Written submission from Change.org petitioners for a 5050 Parliament (WHC0028)

1. Executive summary
(a) The role of the voters is missing from the Committee’s three key areas for consideration, and should not be left out of account.
(b) The idea of forcing the pace of change by quotas or all-female short lists demonstrates either impatience, or a belief that existing structures will prevent change unless such drastic action is taken.
(c) As long as Parliament is seen by the general public as a man’s world, women are less likely to be elected; these perceptions can and should be addressed by Parliament now.
(d) If a short cut to gender balance is required, there is a way of using all-female short lists which, if used in 2020 when some MPs will have to retire anyway, would not need to be repeated.
(e) The slower but in the end surer route trusts the voters, and involves giving more power to the voters than the present electoral system does.

2. Introduction
I am a retired academic, whose political experience includes eight years as political leader of the North East Fife District Council (1988-96), during which time I was the first Convener of the Rural Affairs Committee of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (1990-92). I was nominated by COSLA to be an alternate member of the newly formed EU Committee of the Regions (1994-96), where I was able to play a very small part in European decision-making. I signed the Change.org petition for a #5050Parliament because I agree with those who started it that decision-making is improved by making use of the widest possible range of talents, and that as a representative body the House of Commons needs to reflect, in its diversity and range of experience, the public which elects it. The petitioners have asked their signatories to submit evidence to your inquiry, and I do so because I believe the role of the voters needs to be considered in any conclusions you draw.

3. My evidence
The Committee’s three key areas for consideration focus on what existing bodies should do to improve female representation in the House of Commons, with particular reference to the political parties. They leave out what the voters might think. Although there will always be special factors about a single example, it is worth remembering that in 2005, the voters of Blaenau Gwent declined to choose the Labour candidate who emerged from the all-female short list imposed by the party nationally, and elected instead Peter Law, their AM who stood against the official Labour candidate and won. This did not seem to be a protest against the official candidate or the Labour party as such, but to reflect a belief that it was for voters to choose, and that it was not for parties, for reasons on which voters were not consulted, to restrict the choice offered to them.

4. The reasons I have heard for systems of quotas or all-female short lists are essentially (a) that the goal of diverse representation is so beneficial to good government that it must be achieved, (b) that there are structural obstacles in the way of achieving it, some to do with the working conditions of MPs, others with the male domination of politics which makes a career in politics unattractive to women, and (c) nothing short of overcoming these obstacles by quotas or all-female short lists will change structures. In essence, these reasons reflect impatience with the slow rate of progress achieved by allowing constituency parties to select as they wish from an approved list of candidates, even after a party has provided mentoring to increase the diversity of candidates on its list. In terms of democracy, it must be right to allow
parties to select the candidate they think has the most chance of convincing the voters to vote for them, and to allow voters to decide who they wish to support. As the example of Peter Law shows, voters have in any case the ultimate say. It follows, therefore, that the public needs to be convinced that women can be as effective as men in Parliament. Convincing the voters depends on changing the image of Parliament as a man’s world.

5. The most salient image of parliamentary politics is still Prime Minister’s question time. Despite the gender of now two Prime Ministers, this is perceived as a testosterone fuelled event which encapsulates all that is wrong in British politics, and which turns in particular women off politics altogether. It simply reinforces the idea that the stereotypical MP will always be male, and leads voters to question the motives of anyone who wishes to become an MP. After the expenses scandal, all too many voters now see money rather than ambition as the most likely reason for anyone wanting to stand for Parliament. This scandal has reinforced the longer-standing view that the House of Commons is an old boys club in which new MPs rapidly fall into line, and is content to churn out voluminous and incomprehensible legislation authorising a minister to take all decisions of detail. The strengthening of the role of the Committee system has made it more possible for Parliament as a whole to hold the Government to account for its actions, but the public would be more convinced that this represented a real strengthening of Parliament if it saw current Government decisions being reversed and incompetent ministers removed. Finally, the voters are most likely to have contact with MPs when they ask their local MP for help. What they all too often find is that the MP is personally very helpful, but is unable to achieve a solution to their problem, often because the current legislation does not allow for a solution and the civil servants who reply for the minister the MP has contacted are in full Sir Humphrey mode. If Parliament were truly sovereign, MPs would be able from their casework to identify where the law is not working as intended, or where new problems have arisen since the current law was passed, and change the law to make it work for modern circumstances. Changing these perceptions is likely to prove as important to securing a more diverse and representative House of Commons as any changes to working hours or other support for current MPs.

