in facilities for disabled people in Parliament in recent years, including:

- more lifts;
- induction loops fitted in the Public Gallery and committee rooms, and checked regularly;
- better wheelchair access and lighting;
- arrangements for accessible tours for visitors with hearing and visual impairments; and
- more parking for disabled people.

Most of these improvements have related to the House's role as an employer or as a provider of services to visitors.

302. Some improvements have had a more direct impact on the work of Members, like the provision of 'speech to text' services (live subtitling) to help deaf visitors at oral evidence sessions—including some of our own—and the availability of British Sign Language interpreters when Members have deaf visitors. The House authorities have allowed guide dogs onto the floor of the Commons Chamber and in the officials' box. The recent session of the UK Youth Parliament showed what could be done for deaf people in the Chamber: two BSL interpreters were found seats which are not technically "on the floor of the House" and were able to assist those taking part.

303. There is also a broader scheme of help from the House authorities for MPs with disabilities, aimed at making reasonable adjustments to the working conditions and equipment of Members with particular needs because of disability, and covering necessary additional continuing costs. Assistance can take the form of additional staff, necessary equipment or help with travel. Funding has for instance been provided for journeys on parliamentary business, specialised computer equipment (or alterations to existing equipment to suit particular work needs arising from disability). Extra staff (including training where necessary) to act as carers or facilitators have been funded along with specialised furniture, for example special chairs or desks. The introduction of this scheme and the other improvements we describe above are heartening developments and we welcome them.

217 Ibid.

304. The House of Lords has also made good progress towards meeting the needs of disabled members. Baroness Campbell of Surbiton, a wheelchair user, paid tribute to the support she had been given by the House of Lords authorities, telling the Conference that she had found her need for reasonable adjustments had been “absolutely superbly met by the House authorities [who had] all been extremely positive about my requirements, and have gone out of their way to make things happen.”²¹⁸ This includes the provision of a specially-adapted room close to the Lords Chamber. The Lords authorities for some years have put in place effective arrangements to help deaf and blind peers, and a number of peers with impaired mobility, to play a full part in debates.

305. But Baroness Campbell then explained the effects of the tradition which says that only members of the House of Lords can sit on the chamber’s red benches. Because her condition leaves her short of breath and she finds it hard to speak for long periods,

I asked six months ago whether or not tradition could be broken and I would be allowed to bring a PA [personal assistant] to sit next to me on the floor of the House to assist me with debates, or in Committee, and of course, the answer was no. No commoner shalt come on the House floor.²¹⁹

A similar principle applies on the floor of the Commons Chamber, and John Knight of Leonard Cheshire Disability urged the Commons authorities to be “flexible” about allowing BSL interpreters to sit on the green benches to support MPs with hearing impairments.²²⁰

306. Not surprisingly given the age of many of the buildings, many parts of Parliament are difficult for people with mobility problems to get around. The layout of the Commons Chamber, with its rigid seating, makes it hard for wheelchair users. When mobility problems are temporary (though sometimes long-term), Members sometimes find it difficult to persuade the Whips that suitable accommodation should be provided. Facilities for people with other impairments are developing but still hampered by the design of the buildings. Facilities for individuals using larger wheelchairs are still inadequate and some signage needs to be improved.

307. 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. John Knight of Leonard Cheshire Disability told us that there was nothing set out regarding the support a disabled MP might expect to get from the House of Commons:

I think just formalising what the House can do, and as importantly, what it cannot do, and where it might need to go to get that support if it cannot do it, would be an enormous asset to people, not only entering the House, but people aspiring to enter the House, because they know that they would get what support they can get once

218 Q 326

219 Ibid.

220 Q 317

they are in the House. It is actually setting it all out, in terms of what you would be entitled to, and I think that would be an enormous asset.²²¹

308. Publishing such a statement would, in our view, offer one proportionate means by which Parliament might stop appearing to act “as both a physical and symbolic barrier” to disabled people who want to become MPs.²²² It would send out just the right message to those thinking about becoming parliamentary candidates. We do not believe that the provision of proper arrangements for disabled Members to do their jobs and represent their constituents need upset important constitutional principles or cause “considerable disruption to parliamentary proceedings”, as long as the House is organised to do it and explains what is available.

