Written submission from the Women’s Equality Party

Executive Summary

- The Women’s Equality Party (WE) is a non-partisan political party whose members are drawn from right across the political spectrum.

- WE are a new collaborative force in British politics uniting people in the shared determination to see women enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men, so that all can flourish.

- One of the six core goals of the Women’s Equality Party is equal representation in politics, business, industry and throughout working life.

- WE welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee as it considers women’s political representation. WE believe that it is in the interests of everyone for our legislatures, at the local, sub-national and national levels, to be representative of the societies they seek to serve.

- As 51% of the population women have long been under-represented, WE have concluded as a temporary measure legislative quotas are necessary to drive substantial change. Drawing on only half of this country’s talent in politics diminishes the effectiveness of our whole political system.

Recommendations

- Equal representation is one of the six core goals of the Women’s Equality Party. Drawing on only half the talent in politics diminishes the effectiveness of the whole political system and the economy.

- Across the world, proportional voting systems tend to be better at electing women, but in the absence of such electoral reform, quotas are a necessary tool to drive substantial change. Progress otherwise will simply be too slow.

- The only 16 countries in the world to come close to gender parity in their legislatures, with 40 per cent or more of their lawmakers women, are Cuba, Ecuador, Finland, Iceland, Mexico, Mozambique, Namibia, Nicaragua, Norway, Senegal, Seychelles, South Africa, Spain and Sweden. In two countries Bolivia and Rwanda, female parliamentarians outnumber their male colleagues. Little of this change has been slow and incremental. Thirteen of these nations have either introduced gender quotas or the main parties in their political systems have done so voluntarily.

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1 We would like to acknowledge the assistance and advice provided to us by Dr Elizabeth Evans (Goldsmiths, University of London) and Dr Meryl Kenny (University of Edinburgh) in preparing this submission.
• Women make up 29% of MPs: to correct this women should make up at least 66% of new MPs for the next two elections. This requires parties to ensure women make up at least 66% of candidates replacing retiring MPs and at least 66% of their other candidates prior to the 2025 General Election. Based on current retirement and appointment rates, and current rates of improvement in the representation of women in parliament, this will achieve a 50:50 Parliament in 2025.

• Political parties should work together to develop best practices in creating a political platform for women and for underrepresented groups. Simple measures such as offering childcare to candidates enabled a number of women, who would otherwise not have done so, to seek to stand as candidates for the Women’s Equality Party in London, Scotland and Wales in May 2016.

• The Equality Act (2010) should be amended with immediate effect to allow new political parties to take positive action for the achievement of proportional representation. Currently, Section 104 of the Act stipulates that political parties must first demonstrate underrepresentation of their own elected candidates who share a protected characteristic. For parties that do not yet have elected representatives, this is plainly not possible. Therefore, new political parties are prevented from proactively using positive action measures, such as quotas, targeted recruitment and zipping, to achieve proportional representation of e.g. black, minority and ethnic (BME) or female candidates. The Act should instead reference the unequal representation within a given legislature. This would enable newer political parties to contribute to improving the representation of female and BME representatives from the outset, rather than potentially contributing to their ongoing underrepresentation.

• The evidence in both the UK and internationally demonstrates that (well-designed) quotas work, delivering increased numbers of women in legislatures\(^2\). UK parties are permitted to use voluntary sex quotas by the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, subsequently extended by an amendment to the Equality Act 2010 until 2030.

• However, while the number of women MPs has increased over time, the use of quotas has been variable across the parties, leading to asymmetry in women’s political representation. Consequently, legislative quotas may be necessary to achieve real change.

• For legislative quotas to ensure increases in women’s legislative presence, they must be well-designed and effectively implemented. In particular, they must not only stipulate that more women be selected, but must also ensure that parties are running them in ‘winnable’ seats. The design of legislative quotas in the UK should

take this into account – women should not be less than 50% of candidates selected for vacant-held, winnable (those requiring a swing to win of 5% or less) or target seats. Parties should have to regularly report on their enforcement of the law.

- A phased introduction of the legislative quota (following the Irish model) could also be considered whereby the threshold increases from 40% over subsequent elections.

- WE fully endorse the proposals made by Professor Sarah Childs in The Good Parliament report, in particular the proposals surrounding reform of the Parliamentary estate, timetable and sitting hours; educational outreach; and provision for MPs with parenting and caring responsibilities (including further provision for maternity, paternity, adoption and caring leave; permitting infants in the Chamber and committees; and providing a parliamentary crèche for ad hoc - and primarily externally facing - childcare). As research highlights, there is a significant ‘motherhood gap’ at Westminster, in that women MPs with children are particularly under-represented in the House of Commons.

