What should the Government, political parties, the House of Commons and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority be doing now to ensure better female representation in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond?

To ensure better female representation in the House of Commons, all MPs male and female, need to show that the bills and other legislation passed will have an impact which does not discriminate civic society. By doing so, Parliament will present themselves as an Institution which welcomes all who live and work in the UK and its four countries. A method of encouraging a change of attitude from women who could then consider themselves as candidates for being members of Parliament, rather than being encouraged, will be achievable through checking and approval mechanisms for the inclusion of cross-party gender equality criteria. Applying such criteria (along with criteria for other equal opportunity groupings) will improve the image of Parliament as being inclusive on an equal opportunities basis. This should be compulsory at a stage before one of the reading stages before Bills are sent to the House of Lords before being passed (or rejected). All Bills should be checked and approved for meeting a cross-party gender criteria. The criteria should be created by an Independent Body who will be responsible for making any changes during the evolution of the criteria. There should never be a final version.

What are the political parties doing to ensure that female representation will increase at the next general election given the impact that the 2018 Boundary Commission Review could have?

Female representation will be affected by the planned changes to boundaries of constituencies, as stated by Paul Waugh. This article includes a request by an MP to have all-female selection panel for Islington, one of the boroughs which will be changed in constituency numbers. Having all-female selection panels may be a solution which could be followed by one or more of the political parties but it shouldn’t be compulsory to opt for a positive discrimination practice. Selection processes used by local political associations should include lobbying of local women members with evidence provided to the central organization to demonstrate the number of women (and other groupings) lobbied and asked to stand for selection. If there are aren’t any female candidates included in the selection processes, reasons for omission of female candidates should be provided as well. Those associations which are finding difficulties should start proactive conversations with their central organisation’s to agree the reasons for why such a situation happened and for actions to be agreed in order to surmount the situation for the next election where a new MP is demanded. An action which could be considered is to assess

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the performance of an MP, from a constituency where there previously hadn’t been any female candidates, in preparation for the next election and make a decision whether the MP should be replaced by another person, especially if the association has, by that time, been able to recruit new women for consideration.

Carl Cullinane has stated, due to the increasing power of smaller political parties to gain public support, there has been an increase in the number of women candidates for the 2016 election. At the same time, he has equally stated there are some challenges which are being faced by women, especially in being placed in constituencies that are ‘unwinnable’. He refers to an article by Clara Kulich. It hasn’t been ascertained, based on this one article, whether women were chosen in order to offer something differently to a constituency they might not have won with a male candidate. However, one could surmise that women are placed in such constituencies in order for them not to challenge the existing status quo at the House of Commons, rather than being chosen as candidates in constituencies where women have a fair chance of winning, or indeed being in a ‘safe seat’. This suggests that in order for selection recommendations and changes are supported at the local level by central organisations’, there either has to be a person, independently appointed to oversee communications between national and local to minimize the risk of prejudice against certain female candidates, or for the national association to have a self-assessment policy for them to apply to any communications between national and local organisations’ e.g. a register of communications which can be used as evidence in the event of any allegations of prejudice and discrimination over candidature selections.

In local areas, there should be efforts to increase the presence of women MPs and members of local associations in order to show to local populations that they are diverse in their base. Local publicity methods, such as newspaper, magazine, newsletter articles should be written by just not local male members and photographs should not just feature men. Women should be involved with the writing of articles and be included in photographs.

What further changes are needed to improve retention of women MPs?

MPs will always lose their seats, men or women. However, it is vital that if women MPs do lose their seats, that this does nothing to stop other women from running for Parliament. Parliamentary debate may be seen as being very masculine in terms of the level of shouting. However, in heated situations outside Parliament, women can also shout themselves! The

importance for Parliament is that there has to be a level of control in place which ensures prejudicial and offensive words and exchanges are not used by either male or female MPs during Parliamentary debates. Prejudicial and offensive words and exchanges aren’t accepted in ordinary offices across the country. If women MPs are leaving because of the nature of the debate, they should accept the liveliness of the debates in order to keep a public level of interest. However, no-one wants to see people being demeaned by others, especially by people seen to be highly-educated, highly-intelligent and who have made a contribution towards society before entering politics.

Behind the parliamentary debates, Parliament should focus on providing activities which aren’t inherently masculine and masochistic. There is room for activities which cater for male professional and social interests as well as female professional and social interests. It is vital that here should be activities which enable a greater exchange between men and women MPs. Women will feel more comfortable in these kind of surroundings.

When there are leadership challenges which involve women MPs, there should be a ban on any references to their status e.g. marital and motherhood. If women MPs leave because of their marriage or of their children, should do so based on their choice not the imposition of another’s opinion voiced privately or publicly.

Ultimately, to retain women MPs, there need to be a commitment to women appointed to senior government positions as well as in senior positions across governmental departments. As James Hand wrote, ‘The first May Cabinet does also surpass the target for women on boards of FTSE 350 companies. But, taken altogether, it is by no means a big step forward for gender diversity within British politics.’4 His article provides a useful summary about the increasing presence of women in some Government departments but in others, an absolute omission of them. This situation will hopefully change.

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