309. Above all, and consistently with our overriding belief in the importance of the ‘social model’ of disability, we see ‘reasonable’ adjustments for disabled Members as a right, not a privilege. Parliament already publishes a clear and helpful booklet of information for “Members of both Houses and pass holders escorting visitors with disabilities”. Something similar, meeting the need for clarity and enshrining the House’s acceptance of responsibility for making adjustments, could be produced to cover other aspects of the working lives of Members. A new leaflet is in preparation explaining the facilities available to Members with disabilities and where they can get support. It is important that disabled Members should have all the information they need, and that a clear signal comes from the House to every potential disabled candidate that Parliament is committed to demolishing the barriers.

310. We welcome the range of effective measures which have been taken by the authorities in both Houses in recent years to meet the needs of disabled Members. Parliament responds well, in the vast majority of cases, to specific requests for assistance. However, there is still a largely unfair impression among some people that the House of Commons does not welcome disabled Members. The House needs to put this right. We recommend that the House should explicitly accept its responsibility to provide the support needed to enable disabled Members to do their job. In particular, the Parliamentary ICT service (PICT) should designate an experienced liaison officer to provide customised advice and support to maximise access to computing and other communications technology for disabled Members who require it. The passage into law of the Equality Bill currently before Parliament will be a good opportunity for the House authorities to announce publicly how committed they are to supporting disabled Members. The House should therefore make an early policy statement that it will apply fully the principles of the Equality Bill on reasonable adjustment and discrimination. This should cover both areas where the House is required to act within the law and those where it is not so required.

311. We also recommend that the House should provide to each Member information on all the facilities and assistance available for disabled Members, which should be given wide publicity amongst disabled people and updated regularly. We also urge the parties to make this information widely known among their own members, to give

221 Q 316

222 Ev 182

potential parliamentary candidates confidence that support will be provided. We would also encourage the authorities in the House of Lords similarly to consider what further steps can be taken to improve the situation for disabled peers. In general we believe that any recommendations made by the occupational health service about the facilities and assistance which should be made available for disabled Members should be accepted by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

312. Funding can be a problem for disabled MPs, as it is for disabled candidates. As noted above, the House currently makes additional funding to disabled Members through its allowances system. However, Scope's research suggested that MPs "often had little knowledge of what was perceived as a highly ad-hoc system of allocating additional funds. There is also virtually no knowledge of the availability of such funding outside of Westminster, potentially dissuading good PPCs from standing." The current discussions on reforms to parliamentary allowances should take account of the need to reduce the barriers to disabled people who wish to become MPs. We are also concerned to see better provision specifically to enable disabled MPs to serve their constituents better, 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 the level of funding for disability assistance will be for the new authority, although we would expect that the House's occupational health department would also continue to have a key role in the operation of any new scheme.

313. We see benefits in the idea of a ring-fenced fund to assist disabled Members to make reasonable adjustments to help them serve their constituents. This might fund better access to constituency offices or the provision of BSL interpreters for surgeries, and would be of particular assistance to newly-elected disabled MPs. We recommend that the new Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority includes provision for this in its allowances scheme, and we expect IPSA and the House authorities to work closely together on the provision of services and allowances to disabled MPs, and to devise a scheme which provides the help that is needed.

314. But how should this new approach be taken forward? Internally, there will be a need for a plan and consistent and coordinated monitoring of it, covering both internal and external activities. There is a successful precedent in the UK. The National Assembly for Wales has a very active Equalities Team, the main aims of which are to widen access and engagement and promote equality. It works with a mandate from the Presiding Officer and the Assembly Commission to make the Assembly an exemplar organisation on diversity for staff, Members and the general public. We met informally with some of the members of the team when we visited Cardiff. There would be value in a similar permanent team being established in the House, building on the House's existing Corporate Diversity team, with clearer responsibilities for promoting and monitoring progress on equality issues both internally and externally.