- MPs and gender equality experts have also raised concerns about the working practices of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), in particular whether the existing system of MPs costs and expenses works to the detriment of the ‘parent MP’. WE endorse the recommendations of the 2014 Women in Parliament APPG Improving Parliament Report and the 2016 Good Parliament Report, which call for a comprehensive diversity and equality review of IPSA, which will in turn provide greater transparency and accountability regarding the costs of being an MP.

- Related to the above, the personal security of MPs are shaped in part by MPs’ gender identities, which is not sufficiently recognised by IPSA. Security has been raised as a concern by women MPs, including in light of continued forms of online violence targeted at women MPs. WE call on all parties to work together to deliver digital legislation that works to protect all women from violence online and WE are

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3 Buckley, F (2016) 'The 2016 Irish Election demonstrated how gender quotas can shift the balance on female representation', Available at: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/03/16/the-2016-irish-election-demonstrated-how-gender-quotas-can-shift-the-balance-on-female-representation/.

4 Buckley, F (2016) 'The 2016 Irish Election demonstrated how gender quotas can shift the balance on female representation', Available at: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/03/16/the-2016-irish-election-demonstrated-how-gender-quotas-can-shift-the-balance-on-female-representation/


8 Report for the House of Commons Administration Committee on the Findings of the Interview Study with Members on Women’s Experience in Parliament, 21 August 2015.
ready to lead that work. In collaboration with the Liberal Democrats, WE have put forward amendments to the Police and Crime Bill which serve as a good starting point. WE also recommend that the House should review the security advice for MPs and staff, ensure that IPSA adequately recognises MPs’ security concerns, and review measures to support MPs subject to cyber harassment (as also recommended in the 2015 Report of the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy).

• Without active intervention, the outcome of the current Boundary Commissions review is likely to have a detrimental impact on the number of women MPs. When electoral competition increases, and there is a resulting ‘squeeze’ in seats, women candidates typically lose out. Labour is expected to lose most seats and is also the party with the largest number of women MPs. An equality and diversity audit of the Boundary Commission’s proposals should be undertaken after they are published in September 2016, paying particular attention to marginal seats and those new seats containing more than one sitting MP wishing to stand.

• Following from the point above, the Boundary Commissions review also presents an opportunity for parties to increase their percentage of women candidates and MPs. WE support the recommendation in the 2016 Good Parliament Report for a cross-party concord on candidate selection for the 2020 Parliament following the boundary review, and calls on all parties to publicly commit to increasing the number of women selected in winnable seats for the 2020 election. Where seats are being merged, and there is more than one incumbent of the same party, parties should give priority to re-selecting incumbent women MPs.

• Gender equality is not achieved when there is no heterogeneity amongst women politicians.

• WE recommend that the Government should consult on amending the Race Relations Act to introduce permissive legislation for parties to adopt black and ethnic minority quotas – for example, all-black shortlists - following the recommendations of the 2016 Good Parliament Report. Quotas and reserved seats for ethnic groups have become increasingly popular around the world, while international evidence suggests that minority groups that are geographically concentrated can do well in plurality systems where they are selected for winnable seats. More recent UK evidence suggests that ‘tandem quotas’ – attention to both sex and race/ethnicity in selection decisions – can result in positive outcomes for minority women.

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Voluntary quotas for ethnic minorities should, therefore, contain within them, at a minimum, a commitment to sex-balancing at the point of shortlisting.

- By-elections can present important opportunities for parties to ‘top up’ under-represented groups. The exemption of by-elections from the types of elections in which voluntary sex quotas can be adopted (as set out in the Equality Act 2010) should be reconsidered.\textsuperscript{12}

- The Speaker’s Conference 2010 (Recommendation 25) recommended that parties be required to report data on candidate selection every six months, including data on sex, ethnicity, and disability. This commitment has been inconsistently delivered upon (if at all), and WE believe that parties must be held to account for their selection decisions as they happen, rather than after the fact. Following the recommendations of the \textit{Good Parliament} Report, WE support the call for the Minister for Women and Equalities to commence Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 as soon as possible. WE also believe that intersectional reporting of this data is vital. It is not sufficient to present data based on a single axis, we need, for instance, to know how many ethnic minority women are selected.

September 2016