6. There are practical steps which can and should be taken now to change these perceptions. The first is to abolish Prime Minister’s question time altogether, on the grounds that holding his or her government to account is done through Parliament’s detailed scrutiny of government departments, and that written questions and written answers allow the Prime Minister to be asked about the political direction of the Government. The second is to make sure that payments for expenses never go to MPs, but that the Commons like any other employer decides what support it regards as necessary to do the job. It should then pay directly for each MP’s research or constituency staff, and for travel tickets and accommodation for those MPs out of reach of London. The third is to focus on getting the legislation right first time, which means not using time as the sole weapon an opposition has to oppose legislation it disagrees with, but rather using it to persuade Government to make its legislation coherent and workable, rather than risk the fate of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, passed when the SNP had an absolute majority. An opposition can always promise to repeal legislation it finds wrong in principle, and such promises should be kept. The fourth is to provide Parliamentary time to change existing legislation which MPs have found from casework to be not fit for purpose in today’s world.

7. If the Committee considers that achieving a Parliament properly representative of the diversity of the British population requires a short cut, there is an option which would achieve the desired result in just one election, which could be the 2020 election. If candidates
are selected in the usual way for 2020, the main impact of reducing the number of MPs will
be that all those who wish to stay will scramble for safe seats, and will tend to crowd out
newcomers, including therefore potential new women, which may well result in worsening
the present gender balance. Given that more than half the seats in the House of Commons are
considered ‘safe’ seats, it would suffice for all parties to agree that all safe seats should have
their 2020 party candidates selected from all-female short-lists. This would cause many long-
serving male MPs to retire, but some of those would have to retire early anyway because of
the reduction in the number of seats to 600. Male MPs in safe seats who wished to continue
would have the option of standing as experienced people in marginal or difficult to win seats.
All-female shortlists across the board in safe seats might provoke a voter backlash and more
independent male MPs, but it would only have to be done once, and parties could then for
subsequent elections select the person they consider the most suitable for their area, who if
the voters agree could well be the sitting female MP.

8. An alternative route would be to allow voters to choose whether to elect female or
male candidates from the same party, which however requires multi-member seats as in the
past, and not today’s single member seats. Voter choice would be most effective under a
Single Transferable Vote system, which, as the Electoral Reform Society would tell you in
whatever detail the Committee requires, is designed to put maximum power in the hands of
the voter. One effect of STV is that the political parties will need to show their internal
diversity, including gender balance, in order to attract the largest number of voters. This will
deliver more female MPs as long as a larger proportion of the voters vote for them. To
courage as much diversity as possible, constituencies should be relatively large, say in
county size constituencies of perhaps five MPs, or citywide with more MPs in the larger
cities. In the short term, larger constituencies would make the election of more women more
likely than smaller constituencies.

9. Conclusion
Bringing the voters into the equation may appear to create a chicken and egg question: Which
comes first, achieving gender balance in the House of Commons or changing voter
perceptions of politics? The short sharp shock proposed in paragraph 7 risks a voter backlash,
but establishes clearly that this parliament’s members are not motivated by ambition or
money because they put the goal of achieving a diverse and representative House of
Commons above their own personal interests. To this extent it would change perceptions
now, but if the practical steps proposed in paragraph 6 have not been adopted, it risks
achieving in the longer term the perception that in politics women are as bad as the men. The
longer but more durable solution proposed in paragraph 8 requires the actions set out in
paragraph 6 to be adopted forthwith in order to change voter perceptions of MPs by 2020.
With these changes in place, empowering the voters and giving them the choice in larger
constituencies of more than one candidate from the same party will over time create the more
diverse representation the Committee is seeking. However, if perceptions are not changed,
any action taken to ‘fix’ gender balance now risks rejection by the voters, and the Committee
will be holding another inquiry for 2025.

10. Recommendations
(a) Implement the proposals in paragraph 6 now to change public perceptions of politics and
the House of Commons before 2020.
EITHER (b) Implement the proposals in paragraph 7 for 2020 only.
OR PREFERABLY (c) Implement the proposals in paragraph 8 for all elections after 2019.