315. We believe that the House and its Members would benefit from having a small in-house team on the model of the National Assembly for Wales Equalities Team, responsible for monitoring how the House is doing on all equalities issues and also for planning provision for disabled Members, staff and visitors. The team would have

responsibility both for internal and external work to promote greater diversity and equality. It should also liaise with IPSA.

Attitudes to mental illness and the disqualification of MPs

316. A number of witnesses suggested that society's attitudes to those who experience mental illness discouraged such people from putting themselves forward for selection as candidates. In the opinion of several witnesses, including the Royal College of Psychiatrists, section 141 of the Mental Health Act 1983 illustrated this problem vividly. Section 141 provides for the notification of the Speaker if a Member of Parliament is authorised to be detained on grounds of mental illness.²²³ This means 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.

317. The Royal College contrasted the position of those detained in this way with the situation facing those with a physical illness:²²⁴

By contrast there are no provisions to remove an MP if he or she suffers from a physical illness, even if the illness (e.g. a serious stroke or cancer) is very debilitating and substantially affects the person's ability to perform their parliamentary functions. Furthermore, a person who lacks mental capacity may also be detained under the Mental Capacity Act 2005 but does not thereby automatically lose his or her seat as a result.

318. The Royal College then went on to urge repeal of s141 on the basis that "there is no relevant distinction between these two latter situations and that covered by section 141 of a person who has been sectioned under the Mental Health Act." The College believed that "type of illness, and whether the MP has been subject to the Mental Health Act should not be the primary concern, but rather it should be the effect the particular health problem has on an individual's ability to perform the functions of an MP."

319. The Royal College then argued that :

By removing the seat of an MP who is detained under the Mental Health Act, the law also gives the false impression that an MP cannot recover from a mental disorder. This is a wholly out of date viewpoint and runs counter to the modern approach to recovery in mental health.

320. Several witnesses pointed out that s141 has never been used, but believed that its very existence meant that mental illness carried an unjust stigma. A survey carried out on behalf of the All-Party Group on Mental Health showed that "MPs had a significant experience of mental distress both personally and among friends and family, but they were worried about disclosing this because of fear of the stigma and discrimination that is associated. The

²²³ The Mental Health Act 2007 amended the Mental Health Act 1983, changing the term "mental illness" to "mental disorder" which is more broadly defined.

²²⁴ Ev 223

Group therefore argued that repealing Section 141 of the Mental Health Act would be a symbolic step towards addressing this stigma.”²²⁵

321. Similar evidence was provided by the charity Rethink,²²⁶ which considered that Section 141 breaches Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights because “there is no provision for any hearing and no locus for the MP to represent themselves.” Rethink pointed to the case of the former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, who “spoke to the UK Parliament about his experience of mental ill health when in office as he recovered and went on to be re-elected for a second term.”

322. Those who advocate repeal of Section 141 do so partly on the basis that its very existence is symbolic of prejudiced attitudes to people experiencing all kinds of mental health problems. Alastair Campbell, former Director of Communications to Prime Minister Tony Blair, told the Conference of a report he had co-authored, entitled *A World Without*. This report, he said,

was trying to show that if employers adopt discriminatory attitudes vis à vis people's history of mental illness, then an awful lot of very interesting, clever people would be cut right out of the workforce ... the point was that if people were excluded from gainful employment on account of having mental health problems then you would be kicking out not just Churchill, but Abraham Lincoln, Florence Nightingale, Marie Curie, Charles Darwin, all sorts of people who, today, had what would be termed mental health problems.²²⁷

323. Mr Campbell noted the difficulty for politicians, and public figures of all sorts, in admitting to mental health problems, and saw one answer in greater openness among Members:

“if there were a few parliamentarians around the place who popped up at conferences, and so forth, and were able to give really open support to the work that the mental health charities are doing, that would help, and I think also it would help change the mood within this place.”²²⁸

324. There are arguments both for and against Section 141. In its favour, it may be said that the crux of the issue is not the illness itself but the detention of the Member by law, and the effects of that situation upon his or her ability to fulfil their parliamentary and constituency duties. A Member unable to attend Parliament is incapable of working for constituents or attending the House. A similar principle lies behind other categories of disqualification, such as disqualification because a Member is in prison for more than a year. Neither is s141 directly relevant to people with a wide range of milder conditions which impair their mental health; it could only ever apply to a small number of people with serious conditions that really need to be detained.

225 Ev 223

226 Ev 237

227 Q265

228 Q267

325. On the other hand, **the law on disqualification from Membership 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 unrepresented in much the same way as if a Member has a serious mental disorder. Yet there is no parallel provision to s141 of the Mental Health Act 1983 for cases of physical illness. We have received substantial evidence from a number of sources, both expert and lay, to suggest that s141 wrongly implies that mental illness is in some way fundamentally different in its effects from physical illness. Yet 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.**

326. We have seen the evidence that, fearful of stigma, disabled people and those with illnesses sometimes fail to make their impairments public. There is a danger, therefore, that s141 might deter Members from admitting their mental health problems and seeking suitable treatment. So, from a purely medical point of view, the section may not operate in the best interests of MPs. Section 141 is a vivid, continuing and unfair symbol of the particular and potentially harmful stigma that attaches to mental illness.

327. **We believe that s141 of the 1983 Mental Health Act is unnecessary and damaging. It embodies attitudes which stigmatise and sap the confidence of people with mental illness. Section 141 should be repealed as soon as practicable.**

328. We recognise, however, that some provision may be needed to protect the legitimate interests of constituents and the House in circumstances where a Member is physically or mentally incapacitated to the extent that he or she is entirely unable to fulfil their duties for an extended period. We recommend that the House should invite an appropriate select committee to undertake an inquiry into this issue, consider whether new legislation or other measures may be needed, and make recommendations to the House and to Government as appropriate.

329. The House medical services can provide care and support for those with mental illness when necessary, but information about what is available should be more effectively circulated. **We recommend that an information pack and supporting guidance on the House's occupational health services should be sent to all Members of Parliament immediately after each General Election.**

Aggression in Parliamentary culture

330. The image of a 'yah-boo' culture in Parliament is widespread and clearly off-putting, not only to the general public but also to potential candidates. The perception of parliamentary culture as aggressive was frequently cited as a barrier to participation in the written evidence we received, on our online forum and in our discussions around the country.²²⁹ The example many people give for Parliament's aggressiveness is Prime Minister's Questions which, every week, is a focal point for media reporting on Westminster.

²²⁹ See, for example, Ev 43; Ev 47; Ev 49; Ev 72; Ev 167; Ev 170; Ev 173; Q 174

Media coverage of Parliament

331. Media reporting of Parliament is attracted to the dramatic, and it is often personalities and emotions which make the headlines, rather than the policy under examination. We accept that in many cases the tensions between people and parties, which are frequently displayed at Prime Minister's Questions, create an easy 'entry point' to a story for the media. The cumulative effect of continually reporting conflict, however, is to portray Westminster as a crudely aggressive place when, most of the time, it is not.

332. The work Members do outside the main Chamber of the House is less widely reported than debates on the floor of the House. We can understand why. Some of it, such as discussion of the fine print in bills on taxation or pensions, can be deeply technical while other parts such as a committee inquiry into the collapse of dairy co-operatives, or a presentation to a Minister (an adjournment debate) about a constituency problem, may be of particular interest to only a small number of people. There is also a great deal going on at any one time and on any one day. Parliamentary news has to compete for space and airtime with news from many other sources; no wonder journalists put the emphasis on the stories that grab the attention most easily.

333. The simple fact that there is so much activity in the House means that broadcasters and journalists need to be selective about what debates and meetings they attend, write about and broadcast. At present, it can be argued **that there is a lack of balance in media coverage of Parliament between 'set piece' debates in the Chamber and the less heated discussion in other settings.** When the media do cover select committees, they naturally tend to focus on confrontation and tough scrutiny of individuals rather than the measured debate which is the norm. **Correcting the balance would benefit Parliament in several ways. Greater reporting of constructive committee hearings and events outside the main Chamber would:**

- **increase public understanding of the breadth of Parliamentary activity and the work of backbenchers;**
- **clearly demonstrate that there is more to the work and culture of the Commons, and of individual Members, than barracking, shouting and trying to get one over on the other side; and could**
- **re-engage those members of the public who find the presentation of debates and questions in the Chamber tiresome and off-putting.**

334. Part of the responsibility for the predictable and occasionally sensationalist nature of current Parliamentary coverage must rest with the House itself: Parliament itself could take more of the initiative in explaining what is happening, and why it matters. We welcome the establishment of a central Press Office for the House of Commons (the Media and Communications Service) following the Modernisation Committee's report of 2003-04²³⁰ and particularly its role in actively promoting the work of select committees. However, if the media tends to focus on the more confrontational and dramatic elements of the

²³⁰ Modernisation Committee, First Report of Session 2003-04, *Connecting Parliament with the Public*, HC 368, para 121

House's work, this may be because more needs to be done to address the challenge presented by mainstream news values.

335. The House of Commons Media and Communications Service should identify new approaches in both old and new media which would bring the more measured and less heated elements of the House's work to a wider audience. We urge Members to take the opportunities thus offered to present the work of the House in a more constructive light.

336. While there is little reporting of the work Members do to scrutinise Government outside the main Chamber, the national media is even less interested in the work Members do for their constituents. If we accept that much of what Members do is unlikely to be reported on by the media, a logical response must be for Members to seek to report it themselves more effectively than they do at present. Many Members are able to correspond with their constituents through local or regional newspapers but the internet, and the development of blogs and social networking sites, are changing the ways in which events are reported. It is now much easier for individual Members to communicate their achievements and ideas directly to constituents, if they can harness the technology.

337. At present many Members remain reluctant to use the internet. We acknowledge that it is not as easy for Members to blog as it is for journalists. The public expects MPs to be consistent in their views, sometimes over periods of many years, where the same expectation does not exist for journalists. There will also be those who will read blogs in search of opportunities to manipulate and exploit perceived differences between the Member and their political party. These concerns, however, can be addressed. A Member should not have any more difficulty communicating via a blog than via a newspaper column or television interview, if it is approached in the same way as those more formal communications. Blogging regularly, if not daily, could help inform people what Members do on a daily basis. It can also be a relatively low-cost way for Members to communicate with their constituents. **The House service should make training available to Members for communication through the internet.**

Personal attacks

338. In politics, as in other walks of life, individuals are frequently criticised not for their performance but for some aspect of themselves. Politics as a profession requires Members of Parliament to invest much of their personality in their work, and they live their lives substantially in the public eye. Their families also live partially in the public eye, by association: one has only to think of what is generally known about the family life of political leaders compared to what is generally known about the family life of captains of industry to see the difference. The fear of intrusion and personal attacks is a major deterrent to people standing for office, and there is a perception that Members and candidates who "deviate[] from the norm, as it were ... white male, middle-aged, middle-class"²³¹ are more likely to suffer them.

339. Both disabled people and members of the LGBT communities told us of their deep concern over such attacks, which are sometimes the result of prejudice and stigma. A witness from the Leonard Cheshire Foundation wrote of his conviction that both political opponents and the media would “draw out maggoty slurs” against disabled candidates: the phrase powerfully indicates the unpleasantness of such an experience.²³² Paul Martin of the Lesbian and Gay Foundation noted the stereotyping which prompted the media to label one party leadership candidate a “Limp Dem”,²³³ while community activists in Manchester told us that the media treatment of local MP Maureen Colquhoun, when she came out as a lesbian in the 1970s,²³⁴ was so vicious that it continued to be a deterrent to potential lesbian candidates more than thirty years on.

340. The anticipation of such attacks can create a double barrier: potential candidates may not only fear public humiliation of itself, but also perceive that the only way to escape such attacks is to be impossibly perfect. Paul Martin said,

“It is that real fear that people will be criticised because of their sexual orientation, that they will be humiliated in public, that actually does stop them from disclosing, and my sense is that “out” lesbians and gay men, in the same way as many black politicians, disabled politicians and so on, have to be better than their peers in order to participate and get up the slippery pole because of that difference”.²³⁵

341. While specific concerns about stigma may be less acute in other groups, similar fears and concerns were expressed to us by others. Contributors to our informal meetings and online forum said that they would not stand as Members of Parliament because they did not want their past lives and particularly their sexual history subjected to media scrutiny.²³⁶ Women were particularly likely to express concerns that, by putting themselves in the public eye as political candidates, they might expose their partners and families to unwanted media attention and possible criticism. The recent press censure of a woman Member for her childcare arrangements validates their concerns.

342. The 2001 Commission on Candidate Selection expressed a vision of “a virtuous circle in which Parliament works better and is seen as more socially inclusive—thus encouraging a wider variety of people to put themselves forward”; it said that this could only be achieved if there were

a more mature debate in the media and elsewhere about the role of politicians. The strident, hostile and intrusive nature of reporting and editorialising in some newspapers about politicians and their private lives turns many voters off politics and discourages talented people from putting themselves forward as candidates.²³⁷

343. The media are, quite properly, an independent force in our political system. Yet **we, like the Commission on Candidate Selection before us, would wish to see an end to**

232 Ev 183-184

233 Q374

234 See *The Divided House: Women at Westminster* by Melanie Phillips, Sidgwick & Jackson 1980

235 Q374

236 <http://forums.parliament.uk/speakers-conference/index.php?read,1,121>

237 Report of the Commission on Candidate Selection, Peter Riddell, 2003 p33

strident, hostile and intrusive reporting of politicians' private lives which is destructive not only of those individuals but also of their families, relationships, and of the democratic process itself.

Actions of Members

344. There is a responsibility upon us as individual Members also to remember that we should uphold the dignity of our profession and of Parliament. **We acknowledge that Members as well as outside commentators have been known to abuse other Members, of their own and other parties. Such behaviour among colleagues would not be considered acceptable in most professions and brings the profession of Parliamentarian into disrepute. Members should treat their colleagues, across all parties, with courtesy.**

8 Conclusion

we had a Member of the Youth Parliament elected some two weeks ago in the East Midlands, he came from a very deprived community, he stood up, was elected and was absolutely thrilled, but the next day he had a brick through his window because he was told, "Why do you want to be a politician? Why do you want to be like one of them?"²³⁸

345. Few people can doubt that in 2009 the reputation of MPs, and of our political process, has been brought to an all-time low. Yet the current problems present a tremendous opportunity: for alongside public anger there has also been a movement for change which could transform representation in the House of Commons.

346. The need to correct under-representation in the House of Commons is, first and foremost, a matter of justice. The House is the representative body for the United Kingdom and there should be a place in it for individuals from all parts of society. We believe that broadening representation would bring the positive benefit of improved effectiveness in the development of legislation and the scrutiny of Government performance. Enabling people from all communities to be seen and heard in the House could also enhance the legitimacy of the House's decision-making.

347. Our inquiry has shown us that 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, disabled or open members of the LGBT communities. Some of these steps relate to the individual; many require the political parties to account for their actions locally, regionally and nationally and to make changes where these are needed. Parliament and Government must also contribute to the effort of producing an environment in which a more just, credible and effective representation of society can flourish.

348. We are optimistic about the future of politics in this country, provided these actions are taken. Simple steps, such as asserting through legislation that standing for election is a public benefit, could help the process of restoring trust in our democratic system. 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.

349. 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".²³⁹ We believe that a great deal can be accomplished in a short space of time provided the political will is there to achieve it. 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.

238 Q115

239 Q434

350. This opportunity could transform our politics for a lifetime. We urge the parties, Parliament and Government to use the opportunity well.

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 6 January 2010

Members present:

Miss Anne Begg, in the Chair

Ms Diane Abbott
Mr David Blunkett
Mrs Ann Cryer

Fiona Mactaggart
Jo Swinson
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 Report HC 167 - I

Session 2009–10

Second Interim Report HC 63 - I